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THE FLYERS OF THE HUNT.



"THERE'S NOTHING TO STOP YER." HALLOOED ROBERT TOP; "KEEP HIS HEAD STRAIGHT."—P. 19.

THE
FLYERS OF THE HUNT.

BY

JOHN MILLS,

AUTHOR OF

THE "OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN," THE "LIFE OF A RACEHORSE," ETC. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN LEECH.

"And hearts that had grown cold
Shall meet again, like parted streams,
And mingle as of old."



"THE FIELD" OFFICE, STRAND;
AND
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TO

The True Sportsman,

WHEREVER HE MAY BE FOUND,

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED,

BY

AS ENTHUSIASTIC AN ADMIRER AS HE POSSESSES,

IN

THE WRITER.

P R E F A C E.

THE readers of "The Life of a Racehorse" will find one or two old friends introduced in these pages. The extraordinary favour, however, with which they were originally received gives rise to the hope that a second appearance in new scenes may prove equally acceptable.

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THE FLYERS OF THE HUNT.

CHAPTER I.

ROBERT TOP, the head of that well-known family of head grooms, illustrated in his own proper person the truly pleasant axiom that "he who lives long is sure to live well." As year succeeded year he discovered, through the agency of his waistcoat, that the gravity of his corporeal system increased ; and to be borne safely on the pigskin, or with proportionate risk, at least, of dislocations, fractures, and contusions, he must now, to apply his own vernacular, "mount a weight-carrier, and not a weed." In an earlier stage of existence, but by no means a remote one, he superintended his master's breeding establishment for the Turf ; but, upon giving up that pursuit—or as may be within the recollection of others, besides that of the oldest sane inhabitant, the pursuit giving up him—Sir Digby transferred his enthusiasm to the chase ; and Robert Top held a corresponding position, which he maintained in the more feverish seasons of rearing and breaking candidates for Criterions, Derbys, and St. Legers.

"The old blood, Sir Digby, the old blood !" observed he, directing the Baronet's attention to the animal occupying the loose box in which they then stood.

"He puts me forcibly in mind of what Sheet Anchor was in his palmy days," replied Sir Digby, fixing a steady criticising gaze upon the horse before him.

"Ay, like begets like," rejoined Robert Top, stretching his legs wide apart, as of yore, and fathoming the depths of his breeches pockets with both hands ; "and he's as much like his

sire when at the same age, as two fresh-hatched sparrows in the same nest."

"A fine-grown, lengthy, splendid-looking colt," returned his master.

"And as good as he looks," added the head groom, "as he will prove himself to be when the chance offers."

"He must be proficient in his business," remarked Sir Digby, "before I give him the opportunity of exhibiting his accomplishments."

"No, no," responded Robert Top, respectfully raising a forefinger to his brow; "we must run no risk with your neck, Sir Digby; for, take my word for it, when he sees hounds, 'Be with them I will,' will be his motto."

"And an unexceptionable one," returned his master, "when the knowledge is acquired *how* to be with them."

"The lesson will soon be learned," said the head groom with confidence; "for although high couraged, his temper is like a cooing dove's, and all he'll require will be good and temperate riding."

"To whom is the maiden mount in the field to be given?" inquired the Baronet.

"With your approval, Sir Digby," replied Robert Top, "I don't think we could do better than put up young Martin Round. He has a good seat, good hands, plenty of pluck, and as much judgment as is generally found covered by a skin twenty-three year old."

"To him, then, let both the honour and probable consequences be assigned," rejoined his master, smiling. "All ordinary precautions, however," continued he, "for avoiding injury to himself and others, horse and hounds, I expect to be fully observed."

Robert Top, withdrawing a hand and arm buried to the elbow in the secret depths of a side-pocket, gave a significant double knock just below the gold horse-shoe pin still occupying a front place in the snowy wisp of cambric encircling his throat, and remarked that "his eye would never be off young Martin

Round. If not exactly there at all times, young Martin Round would find him thereabouts, without the aid of spectacles."

"A little finer," observed Sir Digby, drawing a hand down the soft, satin-like neck of the horse, the veins of which stood out like fibres upon a vine leaf; "a little lighter in flesh," repeated he, "and he would be fit for the post."

"But not being meant for the post?" remarked the head groom, interrogatively, and peering out of the extreme corners of his eyes, as he jerked his badger-pied fur cap jauntily at an acute angle—

"His condition is perfect," responded the Baronet.

"Nothing to be done, and nothing left undone, eh, Sir Digby?" rejoined the head of the family of the Tops, with a flush of pride spreading from chin to brow.

"Such is my opinion," returned his master.

"And a sound one, too," flatteringly added Robert Top. "It doesn't lie in everybody's brain-pan," resumed he, "to know what condition is when they see it; and it's still more like a pearl in a hailstorm to find the man capable of putting on the finishing touches of perfection. The constitutions of horses vary as much as our own, and, in training, should be studied with particular nicety before sweating a hair. That's my rule, Sir Digby;" and the speaker concluded his remark with a vigorous double knock beneath the horseshoe.

"We have not named this colt," remarked the Baronet. "As a son of Sheet Anchor, suppose we call him Mainstay?"

"Mainstay?" echoed the head groom, reflectively. "Umph. So be it then;" and, striding forward, he fondly caressed the horse, saying, in a subdued tone, "You'll gladden my old heart to see ye go. The blood of Sheet Anchor! Ay, the old blood, Sir Digby."

As the most watchful of village cocks threw his bold challenge on the breeze, young Martin Round entered the box in which Mainstay had just risen from his litter, and, with a cheerful "Well, my bo-o-oy!" proceeded to divest himself of his clothing until he stood in the airy costume only of a shirt and

pair of breeches. "Well, my bo-o-oy!" repeated he, "is it to be neck or nothing to-day?"

Martin Round, be it known, held the responsible position of second in authority in Sir Digby's stable, and rode his master's second horse, to the infinite satisfaction of himself and unmitigated envy of his fellow-lads ambitious of like promotion. With a light, wiry figure, the striking peculiarities of which consisted of a disproportionately long body joined to a pair of remarkably short bandy legs, young Martin Round presented to the attention of the physiognomist a countenance indicative of ease and contentment, both mental and physical. Red as the rosiest of apples were his cheeks, and his clear grey eyes revealed that Robert Top's tuition had not been thrown away upon a dullard. Dark brown, and short and crisp as the curls upon a poodle's back, were those which surmounted the expansive brow of young Martin Round; and, taking him all in all, from head to heel, he looked peculiarly designed for the position he so efficiently occupied in Sir Digby's stable.

Humming the snatch of a popular ballad, Martin proceeded to rack up Mainstay's head, clean out the crib with the nicest care, and remove to a corner of the box a small quantity of hay which had been left. He then offered the object of his scrupulous attention a few go-downs of water, and afterwards placed before him a feed of nicely-winnowed corn, for which an acknowledgment was made by a somewhat doubtful action of Mainstay's ears and near hind leg.

"Come, come," said Martin, "none o' your nonsense. Stick your nose into that, and leave me for another day. You can eat me at your leisure, ye know, bones, buttons, and all; but there's no time to spare for that this morning."

Young Martin Round now shook up the litter, carefully separating the clean from the soiled, and, keeping up a vigorous "psh-sh, psh-sh," during his manual labour, concluded this division of his task by sweeping the box, and setting it as fair and trim as a lady's drawing-room. A sponge having been damped, he removed an unsightly stain from Mainstay's shot-silk quarter,

and after sprinkling a wisp with a few drops of water, he proceeded to apply it vigorously to his thighs and hocks. The warm, caressing rug was then stripped from his bright chesnut body, to which, with an increased splutter of the "psh-sh, psh-sh," Martin used the wisp, adding a final polish with a soft, dry cloth. Then, after adjusting the quarter-piece and breast-clothes, a nicely-padded saddle was placed on Mainstay's back, with the girths drawn loose.

"There," said young Martin Round, breathing a little harder than was his wont, as he surveyed Mainstay from ear to fetlock, "you're nearly done, my bo-o-oy!"

An examination was then made of his feet, the dirt removed, his legs brushed, and, after a moistened sponge being drawn down them, the morning preparation completed by rubbing them bright as polished mahogany.

"Not a single oat left," observed Martin, peeping into the crib. "A pretty feeder you are, and no mistake. Well, that no time may be lost, I'll go and see what I can do in that line, and then—" Young Martin Round drew a long breath, which seemed to indicate a satisfaction that no language could express, "I'll jog ye to the meet," continued he.

CHAPTER II.

ALTHOUGH Mainstay had, as yet, possessed the opportunity of seeing hounds only when at exercise, it must not be erroneously supposed that the rudiments of his hunting education had been so far neglected as to leave him in perfect ignorance of the art of clearing obstacles in his path. So soon as his novitiate had been advanced to the carrying himself in form in a stretch gallop, Robert Top, leading-rein in hand, taught him to face most of the small ditches, low fences, and open drains in the neighbourhood. Then, with many tokens of encouragement, he was led over an easy stile, and subsequently towards a flight of turnip hurdles, over which he sprang with the ease of a roebuck.

Felicitous Robert Top !

And never, perhaps, more felicitous than now, mounted on a hack, "strong as a castle, and easy-going as a rocking-horse," to borrow one of his own stereotyped phrases, as he rode by the side of young Martin Round on their way to the meet. With an approving and admiring look, he saw that both Mainstay and his rider were faultless in their appointments : bit, buckle, girth, and strap were just as they should be ; and Martin, equipped in a dark, closely-buttoned grey coat, drab breeches and gaiters, profusely ornamented with pearl buttons, had the air of "a younker prancing to his love." White as hill-top snow was the cravat tied with the squarest of bows in front, and gloves of corresponding hue, with a well-brushed hat, round-brimmed as a pipkin, added considerably to the framed-and-glazed effect of young Martin Round.

A good personal appearance being, in accordance with the Chesterfield code, the best recommendatory letter of introduc-

tion, and acting as his own postman whenever the opportunity presented itself, the head of the family of the Tops exhibited upon the present occasion a fair sample of what may be accomplished with combined care, taste, and ingenuity. Painfully clean had the razor swept the bristles from his chin, and a wetted brush forced the few thin woolly-looking hairs fringing the cerebellum to keep a forward place beneath his shining beaver. A single button of the cut-away dark-green coat, fastened across the breast, gave a prominent position to the gold horseshoe pin stuck in the roll of cambric encircling his now doublest of double chins, and permitted the bright canary waistcoat to be visible, forming an arch above the pommel of the saddle. Smooth and speckless "leathers" were united to a pair of boots blacked to a polish which defies description; but in spite of straps and tape, a thick margin of Robert Top's calves puffed between the boots and breeches, and supported the fact of the increase of his corporeal system being general, and not local. Bright, and even glittering, were the spurs buckled to his heels, and in a white-gloved hand he carried a double-thonged whip, to which was attached a hammer of considerable weight, as an occasional locked gate in Sir Digby's country bore ample testimony.

Maintaining a dignified silence, the head of the family of the Tops continued to ride between the hedgerows flanking the roadside at an easy pace, distributing his looks of admiration between Mainstay, himself, the stout roan hack which had the honour of carrying him, and young Martin Round.

"I think there'll be a scent this morning, sir," remarked the latter, in the hope of breaking the monotony of the hour with a little pleasant discourse.

Now it is worthy of remark for future guidance, whether immediate or otherwise, that had young Martin Round confined himself to asking Mr. Top's opinion concerning the likelihood of scent, and not ventured upon expressing his own, he would have received a much more gracious reply. As it was, young Martin Round's auricular nerves were somewhat wrung with,

"Do ye? I don't," which, figuratively speaking, caused him to drop the subject like a hot potato.

Robert Top, from the extreme corners of his eyes, saw at once the effect he had produced, but was tyrannical enough not to lessen its acrimony by the addition of a single honeyed word. And so the concluding part of the journey to the meet was stately to a degree, not to say solemn.

It is generally acknowledged as a great fact that a carriage and four horses may be driven through the most perfect Act of Parliament that was ever framed. Whether this rule, unlike others, remains devoid of the ordinary amount of exceptions, it may not, perhaps, be worth while to inquire; but that particular Act of the Legislature regulating direction-posts, clearly possesses a gap of no ordinary width. For, although it enforces their erection "under certain penalties, in certain cases made and provided," the necessity for keeping them legibly painted, when worn by time and the seasons, is not even hinted at.

The way-warden, or some such parochial functionary of Gannet Green, took all possible advantage of this omission; for, standing as the local wooden directory did, in a truly conspicuous position, with its arms pointing north, south, east, and west, as the four roads met in a common centre, not a single letter had been visible upon either of them since he was a little—not to add extremely unpleasant—boy. No one, therefore, but a stranger to Gannet Green and its district would think of seeking assistance from this ridiculous dummy, pointing nowhere in general and to nothing in particular; and consequently, as Robert Top's eye fell upon a mounted scarlet coat, carefully examining the washed-out, worn-out, crumbling, rickety, moss-grown post, he knew, and mentally remarked, that "the mounted scarlet coat must come from a distance." In the twinkling of something gifted with extraordinary powers of speed, the head of the family of the Tops came to the conclusion that a gentleman who could ride, and a horse that could go, stood before him.

"Your servant, sir," said he, touching his hat; "I think I can show you the road you want."

"Thank you," replied the stranger, "I'm pointing for Rayton Heath."

"Exactly so," rejoined Robert. "So am I. Master's hounds meet there to-day."

"You are in Sir Digby's service, then?" interrogatively returned the other.

"Ay, sir," added Robert Top, thoughtfully, "in the late and present Baronet's, man and boy, it's close upon fifty-three years since it began."

"A term which speaks well for the good qualities of both masters and servant," answered the stranger with a courteous smile.

"Thank *you*, sir," responded Robert Top, emphatically, in the full conviction that nothing more nor less than a simple truism had been uttered.

The reply, or at least an equally pleasing one, might have been anticipated from the speaker, for the attributes of a gentleman were clearly defined in his appearance, tone, and manner. By a fine old sportsman of the fine old school—the rough-tongued port-wine soaker of other days—he would probably have been pronounced something between a man-milliner and a French dancing-master, so pale were his features, and delicate, even to effeminacy, his figure; but something within enabled him to make a very satisfactory comparison of notes with the finest old sportsman of the finest old school, as time, that unerring revealer of truth, will prove. Doubtless his hunting gear was open to criticism. The small saddle, martingale, and snaffle-bit, straight-cutting whip, thin stirrups and spurs, top-boots with wafer-like soles, tight-fitting doeskin breeches, and black cap, were, particularly and collectively, better adapted for the race-course than the hunting-field; and had a satin jacket, either bright or sombre, been in the place of the scarlet coat, all would have been in perfect keeping for the post. The combined effect, indeed, of horse and rider, was pace, and pace only. With a finely-drawn barrel, blood-like quarters, and bang-tail, the mare he rode looked fit to start for the Ascot Cup, without undergo-

ing the process of another sweat. Long in the leg, and with a springy, elastic movement, she walked with dainty tread by the side of Robert Top's roan hack ; and that experienced judge of what might or might not be accomplished by certain material came to the decision that, with a light weight, she could fly, but a few ounces more than ten stone seven would bring her to a stand-still.

"A likely one to show in front, sir," remarked he.

"Yes," replied the stranger ; and," added he, twitching with the point of his whip a lock of the silky mane from the near to the off side of her neck, "she can stay there."

"With just enough to steady her," rejoined Robert.

"You are right," returned his companion. "I sink the scale," continued he, "just within what she can carry well."

"And that is——?" inquiringly remarked Robert Top.

"Allowing seven pound for saddle and bridle," responded the stranger, "ten stone six."

"Fitted her to a pound, sir," rejoined Robert. "Measured her as if with rule and compasses."

"That's Sir Digby's second horse, I suppose," observed the stranger.

"He will be, some day," replied Robert Top, "but he's never been ridden to hounds yet."

"His first appearance, eh?"

"Exactly so, sir," added the head of the family of the Tops ; "and although as a novice he may come to grief, he won't disgrace himself, take my word for it."

"Do you consider falls desirable for a young horse?" inquired the stranger.

"The fewer of them the better, sir," replied Robert Top. "What we want in a hunter," resumed he, "whether young or old, but particularly in the young, is confidence. Now, I will ask any one, with the commonest of common sense, if a horse, which is amongst the timidest of animals living, is likely to gain, keep, or increase his confidence by being frightened or hurt? It doesn't stand to reason, sir."

"And yet we often hear, when a mistake is committed," added his companion, "'it will teach him to know better next time.'"

"Better may be done," said Robert Top, "but no thanks to the fall; for if severe enough to be remembered, it is much more likely to cause him to blunder again, from fear alone, than otherwise."

"I'm disposed to agree with you to a certain extent," said his companion; "but an unmade hunter often takes his leaps much better after experiencing the consequences of carelessness, or jumping short."

"He may do that, sir, certainly," rejoined Robert Top, "if high-couraged and well-riden; but I would rather see him improve gradually, with as little risk from falls to nerves, bones, thews, and sinews as possible. They are capable, you see, sir," continued he, "of doing a great deal of harm in a very short time; and the little amount of good is much too small to balance the account."

The emerald greensward of Rayton Heath now became visible in the distance; and Robert Top, directing the stranger's attention with his whip, said, "There, sir, is the fixture."

CHAPTER III.

FAR and wide was it known that Sir Digby's hounds would meet on Rayton Heath, in accordance with the published fixture, both as to time and place. Punctuality and certainty were the Baronet's popular and distinctive features as a master of foxhounds, although perfectly independent of that too general requisite, a subscription list. Wherever and whenever it was announced that his hounds would meet, there they would be, nothing keeping them in the kennel short of throwing off being impossible. Should the first draw be the widest from home in his country, and the weather such as to render sport problematical in the extreme, old Martin Round's orders were never countermanded. The fixture *was* a fixture, and he knew it. And now, having announced that such a being as *old* Martin Round possessed a name, it becomes necessary to enter into more interesting details concerning his habitation, and other matters of corresponding interest. The proximity of his dwelling to the kennel and boiling-house was such that, on certain days, when the wind blew due south, a strong scent of broth pervaded every room, not excepting the beer-cellar. Such, however, was the peculiar construction of old Martin Round's olfactory nerves that, as he said, he rather liked it than otherwise. Having graduated from the respective and subordinate offices of second and first whipper-in, he now, and for many seasons past, occupied that of huntsman to the best hounds and most popular M. F. H. in the county. Proud of his place, and not a little satisfied with the profits appertaining thereto, old Martin Round, so designated from being the respected parent of young Martin Round, and not from evincing too decided physical inroads of the sere and yellow leaf of life—was consti-

tutionally composed of that tough material which rendered him capable of filling it so efficiently. With a voice as musical as ever cheered a hound, he possessed a bony, muscular frame, which seemed to set fatigue at defiance. Long as might be the distance, and difficult as might be the work he accomplished, there was the same activity, the same punctilious discharge of his duties at night, as when he pressed toe in stirrup in the morning. Bearing a close resemblance to his son, both in form and feature, old Martin Round, year by year, exhibited almost as little change as the wave-washed rock. Beneath the edge of his cap a fringe of frosted hair was visible, and this appeared to be its natural hue, for it never altered. With the eyes of a hawk, he seemed to scan two or three of the adjoining parishes as he threw them forward to learn what should be done, and what left alone; and when hounds wanted assistance—but never before—he was at their heads like the flash of an electric telegram. However ruffled in temper—and old Martin Round's was none of the mildest—he was never known to render audible one word of an objectionable description. It was conjectured that many parts of speech were held firmly between his lips and teeth; and, from the repressed and clenched condition which occasionally they exhibited, it is far from unlikely that he kept his opinion sometimes, concerning men, matters, and things, a secret under considerable pressure. On the sunny side of fifty, he could boast, as he did, of never feeling younger in his life; and Mrs. Martin Round bore testimony to the fact, in so far, at least, as declaring, at all convenient times and opportunities, that, "although old enough to know better, he rather grew worse;" but let anybody else breathe one syllable against the husband of her bosom, and then, nautically speaking, a wide berth between the hearth and homestead of Mrs. Martin Round and the anchorage of the libeller became more than desirable for the general peace of the community.

And there, to the admiring gaze of that rural part of the British public congregated on Rayton Heath, old Martin Round might be seen mounted on a plain, long-necked, goose-rumped,

stout-limbed, short-tailed horse, and surrounded by eighteen couples and a half of hounds of various degrees of merit, but not one coming within a considerable margin of good-for-nothing. In attendance were the first and second whippers-in—John Armstrong, familiarly called Jack; and William Hall, as familiarly called Bill—and each, to his credit, not only knew his business, but felt unequivocal pleasure in the performance of his respective and manifold duties.

Such was the position occupied on Rayton Heath as Mainstay stood, carefully guarded by Robert Top, and watching the scene of excitement before him, with pricked ears and distended nostrils, and looking more than prepared to jump off with young Martin Round without further ceremony.

Plethoric yeomen, in long-skirted green coats, and low broad-brimmed hats, came trotting up on animals expected to do whatever was required of them. With hounds to-day, they might be seen bearing their owners to the adjoining market-town to-morrow, and drawing the entire family to church on the succeeding Sunday. Nothing, indeed, could be more useful; but the less said, perhaps, about their ornamental qualities, the better.

And now dog-cart, chaise, and “trap” came briskly to the spot, and hacks were exchanged for hunters, sent in advance “up in the morning early,” and a goodly show of red-coats began to look like full-blown poppies, sprinkled in groups and singly over the heath, glittering in dew and sunshine.

It invariably required a strong effort for Farmer Pattymore to get a glimpse at the dial of his watch; for, that piece of mechanism being about the size and shape of a moderate-sized turnip, and imbedded in a deep fob—rendered as tight as a drum from circumstances over which he had no control—seemed to resist the pull in proportion to the strength applied. After becoming, however, about the colour of a mulberry, success crowned the attempt of Farmer Pattymore, and that remarkably fat and loyal subject announced, by way of general information, that “in less than three minutes the Barrownite would be there.”

The prophetic Pattymore was right beyond all cavil or question ; for, as the last monosyllable died upon his lips, Sir Digby arrived within view, gently cantering his hack over the green-sward towards the assembled throng. Hats were lifted string high, and caps were doffed, as he greeted each and all with his hearty "Good morning,;" and although, perchance, there was not much wit in the joke, a great deal of laughter followed the prompt essay on the part of the Baronet to crack one at the small expense of Farmer Pattymore as he dismounted, preparatory to throwing his leg over the symmetrical hunter held by a groom at hand. No sooner was he in the saddle than a move was made towards Maxy Gorse, the first draw, and accredited as being a sure find.

Before climbing into the saddle—for, be it known, Sir Digby now required a strong pull to lift him there—it might have been observed how minutely he scanned the appointments of his horse before mounting him. Girths, stirrup-leathers, bridle, bits, and curb-chain were ascertained to be in perfect order ; and the memory of every servant in his establishment found infinite strength in the knowledge that whatever had been forgotten or neglected would be discovered with unerring certainty, and a stern suggestion made that it might not occur again.

In brilliant red, and more sombre green ; in white cords, brown cords, cream-like leathers, and kersey drabs ; in brown tops, white, mahogany, and almost black ; in caps, hats, and wide-awakes ; many mounted, and some on foot ; from the thoroughbred and high-mettled flyer, with his coat as bright as a peacock's plume, to the wiry, rough, roadside-fed shoemaker's pony ; all sorts, sizes, and conditions, varied colours, hues, and tints, might be seen wending their way down a tortuous bridle-path on the road for Maxy Gorse.

As the stranger, piloted to the meet by Robert Top, walked his mare to the side of Sir Digby, to exchange courteous salutations with him, the contrast became manifest in the extreme, both personally and as regards the respective horses on which

they were mounted. Forty-eight summers and winters had thickened the baronet's form, and the five feet ten inches which formerly dropped the scale slowly with eleven stone ten pounds, now displayed a decided movement when full fourteen stone was placed in the balance. Broad, however, as were his shoulders, and widely-distended his breast, as yet no segment of a circle was visible above the pommel of his saddle ; and, if the expressed opinion of *the belle* at the last county ball might be trusted, his ruddy features were as handsome as when a boy he went bird's-nesting a long time ago. In his hunting gear there was little difference between that and old Martin Round's ; but, although the sheathed horn at his saddle, cap, and long-skirted "bit of pink," might be regarded as close imitations of those of his huntsman, there was not a chink or crevice for a doubt respecting a much loftier claim of distinction on the part of their owner. The Master he looked, and the Master he was ; albeit neither addicted to swearing trooper's maledictions, horse-whipping those whom he dared without fear of retributive consequences to himself, nor bragging of the deep strong draughts he daily imbibed before his brains were stolen away. He was not ambitious of claiming the admiration of the stable or the alehouse, or that his eccentricities should be the principal subject of discussion in these local forums. To dwell, however, no longer upon his negative good qualities, it may be added, that with an affable demeanour he possessed a spirit and force to keep the most unruly field in order ; and rare, indeed, was the offence repeated when his displeasure had been expressed at its commission. Severe was his rebuke at all unfair riding over wheat, clover layers, and young grass ; and whenever a gate, rail, or bar was broken, or any of the unavoidable injuries committed, likely to cause the smallest loss or annoyance to the humblest cottager in the vicinity, it had but to reach Sir Digby's ken for prompt recompence to be made. The generosity of his disposition being patent to that cosmopolite, Everybody, it must be admitted that the poultry claims were excessive, and far beyond the destruction alleged to be committed by that much-

abused marauder the fox ; but, fallacious as were the arguments to prove that more were eaten than hatched, the claimants generally retired from the issue well contented with the damages awarded. Under these circumstances, therefore, it will not occasion much astonishment that such an untoward event as a blank day with Sir Digby's hounds was unknown. Foxes were plentiful because their friends were numerous ; and their friends were numerous, because the Master was popular.

A powerful bay horse, up to great weight (in the vernacular of the dealer), and one that had been ridden straight for six successive seasons, carried Sir Digby to the verge of Maxy Gorse, which was no sooner gained than, the whippers-in being in their assigned places, old Martin Round—after a moment's pause, during which nearly every hound stood gazing earnestly at his face, with ears thrown back and waving sterns—lifted a forefinger, and making a slight motion with it towards the cover, in the fiery pack crashed, with the ardour of good hounds well hunted.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a theory of old Martin Round, supported by unexceptionable practice, that a quiet tongue evinced strong proof of a wise head ; and consequently it will readily be believed that his attention was more directed to the employment of his eyes and ears than to making a great and unnecessary noise. In truth, nothing could be more mute, not even a mole, than he was upon throwing hounds into cover, and during the draw his voice was only now and then heard, intimating a desire that a find might be made with as little loss of time and patience as possible. But when the find *was* made, old Martin Round's cheer could be heard with remarkable distinctness a full mile up wind. In the conclusion of drawing a blank, too, he touched his horn with a force of no ordinary kind ; and his halloo to "Come awa-a-ay" let every hound know where he was expected without delay, or the alternative of receiving a less agreeable hint through the medium of Will Hall's double thong.

It is difficult to describe the method he adopted ; but let hounds be where they might, there was old Martin Round at their heads, or close to their sterns. In cover or out, picking along a cold scent, or flying from scent to view, there he was, the leader of the foremost flight, with his loose seat and slack rein, paying almost as little attention to the horse carrying him as if that particular animal was specially engaged in bearing the weight of somebody else, within neither the range of his sight nor memory. Whatever obstacle presented itself must be either got through or over—it mattered not which to Martin, so long as he maintained his place : and there he might be seen, creeping over a bank, floundering through a brook, and never clearing anything handsomely ; but always with hounds.

As an accredited sure find, Maxy Gorse was destined to lose none of the lustre of its claim to-day. Scarcely had the ardent Ringwood got his nose down wind when he was seen to feather his stern ; and, throwing his tongue in a deep bell-like note, the body of the hounds flew to him, and away they crashed through the cover like a thunderbolt, "loading the trembling air with music." Full swing they swept towards the farthest end, where John Armstrong, the first whipper-in, had placed himself to watch the issue of events, and, closely imitating his superior's silent system, telegraphed the gratifying "gone away" by lifting his cap at the full stretch of an arm in the air. A few moments afterwards, and Sir Digby's ringing "Tally-ho" announced that the fox had made a clear break, and must now race to live.

"Hold hard, gentlemen !" cried he, as a bunch of hounds flashed out of cover ; "let them get at him."

Through bush, briar, and thicket, and over stubs, which would have set any other horse but a huntsman's to grief twenty times in as many yards, old Martin Round jammed his way, and, horn in hand, arrived at the spot where the fox broke, just as the body of the hounds settled upon his line. Getting on the best of terms with him, they flew across the open like greyhounds from the slips.

It was well for the scion of the Rounds that he possessed a more than ordinarily good seat, otherwise the plunge which Mainstay gave, as a judicious pull was made upon his jaws to restrain his ardour, would have sent young Martin to occupy a temporary position with Mahomet's coffin.

"There's nothing to stop ye," hallooed Robert Top, pointing with his whip over the hills looming in the distance and far away ; "keep his head straight."

No instructions could be more in accordance with young Martin Round's inclination to obey, and with hands down, and slightly leaning forward in his saddle, he intimated to the impatient horse that he might "go."

With a bound, which for a brief space poised both in air, Mainstay jumped off like a racehorse from the post ; and as he

rushed, too near to be pleasant, past Farmer Pattymore, that individual snapped both eyes, and whispered a little thanksgiving that he was not knocked over like a wicket from a well-directed ball.

Possessing a profound knowledge of the country, Robert Top took a line of his own, well adapted for avoiding impediments of a more serious character than an easy gap or a fence, over which the roan hack might be turned with pleasant ease. Robert Top had neither the ambition nor ability to show in front, but invariably carried out the resolution, to the fullest extent, of being an eye-witness of those who did ; and never, perhaps, was this resolution more fixed than on the present occasion. The roan hack, therefore, found that to escape the constant stimulating effect of the rowels at his sides he must accomplish his best pace, if not a trifle more ; and as he carried his rider through a long, soft, winding grass road, known in the locality as Featherbed Lane, Farmer Pattymore, who was close to his heels, became sensible that he was enjoying a shower-bath of a kind which improved neither his linen nor his complexion.

"Now, Martin !" ejaculated the head of the family of the Tops to himself, as he saw Mainstay coming conspicuously to the front. "Keep him together," continued he, watching every movement of his favourite. "There, that's it, lad ;" and as he spoke the noble horse cleared in his stride a ditch and bank which brought half the field to a standstill.

"Well done !" hallooed Sir Digby, turning round in his saddle, as he led some twenty lengths in advance.

"Ay," said Robert Top, feeling that the compliment belonged to a partnership account, "*it was* well done !"

Meeting nothing objectionable in his line, the fox continued to run up wind, and the scent, breast high and as good as could be wished, enabled the hounds to rattle him along without let, check, or stop.

The first part of the run being over some heavy and newly-ploughed land, "the mounted scarlet coat that came from a distance" appeared to wait for a more favourable opportunity to

show in the foremost flight ; but that keen observer, Robert Top, glancing from time to time at the relative positions held by those proud of place, saw—as he subsequently affirmed—he was coming.

Far more quickly than his wont, old Martin Round out with his horn as hounds threw up in a wide field of grass. Without the hesitation of a moment he gave it a chink-wink, and came trotting back with a good-humoured smile of confidence upon his lip.

"Flashed a little too for'ard," said he. "That's it, Rhapsody !" and, with barely sufficient time to let those in who crane at difficulties, Rhapsody hit off the scent again short to the left, and away they went with Crafty's nose getting a slant down the wind.

"He carries you well," observed Sir Digby, as Mainstay's head laid within a few feet of his girths.

"Like a bird, Sir Digby," responded young Martin Round, his rubicund countenance beaming with pleasure.

"You must ease him soon," rejoined his master ; "and if the run proves long, stop him altogether."

"Very good, Sir Digby," returned Mainstay's rider ; "but he's as fresh as a kitten now."

"We are getting into a difficult country," added the Baronet, "where the fences are stiff and numerous. Be careful how you ride him, more particularly if at all blown, or showing any symptoms of distress."

The change of country alluded to by Sir Digby became apparent while he was speaking. Instead of ploughed land, the inclosures consisted principally of grass, intersected with flights of high post-and-rail fences, and a marsh ditch, here and there, yawned with considerable effect to weak nerves.

"It will become very select presently," remarked Robert Top, still piloting Farmer Pattymore in a line exclusively his own. "A few only of the right sort can live with 'em now."

"That young horse o' yourn seems to be one of them," returned Farmer Pattymore, as Mainstay approached a flight of rails as straight as a winged arrow from a yew bow.

"Look at him!" added the head of the family of the Tops, with enthusiasm. "If you want to look at a picter, look at *him*!"

With outstretched neck, and his small and beautiful head erect, Mainstay neared the leap, and, gathering himself together when within a few feet of the barrier, rose in the air, and, to the admiring Robert Top's cheer of "Hie over!" cleared the five feet six inches of timber with the ease of a pigeon in its flight.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Farmer Pattymore. "I never saw a thing done better."

"And never will," replied his companion; "but here comes somebody that'll be close upon doing it as well;" and as he spoke he pointed to "the mounted scarlet coat that came from a distance."

Standing in his stirrups, with a perfect racing seat, the stranger now came with a rush to the front, but dropping into his saddle as he approached the five feet six, steadied the bang-tailed mare for a moment, and then, rising with the bound of an antelope, she was again in her long lurching stride before Farmer Pattymore could recover from once more snapping his eyes.

"I thought so," said Robert Top. "I saw he'd come, by-an'-by."

Turning to the right, Sir Digby and old Martin Round avoided the jump by seeking egress through a neighbouring gateway; and, the example being followed by those in the rear, upon the principle that discretion is the better part of valour, Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare were alone in their glory, sailing side by side, and going as straight to hounds as the crow flies.

"Come up, 'oss," said Robert Top, giving the roan hack more than a touch upon the flank with his double thong; "I must put an end to this now as soon as possible."

"They've flung up," observed Father Pattymore, "we shall nick in again nicely."

"Come up, 'oss," repeated the head of the family of the Tops; and again the whip cracked round the roan's sides.

Sheep had stained the ground, and continuing to rush before the hounds as John Armstrong failed to get to their heads in time to prevent the difficulty, a check of some duration now took place. In the twinkling of a dewdrop old Martin Round saw, as a further proof that the finest rule cannot invariably be applied, "letting them alone" would be a mere waste of time, and, blowing his horn hard, lifted them well forward and again hit on the line; and—heads up and sterns down, with every hackle bristling for blood—away they flew.

"Hold hard," said Robert Top, coming up at the moment that Mainstay's head was about to be eased for another spin. "Hold hard," reiterated he, "he's had enough to-day."

Young Martin Round touched the brim of his hat, in silent obedience to the mandate, and, turning Mainstay homeward, gave a last fond look to where he would have been had Robert Top arrived a small pinch of seconds later.

CHAPTER V.

As Mainstay's head was turned towards home, and when a sufficient distance had been accomplished to convince him that he was separated from his companions in the field, he began to manifest decided effects of impatience and irritability. Tossing his head aloft with flashing eyes and distended nostrils, he kept his rider, young Martin Round, in momentary expectation of being compelled to make an essay of his best powers to retain his seat in the pigskin. Upon his sweat-stained coat the large fibrous-looking veins stood out like a piece of intricate net-work, and from his champed bit flakes of white foam flew and scudded in the breeze.

"He doesn't like to leave 'em," remarked Robert Top with a chuckle. "He can't abide to leave 'em," continued he.

Young Martin Round jerked his hat on one side, so much as to say, "For his part, he didn't wonder at it."

"Softly, lad," said the head of the family of the Tops, as Mainstay bored his head between his knees, and evinced increasing symptoms of irritation; "softly, lad, so-o-of-tly," repeated he, in as oily a tone as his voice was capable of producing.

"He'd have taken the shine out of 'em to-day, sir, from the find to the finish," observed young Martin Round, "if we'd kept him going."

"You couldn't have shaken off that scarlet coat that came from a distance, though," returned Robert Top.

Again a significant movement of young Martin Round's hat led to the conclusion that he maintained a different opinion.

"He's a flyer," resumed Robert Top, "let him be who he may, and, although I suspect he neither cares nor knows much about

hounds or hunting, is always in the first flight when it's not too much like scrambling through dirt."

"He certainly took his fences in pretty form, sir," said young Martin Round, drawing back the angles of his mouth, and exhibiting a remarkably white and sound set of teeth.

"There wasn't much room for improvement," replied the head of the family of the Tops—"at least," continued he, "*I* couldn't see it;" and a satisfactory smile spread itself over his features, conveying the idea that, such being the boundary of *his* vision, beyond it no range for mortal ken existed.

At this juncture young Martin Round appeared to be suddenly afflicted with a dry, short cough, as if a feather had got into his larynx. At last, apparently having mastered the irritating cause in his throat by swallowing it, he was seized with a sort of stuttering fit, and could not proceed a word or letter further than "I—I—I."

"You were going to speak, Martin?" said Robert Top, encouragingly.

"I were, sir," replied Martin, wiping his lips on the back of the glove of his whip hand.

"Then go on," rejoined his companion, with an air which partook of condescension, if not of patronage.

"I was going to ask," returned young Martin Round, hesitatingly, "how you thought *we* went, sir?"

"Well," said Robert Top, and, after a pause which gave considerable effect to the almost military manner of expressing his approbation, added, "very well."

From heel to head young Martin Round became in a perfect glow, and was profane enough, at the moment, to worship Robert Top in his heart, who, to him, looked like a perfect cherub in boots.

Knowing the country well, and being desirous of getting Mainstay in his comfortable box with as little delay as possible, Robert Top soon piloted him by short cuts within view of the gilded weather-vane glittering in the afternoon sun on the roof of Sir Digby's stable.

"We shall soon have your nose in the crib now, my bo-o-y," said Robert, addressing his favourite, "and you wouldn't be a bit of the old blood if ye didn't keep it there while a single oat was left."

Young Martin Round grinned as he added, "Bless'd if I don't think, sir, crib and all will go some day or other."

"Ay," returned Robert, "there isn't much heart in 'em when they can't feed. Neither man nor 'oss is good for much that can't feed. The Tops," continued he, "were always noted grubbers."

His companion felt strongly disposed to assert the claim of the Rounds to a similar distinction; but, fearing that he might possibly be infringing on a prerogative of his superior, restrained the inclination, and steered the now willing Mainstay into the neatly-gravelled court adjoining his stable. With nervous alacrity, four strong, healthy-looking lads rushed forward, apparently from different points of the compass, and each evinced ambition in rendering his assistance generally; but particularly, it may be observed, to the dismounting of Robert Top with great personal ease. One held the roan hack short by the head, so that he could not move the eighth of an inch backwards or forwards. Another grasped the off stirrup by way of acting as a prop or fulcrum. A third took the precaution of steadying him in his descent, by holding him with a delicate clutch round the middle; and a fourth seemed to hold himself in reserve for any unforeseen emergency.

"That's it!" exclaimed Robert Top upon reaching the ground in safety. "Ay," he continued, "with increase of weight there's always a proportionate decrease of nimbleness. Think o' that lads, think o' that," repeated the head of the family of the Tops, following Mainstay as he was led by young Martin Round into an apartment assigned for the especial purpose of removing the outward effects of his day's work as expeditiously as possible, and as a preliminary to entering his own cozy box.

In the same state of nervous alacrity two of the muscular lads followed, jointly and severally bearing a bucket, containing

about three quarts of warm oatmeal gruel as thick as cream and quite as soft, a small quantity of the sweetest hay, a pail of hot water, soft soap, flannels, sponges, scrapers, bandages, and a full suit of clothing.

No sooner were the girths slackened than Mainstay drained the soothing draught to the last drop, following up his evident enjoyment by pulling, with the keenest of appetites, at the lock of hay placed before him.

"Now, lads!" ejaculated Robert Top, "set to work, and with a will, too."

With additional nervous alacrity the individuals addressed began washing Mainstay all over, from head to heel, and such was the industry displayed that scarcely had a lather of nice consistency been effected through the medium of the soft soap, flannels, and hot water, than the sponges and scrapers were successively applied to get him as dry as possible, his feet carefully examined and cleansed, legs bandaged, and the full suit of clothing adjusted. Mainstay was now conducted to his own box, wherein a liberal quantity of clean straw had been littered, and a small feed of corn placed in his crib.

"There, my bo-o-y," said Robert Top, "we'll leave ye alone for an hour, and then polish you off for the night."

At the expiration of the time named by the head of the family of the Tops, the son of Sheet-Ancor was again visited both by him and the attendant helpers. The clothing and bandages being removed, and which had absorbed nearly the whole of the moisture left, a vigorous wipping was commenced, and in less than a quarter of an hour not so much as a damp hair remained. Dry rubbers were then applied by way of giving his satin-like skin a few finishing touches; his mane and tail brushed over; legs brushed, well hand-rubbed, and fresh bandaged, and his sleek form carefully covered with clothing just brought from the hot closet in the saddle-room.

"A good horse," said Robert Top, lifting the corner of the quarter-piece, and giving Mainstay a playful slap on his shot-silk skin, "deserves great attention."

Mainstay threw back both his ears, and lifted his near hind leg threateningly.

"You know you wouldn't do any such thing," resumed Robert Top, shaking his head, and repeating the slap on Mainstay's quarter. "How often," continued he, "has your father pretended he was going to lash out in the same way; and when I was a little egg-sucking boy, your grandam would just as much as say to me, 'I'll roll ye over presently,' but she never did."

The usual feed of bright clean oats and the allowance of hay were now brought by young Martin Round, and the door of his box swung and slowly closed upon its hinges for the night.

"The old blood," said Robert Top, thoughtfully, as he crossed the yard towards his dwelling, "the old blood!"

CHAPTER VI.

AMONG the retainers in Sir Digby's hunting establishment was one bearing the somewhat remarkable appellation of "Puffy Doddles." The immediate cause of the first part of the distinctive title being assigned to him with one accord by the popular voice, was the physical tendency of his corporeal system to become as broad as it was long, and as thick as it was broad. In short, for a lad of fourteen years old, he might have been exhibited as a natural wonder of what is possible to be accomplished by a good appetite, excellent digestion, famous temper, moderate work, plenty of sleep, and a chronic habit of laughing; for, let the subject mooted be grave or gay, there was Puffy Doddles grinning, and ready to explode with mirth at the termination of the narrative. It in no way affected the result whether he listened, as he was always ready to do, to an oft-repeated veteran Joe Miller, or the alleged farewell address and penitent confession of a candidate for public sympathy on his sudden departure from this sublunary stage of his errors of commission and omission. Puffy Doddles was certain to laugh at anything told him, and at any one telling him anything. He could no more prevent it than prevent sneezing with a bad cold or any other involuntary combined action of the nerves and muscles; and the general effect of these united causes was that Puffy Doddles grew—as the head of the family of the Tops described his increasing plethoric condition—"fatter and fatterer every day." Red as a peony were his cheeks, which, shining like wax, stood out as if his mouth was always full of the pudding he most loved; and that, in accordance with the prevailing opinion, might be called suet. Not even the summer's cloudless sky was of a clearer blue than Puffy Doddles's

eyes, and his hair, as yellow as the garden marigold, crisped itself into short stiff curls over his head, not unlike those that may be seen on a water-spaniel's back. Short of stature, and yet long in body for his height, with a pair of legs approaching almost to deformity from the extreme inward bend beneath the knee, Puffy Doddles looked, from heel to head, designed by Nature for the stable, the drawback alone excepted for getting "fatter and fatterer every day." Now, for the figurative forging of the chain of circumstances, past, present, and to come, it seems advisable to state that, although a distinguished favourite of Robert Top, this bodily condition of Puffy Doddles gave his superior great anxiety, not to add vexation. As he remarked to himself once during the day at least, "Good head, good hands, good seat; but" (and here dropping his voice to a whisper, and shaking his head, added), "confound his fat!"

As blithely as the lark trilling his matin song mid air above his head, Puffy Doddles was occupied, one morning, in burnishing a snaffle as bright as polished silver at the entrance of the saddle-room, with a foot resting on the bottom of a pail reversed, and equipped in the airy costume of a shirt and pair of drab breeches and gaiters—the latter profusely ornamented with mother-of-pearl buttons. As blithely as the lark trilling his matin song mid air above his head, Puffy Doddles continued to add lustre to the snaffle-bit, singing in one of the most subdued tones (for singing or whistling on duty was scarcely a venial offence in the strict stable discipline of the head of the family of the Tops), "Of all the gals that are so sma-r-rt, there's none like pretty Sally. She is—" and here an abrupt termination broke off the personal attractions of that charming and celebrated denizen of an alley, by the sudden appearance of Robert Top from the shade and shelter of an acute angle formed by the doorpost of the saddle-room.

In wholesome dread at being caught in the commission of a breach of duty, slight as it must be deemed, considering that the vocal description of Sally's beauty was scarcely above the hum of a beetle's wing, Puffy Doddles raised a hand deferen-

tially to the bunch of yellow curls surmounting a brow of anything but poetical development, and looked as if a strong impulsive inclination seized him of getting his head into his shoes, or anywhere so as to be hidden from the measured penetrating gaze of Robert Top.

"Puffy," said that somewhat despotic individual, burying his hands and arms to the elbows in the pockets of his breeches, and widening the distance of his legs apart as he jerked the badger-pied fur cap almost on the tip of his nose; "Puffy Doddles," added he, after a pause, during which the culprit's cheeks lost several shades of the peony tint, "you was a-singing, sir, that's what you was."

Nothing could have assisted his cause less than a direct denial of the impeachment, and being prepared with no other plea, Puffy Doddles threw himself passively upon the merciful consideration of his accuser, and ventured nothing in reply.

"I say you was a-singing, sir," repeated the head of the family of the Tops, looking, if possible, sterner than before. "Now, the fact is," continued he in the same voice and manner, "and facts are stubborn things—this won't do at any market price that can be named."

Puffy Doddles began to look as if seized with cramp in the stomach.

"Folks, but particularly boys," resumed Robert Top, "that stand about a-singing while at work, are *sure* to grow fat and fatterer every day; there's no keeping 'em down, do what you will."

Unshed tears rose to swim in Puffy Doddles's sky-blue eyes.

"What with eating, sleeping, laughing, and a-singing," continued Robert Top, as if Puffy Doddles stood self-convicted of an offence certainly not less than a misdemeanour, "here you are as much like an oyster-barrel as anything I ever saw, taken at any point of view, but particularly from behind."

Puffy Doddles screwed a couple of clenched knuckles into the corner of an eye, while the angles of his mouth were drawn down as low as they could be stretched.

"Who knows," said the head of the family of the Tops inter-

rogatively, "what might be in store for ye, supposing your case could be kept within Christian-like bounds? With seat, hands, and judgment for a boy, like you have, an owner of a good horse might be found, perhaps, to give you a mount in colours some day. Think o' that," added he; "think o' that!"

Puffy Doddles, at the moment, wished himself the living British skeleton.

"If you were not worth a little o' my notice," continued Robert Top impressively, "I should turn ye into the farmyard to feed the pigs, pigeons, and poultry; but, as it is, I'll see what can be done to draw ye fine and keep ye so."

Puffy Doddles felt the full force of his iniquity, and a corresponding amount of gratitude towards his proposed benefactor.

"By way of a beginning," said the head of the family of the Tops, as if engaged in carrying out one of the most charitable actions of his life, "you'll take that in about half a pint of warm water before breakfast this morning;" and as he spoke he extracted from one of the secret depths of his pockets a paper containing what appeared to be little short of an ounce of Epsom salts, and presented it to Puffy Doddles.

The culprit took the proffered gift, and not only expressed his gratitude, but, what is far more rare in this world of "masks and hollow hearts," entertained it in all sincerity.

"For breakfast," resumed Robert Top, "you'll take a small crust—it can't be too hard or too dry—and one cup of tea—it can't be too weak; and when dinner-time comes you must put on the muzzle, Puffy, and deny yourself pudding, pie, and all sorts of vegetables, particularly taters. No beer, remember; keep from butter, and don't take cheese on any account."

Puffy Doddles had almost summoned sufficient courage to inquire the nature of the edibles of which he might partake; but at the critical moment the spirit proved too weak, and he remained both sad and silent.

"One mutton-chop at most," continued the head of the family of the Tops, "and that not a large one, and a slice of stale

bread—not too thick, recollect—with a mug o' water, is your full allowance, Puffy, for some time to come."

Puffy Doddles involuntarily heaved a sigh, and, keeping his eyes fixed in a vacant stare on the ground, appeared to be listening with profound attention.

"In addition to this muzzling system," said Robert Top, "you must wrap up warm, no matter how hot it may be, and walk every day as fast as ye can, say five miles out and five miles in. That will waste ye, Puffy, if anything will, take my word for it, and then, perhaps, you'll become a credit to yourself, and a credit to me."

Puffy Doddles ventured to express briefly a hope that he might live to see that bless—ed day.

"That's a good lad," rejoined the head of the family of the Tops, encouragingly. "And by way of showing that I can trust ye with a pearl of great price," continued he, "you shall give Mainstay a spin this morning in order to waste *him* a little."

The cheeks of which Puffy Doddles was the proprietor began now to mantle over with a decided tint of the peony.

"Yes," said Robert Top, making a vigorous attempt to get both hands deeper into the pockets of his breeches, "Mainstay shall have a five mile gallop this morning. His shoulders and neck are a leetle too heavy to please me, and so I'll lighten 'em before he's ridden to hounds again;" and, thus speaking, he strode towards Mainstay's box.

Having had his usual quantity of hay diminished by nearly one half the night before, Mainstay was prepared for the wasting process, and he now stood, turned round in his box, with young Martin Round at his head, hooded, clothed, and saddled, ready to be led out. The design being to get rid of the superabundance of flesh which the son of Sheet Anchor carried before the saddle only, the breast-sweater and double-hood were of warm rug material, while the quarter-piece consisted of lighter texture.

"Lead out," said Robert Top, authoritatively.

With the pride of his race in his step, head held aloft, and lashing his flanks with the point of his silky tail, Mainstay

walked into the adjacent court-yard, where Puffy Doddles stood equipped in the ordinary attire of a stable-lad in his undress. An attendant helper gave him a leg up, and he dropped lightly and gracefully into the pigskin.

Walking by the side of young Martin Round, who held the near rein close to Mainstay's jaw, the head of the family of the Tops directed him to be taken through a small gate, purposely made in the park fence, contiguous to the stable, and which led immediately to the exercising ground.

As nearly level as a billiard-table was the straight mile, with a long sweeping turn at both ends, which formed that portion of Sir Digby's capacious, undulated, and nobly-timbered park, assigned for the exercising ground. After being walked from one end to the other twice, Puffy Doddles received orders to give Mainstay a gentle canter to about midway, then to gradually increase it to the turn, and as he came into the straight again to bring him along at a gallop, but not too fast.

"Keep him well together," said Robert Top, "and if you see my hat in the air, take a pull at him, as you'll be making the pace too strong. If you see my right arm out like a signpost, mend your pace; and if you see my left one straight above my head, stop him altogether."

Puffy Doddles hesitated to put the question; but the fear of not perfectly comprehending his instructions overcame the scruple.

"Supposing I don't see your hat in the air, sir, and none of your arms, what am I to do then?" inquired he, with considerable trepidation of tone and manner.

"That'll mean as you was, Puffy," returned the head of the family of the Tops with a benevolent expression of countenance. 'If you see me do nothing,' continued he, "you do the same, and you can't do wrong—meaning, as it will, 'as you was,' Puffy."

Confidence having been gained by Puffy Doddles in the full faith that he understood the duties required of him, he raised himself in the saddle as became a well-trained pupil of Robert Top, and Mainstay felt that he was to go.

Like a fleet-pinioned bird he jumped off, pulling hard ; but, yielding to the force applied, Mainstay settled himself into the measured stride of a canter, and, passing the mark for the pace to be increased, his rider gradually let him out, and as he swept round the top turn entered the straight ground at half speed.

"The boy has good judgment," observed Robert Top, as the horse glided past him in his easy, racing-like stride.

Puffy Doddles kept the corner of an eye fixed upon his superior's hat and arms ; but, seeing no telegraphic signal, concluded that he was strictly conforming to the directions given.

Up and down, and round the top and bottom turns, the noble horse went with the action of a perfect piece of machinery, and upon completing the task assigned was permitted to stand still two or three minutes by way of "a refresher," and then walked back to the loose box, where four helpers stood in ready attendance, and in which he had been washed after his return from the hunting field. More clothing was now thrown over his neck and shoulders in order to increase the perspiration, trickling down his legs in streams, while his mouth was washed out from a bottle, and his lips and nostrils well sponged. The quarter-piece was then thrown forward, and his flanks and quarters lightly scraped, so as to cause as little irritation as possible either to his skin or temper. The girths were then slackened, and the hoods and breast-sweaters removed, so as to enable Mainstay's head and ears to be rubbed dry, his neck and shoulders scraped and wisped, mane struck over and combed—the greatest expedition being used to finish the work as expeditiously as possible. A handful of hay, with the fragrance of a violet, was then placed before him, the saddle and quarter-piece removed, and his body subjected to the same treatment. A full dry suit of clothing being buckled upon his now partially-dry skin, the saddle was again girthed upon his back and his mouth washed out, and upon being conducted from the apartment known as "the rubbing-house," Mainstay was once more led into the park by young Martin Round.

"Walk him quietly up the straight to the top turn, with

his nose to the wind," said Robert Top, superintending every detail ; "and when there," continued he, "put up Puffy, and let him bring him along to where I stand, at a steady gallop."

The mandate being obeyed, Mainstay was walked about for a few minutes longer, and when found to be cool enough led into his own cozy box, where wisps and rubbers, accompanied with the usual "psh-sh, psh-sh" of the helpers, soon brought a shine upon his coat as bright as a polished mirror. After his feet being carefully examined and washed, his legs fomented with hot water, sponged, and bandaged, light fresh clothing was placed over his sleek form, and the roller buckled by Robert Top himself, so as to insure a proper degree of pressure only about that important member, the heart. "There, my lad-o'-wax," said he ; "now you shall have two quarts of oatmeal gruel, a bran mash, and a little of as good old hay as ever was cut by scythe ; and for four hours and a half," continued he, referring to the dial of his watch, "left to yourself."

As Puffy Doddles wended his way towards his own quarters, he kept his sky-blue eyes fixed upon the ground, and seemed to be cogitating, both deeply and seriously, upon the severity of the measures recommended for the reduction of his fat.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE observed of all observers," with his large, full gazelle eyes flashing with excitement as he again stood by the cover side, Mainstay looked the perfection of a hunter, albeit one still in his novitiate. Young Martin Round, prouder than any known prince of his position, once more had possession of the saddle, and Robert Top, mounted on the roan hack, evinced no perceptible change whatever in his outward appearance or (in the absence of any evidence to the contrary) inward sensibilities, notwithstanding the passing away of one more season since he offered the first tribute of admiration to the way in which his favourite went straight to hounds. Another year had fled, and there the son of Sheet Anchor again stood by the cover side, admired by that portion of the British public then present, and causing a certain commandment to be forgotten by the majority, who fervently desired the rightful claim of ownership to Sir Digby's "young flyer of the hunt," by which title he was now popularly known.

"He's a picter, Sir Digby," observed Farmer Pattymore, examining the object of his remark from ear to heel with the keen scrutinising look of one who knew a horse from a hand-saw; "he's a picter, Sir Digby," repeated he, "if ever there *was* a picter on this earth, not to speak of other planets."

"The old horse over again," replied the Baronet, smiling. "The old horse over again!"

"Ay," rejoined Robert Top, "the identical same, Sir Digby. "We've the sire in the son as certain as"—here Robert appeared temporarily at a loss for a simile, but added after an effort—"fleas ain't lobsters."

"Blood, bone, and sinew," said Farmer Pattymore, scanning

Mainstay's points of symmetry, "and not an ounce of flesh too much anywhere, pick it out as you will."

Robert Top jerked his narrow round-brimmed hat slightly on one side, and, with increased colour in his cheeks, remarked that, "for one who had not been apprenticed to the business, he never knew a Christian who had a better eye for what condition really was than the farmer."

"I can see," returned the easily-flattered Pattymore, "as well as most men, what ought and what ought not to be ; and, if asked to find out a fault in the condition of that 'oss, I should say it'll take too much of my spare time between now and when my lease is out, which has nineteen years to run come next Candlemas. That is what *I* should say"—and Farmer Pattymore looked as if he courted an immediate introduction to any one capable of delivering something more appropriate to the subject.

"Time, with good and temperate riding," said Sir Digby, whose words caused a warm pleasurable sensation in the breast of young Martin Round, "will finish well that which has been well begun. In other hands," continued he, and, as he spoke, a shade passed over his features, "or in other days he might, and doubtlessly would, have been brought to the post for what his sire both won and lost——"

"When pulled," added Robert Top, by way of, as he thought, a great improvement to the observation.

"If his work, however," resumed the baronet, "be of a less feverish or ambitious kind, he, like those whose spheres of action are limited, must rest contented with winning such honours as are within his reach."

"He'll take all them, Sir Digby," returned Robert Top, with confidence both in his tone and manner. "There's nothing that can be asked of him in reason," continued he, extending his whip hand towards Mainstay, "but he will do"—he paused—"and do," he repeated emphatically, "well, with a little over."

"That's right enough," responded Farmer Pattymore ; "a man might take his solemn oath o' that, and chance the consequences."

With a subdued "Hoik in, hoik in!" and a single wave of his whip hand, every hound flew to obey the mandate of old Martin Round; and in that brief space of time known as a "twinkling" not one was to be seen, the shaking tops of the gorse alone revealing the busy work going on beneath. By way of avoiding an unusually stiff bit of old furze, through which acute difficulties presented themselves of forcing a way, a hound, now and then, made himself visible, by leaping over the obstacle, and red and white, badger-pied, dappled skins, rose by turns from the brake as the pack drew carefully up wind for the finding of one particularly hoped to be "there or thereabouts." Not a whimper was to be heard, and yet a close observer of old Martin Round might have perceived his lips become more closely pressed together, and his eyes to kindle with a peculiar fire as he watched the increased busy drawing of the hounds. The almost impenetrable gorse was heard to crack again as here and there they rushed through it, jumping over each other's backs, and flinging themselves right and left in a manner which led to the conclusion that certain noses began to draw certain inferences, although further search might be deemed expedient previous to a decided announcement of them.

A cheer was on the huntsman's lips, but he still reserved it.

A hound now, with his ears and tip of his stern blood-stained from the effect of his indifference to the sharp-pointed furze, flashed out of cover, and with his nose to the ground flew along the side as if in full expectation of hitting upon a piece of genuine intelligence which he particularly desired to be the direct medium of communicating to his companions.

"Varletine, Var-r-letine!" hallooed William Hall, the second whipper-in, with a crack of his double thong, sounding like the ring of a rifle, "back to cover, Varletine!"

Having a lively remembrance of the expeditious manner in which William Hall gets to the head of a refractory hound, Varletine concludes within himself—for his mind's eye sees the force of the argument at a glance—that the sooner these

instructions are conformed with the better, and springs into the cover again with a readiness of will and sympathetic agency of limb commendable in the extreme.

The drag was somewhat stale, but a slight whimper from a sixth season hound, old Furrier, announced that a fox had been there before, perchance, the most watchful of village cocks crowed pugnacious defiance to each other.

"Have at him!" cried old Martin Round; "have at him there," repeated he. "Hoik to Furrier! hoik together, hoik!"

Noses were now clustered together, and sterns flourished above the gorse as Furrier's eager companions gladly responded to their leader's opening. But a few more grains of sand had sifted through Time's hour-glass, when Furrier up with his head, and, throwing tongue, said as plainly as ever hound spoke, "I'm at him now. Come along."

By way of relieving a little strain upon the tympanum, old Martin Round pressed a forefinger into an ear, and then screamed a scream which, for high pressure on the organs of human sound, probably had never been greatly exceeded.

"A find!" exclaimed Sir Digby, settling himself in his saddle, shaking his stirrups a little further towards the middle of his feet, and drawing his reins tighter in his bridle hand. "A find!" repeated he. "Hold hard there. Stand still, and he'll go like a shot."

The now challenged fox found the pursuit too hot to hang in cover one moment longer, and slipping from the furthest corner up wind, where John Armstrong, the first whipper-in, had stationed himself in the form of a mounted statue carved from Scotch granite or any similar lifeless material, commenced the race for life.

Far above his head might be seen John Armstrong's cap as his usual silent signal of "gone away."

"He's gone!" cried the Baronet exultingly; and, giving his willing horse a shake, rushed to the corner where the first whipper-in still remained.

"Ware hounds!" hallooed he, holding out his whip hand

as the field came thundering to the spot. "Ware hounds!" repeated he. "Give them room; let them get at him!"

A bunch of hounds, led by Furrier, now flashed from the end of the brake, and, without the lapse of a moment, settled to their fox.

With his spurs jobbing at the sides of his horse, old Martin Round squeezed his way through the cover; and, before the body of the hounds had got on the line, he was in his place—first of the foremost flight.

A finer burst was never seen.

"Go along!" cried Robert Top, as Mainstay rushed with the force of a locomotive past the roan hack, with his head held straight out; full-swing he went at a flight of strong posts and rails stretching before him, which, had he failed to clear without a touch, would have probably caused young Martin Round to take an aerial voyage into the adjoining parish.

Higher than was necessary, and further than the accomplishment of the feat required, "the young flyer of the hunt" bounded in the air, and took the leap in his stride with as little risk to his rider's neck as, under the circumstances, the most anxious maternal parent could desire or expect.

"He's safer than a child's rocking-horse!" ejaculated the head of the family of the Tops.

For several minutes the few hounds that had not got away at first had to race in vain to reach the leading ones; but these, flashing too forward, overran the scent, and throwing up about the centre of forty acres of grass, the opportunity was afforded of a union being effected between the first and the last. Like a fan the hounds spread out right and left, with their noses sweeping the ground, mute as moles, but busy as the busiest of bees.

From the densely dark cloud which hung over the brow of old Martin Round, it is conjectured that he indulged in a choice selection of those forcible but silent observations to himself when the check took place, more particularly as in the present instance the cause might be fairly assigned to the pace at which

the field in general had forced the hounds on, the distinction of so doing particularly belonging to Mainstay's front position.

The two Rounds, at this precise moment of the world's history, presented a wide contrast in the expression of their respective features. As may be inferred from a former remark, old Martin's partook of that shade known to others besides artists as "thundering black," while Martin Round *secundus* gave to view one of the sunniest countenances ever beheld. "His orders had been to ride straight to hounds; and straighter to hounds neither horse nor man could go or ride. *That* he knew, and there he was, fresh as paint, and ready to take the shine out of anybody. His father might look 'thundering black' at over-riding hounds; but so long as they were not ridden over, there was no great amount of harm done as far as *he* could see." So young Martin Round thought; so young Martin Round said, in that suppressed description of language which people apply when addressing confidential communications to themselves.

With the blast of a Triton old Martin touched his horn, and William Hall riding to the heads of the hounds at the same moment, every one flew to the summons and back to the point where the scent failed.

"Yoo-doit, Furrier!" cheered the huntsman, as the old hound flourished his stern and began to lash his sides under a bank, and short to the left of the line hitherto taken. "Yoo-doit, Furrier!" repeated he.

Again the gallant old hound threw his tongue, and, with head high in the air, ears thrown back, and tucked-in haunches, away he streaked.

"That's it!" cried old Martin Round, forgetting with lightning rapidity the cause of his ill humour, and once more he was going with his loose seat and slack rein, paying minute attention to the working of the hounds, but leaving his horse to do the best he could under any circumstances, whether adverse or favourable, so long as he carried him "in his place." Such was the implied compact at all times between old Martin Round and

the animal assigned for his particular use and unequivocal pleasure in the field.

There was little music now. In a close body the hounds swept along at a pace too good for the use of tongues. Now and then a few light notes were heard, as the pack skimmed with the speed of swallows on the wing over the great grass inclosures forming the best of Sir Digby's fine hunting country ; but every stern was down, and nearly every hound ran mute. To the leeward side of the hounds, and almost abreast of them, Sir Digby held his usual forward place, while Mainstay's head lay within a few feet of his saddle on the off side.

"We are coming to a brook," said Sir Digby, pointing to a glassy stream glittering in the distance ; "I will lead you over it."

Young Martin Round formed a hasty opinion that he could have set the example quite as well, and possibly a trifle better, but exercised the wise discretion of keeping this opinion entirely to himself.

Danby's Brook was a well-known water jump in that part of the country, and many a horse and many a man had met with a frigid bath, much against their joint and several inclinations, in attempting to clear its boundaries. Its steep and even precipitous banks precluded the possibility of fording a passage ; and eighteen measured feet of deep water are not of that ilk for the stale, the weak, or the timid to go at with any degree of confidence or comfort.

As the hounds plunged into the stream, sending the water flying in a cloud of white spray, and climbed struggling up the opposite bank, many of the field turned to the right for a ford little less than a mile distant. Some, laughing, shook their heads, and, pulling up, proclaimed themselves stopped ; while a few, and but a few, resolved to hazard a fly at Danby's Brook.

"Steady him !" said Sir Digby, as, almost neck and neck, he and young Martin Round approached the yawner.

Mainstay's rider promptly obeyed the mandate, and taking a pull at his reins, laid him within a short length of his master's girth.

Sir Digby was first over, and as he landed, turned his head to witness the result of young Martin Round's attempt. Mainstay gave a mighty spring, and when he had quitted the earth, and appeared to be clearing about double the distance required, young Martin Round dropped from his saddle as if knocked over by a cannon shot, and fell head foremost into the middle of Danby's Brook.

A stirrup leather had broken.



CHAPTER VIII.

PUFFY DODDLES was no more. His remains, indeed, were still palpable, and of a nature, perhaps, too lively for any apprehension to arise that he as yet belonged to any other state of existence than that coming under the definition of "mortal ;" but the falling off in Puffy Doddles threatened to leave nothing but the shadow of his former self. Those rosy pippins of cheeks, which were wont to shine like wax, had completely melted away under the awfully strict discipline to which his virtues of self-denial had been subjected, and the form, once truthfully compared to an oyster-barrel by the cynical Robert Top, now looked like some slight, cunning device for airing the baggy suit of clothes which hung flutteringly on his attenuated frame. Puffy Doddles no longer laughed at anything and everything. He no longer warbled snatches of that favourite ballad descriptive of the charms and attractions of a certain Sally, who, of all others within the circle of his acquaintance, was the smartest, and held the sovereign sway of his heart, notwithstanding she resided in a humble locality known as "our alley." For aught that appeared to the contrary, he might never have heard of her. Sad, silent, and bony, with the drawn-out expression upon his features of constantly practising the "Old Hundredth" on the clarionet, or some such elongating village instrument, Puffy Doddles began to look as if his hopes erst entertained of rivalling the living British skeleton were about to be consummated. The thinner, however, he became, the greater the satisfaction on the part of Robert Top. The daily perceptible decrease of his pupil's remains appeared to give a *pro rata* increase in the estimation of his superior ; and such was the enthusiasm of Puffy Doddles to elevate himself to the loftiest pinnacle in the architectural

favour of the head of the family of the Tops, that the progress made threatened little short of annihilation.

"You begin to do both yourself and me a little credit, Puffy," remarked that individual, as he measured the reduced expectant possessor of more of his unqualified approval in the fulness of time. "You begin to do both yourself and me a little credit, Puffy," repeated he.

"Thanks to your kindness, sir," replied "the remains;" "I'm lighter and lighter every time I go to scale."

"Ay; and what a blessing that is!" rejoined Robert Top, casting his eyes upwards, and shaking his head with a motion amounting to solemnity. "Instead of turning your hand, perhaps, to gardening, or something o' that sort, you're about going into the great stable of the North, Puffy. Think o' that, Puffy, and when you say your prayers, remember to give thanks for getting lighter and lighter every time you go to scale. We should always recollect our blessings, Puffy; and you are not the lad, I know, to forget yourn."

The remains of what Puffy Doddles was begged to be believed, with tears unshed swimming in his eyes, that he was the last of the line to neglect so Christian a duty.

"Very good," rejoined Robert Top; "very good, indeed! A lad brought up under a real pet parson couldn't speak more oily; and so long as the works which follow don't partake of the gammon, it isn't Lombard-street to a farthing of gingerbread but what you may have a leg up on a very high horse some day."

None of the Doddleses, for at least three generations, were known to comprehend metaphorical language; and, consequently, "the remains" stood staring with blinkless eyelids, and wondering within himself what particular leggy animal "the high horse" had reference to.

Robert Top, perceiving the labyrinth of wonderment he had caused, smiled as he remarked: "We all want to get a mount on the high horse, Puffy; but some have terrible grassers in climbing into the pigskin, and not a few lie flat on their

blessed backs, when flung, to the last day of their precious lives."

A new light began to break through the opaque darkness surrounding the mental faculties of "the remains," and with sympathetic physical action he slapped a knee with the broad palm of his dexter hand, and "wished he might be rendered comical but he knew what was meant."

"That's a great thing, that is," returned Robert Top, getting his elbows buried in the pockets of his breeches, separating his legs widely apart, and jerking the badger-pied cap at an acute angle. "That's a great thing, that is!" reiterated he. "To know what's meant in this world, Puffy, is about the most profitable kind of knowledge one can possess. It isn't altogether confined to stable secrets," continued he; "but in love, law, and physic—not to say anything of polly-ticks—if we only know what's meant, we don't want to learn much more, take my word for it."

"The remains," taking no interest whatever in love, law, physic, or politics, paid but little attention to the concluding part of his mentor's harangue, feeling it somewhat prosaic than otherwise.

With a careless rolling gait, Robert Top, followed by "the remains," led the way towards Mainstay's quarters; where he was now indulging in that corporeal ease which the close of the season insures to horse and hound.

It was June, and the scorching sun darted his sultry rays upon the dried earth, rending it apart in wide crevices, as if agape with thirst. Blossom and branch drooped, and the scarcely-opened flowers fell in faded leaves, like hopes of happiness. Birds hid themselves in the thickest foliage, or with languid wing took their way through the hot, flickering air in search of cooler shades. The shallow rivulet no longer murmured along its pebbly bed, but here and there thick, stagnant pools marked its course, from which the swallow gathered material to build her nest. Faint and wearied before his task was done, the peasant stood resting from his toil, and beneath

wide-spreading trees panting sheep lay stretched in dreamy idleness. Things of the air and of the earth looked parched and feverish.

Despite the prevailing heat, however, Mainstay presented a remarkably refreshing appearance, as he stood in a small convenient outlet adjoining a capacious loose straw-strewn box, fenced in with high palings, and over which a huge chestnut tree threw a wide and sombre shade. Close to the trunk of the tree, and for some yards around, near which Mainstay might be often seen, with one ear pricked, the other thrown back, sleepily switching his flanks with the point of his fine and silky tail, a quantity of clay had been thrown, and being constantly kept moist and soft, material comfort and benefit were derived from this considerate method for keeping his feet cool. The flies, too, refused to hold large gatherings at this refrigerated spot; and occasionally when a stinging intruder was stamped irritably off, the oozy soil relieved the jar which might have led to injury.

Little was the change in Mainstay's living, notwithstanding his work had for the time terminated, and he possessed the privilege of taking what amount of exercise in his yard he thought either proper or gratifying. The daily quantity of corn was reduced to two feeds; but the allowance of hay had been proportionably increased, and cold bran mashes were proffered twice during the week, by way of avoiding the necessity of physic.

Such was the simple economy of Mainstay's "summering."

"Some of us live in clover," remarked Robert Top, as he unlocked the outer door leading into the yard where Mainstay stood, as was his wont, under the tree, gently touching his sides with a pendulum movement of his web-like tail. "Some of us live in clover," repeated he. "Plenty to eat, enough to drink, and nothing to do. That's what I call living in clover, Puffy."

"The remains" arrived at the hasty, but correct conclusion, that this graphic description of living in clover bore no

resemblance whatever to the rules governing his own strict regimen.

“Ah !” ejaculated the head of the family of the Tops, going to Mainstay’s side, and giving him a succession of familiar slaps on the neck ; “those that live in clover make a little too much flesh sometimes, but there are more ways than one in taking it off again. Ain’t there, Puffy ?”

CHAPTER IX.

THE rolling waves of yellow corn had fallen beneath the whetted edge of the scythe and sickle, and nothing remained to mark where they had been but stubble and eddish, and the few scattered ears of grain left here and there by the gleaners.

Up in the morning early, when the mist still hung in glistening drops on the spider's net meshed on sprig and spray, old Martin Round, mounted on a hack, might have been seen by that bird which proverbially secures the worm, jogging along a bye-road, with the pack trotting gaily at the heels of his horse. Although equipped in hunting gear, there was a total absence of that neatness of effect which characterised the personal appearance of Sir Digby's huntsman in the field. The cap upon his brow looked rusty in the extreme, and the coat had changed its pristine hue from bright scarlet to a deep purple tint; while the skirt thereof exhibited conclusive proof of rough usage from wear and tear, time, and the seasons. His cleanly-shaved throat and chin, instead of being encircled with a roll of the whitest cambric, bleached and starched with scrupulous nicety by Mrs. Round, were protected from harm, either real or imaginary, by a cotton counterfeit of that texture known as "bandana." His boots, too, corresponded in their seediness with the rest of his habiliments, and his spurs strictly accorded in dinginess with his boots. Old Martin Round, therefore, at this precise moment of the world's history, may be said to have exhibited anything but the "get up" which combines great care with a total disregard to expenditure.

His subordinate officers, also, John Armstrong and William Hall, who, in their respective capacities of first and second whippers-in, both preceded and followed him, evinced an equal

degree of indifference in their costume, and appeared to have adopted the example with minute accuracy set by their superior. In order, however, that what might seem at the first glance to be a degeneracy of taste should not militate even temporarily against the fair fame of old Martin Round and his compeers, it had better be promptly declared that this was the introductory morning for cub-hunting, when, from the early hour at which the work commenced, it was neither convenient nor necessary that much time should be consumed in performing the ordinary duties of the toilet.

With their sterns carried high over their backs, the hounds trotted gaily at the heels of the huntsman's hack, John Armstrong riding ahead to make safe the way in advance, while William Hall brought up the rear, now and then drawing the attention of the laggard or straggler to the expediency of "getting on ;" but leaving convenient room for stoppages of a necessary description.

Now, among things of "the earth earthy" it should be known that nothing gave Farmer Pattymore more unmitigated satisfaction than for Kipton Briars to hold a litter of foxes. The farmer's strong desire that Kipton Briars should hold a litter of foxes may be most readily described from an argument held with Mrs. Pattymore, when that exemplary matron, with closed eyelids and general expression of Christian resignation illuminating her features, announced upon a certain occasion that "another duck had gone."

"Martha Jane," replied the farmer, with an admonitory shake of the head, "Kipton Briars belong to my farm ; my farm belongs to Sir Digby Digby, Bart. Sir Digby Digby, Bart., is the master of foxhounds, a real gentleman, and a good landlord. *That's* all I've got to say, Martha Jane, about your ducks, fat or lean."

But Mrs. Pattymore felt, at least, that she had a little more to add upon the subject, and did not hesitate to express a wish that "Kipton Briars were further off."

"Martha Jane !" returned the farmer, in a tone and manner

approaching solemnity, "you appear to me, ma'am, to be forgetting your catechism."

Mrs. Pattymore begged she might not be accused of any such soul-harrowing wickedness. She knew her catechism as well as most people, and a great deal better than some she should have no difficulty in putting her finger on, if made worth her while so to do. At the same time she did say, and would repeat in spite of everybody, that to lose her ducks when just fit for table, year after year, was enough to make her speak her mind, particularly as she hadn't her way in letting Sir Digby know the extent of her losses. Other folk had them made good. Why shouldn't she?

"Martha Jane," rejoined Farmer Pattymore, with a dignified deportment, "you have had an answer to that question upon a former occasion, ma'am; but I have no great objection"—here he waved a hand almost majestically—"to repeat the answer."

Mrs. Pattymore felt particularly obliged for so much unadulterated kindness, and hoped to live long enough to repay it.

"The good done to a neighbourhood by a gentleman keeping fox-hounds," continued the farmer, without noticing the biting tone and manner of his sarcastic spouse, "is such as warrants our putting up with a few trifling losses, and not holla. I can't abide for people to think and speak only of what they lose. Just look at the servants and 'osses kept, and the mint o' money spent in Sir Digby's hunting establishment. Not a house empty, big or little, nor a stable to be had within easy reach of his fixtures. Then, again, what would be the use of breeding a colt in these parts if it were not for his hounds? There'd be no one to buy a good 'oss, and no chance of showing him. Putting all this aside in the shape of chink profit, look at the meet, when landlord and tenant, squire and yeoman, master and man, come with hearty good feeling to join together in a sport which may open the heart, but can't close it. The gentlemen of England, Martha Jane, take my word for it, wouldn't be what they are, neither would those who depend upon 'em, were it not for the field; and so let's welcome all belonging to the sport, I say, and never

heed a little straight going over land when no real harm is done, the breaking of a rail or two of an old gate which had better have been left unlocked, or missing a few head of poultry, which might either die of the pip or be made into soup by the first tramping vagabond that passes your door. Those are *my* sentiments, Martha Jane ;"—and as Farmer Pattymore concluded his address he bore the outward and visible signs of possessing an inward amount of satisfaction, which acted with a considerable degree of pressure to the square inch upon his system, evincing, as it did, a strong tendency to swell without the requisite room.

Mrs. Pattymore had never been convinced against her will, and, therefore, it may seem superfluous to add, was of the same opinion still. Recollecting, however, that patience and resignation under affliction were among the most prominent of her acknowledged characteristics, Mrs. Pattymore's largely developed bosom heaved a deeply-drawn sigh, and with closed eyelids, as was her wont, she slowly turned and left the spot, in the firm belief that her wrongs were many and that her husband was a brute.

Up in the morning early, and when the mist still hung in glistening drops on the spider's net meshed on sprig and spray, old Martin Round jogged, in the fulness of time, in view of Kipton Briars ; and, strictly in accordance with his anticipations, he perceived that Sir Digby had arrived there before him, and was then engaged in conversation with Farmer Pattymore, who seemed (in the distance) to be discussing some point with much earnestness.

Mainstay, too, with young Martin Round in the saddle, formed one of the group, and as he stood motionless, with outstretched limbs, head held aloft, and ears pricked, gazing with fiery glance at the approaching pack, he looked like a beautiful statue standing clearly out against the morning light on the abruptly rising ground, forming a sort of pedestal. It was not long, however, that he maintained the lifeless form of a natural

likeness in chiselled stone or moulded bronze ; for no sooner was he assured within himself that the hitherto indistinct approaching body was the dearly loved hounds, than as perpendicularly as ever a horse reared up he went on his hind legs, and, after feeling the temperature of the upper current above his head with his fore feet, down he dropped them on the greensward with the lightness of a cat, and, flinging out once behind, reversed the action with equal effect and force.

"Ha ! ha ! ha !" laughed Farmer Pattymore. "That's what I call a nice game of see-saw."

"He must be either tired or forgetful of such games," replied Sir Digby, "before I trust him with my weight ; but I hope to see him steady enough, and a made hunter before the close of the season."

"Bar a few young tricks, and the want of a little more practice," rejoined Farmer Pattymore, "and there's not much more for'm to learn. Old Robert," continued he, "handled'm early, and, instead of being a wild, shy, half-broken colt when first ridden to hounds, I've knew a good deal more at the beginning of his trade than many know at the time of quitting it."

"A flyer," returned Sir Digby, scanning the horse with a look of admiration ; "a flyer from ear to heel !"

"All over," added the farmer, "and nothing else, pick it out as you will."

Old Martin Round, with the hounds trotting gaily by the side and at the heels of his hack, now came up the sloping ground, at the bottom of which a thin bright shallow stream threaded its silvery line through the rich, green vale as far as the eye could see.

The thatched home of Farmer Pattymore, cradled among towering witch elms and beech trees, through the delicate boughs of which blue curling smoke rose gracefully upwards, stood within range of a stone slung by a stalwart arm ; and Kipton Briars, as the cover was usually called, began at the further side of the stream murmuring beneath, and stretched

away over the hill, rising gradually from the base—a chosen solitude of the fox and badger, and many other denizens of the wild.

Old Martin Round and his compeers lifted their caps respectfully upon approaching their master, and the salute was returned by the raised forefinger of the Baronet's whip hand to the peak of his own.

"Be careful that not a hound gets away," said Sir Digby. "We'll give the cover a good rattling ; but mind and hold the hounds in."

Mounted on hacks only, although anything but "screws," and the whole pack out, including the puppies fresh from their respective walks, the expediency of obeying this order with as much practical strictness as possible rendered itself clear and conclusive to the allotted quantity of brains in the joint and several possession of John Armstrong and William Hall.

"Cover, hoik !" cheered old Martin Round with a wave of his whip hand, when through the stream the old hounds dashed, and, springing up the little shelving bank on the opposite side, into Kipton Briars they poked their noses with a readiness pertaining to electricity. The majority of the younger and uninitiated followed the huntsman as he pricked his hack into cover, and the remaining few, exhibiting an entire ignorance of the rudiments of their education by remaining outside, considered it prudent, at least, to get out of the reach of William Hall's double thong, and dashed into Kipton Briars by way of avoiding the threatened crack of that instrument of justice.

No sooner had the whole of the hounds disappeared than Mainstay began to show symptoms of decided impatience. Fretfully pulling and boring his head between his knees, he could not be persuaded by his rider to remain quiet for a single moment. Pawing and delving the earth, first with one foot, then with the other, and irritably champing his bit until the foam dropped from his mouth in large white flakes, while the sweat began to ooze from every pore in his skin, Mainstay looked almost prepared to test the possibility of having his own

way rather than being subjected to the will and pleasure of young Martin Round for one moment longer.

"You must do as I wish ye, my lad o' mettle," said young Martin, patting the neck of the excited animal. "It's no use deceiving yourself, and thereby giving both of us trouble. One of us, mind ye, will have to give in, and it won't be *me*."

From the close, firm seat of his rider, and the steady nervous pull upon his jaws, Mainstay seemed to arrive suddenly at a corresponding opinion; and, feeling that contention was hopeless with one who was sure to be obeyed in the end without losing his temper for an instant during the struggle, however prolonged, he gradually submitted to the terms of peace, and lost in a brief period all trace of a rebellious spirit.

"That's it," said young Martin Round, in a coaxing voice, and bringing a hand gently down the smooth and veiny neck of the horse. "That's it," repeated he; "I thought we should understand one another presently."

There was but one known voice in the county that could scream such a scream as that. On the wings of the wind it was borne far and wide, and over the hills and down the vales, and through the dark deep wood, spiney dingle and dell, that cheer of old Martin Round rung again.

"The vixen and whole litter are afoot," cried Farmer Pattymore in ecstasy.

"Have at 'em," halloed the huntsman from the centre of Kipton Briars. "Push'm along! hoik to Merryman, Dairy-maid, Dauntless!"

Hounds were now crashing through the cover in every direction.

"Let the vixen go," said Sir Digby. "I should be sorry indeed to have her chopped, and she's very poor and weak."

Scarcely had the order been given when out the vixen broke, with her tongue hanging from her jaws, back up, ears thrown back, and her brush dragging on the ground. The pace was a poor attempt at a gallop, and had not the first whipper-in rode at a bunch of hounds which flashed out of cover upon her line,

and headed them back, it would have been short work with her from the find to the finish.

For several minutes the hounds continued to force the cubs up and down, round, and about Kipton Briars, until feeling, probably, his home too hot to be agreeable, one of the family made an attempt to follow the example set by his mother to leave their ruthless pursuers in the rear. Breaking from the cover, he sped on his way some thirty yards like a hero. Then catching sight of what he had never seen before—a red coat—lost courage, stopped, hesitated whether to go on or head short back; chose the latter dodge, and ran clean into Blue-cap's jaws.

The first whipper-in, dismounting quickly, rescued the carcass of the dead cub from the scrambling, pulling, and tugging which threatened to tear it piecemeal.

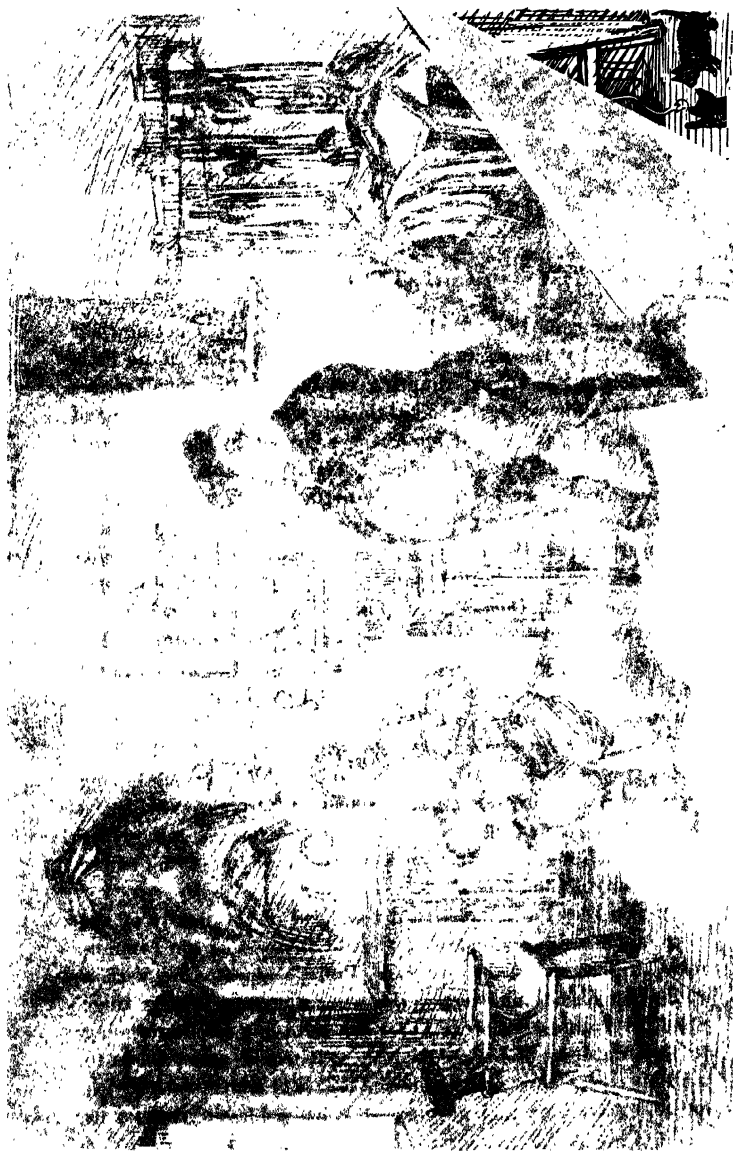
"We can afford to blood with a cub in Kipton Briars," remarked Sir Digby, smiling.

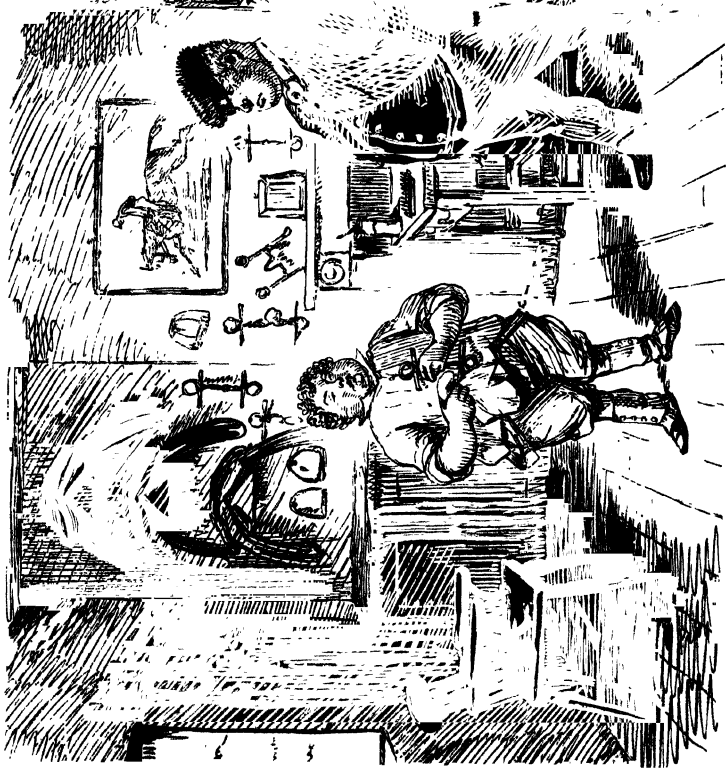
"It's never drawn blank," replied Farmer Pattymore, with confidence; "and while I live—" he paused, to give due effect to the completion of the sentence—"never will be."

CHAPTER X.

THE remains of Puffy Doddles being on the eve of taking their departure for the great stable of the North, created no little sensation in Sir Digby's hunting establishment. Small circles might be seen, when the toil of the day was over, gathered round and radiating from a common centre formed by the attenuated individuality of Puffy Doddles. Ambitious lads, full of expectancy and hope of rendering distinguished services in the field when that uncertain time arrived known as "some day," stood staring at the cadaverous countenance of Puffy Doddles with looks of ill-concealed envy. It was felt that he no longer continued one of them. A step had been gained which left an immeasurable distance between them and "the remains." The thought might be humiliating, but such was the fact, against which no specious argument would prevail. Under the direct and immediate patronage of Robert Top, the promotion of Puffy Doddles had been secured. To the great stable of the North he was to proceed with all convenient despatch, a vacancy having occurred in that institution, through, as the letter conveying the intelligence expressed, "a colt bolting at exercise, and giving the boy such a grasser that he was not likely to get the better of *that* side of Christmas."

"You see, Puffy," observed the head of the family of the Tops, upon reading aloud this point of interest in the communication just received; "you see, Puffy," repeated he, with a smile of genuine benevolence throwing a warm, glowing tinge upon his features, "that we never can tell when a fellow's going to be pitched out of his saddle just, as it would seem, for us to take his seat. Now, what a blessin' that is!" continued he, with an impressive tone and gesture. "What a blessin' it is for us





to know that at any moment of our lives, when heartsick perhaps at waiting for a mount, a chap may be flung clean out of the pigskin, just, as it would seem, for us to get a leg up in his place. Ah!" and Robert Top drew a sigh from somewhere about the middle button of his canary-coloured waistcoat, "we can't be too thankful; we can't indeed!"

"The remains" acquiesced in this sentiment by venturing to reply, "Certainly not, sir, when the pull's in our favour."

"Exactly so, Puffy," rejoined the head of the family of the Tops, with a nod of approval. "One can't, of course," continued he, driving his hands into the bottom of his breeches-pockets, jerking the badger-pied cap over the tip of his nose, and widening the distance of his legs asunder, "be expected to be over hot in our thanks when the boot's on t'other leg. 'Tisn't human nature, so to speak, Puffy."

"The remains" had always entertained a corresponding thought upon this subject, and faithfully believed that neither time nor circumstances were likely to produce any change whatever in his ideas relating to it.

Mainstay was about being quitted for the night; and his attendant, young Martin Round, had just completed shaking up and arranging his bed of clean, fresh-smelling straw, when Robert Top, accompanied by Puffy Doddles, entered the box. An intimation being given that young Martin Round might leave upon the completion of his task, the head of the family of the Tops and "the remains" were left together in Mainstay's box, as neatly arranged and set as fair as a lady's boudoir.

"This is the last opportunity I shall have, perhaps, of speaking to you, Puffy," tenderly began Robert Top, "and when I'm gone to a very different kind of occupation to training 'osses—".

Puffy Doddles felt suddenly a moisture upon his eyelids.

"To a very different kind of occupation to training 'osses," resumed the speaker, in a tone and manner reaching almost to sadness, "you'll recollect, I hope, what an old man said to you for your own good, and not his."

Had he yielded to the impulse, Puffy Doddles would have dropped on the bricks then and there, and sworn upon his knees to have nailed, rivetted, or screwed the advice, suggestion, or whatever it might be, in his memory for ever. As it was, he stammered a determination to do and leave undone anything required by way of commission or omission.

"I first took a fancy to you, Puffy," continued the head of the family of the Tops, "from that very feeling of yours. Always ready not only to do your duty, but willing to learn what you didn't know. That's what I call a jewel of a lad, to be picked up about as often as a pearl in a hailstorm."

Puffy Doddles blushed modestly at finding himself compared to a delicate thing of price, and breathed a whispered hope that his fair market value might be discovered in the great stable of the North.

"Now, above all things," resumed Robert Top, withdrawing a hand from the secret depths it had been fathoming, and raising a straightened forefinger, "keep your fat down; no matter how—keep it down. Having drawn yourself as fine as a needle, keep yourself so, as whatever talent a jockey may possess is of no use at all if coupled with fat. Be civil to your superiors, obliging to your equals, and kind to those placed under ye. Let your dress be always clean and smart, and neither in yourself nor anything belonging to you permit the smallest speck of neglect or carelessness to be seen. With the secrets of your stable be dumb as death; know nothing, or, if knowing, say nothing. If questioned, as boys sometimes are both by the crafty and foolish, say at once that your orders are not to tell, or, indeed, speak upon such matters. Such are the rules, Puffy, which you must observe in the event of your hoping to get on in the great stable of the North."

"The remains" considered the code nothing short of golden, and resolved to be governed by it with the utmost strictness.

"In measuring the points of what a flyer should be," continued Robert Top, "keep *him* in your mind's eye;" and as he spoke he made a slight jerk with his head towards Mainstay, as

he stood drawing small locks of sweet hay from the rack, and chewing them with epicurean pleasure. "I've often tried to find out a fault," said he, going to the side of the horse and drawing a hand down his glossy quarters, "but never could. A little too full of flesh just now; but if open to improvement in condition, that's all that can be said of him, past, present, or to come."

"I shall always remember him, sir, as a sort o' guide to what the make and shape of a real good 'oss ought to be," observed Puffy Doddles.

"That's just what I want you to do," returned the head of the family of the Tops. "Nothing could be nearer to what I want you to do than that. We can judge by comparison better than any other plan; and, getting a line which we know to be the mark, let us see pretty clearly that which doesn't quite come up to it."

"The remains" considered this a great facility for forming a judgment of things in general, but horses in particular.

After a slight pause, during which Robert Top appeared to be buried deeply, not to say entombed, in thought, he inquired somewhat abruptly "if his pupil knew what fat was?"

"Grease," responded Puffy, quickly.

"A safe answer that, lad," rejoined Robert Top, smiling; "but not one in a hundred knows more about it," continued he. "Now fat comes from the oil formed in the blood, and this is placed about the muscles and membranes more immediately in contact with the skin, too much of which interferes with the muscles, and renders both man and 'oss incapable of performing work demanding either speed or staying powers. The action of the lungs, too, is greatly interfered with when the blood is overcharged with this oily fluid, because it cannot pass through them, and congestion follows, which often becomes chronic. For the condition of both wind and limb, therefore, it is necessary that fat should be got rid of when fast or good work is required to be done; and sweating is the natural, and consequently least injurious, mode of removing it. This is all I have got to say about fat, Puffy."

"The remains" recollected certain severe twinges in his abdominal regions when under the self-denying process of decreasing the oily and superfluous properties of his own blood, and thought within himself that a few ounces less of Epsom salts might have been taken with some comfort and constitutional advan-

"Had I been a hoss," observed he, mentally, "he wouldn't have physicked me so."

The weather-vane on the roof of the stable creaked harshly as it swung in the night breeze, and added to the several causes disturbing the peaceful rest of Puffy Doddles. That eventful to-morrow was about dawning which was to see him on his way to the great stable of the North. Sleep, therefore, "weighed not his eyelids down, nor steeped his senses in forgetfulness."

CHAPTER XI.

CARRIED by the wings of the post-horse "Rumour," it was circulated far and near, close and wide, that on a certain morning Sir Digby would entertain the members of the hunt at breakfast; and in opening house to all, it was well known that in feasting the great, the host would pay equal, if not additional, attention to the small. The preparations for this "breakfast" caused no insignificant sensation throughout the breadth and width of the establishment. Unusual bustle might be perceived in the culinary department, and the butler, never continuing on terms of amity with the cook, took advantage of kicking him with violence when in the exposed position of picking up a pin. Robert Top could ill-conceal a nervous desire for things generally connected with the stable to be an improvement upon perfection, knowing as he did that a review would be made by eyes and heads capable of keenly criticising a work of the kind, however high the art might be. Old Martin Round, too, maintained a searching and almost dissatisfied look about the courts and lodging rooms of the kennel, and muttered something which sounded like a bee in a bottle. Nothing appeared to be quite in accordance with his wishes, and yet he felt compelled to admit secretly that where the fault lay he could not exactly tell. Now, in this general flutter of excitement, it must not be erroneously conjectured that Mrs. Martin Round was as unmoved and imperturbable as the Egyptian Sphinx. So far, indeed, from that being the case, that excellent matron felt she had a duty to perform to the parent of her child and the husband of her bosom. Her conscience would have been ill at ease had she neglected to bestow not only more than ordinary, but much more than extraordinary care upon the front of

his shirt for this special occasion, omitting in no particular equal care to the cravat designed to encircle his neck in its snowy folds. The solicitude displayed in getting the starch to the proper consistency, the anxiety that the iron should be of the heat to smooth but not to scorch, the sanguine hope that the end would end well, acted as the several and collective causes of agitation in the breast of Mrs. Martin Round ; but, having a duty to perform, she relied upon herself, and no extraneous aid, for its accomplishment.

Unmitigated must be the satisfaction to learn through the local historian, known by the name of "Gossip," that "the breakfast" became numbered with the things that were under the most favourable circumstances. The butler and the cook becoming reconciled, for the ninety-ninth time of their lives, embraced, and swore eternal friendship. Robert Top almost blushed to hear the lavish praise bestowed upon the condition of the stud and management of the stable. The unpleasant buzz emanating from the lips of old Martin Round ceased altogether, and his rubicund visage became radiant with smiles as unqualified admiration was expressed of the draft which he presented to public gaze by way of specimens of the pack. The partner, also, of his cares and joys, having succeeded beyond her hopes with the shirt and cravat, was as happy as an uncaged linnet, and ready to sing blithely at the shortest notice. The establishment felt that, having done its best to shine, a degree of polish had been attained which might be called little short of glittering. With the general effect, therefore, the object and aim of the establishment, that proud, not to say vain-glorious body was satisfied.

As Farmer Pattymore remarked, upon draining the third glass of emolliating milk-punch at the whispered suggestion of the butler, who looked mysterious while he spoke—"nothing lasts," and "the breakfast" proving necessarily no exception to this rule, a move was made, upon its completion, to the outside of the Hall, where "the lawn meet," in accordance with its wont, attracted numbers from a distance to swell the motley

gathering upon the green-sward forming the derivation of its title.

With an eye, perhaps, to effect, or by way of keeping him out of the reach of the heels of the congregated hunters, hacks, roadsters, cobs, galloways, and ponies held and led singly and in groups in front of the Hall, Mainstay, attended by Robert Top and young Martin Round, was being moved at a gentle walk far away from the crowd. Alone he trod the ground with proudly-curved neck and springy step, his full large eyes flashing, and his nostrils stretched to their utmost as he champed the bit impatiently, and tossed his head to and fro, now high in the air and then almost to his fetlocks, greatly to the personal inconvenience of young Martin Round, who held the rein, in a nervous grasp, close to his jaws. To the yet unoccupied saddle a sheathed horn was attached, and the stirrups, burnished as bright as the brightest steel, slipped through the leathers, afforded presumptive proof that a change was intended in Mainstay's rider to-day. In further support, too, of this fair inference there was an unaccountably serious, not to say disappointed look about young Martin Round, and he was observed to shake his head despondingly, and sigh like one whose heart was sad.

"Five year old this very day," remarked Robert Top, smiling, "It's just as it should be. Sir Digby will have his first mount on the very morning, five year ago, that Mainstay was dropped, Martin."

Martin replied "that was right enough," but the depression both of the tone and manner might have led to the conjecture that nothing could be further from right in the estimation of the speaker.

"Never mind, lad," rejoined the head of the family of the Tops, "you'll be up now and then as second horseman, ye know, and there's something in that, Martin."

Martin knew very well there was something in that ; but the worst of it was, like a good many things he knew besides blown eggs, there wasn't enough in the something. So young Martin

Round thought ; but, impressed with the knowledge that, however safe might be the freedom of thought, it was far safer to limit the freedom of speech, he exercised a wise discretion in giving no utterance to this irritable sentiment.

A movement was now perceptible among the assembled hunters, hacks, roadsters, cobs, gallowses, and ponies. As if by magic, saddles that had hitherto been empty were filled, and, if unreserved truth must be spoken, from the obese condition of many of the occupants, more than filled. Girths were drawn tightly, stirrup leathers shortened, curb chains taken up, and every preparation made by way of preliminary, to "the throw off."

As Sir Digby approached the spot where Mainstay stood receiving a last polishing rub at the hands of Robert Top himself, performed through the medium of a silk pocket handkerchief extracted from the interior of his hat, a large circle of admirers gathered round to see "the young flyer of the hunt" mounted for the first time by his owner. With the lightness of a lighter man the Baronet took the reins in hand, pressed toe in stirrup, and threw himself quickly and gracefully in the saddle.

"Glad to see you up, Sir Digby," observed Robert Top, drawing back the angles of his mouth as far as they could be stretched, and touching the narrow brim of his round hat with the tip of a fore-finger. "Glad to see you up, Sir Digby," repeated he.

His master smiled, and nodded good-humouredly in return, knowing that he was then affording to his old servant about the greatest pleasure in his power to bestow.

"If that isn't a picter," remarked the head of the family of the Tops, as Mainstay strode away with the step of a peacock on the point of displaying his tail, "if that isn't a picter," reiterated he, "there never was a picter painted."

Young Martin Round coincided fully in this opinion ; but fervently wished that he himself formed a conspicuous object in the design.

Within something less than a mile from "the home meet,"

a belt of covers skirted the ridge of rising ground forming the boundary of the park, undulated and thickly studded with giant oaks and elms, whose gnarled trunks bore testimony that centuries had taken to rear them. Towards this line of dark sombre woods, looming indistinctly in the distance, the hounds were trotted, followed by those "whose hearts were light and eyes were bright," while nature's face presented a promising hunting morning.

Among certain organs of vision unusually sparkling may be mentioned those belonging to Farmer Pattymore. It was a subject also of passing remark that the end of his nose bore the inflammatory hue of a carbuncle, and, notwithstanding his discourse possessed as insignificant a minimum of wit as can readily be imagined, he roared with laughter at every third word to which he gave utterance.

"I feel, Robert," said he, as the head of the family of the Tops came ambling to his side on the roan hack; "I feel, Robert—ha! ha! ha—that I shall—ha! ha! ha!—take the lead—ha! ha! ha!—and keep it—ha! ha! ha!—to-day, sir—ha! ha! ha!"

"If you take my advice," replied the head of head grooms, with considerable gravity of deportment, "you'll not give anybody present the chance of calling you a name which you don't deserve."

"And what's that—ha! ha! ha!—may I be—ha! ha! ha!—so bold to ask—ha! ha! ha!" inquired Farmer Pattymore.

"A hass!" returned Robert Top, in a suppressed and confidential voice.

Nothing could have proved more effective in the shape of a decided check to hilarity. Like a strong stream of water suddenly stopped by the turning of a tap, the laugh altogether ceased, and a wet, not to say soppy blanket, in a figurative sense, seemed to have been thrown over the subdued spirits of Farmer Pattymore.

Perceiving that a greater effect had been produced than was intended, the head of the family of the Tops essayed to soften its

acerbity, and, after a slight pause, said, in a conciliatory tone and manner, "If you were to try a line o' your own, you'd come to grief in less than a brace of shakes. Let me pilot ye, and you'll be there or thereabouts, from the find to the finish."

"Thank you kindly, Robert," returned Farmer Pattymore, with a tendency to choke from deep emotion; "I—I—I always looked upon you—I say I always looked upon you as a friend in distress, and a father to the fatherless—although not exactly fatherless, from being a parent of nine——"

"Adzooks!" interrupted Robert Top, pointing with his whip, "look at old Martin; he's about to give 'em the cover hoik."

Within a few yards of the wattled fence forming the boundary of the cover selected as the first draw "up wind," the huntsman stood with nearly every hound grouped closely together at the head of his horse, looking earnestly in his face with ears thrown back and waving sterns. For a few brief seconds he kept, as was his rule, a restraint upon their impatient ardour, by withholding the longed-for signal, and bent a severe authoritative look upon two or three couple of rebellious spirits, indicating a disposition to break away without waiting for orders. A single wave of old Martin Round's hand, however, and away the pack flew over the wattled fence like greyhounds from the slips.

With his loose seat and slack rein old Martin Round charged at a weak place in the wattled fence, and crashing through it, made a gap of no inconsiderable width.

"It's all the same to him," said Robert Top, "either through or over."

"Either through or over," dreamily repeated Farmer Pattymore.

"Always in his place," added the head of the family of the Tops.

"That's your s-s-s-sort!" hissed Farmer Pattymore with a hiccough.

"Hark!" ejaculated Robert Top, placing a hand to an ear. "A quick find," continued he, digging the rowels of his spurs deeply into the flanks of the roan hack. "Come along."

CHAPTER XII.

THE chattering jay darted from tree to tree, and the wood pigeon flapped her wing from a topmost branch in fear of the disturbers to her solitude, as the hounds "loaded the trembling air with music." The scared pheasant rose from the thicket, and, with outstretched neck, drummed his strong flight to a neighbouring cover promising silence and seclusion. Hares leaped from their forms, or, rucking more closely, remained with panting sides and eyes betokening their dread. Rabbits ran nimbly across the rides and paths, and, skipping into burrows delved in the adjoining bank, sought safer retreats under the ground than upon its surface. Fear lent speed to foot and pinion, and, scattering far and near, the denizens of the wood hastened from the spot in which "Echo herself had huntress turned."

As Robert Top observed, it was a quick find, and scarcely had that most desirable introductory step been achieved than to an experienced ear a conclusive proof was presented that "the found one" must either go with great expedition or submit to the alternative of dying where the discovery was made.

With a forefinger pressing hard upon his dexter ear old Martin Round gave a "Hoik to-ge-ther!" which, for powerful effect, perhaps, had never been exceeded. To the hearty cheer, echoing far and wide, a practical response was given by the body of the hounds going with a swing through the cover, showing in the form they went the dash and spirit of their blood.

"He's gone!" halloed a voice.

"Hold hard, gentlemen!" cried Sir Digby, taking a strong pull at Mainstay, as he jumped off in close resemblance to his sire when starting from the post. "Hold hard!" repeated he,

as a few of the unruly began to prick for front places at the head of the hounds. "Give them time to get at him, and then," added the Baronet, with a good-humoured smile, "ride over them if ye can."

"Ta-a-ally-ho!" shouted Farmer Pattymore, holding out his hat at the length of its string, and pointing to the fox as he raced over an undulated fallow, within a short distance of where he stood, in the ardent hope of being the first to view him away. "Ta-a-a-ally-ho!" reiterated he, in a loud but somewhat thick tone; and giving a slap on a knee, expressive of an unlimited amount of self-satisfaction, said, "I'm the lad to do the trick. That's your s-s-sort."

At this exact moment, however, of the earth's rotatory motion round the sun, Farmer Pattymore both saw and felt that the eyes, of which the head of the family of the Tops was the acknowledged proprietor, were bent sternly upon him: and the gaze immediately acted as a strong sedative upon the exuberance of his spirits.

"There's somebody not far from your elbow," remarked Robert Top, in a whisper, "that will be putting you down for a hass presently. Now don't," continued he, with marked emphasis, "don't, for my sake, your missus's, and your little kids' sake, be put down for a hass."

"I won't, Robert," responded Farmer Pattymore, with dramatic effect, as he gave a single heavy knock on his expansive breast with the broad palm of a hand. "May I be jiggered if I do!"

With old Martin Round close to their sterns, and squeezing a straight path through in spite of intercepting bough, branch, and bramble, the hounds swept from the end of the cover, and, being on the best of terms with their fox, flashed on his line in a moment, and settled to it with many a hackle bristling for a kill.

Lifting his horn to his lips, old Martin Round gave it a twang that possibly might have split inferior metal, and then, throwing his keen eyes forward, gave his willing horse a hint to take his accustomed place—first to hounds.

Among those who had come from a distance was "the scarlet coat" of other days, mounted on the bang-tailed, racing-looking mare. As Robert Top remarked, she had thickened since she laid her head even with Mainstay's in his first rattling gallop in the field ; but still maintained the fine drawn appearance of a horse prepared for the post, and fit to fly with a light weight such as she now carried.

Either by chance or design "the scarlet coat that came from a distance" laid his mare's head within a few inches of Mainstay's girths the moment Sir Digby took the lead, and, as was his wont, occupied the front place in the first flight.

With the emulation of a true sportsman, and feeling that the favourite of his stable should maintain the character he had won when ridden by young Martin Round, the Baronet glanced at the evident rival by his side, and resolved to do his best to shake her off. Probably a similar determination had been arrived at by "the scarlet coat which had come from a distance ;" for sitting as a jockey does watching a competitor known to be dangerous, he appeared to measure Mainstay, stride by stride, with the closest scrutiny.

In cover and out the scent was as good as the most ardent for pace could desire ; and, taking into consideration the effects of "the breakfast," it was truly fortunate that the hounds got away with their fox before an opportunity was given of overriding them or causing any of those sad interruptions to a run which cherry brandy, strong ale, milk punch, and other disguised enemies to sport not unfrequently give rise.

At the burst the fox flew straight up wind, but soon essayed an amendment to his line by slanting a little to the east, as if

The land of all lands that he loved the best
Was not the one that he came from, the beautiful West.

"His point's Drayton Downs," observed Robert Top, taking a particular line of his own, and anything opposed to the correct description of being straight to hounds.

"And an out-and-out point, too," responded Farmer Patty-

more, maintaining his balance in the saddle with no little amount of physical exertion. "I give you my solemn word, sir, that I consider Draytod Dowds an out-an'-out point, too."

"Hold on," briefly remarked the head of the family of the Tops.

"Like Molly to her mop," returned Farmer Pattymore, clutching a handful of the mane of his horse, and steadying himself by the leverage.

Nearly as straight as the crow wings her homeward flight at eventide, the fox raced in accordance with Robert Top's anticipation, direct for Drayton Downs, affording a run to this point of full six miles without a check of the duration of a second. Here he trusted to the strong earths, honeycombed in a deep shelving bank of gravel; but the spade of the earthstopper had busily clinked among the pebbles when the moon was sailing through the heavens on the night previous, and each one was closed even to the entrance of a mouse.

Scarcely had each been tried in vain when the hounds were too close to the tag of his brush for any longer pause to be made in his flight, and setting his nose for another hoped-for point of safety, away he streaked with the pace of a good stout fox, determined to do his best as long as life remained. Climbing, however, to the summit of the bank, and running a few yards along the edge, old Martin Round viewed him, and as the hounds went crashing down the slope, tumbling over each other in their fiery eagerness, he unsheathed his horn, and, giving it a chink-wink, spurred hard to the opposite side, and capped them on to the line again without a breathing moment.

"That's what I call getting over a difficulty," said the head of the family of the Tops.

"So do I, Robert," replied Farmer Pattymore. "No—doubt—about—it."

To Drayton Downs the critics present were of unanimous opinion that nothing could be more nicely balanced than the going of Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare. Without a swerve

or finch, both had taken their fences in their stride, and cleared them with the ease of fleet-winged birds. At Mainstay's girths there still laid the head of the bang-tailed mare, and up to this point, as Robert Top made a mental note, it looked like a dead heat.

Instead, however, of the wide open country which had hitherto been crossed, consisting chiefly of pasturage, a change became manifested in the deep arable and comparatively small inclosures which now presented themselves to view.

"A different country," observed Sir Digby, pointing before him with his whip.

"And one that will suit you better than me," replied "the scarlet coat that came from a distance."

"The finish will tell," rejoined Sir Digby, but a twinkle of pleasure in his eyes might have led an observer to think that the "finish" was anticipated.

That which the pace had failed to do, the deep ground soon began to accomplish in placing the bang-tailed mare in difficulties. Through the stiff soil she scrambled for a short time, maintaining her old position at Mainstay's girths; but it was not long before her head fell behind, and at every stride the distance became widened.

In view, with his brush down, and back bowed like a hoop, the fox crawled through a thick hedgerow, bounding a cover of several acres in extent, but affording little shelter from the underwood. The hounds were in almost as soon as the fox; but as if sunk into the ground, or flown into the air, not an inch further could they hunt him.

"He's down!" cried Sir Digby, "let them alone."

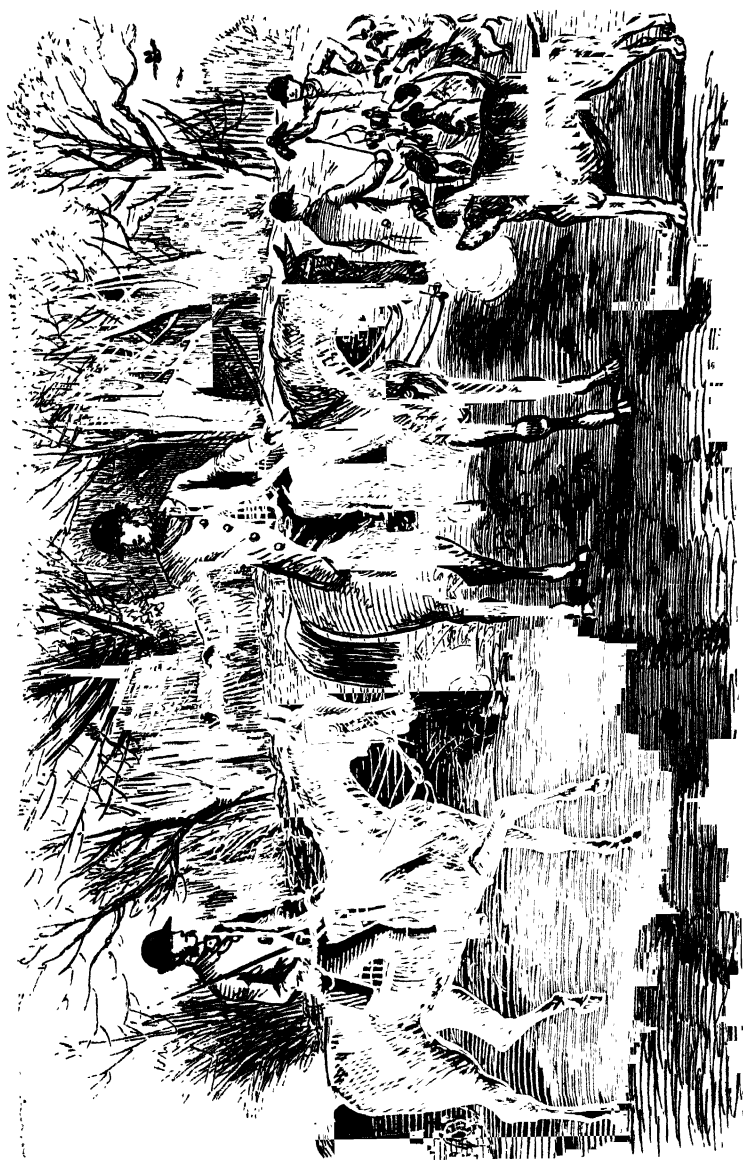
Every hound was now looking for the fox; and did but a hedge-sparrow flutter from the ground, was ready to dash at it.

Close, but not close enough to escape the vigilance of his enemies, the fox was "down" in the hedgerow flanking the cover, and, as a hound approached the thicket of brambles in

which he had taken refuge, out he leaped, and over was rolled to as ringing a "who-whoop" as ever was given.

As the brush was handed to Sir Digby, the bang-tailed mare came up, showing most decided symptoms of distress.

"You went well, sir," said the baronet to "the scarlet coat that came from a distance," "as long as it was possible for you to last ; permit me to present you with the brush."



CHAPTER XIII.

As a local cause for excitement there had never been within the memory of that universal authority, "the oldest inhabitant," a more absorbing subject of heart-felt interest than the match made between Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare for one thousand pounds sterling, the conditions being that the former was to carry eleven stone, and the latter just seven pounds less, over four miles of a fair hunting country. Such were the terms of agreement between Sir Digby and "the scarlet coat that came from a distance," for a race between the flyers of the hunts to which they respectively belonged, if that which everybody said to be true might be received as an unquestionable fact. A great diversity of opinion, however, existed as to the exact time fixed for the coming off of the great event. Some maintained a conviction that, no preparation being necessary for either, an early day might be expected; others thought the season would be brought to a close before it would be named; while a few, who wished it to be supposed from their connection with "the stables," that the arrangement in every detail was no secret to them, looked mysterious when addressed upon the point, and slowly winked at their questioners with their tongues in their cheeks. In addition to this disputed particular, there was one more which afforded an unlimited amount of discussion: Who would ride? Would "professionals" be up or not? If not, would young Martin Round be selected, or Puffy Doddles be sent from the great stable of the North to "do the trick"? In the absence of "professionals," there was a large balance of public opinion in favour of the bang-tailed mare being ridden by her owner; but anything but unanimity existed between the supporters of young Martin Round and Puffy Doddles.

Both could ride well—that was conceded without opposition; but an idea prevailed that young Martin Round would be likely to take too much out of his horse at first, and that Sir Digby had said this in strict confidence to somebody, somewhere, on some occasion; but as to the exact body, place, or circumstance, no attempt was made to carry the evidence the length of a single barleycorn further. Now Puffy Doddles, it was asserted without fear of contradiction, would “ride to orders.” His grandfather did the same, and so would his grandmother had the opportunity presented itself. He had been bred, born, and brought up to “ride to orders.” Nothing that could be done or undone would persuade or compel him to anything but “ride to orders;” and such being the unrefuted allegation, the Doddleites formed a strongly organised party.

The somewhat remarkable sign of that well-known hostelry, the Ship and Shovel, swung to and fro lazily as the fitful gusts of the March wind, “piping before the flowers like a bacchanal,” roared in the chimney, hummed through bough and bush, whistled through chink and crevice, jarring old casements, and roughly shaking door, hinge, and latch. High was the wind. Low was the wind. Strong was the wind. In nooks and corners he toyed with the sere leaves, scattering and whirling them far and wide. Over the hill top, and down the valley beneath, through dark, deep woods, snapping the giant stems and stalwart limbs of many a towering oak and elm, he swept along—no one knowing whence he came or whither he went.

Faded as were the red curtains drawn closely across the window of the bar parlour, a warm red light streamed through them upon the road, giving a cheerful inviting effect to the outside of the Ship and Shovel. Outside show, however, or pretension of any kind was not the flimsy aim of the Ship and Shovel. To comprehend the real object to which it aspired for distinction, the inside must be visited, and, however cursory the glance, it would be at once perceived that Comfort—that social goddess of English homes—reigned paramount.

The floor, it is true, was sanded, and grated somewhat

harshly under the tread ; but what could be more caressing than Mrs. Ben Binks's shining walnut-tree chairs, each provided with arms, and fortified with seats and flowery-glazed cotton cushions stuffed with feathers plucked from her own poultry ? Eider down was never softer, although it must be confessed that the flowery-glazed cotton seats occasionally gave rise to emotions that, at a certain angle, the occupier would illustrate the laws of specific gravity, and come, like Newton's apple, to the ground. Bright as crystal were the glasses, of many shapes and sizes, arranged with minute regard to order upon the shelves ; bright as polished silver were the pewter flagons and measures suspended on nails attached to the shelves. A capacious china bowl, in which (taking the aggregate) not a few inland seas of punch had been mixed, stood consequentially on a small side-table alone ; and such was the mirror-like surface of the mahogany forming the plinth, that its reflection appeared as distinct to view as the body from which it was thrown.

The fragrant incense of lemons pervaded the bar parlour of the Ship and Shovel. Bottles of cherry bounce of Mrs. Ben Binks's own making, corked and labelled and ready on the spot, required no advertising in *that* division of the county, being as well known, appreciated, and popular as Mrs. Ben Binks herself. Then the ale, known as her own entire stingo, possessed marvellous properties, if but a modest part of the praise bestowed upon it was derived from intrinsic merit, and in no way belonged to the coquettish manner in which she foamed the respective quantities ordered to a head, and won the hearts of her customers at one and the same moment.

In common justice to Mr. Benjamin Binks, commonly called "Old Ben," it should be chronicled as an event in history that, having conducted himself with great propriety for nearly fifty years, he was suddenly attacked with a complaint described as "the willy-wabbles," and, as may be seen on the stone marking the spot where he lies, "never rallied." Being left a widow—but neither lonely nor disconsolate—Mrs. Ben Binks deter-

mined to put the most favourable construction upon things in general, and do her best. Her mourning getting rusty in the ordinary course of time, she again had recourse to silks and ribbons of a brighter hue and gayer texture; and as the last day of the first year of her widowhood became numbered with the past, Mrs. Ben Binks appeared again, as the head of the family of the Tops gallantly observed, "fresh as a three-year-old."

Large, but not heavy, were the proportions of Mrs. Binks. As Robert Top had more than once told her, "she wouldn't bear drawing an inch finer in any of her points; for what he liked in certain forms was rounds." The looking-glass over the high, quaintly-carved mantel-shelf, and to which reference was frequently made, informed Mrs. Binks that, with a little "getting up," she might hold in contempt a great deal of competition. Give her the jaunty little lace cap, trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and her black-ribbed silk dress, as stiff as a deal board, and little more was necessary to fan the feelings of a few Mrs. Binks could name to a white heat.

And there, with her toes perched upon a stool to give them elevation, knowing, as she did, they were encased in a neat shoe—a little tight, if anything—Mrs. Binks sat before a bright, hissing, spluttering, crackling, blazing wood fire, piled on the hearth of the bar parlour of the Ship and Shovel. In the opposite corner—and a particularly pleasant corner it was acknowledged to be—sat Robert Top, gently smoking, with a soft, languid expression upon his features, a lily-white pipe, nicely waxed at the end with red sealing-wax. The canary-coloured waistcoat, cutaway coat, and snowy wisp of a cravat, ornamented by the gold horseshoe pin of other days, were strictly in keeping with the drab breeches and pearl-buttoned gaiters; and, with the exception of the great increase in his weight, perceptible at all points, and the bleached effect of the few locks which fringed his smooth, shining forehead, no other change worthy of remark was to be seen in Robert Top.

Mrs. Ben Binks had had her eyes—blue and very soft if

the looking-glass over the high, quaintly-carved mantel-shelf reflected the reality—Mrs. Ben Binks, it must be repeated, had had her eyes fixed stedfastly for some three minutes by the clock upon a piece of smouldering wood; but, from their expression, it was obvious that she saw it not. Silent and absorbed Mrs. Binks remained with blinkless eyelids, buried, so to speak, in thought so deep that no bottom could be reached.

Mrs. Ben Binks's well-developed bosom heaved like a small billow, and from her lips issued a tender sigh.

"It will be a great match, ma'am," abruptly remarked Robert Top, looking at the ceiling immediately above his seat, and rolling his head from side to side.

Mrs. Binks started, and darted an inquiring look towards the speaker.

"It will be a grand match, ma'am," continued he, with the same motion of the head.

Mrs. Binks felt, as she subsequently affirmed, "like a Michaelmas flea, all in a flutter."

"Such as them," resumed Robert Top, with marked emphasis, "ought to be brought together."

Mrs. Binks had a very great mind to instantly call for harts-horn.

"Clippers, and no mistake!" ejaculated he.

Mrs. Binks knew he had spoken of her as "a clipper" before, and her emotion consequently increased.

"Out an' outers!" exclaimed the head of the family of the Tops.

Mrs. Binks felt flattered at his enthusiasm.

"I hope this day month, ma'am——"

Mrs. Binks could restrain her pent-up feelings no longer, and burst into an inundation of tears. Surprised to an unlimited extent at the interruption which this flood produced, Robert Top looked, spoke, and acted like mortals in general when figuratively described as "standing on their heads."

"Not so soon as a month, a little month," indistinctly murmured Mrs. Binks, covering her face with a snowy handkerchief.

Robert Top, leaving his chair, gave a hasty glance all round the bar parlour ; looked at the floor as if searching for a pin ; then at the ceiling for direct information as to what he was to do, and, not finding it there, felt himself in a fix of a very firm character.

"Why not, ma'am?" at length spluttered he. "Why—why—why cry about it?"

"My feelin's is overcome," sobbed Mrs. Binks.

"Overcome!" echoed the head of the family of the Tops, with staring eyeballs.

"In course they are," responded Mrs. Binks ; "but I'll not oppose your wishes, Robert," continued she. "Let it be this day month, dear Robert. We'll say, if you please, dearest Robert, this day month ;" and extending her hand, gave it as a pledge and token of her earnestness of purpose.

The head of the family of the Tops took the proffered hand within his own ; but, apparently not knowing what to do with it, dropped it like a potato too hot to hold. It was too late, however, or too something—what he scarcely knew—to back out of the scrape without inflicting a terrible wound upon the sensitive nature of Mrs. Ben Binks, and he, therefore, determined to face it at all risks, and any hazard.

It signifies but little, perhaps, what subsequently passed between Robert Top and his betrothed in the bar parlour of the Ship and Shovel ; but little did he think, upon entering it that evening, that a reference to the match between Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare would lead to another fraught with so much personal interest to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

UPON no one occasion within the record of his memory had Robert Top felt his reputation so completely at stake as upon the match now pending between Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare. It was well known within a wide circuit of Sir Digby's stable that this acknowledged oracle of a head groom had ventured to declare upon all fitting opportunities (not to mention one or two of a decidedly opposite character) that "the son of Sheet Anchor was as good as his sire, and better was never dropped." Freely and without reservation he had also asserted, with a confidence of tone and manner unparalleled, that "the 'oss had never been foaled that could beat him, weight for age, over four mile of any country that could be picked. He didn't care, not he, whether it was grass or plough, hill or flat. The going might be bad or good—hard as the church floor, or deep as the steeple was high. He didn't care which, not he. Mainstay could give seven pound and a licking to anything of his year, and he would lay his grandmother's last fiddle-headed teaspoon upon the event. The mare was a flyer—*that* he admitted; and she would make the pace good throughout—*that* he knew. Orders, no doubt, would be given for her to take a strong lead, keep it, and so cut their 'oss down at first; but"—here the head of the family of the Tops jingled a mixture of keys, halfpence, and beans together, at the bottom of his breeches' pockets, and added, with the angles of his mouth drawn back in the shape of a parenthesis, "they must be up to a thing or two more than he was, and know their way about a great deal better, to cut Mainstay down first or last, in the middle, here or there, anywhere—he wasn't particular—not he. He'd show 'em *his* 'oss in a form they had never seen him yet, fit to run for a kingdom—yes, and

win it, too. When stripped for the great match they would understand what condition meant ; and, perhaps, it might prove as good as any eyewater he could name in assisting some folk to see how the cat would be likely to jump."

Such being the oft-repeated opinion of Robert Top concerning the great event which occupied much more than the leisure moments of men of every degree within a wide range of its circulation, it will form no matter of surprise that the general excitement, at length, led to considerable speculation. The fever running high and higher yet as the day approached for the momentous decision of the match, men of substance were heard to lay their hundreds, fifties, ponies, tens, and fives ; while those whose pecuniary position scarcely qualified them to occupy front rank under this desirable category, ventured pounds, crowns, shillings, and pence ; the scale still descending, pots of half-and-half, flagons of ale, glasses of brandy and water, goes of mountain dew, and even screws of tobacco, were freely offered and accepted as stakes on the result. To possess a direct and personal interest in the race between Mainstay and the bang-tailed mare appeared to be the paramount business and social duty of that universal subject, Everybody ; and such was the unflagging energy displayed in the attainment of the end, that few indeed were the exceptions in that division of the county who could place their hands upon their hearts and say, "I don't care a straw which wins."

It will seem almost superfluous to state that the unlimited experience, innate abilities, and acquired knowledge of the head of the family of the Tops were condensed to their full force in the carrying out of his threat to "show em *his* 'oss in a form they had never seen him yet, fit to run for a kingdom—yes, and win it, too." Asleep, his thoughts were still of his favourite Feverish dreams, in which Mrs. Ben Binks seemed mounted on Mainstay, disturbed his repose, more particularly as the cap jacket, and leather breeches were far from becoming to the landlady of the Ship and Shovel. A change came o'er it. Like

shadow, and with a ghostly, noiseless stride, the bang-tailed mare glided in front, over field, fence, ditch, brook, wall, and gate, while Mainstay stood as if rooted to the ground, with his ears thrown viciously back, fore-legs stretched out, and his hind ones gathered under him—exhibiting the most determined spirit not to stir a peg. Robert Top groaned in his agony, and, waking from its intensity, whispered a fervent thanksgiving that “it was only a dream.” Sleeping and waking, day and night, his physical and mental capacities were absorbed in real or ideal attentions to Mainstay, and consequently to the temporary neglect of Mrs. Ben Binks, who, as he did not hesitate to declare, with marked emphasis, “must wait a bit.”

“Fit for the post means this,” remarked he, communing with himself, as he stood in Mainstay’s box alone—“fit for the post means this,” repeated Robert Top, diving his hands to the lowest depths of his pockets, separating his legs wide apart, and commencing a musical accompaniment to his soliloquy by jingling the keys, beans, and halfpence together, while the badger-pied cap came with a jerk over the rubicund tip of his nose—“It means,” resumed he, “as much pluck as can be raised through high feeding; as much muscle as can be got through exercise, good and strong work; as little fat as can be left without making the ’oss stale on his legs, or, what’s as bad, stale in his heart; and, in short, as light, fresh, and strong in wind and limb, as mortal means can make him. That’s what ‘fit for the post’ means,” said the head of the family of the Tops.

After an interval, occupied in jingling the keys, beans, and halfpence together, he continued: “Now, those jolly muffs, the Thickeds, who never learn anything they ought to know, and never forget anything they oughtn’t to have learnt, in putting a string of ’osses through the sieve, often treat ’em all alike. They don’t find out, in the first place, what one ’oss can bear, and what another can’t. Sweat and work, work and swcat, is the rule of the Thickeds; and, when they’ve trained an ’oss almost to

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death, he's stripped to run with about as much pluck in him as a half-drowned cat. Then again," said Robert Top, drawing a hand from the depth of one of his pockets, and extending it in a manner as if then addressing the Speaker of the House of Commons, or the head of an equally august assembly—"then again," repeated he, "look at the training of the Thickeds with regard to the legs. They, the precious duffers, can't see when it's time to draw it mild in respect to the legs, but go on with their pipe-openers and rattling gallops just long enough to make 'em shin-sore, and often break 'em down at the very moment they're wanted to pull through a race. That's what the Thickeds do!" concluded Robert Top, with as decided a sneer as ever curled the lip of a lineal descendant of Adam with contempt.

Young Martin Round now entered the box, and occupied a place by the side of his superior.

"This is Saturday?" interrogatively observed the head of the family of the Tops, drawing back the angles of his mouth, and glancing from the extreme corners of his eyes at Mainstay's attendant.

Young Martin Round rejoined deferentially that "it was Saturday, and no mistake."

"Wednesday next, then, as ever will be," returned Robert Top, "is *the* day, Martin."

Martin drew a long breath, which wheezed audibly through his clenched teeth, but made no reply.

"To-day, therefore," continued Robert Top, "we'll sweat him for the last time, and on Monday give him a good, steady gallop by way of a polisher off before ——" the speaker paused, and the angles of his mouth were again drawn back in the shape of a parenthesis, and the keys, beans, and halfpence jingled together as he peered out of the extreme corners of his eyes at Mainstay's attendant—"before," slowly repeated the head of the family of the Tops, "you've a leg up for the mount, Martin."

A dizzy, swimming, confused feeling took possession of young Martin Round's brain, and he almost reeled to learn that there

was no longer a doubt upon the moot point concerning Mainstay's jockey.

"I—I—I, sir?" gasped he.

"And no other," responded Robert Top; "you'll be up, Martin, in the cherry jacket, white belt, and black cap, and my old eyes once more will see Sir Digby's colours carried to the front by Mainstay, the son of Sheet Anchor."

CHAPTER XV.

As distinctive badges of "the strong parties" supporting the pretensions of the two favourites, Sir Digby's colours, cherry and white, and those of the owner of the bang-tailed mare, flaunting yellow, were displayed in various ways and methods by their respective admirers. In the form of cravats, cockades, bows, streamers, rosettes, bonnet strings, trimmings, and even whole dresses of not a few of the softer sex, were the medium for making known their sanguine hopes and personal interests in the result. In order, probably, that there might not be the slightest thread on which the skeleton of a doubt could possibly be suspended in the mind of the public regarding the horse Mrs. Ben Binks hoped, from the inmost recesses of her capacious bosom, might prove the easiest of winners, she presented herself to general inspection in a cherry-coloured satin gown, cherry-coloured velvet bonnet, ornamented by a cherry and white-coloured feather, cherry and white-coloured shawl, and cherry-coloured kid gloves; her ever-healthy cheeks being brightened in their rubicund hue and tinge—from excitement, perhaps—were also red as the ripest cherry; and thus, in a sort of perfect blaze, Mrs. Ben Binks was driven from the door of the Ship and Shovel towards Gannet Green, on which piece of uninclosed greensward the great race was arranged both to commence and finish.

In her journey thither Mrs. Ben Binks found ample time to indulge in a few reflections, and to jot down a corresponding number of mental notes. She thought, as the wheels of the light, creaking cart jumbled and rolled on each side of her, how much in this world hung upon so little. Dear Robert's sub-lunary happiness, and consequently her own, depended upon the result of that day—absolutely depended upon Mainstay's nose being first or second past the scarlet flags fluttering gaily on the

topmost branches of two lofty elm trees in the distance, marking that most important spot of all others in a racecourse, "the finish." Mrs. Ben Binks sighed sorrowfully to think that so much in this world should hang upon so little! Something told her—she knew not what—but an inward communication revealed the horrid fact that if Mainstay was beaten dearest Robert might be seized with the willy-wabbles, and, like her old Ben of other days, might never rally. Mrs. Binks, at this point of her reflections, dismally shook her head, and, applying the corner of a snowy handkerchief to her eyes, damped it in silence at the thought that so much in this world should hang upon so little!

With the buoyant, cork-hearted landlady of the Ship and Shovel, however, the shades of sorrow were of a truly fleeting kind, and scarcely was the corner of the handkerchief moist with "unshed tears swimming in her eyes," than her general cheerfulness of character appeared again, like a gleam of sunshine in an April shower. Mrs. Ben Binks felt surprise at her own foolish weakness. What! give way to her feelings when no feelings might be felt? With a lively hope for the best, not she. With a faith not easily shaken in "All's well that ends well," not she; and, with a toss of the velvet bonnet, which looked bold defiance to weakness of every description, Mrs. Ben Binks gave directions to her charioteer to improve the pace by saying, "Drive on, Bud."

Now, Bud, the straight-haired, goggle and blue-eyed Saxon by her side, was the most taciturn mortal in corderoys, gaiters, and fustian jacket ever, perhaps, beheld. A boy of remarkably few words, he seldom explained his views and feelings upon any subject beyond the inference that might be drawn from raising a fore-finger to the brim of his slouched wide-awake, or, in the absence of that article of dress, to a small brown mole in the centre of his forehead. Occupying the important post of head everything at the Ship and Shovel—no one assisting him in the onerous duties of ostler, gardener, barman, pot-boy, and (upon occasions) chamber-maid—Bud was in receipt of a fair average

income from these various sources, and, looking with pleasure on the expansive bulk of the old stocking forming his bank of deposit, he counted his savings every night before seeking that repose to which his several labours fully entitled him, felt grateful for all sublunary blessings, and touched his mole. Being ambitious, possibly, of illustrating the axiom that "a silent tongue is indicative of a wise head," Bud was silent even in his devotions, and never said "Amen" at church excepting by a practical appeal to the mole.

"Drive on, Bud," repeated Mrs. Binks, in a cheery tone and manner. "There's Gannet Green, you see," continued the landlady of the Ship and Shovel, extending a pointed finger towards the locality so named; "and what a sight o' people, to be sure!" exclaimed she, with unfeigned astonishment. Bud touched the brim of his slouched wide-awake as a signal of acquiescence in the remark, and then proceeded to stimulate, through the agency of the thong, the old hog-maned, goose-rumped, Roman-nosed pony, invariably doing the worst he was permitted, to an improved exhibition of physical exertion.

The simple fact, in itself, strictly supported the last observation made by Mrs. Ben Binks. Assembled, and assembling, there was indeed "a sight o' people" to be beheld on Gannet Green at this precise moment of the world's history. In holiday gear that many-headed monster, the "British public," had decked itself with great precision, and, through every variety of ways and means by which the end might practically be attained, had deposited itself by instalments upon that so-called part of the earth's surface. Old and young, muling and puking, strong and weak, rich and poor, dark, fair, and nothing particular; fat and lean, upright, crooked, and tottering—each and all wended their way to Gannet Green as the desired shrine of their pilgrimage.

Upon the arrival of Mrs. Ben Binks in the fulness of time, it may appear somewhat superfluous to state that she made a hasty and even solicitous glance at the congregated multitude—before, behind, and around her—in the fond hope of discovering



the presence of one, and one only ; but that particular "one" did not meet her anxious gaze, in consequence of the most conclusive of all natural causes—not being in sight. Brief, however, was the time thus occupied, when a shout of "Here they come !" was raised, and being echoed and re-echoed from various parts and parcels of Gannet Green, Bud took upon himself the responsibility of repeating the stimulating dose to the Roman-nosed pony (invariably doing the worst he was permitted), which forthwith ambled the cart and its contents towards a point of the compass appearing to possess unusual attraction.

And little shall be the wonder. For on the well-known roan hack rode Robert Top, followed immediately by Mainstay, hooded and clothed, and mounted by young Martin Round. In the regal splendour of a new cutaway green coat, fastened by a single button across the chest, canary-coloured waistcoat, doe-skin breeches, gloves to match, and spurs, glittering with a burnished polish, the head of the family of the Tops looked like a prince of the blood ; at least, such was the opinion of Mrs. Ben Binks, as she scanned him slowly from head to heel with a look of the most profound admiration. As he approached the spot at which Bud had come to a standstill, he recognised Mrs. Binks with a knowing, and, perhaps, loving jerk of the narrow, round-brimmed beaver, stuck jauntily on the side of his head, but passed on without further greeting of any kind. Pompous, silent, and grand was the demeanour of Robert Top.

Of a totally different kind was the pride of circumstance and place displayed by young Martin Round. With quite as full a measure of vanity as his superior, he essayed to don the flimsy veil of assumed meekness. The bright cherry-coloured collar of his satin jacket had occupied him minutes to arrange, so as to be visibly defined above that of the drab overcoat (with white bone buttons as big as native oyster shells), hiding but not concealing it. The expression upon his features, as he threaded his way through the crowd, notwithstanding the impotent attempt to look modest, seemed to say, "Here I am. Behold how a fine young chap like me looks in the pigskin, and where's your shine

if it isn't here?" The square-tied bow of his bleached and starched cravat would alone have proclaimed the innate vanity of the wearer, not to mention anything of his boots, which took a full hour to complete the mirror-like lustre given to them. With a black velvet cap pressed closely upon his brow, and a straight-cutting whip held in his dexter hand, young Martin Round, as he sat with a gingerly seat in the saddle, looked, it must be confessed, greatly to advantage.

With head erect, ears pricked, and his dark, full gazelle eyes flashing with the fire of his race, Mainstay strode with dainty tread in the wake of the roan hack, while on each side walked an attendant with rubbers, sponge, and bottle, as the appliances for refreshing him either as the victor or the vanquished.

"You'll see him presently," observed Farmer Pattymore, jerking his elbow into the ribs of a neighbour, by way of attracting immediate attention to his remark—"You'll see him presently," repeated he, "when stripped, and then, mark my words, you'll see a picter."

The neighbour coincided in this opinion, but entertained the secret wish that a practical reference had not been made to his ribs.

At this juncture the bang-tailed mare approached, hooded and clothed like her rival, and led by a neat-liveried groom through a double line of friends, who (as Robert Top mentally remarked) "had come from a distance." Her walk was as light and springy as that of an antelope, and, pulling hard upon the rein, her neck formed a graceful curve as she strode along in her blood-like step, with her square-cut tail swinging level with her hocks, and looking (as the head of the family of the Tops again observed in silence) "a flyer from head to heel."

Upon a high-stepping and powerful hack, Sir Digby was now seen trotting by the side of a well-appointed open carriage, which came with a lurching swing from the road on to the turf, and, in conformity with his directions, was brought to a standstill at a point commanding the best view of the start and the finish. Within that well-appointed open carriage was a lady of

more than ordinary pretensions to aristocratic beauty, and amidst a general lifting of hats, the hum of "Her ladyship!" was heard around.

Immediately after the arrival of Sir Digby the order was given for "saddling," and then, as if by the touch of a harlequin's wand, the clothes were stripped from the glossy skins of the rival flyers, and there they stood, in the pride of their beauty, "the observed of all observers." Both loud and general was the admiration displayed as Mainstay's saddle was girthed upon his back; and upon young Martin Round unshelling himself from the drab overcoat, and appearing in the full glitter of the cherry-coloured jacket and white belt, loud "Oh's!" burst forth as if a rocket had risen to dazzle beholders with its starry brightness.

A corresponding preparation having been made with Mainstay's rival, their respective riders had "a leg up" at one and the same moment, and the owner of the bang-tailed mare (he from a distance) settled the long-disputed point as to whom would have the mount by himself appearing in an orange satin jacket and white cap.

Hearts beat loudly, and the pulse of the multitude throbbed more quickly than its wont, as the horses' heads were turned to take their places for the start.

As Mrs. Ben Binks subsequently affirmed with great solemnity of manner, "She could scarcely keep herself in her skin, and found herself pulling and shaking Bud by the nose, by way of giving vent to her feelings, which she considered a relief of great value."

Robert Top had imbibed that day nothing more potent than two cups of strong bohea, and yet how flushed were his cheeks, and bloodshot his eyes, as he walked by Mainstay's near shoulder, patting and stroking his arched neck, upon which the thick veins were mapped and lined, like fibres on a leaf.

"You may have your work cut out," said he, in a tone he adopted when desirous of not being overheard by the sharpest of ears, "but you'll pull through, I know. Yes, that you will;"

and then, turning towards young Martin Round, he raised his voice to a husky whisper, and added, "Ride to orders. Wait upon her, and come only at the finish."

Young Martin Round touched the peak of his cap as a telegraphic signal of his acquiescence to these instructions, soaked into his memory by frequent repetition.

Head and head "the flyers" now reached the spot selected as "the start," and which was conspicuously marked by a small scarlet flag fluttering on a pole.

"Go!" cried Sir Digby.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH a simultaneous bound the horses jumped from the post, and, as they started, head and head, approached the first fence, a dwarf hedgerow with a narrow ditch on the taking-off side leading from Gannet Green into an open fallow field. Neck and neck, over they went, and, as they landed from mid-air, Mainstay was seen to be pulled almost double, to bring his nose into a less prominent position.

"He will ride to orders!" remarked the head of the family of the Tops to himself, as he sat on his roan hack, straining his powers of vision to their utmost limits by watching every movement and change in the race. "Martin will ride to orders!" repeated he, with a loud chuckle of inward satisfaction.

Although somewhat deep, the bang-tailed mare appeared to skim over the surface of the wide ploughed land, and her rider, turning his head for a moment, was seen to shake her, and in a moment the distance became widened between Mainstay and herself.

"As I said," observed Robert Top; "he will make strong running, and try to cut our 'oss down."

Such, indeed, seemed to be the tactics of the owner of the bang-tailed mare; for, making the pace better at every stride, he neared the second barrier at a stretch gallop, and flew across a flight of strong posts and rails full twenty lengths in advance of Mainstay.

Patience, young Martin Round! Recollect your orders: "Wait on her, and come only at the finish."

It was a strain, however, which neither Mainstay's impetuous nature nor that of young Martin Round could bear, and the hard and steady pull upon the horse's jaws being eased,

at the strong flight of posts and rails he rushed, making the cherry-coloured jacket flash as it rose in the sunshine like a ball of fire.

Mrs. Binks snapped both eyes, and involuntarily exclaimed, "Oh!"

"He won't ride to orders," bitterly exclaimed Robert Top between his teeth. "He's coming too soon—too soon," he repeated with a shake of the round-brimmed beaver, expressive both of sorrow and anger.

As Mainstay, however, laid his head within half a length of the bang-tailed mare's quarters, young Martin Round took a hard pull at his horse, and his rival stole away in front again with her rapid, long, light stride, like a bird on the wing skimming just above the surface of the ground.

A high, narrow-topped bank and yawning double ditch, cut sharply away from the edges on both sides, now stretched itself in an irregular line before the heads of the rival flyers, and to clear which handsomely required a clean jump of five feet nine inches in height, and twenty-two feet in length.

At this point a select few of the mounted friends and supporters of both horses had stationed themselves within a few yards of the tree on which the red flag waved to mark the line of the steeple-chase. Farmer Pattymore formed one of the excited but silent group, and as the mare led towards the leap at racing pace, he could not refrain from breathing a short prayer that "she might come to grief."

Swift and straight she came along, with her neck stretched out, and her silken tail level with the cantle of the saddle she carried.

"He's cutting out the work too strong to last," said the head of the family of the Tops, from his post of observation. "He'll pump her presently, and then——"

The angles of his mouth became drawn back in the curve of the parenthesis; but he left the sentence unfinished.

Swift and straight she came along with her rider standing in his stirrups; but when within a few lengths of the narrow-

topped bank and yawning double ditch, he dropped into his saddle, steadied her with a pull, and, with his whip-hand held aloft, at them she rose in a form which impressed Farmer Pattymore with the conviction that she was not doomed "to grief" in accordance with the prayer he had so recently offered. And yet, as she landed on the opposite side, it looked for a second or two otherwise; for, dropping her hind feet close to the edge of the ditch, the earth gave way, and threatened to bring her backwards into it. With a struggle, however, she scrambled forwards, and was scarcely out of her long and quick stride before she was set going again, "cutting out the work."

Too proud to follow the exact line of the bang-tailed mare, young Martin Round brought Mainstay a few yards to the right of the spot where she had chanced the hazard of the leap. Pulling hard, the son of Sheet Anchor swept towards it, and with a mighty spring, which must have flung the cherry-coloured jacket clean over his ears had it not been thrown back almost to his quarter, he safely landed clear of the ditch, giving rise to no apprehension of his being too near its edge to be dangerous.

"Bray-vo!" shouted Farmer Pattymore.

"He can jump well enough," remarked a partisan of the bang-tailed mare; "but he hasn't got the pace to win."

"What 'll ye lay o' that?" quickly, and even passionately, asked the farmer.

The partisan of the bang-tailed mare had no wish to bet.

"'No wish to bet?'" repeated Farmer Pattymore, with a look of undisguised contempt, as he extracted a long canvas bag from a pocket of great depth and of considerable dimensions. "There," continued he, holding out a sack on a small scale; "there's thirty pound, and I'll lay the whole in a lump, or any part, from a shilling up'ards, that Sir Digby's hoss *has* the pace to win."

This bold offer momentarily drew individual attention to the speaker, but no one ventured to accept it, and Farmer

Pattymore, in replacing the "thirty pound," glanced indignant defiance at the partisan of the bang-tailed mare.

Again casting a look backwards in the hope of seeing Mainstay falling in the rear, "he from a distance" led across three open grass inclosures at a pace subsequently described in the columns of the *County Claptrap* as "terrific;" but the son of Sheet Anchor hung upon the quarter of his rival like her shadow, and there was no shaking him off.

The Whissenden brook now twined itself in view in a wide and murky stream at the bottom of the third grass field, down the sloping ground of which the bang-tailed mare galloped with undiminished speed.

"I'm not going to be led over the Whissenden brook," muttered young Martin Round, and meeting with as sympathetic a response from Mainstay as was ever entertained between a horse and his rider, to the side of the bang-tailed mare he rushed, and, neck and neck, they raced for first over the water jump.

Robert Top groaned audibly at this second violation of orders on the part of young Martin Round; but upon seeing his favourite draw a clear length in advance and swing his colours over the Whissenden brook in a way which drew forth a loud, ringing cheer from the spectators gathered together on the bank, he felt that to forgive a fault was quite within the margin of his humane nature.

The "four miles of hunting country" had been chosen so as to form the course in the shape of a horse-shoe, two out and two in; and soon after leaving Whissenden brook the flag appeared round which the turn back was to be made. In the apparent hope of still being able to outpace the son of Sheet Anchor, and the bang-tailed mare evincing no symptoms of distress, her rider went on with the running at the same great speed, rounding the flag slightly ahead, and once more facing the water jump.

"I must ride to orders now," said young Martin Round to himself, making up his mind reluctantly to be led over Whis-

senden brook the second time facing it. "Old Turnip-tops," continued he, "will be at me as it is, I fear."

It is, perhaps, quite unnecessary to explain, that the venerable vegetable referred to was no other than the head of the family of the Tops himself.

Upon its being announced, through the medium of a number of juvenile enthusiasts occupying the topmost branches of the whole of the lofty trees in the vicinity, that "the 'osses were a-coming back," great was the excitement, and manifold the ways of displaying it, on Gannet Green.

Mrs. Ben Binks, upon the intelligence being revealed to her, began to laugh and cry by turns, and then both at the same moment; but her feelings not getting sufficient vent through this ordinary channel, she once more manipulated Bud's nose, until his blue and goggle eyes were filled to overflowing with tears.

"Which is first?" almost screamed the landlady of the Ship and Shovel.

"Yallar's fust," replied a voice in the clear, piping tone of boyhood.

"No, no," rejoined Mrs. Binks, faintly; "say not yallar. Tell me it's ch—ch—cherry."

"Yallar's fust," once more hallooed the clear piping tone of boyhood.

A dizzy, swimming sensation passed like a cloud before Mrs. Binks's eyes. The earth, the cart, Bud's nose, everything went round. Her hitherto blooming cheeks turned suddenly to the unnatural tint of a light pea-green, as she indistinctly begged to be informed "Where she was? who she was? and if not, how came she there?"

"Here they come!" roared from the throats of the multitude, and echo, answering, roared again.

Her presence of mind regained, the landlady of the Ship and Shovel made her question heard far above the increasing din: "Which was first?"

"Yallar's fust," was still the answer.

Who or what can faithfully describe the feelings of Mrs. Ben Binks?

"Water!" she cried, with a frantic gesture. "Give mewater, with a bottom of brandy in it!"

"He's down!" was the cry of a hundred tongues.

"Who's down?"

"Yallar."

"May he never get up again!" ejaculated Mrs. Binks, with a pious and conjoint movement of both hands.

"Hoo-ra-ay! Well done! He isn't off! Go it, yallar!" now greeted the ears of the landlady of the Ship and Shovel.

The colours of the riders in the distance meeting, at this moment, the anxious and forward gaze of Mrs. Binks, she felt at least consoled with the thought that she was no longer dependent upon the conflicting testimony of others, but in a position to judge for herself.

And towards Gannet Green, and within a short distance of that locality, she saw dizzily the horses approaching, with their noses (as they appeared to her) exactly level with each other. In a few more strides she saw the cherry-coloured jacket shoot suddenly in advance, when he in "flaunting yellow" raised his whip, and immediately followed a succession of sharp, snapping sounds, not unlike an explosion of percussion caps. Again momentarily (as they appeared to her) the noses were exactly level.

"Go it, yallar! Mainstay wins! Yallar for ever! Mainstay for a hundred!" were the loud, echoing cheers of the respective supporters of the two flyers struggling for victory within a few lengths of the winning-post.

Bleached were his features; but a smile spread over them from chin to brow, as Robert Top watched what he knew to be the failing effort of the bang-tailed mare.

"Her bolt is shot!" cried he, spinning his round, narrow-brimmed beaver in the air; and as he spoke, young Martin



Round, with his hands down, shook his rival off, and passed between the flags marking the finish, the hailed winner of the match by a full length and something to spare.

It was no sham. Mrs. Binks dropped to the bottom of the cart in a heap, unconscious of Bud's strenuous endeavours to "bring her to" by fanning her light pea-green cheeks with his wide-awake.

CHAPTER XVII.

UPON young Martin Round returning to scale and being passed with the assurance of the presiding official that it was "all right," he met with that prevalent kind of popular demonstration which a successful candidate for fame (whether deserving or otherwise) generally receives through the medium of the hands, arms, and throats of a not too discriminating British public. Surrounded, hemmed, and wedged in, jammed, rammed, and crammed by an admiring throng, young Martin Round felt himself completely overwhelmed with the enthusiasm displayed. Those admirers (and probable winners on the result) stationed in the rear patted him roughly on the back, while others, squeezed in front, clutched him by the hands and wrung them until the blood tingled again in the tips of his fingers. Then as he moved forwards a sort of procession was formed, headed by a compact body of enthusiasts, who both capered and shouted as only a compact body of enthusiasts *could* caper and shout. If greedy eyes were capable of devouring young Martin Round, in the twinkling of a drop of dew glittering in the sunshine not a vestige would have been left of his "marrow bones, and all." Before, behind, and around, the deafening cry "Hoo-ra-a-ay!" (of Saxon origin) thundered in his ears. Wherever he cast his eyes he saw mouths stretched wide apart, admitting, as far as was practicable, an insight into regions known as the "abdominal." Wherever he turned the same sight met his view, the same sound struck upon his tympanum.

And Mainstay, too, met with a corresponding demonstration of popular favour. With heaving flanks the victor stood receiving the prompt assistance at the hands of his attendants in refreshing his taxed powers and the ovation of the British

public at one and the same moment. Cheers succeeded cheers as the neck of a black bottle was placed between his jaws by Robert Top—the features of the head of the family wreathed with sunny smiles—and the cooling draught gurgled forth to soften his favourite's clammy and feverish mouth. His eyes, face, and nostrils sponged, body scraped and rubbed, and legs carefully wiped down, a suit of clothes was adjusted, and the son of Sheet Anchor strode proudly from the spot, led by the head of the family of the Tops himself, with proudly curved neck, eyes glowing with fire, and thick veins mapped and roped upon his skin from ear to fetlock.

"He's not distressed?" interrogatively remarked Sir Digby, as they came close to the carriage in which "her ladyship" now sat with crimsoned cheek, and her eyes fixed with unequivocal admiration upon Mainstay.

"Not he, Sir Digby," replied Robert Top, touching the brim of his hat with the unemployed fore-finger. "There's too much of the old stuff in him for a four-mile spin to distress 'm, cut it out as they will."

"The race was never in doubt," remarked the Baronet.

"Not from the start to the finish," rejoined the head of the family of the Tops, in a tone and manner which clearly expressed any possible amount of faith in the truth of the asserted fact.

"He's a beautiful creature," observed her ladyship.

"And as good as he's beautiful, my lady," returned Robert Top.

Her ladyship smiled at the portrayed enthusiasm of Mainstay's attendant-in-chief, and, turning to Sir Digby, remarked in a suppressed tone, "Rare qualities for a favourite."

"And therefore," added the Baronet, "the more to be valued."

Now it so happened that at the precise moment that Mrs. Ben Binks was "brought to" through the agency of Bud's wide-awake, Robert Top and Mainstay were passing close to the cart, from the bottom of which she had just risen in a very languid and even limp condition.

"Ho, Robert!" ejaculated the landlady of the Ship and

Shovel; "ho, Robert!" repeated she, "my feelin's is overcome."

"No, no," returned the head of the family, in an expostulating tone, "not here. Don't let 'm be overcome just now. People 'll see ye."

"I've just been and f—f—f—fainted," rejoined Mrs. Binks, in a voice almost choked with emotion.

"Then don't do it again," added Robert Top, somewhat authoritatively. "That's all," continued he. "Don't do it again."

"I won't, if I can help it," sobbed the landlady of the Ship and Shovel. "But joy, great joy, dearest Robert, will sometimes cause us weak vessels to f—f—f—faint."

"Never mind weak vessels," added he, somewhat sternly; "but whatever you do, don't faint. I can't abide it."

And thus speaking he walked on, leading Mainstay homewards, as if jealous now of any one's hand besides his own touching even the rein of his favourite.

"Not a word that I've said of ye, my bo-o-oy," muttered Robert Top, as he staggered, rolled, and stumbled by the side of the horse, in his determination to proceed on foot to the stable-door, in spite of certain twinges which threatened a relapse of the recent mild attack of gout—"Not a word that I've said of ye," repeated he, "but what's come right, bang-up to the mark, my bo-o-oy! I said you'd do the trick 'ansum, and as such you've done it. I cracked ye up—said nothing could beat ye, weight for age, over four mile of any fair hunting country in the world, and nothing can. I told 'em the 'oss wasn't dropped, as could be made to go in front of ye, and the 'oss isn't dropped, and, what's more, never will be. I offered to stake my shirt buttons on your pulling through game as a pebble, knowing what the old blood *could* do, and you've shown me what it *has* done. That's the sort of thing for a backer!" And thus confidentially addressing Mainstay, communing silently with his own pleasurable thoughts, and exchanging greetings and salutations with that citizen of the world "Everybody," occupying conspicuous positions at gates, doors, and windows as he passed, the gilded

weather-vane on the roof of Sir Digby's stable became at length visible in the distance, and soon afterwards the triumphant son of Sheet Anchor entered his box once more.

With the alacrity of mice in the dreaded presence of tabby Tom, the helpers, specially appointed for the service, proceeded to foment his legs well with warm water, and greatly administered to his comfort by at once presenting a draught of smooth oatmeal gruel of about the consistency of dairy cream. Then bandages were rolled with consummate skill from fetlock joint to knee and hock, and his clothes stripped from his back—a sharp and vigorous dressing, commenced and finished within ten minutes by “Shrewsbury clock.” During the brief period occupied by the nimble attendants in removing all possible trace of the effects of Mainstay's gallant struggle for the pride of place, a lock of hay, as fragrant as if made of choice exotics, was given for him to pull at, by way, perhaps, of agreeably wiling away the time. A fresh suit of clothes having been placed and buckled upon his glossy coat, the head of the family of the Tops advanced, and, from a pail carried by a helper, scooped from it with his own particular hands as nicely a mixed bran-mash as was ever given to a winning horse.

“There, my bo-o-oy,” said he, “have a go in at that. You've done your dooty to your stable, and thereby your stable should do its dooty to you. That's my text, and if anybody can improve upon it, let 'm ; I don't want.”

By way of responding to the invitation, Mainstay drove his mouth greedily into the bran-mash, even to the concealment of his nostrils.

“That's your sort !” ejaculated Robert Top, drawing back the angles of his mouth parenthetically. “That's your sort,” repeated he. “He'd eat up his crib, as certain as we're jolly Christians, if nothing better was handy.”

The helper with the pail offered to make a strong affidavit on the spot that not a square inch of the oak crib would be left in less time than it occupied his venerable grandmother to wink her eye.

The head of the family of the Tops looked reproachfully at the helper with the pail, as if he thought a considerable liberty had been taken in making any allusion to his grandmother. The helper with the pail became silent, and exhibited in his outward bearing mental confusion of no common order.

"At a time like this," observed Robert Top, in a solemn tone, combined with great gravity of demeanor, "I don't want to hear any particulars of your grandmother's winking, sir."

The helper with the pail telegraphed his contrition by making a tug at the piece of hair which hung in a square fringe upon his forehead, and formed a close junction with his eyebrows.

"We'll now leave ye to yourself, my bo-o-oy," said Robert Top, in a very different voice and manner, as he addressed Mainstay. "For five full hours," continued he, "the key of your box shall remain in my westcot pocket."

CHAPTER XVIII.

As the winner of the "great match," Mainstay proved an object of marked interest as he made his first appearance at the coverside after his successful achievement. It is almost unnecessary to add that Sir Digby was in the saddle, as the son of Sheet Anchor, now a made and perfect hunter, carried no one but his owner in the field. His barrel still presented the outward effect of having recently undergone the process of Robert Top's "fine-drawing;" but, with this exception, no trace remained of the preparation for the event, or the excitement attending it, on Gannet Green. With outstretched limbs and pricked ears he stood almost motionless, listening for the throw of the hounds' tongue proclaiming the find. His rider, it might have been observed, maintained his seat with the confidence of one occupying a domestic easy chair, lined with no common stuffing. His reins, too, were slackened so as to fall negligently over the neck and shoulders of the horse, as if the necessity of such means of control no longer existed, and both the baronet and Mainstay evinced that mutual terms of the most perfect amity existed between them.

"He's as tempee-rate and quiet to-day," remarked Farmer Pattymore, "as if he'd never been called upon to race a yard."

"Recollect he's my breeding, making, and training," returned Robert Top, sitting on the roan cob by the side of his friend, mounted on the steed used for all family purposes, either for profit or pleasure. "Recollect," reiterated the head of the family of the Tops, bearing a remarkable semblance to an inflated pouter pigeon, "he's my breeding, making, and training."

"Which thereby does you credit," added the farmer.

"Hah!" exclaimed Robert Top, compressing his lips together, "it doesn't perhaps sound quite the thing for a man to praise hisself, but if there was more of this stock in the world" (he tapped with the hammer of his whip the single button of the green coat fastened across his breast) "there'd be more o' that," and, reversing the movement, he pointed with the thong to Mainstay.

"In good time, perhaps," returned the farmer, "we may have a hincrase. I say, Robert," continued he, with a chuckle, "we may have a hincrase, sir."

The head of the family of the Tops gave vent to a single sigh, and murmured something scarcely audible about "being resigned to circumstances over which he had no control."

"Now one match is brought off," observed Farmer Pattymore, resolved to ease the strain of his natural curiosity at what he considered to be a favourable moment, "when may we hope to see——?"

"All in good time," interrupted Robert Top. "Some things, to be done well," resumed he, "ought, I'm willing to confess, to be done quickly; but——" (here he paused, evidently for the express purpose of giving due effect to the conclusion of the sentence) "marryin' aint one of 'em."

"That's true enough," added Farmer Pattymore, giving his dexter knee a loud and vigorous slap with the broad palm of a hand. "I'll be bound, Robert, hand and foot, that's true enough, and, like a precious many of mortal errors, fallen into by more sinners than saints."

The throw of a single hound's tongue, like the note of a deep-toned bell, was now borne backwards upon the breeze.

"That's it!" exclaimed Sir Digby, exultingly, drawing his reins quickly through his fingers, and settling himself with a firmer seat in the saddle. "That's it!" he repeated, as a ringing cheer from old Martin Round followed the welcome challenge of the fox.

"Have at 'em!" cried the huntsman, as the body of the hounds crashed through the wood, up wind.

"Gone away!" hallooed Sir Digby, perceiving the well-known signal of the first whipper-in's cap in the air.

"Now, then," shouted Robert Top, giving the roan hack a dig with his spurs, "come along."

Nothing loth, Farmer Pattymore set the "useful one" in motion, following, at a truly respectful distance, the lead taken by Mainstay.

Like a fox good enough to stand before the best of hounds, he broke cover without hanging for a moment, and his brush, held out stiff and straight, gave to view the tag at the end as white as a ball of snow.

Close to him the hounds burst from the wood in a body, and, with heads up and sterns down, away they flew upon the line at a pace which only scent breast high could show.

The quick burst, and the hounds getting away upon such terms with the fox that admitted of no improvement, the majority of the field found themselves in that too common state for mortals known as "difficulties" at a very early part of the run. As a direct opposite to the description known as "woodland," the country over which the fox raced at the commencement of the run presented not even a spinny for a retreat, and to his powers of speed and endurance alone had he to trust for life.

"Few will live to see the finish of this," soliloquised Sir Digby, as he momentarily glanced backwards and perceived how select the field had become in less than thirty minutes from the find.

The grains of sand dropped on marking off the present in the past, and still the chase went on at the same flying speed, while every now and then a halloo announced that the fox could barely keep himself from view.

The hounds now bent slightly to the left, when Sir Digby coming to the side of old Martin Round, observed, "His point must be Rockwell earths."

"There's nothing to hold 'em between here and there," responded the huntsman, "and his nose points straight for 'em now."

"How far are they?" asked the baronet.

"Nine clear mile, if a yard," was the reply.

"He can't live the distance," returned Sir Digby.

"Only one of us will if *he* can," added old Martin Round, emphatically.

"And who is that?" was the question, followed by a short, hearty laugh.

"You, Sir Digby," replied the huntsman, bringing his heels against the flanks of his horse with a movement which had the effect of giving vent to feelings of anything but charity and goodwill. "*You*, Sir Digby," repeated he, again stabbing the rowels of his spurs deeply into the sides of his horse, while the hue of "thundering black" spread itself loweringly over his features.

In place of the large, open grass enclosures forming the principal features of the country which had hitherto been crossed, the fences now became far more numerous, and although neither so wide nor high, the many leaps began to tell with failing effect upon the hounds, and to bring nearly every horse to a standstill.

"It's no use," gasped Robert Top, as he floundered through a deep, miry land, followed by Farmer Pattymore—"It's no use," repeated he, blowing like a grampus, "we can't go an inch further."

"Oh! keep on," rejoined his companion. "Take a squeeze at the lemon, and at 'em again!"

"It's all very well to talk about lemons," returned the head of the family of the Tops, stopping the truly willing roan hack; "but I'm not going to copy a well-known original by making a hass o' myself."

Farmer Pattymore entertained a sketchy notion that this remark was not totally devoid of personality.

"I know," resumed Robert Top, in a moist state of body and irritable condition of mind, "what enough means. Some folks don't."

Farmer Pattymore ventured to retort, that he "wasn't one of 'm."

"Then what does it mean?" sharply inquired the head of the family of the Tops.

"Why," returned the farmer, reflectively, "enough means enough."

"And a little over," added Robert Top. "That's what enough means; quite sufficient and a little over. Now, that being our present case—let any fool deny it who can—the sensible course for us to adopt is to cry 'enough,' and head short back upon our line as straight homewards as we can go."

No positive objection being raised to the proposal by Farmer Pattymore, their horses—who evinced the most decided symptoms of having had "enough"—were turned to that point of the compass indicating the most direct road homewards.

The day was waning fast. Long shadows began to be thrown upon the ground as the sun's last rays streamed in purple glory from the west, and objects at a short distance loomed hazily through the thickening shades. Still the chase continued without check, let, or stop.

The body of the hounds, like leaves in autumn, however, had gradually fallen off, tailing one by one, and occasionally in greater numbers. At length two couples and a half only were left to support the struggle between the pursuing and pursued.

Within gunshot of this remnant of the pack a single horseman still maintained the place he had taken at the burst, without a crane, flinch, or swerve. No second was within range even of the vision of an eagle, and the five hounds, Sir Digby, and Mainstay, monopolised the enjoyment of now having it "all to themselves."

The work which had beaten every horse but the son of Sheet Anchor to a standstill began, it must be admitted, to produce palpable effects even in "the Flyer of the Hunt." He had tired, it was true, and his flanks heaved quickly from the pace and the distance accomplished, but the fire of his race—the high-mettled blood of the thorough-bred horse—enabled him still to take each fence in his stride, and bear his rider straight to hounds.

"Tally-ho!" loudly cried a peasant returning from his toil at eventide, with a faggot of firewood on his shoulders, as a fox swept across his path with his tongue out, tucked-up body, and brush trailing upon the ground.

"Ta-a-ally-ho!" screamed an urchin in ecstasy, as the fox, beaten to a trot, caught his view.

"Ta-a-a-ally-ho!" halloed a third proprietor of stentorian lungs, and making the concluding vowel echo along the chain of the Rockwell hills, at the foot of which the two couples and a half of hounds, with Mainstay lying within twenty lengths of their sterns, rushed from scent to view, and ran into as gallant a fox as ever stood.

"Who-whoop!" rang merrily from Sir Digby's lips as he threw himself from the saddle. "Who-whoop! good hounds," repeated he.

Far, far from home Mainstay was littered for the night, and the head of the family of the Tops, in recounting this memorable run (which is still the popular belief he continues to repeat once, at least, daily, not excepting Sundays), always begged his hearers clearly to understand that Sir Digby took especial care to personally attend to the comfort of his gallant horse before thinking of his own.

CHAPTER XIX.

BUD was never in greater force in the whole course of his sub-lunary existence. It may be, indeed, added with considerable confidence, that Bud was never in such force as on a particular morning in a particular month, when "bees from flower to flower" enjoy the privilege of humming, butterflies trifle their time away, and the thrifty ant pays due regard to the sage advice of preparing for rainy weather when the sun shines brightly. Bud, like many of the ornaments of the Senate, the Bench, and the Bar, in the noviciate stage of the brilliant career before them, occupied a garret. It was a small unpretending chamber, with an acutely sloping ceiling, against which he continually bumped his head, but whether from accident or design history has no record. The furniture, corresponding with the unpretending nature of the chamber, consisted of a bedstead, called in the language of upholsterers "stump;" a plain wooden stool, which, from its short, narrow, and contracted proportions, brought his nose in close proximity to his knees, and, from other causes unnecessary to particularise, rendered it anything but a seat of ease when perched, so to speak, upon its surface; a white basin, and jug to match, were placed in a convenient corner on the floor for the express purpose of applying those best of cosmetics to the skin in the shape of soap and water; and a looking-glass, exactly three inches by two in length and breadth, hanging on the wall close to the window, completed the indispensable furniture of Bud's dormitory, provided, at least, a necessity existed for the chamber to be literally qualified for such a designation.

Bud was arraying himself, and it is not too much to state, "gorgeously" arraying himself in "bridal attire." For be it

known to all whom it may concern, and any portion of the community it possibly may not, that this particular morning in this particular month to which particular reference is now being made, was no other than the one appointed for the union of hands and hearts of Robert Top and the landlady of the Ship and Shovel. Mrs. Binks was to change her name to Top on this very day, and Bud, feeling something within—"a still small voice," perhaps—communicating the extremely pleasant fact that he himself was an important part, parcel, and person in and of the imposing ceremony about to commence, and in the fulness of time, of course, to finish—Bud felt that the eyes of the world either were or would be fixed upon him this day. With commendable pride, therefore, he resolved to exhibit himself to the world in the most attractive form that the then present financial state of his exchequer and individual good taste would jointly and severally permit. With an indifference to outlay, or, at any rate, something closely treading upon the heels of a total disregard of expenditure, Bud invested a part of his savings in the purchase of a long swallow-tail cerulean blue coat, with brass buttons of the brightest quality that money could command. Having an eye to conspicuous, if not artistical effect, his pantaloons were of that hue commonly called "pea-green," while his waistcoat blended a rainbow mixture of orange, red, and purple.

The looking-glass, exactly three inches by two in length and breadth, in reflecting Bud's countenance, caused him to appear with as decided and horrible a squint as the organs of vision could possibly be distorted, and the corners of his mouth seemed looped up in a shape scarcely to be called human. Notwithstanding these imperfections, however, Bud stood before the mirror with infinite complacency, and in tying a large white bow beneath his fat and double chin, proclaimed himself, in an audible whisper, "a stunning swell." As will be recollected, upon the introduction of Bud to the notice of the cosmopolitan Everybody, he was stated to be a remarkably taciturn subject of the realm, seldom revealing his sentiments, except by the

inference which might be drawn from a telegraphic signal to the mole on his forehead. A declaration, therefore, of his being "a stunning swell," made, as it was, in words of no questionable kind, will leave a faithful impression of what Bud's feelings were on this momentous occasion.

The toilet complete, Bud descended to the stable yard, and having taken the precaution to get the pony and cart ready before "gorgeously arraying himself in bridal attire," he at once ascended to the driving-seat of that vehicle, and, taking the reins and whip in true coachman-like style, stimulated the animal (always doing the worst he was permitted) to the exhibition of his best pace, without the introduction of a walk, and started with a sharp swing to the door of the Ship and Shovel, where he pulled up with a jerk which nearly sent him sprawling, in the form of a spread eagle, over the pony's quarters. Recovering himself just in time to prevent so grave a catastrophe, Bud boxed the compass with a rapid glance, in order to learn if the eyes of the world were scrutinising him at that precise moment, and finding the eyes were not so occupied, greatly to his satisfaction, Bud regained both his dignity and happiness at one and the same time.

It might, probably, be deemed inquisitive, if not impertinent, to inquire into or assign any positive motive for the firm resolution to which Mrs. Binks had arrived, "not to keep her dear Robert waiting." The avowed intention might emanate from various causes; but the true one, whatever that might be, being kept an inviolable secret in the spacious bosom of Mrs. Binks, where it necessarily must have found plenty of room, it shall be left to dwell in its delicate tenement without being exposed to the vulgar curiosity of the peeping and prying. The landlady of the Ship and Shovel had declared that "she would not keep her dear Robert waiting." Punctual, therefore, as one of Alderman Carter's chronometers, Mrs. Binks crossed the threshold of the door of the Ship and Shovel as the second-hand of the clock in the bar-parlour pointed that it was then the nick of time to start for church, if the exact minute

appointed for the ceremony to take place was to be observed with anything like precision. Decked, as became a bride, in snowy white from head to heel, Mrs. Binks presented an appearance which her dear Robert plainly admitted, at a later period of the day, "would take a great deal to beat." If not altogether lovely, the landlady of the Ship and Shovel had done her best to render herself as lovely as her natural charms and the artificial appliances at her command would permit in producing so desirable an effect. She had done her best, and success crowned the effort.

Without assistance, Mrs. Binks mounted the cart, and, occupying a comprehensive share of the seat, instructed Bud to "drive on."

And drive on he did, with spirit and skill, as the eyes of the world became rivetted on the bride and her charioteer in their progress to the church. Mrs. Binks naturally smiled and exchanged greetings with the cosmopolitan Everybody, and expressed acknowledgments for good wishes combined with good luck, and both did and said all that might be anticipated by a happy woman on a short journey to be made happier.

And fortunately for the consummation of her peace of mind, there at the lych-gate of the church itself stood the gallant Robert Top, attended by Farmer Pattymore, waiting the arrival of his expectant bride. Politely he handed her from the cart, taking particular care that not even her ankles might be visible to the dense throng gathered round and about the vehicle as it was brought to a gentle stop at the entrance of the church.

"Mind," said Robert, staggering under the weight of his expectant bride, as he assisted her to alight. "Take care."

"I will," replied Mrs. Binks, accepting the proffered arm of the head of the family of the Tops, and, bringing her lips within whispering distance, added, "I'll take care of you."

And she kept her word, too, aye, to the very letter of the promise.

CHAPTER XX.

BUD had shaved years ago. He was no longer the flaxen-haired blue-eyed Saxon hobblèdehoy of other days, but a man upon whose chin grew a crop which blunted sheer steel to reap. Not that he was proud of his beard. On the contrary, had his wishes or convenience been consulted, he would have preferred being without that hirsute mark of manhood. The purpose, however, will be served in simply repeating that Bud had shaved years ago, and now found much of his time occupied in driving a corpulent individual (periodically attacked with the gout) to the meets of Sir Digby Digby's foxhounds. This corpulent individual was invariably driven by Bud in a low four-wheel phaeton, constructed entirely for ease and personal comfort. His dress consisted of a green coat, fastened by a single button across the chest, a canary-coloured waistcoat, drab knee breeches and gaiters, round narrow-brimmed hat, and a white cravat, in the front of which was fixed a gold horseshoe pin. It will seem, from the details given, almost unnecessary to add that this corpulent individual (periodically attacked with the gout) was no other than old Robert Top, older grown.

To the cover side, however, he would still be constantly wheeled ; and whenever a certain horse met his view (still the Flyer of the Hunt), he would turn to Bud and say, in a tone of exultation, "My breeding, rearing, and training, recollect. The old blood—the old blood !"

THE END.

