

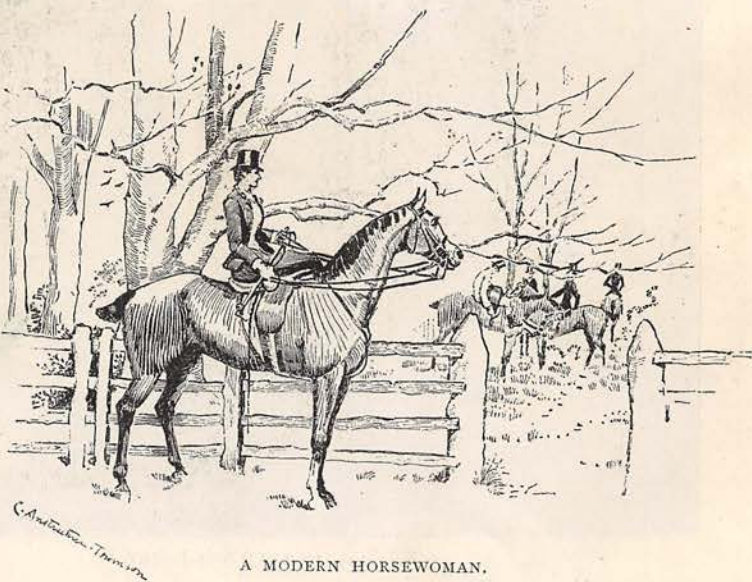


WOMEN ON HORSEBACK.

By C. ANSTRUTHER-THOMSON.

THE Female Centaur—whom antiquity conceived only as a mythological creature, appears at first sight as an exclusively nineteenth century production. Let us look at her for a moment. She sits straight and square on her narrow hunting saddle, restraining by a bend of her wrist subtly alternated with the intermittent reaching forward of his head, her strong and impatient horse; another second, and a whimper of the hounds has broken up the crowd of riders, the horse bounds forward, the reins are slipped on between the fingers, her body swings back; there is a perfect rhythm, almost an interchange of reflex motions, between the woman and her horse. An artist such as this, or rather such a work of art, could, one might think, have been produced only by the accumulated experience of centuries; but the truth is otherwise, and such consummate horsemanship is but the revival and adaptation of an art which disappeared six hundred years ago.

To meet this art again we must go back to the latter half of the fourteenth century, when the ladies spent their lives on horseback, hunting, hawking, or travelling, and, when much as the ladies of to-



A MODERN HORSEWOMAN.

day, they were not satisfied with spirited palfreys, but says the Chronicler, "must needs ride afield on chargers, like the Knights." They rode astride in those days, on saddles adapted from those of the knights, but their strong seats depended, not on grip, for these ladies did not ride by grip, but upon balance, and upon the leverage obtained by leaning against the saddle-back while pressing both knees forward against

the front pommels. That this was actually the case is evident from a beautiful fourteenth century woman's ivory saddle in the Bargello Museum ; the pressure of the knees has actually worn away the carving on the lower edge of the front pommel, while the pattern is intact in every other part. Curious to learn something of these ladies and their horsemanship, I opened a beautiful old MS. existing in the library at Florence ; it is written on vellum, and the illustrations are charming outlines drawn in light touches with dim brown ink. Here the mother of Tristram rides through a wood astride, as is the custom if not of mythical Britain, at least of mediæval Italy ; her dress falling to her feet on either side in long, straight folds, a foolish little dog barking in her pony's face, and a foolish little rabbit scampering off in alarm, while impossible little daisies and buttercups cluster everywhere among the roots of the little impossible pine trees. A few pages further on Queen Guinevere meets a knight riding in the wood ; they dismount and tether their horses to trees, and spread a tiny embroidered napkin on the grass, and they share two apples and a bowl of wine before leisurely going on their separate or united way. A little further a curly-headed lady comes riding along. I have reproduced the drawing as an illustration, for I would have you notice how poised she is upon the saddle, how easily she sits her big horse ; in the next drawing, taken from the same MS., the lady rides with shorter stirrups and a more hunting seat ; she is very strong, for though handling her



DIAGRAM SHOWING
14TH CENTURY SEAT.



IVORY SADDLE IN THE BARGELLO MUSEUM, FLORENCE.

horse delicately as a lady should, she stops him with one hand as easily as if he were a pony. On the next page I find a little lady riding boldly about in boots and breeches, but the orthodox riding costume of the day, about 1360, appears to have been a full dress of some long, soft, folding stuff divided to the knee, and the chaperon was worn as head covering. They were fine horsewomen, unquestionably, with their strong, easy seats and light hands. Charmed

with the faintly-outlined sketches of these dainty little riders, and wanting to see more of the people of those times, I turned for information to the great work of Viollet-le-Duc, and reading here and there I chanced upon some extracts which sheds some light upon the subject from a French fourteenth century hunting poem by the author of *La Roy Modus*.
 "It is fine to gallop through the woods when the hounds are running, to go well in front, and to make the stag break covert." Thus speaks one of the ladies in the poem, discussing with another horsewoman the comparative honours and pleasures of hunting as against hawking. "Let us imagine a fine summer morning, the 'Veneurs,' who went out early, have come in with their report, so one's mind is at ease. Cavaliers and ladies are equally light-hearted, one laughs, one plays, one is



CURLY-HEADED LADY FROM FLORENTINE MS.

as good of its kind, and it would be strange indeed if they had not ridden well, for at that time the people were fond of change, and travelled much, and all their travelling was on horseback, witness the Wyf of Bathe ("on hire fete a pair of Spores scharpe"), how she had been three times to Jerusalem, to Rome, and to "Boloynne," in "Galice to Seynt Jame," and finally to "Coloynne." All the world rode; men, women, and children. Horse litters existed and also springless carts, but they were rarely used but for invalids. After the Crusades Philippe le Bel issued an edict forbidding the bourgeois of France to use carriages. But judging by the pictures there can have been but small inducements to use them, for at best they were springless waggons drawn by a tandem and driven by a man who rode the wheeler. The roads appear to have been mere tracks, frequently impassable, so the art of coach-building made but slow progress, and it was only about the beginning of the sixteenth century, if I remember right, that carriages were built with springs. Queen Elizabeth had one and an English coach-maker went over to France in 1564 to build one for the Queen.

In the time of the Romans, ladies had carriages with springs, but I suppose it was the excellence of their roads that made it possible, and that rougher countries could not avail themselves of the invention, which therefore lapsed and became forgotten. The Roman women seem never to have ridden, nor do the Greeks, nor still further

amused, then one breakfasts on the grass, and those who can tell good stories tell them; then one gets into the saddle, the hounds are put on the scent, the huntsmen follow running and holloaing. Oh, then you hear horns blowing, if the forest is deep and the pack numerous the sounds of the hunt make your heart rejoice; the ladies ride in front, they view the stag, he is very big with a fine head, every one gallops in pursuit, every one shouts, and every one sounds the bugle, the cry of the hounds redoubles *si bien qu'on entendrait pas tonner Dieu*. What is a little bird on one's wrist compared to such a scene? Horses and men become equally excited, and let the best man win till the stag takes to the water. I don't even mention boar-hunting—but doesn't this beat the flying of all the ducks and mallard in your rivers?"

These mediæval hunting people seem to me not unlike the hunting people of the present, and their riding appears to have been almost



LADY IN A HOOD, FROM FLORENTINE MS.

back the Egyptians. I have no idea when women first began to ride, nor where it originated, nor what the causes were. The earliest mention I have met is about the middle of the tenth century, a carving on a stone sarcophagus of a lady hawking; but the heyday of women's riding seems to have been about the latter half of the fourteenth century when, mounted on their big chargers, they rode with the knights to the tournaments, dressed in parti-coloured clothes, gold chains round their necks, and embroidered girdles round their waists made in imitation of the sword-belts of the men, with absurd little daggers and pouches dangling down in front; but this lasted but a short time, for at the extreme end of the fourteenth century women's riding was revolutionized by the general adoption of the side-saddle. Insecurely seated women could no longer hold their own with the horsemen and all the comradeship, all the terms of equality on which they had hitherto ridden became a thing of the past; their freedom of movement in out-door life was regained only six centuries later with the invention of the modern side-saddle. The earliest saddles seem to have been adaptations of those used by the men, with the addition of a pommel on the right-hand side, some were furnished with a second shorter stirrup for greater safety, and saddle-cloths some feet in length were worn to protect the rider's clothes. A certain firmness of seat seems to have been secured by leaning back and pressing the right knee against the front of the saddle, but this tightness of fit made trotting impossible, and even galloping became a series of jerks instead of the flowing easy movement it had hitherto been. In short with this change went all the finer qualities of horsemanship, all the pliancy and strength so striking in the riding of the ladies of King Modus' Court. As a proof of this we may take Froissart's miniature of Queen Eleanor, in the absence of her husband, King Edward III., riding to inspect her army on the battle-field before Newcastle. Looking at her one feels that, brave and enterprising as she undoubtedly was, had it been a question of heading her troops for half-a-mile at a gallop she could not, thus seated, have done the thing, but must inevitably have slipped off and been ridden over by her own bodyguard.

But unsatisfactory as they were, side-saddles seem henceforth to have been universally used, and in 1380, at the jousts at Smithfield, King Richard II. was accompanied by many ladies "riding on one side and mounted on palfreys;" they were all sumptuously dressed with "hertis embrowdered on their Cotys"—the King's badge being a white hart—with jewels on their saddle-cloths and bridles sewn with pearls. The luxury of horse trappings seems at this time to have been pushed to incredible extravagance, but all vestiges of horsemanship must indeed have disappeared when the "Sambue" came into general use. It consisted of a thick, soft, silk-covered pad, both sides alike, so that the rider could sit on either side at will. Queen Isabeau de Bavière made her state entry into Paris in 1389 sitting on the left side according to Froissart's miniature, her example, as well as her person, being followed by all her ladies. The people of Paris gave her a Royal reception, and arranged a strange gala hunt in her honour, stocking the streets with hares, rabbits, and "oisillons." A hunt of a less exotic description was given by Louis XII. for the entertainment of the Archduke Maximilian, when somewhere about the year 1500 he visited France accompanied by his wife Mary of Burgundy. The Royal guests hunted with ardour till one disastrous day when the poor princess fell off, and died shortly after from the effects of the accident. Maximilian's grief was overwhelming and he mourned her loss so bitterly that the King, apparently, at his wit's end for a token of sympathy, made him a present of all his best falcons, this *naïf* consolation seems to have acted like a charm, and the Archduke, greatly consoled, forthwith hunted his way home to Austria.

It is only wonderful that more horsewomen did not meet their death, for mounted on such saddles galloping became an acrobatic feat; the danger did not, however, deter them from hunting, and even Mary Magdalen, of all unlikely people, appears in a picture by Lucas van Leyden, seated sideways—a halo round her head—galloping valiantly after a stag; but the painter himself must answer for the historical correctness of his picture, I do not produce it as evidence.

Crowds of ladies are "out" at a German hunt by Hans Schauflein of about the year 1520, but they are all very cautious, and their proceedings would have shocked the little ladies of the time of Le Roy Modus as much as they would shock the little hard-riding horsewomen of these modern days; for a group of them ride huddled together



DIAGRAM OF THE FIRST SIDE SADDLE

like sheep behind some trees, while in the foreground mounted on a loose hung cart horse a placid figure sits in a sort of



LADY IN BOOTS AND BREECHES, FROM FLORENTINE MS.

chair, apparently discussing household matters with a neighbour in a pillion. The hounds meanwhile have found two stags and are running hard across the middle distance, they are a ludicrous sight, poor ladies, at the same time rather a pitiful one, for in the course of the preceding century they lost all initiative, all horsemanship, and all freedom of action, and appear to have plodded soberly through a somewhat tedious existence, content or not content, as the case may be. Thus women's riding sank from bad to worse; till a hawking picture by Wouvermans shows a lady riding a white horse in a low dress with no hat, her veil and long draperies flying in the wind, holding a big feather fan in her bridle hand, and having a little pet dog *en croup*. But with her we reach the climax of ineptitude, and matters mend a little in the time of Louis XIV., when in a gala hunt at Fontainebleau the Court ladies appear in laced coats, and plumed hats, and wide-sweeping dresses, and ride their long-tailed horses gallantly enough; it looks an absurdly Courtly hunt judging by Van der Meulen's picture. The field apparently galloping by precedence; and even the stag fleeing along with a ludicrous air of

deference to Majesty. The side-saddles in use at this time appear to have had only one pommel, but the cantle was very much curled up at the back so as to make a sort of *point d'appui*, as opposed to the pressure on the stirrup; so they were perhaps safer than the flatter cantled saddle which succeeded them, and which had a second pommel to clasp the rider's right leg on the outside, but as the left leg hung loose in the stirrup the seat was mainly a matter of equilibrium. The little power obtainable being derived from the pressure of the right knee against the inner pommel, as opposed to the pressure of the right ankle against the saddle flap, but an instant's loss of balance made a fall un-

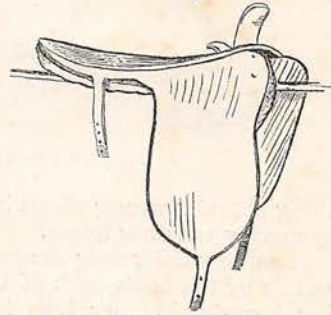


FROM A WOODCUT BY HANS SCHAUFLEIN.

avoidable, and of all the saddles we have seen this one appears to me by far the most unsafe and the least fitted for its purpose. Yet such were the saddles on which with infinite pluck and skill our grandmothers rode till the beginning of this century. What a touch-and-go seat it was, is shown by the following extract from an excellent little

primer on riding written about eighty years ago. "The stirrup is no security to the seat in any situation, the right leg is to be applied to the horse's shoulder with such firmness as to keep you down in the saddle, but be mindful that in getting his head down he does not pull your body forward lest you lose your balance and tumble over his head."

About the year 1830 by an accidental circumstance women's riding was again revolutionized. An Englishman made a wager to ride a steeplechase on a side-saddle; a preliminary trial showed him, I imagine, the rashness of the attempt; so to minimize the danger by enabling him to sit safely, Mr. Fitzhardinge Oldacre (I think) invented the third pommel. Looking back one wonders how it was that women had not long before invented it for themselves under the stress of urgent need. But one generation followed another, and no one seems to have thought of it. Once invented however it was immediately adopted, and a three pommelled side-saddle came into general use. This invention at once reinstated women's riding as a fine art by producing a new departure under improved conditions. For the grip obtainable by its means gives the greatest possible security in exchange for the least possible expenditure of force. Saddles of this kind were cumbersome and very heavy, but during the following fifty years the weight of construction was gradually reduced, and little by little every unnecessary item was cut away, till in course of time the three pommelled saddle evolved into the long light hunting saddle actually in use at present. It differs in several ways from its prototype, so I have sketched a twelve lb. saddle to show its peculiarities. In this modern saddle the long narrow cantle is built over a sort of tunnel which takes in the horse's withers, and allows the seat of the saddle to lie flat; while the old-fashioned seat sloped up and tilted the rider's knee with much the same effect as riding up hill. All traces of the outer pommel have disappeared, leaving a free space where no resistance is necessary. Finally, the left-hand pommel is placed high up the thigh where the grip is strongest, the pressure having formerly been placed just above the knee, so that a shorter stirrup was necessary; now such greater leverage led to an exaggeration of movement, which prevented all rhythm, for obviously the closer the rider can sit, the more possibility there will be of being "one" with the horse, of riding so as to blend with his action, of so to speak following the pattern of his movement.



A MODERN SIDE SADDLE.

In the modern saddle all modifications tend to diminish effort and by greater security to enable the rider to sit very still. Strength of seat seems to me to be the result roughly speaking, of three grips, caused by the opposing pressure of the two legs against the pommels; of these grips, the first results from the downward pressure of the whole length of the right thigh and the upward pressure of the left. The second is the grip, just above the knee, of the right thigh against the pommel, involving the pressure of the leg just above the ankle on the saddle-flap below; this grip is counterbalanced by the left leg's inward pressure at the knee. And thirdly the hook back of the right leg over the pommel as opposed to the pressure of the stirrup foot. Moreover by sitting far back the leverage of these three grips is increased, and the consequent distribution of the weight makes the balance right. The legs must be immovable on the saddle, but above the waist the body sways and gives to the horse's action, and from constant habit a good rider adjusts the balance almost by instinct, and carries on the horse's movements in a multiplicity of tiny curves which pass imperceptibly from one step to another without any jerk or abruptness of movement.

It is this pliancy and sway which distinguishes the "Centaur Woman," from other horsewomen, and it is the quality which I had in my mind when I spoke of the horsemanship of the ladies of King Modus's time as having been as good in its way as the bold and finished riding of the women of to-day. I know of course that they could not have lived through a run with a modern pack, and their horses could not certainly have crossed two fields of ridge and furrow in the shires; it would have been break-neck work at best, for in the event of a fall, they could not have been extricated from the high inclosing pommels of the saddle, and horse and rider must

inevitably have come down together, in all probability once for all; but in this quality of "centaurship" they hold their own I think with the riders both of present and of future times. Let me try and explain what this "centaurship" is, and

perhaps the simplest way to do so is to begin by showing what it is *not*, by the help of the accompanying sketch.



TROTGING AS IT SHOULD NOT BE.

thing actually wrong about it, but she has no grace of movement and she is not in sympathy with her horse.

See how differently the centaur women would do the same thing; rising from the saddle by the hook-back of the right knee aided by the pressure of the left against her horse's side, her legs hang loose below the knee instead of "riding with her boots," she presses very little on the stirrup but takes care to regulate her horse's pace by a light pull and a touch of her heel, making him move lightly and collectedly, so that at each step his action shall almost suffice to throw her slightly into the air without much exertion of her own; in coming down she catches her weight on the pommel under her right knee and distributes it all the way along her thigh, landing lightly and without jar in the saddle to be tossed up afresh by the next step, and so on.



TROTGING AS IT SHOULD BE.

There is, moreover, a curious intimate connection between the delicacy of a woman's fingers and the delicacy of a horse's mouth, enabling her to handle him in harmony with the rhythm of his action; taking up the reins with a delicate little pressure between his strides and relaxing again to leave him free as he steps out. The movement is so slight and subtle as to be barely perceptible, and is done by the spring of bent wrist and of fingers handling the reins as though fearing to break them. This handling in galloping has to harmonize to a quite different movement,