

MARKET HARBOROUGH

How Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires.

CHAPTER VII.

A FOG OF THE SAME.

Mr. Sawyer caught himself vainly wondering whether it belonged to his wife or daughter, and laughed at his own preoccupation as he thought, "What could it signify to him?"

It is very tiresome work, that waiting for a fog to clear off before hounds are put into covert. In all other anti-hunting weather, you know, to a certain extent, what you are about; the frost, that sent you to look at the thermometer last night before you went to bed, is either all gone by twelve o'clock, or the matter set at rest the other way, and you make up your mind not to hunt again till the mood changes. It is the same thing with snow; and, moreover, if you can hunt on the surface of another earth when wrapped in her spots shroud, she rewards you by carrying a capital scent. But in a fog everything is uncertain and obscure; it may clear off in ten minutes, or it may not be so dense elsewhere. It seems a pity to go home, when the very signal for a return may herald a change of weather; and yet it is a melancholy amusement to walk hounds and horses round a wet field till far on in the afternoon. Everybody is of a different opinion, too, usually regulated by personal convenience; those who live a long way off are all for having a try, whilst the man who has ridden his hunter a mile or two to the place of meeting, and can keep him fresh for next day, opines that "It is madness—folly—you'll disturb your country—you'll lose your hounds—you might as well go out hunting in the middle of the night," etc.

On the present occasion it was obvious that the day was getting worse. Sheets of mist came driving up the valleys and wreathing round the crests of the wooded hills; the slight breeze seemed but to bring up fresh relays of vapour, and every visible object, trees, hedges, gates—nay, the very ears of the horses, and whiskers of their riders, were dripping and saturated with moisture. The Master of the Hounds, a thorough sportsman, never to be beat by a difficulty, announced his intention of waiting whilst any one else remained; but it soon appeared that ere long he would have the field to himself. The Molton gentlemen lost no time in galloping home on their hacks, to while away the hours till dinner-time with a "smoking rubber." Half-a-dozen yeomen adjourned to a neighboring farm house to have what they called "a snack" and drink a goodly allowance of port and sherry in the middle of the day. Even the clerical gentleman, owner of the chestnut ladies' horse, thought it wouldn't do; and just as Isaac on the grey turned up the head of a strong detachment from Harborough, with whom he had fortunately fallen in, after losing his way twice, it was finally decided that the hounds should go home, and the day's hunting be given up.

Warned by his father's covert, and hopeless of finding his way back, except in the same company, Mr. Sawyer lost no time in exchanging The Dandy for the grey. "If we are to lark home," he thought, "I may as well ride a nag I can trust; but if ever I put my faith upon one of these thin-boated gentlemen to show me the way again, why, I shall deserve the worst that can happen to me—that's all!"

Now, although the appearance of a stranger is not out of the ordinary in Leicester, as in most of our country, yet the Honorable Crasher was so well known, that it was natural some inquiries should be made as to his companion, for the Honorable C., who was thoroughly acquainted, had no sooner started with our friend than he began to consider him in some sort, and in his off-hand way, as under his special charge. Mr. Sawyer's exterior, though not extraordinarily prepossessing, was undoubtedly workmanlike. As he started from the grey's saddle, and adjusted the stirrups which Isaac could never be persuaded to pull to the same length, the Honorable C. whiskered to the latter.

"Where's that fellow? Is he staying with you at Harborough?"

"He's the clerical gentleman," he replied, as if there could be any connection between the two. "He don't seem half a bad fellow though," he added, "and I shouldn't wonder if he could ride."

Now, the clerical gentleman, who was, in fact, no other than the well-known Parson Dove, had struck up an acquaintance with the Honorable C. some time before both were to be seen at Harborough.

that he fell into the virtual introduction of a man whose name he didn't know, put a bold face on the matter, devoutly hoping the patronymic might never be asked, and the three turned in at a hand-gate, and jogged on amiably through the fog, in the direction of the Rectory.

As Mr. Sawyer ran his eye over the person and appointments of his future host, he could not but acknowledge to himself that never, no, never in his life had he seen such a thoroughly workmanlike exterior: from the clean-shaven ruddy face, with its bright-blue eye and close-cropped grey hair, down to long heavy hunting-spurs, the man was faultless all over. Nobody's leathers were so well made, so well cleaned, so well put on as Parson Dove's; and, though he affected brown tops, it is well known that they were such unequalled specimens as to have caused one of his intimate friends who particularly peeped himself on boots, "to give up all hope, even of imitation, and relapse into 'Napoleons in disgust.' Why, the very way he folded his neckcloth was suggestive of Newmarket, and no scarlet coat that was ever turned out by Paole looked so like hunting as that well-cut unassuming black. His open flapped saddle, his shining stirrups, his heavy double-bridle, were all in keeping with the man himself, and it is needless to state that he was riding a thorough-bred bay, with a pair of fired forelegs, and about the best shoulders you ever saw on a hunter.

All this Mr. Sawyer had time to observe ere they rode into a neatly-bricked stable-yard, where they gave their horses to a couple of smart grooms, and followed the owner through the back door, past the cleanest of kitchens and tidiest of sculleries, into the more aristocratic part of the mansion.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DOVE OF THE SAME.

I think it is the observant author of 'Soapy Sponge,' who makes that sporting tourist declare that "women never look so well as when you come home from hunting." Certainly the contrast between a cold cheerless day out-of-doors and the luxurious atmosphere of a well-warmed, well-ventilated house, inclines a man to view everything through a complimentary medium, even without taking into consideration the delightful exchange of a hard slippery saddle for the cushions of a comfortable arm-chair, or the warmth of a blazing fire. The inside of the rectory was as pretty and as snug as it was possible for any house to be. Parson Dove was one of those men in whom the bump of comfort is strongly developed, and whether he bought a warming-pan or a wine-cooler, he was sure to get the best, and the best-looking article that was to be had for money.

As the three sportsmen clanked along the carpeted passage to the drawing-room, they heard the notes of a pianoforte sounding from that apartment, and Mr. Sawyer had barely time to summon all his fortitude, for the subversion of his constitutional shyness, ere he found himself ushered into that sanctuary, in the wake of the Honorable Crasher, whom, truth to tell, just at that moment, he felt he would have followed with less apprehension over another locked gate, or treacherous "over." It was not so formidable an undertaking, after all. There were but two ladies, and both seemed delighted at the acquisition of visitors on so dull a morning. The introductions were got over, none the worse that nobody knew the stranger's name; and both Mrs. Dove, an ample lady, with the remains of considerable beauty, and "My daughter Cecilia," of whom more anon, seemed resolved to make themselves agreeable to their guests—Mamma rather inclining to the Honorable Crasher, who was an old friend, and had often dropped in to luncheon; whilst the siren Cecilia, fresh from the execution of that "sweet thing" which she had had on the pianoforte, seemed to devote herself to the amusement and possible subjugation of the stranger.

There are some men on whom young ladies feel instinctively they are but wasting their time, and it is curious how seldom their perceptions deceive them on this point. Of such was the Honorable C. Good-looking, amiable, to all appearance well-off, and not over-burdened with brains, he possessed all the attributes of an "eligible party," and yet somehow the most match-making of mothers, and the most enterprising of daughters, always gave him up as a bad job, after the first ten minutes. There was something about him that betrayed to female shrewdness he was not "a marrying man," and as they judiciously abstain from playing a game in which the loss is not exclusively on the side of the adversary, they let him alone accordingly.

Now, it was otherwise with Mr. Sawyer. He was otherwise with Mr. Sawyer. He was otherwise with Mr. Sawyer.

was exceedingly round and symmetrical; not an angle nor a corner in those graceful, flowing lines. Her foot and ankle were undeniable, and her hands white and well-shaped. Altogether, she would have passed as good-looking in London: it is needless, therefore, to say that she ought to have been placarded "dangerous" in Leicestershire. Nor had this young woman neglected such opportunities of improving her natural advantages as had come in her way. She could play and sing with much taste and tolerable skill; she could waltz down a strong man in pretty good training, without drawing her breath quicker for the exertion; she could ride with a degree of nerve and judgment seldom enjoyed by the softer sex; and, finally, she had a way of looking down, to show her long eyelashes, which in many instances had been productive of much loss and confusion to the adversary.

It was, you see, scarcely a fair match to pit all these qualities against honest John Standish Sawyer, with his coarse hands and feet, his short, square-tailed coat, ill-made boots and breeches, red whiskers, and general diffidence.

As he sat before her, with his cap between his feet (I need hardly observe that, like the other ornaments of the Old Country, he wore a velvet hunting cap), and the horn handle of his whip in his mouth, she took the lead in the conversation; indeed, I am prepared to lay my reader considerable odds, that, whenever he meets a lady and gentleman together, the former is talking, and the latter is listening.

Miss Dove began at him without delay: "You've only just arrived, I hear, and, indeed, what unpromising weather you find us with! I told papa, this morning, I was sure we shouldn't be able to hunt; and I went and took my hat off directly after breakfast. If there's one thing I abominate more than another, it's a fog; and at Tilton Wood, too, of all places in the world! I've no idea of leaving a good fire, to go and sit there with the others, like a lot of crows in a mist; and this weather always lasts three days; and to-morrow they meet at the best place they have; and I hope you like our country?"

Mr. Sawyer could not conscientiously affirm that he had yet seen it, so he mumbled out an unintelligible answer, and the young lady went off again at score.

"Harborough's getting quite a gay place, I declare. So many gentlemen come there now, to hunt; and it's so convenient for the railroad; and I dare say you know Mr. Savage, and Captain Struggles, and Major Brush; and are you going to give us a Harborough ball?"

Mr. Sawyer was sufficiently experienced to take heart of grace at this juncture, an reply, "Oh, certainly—certainly! I'm sure it will be a capital ball. May we hope, Miss Dove, that you will come to it?"

The eyelashes went down immediately and Miss D. was, no doubt, on the eve of making an appropriate reply, when the luncheon, and the simultaneous return of Paterfamilias, broke up the pair of tete-a-tetes, and the party adjourned to the dining-room, all, apparently, on pretty good terms with themselves—Mr. Sawyer inwardly proud of having got so well out of the ball difficulty; "Cissy" a little elevated with the conviction that she had made a fresh conquest (not that it was any novelty, but the feeling is always more or less agreeable); papa ready for luncheon, and sanguine about the four-year-old; mamma enchanted to have caught a good listener; and the Honorable Crasher in his usual state of easy and affable nonchalance.

It is only right to observe that the Rev. had exchanged his hunting costume for a suit of more clerical attire, and somehow, had failed to put off with his leathers an atom of his equestrian air. Even in the fall-out canonicals, you never could have taken Mr. Dove for anything but a sportsman.

Why are people always so much pleasanter at luncheon than at dinner? Notwithstanding John Bull's predilection for the latter meal, as a mode of testifying his regard, his civility, and his own respectability, I cannot help thinking that foreigners are right to ignore that heavy system of dinner-giving which we Islanders regard as the very frame work of our social system. There is always more or less of pomposity, and consequent restraint, attendant upon a regular set dinner in the country. A few thorough people of the world, "worldly," know how to ask exactly the right three couple or so, and put them down to a hot dinner at a round table, such as the very acme of all festive boards; but this is a very rare quality in host and hostess. Usually, you are placed next to a guest you don't know, and opposite to one you don't like. Your soup is cold, your venison under-done; and the eyes of three or four servants intently watching every mouthful you swallow is destruction to a delicate appetite. In some old-fashioned houses, you may even recognize the burly coachman assisting his fellow domestics to wait upon the company; and although, for my own part, I confess to a liking for "the smell of the stable," I cannot but admit that the flavor

but it is sometimes hard upon the young Phæbe to have perpetually at her side the shapeless Mother Bunch, into the facsimile of which she must eventually grow. Mr. Sawyer, gazing intently on his hostess discussing her cutlet and glass of port-wine with considerable relish, acknowledged, though he would not accept, the warning.

Miss Dove took after Mamma rather than Papa. The matron's ruddy face was a brilliant color in the girl; and the exuberant proportions of the one, suggestive of good-humour, good living, and motherly content, were but the full, flowing outlines of perfect symmetry in the other.

However, they all got on remarkably well. Even the Honorable Crasher made a feeble joke, of which the point somehow escaped his listeners—without, however, destroying his own enjoyment in its delivery. By the time Papa proposed an adjournment to the stables, to inspect the four-year-old—"Cissy" pleading for two minutes' law, to put her hat on—they were all in high good humor. If "one spur in the head" be "worth two in the heel," I think it is equally true that a slight stimulant about 1.80 is twice as effectual as a feast at 7.45.

The four-year old was a fine, lengthy, slashing-looking young horse, to use a graphic expression, more akin to the kennel than the stable. He had all that thickness of outline and coarseness of particular points which sportsmen so like to see, when pedigrees are unimpeachable, and which are sure to grow out into eventual strength and symmetry. Mr. Sawyer would perhaps have admired him more, had his attention not been distracted by the apparition in the young one's box of the following choice assortment: viz. one pair of Balmoral-boots (arched instep and pointed heels, after Leech); one scarlet jupo, short and full; one morning-gown, very rich and voluminous, tucked and girt up all about ditto; one pair of neat little gloved hands, with tight-fitting bust and arms to match; and one rosy, smiling, happy face; the whole crowned by such a hat and feather as said "Suivez-moi, far more pretemporarily than ever did Henri Quatre's great white panache. After that, he looked very little at the four-year-old.

Poor Mr. Sawyer! When his horse was led out, to take him back to Harborough, she patted its grey nose, and called it "a darling." "A darling!" and the ungrateful brute snorted all over her pretty face and hands! Well, he patted its neck himself, as he rode out of the yard.

The day seemed to have improved somehow, though the fog was equally dense, and twilight—or rather no-light—had set in. That cigar, too, which the Honorable gave him just under Langton, he thought, was the best he had ever smoked in his life.

CHAPTER IX.

FOUR O'CLOCK, STABLES.

I should be sorry for my reader to suppose that John Standish Sawyer was what is termed "a susceptible man." On the contrary, since his well-remembered rejection by Miss Mexico, an event of which it is unnecessary to specify the date, he had steeled himself resolutely against the fair, and devoted his energies, if possible, more exclusively than ever to the worship of Diana. Cold as she is at times, and rigorous as are her icy frowns, corrugating that beaming face into inappropiate wrinkles, at least she is a mistress who never deceives. The thermometer at your dressing-room window tells you exactly the humor in which you will find her, and we do not hear the old, whose season of enjoyment has passed away, regretting the hours and days they have spent in her service. "If I had my time to come over again," I heard a hale octogenarian declare not long ago, "I should make one alteration. I should flirt a little less and hunt a great deal more." So had he a four-days-a-week man all his life, and in his youth a fierce admirer of ladies. To forego, nevertheless, was the result of his experience.

Mr. Sawyer, like any other male biped, was not above being flattered and pleased by the notice of such a girl as Miss Dove. It smoothed his feathers, so to speak, and encouraged him to think better of himself. The Honorable Crasher, too, who had quite taken a fancy to his new friend, asked him to ajete-a-tete dinner at his lodgings on the night after the Tilton Wood meet; and as the wine was remarkably good, and the host, in his sleepy, quiet way, rather pleasant company, he spent an agreeable evening enough.

For the next two or three days there was a rattling land of frost, of the most provoking description, just hard enough to stop hunting, yet with a deceitful appearance of "going," which prevented sportsmen from leaving their quarters in London. During this interregnum Mr. Sawyer had leisure to unpack his things, arrange his books—consisting of "Colonel White's Observations on Fox-hunting," "Ask Mamma" (illustrated with

paid, according to custom, by the whole gang to the stables of the Honorable Crasher. Time, 4:30, on a dark afternoon, with every appearance of a thaw.

Boadicea, by Bellerophon out of Blue Light, is being stripped for Mr. Sawyer's inspection. As a compliment to the stranger, he is further invited to "walk up to the mare, a mile how fit she is!" at the risk of having his brains kicked out; Boadicea, out of Blue Light, resenting such liberties with the froocity of her British namesake, and kicking with considerable energy when her ribs are tickled. Mr. Tiptop, by far too great a man to touch a rug or hood, gives his directions from the ofling, with his hat very much over his eyes, removing it only when addressed by his master, his legs very wide apart, and his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his tight trousers.

Captain Struggles, a heavy gentleman, who rides light-weight horses, and wears a shooting suit of the broadest check fabric, takes a straw out of his mouth, and observes, "That's about the sort, I think, when you want to do the trick over this country. Ain't it, Tiptop?"

Mr. Tiptop is always mysterious and oracular concerning the Honorable's stud. Somebody, he thinks, ought to preserve the secrets of the stable, and Crasher himself is the most indiscreet of mortals on such subjects. So the groom raises his hat with both hands, puts it on again, and replies, "We like to get all of ours as nearly as possible about that mould. There's a young horse as is quite one of your sort, Captain, in the next box." Whereupon Mr. Sawyer, who has no patience with Tiptop, winks at Major Brush, and the latter bursts out laughing.

The conversation now becomes generally, and not altogether devoid of personality.

"Your sort are rather of the woody order, Struggles," observes the Major. "Too light for this country, as you'll find out before you're many days older, now that we've got the ground to ride as it should do, up to our girths. Besides, those thorough-bred ribs never have courage to face large fences. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Sawyer?"

The Major has not yet forgiven Struggles for stopping him on the last day they were out, at the only practicable place in a bull finch, on which the heavy weight and a very little chestnut stallion were sawing backwards and forwards, like some exquisitely-balanced piece of machinery. Mr. Sawyer, thus appealed to, gives his opinion, thinking of the roan all the while: "They must have power, I fancy, for these flying countries, but they must have blood too. I should like to show you a horse I've just bought that I mean to hunt to-morrow if the frost goes. My stables are 'close at hand.'"

It is resolved that Mr. Sawyer's shall be the next stud inspected; but such an unheard-of breach of etiquette as leaving their present haunt until every individual horse has been stripped, cannot be entertained for a moment; so Mr. Savage, in his turn, enlivens the process by attacking poor Struggles: "You never got to the end that Keythorpe day, after all," says he. "What's the use of these long pedigrees of yours, if they can't stay? I have always understood their only merit as hunters is, that you can't tire the thro-bred ones. But confess now, Struggles, you stopped before the hounds ran through the Coplow!"

"No distance at all!" chimes in Brush.

"And the ground must have been quite light before the rain," adds Mr. Sawyer, who thinks he must say something, and who has not been permitted to remain in ignorance of this Keythorpe day, now more than a fortnight old.

Struggles turned from one to the other of his tormentors, with a grin on his jolly face. "Little Benjamin couldn't have been so beat, when I caught your horse for you," said he to Brush; "or when I went by you, Savage, in the lane, and that was after five-and-twenty minutes, with fifteen stone on his back, amongst those hills. No, no, my boys! Fair play's a jewel, and neither of you were there to see whether I'd had my gruel or no." Stop indeed! I'd lay odds none of old Catamaran's stick would cut up soft if you rode them till the day after to-morrow. Stop! I'll be hanged if I didn't trot when I got on the high-road coming home."

"Never mind! we know," interposed Mr. Savage—a tall pale man, with a hawk's eye that nothing escaped. "Why, you were seen, my good fellow!—seen with your own back against your horse's, shoving him through a fence. They said if you hadn't been the heaviest of the two, you'd have been there now."

Like almost all stout men, Struggles was the essence of good humor. He burst into a hearty laugh, but persevered in his denial. "Who saw me?" said he; "who saw me? He must have been in a right good place, though I say it."

"Parson Dove saw you," rejoined his accuser. Whereat Mr. Sawyer felt his heart give a thump. "Parson Dove made a capital story about it. He said he never saw a