

IX

"A HORSE! A HORSE!"

PART II

A QUARTER of an hour later Philippa and I stood in the high road, with the sense of deliverance throbbing in every grateful nerve, and viewed the car, with the job-cook and the policeman, swing heavily away towards the railway station.

Mine was the strategy that had brought about our escape, mine were the attractions that had lured the cook to mount the policeman's car with me, and still more inalienably mine was the searing moment when, still arm-in-arm with the cook, we drove away from the deeply appreciative party on the doorsteps. Philippa and a policeman were on the opposite side of the car; the second policeman, very considerately, walked.

We were close to the station, the cook had sung herself to sleep, and Philippa and I had relapsed into the depths of abysmal despondency, when our incredulous eyes beheld the Butler-Knoxes' coachman coming towards us at a trot,

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riding a bay horse and leading a grey, on which was a side-saddle. Flavin, the horse dealer, had, after all, been as good as Flurry's word—the hirelings were here, and all was right with the world.

The car slackened to a walk, we slid from it silently, and it and its burden passed into that place of shadows to which all extraneous affairs of life betake themselves on a hunting morning, when the hour is come, and the horse.

Looshy's coachman delivered to me the bay horse, a large and notable-looking animal, with a Roman nose adorned with a crooked blaze, a tranquil eye, and two white stockings. In his left hand he held a compact iron-grey mare, hogged and docked, who came up to the bank by the roadside, to be mounted, as neatly as a man-o'-war boat comes alongside. Hirelings of so superior a class it had never before been my privilege to meet, and I made up my mind that they were either incurably vicious or broken winded.

“It's easy known that this mare's carried a lady before, sir,” said the coachman, a young man with a soul for higher things than driving, the Butler-Knox covered car, “and the big horse is the best I ever seen come out of Flavin's! He's in grand condition, he's as slick as a mouse!

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Only for Mr. Flurry being there we'd hardly have got them," he continued, while he lengthened my stirrup-leathers, "the chap Flavin sent with them had drink taken, and the porters had the box shunted and himself in it, stretched, and the bottle of whisky with him!"

Flavin's man and his bottle of whisky were now negligible incidents for me. Philippa was already under way, and the time was short. The bay horse, arching his neck and reaching pleasantly at his bit, went away at a rhythmic and easy trot, the grey mare flitted beside him with equal precision; it was, perhaps, rather fast for riding to a meet, but we were late, and were they not hirelings?

We followed our guides, the telegraph posts, for some four miles of level road; they dropped down a deepening valley to a grey and brimming river, and presently came slate roofs and white-washed houses, staring at each other across an empty village street. We had arrived at Kilbarron, the scene of the meet, and the meet was not.

"They've gone on! they've gone on!" screamed an old woman from a doorway, "away up over the hill!"

Evidently every other live thing had followed the hunt; and we did not spare Mr. Flavin's

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horses in doing the same. We reached the top of the long hill in a remarkably brief space of time, and, having done so, realised that we were not too late. A couple of fields away a row of figures, standing like palings along the top of a bank, with their backs to us, told that the hounds were still in view ; even as we sighted them, the palings plunged *en masse* from their standpoint with that composite yell that in Ireland denotes the breaking (and frequently the heading) of a fox, and vanished. Whatever was happening, it was not coming our way. I turned my hireling at the bank by the roadside, he came round with a responsive swing, and in two large and orderly bounds he was over. Before I had time to look round, the grey mare, with the faintest hint of a buck, galloped emulously past me.

“Perfection !” panted Philippa, putting her hat straight.

As we came up on to the next bank, recently vacated by its human palisade, we found that fortune had smiled upon us. Just below, on our right, was a long strip of gorse covert ; three big fields beyond it, gliding from us like a flock of seagulls, were the clamouring hounds, and in the space between us and them bucketed the hunt, in the first fine frenzy of getting away. Flavin's bay immediately caught hold, not implacably, but

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with the firmness of superior knowledge; the grey mare, having ascertained that Philippa was not going to interfere, thought better of going on alone, and took the time from her stable companion. The field was already sorting itself into the usual divisions of the forward, the cunning, and the useless; our luck stood to us; the forward division, carried away by the enthusiasm of a good start and a sympathetic fall of ground, succeeded in less than a quarter of a mile in hustling the hounds over the line, and brought about a check. We joined the rearguard, and worked our way towards the front, unobtrusively, because Sir Thomas Purcell's comments on the situation were circling like a stock-whip among the guilty, and were not sparing the innocent. At this moment we found Flurry Knox beside us.

"Sir Thomas is giving the soldiers their tea in a mug!" he said; "and they were in the want of it! How are those horses doing with you?" he went on, looking our steeds up and down. "They look up to your weights, anyhow! I suppose you didn't see your friend, the General? He was at the meet in a motor."

"In a motor!" repeated Philippa. "I thought he was such a wonderful rider."

"He knows how to get a motor along, anyhow," replied Flurry, his attentive eyes following

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the operations of the hounds; “maybe he has the gout. You’d say he had by the colour of his face. Hullo! Boys! They’re away again! Come on, Mrs. Yeates! Knock your two guineas’ worth out of Flavin!”

Short as it was, the burst had been long enough to tranquillise my anxieties as to our hirelings’ wind, and when we started again we found them almost excessively ready for the stone-faced bank that confronted us at the end of the field. Some twenty of us, including the chidden, but wholly unabashed soldiers, went at it in line, and, after the manner of stone-faced banks, it grew very tall as we approached it. Flavin’s bay strode unfalteringly over it; it was as though he grasped it and flung it behind him. The grey mare, full of jealousy and vain-glory, had a hard try to fly the whole thing, but retained sufficient self-control to change feet at the last possible instant; with or without a scramble or a peck, we all arrived somehow in the next field, and saw, topping the succeeding fence, the bulky chestnut quarters of Sir Thomas Purcell’s horse and the square scarlet back of Sir Thomas. Away to the left, on an assortment of astute crocks, three of the Misses Purcell followed the First Whip, at as considerable a distance from their parent as was consistent with a good place. Their voices came confusedly

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to us; apparently each was telling the others to get out of her way.

For a quarter of an hour the hounds ran hard over the clean pasture-land, whose curves rose before us and glided astern like the long rollers under an Atlantic liner. Innocent of rocks or pitfalls, unimpeachable as to surface, it was a page of fair print as compared with the black letter manuscript to which the country of Mr. Flurry Knox's hounds might be likened. Never before have I crossed fences as sound, as seductive, it was like jumping large and well-upholstered Chesterfield sofas; Chesterfieldian also were the manners of Flavin's bay. I found myself in the magnificent position of giving a lead to Flurry and the Dodger, of giving several leads to the soldiery; once, when a wide and boggy stream occurred, the Misses Purcell and the crocks looked to me as their pioneer. The hustle and the hurry never relaxed; the hounds had fastened on the line and were running it as though it were a footpath; but for the check at the start, no fox could have held his lead for so long at such a pace, and whatever the pace, the tails of the horses of Sir Thomas and the First Whip never failed to disappear over the bank just ahead.

For me, in the unwonted glory of heading the desperadoes of the first flight, life and the future

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were contained in the question of how much longer I could count on my hireling. I was just able to spare a hasty thought or two to Philippa and the grey, and I remember that it was after a heavy drop into a road that I noticed, with the just and impotent wrath of a husband, that her hair was beginning to come down.

It was just then that I first saw the motor. The fox had run the road for some little distance; we clattered and splashed along it, until an intimidating roar from Sir Thomas and the sight of his right arm in the air, brought us, bumping and tugging, to a standstill. The hounds were for a moment at fault, swarming, with their heads down, over every inch of the road, and beyond them, about a hundred yards from us, was a resplendent scarlet motor, whose nearer approach was summarily interdicted by the First Whip. I am short-sighted, but I caught an impression of two elderly gentlemen, one of whom, wearing a white moustache and a tall hat, was responding warmly to the fulminations of Sir Thomas. If this were my ancient brother-in-arms, Jimmy Porteous, following hounds in a motor, times were indeed changed. I dismissed the possibility from my mind. Just then I caught sight of Flurry's face; it had in it the fearful joy of a schoolboy who has seen a squib put into the

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tail pocket of the schoolmaster, and awaits the result. Mrs. Flurry, in the heroic act of plucking a hairpin from her own unshaken golden-red plaits, and yielding it to Philippa, met his eye with a glance that was so expressionless as to amount to a danger signal.

At this moment the hounds jostled over the wall with a clatter of falling stones; they spread themselves in the field like the opening of a fan, they narrowed to the recovered line like the closing of one; Sir Thomas's chestnut hoisted himself and his fifteen-stone burden out of the road with the heave of an earthquake. The riders shoved after him, and we were swept again into the current of the hunt.

As we thundered away up the field threatening shouts from the checked motorists followed us; apparently, after the manner of their kind, they had not a moment to spare, and the delay had annoyed them. The next fence arrived, and they, and all else, were forgotten.

There was a wood ahead of us, cresting a long upland, and for it the hounds were making, at a pace that brutally ignored the rise of ground, and the fact that in these higher levels the fields were smaller, and the fences had to be faced up a hill that momentarily grew steeper.

“Hold on, Mrs. Yeates, till I take down that

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pole for you!” Flurry’s voice followed us up the hill, and there was that in it that told he was making heavy weather of it. He was leading the dripping Dodger, and I have seldom seen a redder face than his as he laboured past Philippa and dragged away the shaft of a cart that barred a gap. “Bad luck to this for a close country!” he puffed. “You’re not off one fence before you’re on top of the next!” Flavin’s horses were certainly lathering pretty freely, but were otherwise making no remark on the situation, and neither of them had so far made a mistake of any kind. I saw the First Whip regard the bay with obvious respect, and turn with a confidential comment to the nearest Miss Purcell. It hall-marked my achievements.

Philippa and I were among the first into the wood; even Flurry had been left three fields behind, and the glory of our position radiated from us, as we stood at the end of the main ride, sublimely surveying the arrival of the rest of the streaming hunt. Sir Thomas and the hounds had dived out of sight into the recesses of the wood; a period of inaction ensued, and for a few balmy minutes peace with honour was ours.

Balmy, however, as were the minutes, there crept into them an anxiety as to what the hounds were doing. A great and complete silence had

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fallen as far as they and Sir Thomas were concerned, and Philippa and I, conscious of our high estate as leaders of the hunt, melted away from the crowd to investigate matters. We followed a path that took us across the wood, and the deeper we went the deeper was the silence, and the more acute became our fears that we had been left behind. Sir Thomas had an evil reputation for slipping his field and getting away alone.

"There's the horn!" cried Philippa. "It's outside the wood! They *have* gone away. Hurry!"

We were squeezing along the farther edge of the covert, looking for a way out, and I, too, heard the note, faint, yet commanding. I hurried. That is to say, with my hat over my eyes, and my cheek laid against the bay's neck, I followed my wife up an alley that was barely wide enough for a woodcock.

On our left was an impassable hedge of small trees, crowning a heavy drop into the field outside the wood; our faces were rowelled by the branches of young spruce firs. It was all very well for Philippa, riding nearly two hands lower than I, to twist her way in and out through them like a squirrel, but for me, on a 16.2 horse, resolved on following his stable companion through a keyhole if necessary, it was anything but well.

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My eyes were tightly shut, my arm was in front of them, and my eye-glass was hanging down my back, when I felt the bay stop.

“Here’s a way out,” said my wife’s voice, apparently from the middle of a fir tree, “there’s a sort of a cattle track here.”

There followed a scramble and a slide, then Philippa’s voice again, enjoining me to keep to the right.

She has since explained that she really meant the left, and that, in any case, I might have known that she always said right when she meant left; be that as it may, when the bay and I had committed ourselves to the steep descent—half water-course, half cattle track—I was smitten in the face by a holly branch. Before I had recovered from its impact, a stout beechen bough, that it had masked, met me violently across the waist-coat and held me in mid-air, as the gorilla is reputed to grasp and hold the traveller, while my horse moved firmly downward from beneath me. After a moment of suspense, mental and physical, I fell to earth, like the arrow in the song, I knew not where, and tobogganed painfully down something steep and stony, with briers in it.

As I rose to my feet, the mellow note of the horn that had beguiled us from the wood, again sounded; nearer now, and with a harsher cadence,

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and I perceived, at the farther end of the field in which I had arrived, a bullock, with his head over a gate, sending a long and lamentable bugle note to the companions from whom he had been separated. Simultaneously the hounds opened far back in the wood behind me, and I knew that the flood-tide of luck had turned against us.

Flavin's bay had not waited for me. He was already well away, going with head and tail high held, a gentleman at large, seeking for entertainment at a lively and irresponsible trot. Pursuing him, with more zeal than discretion, was Philippa on the grey mare; he broke into a canter, and I had the pleasure of seeing them both swing through a gateway and proceed at a round gallop across the next field. I followed them at the best imitation of the same pace that my boots permitted, and squelched through the mire of the gateway in time to see the bay horse jump a tall bank, and drop with a clatter into a road. At the same moment the drumming and hooting of a motor-car broke upon my ear, and three heads, one of them wearing a tall hat, slid at high speed along the line of the fence. At sight of this apparition the bay horse gave a massive buck, and fled at full speed up a lane. To my surprise and gratification, the motor-car instantly stopped, and one of its occupants—the wearer of

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the tall hat—sprang out and gave chase to my horse.

My attention was here abruptly transferred to my wife, who, having followed the chase, whether by her own wish or that of the grey mare I have never been able to discover, was now combating the desire of the latter to jump the bank at the exact spot calculated to land them both in the lap of the motor-car. The dispute ended in a slanting and crab-like rush at a place twenty yards lower down, and it was then that the figure of our host, Mr. Lucius Butler-Knox, rose, amazingly, in the motor-car, making semaphore gestures of warning.

The mare jumped crookedly on to the bank, hung there for half a second, and launched herself into space, the launch being followed, appropriately, by a mighty splash. Neither she nor Philippa reappeared.

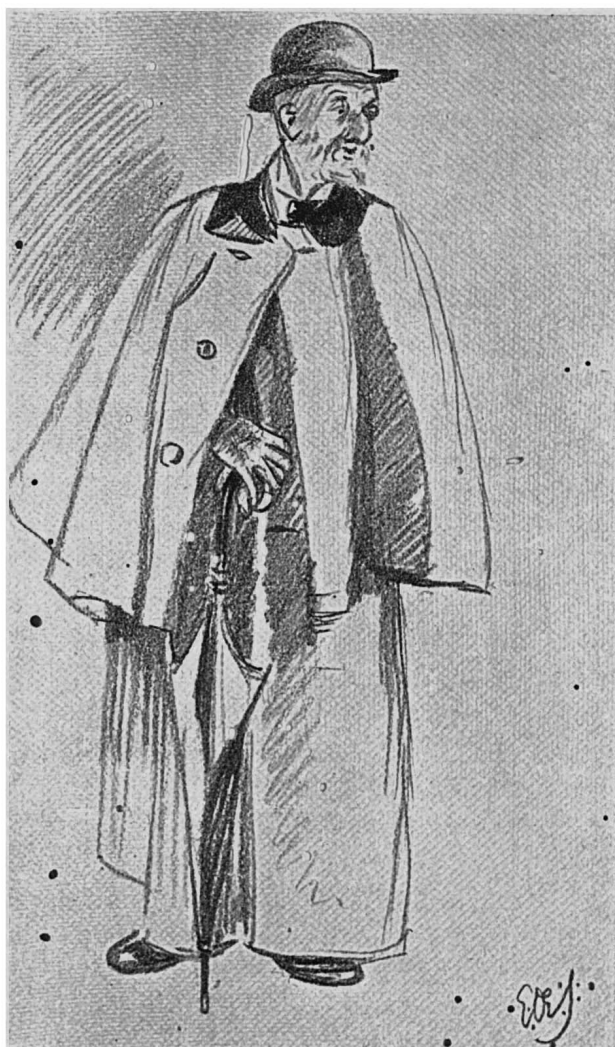
Throughout these events I had not ceased to run, and the next thing I can distinctly recall is scrambling, thoroughly blown, on to the fence, whence a moving scene presented itself to me. The grey mare and Philippa had, with singular ingenuity, selected between them the one place in the fence where disaster was inevitable; and I now beheld my wife prone in two feet of yellow water, the overflow of a flooded ditch that had turned a hollow by the roadside into a sufficiently

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imposing pond. Mr. Butler-Knox and the chauffeur were already rendering all the assistance possible, short of wetting their feet, and were hauling her ashore; while the grey mare, recumbent in deeper water, surveyed the operation with composure, and made no attempt to move. When I joined the party—a process involving a wide circuit of the flood—Philippa had sunk, dripping, upon a heap of stones by the roadside, in laughter as inexplicable as it was unsuitable. There was, at all events, no need to ask if she were hurt.

“The most appalling thing that you ever knew in your life has happened!” she wailed, and instantly fell again into unseemly convulsions.

Whatever the jest might be, it did not appeal to the chauffeur, who withdrew in silence to his motor, coldly wiping the vicarious duckweed from his knees with a silk pocket-handkerchief. Still less did it appeal to me. Any fair-minded person will admit that I had cause to be excessively angry with Philippa. That a grown woman, the mother of two children, should mistake the bellow of a bullock for the note of a horn was bad enough; but that when, having caused a serious accident by not knowing her right hand from her left, and having, by further insanities, driven one valuable horse adrift into the country, probably broken the back of another, laid the



"I WILL WALK—I SHOULD REALLY PREFER IT"

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seeds of heart disease in her husband from shock and over-exertion, and of rheumatic fever in herself; when, I repeat, after all these outrages, she should sit in a soaking heap by the roadside, laughing like a maniac, I feel that the sympathy of the public will not be withheld from me.

The mystery of Mr. Butler-Knox's appearance in the motor-car passed by me, like a feather in a whirlwind; I strode without a word into the yellow flood in which the mare was lying, and got hold of her reins with the handle of my crop; I might as well have tried to draw out Behemoth with a hook. Her hind-quarters were well fixed in the hidden ditch, she made not the slightest effort to stir, and continued to recline, contentedly, not to say defiantly.

"That's a great sign of fine weather," said a voice behind me in affable comment, "when a horse will lie down in wather that way."

I turned upon my consoler, and saw a young countryman with a fur-lined coat hanging upon his arm.

"I got this thrown in the bohieren above," he said, "the other gentleman, that's follying the bay horse, stripped it off him, and God knows it's itself that's weighty!"

"My dear Major!" began Looshy, addressing me agitatedly from the bank, as a hen might

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address a refractory duckling, "there has been a most unfortunate mistake."

"There has! There ha! It's all Flurry's



"THAT'S A GREAT SIGN OF FINE WEATHER WHEN A HORSE WILL
LIE DOWN IN WATER THAT WAY"

fault!" gasped Philippa, staggering towards me like a drunken woman.

"I fear the General is terribly annoyed," continued Looshy, wiping his grey beard and mopping his collar to remove the muddy imprint of

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Philippa's arm; “he rushed into Garden Mount in search of his horses when he found they were not at the meet nor at the station—he left Lady Porteous with my sisters and took me to identify you; I mentioned your name, but he did not seem to grasp it—indeed his language was—er—was such that I thought it unwise to press the point.”

I dropped the reins and began, slowly, to wade out of the pool.

“I understand he has but just paid £300 for these horses—it was an unpardonable mistake of Flurry's,” went on Looshy, “he found the General's horses at the station and thought that they were Flavin's.”

“Dear Flurry!” sobbed Philippa, shamelessly, feeling against me and clutching my arm.

“Begor' he have the horse!” said the young countryman, looking up the hill.

A stout figure in a red coat and tall hat was approaching by way of the bohieren, followed by a man leading a limping horse.

“I think,” said Looshy nervously, “that Mrs. Yeates had better have my seat in the motor-car and hurry home. I will walk—I should really prefer it. The General will be quite happy now that he has found his horses and his old friend.”

The chauffeur, plying a long-necked oil-can; smiled sardonically.