

MARKET HARBOROUGH

How Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires.

CHAPTER III.

"YOUR HAND-WRITING, SIR."

"Look at his legs, Mr. Sawyer!" observed the dealer, turning away to conceal the triumph that would ooze out. "There's some thing there a some hocks and thighs! Talk of him, and look where his tail's set on. Carry his own head, too; and if you could see him in the hunting-field. Six-year-old—not a tick or flinch, bold as a bull, and gentle as a lady, he can go as fast as you can cap your hands, and stay till the middle of the week after next—jump a town, too, and never turn his head from the place you put him at. As handy as a fiddle, as neat as a punk, and worth all the money to carry in your eye when you go out to buy hunters. But what's the use of talking about it to a judge like you? Lay your leg over him—only just lay your leg over him, Mr. Sawyer—I don't want you to buy him! but get the man and feel his action, just as a favour to me.

Our friend had made up his mind he would do so from the first. There was no mistaking the appearance of the animal; so good was it, that he had but two misgivings—some rank unsoundness, to account for its being there, or so high a price as to be beyond his means; for Mr. Sawyer was too fond of the sport to give a sum that he could not replace for so perishable an article as a hunter.

It was no mean equestrian, our friend, and quite at home on a strange horse. As he drew the curb rein gently through his fingers, the roan dropped his long lean head, and stamped the bit playfully, tossing a speck of froth back on his rider's boots.

"You've got a mouth, at any rate," quoth Mr. Sawyer, and trotted him gently down the road, the animal stepping freely and easily under him, full of life and spirits. The customer liked his mount, and couldn't help saying so. "May I lark him?" said he, jumping up after a short canter to and fro, and then by the wayside, during which Job's pet had been exercising his mental and athletic in what we may term a sum of problematical addition.

"Take him into the close, sir," was the generous reply, "put him at anything you like. If you can get him into one of these fences, I'll give him to you!"

So Mr. Sawyer sat down to jump a low fence, and ditch, then stood up, and caught the roan's head, and sent him a canter through the adjoining plough, and a larger fence into a pasture, and back again by a fair flight of rails and lost his balance at the last, and rucked his plaid trousers up to his knees; and Slopers marked his glancing and glowing check, and knew that he had landed him.

"Walk him about for ten minutes before you buy him over," said that worthy to Barney Sawyer, who dismounted, and the latter trotted him his hat. "And now, sir," said the respectable dealer, "you can't go away without tasting my cheese—the same as I do at this time, you know. Walk it, sir, in your way, and mind the step, if you please. No speaking, Mr. Slopers ushered him into a neat little parlor with a strong odor of preserved tobacco-smoke, where a comfortable set of a nice luncheon of bread and butter, flanked by a foaming jug of ale and a decanter of oily-brown stout.

Neither the dealer showed his knowledge of human nature, and his discrimination of the different characteristics of the species. Had his guest been some generous sportsman, with more money than he, he would have primed him first, and put him up to ride afterwards. But he knew his man. He was well aware that Mr. Sawyer required no stimulant to get him on his legs, but a strong one to induce him to part with his money; so he proposed to amuse him after he was satisfied that his customer was pleased with his mount.

Neither of them touched on business during the conversation, which consisted of the runs that had taken place in the old country, and an inferred compliment to the possible purchaser. Mr. Sawyer, produced the Larans, and then led up to Job, who bit it, and then he smoked it, as men do who are used to clay pipes, and then they went to the stable to see the roan down.

When the dealer saw the roan working in the field, and he didn't see his

which he had eventually purchased. "I should say you might get a hundred and twenty for him down there, if you'd luck. But it's a great risk—a great risk—and a long distance: and perhaps have him sent back to you in the spring. If I wanted a horse, I'd give you a hundred for him, though he isn't exactly my sort. A hundred!—I'll tell you what, Slopers, I'll be hanged if I won't chance it—I'll give you a hundred—guineas—come! Money down and no questions asked."

"I can warrant him sound," answered Mr. Slopers, "and I'd rather you had him than anybody. But it's childish talking of a hundred guineas and that horse on the same afternoon. However, I thank you kindly all the same, Mr. Sawyer. Barney I shut the box up. Come in, sir, and have one glass of sherry before you start. The evenings get chill at this time of year, and that's old sherry, and won't hurt you no more than milk. He is a nice horse, Mr. Sawyer, I think—a very nice horse, and I'm glad you're pleased with him."

So they returned into the little parlor, and stirred up the fire, and finished the bottle of old sherry; nor is it necessary to remark that, with the concluding glass of that generous fluid the roan became the property of John Standish, under the following somewhat complicated agreement:—That he was to give an immediate cheque for a hundred and forty pounds, and ten pounds more at the end of the season, which latter donation was to be increased to twenty if he should sell him for anything over two hundred—a contingency which the dealer was pleased to observe amounted to what he called "a moral."

The new owner went to look at him once more in the stable, and thought him the nicest horse he ever saw in his life. The walk home, too, was delightful, all the sherry had evaporated, when it became rather tedious; and at dinner-time Mr. Sawyer was naturally less hungry than thirsty. All the evening, however, he congratulated himself on having done a good day's work. All night, too, he dreamed of the roan; and on waking resolved to call him "Hotspur."

When the horse came home next day, he certainly looked rather smaller than his new owner had fancied. Old Isaac too, growled out his untoward opinion that he "looked a sort as would work very light." But then Isaac always grumbled—it was the old groom's way of enjoying himself.

CHAPTER IV.

MARCHING ORDERS.

Isaac was a character in his way—quite an institution at The Grange, where, by dint of indomitable tenacity of opinion, and a singular talent for silence, he had contrived to extend his influence over a good many matters not in the least connected with his department. For instance, not a sheep could be killed without consulting Isaac. His word on the subject of pigs was law; and it needed but a wave of his hands to substitute for the useless, hideous, gigantic Cochran-Chinas of the poultry-yard, a certain breed of pump Dorkings, that laid diurnal eggs in their lifetime, and after death, made almost as handsome appearance as Norfolk turkeys on the dining table.

Perhaps the old groom was less omnipotent in the stable than elsewhere. Mr. Sawyer, like many other proprietors of small studs, chose to have his own way with his horses, and would more have omitted to visit them after breakfast than he would have neglected to smoke his cigar. It is only the tip-top swells, with whom our friend had not yet scraped acquaintance, who "suppose their fellow will have two or three" at the place of meeting. But although it is doubtless a great luxury to own plenty of hunters, this very luxury to ten prevents a man from finding out which is his best horse. There are not a great many good runs over any country in one season. It is a long time before you have treated each one of your dozen to a clipper, and, till then, you only know you have a good hunter, but cannot tell you have got a good horse.

Mr. Sawyer, however, knew the merits and the faults of his own two or three nags but too well. He was pretty often on their backs, and, with a few exceptions, constantly in and out of the stable. Isaac would no more have dared to give one of them a gallop, or a dose of physic, than to have indicted the same discipline on his master. Nevertheless he grumbled at ways and means. As I have said before, it was the one relaxation he permitted himself. Perhaps he never had a better opportunity than on the morning after the roan had come home, when Mr. Sawyer, being tired, and with a trifling headache, was sitting in his favorite

roan's long shapely quarters and square tail. "The rarest shaped one we've had in this stable for many a day," he added, seeing his servant's features screwed into the well known twist that denoted disapprobation.

"Looks!" grunted Isaac, who never called his master "sir." "Looks! Ah! he'd be a nice thing enough to knock a light trap about, or do you a day now and then when the country gets dry. He'll never be fit for our ploughs—you see if he will! They'll pull him in pieces in a fortnight—you see if they won't!"

"I don't want him for our ploughs," answered Mr. Sawyer, waxing somewhat impatient. "I don't think I shall have another day in the old county this year. Look you here, Isaac. I'm going to move the horses. I've three now, let alone 'Jack'—this was an abbreviation for the lack, who seldom enjoyed his full name, being generally designated as above, or as "The Dandy"—"three right good ones. I can easily pick up another, when I'm settled. I'm going down to the grass."

"Grass!" grunted the listener. "Where be that?"

"Well, I'm going to see what sport they have in the Shires," answered his master, warming up with the subject—"going to have a look at Mr. Tailby and the Earl of Stamford and Warrington, and try if I can't make a fight good enough to see those Pytchley bitches run into their fox. I'm going to Market Harborough, Isaac. Such horses as mine are wasted in this out-of-the-way country. Why, the grey's the best I've ever had; and the roan ought to be faster than he; and even the bay would carry me better, I think, in that country than he does here."

A gleam of pity softened old Isaac's hard blue eye, as it rested on Marathon tucking in his feed and he pictured that devoted animal rolling and lurching, disconsolate, over the ridge-and-furrow, over a fifty-acre grass-field. But he only observed sardonically.

"Market Harboro', is it? To stand at the sign of the 'Hand-in-Pocket,' I suppose?"

"Never mind what you suppose!" answered Mr. Sawyer, now positively angry. "You do what I bid you. Move the horses down to-morrow by the rail. Take The Boy with you; and mind you keep him out of mischief. I've written to a friend of mine to engage stables. Next week we'll begin work in right earnest. Come into the house, with your look, after your dinner; and hold your tongue!"

Old Isaac knew better than to pursue the subject any further; and, truth to tell, the old fellow had a spark of his youth's adventurous spirit lingering about him still, which made him not averse to a change, although he thought the scheme wasteful, imprudent, and extravagant. He looked after his master, strolling leisurely towards the house, and observed very slowly to himself and the stable-cat:

"Market Harboro'! Market Harboro'! Five days a week, bullock fences, and a wet country! Thorns, stubs, cracked heels, and his awful wear-and-tear of horses! No—I couldn't of benefited it of him!"

Eight-and-forty hours more saw old Isaac stamping drearily about on the wet pavement of that excellent sporting locality. Market Harborough, though perhaps the best head-quarters in the world for fox-hunting, can scarcely be termed a gay or very beautiful town. On a wet, drizzling afternoon in early winter, when twilight begins somewhere about 2.45, with no movable object visible save a deserted carrier's cart, and a small rain falling, which dulls the red-brick houses while it polishes the paved and slippery streets, it is, doubtless, a city suggestive of repose, not to say stagnation. Isaac was a temperament sufficiently susceptible of all unpleasant influences; and he began to wish heartily he hadn't come. A variety of disadvantages had occurred to him since his arrival. The price of forage and stabling he considered enormous. The conveniences for hot water were not what he was accustomed to at home. Hotspur did by no means feed well in a strange box: the horse had begun to look poorer day by day since he left the dealer's. And last night The Boy, who had never been from home before, certainly smelt of gun when he came to bed.

This youth—who, if he once had a name, must have long forgotten it, since he was never called anything but "The Boy"—was a continual thorn in the head groom's side. He had originally been taken solely on Isaac's recommendation, and had caused that worthy more trouble than all the rest of the establishment put together, horses, pigs, and the Cochran-Chinas to boot. He was a light, lathy lad, with a pretty face: a good horseman, considering his strength, or rather weakness; and had a knack of keeping his hands down; but he owned the usual fruits of boyhood—carelessness, forgetfulness,

stunned this affable functionary, "when I was out a hairin' some o' mine; and you're puttin' up close by my place. Come in, governor, and take something hot, to keep the cold off till we becomes better acquainted."

With this hospitable offer, Isaac found himself following his new friend into a cosy little tap-room, with red curtains and a sand-cd floor with apartment they had all to themselves; and whilst "something hot"—a delicious compound of yoke and egg, brown sugar, warm beer, and cordial gin—was being got ready, he had time to study the exterior of his new acquaintance.

Probably the utmost ingenuity of the tailor's art must have been exhausted in constructing trousers so tight as the pair which clung to that person's legs. Not a crease had they, nor a fold anywhere; and, unless the man slept in them, it was difficult to conceive how they could conveniently be used as articles of daily apparel. The person's boots, too, were neat, round-toed Wellingtons; his waistcoat descended far below his hips, and the waist-buttons of his grey-mixture coat were unusually low and wide apart. A cream-coloured silk neckcloth, secured by a horse-shoe pin, set off a pale, sharp-looking countenance, speaking of hot stables and dissipation, while the closest possible crop of hair and whiskers did justice to a shaven hat with an exceedingly flat brim. A few splashes of mud on the boots and trousers showed he had been lately on horseback; and he held up one of his thin little legs as he took his seat, and contemplated the stains with a grin of morbid satisfaction.

"Blessed if ever I see this country so deep!" he remarked after a pull at the flip. "How my horses will stand it, I know no more than the dead, the way the governor rides. We've only nine this year; and he's an awful hard man upon a horse."

"Nine!" exclaimed old Isaac, smacking his lips after the draught, which warmed the very cockles of his heart; and, being a man of few words, only added, "Well, now, to be sure!"

"He is awful hard upon 'em—that's the truth," continued the narrator. "It was only last week he says to me, 'Tiptop,' says he—my name's Tiptop—'what made Boddicea' (that's our bay mare by Bellerophon out of Blue Light)—'what made Boddicea stop with me under Carlton Clump to-day? Either she wasn't fit,' says he, or she isn't worth five shillings. 'Well, sir,' says I, 'the mare's a gross feeder,' says I, 'and you ride with rather a slack rein.' 'Slack rein be hanged!' says he. 'If ever such a thing happens again, you'd get the sack,' says he. So I up and told him I was ready to go whenever he could replace me; and the upshot of it was as he apologized quite like a gentleman; for, indeed, he wouldn't know whatever to do without me. He's a good man—my governor—enough; but he's hasty—that's our chestnut, as ran fourth for the Liverpool—you'd say he'd no discretion whatever; but they're all got their faults—all on 'em. What's yours? Can he ride?"

Discreet Isaac answered with a counter-question. "What's your governor's name?" said he, peeping once more into the waning pewter measure.

"The Honourable Crasher," replied Mr. Tiptop, not without an air of exultation. "A brother he is to the Earl of Helgoland. Now I've told you all about it bloke. There—you ease your mind in return, and give us your name."

"I'll let you know when I've seen the register," answer Isaac. "But it's a long way to the parish as owes me a settlement; and I'm afraid you'll have to wait, Mr. Tiptop, till I can communicate with you by post." Saying which Isaac finished the flip at a gulp, and walked off to seven o'clock stables without uttering another word.

CHAPTER V.

"BOOTS AND SADDLES."

London is in the way to everywhere. I have an old friend—an honest Lincolnshire squire—who, paying his sister a visit in Norfolk, always goes and returns by London. I do not think it is necessary to traverse Oxford Street in order to proceed from the Old County to Market Harborough; and yet on the day that witnessed his faithful groom's introduction to Mr. Tiptop, John Standish Sawyer might have been, and indeed was, seen crossing that crowded thoroughfare, with hasty steps and an air of considerable preoccupation.

The fact is, Mr. Sawyer was full of business. In the first place, it is needless to observe, he had been to have his hair cut—a rite seldom neglected by the true Englishman when entering upon a phase in his career. Also he had to purchase many articles of wearing apparel, such as are only

directions to Messrs. Puffy's foreman, an exceedingly smart and voluble disciple of St. Crispin.

"Not too thick," said the languid man, in a tone of utter physical exhaustion. "Man can't ride nicely, if he don't feel his stirrup through his boot;" and Mr. Sawyer nudged my elbow with a delightful wink, that seemed to say—"This swell, too, is a votary of Dianna!"

The languid man's silk-stockinged foot having been re-shod, he rose with great difficulty, and moved feebly in the direction of his brougham, from the window of which he addressed the shopman, in a faint voice, to forward "the tops when finished to my address 'at Market Harborough,'" and sank back amongst the cushions, completely overcome.

The talsmanic syllables raised the curiosity of my friend. "Who is it?" he whispered eagerly to the returning shopman; and that worthy, placing a chair and a fresh square of brown paper for his new customer, replied somewhat condescendingly—"That, sir; that's the Honourable Crasher, sir; hunting gentleman, and every particular about his tops. What can I do for you, sir?"

I had now an opportunity of observing the great warmth and thickness of the worsted stockings in which my friend kept his legs encased; also the stout proportions of those useful limbs, more adapted perhaps for the Highland kilt, than any other costume. Mr. Puffy's foreman saw at a glance the difficulties he would have to contend with, and prepared to subdue them.

"Very muscular gentleman!" said he; passing his tape round my friend's calf. "Great pedestrian powers, I should say. Inconvenient in the saddle; but will endeavor to rectify that. Excuse me, sir: take the liberty of asking whereabouts you generally hunt?"

"Hunt?" repeated the customer. "Oh! Leicestershire—Northamptonshire, all about there, in the neighborhood of Market Harborough." Mr. Sawyer spoke in a vague general sort of way, as if he was in the habit of pervading the whole of the grazing districts.

A cloud gathering on the foreman's brow.

"The Shires!" he rejoined, with a perplexed air; "that increases our difficulties very much indeed. I could have made you now, a particular neat provincial boot; but with this pattern it's exceedingly difficult to attain the correct appearance for the flying countries. I'll show you a pair here, sir, that the Honourable Crasher sent back this very morning, because they fell away the eighth-of-an-inch at the setting-on of the leg, and the Honourable's girth is at least two-and-a-half less than yours. You wouldn't like a pair of Napoleons, I presume. Very fashionable just now, sir. All the gentlemen wear them in the Vale of Aylesbury."

I confess I rather expected an outburst at this suggestion; my friend sharing with me a strong prejudice against what have been termed "Butcher-boots," but

"Prolonged endurance tames the blood,"

and Sawyer submitted with considerable patience to the foreman's promise, that they would do all in their power to make him two pair of top-boots, only inferior to those of the Honourable Crasher, and send them down to him in a little over a fortnight; or, "not to disappoint him, say punctually that day three weeks."

A thorough revival of gloves, neckcloths, etc., is soon made; and after a hearty luncheon at the railway station, I put my friend into a first-class carriage attached to the fast train, and wished him "Good sport," and "Good-bye," with a feeling somewhat akin to envy, as I remained in Smoky London, and he was whirled away into the soft fragrant country saturated with rain, and smiling itself to sleep in the calm grey light of a mild winter's afternoon. He had but one fellow-passenger, of whom more anon.

I wonder whether the reflections of other men in a railway-carriage, bowling through the midland counties at the rate of forty miles an hour, on such a day as I have described, are like my own. I honestly confess that a very few ideas, if they are favorite ones, are sufficient to fill my brain. As I speed along the level embankments, which give one such a commanding view of the surrounding country, I cannot help imagining myself on the back of a horse, sailing away from field to field after a pack of hounds. How well I can see my way!—how easy the fences look!—how readily I distinguish the place I should make him take off at, and the exact spot on which he would land, choosing unhesitatingly the soundest ridge, on which I should increase my pace so confidently down to that glassy brook, that looks as if you could hop over it from here, but which memory tells me is at least fifteen feet of water! How easy to get