



***MARTIN ROSS,
E. OE.
SOMERVILLE***

***BEGGARS
ON HORSEBACK;
A RIDING TOUR
IN NORTH
WALES***

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Beggars on Horseback; A riding tour in North Wales

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CHAPTER II.

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THERE are no suburbs to Welshpool. Practical, like its countrywomen, it does not trail a modish skirt across the meadows; the woods and hedgerows run down to it, but it will not change its working-dress and come up from its hollow to be idle with them. Of this, indeed, we were not disposed to complain, when at some three of the clock on the next afternoon we started on the first stage of our journey. We had received, in the act of departure, an amount of interest and attention that would have satiated, not to say embarrassed, a sandwich-man—from the congregated friends of the chemist and ironmonger, from the old Yorkshire woman (framed like a Holbein behind the glass of a firmly closed window), from the exponents of fashion in baggy breeches and slim gaiters who habitually “practised at the bar” of the hotel, from the carriage of an unknown magnate, and from the pit and gallery section which had early possessed itself of the best places on the central lamp-post. The subtler observation of villa residences was at least spared us, the vulture eye of the tradesman’s widow behind the lace curtain, the scorn of the offspring of the dentist or the auctioneer.

Powys Castle and its woods towered aloof in a shimmer of heat, as unaware of town and tourist as the cattle within its gates. The grey houses of the town became smaller and older looking; cats sat on the doorstep and mused on the deceitfulness of things, overawing the languid dogs in the eternal supremacy of mind over matter; and the flame of

sunshine blazed tangibly round us and all things. Our last impression of Welshpool is of its oldest house, a black-beamed cottage, lolling and bulging, crooked and bowed in every line; impossible as to perspective, but strong and stable beyond all houses in the town—so the town says. Then the hedgerows, and the white road stretching westward into the unknown. Elder-bushes, with their creamy discs; dog-roses of every shade of pink gazing at us with soft innumerable faces; honeysuckle in thickets; perfumes lonely and delicate, perfumes blended and intoxicating. The thought of them takes the pen from the paper in indolent remembrance of that first ride between the Montgomery hedgerows, while yet the horse-flies had not discovered us, and while the hold-alls lay trim and deceptive in the straps that bound them to the saddles.

The mention of the hold-alls disperses like an east wind all ideas of the indolent and the picturesque. Briefly they may be described as was a kitchen-maid in a Galway household by an enraged fellow-servant—“She’s able to put any one that’d be with her into a decay.” We had spent the morning in packing them, in repacking them, in acrid argument as to whether Miss O’Flannigan’s painting-box (apparently made of lead and filled with stones) would fit in my hold-all with the teapot, tin kettle, india-rubber bath, shooting-boots, drugs, and other angular things which had been already bestowed in it; in punching fresh holes in the straps, in going to the saddler to have more “dees” put on the off-sides of the saddles, and finally in a harrowing parting with our portmanteaus, which, labelled “Dolgelly, per goods train,” had been delivered to the hand of the

boots. It was the burning of the ships; and while the smart, tightly-belted hold-alls were hoisted like plethoric grooms to their saddles, we looked back to the portmanteaus, and said, with a hope no larger than Brutus had, "If we do meet again, we'll smile indeed."

For about two miles we crawled at a walk in the heat,—the drab Tommy niggling, shuffling, and plodding; the bay Tom "dishing," crossing his legs, and stumbling, but both absolutely laid out for goodness. Lulled to a false security, we ambled thus up and down the slopes, and prozed a little to each other about the scenery: plump,



Packing the "hold-alls."

knobby hills, such as one would cut out of dough with a tumbler, with strips of wood straddling over them; rich valleys with their sides padded with dark-green trees, all complete and devoid of relation to each other, but all similar, like a picture-gallery full of replicas of the same landscape. This, we said, was not the kind of thing we had come to Wales to see.

A shaded stretch of road tempted us at length to urge the Tommies to their own wild trot, and to its vagaries we and the hold-alls rose and fell, bumped and joggled with what grace we might. Roadside heaps of stones, that had till now been merely matter for composed inquiry to the Tommies, became at this pace fraught with all supernatural powers and malign intents, and we cannoned violently and often, as Tom swerved, wild-eyed, from one of these objects of terror, or as Tommy, the ignoble, turned with incredible swiftness and endeavoured to flee home to the chemist. We persevered to the top of a steep descent, where the white dusty road fell away from our feet, and there slackened as there came into view a cart drawn by four giant horses with solemn bowed heads and huge legs that gave them the effect of wearing sailor's trousers, tight at the knee and full at the ankle. The trunk of a great elm lay on the cart, a "vibrating star," as George Eliot has described the prone advance of such another tree, and on top of it sat a man in a blue linen coat, looking as unimportant as a squirrel in relation to the mammoth creatures who were accepting his authority. We looked at him with respect as the quivering bole of the elm-tree drew slowly level with us, but he regarded us not at all. His gaze was fixed on my hold-all, from whose gaping mouth, as we suddenly became aware, a sponge-bag and the spout of the tea-kettle were protruding.

"Hoy!" said the carter, pointing with his brass-ringed whip at something on the road behind us.

It was Miss O'Flannigan's india-rubber cup, a noisome vessel from which she indifferently partook of tea, bovril, and claret. We dismounted, and the saddles, released from

the compensating balance of the weight that experience had already taught us to bring to bear on the stirrups, obeyed instantly the four-stone drag of each hold-all, and began to turn very slowly and steadily to the off-side. We collected the cup and some other scattered valuables, and then, while the flies closed in round us, we began the long strife with straps and buckles. The Tommies sidled, stamped, and snapped ungovernably; while the flies devoured us and them impartially, the girths were dragged to their last holes, the hold-alls repacked and strapped on again, and the reign of suffering that ceased not till our journey's end was fairly inaugurated.

Cannoffice was our destination, Llanfair was to be our stopping-place for tea. I almost hesitate to mention that Llanfair is but seven miles from Welshpool; but it is, perhaps, better to state at once that we, and, still more, the Tommies, were above the vulgarities of record-breaking, unless, indeed, we can lay claim to our daily journeys being the shortest hitherto performed by any Welsh tourist. It must have been five o'clock when we rode down the stony hill beside the no less dry and stony river-bed, where at any time, except in this rainless year, the water must swirl pleasantly below the grey village of Llanfair. Welsh villages are composed of nearly equal parts of inns and chapels, so that such names as "The Cross Foxes," "Rehoboth," "The Goat," "The Grapes," "Addoldy," "Salem," and "Bethesda," greet the traveller in startling succession. We crossed the humpbacked bridge, above the fevered bed of the river, where the children sat and played at giving parties with many long drowned crockeries, and we rode the length of

the little street and selected the last of the inns that clung to its steep sides.

It was the glimpse of oak settles and panels, and gleams of old brass and copper, that we saw through the open door of the Wynnstay Arms that turned the scale, already tilted by the vision of a fat ostler boy with gold earrings, who grinned



The fat ostler boy.

from the stable opposite. That he spoke English about as well as a French porter at Calais was subsequently a drawback, when it came to words like surcingle and hold-all, and the beautiful kitchen with the tiled floor and the high settles (and we are compelled to add, the spittoons) was not permitted to us. For us was reserved the fusty decorum of an upper parlour, obviously consecrate to domestic ceremonies,—funeral cards and the plaster ornament of a wedding-cake formed the chimney ornaments,—to the rare female visitor, and to a vow that the windows should not be opened. We cannot, however, look back otherwise than with affection to the tea which presently came to us, to the cream and the bread-and-butter, and to the fact that it was