

***ROBERT SMITH
SURTEES***



***MR. SPONGE'S
SPORTING
TOUR***

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TOUR***

Robert Smith Surtees

Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour

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PREFACE

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The author gladly avails himself of the convenience of a Preface for stating, that it will be seen at the close of the work why he makes such a characterless character as Mr. Sponge the hero of his tale.

He will be glad if it serves to put the rising generation on their guard against specious, promiscuous acquaintance, and trains them on to the noble sport of hunting, to the exclusion of its mercenary, illegitimate off-shoots.

November 1852

CHAPTER I

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OUR HERO

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

Oxford Street acts to the north part of London what the Strand does to the south: it is sure to bring one up, sooner or later. A man can hardly get over either of them without

knowing it. Well, Soapey having got into Oxford Street, would make his way at a squarey, in-kneed, duck-toed, sort of pace, regulated by the bonnets, the vehicles, and the equestrians he met to criticize; for of women, vehicles, and horses, he had voted himself a consummate judge. Indeed, he had fully established in his own mind that Kidney Downey and he were the only men in London who *really* knew anything about horses, and fully impressed with that conviction, he would halt, and stand, and stare, in a way that with any other man would have been considered impertinent. Perhaps it was impertinent in Soapey—we don't mean to say it wasn't—but he had done it so long, and was of so sporting a gait and cut, that he felt himself somewhat privileged. Moreover, the majority of horsemen are so satisfied with the animals they bestride, that they cock up their jibs and ride along with a 'find any fault with either me or my horse, if you can' sort of air.

Thus Mr. Sponge proceeded leisurely along, now nodding to this man, now jerking his elbow to that, now smiling on a phaeton, now sneering at a 'bus. If he did not look in at Shackell's or Bartley's, or any of the dealers on the line, he was always to be found about half-past five at Cumberland Gate, from whence he would strike leisurely down the Park, and after coming to a long check at Rotten Row rails, from whence he would pass all the cavalry in the Park in review, he would wend his way back to the Bantam, much in the style he had come. This was his summer proceeding.

Mr. Sponge had pursued this enterprising life for some 'seasons'—ten at least—and supposing him to have begun at twenty or one-and-twenty, he would be about thirty at the time we have the pleasure of introducing him to our readers—a period of life at which men begin to suspect they were not quite so wise at twenty as they thought. Not that Mr. Sponge had any particular indiscretions to reflect upon,

for he was tolerably sharp, but he felt that he might have made better use of his time, which may be shortly described as having been spent in hunting all the winter, and in talking about it all the summer. With this popular sport he combined the diversion of fortune-hunting, though we are concerned to say that his success, up to the period of our introduction, had not been commensurate with his deserts. Let us, however, hope that brighter days are about to dawn upon him.

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

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

In height, Mr. Sponge was above the middle size—five feet eleven or so—with a well borne up, not badly shaped,

closely cropped oval head, a tolerably good, but somewhat receding forehead, bright hazel eyes, Roman nose, with carefully tended whiskers, reaching the corners of a well-formed mouth, and thence descending in semicircles into a vast expanse of hair beneath the chin.

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

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

That there may be a dandified simplicity in dress, is exemplified every day by our friends the Quakers, who

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

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

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

To the frequenters of the 'corner,' it were almost superfluous to mention that he is a constant attendant. He has several volumes of 'catalogues,' with the prices the horses have brought set down in the margins, and has a rare knack at recognizing old friends, altered, disguised, or disfigured as they may be—'I've seen that rip before,' he will say, with a knowing shake of the head, as some woe-begone devil goes, best leg foremost, up to the hammer, or, 'What! is that old

beast back? why he's here every day.' No man can impose upon Soapy with a horse. He can detect the rough-coated plausibilities of the straw-yard, equally with the metamorphosis of the clipper or singer. His practised eye is not to be imposed upon either by the blandishments of the bang-tail, or the bereavements of the dock. Tattersall will hail him from his rostrum with—'Here's a horse will suit you, Mr. Sponge! cheap, good, and handsome! come and buy him.' But it is needless describing him here, for every out-of-place groom and dog-stealer's man knows him by sight.

CHAPTER II

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MR. BENJAMIN BUCKRAM

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

Mark him as he stands at the corner. He sees what he wants, it's the chequered one with the red and blue wheels that the Bayswater ones have got between them, and that

the St. John's Wood and two Western Railway ones are trying to get into trouble by crossing. What a row! how the ruffians whip, and stamp, and storm, and all but pick each other's horses' teeth with their poles, how the cads gesticulate, and the passengers imprecate! now the bonnets are out of the windows, and the row increases. Six coachmen cutting and storming, six cads sawing the air, sixteen ladies in flowers screaming, six-and-twenty sturdy passengers swearing they will 'fine them all,' and Mr. Sponge is the only cool person in the scene. He doesn't rush into the throng and 'jump in,' for fear the 'bus should extricate itself and drive on without him; he doesn't make confusion worse confounded by intimating his behest; he doesn't soil his bright boots by stepping off the kerb-stone; but, quietly waiting the evaporation of the steam, and the disentanglement of the vehicles, by the smallest possible sign in the world, given at the opportune moment, and a steady adhesion to the flags, the 'bus is obliged either to 'come to,' or lose the fare, and he steps quietly in, and squeezes along to the far end, as though intent on going the whole hog of the journey.

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

Presently a glimpse of green country or of distant hills may be caught between the wider spaces of the houses, and frequent settings down increase the space between the

passengers; gradually conservatories appear and conversation strikes up; then come the exclusiveness of villas, some detached and others running out at last into real pure green fields studded with trees and picturesque pot-houses, before one of which latter a sudden wheel round and a jerk announces the journey done. The last passenger (if there is one) is then unceremoniously turned loose upon the country.

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

Mr. Benjamin Buckram was a small horse-dealer—small, at least, when he was buying, though great when he was selling. It would do a youngster good to see Ben filling the two capacities. He dealt in second hand, that is to say, past mark of mouth horses; but on the present occasion, Mr. Sponge sought his services in the capacity of a letter rather than a seller of horses. Mr. Sponge wanted to job a couple of plausible-looking horses, with the option of buying them, provided he (Mr. Sponge) could sell them for more than he would have to give Mr. Buckram, exclusive of the hire. Mr. Buckram's job price, we should say, was as near twelve pounds a month, containing twenty-eight days, as he could screw, the hirer, of course, keeping the animals.

Scampley is one of those pretty little suburban farms, peculiar to the north and north-west side of London—farms varying from fifty to a hundred acres of well-manured, gravelly soil; each farm with its picturesque little buildings, consisting of small, honey-suckled, rose-entwined brick

houses, with small, flat, pan-tiled roofs, and lattice-windows; and, hard by, a large hay-stack, three times the size of the house, or a desolate barn, half as big as all the rest of the buildings. From the smallness of the holdings, the farmhouses are dotted about as thickly, and at such varying distances from the roads, as to look like inferior 'villas,' falling out of rank; most of them have a half-smart, half-seedy sort of look.

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

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

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

Mr. Benjamin Buckram, though very far from being one, had the advantage of looking like a respectable man. There was a certain plump, well-fed rosiness about him, which, aided by a bright-coloured dress, joined to a continual fumble in

the pockets of his drab trousers, gave him the air of a 'well-to-do-in-the-world' sort of man. Moreover, he sported a velvet collar to his blue coat, a more imposing ornament than it appears at first sight. To be sure, there are two sorts of velvet collars—the legitimate velvet collar, commencing with the coat, and the adopted velvet collar, put on when the cloth one gets shabby.

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

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

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

As Buckram made this retrograde movement, he gave a gentle pull to the wooden handle of an old-fashioned wire bell-pull in the midst of buggy, four-in-hand, and other

whips, hanging in the entrance, a touch that was acknowledged by a single tinkle of the bell in the stable-yard.

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

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

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

'Well, Mr. Sponge,' replied Buckram, sliding several consecutive half-crowns down the incline plane of his pocket. 'Well, Mr. Sponge, I shall be happy to do my best for you. I wish you'd come yesterday, though, as I said before, I jest had two of the neatest nags—a bay and a grey—not that colour makes any matter to a judge like you; there's no sounder sayin' than that a good oss is not never of a bad colour; only to a young gemman, you know, it's well to have 'em smart, and the ticket, in short; howsomever, I must do the best I can for you, and if there's nothin' in that tickles

your fancy, why, you must give me a few days to see if I can arrange an exchange with some other gent; but the present is like to be a werry haggiwatin' season; had more happlications for osses nor ever I remembers, and I've been a dealer now, man and boy, turned of eight-and-thirty years; but young gents is whimsical, and it was a young 'un wot got these, and there's no sayin' but he mayn't like them—indeed, one's rayther difficult to ride—that's to say, the grey, the neatest of the two, and he *may* come back, and if so, you shall have him; and a safer, sweeter oss was never seen, or one more like to do credit to a gent: but you knows what an oss is, Mr. Sponge, and can do justice to me, and I should like to put summut good into your hands—*that* I should.'

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

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PETER LEATHER

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

Those about Mr. Buckram's were of a very shady order. Dirty-shirted, slogging, baggy-breeched, slangey-gaitered fellows, with the word 'gin' indelibly imprinted on their faces. Peter Leather, the head man, was one of the fallen angels of servitude. He had once driven a duke—the Duke of Dazzleton—having nothing whatever to do but dress himself and climb into his well-indented richly fringed throne, with a helper at each horse's head to 'let go' at a nod from his broad laced three-cornered hat. Then having got in his cargo (or rubbish, as he used to call them), he would start off at a pace that was truly terrific, cutting out this vehicle, shooting past that, all but grazing a third, anathematizing the 'buses, and abusing the draymen. We don't know how he might be with the queen, but he certainly drove as though he thought nobody had any business in the street while the Duchess of Dazzleton wanted it. The duchess liked going fast, and Peter accommodated her. The duke jobbed his horses and didn't care about pace, and so things might have gone on very comfortably, if Peter one afternoon hadn't run his pole into

the panel of a very plain but very neat yellow barouche, passing the end of New Bond Street, which having nothing but a simple crest—a stag's head on the panel—made him think it belonged to some bulky cit, taking the air with his rib, but who, unfortunately, turned out to be no less a person than Sir Giles Nabem, Knight, the great police magistrate, upon one of whose myrmidons in plain clothes, who came to the rescue, Peter committed a most violent assault, for which unlucky casualty his worship furnished him with rotatory occupation for his fat calves in the 'H. of C.,' as the clerk shortly designated the House of Correction. Thither Peter went, and in lieu of his lace-bedaubed coat, gold-gartered plushes, stockings, and buckled shoes, he was dressed up in a suit of tight-fitting yellow and black-striped worsteds, that gave him the appearance of a wasp without wings. Peter Leather then tumbled regularly down the staircase of servitude, the greatness of his fall being occasionally broken by landing in some inferior place. From the Duke of Dazzleton's, or rather from the tread-mill, he went to the Marquis of Mammon, whom he very soon left because he wouldn't wear a second-hand wig. From the marquis he got hired to the great Irish Earl of Coarsegab, who expected him to wash the carriage, wait at table, and do other incidentals never contemplated by a London coachman. Peter threw this place up with indignation on being told to take the letters to the post. He then lived on his 'means' for a while, a thing that is much finer in theory than in practice, and having about exhausted his substance and placed the bulk of his apparel in safe keeping, he condescended to take a place as job coachman in a livery-stable—a 'horses let by the hour, day, or month' one, in which he enacted as many characters, at least made as many different appearances, as the late Mr. Mathews used to do in his celebrated 'At Homes.' One day Peter would be seen ducking under the mews' entrance in one of those greasy, painfully well-brushed hats, the certain precursors of

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

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

'Here's Mr. Sponge wants some osses,' observed Mr. Buckram, as Leather met them in the middle of the little yard, and brought his right arm round with a sort of military swing to his forehead; 'what 'ave we in?' continued Buckram, with the air of a man with so many horses that he didn't know what were in and what were out.

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

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

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

'In course,' nodded Buckram.

Leather and Buckram had a good understanding in the lying line, and had fallen into a sort of tacit arrangement that if the former was staunch about the horses he was at liberty

to make the best terms he could for himself. Whatever Buckram said, Leather swore to, and they had established certain signals and expressions that each understood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lad was a mere stripling—some fifteen or sixteen, years, perhaps—tall, slight, and neat, with dark hair and eyes, and

was dressed in a brown jacket—a real boy's jacket, without laps, white cords, and top-boots. It was his business to risk his neck and limbs at all hours of the day, on all sorts of horses, over any sort of place that any person chose to require him to put a horse at, and this he did with the daring pleasure of youth as yet undaunted by any serious fall. Sam now bestirred himself to get out the horse. The clambering of hoofs presently announced his approach.

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

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

Mr. Sponge, however, was a dauntless horseman. What man dared he dared, and as the horse stepped proudly and freely