

LADY MINA MILLINGTOWER, M.F.H.

CHAPTER I.

MEADOWVALE is not one of the largest counties in England, yet agricultural authorities will agree with me in stating that it is one of the richest, an acre of its best soil yielding either in grass or grain double the produce which can be got from a similar extent of its neighbours lying to the north, south, east, or west of it. As regards its scenic beauties, it is unsurpassable; and were it not for its quiet lanes, its charming sylvan little lakes, its soft woodland glades, it is questionable, indeed, whether many who now write "R.A." to their names would have won their fame with the brush. It is the favourite haunt, too, of the quiet school of sportsmen, who love to angle in its clear waters during the spring-time; in autumn the knights of the triggers are always to be found amongst its stubbles or its turnips after partridges; and in winter men come from all parts of the country to have a few days with the Meadowvale—a pack the doings of which has been celebrated for years in the columns of the newspapers devoted to field sports and pastimes. The old county-town of Mead, at the time of our story, was never without society or some society movement, from a concert to recruit the lungs of the curate to a charity bazaar to mend the pipes of the broken-winded organ. People literally crept close together in the little place from sheer loneliness, just as sheep do in a snowstorm on the side of a mountain, just as strong men do in a snow-hut on an Arctic expedition. What Mead would have been without its influx of strangers, and the affable, social manner in which they were received, was a question which never entered into the minds of the good people of the place who made their living through catering to their wants; and the man who would have ventured to say that some day the "Medes," as they were familiarly termed by the strangers, would have done without the Persians, as the sportsmen liked to dub themselves, would have been looked upon as a spirit of evil who should be drummed out of the place by the common town crier.

It was at noon on a market day in this little place that a number of farmers were engaged in very serious conversation with a man whom people would say looked strange if they met him on the shore at Ramsgate or the pier at Brighton. There was nothing, however, *outré* about his appearance in a country town to a Shire farmer, bow-legged and short as he was, with hard muscular face, roast-beef complexion, and grey eyes. He was Dick Divotts, the huntsman, who had been with the Meadowvale for years, and had been, as some of them said, on "two sides of every fence in the country, sir, in the same two seconds;" and the subject of their conversation was the Meadowvale hounds, which had been hunted for years by old Lord Millingtower, the principal landowner in the country, but whose sudden death at his London house at the end of the last hunting season had caused some little gossip as to the probable doings of his successor. His Lordship's heir was Lady Mina Millingtower, an only daughter: good-looking and handsome, but such an Amazon that those who would have wooed were frightened of her, though every domestic about Millingtower said that there was "no more kind and amiable lady as ever breathed," and how it was a pity that her poor mother died so early and let her be spoiled by her father. Motherless sons are wild enough, in all conscience, but motherless and only daughters are proverbially apt to get spoiled by doating fathers.

"And what's this they're sayin' as you've been sayin', Dick, up at the King's Head?"

"What do they say I be sayin', Mister Greenvetch, at t' King's Head?"

"Sayin'! Why, they're sayin' as you said that Lady Mina was agoin' to hunt the Meadowvale herself, you rum owd rascal that you are; you're always a settin' 'em by their ears, just as if with the hounds yourself."

"That's all they're talkin' about yet, are they? Well, all I can say 'bout it, Mr. Greenvetch, is that they've got summat to talk about that's true, I tell 'ee, and that's more'n they get every market day in Mead."

"Eh! Why man alive, you don't tell me t' lass is actually goin' to take up the country herself? She's a bit skittish, I know, but, dang me, Dick Divotts, if I thought as she'd a thought o' doin' that!"

“Well, that’s all I knows yet ; hunt the country this season she will, and I’d like to see the gent in this ’ere Shire as ’ll say Lady Mina Millingtower, my old master’s—God bless him !—only daughter won’t do a thing once she’s taken a mind to it.”

“Well, I’d heard last Friday at Nokes market as my landlord, Sir Philip, was goin’ to hunt t’ shire by subscription, and was goin’ to take over the pack.”

“He’d a liked to have done so, I daresay ; but it’s as like as not, Mr. Greenvetch, as that very talk made Lady Mina resolve to do what she’s goin’ to do this season, and you know why.”

“Jilted her, didn’t he ?”

“Jilt, the —— ! I begs yer pardin. No ; yer landlord, nor no other man in the country, ever had the pluck to do that ! Why, my old master, cripple as he was, would a stood upon his crutches and shot him ! But I daresay he wouldn’t a needed. She’d a settled matters herself.”

“Well, there was something, for they were a bit thick, you know, and you know it was hinted at in the Lunnon papers.”

“So there was, but it never came to jilting. If you want to have it, *he funked it*, as I have seen him do more than once when he didn’t like the looks of things in front of him. And I’ll tell you how it was, for I was there. We were a-comin’ on together with hounds pressin’ their fox hard in Drybottoms, Lady Mina, and me, and your master—I beg your pardon, *landlord*. Well, she was ridin’ a great, big, striding bay, just sent down from London—not one of ’em as is recommended as being ridden by a lady, for she’d have nowt to do wi’ such spiled cattle, she’d say—and he twisted his mouth about and commenced to run awkward with the Bottoms ditch six feet full of water just in front. Sir Philip was close alongside, and didn’t seem to like the look of things, or he’d given her a lead. Losing her temper, however, she slipped a word—excusable in you or me, or mayhap in my missus or your missus, at times. It wasn’t a *good* word, or it wasn’t a bad one either, just as circumstances go ; but my old lord had a habit o’ sayin’ it when in temper before his daughter, and, you see, t’ lass maybe couldn’t help it. However, Sir Philip ‘funked’ the ditch, and my lady, too. But it strikes me very hard his own present lady has let him know some strange language since, and I heard him a-gettin’ it from

her one day herself. *Jilt* my Lady Mina Millingtower! Lor' bless you, no, sir."

"Well, Divotts, as you will; but I think it would be more like Sir Philip Daveney hunting the Meadowvale Hounds than a lady, and don't let your tongue carry you too far, for you might be asked to serve under him some day."

"Well, I might be *axed*, as you say," said the old huntsman, drily; "but I never yet worked under a muff of a master yet, and I never shall. I couldn't do it; and with no family and a little bit in the bank, Dick Divotts can afford to look on if it comes to that; but one thing I know, I've got a home at Meadowvale so long as my lady lives, and that's maybe more'n you've got on t' Daveney estates."

It was possibly well for the old huntsman that he uttered these words, as the farmer bade him good-bye, in an undertone, for just at that minute the group divided to allow a gentleman to pass. It was the baronet of whom they had been speaking; along with him was the Treasurer of the Covert Fund, who motioned the old huntsman to step aside.

"Of course you've heard the step her ladyship means to take regarding the hunting of the county, Divotts?" said the former.

"I heard it from herself a week ago. Fact is, I've the letter in my pocket now."

"Never mind the letter. What do you think of such a step?" said Sir Philip, impatiently.

"Well, I don't think there's anyone in the whole country knows so much about huntin' as herself," said the old huntsman, proudly; "she knows every hound in the pack, and my lord, her father, used to say she knew more than hisself, and I dare say, Sir Philip, you know how well she can ride across country."

"Ahem!" said the baronet, with a short, stiff, sulky bow. "Good morning; she'll spoil the country, that is all."

And however great a "craner" the baronet may have been, there was truth in the remark, for it was not likely that the hard-riding men of the Meadowvale were going to stand the badinage of the followers of every other pack within a hundred miles round as being under petticoat government. Dick Divotts, who had gathered much cunning out of the fox from long following him, turned and laughed in his sleeve, and said, "Well, I wonder

how it'll all go. One thing is certain, if I stick to Lady Mina, Lady Mina will stick to the old missus and me. But I must get out of Mead this market day, or with a drop of ale I'll be babbling like an owd turkeycock, and every farmer is wantin' to draw me out. So one glass of good ale at the Head, and then home."

CHAPTER II.

IT was the last week of July, and London, gay London, was stretching her wings like a migratory bird preparing for a long ocean flight. Parliament was sitting far on into the night, and the careless Bohemian, as he wandered homeward in what are called the "small hours," saw the lamp on the gilded tower of Westminster grow dim against the first streaks of the rising sun, like the anchor-light on the forestay of a yacht in early morning. "Parliament was likely to sit," said the newspapers, "till far on in August," so that Society could not be expected to wait for it. For three or four weeks paragraphs had been appearing which announced that Lord Kohl Rabi had taken Tappitstane Towers, with the deep forests, moors, and fishings, for the season, and that Sir Sappho Sordstyx would be the guest of The MacMarrow at Glenmarrow during the coming shooting season. Who would to Goodwood were at Goodwood, and some there were—but this hasgot to be characteristic of Cowes—determined to hang on for some yachting by the Isle of Wight. It was cheap, if lonely. The Park was not deserted, the Row still had its charms. People paraded in the walk on the Sunday afternoons as formerly, and in easy, negligent attitudes stretched themselves on their penny chairs under the leafy trees. Now and then some notable would pass, and lady or gentleman would come in for some remarks of a complimentary or uncomplimentary nature. Complexions were commented upon, but ladies are never content with so shallow a thing as the complexion; and so their characters also came under the handrake. Perhaps as she walked stately down through the ranks of the critics, there was no one who came in for more attention than Lady Mina Millingtower. The deep mourning well became her, and the masses of crape contrasted well with her golden

hair, which beamed in the sunshine. Her face was the face of health, but now and then one could see that it was haunted by some care. She looked as if she felt conscious that the eyes of every one were upon her, *and they were*. In the last edition of the leading organ of fashionable Society had appeared a paragraph which, in the usual way, stated that "a considerable amount of gossip had been caused amongst hunting men by the announcement of the fact, in a well-informed country journal, that Lady Mina Millingtower, the wealthy heiress, &c.," and so on. What annoyed her was the fact that it contained a statement or two which she wished only to be known by her huntsman and herself. How did they come out? Alas! poor Divotts; that last glass at the King's Head and some banter from the farmers had made you babble, as you expressed it, like a turkeycock, and the editor of the country journal had, in strict confidence—as if there were ever such a thing about a country editor—had a look at my lady's letter. As soon as that letter was shown depend upon it the greedy ears of London were opened wide, and not in vain.

Lady Mina Millingtower was now the subject of gossip in every club, and fortunate was it for her that the season was so near an end. Feeling that she was being talked about, the fair Amazon resolved not to tarry long in the Great City, but to return to her ancestral home at once, where she at least knew she held the hearts of her people, and was free from the evil effects of all innuendoes and insinuations. So ere Society met for their last Sunday's tittle-tattle under the lime-trees, she was home at Millingtowers gazing from the topmost turret at the country, golden with the ripening grain; following the hounds over fields, with her memory of glorious hunting days, far away on to the dip of the horizon, and wondering much about the hunting days to come. Seizing her guitar, which she had laid down for a moment, she, with heaving heart and full sweet contralto voice, as her hair waved in the breeze and shone in the sun like the top of a bursting wave, sang of her love for her lands:

Oh, talk not of their joys of town,
Their picnics, routs, and dances,

But let me to the country down—
I've simple country fancies.
I love to hear the lark at morn,
I love to hear the hunting-horn,
And, oh, the waving, yellow corn
My simple heart entrances.

When pent-up in the playhouse stalls,
Oh, little are they thinking,
They miss the balmy dew that falls,
The lark at eve is drinking.
But dearer still than all to me
Is golden field or gowan lea
On bush, or briar, or woodland tree,
When summer's sun is sinking.

Oh fields, and lakes, and streams my own,
My love I scarce can prove you,
And woodland glades that's round you grown,
And sky that gleams above you.
You wild birds that do sing at e'en,
You bees that flit the flowery scene,
My heart is all your own, I ween,
Oh, how I do so love you.

She had just finished, with tears streaming from her eyes, when a servant announced the huntsman.

CHAPTER III.

It was Dick Divotts' first meeting with Lady Mina since his good old master died, and there was naturally a little soft-heartedness shown by both, though it did not get as far as blubbering, and the subject was at once changed from death to business.

"And what do the people say about it, Divotts," she asked eagerly, "now that they know it is my firm intention?"

"Well, there be some as says that it won't make much of a difference, as you allus was master before my lord, your father, died; but Sir Philip and a lot of 'em thinks that it won't do.

They don't seem to like the idea, that's all. Farmers all seem to take kindly to it, but the wimmen folks are all dead against it *to a man*," continued the huntsman.

"That might have been expected," was the reply; "however, that does not matter; we shall see. *One* man shall not hunt the country if I can help that, Divotts; and till I can make this certain, Lady Mina Millingtower is M.F.H. of the Meadowvale, and things will just go on the same as if your late master were alive."

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When harvest was three-parts over Dick Divotts was kept very busy cub-hunting, and was joined by many of the hard-riding young country squires and farmers, who all tried to draw the old man, with blank draws as the invariable result.

"D'ye see yon castle through the trees? It's just a nice ride over, and you might see my lady herself. She'd let you know, I dare say, a good deal better than an old man like me," he would answer.

Lady Mina contented herself with a few visits to the kennels to see the old man at the close of the day's work. At last came that day in the end of October when the first cards of the fixtures were sent out, not from the office of the Secretary of the Covert Fund, who was a known Sir Philipite, but from the office of the steward of the estate. Pedlar's Pike was the fixture, as it had been from time immemorial with Meadowvale opening days, but the pike-keeper was sore dismayed on finding that instead of a long string of carriages as on former occasions only a few vehicles, mostly hired at Mead, rumbled into view. Not one drag, not one tandem cart was there, and as the hour, eleven, drew near it really looked as if there had been some doubt as to the appointed place of rendezvous. City men, in gorgeous hunting array, with their money all *over*, instead of under them, were in strong force, while the Millingtower hunting farmers were there every one. Customary good greetings were as hearty as heretofore, but these were very early subdued into hushed whisperings, which dropped to a dead silence when the hounds appeared in view with the new M.F.H., in green habit, surmounted with red jacket and hunting cap, appeared in view. As she bowed to all, however, one could see from her lip that she missed the faces, and knew what she suspected might prove



Lady Mina, M.F.H.
reads the "Riot Act."

the case : the country was on strike. "Well, let them please themselves," she remarked inwardly, though she could not help thinking that she might be going too far, out of sheer pique.

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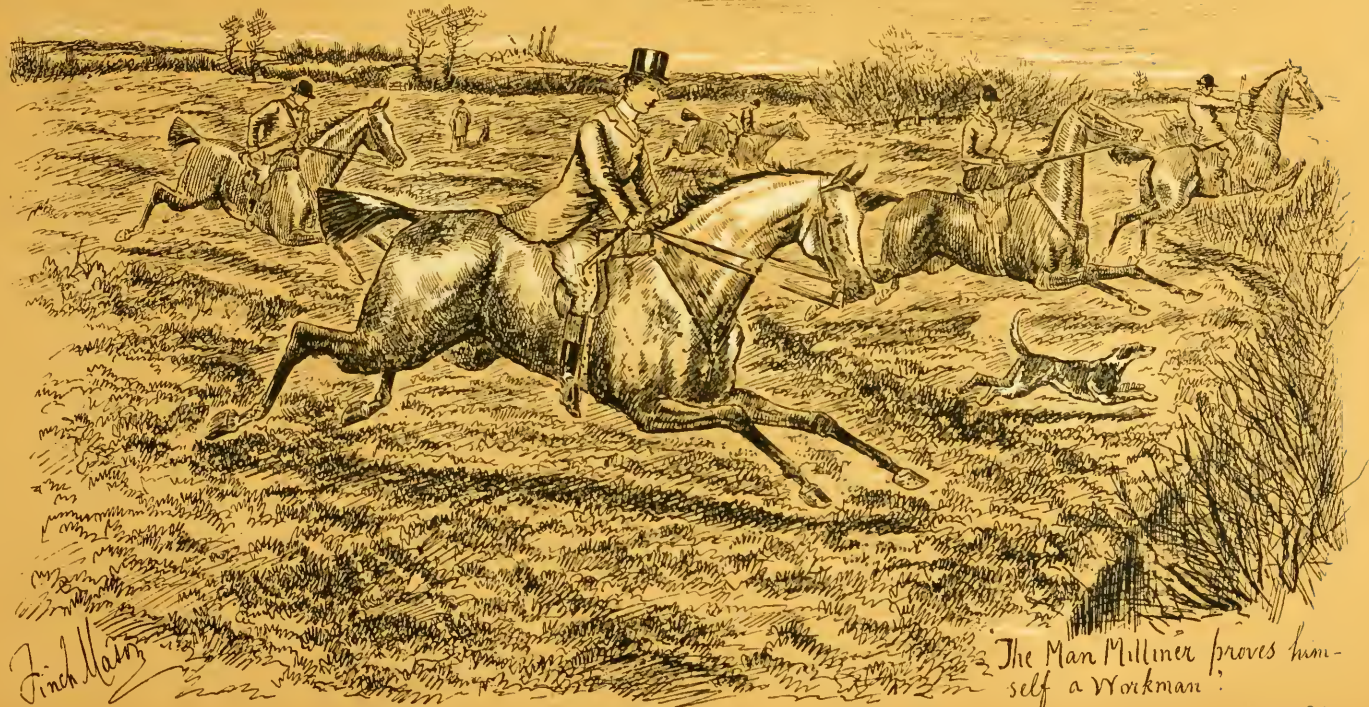
The opening day passed off quietly and with little sport, which as a rule is the case with opening days. The first week passed without a good thing ; the second with one of the best things, the *London Park* Correspondent said, that had ever been experienced in the country. Still the country people held aloof, and the fields got thinner every day. A Master of Foxhounds may give rebukes to members which can be readily forgiven ; a Mistress of Foxhounds only those which fester and rankle.

Lady Mina Millingtower had a hasty temper, and it was made worse with the knowledge of the fact that she was the daily subject of conversation for a hundred miles round. Little paragraphs, too, at times, she knew to be pointed at her, many of them, no doubt, from the gall-dipped pens of her own sex. "She hunts the country for a set of sporting tailors who come down by train from Shoddyham," said one, "and seems rather to court their society." After this, the sporting tailors had a very bad time of it, and in the end began to think of staying at home also.

One, who persisted in talking loud at the covert-side was gently reminded to leave his goose at home in future if he could not keep it from cackling, while a second, who made a feeble attempt at a view holloa, was asked if his mamma did not think it dangerous to allow him out before he had got over the whooping-cough. On the opening day of the sixth week the field was reduced to the worthy M.F.H., the huntsman and whips, a couple of farmers, a local vet., and a few of the town brigade. How and when was it going to end was the question. Dick Divotts said he thought he could answer it, and he said it would be when not a single stranger would come forward. For this, it was evident, they had not to wait long, for on the following Monday, when they met at Pedlar's Pike, the field comprised only one man, a handsome-looking gentleman of about twenty-five years of age, with slightly bronzed complexion, who certainly never had been out with the Meadowvale before.

His loneliness seemed rather to surprise himself, and it was not till hounds were thrown in in the covert at hand that he found himself even more lonely than the young and fair horseman in G. P. R. James's novels, who had always a dark and tall companion. Not knowing the country, and having no one to guide him, it was but natural that he should make mistakes. And so he did, for he headed the fox, and had the mortification of hearing himself alluded to in a remark to the huntsman as a man milliner from Mead, probably just off the sewing machine. But the fox did get away eventually, and, being stout, strong, and straight-necked, soon had the hounds streaming behind him, with the Man Milliner, the M.F.H., and Dickie Divotts going well and steadily in their wake. Mile after mile was covered, hedges topped, ditches flown, valleys sunk and hills risen without a check, and in the end he was pulled down in a lea-field, with the stranger in the field behind him. The death rites were soon over, and the huntsmen handed the brush to the fair M.F.H., who felt as embarrassed in the situation she was placed in as did the stranger, the Man Milliner, to whom she had to present it. It was Leap Year certainly in the hunting-field, and something altogether new in his experience. Still, it was done with blushes on both faces, while the huntsman and whips sniggered in their sleeves.

It will suffice to say that at a hunt ball in a neighbouring county town three days afterwards Lady Mina Millingtower had introduced to her by an old friend Sir Robert Mangford, a son of an old friend of her father's, and one of the ablest hunting men in the shires. There were apologies made about heading foxes, and calling people "men milliners." There was a promise given to come and take the Meadowvale horn, and a condition made and agreed that the hand that gave it should go along with it. A week after that there was a wedding, a week after that a homecoming, and a week after that the biggest field met at Pedlar's Pike that had ever been seen with the Meadowvale. Lady Mina was there, but it was as Lady Mina Mangford, not Lady Mina Millingtower, M.F.H.



Finch Hain

The Man Milliner proves himself a Workman.

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