

in their clothing when it is dark, the Dandy would win the Derby if it were over half a mile.

It was too true: though the smart little dog never could stay a mile at a racing pace on his best days, he was as quick on his legs as a rabbit, and nothing could touch him in two furlongs. Swaddled up in his clothes under the dubious twilight of a winter's evening, Mr. Tiptop never suspected him, and went home with the conviction that Marathon, and none other, was the horse that had beaten his favorite.

Mr. Sawyer laughed to himself as he rode Jack very gingerly on to Barkby.

CHAPTER XVI

RIDING TO SELL.

If Mr. Sawyer had kept a hunting journal which he didn't he would have noted down the meet at Barkby, as one of those gorgeous spectacles which makes an unfaceable impression on the eye of the unpractised beholder. There appeared to be more hounds, more horses, more servants, more carriages, and altogether a larger staff and retinue attached to the establishment, than he had ever hitherto seen paraded for the purpose of riding a fox. Nevertheless, with all this show, there was no mistake about the workmanlike tendency of the turn-out. If the pack was numerous, it was also exceedingly level and in faultless condition; the huntsman and whips looked as if they must have been born and bred for the special offices they respectively filled, and the second horsemen, notwithstanding their numbers, appeared to be all cut from the same pattern. As for the hunters, Mr. Sawyer would have wished no better luck than to ride the worst of them at a hundred and fifty guineas. One magnificent bay with a side-saddle, destined, no doubt, to carry a beautiful and precious maiden, quite put him out of conceit with Hetspur and the grey. As for Marathon? why he would never have got on him, in such company, had not the pleasing red cloth crossed his mind, that perhaps to-day he should get rid of the brute altogether.

He had ridden The Dandy very leisurely to a visit, in consideration of the animal's services before dawn, and had sent on the grey with an occasional helper from the inn, under the superintendence of The Boy, who was perched on Marathon; old Isaac, who wanted to buy some hay cheap, having given himself leave of absence for the day. The helper, with many injunctions to go steadily, was entrusted with the homeward-bound bay, and The Boy shifted to the second horse, whilst Mr. Sawyer himself bestrode the redoubtable bay. All these arrangements with the accompanying pulling up of curb-chains and letting down of stirrup-leathers, took some little time. Before our friend was fairly mounted and under way, the hounds had gone on to draw, and he found himself nearly the last of the lengthening cavalcade. Under existing circumstances, this was no great disadvantage, and the quieter he kept the bay, he thought, the best was his chance of selling him; yet he could not help wishing old Isaac had left the whole business alone. He might then have been forward with the hounds, looking out for a start on whichever horse he liked best, unimpeded by a man always should be, ready to enjoy fox-hunting—by the said considerations of Isaac.

Marathon was very fresh, and set his back up, squeaking in a most undignified manner, and swishing his heavy tail till it reached his ears.

A horse galloping up from behind set him peering with a violence that was scarcely pleasant, even to so practised a rider as our friend. He returned the greeting of the new comer—no less a personage than the Hon-

orable, interrupting his own explanation of how he should handle skirmishers if he was a general officer, which, by the way, it was fortunate for the skirmishers he was not. "What a bore! We shan't catch them in a week!" he added, turning Boadicea's head at the fence, and starting her at a score through a deep ploughed field. In a few strides he had forgotten his skirmishers, and Marathon, and Mr. Sawyer, and everything in the world except that he had lost his start.

The latter watching the line "fine ly degrees and beautifully less" on the horizon, rather congratulated himself, that his chance was completely out, and that there was now no temptation for him either to exert his own energies, or draw upon the failing powers of Marathon in the pursuit of that which he felt could scarcely be called pleasure. He jogged along the lane accordingly, contented enough, thinking what fun he would have on the grey, in the afternoon, with a second fox.

But a few of us can have hunted much without remarking a peculiarity connected with the chase, that occasions constant irritation and annoyance to its votaries. Have you never observed, that if you loose your chance of getting away with hounds, whether for procrastination, inattention, or the landable objection entertained by a rational man to ride at a large fence, do what you will, you only succeed in increasing the distance between yourself and the object you wish to reach? In vain you "nick," and "skirt," and ride to points that you think likely to be affected by a fox running for his life; in vain you "harden your heart," and sail away boldly over the line of gaps already established by your predecessors; you are only tiring your horse, and risking your neck in a wild goose chase. You diverge to a distant halloo, and find it raised by a boy scaring crows. You succeed by extraordinary exertions in reaching the group of scarlet coats and bobbing hats you have been following so long, and learn that they have been "trowen out" like yourself, and the further you go, the further you are left behind: till you hate yourself, as much as your horse hates you for not having judiciously joined the band of second-horse riders, and so jogged contentedly along in ease and safety, sure to come up with the first flight at last.

On the other hand, we will suppose that you have tired your best hunter early in the day, or he has fallen lame on that weak point where everybody said he would be lame when you bought him, or you have a hundred and fifty other reasons for wishing to speak quietly home, out of the observation of your friends. Those plaguy hounds seem to follow you as if you were the Wild Huntsman himself, and you begin to appreciate the severity of the punishment inflicted on that wicked German Baron. They draw covers that lie on your homeward way. They find, and hunt with provoking persistence alongside the very lane up which you would fain jog in solitude, crossing it more than once under your nose. There is sure to be a fair holding scent, not good enough to enable them to run clear out of your neighborhood and have done with it, yet sufficient to afford plenty of enjoyment to

the lucky few who are in it cannot spare a moment's attention from anything but their horses' ears.

Had he been riding a donkey, it was not in Mr. Sawyer's nature to abstain from turning the animal's head towards the hounds under such temptations; moreover, he distinguished among the first flight his Harborough companions, including the pale face of the Honorable Crasher, who by "bucketing" Boadicea most unmercifully, had got there somehow, and appeared quite satisfied with his situation. What could our friend do, but cut in, and go to work at once?

Marathon, excited by the turmoil, was fain to set his back up once more. He found, however, that the kicking was now all the other way. Taking him in a grasp that would have lifted a ton, Mr. Sawyer drove his spurs into the half-bred brute, and set him going close to the hounds at the best pace he could command. For a short distance, and when held well together, Marathon could stride away in a very imposing form. The sensation of having a lead is, in itself, provocative of emulation; behind our friend were four or five intimate companions who were not likely to let him hear the last of any sentence of shirking that should come under their notice. Close on their track were the flower of Leicestershire, and these again were succeeded, so to speak, by a whole army of camp followers, "maddening in the rear." Had the styx been in front of him, he must have charged it "in or over."

Instead of the waters of Acheron, however, there was nothing more formidable in his line than a straggling, over-grown bullfinch at the far end of the field; just such a fence, indeed, as Marathon was in the habit of declining, but yet which he hoped the turmoil behind, the general excitement, and the persuasive powers of his own spurs, would enable him to induce his horse to face. He had plenty of time to scan it as he approached. Half a mile or so of ridge and furrow, even at a hunter's best pace, gives leisure for consideration. Ere the hounds had strung through it in single file, he was aware of a wide ditch to him, on the further side was obviously a grass-field, and an uncertainty.

Marking him with his eye the weakest place, through which, nevertheless, he could not see daylight, Mr. Sawyer, crammed his hat on his head, and set his horse resolutely at the fence; Marathon, according to custom, shutting up every stride he went. Had it not been rather downhill, even his master's consummate horsemanship would have failed to bring him close to it. The fall of the ground, however, and the pace he was going forbade the bay to stop. Crash! he plunged into the very middle of the fence—broke through it from sheer velocity, to jerk both knees against a strong oak rail beyond—blundered on to his nose over that—slid half-a-dozen yards on his head—nearly recovered himself—stumbled once more, and finally got up again, with his curb-rein turned over his ears; the rider's feet out of both stirrups, hat off, a contusion on his left eyebrow, and the horses' nostrils full of mud, but no fall!

"By the powers, that's a rum one!" said Mr. Sawyer, as he cantered slowly up the opposite slope, repairing damages the while, and turned round to see the first flight charge the obstacle, which had so nearly disposed of his own chance.

Lusty as eagles, ravenous as wolves, jealous as girls, down came the four gluttons at the fence, each man having chosen his own place, and scorning to deviate one hair's breadth from his line. None, however, had made so judicious a selection as Mr. Sawyer. The rail, which had so nearly discomfited the latter, would neither bend nor break, but he had the luck of getting it where it was lowest and nearest to the fence; everywhere else it was not only high, but stood out a horse's length into the field, just the place which must catch the cleverest hunter in the world, if ridden to do it all in his stride.

The scene that met Mr. Sawyer's eyes

scanned Marathon with the eye of a purchaser. He looked on the horse now as his own property. He was determined to have him.

By some mysterious law of nature, whenever one individual succeeds either in what is termed pounding a field, or in getting such a start of them that nobody shall have a chance of catching him whilst the pace holds—and this, be it observed, is no everyday occurrence in countries where the best riders in England congregate for the express purpose of riding as well as they can—it invariably happens that the immediate failure of ascent, or some such untoward contingency, robs the lucky one of his anticipated triumph. On the present occasion, much to Mr. Sawyer's delight, they never hit off their fox again. By degrees, the tail of the field straggled up, having found their way by every available gate and gap; then came the second horses, carefully ridden, cool, and comparatively clean, not having turned a hair; lastly, arrived a man in a gig, by a convenient bridle-road, hotter than any one present, wiping his face on a coloured handkerchief, which he afterwards put in the crown of his hat.

Whilst sandwiches were being munched, and silver horns drained of their contents, ginger-cordial, orange-brandy V. O. P., and other enticing fluids, Mr. Sawyer giving The Boy stringent orders about taking Marathon home. He could not feel thoroughly comfortable till that imposter was fairly out of sight, and he should find himself established on the assuming little grey.

When he had made up his mind, the Honorable Crasher was a man of few words. Refreshed by a mouthful of sherry, not unacceptable after a rattling fall, and comfortably perched on the back of Confidence, a delightful animal that a child could ride, and perhaps the best and safest hunter in his stable, he ranged alongside of our friend, and plunged at once in *medias res*.

"So you want to sell the bay horse you have just sent home?" said he, with none of the hesitation and beating about the bush to which Mr. Sawyer had hitherto been accustomed in his horse-dealing operations. "If you do, and will name the price you ask for him, altogether."

"I don't think I ought to part with him," said he reflectively; "it strikes me he's about the best in my stable."

Crasher fell back apparently satisfied. It was evident he did not attach so much importance to the act of "exchange or barter" as did our friend. Mr. Sawyer picked himself up without loss of time. "I shouldn't like to sell him to everybody," said he affectionately, "but if you fancy him very much I wouldn't mind letting you have him," he added, after a pause, and in the tone of a man who makes a painful sacrifice in the cause of friendship.

"If I give you two hundred and fifty for him," drawled out the Honorable, with apparently about as much interest as he would have felt in paying three-and-sixpence for a pair of gloves.

"Guineas!" stipulated Mr. Sawyer; "Guineas," was the answer; and in this simple manner the deal was concluded.

My readers will agree will Isaac and his master, in thinking that Marathon was not the only one of the party who was pretty well sold. The old groom laughed in his sleeve a week afterwards, when he heard that on giving him "a spin" with Chance, just to keep his pipes clear, the mare went away from him as if he was standing still.

Mr. Tiptop couldn't make it out at all.

* Very Old Pale—a tempting label attached to certain black bottles containing the best French brandy; an excellent liquor, doubtless, and wholesome, provided you don't drink too much of it. Opinions vary, however, as to what is too much. The modest quencher of 9 p.m. growing to a superfluous stimulant at the same hour the following morning.

cheerful, joyous little town, but would wish to turn the stream of time, and live those golden days and pleasant nights over again?—would wish to be galloping his covert-hack once more through the fragrant air and under the dappled sky of a February morning, with a good horse to ride from Hanksborough Gorse or Barkby Holt, as his day's amusement, and a choice of at least a couple of invitations, offering him the pleasantest society and the best dinner in England, for his evening's gratification?

It is not more than thirty years since Nimrod wrote his celebrated "Quarterly Review Run"—the best description of fashionable hunting that has ever yet been printed, though many a hand, as light upon the bridle as the pen, has portrayed the same subject since then—not more than thirty years, certainly and the ways of Melton are but little changed, only, of the *dramatis personæ* there are not many left. Of those who charged the flooded Whissendine so boldly, the majority have already crossed the Styx. Nevertheless, a few of the old lot may still be seen ready, when the hounds run, to face "wood and water," as of yore.

Mr. Sawyer, for an unimaginative man, was the least thing in the world of a hero-worshipper. As he rode along, contemplating from behind them the fine powerful frame and the slim and graceful figure of two Meltonians, who for many years have shone, a couple of *lucida sedira*, in the front rank, and of whom, indeed, so fast have they always gone it may almost be said that

"Panting Time toils after them in vain,"

he was accosted by the pleasant, gentleman-like personage with whom he had spent an agreeable quarter of an hour in the hovel, on that memorable day when his ambition had so completely "cooked the goose" of Hetspur with the Pytchley.

"Good morning, sir," said this affable individual, bringing his horse alongside of our friend, with a bow such as nobody in the Old Country could ever have perpetrated. "I thought you'd be out to-day, so I've a couple here for you to look at."

When a nobleman not only touches his hat, but takes it off to you, at the same time offering you "a couple of horses to look at," as if he were about to make you a present of them, such politeness, thought Mr. Sawyer, is rather overwhelming than assuring. He returned the greeting, however, with his best air, and took off his hat in return, somewhat disconcerted, however, by the rude behavior of Struggles and Brush who were riding beside him, and who both bared out laughing.

The illustrious stranger, too—who, by the way, though still wearing a black coat, was "got up" with the utmost splendor of which a hunting costume admits—looked rather surprised, and winked at the two irreverent laughers as they are certainly not in the habit of winking in the House of Peers.

"Is that a favorite one you are riding?" inquired Mr. Sawyer, who fancied he must say something, and could think, at the moment, of no more opposite remark.

"I don't know much of him," was the reply. "He's only a five-year-old; and I haven't had him a fortnight. A thundering well-bred one, though, and can jump like a deer! I gave a hat full of money for him, without getting on his back; but we'll see what he's made of this afternoon, I hope. I should say, now, that he'd carry you alarming!"

Mr. Sawyer, whose conversational powers were soon exhausted, made no reply, but, more out of civility than curiosity, contented himself with scanning the five-year-old from his ears to his tail.

The illustrious unknown seemed to have no dislike to inspection; on the contrary, he courted further companionship, by producing the gorgeous cigar-case, and offering Mr. Sawyer a weed.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]