

MR SPONGE'S SPORTING TOUR

CHAPTER I

Our Hero

IT WAS A MURKY OCTOBER DAY that the hero of our tale, Mr Sponge, or Soapey Sponge, as his good-natured friends call him, was seen mizzling along Oxford Street, wending his way to the west. Not that there was anything unusual in Sponge being seen in Oxford Street, for when in town his daily perambulations consist of a circuit, commencing from the Bantam Hotel in Bond Street into Piccadilly, through Leicester Square, and so on to Aldridge's, in St Martin's Lane, thence by Moore's sporting-print shop, and on through some of those ambiguous and tortuous streets that, appearing to lead all ways at once and none in particular, land the explorer, sooner or later, on the south side of Oxford Street.

Oxford Street acts to the north part of London what the Strand does to the south; it is sure to bring one up, sooner or later. A man can hardly get over either of them without knowing it. Well, Soapey having got into Oxford Street, would make his way at a squarey, in-kneed, duck-toed, sort of pace, regulated by the bonnets, the vehicles, and the equestrians he met to criticise; for of women, vehicles, and horses, he had voted himself a consummate judge. Indeed he had fully established in his own mind that Kiddey Downey and he were the only men in London who *really* knew anything about horses, and fully impressed with that conviction, he would halt, and stand, and stare, in a way that with any other man would have been considered impertinent. Perhaps it was impertinent in Soapey – we don't mean to say it wasn't – but he had done it so long, and was of so sporting a gait and cut, that he felt himself somewhat privileged. Moreover, the majority of horsemen are so satisfied with the animals they bestride, that they cock up their jibs and ride along with a 'find any fault with either me or my horse, if you can' sort of air.

Thus Mr Sponge proceeded leisurely along, now nodding to this man, now jerking his elbow to that, now smiling on a phaëton, now sneering at a 'bus. If he did not look in at Shackell's, or Bartley's, or any of the dealers on the line, he was always to be found about half-past five

at Cumberland Gate, from whence he would strike leisurely down the Park, and after coming to a long check at Rotten Row rails, from whence he would pass all the cavalry in the Park in review, he would wend his way back to the Bantam, much in the style he had come. This was his summer proceeding.

Mr Sponge had pursued this enterprising life for some 'seasons' – ten at least – and supposing him to have begun at twenty or one-and-twenty, he would be about thirty at the time we have the pleasure of introducing him to our readers – a period of life at which men begin to suspect they were not quite so wise at twenty as they thought. Not that Mr Sponge had any particular indiscretions to reflect upon, for he was tolerably sharp, but he felt that he might have made better use of his time, which may be shortly described as having been spent in hunting all the winter, and in talking about it all the summer. With this popular sport he combined the diversion of fortune-hunting, though we are concerned to say that his success, up to the period of our introduction, had not been commensurate with his deserts. Let us, however, hope that brighter days are about to dawn upon him.

Having now introduced our hero to our male and female friends, under his interesting pursuits of fox and fortune-hunter, it becomes us to say a few words as to his qualifications for carrying them on.

Mr Sponge was a good-looking, rather vulgar-looking man. At a distance – say ten yards – his height, figure, and carriage gave him somewhat of a commanding appearance, but this was rather marred by a jerky, twitchy, uneasy sort of air, that too plainly showed he was not the natural, or what the lower orders call the *real* gentleman. Not that Sponge was shy. Far from it. He never hesitated about offering to a lady, after a three days' acquaintance, or in asking a gentleman to take him a horse in overnight, with whom he might chance to come in contact in the hunting field. And he did it all in such a cool, off-hand, matter-of-course sort of way, that people who would have stared with astonishment if anybody else had hinted at such a proposal, really seemed to come into the humour and spirit of the thing, and to look upon it rather as a matter of course than otherwise. Then his dexterity in getting into people's houses was only equalled by the difficulty of getting him out again, but this we must waive for the present in favour of his portraiture.

In height, Mr Sponge was about the middle size – five feet eleven or so – with a well-borne-up, not badly shaped, closely cropped oval head, a tolerably good, but somewhat receding forehead, bright hazel eyes, Roman nose, with carefully tended whiskers, reaching the corners of a well-formed mouth, and thence descending in semicircles into a vast

expanse of hair beneath the chin.

Having mentioned Mr Sponge's gloomy gait and horsey propensities, it were almost needless to say, that his dress was in the sporting style – you saw what he was by his clothes. Every article seemed to be made to defy the utmost rigour of the elements. His hat (Lincoln and Bennett) was hard and heavy. It sounded upon an entrance-hall table like a drum. A little magical loop in the lining explained the cause of its weight. Somehow, his hats were never either old or new – not that he bought them second-hand, but when he bought a new one he took its 'long-coar' off, as he called it, with a singeing lamp, and made it look as if it had undergone a few probationary showers.

When a good London hat recedes to a certain point, it gets no worse; it is not like a country-made thing that keeps going and going until it declines into a thing with no sort of resemblance to its original self. Barring its weight and hardness, the Sponge hat had no particular character apart from the Sponge head. It was not one of those punty ovals or Cheshire-cheese flats, or curly-sided things that enables one to say who is in a house and who is not, by a glance at the hats in the entrance, but it was just a quiet, round hat, without anything remarkable, either in the binding, the lining, or the band, still it was a very becoming hat when Sponge had it on. There is a great deal of character in hats. We have seen hats that bring the owners to the recollection far more forcibly than the generality of portraits. But to our hero.

That there may be a dandified simplicity in dress, is exemplified every day by our friends the Quakers, who adorn their beautiful brown Saxony coats with little inside velvet collars and fancy silk buttons, and even the severe order of sporting costume adopted by our friend Mr Sponge, is not devoid of capability in the way of tasteful adaptation. This Mr Sponge chiefly showed in promoting a resemblance between his neckcloths and waistcoats. Thus, if he wore a cream-coloured cravat, he would have a buff-coloured waistcoat, if a striped waistcoat, then the starcher would be imbued with somewhat of the same colour and pattern. The ties of these varied with their texture. The silk ones terminated in a sort of coaching fold, and were secured by a golden fox-head pin, while the striped starchers, with the aid of a pin on each side, just made a neat, unpretending tie in the middle, a sort of miniature of the flagrant, flyaway, Mile-End ones of aspiring youth of the present day. His coats were of the single-breasted cut-away order, with pockets outside, and generally either Oxford mixture or some dark colour, that required you to place him in a favourable light to say what it was.

His waistcoats, of course, were of the most correct form and material, generally either pale buff, or buff with a narrow stripe, similar

to the undress vests of the servants of the Royal Family, only with the pattern run across instead of lengthways, as those worthies mostly have theirs, and made with good honest step collars, instead of the make-believe roll collars they sometimes convert their upright ones into. When in deep thought, calculating, perhaps, the value of a passing horse, or considering whether he should have beefsteaks or lamb chops for dinner, Sponge's thumbs would rest in the arm-holes of his waistcoat; in which easy, but not very elegant, attitude, he would sometimes stand until all trace of the idea that elevated them had passed away from his mind.

In the trouser line he adhered to the close-fitting costume of former days; and many were the trials, the easings, and the alterings, ere he got a pair exactly to his mind. Many were the customers who turned away on seeing his manly figure filling the swing mirror in 'Snip and Sneiders', a monopoly that some tradesmen might object to, only Mr Sponge's trousers being admitted to be perfect 'triumphs of the art,' the more such a walking advertisement was seen in the shop the better. Indeed, we believe it would have been worth Snip and Co.'s while to have let him have them for nothing. They were easy without being tight, or rather they looked tight without being so; there wasn't a bag, a wrinkle, or a crease that there shouldn't be, and strong and storm-defying as they seemed, they were yet as soft and as supple as a lady's glove. They looked more as if his legs had been blown in them than as if such irreproachable garments were the work of man's hands. Many were the nudges, and many the 'look at this chap's trousers,' that were given by ambitious men emulous of his appearance as he passed along, and many were the turnings round to examine their faultless fall upon his radiant boot. The boots, perhaps, might come in for a little of the glory, for they were beautifully soft and cool-looking to the foot, easy without being loose, and he preserved the lustre of their polish, even up to the last moment of his walk. There never was a better man for getting through dirt, either on foot or horseback, than our friend.

To the frequenters of the 'corner,' it were almost superfluous to mention that he is a constant attendant. He has several volumes of 'catalogues,' with the prices the horses have brought set down in the margins, and has a rare knack at recognising old friends, altered, disguised, or disfigured as they may be - 'I've seen that rip before,' he will say, with a knowing shake of the head, as some woebegone devil goes, best leg foremost, up to the hammer, or, 'What! is that old beast back? why he's here every day.' No man can impose upon Soapey with a horse. He can detect the rough-coated plausibilities of the straw-yard, equally with the metamorphosis of the clipper or singer. His practised

eye is not to be imposed upon either by the blandishments of the bang-tail, or the bereavements of the dock. Tattersall will hail him from his rostrum with - 'Here's a horse will suit you, Mr Sponge! cheap, good, and handsome! come and buy him.' But it is needless describing him here, for every out-of-place groom and dog-stealer's man knows him by sight.

CHAPTER II

Mr Benjamin Buckram

HAVING DRESSED and sufficiently described our hero to enable our readers to form a general idea of the man, we have now to request them to return to the day of our introduction. Mr Sponge had gone along Oxford Street at a somewhat improved pace to his usual wont - had paused for a shorter period in the 'bus-perplexed Circus, and pulled up seldomer than usual between the Circus and the limits of his stroll. Behold him now at the Edgeware Road end, eyeing the 'buses with a wanting-a-ride-like air, instead of the contemptuous sneer he generally adopts towards those uncouth productions. Red, green, blue, drab, cinnamon-colour, passed and crossed, and jostled, and stopped, and blocked, and the cads telegraphed, and winked, and nodded, and smiled, and slanged, but Mr Sponge regarded them not. He had a sort of 'bus panorama in his head, knew the run of them all, whence they started, where they stopped, where they watered, where they changed, and, wonderful to relate, had never been entrapped into a sixpenny fare when he meant to take a threepenny one. In cab and 'bus geography there is not a more learned man in London.

Mark him as he stands at the corner. He sees what he wants, it's the chequered one with the red and blue wheels that the Bayswater ones have got between them, and that the St John's Wood and two Western Railway ones are trying to get into trouble by crossing. What a row! how the ruffians whip, and stamp, and storm, and all but pick each other's horses' teeth with their poles, how the cads gesticulate, and the passengers imprecate! now the bonnets are out of the windows, and the row increases. Six coachmen cutting and storming, six cads sawing the air, sixteen ladies in flowers screaming, six-and-twenty sturdy passengers

swearing they will 'fine them all,' and Mr Sponge is the only cool person in the scene. He doesn't rush into the throng and 'jump in,' for fear the 'bus should extricate itself and drive on without him; he doesn't make confusion worse confounded by intimating his behest; he doesn't soil his bright boots by stepping off the kerbstone, but, quietly waiting the evaporation of the steam, and the disentanglement of the vehicles, by the smallest possible sign in the world, given at the opportune moment, and a steady adhesion to the flags, the 'bus is obliged either to 'come to,' or lose the fare, and he steps quietly in, and squeezes along to the far end, as though intent on going the whole hog of the journey.

Away they rumble up the Edgware Road; the gradual emergence from the brick and mortar of London being marked as well by the telling out of passengers as by the increasing distances between the houses. First, it is all close huddle with both. Austere iron railings guard the subterranean kitchen areas, and austere looks indicate a desire on the part of the passengers to guard their own pockets; gradually little gardens usurp the places of the cramped areas, and, with their humanising appearance, softer looks assume the place of frowning *anti-swell-mob* ones.

Presently a glimpse of green country or of distant hills may be caught between the wider spaces of the houses, and frequent settings down increase the space between the passengers; gradually conservatories appear, and conversation strikes up; then come the exclusiveness of villas, some detached and others running out at last into real pure green fields studded with trees and picturesque pot-houses, before one of which latter a sudden wheel round and a jerk announces the journey done. The last passenger (if there is one) is then unceremoniously turned loose upon the country.

Our readers will have the kindness to suppose our hero, Mr Sponge, shot out of an omnibus at the sign of the Cat and Compasses, in the full rurality of grass country, sprinkled with fallow and turnip fields. We should state that this unwonted journey was a desire to pay a visit to Mr Benjamin Buckram, the horse-dealer's farm at Scampley, distant some mile and a half from where he was set down, a space that he now purposed travelling on foot.

Mr Benjamin Buckram was a small horse-dealer – small, at least, when he was buying, though great when he was selling. It would do a youngster good to see Ben filling the two capacities. He dealt in second hand, that is to say, past mark of mouth horses; but on the present occasion Mr Sponge sought his services in the capacity of a letter rather than a seller of horses. Mr Sponge wanted to job a couple of plausible-looking horses, with the option of buying them, provided he

(Mr Sponge) could sell them for more than he would have to give Mr Buckram, exclusive of the hire. Mr Buckram's job price, we should say, was as near twelve pounds a month, containing twenty-eight days, as he could screw, the hirer, of course, keeping the animals.

Scampley is one of those pretty little suburban farms, peculiar to the north and northwest side of London – farms varying from fifty to a hundred acres of well-manured, gravelly soil; each farm with its picturesque little buildings, consisting of small, honeysucked, rose-entwined brick houses, with small, flat, pan-tiled roofs, and lattice-windows; and, hard by, a large haystack, three times the size of the house, or a desolate barn, half as big as all the rest of the buildings. From the smallness of the holdings, the farmhouses are dotted about as thickly, and at such varying distances from the roads, as to look like inferior 'villas' falling out of rank; most of them have a half-smart, half-seedy sort of look.

The rustics who cultivate them, or rather look after them, are neither exactly town nor country. They have the clownish dress and boorish gait of the regular 'chaws,' with a good deal of the quick, suspicious, sour sauciness of the low London resident. If you can get an answer from them at all, it is generally delivered in such a way as to show that the answerer thinks you are what they call 'chaffing them,' asking them what you know.

These farms serve the double purpose of purveyors to the London stables, and hospitals for sick, overworked, or unsaleable horses. All the great job-masters and horse-dealers have these retreats in the country, and the smaller ones pretend to have, from whence, in due course, they can draw any sort of an animal a customer may want, just as little cellarless wine-merchants can get you any sort of wine from real establishments – if you only give them time.

There was a good deal of mystery about Scampley. It was sometimes in the hands of Mr Benjamin Buckram, sometimes in the hands of his assignees, sometimes in those of his cousin Abraham Brown, and sometimes John Doe and Richard Roe were the occupants of it.

Mr Benjamin Buckram, though very far from being one, had the advantage of looking like a respectable man. There was a certain plump, well-fed rosiness about him, which, aided by a bright-coloured dress, joined to a continual fumble in the pockets of his drab trousers, gave him the air of a 'well-to-do-in-the-world' sort of man. Moreover, he sported a velvet collar to his blue coat, a more imposing ornament than it appears at first sight. To be sure, there are two sorts of velvet collars – the legitimate velvet collar, commencing with the coat, and the adopted velvet collar, put on when the cloth one gets shabby.

Buckram's was always the legitimate velvet collar, new from the first, and, we really believe, a permanent velvet collar, adhered to in storm and in sunshine, has a very money-making impression on the world. It shows a spirit superior to feelings of paltry economy, and we think a person would be much more excusable for being victimised by a man with a good velvet collar to his coat, than by one exhibiting that spurious sign of gentility – a horse and gig.

The reader will now have the kindness to consider Mr Sponge arriving at Scampley.

'Ah, Mr Sponge!' exclaimed Mr Buckram, who, having seen our friend advancing up the little twisting approach from the road to his house through a little square window almost blinded with Irish ivy, out of which he was in the habit of contemplating the arrival of his occasional lodgers, Doe and Roe, 'Ah, Mr Sponge!' exclaimed he, with well-assumed gaiety; 'you should have been here yesterday; sent away two sich osses – perfect 'unters – the werry best I do think I ever saw in my life; either would have bin the werry oss for your money. But come in, Mr Sponge, sir, come in,' continued he, backing himself through a little sentry-box of a green portico, to a narrow passage which branched off into little rooms on either side.

As Buckram made this retrograde movement, he gave a gentle pull to the wooden handle of an old-fashioned wire bell-pull, in the midst of buggy, four-in-hand, and other whips, hanging in the entrance, a touch that was acknowledged by a single tinkle of the bell in the stable-yard.

They then entered the little room on the right, whose walls were decorated with various sporting prints, chiefly illustrative of steeple-chases, with here and there a stunted fox-brush, tossing about as a duster. The ill-ventilated room reeked with the effluvia of stale smoke, and the faded green baize of a little round table in the centre was covered with filbert-shells and empty ale-glasses. The whole furniture of the room wasn't worth five pounds.

Mr Sponge, being now on the dealing tack, commenced in the poverty-stricken strain adapted to the occasion. Having deposited his hat on the floor, taken his left leg up to nurse, and given his hair a backward rub with his right hand, he thus commenced:

'Now, Buckram,' said he, 'I'll tell you how it is. I'm deuced hard-up – regularly in Short's Gardens. I lost eighteen 'undred on the Derby, and seven on the Leger, the best part of my year's income, indeed: and I just want to hire two or three horses for the season, with the option of buying, if I like; and if you supply me well, I may be the means of bringing grist to your mill; you twig, eh?'

'Well. Mr Sponge,' replied Buckram, sliding several consecutive

half-crowns down the incline plane of his pocket. 'Well, Mr Sponge, I shall be happy to do my best for you. I wish you'd come yesterday, though, as I said before, I jest had two of the neatest nags – a bay and a grey – not that colour makes any matter to a judge like you; there's no sounder sayin' than that a good oss is not never of a bad colour; only to a young gemman, you know, it's well to have 'em smart, and the ticket, in short; howsomever, I must do the best I can for you, and if there's nothin' in that tickles your fancy, why, you must give me a few days to see if I can arrange an exchange with some other gent; but the present is like to be a werry haggiwatin' season; had more happlications for osses nor ever I remembers, and I've been a dealer now, man and boy, turned of eight-and-thirty years; but young gents is whimsical, and it was a young'un wot got these, and there's no sayin' but he mayn't like them – indeed, one's rayther difficult to ride – that's to say, the grey, the neatest of the two, and he *may* come back, and if so, you shall have him; and a safer, sweeter oss was never seen, or one more like to do credit to a gent: but you knows what an oss is, Mr Sponge, and can do justice to me, and I should like to put summut good into your hands – *that* I should.'

With conversation, or rather with balderdash, such as this, Mr Buckram beguiled the few minutes necessary for removing the bandages, hiding the bottles, and stirring up the cripples about to be examined, and the heavy flap of the coach-house door announcing that all was ready, he forthwith led the way through a door in a brick wall into a little three-sides of a square yard, formed of stables and loose boxes, with a dilapidated dove-cote above a pump in the centre; Mr Buckram, not growing corn, could afford to keep pigeons.

CHAPTER III

Peter Leather

NOTHING BESPEAKS the character of a dealer's trade more than the servants and hangers-on of the establishment. The civiler in manner, and the better they are 'put on,' the higher the standing of the master, and the better the stamp of the horses.

Those about Mr Buckram's were of a very shady order. Dirty-shirted,

sloggering, baggy-breeched, slangey-gaitered fellows, with the word 'gin' indelibly imprinted on their faces. Peter Leather, the head man, was one of the fallen angels of servitude. He had once driven a duke – the Duke of Dazzleton – having nothing whatever to do but dress himself and climb into his well-indented richly-fringed throne, with a helper at each horse's head to 'let go' at a nod from his broad laced three-cornered hat. Then having got in his cargo (or rubbish, as he used to call them), he would start off at a pace that was truly terrific, cutting out this vehicle, shooting past that, all but grazing a third, anathematizing the 'buses, and abusing the draymen. We don't know how he might be with the queen, but he certainly drove as though he thought nobody had any business in the street while the Duchess of Dazzleton wanted it. The duchess liked going fast, and Peter accommodated her. The duke jobbed his horses and didn't care about pace, and so things might have gone on very comfortably, if Peter one afternoon hadn't run his pole into the panel of a very plain but very neat yellow barouche, passing the end of New Bond Street, which having nothing but a simple crest – a stag's head on the panel – made him think it belonged to some bulky cit, taking the air with his rib, but who, unfortunately, turned out to be no less a person than Sir Giles Nabem, Knight, the great police magistrate, upon one of whose myrmidons in plain clothes, who came to the rescue, Peter committed a most violent assault, for which unlucky casualty his worship furnished him with rotatory occupation for his fat calves in the 'H. of C.,' as the clerk shortly designated the House of Correction. Thither Peter went, and in lieu of his lace-bedaubed coat, gold-gartered plushes, stockings, and buckled shoes, he was dressed up in a suit of tight-fitting yellow-and-black-striped worsteds, that gave him the appearance of a wasp without wings. Peter Leather then tumbled regularly down the staircase of servitude, the greatness of his fall being occasionally broken by landing in some inferior place. From the Duke of Dazzleton's, or rather from the treadmill, he went to the Marquis of Mammon, whom he very soon left because he wouldn't wear a second-hand wig. From the marquis he got hired to the great Irish Earl of Coarsegab, who expected him to wash the carriage, wait at table, and do other incidentals never contemplated by a London coachman. Peter threw this place up with indignation on being told to take the letters to the post. He then lived on his 'means' for a while, a thing that is much finer in theory than in practice, and having about exhausted his substance and placed the bulk of his apparel in safe keeping, he condescended to take a place as job coachman in a livery-stable – a 'horses let by the hour, day, or month' one, in which he enacted as many characters, at least made as many different appearances, as the late Mr

Mathews used to do in his celebrated 'At Homes.' One day Peter would be seen ducking under the mews' entrance in one of those greasy, painfully well-brushed hats, the certain precursors of soiled linen and seedy, most seedy-covered buttoned coats, that would puzzle a conjuror to say whether they were black, or grey, or olive, or invisible green turned visible brown. Then another day he might be seen in old Mrs Gadabout's sky-blue livery, with a tarnished, gold-laced hat, nodding over his nose; and on a third he would shine forth in Mrs Major-General Flareup's cockaded one, with a worsted shoulder-knot, and a much over-daubed light drab livery coat, with crimson inexpressibles, so tight as to astonish a beholder how he ever got into them. Humiliation, however, has its limits as well as other things; and Peter having been invited to descend from his box – alas! a regular country patent leather one, and invest himself in a Quaker-collared blue coat, with a red vest, and a pair of blue trousers with a broad red stripe down the sides, to drive the Honourable old Miss Wrinkleton, of Harley Street, to Court in a 'one oss pianoforte-case,' as he called a Clarence, he could stand it no longer, and, chucking the nether garments into the fire, he rushed frantically up the area-steps, mounted his box, and quilted the old crocodile of a horse all the way home, accompanying each cut with an imprecation such as '*me* make a guy of myself!' (whip) '*me* put on sich things!' (whip, whip) '*me* drive down Sin Jimeses Street!' (whip, whip, whip), '*I'd* see her – fust!' (whip, whip, whip), cutting at the old horse just as if he was laying it into Miss Wrinkleton, so that by the time he got home he had established a considerable lather on the old nag, which his master resenting a row ensued, the sequel of which may readily be imagined. After assisting Mrs Clearstarch, the Kilburn laundress, in getting in and taking out her washing, for a few weeks, chance at last landed him at Mr Benjamin Buckram's, from whence he is now about to be removed to become our hero Mr Sponge's Sancho Panza, in his fox-hunting, fortune-hunting career, and disseminate in remote parts his doctrines of the real honour and dignity of servitude. Now to the inspection.

Peter Leather, having a peephole as well as his master, on seeing Mr Sponge arrive, had given himself an extra rub over, and covered his dirty shirt with a clean, well-tied, white kerchief and a whole coloured scarlet waistcoat, late the property of one of his noble employers, in hopes that Sponge's visit might lead to something. Peter was about sick of the suburbs, and thought, of course, that he couldn't be worse off than where he was.

'Here's Mr Sponge wants some osses,' observed Mr Buckram, as Leather met them in the middle of the little yard, and brought his right

arm round with a sort of military swing to his forehead: 'what 'ave we in?' continued Buckram, with the air of a man with so many horses that he didn't know what were in and what were out.

'Vy we 'ave Rumbleton in,' replied Leather, thoughtfully, stroking down his hair as he spoke, 'and we 'ave Jack o'Lanthorn in, and we 'ave the Camel in, and there's the little Hirish oss with the sprig tail – Jack-a-Dandy, as I calls him, and the Flyer will be in tonight, he's jest out a hairing, as it were, with old Mr Callipash.'

'Ah, Rumbleton won't do for Mr Sponge,' observed Buckram, thoughtfully, at the same time letting go a tremendous avalance of silver down his trouser pocket, 'Rumbleton won't do,' repeated he, 'nor Jack-a-Dandy nouter.'

'Why, I wouldn't commend neither on 'em,' replied Peter, taking his cue from his master, 'only ven you axes me vot there's in, you knows vy I must give you a *cor*-rect answer, in course.'

'In course,' nodded Buckram.

Leather and Buckram had a good understanding in the lying line, and had fallen into a sort of tacit arrangement, that if the former was staunch about the horses he was at liberty to make the best terms he could for himself. Whatever Buckram said, Leather swore to, and they had established certain signals and expressions that each understood.

'I've an unkimmon nice oss,' at length observed Mr Buckram, with a scrutinising glance at Sponge, 'and an oss in hevery respect werry like your work, but he's an oss I'll candidly state, I wouldn't put in everyone's 'ands, for, in the fust place, he's wery walueous, and in the second, he requires an ossman to ride; howsomever, as I knows that you *can* ride, and if you doesn't mind taking my 'ead man,' jerking his elbow at Leather, 'to look arter him, I wouldn't mind 'commodat' on you, *provided* we can 'gree upon terms.'

'Well, let's see him,' interrupted Sponge, 'and we can talk about terms after.'

'Certainly, sir, certainly,' replied Buckram, again letting loose a reaccumulated rush of silver down his pocket. 'Here, Tom! Joe! Harry! where's Sam?' giving the little tinkler of a bell a pull as he spoke.

'Sam be in the straw 'ouse,' replied Leather, passing through a stable; into a wooden projection beyond, where the gentleman in question was enjoying a nap.

'Sam!' said he, '*Sam!*' repeated he, in a louder tone, as he saw the object of his search's nose popping through the midst of the straw.

'*What now!*' exclaimed Sam, starting up, and looking wildly around; 'what now?' repeated he, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands.

'Get out Ercles,' said Leather, *sotto voce*.

The lad was a mere stripling – some fifteen or sixteen years perhaps – tall, slight, and neat, with dark hair and eyes, and was dressed in a brown jacket – a real boy's jacket, without laps, white cords, and top-boots. It was his business to risk his neck and limbs at all hours of the day, on all sorts of horses, over any sort of place that any person chose to require him to put a horse at, and this he did with the daring pleasure of youth as yet undaunted by any serious fall. Sam now bestirred himself to get out the horse. The clambering of hooves presently announced his approach.

Whether Hercules was called Hercules on account of his amazing strength, or from a fanciful relationship to the famous horse of that name, we know not; but his strength and his colour would favour either supposition. He was an immense, tall, powerful, dark brown, sixteen hands horse, with an arched neck and crest, well set on, clean, lean head, and loins that looked as if they could shoot a man into the next county. His condition was perfect. His coat lay as close and even as satin, with cleanly developed muscle, and altogether he looked as hard as a cricket-ball. He had a famous switch tail, reaching nearly to his hocks, and making him look less than he would otherwise have done.

Mr Sponge was too well versed in horseflesh to imagine that such an animal would be in the possession of such a third-rate dealer as Buckram, unless there was something radically wrong about him, and as Sam and Leather were paying the horse those stable attentions that always precede a show out, Mr Sponge settled in his own mind that the observation about his requiring a horseman to ride him, meant that he was vicious. Nor was he wrong in his anticipations, for not all Leather's whistlings, or Sam's endearings and watchings, could conceal the sunken, scowling eye, that as good as said, 'you'd better keep clear of me.'

Mr Sponge, however, was a dauntless horseman. What man dared he dared, and as the horse stepped proudly and freely out of the stable, Mr Sponge thought he looked very like a hunter. Nor were Mr Buckram's laudations wanting in the animal's behalf.

'There's an 'orse!' exclaimed he, drawing his right hand out of his trouser pocket, and flourishing it towards him. 'If that 'orse were down in Leicestersheer,' added he, 'he'd fetch three 'under'd guineas. Sir Richard would 'ave him in a minnit – *that he would!*' added he, with a stamp of his foot as he saw the animal beginning to set up his back and wince at the approach of the lad. (We may here mention by way of parenthesis, that Mr Buckram had brought him out of Warwicksheer for thirty pounds, where the horse had greatly distinguished himself, as well by kicking off sundry scarlet swells in the gaily-thronged streets of

Leamington, as by running away with divers others over the wide-stretching grazing grounds of Southam and Dunchurch.)

But to our story. The horse now stood staring on view: fire in his eye, and vigour in his every limb. Leather at his head, the lad at his side, Sponge and Buckram a little on the left.

'*W-h-o-a-a-y*, my man, *w-h-o-a-a-y*,' continued Mr Buckram, as a liberal show of the white of the eye was followed by a little wince and hoist of the hindquarters on the nearer approach of the lad.

'*Look sharp, boy*,' said he, in a very different tone to the soothing one in which he had just been addressing the horse. The lad lifted up his leg for a hoist, Leather gave him one as quick as thought, and led on the horse as the lad gathered up his reins. They then made for a large field at the back of the house, with leaping-bars, hurdles, 'on and offs,' 'ins and outs,' all sorts of fancy leaps scattered about. Having got him fairly in, and the lad having got himself fairly settled in the saddle he gave the horse a touch with the spur as Leather let go his head, and after a desperate plunge or two started off at a gallop.

'*He's fresh*,' observed Mr Buckram confidentially to Mr Sponge, 'he's fresh – wants work, in short – short of work – wouldn't put everyone on him – wouldn't put one o' your timid cocknified chaps on him, for if ever he were to get the hupper 'and, vy I doesn't know as ow that we might get the hupper 'and o' him, agen, but the playful rogue knows ven he's got a workman on his back – see how he gives to the lad though he's only fifteen, and not strong of his hage nouter,' continued Mr Buckram, 'and I guess if he had sich a consternation of talent as you on his back, he'd wery soon be as quiet as a lamb – not that he's wicious – far from it, only play – full of play, I may say, though to be sure, if a man gets spilt it don't argufy much whether it's done from play or from wice.'

During this time the horse was going through his evolutions hopping over this thing, popping over that, making as little of everything as practice makes them do.

Having gone through the usual routine, the lad now walked the glowing coated snorting horse back to where the trio stood. Mr Sponge again looked him over, and still seeing no exception to take to him, bid the lad get off, and lengthen the stirrups for him to take a ride. That was the difficulty. The first two minutes always did it. Mr Sponge, however, nothing daunted, borrowed Sam's spurs, and making Leather hold the horse by the head till he got well into the saddle, and then lead him on a bit he gave the animal such a dig in both sides as fairly threw him off his guard, and made him start away at a gallop, instead of standing and delivering, as was his wont.

Away Mr Sponge shot, pulling him about, trying all his paces and

putting him at all sorts of leaps.

Emboldened by the nerve and dexterity displayed by Mr Sponge, Mr Buckram stood meditating a further trial of his equestrian ability, as he watched him bucketing 'Ercles' about. Hercules had 'spang-hewed' so many triers, and the hideous contraction of his resolute back had deterred so many from mounting, that Buckram had begun to fear he would have to place him in the only remaining school for incurables, the 'Bus. Hack-horse riders are seldom great horsemen. The very fact of their being hack-horse riders shows they are little accustomed to horses, or they would not give the fee-simple of an animal for a few weeks' work.

'I've a wonderful clever little oss,' observed Mr Buckram, as Sponge returned with a slack rein and a satisfied air on the late resolute animal's back. '*Little* I can 'ardly call 'im,' continued Mr Buckram, 'only he's low; but yon knows that the 'eight of an oss has nothin to do with his size. Now this is a perfect dray-oss in minature. An 'Arrow gent, lookin' at him t'other day christen'd him "*Multum in Parvo*." But though he's so *ter-men*-dous strong, he has the knack o' goin', specially in deep; and if you're not a-goin' to Sir Richard, but into some o' them plough sheers [shires], I'd 'commend him to you.'

'Let's have a look at him,' replied Mr Sponge, throwing his right leg over Hercules' head, and sliding from the saddle on to the ground, as if he were alighting from the quietest shooting pony in the world.

All then was hurry, scurry, and scamper to get this second prodigy out. Presently he appeared. *Multum in Parvo* certainly was all that Buckram described him. A long, low, clean-headed, clean-necked, big-hocked, chesnut, with a long tail, and great, large, flat, white legs, without mark or blemish upon them. Unlike Hercules, there was nothing indicative of vice or mischief about him. Indeed, he was rather a sedate, meditative-looking animal; and, instead of the watchful, arm's-length sort of way Leather and Co. treated Hercules, they jerked and punched Parvo about as if he were a cow.

Still Parvo had his foibles. He was a resolute, headstrong animal, that would go his own way in spite of all the pulling and hauling in the world. If he took it into his obstinate head to turn into a particular field, into it he would be; or against the gatepost he would bump the rider's leg in a way that would make him remember the difference of opinion between them. His was not a fiery, hot-headed spirit, with object or reason for its guide, but just a regular downright pig-headed sort of stupidity, that nobody could account for. He had a mouth like a bull, and would walk clean through a gate sometimes rather than be at the trouble of rising to leap it; at other times he would hop over it like a

bird. He could not beat Mr Buckram's men, because they were always on the look-out for objects of contention with sharp spur rowels, ready to let into his sides the moment he began to stop; but a weak or a timid man on his back had no more chance than he would on an elephant. If the horse chose to carry him into the midst of the hounds at the meet, he would have him in – nay, he would think nothing of upsetting the master himself in the middle of the pack. Then the provoking part was, that the obstinate animal, after having done all the mischief, would just set to to eat as if nothing had happened. After rolling a sportsman in the mud, he would repair to the nearest haystack or grassy bank, and be caught. He was now ten years old, or a *leetle* more perhaps, and very wicked years some of them had been. His adventures, his sellings and his returning, his lettings and his unlettings, his bumpings and spillings, his smashings and crashings, on the road, in the field, in single and in double harness, would furnish a volume of themselves; and in default of a more able historian, we purpose blending his future fortune with that of 'Ercles,' in the service of our hero Mr Sponge, and his accomplished groom, and undertaking the important narration of them ourselves.

CHAPTER IV

Laverick Wells

WE TRUST OUR OPENING CHAPTERS, aided by our friend Leech's pencil, will have enabled our readers to embody such a Sponge in their mind's eye as will assist them in following us through the course of his peregrinations. We do not profess to have drawn such a portrait as will raise the same sort of Sponge in the minds of all, but we trust we have given such a general outline of style, and indication of character, as an ordinary knowledge of the world will enable them to imagine a good, pushing, free-and-easy sort of man, wishing to be a gentleman without knowing how.

Far more difficult is the task of conveying to our readers such information as will enable them to form an idea of our hero's ways and means. An accommodating world – especially the female portion of it – generally attribute ruin to the racer, and fortune to the fox-hunter; but though Mr Sponge's large losses on the turf, as detailed by him to Mr

Buckram on the occasion of their deal or 'job,' would bring him in the category of the unfortunates; still that representation was nearly, if not altogether, fabulous. That Mr Sponge might have lost a trifle on the great races of the year, we don't mean to deny, but that he lost such a sum as eighteen hundred on the Derby, and seven on the Leger, we are in a condition to contradict, for the best of all possible reasons, that he hadn't it to lose. At the same time we do not mean to attribute falsehood to Mr Sponge – quite the contrary – it is no uncommon thing for merchants and traders, men who 'talk in thousands,' to declare that they lost twenty thousand by this, or forty thousand by that, simply meaning that they didn't make it, and if Mr Sponge, by taking the longest of the long odds against the most wretched of the outsiders, might have won the sums he named, he surely had a right to say he lost them when he didn't get them.

It never does to be indigenously poor, if we may use such a term, and when a man gets to the end of his tether, he must have something or somebody to blame rather than his own extravagance or imprudence, and if there is no 'rascally lawyer' who has bolted with his title-deeds, or fraudulent agent who has misappropriated his funds, why then, railroads, or losses on the turf; or joint-stock banks that have shut up at short notice, come in as the scapegoats. Very willing hacks they are, too, railways especially, and so frequently ridden, that it is no easy matter to discriminate between the real and the fictitious loser.

But though we are able to contradict Mr Sponge's losses on the turf, we are sorry we are not able to elevate him to the riches the character of a fox-hunter generally inspires. Still, like many men of whom the common observation is, 'nobody knows how he lives,' Mr Sponge always seemed well to do in the world. There was no appearance of want about him. He always hunted; sometimes with five horses, sometimes with four, seldom with less than three, though at the period of our introduction he had come down to two. Nevertheless, those two, provided he could but make them 'go,' were well calculated to do the work of four. And hack horses, of all sorts, it may be observed, generally do double the work of private ones; and if there is one man in the world better calculated to get the work out of them than another, that man most assuredly is Mr Sponge. And this reminds us, that we may as well state that his bargain with Buckram was a sort of jobbing deal. He had to pay ten guineas a month for each horse, with a sort of sliding scale of prices if he chose to buy – the price of 'Ercles' (the big brown) being fixed at fifty, inclusive of hire at the end of the first month, and gradually rising according to the length of time he kept him beyond that; while *Multum in Parvo*, the

resolute chesnut, was booked at thirty, with the right of buying at five more, a contingency that Buckram little expected. He, we may add, had got him for ten, and dear he thought him when he got him home.

The world was now all before Mr Sponge where to choose; and not being the man to keep hack-horses to look at, we must be setting him a-going.

'Leicestersheer swells,' as Mr Buckram would call them, with their fourteen hunters and four hacks, will smile at the idea of a man going from home to hunt with only a couple of 'screws,' but Mr Sponge knew what he was about, and didn't want anyone to counsel him. He knew there were places where a man can follow up the effect produced by a red coat in the morning to great advantage in the evening; and if he couldn't hunt every day in the week, as he could have wished, he felt he might fill up his time perhaps quite as profitably in other ways. The ladies, to do them justice, are never at all suspicious about men – on the 'ribble' – always taking it for granted, they are 'all they could wish,' and they know each other so well, that any cautionary hints act rather in a man's favour than otherwise. Moreover, hunting men, as we said before, are all supposed to be rich, and as very few ladies are aware that a horse can't hunt every day in the week, they just class the whole 'genus' fourteen-horse power men, ten-horse power men, five-horse power men, two-horse power men, together, and tying them in a bunch, label it '*very rich*,' and proceed to take measures accordingly.

Let us now visit one of the 'strongholds' of fox and fortune-hunting.

A sudden turn of a long, gently-rising, but hitherto uninteresting road, brings the posting traveller suddenly upon the rich well-wooded, beautifully undulating vale of Fordingford, whose fine green pastures are brightened with occasional gleams of a meandering river, flowing through the centre of the vale. In the far distance, looking as though close upon the blue hills, though in reality several miles apart, sundry spires and taller buildings are seen rising above the grey mists towards which a straight, undeviating, matter-of-fact line of railway passing up the right of the vale, directs the eye. This is the famed Laverick Wells, the resort, as indeed all watering-places are, according to Newspaper accounts, of

Knights and dames,
And all that wealth and lofty lineage claim.

At the period of which we write, however, Laverick Wells was in great favour – it had never known such times. Every house, every

lodging, every hole and corner was full, and the great hotels, which more resemble Lancashire cotton-mills than English *hostelries*, were sending away applicants in the most offhand, indifferent way.

The Laverick Wells hounds had formerly been under the management of the well-known Mr Thomas Slocdolager, a hard-riding, hard-bitten, hold-harding sort of sportsman, whose whole soul was in the thing, and who would have ridden over his best friend in the ardour of the chase.

In some countries such a creature may be considered an acquisition, and so long as he reigned at the Wells, people made the best they could of him, though it was painfully apparent to the livery-stable keepers, and others, who had the best interest of the place at heart, that such a red-faced, gloveless, drab-breeched, mahogany-booted buffer, who would throw off at the right time, and who resolutely set his great stubbly-cheeked face against all show meets and social intercourse in the field, was not exactly the man for a civilised place. Whether time might have enlightened Mr Slocdolager as to the fact, that continuous killing of foxes, after fatiguingly long runs, was not the way to the hearts of the Laverick Wells sportsmen, is unknown, for on attempting to realise as fine a subscription as ever appeared upon paper, it melted so in the process of collection, that what was realised was hardly worth his acceptance; so saying, in his usual blunt way, that if he hunted a country at his own expense he would hunt one that wasn't encumbered with fools, he just stamped his little wardrobe into a pair of old black saddle-bags, and rode out of town without saying '*tar, tar*,' goodbye, carding, or PPC-ing anybody.

This was at the end of a season, a circumstance that considerably mitigated the inconvenience so abrupt a departure might have occasioned, and as one of the great beauties of Laverick Wells is, that it is just as much in vogue in summer as in winter, the inhabitants consoled themselves with the old aphorism, that there is as 'good fish in the sea as ever came out of it,' and cast about in search of someone to supply his place at as small cost to themselves as possible. In a place so replete with money and the enterprise of youth, little difficulty was anticipated, especially when the old bait of 'a name' being all that was wanted, 'an ample subscription,' to defray all expenses figuring in the background, was held out.

CHAPTER V

Mr Waffles

AMONG A HOST of most meritorious young men – (any of whom would get up behind a bill for five hundred pounds without looking to see that it wasn't a thousand) – among a host of most meritorious young men who made their appearance at Laverick Wells towards the close of Mr Slocdolager's reign, was Mr Waffles; a most enterprising youth, just on the verge of arriving of age, and into the possession of a very considerable amount of charming ready money.

Were it not that a 'proud aristocracy,' as Sir Robert Peel called them, have shown that they can get over any little deficiency of birth if there is sufficiency of cash, we should have thought it necessary to make the best of Mr Waffles' pedigree, but the tide of opinion evidently setting the other way, we shall just give it as we had it, and let the proud aristocracy reject him if they like. Mr Waffles' father, then, was either a great grazier or a great brazier – which, we are unable to say, 'for a small drop of ink having fallen,' not 'like dew,' but like a black beetle, on the first letter of the word in our correspondent's communication, it may do for either – but in one of which trades he made a 'mint of money,' and latish on in life married a lady who hitherto had filled the honourable office of dairy-maid in his house; she was a fine handsome woman, and a year or two after the birth of this their only child, he departed this life, nearer eighty than seventy, leaving an 'inconsolable,' &c., who unfortunately contracted matrimony with a master pork-butcher, before she got the fine flattering white monument up, causing young Waffles to be claimed for dry-nursing by that expert matron the High Court of Chancery; who, of course, had him properly educated – where, it is immaterial to relate, as we shall step on till we find him at college.

Our friend, having proved rather too vivacious for the Oxford Dons, had been recommended to try the effects of the Laverick Wells, or any other waters he liked, and had arrived with a couple of hunters and a hack, much to the satisfaction of the neighbouring master of hounds and his huntsman; for Waffles had ridden over and maimed more

hounds to his own share, during the two seasons he had been at Oxford, than that gentleman had been in the habit of appropriating to the use of the whole university. Corresponding with that gentleman's delight at getting rid of him was Mr Slocdolager's dismay at his appearance, for fully satisfied that Oxford was the seat of fox-hunting as well as of all the other arts and sciences, Mr Waffles undertook to enlighten him and his huntsman on the mysteries of their calling, and 'Old Sloc,' as he was called, being a very silent man, while Mr Waffles was a very noisy one, Sloc was nearly talked deaf by him.

Mr Waffles was just in the heyday of hot, rash, youthful indiscretion and extravagance. He had not the slightest idea of the value of money, and looked at the fortune he was so closely approaching as perfectly inexhaustible. His rooms, the most spacious and splendid at that most spacious and splendid hotel, the Imperial, were filled with a profusion of the most useless but costly articles. Jewellery without end, pictures innumerable, pictures that represented all sorts of imaginary sums of money, just as they represented all sorts of imaginary scenes, but whose real worth or genuineness would never be tested till the owner wanted to 'convert them.'

Mr Waffles was a 'pretty man.' Tall, slim, and slight, with long curly light hair, pink and white complexion, visionary whiskers, and a tendency to moustache that could best be seen sideways. He had light blue eyes; while his features generally were good, but expressive of little beyond great good-humour. In dress, he was both smart and various; indeed, we feel a difficulty in fixing him in any particular costume, so frequent and opposite were his changes. He had coats of every cut and colour. Sometimes he was the racing man with a bright-button'd Newmarket brown cut-away, and white-cord trousers, with drab cloth-boots: anon, he would be the officer, and shine forth in a fancy forage cap, cocked jauntily over a profusion of well-waxed curls, a richly-braided surtout, with military over-alls strapped down over highly-varnished boots, whose hypocritical heels would sport a pair of large rowelled, long-necked, ringing, brass spurs. Sometimes he was a Jack tar, with a little glazed hat, a once-round tye, a checked shirt, a blue jacket, roomy trousers, and broad-stringed pumps; and, before the admiring ladies had well digested him in that dress, he would be seen cantering away on a long-tailed white barb, in a pea-green duck-hunter, with cream-coloured leather and rose-tinted tops. He was

All things by turns, and nothing long.

Such was the gentleman elected to succeed the silent, matter-of-fact Mr Slocdolager in the important office of Master of the Laverick Wells Hunt; and whatever may be the merits of either – upon which we pass no opinion – it cannot be denied that they were essentially different. Mr Slocdolager was a man of few words, and not at all a ladies' man. He could not even talk when he was crammed with wine, and though he could hold a good quantity, people soon found out they might just as well pour it into a jug as down his throat, so they gave up asking him out. He was a man of few coats, as well as of few words; one on, and one off, being the extent of his wardrobe. His scarlet was growing plum-colour, and the rest of his hunting-costume has been already glanced at. He lodged above Smallbones, the veterinary-surgeon, in a little back street, where he lived in the quietest way, dining when he came in from hunting – dressing, or rather changing, only when he was wet, hunting each fox again over his brandy-and-water, and bundling off to bed long before many of his 'field' had left the dining-room. He was little better than a better sort of huntsman.

Waffles, as we said before, had made himself conspicuous towards the close of Mr Slocdolager's reign, chiefly by his dashing costume, his reckless riding, and his off-hand way of blowing up and slanging people.

Indeed, a stranger would have taken him for the master, a delusion that was heightened by his riding with a formidable-looking sherry-case, in the shape of a horn, at his saddle. Save when engaged in sucking this, his tongue was never at fault. It was jabber, jabber, jabber; chatter, chatter, chatter; prattle, prattle, prattle; occasionally about something, oftener about nothing, but in cover or out, stiff country or open, trotting or galloping, wet day or dry, good scenting day or bad, Waffles' clapper never was at rest. Like all noisy chaps, too, he could not bear anyone to make a noise but himself. In furtherance of his, he called in the aid of his Oxfordshire rhetoric. He would holloo *at* people, designating them by some peculiarity that he thought he could wriggle out of, if necessary instead of attacking them by name. Thus, if a man spoke, or placed himself where Waffles thought he ought not to be (that is to say, anywhere but where Waffles was himself), he would exclaim, 'Pray, sir, hold your tongue! – you, sir! – no, sir, not you – the man that speaks as if he had a brush in his throat!' – or, 'Do come away, sir! – you, sir! – the man in the mushroom-looking hat!' – or, 'that gentleman in the parsimonious boots!' looking at someone with very narrow tops.

Still he was a rattling, good-natured, harum-scarum fellow; and masterships of hounds, memberships of Parliament – all expensive

unmoney-making offices – being things that most men are anxious to foist upon their friends, Mr Waffles' big talk and interference in the field procured him the honour of the first refusal. Not that he was the man to refuse, for he jumped at the offer, and, as he would be of age before the season came round, and would have got all his money out of Chancery, he disdained to talk about a subscription, and boldly took the hounds as his own. He then became a very important personage at Laverick Wells.

He had always been a most important personage among the ladies, but as the men couldn't marry him, those who didn't want to borrow money of him, of course, ran him down. It used to be, 'Look at that dandified ass, Waffles, I declare the sight of him makes me sick;' or, 'What a barber's apprentice that fellow is, with his ringlets all smeared with Macassar.'

Now it was Waffles this, Waffles that, 'Who dines with Waffles?' 'Waffles is the best fellow under the sun! By Jingo, I know no such man as Waffles!' 'Most deserving young man!'

In arriving at this conclusion, their judgement was greatly assisted by the magnificent way he went to work. Old Tom Towler, the whip, who had toiled at his calling for twenty long years on fifty pounds and what he could 'pick up,' was advanced to a hundred and fifty, with a couple of men under him. Instead of riding worn-out, tumble-down, twenty-pound screws, he was mounted on hundred-guinea horses, for which the dealers were to have a couple of hundred, *when they were paid*. Everything was in the same proportion.

Mr Waffles' succession to the hunt made a great commotion among the fair – many elegant and interesting young ladies, who had been going on the pious tack against the Reverend Solomon Winkeyes, the popular bachelor-preacher of St Margaret's, teaching in his schools, distributing his tracts, and collecting the penny subscriptions for his clothing club, now took to riding in fan-tailed habits and feathered hats, and talking about leaping and hunting, and riding over rails. Mr Waffles had a pound of hat-strings sent him in a week, and muffatees innumerable. Some, we are sorry to say, worked him cigar-cases. He, in return, having expended a vast of toil and ingenuity in inventing a 'button,' now had several dozen of them worked up into brooches, which he scattered about with a liberal hand. It was not one of your matter-of-fact story-telling buttons – a fox with 'TALLY-HO,' or a fox's head grinning in grim death – making a red coat look like a miniature butcher's shamble, but it was one of your queer twisting lettered concerns, that may pass either for a military button, or a naval button, or a club button, or even for a livery button. The letters, two Ws, were

so skilfully entwined, that even a compositor – and compositors are people who can read almost anything – would have been puzzled to decipher it. The letters were gilt, riveted on steel, and the wearers of the button-brooches were very soon dubbed by the non-recipients, 'Mr Waffles' sheep.'

A fine button naturally requires a fine coat to put it on, and many were the consultations and propositions as to what it should be. Mr Slocdolager had done nothing in the decorative department, and many thought the failure of funds was a good deal attributable to that fact. Mr Waffles was not the man to lose an opportunity of adding another costume to his wardrobe, and after an infinity of trouble, and trials of almost all the colours of the rainbow, he at length settled the following uniform, which, at least, had the charm of novelty to recommend it. The morning, or hunt-coat, was to be scarlet, with a cream-coloured collar and cuffs; and the evening, or dress coat, was to be cream-colour, with a scarlet collar and cuffs, and scarlet silk facings and linings, looking as if the wearer had turned the-morning one inside out. Waistcoats, and other articles of dress, were left to the choice of the wearer, experience having proved that they are articles it is impossible to legislate upon with any effect.

The old ladies, bless their disinterested hearts, alone looked on the hound freak with other than feelings of approbation.

They thought it a pity he should take them. They wished he mightn't injure himself – hounds very expensive things – led to habits of irregularity – should be sorry to see such a nice young man as Mr Waffles led astray – not that it would make any difference to them, *but* – (looking significantly at their daughters). No fox had been hunted by more hounds than Waffles had been by the ladies; but though he had chatted and prattled with fifty fair maids – anyone of whom he might have found difficult to resist, if 'pinned' single-handed by, in a country house, yet the multiplicity of assailants completely neutralised each other, and verified the truth of the adage that there is 'safety in a crowd.'

If pretty, lisping Miss Wordsworth thought she had shot an arrow home to his heart over night, a fresh smile and dart from little Mary Ogleby's dark eyes extracted it in the morning, and made him think of her till the commanding figure and noble air of the Honourable Miss Letitia Amelia Susannah Jemimah de Jenkins, in all the elegance of first-rate millinery and dressmakership, drove her completely from his mind, to be in turn displaced by someone more bewitching. Mr Waffles was reputed to be made of money, and he went at it as though he thought it utterly impossible to get through it. He was

greatly aided in his endeavours by the fact of its being all in the funds – a great convenience to the spendthrift. It keeps him constantly in cash, and enables him to 'cut and come again,' as quick as ever he likes. Land is not half so accommodating; neither is money on mortgage. What with time spent in investigating a title, or giving notice to 'pay in,' an industrious man wants a second loan by the time, or perhaps before he gets the first. Acres are not easy of conversion, and the mere fact of wanting to sell implies a deficiency somewhere. With money in the funds, a man has nothing to do but lodge a power of attorney with his broker, and write up for four or five thousand pounds, just as he would write to his bootmaker for four or five pairs of boots, the only difference being, that in all probability the money would be down before the boots. Then, with money in the funds, a man keeps up his credit to the far end – the last thousand telling no more tales than the first, and making just as good a show.

We are almost afraid to say what Mr Waffles' means were, but we really believe, at the time he came of age, that he had £100,000 in the funds, which were nearly at 'par' – a term expressive of each hundred being worth a hundred, and not eighty-nine or ninety pounds as is now the case, which makes a considerable difference in the melting. Now a real *bona fide* £100,000 always counts as three in common parlance, which latter sum would yield a larger income than gilds the horizon of the most mercenary mother's mind, say ten thousand a-year, which we believe is generally allowed to be '*v-a-a-a-ry* handsome.'

No wonder, then, that Mr Waffles was such a hero. Another great recommendation about him was, that he had not had time to be much plucked. Many of the young men of fortune that appear upon town have lost half their feathers on the race-course or the gaming-table before the ladies get a chance at them; but here was a nice, fresh-coloured youth, with all his downy verdure full upon him. It takes a vast of clothes, even at Oxford prices, to come to a thousand pounds, and if we allow four or five thousand for his other extravagances, he could not have done much harm to a hundred thousand.

Our friend, soon finding that he was 'cock of the walk,' had no notion of exchanging his greatness for the nothingness of London, and, save going up occasionally to see about opening the flood-gates of his fortune, he spent nearly the whole summer at Laverick Wells. A fine season it was, too – the finest season the Wells had ever known. When at length the long London season closed, there was a rush of rank and fashion to the English watering-places, quite unparalleled in the 'recollecion of the oldest inhabitants.' There were blooming widows in every stage of grief and woe, from the becoming cap to the fashionable corset

and ball flounce – widows who would never forget the dear deceased, or think of any other man – *unless he had at least five thousand a year*. Lovely girls, who didn't care a farthing if the man was 'only handsome,' and smiling mammas 'egging them on,' who would look very different when they came to the horrid £. s. d. And this mercantile expression leads us to the observation that we know nothing so dissimilar as a trading town and a watering-place. In the one, all is bustle, hurry, and activity; in the other, people don't seem to know what to do to get through the day. The City and West-End present somewhat of the contrast, but not to the extent of manufacturing or sea-port towns and watering-places. Bathing-places are a shade better than watering-places in the way of occupation, for people can sit staring at the sea, counting the ships, or polishing their nails with a shell, whereas, at watering-places, they have generally little to do but stare at and talk of each other, and mark the progress of the day, by alternately drinking at the wells, eating at the hotels, and wandering between the library and the railway-station. The ladies get on better, for where there are ladies there are always fine shops, and what between turning over the goods, and sweeping the streets with their trains, making calls, and arranging partners for balls, they get through their time very pleasantly; but what is 'life' to them is often death to the men.

CHAPTER VI

To Laverick Wells

THE FLATTERING ACCOUNTS Mr Sponge read in the papers of the distinguished company assembled at Laverick Wells, together with details of the princely magnificence of the wealthy commoner, Mr Waffles, who appeared to entertain all the world at dinner after each day's hunting, made Mr Sponge think it would be a very likely place to suit him. Accordingly, thither he despatched Mr Leather with the redoubtable horses by the road, intending to follow in as many hours by the rail as it took them days to trudge on foot.

Railways have helped hunting as well as other things, and enables a man to glide down into the grass 'sheers,' as Mr Buckram calls them, with as little trouble, and in as short a time almost, as it took him to

accomplish a meet at Croydon, or at the Magpies at Staines. But to our groom and horses.

Mr Sponge was too good a judge to disfigure the horses with the miserable, pulpy, weather-bleached job-saddles and bridles of 'livery,' but had them properly turned out with well-made, slightly-worn London ones of his own, and nice, warm brown woollen rugs, below broadly-bound, blue-and-white-striped sheeting, with richly-braided lettering, and blue and white cordings. A good saddle and bridle makes a difference of ten pounds in the looks of almost any horse. There is no need because a man rides a hack-horse to proclaim it to all the world; a fact that few hack-horse letters seem to be aware of. Perhaps, indeed, they think to advertise them by means of their inferior appointments.

Leather, too, did his best to keep up appearances, and turned out in a very stud-groomish-looking, basket-buttoned, brown cutaway, with a clean striped vest, ample white cravat, drab breeches and boots, that looked as though they had brushed through a few bullfinches; and so they had, but not with Leather's legs in them, for he had bought them second-hand of a pad groom in distress. His hands were encased in cat's-skin sable gloves, showing that he was a gentleman who liked to be comfortable. Thus accoutred, he rode down Broad Street at Laverick Wells, looking like a fine, faithful old family servant, with a slight scorbutic affection of the nose. He had everything correctly arranged in true sporting marching order. The collar-shanks were neatly coiled under the headstalls, the clothing tightly rolled and balanced above the little saddle-bags on the led horse, Multum in Parvo's back, with the story-telling whip sticking through the roller.

Leather arrived at Laverick Wells just as the first shades of a November night were drawing on, and anxious mammas and careful *chaperons* were separating their fair charges from their respective admirers and the dreaded night air, leaving the streets to the gas-light men and youths 'who love the moon.' The girls having been withdrawn, licentious youths linked arms, and bore down the broad *pavé*, quizzing this person, laughing at that, and staring the pin-stickers and straw-chippers out of countenance.

'Here's an arrival!' exclaimed one. 'Dash my buttons, who have we here?' asked another, as Leather hove in sight. 'That's not a bad looking horse,' observed a third. 'Bid him five pounds for it for me,' rejoined a fourth.

'I say, old Bardolph! who do them 'ere quadrupeds belong to?' asked one, taking a scented cigar out of his mouth.

Leather, though as impudent a dog as any of them, and far more than a match for the best of them at a tournament of slang, being on his

preferment, thought it best to be civil, and replied with a touch of his hat, that they were 'Mr Sponge's.'

'Ah! old sponge biscuits! – *I know him!*' exclaimed a youth in a Tweed wrapper. 'My father married his aunt. Give my love to him, and tell him to breakfast with me at six in the morning – *he! he! he!*'

'I say, old boy, that copper-coloured quadruped hasn't got all his shoes on before,' squeaked a childish voice, now raised for the first time.

'*That's intended, gov'nor,*' growled Leather, riding on, indignant at the idea of anyone attempting to 'sell him' with such an old stable joke. So Leather passed on through the now splendidly lit up streets, the large plate-glass windowed shops, radiant with gas, exhibiting rich, many-coloured velvets, silver gauzes, ribbons without end, fancy flowers, elegant shawls labelled 'Very chaste,' 'Patronised by Royalty,' 'Quite the go!' and white kid-gloves in such profusion that there seemed to be a pair for every person in the place.

Mr Leather established himself at the 'Eclipse Livery and Bait Stables,' in Pegasus Street, or Peg Street, as it is generally called, where he enacted the character of stud-groom to perfection, doing nothing himself, but seeing that others did his work, and strutting consequentially with the corn-sieves at feeding time.

After Leather's long London experience, it is natural to suppose that he would not be long in falling in with some old acquaintance at a place like the 'Wells,' and the first night fortunately brought him in contact with a couple of grooms who had had the honour of his acquaintance when in all the radiance of his glass-blown wigged prosperity as body-coachman to the Duke of Dazzleton and who knew nothing of the treadmill, or his subsequent career. This introduction served with his own easy assurance, and the deference country servants always pay to London ones, at once to give him standing, and it is creditable to the *etiquette* of servitude to say, that on joining the 'Mutton-chop and Mealy-potato Club,' at the Cat and Bagpipes, on the second night after his arrival, the whole club rose to receive him on entering, and placed him in the post of honour, on the right of the president.

He was very soon quite at home with the whole of them, and ready to tell anything he knew of the great families in which he had lived. Of course, he abused the duke's place, and said he had been obliged to give him 'hup' at last, 'bein' quite an impossible man to live with; indeed, his only wonder was, that he had been able to put hup with him so long.' The duchess was a 'good cretur,' he said, and, indeed, it was mainly on her account that he stayed, but as to the duke, he was – everything that was bad, in short.

Mr Sponge, on the other hand, had no reason to complain of the colours in which his stud-groom painted him. Instead of being the shirtless strapper of a couple of vicious hack hunters, Leather made himself out to be the general superintendent of the opulent owner of a large stud. The exact number varied with the number of glasses of grog Leather had taken, but he never had less than a dozen, and sometimes as many as twenty hunters under his care. These, he said, were planted all over the kingdom; some at Melton, to 'unt with the Quorn;' some at Northampton, to 'unt with the Pytchley;' some at Lincoln, to 'unt with Lord 'Enry;' and some at Louth, to 'unt with' – he didn't know who. What a fine flattering, well-spoken world this is, when the speaker can raise his own consequence by our elevation! One would think that 'envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness,' had gone to California. A weak-minded man might have his head turned by hearing the description given of him by his friends. But hear the same party on the running-down tack! – when either his own importance is not involved, or dire offence makes it worth his while 'to cut off his nose to spite his face.' No one would recognise the portrait then drawn as one of the same individual.

Mr Leather, as we said before, was in the laudatory strain, but, like many indiscreet people, he overdid it. Not content with magnifying the stud to the liberal extent already described, he must needs puff his master's riding, and indulge in insinuations about 'showing them all the way,' and so on. Now nothing 'aggravates' other grooms so much as this sort of threat, and few things travel quicker than these sort of vapourings to their masters' ears. Indeed, we can only excuse the lengths to which Leather went, on the ground of his previous coaching career not having afforded him a due insight into the delicacies of the hunting stable; it being remembered that he was only now acting as stud-groom for the first time. However, be that as it may, he brewed up a pretty storm, and the longer it raged the stronger it became.

'Ord dash it!' exclaimed young Spareneck, the steeplechase rider, bursting into Scorer's billiard-room in the midst of a full gathering, who were looking on at a grand game of pool, 'Ord dash it! there's a fellow coming who swears by Jove that he'll take the shine out of us all, "*cut us all down!*"'

'I'll play him for what he likes!' exclaimed the cool, coatless Captain Macer, striking his ball away for a cannon.

'Hang your play!' replied Spareneck; 'you're always thinking of play – it's *hunting* I'm talking of,' bringing his heavy, silver-mounted jockey-whip a crack down his leg.

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Sam Shortcut, who had been flattered

into riding rather harder than he liked, and feared his pluck might be put to the test.

'What a ruffian!' – (puff) – observed Mr Waffles, taking his cigar from his mouth as he sat on the bench, dressed as a racket-player, looking on at the game, 'he shalln't ride roughshod over us.'

'*That he shalln't!*' exclaimed Caingey Thornton, Mr Waffles's *premier* toady, and constant trencherman.

'*I'll ride him!*' rejoined Mr Spareneck, jockeying his arms, and flourishing his whip as if he was at work, adding: 'his old brandy-nosed, frosty-whiskered trumpeter of a groom says he's coming down by the five o'clock train. I vote we go and meet him – invite him to a steeplechase by moonlight.'

'I vote we go and see him, at all events,' observed Frank Hoppey, laying down his cue and putting on his coat, adding, 'I should like to see a man bold enough to heard a whole hunt – especially such a hunt as *ours*.'

'Finish the game first,' observed Captain Macer, who had rather the best of it.

'No, leave the balls as they are till we come back,' rejoined Ned Stringer; 'we shall be late. See, it's only ten *to*, now,' continued he, pointing to the timepiece above the fire; whereupon there was a putting away of cues, hurrying on of coats, seeking of hats, sorting of sticks, and a general desertion of the room for the railway station.

CHAPTER VII

Our Hero Arrives at Laverick Wells

PUNCTUAL TO THE MOMENT, the railway train, conveying the redoubtable genius, glid into the well-lighted, elegant little station of Laverick Wells, and out of a first-class carriage emerged Mr Sponge, in a 'down the road' coat, carrying a horse-sheet wrapper in his hand. So small and insignificant did the station seem after the gigantic ones of London, that Mr Sponge thought he had wasted his money in taking a first-class ticket, seeing there was no one to know. Mr Leather, who was in attendance, having received him hat in hand, with all the deference due to the master of twenty hunters, soon undeceived him

on that point. Having eased him of his wrapper, and enquired about his luggage, and despatched a porter for a fly, they stood together over the portmanteau and hat-box till it arrived.

'How are the horses?' asked Sponge.

'Oh, the osses be nicely, sir,' replied Leather; 'they travelled down uncommon well, and I've had 'em both removed sin they com'd, so either on 'em is fit to go i' the mornin' that you think proper.'

'Where are the hounds?' asked our hero.

'Ounds be at Whirleypool Windmill,' replied Leather, 'that's about five miles off.'

'What sort of country is it?' enquired Sponge.

'It be a stiffish country from all accounts, with a good deal o' water jumpin'; that is to say, the Liffey runs twistin' and twinin' about it like a H'Eel.'

'Then I'd better ride the brown, I think,' observed Sponge, after a pause: 'he has size and stride enough to cover anything, if he will but face water.'

'I'll warrant him for that,' replied Leather; 'only let the Latchfords well into him, and he'll go.'

'Are there many hunting-men down?' enquired our friend, casually.

'Great many,' replied Leather, 'great many; some good 'ands among 'em too; at least so say their grums, though I never believe all these jockeys say. There be some on 'em 'ere now,' observed Leather, in an under tone, with a wink of his roguish eye, and jerk of his head towards where a knot of them stood eyeing our friend most intently.

'Which?' enquired Sponge, looking about the thinly-peopled station.

'There,' replied Leather, 'those by the book-stall. That be Mr Waffles,' continued he, giving his master a touch in the ribs as he jerked his portmanteau into a fly, 'that be *Mr Waffles*,' repeated he, with a knowing leer.

'Which!' enquired Mr Sponge eagerly.

'The gent in the green wide-awake 'at, and big-button'd overcoat,' replied Leather, 'jest now aspeakin' to the youth in the tweed and all tweed; that be Master Caingey Thornton, as big a little blackguard as any in the place – lives upon Waffles, and yet never has a good word to say for him, no, nor for no one else – and yet to 'ear the little devil a-talkin' to him, you'd really fancy he believed there wasn't not never sich another man i' the world as Waffles – not another sich rider – not another sich racket-player – not another sich pigeon-shooter – not another sich fine chap altogether.'

'Has Thornton any horses?' asked Sponge.

'Not he,' replied Leather, 'not he, nor the gen'lman next him

nouthor – he, in the pilot coat, with the whip sticking out of the pocket, nor the one in the coffee-coloured 'at, nor none on 'em in fact,' adding, 'they all live on Squire Waffles – breakfast with him – dine with him – drink with him – smoke with him – and if any on 'em 'appen to 'ave an 'orse, why they sell to him, and so ride for nothin' themselves.'

'A convenient sort of gentleman,' observed Mr Sponge, thinking he, too, might accommodate him.

The fly-man now touched his hat, indicative of a wish to be off, having a fare waiting elsewhere. Mr Sponge directed him to proceed to the Brunswick Hotel, while, accompanied by Leather, he proceeded on foot to the stables.

Mr Leather, of course, had the valuable stud under lock and key, with every crevice and air-hole well stuffed with straw, as if they had been the most valuable horses in the world. Having produced the ring-key from his pocket, Mr Leather opened the door, and having got his master in, speedily closed it, lest a breath of fresh air might intrude. Having lighted a lucifer, he turned on the gas, and exhibited the blooming-coated horses, well littered in straw, showing that he was not the man to pay four-and-twenty shillings a week for nothing. Mr Sponge stood eyeing them for some seconds with evident approbation.

'If anyone asks you about the horses, you can say they are *mine*, you know,' at length observed he, casually, with an emphasis on the mine.

'*In course*,' replied Leather.

'I mean, you needn't say anything about their being *jobs*,' observed Sponge, fearing Leather mightn't exactly 'take.'

'*You trust me*,' replied Leather, with a knowing wink and a jerk of his elbow against his master's side; '*you trust me*,' repeated he, with a look as much as to say, 'we understand each other.'

'I've haddad a few to them, indeed,' continued Leather, looking to see how his master took it.

'Have you?' observed Mr Sponge, enquiringly.

'I've made out that you've as good as twenty, one way or another,' observed Leather; 'some 'ere, some there, all over in fact, and that you jest run about the country, and 'unt with 'oever comes h'uppermost.'

'Well, and what's the upshot of it all?' enquired Mr Sponge, thinking his groom seemed wonderfully enthusiastic in his interest.

'Why, the hupshot of it is,' replied Leather, 'that the men are all mad, and the women all wild to see you. I hear at my club, the Mutton Chop and Mealy Potato Club, which is frequented by flunkies as well as grums, that there's nothin' talked of at dinner or tea, but the terrible rich stranger that's a comin', and the gals are all pulling caps, who's to have the first chance.'

'Indeed,' observed Mr Sponge, chuckling at the sensation he was creating.

'The Miss Shapsets, there be five on 'em, have had a game at fly loo for you,' continued Leather, 'at least so their little maid tells me.'

'*Fly what?*' enquired Mr Sponge.

'Fly loo,' repeated Leather, 'fly loo.'

Mr Sponge shook his head. For once he was not 'fly.'

'You see,' continued Leather, in explanation, 'their father is one of them tight-laced candlestick priests wor abhors all sorts of wice and himmorality, and won't stand card playin', or gamblin', or nothin' o' that sort, so the young ladies when they want to settle a point, who's to be married first, or who's to have the richest 'usband, play fly loo. 'Sposing it's at breakfast time, they all sit quiet and sober like round the table, lookin' as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, and each has a lump o' sugar on her plate, or by her cup, or somewhere, and whoever can 'tice a fly to come to her sugar first, wins the wager, or whatever it is they play for.'

'Five on 'em,' as Leather said, being a hopeless number to extract any good from, Mr Sponge changed the subject by giving orders for the morrow.

Mr Sponge's appearance being decidedly of the sporting order, and his horses maintaining the character, did not alleviate the agitated minds of the sporting beholders, ruffled as they were with the threatening, vapouring insinuations of the coachman-groom, Peter Leather. There is nothing sets men's backs up so readily, as a hint that anyone is coming to take the 'shine' out of them across country. We have known the most deadly feuds engendered between parties who never spoke to each other by adroit go-betweens reporting to each what the other said, or, perhaps, did not say, but what the 'go-betweens' knew would so rouse the British lion as to make each ride to destruction if necessary.

'He's a varmint-looking chap,' observed Mr Waffles, as the party returned from the railway station; 'shouldn't wonder if he can go – dare say he'll try – shouldn't wonder if he's floored – awfully stiff country this for horses that are not used to it – most likely his are Leicestershire nags, used to fly – won't do here. If he attempts to take some of our big banked bullfinches in his stride, with a yawner on each side, will get into grief.'

'Hang him,' interrupted Caingey Thornton, 'there are good men in all countries.'

'So there are!' exclaimed Mr Spareneck, the steeplechase rider.

'I've no notion of a fellow lording it, because he happens to come out

of Leicestershire,' rejoined Mr Thornton.

'Nor I!' exclaimed Mr Spareneck.

'Why doesn't he *stay* in Leicestershire?' asked Mr Hoppey, now raising his voice for the first time – adding, 'Who asked him here?'

'Who, indeed?' sneered Mr Thornton.

In this mood our friends arrived at the Imperial Hotel, where there was always a dinner the day before hunting – a dinner that, somehow, was served up in Mr Waffles's rooms, who was allowed the privilege of paying for all those who did not pay for themselves; rather a considerable number, we believe.

The best of everything being good enough for the guests, and profuse liberality the order of the day, the cloth generally disappeared before a contented audience, whatever humour they might have sat down in. As the least people can do who dine at an inn and don't pay their own shot, is to drink the health of the man who does pay, Mr Waffles was always lauded and applauded to the skies – such a master – such a sportsman – such knowledge – such science – such a pattern-card. On this occasion the toast was received with extra enthusiasm, for the proposer, Mr Caingey Thornton, who was desperately in want of a mount, after going the rounds of the old laudatory course, alluded to the threatened vapourings of the stranger, and expressed his firm belief that he would 'meet with his match,' a 'taking of the bull by the horns,' that met with very considerable favour from the wine-flushed party, the majority of whom, at that moment, made very 'small,' in their own minds, of the biggest fence that ever was seen.

There is nothing so easy as going best pace over the mahogany.

Mr Waffles, who was received with considerable applause, and patting of the table, responded to the toast in his usual felicitous style, assuring the company that he lived but for the enjoyment of their charming society, and that all the money in the world would be useless, if he hadn't Laverick Wells to spend it in. With regard to the vapourings of a 'certain gentleman,' he thought it would be very odd if some of them could not take the shine out of him, observing that 'Brag' was a good dog, but 'Holdfast' was a better, with certain other sporting similes and phrases, all indicative of showing fight. The steam is soon got up after dinner, and as they were all of the same mind, and all agreed that a gross insult had been offered to the hunt in general, and themselves in particular, the only question was, how to revenge it. At last they hit upon it. Old Slocdolager, the late master of the hunt, had been in the habit of having Tom Towler, the huntsman, to his lodgings the night before hunting, where, over a glass of gin-and-water, they discussed the doings of the day, and the general arrangements of the country.

Mr Waffles had had him in sometimes, though for a different purpose – at least, in reality for a different purpose, though he always made hunting the excuse for sending for him, and that purpose was, to try how many silver fox's heads full of port wine Tom could carry off without tumbling, and the old fellow being rather liquorishly inclined, had never made any objection to the experiment. Mr Waffles now wanted him, to endeavour, under the mellowing influence of drink, to get him to enter cordially into what he knew would be distasteful to the old sportsman's feelings, namely, to substitute a 'drag' for the legitimate find and chase of the fox. Fox-hunting, though exciting and exhilarating at all times, except, perhaps, when the 'fallows are dying,' and the sportsman feels that in all probability the further he goes the further he is left behind – Fox-hunting, we say, though exciting and exhilarating, does not, when the real truth is spoken, present such conveniences for neck-breaking, as people, who take their ideas from Mr Ackermann's print shop window, imagine. That there are large places in most fences is perfectly true; but that there are also weak ones is also the fact, and a practised eye catches up the latter uncommonly quick. Therefore, though a madman may ride at the big places, a sane man is not expected to follow; and even should anyone be tempted so to do, the madman having acted pioneer, will have cleared the way, or at all events proved its practicability for the follower.

In addition to this, however, hounds having to smell as they go, cannot travel at the ultra steeplechase pace, so opposed to 'looking before you leap,' and so conducive to danger and difficulty, and as going even at a fair pace depends upon the state of the atmosphere, and the scent the fox leaves behind, it is evident that where mere daring hard riding is the object, a fox-hunt cannot be depended upon for furnishing the necessary accommodation. A drag-hunt is quite a different thing. The drag can be made to any strength; enabling hounds to run as if they were tied to it, and can be trailed so as to bring in all the dangerous places in the country with a certain air of plausibility, enabling a man to look round and exclaim, as he crams at a bullfinch or brook, 'he's leading us over a most desperate country – never saw such fencing in all my life!' Drag-hunting, however, as we said before, is not popular with sportsmen, certainly not with huntsmen, and though our friends with their wounded feelings determined to have one, they had yet to smooth over old Tom to get him to come into their views. That was now the difficulty.

CHAPTER VIII

Old Tom Towler

THERE ARE FEW more difficult persons to identify than a huntsman in undress, and of all queer ones perhaps old Tom Towler was the queerest. Tom in his person furnished an apt illustration of the right appropriation of talent and the fitness of things, for he would neither have made a groom, nor a coachman, nor a postilion, nor a footman, nor a ploughman, nor a mechanic, nor anything we know of, and yet he was first-rate as a huntsman. He was too weak for a groom, too small for a coachman, too ugly for a postilion, too stunted for a footman, too light for a ploughman, too useless-looking for almost anything.

Anyone looking at him in 'mufti' would exclaim, 'what an unfortunate object!' and perhaps offer him a penny, while in his hunting habiliments lords would hail him with, 'Well, Tom, how are you?' and baronets ask him 'how he was?' Commoners felt honoured by his countenance, and yet, but for hunting, Tom would have been wasted – a cypher – an inapplicable sort of man. Old Tom, in his scarlet coat, black cap, and boots, and Tom in his undress – say, shirt-sleeves, shorts, grey stockings and shoes, bore about the same resemblance to each other that a three months dead jay nailed to a keeper's lodge bears to the bright-plumaged bird when flying about. On horseback, Tom was a cockey, wiry-looking, keen-eyed, grim-visaged, hard-bitten little fellow, sitting as though he and his horse were all one, while on foot he was the most shambling, scrambling, crooked-going crab that ever was seen. He was a complete mash of a man. He had been scalped by the branch of a tree, his nose knocked into a thing like a button by the kick of a horse, his teeth sent down his throat by a fall, his collar-bone fractured, his left leg broken and his right arm ditto, to say nothing of damage to his ribs, fingers, and feet, and having had his face scarified like pork by repeated brushings through strong thorn fences.

But we will describe him as he appeared before Mr Waffles, and the gentlemen of the Laverick Wells Hunt, on the night of Mr Sponge's arrival. Tom's spirit being roused at hearing the boastings of Mr Leather, and thinking, perhaps, his master might have something

to say, or thinking, perhaps, to partake of the eleemosynary drink generally going on in large houses of public entertainment, had taken up his quarters in the bar of the Imperial, where he was attentively perusing the 'meets' in *Bell's Life*, reading how the Atherstone met at Gopsall, the Bedale at Hornby, the Cottessmore at Tilton Wood, and so on, with all industry worthy of a better cause; for Tom neither knew country, nor places, nor masters, nor hounds, nor huntsmen, nor anything, though he still felt an interest in reading where they were going to hunt. Thus he sat with a quick ear, one of the few undamaged organs of his body, cocked to hear if Tom Towler was asked for; when, a waiter dropping his name from the landing of the staircase to the hall porter, asking if anybody had seen anything of him, Tom folded up his paper, put it in his pocket, and passing his hand over the few straggling bristles yet sticking about his bald head, proceeded, hat in hand, upstairs to his master's room.

His appearance called forth a round of view halloos! Who – hoops! Tally – ho's! Hark forwards! amidst which, and the waving of napkins, and general noises, Tom proceeded at a twisting, limping, halting, sideways sort of scramble up the room. His crooked legs didn't seem to have an exact understanding with his body which way they were to go; one, the right one, being evidently inclined to lurch off to the side, while the left one went stamp, stamp, stamp, as if equally determined to resist any deviation.

At length he reached the top of the table, where sat his master, with the glittering Fox's head before him. Having made a sort of scratch bow, Tom proceeded to stand at ease, as it were, on the left leg, while he placed the late recusant right, which was a trifle shorter, as a prop behind. No one, to look at the little wizen'd old man in the loose dark frock, baggy striped waistcoat, and patent cord breeches, extending below where the calves of his bow legs ought to have been, would have supposed that it was the noted huntsman and dashing rider, Tom Towler, whose name was celebrated throughout the country. He might have been a village tailor, or sexton, or barber; anything but a hero.

'Well, Tom,' said Mr Waffles, taking up the Fox's head, as Tom came to anchor by his side, 'how are you?'

'Nicely, thank you, sir,' replied Tom, giving the bald head another sweep.

Mr Waffles – 'What'll you drink?'

Tom – 'Port, if you please, sir.'

'There it is for you, then,' said Mr Waffles, brimming the Fox's head, which held about the third of a bottle (an inn bottle at least) and handing it to him.

'Gentlemen all,' said Tom, passing his sleeve across his mouth, and casting a side-long glance at the company as he raised the cup to drink their healths.

He quaffed it off at a draught.

'Well, Tom, and what shall we do tomorrow?' asked Mr Waffles, as Tom replaced the Fox's head, nose uppermost, on the table.

'Why, we must draw Ribston Wood fust, I 'spose,' replied Tom, 'and then on to Bradwell Grove, unless you thought well of tryin' Chesterton Common on the road, or —'

'Aye, aye,' interrupted Waffles, 'I know all that; but what I want to know is, whether we can make sure of a run. We want to give this great metropolitan swell a benefit. You know who I mean?'

'The gen'leman as is com'd to the Brunswick, I 'spose,' replied Tom; 'at least, as *is* comin', for I've not heard that he's com'd yet.'

'Oh, but he *has*,' replied Mr Waffles, 'and I make no doubt will be out tomorrow.'

'S-o-o,' observed Tom, in a long drawled note.

'Well, now! do you think you can engage to give us a run?' asked Mr Waffles, seeing his huntsman did not seem inclined to help him to his point.

'I'll do my best,' replied Tom, cautiously running the many contingencies through his mind.

'Take another drop of something,' said Mr Waffles, again raising the Fox's head. 'What'll you have?'

'Port, if you please,' replied Tom.

'There,' said Mr Waffles, handing him another bumper; 'drink, Fox-hunting.'

'Fox-huntin',' said old Tom, quaffing off the measure, as before. A flush of life came into his weather-beaten face, just as a glow of heat enlivens a blacksmith's hearth, after a touch of the bellows.

'You must never let this bumptious cock beat us,' observed Mr Waffles.

'No-o-o,' replied Tom, adding, 'there's no fear of that.'

'But he swears he *will*!' exclaimed Mr Caingey Thornton. 'He swears there isn't a man shall come within a field of him.'

'Indeed,' observed Tom, with a twinkle of his little bright eyes.

'I tell you what, Tom,' observed Mr Waffles, 'we must *sarve* him out, somehow.'

'Oh! he'll sarve hissel' out, in all probability,' replied Tom; carelessly adding, 'these boastin' chaps always do.'

'Couldn't we contrive something,' asked Mr Waffles, 'to draw him out?'

Tom was silent. He was a hunting huntsman, not a riding one.

'Have a glass of something,' said Mr Waffles, again appealing to the Fox's head.

'Thank you, sir, I've had a glass,' replied Tom, sinking the second one.

'What will you have?' asked Mr Waffles.

'Port, if you please,' replied Tom.

'Here it is,' rejoined Mr Waffles, again handing him the measure.

Up went the cup, over went the contents; but Tom set it down with a less satisfied face than before. He had had enough. The left leg prop, too, gave way, and he was nearly toppling on the table.

Having got a chair for the dilapidated old man, they again essayed to get him into their line with better success than before. Having plied him well with port, they now plied him well with the stranger, and what with the one and the other, and a glass or two of brandy-and-water, Tom became very tractable, and it was ultimately arranged that they should have a drag over the very stiffest parts of the country, wherein all who liked should take part, but that Mr Caingey Thornton and Mr Spareneck should be especially deputed to wait upon Mr Sponge, and lead him into mischief. Of course it was to be a 'profound secret,' and equally, of course, it stood a good chance of being kept, seeing how many were in it, the additional number it would have to be communicated to before it could be carried out, and the happy state old Tom was in for arranging matters. Nevertheless, our friends at the Imperial congratulated themselves on their success; and after a few minutes spent in discussing old Tom on his withdrawal, the party broke up, to array themselves in the splendid dress uniform of the 'Hunt,' to meet again at Miss Jumpheavy's ball,

CHAPTER IX

The Meet

EARLY TO BED and early to rise being among Mr Sponge's maxims, he was enjoying the view of the pantiles at the back of his hotel shortly after daylight the next morning, a time about as difficult to fix in a November day as the age of a lady of a 'certain age.' It takes even an expeditious dresser ten minutes or a quarter of an hour extra the first

time he has to deal with boots and breeches; and Mr Sponge being quite a pattern card in his peculiar line, of course took a good deal more to get himself 'up.'

An accustomed eye could see a more than ordinary stir in the streets that morning. Riding-masters and their assistants might be seen going along with strings of saddled and side-saddled screws; flies began to roll at an earlier hour, and natty tigers to kick about in buckskins prior to departing with hunters, good, bad, and indifferent.

Each man had told his partner at Miss Jumpheavy's ball of the capital trick they were going to play the stranger; and a desire to see the stranger, far more than a desire to see the trick, caused many fair ones to forsake their downy couches who had much better have kept them.

The world is generally very complacent with regard to strangers, so long as they *are* strangers, generally making them out to be a good deal better than they really are, and Mr Sponge came in for his full share of stranger credit. They not only brought all the twenty horses Leather said he had scattered about to Laverick Wells, but made him out to have a house in Eaton Square, a yacht at Cowes, and a first-rate moor in Scotland, and some said a peerage in expectancy. No wonder that he 'drew,' as theatrical people say.

Let us now suppose him breakfasted, and ready for a start.

He was 'got up' with uncommon care in the most complete style of the severe order of sporting costume. It being now the commencement of the legitimate hunting season – the first week in November – he availed himself of the privileged period for turning out in everything new. Rejecting the now generally worn cap, he adhered to the heavy, close-napped hat, described in our opening chapter, whose connection with his head, or back, if it came off, was secured by a small black silk cord, hooked through the band by a fox's tooth, and anchored to a button inside the haven of his low coat-collar. His neck was enveloped in the ample folds of a large white silk cravat, tied in a pointing diamond tie, and secured with a large silver horseshoe pin, the shoe being almost large enough for the foot of a young donkey.

His low, narrow-collared coat was of infinitesimal order; that is to say, a coat, and yet as little of a coat as possible – very near a jacket, in fact. The seams, of course, were outside, and were it not for the extreme strength and evenness of the sewing and the evident intention of the thing, an ignorant person might have supposed that he had had his coat turned. A double layer of cloth extended the full length of the outside of the sleeves, much in the fashion of the stage-coachmen's greatcoats in former times; and instead of cuffs, the sleeves were carried out to the ends of the fingers, leaving it to the fancy of the

wearer to sport a long cuff, or no cuff at all – just as the weather dictated. Though the coat was single-breasted, he had a hole made on the button side, to enable him to keep it together by means of a miniature snaffle, instead of a button. The snaffle passed across his chest, from whence the coatee, flowing easily back, displayed the broad ridge and furrow of a white cord waistcoat, with a low step collar, the vest reaching low down his figure, with large flap pockets and a nick out in front, like a coachman's. Instead of buttons, the waistcoat was secured with foxes' tusks and catgut loops, while a heavy curb chain, passing from one pocket to the other, raised the impression that there was a watch in one and a bunch of seals in the other. The waistcoat was broadly bound with white binding, and, like the coat, evinced great strength and powers of resistance. His breeches were of a still broader furrow than the waistcoat, looking as if the ploughman had laid two ridges into one. They came low down the leg, and were met by a pair of well-made, well put on, very brown topped boots, a colour then unknown in Laverick Wells. His spurs were bright and heavy, with formidable necks and rowels, whose slightest touch would make a horse wince, and put him on his good behaviour.

Nor did the great slapping brown horse, Hercules, turn out less imposingly than his master. Leather, though not the man to work himself, had a very good idea of work, and right manfully he made the helpers at the Eclipse livery and bait stables strap and groom his horses. Hercules was a fine animal. It did not require a man to be a great judge of a horse to see that. Even the ladies, though perhaps they would rather have had him a white or a cream colour, could not but admire his nut-brown muzzle, his glossy coat, his silky mane, and the elegant way in which he carried his flowing tail. His step was delightful to look at – so free, so accurate, and so easy. And that reminds us that we may as well be getting Mr Sponge up – a feat of no easy accomplishment. Few hack hunters are without their little peculiarities. Some are runaways – some kick – some bite – some go tail first on the road – some go tail first at their fences – some rush as if they were going to eat them, others baulk them altogether – and few, very few, give satisfaction. Those that do, generally retire from the public stud to the private one. But to our particular quadruped, 'Hercules.'

Mr Sponge was not without his misgivings that, regardless of being on his preferment, the horse might exhibit more of his peculiarity than would forward his master's interests, and, independently of the disagreeableness of being kicked off at the cover side, not being always compensated for by falling soft, Mr Sponge thought, as the meet was not far off, and he did not sport a cover hack, it would look quite as

well to ride his horse quietly on as go in a fly, provided always he could accomplish the mount – the mount – like the man walking with his head under his arm – being the first step to everything.

Accordingly, Mr Leather had the horse saddled and accoutred as quietly as possible – his warm clothing put over the saddle immediately, and everything kept as much in the usual course as possible, so that the noble animal's temper might not be ruffled by unaccustomed trouble or unusual objects. Leather having seen that the horse could not eject Mr Sponge even in trousers, had little fear of his dislodging him in boots and breeches; still it was desirable to avoid all unseemly contention, and maintain the high character of the stud, by which means Leather felt that his own character and consequence would best be maintained. Accordingly, he refrained from calling in the aid of any of the stable assistants, preferring for once to do a little work himself, especially when the rider was up to the trick, and not 'a gent' to be cajoled into 'trying a horse.' Mr Sponge, punctual to his time, appeared at the stable, and after much patting, whistling, so – so – ing, my man, and general ingratiation, the redoubtable nag was led out of the stable into a well-littered straw-yard, where, though he might be gored by a bull if he fell, the 'eyes of England' at all events would not witness the floorer. Horses, however, have wonderful memories and discrimination. Though so differently attired to what he was on the occasion of his trial, the horse seemed to recognise Mr Sponge, and independently of a few snorts as he was led out, and an indignant stamp or two of his foot as it was let down, after Mr Sponge was mounted he took things very quietly.

'Now,' said Leather, in an undertone, patting the horse's arched neck, 'I'll give you a hint; they're a goin' to run a drag to try what he's made on, so be on the look-out.'

'How do you know?' asked Mr Sponge, in surprise, drawing his reins as he spoke.

'*I know*,' replied Mr Leather, with a wink.

Just then the horse began to plunge, and paw, and give symptoms of uneasiness, and not wishing to fret or exhibit his weak points, Mr Sponge gave him his head, and passing through the side-gate was presently in the street. He didn't exactly understand it, but having full confidence in his horsemanship, and believing the one he was on required nothing but riding, he was not afraid to take his chance.

Not being the man to put his candle under a bushel, Mr Sponge took the principal streets on his way out of town. We are not sure that he did not go rather out of his way to get them in, but that is neither here nor there, seeing he was a stranger who didn't know the way. What a

sensation his appearance created as the gallant brown stepped proudly and freely up Coronation Street, throwing his smart, clean, well-put-on head up and down on the unrestrained freedom of the snaffle.

'Oh, damn it, there he is!' exclaimed Mr Spareneck, jumping up from the breakfast table, and nearly sweeping the contents off by catching the cloth with his spur.

'Where?' exclaimed half a dozen voices, amid a general rush to the windows.

'What a flight!' exclaimed little Miss Martindale, whispering into Miss Beauchamp's ear: 'I'm sure anybody may have him for me,' though she felt in her heart that he was far from bad looking.

'I wonder how long he's taken to put on that choker,' observed Mr Spareneck, eyeing him intently, not without an inward qualm that he had set himself a more difficult task than he imagined, to 'cut him down,' especially when he looked at the noble animal he bestrode, and the masterly way he sat him.

'What a pair of profligate boots,' observed Captain Whitfield, as our friend now passed his lodgings.

'It would be the duty of a right-thinking man to ride over a fellow in such a pair,' observed his friend, Mr Cox, who was breakfasting with him.

'Ride over a fellow in such a pair!' exclaimed Whitfield. 'No well-bred horse would face such things, I should think.'

'He seems to think a good deal of himself!' observed Mr Cox, as Sponge cast an admiring eye down his shining boot.

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied Whitfield; 'perhaps he'll have the conceit taken out of him before night.'

'Well, I hope you'll be in time, old boy!' exclaimed Mr Waffles to himself, as looking down from his bedroom window, he espied Mr Sponge passing up the street on his way to cover. Mr Waffles was just out of bed, and had yet to dress and breakfast.

One man in scarlet sets all the rest on the finger, and without troubling to lay 'that or that' together, they desert their breakfasts, hurry to the stables, get out their horses, and rattle away, lest their watches should be wrong, or some arrangement made that they are ignorant of. The hounds, too, were on, as was seen, as well by their footmarks, as by the bob, bob, bobbing of sundry black caps above the hedges, on the Borrowdon Road, as the huntsman and whips proceeded at that pleasant post-boy trot, that has roused the wrath of so many riders against horses that they could not get to keep in time.

Now look at old Tom, cocked jauntily on the spicy bay, and see what a different Tom he is to what he was last night. Instead of a battered,

limping, shabby-looking, little old man, he is all alive, and rises to the action of his horse, as though they were all one. A fringe of grey hair protrudes beneath his smart velvet cap, which sets off a weather-beaten, but keen and expressive face, lit up with little piercing black eyes. See how chirpy and cheery he is; how his right arm keeps rising and falling with his whip, beating responsive to the horse's action with the butt-end against his thigh. His new scarlet coat imparts a healthy hue to his face, and good boots and breeches hide the imperfections of his bad legs. His hounds seem to partake of the old man's gaiety, and gather round his horse, or frolic forward on the grassy sidings of the road, till, getting almost out of earshot, a single '*yooi doit! - Arrogant!*' – or '*here again, Brusher!*' brings them cheerfully back to whine and look in the old man's face for applause. Nor is he chary of his praise. '*G-ood betch! - Arrogant! - g-ood betch!*' says he, leaning over his horse's shoulder towards her, and jerking his hand to induce her to proceed forward again. So the old man trots gaily on, now making of his horse, now coaxing a hound, now talking to a 'whip,' now touching or taking off his cap as he passes a sportsman, according to the estimation in which he holds him.

As the hounds reach Whirleypool Windmill, there is a grand rush of pedestrians to meet them. First comes a velveteen-jacketed, leather-leggined keeper, with whom Tom (albeit suspicious of his honesty) thinks it prudent to shake hands; the miller and he, too, greet; and forthwith a black bottle with a single glass make their appearance, and pass current with the company. Then the earth-stopper draws nigh, and, resting a hand on Tom's horse's shoulder, whispers confidentially in his ear. The pedestrian sportsman of the country, too, has something to say; also a horse-breaker; while groups of awe-stricken children stand staring at the mighty Tom, thinking him the greatest man in the world.

Railways and fox-hunting make most people punctual, and in less than five minutes from the halting of the hounds by the Windmill, the various roads leading up to it emit dark-coated grooms, who, dismounting, proceed to brush off the mud sparks, and rectify any little derangement the horses or their accoutrements may have contracted on the journey. Presently Mr Sponge, and such other gentlemen as have ridden their own horses on, cast up, while from the eminence the road to Laverick Wells is distinctly traceable with scarlet coats and flies, with furs and flaunting feathers. Presently the foremost riders begin to canter up the hill, when

All around is gay, men, horses, dogs,
And in each smiling countenance appears
Fresh blooming health and universal joy.

Then the ladies mingle with the scene, some on horseback, some in flies, all chatter and prattle as usual, some saying smart things, some trying, all making themselves as agreeable as possible, and of course as captivating. Some were in ecstasies at dear Miss Jumpheavy's ball – she was such a *nice* creature – such a charming ball, and so well managed, while others were anticipating the delights of Mrs Tom Hoppey's, and some again were asking which was Mr Sponge. Then up went the eye-glasses, while Mr Sponge sat looking as innocent and as killing as he could. 'Dear me!' exclaimed one, 'he's younger than I thought.' 'That's him, is it?' observed another; 'I saw him ride up the street,' while the propriety-playing ones praised his horse, and said it was a beauty.

The hounds, which they all had come to see, were never looked at.

Mr Waffles, like many men with nothing to do, was most unpunctual. He never seemed to know what o'clock it was, and yet he had a watch, hung in chains, and gewgaws, like a lady's chatelaine. Hunting partook of the general confusion. He did not profess to throw off till eleven, but it was often nearly twelve before he cast up. Then he would come up full tilt, surrounded by 'scarlets,' like a general with his staff; and once at the meet, there was a prodigious hurry to begin, equalled only by the eagerness to leave off. On this auspicious day he hove in sight, coming best pace along the road, about twenty minutes before twelve, with a more numerous retinue than usual. In dress, Mr Waffles was the light, butterfly order of sportsman – once-round tie, French polish, paper boots, and so on. On this occasion he sported a shirt-collar with three or four blue lines, and then a white space followed by three or more blue lines, the whole terminating in blue spots about the size of fourpenny pieces at the points; a once-round blue silk tie, with white spots and flying ends. His coat was a light, jackety sort of thing, with little pockets behind, something in the style of Mr Sponge's (a docked dressing-gown), but wanting the outside seaming, back strapping, and general strength, that characterised Mr Sponge's. His waistcoat, of course, was a worked one – heart's-ease mingled with foxes' heads, on a true blue ground, the gift of – we'll not say who – his leathers were of the finest doe-skin, and his long-topped, pointed-toed boots so thin as to put all idea of wet or mud out of the question.

Such was the youth who now cantered up and took off his cap to the rank, beauty, and fashion, assembled at Whirleypool Windmill. He then proceeded to pay his respects in detail. At length, having

exhausted his 'nothings,' and said the same thing over again in a dozen different ways to a dozen different ladies, he gave a slight jerk of the head to Tom Towler, who forthwith whistled his hounds together, and attended by the whips, bustled from the scene.

CHAPTER X

The Find and the Finish

EPHING HUNT, in its most palmy days could not equal the exhibition that now took place. Some of the more lively of the horses, tired of waiting, perhaps pinched by the cold, for most of them were newly clipped, evinced their approbation of the more lively sundry squeals and capers, which being caught by others in the neighbourhood, the infection quickly spread, and in less than a minute there was such a scene of rocking, and rearing, and kicking, and prancing, and neighing, and shooting over heads, and rolling over tails, and hanging on by manes, mingled with such screamings from the ladies in the flies, and such hearty-sounding kicks against splash boards and fly bottoms, from sundry of the vicious ones in harness, as never was witnessed. One gentleman, in a bran new scarlet, mounted on a flourishing pie-bald, late the property of Mr Batty, stood pawing and fighting the air, as if in the saw-dust circle, his unfortunate rider clinging round his neck, expecting to have the beast back over upon him. Another little wiry chestnut, with abundance of rings, racing martingale, and tackle generally, just turned tail on the crowd and ran off home as hard as ever he could lay legs to the ground; while a good steady bay cob, with a barrel like a butt, and a tail like a hearth-brush, having selected the muddiest, dirtiest place he could find, deliberately proceeded to lie down, to the horror of his rider, Captain Greatgun, of the royal navy, who, feeling himself suddenly touch mother earth, thought he was going to be swallowed up alive, and was only awoke from the delusion by the shouts of the foot people, telling him to get clear of his horse before he began to roll.

Hercules would fain have joined the truant set, and, at the first commotion, up went his great back, and down went his ears, with a single lash out behind that meant mischief, but Mr Sponge was on the

alert, and just gave him such a dig with his spurs as restored order, without exposing anything that anybody could take notice of.

The sudden storm was quickly lulled. The spilt ones scrambled up; the loose riders got tighter hold of their horses; the screaming fair ones sunk languidly in their carriages; and the late troubled ocean of equestrians fell into irregular line *en route* for the cover.

Bump, bump, bump; trot, trot, trot; jolt, jolt, jolt; shake, shake, shake; and carriages and cavalry got to Ribston Wood somehow or other. It is a long cover on a hill-side, from which parties, placing themselves in the green valley below, can see hounds 'draw,' that is to say, run through with their noses to the ground, if there are any men foolish enough to believe that ladies care for seeing such things. However, there they were.

'*Eu leu, in!*' cries old Tom, with a wave of his arm, finding he can no longer restrain the ardour of the pack as they approach, and thinking to save his credit, by appearing to direct. '*Eu leu, in!*' repeats he, with a heartier cheer, as the pack charge the rotten fence with a crash that echoes through the wood. The whips scuttle off to their respective points, gentlemen feel their horses' girths, hats are thrust firmly on the head, and the sherry and brandy flasks begin to be drained.

'*Tally ho!*' cries a countryman at the top of the wood, hoisting his hat on a stick. At the magic sound, fear comes over some, joy over others, intense anxiety over all. What commotion! What indecision! What confusion! 'Which way? - Which way?' is the cry.

'*Twang, twang, twang,*' goes old Tom's horn at the top of the wood, whither he seems to have flown, so quick has he got there.

A dark-coated gentleman on a good family horse solves the important question - 'Which way?' - by diving at once into the wood, crashing along till he comes to a crossroad that leads to the top, when the scene opening to 'open fresh fields and pastures new,' discloses divers other sections struggling up in long drawn files, following other leaders, all puffing, and wheezing and holding on by the manes, many feeling as if they had had enough already - 'Quick!' is the word, for the tail-hounds are flying the fence out of the first field over the body of the pack, which are running almost mute at best pace beyond, looking a good deal smaller than is agreeable to the eyes of a sportsman.

'*F-o-o-r-rard!*' screams old Tom, flying the fence after them, followed by jealous jostling riders in scarlet and colours, some anxious, some easy, some wanting to be at it, some wanting to look as if they did, some wishing to know if there was anything on the far side.

Now Tom tops another fence, rising like a rocket and dropping like a bird; still '*F-o-o-r-rard!*' is the cry - away they go at racing pace.

The field drawn out like a telescope, leaving the largest portion at the end, and many – the fair and fat ones in particular – seeing the hopelessness of the case, pull up their horses, while yet on an eminence that commands a view. Fifteen or twenty horsemen enter for the race, and dash forward, though the hounds rather gain on old Tom, and the further they go the smaller the point of the telescope becomes. The pace is awful; many would give in but for the ladies. At the end of a mile or so, the determined ones show to the front, and the spitters and 'make-believes' gladly avail themselves of their pioneering powers.

Mr Sponge, who got well through the wood, has been going at his ease, the great striding brown throwing the large fields behind him with ease, and taking his leaps safely and well. He now shows to the front, and old Tom, who is still '*F-o-o-r-r-arding*' to his hounds, either rather falls back to the field or the field draws upon him. At all events they get together somehow. A belt of Scotch fir plantation, with a stiffish fence on each side, tries their mettle and the stoutness of their hats: *crash* they get through it, the noise they make among the thorns and rotten branches resembling the outburst of a fire. Several gentlemen here decline under cover of the trees.

'*F-o-o-r-r-ard!*' screams old Tom, as he dives through the stiff fence and lands in the field outside the plantation. He might have saved his breath, for the hounds were beating him as it was. Mr Sponge bores through the same place, little aided, however, by anything old Tom has done to clear the way for him, and the rest follow in his wake.

The field is now reduced to six, and two of the number, Mr Spareneck and Caingey Thornton, become marked in their attention to our hero. Thornton is riding Mr Waffles' crack steeplechaser 'Dare-Devil,' and Mr Spareneck is on a first-rate hunter belonging to the same gentleman, but they have not been able to get our friend Sponge into grief. On the contrary, his horse, though lathered, goes as strong as ever, and Mr Sponge, seeing their design, is as careful of him as possible, so as not to lose ground. His fine, strong, steady seat, and quiet handling, contrasts well with Thornton's rolling bucketing style, who has already begun to ply a heavy cutting whip, in aid of his spurs at his fences, accompanied with a half frantic '*g-u-r-r-r* along!' and enquires of the horse if he thinks he stole him?

The three soon get in front; fast as they go, the hounds go faster, and fence after fence is thrown behind them, just as a girl throws her skipping-rope.

Tom and the whips follow, grinning with their tongues in their cheeks, Tom still screeching '*F-o-o-o-r-r-ard!* – *F-o-o-o-r-r-ard!*' at intervals.

A big stone wall, built with mortar, and coped with heavy blocks of stone, is taken by the three abreast, for which they are rewarded by a gallop up Stretchfurrow pasture, from the summit of which they see the hounds streaming away to a fine grass country below, with pollard willows dotted here and there in the bottom.

'*Water!*' says our friend Sponge to himself, wondering whether Hercules would face it. A desperate black bullfinch, so thick that they could hardly see through it, is shirked by consent, for a gate which a countryman opens, and another fence or two being passed, the splashing of some hounds in the water, and the shaking of others on the opposite bank, show that, as usual, the willows are pretty true prophets.

Caingey, grinning his coarse red face nearly double, and getting his horse well by the head, rams in the spurs, and flourishes his cutting whip high in air, with a '*g-u-u-ur* along! *do you think I* – the '*stole you*' being lost under water just as Sponge clears the brook a little lower down. Spareneck then pulls up.

When Nimrod had Dick Christian under water in the Whissendine in his Leicestershire run, and someone more humane than the rest of the field observed, as they rode on,

'But he'll be drowned.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' exclaimed another.

'But the *pace*,' Nimrod added, '*was too good to enquire.*'

Such, however, was not the case with our watering-place cock, Mr Sponge. Independently of the absurdity of a man risking his neck for the sake of picking up a bunch of red herrings, Mr Sponge, having beat everybody, could afford a little humanity, more especially as he rode his horse on sale, and there was now no one left to witness the further prowess of the steed. Accordingly, he availed himself of a heavy, newly-ploughed fallow, upon which he landed as he cleared the brook, for pulling up, and returned just as Mr Spareneck, assisted by one of the whips, succeeded in landing Caingey on the taking-off side. Caingey was not a pretty boy at the best of times – none but the most partial parents could think him one – and his clumsy-featured, short, compressed face, and thick, lumpy figure, were anything but improved by a sort of pea-green net-work of water-weeds with which he arose from his bath. He was uncommonly well soaked, and had to be held up by the heels to let the water run out of his boots, pockets and clothes. In this undignified position he was found by Mr Waffles and such of the field as had ridden the line.

'Why, Caingey, old boy! you look like a boiled porpoise with parsley sauce!' exclaimed Mr Waffles, pulling up where the unfortunate youth

was sputtering and getting emptied like a jug. 'Confound it!' added he, as the water came gurgling out of his mouth, 'but you must have drunk the brook dry.'

Caingey would have censured his inhumanity, but knowing the imprudence of quarrelling with his bread and butter, and also aware of the laughable, drowned-rat figure he must then be cutting, he thought it best to laugh, and take his change out of Mr Waffles another time. According, he chuckled and laughed too, though his jaws nearly refused their office, and kindly transferred the blame of the accident from the horse to himself.

'He didn't put on steam enough,' he said.

Meanwhile, old Tom, who had gone on with the hounds, having availed himself of a well-known bridge, a little above where Thornton went in, for getting over the brook, and having allowed a sufficient time to elapse for the proper completion of the farce, was now seen rounding the opposite hill, with his hounds clustered about his horse, with his mind conning over one of those imaginary runs that experienced huntsmen know so well how to tell, when there is no one to contradict them.

Having quartered his ground to get at his old friend the bridge again, he just trotted up with well-assumed gaiety as Caingey Thornton spluttered the last piece of green weed out from between his great thick lips.

'Well, Tom!' exclaimed Mr Waffles, 'what have you done with him?'

'*Killed him, sir,*' replied Tom, with a slight touch of his cap, as though 'killing' was a matter of everyday occurrence with them.

'*Have you, indeed?*' exclaimed Mr Waffles, adopting the lie with avidity.

'Yes, sir,' said Tom, gravely; 'he was nearly beat afore he got to the brook. Indeed, I thought Vanquisher would have had him in it; but, however, he got through, and the scent failed on the fallow, which gave him a chance; but I held them on to the hedgerow beyond, where they hit it off like wildfire, and they never stopped again till they tumbled him over at the back of Mr Plummey's farm-buildings, at Shapwick. I've got his brush,' added Tom, producing a much tattered one from his pocket, 'if you'd like to have it?'

'Thank you, no - yes - no,' replied Waffles, not wanting to be bothered with it; 'yet stay,' continued he, as his eye caught Mr Sponge, who was still on foot beside his vanquished friend; 'give it to Mr What-de-ye-call-'em,' added he, nodding towards our hero.

'*Sponge,*' observed Tom, in an undertone, giving the brush to his master.

'Mr Sponge, will you do me the favour to accept the brush?' asked

Mr Waffles, advancing with it towards him; adding, 'I am sorry this unlucky bather should have prevented your seeing the end.'

Mr Sponge was a pretty good judge of brushes, and not a bad one of camphire; but if this one had smelt twice as strong as it did - indeed, if it had dropped to pieces in his hand, or the moths had flown up in his face, he would have pocketed it, seeing it paved the way to what he wanted - an introduction.

'I'm very much obliged, I'm sure,' observed he, advancing to take it - 'very much obliged, indeed; been an extremely good run, and fast.'

'Very fair - very fair,' observed Mr Waffles, as though it were nothing in their way; seven miles in twenty minutes, I suppose, or something of that sort.'

'*One-and-twenty,*' interposed Tom, with a laudable anxiety for accuracy.

'Ah! one-and-twenty,' rejoined Mr Waffles. 'I thought it would be somewhere thereabouts. Well, I suppose we've all had enough,' added he; 'may as well go home and have some luncheon, and then a game at billiards, or rackets, or something. How's the old water-rat?' added he, turning to Thornton, who was now busy emptying his cap and mopping the velvet.

The water-rat was as well as could be expected, but did not quite like the new aspect of affairs. He saw that Mr Sponge was a first-rate horseman, and also knew that nothing ingratiated one man with another so much as skill and boldness in the field. It was by that means, indeed, that he had established himself in Mr Waffles' good graces - an ingratiation that had been pretty serviceable to him, both in the way of meat, drink, mounting, and money. Had Mr Sponge been, like himself, a needy, penniless adventurer, Caingey would have tried to have kept him out by some of those plausible, admonitory hints, that poverty makes men so obnoxious to; but in the case of a rich, flourishing individual, with such an astonishing stud as Leather made him out to have, it was clearly Caingey's policy to knock under and be subservient to Mr Sponge also. Caingey, we should observe, was a bold, reckless rider, never seeming to care for his neck, but he was no match for Mr Sponge, who had both skill and courage.

Caingey being at length cleansed from his weeds, wiped from his mud, and made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, was now hoisted on to the renowned steeplechase horse again, who had scrambled out of the brook on the taking-off side, and, after meandering the banks for a certain distance, had been caught by the bridle in the branch of a willow - Caingey, we say, being again mounted, Mr Sponge also, without hindrance from the resolute brown horse, the

first whip put himself a little in advance, while old Tom followed with the hounds, and the second whip mingled with the now increasing field, it being generally understood (by the uninitiated, at least) that hounds have no business to go home so long as any gentleman is inclined for a scurrey, no matter whether he has joined early or late. Mr Waffles, on the contrary, was very easily satisfied, and never took the shine off a run with a kill by risking a subsequent defeat. Old Tom, though keen when others were keen, was not indifferent to his comforts, and soon came into the way of thinking that it was just as well to get home to his mutton-chops at two or three o'clock, as to be groping his way about bottomless by-roads on dark winter nights.

As he retraced his steps homeward, and overtook the scattered field of the morning, his talent for invention, or rather stretching, was again called into requisition.

'What have you done with him, Tom?' asked Major Bouncer, eagerly bringing his sturdy collar-marked cob alongside of our huntsman.

'Killed him, sir,' replied Tom, with the slightest possible touch of the cap. (Bouncer was no tip.)

'Indeed!' exclaimed Bouncer, gaily, with that sort of sham-satisfaction that most people express about things that can't concern them in the least. 'Indeed! I'm *deuced* glad of that! Where did you kill him?'

'At the back of Mr Plummey's farm-buildings, at Shapwick,' replied Tom; adding, 'but, my word, he led us a dance afore we got there – up to Ditchington, down to Somerby, round by Temple Bell Wood, cross Goosegreen Common, then away for Stubbington Brooms, skirting Sanderwick Plantations, but scarce goin' into 'em, then by the round hill at Camerton, leavin' Great Heatherton to the right, and so straight on to Shapwick, where we killed, with every hound up –'

'*God bless me!*' exclaimed Bouncer, apparently lost in admiration, though he scarcely knew the country; '*God bless me!*' repeated he, 'what a run! The finest run that ever was seen.'

'Nine miles in twenty-five minutes,' replied Tom, tacking on a little both for time and distance.

'*B-o-y Jove!*' exclaimed the major.

Having shaken hands with and congratulated Mr Waffles most eagerly and earnestly, the major hurried off to tell as much as he could remember to the first person he met, just as the cheese-bearer at a christening looks out for someone to give the cheese to. The cheese-getter on this occasion was Doctor Lotion, who was going to visit old Jackey Thompson, of Woolleyburn. Jackey being then in a somewhat precarious state of health, and tolerably advanced in life, without any very self-evident heir, was obnoxious to the attentions of three distinct

litters of cousins, someone or other of whom was constantly 'baying him.' Lotion, though a sapient man, and somewhat grinding in his practice, did not profess to grind old people young again, and feeling he could do very little for the body corporate, directed his attention to amusing Jackey's mind, and anything in the shape of gossip was extremely acceptable to the doctor to retail to his patient. Moreover, Jackey had been a bit of a sportsman, and was always extremely happy to see the hounds – *on anybody's land but his own*.

So Lotion got primed with the story, and having gone through the usual routine of asking his patient how he was, how he had slept, looking at his tongue, and reporting on the weather, when the old posing question, 'What's the news?' was put, Lotion replied, as he too often had to reply, for he was a very slow hand at picking up information.

'Nothin' particklar, I think, sir; 'adding, in an off-hand sort of way, 'you've heard of the greet run, I s'pose, sir?'

'Great run!' exclaimed the octogenarian, as if it was a matter of the most vital importance to him; 'great run, sir; *no, sir, not a word!*'

The doctor then retailed it.

Old Jackey got possessed of this one idea – he thought of nothing else. Whoever came, he out with it, chapter and verse, with occasional variations. He told it to all the 'cousins in waiting'; Jackey Thompson, of Carrington Ford; Jackey Thompson, of Houndesley; Jackey Thompson, of the Mill; and all the Bobs, Bills, Sams, Harries, and Peters, composing the respective litters; forgetting where he got it from, he nearly told it back to Lotion himself. We sometimes see old people affected this way – far more enthusiastic on a subject than young ones. Few dread the aspect of affairs so much as those who have little chance of seeing how they go.

But to the run. The cousins reproduced the story according to their respective powers of exaggeration. One tacked on two miles, another ten, and so it went on and on, till it reached the ears of the great Mr Seedeysman, the mighty *we* of the country, as he sat in his den penning his 'stunners' for his market-day *Mercury*. It had then distanced the great sea-serpent itself in length, having extended over thirty-three miles of country, which Mr Seedeysman reported to have been run in one hour and forty minutes.

Pretty good going, we should say.

CHAPTER XI

The Feeler

BAG FOX-HUNTS, be they ever so good, are but unsatisfactory things; drag runs are, beyond all measure, unsatisfactory. After the best-managed bag fox-hunt, there is always a sort of suppressed joy, a deadly liveliness in the field. Those in the secret are afraid of praising it too much, lest the secret should ooze out, and strangers suppose that all their great runs are with bag foxes, while the mere retaking of an animal that one has had in hand before is not calculated to arouse any very pleasurable emotions. Nobody ever goes frantic at seeing an old donkey of a deer handed back into his carriage after a canter.

Our friends on this occasion soon exhausted what they had to say on the subject.

'That's a nice horse of yours,' observed Mr Waffles to Mr Sponge, as the latter, on the strength of the musty brush, now rode alongside the master of the hounds.

'I think he is,' replied Sponge, rubbing some of the now dried sweat from his shoulder and neck; 'I think he is; I like him a good deal better today than I did the first time I rode him.'

'What, he's a new one, is he?' asked Mr Waffles, taking a scented cigar from his mouth, and giving a steady sidelong stare at the horse.

'Bought him in Leicestershire,' replied Sponge. 'He belonged to Lord Bullfrog, who didn't think him exactly up to his weight.'

'Up to his weight!' exclaimed Mr Caingey Thornton, who had now ridden up on the other side of his great patron, 'why, he must be another Daniel Lambert.'

'Rather so,' replied Mr Sponge; 'rides nineteen stuns.'

'What a monster!' exclaimed Thornton, who was of the pocket order.

'I thought he didn't go fast enough at his fences the first time I rode him,' observed Mr Sponge, drawing the curb slightly so as to show the horse's fine arched neck to advantage; 'but he went quick enough today, in all conscience,' added he.

'He did *that*,' observed Mr Thornton, now bent on a toadying match. 'I never saw a finer lepper.'

'He flew many feet beyond the brook,' observed Mr Spareneck, who, thinking discretion was the better part of valour, had pulled up on seeing his comrade Thornton blobbing about in the middle of it, and therefore was qualified to speak to the fact.

So they went on talking about the horse, and his points, and his speed, and his action, very likely as much for want of something to say, or to keep off the subject of the run, as from any real admiration of the animal.

The true way to make a man take a fancy to a horse is to make believe that you don't want to sell him – at all events, that you are easy about selling. Mr Sponge had played this game so very often, that it came quite natural to him. He knew exactly how far to go, and having expressed his previous objection to the horse, he now most handsomely made the *amende honorable* by patting him on the neck, and declaring that he really thought he should keep him.

It is said that every man has his weak or 'do-able' point, if the sharp ones can but discover it. This observation does not refer, we believe, to men with an innocent *penchant* for play, or the turf, or for buying pictures, or for collecting china, or for driving coaches and four, all of which tastes proclaim themselves sooner or later, but means that the most knowing, the most cautious, and the most careful, are all to be come over, somehow or another.

There are few things more surprising in this remarkable world than the magnificent way people talk about money, or the meannesses they will resort to in order to get a little. We hear fellows flashing and talking in hundreds and thousands, who will do almost anything for a five-pound note. We have known men pretending to hunt countries at their own expense, and yet actually 'living out of the hounds.' Next to the accomplishment of that – apparently almost impossible feat – comes the dexterity required for living by horse-dealing.

A little lower down in the scale comes the income derived from the profession of a 'go-between' – the gentleman who can buy the horse cheaper than you can. This was Caingey Thornton's trade. He was always lurking about people's stables talking to grooms and worming out secrets – whose horse had a cough, whose was a wind-sucker, whose was lame after hunting, and so on – and had a price current of every horse in the place – knew what had been given, what the owners asked, and had a pretty good guess what they would take.

Waffles would have been an invaluable customer to Thornton if the former's groom, Mr Figg, had not been rather too hard with his

'reg'lars.' He insisted on Caingey dividing whatever he got out of his master with him. This reduced profits considerably; but still, as it was a profession that did not require any capital to set up with, Thornton could afford to be liberal, having only to tack on to one end to cut off at the other.

After the opening Sponge gave as they rode home with the hounds, Thornton had no difficulty in sounding him on the subject.

'You'll not think me impertinent, I hope,' observed Caingey, in his most deferential style, to our hero, when they met at the Newsroom the next day – 'you'll not think me impertinent, I hope; but I think you said as we rode home, yesterday, that you didn't altogether like the brown horse you were on?'

'*Did I?*' replied Mr Sponge, with apparent surprise; 'I think you must have misunderstood me.'

'Why, no; it wasn't exactly that,' rejoined Mr Thornton, 'but you said you liked him better than you did, I think?'

'Ah! I believe I did say something of the sort, replied Sponge, casually – 'I believe I did say something of the sort; but he carried me so well that I thought better of him. The fact was,' continued Mr Sponge, confidentially, 'I thought him rather too light-mouthed; I like a horse that bears more on the hand.'

'Indeed!' observed Mr Thornton; 'most people think a light mouth a recommendation.'

'I know they do,' replied Mr Sponge, 'I know they do; but I like a horse that requires a little riding. Now this is too much of a made horse – too much of what I call an old man's horse, for me. Bullfrog, whom I bought him of, is very fat – eats a great deal of venison and turtle – all sorts of good things, in fact – and can't stand much tewing in the saddle; now, I rather like to feel that I am on a horse, and not in an armchair.'

'He's a fine horse,' observed Mr Thornton.

'So he ought,' replied Mr Sponge; 'I gave a hatful of money for him – two hundred and fifty golden sovereigns, and not a guinea back. Bullfrog's the biggest screw I ever dealt with.'

That latter observation was highly encouraging to Thornton. It showed that Mr Sponge was not one of your tight-laced dons, who take offence at the mere mention of 'drawbacks,' but, on the contrary, favoured the supposition that he would do the 'genteel,' should he happen to be a seller.

'Well, if you should feel disposed to part with him, perhaps you will have the kindness to let me know,' observed Mr Thornton, adding, 'he's not for myself, of course, but I think I know a man he would suit,

and who would be inclined to give a good price for him.'

'I will,' replied Mr Sponge; 'I will,' repeated he; adding, 'if I *were* to sell him, I wouldn't take a farthing under three 'underd for him – three 'underd *guineas*, mind, *not punds*.'

'That's a vast sum of money,' observed Mr Thornton.

'Not a bit on't,' replied Mr Sponge. 'He's worth it all, and a great deal more. Indeed, I haven't said, mind that. I'll take that for him; all I've said is, that I wouldn't take less.'

'Just so,' replied Mr Thornton

'He's a horse of high character,' observed Mr Sponge. 'Indeed, he has no business out of Leicestershire; and I don't know what set my fool of a groom to bring him here.'

'Well, I'll see if I can coax my friend into giving what you say,' observed Mr Thornton.

'Nay, never mind coaxing,' replied Mr Sponge, with the utmost indifference; 'never mind coaxing; if he's not anxious, my name's "easy." Only mind ye, if I ride him again, and he carries me as he did yesterday, I shall clap on another fifty. A horse of that figure can't be dear at any price,' added he. 'Put him in a steeplechase, and you'd get your money back in ten minutes, and a bagful to boot.'

'True,' observed Mr Thornton, treasuring that fact up as an additional inducement to use to his friend.

So the amiable gentlemen parted.

CHAPTER XII

The Deal and the Disaster

IF PEOPLE are inclined to deal, bargains can very soon be struck at idle watering places, where anything in the shape of occupation is a godsend, and bargainers know where to find each other in a minute. Everybody knows where everybody is.

'Have you seen Jack Sprat?'

'Oh, yes; he's just gone into Muddle's Bazaar with Miss Flouncey, looking uncommon sweet.' Or –

'Can you tell me where I shall find Mr Slowman?'

Answer – 'You'll find him at his lodgings, No. 15, Belvidere Terrace,

till a quarter before seven. He's gone home to dress, to dine with Major and Mrs Holdsworthy, at Grunton Villa, for I heard him order Jenkins's fly at that time.'

Caingey Thornton knew exactly when he would find Mr Waffles at Miss Lollypop's, the confectioner, eating ices and making love to that very interesting, much-courted young lady. True to his time, there was Waffles, eating and eyeing the cherry-coloured ribbons, floating in graceful curls along with her raven-coloured ringlets, down Miss Lollypop's nice fresh plump cheeks.

After expatiating on the great merits of the horse, and the certainty of getting all the money back by steeplechasing him in the spring, and stating his conviction that Mr Sponge would not take any part of the purchase-money in pictures or jewellery, or anything of that sort, Mr Waffles gave his consent to deal, on the terms the following conversation shows.

'My friend will give you your price, if you wouldn't mind taking his cheque and keeping it for a few months till he's into funds,' observed Mr Thornton, who now sought Mr Sponge out at the billiard-room.

'Why,' observed Mr Sponge, thoughtfully, 'you know horses are always ready money.'

'True,' replied Thornton; 'at least that's the theory of the thing; only my friend is rather peculiarly situated at present.'

'I suppose Mr Waffles is your man?' observed Mr Sponge, rightly judging that there couldn't be two such flats in the place.

'Just so,' said Mr Thornton.

'I'd rather take his "stiff" than his cheque,' observed Mr Sponge, after a pause. 'I could get a bit of stiff *done*, but a cheque, you see – especially a post-dated one – is always objected to.'

'Well, I dare say that will make no difference,' observed Mr Thornton, '“stiff,” if you prefer it – say three months; or perhaps you'll give us four?'

'Three's long enough, in all conscience,' replied Mr Sponge, with a shake of the head; adding, 'Bullfrog made me pay down on the nail.'

'Well, so be it, then,' assented Mr Thornton; 'you draw at three months, and Mr Waffles will accept, payable at Coutts's.'

After so much liberality, Mr Caingey expected that Mr Sponge would have hinted at something handsome for him; but all Sponge said was, 'So be it,' too, as he walked away to buy a bill-stamp.

Mr Waffles was more considerate, and promised him the first mount on his new purchase, though Caingey would rather have had a ten-, or even a five-pound note.

Towards the hour of ten on that eventful day, numerous gaitered,

trouserer, and jacketed grooms began to ride up and down the High Street, most of them with their stirrups crossed negligently on the pommels of the saddles, to indicate that their masters were going to ride the horses, and not them. The street grew lively, not so much with people going to hunt, as with people coming to see those who were. Tattered Hibernians, with rags on their backs and jokes on their lips; young English *chevaliers d'industrie*, with their hands ready to dive into anybody's pockets but their own; stablemen out of place, servants loitering on their errands, striplings helping them, ladies'-maids with novels or three-corner'd notes, and a good crop of beggars.

'What, Spareneck, do you ride the grey today? I thought you'd done Gooseman out of a mount,' observed Ensign Downley, as a line of scarlet-coated youths hung over the balcony of the Imperial Hotel, after breakfast and before mounting for the day.

Spareneck – 'No, that's for Tuesday. He wouldn't stand one today. What do you ride?'

Downley – 'Oh, I've a hack, one of Screwman's, Perpetual Motion they call him, because he never gets any rest. That's him, I believe, with the lofty-actioned hind-legs,' added he, pointing to a weedy string-halty bay passing below, high in bone and low in flesh.

'Who's o' the gaudy chestnut?' asked Caingey Thornton, who now appeared, wiping his fat lips after his second glass of *eau de vie*.

'That's Mr Sponge's,' replied *Spareneck*, in a low tone, knowing how soon a man catches his own name.

'A deuced fine horse he is, too,' observed Caingey, in a louder key; adding, 'Sponge has the finest lot of horses of any man in England – in the *world*, I may say.'

Mr Sponge himself now rose from the breakfast table, and was speedily followed by Mr Waffles and the rest of the party, some bearing sofa-pillows and cushions to place on the balustrades, to loll at their ease, in imitation of the Coventry Club swells in Piccadilly. Then our friends smoked their cigars, reviewed the cavalry, and criticised the ladies who passed below in the flies on their way to the meet.

'Come, old Bolter!' exclaimed one, 'here's Miss Bussington coming to look after you – got her mamma with her, too – so you may as well knock under at once, for she's determined to have you.'

'A devil of a woman the old un is, too,' observed Ensign Downley; 'she nearly frightened Jack Simpers of ours into fits, by asking what he meant after dancing three dances with her daughter one night.'

'My word, but Miss Jumpheavy must expect to do some execution today with that fine floating feather and her crimson satin dress and ermine,' observed Mr Waffles, as that estimable lady drove past in her

Victoria phaeton. 'She looks like the Queen of Sheba herself. But come, I suppose,' he added, taking a most diminutive Geneva watch out of his waistcoat-pocket, 'we should be going. See! there's your nag kicking up a shindy,' he said to Caingey Thornton, as the redoubtable brown was led down the street by a jean-jacketed groom, kicking and lashing out at everything he came near.

'I'll kick him,' observed Thornton, retiring from the balcony to the brandy-bottle, and helping himself to a pretty good-sized glass. He then extricated his large cutting whip from the confusion of whips with which it was mixed, and clonk, clonk, clonked downstairs to the door.

Multum in Parvo stopped the doorway, across whose shoulder Leather passed the following hints, in a low tone of voice, to Mr Sponge, as the latter stood drawing on his dog-skin gloves, the observed, as he flattered himself, of all observers.

'Mind, now,' said Leather, 'this oss as a will of his own; though he seems so quiet like, he's not always to be depended on: so be on the look-out for squalls.'

Sponge, having had a glass of brandy, just mounted with the air of a man thoroughly at home with his horse, and drawing the rein, with a slight feel of the spur, passed on from the door to make way for the redoubtable Hercules. Hercules was evidently not in a good humour. His ears were laid back, and the rolling white eye showed mischief. Sponge saw all this, and turned to see whether Thornton's clumsy, wash-ball seat, would be able to control the fractious spirit of the horse.

'Whoay!' roared Thornton, as his first dive at the stirrup missed, and was answered by a hearty kick out from the horse, the 'whoay' being given in a very different tone to the gentle, coaxing style of Mr Buckram and his men. Had it not been for the brandy within and the lookers-on without, there is no saying but Caingey would have declined the horse's further acquaintance. As it was, he quickly repeated his attempt at the stirrup with the same sort of domineering 'whoay,' adding, as he landed in the saddle and snatched at the reins, 'Do you think I stole you?'

Whatever the horse's opinion might be on that point, he didn't seem to care to express it, for finding kicking alone wouldn't do, he immediately commenced rearing too, and by a desperate plunge, broke away from the groom, before Thornton had either got him by the head or his feet in the stirrups. Three most desperate bounds he gave, rising at the bit as though he would come back over if the hold was not relaxed, and the fourth effort bringing him to the opposite kerbstone, he up again with such a bound and impetus that he crashed right through Messrs Frippery and Flummery's fine plate-glass window, to

the terror and astonishment of their elegant young counter-skippers, who were busy arranging their ribbons and finery for the day. Right through the window Hercules went, switching through book muslins and barèges as he would through a bullfinch, and attempting to make his exit by a large plate-glass mirror against the wall of the cloakroom beyond, which he dashed all to pieces with his head. Worse remains to be told. Multum in Parvo, seeing his old comrade's hindquarters disappearing through the window, just took the bit between his teeth, and followed, in spite of Mr Sponge's every effort to turn him; and when at length he got him hauled round, the horse was found to have decorated himself with a sky-blue *visite* trimmed with Honiton lace, which he wore like a charger on his way to the Crusades, or a steed bearing a knight to the Eglinton tournament.

Quick as it happened, and soon as it was over, all Laverick Wells seemed to have congregated in the street as our heroes rode out of the folding glass-doors.

CHAPTER XIII

An Old Friend

ABOUT A FORTNIGHT AFTER the above catastrophe, and as the recollection of it was nearly effaced by Miss Jumpheavy's abduction of Ensign Downley, our friend, Mr Waffles, on visiting his stud at the four o'clock stable-hour, found a most respectable, middle-aged, rosy-gilled, better-sort-of-farmer-looking man, straddling his tight drab-trousered legs, with a twisted ash plant propping his chin, behind the redoubtable Hercules. He had a bran-new hat on, a velvet-collared blue coat with metal buttons, that anywhere but in the searching glare and contrast of London might have passed for a spic-and-span new one; a small, striped, step-collared toilanette vest; and the aforesaid drab trousers, in the right-hand pocket of which his disengaged hand kept fishing up and slipping down an avalanche of silver, which made a pleasant musical accompaniment to his monetary conversation. On seeing Mr Waffles, the stranger touched his hat, and appeared to be about to retire, when Mr Figg, the stud-groom, thus addressed his master:

'This be Mr Buckram, sir, of London, sir; says he knows our brown 'orse, sir.'

'Ah, indeed,' observed Mr Waffles, taking a cigar from his mouth; 'knows no good of him, I should think. What part of London do you live in, Mr Buckram?' asked he.

'Why, I doesn't exactly live in London, my lord – that's to say, sir – a little way out of it, you know – have a little hindeppendence of my own, you understand.'

'Hang it, how should I understand anything of the sort – never set eyes on you before,' replied Mr Waffles.

The half-crowns now began to descend singly in the pocket, keeping up a protracted jingle, like the notes of a lazy, undecided musical snuff-box. By the time the last had dropped, Mr Buckram had collected himself sufficiently to resume.

Taking the ash-plant away from his mouth, with which he had been barricading his lips, he observed,

'I know'd that oss when Lord Bullfrog had him,' nodding his head at our old friend as he spoke.

'The deuce you did!' observed Mr Waffles; 'where was that?'

'In Leicestersheer,' replied Mr Buckram. 'I have a haunt as lives at Mount Sorrel; she has a little hindeppendence of her own, and I goes down 'casionaly to see her – in fact, I believes I'm her *bare*. Well, I was down there just at the beginnin' of the season, the 'ounds met at Kirby Gate – a mile or two to the south, you know, on the Leicester road – it was the first day of the season, in fact – and there was a great crowd, and I was one; and havin' a heye for an oss, I was struck with this one, you understand, bein', as I thought, a 'ticklar nice 'un. Lord Bullfrog's man was a ridin' of him, and he kept him outside the crowd, showin' off his pints, and passin' him backwards and forwards under people's noses, to 'tract the notish of the nobs – *parsecutin*, what I call – and I see'd Mr Sponge struck – I've known Mr Sponge many years, and a 'ticklar nice gent he is – well, Mr Sponge pulled hup, and said to the grum, "Who's o' that oss?" "My Lor' Bullfrog's, sir," said the man. "He's a deuced nice 'un," observed Mr Sponge, thinkin', as he was a lord's, he might praise 'im, seein', in all probability, he weren't for sale. "He is *that*," said the grum, patting him on the neck, as though he were special fond on him. "Is my lord out?" asked Mr Sponge. "No, sir; he's not comed down yet," replied the man, "nor do I know when he will come. He's been down at Bath for some time, 'sociatin' with the aldermen o' Bristol, and has thrown up a vast o' bad flesh – two stun' sin' last season – and he's afeared this oss won't be able to carry him, and so he writ to me to take 'im out today to show 'im. He'd carry *me*, I think," said Mr

Sponge, making hup his mind on the moment, jist as he makes hup his mind to ride at a fence – not that I think it's a good plan for a gent to show that he's sweet on an oss, for they're sure to make him pay for it. Howsomever, that's nouthere here nor there. Well, jist as Mr Sponge said this, Sir Richard driv' hup, and havin' got his oss, away we trotted to the goss jist below, and the next thing I see'd was Mr Sponge leadin' the 'ole field on this werry nag. Well, I heard no more till I got to Melton, for I didn't go to my haunt's at Mount Sorrel that night, and I saw little of the run, for my oss was rather puffy, livin' principally on chaff, bran mashies, Swedes, and soft food; and when I got to Melton, I heard 'ow Mr Sponge had bought this oss,' Mr Buckram nodding his head at the horse as he spoke, 'and 'ow that he'd given the matter o' two 'under'd – or I'm not sure it weren't two 'under'd-and-fifty guineas for 'im, and –'

'Well,' interrupted Mr Waffles, tired of his verbosity, 'and what did they say about the horse?'

'Why,' continued Mr Buckram, thoughtfully, propping his chin up with his stick, and drawing all the half-crowns up to the top of his pocket again, 'the fast 'spicious thing I heard was Sir Digby Snaffle's grum, Sam, sayin' to Captain Screwley's bat-man rum, jist afore the George Inn door,

'"Well, Jack, Tommy's sold the brown oss!"

'"N-o-o-r!" exclaimed Jack, starin' 'is eyes out, as if it were impossible.

'"He 'as, though," said Sam.

'"Well, then, I 'ope the gemman's fond o' walkin'," exclaimed Jack, bustin' out a laughin' and runnin' on.

'This rayther set me a thinkin',' continued Mr Buckram, dropping a second half-crown, which jinked against the nest-egg one left at the bottom, 'and fearin' that Mr Sponge had fallen 'mong the Philistines – which I was werry concerned about, for he's a real nice gent, but thoughtless, as many young gents are who 'ave plenty of tin – I made it my business to enquire 'bout this oss; and if he *is* the oss that I saw in Leicestersheer, and I 'ave little doubt about it (dropping two consecutive half-crowns as he spoke), though I've not seen him out, I –'

'Ah! well, I bought him of Mr Sponge, who said he got him from Lord Bullfrog,' interrupted Mr Waffles.

'Ah! then he *is* the oss, in course,' said Mr Buckram, with a sort of mournful chuck of the chin; 'he *is* the oss,' repeated he; 'well, then, he's a *dangerous* hanimal,' added he, letting slip three half-crowns.

'What does he do?' asked Mr Waffles.

'Do!' repeated Mr Buckram, 'do! he'll do for anybody.'

'Indeed,' responded Mr Waffles; adding, 'how could Mr Sponge sell me such a brute?'

'I doesn't mean to say, mind ye,' observed Mr Buckram, drawing back three half-crowns, as though he had gone that much too far – 'I doesn't mean to say, mind, that he's wot you call a misteched, runaway, rear-backwards-over-hanimal – but I mean to say he's a difficultish oss to ride – himpetuous – and one that, if he got the hupper 'and, would be werry likely to try and keep the hupper 'and – you understand me?' said he, eyeing Mr Waffles intently, and dropping four half-crowns as he spoke.

'I'm tellin' you nothin' but the truth,' observed Mr Buckram, after a pause, adding, 'in course it's nothin' to me, only bein' down 'ere on a visit to a friend, and 'earin' that the oss were 'ere I made bold to look in to see whether it was 'im or no. No offence, I 'opes,' added he, letting go the rest of the silver, and taking the prop from under his chin, with an obeisance as if he was about to be off.

'Oh, no offence at all,' rejoined Mr Waffles, 'no offence – rather the contrary. Indeed, I'm much obliged to you for telling me what you have done. Just stop half a minute,' added he, thinking he might as well try and get something more out of him. While Mr Waffles was considering his next question, Mr Buckram saved him the trouble of thinking by 'leading the gallop' himself.

'I believe 'im to be a *good* oss, and I believe 'im to be a *bad* oss,' observed Mr Buckram, sententiously. 'I believe that oss, with a bold rider on his back, and well away with the 'ounds, would beat most osses goin', but it's the start that's the difficulty with him; for if, on the other 'and he don't incline to go, all the spurrin', and quiltin', and leatherin' in the world won't make 'im. It'll be a mercy o' Providence if he don't cut out work for the crowner someday.'

'Hang the brute!' exclaimed Mr Waffles, in disgust; 'I've a good mind to have his throat cut.'

'Nay,' replied Mr Buckram, brightening up, and stirring the silver round and round in his pocket like a whirlpool, 'nay,' replied he, 'he's fit for summat better nor that.'

'*Not much*, I think,' replied Mr Waffles, pouting with disgust. He now stood silent for a few seconds.

'Well, but what did they mean by hoping Mr Sponge was fond of walking?' at length asked he.

'Oh, vy,' replied Mr Buckram, gathering all the money up again, 'I believe it was this 'ere,' beginning to drop them to half-minute time, and talking very slowly; 'the oss, I believe, got the better of Lord Bullfrog one day, somewhere a little on this side of Thrussinton – that,

you know, is where Sir 'Arry built his kennels – between Mount Sorrel and Melton in fact – and havin' got his Lordship off, who, I should tell you, is an uncommon fat 'un, he wouldn't let him on again, and he 'ad to lead him the matter of I don't know 'ow many miles,' Mr Buckram letting go the whole balance of silver in a rush, as if to denote that it was no joke.

'*The brute!*' observed Mr Waffles, in disgust, adding, 'Well, as you seem to have a pretty good opinion of him, suppose you buy him; I'll let you have him cheap.'

''Ord bless you, my lord – that's to say, sir!' exclaimed Buckram, shrugging up his shoulders, and raising his eyebrows as high as they would go, 'he'd be of no use to me, none votsomever – shouldn't know wot to do with him – never do for 'arness – besides, I 'ave a werry good machiner as it is – at least, he sarves my turn, and that's everything, you know. No, sir, no,' continued he, slowly and thoughtfully, dropping the silver to half-minute time; 'no, sir, no; if I might make free with a gen'leman o' your helegance,' continued he, after a pause, 'I'd say, sell 'im to a post-master or a bus-master, or some sich cattle as those, but I doesn't think I'd put 'im into the 'ands of no gen'leman, that's to say if I were *you*, at least,' added he.

'Well, then, will you speculate on him yourself for the bus-masters?' asked Mr Waffles, tired alike of the colloquy and the quadruped.

'Oh, vy, as to that,' replied Mr Buckram, with an air of the most perfect indifference, 'vy, as to that – not bein' nouter a post-master nor a bus-master – but 'avin', as I said before, a little hindeppendence o' my own, vy, I couldn't in course give such a bountiful price as if I could turn 'im to account at once; but if it would be any 'commodation to you,' added he, working the silver up into full cry, 'I wouldn't mind givin' you the with (worth) of 'im – say, deductin' expenses hup to town, and standin' at livery afore I finds a customer – expenses hup to town,' continued Mr Buckram, muttering to himself in apparent calculation, 'standin' at livery – three-and-sixpence a night, grum, and so on – I wouldn't mind,' continued he briskly, 'givin' of you twenty pund for 'im – if you'd throw me back a sov.,' continued he, seeing Mr Waffles' brow didn't contract into the frown he expected at having such a sum offered for his three hundred-guinea horse.

In the course of an hour, that wonderful invention of modern times – the Electric Telegraph – conveyed the satisfactory words 'All right' to our friend Mr Sponge, just as he was sitting down to dinner in a certain sumptuously sanded coffee-room in Conduit Street, who forthwith sealed and posted the following ready-written letter:

Bantam Hotel, Bond Street

SIR – I have been greatly surprised and hurt to hear that you have thought fit to impeach my integrity, and insinuate that I had taken you in with the brown horse. Such insinuations touch one in a tender point – one's self-respect. The bargain, I may remind you, was of your own seeking, and I told you at the time I knew nothing of the horse, having only ridden him once, and I also told you where I got him. To show how unjust and unworthy your insinuations have been, I have now to inform you that, having ascertained that Lord Bullfrog know he was vicious, I insisted on his lordship taking him back, and have only to add, that, on my receiving him from you, I will return you your bill.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

H. SPONGE

To W. Waffles, Esq., Imperial Hotel, Laverick Wells.

Mr Waffles was a good deal vexed and puzzled when he got this letter. He had parted with the horse, who was gone no one knew where, and Mr Waffles felt that he had used a certain freedom of speech in speaking of the transaction. Mr Sponge having left Laverick Wells, had, perhaps, led him a little astray with his tongue – slandering an absent man being generally thought a pretty safe game; it now seemed Mr Waffles was all wrong, and might have had his money back if he had not been in such a hurry to part with the horse. Like a good many people, he thought he had best eat up his words, which he did in the following manner:

Imperial Hotel, Laverick Wells

DEAR MR SPONGE – You are quite mistaken in supposing that I ever insinuated anything against *you* with regard to the horse. I said *he* was a beast, and it seems Lord Bullfrog admits it. However, never mind anything more about him, though I am equally obliged to you for the trouble you have taken. The fact is, I have parted with him.

We are having capital sport; never go out but we kill, sometimes a brace, sometimes a leash of foxes. Hoping you are recovered from the effects of your ride through the window, and will soon rejoin us, believe me, dear Mr Sponge,

Yours very sincerely,

W. WAFFLES

To which Mr Sponge shortly after rejoined as follows:

Bantam Hotel, Bond Street

DEAR WAFFLES – Yours to hand – I am glad to receive a disclaimer of any unworthy imputations respecting the brown horse. Such insinuations are only for horse-dealers, not for men of high gentlemanly feeling.

I am sorry to say we have not got out of the horse as I hoped. Lord Bullfrog, who is a most cantankerous fellow, insists upon having him back, according to the terms of my letter; I must therefore trouble you to hunt him up, and let us accommodate his lordship with him again. If you will say where he is, I may very likely know someone who can assist us in getting him. You will excuse this trouble, I hope, considering that it was to serve you that I moved in the matter, and insisted on returning him to his lordship, at a loss of £50 to myself, having only given £250 for him.

I remain, dear Waffles,

Yours sincerely,

H. SPONGE

To W. Waffles, Esq., Imperial Hotel, Laverick Wells.

Laverick Wells

DEAR SPONGE – I'm afraid Bullfrog will have to make himself happy without his horse, for I hav'n't the slightest idea where he is. I sold him to a cockneyfied, countryfied sort of a man, who said he had a small 'hindependence of his own' – somewhere, I believe, about London. He didn't give much for him, as you may suppose, when I tell you we paid for him chiefly in silver. If I were you, I wouldn't trouble myself about him.

Yours very truly,

W. WAFFLES

To H. Sponge, Esq.

Our hero addressed Mr Waffles again, in the course of a few days, as follows:

DEAR WAFFLES – I am sorry to say Bullfrog won't be put off without the horse. He says I insisted on his taking him back, and now he insists on having him. I have had his lawyer, Mr Chousam, of the great firm of Chousam, Doem, and Co., of Throgmorton Street, at me, who says his lordship will play old gooseberry with us if we don't return him by Saturday. Pray put on all steam, and look him up.

Yours in haste,

H. SPONGE

To W. Waffles, Esq.

Mr Waffles did put on all steam, and so successfully that he ran the horse to ground at our friend Mr Buckram's. Though the horse was in the box adjoining the house, Mr Buckram declared he had sold him to go to 'Hireland,' to what county he really couldn't say, nor to what hunt; all he knew was, the gentleman said he was a 'captin,' and lived in a castle.

Mr Waffles communicated the intelligence to Sponge, requesting him to do the best he could for him, who reported what his 'best' was in the following letter:

DEAR WAFFLES – My lawyer has seen Chousam, and deuced stiff he says he was. It seems Bullfrog is indignant at being accused of a 'do,' and having got me in the wrong box, by not being able to return the horse as claimed, he meant to work me. At first Chousam would hear of nothing but 'l-a-w.' Bullfrog's wounded honour could only be salved that way. Gradually, however, we diverged from l-a-w to £-s.-d.; and the upshot of it is, that he will advise his lordship to take £250 and be done with it. It's a bore; but I did it for the best, and shall be glad now to know your wishes on the subject. Meanwhile, I remain,

Yours, very truly,

H. SPONGE

To W. Waffles, Esq.

Formerly a remittance by post used to speak for itself. The tender-fingered clerks could detect an enclosure, however skilfully folded. Few people grudged double postage in those days. Now one letter is so much like another, that nothing short of opening them makes one any wiser. Mr Sponge received Mr Waffles' answer from the hands of the waiter with the sort of feeling that it was only the continuation of their correspondence. Judge, then, of his delight, when a nice, clean, crisp promissory note, on a five-shilling stamp, fell quivering to the floor. A few lines, expressive of Mr Waffles' gratitude for the trouble our hero had taken, and hopes that it would not be inconvenient to take a note at two months, accompanied it. At first Mr Sponge was overjoyed. It would set him up for the season. He thought how he'd spend it. He had half a mind to go to Melton. There were no heiresses there, or else he would. Leamington would do, only it was rather expensive. Then he thought he might as well have done Waffles a little more.

'Confound it!' exclaimed Sponge, 'I don't do myself justice! I'm too much of a gentleman! I should have had five 'under'd – such an ass as Waffles deserves to be done!'

CHAPTER XIV

A New Scheme

OUR FRIEND SOAPEY was now in good feather; he had got a large price for his good-for-nothing horse, with a very handsome bonus for not getting him back, making him better off than he had been for some time. Gentleman of his calibre are generally extremely affluent in everything except cash. They have bills without end – bills that nobody will touch, and book debts in abundance – book debts entered with metallic pencils in curious little clasped pocketbooks, with such utter disregard of method that it would puzzle an accountant to comb them into anything like shape.

It is true, what Mr Sponge got from Mr Waffles were bills – but they were good bills, and of such reasonable date as the most exacting of the Jew tribe would 'do' for twenty per cent Mr Sponge determined to keep the game alive, and getting Hercules and Multum in Parvo together again, he added a showy piebald hack, that Buckram had just got from some circus people, who had not been able to train him to their work.

The question now was, where to manœuvre this imposing stud – a problem that Mr Sponge quickly solved.

Among the many strangers who rushed into indiscriminate friendship with our hero at Laverick Wells, was Mr Jawleyford, of Jawleyford Court, in —shire. Jawleyford was a great humbug. He was a fine, off-hand, open-hearted, cheery sort of fellow, who was always delighted to see you, would start at the view, and stand with open arms in the middle of the street, as though quite overjoyed at the meeting. Though he never gave dinners, nor anything where he was, he asked everybody, at least everybody who did give them, to visit him at Jawleyford Court. If a man was fond of fishing, he must come to Jawleyford Court, *he must, indeed*; he would take no refusal, he wouldn't leave him alone till he promised. He would show him such fishing – no waters in the world to compare with his. The Shannon and the Tweed were not to be spoken of in the same day as his waters in the Swiftley.

Shooting, the same way. 'By Jove! are you a shooter? Well, I'm

delighted to hear it. Well, now, we shall be at home all September, and up to the middle of October, and you must just come to us at your own time, and I will give you some of the finest partridge and pheasant shooting you ever saw in your life; Norfolk can show nothing to what I can. Now, my good fellow say the word; *do* say you'll come, and then it will be a settled thing, and I shall look forward to it with such pleasure!

He was equally magnanimous about hunting, though, like a good many people who have 'had their hunts,' he pretended that his day was over, though he was a most zealous promoter of the sport. So he asked everybody who did hunt to come and see him and what with his hearty, affable manner, and the unlimited nature of his invitations, he generally passed for a deuced hospitable, good sort of fellow, and came in for no end of dinners and other entertainments for his wife and daughters, of which he had two – daughters, we mean, not wives. His time was about up at Laverick Wells when Mr Sponge arrived there; nevertheless, during the few days that remained to them, Mr Jawleyford contrived to scrape a pretty intimate acquaintance with a gentleman whose wealth was reported to equal, if it did not exceed, that of Mr Waffles himself. The following was the closing scene between them:

'Mr Sponge,' said he, getting our hero by both hands in Culeyford's Billiard Room, and shaking them as though he could not bear the idea of separation; 'my dear Mr Sponge,' added he, 'I *grieve* to say we're going tomorrow; I had hoped to have stayed a little longer, and to have enjoyed the pleasure of your most agreeable society.' (This was true; he would have stayed, only his banker wouldn't let him have any more money.) 'But, however, I won't say adieu,' continued he; 'no, I *won't* say adieu! I live, as you perhaps know, in one of the best hunting counties in England – my Lord Scamperdale's – Scamperdale and I are like brothers; I can do whatever I like with him – he has, I may say, the finest pack of hounds in the world; his huntsman, Jack Frostyface, I really believe, cannot be surpassed. Come, then, my dear fellow,' continued Mr Jawleyford, increasing the grasp and shake of the hands, and looking most earnestly in Sponge's face, as if deprecating a refusal; 'come then, my dear fellow, and see us; we will do whatever we can to entertain and make you comfortable. Scamperdale shall keep our side of the country till you come; there are capital stables at Lucksford, close to the station, and you shall have a stall for your hack at Jawleyford, and a man to look after him, if you like; so now, don't say nay – your time shall be ours – we shall be at home all the rest of the winter, and I flatter myself, if you once come down, you will be inclined to repeat your visit; *at least, I hope so.*'

There are two common sayings; one, 'that birds of a feather flock

together;' the other, 'that two of a trade never agree;' which often seem to us to contradict each other in the actual intercourse of life. Humbugs certainly have the knack of drawing together, and yet they are always excellent friends, and will vouch for the goodness of each other in a way that few straightforward men think it worth their while to adopt with regard to indifferent people. Indeed, humbugs are not always content to defend their absent brother humbugs when they hear them abused, but they will frequently lug each other in neck and crop, apparently for no other purpose than that of proclaiming what excellent fellows they are, and see if anybody will take up the cudgels against them.

Mr Sponge, albeit with a considerable cross of the humbug himself, and one who perfectly understood the usual worthlessness of general invitations, was yet so taken with Mr Jawleyford's hail fellow-well-met, earnest sort of manner, that, adopting the convenient and familiar solution in such matters, that there is no rule without an exception, concluded that Mr Jawleyford *was* the exception, and really meant what he said.

Independently of the attractions offered by hunting, which were both strong and cogent, we have said there were two young ladies, to whom fame attached the enormous fortunes common in cases where there is a large property and no sons. Still Sponge was a wary bird, and his experience of the worthlessness of most general invitations made him think it just possible that it might not suit Mr Jawleyford to receive him now, at the particular time he wanted to go; so after duly considering the case, and also the impressive nature of the invitation, so recently given, too, he determined not to give Jawleyford the chance of refusing him, but just to say he was coming, and drop down upon him before he could say 'no.' Accordingly, he penned the following epistle:

Bantam Hotel, Bond Street, London

DEAR JAWLEYFORD – I purpose being with you tomorrow, by the express train, which I see, by Bradshaw, arrives at Lucksford a quarter to three. I shall only bring two hunters and a hack, so perhaps you could oblige me by taking them in for the short time I shall stay, as it would not be convenient for me to separate them. Hoping to find Mrs Jawleyford and the young ladies well, I remain, dear sir,

Yours very truly,

H. SPONGE

To – Jawleyford, Esq., Jawleyford Court, Lucksford.

'Curse the fellow!' exclaimed Jawleyford, nearly choking himself with a fish bone, as he opened and read the foregoing at breakfast. 'Curse the fellow!' he repeated, stamping the letter under foot, as though he would crush it to atoms. 'Who ever saw such a piece of impudence as that!'

'What's the matter, my dear?' enquired Mrs Jawleyford, alarmed lest it was her dunning jeweller writing again.

'Matter!' shrieked Jawleyford, in a tone that sounded through the thick wall of the room, and caused the hobbling old gardener on the terrace to peep in at the heavy-mullioned window. 'Matter!' repeated he, as though he had got his *coup de grace*; 'look there,' added he, handing over the letter.

'Oh, my dear,' rejoined Mrs Jawleyford, soothingly, as soon as she saw it was not what she expected. 'Oh, my dear, I'm sure there's nothing to make you put yourself so much out of the way.'

'No!' roared Jawleyford, determined not to be done out of his grievance. 'No!' repeated he; 'do you call that nothing?'

'Why, nothing to make yourself unhappy about,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, rather pleased than otherwise; for she was glad it was not from rings, the jeweller, and, moreover, hated the monotony of Jawleyford Court, and was glad of anything to relieve it. If she had had her own way, she would have gadded about at watering-places all the year round.

'Well,' said Jawleyford, with a toss of the head and a shrug of resignation, 'you'll have me in gaol; I see that.'

'Nay, my dear J.,' rejoined his wife, soothingly; 'I'm sure you've plenty of money.'

'Have I?' ejaculated Jawleyford. 'Do you suppose, if I had, I'd have left Laverick Wells without paying Miss Bustleby, or given a bill at three months for the house-rent?'

'Well, but my dear, you've nothing to do but tell Mr Screwentight to get you some money from the tenants.'

'Money from the tenants!' replied Mr Jawleyford. 'Screwentight tells me he can't get another farthing from any man on the estate.'

'Oh, pooh!' said Mrs Jawleyford; 'you're far too good to them. I always say Screwentight looks far more to their interest than he does to yours.'

Jawleyford, we may observe, was one of the rather numerous race of paper-booted, pen-and-ink landowners. He always dressed in the country as he would in St James's Street, and his communications with his tenantry were chiefly confined to dining with them twice a year in the great entrance-hall, after Mr Screwentight had eased them of their cash in the steward's-room. Then Mr Jawleyford would shine forth the

very impersonification of what a landlord ought to be. Dressed in the height of the fashion, as if by his clothes to give the lie to his words, he would expatiate on the delights of such meetings of equality; declare that, next to those spent with his family, the only really happy moments of his life were those when he was surrounded by his tenantry; he doated on the manly character of the English farmer. Then he would advert to the great antiquity of the Jawleyford family, many generations of whom looked down upon them from the walls of the old hall; some on their war-steeds, some armed cap-à-pie, some in court-dresses, some in Spanish ones, one in a white dress with gold brocade breeches and a hat with an enormous plume, old Jawleyford (father of the present one) in the Windsor uniform, and our friend himself, the very prototype of what then stood before them. Indeed, he had been painted in the act of addressing his hereditary chaw-bacons in the hall in which the picture was suspended. There he stood, with his bright auburn hair (now rather badger-pied, perhaps, but still very passable by candlelight) – his bright auburn hair, we say, swept boldly off his lofty forehead, his hazy grey eyes flashing with the excitement of drink and animation, his left hand reposing on the hip of his well-fitting black pantaloons, while the right one, radiant with rings, and trimmed with upturned wristband, sawed the air, as he rounded off the periods of the well-accustomed saws.

Jawleyford, like a good many people, was very hospitable when in full fig – two soups, two fishes, and the necessary concomitants; but he would see anyone far enough before he would give him a dinner merely because he wanted one. That sort of ostentatious banqueting has about brought country society in general to a dead lock. People tire of the constant revision of plate, linen, and china.

Mrs Jawleyford, on the other hand, was a very rough-and-ready sort of woman, never put out of her way; and though she constantly preached the old doctrine that girls 'are much better single than married,' she was always on the look-out for opportunities of contradicting her assertions.

She was an Irish lady, with a pedigree almost as long as Jawleyford's, but more compressible pride, and if she couldn't get a duke, she would take a marquis or an earl, or even put up with a rich commoner.

The perusal, therefore, of Sponge's letter, operated differently upon her to what it did upon her husband, and though she would have liked a little more time, perhaps, she did not care to take him as they were. Jawleyford, however, resisted violently. It would be most particularly inconvenient to him to receive company at that time. If Mr Sponge had gone through the whole three hundred and sixty-five days in the year,

he could not have hit upon a more inconvenient one for him. Besides, he had no idea of people writing in that sort of a way, saying they were coming, without giving him the chance of saying no.

'Well, but my dear, I dare say you asked him,' observed Mrs Jawleyford.

Jawleyford was silent, the scene in the billiard-room recurring to his mind,

'I've often told you, my dear,' continued Mrs Jawleyford, kindly, 'that you shouldn't be so free with your invitations if you don't want people to come; things are very different now to what they were in the old coaching and posting days, when it took a day and a night and half the next day to get here, and I don't know how much money besides. You might then invite people with safety, but it is very different now, when they have nothing to do but put themselves into the express-train and whisk down in a few hours.'

'Well, but confound him, I didn't ask his horses,' exclaimed Jawleyford; 'nor will I have them either,' continued he, with a jerk of the head, as he got up and rang the bell, as though determined to put a stop to that at all events.

'Samuel,' said he, to the dirty page of a boy who answered the summons, 'tell John Watson to go down to the Railway Tavern directly, and desire them to get a three-stalled stable ready for a gentleman's horses that are coming today – a gentleman of the name of Sponge,' added he, lest anyone else should chance to come and usurp them – 'and tell John to meet the express train, and tell the gentleman's groom where it is.'

CHAPTER XV

Jawleyford Court

TRUE TO A MINUTE, the hissing engine drew the swiftly-gliding train beneath the elegant and costly station at Lucksford – an edifice presenting a rare contrast to the wretched old red-tiled, five-windowed house, called the Red Lion, where a brandy-faced blacksmith of a landlord used to emerge from the adjoining smithy, to take charge of anyone who might arrive per coach for that part of the country.

Mr Sponge was quickly on the platform, seeing to the detachment of his horse-box.

Just as the cavalry was about got into marching order, up rode John Watson, a ragamuffin-looking gamekeeper, in a green plush coat, with a very tarnished laced hat, mounted on a very shaggy white pony, whose hide seemed quite impervious to the visitations of a heavily-knotted dogwhip, with which he kept saluting his shoulders and sides.

'Please, sir,' said he, riding up to Mr Sponge, with a touch of the old hat, 'I've got you a capital three-stall stable at the Railway Tavern, here,' pointing to a newly-built brick house standing on the rising ground.

'Oh! but I'm going to Jawleyford Court,' responded our friend, thinking the man was the 'tout' of the tavern.

'Mr Jawleyford don't take in horses, sir,' rejoined the man, with another touch of the hat.

'He'll take in *mine*,' observed Mr Sponge, with an air of authority.

'Oh, I beg pardon, sir,' replied the keeper, thinking he had made a mistake; 'it was Mr Sponge whose horses I had to bespeak stalls for,' touching his hat profusely as he spoke.

'Well, *this* be Mister Sponge,' observed Leather, who had been listening attentively to what passed.

'Deed!' said the keeper, again turning to our hero, with an 'I beg pardon, sir, but the stable *is* for you then, sir – for Mr Sponge, sir.'

'How do you know that?' demanded our friend.

'Cause Mr Spigot, the butler, says to me, says he, "Mr Watson," says he – my name's Watson, you see,' continued the speaker sawing away at his hat, 'my name's Watson, you see, and I'm the head gamekeeper. "Mr Watson," says he, "you must go down to the tavern and order a three-stall stable for a gentleman of the name of Sponge, whose horses are a comin' today;" and in course I've come 'cordingly,' added Watson.

'A *three-stall'd* stable!' observed Mr Sponge, with an emphasis.

'A *three-stall'd* stable,' repeated Mr Watson.

'Confound him, but he said he'd take in a hack at all events,' observed Sponge, with a sideways shake of the head; 'and a hack he *shall* take in, too,' he added. 'Are your stables full at Jawleyford Court?' he asked.

'Ord bless you, no, sir,' replied Watson with a leer; 'there's nothin' in them but a couple of weedy hacks and a pair of old worn-out carriage-horses.'

'Then I can get this hack taken in, at all events,' observed Sponge, laying his hand on the neck of the piebald as he spoke.

'Why, as to that,' replied Mr Watson, with a shake of the head, 'I can't say nothin'.'

'*I must, though,*' rejoined Sponge, tartly; 'he said he'd take in my hack, or I wouldn't have come.'

'Well, sir,' observed the keeper, 'you know best, sir.'

'Confounded screw!' muttered Sponge, turning away to give his orders to Leather. 'I'll *work* him for it,' he added. 'He sha'n't get rid of *me* in a hurry – at least not unless I can get a better billet elsewhere.'

Having arranged the parting with Leather, and got a cart to carry his things, Mr Sponge mounted the piebald, and put himself under the guidance of Watson to be conducted to his destination. The first part of the journey was performed in silence, Mr Sponge not being particularly well pleased at the reception his request to have his horses taken in had met with. This silence he might perhaps have preserved throughout had it not occurred to him, that he might pump something out of the servant about the family he was going to visit.

'That's not a bad-like old cob of yours,' he observed, drawing rein so as to let the shaggy white come alongside of him.

'He belies his looks, then,' replied Watson, with a grin of his cadaverous face, 'for he's just as bad a beast as ever looked through a bridle. It's a perfect disgrace to a gentleman to put a man on such a beast.'

Sponge saw the sort of man he had got to deal with, and proceeded accordingly.

'Have you lived long with Mr Jawleyford?' he asked.

'No, nor *will* I, if I can help it,' replied Watson, with another grin and another touch of the old hat. Touching his hat was about the only piece of propriety he was up to.

'What, he's not a brick then?' asked Sponge.

'*Mean man,*' replied Watson with a shake of the head; '*mean man,*' he repeated. 'You're nowise connected with the fam'ly, I s'pose?' he asked with a look of suspicion lest he might be committing himself.

'No,' replied Sponge; 'no; merely an acquaintance. We met at Laverick Wells, and he pressed me to come and see him.'

'Indeed!' said Watson, feeling at ease again.

'Who did you live with before you came here?' asked Mr Sponge after a pause.

'I lived many years – the greater part of my life, indeed – with Sir Harry Swift. *He* was a *real* gentleman now, if you like – free, open-handed gentleman – none of your close shavin', cheese-parin' sort of gentlemen, or imitation gentlemen, as I calls them, but a man who knew what was due to good servants and gave them it. We had good

wages, and all the proper "reglars." Bless you, I could sell a new suit of clothes there every year, instead of having to wear the last keeper's cast-offs, and a hat that would disgrace anything but a flay-crow. If the linin' wasn't stuffed full of gun waddin' it would be over my nose,' he observed, taking it off and adjusting the layer of wadding as he spoke.

'You should have stuck to Sir Harry,' observed Mr Sponge.

'*I did,*' rejoined Watson, 'I did, I stuck to him to the last. I'd have been with him now, only he couldn't get a manor at Boulogne, and a keeper was of no use without one.'

'What, he went to Boulogne, did he?' observed Mr Sponge.

'Aye, the more's the pity,' replied Watson. 'He was a gentleman, every inch of him,' he added, with a shake of the head and a sigh, as if recurring to more prosperous times. 'He was what a gentleman ought to be,' he continued, 'not one of your poor, pryin', inquisitive critturs, what's always fancyin' themselves cheated. I ordered everything in my department, and paid for it too; and never had a bill disputed or even commented on. I might have charged for a ton of powder, and never had nothin' said.'

'Mr Jawleyford's not likely to find his way to Boulogne, I suppose?' observed Mr Sponge.

'Not he!' exclaimed Watson, 'not he! – safe bird – *very.*'

'He's rich, I suppose?' continued Sponge, with an air of indifference.

'Why, *I* should say he was; though others say he's not,' replied Watson, cropping the old pony with the dog-whip, as it nearly fell on its nose. 'He can't fail to be rich, with all his property; though they're desperate hands for gaddin' about; always off to some waterin' place or another, lookin' for husbands, I suppose. I wonder,' he continued, 'that gentlemen can't settle at home, and amuse themselves with coursin' and shootin'.' Mr Watson, like many servants, thinking that the bulk of a gentleman's income should be spent in promoting the particular sport over which they preside.

With this and similar discourse, they beguiled the short distance between the station and the Court – a distance, however, that looked considerably greater after the flying rapidity of the rail. But for these occasional returns to *terra firma*, people would begin to fancy themselves birds. After rounding a large but gently swelling hill, over the summit of which the road, after the fashion of old roads, led, our traveller suddenly looked down upon the wide vale of Sniperdown, with Jawleyford Court glittering with a bright open aspect, on a fine, gradual elevation, above the broad, smoothly-gliding river. A clear atmosphere, indicative either of rain or frost, disclosed a vast tract of wild, flat, ill-cultivated-looking country to the south, little interrupted

by woods or signs of population; the whole losing itself, as it were, in an indistinct gray outline, commingling with the fleecy white clouds in the distance.

'Here we be,' observed Watson, with a nod towards where a tarnished red-and-gold flag floated, or rather flapped lazily in the winter's breeze, above an irregular mass of towers, turrets, and odd-shaped chimneys.

Jawleyford Court was a fine old mansion, partaking more of the character of a castle than a Court, with its keep and towers, battlements, heavily grated mullioned windows, and machicolated gallery. It stood, sombre and gray, in the midst of gigantic but now leafless sycamores – trees that had to thank themselves for being sycamores; for, had they been oaks, or other marketable wood, they would have been made into bonnets or shawls long before now. The building itself was irregular, presenting different sorts of architecture, from pure Gothic down to some even perfectly modern buildings; still, viewed as a whole, it was massive and imposing: and as Mr Sponge looked down upon it, he thought far more of Jawleyford and Co. than he did as the mere occupants of a modest, white-stuccoed, green-verandahed house, at Laverick Wells. Nor did his admiration diminish as he advanced, and, crossing by a battlemented bridge over the moat, he viewed the massive character of the buildings rising grandly from their rocky foundation. An imposing, solemn-toned old clock began striking four, as the horsemen rode under the Gothic portico whose notes re-echoed and reverberated, and at last lost themselves among the towers and pinnacles of the building. Sponge, for a moment, was awe-stricken at the magnificence of the scene, feeling that it was what he would call 'a good many cuts above him;' but he soon recovered his wonted impudence.

'He *would* have me,' thought he, recalling the pressing nature of the Jawleyford invitation.

'If you'll hold my nag,' said Watson, throwing himself off the shaggy white, 'I'll ring the bell,' added he, running up a wide flight of steps to the hall-door. A riotous peal announced the arrival.

CHAPTER XVI

The Jawleyford Establishment

THE LOUD PEAL of the Jawleyford Court door-bell, announcing Mr Sponge's arrival, with which we closed the last chapter, found the inhabitants variously engaged preparing for his reception.

Mrs Jawleyford, with the aid of a very indifferent cook, was endeavouring to arrange a becoming dinner; the young ladies, with the aid of a somewhat better sort of maid, were attractifying themselves, each looking with considerable jealousy on the efforts of the other; and Mr Jawleyford was trotting from room to room, eyeing the various pictures of himself, wondering which was now the most like, and watching the emergence of curtains, carpets, and sofas from their brown-holland covers.

A gleam of sunshine seemed to reign throughout the mansion; the long-covered furniture appearing to have gained freshness by its retirement, just as a newly done-up hat surprises the wearer by its goodness; a few days, however, soon restore the defects of either.

All these arrangements were suddenly brought to a close by the peal of the door-bell, just as the little stage-tinkle of a theatre stops preparation, and compels the actors to stand forward as they are. Mrs Jawleyford threw aside her silk apron, and took a hasty glance of her face in the old eagle-topped mirror in the still-room; the young ladies discarded their coarse dirty pocket-handkerchiefs, and gently drew elaborately-fringed ones through their taper fingers to give them an air of use, as they took a hasty review of themselves in the swing mirrors; the housemaid hurried off with a whole armful of brown holland; and Jawleyford threw himself into attitude in an elaborately-carved, richly-cushioned, easy-chair, with a Disraeli's *Life of Lord George Bentinck* in his hand. But Jawleyford's thoughts were far from his book. He was sitting on thorns lest there might not be a proper guard of honour to receive Mr Sponge at the entrance.

Jawleyford, as we said before, was not the man to entertain unless he could do it 'properly;' and, as we all have our pitch-notes of propriety up to which we play, we may state that Jawleyford's note was a butler

and two footmen. A butler and two footmen he looked upon as perfectly indispensable to receiving company. He chose to have two footmen to follow the butler, who followed the gentleman to the spacious flight of steps leading from the great hall to the portico, as he mounted his horse. The world is governed a good deal by appearances.

Mr Jawleyford started life with two most unimpeachable Johns. They were nearly six feet high, heads well up, and legs that might have done for models for a sculptor. They powdered with the greatest propriety, and by two o'clock each day were silk-stockinged and pumped in full-dress Jawleyford livery; sky-blue coats with massive silver aiguillettes, and broad silver seams down the front and round their waistcoat-pocket flaps; silver garters at their crimson plush breeches' knees: and thus attired, they were ready to turn out with the butler to receive visitors, and conduct them back to their carriages. Gradually they came down in style, but not in number, and, when Mr Sponge visited Mr Jawleyford, he had a sort of out-of-door man-of-all-work who metamorphosed himself into a second footman at short notice.

'My dear Mr Sponge! – I am delighted to see you!' exclaimed Mr Jawleyford, rising from his easy-chair, and throwing his Disraeli's *Bentinck* aside, as Mr Spigot, the butler, in a deep sonorous voice, announced our worthy friend. 'This is, indeed, most truly kind of you,' continued Jawleyford, advancing to meet him; and getting our friend by both hands, he began working his arms up and down like the under man in a saw-pit. 'This is, indeed, most truly kind,' he repeated; 'I assure you I shall never forget it. It's just what I like – it's just what Mrs Jawleyford likes – it's just what we *all* like – coming without fuss or ceremony. Spigot!' he added, hailing old Pomposo as the latter was slowly withdrawing, thinking what a humbug his master was – 'Spigot!' he repeated in a louder voice; 'let the ladies know Mr Sponge is here. Come to the fire, my dear fellow,' continued Jawleyford, clutching his guest by the arm, and drawing him towards where an ample grate of indifferent coals was crackling and spluttering beneath a magnificent old oak mantelpiece of the richest and costliest carved work. 'Come to the fire, my dear fellow,' he repeated, 'for you feel cold; and I don't wonder at it, for the day is cheerless and uncomfortable, and you've had a long ride. Will you take anything before dinner?'

'What time do you dine?' asked Mr Sponge, rubbing his hands as he spoke.

'Six o'clock,' replied Mr Jawleyford, 'six o'clock – say six o'clock – not particular to a moment – days are short, you see – days are short.'

'I think I should like a glass of sherry and a biscuit, then,' observed Mr Sponge.

And forthwith the bell was rung, and in due course of time Mr Spigot arrived with a tray, followed by the Miss Jawleyfords, who had rather expected Mr Sponge to be shown into the drawing-room to them, where they had composed themselves very prettily, one working a parrot in chenille, the other with a lapful of crochet.

The Miss Jawleyfords – Amelia and Emily – were lively girls; hardly beauties – at least not sufficiently so to attract attention in a crowd, but still, girls well calculated to 'bring a man to book,' in the country. Mr Thackeray, who bound up all the home truths in circulation, and many that exist only in the inner chambers of the heart, calling the whole *Vanity Fair*, says, we think (though we don't exactly know where to lay hand on the passage), that it is not your real striking beauties who are the most dangerous – at all events, that do the most execution – but sly, quiet sort of girls, who do not strike the beholder at first sight, but steal insensibly upon him as he gets acquainted. The Miss Jawleyfords were of this order. Seen in plain morning gowns, a man would meet them in the street, without either turning round or making an observation, good, bad, or indifferent; but in the close quarters of a country house, with all the able assistance of first-rate London dresses, well flounced and set out, each bent on doing the agreeable, they became dangerous. The Miss Jawleyfords were uncommonly well got up, and Juliana, their mutual maid, deserved great credit for the impartiality she displayed in arraying them. There wasn't a halfpenny's worth of choice as to which was the best. This was the more creditable to the maid, inasmuch as the dresses – sea-green *glacés* – were rather dashed; and the worse they looked, the likelier they would be to become her property. Half-dashed dresses, however, that would look rather seedy by contrast, come out very fresh in the country, especially in winter, when day begins to close in at four. And here we may observe, what a dreary time is that which intervenes between the arrival of a guest and the dinner hour, in the dead winter months in the country. The English are a desperate people for overweighting their conversational powers. They have no idea of penning up their small talk, and bringing it to bear in generous flow upon one particular hour; but they keep dribbling it out throughout the livelong day, wearying their listeners without benefiting themselves – just as a careless waggoner scatters his load on the road. Few people are insensible to the advantage of having their champagne brisk, which can only be done by keeping the cork in; but few ever think of keeping the cork of their own conversation in. See a Frenchman – how light and buoyant he trips into a drawing-room, fresh from the satisfactory scrutiny of the looking-glass, with all the news, and jokes, and tittle-tattle of the day, in full bloom! How sparkling and radiant he

is, with something smart and pleasant to say to everyone! How thoroughly happy and easy he is and what a contrast to phlegmatic John Bull, who stands with his great red fists doubled, looking as if he thought whoever spoke to him would be wanting him to endorse a bill of exchange! But, as we said before, the dread hour before dinner is an awful time in the country – frightful when there are two hours, and never a subject in common for the company to work upon. Laverick Wells and their mutual acquaintance was all Sponge and Jawleyford's stock-in-trade; and that was a very small capital to begin upon, for they had been there together too short a time to make much of a purse of conversation. Even the young ladies, with their enquiries after the respective flirtations – how Miss Sawney and Captain Snubnose were 'getting on'? and whether the rich Widow Spankley was likely to bring Sir Thomas Greedey to book? – failed to make up a conversation; for Sponge knew little of the ins and outs of these matters, his attention having been more directed to Mr Waffles than anyone else. Still, the mere questions, put in a playful, womanly way, helped the time on, and prevented things coming to that frightful dead-lock of silence, that causes an involuntary inward exclamation of 'How *am I* to get through the time with this man!' There are people who seem to think that sitting and looking at each other constitutes society. Women have a great advantage over men in the talking way; they have always something to say. Let a lot of women be huddled together throughout the whole of a livelong day, and they will yet have such a balance of conversation at night, as to render it necessary to convert a bedroom into a clearing-house, to get rid of it. Men, however, soon get high and dry, especially before dinner; and a host ought to be at liberty to read the Riot Act, and disperse them to their bedrooms, till such times as they wanted to eat and drink.

A most scientifically-sounded gong, beginning low, like distant thunder, and gradually increasing its murmur till it filled the whole mansion with its roar, at length relieved all parties from the labour of further efforts; and, looking at his watch, Jawleyford asked Mrs Jawleyford, in an innocent, indifferent sort of way, which was Mr Sponge's room; though he had been fussing about it not long before, and dusting the portrait of himself in his green-and-gold yeomanry uniform, with an old pocket-handkerchief.

'The crimson room, my dear,' replied the well-drilled Mrs Jawleyford, and Spigot coming with candles, Jawleyford preceded 'Mr Sponge' up a splendid richly-carved oak staircase, of such gradual and easy rise that an invalid might almost have been drawn up it in a garden-chair.

Passing a short distance along a spacious corridor, Mr Jawleyford

presently opened a door to the right, and led the way into a large gloomy room, with a little newly-lighted wood fire crackling in an enormous grate, making darkness visible, and drawing the cold out of the walls. We need scarcely say it was that terrible room – the best; with three creaking, ill-fitting windows, and heavy crimson satin-damask furniture, so old as scarcely to be able to sustain its own weight.

'Ah! here you are,' observed Mr Jawleyford, as he nearly tripped over Sponge's luggage as it stood by the fire. 'Here you are,' repeated he, giving the candle a flourish, to show the size of the room, and draw it back on the portrait of himself above the mantelpiece. 'Ah! I declare here's an old picture of myself,' said he, holding the candle up to the face, as if he hadn't seen it for some time – 'a picture that was done when I was in the Bumperkin yeomanry,' continued he, passing the light before the facings. 'That was considered a good likeness at the time,' said he, looking affectionately at it, and feeling his nose to see if it was still the same size: 'ours was a capital corps – one of the best, if not the very best in the service. The inspecting officer always spoke of it in the highest possible terms – especially of *my* company, which really was just as perfect as anything my Lord Cardigan, or any of your crack disciplinarians, can produce. However, never mind,' continued he, lowering the candle, seeing Mr Sponge didn't enter into the spirit of the thing; 'you'll be wanting to dress. You'll find hot water on the table yonder,' pointing to the far corner of the room, where the outline of a jug might just be descried; 'there's a bell in the bed if you want anything; and dinner will be ready as soon as you are dressed. You needn't make yourself very fine,' added he, as he retired; 'for we are only ourselves: hope we shall have some of our neighbours tomorrow or next day, but we are rather badly off for neighbours just here – at least for short-notice neighbours.' So saying, he disappeared through the dark doorway.

The latter statement was true enough, for Jawleyford, though apparently such a fine open-hearted, sociable sort of man, was in reality a very quarrelsome, troublesome fellow. He quarrelled with all his neighbours in succession, generally getting through them every two or three years; and his acquaintance were divided into two classes – the best and the worst fellows under the sun. A stranger revising Jawleyford after an absence of a year or two, would very likely find the best fellows of former days transformed into the worst ones of that. Thus, Parson Hobanob, that pet victim of country caprice, would come in and go out of season like lamb or asparagus; Major Moustache and Jawleyford would be as 'thick as thieves' one day, and at daggers drawn the next; Squire Squaretoes, of Squaretoes House, and he, were continually

kissing or cutting; and even distance – nine miles of bad road, and, of course, heavy tolls – could not keep the peace between lawyer Seedywig and him. What between rows and reconciliations, Jawleyford was always at work.

CHAPTER XVII

The Dinner

NOTWITHSTANDING Jawleyford's recommendation to the contrary, Mr Sponge made himself an uncommon swell. He put on a desperately stiff starcher, secured in front with a large gold fox-head pin with carbuncle eyes; a fine, fancy-fronted shirt, with a slight tendency to pink, adorned with mosaic-gold-tethered studs of sparkling diamonds (or French paste, as the case might be); white waistcoat with fancy buttons; a blue coat with bright plain ones, and a velvet collar, black tights, with broad black-and-white Cranbourn-Alley-looking stockings (socks rather), and patent leather pumps with gilt buckles – Sponge was proud of his leg. The young ladies, too, turned out rather smart; for Amelia, finding that Emily was going to put on her new yellow watered silk, instead of a dyed satin she had talked of, made Juliana produce her broad-laced blue satin dress out of the wardrobe in the green dressing-room, where it had been laid away in an old tablecloth; and bound her dark hair with a green-beaded wreath, which Emily met by crowning herself with a chaplet of white roses.

Thus attired, with smiles assumed at the door, the young ladies entered the drawing-room in the full fervour of sisterly animosity. They were very much alike, in size, shape, and face. They were tallish and full-figured, Miss Jawleyford's features being rather more strongly marked, and her eyes a shade darker than her sister's; while there was a sort of subdued air about her – the result, perhaps, of enlarged intercourse with the world – or maybe of disappointments. Emily's eyes sparkled and glittered, without knowing perhaps why.

Dinner was presently announced. It was of the imposing order that people give their friends on a first visit, as though their appetites were larger on that day than on any other. They dined off plate: the sideboards glittered with the Jawleyford arms on cups, tankards, and

salvers; 'Brecknel & Turner's' flamed and swealed in profusion on the table; while every now and then an expiring lamp on the sideboards or brackets proclaimed the unwonted splendour of the scene, and added a flavour to the repast not contemplated by the cook. The room, which was large and lofty, being but rarely used, had a cold, uncomfortable feel; and, if it hadn't been for the looks of the thing, Jawleyford would, perhaps, as soon that they had dined in the little breakfast parlour. Still there was everything very smart; Spigot in full fig, with a shirt-frill nearly tickling his nose, an acre of white waistcoat, and glorious calves swelling within his gauze-silk stockings. The improvised footman went creaking about, as such gentlemen generally do.

The style was perhaps better than the repast: still they had turtle-soup (Shell & Tortoise, to be sure, but still turtle-soup); while the wines were supplied by the well-known firm of 'Wintle & Co.' Jawleyford sank where he got it, and pretended that it had been 'ages' in his cellar: 'he really had such a stock that he thought he should never get; through it;' – to wit, two dozen old port at 36s. a dozen, and one dozen at 48s.; two dozen pale sherry at 36s., and one dozen brown ditto at 48s.; three bottles of Bucellas, of the 'finest quality imported,' at 38s. a dozen; Lisbon 'rich and dry,' at 32s.; and some marvellous creaming champagne at 48s., in which they were indulging when he made the declaration: 'Don't wait of me, my dear Mr Sponge!' exclaimed Jawleyford, holding up a long needle-case of a glass with the Jawleyford crests emblazoned about; 'don't wait of me, *pray*,' repeated he, as Spigot finished dribbling the froth into Sponge's glass; and Jawleyford, with a flourishing bow and waive of his empty needle-case, drank Mr Sponge's very good health, adding, 'I'm *extremely* happy to see you at Jawleyford Court.'

It was then Jawleyford's turn to have a little froth; and having sucked it up with the air of a man drinking nectar, he set down his glass with a shake of the head, saying,

'There's no such wine as that to be got nowadays.'

'Capital wine! – Excellent!' exclaimed Sponge, who was a better judge of ale than of champagne. 'Pray, where might you get it?'

'Impossible to say! – Impossible to say!' replied Jawleyford, throwing up his hands with a shake, and shrugging his shoulders. 'I have such a stock of wine as is really quite ridiculous.'

'Quite ridiculous,' thought Spigot, who, by the aid of a false key, had been through the cellar.

Except the 'Shell & Tortoise' and 'Wintle,' the estate supplied the repast. The carp was out of the home-pond; the tench, or whatever it was, was out of the mill-pond; the mutton was from the farm; the

carrot-and-turnip-and-beet-bedaubed stewed beef was from ditto; while the garden supplied the vegetables that luxuriated in the massive silver side-dishes. Watson's gun furnished the old hare and partridges that opened the ball of the second course; and tarts, jellies, preserves, and custards made their usual appearances. Some first-growth Chateaux Margaux 'Wintle,' again at 66s., in very richly-cut decanters, accompanied the old 36s. port; and apples, pears, nuts, figs, preserved fruits, occupied the splendid green-and-gold dessert set. Everything, of course, was handed about – an ingenious way of tormenting a person that has 'dined.' The ladies sat long, Mrs Jawleyford taking three glasses of port (when she could get it); and it was a quarter to eight when they rose from the table.

Jawleyford then moved an adjournment to the fire; which Sponge gladly seconded, for he had never been warm since he came into the house, the heat from the fires seeming to go up the chimneys. Spigot set them a little round table, placing the port and claret upon it, and bringing them a plate of biscuits in lieu of the dessert. He then reduced the illumination on the table, and extinguished such of the lamps as had not gone out of themselves. Having cast an approving glance around, and seen that they had what he considered right, he left them to their own devices.

'Do you drink port or claret, Mr Sponge?' asked Jawleyford, preparing to push whichever he preferred over to him.

'I'll take a little port, *first*, if you please,' replied our friend – as much as to say, 'I'll finish off with claret.'

'You'll find that very good, I expect,' said Mr Jawleyford, passing the bottle to him; 'it's '20 wine – very rare wine to get now – was a very rich fruity wine, and was a long time before it came into drinking. Connoisseurs would give any money for it.'

'It has still a good deal of body,' observed Sponge, turning off a glass and smacking his lips, at the same time holding the glass up to the candle to see the oily mark it made on the side.

'Good *sound* wine – good *sound* wine,' said Mr Jawleyford. 'Have plenty lighter, if you like.' The light wine was made by watering the strong.

'Oh no, thank you,' replied Mr Sponge, 'oh no, thank you. I like good strong military port.'

'So do I,' said Mr Jawleyford, 'so do I; only unfortunately it doesn't like me – am obliged to drink claret. When I was in the Bumperkin yeomanry we drank nothing but port.' And then Jawleyford diverged into a long rambling dissertation on messes and cavalry tactics, which nearly sent Mr Sponge asleep.

'Where did you say the hounds are tomorrow?' at length asked he, after Mr Jawleyford had talked himself out.

'Tomorrow,' repeated Mr Jawleyford, thoughtfully, 'tomorrow – they don't hunt tomorrow – not one of their days – next day. Scrambleford-green – Scrambleford-green – no, no; I'm wrong – Dundleton Tower – Dundleton Tower.'

'How far is that from here?' asked Mr Sponge.

'Oh, ten miles – say ten miles,' replied Mr Jawleyford. It was sometimes ten, and sometimes fifteen, depending upon whether Mr Jawleyford wanted the party to go or not. These elastic places, however, are common in all countries – to sight-seers as well as to hunters. 'Close by – close by,' one day. 'Oh! a *lo-o-ng* way from here,' another.

It is difficult, for parties who have nothing in common, to drive a conversation, especially when each keeps jibbing to get upon a private subject of his own. Jawleyford was all for sounding Sponge as to where he came from, and the situation of his property; for as yet, it must be remembered, he knew nothing of our friend, save what he had gleaned at Laverick Wells, where certainly all parties concurred in placing him high on the list of 'desirables,' while Sponge wanted to talk about hunting, the meets of the hounds, and hear what sort of a man Lord Scamperdale was. So they kept playing at cross-purposes, without either getting much out of the other. Jawleyford's intimacy with Lord Scamperdale seemed to have diminished with propinquity, for he now no longer talked of him – 'Scamperdale this, and Scamperdale that – Scamperdale, with whom he could do anything he liked,' but he called him 'My Lord Scamperdale,' and spoke of him in a reverent and becoming way. Distance often lends boldness to the tongue, as the poet Campbell says it

Lends enchantment to the view,
And robes the mountain in its azure hue.

There are few great men who haven't a dozen people, at least, who 'keep them right,' as they call it. To hear some of the creatures talk, one would fancy a lord was a lunatic as a matter of course.

Spigot at last put an end to their efforts by announcing that 'tea and coffee were ready!' just as Mr Sponge buzzed his bottle of port. They then adjourned from the gloom of the large oak-wainscoted dining-room, to the effulgent radiance of the well-lit, highly-gilt drawing-room, where our fair friends had commenced talking Mr Sponge over as soon as they retired from the dining-room.

'And what do you think of *him*?' asked mamma

'Oh, I think he's very well,' replied Emily, gaily.

'I should say he was very *toor*-lerable,' drawled Miss Jawleyford, who reckoned herself rather a judge, and indeed had had some experience of gentlemen.

'*Tolerable*, my dear!' rejoined Mrs Jawleyford, 'I should say he's very well – rather *distingué*, indeed.'

'I shouldn't say *that*,' replied Miss Jawleyford; 'his height and figure are certainly in his favour, but he isn't quite my idea of a gentleman. He is evidently on good terms with himself; but I should say, if it wasn't for his forwardness, he'd be awkward and uneasy.'

'He's a foxhunter, you know,' observed Emily.

'Well, but I don't know that that should make him different to other people,' rejoined her sister. 'Captain Curzon, and Mr Lancaster, and Mr Preston, were all foxhunters; but they didn't stare, and blurt, and kick their legs about, as this man does.'

'Oh, you are so fastidious!' rejoined her mamma; 'you must take men as you find them.'

'I wonder where he lives?' observed Emily, who was quite ready to take our friend as he was.

'I wonder where he *does* live?' chimed in Mrs Jawleyford, for the suddenness of the descent had given them no time for enquiry.

'Somebody said *Manchester*,' observed Miss Jawleyford, drily.

'So much the better,' observed Mrs Jawleyford, 'for then he is sure to have plenty of money.'

'Law, ma! but you don't s'pose pa would ever allow such a thing,' retorted Miss, recollecting her papa's frequent exhortations to them to look high.

'If he's a landowner,' observed Mrs Jawleyford, 'we'll soon find him out in Burke. Emily, my dear,' added she, 'just go into your pa's room, and bring me the "Commoners" – you'll find it on the large table, between the "Peerage" and the "Wellington Despatches."'

Emily tripped away to do as she was bid. The fair messenger presently returned, bearing both volumes, richly bound and lettered, with the Jawleyford crests studded down the backs, and an immense coat of arms on the side.

A careful search among the Ss produced nothing in the shape of Sponge.

'Not likely, I should think,' observed Miss Jawleyford, with a toss of her head, as her mamma announced the fact.

'Well, never mind,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, seeing that only one of the girls could have him, and that one was quite ready; 'never mind, I

dare say I shall be able to find out something from himself,' and so they dropped the subject.

In due time in swaggared our hero, himself, kicking his legs about as men in tights or tops generally do.

'May I give you tea or coffee?' asked Emily, in the sweetest tone possible, as she raised her finely turned gloveless arm towards where the glittering appendages stood on the large silver tray.

'Neither, thank you,' said Sponge, throwing himself into an easy-chair beside Mrs Jawleyford. He then crossed his legs, and cocking up a toe for admiration, began to yawn.

'You feel tired after your journey?' observed Mrs Jawleyford.

'No, I'm not,' said Sponge, yawning again – a good yawn this time.

Miss Jawleyford looked significantly at her sister – a long pause ensued.

'I knew a family of your name,' at length observed Mrs Jawleyford, in the simple sort of way women begin pumping men. 'I knew a family of your name,' repeated she, seeing Sponge was half asleep – 'the Sponges of Toadey Hall. Pray are they any relation of yours?'

'Oh – ah – yes,' blurted Sponge: 'I suppose they are. The fact is – the – haw – Sponges – haw – are a rather large family – haw. Meet them almost everywhere.'

'You don't live in the same county, perhaps?' observed Mrs Jawleyford.

'No, we don't,' replied he, with a yawn.

'Is yours a good hunting country?' asked Jawleyford, thinking to sound him in another way.

'No; a devilish bad 'un,' replied Sponge, adding with a grunt, 'or I wouldn't be here.'

'Who hunts it?' asked Mr Jawleyford.

'Why, as to that – haw' – replied Sponge, stretching out his arms and legs to their fullest extent, and yawning most vigorously – 'why, as to that, I can hardly say which you would call my country, for I have to do with so many; but I should say, of all the countries I am – haw – connected with – haw – Tom Scratch's is the worst.'

Mr Jawleyford looked at Mrs Jawleyford as a counsel who thinks he has made a grand hit looks at a jury before he sits down, and said no more.

Mrs Jawleyford looked as innocent as most jurymen do after one of these forensic exploits. – Mr Sponge beginning his nasal recreations, Mrs Jawleyford motioned the ladies off to bed – Mr Sponge and his host presently followed.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Evening's Reflections

'WELL, I THINK HE'LL DO,' said our friend to himself, as having reached his bedroom, in accordance with modern fashion, he applied a cedar match to the now somewhat better burnt-up fire, for the purpose of lighting a cigar – a cigar! in the state-bedroom of Jawleyford Court. Having divested himself of his smart blue coat and white waistcoat, and arrayed himself in a gray dressing-gown, he adjusted the loose cushions of a recumbent chair, and soused himself into its luxurious depths for a 'think over.'

'He has money,' mused Sponge, between the copious whiffs of the cigar, 'splendid style he lives in, to be sure' (puff), continued he, after another long draw, as he adjusted the ash at the end of the cigar. 'Two men in livery' (puff), 'one out, can't be done for nothing' (puff). 'What a profusion of plate, too!' (whiff) – 'declare I never' (puff) 'saw such' (whiff, puff) 'magnificence in the whole course of my' (whiff, puff) 'life.'

The cigar being then well under way, he sucked and puffed and whiffed in an apparently vacant stupor, his legs crossed, and his eyes fixed on a projecting coal between the lower bars, as if intent on watching the alternations of flame and gas; though in reality he was running all the circumstances through his mind, comparing them with his past experience, and speculating on the probable result of the present adventure.

He had seen a good deal of service in the matrimonial wars, and was entitled to as many bars as the most distinguished peninsular veteran. No woman with money, or the reputation of it, ever wanted an offer while he was in the way, for he would accommodate her at the second or third interview: and always pressed for an immediate fulfilment, lest the 'cursed lawyers' should interfere and interrupt their felicity. Somehow or other, the 'cursed lawyers' always had interfered: and as sure as they walked in, Mr Sponge walked out. He couldn't bear the idea of their coarse, inquisitive enquiries. He was too much of a gentleman!

Love, light as air, at sight of human ties
Spreads his light wings and in a moment flies.

So Mr Sponge fled, consoling himself with the reflection that there was no harm done, and hoping for 'better luck next time.'

He roved from flower to flower like a butterfly, touching here, alighting there, but always passing away with apparent indifference. He knew if he couldn't square matters at short notice, he would have no better chance with an extension of time; so, if he saw things taking the direction of enquiry, he would just laugh the offer off, pretend he was only feeling his way – saw he was not acceptable – sorry for it – and away he would go to somebody else. He looked upon a woman much in the light of a horse; if she didn't suit one man, she would another, and there was no harm in trying. So he puffed and smoked, and smoked and puffed – gliding gradually into wealth and prosperity.

A second cigar assisted his comprehension considerably – just as a second bottle of wine not only helps men through their difficulties, but shows them the way to unbounded wealth. Many of the bright railway schemes of former days, we make no doubt, were concocted under the inspiring influence of the bottle. Sponge now saw everything as he wished. All the errors of his former days were apparent to him. He saw how indiscreet it was confiding in Miss Trickery's cousin, the major; why the rich widow at Chesterfield had *chasséed* him; and how he was done out of the beautiful Miss Rainbow, with her beautiful estate, with its lake, its heronry, and its perpetual advowson. Other mishaps he also considered.

Having disposed of the past, he then turned his attention to the future. Here were two beautiful girls apparently full of money, between whom there wasn't the toss-up of a halfpenny for choice. Most exemplary parents, too, who didn't seem to care a farthing about money.

He then began speculating on what the girls would have. 'Great house – great establishment – great estate, doubtless. Why, confound it,' continued he, casting his heavy eye lazily around, 'here's a room as big as a field in a cramped country! Can't have less than fifty thousand a-piece, I should say, at the least. Jawleyford, to be sure, is young,' thought he; 'may live a long time' (puff). 'If Mrs J. were to die . . . Curse – the cigar's burnt my lip,' added he, throwing the remnant into the fire, and rolling out of the chair to prepare for turning into bed.

If anyone had told Sponge that there was a rich papa and mamma on the look-out merely for amiable young men to bestow their fair daughters upon, he would have laughed them to scorn and said, 'Why,

you fool, they are only laughing at you;' or 'Don't you see they are playing you off against somebody else?' But our hero, like other men, was blind where he himself was concerned, and concluded that he was the exception to the general rule.

Mr and Mrs Jawleyford had their consultation too.

'Well,' said Mr Jawleyford, seating himself on the high wire fender immediately below a marble bust of himself on the mantelpiece; 'I think he'll do.'

'Oh, no doubt,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, who never saw any difficulty in the way of a match; 'I should say he is a very nice young man,' continued she.

'Rather *brusque* in his manner, perhaps,' observed Jawleyford, who was quite the 'lady' himself. 'I wonder what he has?' added he, fingering away at his whiskers.

'He's rich, I've no doubt,' replied Mrs Jawleyford.

'What makes you think so?' asked her loving spouse.

'I don't know,' replied Mrs Jawleyford; 'somehow I feel certain he is – but I can't tell why – all foxhunters are.'

'I don't know that,' replied Jawleyford, who knew some very poor ones. 'I should like to know what he has,' continued Jawleyford musingly, looking up at the deeply corniced ceiling as if he were calculating the chances among the filagree ornaments of the centre.

'A hundred thousand, perhaps,' suggested Mrs Jawleyford, who only knew two sums – fifty and a hundred thousand.

'That's a *vast* of money,' replied Jawleyford, with a slight shake of the head.

'Fifty at *least*, then,' suggested Mrs Jawleyford, coming down half way at once.

'Well, if he has that, he'll do,' rejoined Jawleyford, who also had come down considerably in his expectations since the vision of his railway days, at whose bright light he had burnt his fingers.

'He was said to have an immense fortune – I forget how much – at Laverick Wells,' observed Mrs Jawleyford.

'Well, we'll see,' said Jawleyford; adding, 'I suppose either of the girls will be glad enough to take him?'

'Trust them for that,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, with a knowing smile and nod of the head: 'trust them for that,' repeated she. 'Though Amelia does turn up her nose and pretend to be fine, rely upon it she only wants to be sure that he's worth having.'

'Emily seems ready enough, at all events,' observed Jawleyford.

'She'll never get the chance,' observed Mrs Jawleyford. 'Amelia is a very prudent girl, and won't commit herself, but she knows how to

manage the men.'

'Well then,' said Jawleyford, with a hearty yawn, 'I suppose we may as well go to bed.'

So saying, he took his candle and retired.

CHAPTER XIX

The Wet Day

WHEN the dirty slipshod housemaid came in the morning with her blacksmith's-looking tool-box to light Mr Sponge's fire, a riotous winter's day was in the full swing of its gloomy, deluging power. The wind howled, and roared, and whistled, and shrieked, playing a sort of æolian harp amongst the towers, pinnacles, and irregular castleisations of the house; while the old casements rattled and shook, as though someone were trying to knock them in.

'Hang the day!' muttered Sponge from beneath the bedclothes. 'What the deuce is a man to do with himself on such a day as this, in the country?' thinking how much better he would be flattening his nose against the coffee-room window of the Bantam, or strolling through the horse-dealers' stables in Piccadilly or Oxford Street.

Presently the overnight chair before the fire, with the picture of Jawleyford in the Bumperkin yeomanry, as seen through the parted curtains of the spacious bed, recalled his overnight speculations, and he began to think that perhaps he was just as well where he was. He then 'backed' his ideas to where he had left off, and again began speculating on the chances of his position. 'Deuced fine girls,' said he, 'both of 'em: wonder what he'll give 'em down?' – recurring to his overnight speculations, and hitting upon the point at which he had burnt his lips with the end of the cigar – namely, Jawleyford's youth, and the possibility of his marrying again if Mrs Jawleyford were to die. 'It won't do to raise up difficulties for one's-self, however,' mused he; so, kicking off the bedclothes, he raised himself instead, and making for a window, began to gaze upon his expectant territory.

It was a terrible day; the ragged, spongy clouds drifted heavily along, and the lowering gloom was only enlivened by the occasional driving rush of the tempest. Earth and sky were pretty much the same grey,

damp, disagreeable hue.

'Well,' said Sponge to himself, having gazed sufficiently on the uninviting landscape, 'it's just as well it's not a hunting day – should have got terribly soured. Must get through the time as well as I can – girls to talk to – house to see. Hope I've brought my Mogg,' added he, turning to his portmanteau, and diving for his *Ten Thousand Cab Fares*. Having found the invaluable volume, his almost constant study, he then proceeded to array-himself in what he considered the most captivating apparel; a new wide-sleeved dock-tail coatee, with outside pockets placed very low, faultless drab trousers, a buff waistcoat, with a cream-coloured once-round silk tie, secured by red cornelian cross-bars set in gold, for a pin. Thus attired, with Mogg in his pocket, he swaggered down to the breakfast-room, which he hit off by means of listening at the doors till he heard the sound of voices, within.

Mrs Jawleyford and the young ladies were all smiles and smirks, and there were no symptoms of Miss Jawleyford's hauteur perceptible. They all came forward and shook hands with our friend most cordially. Mr Jawleyford, too, was all flourish and compliment; now tilting at the weather, now congratulating himself upon having secured Mr Sponge's society in the house.

That leisurely meal of protracted ease, a country-house breakfast, being at length accomplished, and the ladies having taken their departure, Mr Jawleyford looked out on the terrace, upon which the angry rain was beating the standing water into bubbles, and observing that there was no chance of getting out, asked Mr Sponge if he could amuse himself in the house.

'Oh, yes,' replied he, 'got a book in my pocket.'

'Ah, I suppose – the "New Monthly," perhaps?' observed Mr Jawleyford.

'No,' replied Sponge.

'Dizze's *Life of Bentinck*, then, I dare say,' suggested Jawleyford; adding, 'I'm reading it myself.'

'No, nor that either,' replied Sponge, with a knowing look; 'a much more useful work, I assure you,' added he, pulling the little purple-backed volume out of his pocket, and reading the gilt letters on the back; '“Mogg's *Ten Thousand Cab Fares*, price one shilling!”'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Mr Jawleyford, 'well, I should never have guessed that.'

'I dare say not,' replied Sponge, 'I dare say not; it's a book I never travel without. It's invaluable in town, and you may study it to great advantage in the country. With Mogg in my hand, I can almost fancy myself in both places at once. Omnibus guide,' added he, turning over

the leaves, and reading, 'Acton five, from the end of Oxford Street and the Edger Road – see Ealing; Edmonton seven, from Shoreditch Church – “Green Man and Still,” Oxford Street – Shepherd's Bush and Starch Green, Bank and Whitechapel – Tooting – Totteridge – Wandsworth; in short, every place near town. Then the cab fares are truly invaluable; you have ten thousand of them here,' said he, tapping the book, 'and you may calculate as many more for yourself as ever you like. Nothing to do but sit in an armchair on a wet day like this, and say, If from the Mile End turnpike to the “Castle” on the Kingsland Road is so much, how much should it be to the “Yorkshire Stingo,” or Pineapple Place, Maida Vale? And you measure by other fares till you get as near the place you want as you can, if it isn't set down in black and white to your hand in the book.'

'Just so,' said Jawleyford, 'just so. It must be a very useful work indeed, very useful work. I'll get one – I'll get one. How much did you say it was – a guinea? a guinea?'

'A *shilling*,' replied Sponge, adding, 'you may have mine for a guinea if you like.'

'By Jove, what a day it is!' observed Jawleyford, turning the conversation, as the wind dashed the hard sleet against the window like a shower of pebbles. 'Lucky to have a good house over one's head, such weather; and, by the way, that reminds me, I'll show you my new gallery and collection of curiosities – pictures, busts, marbles, antiques, and so on; there'll be fires on, and we shall be just as well there as here.' So saying, Jawleyford led the way through a dark, intricate, shabby passage, to where a much gilded white door, with a handsome crimson curtain over it announced the entrance to something better. 'Now,' said Mr Jawleyford, bowing as he threw open the door, and motioned, or rather flourished, his guest to enter – 'now,' said he, 'you shall see what you shall see.'

Mr Sponge entered accordingly, and found himself at the end of a gallery fifty feet by twenty, and fourteen high, lighted by skylights and small windows round the top. There were fires in handsome Caen-stone chimney-pieced fireplaces on either side, a large timepiece and an organ at the far end, and sundry white basins scattered about, catching the drops from the skylights.

'Hang the rain!' exclaimed Jawleyford, as he saw it trickling over a river scene of Van Goyen's (gentlemen in a yacht, and figures in boats), and drip, drip, dripping on to the head of an infant Bacchus below.

'He wants an umbrella, that young gentleman,' observed Sponge, as Jawleyford proceeded to dry him with his handkerchief.

'Fine thing,' observed Jawleyford, starting off to a side, and pointing

to it; 'fine thing – Italian marble – by Frère – cost a vast of money – was offered three hundred for it. Are you a judge of these things?' asked Jawleyford; 'are you a judge of these things?'

'A little,' replied Sponge, 'a little;' thinking he might as well see what his intended father-in-law's personal property was like.

'There's a beautiful thing!' observed Jawleyford, pointing to another group. 'I picked that up for a mere nothing – twenty guineas – worth two hundred at least. Lipsalve, the great picture-dealer in Gammon Passage, offered me Murillo's "Adoration of the Virgin and Shepherds," for which he shewed me a receipt for a hundred and eighty-five, for it.'

'Indeed!' replied Sponge, 'what is it?'

'It's a Bacchanal group, after Poussin, sculptured by Marin. I bought it at Lord Breakdown's sale; it happened to be a wet day – much such a day as this – and things went for nothing. This you'll know, I presume?' observed Jawleyford, laying his hand on a life-size bust of Diana, in Italian marble.

'No, I don't,' replied Sponge.

'No!' exclaimed Jawleyford; 'I thought everybody had known this: this is my celebrated "Diana," by Noindon – one of the finest things in the world. Louis Philippe sent an agent over to this country expressly to buy it.'

'Why didn't you sell it him?' asked Sponge.

'Didn't want the money,' replied Jawleyford, 'didn't want the money. In addition to which, though a king, he was a bit of a screw, and we couldn't agree upon terms. This,' observed Jawleyford, 'is a vase of the Cinque Cento period – a very fine thing; and this,' laying his hand on the crown of a much frizzed, barber's-window-looking bust, 'of course you know?'

'No, I don't,' replied Sponge.

'No!' exclaimed Jawleyford, in astonishment.

'No,' repeated Sponge.

'Look again, my dear fellow; you *must* know it,' observed Jawleyford.

'I suppose it's meant for you,' at last replied Sponge, seeing his host's anxiety.

'*Meant!* my dear fellow; why, don't you think it like?'

'Why, there's a resemblance, certainly,' said Sponge, 'now that one knows. But I shouldn't have guessed it was you.'

'Oh, my dear Mr Sponge!' exclaimed Jawleyford, in a tone of mortification, 'Do you *really* mean to say you don't think it like?'

'Why, yes, it's like,' replied Sponge, seeing which way his host wanted it; 'it's like, certainly; the want of expression in the eye makes

such a difference between a bust and a picture.'

'True,' replied Jawleyford, comforted – 'true,' repeated he, looking affectionately at it; 'I should say it was very like – like as anything can be. You are rather too much above it there, you see; sit down here,' continued he, leading Sponge to an ottoman surrounding a huge model of the column in the Place Vendôme, that stood in the middle of the room – 'sit down here now, and look, and say if you don't think it like?'

'Oh, *very* like,' replied Sponge, as soon as he had seated himself. 'I see it now, directly; the mouth is yours to a T.'

'And the chin? It's my chin, isn't it?' asked Jawleyford.

'Yes; and the nose, and the forehead, and the whiskers, and the hair, and the shape of the head, and everything. Oh! I see it now as plain as a pikestaff,' observed Sponge.

'I thought you would,' rejoined Jawleyford, comforted – 'I thought you would; it's generally considered an excellent likeness – so it should, indeed, for it cost a vast of money – fifty guineas! to say nothing of the lotus-leaved pedestal it's on. That's another of me,' continued Jawleyford, pointing to a bust above the fireplace, on the opposite side of the gallery; 'done some years since – ten or twelve, at least – not so like as this, but still like. That portrait up there, just above the "Finding of Moses," by Poussin,' pointing to a portrait of himself attitudinising, with his hand on his hip, and frock-coat well thrown back, so as to show his figure and the silk lining to advantage, 'was done the other day, by a very rising young artist; though he has hardly done me justice, perhaps – particularly in the nose, which he's made far too thick and heavy; and the right hand, if anything, is rather clumsy; otherwise the colouring is good, and there is a considerable deal of taste in the arrangement of the background, and so on.'

'What book is it you are pointing to?' asked Sponge.

'It's not a book,' replied Mr Jawleyford, 'it's a plan – a plan of this gallery, in fact. I am supposed to be giving the final order for the erection of the very edifice we are now in.'

'And a very handsome building it is,' observed Sponge, thinking he would make it a shooting-gallery when he got it.

'Yes it's a handsome thing in its way,' assented Jawleyford; 'better if it had been watertight, perhaps,' added he, as a big drop splashed upon the crown of his head.

'The contents must be very valuable,' observed Sponge.

'Very valuable,' replied Jawleyford. 'There's a thing I gave two hundred and fifty guineas for – that vase. It's of Parian marble, of the Cinque Cento period, beautifully sculptured in a dance of Bacchanals, arabesques, and chimera figures: it was considered cheap. Those fine

monkeys in Dresden china, playing on musical instruments, were forty; thoses bronzes of scaramouches, on or-molu plinths were seventy; that or-molu clock, of the style of Louis Quinze, by Le Roy, was eighty; those Sèvres vases were a hundred – mounted, you see, in or-molu, with lily candelabra for ten lights. The handles,' continued he, drawing Sponge's attention to them, 'are very handsome – composed of satyrs holding festoons of grapes and flowers, which surround the neck of the vase; on the sides are pastoral subjects, painted in the highest style – nothing can be more beautiful, or more chaste.'

'Nothing,' assented Sponge.

'The pictures I should think are most valuable,' observed Jawleyford. 'My friend Lord Sparklebury said to me the last time he was here – he's now in Italy, increasing his collection – "Jawleyford, old boy," said he, for we are very intimate – just like brothers, in fact; "Jawleyford, old boy, I wonder whether your collection or mine would fetch most money, if they were Christie-&-Manson'd." "Oh, your lordship," said I, "your Guidos, and Ostades, and Poussins, and Velasquez, are not to be surpassed." "True," replied his lordship, "they are fine – very fine; but you have the Murillos. I'd like to give you a good round sum," added he, "to pick out half a dozen pictures out of your gallery." Do you understand pictures?' continued Jawleyford, turning short on his friend Sponge.

'A little,' replied Sponge, in a tone that might mean either yes or no – a great deal or nothing at all.

Jawleyford then took him and worked him through his collection – talked of light and shade, and tone, and depth of colouring, tints, and pencillings; and put Sponge here and there and everywhere to catch the light (or rain, as the case might be); made him convert his hand into an opera-glass, and occasionally put his head between his legs to get an upside-down view – a feat that Sponge's equestrian experience made him pretty well up to. So they looked, and admired, and criticised, till Spigot's all-important figure came looming up the gallery and announced that luncheon was ready.

'Bless me!' exclaimed Jawleyford, pulling a most diminutive Geneva watch, hung with pencils, pistol-keys, and other curiosities, out of his pocket; 'Bless me, who'd have thought it? One o'clock, I declare! Well, if this doesn't prove the value of a gallery on a wet day, I don't know what does. However,' said he, 'we must tear ourselves away for the present and go and see what the ladies are about.'

If ever a man may be excused for indulging in luncheon, it certainly is on a pouring wet day (when he eats for occupation), or when he is making love; both which excuses Mr Sponge had to offer, so he just sat

down and ate as heartily as the best of the party, not excepting his host himself, who was an excellent hand at luncheon.

Jawleyford tried to get him back to the gallery after luncheon, but a look from his wife intimated that Sponge was wanted elsewhere, so he quietly saw him carried off to the music-room; and presently the notes of the 'grand piano,' and full clear voices of his daughters, echoing along the passage, intimated that they were trying what effect music would have upon him.

When Mrs Jawleyford looked in about an hour after, she found Mr Sponge sitting over the fire with his Mogg in his hand, and the young ladies with their laps full of company-work, keeping up a sort of cross-fire of conversation in the shape of question and answer. Mrs Jawleyford's company making matters worse, they soon became tediously agreeable.

In course of time, Jawleyford entered the room, with –

'My dear Mr Sponge, your groom has come up to know about your horse tomorrow. I told him it was utterly impossible to think of hunting, but he says he must have his orders from you. I should say,' added Jawleyford, 'it is *quite* out of the question – madness to think of it; much better in the house, such weather.'

'I don't know that,' replied Sponge, 'the rain's come down, and though the country will ride heavy, I don't see why we shouldn't have sport after it.'

'But the glass is falling, and the wind's gone round the wrong way; the moon changed this morning – everything, in short, indicates continued wet,' replied Jawleyford. 'The rivers are all swollen, and the low grounds under water; besides, my dear fellow, consider the distance – consider the distance; sixteen miles, if it's a yard.'

'What, Duntleton Tower!' exclaimed Sponge, recollecting that Jawleyford had said it was only ten the night before.

'Sixteen miles, and *bad* road,' replied Jawleyford.

'The deuce it is!' muttered Sponge; adding, 'Well, I'll go and see my groom, at all events.' So saying, he rang the bell as if the house was his own, and desired Spigot to show him the way to his servant.

Leather, of course, was in the servants'-hall, refreshing himself with cold meat and ale, after his ride up from Lucksford.

Finding that he had ridden the hack up, he desired Leather to leave him there. 'Tell the groom I *must* have him put up,' said Sponge; 'and you ride the chesnut on in the morning. How far is it to Duntleton Tower?' asked he.

'Twelve or thirteen miles, they say, from here,' replied Leather; 'nine or ten from Lucksford.'

'Well, that'll do,' said Sponge; 'you tell the groom here to have the

hack saddled for me at nine o'clock, and you ride Multum in Parvo quietly on, either to the meet, or till I overtake you.'

'But how am I to get back to Lucksford?' asked Leather, cocking up a foot to show how thinly he was shod.

'Oh, just as you can,' replied Sponge; 'get the groom here to set you down with his master's hacks. I dare say they haven't been out today, and it'll do them good.'

So saying, Mr Sponge left his valuable servant to do the best he could for himself.

Having returned to the music-room, with the aid of an old county map Mr Sponge proceeded to trace his way to Duntleton Tower; aided, or rather retarded, by Mr Jawleyford, who kept pointing out all sorts of difficulties, till, if Mr Sponge had followed his advice, he would have made eighteen or twenty miles of the distance. Sponge, however, being used to scramble about strange countries, saw the place was to be accomplished in ten or eleven. Jawleyford was sure he would lose himself, and Sponge was equally confident that he wouldn't.

At length the glad sound of the gong put an end to all further argument; and the inmates of Jawleyford Court retired, candle in hand, to their respective apartments, to adorn for a repetition of the yesterday's spread, with the addition of the Revd Mr Hobanob's company, to say grace, and praise the 'Wintle.'

An appetiteless dinner was succeeded by tea and music, as before.

The three elegant French clocks in the drawing-room being at variance, one being three-quarters of an hour before the slowest, and twenty minutes before the next, Mr Hobanob (much to the horror of Jawleyford) having nearly fallen asleep with his Sèvres coffee-cup in his hand, at last drew up his great silver watch by its jack-chain, and finding that it was a quarter past ten, prepared to decamp – taking as affectionate a leave of the ladies as if he had been going to China. He was followed by Mr Jawleyford, to see him pocket his pumps, and also by Mr Sponge, to see what sort of a night it was.

The sky was clear, stars sparkled in the firmament, and a young crescent moon shone with silvery brightness o'er the scene.

'That'll do,' said Sponge, as he eyed it; 'no haze there. Come,' added he to his papa-in-law, as Hobanob's steps died out on the terrace, 'you'd better go tomorrow.'

'Can't,' replied Jawleyford; 'go next day, perhaps – Scrambleford Green – better place – much. You may lock up,' said he, turning to Spigot, who, with both footmen, was in attendance to see Mr Hobanob off; 'you may lock up, and tell the cook to have breakfast ready at nine *precisely*.'

'Oh, never mind about breakfast for me,' interposed Sponge, 'I'll have some tea or coffee and chops, or boiled ham and eggs, or whatever's going, in my bedroom,' said he; 'so never mind altering your hour for me.'

'Oh, but my dear fellow, we'll all breakfast together' (Jawleyford had no notion of standing two breakfasts) 'we'll all breakfast together,' said he; 'no trouble, I assure you – rather the contrary. Say half-past eight – half-past eight, Spigot! to a *minute*, mind.'

And Sponge, seeing there was no help for it, bid the ladies good-night, and tumbled off to bed with little expectation of punctuality.

CHAPTER XX

The F. H. H.

NOR WAS SPONGE wrong in his conjecture, for it was a quarter to nine ere Spigot appeared with the massive silver urn, followed by the train-band bold, bearing the heavy implements of breakfast. Then, though the young ladies were punctual, smiling, and affable as usual, Mrs Jawleyford was absent, and she had the keys; so it was nearly nine before Mr Sponge got his fork into his first mutton chop. Jawleyford was not exactly pleased; he thought it didn't look well for a young man to prefer hunting to the society of his lovely and accomplished daughters. Hunting was all very well occasionally, but it did not do to make a business of it. This, however, he kept to himself.

'You'll have a fine day, my dear Mr Sponge,' said he, extending a hand, as he found our friend brown-booted and red-coated working away at the breakfast.

'Yes,' said Sponge, munching away for hard life. In less than ten minutes, he managed to get as much down as, with the aid of a knotch of bread that he pocketed, he thought would last him through the day; and, with a hasty adieu, he hurried off to find the stables, to get his hack. The piebald was saddled, bridled, and turned round in the stall; for all servants that are worth anything like to further hunting operations. With the aid of the groom's instructions, who accompanied him out of the courtyard, Sponge was enabled to set off at a hard canter, cheered by the groom's observation, that 'he thought he would

be there in time.' On, on he went; now speculating on a turn; now pulling a scratch map he had made on a bit of paper out of his waistcoat-pocket; now enquiring the name of any place he saw of any person he met. So he proceeded for five or six miles without much difficulty; the road, though not all turnpike, being mainly over good sound township ones. It was at the village of Swineley, with its chubby-towered church and miserable hut-like cottages, that his troubles were to begin. He had two sharp turns to make – to ride through a straw-yard, and leap over a broken-down wall at the corner of a cottage – to get into Swaithing Green Lane, and so cut off an angle of two miles. The road then became a bridle one, and was, like all bridle ones, very plain to those who know them, and very puzzling to those who don't. It was evidently a little-frequented road; and what with looking out for footmarks (now nearly obliterated by the recent rains) and speculating on what queer corners of the fields the gates would be in, Mr Sponge found it necessary to reduce his pace to a very moderate trot. Still he had made good way; and supposing they gave a quarter-of-an-hour's law, and he had not been deceived as to distance, he thought he should get to the meet about the time. His horse, too, would be there, and perhaps Lord Scamperdale might give a little extra law on that account. He then began speculating on what sort of a man his lordship was, and the probable nature of his reception. He began to wish that Jawleyford had accompanied him, to introduce him. Not that Sponge was shy, but still he thought that Jawleyford's presence would do him good.

Lord Scamperdale's hunt was not the most polished in the world. The hounds and the horses were a good deal better bred than the men. Of course his lordship gave the *tone* to the whole; and being a coarse, broad, barge-built sort of man, he had his clothes to correspond, and looked like a drayman in scarlet. He wore a great round flat-brimmed hat, which being adopted by the hunt generally, procured it the name of the F. H. H., or Flat Hat Hunt. Our readers, we dare say, have noticed it figuring away, in the list of hounds during the winter, along with the H. H.s, V. W. H.s and other initialised packs. His lordship's clothes were of the large, roomy, baggy, abundant order, with great pockets, great buttons, and lots of strings flying out. Instead of tops, he sported leather leggings, which at a distance gave him the appearance of riding with his trousers up to his knees. These the hunt too adopted; and his 'particular,' Jack (Jack Spraggon), the man whom he mounted, and who was made much in his own mould, sported, like his patron, a pair of great broad-rimmed, tortoiseshell spectacles of considerable power. Jack was always at his lordship's elbow; and it was 'Jack' this, 'Jack' that, 'Jack' something, all day long. But we must return to Mr Sponge, whom

we left working his way through the intricate fields. At last he got through them, and into Red Pool Common, which, by leaving the windmill to the right, he cleared pretty cleverly, and entered upon a district still wilder and drearier than any he had traversed. Pewits screamed and hovered over land that seemed to grow little but rushes and water-grasses, with occasional heather. The ground poached and splashed as he went; worst of all, time was nearly up.

In vain Sponge strained his eyes in search of Duntleton Tower. In vain he fancied every high, skyline-breaking place in the distance was the much wished-for spot. Duntleton Tower was no more a tower than it was a town, and would seem to have been christened by the rule of contrary, for it was nothing but a great flat open space, without object or incident to note it.

Sponge, however, was not destined to see it.

As he went floundering along through an apparently interminable and almost bottomless lane, whose sunken places and deep ruts were filled with clayey water, which played the very deuce with the cords and brown boots, the light note of a hound fell on his ear, and almost at the same instant, a something that he would have taken for a dog had it not been for the note of the hound, turned as it were, from him, and went in a contrary direction.

Sponge reined in the piebald, and stood transfixed. It was, indeed, the fox! – a magnificent full-brushed fellow, with a slight tendency to grey along the back, and going with the light spiry ease of an animal full of strength and running.

'I wish I mayn't ketch it,' said Sponge to himself, shuddering at the idea of having headed him.

It was, however, no time for thinking. The cry of hounds became more distinct – nearer and nearer they came, fuller and more melodious; but, alas! it was no music to Sponge. Presently the cheering of hunters was heard – '*For-rard! For-rard!*' and anon the rate of a whip further back. Another second, and hounds, horses, and men were in view, streaming away over the large pasture on the left.

There was a high, straggling fence between Sponge and the field, thick enough to prevent their identifying him, but not sufficiently high to screen him altogether. Sponge pulled round the piebald, and gathered himself together like a man going to be shot. The hounds came tearing full cry to where he was; there was a breast-high scent, and everyone seemed to have it. They charged the fence at a waddled pace a few yards below where he sat, and flying across the deep dirty lane, dashed full cry into the pasture beyond.

'*Hie back!*' cried Sponge. '*Hie back!*' trying to turn them; but instead

of the piebald carrying him in front of the pack, as Sponge wanted, he took to rearing, and plunging, and pawing the air. The hounds meanwhile dashed jealously on without a scent, till first one and then another feeling ashamed, gave in; and at last a general lull succeeded the recent joyous cry. Awful period! terrible to anyone, but dreadful to a stranger! Though Sponge was in the road, he well knew that no one has any business anywhere but with hounds, when a fox is astir.

'Hold hard!' was now the cry, and the perspiring riders and lathered steeds came to a standstill.

'*Twang-twang-twang*,' went a shrill horn; and a couple of whips, singling themselves out from the field, flew over the fence to where the hounds were casting.

'*Twang-twang-twang*,' went the horn again.

Meanwhile Sponge sat enjoying the following observations, which a westerly wind wafted into his ear.

'Oh, damn me! that man in the lane's headed the fox,' puffed one.

'Who is it?' gasped another.

'Tom Washball!' exclaimed a third.

'Heads more foxes than any man in the country,' puffed a fourth.

'Always nicking and skirting,' exclaimed a fifth.

'Never comes to the meet,' added a sixth.

'Come on a cow today,' observed another.

'Always chopping and changing,' added another; 'he'll come on a giraffe next.'

Having commenced his career with the F. H. H. so inauspiciously and yet escaped detection, Mr Sponge thought of letting Tom Washball enjoy the honours of his *faux-pas*, and of sneaking quietly home as soon as the hounds hit off the scent; but unluckily, just as they were crossing the lane, what should heave in sight, cantering along at his leisure, but the redoubtable Multum in Parvo, who, having got rid of Old Leather by bumping and thumping his leg against a gate-post, was enjoying a line of his own.

'Whoay!' cried Sponge, as he saw the horse quickening his pace to have a shy at the hounds as they crossed. 'Who-o-a-y!' roared he, brandishing his whip, and trying to turn the piebald round; but no, the brute wouldn't answer the bit, and dreading lest, in addition to heading the fox, he should kill 'the best hound in the pack,' Mr Sponge threw himself off, regardless of the mud-bath in which he lit, and caught the runaway as he tried to dart past.

'*For-rard! - for-rard! - for-rard!*' was again the cry, as the hounds hit off the scent; while the late pausing, panting sportsmen tackled vigorously with their steeds, and swept onward like the careering wind.

Mr Sponge, albeit somewhat perplexed, had still sufficient presence of mind to see the necessity of immediate action; and though he had so lately contemplated beating a retreat, the unexpected appearance of Parvo altered the state of affairs.

'Now or never,' said he, looking first at the disappearing field, and then for the non-appearing Leather. 'Hang it! I may as well see the run,' added he; so hooking the piebald on to an old stone gate-post that stood in the ragged fence, and lengthening a stirrup-leather, he vaulted into the saddle, and began lengthening the other as he went.

It was one of Parvo's going days; indeed, it was that that Old Leather and he had quarrelled about - Parvo wanting to follow the hounds, while Leather wanted to wait for his master. And Parvo had the knack of going, as well as the occasional inclination. Although such a drayhorse-looking animal, he could throw the ground behind him amazingly; and the deep-holding clay in which he now found himself was admirably suited to his short powerful legs and enormous stride. The consequence was, that he was very soon up with the hindmost horsemen. These he soon passed, and was presently among those who ride hard when there is nothing to stop them. Such time as these sportsmen could now spare from looking out ahead was devoted to Sponge, whom they eyed with the utmost astonishment, as if he had dropped from the clouds.

A stranger - a real out-and-out stranger - had not visited their remote regions since the days of poor Nimrod. 'Who could it be?' But 'the pace,' as Nimrod used to say, 'was too good to enquire.' A little further on, and Sponge drew upon the great guns of the hunt - the men who ride *to* hounds, and not *after* them; the same who had criticised him through the fence - Mr Wake, Mr Fossick, Parson Blossomnose, Mr Fyle, Lord Scamperdale, Jack himself and others. Great was their astonishment at the apparition, and incoherent the observations they dropped as they galloped on.

'It isn't Wash, after all,' whispered Fyle into Blossomnose's ear, as they rode through a gate together.

'No-o-o,' replied the nose, eyeing Sponge intently.

'What a coat!' whispered one.

'Jacket,' replied the other.

'Lost his brush,' observed a third, winking at Sponge's docked tail.

'He's going to ride over us all,' snapped Mr Fossick, whom Sponge passed at a hand-canter, as the former was blobbing and floundering about the deep ruts leading out of a turnip field.

'He'll catch it just now,' said Mr Wake, eyeing Sponge drawing upon his lordship and Jack, as they led the field as usual. Jack being at a

respectful distance behind his great patron, espied Sponge first; and having taken a good stare at him through his formidable spectacles, to satisfy himself that it was nobody he knew – a stare that Sponge returned as well as a man without spectacles can return the stare of one with – Jack spurred his horse up to his lordship, and, rising in his stirrups, shot into his ear –

'Why, here's the man on the cow!' adding, '*It isn't Wasbey.*'

'Who the deuce is it, then?' asked his lordship, looking over his left shoulder, as he kept galloping on in the wake of his huntsman.

'Don't know,' replied Jack; 'never saw him before.'

'Nor I,' said his lordship with an air, as much as to say, 'It makes no matter.'

His lordship, though well mounted, was not exactly on the sort of horse for the country they were in; while Mr Sponge, in addition to being on the very animal for it, had the advantage of the horse having gone the first part of the run without a rider: so Multum in Parvo, whether Mr Sponge wished it or not, insisted on being as far forward as he could get. The more Sponge pulled and hauled, the more determined the horse was; till, having thrown both Jack and his lordship in the rear, he made for old Frostyface, the huntsman, who was riding well up to the still-flying pack.

'Hold hard, sir! For God's sake, hold hard!' screamed Frosty, who knew by intuition there was a horse behind, as well as he knew there was a man shooting in front, who, in all probability, had headed the fox.

'HOLD HARD, sir!' roared he, as, yawning and boring and shaking his head, Parvo dashed through the now yelping scattered pack, making straight for a stiff new gate, which he smashed through, just as a circus pony smashes through a paper hoop.

'Hoo-ray!' shouted Jack Spraggon, on seeing the hounds were safe. 'Hoo-ray for the tailor!'

'Billy Burton, himself!' exclaimed his lordship; adding 'Never saw such a thing in my life!'

'Who the deuce is he?' asked Blossomnose, in the full glow of pulling-five-year-old exertion.

'Don't know,' replied Jack; adding, 'He's a shaver, whoever he is.'

Meanwhile the frightened hounds were scattered right and left.

'I'll lay a guinea he's one of those confounded writing chaps,' observed Fyle, who had been handled rather roughly by one of the tribe, who had dropped 'quite promiscuously' upon a field where he was, just as Sponge had done with Lord Scamperdale's.

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied his lordship, eyeing Sponge's vain endeavours to turn the chesnut, and thinking how he would 'pitch into

him' when he came up. 'By Jove,' added his lordship, 'if the fellow had taken the whole country round, he couldn't have chosen a worse spot for such an exploit; for there never *is* any scent over here. *See!* not a hound can own it. Old Harmony herself throws up!'

The whips again are in their places, turning the astonished pack to Frostyface, who sets off on a casting expedition. The field, as usual, sit looking on; some blessing Sponge; some wondering who he was; others looking what o'clock it is; some dismounting and looking at their horses' feet.

'Thank you, Mr Brown Boots!' exclaimed his lordship, as, by dint of biting and spurring, Sponge at length worked the beast round, and came sneaking back in the face of the whole field. 'Thank you, Mister Brown Boots,' repeated he, taking off his hat, and bowing very low. 'Very much obliged to you, Mr Brown Boots. Most particularly obliged to you, Mr Brown Boots,' with another low bow. 'Hang'd obliged to you, Mr Brown Boots! Damn *you*, Mr Brown Boots!' continued his lordship, looking at Sponge as if he would eat him.

'Beg pardon, sir,' blurted Sponge; 'my horse –'

'Hang your horse!' screamed his lordship; 'it wasn't your horse that headed the fox, was it?'

'Beg pardon – couldn't help it; I –'

'Couldn't help it. Hang your helps – you're *always* doing it, Mr; You could stay at home, sir – I s'pose, sir – couldn't you, sir?'

Sponge was silent.

'See, sir!' continued his lordship, pointing to the mute pack now following the huntsman, 'you've lost us our fox, sir – *yes*, sir, lost us our fox, sir. D'ye call that nothin', sir? If you don't, *I* do, you perpendicular-looking Puseyite pig-jobber! By Jove! you think because I'm a lord, and can't swear, or use coarse language, that you may do what you like – but I'll take my hounds home, sir – *yes*, sir, I'll take my hounds home, sir.' So saying, his lordship roared HOME to Frostyface; adding, in an undertone to the first whip, '*bid him go to Furzing Field gorse.*'

CHAPTER XXI

A Country Dinner-Party

'WELL, WHAT SPORT?' asked Jawleyford, as he encountered his exceedingly dirty friend crossing the entrance hall to his bedroom on his return from his day, or rather his non-day, with the Flat Hat Hunt.

'Why, not much – that's to say, nothing particular – I mean, I've not had any,' blurted Sponge.

'But you've had a run?' observed Jawleyford, pointing to his boots and breeches, stained with the variation of each soil.

'Ah, I got most of that going to cover,' replied Sponge; 'country's awfully deep, roads abominably dirty,' adding, 'I wish I'd taken your advice, and stayed at home.'

'I wish you had,' replied Jawleyford, 'you'd have had a most excellent rabbit-pie for luncheon. However, get changed, and we will hear all about it after.' So saying, Jawleyford waved an adieu, and Sponge stamped away in his dirty waterlogged boots.

'*I'm afraid* you are very wet, Mr Sponge,' observed Amelia in the sweetest tone, with the most loving smile possible, as our friend, with three steps at a time, bounded upstairs, and nearly butted her on the landing, as she was on the point of coming down.

'I am that,' exclaimed Sponge, delighted at the greeting; 'I am that,' repeated he, slapping his much-stained cords; 'dirty, too,' added he, looking down at his nether man.

'Hadn't you better get changed as quick as possible?' asked Amelia, still keeping her position before him.

'Oh! all in good time,' replied Sponge, 'all in good time. The sight of you warms me more than a fire would do,' adding, 'I declare you look quite bewitching, after all the roughings and tumblings about out of doors.'

'Oh! you've not had a fall, have you?' exclaimed Amelia, looking the picture of despair; 'you've *not* had a fall, have you? *Do* send for the doctor, and be bled.'

Just then a door along the passage to the left opened; and Amelia, knowing pretty well who it was, smiled and tripped away, leaving

Sponge to be bled or not as he thought proper.

Our hero then made for his bedroom, where, having sucked off his adhesive boots, and divested himself of the rest of his hunting attire, he wrapped himself up in his grey flannel dressing-gown, and prepared for parboiling his legs and feet, amid agreeable anticipations arising out of the recent interview, and occasional references to his old friend Mogg, whenever he did not see his way on the matrimonial road as clearly as he could wish. 'She'll have me, that's certain,' observed he.

'Curse the water! how hot it is!' exclaimed he, catching his foot up out of the bath, into which he had incautiously plunged it without ascertaining the temperature of the water. He then sluiced it with cold, and next had to add a little more hot; at last he got it to his mind, and lighting a cigar, prepared for uninterrupted enjoyment.

'Gad!' said he, 'she's by no means a bad-looking girl' (whiff). 'Devilish good-looking girl' (puff); 'good head and neck, and carries it well too' (puff) – 'capital eye' (whiff), 'bright and clear' (puff); 'no cataracts there. She's all good together' (whiff, puff, whiff). 'Nice size too,' continued he, 'and well set up' (whiff, puff, whiff); 'straight as a dairy maid' (puff); 'plenty of substance – grand thing substance' (puff). 'Hate a weedy woman – fifteen two and a half – that's to say, five feet four's plenty of height for a woman' (puff). 'Height of a woman has nothing to do with her size' (whiff). 'Wish she hadn't run off' (puff); 'would like to have had a little more talk with her' (whiff, puff). 'Women never look so well as when one comes in wet and dirty from hunting' (puff). He then sank silently back in the easy-chair and whiffed and puffed all sorts of fantastic clouds and columns and corkscrews at his leisure. The cigar being finished, and the water in the foot-bath beginning to get cool, he emptied the remainder of the hot into it, and lighting a fresh cigar, began speculating on how the match was to be accomplished.

The lady was safe, that was clear; he had nothing to do but 'pop.' That he would do in the evening, or in the morning, or any time – a man living in the house with a girl need never be in want of an opportunity. That preliminary over, and the usual answer 'Ask papa' obtained, then came the question, how was the old boy to be managed? – for men with marriageable daughters are to all intents and purposes 'old boys;' be their ages what they may.

He became lost in reflection. He eat with his eyes fixed on the Jawleyford portrait above the mantelpiece, wondering whether he was the amiable, liberal, hearty, disinterested sort of man, he appeared to be, indifferent about money, and only wanting unexceptionable young men for his daughters; or if he was a worldly-minded man, like some he

had met, who, after giving him every possible encouragement, sent him to the right about like a servant. So Sponge smoked and thought, and thought and smoked, till, the water in the foot-bath again getting cold, and the shades of night drawing on, he at last started up like a man determined to awake himself, and poking a match into the fire, lighted the candles on the toilet-table, and proceeded to adorn himself. Having again got himself into the killing tights and buckled pumps, with a fine flower-fronted shirt, ere he embarked on the delicacies and difficulties of the starcher, he stirred the little pittance of a fire, and folding himself in his dressing-gown, endeavoured to prepare his mind for the calm consideration of all the minute bearings of the question by a little more Mogg. In idea he transferred himself to London, now fancying himself standing at the end of Burlington Arcade, hailing a Fulham or Turnham Green 'bus; now wrangling with a conductor for charging him sixpence when there was a pennant flapping at his nose with the words 'All the way 3d.' upon it; now folding the wooden doors of a Hansom cab in Oxford Street, calculating the extreme distance he could go for an eightpenny fare: until at last he fell into a downright vacant sort of reading, without rhyme or reason, just as one sometimes takes a read of a directory or a dictionary – 'Conduit Street, George Street, to or from the Adelphi Terrace, Astley's Amphitheatre, Baker Street, King Street, Bryanston Square any part, Covent Garden Theatre, Foundling Hospital, Hatton Garden' and so on, till the thunder of the gong aroused him to a recollection of his duties. He then up and at his neckcloth.

'Ah, well,' said he, reverting to his lady love, as he eyed himself intently in the glass while performing the critical operation, 'I'll just sound the old gentleman after dinner – one can do that sort of thing better over one's wine, perhaps, than at any other time: looks less formal too,' added he, giving the cravat a knowing crease at the side; 'and if it doesn't seem to take, one can just pass it off as if it was done for somebody else – some young gentleman at Laverick Wells, for instance.'

So saying, he on with his white waistcoat, and crowned the conquering suit with a blue coat and metal buttons. Returning his Mogg to his dressing-gown pocket, he blew out the candles, and groped his way downstairs in the dark.

In passing the dining-room he looked in (to see if there were any champagne-glasses set, we believe), when he saw that he should not have an opportunity of sounding his intended papa-in-law after dinner, for he found the table laid for twelve, and a great display of plate, linen, and china.

He then swaggered into the drawing-room, which was in a blaze of light. The lively Emily had stolen a march on her sister, and had just entered, attired in a fine new pale yellow silk dress with a point-lace berthe and other adornments.

High words had ensued between the sisters as to the meanness of Amelia in trying to take her beau from her, especially after the airs Amelia had given herself respecting Sponge; and a minute observer might have seen the slight tinge of red on Emily's eyelids denoting the usual issue of such scenes. The result was, that each determined to do the best she could for herself; and free trade being proclaimed, Emily proceeded to dress with all expedition, calculating that, as Mr Sponge had come in wet, he would, very likely dress at once and appear in the drawing-room in good time. Nor was she out in her reckoning, for she had hardly enjoyed an approving glance in the mirror ere our hero came swaggering in, twitching his arms as if he hadn't got his wristbands adjusted and working his legs as if they didn't belong to him.

'Ah, my dear Miss Emley!' exclaimed he, advancing gaily towards her with extended hand, which she took with all the pleasure in the world; adding, 'And how have you been?'

'Oh, pretty well, thank you,' replied she, looking as though she would have said, 'As well as I can be without you.'

Sponge, though a consummate judge of a horse, and all the minutiae connected with them, was still rather green in the matter of woman; and having settled in his own mind that Amelia should be his choice, he concluded that Emily knew all about it, and was working on her sister's account, instead of doing the agreeable for herself. And there it is where elder sisters have such an advantage over younger ones. They are always shown, or contrive to show themselves, first; and if a man once makes up his mind that the elder one will do, there is an end of the matter; and it is neither a deeper shade or two of blue, nor a brighter tinge of brown, nor a little smaller foot, nor a more elegant waist, that will make him change for a younger sister. The younger ones immediately become sisters in the men's minds, and retire, or are retired, from the field – 'scratched,' as Sponge would say.

Amelia, however, was not going to give Emily a chance; for, having dressed with all the expedition compatible with an attractive toilet – a lavender-coloured satin with broad black lace flounces, and some heavy jewellery on her well-turned arms, she came sidling in so gently as almost to catch Emily in the act of playing the agreeable. Turning the sidle into a stately sail, with a haughty sort of sneer and toss of the head to her sister, as much as to say, 'What are you doing with my man?' – a sneer that suddenly changed into a sweet smile as her eye encountered

Sponge's – she just motioned him off to a sofa, where she commenced a *sotto voce* conversation in the engaged-couple style.

The plot then began to thicken. First came Jawleyford, in a terrible stew.

'Well, this is too bad!' exclaimed he, stamping and flourishing a scented note, with a crest and initials at the top. 'This is *too bad*,' repeated he; 'people accepting invitations, and then crying off at the last moment.'

'Who is it can't come, papa – the Foozles?' asked Emily.

'No – Foozles be hanged,' sneered Jawleyford; 'they always come – *the Blossomnoses*!' replied he, with an emphasis.

'The Blossomnoses!' exclaimed both girls, clasping their hands and looking up at the ceiling.

'What, all of them?' asked Emily.

'*All of them*,' rejoined Jawleyford.

'Why, that's four,' observed Emily.

'To be sure it is,' replied Jawleyford; 'five, if you count them by appetites; for old Blossom always eats and drinks as much as two people.'

'What excuse do they give?' asked Amelia.

'Carriage-horse taken suddenly ill,' replied Jawleyford; 'as if that's any excuse when there are post-horses within half a dozen miles.'

'He wouldn't have been stopped hunting for want of a horse, I dare say,' observed Amelia.

'I dare say it's all a lie,' observed Jawleyford; adding, 'however, the invitation shall go for a dinner, all the same.'

The denunciation was interrupted by the appearance of Spigot, who came looming up the spacious drawing-room in the full magnificence of black shorts, silk stockings, and buckled pumps, followed by a sheepish-looking, straight-haired, red apple-faced young gentlemen, whom he announced as Mr Robert Foozle. Robert was the hope of the house of Foozle; and it was fortunate his parents were satisfied with him, for few other people were. He was a young gentleman who shook hands with everybody, assented to anything that anybody said, and in answering a question, where indeed his conversation chiefly consisted, he always followed the words of the interrogation as much as he could. For instance: 'Well, Robert, have you been at Dulverton today?' Answer, 'No, I've not been at Dulverton today.' Question, 'Are you going to Dulverton tomorrow?' Answer, 'No, I'm not going to Dulverton, tomorrow.' Having shaken hands with the party all round, and turned to the fire to warm his red fists, Jawleyford having stood at 'attention' for such time as he thought Mrs Foozle would be occupied

before the glass in his study arranging her head-gear, and seeing no symptoms of any further announcement, at last asked Foozle if his papa and mamma were not coming.

'No, my papa and mamma are not coming,' replied he.

'*Are you sure?*' asked Jawleyford, in a tone of excitement.

'Quite sure,' replied Foozle, in the most matter-of-course voice.

'The deuce!' exclaimed Jawleyford, stamping his foot upon the soft rug; adding, 'It never rains but it pours!'

'Have you any note, or anything?' asked Mrs Jawleyford, who had followed Robert Foozle into the room.

'Yes, I have a note,' replied he, diving into the inner pocket of his coat, and producing one.

The note was a letter – a letter from Mrs Foozle to Mrs Jawleyford, three sides and crossed; and seeing the magnitude thereof, Mrs Jawleyford quietly put it into her reticule, observing, 'that she hoped Mr and Mrs Foozle were well.'

'Yes, they are well,' replied Robert, notwithstanding he had express orders to say that his papa had the toothache, and his mamma the earache.

Jawleyford then gave a furious ring at the bell for dinner, and in due course of time the party of six proceeded to a table for twelve. Sponge pawned Mrs Jawleyford off upon Robert Foozle, which gave Sponge the right to the fair Amelia, who walked off on his arm with a toss of her head at Emily, as though she thought him the finest, sprightliest man under the sun. Emily followed, and Jawleyford came sulking in alone, sore put out at the failure of what he meant for *the* grand entertainment.

Lights blazed in profusion; lamps more accustomed had now become better behaved; and the whole strength of the plate was called in requisition, sadly puzzling the unfortunate cook to find something to put upon the dishes. She, however, was a real magnanimous-minded woman, who would undertake to cook a lord mayor's feast – soups, sweets, joints, entrees, and all.

Jawleyford was nearly silent during the dinner; indeed, he was too far off for conversation, had there been any for him to join in; which was not the case, for Amelia and Sponge kept up a hum of words, while Emily worked Robert Foozle with question and answer, such as

'Were your sisters out today?'

'Yes, my sisters were out today.'

'Are your sisters going to the Christmas ball?'

'Yes, my sisters are going to the Christmas ball,' &c., &c.

Still, nearly daft as Robert was, he was generally asked where there

was anything going on; and more than one young la – but we will not tell about that, as he has nothing to do with our story.

By the time the ladies took their departure, Mr Jawleyford had somewhat recovered from the annoyance of his disappointment; and as they retired he rang the bell, and desired Spigot to get in the horseshoe table, and bring a bottle of the 'green seal,' being the colour affixed on the bottles of a four-dozen hamper of port ('curious old port at 48s.') that had arrived from Wintle and Co. by rail (goods train of course) that morning.

'There!' exclaimed Jawleyford, as Spigot placed the richly-cut decanter on the horseshoe table. 'There!' repeated he, drawing the green curtain as if to shade it from the fire, but in reality to hide the dullness the recent shaking had given it; 'that wine,' said he, 'is a quarter of a century in bottle, at the very least.'

'Indeed,' observed Sponge: 'time it was drunk.'

'A quarter of a century?' gaped Robert Foozle.

'Quarter of a century if it's a day,' replied Jawleyford, smacking his lips as he set down his glass after imbibing the precious beverage.

'Very fine,' observed Sponge; adding, as he sipped off his glass, 'it's odd to find such old wine so full-bodied.'

'Well, now tell us all about your day's proceedings,' said Jawleyford, thinking it advisable to change the conversation at once. 'What sport had you with my lord?'

'Oh, why, I really can't tell you much,' drawled Sponge, with an air of bewilderment. 'Strange country – strange faces – nobody I knew, and –'

'Ah, true,' replied Jawleyford, 'true. It occurred to me after you were gone, that perhaps you might not know anyone. Ours, you see, is rather an out-of-the-way country; few of our people go to town, or indeed anywhere else; they are all tarry-at-home birds. But they'd receive you with great politeness, I'm sure – if they knew you came from here, at least,' added he.

Sponge was silent, and took a great gulp of the dull 'Wintle,' to save himself from answering.

'Was my Lord Scamperdale out?' asked Jawleyford, seeing he was not going to get a reply.

'Why, I can really hardly tell you that,' replied Sponge. 'There were two men out, either of whom might be him; at least, they both seemed to take the lead, and – and –' he was going to say 'blow up the people,' but he thought he might as well keep that to himself.

'Stout, hale-looking men, dressed much alike, with great broad tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles on?' asked Jawleyford.

'Just so,' replied Sponge.

'Ah, you are right, then,' rejoined Jawleyford; 'it would be my lord.'

'And who was the other?' enquired our friend.

'Oh, that Jack Spraggon,' replied Jawleyford, curling up his nose, as if he was going to be sick; 'one of the most odious wretches under the sun. I really don't know any man that I have so great a dislike to, so utter a contempt for, as that *Jack*, as they call him.'

'What is he?' asked Sponge.

'Oh, just a hanger-on of his lordship's: the creature has nothing – nothing whatever; he lives on my lord – eats his venison, drinks his claret, rides his horses, bullies those his lordship doesn't like to tackle with, and makes himself generally useful.'

'He seems a man of that sort,' observed Sponge, as he thought over the compliments he had received.

'Well, who else had you out, then?' asked Jawleyford. 'Was Tom Washball there?'

'No,' replied Sponge: '*he* wasn't out, I know.'

'Ah, that's unfortunate,' observed Jawleyford, helping himself and passing the bottle. 'Tom's a capital fellow – a perfect gentleman – great friend of mine. If he'd been out you'd have had nothing to do but mention my name, and he'd have put you all right in a minute. Who else was there, then?' continued he.

'There was a tall man in black, on a good-looking young brown horse, rather rash at his fences, but a fine style of goer.'

'*What!*' exclaimed Jawleyford, 'a man in drab cords and jack-boots, with the brim of his hat rather turning upwards?'

'Just so,' replied Sponge; 'and a double ribbon for a hat-string.'

'That's Master Blossomnose,' observed Jawleyford, scarcely able to contain his indignation. 'That's Master Blossomnose,' repeated he, taking a back hand at the port in the excitement of the moment. 'More to his credit if he were to stay at home and attend to his parish,' added Jawleyford; meaning, it would have been more to his credit if he had fulfilled his engagement to him that evening, instead of going out hunting in the morning.

The two then sat silent for a time, Sponge seeing where the sore place was, and Robert Foozle, as usual, seeing nothing.

'Ah, well,' observed Jawleyford, at length breaking silence, 'it was unfortunate you went this morning. I did my best to prevent you – told you what a long way it was, and so on. However, never mind, we will put all right tomorrow. His lordship, I'm sure, will be most happy to see you. So help yourself,' continued he, passing the 'Wintle,' 'and we will drink his health, and success to fox-hunting.'

Sponge filled a bumper and drank his lordship's health, with the accompaniment as desired; and turning to Robert Foozle, who was doing likewise, said, 'Are you fond of hunting?'

'Yes, I'm fond of hunting,' replied Foozle.

'But you *don't* hunt, you know, Robert,' observed Jawleyford.

'No, I don't hunt,' replied Robert.

The 'green seal' being demolished, Jawleyford ordered a bottle of the 'other,' attributing the slight discoloration (which he did not discover until they had nearly finished the bottle) to change of atmosphere in the outer cellar. Sponge tackled vigorously with the newcomer, which was better than the first; and Robert Foozle, drinking as he spoke, by pattern, kept filling away, much to Jawleyford's dissatisfaction, who was compelled to order a third. During the progress of its demolition, the host's tongue became considerably loosened. He talked of hunting and the charms of the chase – of the good fellowship it produced; and expatiated on the advantages it was of to the country in a national point of view, promoting as it did a spirit of manly enterprise, and encouraging our unrivalled breed of horses; both of which he looked upon as national objects, well worthy the attention of enlightened men like himself.

Jawleyford was a great patron of the chase; and his keeper, Watson, always had a bag-fox ready to turn down when my lord's hounds met there. Jawleyford's covers were never known to be drawn blank. Though they had been shot in the day before, they always held a fox the next – if a fox was wanted.

Sponge being quite at home on the subject of horses and hunting, lauded all his papa-in-law's observations up to the skies; occasionally considering whether it would be advisable to sell him a horse, and thinking, if he did, whether he should let him have one of the three he had down, or should get old Buckram to buy some quiet screw that would stand a little work and yield him (Sponge) a little profit, and yet not demolish the great patron of English sports. The more Jawleyford drank, the more energetic he became, and the greater pleasure he anticipated from the meet of the morrow. He docked the lord, and spoke of 'Scamperdale' as an excellent fellow – a real, good, hearty, honest Englishman – a man that 'the more you knew the more you liked,' all of which was very encouraging to Sponge. Spigot at length appeared to read the tea and coffee riot-act, when Jawleyford, determined not to be done out of another bottle, pointing to the nearly-emptied decanter, said to Robert Foozle, 'I suppose you'll not take any more wine?' To which Robert replied, 'No, I'll not take any more wine.' Whereupon, pushing out his chair and throwing away his

napkin, Jawleyford arose and led the way to the drawing-room, followed by Sponge and this entertaining young gentleman.

A round game followed tea; which, in its turn, was succeeded by a massive silver tray, chiefly decorated with cold water and tumblers; and as the various independent clocks in the drawing-room began chiming and striking eleven, Mr Jawleyford thought he would try to get rid of Foozle by asking him if he hadn't better stay all night.

'Yes, I think I'd better stay all night,' replied Foozle.

'But won't they be expecting you at home, Robert?' asked Jawleyford, not feeling disposed to be caught in his own trap.

'Yes, they'll be expecting me at home,' replied Foozle.

'Then, perhaps, you had better not alarm them by staying,' suggested Jawleyford.

'No, perhaps I'd better not alarm them by staying,' repeated Foozle. Whereupon they all rose, and wishing him a very good-night, Jawleyford handed him over to Spigot, who transferred him to one footman, who passed him to another, to button into his leather-headed shandridan.

After talking Robert over, and expatiating on the misfortune it would be to have such a boy, Jawleyford rang the bell for the banquet of water to be taken away; and ordering breakfast half an hour earlier than usual, our friends went to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

The F. H. H. Again

GENTLEMEN UNACCUSTOMED to public hunting often make queer figures of themselves when they go out. We have seen them in all sorts of odd dresses, half fox-hunters, half fishermen, half fox-hunters, half sailors, with now and then a good sturdy cross of the farmer.

Mr Jawleyford was a cross between a military dandy and a squire. The green-and-gold Bumperkin foraging-cap, with the letters B. Y. C., in front, was cocked jauntily on one side of his badger-pyed head, while he played sportively with the patent leather strap – now toying with it on his lip, now dropping it below his chin, now hitching it up on to the peak. He had a tremendously stiff stock on – so hard that no pressure made it wrinkle, and so high that his pointed gills could hardly peer

above it. His coat was a bright green cut-away – made when collars were worn very high and very hollow, and when waists were supposed to be about the middle of a man's back, Jawleyford's back buttons occupying that remarkable position. These, which were of dead gold with a bright rim, represented a hare full stretch for her life, and were the buttons of the old Muggeridge hunt – a hunt that had died many years ago from want of the necessary funds (£80) to carry it on. The coat, which was single-breasted and velvet-collared, was extremely swallow-tailed, presenting a remarkable contrast to the barge-built, roomy roundabouts of the members of the Flat Hat Hunt; the collar rising behind, in the shape of a Gothic arch, exhibited all the stitchings and threadings incident to that department of the garment.

But if Mr Jawleyford's coat went to 'hare,' his waistcoat was fox and all 'fox.' On a bright blue ground he sported such an infinity of 'heads,' that there is no saying that he would have been safe in a kennel of unsteady hounds. One thing, to be sure, was in his favour – namely, that they were just as much like cats' heads as foxes'. The coat and waistcoat were old staggers, but his nether man was encased in rhubarb-coloured tweed pantaloons of the newest make – a species of material extremely soft and comfortable to wear, but not so well adapted for roughing it across country. These had a broad brown stripe down the sides, and were shaped out over the foot of his fine French-polished paper boots, the heels of which were decorated with long-necked, ringing spurs. Thus attired; with a little silver-mounted whip which he kept flourishing about, he encountered Mr Sponge in the entrance-hall, after breakfast. Mr Sponge, like all men who are 'extremely natty' themselves, men who wouldn't have a button out of place if it was ever so, hardly knew what to think of Jawleyford's costume. It was clear he was no sportsman; and then came the question, whether he was of the privileged few who may do what they like, and who can carry off any kind of absurdity. Whatever uneasiness Sponge felt on that score, Jawleyford, however, was quite at his ease, and swaggered about like an aide-de-camp at a review.

'Well, we should be going, I suppose,' said he, drawing on a pair of half-dirty, lemon-coloured kid gloves, and sabreing the air with his whip.

'Is Lord Scamperdale punctual?' asked Sponge.

'Tol-lol,' replied Jawleyford, 'tol-lol.'

'He'll wait for *you*, I suppose?' observed Sponge, thinking to try Jawleyford on that infallible criterion of favour.

'Why, if he knew I was coming, I dare say he would,' replied Jawleyford slowly and deliberately, feeling it was now no time for

flashing. 'If he knew I was coming I dare say he would,' repeated he; 'indeed, I make no doubt he would: but one doesn't like putting great men out of their way; besides which, it's just as easy to be punctual as otherwise. When I was in the Bumperkin –'

'But your horse is on, isn't it?' interrupted Sponge; 'he'll see your horse there, you know.'

'Horse on, my dear fellow!' exclaimed Jawleyford, 'horse on? No, certainly not. How should I get there myself, if my horse was on?'

'Hack, to be sure,' replied Sponge, striking a light for his cigar.

'Ah, but then I should have no groom to go with me,' observed Jawleyford; adding, 'one must make a certain appearance, you know. But come, my dear Mr Sponge,' continued he, laying hold of our hero's arm, 'let us get to the door, for that cigar of yours will fumigate the whole house; and Mrs Jawleyford hates the smell of tobacco.'

Spigot, with his attendants in livery, here put a stop to the confab by hurrying past, drawing the bolts, and throwing back the spacious folding doors, as if royalty or Daniel Lambert himself were 'coming out.'

The noise they made was heard outside; and on reaching the top of the spacious flight of steps, Sponge's piebald in charge of a dirty village lad, and Jawleyford's steeds with a sky-blue groom, were seen scuttling under the portico, for the owners to mount. The Jawleyford cavalry was none of the best; but Jawleyford was pleased with it, and that is a great thing. Indeed, a thing had only to be Jawleyford's, to make Jawleyford excessively fond of it.

'There!' exclaimed he, as they reached the third step from the bottom. 'There!' repeated he, seizing Sponge by the arm, 'that's what I call shape. You don't see such an animal as that every day,' pointing to a not badly-formed, but evidently worn-out, over-knee'd bay, that stood knuckling and trembling for Jawleyford to mount.

'One of the "has beens," I should say,' replied Sponge, puffing a cloud of smoke right past Jawleyford's nose; adding, 'It's a pity but you could get him four new legs.'

'Faith, I don't see that he wants anything of the sort,' retorted Jawleyford, nettled as well at the smoke as the observation.

'Well, where "ignorance is bliss," &c.,' replied Sponge, with another great puff, which nearly blinded Jawleyford. 'Get on, and let's see how he goes,' added he, passing on to the piebald as he spoke.

Mr Jawleyford then mounted; and having settled himself into a military seat, touched the old screw with the spur, and set of at a canter. The piebald, perhaps mistaking the portico for a booth, and thinking it was a good place to exhibit in, proceeded to die in the most approved

form; and not all Sponge's 'Come-up's' or kicks could induce him to rise before he had gone through the whole ceremony. At length, with a mane full of gravel, a side well smeared, and a 'Wilkinson & Kidd' sadly scratched, the *ci-devant* actor arose, much to the relief of the village lad, who having indulged in a gallop as he brought him from Lucksford, expected his death would be laid to his door. No sooner was he up, than, without waiting for him to shake himself, Mr Soapey vaulted into the saddle, and seizing him by the head, let in the Latchfords in a style that satisfied the hack he was not going to canter in a circle. Away he went, best pace; for like all Mr Sponge's horses, he had the knack of going, the general difficulty being to get them to go the way they were wanted.

Sponge presently overtook Mr Jawleyford, who had been brought up by a gate, which he was making sundry ineffectual Briggs-like passes and efforts to open; the gate and his horse seeming to have combined to prevent his getting through. Though an expert swordsman, he had never been able to accomplish, the art of opening a gate, especially one of those gingerly-balanced spring-snecked things that require to be taken at the nick of time, or else they drop just as the horse gets his nose to them.

'Why aren't you here to open the gate?' asked Jawleyford, snappishly, as the blue boy bustled up as his master's efforts became more hopeless at each attempt.

The lad, like a wise fellow, dropped from his horse, and opening it with his hands, ran it back on foot.

Jawleyford and Sponge then rode through.

Canter, canter, canter, went Jawleyford, with an arm a-kimbo, head well up, legs well down, toes well pointed, as if he were going to a race, where his work would end on arriving, instead of to a fox-hunt, where it would only begin.

'You are rather hard on the old nag, aren't you?' at length asked Sponge, as, having cleared the rushy, swampy park, they came upon the macadamised turnpike, and Jawleyford selected the middle of it as the scene of his further progression.

'Oh no!' replied Jawleyford, tit-tup-ing along with a loose rein, as if he was on the soundest, freshest-legged horse in the world; 'oh no! my horses are used to it.'

'Well, but if you mean to hunt him,' observed Sponge, 'he'll be blown before he gets to cover.'

'Get him in wind, my dear fellow,' replied Jawleyford, 'get him in wind,' touching the horse with the spur as he spoke.

'Faith, but if he was as well on his legs as he is in his wind, he'd not be

amiss,' rejoined Sponge.

So they cantered and trotted, and trotted and cantered away, Sponge thinking he could afford pace as well as Jawleyford. Indeed, a horse has only to become a hack, to be able to do double the work he was ever supposed to be capable of.

But to the meet.

Scrambleford Green was a small straggling village on the top of a somewhat high hill, that divided the vale in which Jawleyford Court was situated, from the more fertile one of Farthinghoe, in which Lord Scamperdale lived.

It was one of those out-of-the-way places at which the meet of the hounds, and a love feast or fair, consisting of two fiddlers (one for each public-house), a few unlicensed packmen, three or four gingerbread stalls, a drove of cows and some sheep, form the great events of the year, among a people who are thoroughly happy and contented with that amount of gaiety. Think of that, you 'used up' young gentlemen of twenty, who have exhausted the pleasures of the world! The hounds did not come to Scrambleford Green often, for it was not a favourite meet; and when they did come, Frosty and the men generally had them pretty much to themselves. This day, however, was the exception; and Old Tom Yarnley, whom age had bent nearly double, and who hobbled along on two sticks, declared, that never in the course of his recollection, a period extending over the best part of a century, had he seen such a 'sight of red coats' as mustered that morning at Scrambleford Green. It seemed as if there had been a sudden rising of sportsmen. What brought them all out? What brought Mr Puffington, the master of the Hanby hounds, out? What brought Blossomnose again? What Mr Wake, Mr Fossick, Mr Fyle, who had all been out the day before?

Reader, the news had spread throughout the country that there was a great writer down, and they wanted to see what he would say of them – they had come to sit for their portraits, in fact. There was a great gathering, at least for the Flat Hat Hunt, who seldom mustered above a dozen. Tom Washball came, in a fine new coat and new flat-flipped hat with a broad binding; also Mr Sparks of Spark Hall; Major Mark; Mr Archer of Chean Lodge; Mr Reeves of Coxwell Green; Mr Bliss of Boltonshaw; Mr Joyce of Ebstone; Dr Capon of Calcot; Mr Dribble of Hook; Mr Slade of Three-Burrow Hill; and several others. Great was the astonishment of each as the other cast up.

'Why, here's Joe Reeves!' exclaimed Blossomnose. 'Who'd have thought of seeing you?'

'And who'd have thought of seeing *you*?' rejoined Reeves, shaking hands with the jolly old nose.

'Here's Tom Washball in time for once, I declare!' exclaimed Mr Fyle, as Mr Washball cantered up in apple-pie order.

'Wonders will never cease!' observed Fossick, looking Washy over.

So the field sat in a ring about the hounds, in the centre of which, as usual, were Jack and Lord Scamperdale, looking with their great tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, and short grey whiskers trimmed in a curve up to their noses, like a couple of horned owls in hats.

'Here's the man on the cow!' exclaimed Jack, as he espied Sponge and Jawleyford rising the hill together, easing their horses by standing in their stirrups and holding on by their manes.

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale, turning his horse in the direction Jack was looking, and staring for hard life too. 'So there is, I declare!' observed he. 'And who the deuce is this with him?'

'That ass Jawleyford, as I live!' exclaimed Jack, as the blue-coated servant now hove in sight.

'So it is!' said Lord Scamperdale; 'the confounded *bumbug*!'

'This boy'll be after one of the young ladies,' observed Jack; 'not one of the writing chaps we thought he was.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied Lord Scamperdale; adding, in an under tone, 'I vote we have a rise out of old Jaw. I'll let you in for a good thing – you shall *dine* with him.'

'Not I,' replied Jack.

'You *shall*, though,' replied his lordship, firmly.

'*Pray* don't!' entreated Jack.

'By the powers, if you don't,' rejoined his lordship, 'you shall not have a mount out of me for a month.'

While this conversation was going on, Jawleyford and Sponge having risen the hill, had resumed their seats in the saddle, and Jawleyford, setting himself in attitude, tickled his horse with his spur, and proceeded to canter becomingly up to the pack; Sponge and the groom following a little behind.

'Ah, Jawleyford, my dear fellow!' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale, putting his horse on a few steps to meet him as he came flourishing up, 'Ah, Jawleyford, my dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you,' extending a hand as he spoke. 'Jack, here, told me that he saw your flag flying as he passed, and I said what a pity it was but I'd known before; for Jawleyford, said I, is a *real* good fellow, one of the *best* fellows I know, and has asked me to dine so often that I'm almost ashamed to meet him; and it would have been such a nice opportunity to have volunteered a visit, the hounds being here, you see.'

'Oh, that's so kind of your lordship!' exclaimed Jawleyford, quite delighted – 'that's so kind of your lordship – that's just's what I

like! – that's just what Mrs Jawleyford likes! – that's just what we all like! – coming without fuss or ceremony, just as my friend Mr Sponge, here, does. By the way, will your lordship give me leave to introduce my friend Mr Sponge – my Lord Scamperdale' – Jawleyford suiting the action to the word, and manœuvring the ceremony.

'Ah, I made Mr Sponge's acquaintance yesterday,' observed his lordship drily, giving a sort of servants' touch of his hat as he scrutinised our friend through his formidable glasses; adding – 'To tell you the truth,' addressing himself in an under tone to Sponge, 'I took you for one of those nasty writing chaps, who I 'bominate. But,' continued his lordship, returning to Jawleyford, 'I'll tell you what I said about the dinner. Jack, here, told me the flag was flying; and I said I only wish'd I'd known before, and I would certainly have proposed that Jack and I should dine with you, either today or tomorrow; but unfortunately I'd engaged myself to my Lord Barker's not five minutes before.'

'Ah, my lord!' exclaimed Jawleyford, throwing out his hand and shrugging his shoulders as if in despair, 'you tantalise me – you do indeed. You should have come, or said nothing about it. You distress me – you do indeed.'

'Well, I'm wrong, perhaps,' replied his lordship, patting Jawleyford encouragingly on the shoulder; 'but however, I'll tell you what,' said he, 'Jack here's not engaged, and he shall come to you.'

'Most happy to see Mr – *ha – hum – haw* – Jack – that's to say, Mr Spraggon,' replied Jawleyford, bowing very low, and laying his hand on his heart, as if quite overpowered at the idea of the honour.

'Then, that's a bargain, Jack,' said his lordship, looking knowingly round at his much disconcerted friend; 'you dine and stay all night at Jawleyford Court tomorrow! and *mind*,' added he, 'make yourself 'greeable to the girls – ladies that's to say.'

'Couldn't your lordship arrange it so that we might have the pleasure of seeing you both on some future day?' asked Jawleyford, anxious to avert the Jack calamity. 'Say next week,' continued he; 'or suppose you meet at the Court?'

'*Ha – he – hum*. Meet at the Court,' mumbled his lordship – 'meet at the Court – *ha – he – ha – hum* – no; – got no foxes.'

'*Plenty* of foxes, I assure you, my lord!' exclaimed Jawleyford. '*Plenty* of foxes!' repeated he.

'We never find them, then, somehow,' observed his lordship, drily; 'at least none but those three-legged beggars in the laurels at the back of the stables.'

'Ah! that will be the fault of the hounds,' replied Jawleyford; 'they

don't take sufficient time to draw – run through the covers too quickly.'

'Fault of the hounds be hanged!' exclaimed Jack, who was the champion of the pack generally. 'There's not a more patient, painstaking pack in the world than his lordship's.'

'Ah – well – ah – never mind that,' replied his lordship, 'Jaw and you can settle that point over your wine tomorrow; meanwhile, if your friend Mr What's-his-name here, 'll get his horse,' continued his lordship, addressing himself to Jawleyford, but looking at Sponge, who was still on the piebald, 'we'll throw off.'

'Thank you, my lord,' replied Sponge; 'but I'll mount at the cover side.' Sponge not being inclined to let the Flat Hat Hunt field see the difference of opinion that occasionally existed between the gallant brown and himself.

'As you please,' rejoined his lordship, 'as you please,' jerking his head at Frostyface, who forthwith gave the office to the hounds; whereupon all was commotion. Away the cavalcade went, and in less than five minutes the late bustling village resumed its wonted quiet; the old man on sticks, two crones gossiping at a door, a rag-or-anything-else-gatherer going about with a donkey, and a parcel of dirty children tumbling about on the green, being all that remained on the scene. All the able-bodied men had followed the hounds. Why the hounds had ever climbed the long hill seemed a mystery, seeing that they returned the way they came.

Jawleyford, though sore disconcerted at having 'Jack' pawned upon him, stuck to my lord, and rode on his right with the air of a general. He felt he was doing his duty as an Englishman in thus patronising the hounds – encouraging a manly spirit, of independence, and promoting our unrivalled breed of horses. The post-boy trot at which hounds travel, to be sure, is not well adapted for dignity; but Jawleyford flourished and vapoured as well as he could under the circumstances, and considering they were going down hill. Lord Scamperdale rode along, laughing in his sleeve at the idea of the pleasant evening Jack and Jawleyford would have together, occasionally complimenting Jawleyford on the cut and condition of his horse, and advising him to be careful of the switching raspers with which the country abounded, and which might be fatal to his nice nutmeg-coloured trousers. The rest of the 'field' followed, the fall of the ground enabling them to see 'how thick Jawleyford was with my lord.' Old Blossomnose, who, we should observe, had slipped away unperceived on Jawleyford's arrival, took a bird's-eye view from the rear. Naughty Blossom was riding the horse that ought to have gone in the 'chay' to Jawleyford Court.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Great Run

OUR HERO having inveigled the brown under lee of an outhouse as the field moved along, was fortunate enough to achieve the saddle without disclosing the secrets of the stable; and as he rejoined the throng in all the pride of shape, action, and condition, even the top-sawyers, Fossick, Fyle, Bliss, and others, admitted that Hercules was not a bad-like horse; while the humbler-minded ones eyed Sponge with a mixture of awe and envy, thinking what a fine trade literature must be to stand such a horse.

'Is your friend What's-his-name, a workman?' asked Lord Scamperdale, nodding towards Sponge as he trotted Hercules gently past on the turf by the side of the road along which they were riding.

'Oh, no,' replied Jawleyford, tartly. 'Oh, no – gentleman; man of property –'

'I did not mean was he a mechanic,' explained his lordship drily, 'but a workman; a good 'un across country, in fact.' His lordship working his arms as if he was going to set-to himself.

'Oh, a first-rate man! – *first rate man!*' replied Jawleyford; 'beat them all at Laverick Wells.'

'I thought so,' observed his lordship; adding to himself, 'then Jack shall take the conceit out of him.'

'Jack!' holloed he over his shoulder to his friend, who was jogging a little behind; '*Jack!*' repeated he, 'that Mr Something –'

'*Sponge!*' observed Jawleyford, with an emphasis.

'That Mr Sponge,' continued his lordship, 'is a stranger in the country: have the kindness to take *care* of him. You know what I mean?'

'Just so,' replied Jack; 'I'll take care of him.'

'Most polite of your lordship, I'm sure,' said Jawleyford, with a low bow, and laying his hand on his breast. 'I can assure you I shall never forget the marked attention I have received from your lordship this day.'

'Thank you for nothing,' grunted his lordship to himself.

Bump, bump; trot, trot; jabber, jabber, on they went as before.

They had now got to the cover, Tickler Gorse, and ere the last

horsemen had reached the last angle of the long hill, Frostyface was rolling about on foot in the luxuriant evergreen; now wholly visible, now all but overhead, like a man buffeting among the waves of the sea. Save Frosty's cheery voice encouraging the invisible pack to 'wind him!' and 'rout him out!' an injunction that the shaking of the gorse showed they willingly obeyed, and an occasional exclamation from Jawleyford, of 'Beautiful! beautiful! – never saw better hounds! – can't be a finer pack!' not a sound disturbed the stillness of the scene. The waggoners on the road stopped their wains, the late noisy ploughmen leaned vacantly on their stilts, the turnip-pullers stood erect in air, and the shepherds' boys deserted the bleating flocks; all was life and joy and liberty – 'Liberty, equality, and foxhunt-ity!'

'*Yo-i-cks*, wind him! *Y-o-o-icks!* rout him out!' went Frosty; occasionally varying the entertainment with a loud crack of his heavy whip, when he could get upon a piece of rising ground to clear the thong.

'*Tally-ho!*' screamed Jawleyford, hoisting the Bumperkin Yeomanry cap in the air. 'Tally-ho!' repeated he, looking triumphantly round, as much as to say, 'What a clever boy am I!'

'*Hold your noise!*' roared Jack, who was posted a little below. 'Don't you see it's a *hare*?' added he, amidst the uproarious mirth of the company.

'I haven't your great staring specs on, or I should have seen he hadn't a tail,' retorted Jawleyford, nettled at the tone in which Jack had addressed him.

'Tail be damned!' replied Jack, with a sneer; 'who but a tailor would call it a tail?'

Just then a light low squeak of a whimper was heard in the thickest part of the gorse, and Frostyface cheered the hound to the echo. '*Hoick* to Pillager! *H-o-o-ick!*' screamed he in a long-drawn note, that thrilled through every frame, and set the horses a-capering.

Ere Frosty's prolonged screech was fairly finished, there was such an outburst of melody, and such a shaking of the gorse-bushes, as plainly showed there was no safety for Reynard in cover; and great was the bustle and commotion among the horsemen. Mr Fossick lowered his hat-string and ran the fox's tooth through the button-hole; Fyle drew his girths; Washball took a long swig at his hunting horn-shaped monkey; Major Mark and Mr Archer threw away their cigar ends; Mr Bliss drew on his dogskin gloves; Mr Wake rolled the thong of his whip round the stick, to be better able to encounter his puller; Mr Sparks got a yokel to take up a link of his curb; George Smith and Joe Smith looked at their watches; Sandy McGregor, the factor, filled his great Scotch nose with Irish snuff, exclaiming, as he dismissed the balance

from his fingers by a knock against his thigh, 'Oh, my mon, aw think this tod will gie us a ran!' while Blossomnose might be seen stealing gently forward, on the far side of a thick fence, for the double purpose of shirking Jawleyford, and getting a good start.

In the midst of these and similar preparations for the fray, up went a whip's cap at the lower end of the cover; and a volley of 'Tallyhos' burst from our friends, as the fox, whisking his white-tipped brush in the air, was seen stealing away over the grassy hill beyond. What a commotion was there! How pale some looked! How happy others!

'*Sing out, Jack! for heaven's sake, sing out!*' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale; an enthusiastic sportsman, always as eager for a run as if he had never seen one. 'Sing out, Jack; or, by Jove, they'll over-ride 'em at starting!'

'*HOLD HARD*, gentlemen,' roared Jack, clapping spurs into his grey, or rather into his lordship's grey, dashing in front, and drawing the horse across the road to stop the progression of the field. '*HOLD HARD, one minute!*' repeated Jack, standing erect in his stirrups, and menacing them with his whip (a most formidable one). 'Whatever you do, *pray* let them get away! *Pray* don't spoil your own sport! *Pray* remember they're his lordship's hounds! – that they cost him five-and-twenty underd – two thousand five underd a year! And where, let me ax, with wheat down to nothing, would you get another, if he was to throw up?'

As Jack made this enquiry, he took a hurried glance at the now pouring-out pack; and seeing they were safe away, he wiped the foam from his mouth on his sleeve, dropped into his saddle, and catching his horse short round by the head, clapped spurs into his sides, and galloped away, exclaiming,

'*Now, ye tinkers, we'll all start fair!*'

Then there was such a scrimmage! such jostling and elbowing among the jealous ones; such ramming and cramming among the eager ones; such pardon-begging among the polite ones; such spurting of ponies, such clambering of cart-horses! All were bent on going as far as they could – all except Jawleyford, who sat curvetting and prancing in the patronising sort of way gentlemen do who encourage hounds for the sake of the manly spirit the sport engenders, and the advantage hunting is of in promoting our unrivalled breed of horses.

His lordship having slipped away, horn in hand, under pretence of blowing the hounds out of cover, as soon as he set Jack at the field, had now got a good start, and, horse well in hand, was sailing away in their wake.

'*F-o-o-r-r-r-and!*' screamed Frostyface, coming up alongside of him, holding his horse – a magnificent thoroughbred bay – well by the head,

and settling himself into his saddle as he went.

'*F-o-r-r-ard!*' screeched his lordship, thrusting his spectacles on to his nose.

'*Twang-twang-twang,*' went the huntsman's deep-sounding horn.

'*Tweet-t'weet-t'weet,*' went his lordship's shriller one.

'In for a stinger, my lurd,' observed Jack, returning his horn to the case.

'Hope so,' replied his lordship, pocketing his.

They then flew the first fence together.

'*F-o-r-r-ard!*' screamed Jack in the air, as he saw the hounds packing well together, and racing with a breast-high scent.

'*F-o-r-r-ard!*' screamed his lordship, who was a sort of echo to his huntsman, just as Jack Spraggon was echo to his lordship.

'He's away for Gunnersby Craigs,' observed Jack, pointing that way, for they were a good ten miles off.

'Hope so,' replied his lordship, for whom the distance could never be too great, provided the pace corresponded.

'*F-o-o-r-r-ard!*' screamed Jack.

'*F-o-r-r-ard!*' screeched his lordship.

So they went flying and 'forrharding' together; none of the field - thanks to Jack Spraggon - being able to overtake them.

'*Y-o-o-nder* he goes!' at last cried Frosty, taking off his cap as he viewed the fox, some half-mile ahead, stealing away round the side of Newington Hill.

'*Tally-ho!*' screeched his lordship, riding with his flat hat in the air, by way of exciting the striving field to still further exertion.

'He's a good 'un!' exclaimed Frosty, eyeing the fox's going.

'He is that!' replied his lordship, staring at him with all his might.

Then they rode on, and were presently rounding Newington Hill themselves, the hounds packing well together, and carrying a famous head.

His lordship now looked to see what was going on behind.

Scrambleford Hill was far in the rear. Jawleyford and the boy in blue were altogether lost in the distance. A quarter of a mile or so this way were a couple of dots of horsemen, one on a white, the other on a dark colour - most likely Jones, the keeper, and Farmer Stubble, on the foaly mare. Then, a little nearer, was a man in a hedge, trying to coax his horse after him, stopping the way of two boys in white trousers, whose ponies looked like rats. Again, a little nearer, were some of the persevering ones - men who still hold on in the forlorn hopes of a check - all dark-coated, and mostly trousered. Then came the last of the red-coats - Tom Washball, Charley Joyce, and Sam Sloman, riding well

in the first flight of second horsemen - his lordship's pad-groom, Mr Fossick's man in drab with a green collar, Mr Wake's in blue, also a lad in scarlet and a flat hat, with a second horse for the huntsman. Drawing still nearer came the ruck - men in red, men in brown, men in livery, a farmer or two in fustian, all mingled together; and a few hundred yards before these, and close upon his lordship, were the *élite* of the field - five men in scarlet and one in black. Let us see who they are. By the powers, Mr Sponge is first! - Sponge sailing away at his ease, followed by Jack, who is staring at him through his great lamps, longing to launch out at him, but as yet wanting an excuse; Sponge having ridden with judgement - judgement, at least, in everything except in having taken the lead of Jack. After Jack comes old black-booted Blossomnose; and Messrs Wake, Fossick, and Fyle, complete our complement of five. They are all riding steadily and well; all very irate, however, at the stranger for going before them, and ready to back Jack in anything he may say or do.

On, on they go; the hounds still pressing forward, though not carrying quite so good a head as before. In truth, they have run four miles in twenty minutes; pretty good going anywhere except upon paper, where they always go unnaturally fast. However, there they are, still pressing on, though with considerably less music than before.

After rounding Newington Hill, they got into a wilder and worse sort of country, among moorish, ill-cultivated land, with cold unwholesome-looking fallows. The day, too, seemed changing for the worse; a heavy black cloud hanging overhead. The hounds were at length brought to their noses.

His lordship, who had been riding all eyes, ears, and fears, foresaw the probability of this; and pulling-to his horse, held up his hand, the usual signal for Jack to 'sing out' and stop the field. Sponge saw the signal, but, unfortunately, Hercules didn't; and tearing along with his head to the ground, resolutely bore our friend not only past his lordship, but right on to where the now stooping pack were barely feathering on the line.

Then Jack and his lordship sang out together.

'*Hold hard!*' screeched his lordship, in a dreadful state of excitement.

'*HOLD HARD!*' thundered Jack.

Sponge *was* holding hard - hard enough to split the horse's jaws, but the beast would go on, notwithstanding.

'By the powers, he's among 'em again!' shouted his lordship, as the resolute beast, with his upturned head almost pulled round to Sponge's knee, went stargazing on like the blind man in Regent Street. '*Sing out, Jack! sing out! for heaven's sake sing out,*' shrieked his lordship, shutting his eyes, as he added, 'or he'll kill every man Jack of them.'

'Now, SUR!' roared Jack, 'can't you steer that ere aggravatin' quadruped of yours?'

'Oh, you pestilential son of a pontry-maid!' screeched his lordship, as Brilliant ran yelping away from under Sponge's horse's feet. '*Sing out Jack! sing out!*' gasped his lordship again.

'Oh, you scandalous, hypocritical, rusty-booted, numb-handed son of a puffing corn-cutter, why don't you turn your attention to feeding hens, cultivating cabbages, or making pantaloons for small folks, instead of killing hounds in this wholesale way?' roared Jack; an enquiry that set him foaming again.

'Oh, you unsightly, sanctified, idolatrous, Bagnigge-Wells copper-smith, you think because I'm a lord, and can't swear or use coarse language, that you may do what you like; rot you, sir, I'll present you with a testimonial! I'll settle a hundred a-year upon you if you'll quit the country. *By the powers*, they're away again!' added his lordship, who, with one eye on Sponge and the other on the pack, had been watching Frosty lifting them over the bad scenting-ground, till, holding them on to a hedgerow beyond, they struck the scent on good sound pasture, and went away at score, every hound throwing his tongue, and filling the air with joyful melody. Away they swept like a hurricane. 'F-o-o-rard!' was again the cry.

'Hang it, Jack,' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale, laying his hand on his *double's* shoulder, as they galloped alongside of each other - 'Hang it, Jack, see if you can't sarve out this unrighteous, mahogany-booted, rattlesnake. *Do* if you *die* for it! - I'll bury your remainders genteelly - patent coffin with brass nails, all to yourself - put Frosty and all the fellows in black, and raise a white marble monument to your memory, declaring you were the most spotless virtuous man under the sun.'

'Let me off dining with Jaw, and I'll do my best,' replied Jack.

'*Done!*' screamed his lordship, flourishing his right arm in the air, as he flew over a great stone wall.

A good many of the horses and sportsmen too had had enough before the hounds checked; and the quick way Frosty lifted them and hit off the scent, did not give them much time to recruit. Many of them now sat, hat in hand, mopping, and puffing, and turning their red perspiring faces to the wind. '*Poough*,' gasped one, as if he was going to be sick; 'Puff,' went another; 'Oh! but its 'ot!' exclaimed a third, pulling off his limp neckcloth; 'Wonder if there's any ale hereabouts,' cried a fourth; 'Terrible run!' observed a fifth; 'Ten miles at least,' gasped another. Meanwhile the hounds went streaming on; and it is wonderful how soon those who don't follow are left hopelessly in the rear.

Of the few that did follow, Mr Sponge, however, was one. Nothing

daunted by the compliments that had been paid him, he got Hercules well in hand; and the horse dropping again on the bit, resumed his place in front, going as strong and steadily as ever. Thus he went, throwing the mud in the faces of those behind, regardless of the oaths and imprecations that followed Sponge knowing full well they would do the same by him if they could.

'All jealousy,' said Sponge, spurring his horse. 'Never saw such a jealous set of dogs in my life.'

An accommodating lane soon presented itself, along which they all pounded, with the hounds running parallel through the enclosures on the left; Sponge sending such volleys of pebbles and mud in his rear as made it advisable to keep a good way behind him. The line was now apparently for Firlingham Woods; but on nearing the thatched cottage on Gaspar Heath, the fox, most likely being headed, had turned short to the right; and the chase now lay over Sheeprow Water meadows, and so on to Bolsover brickfields, when the pack again changed from hunting to racing, and the pace for a time was severe. His lordship having got his second horse at the turn, was ready for the tussle, and plied away vigorously, riding, as usual, with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, and with all his strength; while Jack, still on the grey, came plodding diligently along in the rear, saving his horse as much as he could. His lordship charged a stiff flight of rails in the brickfields; while Jack, thinking to save his, rode at a weak place in the fence, a little higher up, and in an instant was souse overhead in a clay-hole.

'*Duck under, Jack! duck under!*' screamed his lordship, as Jack's head rose to the surface. '*Duck under! you'll have it full directly!*' added he, eyeing Sponge and the rest coming up.

Sponge, however, saw the splash, and turning a little lower down, landed safe on sound ground; while poor Blossomnose, who was next, went floundering overhead also. But the pace was too good to stop to fish them out.

'Dash it,' said Sponge, looking at them splashing about, 'but that was a near go for me!'

Jack being thus disposed of, Sponge, with increased confidence, rose in his stirrups, easing the redoubtable Hercules; and patting him on the shoulder, at the same time that he gave him the gentlest possible touch of the spur, exclaimed, 'By the powers, we'll show these old Flat Hats the trick!' He then commenced humming -

'Mister Sponge, the raspers taking,
Sets the junkers' nerves a-shaking;'

and riding cheerfully on, he at length found himself on the confines of a wild, rough-looking moor, with an undulating range of hills in the distance.

Frostyface and Lord Scamperdale here for the first time diverged from the line the hounds were running, and made for the neck of a smooth, flat, rather inviting-looking piece of ground, instead of crossing it, Sponge, thinking to get a niche, rode to it; and the 'deeper and deeper still' sort of flounder his horse made soon let him know that he was in a bog. The impetuous Hercules rushed and reared onwards as if to clear the wide expanse; and alighting still lower, shot Sponge right overhead in the middle.

'That's cooked *your* goose!' exclaimed his lordship, eyeing Sponge and his horse floundering about in the black porridge-like mess.

'Catch my horse!' hallooed Sponge to the first whip, who came galloping up as Hercules was breasting his way out again.

'Catch him yourself,' grunted the man, galloping on.

A peat-cutter, more humane, received the horse as he emerged from the black sea, exclaiming, as the now-piebald Sponge came lobbing after on foot, 'A, sir! but ye should niver set tee to ride through sic a place as that!'

Sponge having generously rewarded the man with a fourpenny piece, for catching his horse and scraping the thick of the mud off him, again mounted, and cantered round the point he should at first have gone; but his chance was out – the further he went, the further he was left behind; till at last, pulling up, he stood watching the diminishing pack, rolling like marbles over the top of Botherjade Hill, followed by his lordship hugging his horse round the neck as he went, and the huntsman and whips leading and driving theirs up before them.

'Nasty jealous old beggar!' said Sponge, eyeing his lessening lordship disappearing over the hill too. Sponge then performed the sickening ceremony of turning away from hounds running; not but that he might have plodded on on the line, and perhaps seen or heard what became of the fox, but Sponge didn't hunt on those terms. Like a good many other gentlemen, he would be first, or nowhere.

If it was any consolation to him, he had plenty of companions in misfortune. The line was dotted with horsemen back to the brickfields. The first person he overtook wending his way home in the discontented, moody humour of a thrown-out man, was Mr Puffington, master of the Hanby hounds; at whose appearance at the meet we expressed our surprise.

Neighbouring masters of hounds are often more or less jealous of each other. No man in the master-of-hound world is too insignificant

for censure. Lord Scamperdale *was* an undoubted sportsman; while poor Mr Puffington thought of nothing but how to be thought one. Hearing the mistaken rumour that a great writer was down, he thought that his chance of immortality was arrived; and ordering his best horse, and putting on his best apparel, had braved the jibes and sneers of Jack and his lordship for the purpose of scraping acquaintance with the stranger. In that he had been foiled: there was no time at the meet to get introduced, neither could he get jostled beside Sponge in going down to the cover, while the quick find, the quick get away followed by the quick thing we have described, were equally unfavourable to the undertaking. Nevertheless, Mr Puffington had held on beyond the brickfields; and had he but persevered a little further, he would have had the satisfaction of helping Mr Sponge out of the bog.

Sponge now, seeing a red coat a little before, trotted on, and quickly overtook a fine nippy, satin-stocked, dandified looking gentleman, with marvellously smart leathers and boots – a great contrast to the large, roomy, bargeman-like costume of the members of the Flat Hat Hunt.

'You're not hurt, I hope?' exclaimed Mr Puffington, with well-feigned anxiety, as he looked at Mr Sponge's black-daubed clothes.

'Oh no!' replied Sponge. 'Oh no! – fell soft – fell soft. More dirt, less hurt – more dirt, less hurt.'

'Why you've been in a bog!' exclaimed Mr Puffington, eyeing the much-stained Hercules.

'Almost over head,' replied Sponge. 'Scamperdale saw me going, and hadn't the grace to holloa.'

'Ah, that's like him,' replied Mr Puffington – 'that's like him, there's nothing pleases him so much as getting fellows into grief.'

'Not very polite to a stranger,' observed Mr Sponge.

'No, it isn't,' replied Mr Puffington – 'no, it isn't; far from it indeed – far from it; but, low be it spoken,' added he, 'his lordship is only a roughish sort of customer.'

'So he is,' replied Mr Sponge, who thought it fine to abuse a nobleman.

'The fact is,' said Mr Puffington, 'these Flat Hat chaps are all snobs. They think there are no such fine fellows as themselves under the sun; and if ever a stranger looks near them, they make a point of being as rude and disagreeable to him as they possibly can. This is what they call keeping the hunt select.'

'Indeed!' observed Mr Sponge, recollecting how they had complimented him; adding, 'They seem a queer set.'

'There's a fellow they call "Jack,"' observed Mr Puffington, 'who acts as a sort of bulldog to his lordship, and worries whoever his lordship sets

him upon. He got into a clay-hole a little further back, and a precious splashing he was making, along with the chaplain, old Blossomnose.'

'Ah, I saw him,' observed Mr Sponge.

'You should come and see *my* hounds,' observed Mr Puffington.

'What are they?' asked Sponge.

'The Hanby,' replied Mr Puffington.

'Oh! then you are Mr Puffington,' observed Sponge, who had a sort of general acquaintance with all the hounds and masters – indeed, with all the meets of all the hounds in the kingdom – which he read in the weekly lists in *Bell's Life*, just as he read Mogg's *Cab Fares*. 'Then you are Mr Puffington?' observed Sponge.

'The same,' replied the stranger.

'I'll have a look at you,' observed Sponge; adding, 'Do you take in horses?'

'Yours, of *course*,' replied Mr Puffington, bowing; adding something about great public characters, which Sponge didn't understand.

'I'll be down upon you, as the extinguisher said to the rushlight,' observed Mr Sponge.

'*Do*,' said Mr Puffington; 'come before the frost. Where are you staying now?'

'I'm at Jawleyford's,' replied our friend.

'Indeed! – Jawleyford's, are you?' repeated Mr Puffington. 'Good fellow, Jawleyford – gentleman, Jawleyford. How long do you stay?'

'Why, I haven't made up my mind,' replied Sponge. 'Have no thoughts of budging at present.'

'Ah, well – good quarters,' said Mr Puffington, who now smelt a rat; 'good quarters – nice girls – fine fortune – fine place, Jawleyford Court. Well, book me for the next visit,' added he.

'I will,' said Sponge, 'and no mistake. What do they call your shop?'

'Hanby House,' replied Mr Puffington; 'Hanby House – anybody can tell you where Hanby House is.'

'I'll not forget,' said Mr Sponge, booking it in his mind, and eyeing his victim.

'I'll show you a fine pack of hounds,' said Mr Puffington, 'far finer animals than those of old Scamperdale's – steady, true hunting hounds, that won't go a yard without a scent – none of your jealous, flashy, frantic devils, that will tear over half a township without one, and are always looking out for "holloas" and assistance –'

Mr Puffington was interrupted in the comparison he was about to draw between his lordship's hounds and his, by arriving at the Bolsover brickfields, and seeing Jack and Blossomnose, horse in hand, running to and fro, while sundry countrymen blobbed about in the clay-hole

they had so recently occupied. Tom Washball, Mr Wake, Mr Fyle, Mr Fossick, and several dark-coated horsemen and boys, were congregated around. Jack had lost his spectacles, and Blossomnose his whip, and the countrymen were diving for them.

'Not hurt, I hope?' said Mr Puffington, in the most dandified tone of indifference, as he rode up to where Jack and Blossomnose were churning the water in their boots, stamping up and down, trying to get themselves warm.

'Hurt be hanged!' replied Jack, who had a frightful squint, that turned his eyes inside out when he was in a passion: 'Hurt be hanged!' said he; 'might have been drowned, for anything you'd have cared.'

'I should have been sorry for that,' replied Mr Puffington; adding, 'The Flat Hat Hunt could ill afford to lose so useful and ornamental a member.'

'I don't know what the Flat Hat Hunt can afford to lose,' spluttered Jack, who hadn't got all the clay out of his mouth; 'but I know they can afford to do without the company of certain gentlemen who shall be nameless,' said he, looking at Sponge and Puffington as he thought, but in reality showing nothing but the whites of his eyes.

'I told you so,' said Puffington, jerking his head towards Jack, as Sponge and he turned their horses' heads to ride away; 'I told you so,' repeated he; 'that's a specimen of their style;' adding, 'they are the greatest set of ruffians under the sun.'

The new acquaintances then jogged on together as far as the crossroads at Stewley, when Puffington, having bound Sponge in his own recognisance to come to him when he left Jawleyford Court, pointed him out his way, and with a most hearty shake of the hands the new-made friends parted.

CHAPTER XXIV

Lord Scamperdale at Home

WE FEAR OUR FAIR FRIENDS will expect something gay from the above heading – lamps and flambeaux outside, fiddlers, feathers, and flirts in. Nothing of the sort, fair ladies – nothing of the sort. Lord Scamperdale 'at home,' simply means that his lordship was not out

hunting, that he had got his dirty boots and breeches off, and dry tweeds and tartans on.

Lord Scamperdale was the eighth earl; and, according to the usual alternating course of great English families – one generation living and the next starving – it was his lordship's turn to live; but the seventh earl having been rather unreasonable in the length of his lease, the present earl, who during the lifetime of his father was Lord Hardup, had contracted such parsimonious habits, that when he came into possession he could not shake them off; and but for the fortunate friendship of Abraham Brown, the village blacksmith, who had given his young idea a sporting turn, entering him with ferrets and rabbits, and so training him on with terriers and rat-catching, badger-baiting and otter-hunting, up to the noble sport of fox-hunting itself, in all probability his lordship would have been a regular miser. As it was, he did not spend a halfpenny upon anything but hunting; and his hunting, though well, was still economically done, costing him some couple of thousand a-year, to which, for the sake of euphony, Jack used to add an extra five hundred; 'two thousand five under a year, five-and-twenty under a year,' sounding better, as Jack thought, and more imposing, than a couple of thousand, or two thousand, a-year. There were few days on which Jack didn't inform the field what the hounds cost his lordship, or rather what they didn't cost him.

Woodmansterne, his lordship's principal residence, was a fine place. It stood in an undulating park of 500 acres, with its church, and its lakes, and its heronry, and its decoy, and its racecourse, and its varied grasses of the choicest kinds, for feeding the numerous herds of deer, so well known at Temple Bar and Charing Cross as the Woodmansterne venison. The house was a modern edifice, built by the sixth earl, who, having been a 'liver,' had run himself aground by his enormous outlay on this Italian structure, which was just finished when he died. The fourth earl, who, we should have stated, was a 'liver' too, was a man of *vertù* – a great traveller and collector of coins, pictures, statues, marbles, and curiosities generally – things that are very dear to buy, but oftentimes extremely cheap when sold; and, having collected a vast quantity from all parts of the world (no easy feat in those days), he made them heirlooms, and departed this life, leaving the next earl the pleasure of contemplating them. The fifth earl having duly starved through life, then made way for the sixth; who, finding such a quantity of valuables stowed away as he thought in rather a confined way, sent to London for a first-rate architect, Sir Thomas Squareall (who always posted with four horses), who forthwith pulled down the old brick-and-stone Elizabethan mansion, and built the present splendid Italian structure, of

the finest polished stone, at an expense of – furniture and all – say £120,000; Sir Thomas's estimates being £30,000. The seventh earl of course they starved; and the present lord, at the age of forty-three, found himself in possession of house, and coins, and curiosities; and, best of all, of some £90,000 in the funds, which had quietly rolled up during the latter part of his venerable parent's existence. His lordship then took counsel with himself – first, whether he should marry or remain single; secondly, whether he should live or starve. Having considered the subject with all the attention a limited allowance of brains permitted, he came to the resolution that the second proposition depended a good deal upon the first; 'for,' said he to himself, 'if I marry, my lady, perhaps, may *make* me live; and therefore,' said he, 'perhaps I'd better remain single.' At all events, he came to the determination not to marry in a hurry; and until he did, he felt there was no occasion for him to inconvenience himself by living. So he had the house put away in brown Holland, the carpets rolled up, the pictures covered, the statues shrouded in muslin, the cabinets of curiosities locked, the plate secured, the china closeted, and everything arranged with the greatest care against the time, which he put before him in the distance like a target, when he should marry and begin to live.

At first he gave two or three great dinners a-year, about the height of the fruit season, and when it was getting too ripe for carriage to London by the old coaches – when a grand airing of the state-rooms used to take place, and ladies from all parts of the county used to sit shivering with their bare shoulders, all anxious for the honours of the head of the table. His lordship always held out that he was a marrying man; but even if he hadn't they would have come all the same, an unmarried man being always clearly on the cards: and though he was stumpy, and clumsy, and ugly, with as little to say for himself as could well be conceived, they all agreed that he was a most engaging, attractive man – quite a pattern of a man. Even on horseback, and in his hunting clothes, in which he looked far the best, he was only a coarse, square, bull-headed looking man, with the hard, dry, round, matter-of-fact features that never look young, and yet somehow never get old. Indeed, barring the change from brown to grey of his short stubby whiskers, which he trained with great care into a curve almost on to his cheek-bone, he looked very little older at the period of which we are writing than he did a dozen years before, when he was Lord Hardup. These dozen years, however, had brought him down in his doings.

The dinners had gradually dwindled away altogether, and he had had all the large tablecloths and napkins rough dried and locked away against he got married; an event that he seemed more anxious to

provide for the more unlikely it became. He had also abdicated the main body of the mansion, and taken up his quarters in what used to be the steward's room; into which he could creep quietly by a side door opening from the outer entrance, and so save frequent exposure to the cold and damp of the large cathedral-like hall beyond. Through the steward's room, was what used to be the muniment room, which he converted into a bedroom for himself; and a little further along the passage was another small chamber, made out of what used to be the plate-room, whereof Jack, or whoever was in office, had the possession. All three rooms were furnished in the roughest, coarsest, homeliest way – his lordship wishing to keep all the good furniture against he got married. The sitting-room, or parlour as his lordship called it, had an old grey drugget for a carpet, an old round black mahogany table on castors, that the last steward had ejected as too bad for him, four semicircular wooden-bottomed walnut smoking-chairs; an old spindle-shanked sideboard, with very little middle, over which swung a few book-shelves, with the termination of their green strings surmounted by a couple of foxes' brushes. Small as the shelves were, they were larger than his lordship wanted – two books, one for Jack and one for himself, being all they contained; while the other shelves were filled with hunting-horns, odd spurs, knots of whipcord, piles of halfpence, lucifer match-boxes, gun-charges, and suchlike miscellaneous articles.

His lordship's fare was as rough as his furniture. He was a great admirer of tripe, cow-heel, and delicacies of that kind; he had tripe twice a-week – boiled one day, fried another. He was also a great patron of beefsteaks, which he ate half raw, with slices of cold onion served in a saucer with water.

It was a beefsteak-and-batter-pudding day on which the foregoing run took place; and his lordship and Jack having satisfied nature off their respective dishes – for they only had vegetables in common – and having finished off with some very strong Cheshire cheese, wheeled their chairs to the fire, while Bags the butler cleared the table and placed it between them. They were dressed in full suits of flaming large-checked red-and-yellow tartans, the tartan of that noble clan the 'Stunners,' with black-and-white Shetland hose and red slippers. His lordship and Jack had related their mutual adventures by cross visits to each other's bedrooms while dressing; and, dinner being announced by the time they were ready, they had fallen to, and applied themselves diligently to the victuals, and now very considerably unbuttoned their many-pocketed waistcoats and stuck out their legs, to give it a fair chance of digesting. They seldom spoke much until his lordship had had his nap, which he generally took immediately after dinner; but on

this particular night he sat bending forward in his chair, picking his teeth and looking at his toes, evidently ill at ease in his mind. Jack guessed the cause, but didn't say anything. Sponge, he thought, had beat him.

At length his lordship threw himself back in his chair, and stretching his little queer legs out before him, began to breathe thicker and thicker, till at last he got the melody up to a grunt. It was not the fine generous snore of a sleep that he usually enjoyed, but, short, fitful, broken naps, that generally terminated in spasmodic jerks of the arms or legs. These grew worse, till at last all four went at once, like the limbs of a Peter Waggey, when, throwing himself forward with a violent effort, he awoke; and finding his horse was not a-top of him, as he thought, he gave vent to his feelings in the following ejaculations:

'Oh, Jack, I'm onhappy!' exclaimed he. 'I'm distressed!' continued he. '*I'm wretched!*' added he, slapping his knees. '*I'm perfectly miserable!*' he concluded, with a strong emphasis on the 'miserable.'

'What's the matter?' asked Jack, who was half asleep himself.

'Oh, that Mister Something! – he'll be the death of me!' observed his lordship.

'I thought so,' replied Jack; 'what's the chap been after now?'

'I dreamt he'd killed old Lablache – best hound I have,' replied his lordship.

'He be –,' grunted Jack.

'Ah, it's all very well for you to say "he be this" and "he be that," but I can tell you what, that fellow is going to be a very awkward customer – a terrible thorn in my side.'

'*Humph!*' grunted Jack, who didn't see how.

'There's mischief about that fellow,' continued his lordship, pouring himself out half a tumbler of gin, and filling it up with water. 'There's mischief about the fellow. I don't like his looks – I don't like his coat – I don't like his boots – I don't like anything about him. I'd rather see the back of him than the front. He must be got rid of,' added his lordship.

'Well, I did my best today, I'm sure,' replied Jack. 'I was deuced near wanting the patent coffin you were so good as to promise me.'

'You did your work *well*,' replied his lordship; 'you did your work well; and you shall have my other specs till I can get you a new pair from town; and if you'll serve me again, I'll remember you in my will – I'll leave you something handsome.'

'I'm your man,' replied Jack.

'I never was so bothered with a fellow in my life,' observed his lordship. 'Captain Topsawyer was bad enough, and always pressed far too close on the hounds, but he would pull up at a check; but this rusty

booted 'bomination seems to think the hounds are kept for him to ride over. He must be got rid of somehow,' repeated his lordship; 'for we shall have no peace while he's here'

'If he's after either of the Jawley girls, he'll be bad to shake off,' observed Jack.

'That's just the point,' replied his lordship, quaffing off his gin with the air of a man most thoroughly thirsty; 'that's just the point,' repeated he, setting down his tumbler. 'I think if he is, I could cook his goose for him.'

'How so?' asked Jack, drinking off his glass.

'Why, I'll tell you,' replied his lordship, replenishing his tumbler, and passing the old gilt-labelled blue bottle over to Jack; 'you see, Frosty's a cunning old file, picks up all the news and gossip of the country when he's out at exercise with the hounds, or in going to cover – knows everything! – who licks his wife, and whose wife licks him – who's after such a girl, and so on – and he's found out somehow that this Mr What's-his-name isn't the man of metal he's passing for.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Jack, raising his eyebrows, and squinting his eyes inside out; Jack's opinion of a man being entirely regulated by his purse.

'It's a fact,' said his lordship, with a knowing shake of his head. 'As we were toddling home with the hounds, I said to Frosty, "I hope that Mr Something's comfortable in his bath" – meaning Gobblecow Bog, which he rode into. "Why," said Frosty, "it's no great odds what comes of such rubbage as that." Now, Frosty, you know, in a general way, is a most polite, fairspoken man, specially before Christmas, when he begins to look for the tips; and as we are not much troubled with strangers, thanks to your sensible way of handling them, I thought Frosty would have made the most of this natural son of Dives, and been as polite to him as possible. However, he was evidently no favourite of Frosty's. So I just asked – not that one likes to be familiar with servants, you know, but still this brown-booted beggar is enough to excite one's curiosity and make anyone go out of one's way a little – so I just asked Frosty what he knew about him. "All over the left," said Frosty, jerking his thumb back over his shoulder, and looking as knowing as a goose with one eye; "all over the left," repeated he. "What's over the left?" said I. "Why, this Mr Sponge," said he. "How so?" asked I. "Why," said Frosty, "he's come gammonin' down here that he's a great man – full of money, and horses, and so on; but it's all my eye, he's no more a great man than I am."'

'The deuce!' exclaimed Jack, who had sat squinting and listening intently as his lordship proceeded. 'Well now, hang me, I thought he

was a snob the moment I saw him,' continued he; Jack being one of those clever gentlemen who know everything after they are told.

'Well, how do you know, Jack?' said I to Frosty. "*Oh I know*," replied he, as if he was certain about it. However, I wasn't satisfied without knowing too; and, as we kept jogging on, we came to the old Coach and Horses, and I said to Jack, "We may as well have a drop of something to warm us." So we halted, and had glasses of brandy apiece, whips and all; and then, as we jogged on again, I just said to Jack, casually, "Did you say it was Mr Blossomnose told you about old Brown Boots?" "*No – Blossomnose – no*," replied he, as if Blossom never had anything half so good to tell; "it was a young woman," said he, in an undertone, "who told me, and she had it from old Brown Boots's groom."'

'Well, that's *good*,' observed Jack, diving his hands into the very bottom of his great tartan trouser pockets, and shooting his legs out before him; 'Well, that's *good*,' repeated he, falling into a sort of reverie.

'Well, but what can we make of it?' at length enquired he, after a long pause, during which he ran the facts through his mind and thought they could not be much ruder to Sponge than they had been. 'What can we make of it?' said he. 'The fellow can ride, and we can't prevent him hunting; and his having nothing only makes him less careful of his neck.'

'Why, that was just what I thought,' replied Lord Scamperdale, taking another tumbler of gin; 'that was just what I thought – the fellow can ride, and we can't prevent him; and just as I settled that in my sleep, I thought I saw him come staring along, with his great brown horse's head in the air, and crash right a-top of old Lablache. But I see my way clearer with him now. But help yourself,' continued his lordship, passing the gin-bottle over to Jack, feeling that what he had to say required a little recommendation. 'I think I can turn Frosty's information to some account.'

'I don't see how,' observed Jack, replenishing his glass.

'I do, though,' replied his lordship; 'but I must have your assistance.'

'Well, anything in moderation,' replied Jack, who had had to turn his hand to some very queer jobs occasionally.

'I'll tell you what *I* think,' observed his lordship. 'I think there are two ways of getting rid of this haughty Philistine – this unclean spirit – this 'bomination of a man. I think, in the first place, if old chatterbox knew that he had nothing, he would very soon bow him out of Jawleyford Court; and, in the second, that we might get rid of him by buying his horses.'

'Well,' replied Jack, 'I don't know but you're right. Chatterbox

would soon wash his hands of him, as he has done of many promising young gentleman before, if he has nothing; but people differ so in their ideas of what nothing consists of.'

Jack spoke feelingly, for he was a gentleman who was generally spoken of as having nothing a-year, paid quarterly; and yet he was in the enjoyment of an annuity of sixty pounds.

'Oh, why, when I say he has nothing,' replied Lord Scamperdale, 'I mean that he has not what Jawleyford, who is a bumptious sort of an ass, would consider sufficient to make him a fit match for one of his daughters. He may have a few hundreds a year, but Jaw, I'm sure, will look at nothing under thousands.'

'Oh, certainly not,' replied Jack; 'there's no doubt about that.'

'Well, then, you see, I was thinking,' observed Lord Scamperdale, eyeing Jack's countenance, 'that if you would dine there tomorrow, as we fixed -'

'Oh, dash it! I couldn't do that,' interrupted Jack, drawing himself together in his chair like a horse refusing a leap; 'I couldn't do that - I couldn't dine with Jaw not at no price.'

'Why not?' asked Lord Scamperdale; 'he'll give you a good dinner - *fricassees*, and all sorts of good things; far finer fare than you have here.'

'That may all be,' replied Jack, 'but I don't want none of his food. I hate the sight of the fellow, and detest him fresh every time I see him. Consider, too, you said you'd let me off if I sarved out Sponge; and I'm sure I did my best. I led him over some awful places, and then what a ducking I got! My ears are full of water still,' added he, laying his head on one side to try to run it out.

'You did well,' observed Lord Scamperdale - 'you did well, and I fully intended to let you off; but then I didn't know what a beggar I had to deal with. Come, say you'll go, that's a good fellow.'

'*Couldn't*,' replied Jack, squinting frightfully.

'You'll *oblige* me,' observed Lord Scamperdale.

'Ah, well, I'd do anything to oblige your lordship,' replied Jack, thinking of the corner in the will. 'I'd do anything to oblige your lordship; but the fact is, sir, I'm not prepared to go. I've lost my specs - I've got no swell clothes - I can't go in the Stunner tartan,' added he, eyeing his backgammon-board-looking chest, and diving his hands into the capacious pockets of his shooting-jacket.

'I'll manage all that,' replied his lordship; 'I've got a pair of splendid silver-mounted spectacles in the Indian cabinet in the drawing-room, that I've kept to be married in. I'll lend them to you, and there's no saying but you may captivate Miss Jawleyford in them. Then as to clothes, there's my new damson-coloured velvet waistcoat with the

steel buttons, and my fine blue coat with the velvet collar, silk facings, and our button on it; altogether I'll rig you out and make you such a swell as there's no saying but Miss Jawleyford'll offer to you, by way of consoling herself for the loss of Sponge.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to make a settlement for me, then,' observed our friend.

'Well, you are a good fellow, Jack,' said his lordship, and I'd as soon make one on you as on anyone.'

'I 'spose you'll send me on wheels?' observed Jack.

'In course,' replied his lordship. 'Dog-cart - name behind - Right Honourable the Earl of Scamperdale - lad with cockade - everything genteel,' adding, 'by Jove, they'll take you for me!'

Having settled all these matters, and arranged how the information was to be communicated to Jawleyford, the friends at length took their block-tin candlesticks, with their cauliflower-headed candles, and retired to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

Mr Spraggon's Embassy

WHEN MR SPONGE RETURNED, all dirtied and stained, from the chase, he found his host sitting in an armchair over the study fire, dressing-gowned and slippered, with a pocket-handkerchief tied about his head, shamming illness, preparatory to putting off Mr Spraggon. To be sure he played rather a better knife and fork at dinner than is usual with persons with that peculiar ailment; but Mr Sponge, being very hungry, and well attended to by the fair - moreover, not suspecting any ulterior design - just ate and jabbered away as usual, with the exception of omitting his sick papa-in-law in the round of his observations. So the dinner passed over.

'Bring me a tumbler and some hot water and sugar,' said Mr Jawleyford, pressing his head against his hand, as Spigot, having placed some bottle ends on the table, and reduced the glare of light, was preparing to retire. 'Bring me some hot water and sugar,' said he; 'and tell Harry he will have to go over to Lord Scamperdale's, with a note, the first thing in the morning.'

The young ladies looked at each other, and then at mamma, who, seeing what was wanted, looked at papa, and asked 'if he was going to ask Lord Scamperdale over?' Amelia, among her many 'presentiments,' had long enjoyed one that she was destined to be Lady Scamperdale.

'No – over – no,' snapped Jawleyford; 'what should put that in your head?'

'Oh, I thought as Mr Sponge was here, you might think it a good time to ask him.'

'His lordship knows he can come when he likes,' replied Jawleyford; adding, 'it's to put that Mr John Spraggon off, who thinks he may do the same.'

'Mr Spraggon!' exclaimed both the young ladies. 'Mr Spraggon! – what should set him here?'

'What, indeed?' asked Jawleyford.

'Poor man! I dare say there's no harm in him,' observed Mrs Jawleyford, who was always ready for anybody.

'No good either,' replied Jawleyford – 'at all events, we'll be just as well without him. You know him, don't you?' added he, turning to Spigot – 'great coarse man in spectacles.'

'Oh yes, I know him,' replied Sponge; 'a great ruffian he is, too,' added he.

'One ought to be in robust health to encounter such a man,' observed Jawleyford, 'and have time to get a man or two of the same sort to meet him. We can do nothing with such a man. I can't understand how his lordship puts up with such a fellow.'

'Finds him useful, I suppose,' observed Mr Sponge.

Spigot presently appeared with a massive silver salver, bearing tumblers, sugar, lemon, nutmeg, and other implements of negus.

'Will you join me in a little wine-and-water?' asked Jawleyford, pointing to the apparatus and bottle ends, 'or will you have a fresh bottle? – *plenty* in the cellar,' added he, with a flourish of his hand, though he kept looking steadfastly at the negus-tray.

'Oh – why – I'm afraid – I doubt – I think I should hardly be able to do justice to a bottle single-handed,' replied Sponge.

'Then have negus,' said Jawleyford; 'you'll find it very refreshing; medical men recommend it after violent exercise in preference to wine. But *pray* have wine if you prefer it.'

'Ah – well, I'll finish it off with a little negus, perhaps,' replied Sponge; adding, 'meanwhile the ladies, I dare say, would like a little wine.'

'The ladies drink white wine – *sherry*' – rejoined Jawleyford, determined to make a last effort to save his port. 'However, you can have a

bottle of port to yourself, you know.'

'Very well,' said Sponge.

'One condition I must attach,' said Mr Jawleyford, 'which is, that you *finish* the bottle. Don't let us have any waste, you know.'

'I'll do my best,' said Sponge, determined to have it; whereupon Mr Jawleyford growled the word 'Port' to the butler, who had been witnessing his master's efforts to direct attention to the negus. Thwarted in his endeavour, Jawleyford's headache became worse, and the ladies, seeing how things were going, beat a precipitate retreat, leaving our hero to his fate.

'I'll leave a note on my writing-table when I go to bed,' observed Jawleyford to Spigot, as the latter was retiring after depositing the bottle; 'and tell Harry to start with it early in the morning, so as to get to Woodmansterne about breakfast – nine o'clock, or so, at latest,' added he.

'Yes, sir,' replied Spigot, withdrawing with an air.

Sponge then wanted to narrate the adventures of the day; but, independently of Jawleyford's natural indifference for hunting, he was too much out of humour at being done out of his wine to lend a willing ear; and after sundry '*hums*,' '*indeeds*,' '*sos*,' &c., Sponge thought he might as well think the run over to himself as trouble to put it into words, whereupon a long silence ensued, interrupted only by the tinkling of Jawleyford's spoon against his glass, and the bumps of the decanter as Sponge helped himself to his wine.

At length Jawleyford, having had as much negus as he wanted, excused himself from further attendance, under the plea of increasing illness, and retired to his study to concoct his letter to Jack.

At first he was puzzled how to address him. If he had been Jack Spraggon, living in old Mother Nipcheese's lodgings at Starfield, as he was when Lord Scamperdale took him by the hand, he would have addressed him as 'Dear Sir,' or perhaps in the third person, 'Mr Jawleyford presents his compliments to Mr Spraggon,' &c.; but, as my lord's right-hand man, Jack carried a certain weight, and commanded a certain influence, that he would never have acquired of himself.

Jawleyford spoilt three sheets of cream-laid satin-wove notepaper (crested and ciphered) before he pleased himself with a beginning. First he had it 'Dear Sir,' which he thought looked too stiff; then he had it 'My dear Sir,' which he thought looked too loving; next he had it 'Dear Spraggon,' which he considered as too familiar; and then he tried 'Dear Mr Spraggon,' which he thought would do. Thus he wrote:

DEAR MR SPRAGGON – I am sorry to be obliged to put you off; but since I came in from hunting I have been attacked with influenza, which will incapacitate me from the enjoyment of society at least for two or three days. I therefore think the kindest thing I can do is to write to put you off; and, in the hopes of seeing both you and my lord at no distant day,

I remain, dear sir, yours sincerely,

CHARLES JAMES JAWLEYFORD

To John Spraggon, Esq., &c. &c. &c., Jawleyford Court.

This he sealed with the great seal of Jawleyford Court – a coat of arms containing innumerable quarterings and heraldic devices. Having then refreshed his memory by looking through a bundle of bills, and selected the most threatening of the lawyers' letters to answer the next day, he proceeded to keep up the delusion of sickness, by retiring to sleep in his dressing-room.

Our readers will now have the kindness to accompany us to Lord Scamperdale's: time, the morning after the foregoing. 'Love me, love my dog,' being a favourite saying of his lordship's, he fed himself, his friends, and his hounds, on the same meal. Jack and he were busy with two great basins full of porridge, which his lordship diluted with milk, while Jack stirred his up with hot dripping, when the put-off note arrived. His lordship was still in a complete suit of the great backgammon-board looking red-and-yellow Stunner tartan; but as Jack was going from home, he had got himself into a pair of his lordships yellow-ochre leathers and new top-boots, while he wore the Stunner jacket and waistcoat to save his lordship's Sunday green cut-away with metal buttons, and canary-coloured waistcoat. His lordship did not eat his porridge with his usual appetite, for he had had a disturbed night, Sponge having appeared to him in his dreams in all sorts of forms and predicaments; now jumping a-top of him – now upsetting Jack – now riding over Frostyface – now crashing among his hounds; and he awoke, fully determined to get rid of him by fair means or foul. Baying his horses did not seem so good a speculation as blowing his credit at Jawleyford Court, for, independently of disliking to part with his cash, his lordship remembered that there were other horses to get, and he should only be giving Sponge the means of purchasing them. The more, however, he thought of the Jawleyford project, the more satisfied he was that it would do; and Jack and he were in a sort of rehearsal, wherein his lordship personated Jawleyford, and was showing Jack (who was only a clumsy diplomatist) how to draw

up to the subject of Sponge's pecuniary deficiencies, when the dirty old butler came in with Jawleyford's note.

'What's here?' exclaimed his lordship, fearing from its smartness, that it was from a lady. 'What's here?' repeated he, as he inspected the direction. 'O, it's for *you*!' exclaimed he, chucking it over to Jack, considerably relieved by the discovery.

'Me!' replied Jack. 'Who can be writing to me?' said he squinting his eyes inside out at the seal. He opened it: 'Jawleyford Court,' read he. 'Who the deuce can be writing to me from Jawleyford Court when I'm going there?'

'A put-off, for a guinea!' exclaimed his lordship.

'Hope so,' muttered Jack.

'Hope *not*,' replied his lordship.

'It is!' exclaimed Jack, reading, 'Dear Mr Spraggon,' and so on.

'The humbug!' muttered Lord Scamperdale; adding, 'I'll be bound he's got no more influenza than I have.'

'Well,' observed Jack, sweeping a red cotton handkerchief, with which he had been protecting his leathers, off into his pocket, 'there's an end of that.'

'Don't go so quick,' replied his lordship, ladling in the porridge.

'Quick!' retorted Jack; 'why, what can you do?'

'Do! why, go to be sure,' replied his lordship.

'How can I go,' asked Jack, 'when the sinner's written to put me off?'

'Nicely,' replied his lordship, 'nicely. I'll just send word back by the servant that you had started before the note arrived, but that you shall have it as soon as you return; and you just cast up there as if nothing had happened.' So saying, his lordship took hold of the whipcord-pull and gave the bell a peal.

'There's no beating you,' observed Jack.

Bags now made his appearance again.

'Is the servant here that brought this note?' asked his lordship, holding it up.

'Yes, *me* lord,' replied Bags.

'Then tell him to tell his master, with my compliments, that Mr Spraggon had set off for Jawleyford Court before it came, but that he shall have it as soon as he returns – *you understand?*'

'Yes, *me* lord,' replied Bags, looking at Jack supping up the fat porridge, and wondering how the lie would go down with Harry, who was then discussing his master's merits and a horn of small beer with the lad who was going to drive Jack.

Jawleyford Court was twenty miles from Woodmansterne as the crow flies, and any distance anybody liked to call it by the road. The

road, indeed would seem to have been set out with a view of getting as many hills and as little level ground over which a traveller could make play as possible; and where it did not lead over the tops of the highest hills, it wound round their bases, in such little, vexatious, up-and-down, wavy dips as completely to do away with all chance of expedition. The route was not along one continuous trust, but here over a bit of turnpike and there over a bit of turnpike, with ever and anon long interregnums of township roads, repaired in the usual primitive style with mud and soft field-stones, that turned up like flitches of bacon. A man would travel from London to Exeter by rail in as short a time, and with far greater ease, than he would drive from Lord Scamperdale's to Jawleyford Court. His lordship being aware of this fact, and thinking, moreover, it was no use trashing a good horse over such roads, had desired Frostyface to put an old spavined grey mare, that he had bought for the kennel, into the dog-cart, and out of which, his lordship thought, if he could get a day's work or two, she would come all the cheaper to the boiler.

'That's a good-shaped beast,' observed his lordship, as she now came hitching round to the door; 'I really think she would make a cover hack.'

'Sooner you ride her than me,' replied Jack, seeing his lordship was coming the dealer over him – praising the shape when he could say nothing for the action.

'Well, but she'll take you to Jawleyford Court as quick as the best of them,' rejoined his lordship; adding, 'the roads are wretched, and Jaw's stables are a disgrace to humanity – might as well put a horse in a cellar.'

'Well,' observed Jack, retiring from the parlour window to his little den along the passage, to put the finishing touch to his toilet – the green cut-away and buff waistcoat, which he further set off with a black satin stock – 'Well,' said he, 'needs must when a certain gentleman drives.'

He presently reappeared full fig, rubbing a fine new eight-and-sixpenny flat-brimmed hat round and round with a substantial puce-coloured bandana.

'Now for the specs!' exclaimed he, with the gaiety of a man in his Sunday's best, bound on a holiday trip. 'Now for the silver specs!' repeated he.

'Ah, true,' replied his lordship; 'I'd forgot the specs.' (He hadn't, only he thought his silver-mounted ones would be safer in his keeping than in Jack's.) 'I'd forgot the specs. However, never mind, you shall have these,' said he, taking his tortoiseshell-rimmed ones off his nose and

handing them to Jack.

'You promised me the silver ones,' observed our friend Jack, who wanted to be smart.

'Did I?' replied his lordship; 'I declare I'd forgot. Ah, yes, I believe I did,' added he, with an air of sudden enlightenment. – 'the pair upstairs; but how the deuce to get at them I don't know, for the key of the Indian cabinet is locked in the old oak press in the still-room, and the key of the still-room is locked away in the linen-press in the green lumber-room at the top of the house, and the key of the green lumber-room is in a drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe in the Star-Chamber, and the –'

'Ah, well; never mind,' grunted Jack, interrupting the labyrinth of lies. 'I dare say these will do – I dare say these will do,' putting them on; adding, 'Now, if you'll lend me a shawl for my neck, and a Macintosh, my name shall be *Walker*.'

'Better make it *Trotter*,' replied his lordship, 'considering the distance you have to go.'

'Good,' said Jack, mounting and driving away.

'It will be a blessing if we get there,' observed Jack to the liveried stable-lad, as the old bag of bones of a mare went hitching and limping away.

'Oh, she can go when she's warm,' replied the lad, taking her across the ears with the point of the whip. The wheels followed merrily over the sound, hard road through the park, and the gentle though almost imperceptible fall of the ground giving an impetus to the vehicle, they bowled away as if they had four of the soundest, freshest legs in the world before them, instead of nothing but a belly-band between them and eternity.

When, however, they cleared the noble lodge and got upon the unscraped mud of the Deepdebt turnpike, the pace soon slackened, and, instead of the gig running away with the old mare, she was fairly brought to her collar. Being a game one, however, she struggled on with a trot, till at length, turning up the deeply-spurlinged clayey-bottomed crossroad between Rookgate and Clamley, it was all she could do to drag the gig through the holding mire. Bump, bump, jolt, jolt, creak, creak, went the vehicle, Jack now diving his elbow into the lad's ribs, the lad now diving his into Jack's; both now threatening to go over on the same side, and again both nearly chucked on to the old mare's quarters. A sharp, cutting sleet, driving pins and needles directly in their faces, further disconcerted our travellers. Jack felt acutely for his new eight-and-sixpenny hat, it being the only article of dress he had on of his own.

Long and tedious as was the road, weak and jaded as was the mare,

and long as Jack stopped at Starfield, he yet reached Jawleyford Court before the messenger Harry.

As our friend Jawleyford was stamping about his study anathematising a letter he had received from the solicitor to the directors of the Doembrown and Sinkall Railway, informing him that they were going to indulge in the winding-up act, he chanced to look out of his window just as the contracted limits of a winter's day were drawing the first folds of night's muslin curtain over the landscape, when he espied a gig drawn by a white horse, with a dot-and-go-one sort of action, hopping its way up the slumpey avenue.

'That's Buggins the bailiff,' exclaimed he to himself, as the recollection of an unanswered lawyer's letter flashed across his mind; and he was just darting off to the bell to warn Spigot not to admit anyone, when the lad's cockade standing in relief against the skyline, caused him to pause and gaze again at the unwonted apparition.

'Who the *deuce* can it be?' asked he of himself, looking at his watch, and seeing it was a quarter past four. 'It surely can't be my lord, or that Jack Spraggon coming after all?' added he, drawing out a telescope and opening a lancet-window.

'*Spraggon as I live!*' exclaimed he as he caught Jack's harsh, spectacled features, and saw him titivating his hair and arranging his collar and stock as he approached.

'Well, that beats everything!' exclaimed Jawleyford, burning with rage, as he fastened the window again.

He stood for a few seconds transfixed to the spot, not knowing what on earth to do. At last resolution came to his aid, and, rushing upstairs to his dressing-room, he quickly divested himself of his coat and waistcoat, and slipped on a dressing-gown and night-cap. He then stood, door in hand, listening for the arrival. He could just hear the gig grinding under the portico, and distinguish Jack's gruff voice saying to the servant from the top of the steps – 'We'll start *directly* after breakfast, mind.' A tremendous peal of the bell immediately followed, convulsing the whole house, for nobody had seen the vehicle approaching, and the establishment had fallen into the usual state of undress torpor that intervenes between calling hours and dinner-time.

The bell not being answered as quickly as Jack expected, he just opened the door himself; and when Spigot arrived, with such a force as he could raise at the moment, Jack was in the act of 'peeling' himself, as he called it.

'What time do we dine?' asked he, with the air of a man with the *entrée*.

'Seven o'clock, my lord – that's to say, sir – that's to say, my lord,' for

Spigot really didn't know whether it was Jack or his master.

'*Seven o'clock!*' muttered Jack. 'What the *deuce* is the use of dinin' at such an hour as that in winter?'

Jack and my lord always dined as soon as they got home from hunting. Jack, having got himself out of his wraps, and run his bristles backwards with a pocket-comb, was ready for presentation.

'What name shall I enounce?' asked Mr Spigot, fearful of committing himself before the ladies.

'MISTER SPRAGGON, to be sure,' exclaimed Jack, thinking, because he knew who he was, that everybody else ought to know too.

Spigot then led the way to the music-room.

The peal at the bell had caused a suppressed commotion in the apartment. Buried in the luxurious depths of a well-cushioned low chair, Mr Sponge sat, Mogg in hand, with a toe cocked up, now dipping leisurely into his work – now whispering something sweet into Amelia's ear, who sat with her crochet-work at his side; while Emily played the piano, and Mrs Jawleyford kept in the background, in the discreet way mothers do when there is a little business going on. The room was in that happy state of misty light that usually precedes the entrance of candles – a light that no one likes to call darkness, lest their eyes might be supposed to be failing. It is a convenient light, however, for a timid stranger, especially where there are not many footstools set to trip him up – an exemption, we grieve to say, not accorded to everyone.

Though Mr Spraggon was such a cool, impudent fellow with men, he was the most awkward, frightened wretch among ladies that ever was seen. His conversation consisted principally of coughing. '*Hem!*' – cough – 'yes, mum,' – hem – cough, cough – 'the day,' – hem – cough – 'mum, is' – hem – cough – 'very,' – hem – cough – 'mum, cold.' But we will introduce him to our family circle.

'Mr Spraggon!' exclaimed Spigot, in a tone equal to the one in which Jack had announced himself in the entrance; and forthwith there was such a stir in the twilit apartment – such suppressed exclamations of –

'Mr Spraggon! – Mr Spraggon! What can bring him here?'

Our traveller's creaking boots and radiant leathers eclipsing the sombre habiliments of Mr Spigot, Mrs Jawleyford quickly rose from her Pembroke writing-desk, and proceeded to greet him.

'My daughters I think you know, Mr Spraggon; also Mr Sponge? Mr Spraggon,' continued she, with a wave of her hand to where our hero was ensconced in his form, in case they should not have made each other's speaking acquaintance.

The young ladies rose, and curtsied prettily; while Mr Sponge gave a

sort of backward hitch of his head as he sat in his chair, as much as to say, 'I know as much of Mr Spraggon as I want.'

'Tell your master Mr Spraggon is here,' added Mrs Jawleyford to Spigot, as that worthy was leaving the room. 'It's a cold day, Mr Spraggon; won't you come near the fire?' continued Mrs Jawleyford, addressing our friend, who had come to a full stop just under the chandelier in the centre of the room.

'*Hem - cough - hem* - thank ye, mum,' muttered Jack. 'I'm not - *hem - cough* - cold, thank ye, mum.' His face and hands were purple notwithstanding.

'How is my Lord Scamperdale?' asked Amelia, who had a strong inclination to keep in with all parties.

'*Hem - cough - hem* - my lord - that's to say my lady - *hem - cough* - I mean to say, my lord's pretty well, thank ye,' stuttered Jack.

'Is he coming?' asked Amelia.

'*Hem - cough - hem* - my lord's - *hem* - not well - *cough* - no - *hem* - I mean to say - *hem - cough* - my lord's gone - *hem* - to dine - *cough* - *hem* - with his - *cough* - friend Lord Bubbley Jock - *hem - cough* - I mean Barker - *cough*.'

Jack and Lord Scamperdale were so in the habit of calling his lordship by this nickname, that Jack let it slip, or rather cough out, inadvertently.

In due time Spigot returned, with 'Master's compliments, and he was very sorry but he was so unwell that he was quite unable to see anyone.'

'Oh, dear!' exclaimed Mrs Jawleyford.

'Poor *pa*!' lisped Amelia.

'What a pity!' observed Mr Sponge.

'I must go and see him,' observed Mrs Jawleyford, hurrying off.

'*Hem - cough - hem* - hope he's not much - *hem* - damaged?' observed Jack.

The old lady being thus got rid of, and Jawleyford disposed of - apparently for the night - Mr Spraggon felt more comfortable, and presently yielded to Amelia's entreaties to come near the fire and thaw himself. Spigot brought candles, and Mr Sponge sat moodily in his chair, alternately studying Mogg's *Cab Fares* - 'Old Bailey, Newgate Street, to or from the Adelphi, the Terrace, 1s. 6d.; Admiralty, 2s.;' and so on; and hazarding promiscuous sidelong sort of observations, that might be taken up by Jack or not, as he liked. He seemed determined to pay Mr Jack off for his out-of-door impudence. Amelia, on the other hand, seemed desirous of making up for her suitor's rudeness, and kept talking to Jack with an assiduity that perfectly astonished her sister; who had always heard her speak of him with the utmost abhorrence.

Mrs Jawleyford found her husband in a desperate state of excitement, his influenza being greatly aggravated by Harry having returned very drunk, with the mare's knees desperately broken 'by a fall,' as Harry hiccuped out, or by his 'throwing her down,' as Jawleyford declared. Horses *fall* with their masters, servants *throw* them down. What a happiness it is when people can send their servants on errands by coaches or railways, instead of being kept on the fidget all day, lest a fifty-pound horse should be the price of a bodkin or a basket of fish!

Amelia's condescension quite turned Jack's head; and when he went upstairs to dress, he squinted at his lordship's best clothes, all neatly laid out for him on the bed, with inward satisfaction at having brought them.

'Dash me!' said he, 'I really think that girl has a fancy for me.' Then he examined himself minutely in the glass, brushed his whiskers up into a curve on his cheeks, the curves almost corresponding with the curve of his spectacles above; then he gave his bristly, porcupine-shaped head a backward rub with a sort of thing like a scrubbing-brush. 'If I'd only had the silver specs,' thought he, 'I should have done.'

He then began to dress; an operation that ever and anon was interrupted by the outburst of volleys of smoke from the little spluttering, smouldering fire, in the little shabby room Jawleyford insisted on having him put into.

Jack tried all things - opening the window and shutting the door, shutting the window and opening the door; but finding that, instead of curing it, he only produced the different degrees of comparison - bad, worse, worst - he at length shut both, and applied himself vigorously to dressing. He soon got into his stockings and pumps, also his black Saxony trousers; then came a fine black lace fringed cravat, and the damson-coloured velvet waistcoat with the cut-steel buttons.

'Dash me, but I look pretty well in this!' said he, eying first one side and then the other as he buttoned it. He then stuck a chased and figured fine gold brooch, with two pendant tassel-drops, set with turquoise and agates, that he had abstracted from his lordship's dressing case, into his, or rather his lordship's, finely-worked shirt-front, and crowned the toilet with his lordship's best new blue coat with velvet collar, silk facings, and the Flat Hat Hunt button - 'a striding fox,' with the letters F. H. H. below.

'Who shall say Mr Spraggon's not a gentleman?' said he, as he perfumed one of his lordship's fine coronetted cambric handkerchiefs with lavender-water. Scent, in Jack's opinion, was one of the criterions of a gentleman.

Somehow Jack felt quite differently towards the house of Jawleyford;

and though he did not expect much pleasure in Mr Sponge's company, he thought, nevertheless, that the ladies and he – Amelia and he at least – would get on very well. Forgetting that he had come to eject Sponge on the score of insufficiency, he really began to think he might be a very desirable match for one of them himself.

CHAPTER XXVI

Mr Spraggon at Jawleyford Court

'THE SPRAGGONS are a most respectable family,' said he, eyeing himself in the glass. 'If not very handsome, at all events, very genteel,' added he, speaking of himself in particular. So saying, he adorned himself with his spectacles and set off to explore his way downstairs. After divers mistakes he at length found himself in the drawing-room, where the rest of the party being assembled, they presently proceeded to dinner.

Jack's amended costume did not produce any difference in Mr Sponge's behaviour, who treated him with the utmost indifference. In truth, Sponge had rather a large balance against Jack for his impudence to him in the field. Nevertheless, the fair Amelia continued her attentions, and talked of hunting, occasionally diverging into observations on Lord Scamperdale's fine riding and manly character and appearance, in the roundabout way ladies send their messages and compliments to their friends.

The dinner was flat. Jawleyford had stopped the champagne tap, though the needle-case glasses stood to tantalise the party till about the time that the beverage ought to have been flowing, when Spigot took them off. The flatness then became flatter. Nevertheless, Jack worked away in his usual carnivorous style, and finished by paying his respects to all the sweets, jellies, and things in succession. He never got any of these, he said, at 'home,' meaning at Lord Scamperdale's – Amelia thought, if she was 'my lady,' he would not get any meat there either.

At length Jack finished; and having discussed cheese, porter, and red herrings, the cloth was drawn, and a hard-featured dessert consisting principally of apples, followed. The wine having made a couple of melancholy circuits, the strained conversation about came to a full

stop, and Spigot having considerably placed the little round table, as if to keep the peace between them, the ladies left the male worthies to discuss their port and sherry together. Jack, according to Woodmansterne fashion, unbuttoned his waistcoat, and stuck his legs out before him – an example that Mr Sponge quickly followed, and each assumed an attitude that as good as said, 'I don't care twopence for you.' A dead silence then prevailed, interrupted only by the *snap, snap, snapping* of Jack's toothpick against his chair-edge, when he was not busy exploring his mouth with it. It seemed to be a match which should keep silence longest. Jack sat squinting his eyes inside out at Sponge, while Sponge pretended to be occupied with the fire. The wine being with Sponge, and at length wanting some, he was constrained to make the first move, by passing it over to Jack, who helped himself to port and sherry simultaneously – a glass of sherry after dinner (in Jack's opinion) denoting a gentleman. Having smacked his lips over that, he presently turned to the glass of port. He checked his hand in passing it to his mouth, and bore the glass up to his nose.

'*Corked*, by Jove!' exclaimed he, setting the glass down on the table with a thump of disgust.

It is curious what unexpected turns things sometimes take in the world, and how completely whole trains of well-preconcerted plans are often turned aside by mere accidents such as this. If it hadn't been for the corked bottle of port, there is no saying but these two worthies would have held a Quakers' meeting without the 'spirit' moving either of them.

'*Corked*, by Jove!' exclaimed Jack.

'It is!' rejoined Sponge, smelling at his half-emptied glass.

'Better have another bottle,' observed Jack.

'Certainly,' replied Sponge, ringing the bell. 'Spigot, this wine's corked,' observed Sponge, as old Pomposo entered the room.

'Is it?' said Spigot, with the most perfect innocence, though he knew it came out of the corked batch. 'I'll bring another bottle,' added he, carrying it off as if he had a whole pipe at command, though in reality he had but another out. This fortunately was less corked than the first; and Jack having given an approving smack of his great thick lips, Mr Sponge took it on his judgement, and gave a nod to Spigot, who forthwith took his departure.

'Old trick that,' observed Jack, with a shake of the head, as Spigot shut the door.

'Is it?' observed Mr Sponge, taking up the observation, though in reality it was addressed to the fire.

'*Noted for it*,' replied Jack, squinting at the sideboard, though he was

staring intently at Sponge to see how he took it.

'Well, I thought we had a bottle with a queer smatch the other night,' observed Sponge.

'Old Blossomnose corked half a dozen in succession one night,' replied Jack.

(He had corked three, but Jawleyford recorked them, and Spigot was now reproducing them to our friends.)

Although they had now got the ice broken, and entered into something like a conversation, it nevertheless went on very slowly, and they seemed to weigh each word before it was uttered. Jack, too, had time to run his peculiar situation through his mind, and ponder on his mission from Lord Scamperdale – on his lordship's detestation of Mr Sponge, his anxiety to get rid of him, his promised corner in his will, and his lordship's hint about buying Sponge's horses if he could not get rid of him in any other way.

Sponge, on his part, was thinking if there was any possibility of turning Jack to account.

It may seem strange to the uninitiated that there should be prospect of gain to a middle-man in the matter of a horse-deal, save in the legitimate trade of auctioneers and commission stable-keepers; but we are sorry to say we have known men calling themselves gentlemen, who have not thought it derogatory to accept a 'trifle' for their good offices in the cause. 'I can buy cheaper than you,' they say, 'and we may as well divide the trifle between us.'

That was Mr Spraggon's principle, only that the word 'trifle' inadequately conveys his opinion on the point; Jack's notion being that a man was entitled to five per cent as of right, and as much more as he could get.

It was not often that Jack got a 'bite' at my lord, which, perhaps, made him think it the more incumbent on him not to miss an opportunity. Having been told, of course he knew exactly the style of man he had to deal with in Mr Sponge – a style of men of whom there is never any difficulty in asking if they will sell their horses, price being the only consideration. They are, indeed, a sort of unlicensed horse-dealers, from whose presence few hunts are wholly free. Mr Spraggon thought, if he could get Sponge to make it worth his while to get my lord to buy his horses, the – whatever he might get – would come in very comfortably to pay his Christmas bills.

By the time the bottle drew to a close, our friends were rather better friends, and seemed more inclined to fraternise. Jack had the advantage of Sponge, for he could stare, or rather squint, at him without Sponge knowing it. The pint of wine apiece – at least as near a pint apiece as

Spigot could afford to let them have – somewhat strung Jack's nerves as well as his eyes, and he began to show more of the pupils and less of the whites than he did. He buzzed the bottle with such a hearty good will as settled the fate of another, which Sponge rang for as a matter of course. There was but the rejected one, which, however, Spigot put into a different decanter, and brought in with such an air as precluded either of them saying a word in disparagement of it.

'Where are the hounds next week?' asked Sponge, sipping away at it.

'Monday, Larkhall Hill; Tuesday, the crossroads by Dallington Burn; Thursday, the Toll Bar at Whitburrow Green; Saturday, the kennels,' replied Jack.

'Good places,' asked Sponge.

'Monday's good,' replied Jack; 'draw Thorney Gorse – sure find; second draw, Barnlow Woods, and home by Loxley, Padmore, and so on.'

'What sort of a place is Tuesday?'

'Tuesday?' repeated Jack. 'Tuesday! Oh, that's the crossroads. Capital place, unless the fox takes to Rumborow Craigs, or gets into Seedeywood Forest, when there's an end of it – at least an end of everything except pulling one's horse's legs off in the stiff clayey rides. It's a long way from here, though,' observed Jack.

'How far?' asked Sponge.

'Good twenty miles,' replied Jack. 'It's sixteen from us; it'll be a good deal more from here.'

'His lordship will lay out overnight, then?' observed Sponge.

'Not he,' replied Jack. 'Takes better care of his sixpences than that. Up in the dark, breakfast by candlelight, grope our ways to the stable, and blunder along the deep lanes, and through all the by-roads in the country – get there somehow or another.'

'Keen hand!' observed Sponge.

'Mad!' replied Jack.

They then paid their mutual respects to the port.

'He hunts there on Tuesdays,' observed Jack, setting down his glass, 'so that he may have all Wednesday to get home in, and be sure of appearing on Thursday. There's no saying where he may finish with a crossroads' meet.'

By the time the worthies had finished the bottle, they had got a certain way into each other's confidence. The hint Lord Scamperdale had given about buying Sponge's horses still occupied Jack's mind; and the more he considered the subject, and the worth of a corner in his lordship's will, the more sensible he became of the truth of the old adage, that 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' 'My Lord,'

thought Jack, 'promises fair, *but* it is but a chance, and a remote one. He may live many years – as long, perhaps longer, than me. Indeed, he puts me on horses that are anything but calculated to promote longevity. Then he may marry a wife who may eject me, as some wives do eject their husbands' agreeable friends; or he may change his mind, and leave me nothing after all.'

All things considered, Jack came to the conclusion that he should not be doing himself justice if he did not take advantage of such fair opportunities as chance placed in his way, and therefore he thought he might as well be picking up a penny during his lordship's life, as be waiting for a contingency that might never occur. Mr Jawleyford's indisposition preventing Jack making the announcement he was sent to do, made it incumbent on him, as he argued, to see what could be done with the alternative his lordship had proposed – namely, buying Sponge's horses. At least, Jack salved his conscience over with the old plea of duty; and had come to that conclusion as he again helped himself to the last glass in the bottle.

'Would you like a little claret?' asked Sponge with all the hospitality of a host.

'No, hang your claret!' replied Jack.

'A little brandy, perhaps?' suggested Sponge.

'I shouldn't mind a glass of brandy,' replied Jack, 'by way of a nightcap.'

Spigot, at this moment entering to announce tea and coffee, was interrupted in his oration by Sponge demanding some brandy.

'Sorry,' replied Spigot, pretending to be quite taken by surprise, 'very sorry, sir – but, sir – master, sir – bed, sir – disturb him, sir.'

'Oh, dash it, never mind that!' exclaimed Jack; 'tell him Mr Sprag – Sprag – Spraggon' (the bottle of port beginning to make Jack rather inarticulate) – 'tell him Mr Spraggon wants a little.'

'Dursn't disturb him, sir,' responded Spigot, with a shake of his head; 'Much as my place, sir, is worth, sir.'

'Haven't you a little drop in your pantry, think you?' asked Sponge.

'The *cook* perhaps has,' replied Mr Spigot, as if it was quite out of his line.

'Well, go and ask her,' said Sponge; 'and bring some hot water and things, the same as we had last night, you know.'

Mr Spigot retired, and presently returned, bearing a tray with three-quarters of a bottle of brandy, which he impressed upon their minds was the 'cook's *own*.'

'I dare say,' hiccupped Jack, holding the bottle up to the light.

'Hope she wasn't using it herself,' observed Sponge.

'Tell her we'll (hiccup) her health,' hiccupped Jack, pouring a liberal potation into his tumbler.

'That'll be all you'll *do*, I dare say,' muttered Spigot to himself, as he sauntered back to his pantry.

'Does Jaw stand smoking?' asked Jack, as Spigot disappeared.

'Oh I should think so,' replied Sponge; 'a friend like you I'm sure, would be welcome' – Sponge thinking to indulge in a cigar, and lay the blame on Jack.

'Well, if you think so,' said Jack, pulling out his cigar-case, or rather his lordship's, and staggering to the chimney-piece for a match, though there was a candle at his elbow, 'I'll have a pipe.'

'So'll I,' said Sponge, 'if you'll give me a cigar.'

'Much yours as mine,' replied Jack, handing him his lordship's richly embroidered case with coronets and ciphers on either side, the gift of one of the many would-be Lady Scamperdales.

'Want a light!' hiccupped Jack, who had now got a glowworm end to his.

'Thanks,' said Sponge, availing himself of the friendly overture.

Our friends now whiffed and puffed away together – whiffing and puffing where whiffing and puffing had never been known before. The brandy began to disappear pretty quickly; it was better than the wine.

'That's a n-n-nice-ish horse of yours,' stammered Jack, as he mixed himself a second tumbler.

'Which?' asked Sponge.

'The bur-bur-brown,' spluttered Jack.

'He is *that*,' replied Sponge; 'best horse in this country by far.'

'The che-che-chest-nut's not a ba-ba-bad un, I dare say,' observed Jack.

'No, he's not,' replied Sponge; 'a deuced good un.'

'I know a man who's rather s-s-s-sweet on the b-b-br-brown,' observed Jack, squinting frightfully.

Sponge sat silent for a few seconds, pretending to be wrapt up in his 'sublime tobacco.'

'Is he a buyer, or just a jawer?' he asked at last.

'Oh, a *buyer*,' replied Jack.

'I'll *sell*,' said Sponge, with a strong emphasis on the sell.

'How much?' asked Jack, sobering with the excitement.

'*Which*?' asked Sponge.

'The brown,' rejoined Jack.

'Three hundred,' said Sponge; adding, 'I gave two for him.'

'Indeed!' said Jack.

A long pause then ensued, Jack thinking whether he should put the

question boldly as to what Sponge would give him for effecting a sale, or should beat about the bush a little. At last he thought it would be most prudent to beat about the bush, and see if Sponge would make an offer.

'Well,' said Jack, 'I'll s-s-s-see what I can do.'

'That's a good fellow,' said Sponge; adding, 'I'll remember you if you do.'

'I dare say I can s-s-s-sell them both, for that matter,' observed Jack, encouraged by the promise.

'Well,' replied Sponge, 'I'll take the same for the chestnut; there isn't the toss-up of a halfpenny for choice between them.'

'Well,' said Jack, 'we'll s-s-s-see them next week.'

'Just so,' said Sponge

'You r-r-ride well up to the h-h-hounds,' continued Jack, 'and let his lordship s-s-see w-w-what they can do.'

'I will,' said Sponge, wishing he was at work.

'Never mind his rowing,' observed Jack; 'he c-c-can't help it.'

'Not I,' replied Sponge, puffing away at his cigar.

When men once begin to drink brandy-and-water (after wine) there's an end of all note of time. Our friends – for we 'may now call them so,' sat sip, sip, sipping – mix, mix, mixing; now strengthening, now weakening, now warming, now flavouring, till they had not only finished the hot water but a large jug of cold, that graced the centre of the table between two frosted tumblers, and had nearly got through the brandy too.

'May as well fi-fi-fin-nish the bottle,' observed Jack, holding it up to the candle. 'Just a thi-thi-thim-bleful apiece,' added he, helping himself to about three-quarters of what there was.

'You've taken your share,' observed Sponge, as the bottle suspended payment before he got half the quantity that Jack had.

'Sque-ee-eze it,' replied Jack, suiting the action to the word, and working away at an exhausted lemon.

At length they finished.

'Well, I s'pose we may as well go and have some tea,' observed Jack.

'It's not announced yet,' said Sponge, 'but I make no doubt it will be ready.'

So saying, the worthies rose, and, after sundry bumps and certain irregularities of course, they each succeeded in reaching the door. The passage lamp had died out and filled the corridor with its fragrance. Sponge, however, knew the way, and the darkness favoured the adjustment of cravats and the fingering of hair. Having got up a sort of drunken simper, Sponge opened the drawing-room door, expecting to

find smiling ladies in a blaze of light. All, however, was darkness, save the expiring embers in the grate. The tick, tick, tick, ticking of the clocks sounded wonderfully clear.

'Gone to bed!' exclaimed Sponge.

'WHO-HOOP!' shrieked Jack, at the top of his voice.

'What's smatter, gentlemen? – What's smatter?' exclaimed Spigot rushing in, rubbing his eyes with one hand, and holding a block tin candlestick in the other.

'Nothin',' replied Jack, squinting his eyes inside out; adding, 'Get me a devilled –' (hiccup)

'Don't know how to do them here, sir,' snapped Spigot.

'Devilled turkey's leg though you do, you rascal!' rejoined Jack, doubling his fists and putting himself in posture.

'Beg pardon, sir,' replied Spigot, 'but the cook, sir, is gone to bed, sir. Do you know, sir, what o'clock it is, sir?'

'No,' replied Jack.

'What time is it?' asked Sponge.

'Twenty minutes to two,' replied Spigot, holding up a sort of pocket warming-pan, which he called a watch.

'The deuce,' exclaimed Sponge.

'Who'd ha' thought it?' muttered Jack.

'Well then, I suppose we may as well go to bed,' observed Sponge.

'S'pose so,' replied Jack; 'nothin' more to get.'

'Do you know your room?' asked Sponge.

'To be sure I do,' replied Jack; 'don't think I'm d-d-dr-drunk, do you?'

'Not likely,' rejoined Sponge.

Jack then commenced a very crab-like ascent of the stairs, which fortunately were easy, or he would never have got up. Mr Sponge, who still occupied the state apartments, took leave of Jack at his own door, and Jack went bumping and blundering on in search of the branch passage leading to his piggery. He found the green baize door that usually distinguishes the entrance to these secondary *suites*, and was presently lurching along its contracted passage. As luck would have it, however, he got into his host's dressing-room, where that worthy slept; and when Jawleyford jumped up in the morning, as was his wont, to see what sort of a day it was, he trod on Jack's face, who had fallen down in his clothes alongside of the bed, and Jawleyford broke Jack's spectacles across the bridge of his nose.

'Rot it!' roared Jack jumping up, 'don't ride over a fellow that way!' when, shaking himself to try whether any limbs were broken, he found he was in his dress clothes instead of in the roomy garments of the Flat

Hat Hunt. 'Who are you? where am I? what the deuce do you mean by breaking my specs?' he exclaimed, squinting frightfully at his host.

'My dear sir,' exclaimed Mr Jawleyford, from the top of his night-shirt, 'I'm very sorry, but -'

'Hang your *buts*! you shouldn't ride so near a man!' exclaimed Jack, gathering up the fragments of his spectacles; when, recollecting himself, he finished by say, 'Perhaps I'd better go to my own room.'

'Perhaps you had,' replied Mr Jawleyford, advancing towards the door to show him the way.

'Let me have a candle,' said Jack, preparing to follow.

'Candle, my dear fellow! why it's broad daylight,' replied his host.

'Is it?' said Jack, apparently unconscious of the fact. 'What's the hour?'

'Five minutes to eight,' replied Jawleyford, looking at a timepiece.

When Jack got into his own den he threw himself into an old invalid chair, and sat rubbing the fractured spectacles together as if he thought they would unite by friction, though in reality he was endeavouring to run the overnight's proceedings through his mind. The more he thought of Amelia's winning ways, the more satisfied he was that he had made an impression, and then the more vexed he was at having his spectacles broken: for though he considered himself very presentable without them, still he could not but feel that they were a desirable addition. Then, too he had a splitting headache; and finding that breakfast was not till ten and might be a good deal later, all things considered, he determined to be off and follow up his success under more favourable auspices. Considering that all the clothes he had with him were his lordship's, he thought it immaterial which he went home in, so to save trouble he just wrapped himself up in his mackintosh and travelled in the dress ones he had on.

It was fortunate for Mr Sponge that he went, for, when Jawleyford smelt the indignity that had been offered to his dining-room, he broke out in such a torrent of indignation as would have been extremely unpleasant if there had not been someone to lay the blame on. Indeed, he was not particularly gracious to Mr Sponge as it was; but that arose, as much from certain dark hints that had worked their way from the servants' hall into 'my lady's chamber' as to our friend's pecuniary resources and prospects. Jawleyford began to suspect that Sponge might not be quite the great 'catch' he was represented.

Beyond, however, putting a few searching questions - which Mr Sponge skilfully parried - advising his daughters to be cautious, lessening the number of lights, and lowering the scale of his entertainments generally, Mr Jawleyford did not take any decided step in the

matter. Mr Spraggon comforted Lord Scamperdale with the assurance that Amelia had no idea of Sponge, who he made no doubt would very soon be out of the country - and his lordship went to church and prayed most devoutly for him to go.

CHAPTER XXVII

Mr and Mrs Springwheat

'LORD SCAMPERDALE'S FOXHOUNDS meet on Monday at Larkhall Hill,' &c., &c. *County Paper*.

The Flat Hat Hunt had relapsed into its wonted quiet, and 'Larkhill Hill' saw none but regular attendants, men without the slightest particle of curve in their hats - hats, indeed, that looked as if the owners sat upon them when they hadn't them on their heads. There was Fyle, and Fossick, and Blossomnose, and Sparks, and Joyce, and Capon, and Dribble, and a few others, but neither Washball nor Puffington, nor any of the holiday birds.

Precisely at ten, my lord, and his hounds, and his huntsman, and his whips, and his Jack, trotted round Farmer Springwheat's spacious back premises, and appeared in due form before the green rails in front. 'Pride attends us all,' as the poet says; and if his lordship had ridden into the yard, and halloaed out for a glass of home-brewed, Springwheat would have trapped every fox on his farm, and the blooming Mrs Springwheat would have had an interminable poultry-bill against the hunt; whereas, simply by 'making things pleasant,' - that is to say, coming to breakfast - Springwheat saw his corn trampled on, nay, led the way over it himself, and Mrs Springwheat saw her Dorkings disappear without a murmur - unless, indeed, an enquiry when his lordship would be coming could be considered in that light.

Larkhall Hill stood in the centre of a circle, on a gentle eminence, commanding a view over a farm whose fertile fields and well-trimmed fences sufficiently indicated its boundaries, and looked indeed as if all the good of the country had come up to it. It was green and luxuriant even in winter, while the strong cane-coloured stubbles showed what a crop there had been. Turnips as big as cheeses swelled above the ground. In a little narrow dell, whose existence was more plainly

indicated from the house by several healthy spindling larches shooting up from among the green gorse, was the cover – an almost certain find, with the almost equal certainty of a run from it. It occupied both sides, of the sandy, rabbit-frequented dell, through which ran a sparkling stream, and it possessed the great advantage to foot-people of letting them see the fox found. Larkhall Hill, was, therefore a favourite both with horse and foot. So much good – at all events so much well-farmed land would seem to justify a better or more imposing-looking house, the present one consisting, exclusive of the projecting garret ones in the Dutch tile roof, of the usual four windows and a door, that so well tell their own tale; passage in the middle, staircase in front, parlour on the right, best ditto on the left, with rooms to correspond above. To be sure, there was a great depth of house to the back; but this in no way contributed to the importance of the front, from which point alone the Springwheats chose to have it contemplated. If the back arrangements could have been divided, and added to the sides, they would have made two very good wings to the old red brick rose-entwined mansion. Having mentioned that its colour was red, it is almost superfluous to add that the door and rails were green.

This was a busy morning at Larkhall Hill. It was the first day of the season of my lord's hounds meeting there, and the handsome Mrs Springwheat had had as much trouble in overhauling the china and linen, and in dressing the children, preparatory to breakfast, as Springwheat had had in collecting knives and forks, and wine-glasses and tumblers for his department of the entertainment, to say nothing of looking after his new tops and cords. 'The Hill,' as the country people call it, was 'full fig'; and a bright, balmy winter's day softened the atmosphere, and felt as though a summer's day had been shaken out of its place into winter. It is not often that the English climate is accommodating enough to lend its aid to set off a place to advantage.

Be that, however, as it may, things looked smiling both without and within. Mrs Springwheat, by dint of early rising and superintendence, had got things into such a state of forwardness as to be able to adorn herself with a little jaunty cap – curious in microscopic punctures and cherry-coloured ribbon interlardments – placed so far back on her finely-shaped head as to proclaim beyond all possibility of cavil that it was there for ornament, and not for the purpose of concealing the liberties of time with her well-kept, clearly-parted, raven-black hair. Liberties of time, forsooth! Mrs Springwheat was in the heighday of womanhood; and though she had presented Springwheat with twins three times in succession, besides an eldest son, she was as young, fresh-looking, and finely-figured as she was the day she was married.

She was now dressed in a very fine French grey merino, with a very small crochet-work collar, and, of course, capacious muslin sleeves. The high flounces to her dress set off her smart waist to great advantage.

Mrs Springwheat had got everything ready, and herself too, by the time Lord Scamperdale's second horseman rode into the yard and demanded a stall for his horse. Knowing how soon the balloon follows the pilot, she immediately ranged the Stunner-tartan-clad children in the breakfast-room; and as the first whip's rate sounded as he rode round the corner, she sank into an easy-chair by the fire, with a lace-fringed kerchief in the one hand, and the *Mark Lane Express* in the other.

'Halloa! Springey!' followed by the heavy crack of a whip, announced the arrival of his lordship before the green palings; and a loud view halloa burst from Jack, as the object of enquiry was seen dancing about the open windowed room above, with his face all flushed with the exertion of pulling on a very tight boot.

'Come in, my lord! pray, come in! The missis is below!' exclaimed Springwheat, from the window; and just at the moment the pad-groom emerged from the house, and ran to his lordship's horse's head.

His lordship and Jack then dismounted, and gave their hacks in charge of the servant; while Wake, and Fyle, and Archer, who were also of the party, scanned the countenances of the surrounding idlers, to see in whose hands they had best confide their nags.

In Lord Scamperdale stamped, followed by his trainband bold, and Maria, the maid, being duly stationed in the passage, threw open the parlour-door on the left, and discovered Mrs Springwheat sitting in attitude.

'Well, my lady, and how are you?' exclaimed his lordship, advancing gaily, and seizing both her pretty hands as she rose to receive him. 'I declare, you look younger and prettier every time I see you.'

'Oh! my lord,' simpered Mrs Springwheat, 'you gentlemen are always so complimentary.'

'Not a bit of it!' exclaimed his lordship, eyeing her intently through his silver spectacles, for he had been obliged to let Jack have the other pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed ones.

'Not a bit of it,' repeated his lordship. 'I always tell Jack you are the handsomest woman in Christendom; don't I, Jack?' enquired his Lordship, appealing to his factotum.

'Yes, my lord,' replied Jack, who always swore to whatever his lordship said.

'By Jove!' continued his lordship, with a stamp of his foot, 'if I could

find such a woman I'd marry her tomorrow. Not such women as you to pick up every day. And what a lot of pretty pups!' exclaimed his lordship, starting back, pretending to be struck with the row of staring, black-haired, black-eyed, half-frightened children. 'Now, that's what I call a good entry,' continued his lordship, scrutinising them attentively, and pointing them out to Jack; 'all dogs – all boys, I mean?' added he.

'No, my lord,' replied Mrs Springwheat, laughing, 'these are girls,' laying her hand on the heads of two of them, who were now full giggle at the idea of being taken for boys.

'Well, they're devilish handsome, anyhow,' replied his lordship, thinking he might as well be done with the inspection.

Springwheat himself now made his appearance, as fine a sample of a man as his wife was of a woman. His face was flushed with the exertion of pulling on his tight boots, and his lordship felt the creases the hooks had left as he shook him by the hand.

'Well, Springey,' said he, 'I was just asking your wife after the new babby.'

'Oh, thank you, my lord,' replied Springey, with a shake of his curly head; 'thank you, my lord; no new babbies, my lord, with wheat below forty, my lord.'

'Well, but you've got a pair of new boots, at all events,' observed his lordship, eyeing Springwheat's refractory calves bagging over the tops of them.

'Deed have I!' replied Springwheat; 'and a pair of uncommon awkward tight customers they are,' added he, trying to move his feet about in them.

'Ah! you should always have a chap to wear your boots a few times before you put them on yourself,' observed his lordship. 'I never have a pair of tight uns,' added he; 'Jack here always does the needful by mine.'

'That's all very well for lords,' replied Mr Springwheat; 'but us farmers wear out our boots fast enough ourselves, without anybody to help us.'

'Well, but I s'pose we may as well fall to,' observed his lordship, casting his eye upon the well-garnished table. 'All these good things are meant to eat, I s'pose,' added he: 'cakes, and sweets, and jellies without end: and as to your sideboard,' said he, turning round and looking at it, 'it's a match for any Lord Mayor's. A round of beef, a ham, a tongue, and is that a goose or a turkey?'

'A turkey, my lord,' replied Springwheat; 'home-fed, my lord.'

'Ah, home-fed, indeed!' ejaculated his lordship, with a shake of the head: 'home-fed: wish I could feed at home. The man who said that

E'en from the peasant to the lord,
The turkey smokes on every board,

told a big un, for I'm sure none ever smokes on mine.'

'Take a little here today, then,' observed Mr Springwheat, cutting deep into the white breast.

'I will,' replied his lordship, 'I will; and a slice of tongue, too,' added he.

'There are some hot sausers comin',' observed Mr Springwheat.

'You *don't* say so,' replied his lordship, apparently thunderstruck at the announcement. 'Well, I must have all three. By Jove, Jack!' said he, appealing to his friend, 'but you've lit on your legs coming here. Here's a breakfast fit to set before the Queen – muffins, and crumpets, and cakes. Let me advise you to make the best use of your time, for you have but twenty minutes,' continued his lordship, looking at his watch, 'and muffins and crumpets don't come in your way every day.'

'Deed they don't,' replied Jack, with a grin.

'Will your lordship take tea or coffee?' asked Mrs Springwheat, who had now taken her seat at the top of the table, behind a richly chased equipage for the distribution of those beverages.

'Pon my word,' replied his lordship, apparently bewildered – 'pon my word, I don't know what to say. Tea or coffee? To tell you the truth, I was going to take something out of my black friend yonder,' nodding to where a French bottle like a tall bully was lifting its head above an encircling stand of liqueur-glasses.

'Suppose you have a little of what we call laced tea, my lord – tea with a dash of brandy in it?' suggested Mr Springwheat.

'Laced tea,' repeated his lordship; 'laced tea: so I will,' said he. 'Deuced good idea – deuced good idea,' continued he, bringing the bottle, and seating himself on Mrs Springwheat's right, while his host helped him to a most plentiful plate of turkey and tongue. The table was now about full, as was the room; the guests just rolling in as they would to a public-house, and helping themselves to whatever they liked. Great was the noise of eating.

As his lordship was in the full enjoyment of his plateful of meat, he happened to look up, and, the space between him and the window being clear, he saw something that caused him to drop his knife and fork and fall back in his chair as if he was shot.

'My lord's ill!' exclaimed Mr Springwheat, who, being the only man with his nose up, was the first to perceive it.

'Clap him on the back!' shrieked Mrs Springwheat, who considered that an infallible recipe for the ailments of children.

'Oh, Mr Spraggon!' exclaimed both, as they rushed to his assistance, 'what *is* the matter with my lord?'

'Oh that Mister something!' gasped his lordship, bending forward in his chair, and venturing another glance through the window.

Sure enough, there was Sponge, in the act of dismounting from the piebald, and resigning it with becoming dignity to his trusty groom, Mr Leather, who stood most respectfully – Parvo in hand – waiting to receive it.

Mr Sponge, being of opinion that a red coat is a passport everywhere, having stamped the mud sparks off his boots at the door, swaggered in with the greatest coolness, exclaiming, as he bobbed his head to the lady, and looked round at the company –

'What, grubbing away! grubbing away, eh?'

'Won't you take a little refreshment?' asked Mr Springwheat, in the hearty way these hospitable fellows welcome everybody.

'Yes, I will,' replied Sponge, turning to the sideboard as though it were an inn. 'That's a monstrous fine ham,' observed he; 'why doesn't somebody cut it?'

'Let me help you to some, sir,' replied Mr Springwheat, seizing the buck-handled knife and fork, and diving deep into the rich red meat with the knife.

Mr Sponge having got two bountiful slices, with a knotch of home-made brown bread, and some mustard on his plate, now made for the table, and elbowed himself into a place between Mr Fossick and Sparks, immediately opposite Mr Spraggon.

'Good-morning,' said he to that worthy, as he saw the whites of his eyes showing through his spectacles.

'Mornin' muttered Jack, as if his mouth was either too full to articulate, or he didn't want to have anything to say to Mr Sponge.

'Here's a fine hunting morning my lord,' observed Sponge, addressing himself to his lordship, who sat on Jack's left.

'Here's a very fine hunting morning, my lord,' repeated Sponge, not getting an answer to his first assertion.

'Is it?' blurted his lordship, pretending to be desperately busy with the contents of his plate, though in reality his appetite was gone.

A dead pause now ensued, interrupted only by the clattering of knives and forks, and the occasional exclamations of parties in want of some particular article of food. A chill had come over the scene – a chill whose cause was apparent to everyone, except the worthy host and hostess, who had not heard of Mr Sponge's descent upon the country. They attributed it to his lordship's indisposition, and Mr Springwheat endeavoured to cheer him up with the prospect of sport.

'There's a brace, if not a leash, of foxes in cover, my lord,' observed he, seeing his lordship was only playing with the contents of his plate.

'Is there?' exclaimed his lordship, brightening up: 'let's be at 'em!' added he, jumping up and diving under the side table for his flat hat and heavy iron hammer-headed whip. 'Good-morning, my dear Mrs Springwheat,' exclaimed he, putting on his hat and seizing both her soft fat-fingered hands and squeezing them ardently. 'Good-morning, my dear Mrs Springwheat,' repeated he, adding, 'By Jove! if ever there was an angel in petticoats, you're her; I'd give a hundred pounds for such a wife as you! I'd give a thousand pounds for such a wife as you! By the powers! I'd give five thousand pounds for such a wife as you!' With which asseverations his lordship stamped away in his great clumsy boots, amidst the ill-suppressed laughter of the party.

'No hurry, gentlemen – no hurry,' observed Mr Springwheat, as some of the keen ones were preparing to follow, and began sorting their hats, and making the mistakes incident to their being all the same shape. 'No hurry, sir – no hurry, sir,' repeated Springwheat, addressing Mr Sponge specifically; 'his lordship will have a talk to his hounds yet, and his horse is still in the stable.'

With this assurance Mr Sponge resumed his seat at the table, where several of the hungry ones were plying their knives and forks as if they were indeed breaking their fasts.

'Well, old boy, and how are you?' asked Sponge, as the whites of Jack's eyes again settled upon him, on the latter's looking up from his plateful of sausages.

'Nicely. How are you?' asked Jack.

'Nicely too,' replied Sponge, in the laconic way men speak who have been engaged in some common enterprise – getting drunk, pelting people with rotten eggs, or anything of that sort.

'Jaw and the ladies well?' asked Jack, in the same strain.

'Oh, nicely,' said Sponge.

'Take a glass of cherry-brandy,' exclaimed the hospitable Mr Springwheat: 'nothing like a drop of something for steadying the nerves.'

'Presently,' replied Sponge, 'presently; meanwhile I'll trouble the missis for a cup of coffee. Coffee without sugar,' said Sponge, addressing the lady.

'With pleasure,' replied Mrs Springwheat, glad to get a little custom for her goods. Most of the gentlemen had been at the bottles and sideboard.

Springwheat, seeing Mr Sponge, the only person who, as a stranger, there was any occasion for him to attend to, in the care of his wife, now

slipped out of the room, and mounting his five-year-old horse, whose tail stuck out like the long horn of a coach, as his ploughman groom said, rode off to join the hunt.

'By the powers, but those are capital sarsingers!' observed Jack, smacking his lips and eating away for hard life. 'Just look if my lord's on his horse yet,' added he to one of the children, who had begun to hover round the table and dive their fingers into the sweets.

'No,' replied the child; 'he's still on foot, playing with the dogs.'

'Here goes, then,' said Jack, 'for another plate,' suiting the action to the word, and running with his plate to the sausage-dish.

'Have a hot one,' exclaimed Mrs Springwheat, adding, 'it will be done in a minute.'

'No, thank ye,' replied Jack, with a shake of the head, adding, 'I might be done in a minute too.'

'He'll wait for you, I suppose?' observed Sponge, addressing Jack.

'Not so clear about that,' replied Jack, gobbling away; 'time and my lord wait for no man. But it's hardly the half-hour yet,' added he, looking at his watch.

He then fell to with the voracity of a hound after hunting. Sponge, too, made the most of his time, as did two or three others who still remained.

'Now for the jumping-powder!' at length exclaimed Sponge, looking round for the bottle. 'What shall it be, cherry or neat?' continued he, pointing to the two.

'Cherry for me,' replied Jack, squinting and eating away without looking up.

'I say *neat*,' rejoined Sponge, helping himself out of the French bottle.

'You'll be hard to hold after that,' observed Jack, as he eyed Sponge tossing it off.

'I hope my horse won't,' replied Sponge, remembering he was going to ride the resolute chestnut.

'You'll show us the way, I dare say,' observed Jack.

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied Sponge, helping himself to a second glass.

'What! at it again!' exclaimed Jack, adding, 'Take care you don't ride over my lord.'

'I'll take care of the old file,' said Sponge; 'it wouldn't do to kill the goose that lays the golden what-do-ye-call-'ems, you know – he, he, he!'

'No,' chuckled Jack; 'Deed it wouldn't – must make the most of him.'

'What sort of a humour is he in today?' asked Sponge

'Middlin', replied Jack, 'middlin'; he'll abuse you most likely, but

that you mustn't mind.'

'Not I,' replied Sponge, who was used to that sort of thing.

'You mustn't mind me either,' observed Jack, sweeping the last piece of sausage into his mouth with his knife, and jumping up from the table. 'When his lordship rows I row,' added he, diving under the side-table for his flat hat.

'Hark! there's the horn!' exclaimed Sponge, rushing to the window.

'So there is,' responded Jack, standing transfixed on one leg to the spot.

'By the powers, they're away!' exclaimed Sponge, as his lordship was seen hat in hand careering over the meadow, beyond the cover, with the tail hounds straining to overtake their flying comrades. Twang – twang – twang went Frostyface's horn; crack – crack – crack – went the ponderous thongs of the whips; shouts, and yells, and yelps, and whoops, and holloas; proclaimed the usual wild excitement of this privileged period of the chase. All was joy save among the *gourmands* assembled at the door – they looked blank indeed.

'What a *sell*!' exclaimed Sponge, in disgust, who, with Jack, saw the hopelessness of the case.

'Yonder he goes!' exclaimed a lad, who had run up from the cover to see the hunt from the rising ground.

'Where?' exclaimed Sponge, straining his eyeballs.

'There!' said the lad, pointing due south. 'D'ye see Tommy Claychop's pasture? Now he's through the hedge and into Mrs Starveland's turnip field, making right for Bramblebrake Wood on the hill.'

'So he is,' said Sponge, who now caught sight of the fox emerging from the turnips on to a grass field beyond.

Jack stood staring through his great spectacles, without deigning a word.

'What shall we do?' asked Sponge.

'Do?' replied Jack, with his chin still up; 'go home, I should think.'

'There's a man down!' exclaimed a groom, who formed one of the group, as a dark-coated rider and horse measured their length on a pasture.

'It's Mr Sparks,' said another; adding, 'he's always rolling about.'

'Lor', look at the parson!' exclaimed a third, as Blossomnose was seen gathering his horse and setting up his shoulders preparatory to riding at a gate.

'Well done, old 'un!' roared a fourth, as the horse flew over it, apparently without an effort.

'Now for Tom!' cried several, as the second whip went galloping up on the line of the gate.

'Ah! he won't have it!' was the cry, as the horse suddenly stopped short nearly shooting Tom over his head. 'Try him again – try him again – take a good run – that's him – there, he's over!' was the cry, as Tom flourished his arm in the air on landing.

'Look! there's old Tommy Baker, the rat-ketcher!' cried another, as a man went working his arms and legs on an old white pony across a fallow.

'Ah, Tommy! Tommy! you'd better shut up,' observed another: 'a pig could go as fast at that.'

And so they criticised the laggards.

'How did my lord get his horse?' asked Spraggon of the groom who had brought them on, who now joined the eye-straining group at the door.

'It was taken down to him at the cover,' replied the man. 'My lord went in on foot, and the horse went round the back way. The horse wasn't there half a minute before he was wanted; for no sooner were the hounds in at one end than out popped the fox at t'other. Such a whopper! – biggest fox that ever was seen.'

'They are all the biggest foxes that ever were seen,' snapped Mr Sponge. 'I'll be bound he was not a bit bigger than common.'

'I'll be bound not, either,' growled Mr Spraggon, squinting frightfully at the man, adding, 'go, get me my hack, and don't be talkin' nonsense there.'

Our friends then remounted their hacks and parted company in very moderate humours, feeling fully satisfied that his lordship had done it on purpose.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Finest Run That Ever Was Seen!

'HOO-RAY, JACK! Hoo-ray!' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale, bursting into his *sanctum*, where Mr Spraggon sat in his hunting coat and slippers, spelling away at a second-hand copy of *Bell's Life* by the light of a melancholy mould candle. 'Hoo-ray, Jack! hoo-ray!' repeated he, waving that proud trophy, a splendid fox's brush, over his grizzly head.

His lordship was the picture of delight. He had had a tremendous

run – the finest run that ever was seen! His hounds had behaved to perfection; his horse – though he had downed him three times – had carried him well, and his lordship stood with his crownless flat hat in his hand, and one coat lap in the pocket of the other – a grinning, exulting, self-satisfied specimen of a happy Englishman.

'Lor! what a sight you are!' observed Jack, turning the light of the candle upon his lordship's dirty person. 'Why, I declare you're an inch thick with mud,' he added: 'mud from head to foot,' he continued, working the light up and down.

'Never mind the mud, you old badger!' roared his lordship, still waving the brush over his head: 'never mind the mud, you old badger; the mud'll come off, or may stay on; but such a run as we've had does not come off every day.'

'Well, I'm glad you have had a run,' replied Jack. 'I'm glad you have had a run; adding, 'I was afraid at one time that your day's sport was spoiled.'

'Well, do you know,' replied his lordship, 'when I saw that unrighteous snob, I was near sick. If it were possible for a man to faint, I should have thought I was going to do so. At first I thought of going home, taking the hounds away too; then I thought of going myself and leaving the hounds; then I thought if I left the hounds it would only make the sinful scaramouch more outrageous, and I should be sitting on pins and needles till they came home, thinking how he was crashing among them. Next I thought of drawing all the unlikely places in the country, and making a blank day of it. Then I thought that would only be like cutting off my nose to spite my face. Then I didn't know what on earth to do. At last, when I saw the critter's great pecker steadily down in his plate, I thought I would try and steal a march upon him, and get away with my fox while he was feeding; and, oh! how thankful I was when I looked back from Bramblebrake Hill, and saw no signs of him in the distance.'

'It wasn't likely you'd see him,' interrupted Jack, 'for he never got away from the front door. I twigged what you were after, and kept him up in talk about his horses and his ridin' till I saw you were fairly away.'

'You did well,' exclaimed Lord Scamperdale, patting Jack on the back; 'you did well, my old buck-o'-wax; and, by Jove! we'll have a bottle of port – a bottle of port, *as I live*,' repeated his lordship, as if he had made up his mind to do a most magnificent act.

'But what's happened you behind! – what's happened you behind?' asked Jack, as his lordship turned to the fire, and exhibited his docked tail.

'Oh, hang the coat! – it's neither here nor there,' replied his lordship;

'hat neither,' he added, exhibiting its crushed proportions. 'Old Blossomnose did the coat; and as to the hat, I did it myself – at least, old Daddy Longlegs and I did it between us. We got into a grass field, of which they had cut a few roods of fence, just enough to tempt a man out of a very deep lane, and away we sailed, in the enjoyment of fine sound sward, with the rest of the field plunging and floundering, and holding and grinning, and thinking what fools they were for not following my example – when, lo and behold! I got to the bottom of the field, and found there was no way out; no chance of a bore through the great thick, high hedge, except at a branchy willow, where there was just enough room to squeeze a horse through, provided he didn't rise at the ditch on the far side. At first I was for getting off; indeed, had my right foot out of the stirrup, when the hounds dashed forrard with such energy – looking like running – and remembering the tremendous climb I should have to get on to old Daddy's back again, and seeing some of the nasty jealous chaps in the lane eyeing me through the fence, thinking how I was floored, I determined to stay where I was; and gathering the horse together, tried to squeeze through the hole. Well, he went shuffling and sliding down to it, as though he were conscious of the difficulty, and poked his head quietly past the tree, when, getting a sight of the ditch on the far side, he rose, and banged my head against the branch above, crushing my hat right over my eyes, and in that position he carried me through blindfold.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Jack turning his spectacles full upon his lordship, and adding, 'it's lucky he didn't crack your crown.'

'It is,' assented his lordship, feeling his head to satisfy himself that he had not done so.

'And how did you lose your tail?' asked Jack, having got the information about the hat.

'The tail! ah, the tail!' replied his lordship, feeling behind, where it wasn't; 'I'll tell you how that was: you see we went away like blazes from Springwheat's gorse – nice gorse it is, and nice woman he has for a wife – but, however, that's neither here nor there; what I was going to tell you about was the run, and how I lost my tail. Well, we got away like winking; no sooner were the hounds in on one side than away went the fox on the other. Not a soul shouted till he was clean gone; hats in the air was all that told his departure. The fox thus had time to run matters through his mind – think whether he should go to Ravenscar Craigs, or make for the main earths at Painscastle Grove. He chose the latter, doubtless feeling himself strong and full of running; and if we had chosen his ground for him he could not have taken us a finer line. He went as straight as an arrow through Bramblebrake Wood, and

then away down the hill over those great enormous pastures to Haselbury Park, which he skirted, leaving Evercreech Green on the left, pointing as if for Dormston Dean. Here he was chased by a cur, and the hounds were brought to a momentary check. Frosty, however, was well up, and a hat being held up on Hothersell Hill, he clapped for'ard and laid the hounds on beyond. We then viewed the fox sailing away over Eddlethorp Downs, still pointing for Painscastle Grove, with the Hamerton Brook lighting up here and there in the distance.

'The field, I should tell you, were fairly taken by surprise. There wasn't a man ready for a start; my horse had only just come down. Fossick was on foot, drawing his girths; Fyle was striking a light to smoke a cigar on his hack; Blossomnose and Capon's grooms were fistling and wipping their horses; Dribble, as usual, was all behind; and altogether there was such a scene of hurry and confusion as never was seen.

'As they came to the brook they got somewhat into line, and one saw who was there. Five or six of us charged it together, and two went under. One was Springwheat on his bay, who was somewhat pumped out; the other was said to be Hook. Old Daddy Longlegs skimmed it like a swallow, and, getting his hindlegs well under him, shot over the pastures beyond, as if he was going upon turf. The hounds all this time had been running, or rather racing, nearly mute. They now, however, began to feel for the scent; and, as they got upon the cold, bleak grounds above Somerton Quarries, they were fairly brought to their noses. Uncommon glad I was to see them; for ten minutes more, at the pace they had been going, would have shaken off every man Jack of us. As it was, it was bellows to mend; and Calcott's roarer roared as surely roarer never roared before. You could hear him half a mile off. We had barely time, however, to turn our horses to the wind, and ease them for a few moments, before the pace began to mend, and from a catching to a holding scent they again poured across Wallingburn pastures, and away to Roughacres Court. It was between these places that I got my head duntled into my hat,' continued his lordship, knocking the crownless hat against his mud-stained knee. 'However, I didn't care a button though I'd not worn it above two years, and it might have lasted me a long time about home; but misfortunes seldom come singly, and I was soon to have another. The few of us that were left were all for the lanes, and very accommodating the one between Newton Bushell and the Forty-foot Bank was, the hounds running parallel within a hundred yards on the left for nearly a mile. When, however, we got to the old water-mill in the fields below, the fox made a bend to the left, as if changing his mind, and making for Newtonbroome Woods, and we

were obliged to try the fortunes of war in the fields. The first fence we came to looked like nothing, and there was a weak place right in my line, that I rode at, expecting the horse would easily bore through a few twigs that crossed the upper part of it. These, however, happened to be twisted, to stop the gap, and not having put on enough steam, they checked him as he rose, and brought him right down on his head in the broad ditch, on the far side. Old Blossomnose, who was following close behind, not making any allowance for falls, was in the air before I was well down, and his horse came with a forefoot into my pocket, and tore the lap clean off by the skirt; his lordship exhibiting the lap as he spoke.

'It's your new coat, too,' observed Jack, examining it with concern as he spoke.

'Deed, is it!' replied his lordship, with a shake of the head. 'Deed, is it! That's the consequence of having gone out to breakfast. If it had been tomorrow, for instance, I should have had number two on, or maybe number three,' his lordship having coats of every shade and grade, from stainless scarlet down to tattered mulberry colour.

'It'll mend, however,' observed his lordship, taking it back from Jack; 'it'll mend, however,' he said, fitting it round to the skirt as he spoke.

'Oh, nicely!' replied Jack; 'it's come off clean by the skirt. But what said Old Blossom?' enquired Jack.

'Oh, he was full of apologies and couldn't help it as usual,' replied his lordship; 'he was down, too, I should tell you, with his horse on his left leg; but there wasn't much time for apologies or explanation, for the hounds were running pretty sharp, considering how long they had been at work, and there was the chance of others jumping upon us if we didn't get out of the way, so we both scrambled up as quick as we could and got into our places again.'

'Which way did you go, then?' asked Jack, who had listened with the attention of a man who knows every yard of the country.

'Well,' continued his lordship, casting back to where he got his fall, 'the fox crossed the Coatenburn township, picking all the plough and bad-scenting ground as he went, but it was of no use, his fate was sealed; and though he began to run short, and dodge and thread the hedgerows, they hunted him yard by yard till he again made an effort for his life, and took over Mossingburn Moor, pointing for Penrose Tower on the hill. Here Frosty's horse, Little Jumper, declined, and we left him standing in the middle of the moor with a stiff neck, kicking and staring and looking mournfully at his flanks. Daddy Longlegs, too, had begun to sob, and in vain I looked back in hopes of seeing Jack-a-Dandy coming up. "Well," said I to myself, "I've got a pair of

good strong boots on, and I'll finish the run on foot but I'll see it;" when, just at the moment, the pack broke from scent to view, and rolled the fox up like a hedgehog amongst them.'

'Well done!' exclaimed Jack, adding, 'that was a run with a vengeance!'

'Wasn't it?' replied his lordship, rubbing his hands and stamping; 'the finest run that ever was seen – the finest run that ever was seen!'

'Why, it couldn't be less than twelve miles from point to point,' observed Jack, thinking it over.

'Not a yard,' replied his lordship, 'not a yard, and from fourteen to fifteen as the hounds ran.'

'It would be all that,' assented Jack. 'How long were you in doing it?' he asked.

'An hour and forty minutes,' replied his lordship; 'an hour and forty minutes from the find to the finish,' adding, 'I'll stick the brush and present it to Mrs Springwheat.'

'It's to be hoped Springy's out of the brook,' observed Jack.

'To be hoped so,' replied his lordship; thinking if he wasn't, whether he should marry Mrs Springwheat or not.

Well now, after all that, we fancy we hear our fair friends exclaim, 'Thank goodness, there's an end of Lord Scamperdale and his hunting; he has had a good run, and will rest quiet for a time; we shall now hear something of Amelia and Emily, and the doings at Jawleyford Court.' Mistaken lady! If you are lucky enough to marry an out-and-out fox-hunter, you will find that a good run is only adding fuel to the fire, only making him anxious for more. Lord Scamperdale's sporting fire was in full blaze. His bumps and his thumps, his rolls, and his scrambles, only brought out the beauties and perfections of the thing. He cared nothing for his hat-crown, no; nor for his coat-lap either. Nay, he wouldn't have cared if it had been made into a spencer.

'What's today? Monday,' said his lordship, answering himself. 'Monday,' he repeated; 'Monday – bubble-and-squeak, I guess – sooner it's ready the better, for I'm half famished – didn't do half justice to that nice breakfast at Springy's. That nasty brown-booted buffer completely threw me off my feed. By the way, what became of the chestnut-booted animal?'

'Went home,' replied Jack; 'fittest place for him.'

'Hope he'll stay there,' rejoined his lordship. 'No fear of his being at the roads tomorrow, is there?'

'None,' replied Jack. 'I told him it was quite an impossible distance from him, twenty miles at least.'

'That's grand!' exclaimed his lordship; 'that's grand! Then we'll have a rare, ding-dong hey-away pop. There'll be no end of those nasty,

jealous, Puffington dogs out; and if we have half such a scent as we had today, we'll sew some of them up, we'll show 'em what hunting is. Now,' he added, 'if you'll go and get the bottle of port, I'll clean myself, and then we'll have dinner as quick as we can.'

CHAPTER XXIX

The Faithful Groom

WE LEFT OUR FRIEND Mr Sponge wending his way home moodily, after having lost his day at Larkhall Hill. Some of our readers will, perhaps, say, why didn't he clap on, and try to catch up the hounds at a check, or at all events rejoin them for an afternoon fox? Gentle reader! Mr Sponge did not hunt on those terms; he was a front-rank or a 'nowhere' man, and independently of catching hounds up, being always a fatiguing and hazardous speculation, especially on a fine-scenting day, the exertion would have taken more out of his horse than would have been desirable for successful display in a second run. Mr Sponge, therefore, determined to go home.

As he sauntered along, musing on the mishaps of the chase, wondering how Miss Jawleyford would look, and playing himself an occasional tune with his spur against his stirrup, who should come trotting behind him but Mr Leather on the redoubtable chestnut? Mr Sponge beckoned him alongside. The horse looked blooming and bright; his eye was clear and cheerful, and there was a sort of springy graceful action that looked like easy going.

One always fancies a horse most with another man on him. We see all his good points without feeling his imperfections – his trippings, or startings, or snatchings, or borings, or roughness of action, and Mr Sponge proceeded to make a silent estimate of *Multum in Parvo's* qualities as he trotted gently along on the grassy side of the somewhat wide road.

'By Jove! it's a pity but his lordship had seen him,' thought Sponge, as the emulation of companionship made the horse gradually increase his pace, and steal forward with the lightest freest action imaginable. 'If he was but all right,' continued Sponge, with a shake of the head, 'he would be worth any money, for he has the strength of a dray-horse,

with the symmetry and action of a racer.'

Then Sponge thought he shouldn't have an opportunity of showing the horse till Thursday, for Jack had satisfied him that the next day's meet was quite beyond distance from Jawleyford Court.

'It's a bore,' said he, rising in his stirrups, and tickling the piebald with his spurs, as if he were going to set-to for a race. He thought of having a trial of speed with the chestnut, up a slip of turf they were now approaching; but a sudden thought struck him, and he desisted. 'These horses have done nothing today,' he said; 'why shouldn't I send the chestnut on for tomorrow?'

'Do you know where the crossroads are?' he asked his groom.

'Crossroads, crossroads – what crossroads?' replied Leather.

'Where the hounds meet tomorrow.'

'Oh, the crossroads at Somethin' Burn,' rejoined Leather, thoughtfully – 'no, 'deed, I don't,' he added. 'From all 'counts, they seem to be somewhere on the far side of the world.'

That was not a very encouraging answer; and feeling it would require a good deal of persuasion to induce Mr Leather to go in search of them without clothing and the necessary requirements for his horses, Mr Sponge went trotting on, in hopes of seeing some place where he might get a sight of the map of the county. So they proceeded in silence, till a sudden turn of the road brought them to the spire and housetops of the little agricultural town of Barleyboll. It differed nothing from the ordinary run of small towns. It had a pond at one end, an inn in the middle, a church at one side, a fashionable milliner from London, a merchant tailor from the same place, and a hardware shop or two where they also sold treacle, Dartford gunpowder, pocket-handkerchiefs, sheep-nets, patent medicines, cheese, blacking, marbles, mole-traps, men's hats, and other miscellaneous articles. It was quite enough of a town, however, to raise a presumption that there would be a map of the county at the inn.

'We'll just put the horses up for a few minutes, I think,' said Sponge, turning into the stable-yard at the end of the Red Lion Hotel and Posting House; adding, 'I want to write a letter, and perhaps,' said he, looking at his watch, 'you may be wanting your dinner.'

Having resigned his horse to his servant, Mr Sponge walked in, receiving the marked attention usually paid to a red coat. Mine host left his bar, where he was engaged in the usual occupation of drinking with customers for the 'good of the house.' A map of the county, of such liberal dimensions, was speedily produced, as would have terrified anyone unaccustomed to distances and scales on which maps are laid down. For instance, Jawleyford Court, as the crow flies, was the same

distance from the crossroads at Dallington Burn as York was from London, in a map of England hanging beside it.

'It's a goodish way,' said Sponge, getting a lighter off the chimney-piece, and measuring the distances. 'From Jawleyford Court to Billingsborough Rise, say seven miles; from Billingsborough Rise to Downington Wharf, other seven; from Downington Wharf to Shapcot, which seems the nearest point, will be – say five or six, perhaps – nineteen or twenty in all. Well, that's my work,' he observed, scratching his head, 'at least, my hack's; and from here, home,' he continued, measuring away as he spoke, 'will be twelve or thirteen. Well, that's nothing,' he said. 'Now for the horse,' he continued, again applying the lighter in a different direction. 'From here to Hardington, will be, say eight miles; from Hardington to Bewley, other five; eight and five are thirteen; and there, I should say, he might sleep. That would leave ten or twelve miles for the morning; nothing for a hack hunter; 'specially such a horse as that, and one that's done nothing for I don't know how long.'

Altogether, Mr Sponge determined to try it, especially considering that if he didn't get Tuesday, there would be nothing till Thursday, and he was not the man to keep a hack hunter standing idle.

Accordingly he sought Mr Leather, whom he found busily engaged in the servants' apartment, with a cold round of beef and a foaming flagon of ale before him.

'Leather,' he said, in a tone of authority, 'I'll hunt tomorrow – ride the horse I should have ridden today.'

'Where at?' asked Leather, diving his fork into a bottle of pickles, and fishing out an onion.

'The crossroads,' replied Sponge.

'The crossroads be fifty mile from here!' cried Leather.

'Nonsense!' rejoined Sponge; 'I've just measured the distance. It's nothing of the sort.'

'How far do you make it, then?' asked Leather, tucking in the beef.

'Why, from here to Hardington is about six, and from Hardington to Bewley, four – ten in all,' replied Sponge. 'You can stay at Bewley all night, and then it is but a few miles on in the morning.'

'And wha'tiver am I to do for clothin'?' asked Leather, adding, 'I've nothin' with me – nothin' nouter for oss nor man.'

'Oh, the ostler'll lend you what you want,' replied Sponge, in a tone of determination; adding, 'you can make shift for one night, surely?'

'One night, surely!' retorted Leather. 'D'ye think an oss can't be ruined in one night? – humph!'

'I'll risk it,' said Sponge.

'But I won't,' replied Leather, blowing the foam from the tankard, and taking a long swig at the ale. 'I thinks I knows my duty to my gov'nor better nor that,' continued he, setting it down. 'I'll not see his waluable 'unters stowed away in pigsties – not I, indeed.'

The fact was, Leather had an invitation to sup with the servants at Jawleyford Court that night, and he was not going to be done out of his engagement, especially as Mr Sponge only allowed him two shillings a day for expenses wherever he was.

'Well, you're a cool hand, anyhow,' observed Mr Sponge, quite taken by surprise.

'Cool 'and, or not cool 'and,' replied Leather, munching away, 'I'll do my duty to my master. I'm not one o' your coatless, characterless scamps wor 'ang about livery-stables ready to do anything they're bid. No, Mr, no,' he continued, pronging another onion; 'I have some regard for the hinterest o' my master. I'll do my duty in the station o' life in which I'm placed, and won't be 'fraid to face no man.' So saying Mr Leather cut himself a grand circumference of beef.

Mr Sponge was taken aback, for he had never seen a conscientious livery-stable helper before, and did not believe in the existence of such articles. However, here was Mr Leather assuming a virtue, whether he had it or not; and Mr Sponge being in the man's power, of course durst not quarrel with him. It was clear that Leather would not go; and the question was, what should Mr Sponge do? 'Why shouldn't I go myself?' he thought, shutting his eyes, as if to keep his faculties free from outward distraction. He ran the thing quickly over in his mind, 'What Leather can do, I can do,' he said, remembering that a groom never demeaned himself by working where there was an ostler. 'These things I have on will do quite well for tomorrow, at least among such rough-and-ready dogs as the Flat Hat men, who seem as if they had their clothes pitched on with a fork.'

His mind was quickly made up, and calling for pen, ink, and paper, he wrote a hasty note to Jawleyford, explaining why he would not cast up till the morrow; he then got the chestnut out of the stable, and desiring the ostler to give the note to Leather, and tell him to go home with his hack, he just rode out of the yard without giving Leather the chance of saying 'nay.' He then jogged on at a pace suitable to the accurate measurement of the distance.

The horse seemed to like having Sponge's red coat on better than Leather's brown, and champed his bit, and stepped away quite gaily.

'Confound it!' exclaimed Sponge, laying the rein on its neck, and leaning forward to pat him; 'it's a pity but you were always in this humour – you'd be worth a mint of money if you were.' He then

resumed his seat in the saddle, and bethought him how he would show them the way on the morrow. 'If he doesn't beat every horse in the field, it shan't be my fault,' thought he; and thereupon he gave him the slightest possible touch with the spur, and the horse shot away up a strip of grass like an arrow.

'By Jove, but you *can* go!' said he, pulling up as the grass ran out upon the hard road.

Thus he reached the village of Hardington, which he quickly cleared, and took the well-defined road to Bewley – a road adorned with mile-stones and set out with a liberal horse-track at either side.

Day had closed ere our friend reached Bewley, but the children returning from school, and the country folks leaving their work, kept assuring him that he was on the right line, till the lights of the town, bursting upon him as he rounded the hill above, showed him the end of his journey.

The best stalls at the head inn – the Bull's Head – were all full several trusty grooms having arrived with the usual head-stalls and rolls of clothing on their horses, denoting the object of their mission. Most of the horses had been in some hours, and were now standing well littered up with straw, while the grooms were in the tap talking over their masters, discussing the merits of their horses, or arguing whether Lord Scamperdale was mad or not. They had just come to the conclusion that his lordship was mad, but not incapable of taking care of his affairs, when the trampling of Sponge's horse's feet drew them out to see who was coming next. Sponge's red coat at once told his tale, and procured him the usual attention.

Mr Leather's fear of the want of clothing for the valuable hunter proved wholly groundless, for each groom having come with a plentiful supply for his own horse, all the inn stock was at the service of the stranger. The stable, to be sure, was not quite so good as might be desired, but it was warm and watertight, and the corn was far from bad. Altogether, Mr Sponge thought he would do very well, and, having seen to his horse, proceeded to choose between beef-steaks and mutton-chops for his own entertainment, and with the aid of the old country paper and some very questionable port, he passed the evening in anticipation of the sports of the morrow.

CHAPTER XXX

The Crossroads at Dallington Burn

WHEN HIS LORDSHIP AND JACK mounted their hacks in the morning to go to the crossroads at Dallington Burn, it was so dark that they could not see whether they were on bays or browns. It was a dull, murky day, with heavy spongy clouds overhead.

There had been a great deal of rain in the night, and the horses poached and squashed as they went. Our sportsmen, however, were prepared as well for what had fallen as for what might come; for they were encased in enormously thick boots, with baggy overalls, and coats and waistcoats of the stoutest and most abundant order. They had each a sack of a macintosh strapped on to their saddle fronts. Thus they went blobbing and groping their way along, varying the monotony of the journey by an occasional spurt of muddy water up into their faces, or the more nerve-trying noise of a floundering stumble over a heap of stones by the roadside. The country people stared with astonishment as they passed, and the muggers and tinkers, who were withdrawing their horses from the farmers' fields, stood trembling, lest they might be the 'pollis' coming after them.

'I think it'll be a fine day,' observed his lordship, after they had bumped for some time in silence without its getting much lighter. 'I think it will be a fine day,' he said, taking his chin out of his great puddingy-spotted neckcloth, and turning his spectacled face up to the clouds.

'The want of light is its chief fault,' observed Jack; adding, 'it's deuced dark!'

'Ah, it'll get better of that,' observed his lordship. 'It's not much after eight yet,' he added, staring at his watch, and with difficulty making out that it was half-past. 'Days take off terribly about this time of year,' he observed; 'I've seen about Christmas when it has never been rightly light all day long.'

They then floundered on again for some time further as before.

'Shouldn't wonder if we have a large field,' at length observed Jack, bringing his hack alongside his lordship's.

'Shouldn't wonder if Puff himself was to come – all over brooches

and rings as usual,' replied his lordship.

'And Charley Slapp, I'll be bund to say,' observed Jack. 'He's a regular hanger-on of Puff's.'

'Ass, that Slapp,' said his lordship; 'hate the sight of him!'

'So do I,' replied Jack; adding, 'hate a hanger-on!'

'There are the hounds,' said his lordship, as they now approached Culverton Dean, and a line of something white was discernible travelling the zig-zagging road on the opposite side.

'Are they, think you?' replied Jack, staring through his great spectacles; 'are they, think you? It looks to me more like a flock of sheep.'

'I believe you're right,' said his lordship, staring too; 'indeed, I hear the dog. The hounds, however, can't be far ahead.'

They then drew into single file to take the broken horse-track through the steep woody dean.

'This is the longest sixteen miles I know,' observed Jack, as they emerged from it, and overtook the sheep.

'It is,' replied his lordship, spurring his hack, who was now beginning to lag; 'the fact is, it's eighteen,' he continued; 'only if I was to tell Frosty it was eighteen, he would want to lay overnight, and that wouldn't do. Besides the trouble and inconvenience, it would spoil the best part of a five-pund note; and five-pund notes don't grow upon gooseberry-bushes – at least not in my garden.'

'Rather scarce in all gardens just now, I think,' observed Jack; 'at least I never hear of anybody with one to spare.'

'Money's like snow,' said his lordship, 'a very meltable article; and talking of snow,' he said, looking up at the heavy clouds, 'I wish we mayn't be going to have some – I don't like the look of things overhead.'

'Heavy,' replied Jack; 'heavy: however, it's due about now.'

'Due or not due,' said his lordship, 'it's a thing one never wishes to come; anybody may have my share of snow that likes – frost too.'

The road, or rather track, now passed over Blobbington Moor, and our friends had enough to do to keep their horses out of peatholes and bogs, without indulging in conversation. At length they cleared the moor, and, pulling out a gap at the corner of the inclosures, cut across a few fields, and got on to the Stumpington turnpike.

'The hounds are here,' said Jack, after studying the muddy road for some time.

'They'll not be there long,' replied his lordship, 'for Grabtintoll Gate isn't far ahead, and we don't waste our substance on pikes.'

His lordship was right. The imprints soon diverged up a muddy lane on the right, and our sportsmen now got into a road so deep and bottomless as to put the idea of stones quite out of the question.

'Hang the road!' exclaimed his lordship, as his hack nearly came on his nose, 'hang the road!' repeated he, adding, 'if Puff wasn't such an ass, I really think I'd give him up the crossroad country.'

'It's bad to get at from us,' observed Jack, who didn't like such trashing distances.

'Ah! but it's a rare good country when you get to it,' replied his lordship, shortening his rein and spurring his steed.

The lane being at length cleared, the road became more practicable, passing over large pastures where a horseman could choose his own ground, instead of being bound by the narrow limits of the law. But though the road improved, the day did not; a thick fog coming drifting up from the south-east in aid of the general obscurity of the scene.

'The day's gettin' *wuss*,' observed Jack, snuffling and staring about.

'It'll blow over,' replied his lordship, who was not easily disheartened. 'It'll blow over,' repeated he, adding, 'often rare scents such days as these. But we must put on,' continued he, looking at his watch, 'for it's half-past, and we are a mile or more off yet.' So saying, he clapped spurs to his hack and shot away at a canter, followed by Jack at a long-drawn 'hammer and pincers' trot.

A hunt is something like an Assize circuit, where certain great guns show everywhere, and smaller men drop in here and there, snatching a day or a brief, as the case may be. Sergeant Bluff and Sergeant Huff rustle and wrangle in every court, while Mr Meeke and Mr Sneeke enjoy their frights on the forensic arenas of their respective towns, on behalf of simple neighbours, who look upon them as thorough Solomons. So with hunts. Certain men who seem to have been sent into the world for the express purpose of hunting, arrive at every meet, far and near, with a punctuality that is truly surprising, and rarely associated with pleasure.

If you listen to their conversation, it is generally a dissertation on the previous day's sport, with enquiries as to the nearest way to cover the next. Sometimes it is seasoned with censure of some other pack they have been seeing. These men are mounted and appointed in a manner that shows what a perfect profession hunting is with them. Of course, they come cantering to cover, lest anyone should suppose they ride their horses on.

The 'Crossroads' was like two hunts or two circuits joining, for it generally drew the picked men from each, to say nothing of outriggers and chance customers. The regular attendants of either hunt were

sufficiently distinguishable as well by the flat hats and baggy garments of the one, as by the dandified, Jemmy Jessamy air of the other. If a lord had not been at the head of the Flat Hats, the Puffington men would have considered them insufferable snobs. But to our day.

As usual, where hounds have to travel a long distance, the field were assembled before they arrived. Almost all the cantering gentlemen had cast up.

One crossroad meet being so much like another, it will not be worth while describing the one at Dallington Burn. The reader will have the kindness to imagine a couple of roads crossing an open common, with an armless sign-post on one side, and a rubblestone bridge, with several of the coping-stones lying in the shallow stream below, on the other.

The country round about, if any country could have been seen, would have shown wild, open, and cheerless. Here a patch of wood, there a patch of heath, but its general aspect bare and unfruitful. The commanding outline of Beechwood Forest was not visible for the weather. Time now, let us suppose, half-past ten, with a full muster of horsemen and a fog making unwonted dullness of the scene – the old sign-pole being the most conspicuous object of the whole.

Hark! what a clamour there is about it. It's like a betting-post at Newmarket. How loud the people talk! what's the news? Queen Ann dead, or is there another French Revolution, or a fixed duty on corn? Reader, Mr Puffington's hounds have had a run, and the Flat Hat men are disputing it.

'Nothing of the sort! nothing of the sort!' exclaims Fossick, 'I know every yard of the country, and you can't make more nor eight of it anyhow, if eight.'

'Well, but I've measured it on the map,' replied the speaker (Charley Slapp himself), 'and it's thirteen, if it's a yard.'

'Then the country's grown bigger since my day,' rejoins Fossick, 'for I was dropped at Stubgrove, which is within a mile of where you found, and I've walked, and I've ridden, and I've driven every yard of the distance, and you can't make it more than eight, if it's as much. Can you, Capon?' exclaimed Fossick, appealing to another of the 'flat brims,' whose luminous face now shone through the fog.

'No,' replied Capon; adding, 'not so much, I should say.'

Just then up trotted Frostyface with the hounds.

'Good-morning, Frosty! good-morning!' exclaim half a dozen voices, that it would be difficult to appropriate from the denseness of the fog. Frosty and the whips make a general salute with their caps.

'Well, Frosty, I suppose you've heard what a run we had yesterday?' exclaims Charley Slapp, as soon as Frosty and the hounds are settled.

'Had they, sir – had they?' replies Frosty, with a slight touch of his cap and a sneer. 'Glad to hear it, sir – glad to hear it. Hope they killed, sir – hope they killed?' with a still slighter touch of the cap.

'Killed, aye? – killed in the open just below Crabstone Green, in *your* country,' adding, 'It was one of your foxes I believe.'

'Glad of it, sir – glad of it, sir,' replies Frosty. 'They wanted blood sadly – they wanted blood sadly. Quite welcome to one of our foxes, sir – quite welcome. That's a brace and a 'alf they've killed.'

'Brace and a ha-r-r-f!' drawls Slapp, in well-feigned disgust; 'brace and a ha-r-r-f! – why, it makes them ten brace, and six run to ground.'

'Oh, don't tell *me*,' retorts Frosty, with a shake of disgust; 'don't tell me. I knows better – I knows better. They'd only killed a brace since they began hunting up to yesterday. The rest were all cubs, poor things! – all cubs, poor things! Mr Puffington's hounds are not the sort of animals to kill foxes: nasty, skirtin', flashy, jealous divils; always starin' about for holloas and assistance. I'll be damned if I'd give eighteenpence for the 'ole lot on 'em.'

A loud guffaw from the Flat Hat men greeted this wholesale condemnation. The Puffington men looked unutterable things, and there is no saying what disagreeable comparisons might have been instituted (for the Puffingtonians mustered strong) had not his lordship and Jack cast up at the moment. Hats off and politeness was then the order of the day.

'Mornin',' said his lordship, with a snatch of his hat in return, as he pulled up and stared into the cloud-enveloped crowd; 'Mornin', Fyle; mornin', Fossick,' he continued, as he distinguished those worthies, as much by their hats as anything else. 'Where are the horses?' he said to Frostyface.

'Just beyond there, my lord,' replied the huntsman, pointing with his whip to where a cockaded servant was 'to-and-froing' a couple of hunters – a brown and a chestnut.

'Let's be doing,' said his lordship, trotting up to them and throwing himself off his hack like a sack. Having divested him-self of his muddy overalls, he mounted the brown, a splendid sixteen hands horse in tip-top condition, and again made for the field in all the pride of masterly equestrianism. A momentary gleam of sunshine shot o'er the scene; a jerk of the head acted as a signal to throw off, and away they all moved from the meet.

Thorneybush Gorse was a large eight-acre cover, formed partly of gorse and partly of stunted blackthorn, with here and there a sprinkling of Scotch firs. His lordship paid two pound a-year for it, having vainly tried to get it for thirty shillings, which was about the actual value of

the land, but the proprietor claimed a little compensation for the trampling of horses about it; moreover the Puffington men would have taken it at two pounds. It was a sure find, and the hounds dashed into it with a scent.

The field ranged themselves at the accustomed corner, both hunts full of their previous day's run. Frostyface's 'Yoicks, wind him!' 'Yoicks, push him up!' was drowned in a medley of voices.

A loud clear shrill 'TALLY-HO, AWAY!' from the far side of the cover caused all tongues to stop, and all hands to drop on the reins. Great was the excitement! Each hunt was determined to take the shine out of the other.

'*Twang, twang, twang!*' '*Tweet, tweet, tweet!*' went his lordship's and Frostyface's horns, as they came bounding over the gorse to the spot, with the eager pack rushing at their horses' heels. Then, as the hounds crossed the line of scent, there was such an outburst of melody in cover, and such gathering of reins and thrusting on of hats outside! The hounds dashed out of cover as if somebody was kicking them. A man in scarlet was seen flying through the fog, producing the usual hold-hardings, 'Hold hard, sir!' 'God bless you, hold hard, sir!' with enquiries as to 'who the chap was that was going to catch the fox.'

'It's Lumpleg!' exclaimed one of the Flat Hat men.

'No, it's not!' roared a Puffingtonite; 'Lumpleg's here.'

'Then it's Charley Slapp; he's always doing it,' rejoined the first speaker. 'Most jealous man in the world.'

'Is he!' exclaimed Slapp, cantering past at his ease on a thoroughbred grey, as if he could well afford to dispense with a start.

Reader! it was neither Lumpleg nor Slapp, nor any of the Puffington snobs, or Flat Hat swells, or Puffington Swells, or Flat Hat snobs. It was our old friend Sponge; Monsieur Tonson again! Having arrived late, he had posted himself, unseen, by the cover side, and the fox had broke close to him. Unfortunately, he had headed him back, and a pretty kettle of fish was the result. Not only had he headed him back, but the resolute chestnut, having taken it into his head to run away, had snatched the bit between his teeth, and carried him to the far side of a field ere Sponge managed to manœuvre him round on a very liberal semicircle, and face the now flying sportsmen, who came hurrying on through the mist like a charge of yeomanry after a salute. All was excitement, hurry-scurry, and horse-hugging, with the usual spurring, elbowing, and exertion to get into places; Mr Fossick considering he had as much right to be before Mr Fyle, as Mr Fyle had to be before old Capon.

It apparently being all the same to the chestnut which way he went so

long as he had his run, he now bore Sponge back as quickly as he had carried him away, and with yawning mouth, and head in the air, he dashed right at the coming horsemen, charging Lord Scamperdale full tilt as he was in the act of returning his horn to its case. Great was the collision! His lordship flew one way, his horse another, his hat a third, his whip a fourth, his spectacles a fifth; in fact, he was scattered all over. In an instant he lay in the centre of a circle, kicking on his back like a lively turtle.

'Oh! I'm kilt!' he roared, striking out as if he was swimming, or rather floating. 'I'm kilt!' he repeated. 'He's broken my back - he's broken my legs - he's broken my ribs - he's broken my collar-bone - he's knocked my right eye into the heel of my left boot. Oh! will nobody catch him and kill him? Will nobody do for him? Will you see an English nobleman knocked about like a nine-pin?' added his lordship, scrambling up to go in pursuit of Mr Sponge himself, exclaiming, as he stood shaking his fist at him, '*Rot ye, sir! bangin's too good for ye! You should be condemned to hunt in Berwickshire the rest of your life!*'

CHAPTER XXXI

Bolting the Badger

WHEN A MAN AND HIS HORSE differ seriously in public, and the man feels the horse has the best of it, it is wise for the man to appear to accommodate his views to those of the horse, rather than risk a defeat. It is best to let the horse go his way, and pretend it is yours. There is no secret so close as that between a rider and his horse.

Mr Sponge, having scattered Lord Scamperdale in the summary way described in our last chapter, let the chestnut gallop away, consoling himself with the idea that even if the hounds did hunt, it would be impossible for him to know his horse to advantage on so dark and unfavourable a day. He, therefore, just let the beast gallop till he began to flag, and then he spurred him and made him gallop on his account.

He thus took his change out of him, and arrived at Jawleyford Court a little after luncheon time.

Brief as had been his absence, things had undergone a great change.

Certain dark hints respecting his ways and means had worked their way from the servants' hall to my lady's chamber, and into the upper regions generally. These had been augmented by Leather's, the trusty groom's, overnight visit, in fulfilment of his engagement to sup with the servants. Nor was Mr Leather's anger abated by the unceremonious way Mr Sponge rode off with the horse, leaving him to hear of his departure from the ostler. Having broken faith with him, he considered it his duty to be 'upsides' with him, and tell the servants all he knew about him. Accordingly he let out, in strict confidence of course, to Spigot, that so far from Mr Sponge being a gentleman of 'fortin,' as he called it, with a dozen or two hunters planted here and there, he was nothing but the hirer of a couple of hacks, with himself as a job-groom, by the week. Spigot, who was on the best of terms with the 'cook-housekeeper,' and had his clothes washed on the sly in the laundry, could not do less than communicate the intelligence to her, from whom it went to the lady's-maid, and thence circulated in the upper regions.

Juliana, the maid, finding Miss Amelia less indisposed to hear Mr Sponge run down than she expected, proceeded to add her own observations to the information derived from Leather, the groom. 'Indeed, she couldn't say that she thought much of Mr Sponge herself; his shirts were coarse, so were his pocket-handkerchiefs; and she never yet saw a real gent without a valet.'

Amelia, without any positive intention of giving up Mr Sponge, at least not until she saw further, had nevertheless got an idea that she was destined for a much higher sphere. Having duly considered all the circumstances of Mr Spraggon's visit to Jawleyford Court, conned over several mysterious coughs and half-finished sentences he had indulged in, she had about come to the conclusion that the real object of his mission was to negotiate a matrimonial alliance on behalf of Lord Scamperdale. His lordship's constantly expressed intention of getting married was well calculated to mislead one whose experience of the world was not sufficiently great to know that those men who are always talking about it are the least likely to get married, just as men who are always talking about buying horses are the men who never do buy them. Be that, however, as it may, Amelia was tolerably easy about Mr Sponge. If he had money she could take him, if he hadn't she could let him alone.

Jawleyford, too, who was more hospitable at a distance, and in imagination than in reality, had had about enough of our friend. Indeed, a man whose talk was of hunting, and his reading Mogg, was not likely to have much in common with a gentleman of taste and

elegance, as our friend set up to be. The delicate enquiry that Mrs Jawleyford now made, as to 'whether he knew Mr Sponge to be a man of fortune,' set him off at a tangent.

'Me know he's a man of fortune! I know nothing of his fortune. You asked him here, not me,' exclaimed Jawleyford, stamping furiously.

'No, my dear,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, mildly; 'he asked himself, you know; but I thought, perhaps, you might have said something that -'

'Me say anything!' interrupted Jawleyford; 'I never said anything - at least, nothing that any man with a particle of sense would think anything of,' continued he, remembering the scene in the billiard-room. 'It's one thing to tell a man, if he comes your way, you'll be glad to see him, and another to ask him to come bag and baggage, as this impudent Mr Sponge has done,' added he.

'Certainly,' replied Mrs Jawleyford, who saw where the shoe was pinching her bear.

'I wish he was off,' observed Jawleyford, after a pause. 'He bothers me excessively - I'll try and get rid of him by saying we are going from home.'

'Where can you say we are going to?' asked Mrs Jawleyford.

'Oh, anywhere,' replied Jawleyford; 'he doesn't know the people about here: the Tewkesburys, the Woolertons, the Browns - anybody.'

Before they had got any definite plan of proceeding arranged, Mr Sponge returned from the chase.

'Ah, my dear sir!' exclaimed Jawleyford, half gaily, half moodily, extending a couple of fingers as Sponge entered his study; 'we thought you had taken French leave of us, and were off.'

Mr Sponge asked if his groom had not delivered his note.

'No,' replied Jawleyford, boldly, though he had it in his pocket; 'at least, not that I've seen. Mrs Jawleyford, perhaps, may have got it,' added he.

'Indeed!' exclaimed Sponge; 'it was very idle of him. He then proceeded to detail to Jawleyford what the reader already knows, how he had lost his day at Larkhall Hill, and had tried to make up for it by going to the crossroads.

'Ah!' exclaimed Jawleyford, when he was done; 'that's a pity - great pity - monstrous pity - never knew anything so unlucky in my life.'

'Misfortunes will happen,' replied Sponge, in a tone of unconcern.

'Ah, it wasn't so much the loss of the hunt I was thinking of,' replied Jawleyford, 'as the arrangements we have made in consequence of thinking you were gone.'

'What are they?' asked Sponge.

'Why, my Lord Barker, a great friend of ours – known him from a boy – just like brothers, in short – sent over this morning to ask us all there – shooting party, charades, that sort of thing – and we accepted.'

'But that need make no difference,' replied Sponge; 'I'll go too.'

Jawleyford was taken aback. He had not calculated upon so much coolness.

'Well,' stammered he, 'that might do, to be sure; but – if – I'm not quite sure that I could take anyone –'

'But if you're as thick as you say, you can have no difficulty,' replied our friend.

'True,' replied Jawleyford; 'but then we go a large party ourselves – two and two's four,' said he, 'to say nothing of servants; besides, his lordship mayn't have room – house will most likely be full.'

'Oh, a single man can always be put up; shake-down – anything does for him,' replied Sponge.

'But you would lose your hunting,' replied Jawleyford. 'Barkington Tower is quite out of Lord Scamperdale's country.'

'That doesn't matter,' replied Sponge; adding, 'I don't think I'll trouble his lordship much more. These Flat Hat gentlemen are not over and above civil, in my opinion.'

'Well,' replied Jawleyford, nettled at this thwarting of his attempt, 'that's for your consideration. However, as you've come, I'll talk to Mrs Jawleyford, and see if we can get off the Barkington expedition.'

'But don't get off on my account,' replied Sponge. 'I can stay here quite well. I dare say you'll not be away long.'

This was worse still; it held out no hope of getting rid of him. Jawleyford therefore resolved to try and smoke and starve him out. When our friend went to dress, he found his old apartment, the state-room, put away, the heavy brocade curtains brown-hollanded, the jugs turned upside down, the bed stripped of its clothes, and the looking-glass laid a-top of it.

The smirking housemaid, who was just rolling the fire-irons up in the hearth-rug, greeted him with a 'Please, sir, we've shifted you into the brown room, east,' leading the way to the condemned cell that 'Jack' had occupied, where a newly-lit fire was puffing out dense clouds of brown smoke, obscuring even the gilt letters on the back of Mogg's *Cab Fares*, as the little volume lay on the toilet-table.

'What's happened now?' asked our friend of the maid, putting his arm round her waist, and giving her a hearty squeeze. 'What's happened now, that you've put me into this dog-hole?' asked he.

'Oh! I don't know,' replied she, laughing; 'I s'pose they're afraid you'll bring the old rotten curtains down in the other room with

smokin'. Master's a sad old wife,' added she.

A great change had come over everything. The fare, the lights, the footmen, the everything, underwent grievous diminution. The lamps were extinguished; and the transparent wax gave way to Palmer's composites, under the mild influence of whose unsearching light the young ladies sported their dashed dresses with impunity. Competition between them, indeed, was about an end. Amelia claimed Mr Sponge, should he be worth having, and should the Scamperdale scheme fail; while Emily, having her mamma's assurance that he would not do for either of them, resigned herself complacently to what she could not help.

Mr Sponge, on his part, saw that all things portended a close. He cared nothing about the old willow-pattern set usurping the place of the Jawleyford-armed china; but the contents of the dishes were bad, and the wine, if possible, worse. Most palpable Marsala did duty for sherry, and the corked port was again in requisition. Jawleyford was no longer the brisk, cheery-hearted Jawleyford of Laverick Wells, but a crusty, fidgetty, fire-stirring sort of fellow, desperately given to his *Morning Post*.

Worst of all, when Mr Sponge retired to his den to smoke a cigar and study his dear *Cab Fares*, he was so suffocated with smoke that he was obliged to put out the fire, notwithstanding the weather was cold, indeed inclining to frost. He lit his cigar notwithstanding; and, as he indulged in it, he ran all the circumstances of his situation through his mind. His pressing invitation – his magnificent reception – the attention of the ladies – and now the sudden change everything had taken. He couldn't make it out, somehow; but the consequences were plain enough. 'The fellow's a humbug,' at length said he, throwing the cigar-end away, and turning into bed, when the information Watson the keeper gave him, on arriving recurred to his mind, and he was satisfied that Jawleyford was a humbug. It was clear Mr Sponge had made a mistake in coming; the best thing he could do now was to back out, and see if the fair Amelia would take it to heart. In the midst of his cogitations Mr Puffington's pressing invitation occurred to his mind, and it appeared to be the very thing for him, affording him an immediate asylum within reach of the fair lady, should she be likely to die.

Next day he wrote to volunteer a visit.

Mr Puffington, who was still in ignorance of our friend's real character, and still believed him to be a second 'Nimrod' out on a 'tour,' was overjoyed at his letter; and, strange to relate, the same post that brought his answer jumping at the proposal, brought a letter from Lord Scamperdale to Jawleyford, saying that, 'as soon as Jawleyford

was *quite alone* (scored under) he would like to pay him a visit.' His lordship, we should inform the reader, notwithstanding his recent mishap, still held out against Jack Spraggon's recommendation to get rid of Mr Sponge by buying his horses, and he determined to try this experiment first. His lordship thought at one time of entering into an explanation, telling Mr Jawleyford the damage Sponge had done him, and the nuisance he was entailing upon him by harbouring him; but not being a great scholar, and several hard words turning up that his lordship could not well clear in the spelling, he just confined himself to a laconic; which as it turned out, was a most fortunate course. Indeed, he had another difficulty besides the spelling, for the hounds having as usual had a great run after Mr Sponge had floored him – knocked his right eye into the heel of his left boot, as he said – in the course of which run his lordship's horse had rolled over him on a road, he was like the railway people – unable to distinguish between capital and income – unable to say which were Sponge's bangs and which his own; so, like a hard cricket-ball sort of a man as he was, he just pocketed all, and wrote as we have described.

His lordship's and Mr Puffington's letters diffused joy into a house that seemed likely to be distracted with trouble.

So then endeth our thirtieth chapter, and a very pleasant ending it is, for we leave everyone in perfect good humour and spirits. Sponge pleased at having got a fresh billet, Jawleyford delighted at the coming of the lord, and each fair lady practising in private how to sign her christian name in conjunction with 'Scamperdale.'

CHAPTER XXXII

Mr Puffington; or The Young Man About Town

MR PUFFINGTON took the Mangeysterne, now the Hanby hounds, because he thought they would give him consequence. Not that he was particularly deficient in that article; but being a new man in the county, he thought that taking them would make him popular, and give him standing. He had no natural inclination for hunting, but seeing friends who had no taste for the turf take upon themselves the responsibility of stewardships, he saw no reason why he should not make a similar

sacrifice at the shrine of Diana. Indeed, Puff was not bred for a sportsman. His father, a most estimable man, and one with whom we have spent many a convivial evening, was a great starchmaker at Stepney; and his mother was the daughter of an eminent Worcester-shire stone-china maker. Save such ludicrous hunts as they might have seen on their brown jugs, we do not believe either of them had any acquaintance whatever with the chase. Old Puffington was, however, what a wise heir esteems a great deal more – an excellent man of business, and amassed mountains of money. To see his establishment at Stepney, one would think the whole world was going to be starched. Enormous dock-tailed dray-horses emerged with ponderous waggons heaped up to the very skies, while others would come rumbling in, laden with wheat, potatoes, and other starch-making ingredients. Puffington's blue roans were well known about town, and were considered the handsomest horses of the day; quite equal to Barclay and Perkins's piebalds.

Old Puffington was not like a sportsman. He was a little, soft, rosy, round-about man, with stiff resolute legs that did not look as if they could be bent to a saddle. He was great, however, in a gig, and slouched like a sack.

Mrs Puffington, *née* Smith, was a tall handsome woman, who thought a good deal of herself. When she and her spouse married, they lived close to the manufactory, in a sweet little villa replete with every elegance and convenience – a pond, which they called a lake – laburnums without end; a yew, clipped into a dock-tailed waggon horse; standing for three horses and gigs, with an acre and a half of land for a cow.

Old Puffington, however, being unable to keep those dearest documents of a British merchant, his balance-sheets, to himself, and Mrs Puffington finding a considerable sum going to the 'good' every year, insisted, on the birth of their only child, our friend, upon migrating to the 'west,' as she called it, and at one bold stroke they established themselves in Heathcote Street, Mecklenburgh Square. Novelists had not then written this part down as 'Mesopotamia,' and it was quite as genteel as Harley or Wimpole Street are now. Their chief object then was to increase their wealth and make their only son 'a gentleman.' They sent him to Eton, and in due time to Christ Church, where, of course, he established a red coat, to persecute Sir Thomas Mostyn's and the Duke of Beaufort's hounds, much to the annoyance of their respective huntsmen, Stephen Goodall and Philip Payne, and the aggravation of poor old Griff. Lloyd.

What between the field and college, young Puffington made the