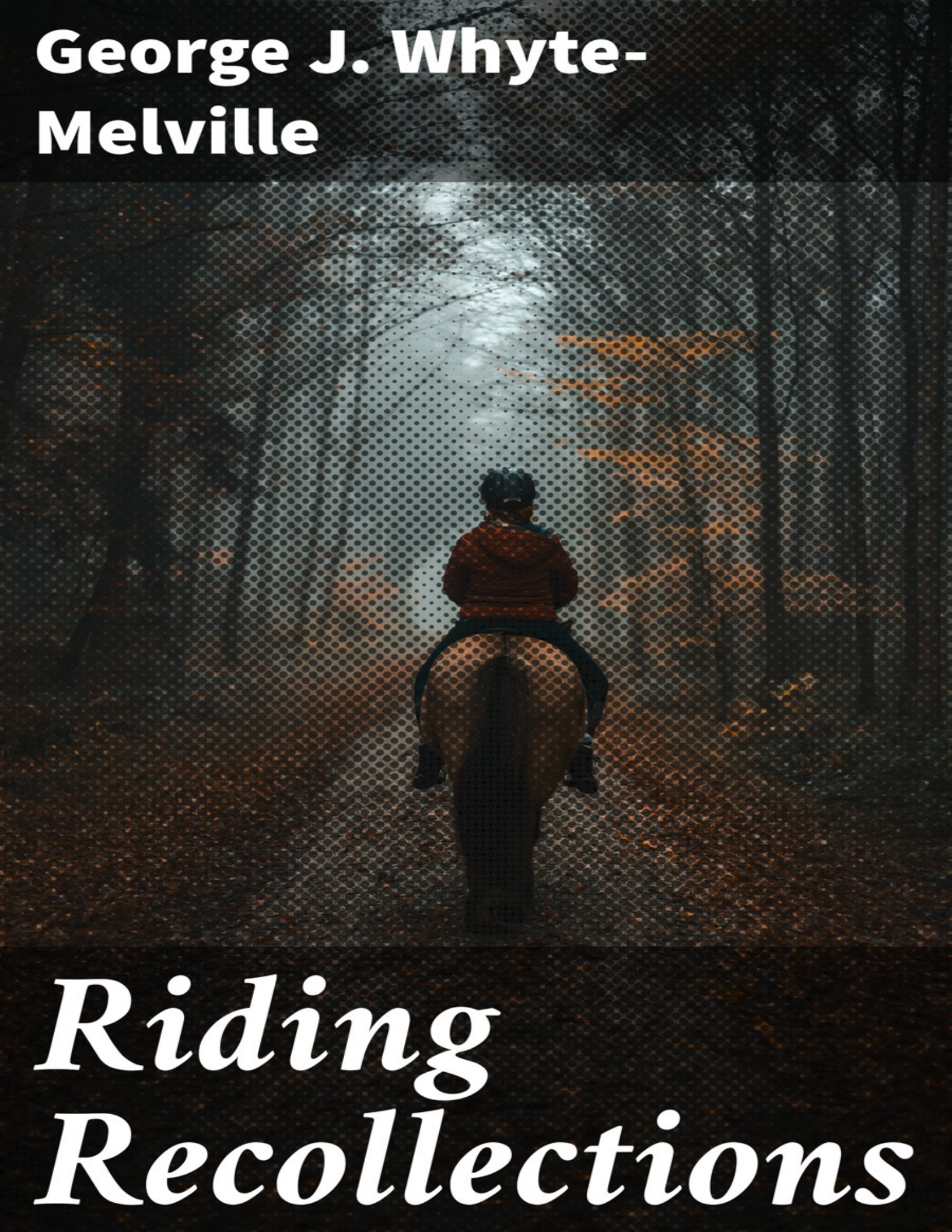
George J. Whyte-Melville



Riding Recollections

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I. — KINDNESS.

Table of Contents

In our dealings with the brute creation, it cannot be too much insisted on that mutual confidence is only to be established by mutual good-will. The perceptions of the beast must be raised to their highest standard, and there is no such enemy to intelligence as fear. Reward should be as the daily food it eats, punishment as the medicine administered on rare occasions, unwillingly, and but when absolute necessity demands. The horse is of all domestic animals most susceptible to anything like discomfort or ill-usage. Its nervous system, sensitive and highly strung, is capable of daring effort under excitement, but collapses utterly in any new and strange situation, as if paralysed by apprehensions of the unknown. Can anything be more helpless than the young horse you take out hunting the first time he finds himself in a bog? Compare his frantic struggles and sudden prostration with the discreet conduct of an Exmoor pony in the same predicament. The one terrified by unaccustomed danger, and relying instinctively on the speed that seems his natural refuge, plunges wildly forward, sinks to his girths, his shoulders, finally unseats his rider, and settles down, without further exertion, in the stupid apathy of despair.

The other, born and bred in the wild west country, picking its scanty keep from a foal off the treacherous surface of a Devonshire moor, either refuses altogether to trust the quagmire, or shortens its stride, collects its energies, chooses the soundest tufts that afford foothold,

and failing these, flaps its way out on its side, to scramble into safety with scarce a quiver or a snort. It has been there before! Herein lies the whole secret. Some day your young one will be as calm, as wise, as tractable. Alas! that when his discretion has reached its prime his legs begin to fail!

Therefore cultivate his intellect—I use the word advisedly—even before you enter on the development of his physical powers. Nature and good keep will provide for these, but to make him man's willing friend and partner you must give him the advantage of man's company and man's instruction. From the day you slip a halter over his ears he should be encouraged to look to you, like a child, for all his little wants and simple pleasures. He should come cantering up from the farthest corner of the paddock when he hears your voice, should ask to have his nose rubbed, his head stroked, his neck patted, with those honest, pleading looks which make the confidence of a dumb creature so touching; and before a roller has been put on his back, or a snaffle in his mouth he should be convinced that everything you do to him is right, and that it is impossible for _you_, his best friend, to cause him the least uneasiness or harm.

I once owned a mare that would push her nose into my pockets in search of bread and sugar, would lick my face and hands like a dog, or suffer me to cling to any part of her limbs and body while she stood perfectly motionless. On one occasion, when I hung in the stirrup after a fall, she never stirred on rising, till by a succession of laborious and ludicrous efforts I could swing myself back into the saddle, with my foot still fast, though hounds were running hard and she loved hunting dearly in her heart. As a friend remarked

at the time, "The little mare seems very fond of you, or there might have been a bother!"

Now this affection was but the result of petting, sugar, kind and encouraging words, particularly at her fences, and a rigid abstinence from abuse of the bridle and the spur. I shall presently have something to say about both these instruments, but I may remark in the mean time that many more horses than people suppose will cross a country safely with a loose rein. The late Colonel William Greenwood, one of the finest riders in the world, might be seen out hunting with a single curb-bridle, such as is called "a hard-and-sharp" and commonly used only in the streets of London or the Park. The present Lord Spencer, of whom it is enough to say that he hunts one pack of his own hounds in Northamptonshire, and is always _in the same field with them_, never seems to have a horse pull, or until it is tired, even lean on his hand. I have watched both these gentlemen intently to learn their secret, but I regret to say without avail.

This, however, is not the present question. Long before a bridle is fitted on the colt's head he should have so thoroughly learned the habit of obedience, that it has become a second instinct, and to do what is required of him seems as natural as to eat when he is hungry or lie down when he wants to sleep.

This result is to be attained in a longer or shorter time, according to different tempers, but the first and most important step is surely gained when we have succeeded in winning that affection which nurses and children call "cupboard love." Like many amiable characters on two legs,

the quadruped is shy of acquaintances but genial with friends. Make him understand that you are his best and wisest, that all you do conduces to his comfort and happiness, be careful at first not to deceive or disappoint him, and you will find his reasoning powers quite strong enough to grasp the relations of cause and effect.

In a month or six weeks he will come to your call, and follow you about like a dog. Soon he will let you lift his feet, handle him all over, pull his tail, and lean your weight on any part of his body, without alarm or resentment. When thoroughly familiar with your face, your voice, and the motions of your limbs, you may back him with perfect safety, and he will move as soberly under you in any place to which he is accustomed as the oldest horse in your stable.

Do not forget, however, that education should be gradual as moon-rise, perceptible, not in progress, but result. I recollect one morning riding to covert with a Dorsetshire farmer whose horses, bred at home, were celebrated as timber-jumpers even in that most timber-jumping of countries. I asked him how they arrived at this proficiency without breaking somebody's neck, and he imparted his plan.

The colt, it seemed, ran loose from a yearling in the owner's straw-yard, but fed in a lofty out-house, across the door of which was placed a single tough ashen bar that would not break under a bullock. This was laid on the ground till the young one had grown thoroughly accustomed to it, and then raised very gradually to such a height as was less trouble to jump than clamber over. At three feet the

two-year old thought no more of the obstacle than a girl does of her skipping-rope. After that, it was heightened an inch every week, and it needs no ready reckoner to tell us at the end of six months how formidable a leap the animal voluntarily negotiated three times a day. "It's never put no higher," continued my informant; "I'm an old man now, and that's good enough for me."

I should think it was! A horse that can leap five feet of timber in cold blood is not likely to be pounded, while still unblown, in any part of England I have yet seen.

The Dorsetshire farmer's plan of teaching horses to jump timber.

Now the Dorsetshire farmer's system was sound, and based on common sense. As you bend the twig so grows the tree, therefore prepare your pupil from the first for the purpose you intend him to serve hereafter. An Arab foal, as

we know, brought up in the Bedouin's tent, like another child, among the Bedouin's children, is the most docile of its kind, and I cannot but think that if he lived in our houses and we took as much notice of him, the horse would prove quite as sagacious as the dog; but we must never forget that to harshness or intimidation he is the most sensitive of creatures, and even when in fault should be rather cautioned than reproved.

An ounce of illustration is worth a pound of argument, and the following example best conveys the spirit in which our brave and willing servant should be treated by his lord.

Many years ago, when he hunted the Cottesmore country, Sir Richard Sutton's hounds had been running hard from Glooston Wood along the valley under Cranehoe by Slawston to Holt. After thirty minutes or so over this beautiful, but exceedingly stiff line, their heads went up, and they came to a check, possibly from their own dash and eagerness, certainly, at that pace and amongst those fences, _not from being overridden_.

"Turn 'em, Ben!" exclaimed Sir Richard, with a dirty coat, and Hotspur in a lather, but determined not to lose a moment in getting after his fox. "Yes, Sir Richard," answered Morgan, running his horse without a moment's hesitation at a flight of double-posts and rails, with a ditch in the middle and one on each side! The good grey, having gone in front from the find, was perhaps a little blown, and dropping his hind legs in the farthest ditch, rolled very handsomely into the next field. "It's not _your_ fault, old man!" said Ben, patting his favourite on the neck as they rose together in mutual good-will, adding in the same breath, while he leapt

to the saddle, and Tranby acknowledged the line—"Forrard on, Sir Richard!—Hoic together, hoic! You'll have him directly, my beauties! He's a Quorn fox, and he'll do you good!"

I had always considered Ben Morgan an unusually fine rider. For the first time, I began to understand _why_ his horse never failed to carry him so willingly and so well.

I do not remember whether Dick Webster was out with us that day, but I am sure if he was he has not forgotten it, and I mention him as another example of daring horsemanship combined with an imperturbable good humour, almost verging on buffoonery, which seems to accept the most dangerous falls as enhancing the fun afforded by a delightful game of romps. His annual exhibition of prowess at the Islington horse show has made his shrewd comical face so familiar to the public that his name, without farther comment, is enough to recall the presence and bearing of the man—his quips and cranks and merry jests, his shrill whistle and ready smile, his strong seat and light, skilful hand, but above all his untiring patience and unfailing kindness with the most restive and refractory of pupils. Dick, like many other good fellows, is not so young as he was, but he will probably be an unequalled rider at eighty, and I am quite sure that if he lives to the age of Methuselah, the extreme of senile irritability will never provoke him to lose his temper with a horse.

Presence of mind under difficulties is the one quality that in riding makes all the difference between getting off with a scramble and going down with a fall. If unvaried kindness has taught your horse to place confidence in his rider, he

will have his wits about him, and provide for _your_ safety as for his own. When left to himself, and not flurried by the fear of punishment, even an inexperienced hunter makes surprising efforts to keep on his legs, and it is not too much to say that while his wind lasts, the veteran is almost as difficult to catch tripping as a cat. I have known horses drop their hind legs on places scarcely affording foothold for a goat, but in all such feats they have been ridden by a lover of the animal, who trusts it implicitly, and rules by kindness rather than fear.

I will not deny that there are cases in which the _suaviter in modo_ must be supplemented by the _fortiter in re_. Still the insubordination of ignorance is never wholly inexcusable, and great discretion must be used in repressing even the most violent of outbreaks. If severity is absolutely required, be sure to temper justice with mercy, remembering that, in brute natures at least, the more you spare the rod, the less you spoil the child!

CHAPTER II. — COERCION.

Table of Contents

I recollect, in years gone by, an old and pleasant comrade used to declare that "to be in a rage was almost as contemptible as to be in a funk!" Doubtless the passion of anger, though less despised than that of fear, is so far derogatory to the dignity of man that it deprives him temporarily of reason, the very quality which confers sovereignty over the brute. When a magician is without his talisman the slaves he used to rule will do his bidding no longer. When we say of such a one that he has "lost his head," we no more expect him to steer a judicious course than a ship that has lost her rudder. Both are the prey of circumstances—at the mercy of winds and waves. Therefore, however hard you are compelled to hit, be sure to keep your temper. Strike in perfect good-humour, and in the right place. Many people cannot encounter resistance of any kind without anger, even a difference of opinion in conversation is sufficient to rouse their bile; but such are seldom winners in argument or in fight. Let them also leave education alone. Nature never meant them to teach the young idea how to shoot or hunt, or do anything else!

It is the cold-blooded and sagacious wrestler who takes the prize, the calm and imperturbable player who wins the game. In all struggles for supremacy, excitement only produces flurry, and flurry means defeat.

Who ever saw Mr. Anstruther Thompson in a passion, though, like every other huntsman and master of hounds, he must often have found his temper sorely tried? And yet,

when punishment is absolutely necessary to extort obedience from the equine rebel, no man can administer it more severely, either from the saddle or the box. But whether double-thonging a restive wheeler, or "having it out" with a resolute buck-jumper, the operation is performed with the same pleasant smile, and when one of the adversaries preserves calmness and common sense, the fight is soon over, and the victory gained.

It is not every man, however, who possesses this gentleman's iron nerve and powerful frame. For most of us, it is well to remember, before engaging in such contests, that defeat is absolute ruin. We must be prepared to fight it out to the bitter end, and if we are not sure of our own firmness, either mental or physical it is well to temporise, and try to win by diplomacy the terms we dare not wrest by force. If the latter alternative must needs be accepted, in this as in most stand-up fights, it will be found that the first blow is half the battle. The rider should take his horse short by the head and let him have two or three stingers with a cutting whip—not more—particularly, if on a thorough-bred one, as low down the flanks as can be reached, administered without warning, and in quick succession, sitting back as prepared for the plunge into the air that will inevitably follow, keeping his horse's head well-up the while to prevent buck-jumping. He should then turn the animal round and round half-a-dozen times, till it is confused, and start it off at speed in any direction where there is room for a gallop. Blown, startled, and intimidated, he will in all probability find his pupil perfectly amenable to reason when he pulls up, and should then coax and soothe him into an

equable frame of mind once more. Such, however, is an extreme case. It is far better to avoid the _ultima ratio_. In equitation, as in matrimony, there should never arise "_the first quarrel_." Obedience, in horses, ought to be a matter of habit, contracted so imperceptibly that its acquirement can scarcely be called a lesson.

This is why the hunting-field is such a good school for leaping. Horses of every kind are prompted by some unaccountable impulse to follow a pack of hounds, and the beginner finds himself voluntarily performing feats of activity and daring, in accordance with the will of his rider, which no coercion from the latter would have induced him to attempt. Flushed with success, and if fortunate enough to escape a fall, confident in his lately-discovered powers, he finds a new pleasure in their exercise, and, most precious of qualities in a hunter, grows "fond of jumping."

The same result is to be attained at home, but is far more gradual, requiring the exercise of much care, patience, and perseverance.

Nevertheless, when we consider the inconvenience created by the vagaries of young horses in the hunting field, to hounds, sportsmen, ladies, pedestrians, and their own riders, we must admit that the Irish system is best, and that a colt, to use the favourite expression, should have been trained into "an accomplished lepper," before he is asked to carry a sportsman through a run.

Mr. Rarey, no doubt, thoroughly understood the nature of the animal with which he had to deal. His system was but a convenient application of our principle, viz., Judicious coercion, so employed that the brute obeys the man without

knowing why. When forced to the earth, and compelled to remain there, apparently by the mere volition of a creature so much smaller and feebler than itself, it seemed to acknowledge some mysterious and over-mastering power such as the disciples of Mesmer profess to exercise on their believers, and this, in truth, is the whole secret of man's dominion over the beasts of the field. It is founded, to speak practically, on reason in both, the larger share being apportioned to the weaker frame. If by terror or resentment, the result of injudicious severity, that reason becomes obscured in the stronger animal, we have a maniac to deal with, possessing the strength of ten human beings, over whom we have lost our only shadow of control! Where is our supremacy then? It existed but in the imagination of the beast, for which, so long as it never tried to break the bond, a silken thread was as strong as an iron chain.

Perhaps this is the theory of all government, but with the conduct and coercion of mankind we have at present nothing to do.

There is a peculiarity in horses that none who spend much time in the saddle can have failed to notice. It is the readiness with which all accommodate themselves to a rider who succeeds in subjugating _one_. Some men possess a faculty, impossible to explain, of establishing a good understanding from the moment they place themselves in the saddle. It can hardly be called hand, for I have seen consummate horsemen, notably Mr. Lovell, of the New Forest, who have lost an arm; nor seat, or how could Colonel Fraser, late of the 11th Hussars, be one of the best heavy-weights over such a country as Meath, with a broken and

contracted thigh? Certainly not nerve, for there are few fields too scanty to furnish examples of men who possess every quality of horsemanship except daring. What is it then? I cannot tell, but if you are fortunate enough to possess it, whether you weigh ten stone or twenty, you will be able to mount yourself fifty pounds cheaper than anybody else in the market! Be it an impulse of nature, or a result of education, there is a tendency in every horse to make vigorous efforts at the shortest notice in obedience to the inclination of a rider's body or the pressure of his limbs. Such indications are of the utmost service in an emergency, and to offer them at the happy moment is a crucial test of horsemanship. Thus races are "snatched out of the fire," as it is termed, "by riding," and this is the quality that, where judgment, patience, and knowledge of pace are equal, renders one jockey superior to the rest. It enables a proficient also to clear those large fences that, in our grazing districts especially, appear impracticable to the uninitiated, as if the horse borrowed muscular energy, no less than mental courage, from the resolution of his rider. On the racecourse and in the hunting field, Custance, the well-known jockey, possesses this quality in the highest degree. The same determined strength in the saddle, that had done him such good service amongst the bullfinches and "oxers" of his native Rutland, applied at the happy moment, secured on a great occasion his celebrated victory with King Lud.

There are two kinds of hunters that require coercion in following hounds, and he is indeed a master of his art who feels equally at home on each. The one must be _steered_,

the other _smuggled_ over a country. As he is never comfortable but in front, we will take the rash horse first.

Let us suppose you have not ridden him before, that you like his appearance, his action, all his qualities except his boundless ambition, that you are in a practicable country, as seems only fair, and about to draw a covert affording every prospect of a run. Before you put your foot in the stirrup be sure to examine his bit—not one groom in a hundred knows how to bridle a horse properly—and remember that on the fitting of this important article depends your success, your enjoyment, perhaps your safety, during the day. Horses, like servants, will never let their master be happy if they are uncomfortable themselves. See that your headstall is long enough, so that the pressure may lie on the bars of the horse's mouth and not crumple up the corners of his lips, like a gag. The curb-chain will probably be too tight, also the throat-lash; if so, loosen both, and with your own hands; it is a pleasant way of making acquaintance, and may perhaps prepossess him in your favour. If he wears a nose-band it will be time enough to take it off when you find he shows impatience of the restriction by shaking his head, changing his leg frequently, or reaching unjustifiably at the rein.

I am prejudiced against the nose-band. I frankly admit a man in a minority of one _must_ be wrong, but I never rode a horse in my life that, to my own feeling, did not go more comfortably when I took it off.

Look also to your girths. For a fractious temper they are very irritating when drawn too tight, while with good shape and a breast-plate, there is little danger of their not being tight enough. When these preliminaries have been carefully

gone through mount nimbly to the saddle, and take the first opportunity of feeling your new friend's mouth and paces in trot, canter, and gallop. Here, too, though in general it should be avoided for many reasons, social, agricultural, and personal, a little "larking" is not wholly inexcusable. It will promote cordiality between man and beast. The latter, as we are considering him, is sure to be fond of jumping, and to ride him over a fence or two away from other horses in cold blood will create in his mind the very desirable impression that you are of a daring spirit, determined to be in front.

Take him, however, up to his leap as slow as he will permit—if possible at a trot. Even should he break into a canter and become impetuous at last, there is no space for a violent rush in three strides, during which you must hold him in a firm, equable grasp. As he leaves the ground give him his head, he cannot have "too much rope," till he lands again, when, as soon as possible, you should pull him back to a trot, handling him delicately, soothing him with voice and gesture, treating the whole affair as the simplest matter of course. Do not bring him again over the same place, rather take him on for two or three fields in a line parallel to the hounds. By the time they are put into covert you will have established a mutual understanding, and found out how much you _dislike_ one another at the worst! It is well now to avoid the crowd, but beware of taking up a position by yourself where you may head the fox! No man can ride in good-humour under a sense of guilt, and you _must_ be good-humoured with such a mount as you have under you to-day.

Exhaust, therefore, all your knowledge of woodcraft to get away on good terms with the hounds. The wildest romp in a rush of horses is often perfectly temperate and amenable when called on to cut out the work. Should you, by ill luck, find yourself behind others in the first field, avoid, if possible, following any one of them over the first fence. Even though it be somewhat black and forbidding, choose a fresh place, so free a horse as yours will jump the more carefully that his attention is not distracted by a leader, and there is the further consideration, based on common humanity, that your leader might fall when too late for you to stop. No man is in so false a position as he who rides over a friend in the hunting field, except the friend!

Take your own line. If you be not afraid to gallop and the hounds _run on_, you will probably find it plain sailing till they check. Should a brook laugh in your face, of no unreasonable dimensions, you may charge it with confidence, a rash horse usually jumps width, and there will be plenty of "room to ride" on the far side. It takes but a few feet of water to decimate a field. I may here observe that, if, as they cross, you see the hounds leap at it, even though they fall short, you may be sure the distance from bank to bank is within the compass of a hunter's stride.

At timber, I would not have you quite so confident. When, as in Leicestershire, it is set fairly in line with the fence and there is a good take-off, your horse, however impetuous, may leap it with impunity in his stroke, but should the ground be poached by cattle, or dip as you come to it, beware of too great hurry. The feat ought then to be accomplished calmly and collectedly at a trot, the horse

taking his time, so to speak, from the motions of his rider, and jumping, as it is called, "to his hand." Now when man and horse are at variance on so important a matter as pace, the one is almost sure to interfere at the wrong moment, the other to take off too soon or get too close under his leap; in either case the animal is more likely to rise at a fence than a rail, and if unsuccessful in clearing it a binder is less dangerous to flirt with than a bar. Lord Wilton seems to me to ride at timber a turn slower than usual, Lord Grey a turn faster. Whether father and son differ in theory I am unable to say, I can only affirm that both are undeniable in practice. Mr. Fellowes of Shottisham, perhaps the best of his day, and Mr. Gilmour, _facile princeps_, almost walk up to this kind of leap; Colonel, now General Pearson, known for so many seasons as "the flying Captain," charges it like a squadron of Sikh cavalry; Captain Arthur Smith pulls back to a trot; Lord Carington scarcely shortens the stride of his gallop. Who shall decide between such professors? Much depends on circumstances, more perhaps on horses. Assheton Smith used to throw the reins on a hunter's neck when rising at a gate, and say,—"Take care of yourself, you brute!"—whereas the celebrated Lord Jersey, who gave me this information of his old friend's style, held his own bridle in a vice at such emergencies, and both usually got safe over! Perhaps the logical deduction from these conflicting examples should be not to jump timber at all!

But the rash horse is by this time getting tired, and now, if you would avoid a casualty, you must temper valour with discretion, and ride him as skilfully as you _can_.