

"Why he's here, he knows me, but I'll give him a good half if he stumps up; 's'pose you and I drive over in the tax cart and see him—you tell him you can manage it, and leave me to tell him how."

"All right, Nobbleall, I'm your man, but I must have Jim Crow cleaned and fed. I will return with you, have a bit of something to eat, and enter home before dark."

"That's your sort," replied the other, as he left the room to order the cart, in which they were presently seated bowling along at twelve miles an hour.

"Two gentlemen wish to see me," exclaimed Shirkington, waking up from his afternoon's nap. He was somewhat lonely by himself, and having nothing to do, had fallen asleep. "Who the deuce are they?"

"One, sir, is Mr. Pastern," returned the servant, "the other is a gentleman I don't know."

"Very well, Mary, show them in."
"Servant, sir, servant," said Nobbleall, briskly; called to see you, sir, confidentially."

"Oh, did you, Nobbleall? what might it be about? 'Take a seat—sit down, Pastern.'"

This they did, placing their hats before them; and seating themselves on the extreme edge of the chairs, which is the company way of such gentlemen. Then before they commenced, polished their foreheads with large cotton handkerchiefs, which, when they had finished, were placed in the hats again.

"Now then, Nobbleall, fire away, let me hear what it is."

"Well, the fact is, sir," commenced Pastern in a gentle voice, "you mentioned to me a short time back, that—ahem—you—ahem—would be glad to see Lady Verriefast's 'osses—to see them in fact," he was somewhat puzzled how to put it, "not too near the winning-post."

"Ah, did I?" said Shirkington, carelessly, "well, I cannot say I recollect it; there's the gin and water on the table, help yourselves."

"Pastern and I have been over to see her Ladyship's horses," said Nobbleall, in his own way. Shirkington knew he had been a stud-groom and was up to racing. "They're doing beautiful, and it's my opinion nothing will beat them, leastways, the one his Lordship gave her; her own horse, Marmaduke, is by no means a bad one, or a slow horse; but 'My Lord,' which she calls her new one, is an out-and-outer. A magnificent fencer, a great turn of speed, and will stay for a week; all that blood will—he's by Katalpan out of a birdcatcher mare, as thorough-bred as Eclipse, nothing else in the race will have a chance with him."

"Do you really think so, Nobbleall?" asked Shirkington; "they seem to say Miss Thornhill's 'Sultan' is the favorite."

"Ha, ha! excuse my laughing, Mr. Duffer; but 'Sultan' is just as likely to win as Miss Dutchbill's old scr-w. Hang me if I would not almost as soon back him as 'Sultan,' for he can stay, which the other cannot. No, sir, no, 'Sultan' will not be in it after the first mile, the cup goes to my Lord—it's as safe as boiled."

"If you wish it, sir," put in Pastern, "I can do the trick. My Lord or the other shan't come within six fields of the winning horse; I know you owe my lady a grudge for her scandalous behavior to you, in pitching you over as she did. We are all friends here. I was telling Mr. Duffer," appealing to his friend, "that if he likes we can prevent either of the horses we have been speaking about coming within fields of the winner."

"Of course we can, Pastern," returned his partner. "Mr. Duffer can lay up against 'em both, to any amount, knock 'em clean out of the betting if he likes, and stick it on something else; but to work this little job will require some coin. Mr. Duffer's cheque for fifty would do the trick handsome."

"Cheque? oh no, Nobbleall, no cheque for me." He knew a cheque would tell against him, and he had a lively horror of signing his name; he had not forgotten how beautiful Alice had done him. "Even if I was disposed," he said, "to give you any money, how do I know it would be done?"

"Well, sir," said Nobbleall, "there's honor amongst—there's, he was going to say, but he checked himself and said, "amongst racing gents. Look here if we stops Lady Verriefast's horses having their noses in front at the winning-post, it's worth

He quite forgot he had done the same thing at Brighton; for when he found out Bessy Spryghtly had nothing, he took his departure without a word; and he also quite forgot that, in spite of his solemn word to Alice, who was getting everything ready for him, he had proposed to and was accepted by Miss Bullion—that directly the steeplechases were over he was to marry her for her hundred thousand pounds.

Alice did not yet know that her swain was unfaithful to her, for the simple reason that as yet it was a secret. Shirkington had made his betrothed promise not to say a word about it. "Wait till after the steeplechases," he said, "and then all the world may know it."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FIRST LEG OF THIRTY YEARS AGO.

"The St. Alban's steeplechase, fiddle-de-dee! ours will be a far better one than that of over was. Talk of your Osbaldestons, your Beechers, your Sefferts, why they can't hold a candle to the Captain's son. I'd like to see the man who could beat Jack Sullivan and Tom Tit over a country; it ain't in the order of things I tell you."

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"Now look there," continued Dawes, pointing to a slim, wiry, nice-looking lad, who was walking towards him, "there's the very boy a-coming" (it was market day at C—y, and the company he addressed was numerous); "tell me he ain't cut out to lick all as was ever foaled—gammon!"

The lad he pointed to was a fair-haired, healthy-complexioned, compact, well-made youth of about seventeen summers; his step was short, sharp, and decisive, he carried his head well up, and looked every one fully and fearlessly in the face with his clear blue eyes.

"Ah, Dawes," said the boy, as he came close to where the burly yeoman was standing, "how are you? I'm getting Tom 'Tit into famous fettle; he is only a little one, but he can go and stay. I hope I shall not be far behind, but you know I am only a youngster, and this will be my first appearance in public. I can stick on, and I know what my horse can do, but with such tip-top sawyers as Black Tom (Oliver), Jim Mason, Dan Seffert, the Squire (Osbaldeston), the Captain (Beecher), and a host of others, I stand but a poor chance."

"Poor chance, Master John! Chance he blowed! If fine temper, patience, good hands, and a heart placed where it ought to be can win, you will—there now, let us go and have two sixpennyworths over it. Damme, I'll lay a crown to a shilling a thousand times over" (pulling out a moderately-sized sack with some difficulty from his breeches pocket) "that you win or are placed."

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"There's a colt for you!" exclaimed the admiring farmer, as the lad walked away, "fine form, a flyer from head to heel; true blood, and blue blood, he'd stay for ever."

The Captain's son, or "young Captain," as he was generally called, was a great favorite with the farmers and yeomen about; he entered into all their amusements, was a good cricketer, fisherman, rode splendidly, and either at the trap or in the field, few

could match him. He quite forgot he had done the same thing at Brighton; for when he found out Bessy Spryghtly had nothing, he took his departure without a word; and he also quite forgot that, in spite of his solemn word to Alice, who was getting everything ready for him, he had proposed to and was accepted by Miss Bullion—that directly the steeplechases were over he was to marry her for her hundred thousand pounds.

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"Got at him," answered the other, "no I've not—it was impossible. I went up to the place, but had it from old Bullfinch, the young one is fly too. Night after night I tried the stable, but the old one slept there—it was no go, not the ghost of a chance."

"And do you think him dangerous? Who put you on to noble him?"

"That's my business," returned the other shortly. "You don't think I'm such an ass as to split, do you? Dangerous! I fancy he is; he wins as sure as I'm a—I'm a—" he was lost for an expression, so said, "as sure as I'm a cow—he can ride as well as any of the others; he's light on his horse, is as fresh as a pink and can stay, he knows every inch of the country, and I don't see what's to stop him. Lord George starts 'em, and he won't stand any nonsense. No it will be run out on the straight from end to end. It lays between Tom Mason, Tom Oliver, and young Jack Sullivan, and he will win it with 'Tom Tit.' I don't believe the old 'uns can out-jocky or out-ride him—he's a wonder is that boy."

There goes the bell for saddling; and away scamper scores to the different leaps. The water jump is the centre of attraction. Others scramble up on their vehicles where they could command a good view.

"You do not feel nervous, do you, Jack?" asked a fine-looking man, addressing a slender youth in a great-coat.

"Not at all, sir. I've weighed out all right."

"Now then, my boy, off with your coat, and I'll give you your 'first leg up';" and he beckoned an elderly man who was leading a corky-looking little bay horse about.

"All right, Captain," said old Bullfinch, coming up with "Tom Tit."

The Captain swept the sheet of the animal, and vaulted his son into his saddle.

"One word, Jack," whispered his father, "you're against the very best men of the day. Mind what I tell you, wait."

Gallant and proud did the lad look in his scarlet jacket and black cap; and gallant did his little horse appear—his coat shone like satin, and he seemed eager to get away.

Look at the others. How careless Mason seemed on his steeple-chaser, yet he was ready on the instant if the animal showed any restiveness. There was Black Tom humming his favorite "Gipsy King"; he kicks his horse into a trot and then into a canter, and it is then seen what a fine seat he has. They keep coming out of the saddling enclosure, all the colors of the rainbow, black, green, blue, yellow, crimson—nineteen in all. A cheer rends the air as the popular squire appears, every inch a gentleman-rider and sportsman; then there is the Captain, a hard man to beat—how square and solidly he sits in his saddle.

"Now then, gentlemen!" exclaims Lord George, jumping on to his back, "come along, I'll start you all fair; but I'll keep you for a week if any of you get away before I say 'Go.'"

They move on and follow as good a sportsman as England ever knew. Now they are in the starting-field and drawn up in line; his lordship is a little in advance with a red flag in hand; he waits patiently till some of the fractious, who have broken away, get into line again. "Go!" he exclaims at last, as his eagle eye catches them all fair, and the flag is dropped.

"They're off!" is shouted from the hoarse throats of the multitude, as the gay cavalcade is seen gently cantering along through the grass-land—they're off! a splendid start. Look at them: how easily and quietly they take the first leap; there is one or two who refuse, but they are got over. Now then the pace is getting a little faster, and the field a little more drawn out; but there is not as yet twenty yards between the leading and the last horses, and amongst the latter might be seen the scarlet jacket and black cap.

"Well, old Cock Bullfinch," said a voice close at that gentleman's elbow. "You think your youngster will pull through, don't you? but you won't pipe that tune this journey."

Bullfinch turned and looked Mr. Slippery Brown superciliously over from top to toe, and said, "I don't want none of your observations, and I don't want no conversashun with a leg and a nobbler; hook it."

The chase is going on. The old hands and top sawyers are sending their horses along and watching each other jealously and warily. The field is not told out yet. Going

thirsty I am—blessed if I shan't choke." The horses are streaming away over the meadows, taking their jumps with beautiful precision. There is no shaking off scarlet—about five lengths is he kept behind, the gentle strain on his jaws is never relaxed—he is to wait.

"I must first at the water again," mentally exclaimed Jack. "Some of them are sure to get a cropper there, and I may be knocked over in the scramble, I'll lead again."

And he did, the little horse jumped it beautifully; not so with all the others, two were in.

"Now, my man," said Jack, patting his horse's neck, "the worst is over now, I think you have the speed of them all, and I know you can stay."

"Here they are," shouts the multitude as the horses are seen again approaching. Jack's father is now fearfully excited. "Do you think he will pull through, Bullfinch?" he hoarsely demands of that worthy.

"Safe as ninepence, sir, they're all a riding of their 'osses now, and Master John's a holding of his own famous."

What yells greet their ears as the horses are seen approaching.

"Jim has it—Mason has it—no, no, Oliver for a thousand—it's the Squire's, who can beat him?" is shouted out frantically by the partizan of each. The last fence is jumped, a gorse topped hurdle—now begins the struggle, the tails of some of the animals are hanging out signals of distress, and whips are at work. "Now then, Tommy," exclaims his owner, the steady strain on the gallant little horse's bridle is relaxed, his rider shakes him the least bit in the world; but no whip is laid over him, or spurs gall his sides, he responds to the call, shoots away from the others, and is landed a winner by eight lengths.

Cheer after cheer rends the air. "Well ridden, magnificently ridden," exclaims Harry England, no mean judge. "By George, that lad is the finest horemán in Europe."

Jack's father rushes through the crowd, and leads his proud and triumphant son's noble little horse back to the enclosure.

Old Bullfinch is busting with impatience by his young master's side. Slippery Brown is pressing forward to congratulate the winner.

"Keep away," roars the old groom. "Keep away, or by the Lord Harry I'll knock you down," but the man still presses forward; a heavy hand was laid on his collar and he is hurled violently aside.

"If you go nigh him," exclaims Bob Dawes, "I'll thrash the life out of you—none of your hankey-pankey tricks here."

"Right," said the clerk of the scales, as Jack was weighting out, "right."

What a crowd is gathered round the gallant little horse as he is being dressed over, but no one can approach very near him. Bob Dawes and a host of others keep the crowd off.

"There," exclaimed Bullfinch, as he buckled the sheet on, "you're all right, my boy, and there's as good a bucket of gruel waiting for you at home as ever horse dipped his nose into, and well you've earned it and a little more too."

The dinner that evening at the "Blue Dragon," is a large one. Jack's father occupies the chair, a host of country gentlemen were present, all determined to do the winner of the day honor.

Jack's health has been drank with three times three and musical honors. Various matches have been made, made never to come off, between gentlemen who had more wine in their heads than brains.

"It's very well," exclaimed farmer Dawes loudly, "making matches to come off six months hence, we may be all dead before then; but I'm prepared to make one to take place two day hence. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll back the young Captain to shoot twenty-one pigeons against any one here, single or double shots, five traps, thirty yard's rise, at the Red House, Batterssea. I'll write to Swaine and have it all ready. I'll make it for fifty pounds a side."

"Done," said a tall dark man; it was V—r, the famous pigeon shot; he had beaten Osbaldeston and Ross; he was a professional pigeon shooter, and few cared to have anything to do with him.