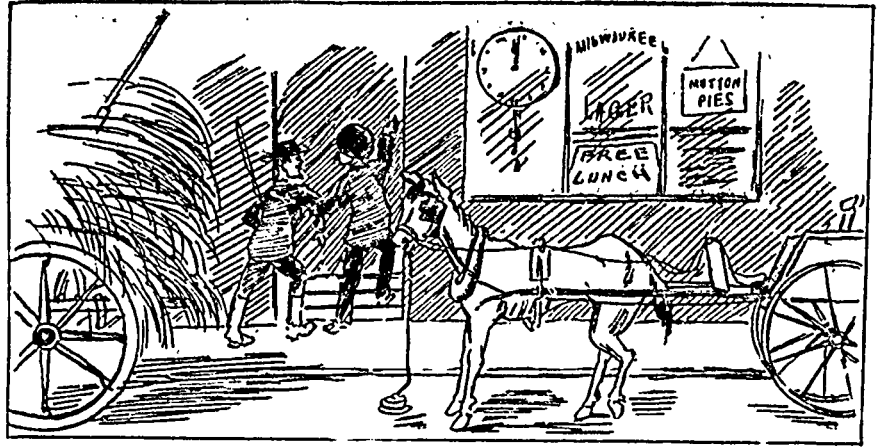


of the leap, was in the middle, but Captain Ashton rammed in the spurs and made him clamber up; Beelzebub in spite of Cannon's efforts positively declined the jump and dropped out of the race. The Baron, who never refused, left the water coolly behind him perfectly unconcerned. Mark had his misgivings as to whether the mare would face water, but he need not have doubted her, she never swerved but with her ears pricked forward, and her large eyes steadfast as ever, she went over with a full yard to spare. Bluebeard who with Benson on his back, knew he must take everything that came before him, instantly followed, but the jockey's face, as he watched the mare jump with her rider never moving on hair's breadth for the saddle, grew a shade graver.

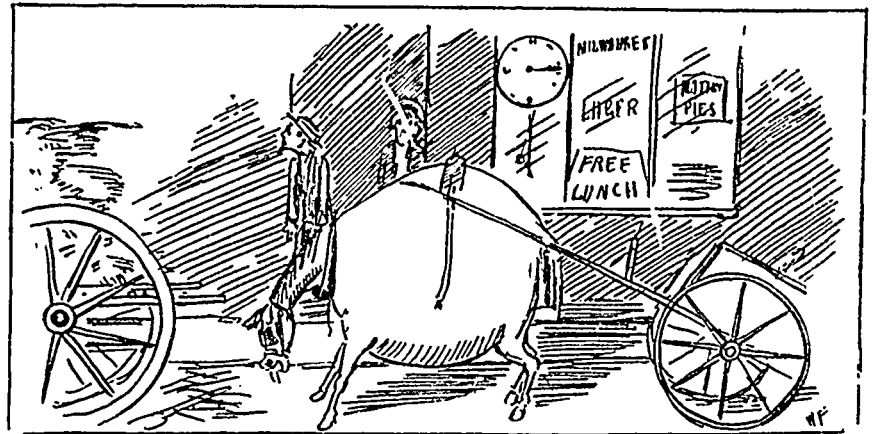
"Bl—t it, but she is a rare good 'un, and so is he," the professional muttered and finding it hopeless to wait for Di Vernon to make a mistake, he tried to induce her rider to do so, and touching up Bluebeard, sent him past the mare, and soon collared The Baron. But the trick was too stale for Mark, knowing as he did, that they had still some three miles to run, and that such a pace would knock any horse to pieces in that distance, besides Di Vernon was carrying the heavier weight, so he would not force her until there was no help for it. "Plenty of time yet Mr. Benson" Talbot thought as he quietly checked the mare, who was quite ready to accept the challenge flung her by Bluebeard. Benson noticed directly that his "ruse" had failed, and took a pull at his horse, when a couple of lengths ahead of The Baron, resolving to keep the advantage gained the whole way home.

Mahome. was still leading, but the fire had died out of his eye, and the next fence, consisting of a wide ditch, with a most uncompromising stone wall beyond, finished him. He was driven at it, but partly his heart, and partly his powers failed him, for he struck the wall with an awful smash and falling backwards nearly crushed his rider.

Bluebeard now led the way, kicking off the top stone of the wall as he took the leap followed by The Baron. Lastly Di Vernon flew over, soon picking up The Baron, so that unless some unforeseen accident happened, the race was now curtailed to Bluebeard and the mare, both of which were scouring away at almost top speed, the horse leading by three or four lengths, but he could not gain another inch as leap after leap were passed. When within half a mile from home, Mark Talbot, feeling that the mare had still plenty to fall back upon, resolved to put the steam on, and giving Di Vernon the sign to go, he said to her, "Now my



FREE LUNCH—(No. 1)—NOON.



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beauty do your very best." And did she not! What a stride she showed when stretched to the utmost! Benson heard her coming tearing behind him, and smiled scornfully as he urged on Bluebeard. But, professional though he was, he did not know what Di Vernon could do when she was pushed. She was being pushed now and answered the call gallantly. The excitement among the spectators was intense, for the two steeds were nearing the last leap before the run in. On they came the mare having lessened the distance between herself and Bluebeard, though still behind the latter. Some thought Mark was riding too fast considering the jump in front of him, but he had by this time implicit faith in Di Vernon and sent her at the fence full tilt. Bluebeard had just got over, as the mare wheeled up at a pace perfectly terrific, "Never funk it old girl!" cried Mark "Over you go!" and over she did go with a vengeance, landing a full length nearer Bluebeard than before the leap. It was then that Mr. Benson began to suspect that Di Vernon ridden by Mark Talbot would prove "one too many" for the winner of the Grand Military. All the jumps were passed, and it was a trial of speed between the two for the finish. On, on, they came, nearer and nearer and the thuds of their hoofs could be

heard on the turf. A hum which gradually swelled into a mighty roar rolled along the living line of spectators as the pair dashed onwards towards the goal, till the excitement was wrought up to a frantic pitch when the distance post was reached. Now were heard the shouts of "Scarlet wins!" "It's Blue!" "No it isn't; Bluebeard for ever!" "The mare! the mare! Di Vernon for a thousand! Hurrah! Di Vernon for a million!"

Yes, the glorious mare was at Bluebeard's quarters, then whish! whish! she was alongside. Benson plied whip and spur as only professional jockeys can, but though the horse was game to the last, she had run herself out; Di Vernon slid past him, meeting with a deafening cheer, as she landed the winner of the Barrington Grand Steeplechase by a good length. Time, fastest yet on record!

Lord Starlingford was a proud man that day, but he did not forget him, to whom he owed his triumph, and somehow Mark Talbot became the owner of Di Vernon, although she was worth more than he could afford to pay. The mare never raced again, but she carried Mark to hounds for many a year, and Harriet has said, with a smile which denied the insinuation, that Di was the only female who caused her a pang of jealousy.