

MARKET HARBOROUGH;

Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires.

CHAPTER V.

BOOTS AND CAPLES.

Such ruminations as the above probably expressed the whole of my friend's intellect, till the courteous offer of 'Punch' containing, as usual, one of Leech's inimitable hunting sketches—drew his attention to his fellow traveller, under whose multiplicity of wrappers he had no difficulty in recognizing the placid features of the gentleman he had that morning noticed in the boot shop. It was, indeed, none other than the Honourable Crasher: by this time completely worn out, and who, to do him justice, was a gentlemanlike, well-featured fellow enough, if he had not always looked so dreadfully tired.

The reply to such a courtesy, where there were no ladies in the carriage, could only be: "Have you any objection to smoking?" And as nobody ever does object nowadays to the soothing practice, and the "forty-shilling penalty" is, I trust, simply a dead-letter and a fallacy, the Laranagas were produced, and a couple of them soon got very freely under way.

No introduction from a mutual friend is equal to that of a cigar. Any two votaries of the "pleasant vice," at least during the time they are engaged in its practice, are sure to fraternize, and in five minutes Mr. Sawyer and the Honourable Crasher were hard at it, I need scarcely observe, on the subject of fox-hunting; the former resolving as far as possible, to pick the brains of his new acquaintance (if he could find them) on that exhaustless topic; the latter positively warming into a languid enthusiasm on the only subject to which he could direct his whole attention for ten consecutive minutes.

Racing men are bad enough. Politicians are sufficiently long-winded. A couple of agriculturists will keep the ball rolling pretty perseveringly on the congenial themes of "cake," mangold wurzel, short-horns, reaping machines, and guano; but I have heard ladies, who are perhaps the best judges of volubility, affirm that, for energy, duration, and the faculty of saying the same thing over and over again, a dialogue between a couple of fox-hunters beats every other kind of discussion completely out of the field.

Mr Sawyer took the initiative by pointing to the fox's track which fastened the string in his new friend's hat.

"Done anything this last week?" said he with that mysterious air specially affected by all individuals who are connected, however remotely, with horseflesh, and which, I believe, has much to answer for, in the impression of consummate roguery which it conveys to the uninitiated. "It's been good seeing weather in my part of the world. Hounds must have run hard on the grass."

The Honourable Crasher emitted a large volume of smoke, ere he roused himself for the effort, and replied: "Good thing, last Friday with the Pytelley, from Fox Hall. Do you know that country?" he added, thinking, if his listener did not, he might save himself the trouble of detailing it.

"I am on my way down to hunt there now," rejoined our friend, "so I take an interest, naturally, in your sport. Last Friday, you say? Ah! that was the day we had such a fine run over our country. Two hours and forty-seven minutes, and killed our fox—and killed our fox," he repeated, as if such a climax was sufficiently rare to merit more than common attention.

Nothing but the spirit of emulation between different packs could have embarked the Honourable Crasher on a long story; but he woke up from his lethargy at this juncture, and observed:

"Two hours and forty-seven minutes? Indeed! It must have been a fine run; but slow, I conclude—slow. I never care much for anything over an hour. It's labour and sorrow, walking after hounds, to my mind."

"Slow!" retorted Mr. Sawyer indignantly. "Not at all; I was riding the best horse in my stable, and he had to do all he could to live with them. Fine country, too—wild fox-hunting country—not a soul in the fields; very deep, and a good deal of hunting. I don't know that I was ever better earned. He added meditatively, hoping to bring the conversation round to the merits of the grey

won't bear liberties being taken with them?

The Honourable Crasher: "Yes, I should say, it wanted a hunter to get over it."

Mr. S.: "Do you consider it as difficult to cross as the Quorn?"

The Hon. C.: "Yes—no—that's to say, I ride the same horses in both; I don't know that there's much difference."

"Whom do you consider your best men now, in your field?"

"Oh! there are lots of fellows who can ride, if they get a start. It's impossible to say; there's a good deal in luck, and a good deal in horses. (N.B. This is hardly a sincere speech of the Hon. C.'s. He does not think either luck or horseflesh constitutes a customer, and has not the slightest doubt in his own mind as to whom he considers about the best performer in that or any other country; only modesty forbids him to name the individual.)

Mr. S., a little dissatisfied: "I suppose the Leicestershire men are splendidly mounted?"

Hon. C.: "No, I should say not. I never remember seeing so few good horses. I shouldn't know where to get a hunter if I wanted one!"

Mr. Sawyer thought of the roan, and ran his eye over his friend's slim figure and horsemanlike shape. "He'd carry him like a bird," thought the owner, "and I shouldn't mind letting him have him for two hundred, or say, if I dropped into a good thing with him, two hundred and fifty;" but he only observed, "I suppose you are very well mounted yourself?"

"So-so," was the reply. "I'm rather short just now; only ten. Good useful brutes some of them; but I shouldn't say my lot was quite first-class, by any means!"

Again Mr. Sawyer found subject for rumination. Ten! Only ten! and not first-class ones neither, though it was probable that a man who had ten hunters in his stable would not find it worth while to keep a bad one; and then he thought of his own three, and the severe infliction it would be to have to ride Marathon over the fences, which, as he looked from the window, loomed larger and larger in the twilight, as they approached the grazing districts. No secret, it has been said, is so close as that between a horse and his rider, and Mr. Sawyer hardly liked to confess, even to himself, the very inferior brute he had got in the bay. Somehow all the difficulties into which he had put him seemed to rise in his mind's eye, like an accumulation of photographs, as he sat back amongst the cushions, and, withdrawing his gaze from the outward world, fixed it on the lately-lit lamp above his head.

He remembered, not without a shudder, what a cropper the brute gave him at that stile in the potato-garden, which at least he might have scrambled over, if he had only risen six inches. He recalled the famous run he lost from the Forty-acres, because no persuasion would induce Marathon to face the bullfinch enclosing that meritorious covert, and which a donkey could get through if he would only look at it. He reflected how the animal perversely

"Struck all his timber, fathomed all his ditches;"

how he had never cleared a brook with him or gone a run to his master's satisfaction, and how even old Isaac allowed his favorite was a better nag in the stable nor he was in the field; and so musing, he shuddered to think of their joint endeavors to get out of a fifty-acre pasture, with an ox-fence all round it, and the gate locked!

To avoid such horrible visions, he would have planged once more into conversation, but looking at his neighbor, observed he was now deep in "The Idylls of the King,"—an epic which served at least to keep the Honourable Crasher awake, there by substantiating a theory I have heard broached by certain philosophers, and which I am not entirely prepared to dispute, viz., that there is something of poetry in every man who rides hard across a country.

Certainly not a Knight of the Table Round could have been more daring in the saddle than the Honourable Crasher, for all his dissipated looks and languid manners; nor could he have been so engrossed in the fate of the Lay Maid of Astolat, nor so lost in the description of the black barge floating dreamily down with its snowy burden (perhaps the most beautiful piece of word-painting in the language), had he not acknowledged in some corner of his much-neglected intellect that *divina particula aura*, which may often be found, like a sweet way-side flower, blooming in the most unexpected and uncultivated localities.

Though Mr. Sawyer was himself innocent of all such weaknesses, he had the grace not

hungry and in want of comfort, he would see following banquet prepared for his delectation: A slice of soft cod, one raw mutton-chop relieved by an undertone ditto, two sorts of pickles, and some exceedingly strong cheese.

CHAPTER VI.

HAZY WEATHER.

When Mr. Sawyer awoke in the morning, his first impression was, that he had never left The Grange, but that the pattern of his bedroom paper was strongly altered, and the situation of his couch had been mysteriously changed in the night.

It was not till he had turned over, and yawned twice or thrice, that he comprehended the actual position in which he was placed. Then, for the first time, the magnitude of the undertaking on which he had embarked presented itself to his mind: and then did he realize the deficiencies of his stud, the rashness and perplexity of the whole proceeding. A feeling of loneliness stole over him; and he even experienced a want of confidence in himself. For an instant, he almost wished he was back at home, and the dastardly possibility of returning there flashed across his mind. All these unworthy thoughts, pair of boots in one hand, and a glimmering bedroom gandle in the other, as the mists of morning are dispelled by the rising sun, and even as the shrinking combatant gathers confidence from the flash of his drawn sword, so, at the first glimpse of those long rowelled spurs of which Marathon knew too well the *per sé* powers, John Starfish Sawyer was himself again.

"Half after eight, sir," said Isaac, setting down the candle, and proceeded to pour cold water into a tub—a process that by no means tempted his master to rise on the instant. "Half after eight, sir; and the grey's got a bit of a cough. It's that strange stable as done it. And you was to let me know in the morning which of them I was to take on."

"What sort of a day is it?" asked our friend, in a sleepy voice, turning, like Dr. Watt's sluggard, into a more comfortable position. At that moment, it would not have broken his heart to be told that it was too hard to hunt.

"Can't see your hand," was the encouraging reply: "it's one of these regular Leicester-sheer fogs, as the grooms tells me, as is wery prevalent hereabouts. The lamps is lit now in the streets; but it'll be wusser up on the high ground. They'll hunt, though, just the same, says they. Weather never stops them here, unless it be the sowerest of frost and snow, as I understand. Shall I open the shutters, sir?"

Isaac threw them back as he spoke, and drew up the blind, disclosing to Mr. Sawyer's view about eighteen feet of tiles, a weathercock pointing east-south-east, and a chimney adorned with what is called an "old woman"—an ingenious contrivance to prevent it from smoking, but in this instance to judge by the smell of soot which pervaded the apartment, by no means a successful piece of mechanism—the whole wrapped in a mantle of the densest and wettest fog he ever remembered to have seen.

"Sure to be late such a morning as this," thought Mr. Sawyer, preparing for another comfortable half-hour in bed; but then he reflected that he must send Isaac forward with a horse, also that he should have to find his own way to Tilton Wood, on his back—a sufficiently intricate proceeding as studied overnight by the map, but which might become excessively puzzling when reduced to practice, through large pastures and unknown bridle-gates, on such a morning as the present.

"Take on the grey!" said he, peremptorily, ignoring the cough; "and order breakfast for me in three-quarters of an hour."

The fact is, Mr. Sawyer had but the grey to ride. He did not quite fancy giving the roan his earliest trial in what he understood to be a hilly country; and as for making his first appearance in High Leicestershire on Marathon—really, though both were pretty strong, neither his nerves nor his self-conceit would have stood such a test.

Somehow, everything went wrong, as is apt to be the case in a strange place, and when we are particularly anxious for the reverse. He cut himself shaving. His leathers were damp, and badly cleaned; looser, too, at the knees, and tighter in the thighs, than he liked. Also, he couldn't find his button-hook, and any one who has put on boots and breeches without the aid of that implement, will sympathize with his distress. Isaac knew where it was, doubtless; but, ere his master arrived at the stage of toilet at

any whether a foggy morning an uninhabited country, and the necessity of riding a horse barely four feet over a gate more than four feet high, after a languid desperado in pursuit of an uncertainty, was not a some what alarming contingency. Nevertheless, there was nothing else for it. The Honourable turned his horse round, took him in a grasp of iron, and put him rather slowly at the gate, which the animal, a well-bred, raking-looking chestnut, with a long bang-tail, got over exceedingly badly, striking the top bar with fore and hind legs; but neither disturbing the Honourable Crasher's seat nor the imperturbability of his demeanor in the slightest degree. He looked back, however to see his companion come, and even condescended to express a feeble approval of his performance, without removing the cigar from his mouth.

It is but justice to The Dandy to observe, that he no sooner obtained "the office" from his rider, and saw what was expected of him, than he cocked his ears, took the bit in his teeth, and bounded over the gate like a buck, indemnifying himself for the effort, by breaking clean away with his rider as soon as he landed, and going by the Honourable Crasher and his chestnut like a flash of lightning.

I have often observed that the blood of a languid person, if once he or she gets it "up," boils more fervently than that of less peaceful temperaments; perhaps it is altogether a thicker fluid, and consequently more retentive of caloric. Be this as it may, no sooner did the Honourable Crasher behold Mr. Sawyer speeding by him like an express train, than, roused by the example, and further stimulated by the insubordination of the chestnut, he sat well down in the saddle and, taking his horse by the head, soon caught up and passed the astonished Sawyer, merely remarking, "We've got a little out of the line; you seem to be riding a good fence, and had better follow me!" and then proceeded to lead his victim perfectly straight across country, in the direction of Tilton Wood; the fog, too, was by this time clearing off considerably, or it might be they had emerged from the region of its influence, and the stranger had not even the advantage of its friendly veil to hide from him the dangers by which he was encompassed.

To this day Mr. Sawyer has not left off talking about this his first ride over High Leicestershire. After a bottle of port, he even becomes heterodox for so good a sportsman, and vows he would rather gallop to covert over those grass-fields, than see a run in any other country in the world. I have my doubts, however, whether he enjoyed it so very much at the time. Jack put him down twice; first at an ox-fence, of which the rail was from him, and which, although his leader hit it very hard, deluded the unsuspecting Dandy; and secondly, by landing on a covered drain which gave way with him, and superinduced one of those falls that are generally designated "collar-boners." On this occasion the Honourable Crasher brought him back his horse, with quite a radiant expression of countenance.

"What a good little animal it is!" said he, throwing the reins back over his neck. "I'm trying to 'crop' this beggar of mine, and I very soon should, if I had to follow you."

In effect, the chestnut's head and bridle-band were plastered over with mud, although his rider's coat was as yet unstained. At Skeffington, they relapsed into a quiet trot, and rode on together, feeling as if they could realize the fact, that twenty-four hours ago they were utter strangers to each other.

It's odd how people cast up at a meet of fox hounds, from all sorts of different directions, even on the most unpromising mornings. Though the fog was as thick as ever at the top of the hill, and Tilton Wood, at no time the best of places to "get away from," was perfectly invisible at two hundred yards' distance, there was already a good sprinkling of sportsmen assembled at the fixture. Two or three "swells" from Melton, very much the pattern of the Honourable Crasher, had arrived on their smoking hacks, and were greeted by him with considerable cordiality. Truth to tell, the Honourable dearly loved what he called a customer, meaning simply an individual who was fool enough to rate his neck at the value he did his own; and, indeed, he never would have taken so affably to Mr. Sawyer on such short notice, had the latter not been fortunate enough to possess an excellent back hunter in Jack-a-Dandy, and bold enough to make very free use of that jumping little animal; the hounds, too, had already arrived, and in the glimpse which Mr. Sawyer caught of them as he rode up, he was sportsman enough to remark that they looked speedy, stout, level, and uncommonly fit to go. Such a pack, he

CHAPTER VII.

A LEICESTERSHIRE LARK.

By good luck one pair of the lost sheep soon hit the bridle gate Mr. Sawyer had been seeking in vain.

"I suppose it's all right," said the Honourable Crasher, putting his horse into a canter, with the loose rein and easy off-land seat peculiar to a gentleman riding to covert.

Mr. Sawyer, following close in his wake devoutly hoped it was so; but had little leisure for considering the subject, inasmuch as his energies were completely engrossed by the delicate task of gammoning The Dandy that he didn't want to pull at him. He knew too well, by the way his little horse's ears were laid back, that he was fully prepared, and only sought an excuse, to come with a rush at the shortest possible

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