

MARKET HARBOURGH!

How Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires.

CHAPTER VI

A MERRY GO-ROUND.

Again, I say, nothing but good wine will wash the infection down. Let him, then, where port is new, or where claret unbound, be ware how he thus trespasses on the forbearance of his guests.

Of course they killed their first check the first day they gradually took to hunting, and so to running once more. Mr. Sawyer distinguished himself by describing a very perfect semicircle with Hotspur, ever some miles near Stanford Hall. The roan was tired, and his rider somewhat, so a downfall was the inevitable result. Nevertheless, he fell honorably enough, and hoped no one but himself knew how completely the accident was occasioned by utter exhaustion on the part of his steed.

There is no secret so close as that between a horse and his rider. Up to the first check, Hotspur had realized his owner's fondest anticipations. "He's fit for a king!" ejaculated the delighted Sawyer, when they flew so gallantly over the brook. Even after the hounds had run steadily on for the best part of an hour, the animal's character had only sunk to "not thoroughly fit to go," but when they arrived at the Hemplow Hills, and the pack, still holding a fair hunting pace, began that choking ascent, he could not disguise from himself that the roan was about "told out." They are indeed no joke, those well known Hills, when they present their red after fifty minutes over the strongest part of Northamptonshire. A sufficiently picturesque object to the admirer of nature, they prove an unwelcome obstacle to the follower of the chase, and it was no disgrace to poor Hotspur that, although he struggled gamely to the top, he was reduced to a very feeble and abortive attempt at a trot when he reached the flat ground on the summit. Ere long this degenerated to a walk; and I leave it to my reader, if a sportsman, to imagine with what feelings of relief Mr. Sawyer observed the now distant 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 irremediable 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; organs are offered and at every body seems pleased and excited. John Staudish Sawyer has attained the object for which he left home—he has seen a good run, made a number of pleasant acquaintances, latched 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!

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

CHAPTER VII.

It is needless for me to observe that Mr. Sawyer was one of those individuals who are so common in common parlance as not having been born yesterday. He had lived through the whole of this superficial world of ours, and the produce of "keeping his eyes open" had kept the key of his

as ingenuous as they were ludicrous. One factious nobleman actually got a tired favourite home next day right through the streets of Melton, disguised as the middle horse of a cart-team; nor did all the lynx-eyes, ready to watch for the "casualties consequent on a cupper, discover the identity of one of the best nags in Leicestershire, under the weather-beaten winkers and shabby harness of a four horse waggon. Mr. Sawyer trusted to the cloud of night for the same immunity.

He had just stabled his steed in the warmest corner of the shed, and, having taken off his own coat to fling over the animal's heavy quarters, was beginning to speculate on the probable rheumatism that would succeed this imprudence, when, to his astonishment and disgust, the door was darkened by another figure, and his solitude disturbed by the entrance of a man and horse, in all probability seeking the same shelter for the same cause.

The new-comer was a remarkably good-looking person, extremely well got-up, particularly as regarded his nother extremities, and our friend at once recognized him as having been very forward with the hounds at different stages of the run. His horse, a well-bred bay, was "done to a turn." When Sawyer looked at its drooping head and leaving flanks, it seemed to put him quite in conceit with the roan. For a moment neither spoke a word—then the absurdity of the situation seemed to strike them simultaneously, and they both burst out laughing.

"What? They've cooked your goose as well as mine!" said the stranger, in off-hand tones, producing at the same time a cigar-case, on which our friend could not help fancying he deserved a coronet, and proceeding to light a most tempting-looking weed.

"A very likely day to do it, too," he added, glancing, as Sawyer thought, somewhat contemptuously at himself and steed. "The pace for the first twenty minutes was alarming, and the country awfully deep. I should say you'll hardly get that horse home to-night."

The suggestion was neither flattering nor consolatory. Mr. Sawyer felt half inclined to be offended; but he thought of the silver cigar-case, and swallowed two retort uncourteous that rose to his lips. He was a true Briton, and not above a weakness for the peerage. "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 this."

"Lucky for you!" replied the other. "I want to get to Melton, if I can. I've a hack 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 comascension and volubility the whole time.

"What you want for this country, said he, rubbing away the wine 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—and 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-beamed 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 gratified with gratitude.

that, as it was dark, and the horses were somewhat recovered, they should endeavor to make their way home.

"When will you come?" asked the unknown, as they emerged into the open air—both horses coughing, one lame before, and the other all round. "I've a bay that would carry you admirably, and a brown, and indeed, a chestnut that you would like. I'd take five hundred for the three, and they're so perfect, a child might ride them."

"What a cordial, good fellow!" thought Mr. Sawyer. "He wishes me to enjoy my visit, and ride his horses with thorough confidence, so he tells me of their great value and perfect tuition. I have indeed 'lit upon my legs, as the saying is." "Thank you," he replied aloud. "My time is my own, and I will pay you a visit whenever it is perfectly convenient to you to receive me. My name is Sawyer, and I am staying at Harborough. Perhaps you will kindly write and let me know."

"Very well, sir," answered the other, muttering something about business; but touching his hat, as Mr. Sawyer thought, with all the politeness of the old school, as their ways diverged; and he jogged off to get his hack, leaving our friend to plod on afoot by the exhausted Hotspur, in the darkening twilight, cheered but by one solitary star, which threatened to be soon eclipsed by the clouds that were rising fast in the sighing night-wind.

It was no such enviable position, after all. Seven miles at least had Mr. Sawyer to go; and he must walk, or ride at a foot's pace, every yard of the way. The sky was ominous of rain, and the Laranagas were all smoked out; and poor Hotspur was unquestionably "done to a turn."

These are the moments which the most thoughtless of men cannot but devote to reflection. There is nothing like pace to drive away unpleasant considerations; but when two miles an hour is the best rate we can command, black Care is pretty sure to abandon his seat on the caudle of the saddle, and, springing nimbly to the front, grins at us in the face. I remember well how a fast-going youth—a friend of my boyhood, now, alas! gone to Jericho via Short-street, and with whom I have spent many a pleasant hour that might have better employed—used to read with great energy whilst he was dressing. It was the only time, he said, that his conscience could get the better of him, and 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 continuing, 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, but, cutting the mud 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 table of the earthenware vessel that sailed down-stream among the iron pots. How was he to hold his own in the last 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—ever 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 squeaking 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

have been thinking about me in the dark, after a day's hunting."

"I was thinking how well you rode," answered Mr. Sawyer, who, not much versed in the ways of womankind, saw he might have said something more flattering, but, like a frightened bather, put one foot in, and then withdrew it. It was not his line, you see, as he said himself, and consequently he felt a little awkward at first with the ladies.

The latter, however, are all cases strenuous advocates for the "sliding scale" rather than the "fixed duty." I think I have observed that they are usually as ready to bring a shy man "on" as they are to keep a forward one back. There is a certain temperance at which they consider you malleable; so they heat you up, or cool you down to it, with no small chemical skill. Sometimes, but rarely, they burn their own fingers in the process.

"I was wondering how you would get home," said the young lady very innocently after a pause. "Your poor horse looked so very tired; but, then, he carried you famous ly. Papa and I know you by your cap—didn't we, Papa?"

Papa, who had now come up, corroborated his daughter; but the Reverend was somewhat abstracted and unobservant. He was not quite satisfied with the way his horse had carried him. He doubted whether the animal had pace. He doubted whether he had blood. He doubted whether he had courage. In truth, he was thinking just then whether he hadn't better sell him to Mr. Sawyer.

That worthy was recovering his lost ground, by expressing many tender hopes that Miss Dove was not very tired. "She had had such a long day; and it was so wet for a lady to be out; and how would she ever get home all that way into Leicestershire?"

"Oh, we have a carriage at Harborough," answered the fair object of all these anxieties; "and I don't mind being late half so much as Papa does. I do so like being out at night. Do you know, though I am so fond of riding, I am rather romantic, Mr. Sawyer?"

"Oh, indeed! Yes, of course," rejoined our friend, seeing another opening, but not getting at it quite so readily as if it had been in a bullfinch. "It's very pleasant sometimes, particularly in the summer; and horses always go best at night. But, there's no moon now," he added, looking wistfully 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 feelings, 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 humbled 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 *tere-a-tere*, or else that he could find something to say, else she must think him so confoundedly 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 to see the long eye-lashes resting on her cheek, those silky

eyebrows having made no slight impression

put her carefully into papa's carriage, and tucked her up as assiduously as if she was going to the North Pole, he actually whispered, "You won't forget your promise?" while he shook hands, and wished her "Good-bye." Nor did the scarce perceptible pressure with which that promise was ratified tend to restore our friend's equanimity in the least.

He was not a ball going man, far from it. Also, I question whether it is not a breach of privilege that you rest at an hotel should be broken for a whole night by the thumping of feet, the squeaking of fiddles, the Scotch Quadrilles, and the monotonous "Tempete," whilst your dinner and general comfort for two days previous to, and two days after the solemnity, is reduced to positive misery. Nevertheless, Mr. Sawyer caught himself repeating more than once during the evening—which, by the way, he spent in an atmosphere of smoke, with Struggles, Brush, Savage, and the Honorable Crasher—"Ball! ball!—was ever anything so lucky? Go!—of course I'll go! In fact, I promised: and perhaps she'll dance with me twice!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"AFTER DARK."

I never can understand upon what principle the rate of a groom's wages is always inversely proportioned to the work he performs. For instance, Major Brush's excellent domestic—a bat-man, of longly proportions and military exterior—brushed his master's clothes, prepared his master's clothes, prepared his master's breakfast, took the first horse to covert, and rode the second on occasion, cleaning either or both, if necessary, when they came in, upon a stipend which would barely have kept Mr. Tiptop in Cavendish and blacking.

The latter worthy, with a whole troop of helpers under his command, never seemed to have a moment to spare for anything but the routine duties of his station. As for riding a second horse, or remaining out on a wet day, beyond his accustomed dinner-hour, his master would as soon have thought of bidding him dig potatoes! No: if Mr. Tiptop went out hunting at all, it was generally on a third horse in excellent condition, that wanted a couple of hours' preparation for the day after to-morrow, when the rider, in a long-backed coat, a shaven 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 hands 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 inebriated—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 procure a horse master that the redoubtable bay horse Marathon should be transferred to his own stables; and, to explain Isaac's a ricty 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 wish-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 judge 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