

## AFTER BR'ER RABBIT IN THE BLUE-GRASS.

### A THANKSGIVING EVENT.

By the author of «Fox-Hunting in Kentucky.»

WITH PICTURES BY MAX F. KLEPPER.



OR little more than a month Jack Frost has been busy—that arch-imp of Satan who has got himself enshrined in the hearts of little children.

After the clear sunset of some late October day, when the clouds have hung low and kept the air chill, he has a good night for his evil work. By dawn the little magician has spun a robe of pure white, and drawn it close to the breast of the earth. The first light turns it silver, and shows the flowers and jewels with which wily Jack has decked it, so that it may be mistaken for a wedding-gown, perhaps, instead of a winding-sheet. The sun, knowing better, lifts, lets loose his tiny warrors, and, from pure love of beauty, with one stroke smites it gold. Then begins a battle which ends soon in crocodile tears of reconciliation from dauntless little Jack, with the blades of grass and the leaves in their scarlet finery sparkling with the joy of another day's deliverance, and the fields grown gray and aged in a single night. On just such a morning, and before the fight is quite done, saddle-horses are stepping from big white barns in certain counties of the blue-grass, and, sniffing the cool air, are being led to old-fashioned stiles, from which a little later they bear master or mistress out to the turnpike and past flashing fields to the little county-seat several miles away. There in the court-house square they gather, the gentlefolk of country and town, and from that point they start into the country the other way. It is a hunting-meet. Br'er Rabbit is the quarry, and they are going for him on horseback without dog, stick, snare, or gun—a unique sport, and, so far as I know, confined wholly to the blue-grass. There is less rusticity than cosmopolitanism in that happy land. The townspeople have farms, and the farmers own stores; intercourse between town and country is unrestrained; and as for social position, that is a question one rarely hears discussed: one either has it unquestioned, or one has it not at all. So out they go, the hunters on horseback, and the chaperons and spectators in buggies, phaëtons, and rockaways, through a morning that

is cloudless and brilliant, past fields that are sober with autumn, and woods that are dingy with oaks and streaked with the fire of sumac and maple. New hemp lies in shining swaths on each side, while bales of last year's crop are going to market along the white turnpike. Already the farmers are turning over the soil for the autumn sowing of wheat. Corn-shucking is just over, and ragged darkies are straggling from the fields back to town. Through such a scene move horse and vehicle, the riders shouting, laughing, running races, and a quartet, perhaps, in a rockaway singing some old-fashioned song full of tune and sentiment. Six miles out they turn in at a gate, where a big square brick house with a Grecian portico stands far back in a wooded yard, with a fish-pond on one side and a great smooth lawn on the other. Other hunters are waiting there, and the start is made through a blue-grass woodland, greening with a second spring, and into a sweep of stubble and ragweed: There are two captains of the hunt. One is something of a wag, and has the voice of a trumpet.

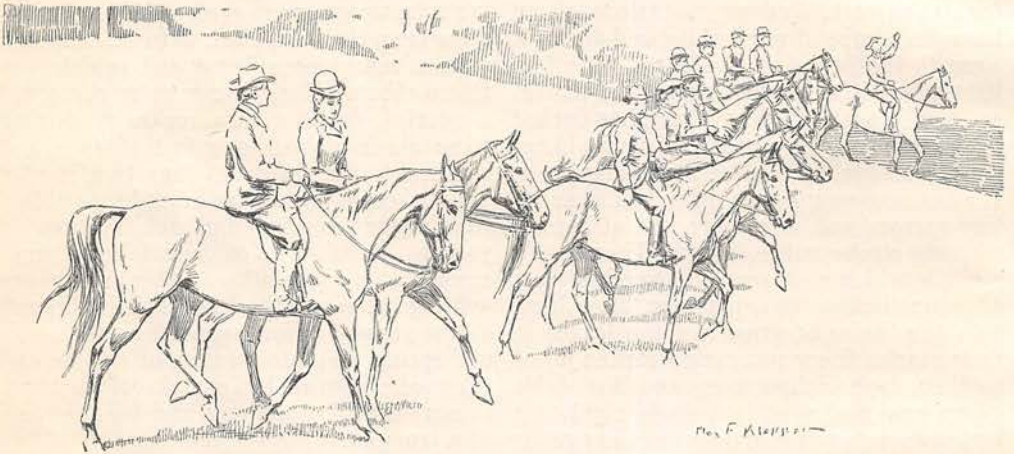
«Form a line, and form a good un!» he yells, and the line stretches out with a space of ten or fifteen feet between each horse and his neighbor on each side. The men are dressed as they please, the ladies as they please. English blood gets expression, as usual, in independence absolute. There is a sturdy disregard of all considerations of form. Some men wear leggings, some high boots; a few have brown shooting-coats. Most of them ride with the heel low and the toes turned according to temperament. The Southern woman's long riding-skirt has happily been laid aside. These young Dianas wear the usual habit; only the hat is a derby, a cap, sometimes a beaver with a white veil, or a tam-o'-shanter that has slipped down behind and left a frank bare head of shining hair. They hold the reins in either hand, and not a crop is to be seen. There are plenty of riding-whips, however, and sometimes one runs up the back of some girl's right arm; for that is the old-fashioned position for the whip when riding in form. On a trip like this, however, everybody rides to please his fancy,



and rides anywhere but off his horse. The men are sturdy country youths, who in a few years will make good types of the beef-eating young English squire—sunburned fellows with big frames, open faces, fearless eyes, and a manner that is easy, cordial, kindly, independent. The girls are midway between the types of brunette and blonde, with a leaning toward the latter type. The extreme brunette is as rare as is the unlovely blonde, whom Oliver Wendell Holmes differentiates from her dazzling sister with locks that have caught the light of the sun. Radiant with freshness these girls are, and with good health and strength; round of figure, clear of eye and skin, spirited, soft of voice, and slow of speech.

pathy between these two, and to cause trouble between country-bred Phyllis, plump, dark-eyed, bare-headed, who rides a pony that is trained to the hunt, as many of the horses are, and young farmer Corydon, who is near her on an iron-gray. Indeed, mischief is brewing among those four. At a brisk walk the line moves across the field, the captain at each end yelling to the men—only the men, for no woman is ever anywhere but where she ought to be in a Southern hunting-field—to keep it straight.

«Billy,» shouts the captain with the mighty voice, «I fine you ten dollars.» The slouch-hat and the white girth are lagging behind. It is a lovers' quarrel, and the girl looks a little



DRAWN BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

«BILLY,» SHOUTS THE CAPTAIN, «I FINE YOU TEN DOLLARS.»

There is one man on a sorrel mule. He is the host back at the big farm-house, and he has given up every horse he has to guests. One of the girls has a broad white girth running all the way around both horse and saddle. Her habit is the most stylish in the field; she has lived a year in Washington, perhaps, and has had a finishing touch at a fashionable school in New York. Near her is a young fellow on a black thoroughbred—a graduate, perhaps, of Yale or Princeton. They rarely put on airs, couples like these, when they come back home, but drop quietly into their old places with friends and kindred. From respect to local prejudice, which has a hearty contempt for anything that is not carried for actual use, she has left her riding-crop at home. He has let his crinkled black hair grow rather long, and has covered it with a black slouch-hat. Contact with the outer world has made a difference, however, and it is enough to create a strong bond of sym-

flushed, while Phyllis watches smiling. «But you can compromise with me,» adds the captain, and a jolly laugh runs down the line. Now comes a «rebel yell.» Somewhere along the line a horse leaps forward. Other horses jump too; everybody yells, and everybody's eye is on a little bunch of cotton that is being whisked with astonishing speed through the brown weeds. There is a massing of horses close behind it; the white girth flashes in the midst of the mêlée, and the slouch-hat is just behind. The bunch of cotton turns suddenly, and doubles back between the horses' feet. There is a great crash, and much turning, twisting, and sawing of bits. Then the crowd dashes the other way, with Corydon and Phyllis in the lead. The fun has begun.

## II.

FROM snow to snow in the blue-grass Br'er Rabbit has two inveterate enemies,—the darky



and the school-boy,—and his lot is a hard one. Even in the late spring and early summer, when «ole Mis'» Rabbit is keeping house, either one of her foes will cast a destructive stone at her if she venture into open lane or pasture. When midsummer comes even her tiny, long-eared brood is in danger. Not one of the little fellows is much larger than your doubled fist when the weeds get thick and high, and the elderberries are ripe, and the blackberries almost gone, but he is a tender morsel, and with the darky ranks in gastronomical favor close after the possum and the coon. You see him then hopping about the edge of hemp- and harvest-fields, or crossing the country lanes, and he is very pretty, and so innocent and unwary that few have the heart to slay him except his two ruthless foes. When the fields of grain are cut at harvest-time, both are on a close lookout for him. For as the grain is mown about him, he is penned at last in a little square of uncut cover, and must make a dash for liberty through stones, sticks, dogs, and yelling darkies. After frost comes, the school-boy has both eyes open for him, and a stone ready, on his way to and from his books, and he goes after him at noon recess and on Saturdays. The darky travels with a «rabbit-stick» three feet long in hand and a cur at his heels. Sometimes he will get his young master's bird-dog out, and give Br'er Rabbit a chase, in spite of the swearing that surely awaits him, and the licking that may. Then he makes a «dead fall» for him—a broad board supporting a heavy rock, and supported by triggers that are set like the lines of the figure 4; or he will bend the top of a young sapling to the ground, and make a snare of a string, and some morning there is innocent Br'er Rabbit strung up like a murderer. Sometimes he will chase him into a rock fence, and then what is a square yard or so of masonry to one fat rabbit? Sometimes Br'er Rabbit will take a favorite refuge, a hollow tree; for while he cannot climb a tree in the usual way, he can arch his back and rise spryly enough on the inside. Then does the ingenious darky contrive a simple instrument of torture—a long, limber stick with a prong or a split end. This he twists into Br'er Rabbit's fur until he can gather up with it one fold of his slack hide, and down comes the game. This hurts, and with this provocation only will the rabbit snap at the hunter's hand. If this device fails the hunter, he will try smoking him out; and if that fails, there is left the ax. Always, too, is the superstitious darky keen for the

rabbit that is caught in a graveyard, by a slow hound, at midnight, and in the dark of the moon. The left hind foot of that rabbit is a thing to conjure with.

On Saturdays both his foes are after him with dog and gun. If they have no dog they track him in the snow, or they «look for him settin'» in thick bunches of winter blue-grass, or under briers and cut thorn-bushes that have been piled in little gullies; and alas! they «shoot him settin'» until the darky has learned fair play from association, or the boy has had it thumped into him at school. Then will the latter give Br'er Rabbit a chance for his life by stirring him up with his brass-toed boot and taking a crack at him as he lopes away. It will be a long time before this boy will get old enough or merciful enough to resist the impulse to get out of his buggy or off his horse, no matter where he is going or in how great a hurry, and shy a stone when a cottontail crosses his path. Indeed, a story comes down that a field of slaves threw aside their hoes and dashed pell-mell after a passing rabbit. An indignant observer reported the fact to their master, and this was the satisfaction he got.

«Run him, did they?» said the master, cheerfully. «Well, I'd have whipped the last one of them if they had n't.»

And yet it is not until late in October that Br'er Rabbit need go into the jimson-weeds and seriously «wuck he haid» (work his head) over his personal safety; but it is very necessary then, and on Thanksgiving day it behooves him to say his prayers in the thickest cover he can find. Every man's hand is against him that day. All the big hunting-parties are out, and the Iroquois Club of Lexington goes for him with horse and greyhound. And that is wild sport. Indeed, put a daredevil Kentuckian on a horse or behind him, and in a proper mood, and there is always wild sport—for the onlooker as well. It is hard to fathom the spirit of recklessness that most sharply differentiates the Southern hunter from his Northern brother, and that runs him amuck when he comes into contact with a horse, whether riding, driving, or betting on him. If a thing has to be done in a hunting-field, or can be done, there is little difference between the two. Only the thing must, with the Northerner, be a matter of skill and judgment, and he likes to know his horse. To him or to an Englishman the Southern hunter's performances on a green horse look little short of criminal. In certain counties of Virginia, where hunters follow the hounds after the English fashion,



the main point seems to be for each man to "hang up" the man behind him, and desperate risks are run. "I have stopped that boyish foolishness, though," said an aged hunter under thirty; "I give my horse a chance." In other words, he had stopped exacting of him the impossible. In Georgia they follow hounds at a fast gallop through wooded bogs and swamps at night, and I have seen a horse go down twice within a distance of thirty yards, and the rider never leave his back. The same is true of Kentucky, and I suppose of other Southern States. I have known one of my friends in the blue-grass to amuse himself by getting into his buggy an unsuspecting friend, who was as sedate then as he is now (and he is a judge now), and driving him at full speed through an open gate, then whizzing through the woods and seeing how near he could graze the trunks of trees in his course, and how sharply he could turn, and ending up the circuit by dashing, still at full speed, into a creek, his companion still sedate and fearless, but swearing helplessly. Being bantered by an equally reckless friend one dark midnight while going home, this same man threw both reins out on his horse's back, and gave the high-strung beast a smart cut with his whip. He ran four miles, kept the pike by some mercy of Providence, and stopped exhausted at his master's gate.

A Northern visitor was irritated by the apparently reckless driving of his host, who is a famous horseman in the blue-grass.

"You lunatic," he said, "you'd better drive over those stone piles!" meaning a heap of unbroken rocks that lay on one side of the turnpike.

"I will," was the grave answer, and he did.

This is the Kentuckian in a buggy.

Imagine him on horseback, with no ladies present to check the spirit or the spirits of the occasion, and we can believe that the Thanksgiving hunt of the Iroquois Club is perhaps a little more serious business than playing polo, or riding after anise-seed. And yet there is hardly a member of this club who could sit in his saddle over the course at Meadowbrook or Chevy Chase, for the reason that he has never practised jumping a horse in his stride, and because when he goes fast he takes the jockey seat, which is not, I believe, a good seat for a five-foot fence; at the same time, there is hardly a country-bred rider in the blue-grass, man or woman, who would

not try it. Still, accidents are rare, and it is yet a tenet in the creed of the Southern hunter that the safer plan is to take no care. On the chase with greyhounds the dogs run, of course, by sight, and the point with the huntsman is to be the first at the place of the kill. As the greyhound tosses the rabbit several feet in the air and catches it when it falls, the place is seen by all, and there is a mad rush for that one spot. The hunters crash together, and often knock one another down. I have known two fallen horses and their riders to be cleared in a leap by two hunters who were close behind them. One of the men was struck by a hoof flying over him.

"I saw a shoe glisten," he said, "and then it was darkness for a while."

But it is the hunting without even a dog that is interesting, because it is unique and because the ladies share the fun. The sport doubtless originated with school-boys. They could not take dogs or guns to school; they had leisure at "big recess," as the noon hour was called; they had horses, and the rabbits were just over the school-yard fence. One day two or three of them chased a rabbit down, and the fun was discovered. These same boys, perhaps, kept up the hunt after their school-days were over, and gave the fever to others, the more easily as foxes began to get scarce. Then the ladies began to take part, and the sport is what it is to-day. The President signs



DRAWN BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

«(I WILL,) WAS THE GRAVE ANSWER, AND HE DID.»

a great annual death-warrant for Br'er Rabbit in the blue-grass when he fixes a day for Thanksgiving.

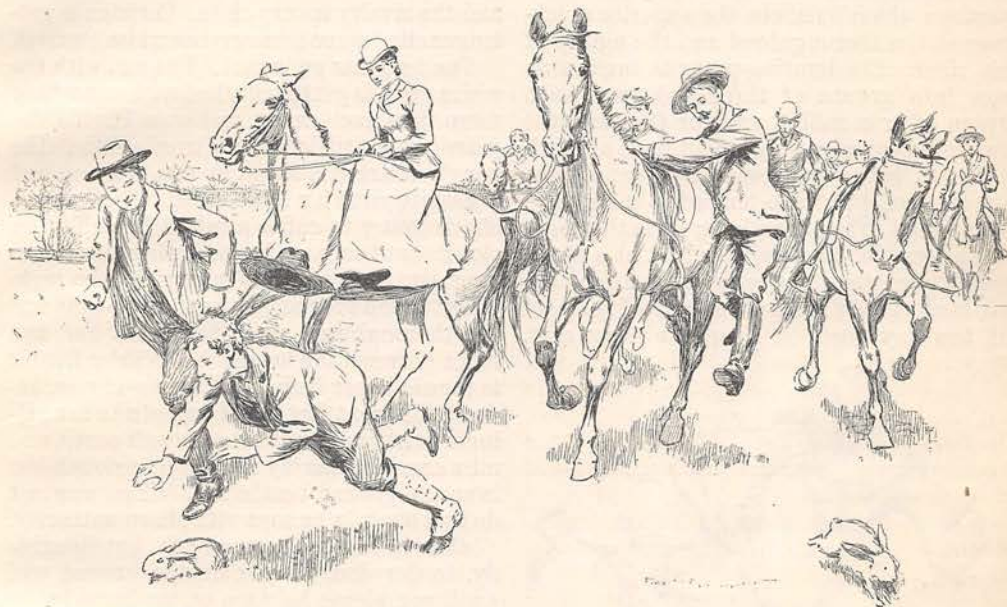
### III.

AGAIN Br'er Rabbit twists, and Phyllis's little horse turns after him like a polo pony after a ball. The black thoroughbred makes a wide sweep; Corydon's iron-gray cuts in behind,



and the whole crowd starts in a body toward the road. This rabbit is an old hand at this business, and he knows where safety lies. A moment later the horses come to their haunches at the pike fence. Br'er Rabbit has gone into a culvert under the road, and already a small boy and a yellow dog are making for that culvert from a farm-house near. Again the trumpet, «Form a line!» Again the long line starts. There has been a shifting of positions. Corydon is next the white

a yelling demon bearing down on her. The slouch-hat swoops near her first, flings himself from his horse, and, in spite of the riders pressing in on him, is after her on foot. Two others swing from their horses on the other side. Mollie makes several helpless hops, and the three scramble for her. The riders in front cry for those behind to hold their horses back, but they crowd in, and it is a miracle that none of the three is trampled down. The rabbit is hemmed in now; there is no way of es-



DRAWN BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

«DOWN GOES HER PURSUER ON TOP OF HER.»

girth and stylish habit now, and he looks very much pleased. The slouch-hat of the college man and Phyllis's bare head are together, and the thoroughbred's master is talking earnestly. Phyllis looks across the field and smiles. Silly Corydon! The slouch-hat is confessing his trouble and asking advice. Yes, she will help, as women will, out of pure friendship, pure unselfishness; sometimes they have other reasons, and Phyllis had two. Another yell, another rabbit. Off they go, and then, midway, still another cry and still another rabbit. The hunters part in twain, the thoroughbred leading one wing, the iron-gray the other. Watch the slouch-hat now, and you will see how the thing is done. The thoroughbred is learning what his master is after, and he swerves to the right; others are coming in from that direction; the rabbit must turn again; others that way, too. Poor Mollie is confused; whichever way her big, startled eyes turn, that way she sees a huge beast and

cape, and instinctively she shrinks frightened to the earth. That is the crucial instant; down goes her pursuer on top of her as though she were a foot-ball, and the quarry is his. One blow of the hand behind the long ears, or one jerk by the hind legs, which snaps the neck as a whip cracks, and the slouch-hat holds aloft the brush, a little puff of down, and turns his eye about the field. The white girth is near, and as he starts toward her he is stopped by a low «Ahem!» behind him. Corydon has caught the first rabbit, and already on the derby hat above the white girth is pinned the brush. The young fellow turns again. Phyllis, demure and unregarding, is there with her eyes on the horns of her saddle; but he understands, and a moment later she smiles with prettily feigned surprise, and the white puff moves off in her loosening brown hair. The white girth is betrayed into the faintest shadow of vexation. Corydon heard that eloquent little clearing of the throat



with a darkling face, and, indeed, no one of the four looks very happy except Phyllis.

«Form a line!»

Again the rabbits jump,—one, two, three,—and the horses dash and crash together, and the men swing to the ground, and are pushed and trampled in a mad clutch for Mollie's long ears; for it is a contest between them as to who shall catch the most game. The iron-gray goes like a demon, and when Corydon drops the horse is trained to stop and to stand still. This gives Corydon an advantage which balances the superior quickness of the thoroughbred and the agility of his rider. The hunting-party is broken up now into groups of three and four, each group after a rabbit, and for the time the disgusted captains give up all hope of discipline. A horse has gone down in a gully. Two excited girls have jumped to the ground for a rabbit. The big mule thrashes the weeds like a tornado. Crossing the field at a heavy gallop, he stops suddenly at a ditch, the girth of the old saddle breaks, and the host of the day goes on over the long ears.



DRAWN BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

«HE STOPS SUDDENLY AT A DITCH.»

When he rises from the weeds there is a shriek of laughter over the field, and then a mule-race, for, with a bray of freedom, the sorrel makes for home. Not a rabbit is jumped on the next circuit; that field is hunted out. No matter; there is another just across the meadow, and they make for it. More than a dozen rabbits dangle head downward behind the saddles of the men. Corydon has caught seven, and the slouch-hat five. The palm lies between them plainly, as does a bigger motive than the game. It is a matter of gallantry—conferring the brush in the field; indeed, secrets are hidden rather than betrayed in that way; so Corydon is free to honor the white girth, and the

slouch-hat can honor Phyllis without suspicion. The stylish habit shows four puffs of down; Phyllis wears five—every trophy that the slouch-hat has won. That is the way Phyllis is helping a friend, getting even with an enemy, and putting down a rebellion in her own camp. Even in the meadow a rabbit starts up, and there is a quick sprint in the open; but Br'er Rabbit, another old hand at the hunt, slips through the tall palings of a garden fence. In the other field the fun is more furious than ever, for the rabbits are thicker and the rivalry is very close. Corydon is getting excited; once he nearly overrides his rival.

The field has gone mad. The girl with the white girth is getting flushed with something more than excitement, and even Phyllis, demure as she still looks, is stirred a little. The pony's mistress is ahead by two brushes, and the white girth is a little vexed. She declares she is going to catch a rabbit herself. The slouch-hat hears, and watches her thereafter uneasily. And she does spring lightly, recklessly, to the ground just as the iron-gray and the thoroughbred crash in toward her, and right between the horses' hoofs Br'er Rabbit is caught in her little black riding-gloves. Indeed, the front feet of a horse strike her riding-skirt, mashing it into the soft earth, and miss crushing her by a foot. The slouch-hat is on the ground beside her. «You must n't do that again!» he says with sharp authority.

«Mr. —,» she says quietly, but haughtily, to Corydon, who is on the ground too, «will you please help me on my horse?»

The slouch-hat looks as red as a flame, but Phyllis whispers comfort. «That's all right,» she says wisely; and it is all right. Under the slouch-hat the white face meant fear, anxiety, distress. The authority of the voice thrilled the girl, and in the depths of her heart she was pleased: and Phyllis knew.

The sun is dropping fast, but they will try one more field, which lies beyond a broad pasture of blue-grass. Now comes the chase of the day. Something big and gray leaps from a bunch of grass and bounds away. It is the father of rabbits, and there is a race indeed—an open field, a straight course, and no favor. The devil take the hindmost! Listen to the music of the springy turf, and watch that thoroughbred whose master has stayed behind to put up the fence! He has n't had half a chance before. He feels the grip of knees as his master rises to the racing-seat, and knowing what that means, he lengthens. No great effort is apparent; he simply stretches himself close to the earth and skims it as a swallow skims a pond.



Within two hundred yards he is side by side with Corydon, who is leading, and Corydon, being no fool, pulls in and lets him go on. Br'er Rabbit is going up one side of a long, shallow ravine. There is a grove of locusts at the upper end. The hunters behind see the slouch-hat cut around the crest of the hill, and, as luck would have it, Br'er Rabbit doubles, and comes back on the other side of the ravine. The thoroughbred has closed up the gap that the turn made, and is not fifty yards behind. Br'er Rabbit is making either for a rain-washed gully just opposite, or for a brier-patch farther down. So they wait. The cottontail clears the gully like a ball of thistledown, and Phyllis hears a little gasp behind her as the thoroughbred too rises and cleaves the air. Horse and rabbit dash into the weedy cover, and the slouch-hat drops out of sight as three hunters ride yelling into it from the other side. There is a scramble in the bushes, and the slouch-hat emerges with the rabbit in his hand. As he rides slowly toward the waiting party, he looks at Phyllis as though to receive further orders. He gets them. Wily Phyllis shakes her head as though to say:

«Not me this time; *her.*»

And with a courtly inclination of the slouch-hat, the big brush goes in lieu of an olive-branch for peace.

The shadows are stretching fast; they will not try the other field. Back they start through the radiant air homeward, laughing, talking, bantering, living over the incidents of the day, the men with one leg swung over theommel of their saddles for rest; the girls with habits disordered and torn, hair down, and a little tired, but all flushed, clear-eyed, and happy. The leaves, russet, gold, and crimson, are dropping to the green earth; the sunlight is as yellow as the wings of a butterfly; and on the horizon is a faint haze that foreshadows the coming Indian summer. If it be Thanksgiving, a big dinner will be waiting for them at the stately old farm-house, or if a little later in the year, a hot supper instead. If the hunt is very informal, and there be neither, which rarely happens, everybody asks everybody else to go home with him, and everybody means it, and accepts if possible. This time it is warm enough for a great spread out in the yard on the lawn and under the big oaks. What a feast that is—chicken, turkey, cold ham, pickles, croquettes, creams, jellies, «beaten» biscuit! And what happy laughter, and thoughtful courtesy, and mellow kindness!

Inside, most likely, it is cool enough for a fire in the big fireplace with the shining old brass andirons; and what quiet, solid, old-fashioned English comfort that light brings out! Two darty fiddlers are waiting on the back porch—waiting for a dram from «young



DRAWN BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

«IN LIEU OF AN OLIVE-BRANCH.»

cap'n,» as «young marster» is now called. They do not wait long. By the time darkness settles the fiddles are talking old tunes, and the nimble feet are busy. Like draws to like now, and the window-seats and the tall columns of the porch hear again what they have been listening to for so long. Corydon has drawn near. Does Phyllis sulk or look cold? Not Phyllis. You would not know that Corydon had ever left her side. It has been a day of sweet mischief to Phyllis.

At midnight they ride forth in pairs into the crisp, brilliant air and under the kindly moon. The white girth turns toward town with the thoroughbred at her side, and Corydon and Phyllis take the other way. They live on adjoining farms, these two. Phyllis has not forgotten; oh, no! There is mild torture awaiting Corydon long after he shall have forgotten the day, and he deserves it. Silly Corydon! to quarrel over nothing, and to think that he could make her jealous over that—the white girth is never phrased, for Phyllis stops there. It is not the first time these two have crossed foils. But there is peace now, and the little comedy of the day, seen by nearly every woman and by hardly a man, comes that night to a happy end.

John Fox, Jr.