

MARKET HARBOROUGH!

How Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires.

CHAPTER XV.

TAKING A HINT.

And left one in the stable! you old man! exclaimed the indignant Mr. Sawyer. "What the deuce have you done that for?"

"You'll want a second horse to-day," answered the groom. "You'll have a bid for Marathon before you've been on him half an hour. Leastways, if you've the discretion not to go a-showing him up."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Sawyer, with a dawning of intelligence oversteering his countenance, for he knew his servant's diplomatic talents of old.

"Only that they're all of 'em wanting a nag to win this here donkey race, as I call it; for none but a donkey would be concerned in such a tomfoolery; and Mr. Crasher, he's satisfied by this time that Marathon's the one as will do. You sit still upon him to-day, and keep jogging of him about, to qualify like, till the hounds find, and then open your mouth, and take what they offer you."

Mr. Sawyer had implicit confidence in his servant; still he could not help wishing to be further enlightened.

"You must have told some precious yarns," said he, "to make people believe Marathon could run up with a man in mud-boots!"

"I never said a word," answered Isaac; "people may believe their own eyes. Mr. Crasher and I, we tried 'im this very morning again Chance, and though she's the best in town, we beat her by more than a length."

"Marathon beat that mare!" exclaimed Mr. Sawyer, now completely taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Old Isaac's features were distorted once more into the mahogany grin.

Well, if Marathon didn't, Jack did," said he quietly. "You couldn't tell one from another in their clothing when it's dark, and the Dandy would win the Derby if it wasn't over half a mile."

It was too true; though the smart little nag never could stay a mile at a racing pace on his best days, he was as quick on his legs as a rabbit, and nothing could touch him, for five furlongs. Swaddled up in his clothes under the dubious twilight of a winter's morning, Mr. Tiptop never suspected him, and went home with the conviction that Marathon, and none other, was the horse that had beaten his favorite.

Mr. Sawyer laughed to himself as he rode Jack very gingerly on to Barkby.

CHAPTER XVI.

RIDING TO SELL.

If Mr. Sawyer had kept a hunting journal (which he didn't) he would have noted down the meet at Barkby, as one of those gorgeous spectacles, which makes an ineffaceable impression on the eye of the unpracticed beholder. There appeared to be more hounds, more horses, more servants, more carriages, and altogether a larger staff and retinue attached to the establishment, than he had ever hitherto seen paraded for the purpose of killing a fox. Nevertheless, with all this show, there was no mistake about the workmanlike tendency of the turnout. If the pack was numerous, it was also exceedingly loved and in faultless condition; the huntsman and whips looked as if they must have been born and bred for the especial offices they respectively filled, and the second-horse men, notwithstanding their numbers, appeared to be all cut from the same pattern. As for the hunters, Mr. Sawyer would have wished no better luck than to ride the worst of them at a hundred and fifty guineas. One magnificent bay with a side-saddle, destined, no doubt, to carry a beautiful and precious burden, quite put him out of conceit with his spur and the grey. As for Marathon: why he would never have got on him, in such company, had not the pleasing reflection crossed his mind, that perhaps to-day he should get rid of the brute alto-

gether. He, late as usual, and cantering to the front on Boadicea by Bellerophon out of the light—with the preoccupied air of a man who expects every moment to be on his back.

The Honorable, slightly amused, pulled up alongside. "Holloa, Sawyer," said he, "you'll be hard to beat to-day: the steep-chase seems uncommon full of running."

"It's only his play," answered Mr. Sawyer, modestly; indulging Marathon, who was preparing for another kick, with a vicious jerk of the curb. "I can't get got my old groom to give him work enough, and he's sent me a second horse to-day!"

This was meant to imply that the kicker was too valuable an animal for a mere hunter, and the Honorable interpreted it accordingly. As he rode alongside, he scanned the bay's points with the critical eye of a purchaser. A horse never looks so well as when he is trotting beside you on a strip of grass, excited by the presence of hounds. If backed by a good horseman, the voracious brute, under these circumstances, makes the most of his own appearance. Marathon going within himself, playing lightly with his bit, and bringing his hind legs under his girths at every step, was a very different horse from the same Marathon extended and laboring in a sticky ploughed field. I have already said he possessed many qualities sufficiently taking to the eye. As the Honorable examined him from his muzzle to his hoofs, he could not but acknowledge that the horse looked uncommonly like a galloper. "If he can only jump," thought Crasher, "and get pretty quick over his fences, he ought to be a rattler. I suppose I shall have to buy him."

Meanwhile Mr. Sawyer, who, as he remarked of himself "was not such a fool as he looked, but on the contrary resembled these 'still waters' which the German proverb says 'run so deep,'" conversed affably with his friend on a number of topics totally unconnected with horseflesh or the pleasures of the hunting-field. For once in his life, he did not want to get a start, that's the truth, and as his companion was one of those indolent, easy-going people whose fancy can be led astray without difficulty in any given direction, they were soon deep in a variety of subjects, originating no doubt with Mr. Sawyer, but to which, I am bound to say, he had never devoted much of his time or attention. They touched upon the last misadventure brought under the notice of Sir Cresswell Crosswell—discussed the agricultural prospects of the season, and on this theme it would be difficult to say which was most incapable of giving an opinion—argued on the importance of a movement for taking the duty off agars, and lastly got involved in the interminable question of what use the Volunteers would be, in the event of an invasion, and whether or not they would be killed to a man, when their conversation was cut short by an obvious bustle and confusion about a mile ahead of them, denoting that a fox had not only been found, but gone away.

"Done to a turn!" exclaimed the Honorable, interrupting his own explanation of how he should handle skirmishers if he was a general officer, which, by the way, it was fortunate for the skirmishers he was not. "What a bore! We shan't catch them in a week!" he added, turning Boadicea's head at the fence, and starting her at score through a deep ploughed field. In a few strides he had forgotten skirmishers, and Marathon, and Mr. Sawyer, and everything in the world except that he had lost his start.

The latter, watching the line "fine by degrees and beautifully less" on the horizon, rather congratulated himself, that Boadicea was completely out, and that there was now no temptation for him either to exert his own energies, or draw upon the failing powers of Marathon in the pursuit of that which he felt could scarcely be called pleasure. He jogged along the lane accordingly, contented enough, thinking what fun he would have on the grey, in the afternoon, with a second fox!

But a few of us can have hunted much without remarking a peculiarity connected with the chase, that occasions constant irritation and annoyance to its votaries. Have you never observed, that if you loose your chance of getting away with hounds, whether for procrastination, inattention, or the laudable objection entertained by a rational man to ride at a large fence, do what you will, you only succeed in increasing the distance between yourself and the object you wish to reach? In vain you "nick," and "skirt," and ride to points that you think likely to

such as are with them; these have, nevertheless, leisure to observe your movements, and to wonder why you are not amongst them. They are all your own particular friends, and you know you will be called upon, next hunting morning, to answer that difficult question—"What became of you, after we left you in the road at So-and-so?" Diana seems to delight in the rule of contrary. Like the rest of her sex, she takes you up and persecutes you, when you don't want her; and when you are most ardent and zealous in her pursuit, she rebuffs you and puts you down.

Nothing could be further from Mr. Sawyer's wishes than to find himself, on the occasion, in a conspicuous position with the Quorn hounds. Had he wanted to be singled out in front of all that talent and beauty, Marathon was certainly the last animal he would have chosen on which to make an appearance in such choice company; nevertheless, the force of circumstances is beyond the control even of men like Mr. Sawyer, and however averse he might be to "achieve greatness," he found, most unwillingly, "greatness thrust upon him." For awhile he had lost sight of everybody, and was in the act of pulling out his cigar-case to enjoy one of his Larnagags in solitude and repose, proposing to hang on the line, keeping a little down wind, and as soon as he should spy the second-horses, mount the grey, and send Marathon straight home. Crasher, he thought, would buy the horse without asking any more questions.

Scarcely, however, had he got his weed fairly under weigh, than the music of a pack of hounds broke suddenly on his ear from behind a high impervious bullfinch that sheltered one side of the grass-lane along which he was proceeding so leisurely. "Confound the brutes!" said Sawyer to himself, "here they are again!" As he opened the gate through which the track led into a sixty-acre pasture, the whole pack swept under his horse's nose, running with sufficient energy to denote what sportsmen call a holding scent; they carried a capital head, and were forcing their fox at a pace which kept him going, but was not good enough to come up with him.

It was just the sort of gallop that enables people who ride to hounds to look about them, and enjoy not only the sport, but the accompanying humors of the scene.

In these days, a real quick thing is such an affair of hurry, that the lucky few who are in it cannot spare a moment's attention from anything but their horses' ears.

Had he been riding a donkey, it was not in Mr. Sawyer's nature to abstain from turning the animal's head towards the hounds under such temptation; moreover, he distinguished amongst the first flight his Harborough companions, including the pale face of the Honorable Crasher, who by "bucketing" Boadicea most unmercifully, had got there somehow, and appeared quite satisfied with his situation. What could our friend do, but cut in, and go to work at once?

Marathon, excited by the turmoil, was fain to set his back up once more. He found, however, that the kicking was now all the other way. Taking him in a grasp that would have lifted a ton, Mr. Sawyer drove his spurs into the half-bred brute, and set him going close to the hounds at the best pace he could command. For a short distance, and when held well together, Marathon could stride away in a very imposing form. The sensation of having a lead is, in itself, provocative of emulation; behind our friend were four or five intimate companions who were not likely to let him hear the last of any sentence of shirking that should come under their notice. Close on their track were the flower of Leicestershire; and these again were succeeded, so to speak, by a whole army of camp-followers, "maddening in the rear." Had the styx been in front of him, he must have charged it "in or over."

Instead of the waters of Acheron, however, there was nothing more formidable in his line than a straggling, over-grown bullfinch at the far end of the field; just such a fence, indeed, as Marathon was in the habit of declining, but yet which he hoped the turmoil behind, the general excitement, and the persuasive powers of his own spurs, would enable him to induce his horse to face. He had plenty of time to scan it as he approached. Half a mile or so of ridge and furrow, even at a hunt's best pace, gives leisure for consideration. Ere the hounds had strung through it in single file, he was aware of a wide ditch to him; on the further side was obviously a grass-field, and an uncertainty.

Marking him with his eye the weakest place, through which, nevertheless, he could

was amusing though alarming. Four imperial crowners at one and the same instant—four loose horses galloping wildly away—four red coats rising simultaneously from Mether Earth—eight top-booted legs shuffling in ludicrous haste after the departing steeds. Had our friend been Briareus himself, he could not have caught all their horses. He was a man, however, who seldom lost an opportunity, and was not likely to miss such a chance as the present. Selecting Boadicea, he galloped after her, and succeeded in pinning her against a pound: notwithstanding that the mare lashed out at him more than once, he brought her back in triumph to her panting owner.

Meanwhile, the four dismounted sportsmen condoled breathlessly with each other, as they labored over the grassy slope.

"I'm but a poor hand at this game," observed Struggles, who did not fancy carrying his own weight across country.

"I wish I'd gone faster at it," said Sawyer, who had been grinding his teeth and hardening his heart the whole way up the field.

"My chestnut mare would have jumped it!" exclaimed Major Brush, inwardly registering a vow to abstain from "oxers" for the future; whilst the Honorable, though he held his tongue, was thinking what a capital horse that was of Sawyer's and dismally reflecting that if Boadicea hadn't kicked at him when he was down, he never would have been such a tailor as to let her go.

"Catch hold!" said Mr. Sawyer, throwing the mare's reins to her owner, whose gratitude he thereby earned for the rest of his life. "There's no hurry," he added, as the Honorable, in a coat plastered with mud and a hat stove, dived wildly at his stirrup; "they've over-run it a mile back, and checked in the next field."

The latter part of the sentence was true enough. His quick eye had shown him the pack at fault, as he secured Boadicea in the corner where the pound stood; the former was a bit of what theatrical people call "gag." It was as much as to say, "Whilst you fellows are hustling and spurring, and tumbling about, I am so well mounted that I can observe matters as coolly as if I was hunting in a balloon."

It was not without its effect on his listener. As they rode through the hand-gate together in the enclosure where the hounds were at fault, the Honorable Crasher no longer scanned Marathon with the eye of a purchaser. He looked on the horse now as his own property. He was determined to have him.

By some mysterious law of nature, whenever one individual succeeds either in what is termed pounding a field, or in getting such a start of them that nobody shall have a chance of catching him whilst the pace holds—and this, he it observed, is no everyday occurrence in countries where the best riders in England congregate for the express purpose of riding as well as they can—it invariably happens that the immediate failure of scent, or some such untoward contingency, robs the lucky one of his anticipated triumph. On the present occasion, much to Mr. Sawyer's delight, they never hit off their fox again. By degrees, the tail of the field straggled up, having found their way by every available gate and gap; then came the second horses, carefully ridden, cool, and comparatively clean, not having turned a hair; lastly, arrived a man in a gig, by a convenient bridle-road, hotter than any one present, wiping his face on a coloured handkerchief, which he afterwards put in the crown of his hat.

Whilst sandwiches were being munch'd, and silver horns drained of their contents, ginger-cordial, orange-brandy V. O. P., and other enticing fluids, Mr. Sawyer giving The Boy stringent orders about taking Marathon home. He could not feel thoroughly comfortable till that imposter was fairly out of sight, and he should find himself established on the assuming little grey.

When he had made up his mind, the Honorable Crasher was a man of few words. Refreshed by a mouthful of sherry, not unacceptable after a rattling fall, and comfortably perched on the back of Confidence, a delightful animal that a child could ride, and perhaps the best and safest hunter in his stable, he ranged alongside of our friend, and plunged at once in *medias res*.

"So you want to sell the bay horse you have just sent home?" said he, with none of the hesitation and beating about the bush to which Mr. Sawyer had hitherto been accustomed in his horse-dealing operations. "If you do, and will name the price you ask for him, altogether."

CHAPTER XVII.

"TEMPTED TO BUY."

And now for the well-pleased John Starfish Sawyer, came in what may be called the "sweet of the day." His horse disposed of, two hundred and sixth-two pounds to shillings in his pocket, for the Honorable Crasher's word was as good as a bank-bill, and the wiry little grey under him, an animal for which he had not given a fourth of the above sum, and yet in whose pace and fencing he had the utmost confidence, with the additional delight of a certain find for the second fox—all these influences combined were enough to put a man in thorough good humor with himself. To do our friend justice, he was not of a mercenary disposition, but having been kept exceedingly short of funds during his youth, and in those hard times hunted under considerable pecuniary difficulties, he had insensibly imbibed a horror of what he called "riding under too much money." "A man must have good nerve," he used to say, "who is not afraid to risk a couple of hundred every time he jumps a fence;" and I really believe he would shove a forty-pound screw along with greater satisfaction than the winner of the Liverpool. The grey was a right good little nag, easy to turn, quick at his fences, and thoroughly accustomed to his master's hand. It is wonderful what a deal of time is saved by a horse that is pleasant to ride, and how rapidly a moderate galloper, with a fine mouth, and quick upon his legs, can slip over a country compared with an animal that may have the pace of a racehorse, but requires a segundo bridle, and a hundred-acre field to turn him in. Mr. Sawyer drew the curb-rein gently through his fingers, struck his heels down, and mingled in the crowd upon the best possible terms with himself.

As the smoking, laughing, chattering cavalcade trotted merrily along, he had an opportunity of scanning many well-known individuals whom his business advocations of the morning had prevented his hitherto recognizing. "The talent," as it is called, was present, from Melton—Melton, once the very metropolis of the hunting world, now, thanks to railroads, rivalled, if not surpassed, by Leicester and Market Harborough; and yet, what a nice place it is! Who that has ever spent a season in the cosy, cheerful, joyous little town, but would wish to turn the stream of time, and live those golden days and pleasant nights over again?—would wish to be galloping his covert-hack once more through the fragrant air and under the dappled sky of a February morning, with a good horse to ride from Ranksborough Gorse or Barkby Holt, as his day's amusement, and a choice of at least a couple of invitations, offering him the pleasantest society and the best dinner in England, for his evening's gratification?

It is not more than thirty years since Nimrod wrote his celebrated "Quarterly Review Run"—the best description of fashionable hunting that has ever yet been printed, though many a hand, as light upon the bridle as the pen, has portrayed the same subject since then—not more than thirty years, certainly and the ways of Melton are but little changed, only, of the *dramatis personæ* there are not many left. Of those who charged the flooded Whissendine so boldly, the majority have already crossed the Styx. Nevertheless, a few of the old lot may still be seen ready, when the hounds run, to face "wood and water," as of yore.

Mr. Sawyer, for an unimaginative man, was the least thing in the world of a horse-worshipper. As he rode along, contemplating from behind them the fine powerful frame and the slim and graceful figure of two Meltonians, who for many years have shone, a couple of *lucida sedira*, in the front rank, and of whom, indeed, so fast have they always gone it may almost be said that

"Fasting Time toils after them in vain,"

he was accosted by the pleasant, gentleman-like personage with whom he had spent an agreeable quarter of an hour in the hotel, on that memorable day when his ambition had so completely "cooked the goose" of Hotspur with the Pychloy.

"Good morning, sir," said this affable individual, bringing his horse alongside of our friend, with a bow such as nobody in the Old Country could ever have perpetrated. "I thought you'd be out to-day, so I've a couple here for you to look at."

When a nobleman not only touches his hat, but takes it off to you, at the same time offering you "a couple of horses to look at," as if he were about to make you a present of