

THE DISSEMBLERS

I

NOBODY was more surprised than Guy Sandilands when a distant kinsman, whom he had only met half-a-dozen times, left the young man a snug property in Melshire, where the shooting is good and the hunting even better. In the centre of a small park stood a delightful old manor-house, not too big. And everything—farms, stables, cottages—was in apple-pie order. Death duties, of course, were high, but Guy, who was in the jute business when his kinsman died, had capital of his own (and a bit over) wherewith to settle these in full.

He told himself that he stood "on velvet."

And he stood alone. No impecunious relations to worry and bleed him. His mother, who lived in London, was amply provided for; his two sisters had married well.

Nevertheless, these three ladies were unanimous in declaring that Guy must marry, and quite willing to find him a suitable life's partner. He laughed at them cheerily.

"I shall find her—in time."

He entered into possession of his kingdom in April, and the neighbours hastened to call, and to entertain him.

II

Amongst these neighbours, all racy of the good Melshire soil, were Sir Gilbert Fonthill, of Fonthill Court, and young Nethercoate, of Nethercoats. Sir Gilbert

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was an ex-M.F.H., who had carried the horn of the Fonthill Vale Hounds in pre-war days. All the Fonthills were followers of the Chase, rain or shine. They took the field on hunters, if they could afford them, or afoot, or on bicycles, or in cars. Sir Gilbert had sons and daughters, nephews and nieces. And each, you may be sure, had been "blooded" as soon as he or she could sit on a pony, properly "entered" to fox. Young Nethercoate was of the same sporting kidney, interested in the management of his estate, which marched with Guy's property, and good at games. Accordingly, within a short time the two men became firm friends.

It was Jack Nethercoate who dropped the first brick upon Guy's toes.

"Of course you hunt?"

"What?"

The monosyllable betrayed him.

"Reynard. Old Charley, bless him!"

"Oh! Stupid of me. I've never hunted foxes. I've never ridden anything except a rocking-horse; and a bad toss off that when I was three wrecked my nerve."

Jack eyed him anxiously.

"But, my dear fellow, you can't live down here and not hunt. Everybody hunts."

"I quite understand that it is my duty to provide foxes."

"Dash it, you must hunt! Good Lord! you'll be bored stiff if you don't. I'll find you a safe conveyance, and you can hack about till cubbing begins. And then—all will be well."

Guy looked dubious.

It is probable that his stables would have remained empty if he had not fallen desperately in love with Miss Esther Fonthill. Talking with her and her people forced him into the saddle. Esther smiled upon him, but—as Guy pointed out to Jack Nethercoate—she smiled as

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beguilingly upon Jack himself, a hardened bachelor. Esther persuaded Guy to "walk" a couple of foxhound puppies. It was the right thing to do, and that was the end of it—or the beginning of what inevitably followed.

Jack said: "You must talk horse and hound to little Esther."

"Tell me to talk Choctaw."

"You'll pick up the patter all right. Hark to Sir Gilbert."

Guy harked to Sir Gilbert and read sporting novels.

We must admit that he was making progress, when he observed mournfully to Jack:

"I'm not getting any forrader with Esther."

"You wait till cubbing begins."

A safe conveyance had been found for Guy, an aged hunter named Beckford, with perfect mouth and manners, a gentleman. What he thought of Guy he kept to himself. Guy asked his groom who was teaching him to ride:

"Why is it that every horse becomes restless when I go near him?"

The groom, a Melshire man, replied caustically: "I reckons they knows more'n we thinks for. You treats Beckford too polite-like. Give 'un a good smack on his quarters, and dig heels into 'un, when he's nappy."

Beckford was inclined to be "nappy" when Guy overdid the politeness. Beckford had perfect control of Guy, but, in the circumstances, didn't abuse his powers. Perhaps the old horse knew that he had a very cushy job, although, for obvious reasons, he was kept short of corn.

In July, Guy was confronted with tragedy. One of the puppies had a nasty red patch upon its little Mary.

"What is that?" asked an ignoramus of Josephs, the groom.

"It be mange."

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"Mange? Do you know anything about mange?"

"Mange," replied Josephs, portentously, "be an insect, yas, an insect, so small that you can't see 'un wi' a microbe."

The puppy was treated successfully by a local "vet" sworn to secrecy; the hideous fact never leaked out, but the "vet" muttered: "Walking valuable puppies is a serious responsibility."

Guy agreed with him.

III

Towards the end of July, Sir Gilbert and Lady Fonthill gave a big tennis party, to which Guy was invited. There were only two courts, and Esther was not in tennis kit. Guy had anticipated with pleasure a set with Esther, no mean performer. Sir Gilbert greeted him warmly, saying in a lower tone:

"My girls tell me that you're hot stuff. Bide a wee; and I'll put you into a good men's four."

At this moment the dissembling, fraught with so many consequences, began to burgeon. It ought to be stated emphatically that neither Guy nor Esther was "hot stuff" at dissembling. Let us reckon them as novices. Guy saw that Esther, looking delightfully frocked and distractingly pretty, was standing close to her father. He raised his voice: "It's a confounded nuisance, Sir Gilbert, but you must count me out."

"Eh, what?"

"I'm a bit crocked."

This was Guy's first essay at "patter" with the ex-M.F.H.

"Crocked?"

"Went short on the off fore on my way here." Sir Gilbert nodded approvingly. Much encouraged, Guy continued: "Back tendon out of whack. Nothing serious. I was shot in the leg after Mons."

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This was true ; it was also true that Guy suffered occasional twinges. Sir Gilbert said genially :

“ Esther was V.A.D. during the last six months of the war. Hi ! Esther ! Oh, there you are. I hand over this wounded warrior to you.”

Together Guy and Esther strolled away from the crowd. Guy felt constrained to limp slightly.

“ Does your leg hurt you ? ” asked the maid.

“ Not so much as it did.”

“ Perhaps we had better sit down.”

Guy assented. More, he strategically manœuvred Esther in the direction of a bench under the shade of a fine copper beech. They sat down and looked at each other.

“ When I’ve rested up, Miss Esther, it would be most awfully nice of you to show me your stables.”

“ Not much to see there yet, Mr. Sandilands.”

“ But—they’re model stables, aren’t they ? ”

“ Father thinks so. Of course you hunt ? ”

Guy replied evasively :

“ I’m looking forward to hunting.”

“ Have you ever been out with our hounds ? ”

“ Never.”

“ The country is trappy. Father says that if a man can really ‘ go ’ here, he can ride anywhere. I dare say you like being in the air.”

Guy guessed that “ being in the air ” was the right “ patter ” for jumping obstacles. He had seen the obstacles—brooks, flying fences, bank-and-ditch doubles, post-and-rails——! The more he looked at them in July the less—so he told himself—would he like them in November.

“ I’m a duffer,” admitted Guy. To cover a slight confusion, because he could see that Esther did not believe him to be a duffer, he dexterously switched the talk from himself to her : “ I know that you go like a bird.”

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“ Who told you that ? ”

“ You’re a Fonthill.”

Esther blushed. She did not go like a bird. It is significant that something within her revolted against dissembling with this clear-eyed, open-faced young man. She murmured hastily :

“ I have a wonderful gee—clever as a cat—never puts me down—always a leg to spare, but—I’m not a thruster, Mr. Sandilands. I—I don’t ride as my sisters ride.”

“ You must have amazing pluck.” As she remained silent, still blushing, he said ardently :

“ I admire pluck more than anything else. And that, of course, is why hunting is such a tremendous asset to England. It—it calls into play the great qualities, doesn’t it ? ”

“ Ye-es,” admitted Esther.

“ Judgment, for instance. One must ride with judgment ? ”

Esther nodded.

“ Decision, too. You spot your place and go for it bald-headed.”

He was warming to his work, so Esther reflected.

“ I can’t answer for the bald-headed, Mr. Sandilands.”

“ I should think not.” He stared audaciously at some brown curls beneath a becoming hat. Esther, concerned for his safety in November, said quickly :

“ Some thrusters who don’t know our country come to sad grief—rotten banks and all that. There is the flying country and the crawling country. None of us regards you as a stranger, Mr. Sandilands. Father was telling us the other night about your wonderful great-grandfather who broke his neck jumping a stiff post-and-rails when he was eighty-one. It was a glorious finish at eighty-one, but not at——” She paused.

“ Twenty-nine,” said Guy, adding tactfully : “ rising thirty.” He had never forgotten his great-grandfather’s

end. Guy's father, who succumbed to a neglected cold, had spoken of that end as a warning. Guy's grandmother had said: "He was not, I fear, prepared to meet his Maker."

Esther continued brightly:

"Considering the country, we don't have many very bad accidents."

"I say, Miss Esther, you're putting the wind up me. I feel as if I were the apex of the world's pyramid of funks."

Had he spoken in a more convincing tone Esther might have replied: "We stand on that apex together." Unfortunately, she had heard such statements before from men whom she knew to be Bayards of the Chase. Sir Gilbert, a first-flighter, affirmed that he rode over certain fences with his heart in his mouth. To test this young man further, she continued:

"You must be extra careful in November. It's blind 'going' till the middle of December. You have bought, I hear, a fine performer."

"Beckford is all right; he knows his job much better than I do. Somehow it's in the air down here that life without horses is a tame affair. You agree with me, I'm sure?"

"It is in the air here," Esther admitted.

They were hovering on the brink of discovering each other, when loud applause from the lawn challenged attention. Four good men and true were giving a fine exhibition. Immediately, rejoicing to feel ground firm beneath his feet, Guy began to talk of tennis. He had seen the cracks at Wimbledon; he had played with some of them. Presently, to illustrate a stroke, he jumped from the bench, seized his racket, and leaped nimbly in front of Esther.

"It's footwork, you see—just footwork."

"Gracious! But your poor leg——"

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A poet has told us that we pay the price of lies by being constrained to lie on still. Guy, being a novice at lying, quite forgot that he had lied.

“My leg——?”

He flew the scarlet of confusion, and an unscrupulous maiden, watching him slyly, said pitifully :

“Is it very bad?”

Guy burst out laughing, wiped a heated brow, sat down and whispered :

“There is nothing the matter with it. I saw that you weren't playing, and I—I wanted to talk with you.”

A faint exclamation escaped her. Unable to meet his glowing eyes, she murmured :

“You told me you were in the jute business. Surely the Diplomatic Service would have suited your great talents better?”

“My leg will hurt abominably, Miss Esther, if you pull it.”

Esther stood up, smiling.

“You must play in the next men's set.”

He did.

IV

He returned to his ancient manor-house and dined alone. Upon the walls of the dining-room hung family portraits, and amongst them that of his great-grandfather, who broke his neck at the ripe age of eighty-one jumping stiff timber. Jack Nethercoate declared that Guy had a look of his great grandsire, acclaimed by all Melshire as the right sort. Each possessed a firm, salient chin and nose that inspired respect.

“Horses were not ‘nappy’ with you,” thought Guy.

Before he left Fonthill Court, Esther did show him the model stables, and further talk, not about stables, established the fact that they had much in common. Esther

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revealed herself as a lover of the country she rode over, a nymph fragrant of the fields and woods, Arcadian, artless, fresh as dew. Just the very girl to be mistress of a charming manor-house. And yet, alas! the essential misunderstanding remained. Man and maid believed firmly that the other was mad keen about the sport of kings. Guy said to himself miserably :

“The darling will spot me as a mug and a liar when she sees me in the pigskin.”

That night, Esther, turning her pretty head upon an uneasy pillow, reflected as miserably :

“What will Mr. Sandilands think of me when he finds out that I’m a funker ? ”

She had not seen Guy in the pigskin. He and Josephs hacked about in the cool mornings, rarely adventuring beyond Guy’s ring fence, and never over it. Very small “leps” were put up in a paddock behind Guy’s stables. Over these Beckford jumped with such consummate ease and smoothness that a tiny measure of confidence in himself and his steed emboldened Guy to go on dissembling with Esther. Thanks to the kindly Jack, a novice bought the right “kit.” Afoot he looked a “workman.” Sir Gilbert, beholding smart breeches and gaiters at the local Pony Show, said to Esther :

“Young Sandilands shapes well. He has a leg for a boot.”

But the malicious imps of comedy saw to it that the pair got “no forrarder,” because Truth hid herself in her well. Guy was something of a “thruster” apart from the hunting field. He would certainly have prosecuted his suit with dash and persistence if the obstacles in Melshire had been less forbidding. He said to himself : “If she will have me after she sees me dead lag of the hunt, we shall be as happy as larks.” Esther, pondering things over in her heart, came to another optimistic conclusion : “Guy” (she thought of him as

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Guy) "will push along; he won't see me, because I shall be behind him. And then—*perhaps*—"

He told her that great pressure had been brought to bear upon him. As the owner of fox coverts, as the great-grandson of a hero, *the hunt button had been sent to him!* Jack Nethercoate said that this was a tremendous compliment, adding:

"You must appear in pink at the opening meet."

"I daren't," faltered Guy.

"I say you must; and I shall see to it that you are turned out smartly. You will want two red coats, *and an evening coat.*"

"Help——!"

"A horseman should be a credit to his gee. You leave everything to me."

"Thank you," gasped Guy.

Esther said to him:

"Are you going to hunt four days a week?"

"With one horse?"

"But you have two good 'uns. Are you looking out for a third?"

"Ye-es. What I want is hard to find."

Esther nodded, making certain that Guy, with an ample income, would buy the best. He had paid a big-gish price for Beckford. The mere fact that he had bought a famous performer, a sometime winner of point-to-point races, established Guy in his own neighbourhood as a fellow to be reckoned with. The horse ridden by Josephs—which Guy dared not mount—was also favourably known with the F.V.H.

Esther put another nasty question:

"Does Beckford rush his fences?"

Now Beckford, wise beast, disdaining the absurd "leps" in the paddock, trotted calmly up to them, cocked his ears, and popped over with a minimum of effort.

"Rush his fences? I—I don't think so."

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"I asked the question," explained Esther, "because Becky has been raced a lot. Father says it's a mistake to race hunters. So often, you turn a fine hunter into a third-rate racehorse."

"Just so," assented Guy, knowing nothing about it, but vaguely alarmed. Did Becky rush his fences? How could he find out? He would ask Josephs. He did the next morning.

"Ah-h-h!" said Josephs, devoted to both his horses. "Beckford be quality, zur. Do 'ee be sure o' this—he'll keep his nose close to 'ounds when they be runnin'. Don't 'ee worry. I understands. You sit snug in saddle, and old 'orse'll do the rest; a rare ride he be, to be sure."

This was not comforting. But, on the other hand, Guy felt daily more at home in a well-polished saddle, and Josephs took infinite pains with his "seat" in it. The pair adventured as far as Fonthill Court one morning, and all the Fonthills beheld Guy on a good horse. Sir Gilbert was visibly impressed. He said to Esther:

"Young Sandilands on that horse will show some of us the way."

To please Guy, Esther repeated to him what her father predicted. A more observant young man, more knowledgeable about all that pertains to the Chase, might have noticed that Esther, not an Echo, invariably quoted Sir Gilbert when hunting was the theme of conversation. Guy inferred that Esther, apart from her father, expected great things of him.

V

Cubbing began.

Beckford knew all about cubbing, and was slightly bored by it. Now and again he reached at his bridle when hounds were bustling a cub, but otherwise he behaved like a gentleman.

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To make things easier for Guy, Fate ordained that Esther was in Scotland. She didn't come out till the opening meet, and on the first Monday in November anything may happen, however blind the country is.

Something, quite unexpected, did happen.

Hounds met in the flying country at Barkford Inn and drew a famous covert. Outside that covert Guy met Esther and was uproariously glad to see her after a six weeks' absence. He was so absorbed in her, so delighted to perceive that she seemed equally glad to see him, that he wandered on with her, away from the rest of the field, to the left of the covert.

They did not talk about hunting. Esther was riding her own horse, well-exercised during her absence by a groom. Was it significant that Esther's mare "nosed" Beckford affectionately, and that Beckford displayed no resentment? Now Esther knew this covert as she knew her own hand. Nine times out of ten foxes broke away from it on the right. More—the covert, unless you stuck to the rides, was not easy to draw properly. Hounds objected to thick brambles. The huntsman went in with his hounds; the first whipper-in galloped to the far right corner. A cub might dash across a few fields into another covert just as thick at that time of year.

A whimper, another whimper, and then a full chorus, proclaimed a find. Esther smiled. She and Guy could take their time.

Beckford cocked his ears, as a fine dark fox slipped out of the brambles not fifty yards away.

"Ought I to halloa?" asked Guy. He knew enough to lift his new top-hat. But none saw him.

"Can you?" asked Esther, trying to quiet a restless mare.

"I've never done it."

"You may be slated if you do."

The leading hound bounded out of the covert, followed

by the body of the pack. They hit the line with a crash and raced across a large grass field.

Beckford followed them.

Esther's mare followed Beckford.

To a true thruster this would have been a memorable moment. To get well away with staunch hounds over a grass country, no wire, flying fences, blind but negotiable, and a screaming scent.

Worth a guinea a second!

Guy's first impulse was to jam his hat over his head. Then he gripped the flaps of his saddle as he had never gripped them before. Beckford strode on, taking his place automatically well to the left of the flying pack. Guy couldn't stop him, and at the moment he didn't attempt to stop him. He obeyed Josephs' admonitions—hands low, sit still, look ahead.

Looking ahead, he saw a fence and no gate. The fence was not formidable. He glanced back, and nearly fell out of the slippery pigskin. Esther was forty yards behind him. Not another soul was in sight. The fox, as rarely happens, had diddled the field and the hunt servants.

Guy thought agonizingly: "It's a thousand to three I shall cut a 'voluntary'" (he had mastered his "patter") "at this fence. Esther will administer first aid."

Beckford picked the easiest place. Esther reflected: "Guy knows all about it. I *must* follow him, if I can. I—I *will* follow him."

Beckford took the fence in his stride. Somehow, Guy, with one hand on the pommel, remained in the saddle. Not a creditable performance, but Esther, being behind him, couldn't see the hand on the pommel nor Guy sprawl Beckford's neck as they landed well into the next field.

More grass, and a convenient gap in the distance. He glanced back. Esther was well over, too. What had Josephs said about a horse taking hold of his bit? Yes.

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“ Kid him, zur ; press 'un ; give 'un his head ; and then a pull ; make 'un bend his neck ; and then you'll have 'un in hand.”

What counsels of perfection !

Still, it might be done on rising ground with a gap as encouragement. Guy pressed Beckford with his blunted spurs. Beckford, slightly surprised, responded, lengthening his stride. As they neared the gap Guy spoke to the old horse, and managed to move the bit. Beckford was “ kidded.” He trotted up to the gap and through it.

Hounds were a field ahead.

Esther's breathless voice was heard, as she cantored alongside :

“ Ought we to stop hounds ? ”

“ We can't,” Guy replied.

They sped on and on, Esther dropping behind. She dared not ride in a thruster's pocket. Another easy fence crowning a slope. Below lay the cream of the F.V.H. and the Barkford brook. Esther knew, of course, every inch of the country ; much of it belonged to her father. Still—hairy fences and blind ditches in early November ! Dare she suggest to this stranger that she, a coward, should pilot him ?

By this time Guy's blood was circulating torrentially. He was wearing red and saw red, the red of Reynard, and he saw in the mid-distance the pollards fringing Barkford brook. The turf was sound under Beckford's hoofs, ideal “ going.”

A farmer's boy opened a gate.

The luck of this overwhelmed Guy. But he hadn't the time or the opportunity to fish half a crown out of his pocket. He roared at the astonished yokel :

“ God bless you ! ”

Beckford was taking hold again. No kidding could be practised downhill. At the next fence, landing on too

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soft ground, he pecked slightly. • Biff! Guy's nose met a hard neck, and something warm and brackish flowed into Guy's mouth.

“ Nearly done—did she see that ? ”

Esther, collecting her horse for an awkward drop, did not see him. She was losing ground, but filled with admiration of her pilot, giving no credit to Becky.

She, too, saw the line of pollards' and marshy meadows beyond. Obviously Guy meant to have the brook, although there was a ford further on. How could he know about the ford? If she turned left-handed priceless minutes would be lost. Would her pilot pick the best place? Not he. She saw Beckford lengthening his stride and Guy, slightly hunched up in the saddle, leaning forward; apparently urging his steed to high endeavour.

They were over.

Trembling with fear, but overmastered by Cupid, Esther followed.

Safely across, on heavy ground, Guy was able to pull up Beckford. Novice though he was, he knew that he had leaped a really big obstacle. All the triumph of that notable achievement oozed from every pore as he realized the danger to Esther, not so well mounted, upon a horse not yet in hunting condition.

The mare did her best, but the water was too wide. Mare and maid crashed upon a rotten bank. Esther was flung to the bulrushes, and lay amongst them even as Moses.

Hounds vanished.

When Esther opened her eyes, her head was on Guy's knees.

“ I'm quite all right,” said Esther.

Guy helped her to her feet, but kept a supporting arm about her waist.

“ Are you sure ? ”

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"The—the wind was knocked out of me. Where are the horses?"

Guy said, grimly: "Becky means to see the end of this hunt, and your mare seems to be attached to him."

He glanced about him; they were alone.

"Darling Esther——!"

"Mr. Sandilands——!"

Before she could protest he had kissed her.

"I adore you——"

"Guy——!"

He went on kissing her, and presently she was kissing him.

Twenty minutes later the huntsman rode up, followed by the field. When Sir Gilbert had satisfied himself that Esther was none the worse for her toss, he reprimanded her sharply for letting go of the reins. Young Sandilands, of course, believing the young lady to be seriously hurt, had broken no unwritten laws in letting *his* horse escape. Young Sandilands, invited to dinner that night, begged to be allowed to remain with Miss Esther, and permission to do so was graciously accorded. Sir Gilbert rode on.

Eventually—as everybody in the F.V.H. knows—hounds killed their fox by themselves some three miles from Barkford brook. Two riderless horses were in the middle of the pack.

VI

Black care sat behind Guy after he had left Esther at Fonthill Court. He had won a sweet girl under false pretences. All excitement bubbled out of him as he lay full length in a hot bath. He was honest with himself. Never, never, would he be a horseman. He had ridden his first and last hunt.

At ease in a chair he thought of a possible future. He would keep four hunters for Esther. Would she accept a man who proposed to hunt henceforward—on wheels?

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Yes ; he might square her aid an ex-M.F.H. with such guilt-edged promises.

Esther, in her bedroom, was as fully sensible of the issues involved. Guy, as a thruster, had terrified her. And he had established a record with the F.V.H. for himself and her. Henceforward she would be expected to "go" as she had gone this eventful morning. Every fibre in a sensitive body quivered at the prospect.

However, being a Fonthill, she consoled herself with the reflection that hunting men of the keenest type did accept with equanimity wives who gave up hunting. That meant more gees for the male. But, being as honest as Guy, she must tell the truth that night and face the consequences. If Guy winced at her confession, if he raised a disconcerting eyebrow, they would be parted for ever !

During dinner, when all the men were in pink, Esther described the run up to the brook with a corroborative detail which upset Guy, confirming his conviction that none but a Fonthill could have done such justice to such a theme. As Esther finished the entrancing narrative, Sir Gilbert made a comment :

"Beats me, child, that you had the gumption to go to the left side of the covert when all of us went to the right."

Esther crumbled her bread and said nothing.

"It was more than luck," observed Sir Gilbert, solemnly. "I believe that some people have an instinct for getting a good start. My father had it. You inherit it from him."

When the port was brought in Sir Gilbert proposed the toast of the evening :

"Fox-hunting !"

It was drunk with acclamation.

After dinner Guy found himself alone with Esther. And he was well aware that the Fonthill family had

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accepted him as one of themselves. Still, before he spoke to Sir Gilbert, it was due to Esther to speak candidly to her. To his surprise she spoke first.

"I have something disagreeable to tell you," she began.

"There has been—*another*," thought Guy. She continued quickly :

"Father wondered why I took you that side of the covert."

"As he says—an inherited instinct."

"No. I took you there, Guy, because I'm a miserable coward. I thought—I hoped that the fox would break away on the other side. Then we should have been pounded, as they were."

"You—you wanted to be pounded ?"

"I'm horribly afraid of my mare. I don't believe I can ever ride her again. I'd rather not ride at all. I—I don't think hunting the only thing in the world. I'm—I'm fed up with it. When Daddy proposed the toast to-night, I whispered under my breath—'Tennis.'"

"You—lamb ! I whispered under my breath—'Golf.'"

"What can you mean ?"

"What you mean. I was in a blue funk too. I can't ride for nuts. If you had been alongside of me you would have seen Becky playing cup-and-ball with me. I was all over the poor beast, from his ears to his tail. At each fence I shut my eyes."

They embraced tenderly. After the interlude Guy said, nervously :

"Shall I tell your father to-night ?"

"We'll tell him together to-morrow."

"I can square him, darling."

"How ?"

"If he gives you to me, I shall give him—Becky."