

THE BAGMAN'S PONY.

BY MARTIN ROSS.



WHEN the Regiment was at Delhi, a T. G. was sent to us from the 11th Lancers, a bagman, as they call that sort of globe-trotting fellow that knocks about from one place to another, and takes all the fun he can out of his other people's expense. Scott in the 11th gave this bagman a letter of introduction to me, told me that he was bringing down a horse to run at the Delhi races; so, as a matter of course, I asked him to stop with me for the week. It was a regular, understood thing in India, then, this passing on the T. G. from one place to another; sometimes he was all right, and sometimes he was a good deal the reverse—in any case, you were bound to be hospitable, and afterwards you could, if you liked, tell the man that sent him that you didn't want any more from him.

The bagman arrived in due course, with a rum-looking roan horse, called the Doctor; a very good horse, too, but not quite so good as the bagman gave out that he was. He brought along his own grass-cutter with him, as one generally does in India, and the grass-cutter's pony, a sort of animal people get because he can carry two or three more of these beastly clods of grass they dig up for horses than a man can, and without much regard to other qualities. The bagman seemed a decent sort of chap in his way, but my word I did put his foot in it the first night at mess; by George he did! There was somehow an idea that he belonged to a wine merchant business in England, and the colonel thought we'd better open our best cellar for the occasion, and so we did; even got out the old Madeira, and told the usual story about the number of times it had been round the Cape. The bagman took everything that came his way, and held his tongue about it, which was rather damping. At last when it came to dessert and the Madeira, Carew, one of our fellows, couldn't stand it any longer—after all, it is aggravating if a man would praise your best wine, no matter how little you care about his opinion, and the bagman was supposed to be a connoisseur.

'Not a bad glass of wine that,' says Carew to him; 'what do you think of it?'

'Not bad,' says the bagman, sipping it. 'I think I'll show you something better in this line if you'll come and dine with me in London when you're home next.'

'Thanks,' says Carew, getting as red as his own jacket, and beginning to splutter—he always did when he got angry—'this is good enough for me, and for most people here—'

'Oh, but nobody up here has got a palate left,' says the bagman, laughing in a very superior sort of way.

'What do you mean, sir?' shouted Carew, jumping up, 'I'll not have any—bagmen coming here to insult me!'

By George, if you'll believe me, Carew had a false palate, with a little bit of sponge in the middle, and we all knew it, except the bagman. There was a frightful shindy, Carew wanting to have his blood and all the rest of us trying to prevent a row. We succeeded somehow in the end, I don't quite know how we managed it, as the bagman was very warlike too; but, anyhow, manage it we did, for soon after they were in the card-room of the Delhi Club, in the friendly stage of iacriety, playing whist with the greatest good humour, their partners being two of the soberest subjects I ever saw.

When I was going to bed that night I saw them both in the billiard room, very tight, leaning up against opposite ends of the billiard table, and making shoves at the balls—with the wrong ends of their cues, fortunately.

'He called me a bagman,' says one, nearly tumbling down with laughing.

'Told me I'd no palate,' says the other, putting his head down on the table and giggling away there, 'best thing I ever heard in my life.'

Everyone was as good friends as possible next day at the races, and for the whole week as well. Unfortunately for the bagman his horse didn't pull off things in the way he expected, in fact he hadn't a look in—we just killed him from first to last. As things went on the bagman began to look queer, and by the end of the week he stood to lose a pretty considerable lot of money, nearly all of it to me. The way we arranged these matters then was a general settling-up day after the races were over; everyone squared up their books and planked ready money down on the nail, or if they hadn't got it they went and borrowed from some one else to do it with. The bagman paid up what he owed the others, and I began to feel a bit sorry for the fellow when he came to me that night to finish up. He hummed and hawed a bit and then asked if I should mind taking an I.O.U. from him, as he was run out of the ready.

Of course I said 'All right old man, certainly, just the same to me,' though it's usual in such cases to put down the hard cash, but still—fellow staying in my house you know—sent on by this pal of mine in the 11th—absolutely nothing else to be done.

Next morning I was up and out on parade as usual, and in the natural course of events began to look about for my bagman. By George, not a sign of him in his room, not a sign of him anywhere. I thought to myself, this is peculiar, and I went over to the stable to try whether there was anything to be heard of him.

'The first thing I saw was that the 'Doctor's' stall was empty.

'How's this?' I said to the groom; 'where's Mr Leggett's horse?'

'The sahib has taken him away this morning.'

'I began to have some notion then of what my I.O.U. was worth.'

'The sahib has left his grass cutter and his pony,' said

the *sais*, who probably had as good a notion of what was up as I had.

'All right, send for the grass-cutter,' I said. The fellow came up, in a blue funk, evidently, and I couldn't make anything of him. Sahib this, and sahib that, and salaaming and general idiocy—or shamming—I couldn't tell which. I didn't know a nigger then as well as I do now.

'This is a very fishy business,' I thought to myself, 'and I think it's well on the cards the grass-cutter will be out of this to-night on his pony. No, by Jove, I'll see what the pony's good for before he does that. Is the grass-cutter's pony there?' I said to the *sais*.

'He is there, sahib, but he is only a *kattiwala tattoo*,' which is the name for a common kind of mountain pony.

I had him out, and he certainly was a wretched looking little brute, dun with a black stripe down his back, like all that breed, and all bony and ragged and starved.

'Indeed, he is a *gareeb kuch kam ki nahin*,' said the *sais*, meaning thereby a miserable beast, in the most intensified form, 'and not fit to stand in the sahib's stable.'

All the same, just for the fun of the thing, I put the grass-cutter up on him, and told him to trot him up and down. By George! the pony went like a flash of lightning! I had him galloped next; same thing—fellow could hardly hold him. I opened my eyes, I can tell you, but no matter what way I looked at him I couldn't see where on earth he got his pace from. It was there anyhow, there wasn't a doubt about that. 'That'll do,' I said, 'put him up. And you just stay here,' I said to the grass-cutter, 'till I hear from Mr Leggett where you're to go to. Don't leave Delhi till you get orders from me.'

It got about during the day that the bagman had disappeared, and had had a soft thing of it as far as I was concerned. The 112th were dining with us that night, and they all set to work to draw me after dinner about the business—thought themselves vastly witty over it.

'Hullo Paddy, so you're the girl he left behind him! Hear he went off with two suits of your clothes, one on over the other.' 'Cheer up, old man; he's left you the grass-cutter and the pony, and what he leaves must be worth having, I'll bet!' and so on.

I suppose I'd had a good deal more than my share of the champagne, but all of a sudden I began to feel pretty warm.

'You're all d—d funny,' I said, 'but I daresay you'll find he's left me something that is worth having.'

'Oh yes!' 'Go on!' Paddy's a great man when he's drunk, and a lot more of the same sort.

'I tell you what it is,' said I, 'I'll back the pony he's left here to trot his twelve miles an hour on the road.'

'Boah!' says Barton of the 112th. 'I've seen him, and I'll lay you a thousand rupees even he doesn't.'

'Done!' said I, whacking my hand down on the table.

'And I'll lay another thousand,' says another fellow.

'Done with you too,' said I.

Everyone began to stare a bit then.

'Go to bed, Paddy,' says the Colonel, 'you're making an exhibition of yourself.'

'Thank you, sir; I know pretty well what I'm talking about,' said I; but, by George, and began privately to think I'd better pull myself together a bit, and I got out my book and began to hedge—laid three to one on the pony to do eleven miles in the hour, and four to one on him to do ten—all the fellows delighted to get their money on. I was to choose my own ground, and to have a fortnight to train the pony, and by the time I went to bed I stood to lose about £1,000.

Somehow in the morning I didn't feel quite so cheery about things—one doesn't after a big night—one gets nasty qualms, both mental and the other kind. I went out to look after the pony, and the first thing I saw by way of an appetiser was Biddy, with a face as low as my arm. Biddy, I should explain, was a chap called Biddolph, in the Artillery; they called him Biddy for short, and partly, too, because he kept a racing stable with me in those days, I being called Paddy by every one, because I was Irish—English idiom of wit—Paddy and Biddy, you see.

'Well,' said he, 'I hear you've about gone and done it this time. The 112th are going about with trumpets and shawms, and looking round for ways to spend that thousand when they get it. There are to be new polo ponies, a big luncheon, and a piece of plate bought for the mess, in memory of that benefactor of the regiment, the departed bagman. Well, now, let's see the pony. That's what I've come down for.'

I'm hanged if the brute didn't look more vulgar and wretched than ever when he was brought out, and I began to feel that perhaps I was more parts of a fool than I thought I was. Biddy stood looking at him there with his underlip stuck out.

'I think you've lost your money,' he said. That was all, but the way he said it made me feel conscious of the shortcomings of every hair in the brute's ugly hide.

'Wait a bit,' I said, 'you haven't seen him going yet. I think he has the heels of any pony in the place.'

I got a boy on to him without any more ado, thinking to myself I was going to astonish Biddy. 'You just get out of his way, that's all,' says I, standing back to let him start.

If you'll believe it, he wouldn't budge a foot!—not an inch—no amount of licking had any effect on him. He just humped his back, and tossed his head and grunted—he must have had a skin as thick as three donkeys! I got on to him myself and put the spurs in, and he went up on his hind legs and nearly came back with me—that was all the good I got of that.

'Where's the grass cutter?' I shouted, jumping off him in about as great a fury as I ever was in, 'I suppose he knows how to make this devil go!'

'Grass cutter went away last night, sahib. Me see him try to open stable door and go away. Me see him no more.'

I used pretty well all the bad language I knew in one blast. Biddy began to walk away, laughing till I felt as if I could kick him.

'I'm going to have a front seat for this trotting match,' he said, stopping to get his wind. 'Spectators along the route requested to provide themselves with pitchforks and fireworks, I suppose, in case the champion pony should show any of his engaging little temper. Now, mind, old man, I'll see you through this, there's no use in getting into a was about it. I'm going shares with you, the way we always do.'

I can't say I responded graciously, I rather think I cursed him and everything else in heaps. When he was gone I began to think of what could be done.

'Get out the dog cart,' I said, as a last chance. 'Perhaps he'll go in harness.'

We wheeled the cart up to him, got him harnessed to it, and in two minutes that pony was walking, trotting, anything I wanted—can't explain why—one of the mysteries of horseflesh. I drove him out through the Cashmere Gate, passing Biddy on the way, and feeling a good deal the better for it, and as soon as I got on to the flat stretch of road outside the gate I tried what the pony could do. He went even better than I thought he could, very rough and uneven, of course, but still promising. I brought him home, and had him put into training at once, as carefully as if he was going for the Derby. I chose the course, took the six mile stretch of road from the Cashmere Gate to Sufter Jung's tomb, and drove him over it every day. It was a splendid course—level as a table, and dead straight for the most part—and after a few days he could do it in about forty minutes out and thirty-five back.

People began to talk then, especially as the pony's look and shape were improving each day, and after a little time everyone was planking their money on one way or another—Biddy putting on a thousand on his own account—still, I'm bound to say the odds were against the pony. The whole of Delhi got into a state of excitement about it, natives and all, and every day I got letters warning me to take care, as there might be foul play. The whole of the pony was in was a big one, and I had a wall built across it and put a man with a gun in the outer compartment. I bought all his corn myself, in feeds at a time, going here, there, and everywhere for it, never to the same place for two days together—I thought it was better to be sure than sorry, and there's no trusting a nigger.

The day of the match every soul in the place turned out, such crowds that I could scarcely get the dog-cart through when I drove to the Cashmere gate. I got down there, and was looking over the cart to see that everything was right, when a little half-caste *keranie*, a sort of low-class clerk, came up behind me and began talking to me in a mysterious kind of way, in that vile *chi chi* accent one gets to hate so awfully.

'Look here, Sar,' he said, 'you take my car, Sar; it built for racing. I do much trot-racing myself—mentioning his name—and you go much faster my car, Sar.'

I trusted nobody in those days, and thought a good deal of myself accordingly. I hadn't found out that it takes a much smarter man to know how to trust a few.

'Thank you,' I said, 'I think I'll keep my own, the pony's accustomed to it.'

I think he understood quite well what I felt, but he didn't show any resentment.

'Well, Sar, you no trust my car, you let me see your wheels?'

'Certainly,' I said, 'you may look at them,' determined in my own mind I should keep my eye on him while he did. He got out a machine for propping the axle, and lifted the wheel off the ground.

'Make the wheel go round,' he said.

I didn't like it much but I gave the wheel a turn. He looked at it till it stopped.

'You lose match if you take that car,' he said, 'you take my car, Sar.'

'What do you mean?' said I, pretty sharply.

'Look here,' he said, setting the wheel going again. 'You see here, Sar, it die, all in a minute, it jerk, doesn't die smooth. Come, you see my wheel, Sar.'

He put the lift under his own, and started the wheel revolving. It took about three times as long to die as mine, going steady and silent and stopping imperceptibly, not so much as a tremor in it.

'Now, Sar?' he said, 'you see I speak true, Sar. I back you two hundred rupees, if I lose I'm ruin, and I beg you, Sar, take my car, can no win with yours, mine match car.'

'All right!' said I, with a sort of impulse, 'I'll take it.' And so I did.

I had to start just under the arch of the Cashmere Gate, by a pistol shot, fired from overhead. I didn't quite care for the look of the pony's ears while I was waiting for it—the crowd had frightened him a bit I think. By Jove, when the bang came he reared straight up, dropped down again and stuck his fore legs out, reared again when I gave him the whip, every second of course telling against me.

'Here, let me help you,' shouted Biddy, jumping into the trap. His weight settled the business, down came the pony, and we went away like blazes.

The three empires rode with us, one each side and one behind, at least that was the way at first, but I found the clattering of their hoofs made it next to impossible to hold the pony. I got them to keep back, and after that he went fairly steadily, but it was anxious work. The noise and excitement had told on him a lot, he had a tendency to break during all that six miles out, and he was in a lather before we got to Sufter Jung's tomb. There were a lot of people waiting for me out there, some ladies on horseback too, and there was a coffee-shop going, with drinks of all kinds. As I got near they began to call out, 'You're done, Paddy, thirty four minutes gone already, you haven't the ghost of a chance. Come and have a drink and look pleasant over it.'

I turned the pony, and Biddy and I jumped out. I went up to the table, snatched up a glass of brandy and filled my mouth with it, then went back to the pony, took him by the head, and sent a squirt of the brandy up each nostril; I equated the rest down his throat, went back to the table and swallowed half a tumbler of cucumber or something, and was in to the start and off again, the whole thing not taking more than twenty seconds.

The business began to be pretty exciting after that. You can see four miles straight ahead of you on that road; and