

...general idea of a war, and to imagine with what feelings of relief Mr. Sawyer observed the now dauntless pack turning short back. The fox was evidently hard pressed, and dodging for his life.

The Rev. Dove, with an exceedingly red face, a broken stirrup leather, and a dirty coat, viewed him crawling slowly down the side of a hedgerow. In an instant his hat was in the air, and Charles, surrounded by his hounds, was galloping to the point indicated. Two sharp turns with the fox sight—a great enthusiasm and hurry amongst these sportsmen who were fortunate enough to be present, and who rode, one and all, considerably faster than their horses could go—a confused mass of hounds rolling over each other in the corner of a field—Charles off his horse, and amongst them, with a loud “Who-whoop!”—and the run is concluded, to the satisfaction of all lookers-on, and the irrepressible disgust of the many equestrians who started “burning with high hope,” and are now struggling and stopping over the adjoining parish, in different stages of exhaustion. The Honorable Crasher congratulates Mr. Sawyer on his success; also takes this opportunity of introducing his friend to the M. F. H. A few courteous sentences are interchanged; Messrs. Savage, Struggles, and Brush propose a return to Harborough; cigars are offered and lit; everybody seems pleased and excited. John Standish Sawyer has attained the object for which he left home—he has seen a good run, made a number of pleasant acquaintances, launched once more into that gay world, which he now thinks he abandoned too soon. He ought to be delighted with his success; but, alas for human triumphs!

“Ay! even in the fount of joy,
Some bitter drops the draught alloy.”

and our friend, with many feigned excuses and a forced expression of countenance, lingers behind his companions, and plods his way homewards alone.

CHAPTER XII.

“DEAD FOR A DUCAT.”

It is needless for me to observe that Mr. Sawyer was one of those individuals who are described in common parlance as not having been “born yesterday.” He had lived long enough in this superficial world of ours to realize the prudence of “keeping his own counsel,” just as he kept the key of his own cellar at The Grange; and he would no more have thought of entrusting his dearest friend with the one than the other.

Accordingly, when he felt certain ominous thumping against the calves of his legs, which he knew to be “Hotspur,” he resolved to conceal it as possible from every eye that untoward falling of so good an animal. And, with considerable judgment, he waited till his friends were out of sight ere he dismounted, and led his jade steeled into a barn, which he opened at hand, there to recover himself a little, and rest a bit, and then, if possible, to make his way home in the dark, and trust to chance for some excuse to account for his delay, when he met them again at the dinner-table.

Perhaps the reason is, that in those fast times a condition so much understood—for we cannot admit the uncomplimentary excuse that hounds do not run now as formerly—why horses stop so much less often in the hunting field than they did in the palmy days of Musters and Ashteton Smith, and “the d-d Quorants,” who were always either “showing” or “being shown the trick” some fifty years ago. Then a hunter’s reputation was as fragile as a sultana’s, and was guarded as jealously. Not only must he be “sans peur,” but also “sans reproche.” And the efforts of these lords to preserve the character of their treasures were

brilliant, and not above a certain degree of extravagance. “This good-looking man,” he argued, “notwithstanding his black coat, must be a Viscount at least!”

“I’m going as far as Market Harborough,” he observed meekly. “It cannot be more than seven or eight miles. I shall hope to accomplish that.”

“Lucky for you!” replied the other. I want to get to Melton, if I can. I’ve a back here at Welford, if this beggar can take me there. He’s short of work, poor devil! and could hardly wag coming up the hill. I should say your horse would die.”

This was an unpleasant and rather startling way of putting the matter. Mr. Sawyer had not indeed considered it from that point of view. Though a man of energy, he felt somewhat helpless; as who would not in a similar position? Eight miles from home, in a strange country, encumbered with a dying horse!

“What had I better do?” inquired he, rather plaintively to the unknown.

Noblemen though he were, the latter seemed to be an energetic personage enough, and pretty familiar with the usages of the stable. Between them they made poor Hotspur as comfortable as circumstances would admit, the unknown conversing with great condescension and volubility the whole time.

“What you want for this country,” said he, rubbing away the while at Hotspur’s ears and forehead, “is a strong stud. If you’ve sport hereabouts, it pulls two horses so to pieces. Now this is a nice little well-bred horse enough, but he hasn’t size, you see, and scope; there’s nothing of him; consequently, when you drop into a run, he goes as long as he can, and it’s all U P! Mine, now, would have gone on for ever, if he’d had condition; but I only bought him ten days ago, and he’s never had a gallop. Nothing like good ones—big ones—an’ plenty of ‘em! Look at him now; he’s getting better every moment.”

Without subscribing entirely to this statement, Mr. Sawyer humbly asked his new friend if he himself was very strong in horses?

“Not very,” was the reply. “I’ve got eleven, however, at my place, which I shall be very happy to show you whenever you like to come over. Every one of them up to more than your weight,” he added, casting his eye over Mr. Sawyer’s much-battered figure. “I shall be happy to give you a mount on any one of them you fancy; and you will know them better than I can tell you.”

Our friend was penetrated with gratitude. Visions stole over him of an eligible acquaintance, that would soon ripen into friendship, with this most affable of peers; of a charming country house, agreeable women, billiards, music, dry champagne, and flirtation—himself an honored guest; of an introduction, perhaps, through his noble ally, into the best London society and everything that he had always thought most desirable, but hitherto considered beyond his reach. “Doubtless,” reasoned Mr. Sawyer, “he has remarked my riding, and taken a fancy to me. On further observation, he finds my manners are those of a perfect gentleman; and he is determined we shall become friends. How lucky Hotspur was so beat that I came in here!”

Accordingly, he thanked his new acquaintance with considerable *empressment*, and assured him that “he should take the first opportunity of taking his hospitality.”

The unknown looked a little astounded. “Well,” he replied, “if you don’t mind roughing it a bit, I dare say I can find room for you, even in little crib; but you can see the horse out hunting, and ride them too, just the same.”

“How considerate these noblemen are!” thought Mr. Sawyer, “and how playful! I dare say his ‘little crib,’ as he calls it, is three times the size of The Grange. But he insists on mounting me, all the same.” So he thanked him once more, and proposed

during which he had leisure to think of his sins and his debts. He smothered the accusing voice and its painful accessories by a course of severe study, and so got the anodyne and the information at once.

Mr. Sawyer’s reflections were cheering enough till he began to get tired. He liked the idea of visiting the hospitable nobleman with whom he had lately parted, and picturing to himself the very pleasant visit he hoped to pay him, and the accession of importance would doubtless invest him amongst his Harborough friends. He only wished he had inquired his name; but then, he was evidently a personage whom everybody knew, and it was better not to betray his ignorance. Also, when the written invitation arrived—as unquestionably it would—with its armorial bearings, and signature in full, he would know all about it. Before he had tramped through the mud for a mile, he began to think he had rather “got into a good thing.”

Ere long, it began to rain—first of all, an ominous drizzle, that seemed like conjuring; then a decided pour, such as runs into the nape of a man’s neck and the tops of his boots, and wets him through in about a quarter of an hour. It was not much fun, changing the fluid in his soles; so he climbed stiffly into the saddle, and was disagreeably aware that Hotspur, besides being thoroughly tired, was also undoubtedly lame.

By degrees, his spirits fell considerably. He began to think of the Honorable Crasher, with his off hand manner and his nine hunters. He remembered a certain fable of the earthenware vessel that sailed downstream among the iron pots. How was he to hold his own in the fast going set which he had entered? He had better, perhaps, have contented himself with the old county, and stayed quietly at home. The comforts of The Grange presented themselves in painful contrast to the muddy road along which he was plodding—even to the smoky bedroom and dingy parlor which would receive him at Harborough. Though the rain had moderated, he jogged along the dark highway, now squelching into puddles on the side, now cursing the stones lately laid down in the middle—in either case, to the equal discomfort of poor Hotspur—and felt himself more unhappy and out of humor every yard he went.

Presently, the horse quickened his pace of his own accord; and the sound of hoofs behind him produced its usual inspiring effect on the rider.

“Company, at all events,” observed Mr. Sawyer, aloud. “Hold up, you brute!” he added, as Hotspur made an egregious “bite,” that nearly landed him on his nose.

Ere long, the new arrivals ranged alongside of him. They were a lady and gentleman, on exceedingly tired horses. What a piece of luck! They were no other than the Reverend and Miss Dove!

She knew him at once, though it’s so dark,” thought our friend, with considerable gratification, as the damsel, adapting her own pace to that of the jaded Hotspur without difficulty, accosting him by name.

“How luckily, too!” said she, in her joyous tones. “We shall keep each other company all the way to Harborough. Papa and I were just saying how lonely the road was, after dark; and our poor horses are so tired, they can hardly walk.”

“Lucky indeed, for me,” replied Mr. Sawyer, gallantly, adding with considerable *empressment*—for it was dark enough to give a shy man confidence—“Do you know I was just thinking of you?”

Two it were had dropped behind to light a cigar. Miss Dove seemed to have no objection to receive this statement; of the truth of which I have myself, however, strong doubts. She wedged her horse a little nearer her companion, and answered laughingly.

“Indeed! A penny for your thoughts, then. I should like to know what you could

do about now,” he added, looking upwards, first at the heavens, and then, as far as the darkness would permit, in his companion’s face.

“I’m certain you’re a great quiz,” answered Miss Dove to this harmless observation. “I told Mamma I was quite afraid of you, the day you came to luncheon at the Rectory. I dare say you think us all wild savages here, compared with what people are in your own country. By the bye, your country place is somewhere near London, I think you said?”

Mr. Sawyer did not remember saying anything of the kind, but he looked insinuating, which he need not have done, as it was so dark, and replied,

“Forty minutes by rail. I can run up, and do my shopping, and back again, between luncheon and dinner. I’m only half a mile from a station.”

Then he had a country place. So far, so good. In discussing him with Mamma, the latter had inclined to think not, but Miss Dove held strongly to her own opinion. She knew the country gentleman’s cut, she said; and in this instance she was right.

“Do you farm much?” was her next inquiry, putting the unconscious Sawyer through his facings, as only a woman can.

It was evidently all right. A man who had land to keep, and a place of his own, was nearly none of your penniless interlopers such as visit the grass at intervals, like the locust, and eat it bare, and fly off and are seen no more. Here was a bee worth catching; with a hive, and honey, and flowers of its own—a good, honest humble-bee, with plenty of buzz, and no sting.

By this time the lights of Harborough were twinkling in the distance, and the Rev. Dove, whose horse had coughed more than once, thought it advisable to trot forward and get the carriage ready; whilst his daughter and Mr. Sawyer came on at a foot’s pace, the latter gallantly affirming that he would take the greatest possible care of his charge, and wishing, as soon as they were alone, either that somebody else would overtake them, and so break the *tete-a-tete*, or else that he could find something to say, else she must think him so confoundingly stupid. It was agreeable too, when he got a little more used to it. The girl talked on in her gentle, pleasant voice, of the hounds, and the people and the country. Her tones had caught the languor of slight fatigue, and were very soft and silvery in the ear. More than once he wished it was not too dark too see the long eye-lashes resting on her cheek, those silky excrescences having made no slight impression on Mr. Sawyer. He felt quite sorry when the turnpike denoted their approach to the confines of the town at which their ride must cease. He could not conceive now how he could have been so out of spirits not an hour ago.

“When shall I see you again?” he ventured to ask as their horses’ hoofs clattered on the stony pavement, and he saw the lamps of the Reverend’s carriage glowing like the eyes of some monster ready to carry off his Andromeda. As he spoke he even ventured to place his hand on her horse’s neck; and this was a great stretch of gallantry for Mr. Sawyer.

“Oh, you’ll be at the ball, of course, even if we don’t meet out hunting before that.”

“Ball!” repeated our friend in amazement. “What ball do you mean?”

“Why, the Harborough Ball,” answered the young lady. “Everybody will be there, Captain Struggles, Major Brush—even Mr. Crasher, though he won’t do much in the way of dancing. Why, it is held at your hotel. The music will keep you awake all night, so you may as well go.”

“I will, if you’ll dance with me,” rejoined Mr. Sawyer, with the air of a man who is “in for a penny, in for a pound.”

And he felt quarer than he had ever done about Miss Mexico when she murmured a gentle affirmative. Nay, when he had

day after tomorrow, when the Rectory, in a long-backed coat, a shaved hat, and the best boots and breeches the art of man can possess, might be seen at intervals, during a run with the first fox, now opening a hand-gate, now creeping cautiously through a gap, and anon cantering, with a Newmarket seat, and his hauds down, up some grassy slope, in front of soldiers, statesmen, hereditary legislators, and justices of the peace, as if not only the field, but the county, was his own.

Old Isaac, on the contrary, though subject to occasional “rustiness,” and imbued with a strong aversion to what he called being “put upon,” was ready and willing to turn his hand to anything, if he thought such versatility would really conduce to Mr. Sawyer’s advantage. With the assistance of The Boy—who, indeed, since his arrival at Harborough, had been constantly incriminated—the old man looked after the three hunters, the hack, and his master, with considerable satisfaction. He had even spare time on his hands, now that he was removed from the responsibility of the pigs, the poultry, and the potatoes at The Grange.

It was in one of these moments of leisure that the bold idea of getting the better of Mr. Tiptop entered the old groom’s mind. I need not, therefore, specify that, under his calm demeanor, Isaac concealed a disposition of considerable enterprise and audacity.

Now the manner in which he proposed to take advantage of the acquaintance he had lately struck up with Mr. Tiptop was as follows:—By dint of his own sagacity and diplomatic reticence, he resolved that he would prevail on that gentleman to purchase his master that the redoubtable bay horse Marathon should be transferred to his own stables; and, to explain Isaac’s anxiety for his consummation, I must be permitted to describe the appearance and general capabilities of that peculiar animal.

Marathon, then, was a long bay horse, about fifteen-two, with short legs, a round barrel, well ribbed up, and an enormous swish-tail, of which he made considerable use. He was one of those doubtfully shaped animals which are condemned alike by the eye of the totally inexperienced and the consummate judges of horseflesh, but which are much coveted by that large class of purchasers with whom “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

And here I must remark how correct is usually our first impression of a horse; and how seldom ladies—who judge of these, as of all other articles, at a glance—are mistaken in their opinion of the animal, if indeed they condescend to turn their attention to his “make and shape.”

The worst point about Marathon was his head, which was coarse, and denoted a sulky temper; but he carried a beautiful coat; could stride away for a mile or so, on light ground, with his hind legs under him, in the form of a race-horse; and in short was never so graphically described as by Mr. Job Sloper, when he sold him for sixty guineas and a set of phaeton harness to his present owner: “If that there horse ain’t worth fifteen sovereigns—that’s all.”

And Mr. Sawyer has since confessed to himself, on more than one occasion, that Job Sloper was right.

Mr. Tiptop liked Isaac, because he thought him an original; and the swell groom, who was as epicurean in his tastes as if he had been a Peer, took the pleasure of his friend’s society over a can of egg-flip and a pipe of Cavendish daily, after evening stables; during which convivalities, the hard-headedness peculiar to the aborigines of the Old Country was of infinite service to the latter, who wormed out all the secrets of the Honorable Crasher’s stable, without betraying his own.

To be Continued.