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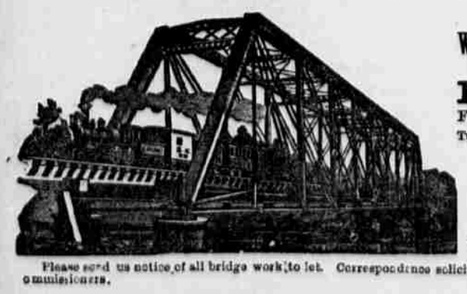

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CHAPTER XII—CONTINUED.

They saw he was in earnest, so called their coachman to assist in the search for a steed. The coachman, in his striped linen waistcoat, joined the group and waited his masters' commands.

"William," said Horace, "Mr. Carruthers is thinking of buying a horse. Do you know of anything for sale round about here?"

"Do I know of a hoss, sir," said William, reflectively.

"Something quiet," put in Herbert, who was solicitous for Frank's safety.

"A hoss—something quiet—" repeated William. "To drive or ride, sir?" he added, turning to Frank.

"To ride."

"A hoss—quiet—to ride. There's Mr. Bulger's cob, sir. His man said he were for sale."

Frank did not like the sound of Mr. Bulger's cob. Herbert and Horace thought it was just the thing.

"Well up to your weight, sir, after Mr. Bulger," said William. "Such a shoulder, such quarters, such a barrel he've got, he have!"

"Who—Mr. Bulger?"

"No, sir—the cob."

"Ah, yes—the cob. But there are barrels and barrels. I want one with an ordinary capacity—I shouldn't care for the great tun of Heidelberg."

"Certainly not, sir," said William, touching his forelock.

"Cobs' backs are so broad," continued Frank, musingly, "it seems contemptible to bestride them. The temptation to chalk one's feet and ride standing would be irresistible. Would you find it so, Horace?"

"Well—no. I don't think I should, answered Horace, with that polite gravity which always amused his cousin.

"Mr. Bulger won't do, William," said Frank. "Try elsewhere."

William scratched his nose, and for a minute was in earnest thought.

"There's Captain Taylor's mare," he said, with a timid glance at his masters. "She as ran off with the stanhope and smashed it. But they *say* she goes quiet enough with a saddle on her back—leastwise if a man knows how to ride.

"We won't deprive Captain Taylor of his treasure," said Frank. "Think again."

"Will you go to Barker's repository, sir?" asked William, who had come to an end of his equine researches.

"Where is it?"

"In Blacktown," said Herbert. "We will go with you."

"No, thank you. I will make my own unbiassed choice. No one shall be blamed if I come to grief—except my doctor. Is Barker an honest man?"

"He is supposed to be so," said Horace.

"He's as honest as hoss-dealers is made," said William.

"Then I'll trust my neck in Barker's hands. I'll walk into Blacktown at once."

He went indoors and put himself into town-going trim. The brothers saw him depart with some misgivings, but as he once more declined the offer of their assistance, politeness would not let them press it.

At the lodge gate he found William waiting for him. "If I may make so bold, sir, you say to Mr. Barker that I sent you to him—William Giles, sir, Mr. Talbert's man. Barker ain't so bad as some, sir; and when he knows I shall have something to do with the hoss, may be he won't try and best you."

"Thank you, William, for your disinterested kindness," said Frank, gravely.

"Don't mention it, sir," said William, with politeness perhaps caught from his masters. "William Giles, Mr. Talbert's man—you'll remember, sir?"

"Certainly, William. Is there anything else I ought to say to Mr. Barker?"

"No, sir, not as I know of."

"Shall I tell him you deserve five or ten per cent. on the transaction?"

William's face was a study. He looked at Frank in a startled way, then glanced guiltily round to see that his masters were out of earshot. Then he looked at Frank again, and, catching the humorous twinkle in his eye, chuckled convulsively.

"Oh, Mr. Carruthers, you know the inside of the ropes, you do. If you ride as well as you reckon up you might 'a bought Captain Taylor's mare. Don't think Barker will take you in much, sir."

"Perhaps not; but I'd better make sure. Fetch me a nice clean straw, William." William obeyed without comment. His respect for Mr. Carruthers had greatly increased. Frank took the straw, and breaking off a piece with the empty ear attached, stuck it between his teeth. "Is that the right length, William?" he asked.

"Bit too long, sir; but you'll have chewed him down proper by the time you get to Barker's."

"All right." Frank passed out through the gate and left William opining that he "was the rummest gent as ever came to the house; one never knew if he was in earnest or chaffing-like."

Frank soon got rid of the straw which he had mounted for William's mystification, and reached the repository without any signs of horsiness about him. He had an interview with the tight legged proprietor, and for the next hour stood watching horses white, horses black, horses piebald, horses brown, bay and chestnut, trotted up and down the long tan-covered way. He heard Mr. Barker eulogise each particular animal.

He heard Mr. Barker eulogize each particular animal.

He listened because he liked to study character—human, not equine—and was fascinated by a desire to know what Barker would find to say when each fresh screw appeared on the scene. But his silence as to his own opinion concerning the merits or demerits of each animal, and the calm contemplative way in which, smoking his cigarette the while, he watched the horses pass and repass drove Mr. Barker almost to distraction. That worthy didn't know whether he had to deal with a flat or with a wiser man than himself. All business men are aware that this places one at a terrible disadvantage in a negotiation. It is annoying to find you have treated a clever man like a fool; but doubly so to find you have treated a fool like a clever man. That is one of the risks of business.

Mr. Barker was the more uncertain because he tried Frank both ways. On each of the first fifteen horses he showed him he placed a ridiculously high price—then resolving that his customer was a knowing one, he veered round and asked a very low figure for the next score of animals paraded. Yet Frank made no sign, and Barker was quite puzzled. He even grew suspicious and glanced at Frank's legs, thinking it just possible that their owner was a horse-dealer from another town, who had come dressed like a swell, to try and take in the redoubtable Barker himself. But Mr. Carruthers' lower limbs were as straight and well-formed as if he had never in his life-time crossed a horse. So Barker was beaten, and breathed his equivalent to a sigh as the last of his five-and-thirty screws was led back without having drawn a word of condemnation or commendation from his visitor.

"Well, you're a hard one to please, sir," he said grimly.

"I wanted to see some horses," said Frank listlessly—flipping the ash from his cigarette.

"Oh!" said Barker, with a deep-drawn breath. "You—wanted to—see—some hosses, did you?" It was only in moments of great excitement that Mr. Barker forgot himself enough to call his wares "hosses." He was a well-to-do man with daughters who played the piano. He knew that the proper pronunciation of the word raised him above the level of grooms and stable boys. He had acquired it with great difficulty, so its retention was precious.

"Yes, I did," said Frank, pleasantly; "but never mind. Sorry to have given you so much trouble. May I give your boy half a crown?"

"Now," said Barker, cocking his head on one side and speaking in a confidential whisper, "without saying a word about the horses I have shown you, tell me what's your idea of a horse—his value, I mean."

"I'm not particular."

"Oh, you're not particular. Jim, bring out the chestnut."

"No," said Frank, "never mind. I don't want to see him. I want you to choose a horse for me."

No doubt horse dealers are as honest as other dealers, but Mr. Barker's astonishment was indescribable. It might have been that of a convicted forger given a blank check and asked to take care of it, or that of a wolf to whom a sheep brought its lamb and begged that it might be looked after for a while, or that of a cat asked to stand sentinel over the cream.

Yet he was equal to the occasion. "Want me to choose a horse? Can't do better, sir. Whenever the duke or the marquis wants a horse in a hurry they write to me to send them one. S'pose if I can suit the duke I can suit you."

"I don't know. I'm fidgety. You can try."

Still Barker could not feel certain whether he was dealing with a sharp man or a fool.

"There's the chestnut I spoke of. He's the very thing for you."

"How much?" said Frank laconically.

"One hundred and twenty guineas," said Mr. Barker with that emphasis on the last word which says that the vendor is proof against the same number of pounds.

"Look here," said Frank, sharply, "you find me a horse for six weeks. I don't care if it's black, brown, or blue. Name the lowest price you mean to take, and if the price suits me and I buy it and don't find any particular vices I'll give you twenty per cent. more, and the horse to resell for me at the end of that time. Now then, is it the chestnut?"

Barker made a long pause; then, with an assumption of candor, said: "No, sir, after that it isn't the chestnut. You come here; I'll show you what it is."

Mr. Carruthers never told any one the exact price his horse cost him, so we will not force ourselves into his secrets. He left the repository, having settled that if a veterinary surgeon's certificate could accompany the dark bay horse just shown him it might be sent to Hazlewood House that afternoon. Then he bade Mr. Barker good-day and strolled back to Oakbury.

Just before he reached Hazlewood House he was overtaken by Beatrice and her cavalier. They reined up and spoke a few words. Young Purton was in high good humor, and delightfully condescending.

"Pity you don't ride, Mr. Carruthers," he said.

"It is a pity. Will you coach me? Revenge is sweet, you know."

"I'll bring my father's old horse round some morning and give you a lesson. I dare say you would soon pick it up."

"You were always a kind-hearted boy," said Frank gratefully. "Miss Clauson, do you think I could learn to ride?"

"You are too lazy, I fear."

"Yes; I suspect I am. I won't trouble you, Purton. Good-by."

The horses trotted on, and Frank sauntered back to Hazlewood House smiling placidly.

In the afternoon, to Miss Clauson's supreme astonishment, the new purchase arrived. She and Frank were in the garden at the time. The bay was placed in Mr. Giles' charge, and that personage, after inspecting it, rejoiced for two reasons: the first, that Mr. Barker had not "bested" Frank; the second, that even if Frank had "bested" Mr. Barker, the horse must have cost a pot of money, and at whatever figure his, William's, introduction might be assessed, the backsheesh must be worth having.

"I thought you didn't care for riding," said Beatrice.

"I don't—much."

"Then why buy such a horse?"

"Because I should like to ride with you."

He gave her one of his quick glances. Beatrice turned away, ashamed to feel that she was blushing. She was very cold and reserved during the evening, yet the audacious young man chose to take it for granted that she would accept him for her cavalier *vice* Purton superseded.

Horace having duly admired the horse and shaken his head at the palpable extravagance, made a series of elaborate rule-of-three calculations, and determined, if three horses ate a certain quantity of certain things in a certain time, how a fourth horse would affect the quantity, the things and the time.

Young Purton was too shy to offer his escort on the next morning—he feared lest he might wear out his welcome. So his ride was a solitary one. Judge his utter disgust when, quietly trotting along, he encountered Miss Clauson and Mr. Carruthers, the latter mounted on a steed the like to which Mr. Purton had for years longed to own, and moreover, riding as if he knew all about it.

This sight was very bad for young Purton. Had he been poetical he might have compared himself to the eagle struck down by its own quill. As it was, he muttered, "A jolly sell, by Jove!" and after the unavoidable greetings and Mr. Carruthers' inevitable bit of badinage, rode home in a disconsolate state.

CHAPTER XIII.

GASTRONOMIC AND EROTIC.

There were delicious rides together.

The long vacation was running down to the lees. August had passed into September, and September had softly stolen away. The scarlet geraniums, calceolarias, and other bedding-out plants which had all the summer brightened the gardens of Hazlewood House, were beginning to show signs of senile decay. The under gardener found it no light work to keep the paths free from fallen leaves. Yet Frank Carruthers still lingered at Oakbury enjoying his cousins' hospitality. Having assumed the post of mental physician to Miss Clauson, he was no doubt reluctant to resign it until he had effected a radical cure.

Besides, the days slipped by happily enough. There were drives through the green elm-shaded Westshire lanes, which lead to hills from the summits of which fine views of the country and the distant sea are obtainable. As Horace drove, and as Herbert invariably occupied the box seat, Frank and Beatrice had the body of the large wagonette to themselves, an arrangement which one of the two found far from unpleasant.

There were the delicious rides together. Young Purton left the place in disgust, and joined an eleven of old Cragtonians who were wandering about England playing matches—a far better and more healthy occupation for a boy than hopeless lovemaking. The bay horse turned out such a beauty that Frank broke his word to Mr. Barker and did not resell it.

Then there was company. Pleasant people who visited Hazlewood House, and pleasant people whom Hazlewood House visited. Frank was such a success with these that Horace and Herbert were quite proud of their cousin.

And there were walks with Miss Clauson; and above all those delightful dreamy hours when they sat under the sycamore, and in the cool shade talked of everything in the world, the heavens above, or the waters under it. Or it may be Miss Clauson was silent, and Frank, watching every line of her beautiful face, knew that the disease which he himself had taken was becoming chronic and incurable.

Altogether, it will be understood that if Mr. Carruthers failed in curing Miss Clauson's complaint it would be from no want of opportunity, or from being debarred making an exhaustive study of the patient.

In plain English, Frank had fallen in love with Beatrice, in that good old-fashioned way, almost at first sight. He had gone down before her gray eyes as surely as had the susceptible Sylvanus. Would he fare any better?

About this date he often asked himself the above question; for he had by now made the curate's acquaintance, and learned that he was a rejected man.

He did not learn it from Beatrice, who, like every true woman, wished to hide, and, if possible, forget the story of a man's discomfiture. He did not learn it from Horace or Herbert. Although they were as fond of gossip as men always are, wild horses would not have rent such a confidence from their kindly hearts. Sylvanus himself was Frank's informant.

The energetic, bustling curate had returned to Oakbury. During his absence the Talberts had requested Beatrice to decide as to the terms of intimacy which should for the future exist between Hazlewood House and Mr. Mordle. Beatrice quietly told her uncles that it was her particular wish that the Rev. Sylvanus should be received on exactly the same footing as heretofore. This decision gave the Talberts great satisfaction. They were unable to see how parochial affairs could go on unless they worked hand in hand with the curate. So when Sylvanus returned he was informed that he might tricycle himself up to Hazlewood House as often as he chose. Which, as he was resolved to case-harden his heart by accustoming himself to seeing Miss Clauson in the light of nothing more than a friend, was very often.

So Mr. Carruthers and the curate met frequently. They recognized each other's good points, and were soon on terms of friendship such as fiction, at least, seldom allows to exist between rivals. Rivals is perhaps the wrong word, for, if any stray fragment of hope clung to Mr. Mordle's portmanteau and so returned with him to England, it was swept away for ever and ever as soon as the owner saw Frank and Beatrice together. He recognized destiny, and bowed to it as a well-bred man should.

It was no doubt the desire to prove incontestably to himself that he was cured, that made him, in a moment of brisk confidence, tell Frank how he had fared. The manner in which the communication was made showed Frank that his own secret was no secret from Mordle. If he did not meet confidence by confidence he made no attempt at deception. He looked at Mordle with a curious smile.

"You scarcely expect me to say I am sorry?" he asked.

"No. Want no sympathy. Only want you to be sure that when the time comes to congratulate you I can do so with all my heart."

"Ah!" said Frank, smiling. "Noble—very noble. When the time comes," he added, softly. Thereupon he fell into a train of thought—a train which ran upon a single line and always took him to one particular station.

This, then, is how matters stood at the beginning of October. Mr. Carruthers having completed his diagnosis, not perhaps to his entire satisfaction, felt that the moment was drawing near when he must make the supreme effort to expel forever that morbidness which he believed to have intrenched itself in Miss Clauson's system. Still he was bound to confess what many other practitioners ought to confess, that he was working in the dark. He was about to try a kill or cure remedy, the desperate nature of which would, strangely enough, act not upon the patient but upon him who administered it. No wonder, with so little to guide him, he hesitated and postponed.

At this juncture the Talberts gave a dinner-party—a man's dinner-party. The following were the blessed recipients of invitations: Lord Kelston, who was staying for a few days at his place; Sir John Williams, of Almondsthorpe; Colonel White, the officer commanding the regiment at the neighboring barracks; Mr. Fallon, the polished Royal Academician who was sojourning at the village inn, and making outdoor sketches of autumnal foliage, and Mr. Fletcher, of the Hollows, the largest landowner, save Lord Kelston, in the county. These, with Frank and the hosts, made a party of eight—the number which, according to an axiom of the Talberts, should never be exceeded.

From the above names and descriptions it will be rightly guessed that the party was distinguished, well-selected and well-balanced. Selection and balance were matters upon which the brothers prided themselves as much if not more than they did upon the refinement of the dinner itself. In this particular party, small as it was, culture, learning, art, arms, landed interest and hereditary sway were properly personified. It was, indeed, a representative gathering after the Talberts' own hearts.

But two days before it took place an event happened which threatened it ill. Lord Kelston wrote Horace one of those pleasant, familiar letters which, coming from a lord, are always delightful. He said he should take the liberty of bringing his friend Mr. Simmons with him. As this would raise the number to nine it necessitated asking another man in order to equalize the sides of the table.

Then came consultation high and earnest. Whom could they ask upon so short a notice worthy of forming one of such a distinguished party? Each of the Talberts would have felt insulted had he been asked by a friend to stop a gap; so, following the golden rule they shrank from the task before them. Still, they could not have four on one side of the table and three on the other.

Frank listened to their solemn deliberations for some time, then tried to help them out of the difficulty. "Leave me out," he said. "Beatrice and I"—he spoke of her sometimes now as Beatrice—"will dine together in the nursery or the housekeeper's room. Whittaker can bring the dishes straight from your table. It will be delightful."

"My dear Frank!" This joint exclamation showed the utter futility of his suggestion.

"Why not ask the rector? I thought it was the duty of a country clergyman to meet emergencies like this."

"He talks about nothing but his fishing," said Horace mournfully.

"Fishing for what? For men?"

"No; salmon and trout," answered Horace, as usual taking the matter prosaically.

"Why not Mordle? He is capital company."

"Ha-hum," said Horace, glancing at Herbert. "This is scarcely a curate's party."

"No, scarcely," said Herbert, shaking his head.

At last they decided to ask a Mr. Turner, but the decision was arrived at with misgivings; for Mr. Turner was in trade. He was, however, a merchant prince—even a merchant emperor—and, as Horace expressed it, was a member of the aristocracy of wealth. They felt that Mr. Turner might be asked at short notice, and would not be offended when he heard it was to meet Lord Kelston. This is one of the many advantages of entertaining lords.

Nevertheless they were conscience stricken at having asked any one to stop a gap, so made amends by arranging their guests so that Mr. Turner should sit on Herbert's left hand; Horace's supporters being Lord Kelston and his friend, Mr. Simmons. The latter was a man of middle age, with dark eyes and exquisitely chiseled aquiline features, and wearing an air of refinement that at once commended him to Horace.

The dinner began propitiously, and progressed faultlessly. The table, over the decoration of which the brothers had spent much time and more thought, was a perfect picture. When their guests were only men the Talberts were extra particular. The lack of the refining element, the presence of woman, had to be compensated by an ultra fastidiousness of detail. Even Frank, who had been behind the scenes, marveled at the effect of his hosts' hospitable and artistic exertions. But, all the same, he pitied them as we should all pity a host who is certain to be rendered wretched by a tureen of burnt soup or a bottle of corked wine.

Horace talked gravely and pleasantly to the right and to the left. Herbert was compelled to attend almost entirely to Mr. Turner, who had a booming voice, which he insisted upon making heard. Frank, who was next to the artist, found the dinner not so dull as he had feared it would be.

In the course of conversation Horace learnt that Lord Kelston's friend was Mr. Simmons, the noted barrister, who had so suddenly sprung into eminence. Mr. Simmons was a Jew of gentle birth and education, and Horace was very fond of high-class Jews. So the two men got on admirably. Frank also knew who Mr. Simmons was. Herbert did not.

All went on as well as the Talberts could have wished until the claret was placed on the table. Then an awful thing occurred—a *contretemps*, which to this day is a sore subject with Horace and Herbert. It all arose from inviting the stop-gap. Listen.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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