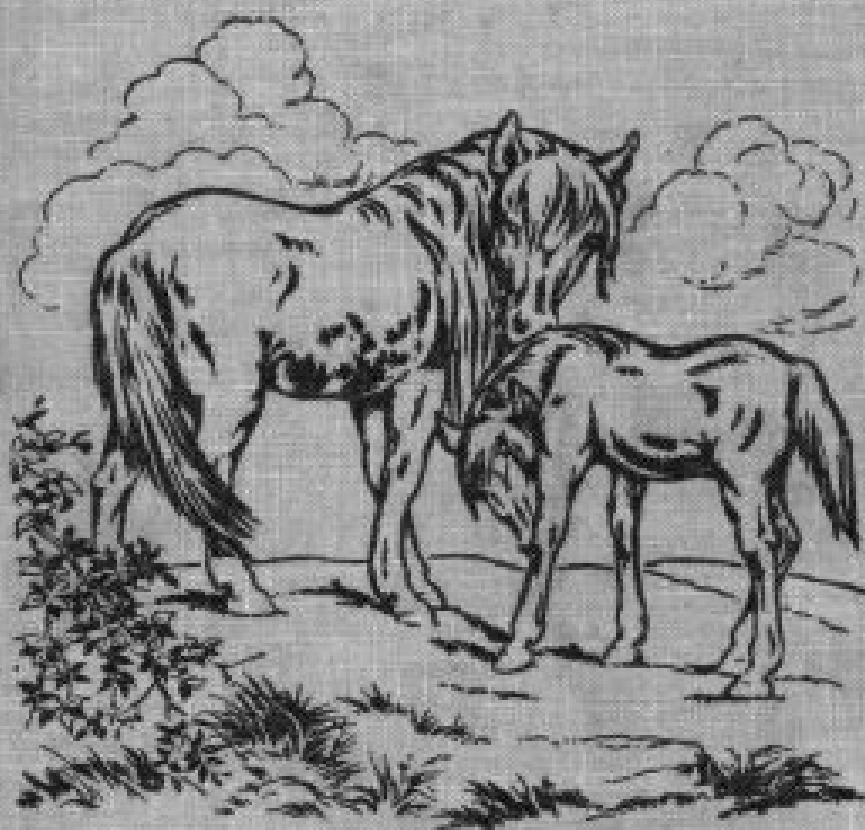


# SKEWBALD

## THE NEW FOREST PONY



BY ALLEN W. SEABY

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SKEWBALD AND HIS MOTHER

# SKEWBALD

## THE NEW FOREST PONY

By ALLEN W. SEABY

AUTHOR OF  
“EXMOOR LASS, AND OTHER PONY STORIES”  
AND “THE BIRDS OF THE AIR; OR, BRITISH BIRDS IN THEIR HAUNTS”



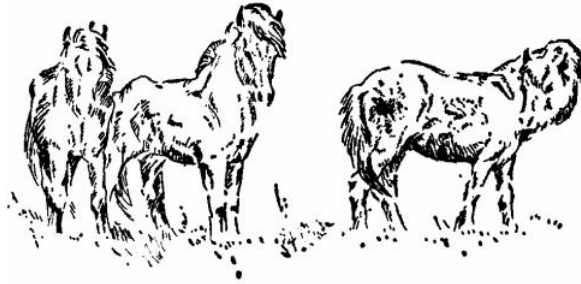
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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALL the characters, human and equine, in this story are fictitious.





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Map of The New Forest

SKEWBALD  
THE NEW FOREST PONY





## I.—THE HERD

ONE hot June afternoon, a group of ponies with their foals and yearlings stood on the edge of a tableland or “plain” in the New Forest. The ground about them was covered with stunted heather and fern, with here and there patches of moss and bare white gravel showing the poverty of the soil.

Beyond the company was a great expanse of blue sky flecked with pinkish cloudlets, and, on the horizon, blue and violet wooded heights, a crinkly contour denoting oak and beech and an evenly serrated line, plantations of firs. As everyone who has journeyed from Southampton to Bournemouth by road or rail knows, a great part of the forest is open heath or moorland; but, unlike the barren wilds of the Highlands, the New Forest has also extensive woods full of gigantic oaks and beeches, while the open ground in many places is becoming choked with self-sown firs.

Therefore, looking into the distance, the masses of woodland largely concealed the open spaces. Emery Down showed on the horizon, the sun fell on the spire of Lyndhurst Church, and in the middle distance a white curving ribbon showed itself as a forest road, before it was lost among the trees.

Below the ponies was a wide valley, covered with coarse grass, and dotted with hollies, gorse and stunted firs. The mares had chosen the hill for their afternoon siesta because up there were fewer flies and biting torments than down below in the swampy bottoms, where, earlier in the day, the ponies had been feeding. They stood mostly in pairs, head to tail, so that the swish of the latter drove the flies from their noses and flanks. Once in a while, a yearling—that is, one born the previous year—finding the sun too hot, butted in between the mares.

The foals or “suckers” lay half-hidden in the heather, wandered here and there

nibbling at the herbage, or drew nourishment from their mothers. These varied greatly in colour and size. The tallest was a black mare with the graceful lines of the racehorse, as well there might be, seeing she had some of the blood of that breed in her veins. Next her stood an old white mare, bleached with age, for, while the forest ponies exhibit the usual equine diversity of hues, there are none all white. In her prime she had been a grey, perhaps a beautiful pearl grey with a few darker dapplings, like her neighbour, a young mare with her first foal, black of coat except for a white forehead blaze and fore-foot. Close by stood, and dozed, a chestnut mare with a mane and tail of pure gold, or so it seemed in the sunshine. There were also bays, with black manes and tails, but the commonest colour in the group was a dark brown. It was noticeable that most of the foals were darker in colour than their mothers.

Standing by themselves were two dingy brown ponies, a mare and a two-year-old, shorter of leg than the other adults. Their necks showed little of the arch of a well-shaped animal—indeed, both ponies were almost donkey-like in shape, with hollow backs, drooping bellies, and “cow-hocked” hind-legs. The mare had a beard hanging below her chin.

Almost their exact counterpart, even to the beard, had been set down, ages before, in the wall-paintings and drawings scratched on bone of the old Stone Age. These two, one might suppose, were throw-backs to the old forest pony, which was hunted, or possibly domesticated, by the men whose remains were interred in the mounds dotted over the forest. Indeed, close by stood a great tumulus, and some way off was a group of nine mounds, big and little, like parents and children.

Of the other ponies, several showed the attempts at improving the breed practised of late years. One had the short leg of the Exmoor pony, another the tiny ear of the Shetland, others the shapely line of the polo and even of the Arab, for at one time or another all these, and others, have been used as sires. In some cases the importation threatened to improve the race off the forest altogether. It is no land of milk and honey, for the green pastures and lush spots are not in themselves extensive enough to support the stock of ponies, and only those which can exist on the coarse tussock grass, the sweet but prickly shoots of gorse, and the astringent heather tufts, are sure of surviving. Also a good proportion of the ponies stay out in the forest all the winter; and though snow does not fall frequently or lie long in this locality, yet the weather is often colder than in the Shetlands, where the little pony of the far North, his ears buried in his shaggy mane, and a doormat-like thatch on his back, winters without difficulty.

But here, at the other extreme of Britain, if there come a long spell of bleak wet

weather, and especially if sharp frosts intervene, the younger ponies are likely to suffer, and a man, seeing his neighbour's yearling looking "seedy," will think it his duty to inform the owner, who, unless careless and improvident, will have the creature "caught in," and give it shelter and food.

Perhaps the most striking in colour of the group on the hill was a chestnut mare, of that rich hue known as "liver" chestnut. In the sun her coat flashed bright orange-red, while by contrast it appeared deep purple in the shade. Her foal at the moment was lying in the heather, out of sight. When at length he arose, one saw why he could lie hidden so completely, for he was so small and evidently had not long been born. Compared with the other foals, which were now well grown, though still leggy, the colt seemed absurdly disproportioned, and with his big head, long ears, and bent hind-legs looked, apart from his colour, more like a fawn than a pony in the making. His body was so meagre that it seemed merely a connecting-link between his fore and hind quarters. As he stood up he swayed to and fro. His little napping tail looked exactly like the strip of goatskin nailed on to form the tail of those wooden steeds which were being made, not so far away from where the ponies stood, in the toy factory at Brockenhurst.

But the interesting thing about him was his colour, for he was a "skewbald," patterned boldly in chestnut and white. Nearly all the other foals were dark, and it was as yet almost impossible to foretell their exact adult colour. Alone among the youngsters, the skewbald foal showed what his coat would be like when he was full grown. Although so young, he possessed the agility of young creatures which have no period of sheltered repose, unlike fledglings in the nest, or the young fawn hardly able to stand, and hidden by its mother while it gathers strength. In his way the foal was as nimble and alive as young partridge or lapwing chicks. He trotted to his mother, took nourishment with the curious twisted neck characteristic of the attitude of a foal when feeding, and relapsed from sight among the heather.

Nearly all the mares had shaggy manes and tails, and the hair hung down over their foreheads so as almost to conceal their eyes. The foals had manes standing up along their necks as if they had been "hogged," and their fore hair rose in a curious tuft between their ears.

The ponies, to all appearance, were as tame as any stable animal, and they would not have retreated if a man had quietly approached them or gone past at a distance of a few yards; unless, of course, he had used a binocular or camera, when the flash of light from glass or metal would have caused them to start and make off. A horseman, however, would be a different matter, and they would have been on the move long before he reached them.

At a nearer view the branding marks on the mares and yearlings could be seen, mostly on the back where a saddle would cover it, but sometimes on the shoulder. These marks indicated the initials or devices of their owners, commoners of the forest, or Crown tenants, who have the right of pasturing their ponies, the Crown demanding a small annual sum for each animal put out in the forest.

These marked ponies had the hair of their tails cut curiously. This had been done by the agisters, forest officers with numerous and complicated duties. The forest is divided into three districts, each served by an agister, and each district has its own way of marking the tails of the ponies registered by him. In one district the lower third of the hair is cut away, leaving a centre tassel; in the other two half the lower third is cut off on the right and left respectively. Thus an agister can tell at a glance whether a pony belongs to his district or not. The cut tail is, in effect, a receipt, testifying that the pony's owner has registered it and paid the dues.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lord and master of the herd on the hill, the stallion, was not, for the moment, in sight. He might have been cooling his heels in a stream, dozing among the gnarled, ingrown hollies, which, with their twisted branches, look fully as grotesque as any of Mr. Rackham's picturing, or have gone off to turn back a mare wandering away down the valley.

Presently a shrill whistling call was heard, and the mares showed signs of animation; ears were pricked up and heads flung round. Up the hill came the stallion with a pounding step. He was a bright bay with a big white blotch on his back. His forelock covered his white forehead blaze, and his eyes also, for all one could see. The black hair of his mane and tail was crimped or waved, unlike the lank locks of the mares. He moved with a vigorous action, lifting his feet high, and with a long stride. He carried his tail with a finer sweep than the mares, while his mane rose and fell with the energetic movement of his neck. His coat was glossy, and the high lights rippling to and fro on the bright sienna surface were golden in the sun and blue in the shade. When he reached the summit he stopped, looking back with twitching ears. He snorted and hurried to the group of ponies, and past them, then stopped, and the herd, understanding, prepared to follow their leader, the mares calling to their recumbent foals, which rose to their feet and stretched before cantering to their mothers. The cavalcade moved off, only the dappled grey remaining motionless. She was wilful or lazy. The stallion took a few quick paces back and touched her with his nose as a hint to move on. She whinnied crossly and tried to strike him with a fore-

foot. He lowered his head, bared his teeth and snorted, whereupon she thought better of it, and moved off. The stallion trotted to the head of the column, and looked round to see that all were following.

As they went down the hill, two riders showed on the ridge to the right, a man on a tall white horse and a boy on a forest pony.

“Look, sonny,” said the horseman, “that was the stallion walking before us up the hill. He has warned his mares and set them all going. How fine they look in a bunch with their varying colours! Seems a pity,” he continued, “that these fine creatures should have to go down into the coal-mines.”

“Let’s ride down and stir them up, dad,” suggested the lad.

“Not a bit of it,” his father answered. “We should want a good reason to disturb mares with young foals. The forest people would think us very inconsiderate. Remember,” with a smile, “you may be a verderer yourself some day, and sit in the court hall at Lyndhurst, where the big stirrup hangs on the wall. We’ll make off to the right and watch them as we go.”

As the ponies saw their supposed pursuers getting further from them, they relaxed their pace, stopped, and fell to grazing.

Only the stallion, still suspicious, kept his head up, and trotted a little way towards the receding figures, watching the intruders until they disappeared behind a rise.

Then he turned and walked to the little stream in which some of the ponies were standing, fetlock-deep, or drinking.





*Blackdown.*



## II.—THE FOAL

DURING July the herd wandered over moor and “plain” or in the woods, keeping to their unmarked, though to them fairly well-defined, territory of several square miles. Outside those limits were other herds, with their leaders ready to take offence at the presence of strange males.

The little skewbald foal kept away from the other youngsters, for they were too big and strong for him to play with; but by good fortune a brown mare with a colt of the same colour, and about the same age as Skewbald, joined the party. What with milk and nibblings of heather and the lush grass of the bottoms, the little foals grew apace and became playmates.

In the late afternoons before the long evening feed, the pair would gambol with all the abandon of youth, while their mothers stood head to tail, jerking manes, waving tails, shaking fore-legs, and ever and anon changing the weight from one hind-leg to another. The colts would race across the meadow where the herd was pasturing, then stop dead, and stand nose to nose, watching for the other’s next move; one would rear up suddenly, startling his playfellow, and race away in glee. Then followed a biting of manes and nibbling of shoulders like any old couple. At times they grew rougher in their play. They ran shoulder to shoulder, trying to bite, or, rearing up on hind-legs like veterans, indulged in an orgy of make-believe biting and kicking.

But, for the greater part of the day, life went quietly with the little foal. His mane, half white and chestnut with a streak of black, was growing fast. His barrel was filling out, and his legs growing straight and strong. His slender muzzle poked about everywhere, and his tail flapped continually.

In the hot July days, the colt and his mother wandered over the hills, and by the

little streams meandering along the bottoms except where the gurgling water was checked, and collected to form a bog. Sometimes the stream was bordered with birch and alder, growing in a soggy bed, littered with dead wood, and choked with undergrowth. Tracks ran in and out among the trees, worn by the hoofs of generations of ponies. Here, the deeper water flowed more slowly. One afternoon, as Skewbald paused at the edge to nibble at a bed of watercress, his mother snorted at two curious objects moving on the surface of the water, two bristling cat-like heads with small ears and a swirling of water behind. They were otters, steering themselves with their thick tails.

Once he nearly stepped on a snipe, her head so far immersed in a muddy pool that she was not aware of an intruder until the hoof was almost upon her, and then what a fluttering and zig-zagging and crying of "scape-scape!" Another time, but this was next year, in spring, as he dawdled around the edge of the wood among the dead bracken, he nosed against a brown stem. It moved, and suddenly became part of the barred head and widely opened eyes of a sitting woodcock, her buff, grey and white back matching the dead leaves and bracken, and her long beak indistinguishable from the stalks of the fern.

At one point the stream opened out into a wide shallow with a pebbly bottom where the little trout played. Tracks led into the stream and out on the other side, for this was a forest ford.

How pleasant the colts found the water, enjoying the splashing of their hoofs as they walked in the stream, the while their elders stood fetlock-deep! How refreshing to take a deep drink, head and neck inclined at just the right angle so that the nostrils were clear of the water, followed by a snort of content!

After whiling away the hotter hours thus, the ponies would take the tracks towards the hill. As they got higher, the white stones showed in the thin crust of soil, and the heather grew more sparsely. One August afternoon, while rounding a gorsebush which shaded a patch of bare blackish soil, strewn with dead sticks and gravel, the colt almost touched with his nose what looked like a piece of dead wood covered with grey lichen and spots of orange fungus, when, on the moment, the thing came to life. The lichen and fungus became grey-tipped and barred feathers, the stalk-like projection opened in half, disclosing a great, rose-pink, frog-like mouth—a mouth so enormous and menacing, that Skewbald shrunk back. Then the mother nightjar appeared from nowhere, and croaking and spluttering she fluttered right before the foal's nose, so that his attention was distracted from her young one. If he had looked again he would have found the gaping mouth and widely spread wings gone, and the young chick again reduced to the semblance of an unattractive lump.

Sometimes the ponies would take the open moor with its coarse grass, scanty tufts of heather, and sweet-scented bog myrtle. Much of it was swamp, and the mare watched her offspring to see that he did not venture into one of the deep bogs known only to the forest men, and to the ponies and deer. If he were rash, she called him on to safety, while if he were obstinate, she butted him with her forehead on to drier ground.

In places the moor was curiously patterned, like a chessboard, a tuft of heather next a patch of bare soil. This was owing to the peat-cutting, a right possessed by the commoners, who, however, are required "to cut one and leave two," so that the soil should not be deprived altogether of vegetable growth.

In early September the colt may have seen the forest gentian, a single blossom of a beautiful violet-blue on an erect stalk, while the seed-pods of the bog asphodel close by, of a vivid orange-yellow, formed a perfect colour complementary. But do ponies see colours? They apparently see well by night, which would seem to show that a large part of their retina consists of structures adapted for nocturnal vision, just as the outer part of the human retina only is used at dusk, the inner being practically blind at this time, and therefore green foliage and grass turn grey, and red flowers appear black, red and green being seen only with that part of the retina concerned with diurnal vision.

About this time, too, as he crossed a sandy forest path, he may have seen the brilliantly green caterpillar of the emperor moth, its sides spotted with pink, full fed, and wandering about seeking a site for its cocoon. Was he able to detect the same creature on its natural resting-place, the heather, practically invisible to human eyes, when motionless; its green merged into the leafage, and the pink spots simulating heather buds?

Certainly the heather the year of Skewbald's birth was of a brilliance such that the oldest forest man declared he had never seen equalled. Especially was this the case on the most barren gravelly spots, where instead of the usual magenta, clumps of the brightest crimson blazed in the sun.

In the warm September days life passed pleasantly. Through the cold, clear nights, while Vega blazed above, he paced on with his mother, ever nibbling, for, like his kind, he did not spend the long nights in sleep, but towards dawn lay down for an hour or so. His coat, fast thickening, kept him warm, even when just after sunrise a white frost covered every blade of grass, heather tuft, and fern frond. As the sun rose higher, the frost turned to a heavy dew in which the colt wandered, the wet bog myrtle washing him to the shoulder, while the rays, shining through the mist, enveloped him with a golden aura.

Later in the day he plodded up the hill on to the “plain,” and while his mother dozed in the shade of a clump of holly, he would roll in a patch of brilliantly white or golden sand. Once as he bent his knees to lie down, a grey-brown thing like a dead furze branch suddenly galvanized into life with a hiss. As the viper moved, the colt, with a snort of astonishment, jumped all four feet in the air at once, and the mother rushed towards him. She saw the reptile gliding along the path, and turned sharply away, calling the colt to her.

So Skewbald learned to avoid a snake, and incidentally that he could jump. He practised this on occasion, leaping over fallen stumps, across streamlets and shallow pits, not knowing how useful an accomplishment it might prove to him in after-life.





### III.—THE CHASE

THE waning of September, with its sunny days, cold nights, and morning mists, made little difference to the ponies' daily routine. Apparently they were as free to go where they listed as any wild Western herd. But their owners kept an eye on them, and left them there or had them "caught in," as they pleased.

Later in the year strings of ponies would wend their way to the Brockenhurst sales, but it chanced that the owner of the bay leader of the herd in which Skewbald ran, decided to have him in before he got busy catching other people's ponies, which was always the case towards the end of the year, as he was an adept at the game.

The shadows of a golden afternoon were lengthening, and the herd, scattered over a mile of valley bottom, was getting to work after the midday siesta, when a horseman appeared on the skyline at the head of the valley. It was the colt-hunter seeking his property. A moment later another rider came down one of the slopes, and a third emerged from the woods bordering the ridge on the other side of the valley. This last was Mollie, a girl of fifteen, and the other a lad of thirteen, her brother Tom. They had come to help their father to capture the pony. This was not the first time they had taken part in the chase.

The mares heard the thud of hoofs, threw up their heads, and whinnied to their foals and yearlings. Then a call came from their leader a good way down the valley, and at once the ponies made off towards the summons, increasing their pace as the boy and girl riders came down upon them, shouting and waving, in the hope of driving them back, so that the stallion could be dealt with alone. But the girl had to check, as she came to a boggy patch, and they swept on to join their leader. "Get along, Tom," called the father, following behind. "Up the hill, Mollie, and head them off." Tom, on a rough pony, and riding like a centaur, raced after the fugitives, which

with one accord stretched into a gallop, stringing out along the valley, according to their ability; the stallion at the head, and putting his best foot forward, as if he knew that out of all the lot he was the one wanted. The ground resounded with the thud of hoofs, manes and tails waved in the air, and mares called to their foals, the youngsters responding gallantly.

The stallion was making for a wood, and to reach this the ponies had to skirt a swamp. As the leader rounded the wet land, and made for the upland shelter, Mollie came directly towards him, screeching and waving. It was too much for the pony's nerves; he turned and fled up the valley, making for the higher ground, and followed by the herd, somewhat confused and bunched together by the check. Some of the foals began to tire, and, with their mothers, slackened and fell out. Among them was the chestnut mare, who retired with her foal to the shelter of a clump of hollies, whence, with twitching ears and distended nostrils, they watched the pursuit. The stallion, with some faithful companions, now encountered Tom, who turned him again, and then the man took up the running. Their aim was to tire out the stallion, "to run him off his legs," for in this waste was no friendly farmyard or paddock into which he could be driven. Grass and heather fed, as he was, he was not likely to have the staying power of stable-fed ponies. On the other hand, he had no weight to carry, and, if allowed to get into the woods, might elude his pursuers until nightfall made it impossible to continue the chase.

The mares, yearlings, and two-year-olds dropped out one by one. In little groups they watched the chase, pursued and pursuers rapidly dwindling in size as they raced down the valley, then thundering back along the ridge, black against the evening sky. The bay had no rest, and was turned time after time. Now and then one rider slowed down, but the others kept inexorably on the heels of their prey.

The chase was not without its dangers, for the hillsides were dry and slippery. Once the stallion fell, and rolled clean over, but was up and away in a moment. The girl's pony slipped twice, but she stuck to him like a burr. The ridden ponies had been on the business before, and were as keen as their riders. They were quick to see the signs of deflection on the part of their quarry, and would of their own accord cut off corners to where the stallion was heading. More than once the boy's pony, going straight for his objective, went under a gnarled holly, and the rider had to flatten himself, with his head buried in the pony's mane, or he would have been swept off by the lower branches, and hung aloft. But it was all in the day's work. Perhaps the man took it the most quietly. He was there to secure his pony—his children were out for a good run.

The end came when the bay visibly tired, and could no longer keep ahead. He

was alone, for all his companions had deserted him. The man forged alongside, and the two ran almost touching, when suddenly the rider, a halter in his hand, jumped from his mount, and flung himself on the stallion's neck, bearing him to the ground. In a trice the halter was slipped on, and the man was up and on his pony, before the shaken bay knew what had happened. It was a feat of strength and agility of which few of the forest men were capable.

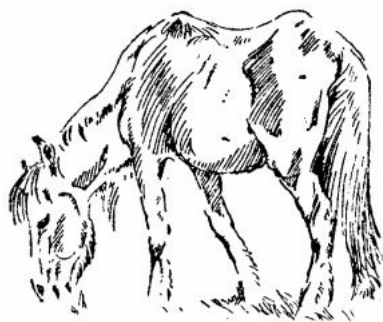
The others rode up exulting in their father's prowess. "Keep clear of his heels, Tom," was the caution. As the stallion turned to make off, the man's mount leaned against the rope, bracing herself against the coming jerk, which brought the would-be fugitive up short, pulling him off his feet. He was up in a twinkling, and lashed out with his heels, but all were prepared, and stinging whips warned him against these tactics. When he hung back the two behind chivied him on. Once he lay down and was dragged along the turf a few paces, but the whips again drove him up. Then, with ears depressed, the red of his eyes showing, and bared teeth, he tried biting, but a slash across the face intimated that such an assault would not pay.

Finally, the stallion, dead tired as he was, lost heart, dropped his ears dejectedly, and trudged along, while his captors, almost as weary, went homewards across the moors, now and then breaking into speech, as they recalled the more exciting moments of the hunt.

Of the stallion's life in the coal-pits there is not much to tell. This was a good mine, and the ponies were well looked after. Their stalls were lit with electricity, and they were properly fed and groomed. When at work they wore leather hats, so that in the low places a bump would not injure them.

Once at least the stallion, who gained the good-will of the drivers by his willingness and activity, had a good rest, beside his weekly one, for when the great strike was decreed and the pony-men were called out, the ponies had to be brought to the surface. The bay was among the first batch, no longer bright of coat, and his eyes dazzled by the light of day. But when he reached the field of dingy grass, so unlike the clean heather of his native soil, he lay down, and rolled to his heart's content, then got up and whinnied long and loud, as if calling across the great open spaces of the forest.







#### IV.—DEATH ON THE ROAD

THE ponies were changing pasture one bright September day. They had eaten the grass from a bottom sward, and the old white mare was leading the party to another, a mile to the south. Up the hill they went, in single file, the mares with drooping heads, looking neither to left nor right, the yearlings nearly as soberly, and the colts wandering on either side to examine things, like scouts on the flanks of a column. The ridge attained, they followed the turf by the road. The Isle of Wight, mostly cerulean blue with touches of pink and gold where the sun caught it, lay along the southern horizon; its hilltops alone showed, the sea being out of sight, so that the island seemed merely the last folds of mainland hill country.

The old mare took the road, and the long string of ponies, as they came on the hard, gritty surface, suddenly became audible, the pounding of their hoofs contrasting with their noiseless progress on the turf. The road was straight, and behind them a green-covered lorry approached rapidly. It lurched somewhat, as if the driver's hand was none too steady. He had met an old acquaintance in Hythe, and they had celebrated the occasion. He held to his speed, being in a foolhardy mood. Why should he make way for ponies when they had all the forest on both sides of the road? They must get out of his way, or all the worse for them. But the ways of ponies were fixed long before motor-lorries or any other of man's contrivances were in being, and the pace of a car was beyond their calculation. Skewbald was ambling behind his little brown friend on the left hand of the road. The man kept to his side, grinning in anticipation of the ponies' sudden dart to safety.

Some quickness of perception beyond the ordinary, some electric rapidity of movement, alone saved Skewbald. The increasing noise and vibration warned him, and without stopping to bend his hind-legs for a leap, he jumped with all four feet

sideways. The lorry, rushing on and missing him by inches, caught the poor little brown foal and hurled it into the ditch, its mother in front escaping with a severe bruise on her flank. The man involuntarily put on his brakes, and the other ponies had time to get off the road. He leaned out, and looked back. There was no car, nor anyone in sight. "Better get out of this," he muttered, and set off, cursing, accelerating to top speed.

But he had looked only along the road. Tom, on pony-back, was going shopping for his mother, and, with his empty bags hanging from his saddle, had taken a short cut across the moor, and by a path through the trees on the hill. As he came to the top the swaying lorry caught his eye. He saw its check and the scattering of the ponies, then its hurried departure. He cantered along until he reached the spot where the brown mare stood, and shrank in horror from the foal's injuries, far beyond his help, then with a hot urge within him to bring the culprit to justice, he set off along the road as fast as his pony could go.

A little later, a car with two officers and a chauffeur came tearing along in the same direction. As they neared the spot where the foal was struck, the brown mare was seen standing in the road. "Slow down," ordered the senior officer peremptorily, remarking to his companion that there had been too many accidents to ponies that summer. "Pony hurt, sir," said the chauffeur, stopping the car of his own accord. One glance at the foal showed that nothing could be done for it, save freeing it from pain. The younger officer got a revolver from the car, while the elder and his man examined the tracks of the lorry before its stoppage, and the pattern of the tyre impressions. Then a shot rang out, and the mare moved away in fright, but returned to the body as the car started.

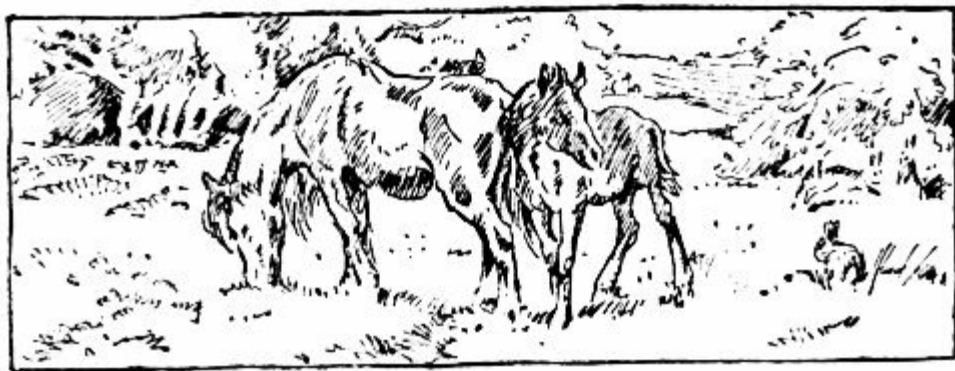
When Tom reached the town he saw the lorry outside a public-house. He looked up the street; the policeman strolling along was an old acquaintance of his father's, and the lad went up to him. "Please, Mr. Jones, that lorry ran over a foal back on the road." "Oh!" exclaimed the constable; "sure? Where's the driver? In there, I suppose. What happened?" At that moment the man emerged, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, and went to the lorry. "What's this about a foal?" asked the policeman. "You ran into it." The boy burst in with, "You ran it down! You know you did!" "You're a lying little rascal," retorted the man surlily; "I never went within a mile of a pony." "I know this boy well," said the constable, "and he wouldn't make trouble for nothing. I want your name and address." A few idlers strolled up, and the man began to bluff; he was in Government employ, and if his lorry with its load wasn't in Ringwood by midday, someone would have to answer for it. Just then the car with the two officers came up. They jumped out and looked at the lorry tyres.

“This is the car,” said the senior officer. “Where’s the chauffeur?” Tom, the policeman, and the bystanders all nodded accusingly at the driver. The officer turned on him. “You’re an inhuman brute, running down harmless creatures. No, sir; don’t bluster,” as the driver opened his mouth. “We came up after you, marked your tyre tracks, put the foal out of its misery, and we shall certainly attend to give evidence against you. Take my name, constable—General ——,” mentioning a famous name, which made the crowd gape and the miserable driver shiver in his shoes.

And later when he appeared in court, the General, his subordinate officer, and the chauffeur attended, as well as Tom, who was complimented on the way in which he gave his evidence; and the driver was severely punished, as a warning to other brutal or careless people.



Denny Bog



## V.—SKEWBALD'S NEIGHBOURS

WANDERING over moor and heath, and through the deep woods, Skewbald while yet a foal got to know the wild life of the forest, for, as with all young things, life to him was more than mere eating, and he was full of curiosity about everything that went on around him.

In the evenings he would see the rabbits, first little and then big, come out of their holes, their white scuts flashing as they gambolled. If they "froze," their quiet umber tint assimilated with the surrounding hues, so that their outline was lost, and sometimes the colt, going towards a patch of herbage, saw nothing but a great black eye gazing at him, until, on a nearer approach, a young rabbit materialized, and loped away. On summer mornings when the dew was heavy, the bunnies looked almost black because of their drenched fur. They would have all day to comb and smooth it out underground. Early one morning he saw a doe rabbit with a mouthful of grass, sticking out on both sides of her muzzle, like a great green moustache; she went below with it, her two little ones following.

Hares he did not see so often, and they sat so quietly in their "forms," that he was not aware of their presence until he nosed up against them. But he once saw a hare anything but quiet. On a bare patch of gravel near the railway, where hares were in the habit of crossing, a big jack hare was writhing and squirming without moving from the spot, and Skewbald went up to see this strange sight. The creature, of course, was in a gin, though the foal was not to know that. Not being afraid of hares, he got quite close, and, as the entrapped one did not move off, but still strained and struggled, he gave a mischievous little stamp to drive him away. Now, the poor hare was caught by a fore toenail only, and Skewbald happening to press with his hoof on the spring the jaw opened, and the prisoner was set free; but his

fore-leg was so strained by the tension, that when he put weight on it, he fell over, and squirmed as before.

Skewbald, very interested, touched him, and the hare made off on to the track, where again he fell and writhed, Skewbald watching through the railings, until the noise of an oncoming train reminded the stricken one that he still had three legs to run on. The following spring Skewbald again witnessed the hare in motion, and this time there were two. The pair were on a level stretch, and indulging in an orgy of violent movement. They chased one another, turning and doubling, taking turns to be pursued and pursuer, till one stopped and crouched, the other jumping over its back. Then they ran apart in tangential circles which brought them face to face, whereupon they stood up on their hind-legs, and thumped one another with their forepaws like boxers. They acted as madly as any other pair of March hares.

Instinct and his mother taught Skewbald to notice all that was going on, to keep his eyes "skinned." When they were in the woods, the harsh notes of the jays made him start, and from his mother's movements, he learned that someone was about. Once in spring, browsing on the young shoots of a hawthorn-bush, he almost nosed against two dormice fresh from their long rest, sleek and tawny bright, among the green tufts.

The squirrels he could not help seeing, and when he stopped, and looked at them sitting on the low boughs of a fir, making short work of the cones, they stamped peevishly with their hind-feet, making quite a noise, as the rabbits did on the ground. Once he witnessed a curious and beautiful sight which lasted but a moment. A squirrel pursued another, going round and round a tree-trunk as they descended, so quickly that they left on the eye the impression of a reddish streak, drawn spirally round the trunk. This again was in spring, and, like the mad antics of the hares, a love chase.

Sometimes a fox trotted by, or sat up and looked at him impudently, and, as it happened, he got tolerably familiar with a family of foxes. The lair was in a bank between the roots of an old oak. Skewbald's mother, as she went by, snuffed the air, and indeed, the smell, whether of fox or high viands, was perceptible even to human nostrils. So Skewbald snuffed too, and whenever he passed the hole, the odour reminded him of what dwelt there. One fine evening, as he idled at a little distance, he perceived movement outside the hole. It was not rabbits, so he went closer, and saw the little fox cubs, lithe and furry. One lay on its back gnawing at a moorhen's wing, two were engaged in a tussle, and one curled into a ball with his tail over his nose, pretending to be asleep; but when the vixen came up, and, after looking round, sat down calmly amidst her family, the mischievous cub got up, came behind her and

worried her tail, until she turned, and seized him in her jaws, so that he yelped.

After this, Skewbald, when his company came that way, looked out for the cubs, but he saw little more of them, for the older they grew, the later they came out, until it was night before they emerged, and then it was not for play but work, learning to hunt for their living.

Skewbald and his mother sometimes sunned themselves by a bank crowned with lichened thorns. It was quite a badger fortress, being honeycombed with passages. A certain family which camped by it one August must have occasioned the badger some inconvenience, for they used the great holes as dustbins, stuffing down newspapers, tins, tea-leaves and coffee grounds, and other rubbish. But they never set eyes on him, not even on moonlight nights. Probably he used an exit on the other side of the bank while the campers were about. But Skewbald sometimes saw him after dusk, coming or going with his rolling gait, or appearing at the mouth of his den with sniffing snout and uplifted paw. Once the foal came upon him in broad day, and sunny at that. He was fast asleep, nearly hidden in a great nest of dried grass and bracken in a sheltered corner.

Sometimes, though probably he was unaware of it, the colt walked over little sharply pitted tracks which were the slots of the deer. Only once did he see that rare and shy British mammal, the roedeer. Skewbald was strolling in a forest ride, when, all at once, a delicate fawn-coloured shape with two uplifted sharp horn spikes emerged from a fern brake, and paused with raised fore-foot and twitching ears before venturing across the grassy space, and like a shadow his mate followed him.

In the thick woods, he sometimes saw the other deer, mostly fallow, the buck with widely branching palmate antlers, but occasionally a great red deer.

One September midday, mother and foal were wandering down a wide drive in the woods, when strange noises came to the foal's ears, people shouting, baying of hounds and blowing of horns. He ran close to his mother, who, though not alarmed, raised her head and snuffed the air with interest. People with horns no longer hunted ponies, and she had no apprehensions of capture.

Presently a buck topped the bank, and shot across the drive, a mere rusty brown streak, gone as soon as seen. The noise of the hounds wavered, and grew fainter. The buck had eluded them. Then in the distance a huntsman appeared coming up the drive on a tall white horse. He was a fine sight in his black velvet cap, dark green coat with brass buttons, and his horn ready to hand. He stopped by a gate watching the drive, not knowing he was too late. On the hill out of sight were the three men in brown velveteen, each holding a team of the leashed hounds; young and swift these, waiting to be put on the track of the quarry when the slow old



hounds, or “tufters,” had got the scent, and mounted hunting folk waiting or patrolling the forest glades. But the noise and the sight of the buck was all that Skewbald experienced, that day, of a forest buck-hunt.

After being warned by his mother, Skewbald kept as respectful a distance from harmless grass-snakes and slow-worms as from vipers. He even jumped when the little brown lizard ran across the path in front of him. And doubtless he sometimes found the open door of the home of the underground wasp, and quickly removed his nose and himself from its proximity. More rarely he saw the brown paperish globe of the wood-wasp hung from a low branch, with a hovering swarm of wasps like a yellow halo round it.

As for “stoats,” heathflies, and the tickling, crawling New Forest fly, they are, in hot weather, the torment of a forest pony’s life, and the less said about them the better.

Of birds, he knew most familiarly the stonechat, always on the topmost spray of a gorsebush, both in summer and in winter, with his little jerking tail and monotonous “tick-tack” note. Sometimes he would see the stonechat’s relative, the wheatear, standing on a stone or clod of earth, with the same flirting of the tail; the attitude alert and vigilant, his black eye-streak emphasizing his suspicious glance.

In the evening he heard the “hoo-hoo” of the tawny owl, and might have seen him sitting upright on the low branch of a willow, close to the trunk; and once in broad daylight, as he was nibbling at the bark of the branches of a stubby hollow holly, a blotched form appeared at the opening as if in response to the noise he made before her door; then with a couple of wing-beats, the little owl flew up into the higher branches and looked at him with fierce gold-rimmed eyes, and irritable movements of her head.

Now and then he came across a small covey of partridges dusting themselves in a sandy patch, or sunning on a bank. Once in May, as he put his nose to a tussock, a sitting partridge gave it a sharp peck. All that season he looked into tussocks warily, and one day he came upon what looked like two partridges sitting together; but the one outside the nest was a cock-bird, as could be seen by his red ear-lobes and absence of cross-bars on his wings. As Skewbald looked, a little head peeped out from under his father’s wing and piped. Then there was more chirping, and from under the mother emerged a tiny chick, and in a moment was lost in his male parent’s feathery recesses. That faithful husband and father was on duty, receiving each little chick as it hatched, and “drying them off.”

One of Skewbald’s most interesting glimpses of his bird neighbours concerned another family party. He was standing one evening in June by a great brake of gorse

on a bank, near a little stream, when he heard a flutter of wings, and a great bird alighted, a shelduck, glorious in her black, white, and chestnut plumage, crimson neb, and coral legs—a bird which one associates with the sandy shores of North Wales or the dunes of Norfolk. Yet here she was, and after looking round, she walked towards a rabbit-hole at the foot of a gorsebush, put her head in, and vanished.

A little later the foal and his mother were drinking at the stream very early in the morning, when a subdued but anxious croaking was heard, accompanied by a “cheeping” from tiny throats, and the shelduck came into view marshalling a long line of the prettiest, fluffy, pied little ducklings, negotiating all sorts of obstacles. And not one parent only, for the father, larger and still more resplendent than his mate, and quite as concerned and anxious, brought up the rear of the procession. Once or twice he whistled shrilly, as he intercepted an errant ball of down, and sent it into the right path. When they tumbled into the tiny stream, at once the youngsters were at home and self-confident. The drake saw them all afloat, and again the procession re-formed to paddle down-stream to the sea. What adventures were they to meet with, and how many would the parents bring safely to the seashore, to run along the margin of the tide, in their pied down indistinguishable from the foamy froth washing over the seaweed? It was perhaps ten miles to their destination, with many enemies in wait—hawks, foxes, badgers, pike, and man.

Later in the season a naturalist, not a sportsman or collector, armed only with his monocular prismatic, passed the shelduck’s burrow, and a feather caught his eye. He stooped, and picking it up, scrutinized it closely. By its white, black and chestnut, he knew at once from what bird it had fallen and that doubtless this was her nesting site.

But perhaps one of the most thrilling sights to be seen in the forest by a lover of birds was what Skewbald first beheld one cold April morning. A rough untidy yearling after his winter outdoors, he wandered down to the brook, where on a muddy patch broad three-toed footprints had been freshly impressed. Loose feathers, white, black, and brown, caught his eye, and as he sniffed at them he heard a strange musical phrase, with a humming vibratory timbre—



—which seemed to fill the air, and was repeated again and again.

Skewbald looked around, and on a little rise crowned by a grove of birches

were several birds about the size of pheasants. Two were a deep blue-black, and there were several smaller, mottled grey and brown. The black grouse still lives in the New Forest, though sadly depleted in numbers, and what the yearling saw was the spring assembly, or “lekking.” The two cock-birds were going through some strange manoeuvres. One which had been sitting in the fork of a tree, with his beautiful lyre-shaped tail showing to advantage, flew to the ground. He drooped his wings, lowered his outstretched neck, which, with every feather on end, looked twice its usual size, then brought up his middle tail vertically with the curved extremities hanging down, so that from the front it looked somewhat like an admiral’s cocked hat. His silvery-white undertail coverts were raised, and expanded like a fan. It was this view he displayed to the presumably admiring hens, though as far as one could see, they took not the least notice of their admirers. Meanwhile he hummed the song already indicated. Then the other bird came forward, got up like the first, and the real business commenced. With outstretched necks and distended crimson eyebrows, they fenced with each other, until one, taking courage, flew at his rival, and there was a rough-and-tumble struggle, only ended when one had had enough. Then the victor strutted about, and renewed his song.





## VI.—WINTER

IT WAS midwinter and “bad pony weather”—that is, the atmospheric conditions were likely to upset the less hardy and the younger members of the herds. For a month there had been a succession of torrential gales from the south-west blotting out the “Wight,” so that the thickest pony thatch was drenched, and when, as had happened several times, a hard frost followed a heavy downpour, the ponies suffered severely from cold, and the youngsters’ constitutions were sorely tried.

Skewbald’s mother sheltered herself and him all ways that an old forest pony knew. In the heaviest storms she took him to the shelter of thick hollies or dense spruce groves, but even a forest pony must eat, and in spite of wet, they had to leave the protection of the woods for the open ground, where most of their provender was to be obtained. Skewbald, from some inherited strength of fibre, suffered less than other youngsters, many of whom were “caught in” with their mothers by the more careful owners, and given food and shelter.

The chestnut and her foal were among those left out all the winter. Continued frost meant little to them, protected as they were by their thick coats. Skewbald, especially, had done his best to keep himself warm. A great shock of hair came over his eyes, his mane hung in a thick mass on his neck, his tail nearly reached the ground and kept his thighs warm, while his body and legs looked half as thick again, from the growth of long hair which covered him right down to the hoofs. Only his nose was soft and velvety much as in summer.

After a heavy fall of snow, the mare showed her son how to kick and scrape away until the herbage was reached. She taught him to nibble at the gorse, hard and prickly though nutritious; with retracted lips nipping off the spikes full of aromatic buds, and grinding the prickles to shreds before swallowing. When the foresters cut

down hollies, she was soon on the spot, showing the youngster how to tear off the sweet bark of the branches hacked from the poles.

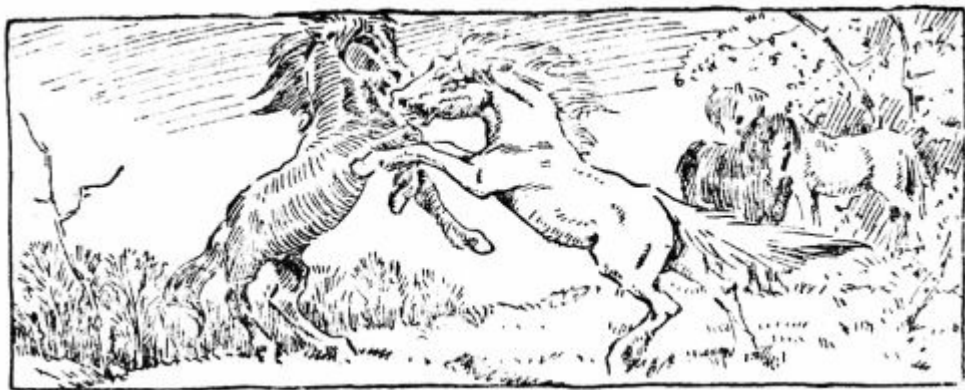
On sunny mornings after sharp frost, he would lie down in the bracken, tuck his legs under him, and doze, warm and comfortable, for hours. If it rained, he followed his mother, and learned the trick of keeping his back to the wind, thus lessening the surface exposed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The agister riding across the moorland heard a mare neighing, and when she repeated her call several times, trotted his mount towards her. She was a bay roan, and after another plaint ran a little way, and stopped. As the rider came to a clump of high gorse, he saw a foal lying in a sheltered nook. One glance showed him it was dead, a poor thin "sucker" with legs outstretched stiffly. "Should have been taken in before," he muttered to himself, "that's the youngster I told Sam Evett about a week ago. Some people aren't to be trusted with animals." On his way back he came across first one and then another young pony looking "seedy," and these with their mothers were gently guided to the nearest farmyard, where they would be taken care of until their owners fetched them away.

That night the weather became worse than ever. The storm raged through the woods, roaring in the pines and swaying the birches and beeches, while dead branches snapped off with cracks like rifle-fire. Skewbald and his mother were sheltering on the lee side of a giant beech. If it had been day, the trail of dead oyster fungus up its trunk would have told its tale of inner decay. The mare became uneasy, and moved away from the shelter of the vast column. She called to Skewbald, who followed, but feeling the bite of the freezing wind, backed behind the trunk again. There was a tremendous crack, a tearing and rending, and the great bole snapped off above the colt's head, and crashed to the ground, the trunk still poised at its line of fracture, held by bark and sound wood, so that Skewbald was untouched and unhurt.





## VII.—THE RIVAL LEADERS

A COLD north-easter blew across the moor. The old thorns were budding, the daffodils were peeping from the turf, and the yellow of the gorse was beginning to show, so spring was at hand, but there were few other signs of it, for the season was late. If the chiffchaff had come, he had no time to make his presence known by song, his food was all too rare.

The chestnut mare and her son wandered on the sheltered side of holly and tall gorse, picking up what they could. Skewbald, now termed a yearling though not yet a year old, showed conspicuously in the landscape in his chestnut and white. But he was ragged and untidy to the last degree. His doormat-like coat was torn and tangled by conflict with the thorns. His face and neck had the same patchy appearance. But for the coarseness of his covering, his ribs would have shown, for, apart from his not yet having filled out, the severe weather had kept him "light." His legs were still bony and ungainly, and he was plainly in the hobbledehoy stage. But he had a good gait, the bones of his shoulders and hind-quarters were of great strength, with plenty of room for muscular attachments, and when he walked, he covered plenty of ground.

The ponies wandered—wandered because they had not time to stand back to the wind as do stall-fed cattle, for both day and night was wanted for finding sustenance.

The mare had joined a herd led by a small but energetic stallion, whose shade of blackish-brown, and "mealy" or light-coloured nose, proclaimed his streak of Exmoor blood. Unlike Skewbald and other ponies, he had been looked after during the winter, and having only lately been turned out into the forest, was in splendid condition. He was full of spirit, alert, and mistrustful of the unusual, while as master

of the herd he brooked no disobedience. One day after the herd had drunk at a favourite shallow, they were moving to another feeding-ground, and the stallion, looking over his company, noted the chestnut mare still standing motionless. Either she had not fully slaked her thirst or some old association made her reluctant to leave. The leader walked to her and snorted. She turned her head, but made no other sign of acquiescence, whereupon he lost patience, bared his teeth, depressed his ears, and made a little run at her as if to bite, when she at once made haste to comply with his command.

On the way, the party was joined by a young stallion of a blue roan hue, with white forehead blaze and pink nose, accompanied by an old bay mare with her yearling. For a time, the three having fallen in at the rear, all went well, but presently the grey left his place, and went forward as if for the express purpose of creating trouble for himself, for the leader, by his depressed ears and backward glance, showed that he considered he had a rival in the field, and was ready to take up the implied challenge. The grey was taller, but not in such good condition, having been left out during the winter.

The mealy-nosed stallion took to making little rushes at the interloper with extended neck and bared teeth. The younger at first contented himself by retreating or swerving, but at last the touch of teeth on his neck aroused his resentment and combativeness. He turned sharply, and flinging out his heels, kicked the leader on the shoulder. It was the first real blow, and as if by signal, the two reared up, and with fore-feet striking vigorously, tried to bite one another on the face and neck, until they had to come down to rest. Then the little stallion in his turn reversed, and let out a kick which took effect on his opponent's hind-quarter. The grey screamed with pain and fury. Rearing, he threw himself at his enemy, knocked him down, and, unable to keep his balance, rolled right over him. The leader was up first, and standing on his prostrate opponent, belaboured him with his hoofs. The grey cried out under this treatment, and when he succeeded in getting to his feet, his adversary rushed at him with jaws agape and bristling mane, so that he fairly turned tail. Then the mealy-nosed one trumpeted shrilly, shook himself, pushed past the waiting herd to the head, and resumed the journey.

They crossed a road, and went down a rutted path, and this for a few yards became a causeway across an obviously boggy patch. The road had been made by dumping gravel into the swamp, its sides being strengthened by balks of timber. Near the edges of the bog, patches of lush grass, emerald of hue, were beginning to sprout. Skewbald strolled down to sample this luxury, but was recalled to her side by his mother's sharp whinny. She knew the temptation this verdant growth had for



youngsters, and its danger. A moment later, a tragedy occurred. A poor-looking, black yearling, motherless for some reason, strayed from the path, to nibble at a tempting patch, a yard or so from the edge. He walked confidently to it, but after a mouthful, sank below his knees, and a cry of fright broke from him. The herd showed signs of distress, and shrill whinnies came from the mares as they plunged to and fro along the margin; but the colt's efforts to reach his companions only involved him the more surely in the morass.

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A few bubbles rising to the surface of what was now a muddy pool told of the disaster which had occurred. The bog keeps its secrets, and no one knows how many ponies have been engulfed in it.



*The Hill Road to Burley.*



## VIII.—SKEWBALD IN TROUBLE

SPRING had come at last. The cold east winds had been followed by warm south-westerly gales with soft rain, making the grass grow and filling the bogs also. The golden-yellow of the marsh-marigold at the stream's edge was repeated in a lighter key by the stunted wild daffodils in the forest meadows, and again in higher but more diluted tone by the primroses on the banks outside the woods. The blackthorn was past its prime, but the bushes were still covered with blossom now looking like soiled snow. The oaks and beeches were still in bud only. The thorns had put out tufts of vivid green, drowning the grey-green of their lichened branches. In the swampy spots the catkins of the bog myrtle shone in the sun with extraordinary brilliance, presenting great patches of that rare colour in wild floral nature—deep orange and orange-scarlet.

Of course, the birds were here. Not only the residents, the stonechat and the little hedge and field birds, and the rook, crow, kestrel, and heron, but the migrants also. The chiffchaff uttered his name continually as he hunted in the scraggy budding oaks, the willow-warbler repeated his wavering refrain, crescendo and diminuendo, very like the bends in the "tail" in "Alice in Wonderland;" and the whitethroat was beginning to throw himself in ecstasy above the bushes. The blackcap flew from bough to bough, as he shrilled his wild, inconsequent, yet melodious and captivating song, while the garden-warbler skulked in the bushes, chuckling and fluting throatily at great length; the nightingale began to "jug," while his shorter but more richly coloured mate industriously collected oak-leaves for her nest. In the beechwoods the woodwren flitted from bough to bough, repeating his clear call, followed by a twittering cadence like ice tinkling in a glass, while his wings quivered in time with his tune.

Above the moor the cock lapwing made occasional flights to amuse his sitting partner, flapping his rounded wings vigorously as he flew all ways, curving downwards to the ground without alighting and up again in another sweep, then “reversing” in his characteristic way. Meanwhile the redshank stood on the bog bobbing his head nervously, or whistled shrilly to his mate, if a crow or a man appeared on the horizon. The redshank likes to nest near the lapwing, which is as brave as the other is timid, dashing threateningly down on an intruder, especially its ancient enemies—crow, jackdaw, and harrier.

Out on the moor lawns of green grass showed amongst the heather, and in the bogs, amidst the bleached tussock grass, were patches of new grass of the most vivid emerald, looking, and most deceptively so, like firm sward.

There are many bogs in the forest, varying from patches a few yards square to huge ones covering many acres. In Denny Bog still lie the remains of an aeroplane which landed on the smooth and, to an eye looking from above, apparently firm surface. The pilot, on getting out of the fuselage, was soon up to his waist; and in spite of repeated efforts, it was found impossible to extricate the plane, and the salvers had to content themselves with removing the engine.

To the human visitor the bog has no terrors, for its dead yellowish grass with green patches and occasional pools proclaim its nature. Moreover, causeways of gravel have been made across narrower parts where necessary.

Skewbald and his mother were wandering as usual on the moor, the rest of the herd strung out over a square mile of forest, hillside, and grass bottom, too intent on making up for their scanty winter fare to desire the close companionship of their fellows.

Skewbald was much the same as a month before, perhaps a little more ragged, as his loosening winter dress got carded out by the thorns.

The two were on the outskirts of a great bog, to the south of which extensive woods filled the horizon. They were not alone. A little distance away two gipsies, a man and a boy, were following the edge of the bog, striding from tussock to tussock and probing with their sticks for bad places which might let them in.

There was no difficulty in divining what *they* wanted. The lapwings screaming overhead, the redshanks wailing as they flew right away, knew also that their eggs were in danger. Plovers’ eggs are part of the gipsy’s livelihood—to sell, because they are too precious for him to eat. He would say that he found far more in a hen’s egg.

As the egg-hunters quartered the ground, they approached the ponies, which, judging from their movements that they themselves were not likely to be molested, ignored their proximity. The boy, when abreast of Skewbald, suddenly raised his

stick, and from pure mischief or rather fun, ran at the yearling, which, startled, bounded off, but in the direction of the bog. He plunged about and sank deeply, while his strenuous efforts to extricate himself only caused him to become more firmly embedded. Soon he could no longer move his legs, the mud reached his flanks, and he was still sinking, though now more slowly.

The man stormed at the boy standing open-mouthed in dismay, then looking round began to run, calling to the other to follow. He was making for a promontory of firm ground stretching into the bog. Here stood a few stunted pines which a fire had caught, for they were black and dead, some already lying on the ground. Both loaded themselves with the fallen logs, staggered back to the yearling, and began to throw the wood on the bog towards him. Skewbald, incapable of motion save for frenzied movements of his head and neck, was aghast at his plight, and called piteously to his mother, who plunged backwards and forwards along the edge of the bog, whinnying distractedly.

The man waded out and pushed log after log under the yearling's belly. Then he got a pole under him behind the fore-legs. His next action was to bend down and feel in the mud to ascertain if the pony's legs were straight. A forcible pull on a bent leg might cause a fracture. His preparations made, he put all his strength into levering up the pole, calling: "Now, Jarge, let 'un have what for;" and the boy, with a stick, belaboured the yearling's hind-quarters. Skewbald felt himself moved by the man's force, and, under the added stimulus of pain, made tremendous exertions. The man made another effort, and a fore-leg came up. "At 'un again, lad;" and the harassed yearling, with a great heave and an explosive "suck," came out of the mud and began to flounder towards the firm ground, leaving the two half-bogged themselves. The man reached out and pulled the boy towards him, and they worked their way out.

They were covered with mud from head to foot, and regarded each other doubtfully, until the man laughed (a smile would not have been perceived), whereupon the boy exploded in peals of merriment. Their hearts were warm within them, with the pleasure of success, for horseflesh or ponyflesh is dear to the gipsy. Then, picking up the eggs they had collected, which, being gipsies, they had carefully deposited in a tussock, they departed.

But Skewbald carried a long scar on his belly, caused by a sharp pine knot, to the day of his death.





## IX.—THE NEW-COMERS

IT WAS full spring. For nearly a month May had flooded the forest with sunlight. The gold of the gorse was blinding to the eye, and almost intoxicating with its strong scent of burnt almonds. The powdery snow of the blackthorn had been followed by the rosy, pinkish bloom of the hawthorn. The foliage of the scraggy oaks was Italian pink (which is a greenish yellow), while the silver birches and the beeches had burst into leaf and emerald tassels had succeeded the crimson buds of the larches. The brambles had two distinct sets of leafage, those of last year, old and tattered, but magnificently blotched with crimson and orange, and edged with sienna, while from their axils sprays of tender green unfolded themselves.

This is the month of song, and everywhere the larks and meadow-pipits rose in the air, the former to go up out of sight still trilling, while the latter ceased singing, and came floating down silently like parachutes of brown paper.

The lapwing chicks peeped from their mother's wings, or crawled over her back like the young of the domestic hen. If an enemy flew over, the male bird rose in the air in a frenzy of militant defence, while at the parents' warning call, the chicks crouched and became, to the casual glance, invisible.

As for the pony population of the forest, it seemed to have doubled in numbers all at once, for everywhere the young foals followed the mares, or lay basking among the heather. The early foals were now tall and long-legged, though here and there a late arrival stood unsteadily with bent hind-legs, or trotted a few paces with a stiff-legged gait. It might even essay a gallop, a curiously mechanical action, reminding one of a rocking-horse.

One mare, at least, had *two* little suckers, and here and there quite a family procession passed, of mare, two-year-old, yearling, and foal, the property of

someone who had not troubled to sell the youngsters, preferring to leave them in the forest to breed. Parties of three—mare, yearling, and sucker—were quite common, the two youngsters on the best of terms.

The hues of the new-comers were sometimes exactly those of their mothers, but often quite different. An old mare, once a grey but now dirty white, was followed by a black foal; if the latter were closely scrutinized its eyebrows might be seen to be grey, and that would mean the foal would turn grey like its mother, and again white in old age—from black to white. But if the eyebrows were black like the rest of the body, then probably the hue would remain black or very dark, for black is rare in the forest, and as some think due to importation of alien blood. In the case of one chestnut foal, its darker eyebrows showed that when adult its coat would be of a rich liver colour.

The majority of the foals bid fair to be like their parents, a dark brown with blackish mane and tail, and the same similarity existed with bays and chestnuts, though generally the foals were darker in hue than their mothers.

But there were exceptions to this. A dappled grey mare, for instance, instead of the more usual black-coated offspring, might be accompanied by a foal, light fawn as to ground tint, with black markings round its eyes and muzzle; or a dark mare be seen with a light-coloured youngster.

The yearlings, among whom Skewbald was one, had shed their winter coat by dint of rubbing against bushes below and overhanging branches above. The bay and chestnut showed clearly, and the lights began to appear on their coats, golden in the sun, blue in the shade, though they could scarcely be said to “ripple,” for the youngsters were still bony, with unfilled barrels.

Young Skewbald was not amongst the dullest hued of his fellows. There were few whose chestnut was brighter than his, while his white could not be matched anywhere among the ponies except for an occasional “sock” or forehead blaze too small in area to tell at a distance.

Like the others of his year, he walked sedately, for his hours of coltish play were over. Never again would he gambol on the lawns with a playmate in the golden evenings, though occasionally he would lie down and roll, a pleasure every horse and pony indulges in till the end of its days. Sufficient for the day was the labour of filling his belly, although the forest fare increased daily in bulk and sweetness.





## X.—THE BRANDING OF SKEWBALD

THREE ponies were grazing on a long level stretch of moorland one perfect evening in early September. To the north were low hills, their sides covered with purple heather and fern, the latter already showing orange amongst the green. Here and there an old thorn or holly dotted the hillside, the ridge itself serrated by groups of firs. Along the southern border of the moor flowed a tiny stream, a few feet across, which, a few miles farther down, would expand into a wide estuary dotted with yachts.

As the sun declined, the moor fell into shade, but on the hill the red trunks of the firs and the orange of the fern glowed with richer hues, while the heather added a ruddy tone to its purple. The foliage took on that rich golden-green which landscape painters love, while the shadows, deriving their colour from the blue of the eastern sky, were glaucous green.

Skewbald, still a yearling although some sixteen months old, was with his mother, who had also by her side her last foal, a brown filly. She was well grown, for she had been born early in April.

As they grazed, Tom and Molly, followed by their father, rode through the gate which led to the little farm beyond the river. "There they are," said the boy—"mare, yearling, and colt." (New Forest folk have a way of referring to a foal as a colt, even speaking of "horse colts" and "filly colts.") "Yes, close at hand," said his father; "push the gate wide open. I hope," he continued, "as we haven't all day to catch the yearling in, that you'll just get quickly to work, and remember catching ponies is one thing, and running races with them quite another." Tom grinned, but in his heart hoped the ponies would not let themselves be driven in without a run.

The father sent his boy along by the river, while he himself made a detour to get

behind the ponies. Molly was to go up the moor to be in readiness in case of a break-away. The ponies were to be driven through the gate over the wooden bridge into the paddock, and, if it could be managed that evening, right into the stable yard. The boy and girl were to watch them, while the father drove them towards the gate. All went well at first. As the man emerged from the trees in view of the ponies, the mare stopped feeding, looked at the intruder, snorted, and trotted away with her offspring. The rider followed, gently shepherding them towards the gate, his assistants closing in on either side. Unfortunately, the youngest boy of the family, who, with a small sister, was fishing in the stream, had succeeded in bringing a minnow to land, and signalized his triumph with a yell of delight, just as the ponies came towards the opening. The mare pricked up her ears, swerved sharply, and, followed by her youngsters, made off at full speed across the moor in spite of all that the hunters could do. The man laughed ruefully, calling, "You'll get your run, Tom; we must try and get them in before night." Tom went like the wind, in shirt and trousers, and barebacked, on a little rough pony, which knew every foot of the ground. The fugitives got to a boggy place, and had to pick their way, so Tom, running wide, got behind a patch of firs, and came upon the ponies suddenly—too suddenly, for they went away up the moor, the mare shaking her mane and tail, Skewbald keeping pace easily, and the foal doing wonderfully well. They went right past the girl, though she tore off her hat, whirled it above her head, and let off blood-curdling shrieks. "After them, Molly," called her father, and the thunder of hoofs resounded, while the setting sun gilded the heather, firs, and fern with a deeper glory than before, and enhanced Skewbald, as he emerged with the mare and foal on the hilltop, then disappeared behind clumps of hollies, or, a moment in shade, told dark on the skyline. The wide, open situation, the sense of space, as the retreating ponies diminished rapidly to mere dots, the sweet scent of bruised bog myrtle, and the clear light, made a scene less like rural England than the setting of some cowboy story of vast upland country in, say, Idaho or Arizona. Only the great sierra background was lacking.

Molly managed to drive the ponies off the moor, up the hill, along the ridge, and then turning them, drove them down the steep forest road across the moor towards the farm, Tom and her father on either side, waving and shouting to prevent a break-away. There was no trouble this time at the gate, for with man and boy to right and left, and the girl thundering behind, the ponies were glad to dash through. "Got 'em," chuckled Tom as he closed the gate. The others followed at the ponies' heels over the bridge. The gates leading to the yard were open, and all was quiet, for Mother had looked out to see how things were going, and had taken charge of her two small

children. As it happened, the fugitives, instead of turning off into the meadow, as they might have done, went up the road, dashed through the opening, and found themselves in the stable yard. Molly closed the great sliding-door, while Tom and his father, jumping from their mounts, attended to Skewbald. As he was a lusty youngster, and with his shaking mane and depressed ears looked mischievous, they paid him the compliment of treating him like a full-grown stallion, and Tom was given the job of haltering him, for practice. The halter was hung on the end of a six-foot rod, and while his father drove the yearling into a corner, distracting his attention, Tom quietly slipped the loop over his head and fastened the rope to a ring in the wall, before Skewbald had time to show resentment at being tied up.

“Fetch the branding-iron, Tom,” said his father. Mother had it on the kitchen fire in readiness. Meanwhile the man got a sack from the shed, and watching his opportunity, dropped it over Skewbald’s head, who, while objecting to it very much, was so puzzled by the darkness, that he ceased his straining and backing, and was reduced to quietude. This bandaging the eyes is not often done, only when it is feared a pony may become obstreperous. Sometimes the yearlings are driven into a stable with no space to kick in, when the brander will reach over one pony to brand the next.

Tom brought out the iron, which was like a poker with a ring handle for hanging up, and the branding device or letters welded to the other end, and of course in reverse. Several such irons were hanging in the stable.

There need be no shuddering at visions of red-hot iron and sizzling flesh, for the iron when it reached the yard was black, and to all appearance cold. Yet it *was* hot—hot enough to destroy hair growth where it was pressed, and leave a permanent mark.

The man took the iron and held it for a moment an inch from his cheek to test its heat. “Just right,” he said; “hold him, Tom;” then firmly pressed the iron against the shoulder—the shoulder, not the saddle, for Skewbald was one day to go to the mines, where appearances do not count for much, hard pulling and quick turning being more highly rated. Skewbald did nothing out of the way when the iron bit into his skin, did not kick or try to rear; he just winced, and that was all.

Then the yearling was released and turned out into the paddock, where his mother and her foal were awaiting him. The agister would be along shortly, and Skewbald would be on hand for the tail-cutting. This is also a delicate operation, as a pony may launch an unexpected kick. Generally, a large pair of scissors in hand, the cutter quietly draws the lower tail hair towards him with the crook of a stick. In a stable into which a dozen ponies may have been driven, perhaps for the first time in

their lives, the agister will venture fearlessly, and cut tail after tail without mishap, trusting to the good sense of the ponies, which will not kick in the confined space, for fear of hurting their fellow-prisoners.

Occasionally, half a dozen commoners will agree to meet on a Saturday afternoon, for the purpose of collecting their ponies. The harness of the ridden ponies varies in style, and is often more homely than elegant. A man may be riding a horse or pony whose accoutrements consist of mere scraps of leather held together by string and rope. The boys of the party ride barebacked, or make an old rug serve as saddle.

Some time may be spent in rounding up the ponies, which, after much hard riding and shouting, are driven into a convenient farmyard, in a bunch of twenty or thirty.

The quiet enclosure, tenanted only by a few pigs and poultry, becomes a place of tumult as the hunted ponies surge in, snorting, neighing, and tossing manes, the pursuers close on their heels to prevent a break-away. In a moment all is life and movement. The poultry and pigs dash hither and thither from beneath the trampling hoofs. The riders jump from their mounts, which with drooping heads stand passive as if glad to rest, strangely contrasting with the restless movements of the wild ponies, which, cowed and bewildered, crowd into a corner, penned up so closely that they have no room to kick, even if they have the inclination; foals wander about, seeking their dams; men and boys, leaning against their steeds, chat with the daughters of the farm, while dogs and children appear as if by magic, the tiniest tot seeming to bear a charmed life. The unwanted ponies are now sorted out, an operation somewhat troublesome and delicate, and given their liberty; the unbranded ones are tied up and marked with their respective owners' branding-irons.

Then the company takes the farm road, leading the freshly caught ponies. Most of the captives, after a few skirmishes, submit to their fate, and go quietly, but some, more resentful of their treatment and unwelcome bondage, give much trouble, both to their captors and to themselves. They put down their fore-feet stubbornly, refusing to budge, and when prodded by those behind, may fling themselves down, to be dragged along the stony road. An obstinate pony will try sorely the patience of those in charge of it, and instances have occurred of an animal causing its own death by its violent resistance; but, generally, after half a mile of rough treatment, the pony realizes that further opposition is useless, and follows more or less submissively.





## XI.—SKEWBALD'S JUMPING

OCTOBER had been wet. Rain in the forest is, at all times of the year, depressing. When the sun shines on purple heather, emerald fern, and the ruddy stems of fir-trees, moorland and hillside are gay enough, but in wet and stormy weather the landscape is the more gloomy by contrast; the lowering clouds, the black sobbing pines, the pools of water, the soggy tussocks squelching underfoot, make up a dull and cheerless scene, although in the eyes of the forest lover it is perhaps then at its best. The damp atmosphere intensifies the local colour, and gives a sense of vastness and distance to the perspectives.

The forest ponies dislike rain. They have to seek food most of their day, and cannot afford to stand idly in shelter like their more favoured relations. Also the boggy ground gets still more shaky and uncertain, and the wary creature is cut off from the areas which might supply him with food. In long continued rain the ponies leave the open moor or hillside, and betake themselves to the woods, where, under the umbrellas formed by the great oaks, beeches, and firs, they find shelter, especially from what most living creatures detest—a cold driving rain.

Skewbald, therefore, was with his companions in the woods, nosing round for clumps of sweet grass, or, in the wettest spells, taking shelter under overhanging trunks. His coat had grown thick during the autumn, and with his dense mane and tail he was as well protected as a pony could be.

The colt-hunter also disliked rain, for apart from the discomforts of the chase in wet weather, rounding up the ponies is vastly more difficult in the woods. On the open moor the chase is not always successful. Not seldom one may drive ponies from miles away to within sight of the open gate, and then something may arouse their mistrust, may cause them to break away, and the work has to be done over

again. But, all things considered, the chase on the moor is a picnic compared with driving ponies out of the woods. In the open one has the great advantage of being able to view one's quarry from a distance, and formulate beforehand a plan of campaign. But in the woods one must search and search until the ponies are chanced upon, and then stick tenaciously to their heels until a capture is effected. In the denser parts, one may beat about all day, and although the ponies may be near, and even heard and seen, yet they may change their ground so evasively that night may fall and still find them uncaptured.

It was not raining much when the colt-hunter and his boy rode out one morning, but the sky gave every promise of a downpour later on. "Wet skins for us to-day, Tom," said his father, as he donned an old mackintosh, and a wide-brimmed hat, which would divert the rain from his neck. Like other people who are out in all weathers, he had no use for caps, which in heavy rain let the water trickle down one's back. Both riders had bread and cheese in their pockets, for they might be out all day, if they were not fortunate in the chase. It had been arranged that they should meet the agister, who wished their help in locating and catching some yearlings and older ponies. At this time of the year ponies are caught in some numbers, and sent to the autumn and winter sales.

The colt-hunter, by long experience and a good memory for the forms and hues of ponies, knew most of the many hundreds in the forest, and their pedigrees. He was acquainted also with the likely places where a wanted pony might be found at any time of the year.

The hunters, with a cheery good-bye to Mother and Molly, rode some distance across the moorland and through the rides in the woods, skirted bogs, and then made their way up a stone-strewn hillpath to the south, past the spot where the young airman, flying from the training-ground on Beaulieu Heath, had stooped at a great white cross of gravel, marked out on the hillside, and had nose-dived to the ground, crumpling up his machine and breathing his last in the arms of a visitor camping near by. Father and son rode across the barren plateau of Blackdown; to the east the great tumulus stood dark and plain on the skyline, but in front of them Wood Fidley was almost obscured by driving clouds of rain-mist coming from the south-west.

When they reached the main road, they found the agister waiting for them. He had on his buckled hat, but his official coat was hidden under his horseman's cloak. He also foreboded bad weather and a long drive through the woods. They crossed the road—now firm and smooth, very unlike its stone-strewn surface during a dry summer—took a winding path over the moors, and so into the woods.

The colt-hunter led the way into the deepest recesses, where great oaks and beeches leaned one against the other, while the ground was encumbered with undergrowth. As they slowed down to a walk, they saw ponies, half-hidden by the bushes, stealing away. "There's one of those we're after," said the agister, "and there's another."

Skewbald was not one of the wanted animals, but of course he was not to know that, and made off with the rest. It was now raining hard, the wood full of driving mist, and the going very heavy. The fugitives had the best of it, for the ridden ponies sank below their fetlocks in the wetter parts, while fallen branches, tangles of briers and brambles, and drooping holly boughs impeded their progress.

Tom's pony, as keen as her rider, and not so heavily weighted, made but little of the heavy ground. She made straight for the fugitives directly she heard or saw them, without waiting for Tom's directing hand on the reins, and several times he was literally pulled from the saddle by projecting boughs of holly, thorn, or oak. But he held on to his mount, though torn, scratched, and wet through. Then, when separated from the other riders, he saw his opportunity, for he came upon Skewbald and a wanted yearling which had got away from them earlier in the day, sheltering behind some dense holly bushes. Off they went, with Tom close on their heels, and after some amount of twisting and turning, the fugitives came out on a grassy drive, with a gate at the far end.

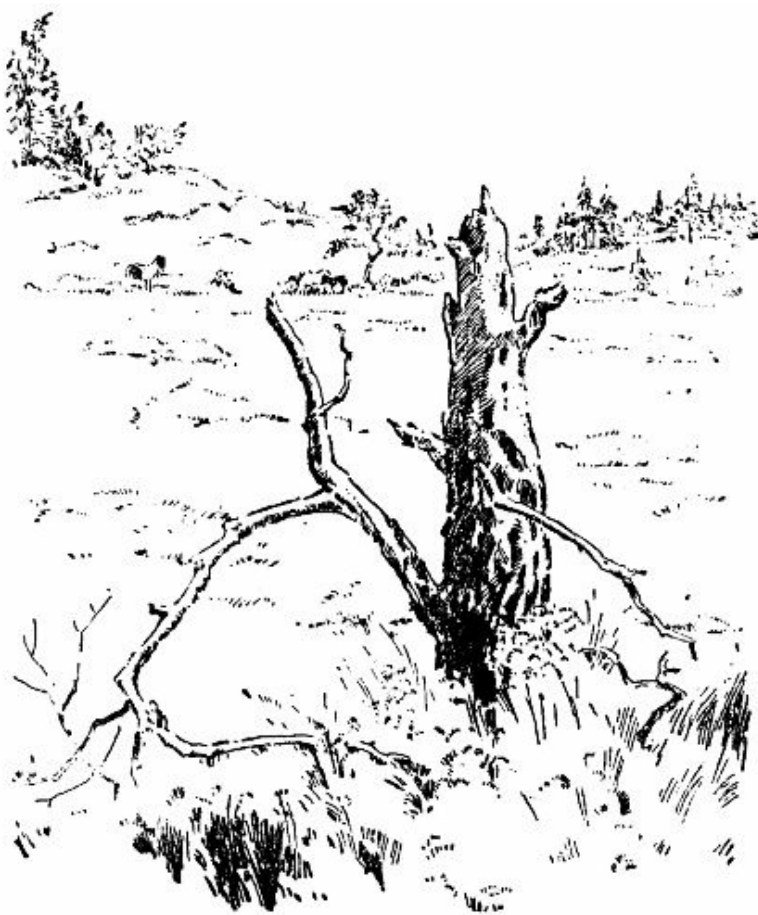
Skewbald made the pace for his companion, and Tom put on a last spurt, trying to get even with his quarry. Skewbald, as he approached the barrier, glanced back at his pursuer, then, acting under an overmastering impulse to escape, went at the gate, cleared it, and was at once lost to sight in a forest enclosure. Tom went right on, charging full tilt into the other pony, which he pinned against the gate, nearly knocking the wind out of both animals. Before the yearling had recovered himself Tom had him haltered, and a safe prisoner.

In the New Year Skewbald again used his jumping powers, and this time saved his life thereby. He was feeding with two other young ponies in a rough part of the forest, when a stray hound, a deserter from the kennels, alarmed them. The intruder, perhaps wishing for company, ran towards them, but the ponies, not relishing his advances, set off at a trot. The hound followed, and the trot became a gallop. It chanced that an artillery company, training in the forest, had dug some pits which had not yet been filled in. The ponies are, as a rule, quite able to take care of themselves. They have a good sense of geography and know the dangerous spots, as bogs and pits, but, being driven away from the training-ground, they were unaware of the existence of the excavations.



As Skewbald fled, through gorse, tall heather, and bog myrtle, the pony in front of him disappeared with a cry, and, the next moment, he found himself at the edge of a deep and wide pit, with no time to turn. But the accident to his companion had given him that fraction of a second of preparation which was enough for his nerve and muscle. He made a spasmodic leap, and just managed to land his heels on the far side. The third also leapt, but fell short.

When the hound, hearing the ponies' moans, looked down, he fled with a yelp of dismay. Later, the huntsmen, searching for the truant, found the two ponies, one dead and the other grievously hurt.



*Longdown Moor.*



## XII.—CHANGING THE BRAND

IN THE rougher corners of the forest are the tents of the gipsies, kept by authority as far as possible from the more frequented beauty spots. One comes across these encampments in little groups of two or three wigwams, each being built on the same principle—a framework of rods bent semi-circularly, over which are thrown blankets and any odd lengths of stuff that can be so used. At one end is the “baulk”—a square tapering tower of blanket or canvas open to the sky. This is the chimney, the fire being built on the ground inside, so that the inmates can prepare their food in the dry, and enjoy the heat radiating into the tent proper. Generally there is another tent beyond the fire, so that the baulk is in the middle of the erection.

On a fine Sunday, one sees the weekly wash drying and bleaching on the bushes, children playing with the dogs, the women cooking and the men in their best clothes. Many before and after Borrow, looking at the gipsy, have been impressed by his fixity of type, his adherence to his mode of life in a country gradually losing its open spaces, and maintaining himself in face of restrictive and sometimes oppressive regulations. To many the standing marvel is that he can live at all outdoors, not only in summer heat, but when frost is in the earth, or when the ground shakes like a quagmire and the ditches run like rivers. But nowadays millions of men who came through the war remember how in the course of their training, or under the actual conditions of warfare, they slept outdoors without even a gipsy tent, by fair and foul, in wet and cold, and remember, too, their astonishment that they suffered no harm, and, bullets apart, thrived on the régime.

But the gipsy has this in common with the town dweller, that he, too, gets his living there; to the town he must go to sell his produce or manufacture, his flower or fern roots, his brooms, mats, baskets, etc., and therefore a cart of some sort is

almost a necessity, and to draw the cart, a pony. The forest pony is thus of great importance to the forest gipsy; she is hardy, gets her own living, is cheap to buy when young, and is a source of wealth. Every forest gipsy is a potential breeder and dealer; the pony is at once his passion and his temptation. If he has no ponies to sell at the autumn sales, there is less money to tide over the winter.

Therefore the ponies wandering at will, unnoted by their owners, as free to wander as the wild creatures, have a great interest for the gipsy, who regards the products of the forest as his lawful tribute. The plover's eggs, the rabbit, hedgehog and squirrel, the flowers and ferns, either supply him with food or put money in his pocket. But the pony is marked and tail-cut, plain signs that it is the acknowledged and registered property of its owner, and not to be appropriated with impunity. Of course, by far the greater number of gipsies are strictly honest in regard to ponies, having learned like the rest of us, from experience, that honesty is the best policy; but to some an unmarked yearling pony must be a temptation, when a branding-iron is always present in the shape of any iron bar handy, to be thrust in the fire kept constantly burning.

One autumn, on the edge of the forest just outside a sheltering wood a small encampment consisting of three gipsy tents and a caravan nestled. As night fell the noise of people talking and children playing ceased, for the gipsies go early to bed, and rise betimes. The evening meal had been eaten, the youngsters snuggled to sleep in corners, and only a few men and women sat around their fires smoking, for most had had a long day going to town to sell their wares, and were glad to seek repose.

Behind the tents, in a little blind lane with high hedges ending at a gate, a mare was tethered. She had been deprived of her foal and grieved noisily, whinnying loudly ever and again. Away on the moor ponies were grazing, and hearing the repeated call of the bereaved mother, they put up their heads for a moment. At last Skewbald, now a two-year-old, and another pony of the same age, a dull bay, could stand it no longer, and sidled away from the herd in the direction of the call. As they approached the silent tents, the bay whinnied, and the mare responded so appealingly that the two quickened their pace to a trot. A big lad, lounging by the fire in the nearest tent, looked out as they passed, and then crawled away silently.

Skewbald and his companion went right up to the mare, which tried hard to get away from her tether, whinnying repeatedly, so that the two-year-olds did not notice several dark figures creeping towards them in the obscurity of the ditch. But when a man stumbled, the two ponies made off up the lane, only to be brought up short by the gate. Their pursuers, close at their heels, threw themselves at their necks, and soon the two were haltered and secured.

An older man came out and examined the captives. Then in no measured terms he abused the captors for troubling to tie up a pony marked like the skewbald, an animal of such striking colour and pattern, and probably well known to commoner, keeper, and agister. It was as good as giving themselves up to the police to have it in their possession for a moment, and he ordered the crestfallen young fellows to release it at once. This was done, and, with a stripe on his flank to help him along, Skewbald was turned loose, and made off towards the herd. Then the man gave his attention to the bay, and pronounced him ordinary enough to keep. But what were the marks, if any? A lantern was brought, and the capitals C. F. were found on the shoulder. A bar was heated and it was not difficult to convert the marks into O. E., though much to the discomfort of the young bay. His tail marks were cut right away as well. Then it was mooted whether the pony should not be taken off at once, but this was pronounced against, as likely to arouse the suspicion of the police, if met with on the way. In a day or two a huckster would come along with a string of ponies, and among them the bay would not attract notice.

But unfortunately for the gipsies, the agister of the district, in tall hat with buckle in front, and green coat with brass buttons, happened to ride by next morning, on his way to clip the tails of some ponies lately caught in.

As he passed, he noticed a young bay tied up behind a tent. Now, the agister knew all the ponies of his district, and many others in the other districts as well. Ponies were a passion with him. He knew them not only by their brands and their colours, but by their shapes, gait, and size. A pony once seen by him was never forgotten, and he could recognize a wanted animal more than half a mile away. He paused and scrutinized the bay. Yes, that was Charles Finch's two-year-old. He had known it since its birth, and could not be mistaken. Its tail was short, but not cut after the fashion of any of the three forest districts—in itself a suspicious circumstance. He went closer and read the letters O. E. No one he knew of in the forest used such a brand. He got off his pony and pressed his thumb in the lowest arm of the E, and the pony winced.

That was enough for the agister, who turned to several lowering but silent lads and men collected in a group. "Who claims this pony?" he asked. There was no answer. "I am positive it's Charles Finch's pony. I shall take it with me if no one objects;" and he tied the pony to his own, and trotted away.

After he had done his business, he took the pony to its owner, who, of course, recognized it at once. "Now," said the agister, "this must be stopped, or some rogues will give the gipsies a bad name. It's your duty to prosecute the men where I found the pony." More he urged of similar argument on old Finch, who heard him in

silence, and then flatly declined to take any proceedings whatever, "I got the pony back, thanks to ye; and much obleeged, I'm sure. But I does business with the gipsies, and most of 'em are a pretty good sort, and stick to their bargain. If I prosecuted e'er a one of them, we should never get on again. I'm out for peace and quietness with my neighbours, and I shan't let a pony come between us." And though the agister, having to take an official view of the matter, protested, at heart he felt there was much to be said for the old man's decision.



*The Path to the Rufus Stone.*



### XIII.—THE BROKEN LEG

ONE WET afternoon towards the end of September, the colt-hunter was in his stable mending some harness. A yell from his youngest boy made him jump, and he half-rose to see what was the matter, but turned to his work again, as the boy's little sister let forth a shriek of delight. "Up to some lark," he muttered, then started, as both children shouted at the top of their voices, "Peter! Peter!" At the same instant the gate slammed, the sound of a heavy boot was heard, and the man tumbled outside, with the harness in his hand, to find himself face to face with his eldest son in full kit, tin hat, rifle and bandolier, and slung around with billycans, etc., his boots still coated with the white slime of the French hills.

"Peter!" "Father!" came out at one breath, and as they grasped hands, their faces came together, and they kissed—an odd thing, perhaps, for forest men to do, but a son coming home from the war unexpectedly was a thrilling moment, and apt to break down even the reserve of a lifetime. Peter, never forgotten for a single day, though not always mentioned by his parents, suddenly appearing, as if from the skies, was enough to make his father gasp, unable to utter more than, "Well, lad!" Then Mother, apprised, came rushing forth, full of joy, and yet of wrath at not being the first to salute her firstborn. She hugged and kissed him until he begged for mercy. "The lad's tired, Mother," said the father; "let's in, so's he can get his things off, and have a wash;" and Peter wanted this last badly. How the youngsters revelled in the tin hat and its dents, while the father spent some time cleaning his son's boots. "Quite a bit of France," he said, as he carefully swept the chalk off the bench into an empty matchbox.

You should have seen Peter eat, when he got among his mother's tarts and cakes. It appeared that he had the usual fourteen days' leave, of which some time

had already expired since he left Havre. "What a shame!" exclaimed his mother. "However, we won't think of going away yet," and everyone was happy, though later on, as Peter inquired for first one and then another of his old schoolfellows, faces fell, and answer was made sadly. After tea Peter felt a bit sleepy, so the youngsters were sent off to play elsewhere, while he stretched himself on a couch before the fire. He had to be wakened for supper, but he didn't mind, and said he would rather be called anything than late for meals.

The next morning, of course, Peter wanted a mount, and inquired what ponies were about. "You know the three in the stable," said his father; "and there's a blue roan mare in the paddock, but she's not properly broken in yet, and you'll find her rather skittish." Whereupon Peter, like a true forest lad, declared she would be just the thing for him, and with the aid of his two brothers, drove her into the yard and secured her.

When he mounted in the paddock, the mare treated him to a few plunges, which he did not repress too sternly; and once out in the open, went off at a great pace, her rider leaving her to go where she listed, sure that she would keep away from unsafe ground. But after letting off her steam with a good run over the heavy ground, the mare slackened her speed, and Peter could take stock of the old familiar sights and sounds. Perhaps the forest never looks so lovely as in autumn, and especially when well soaked. The heather still purpled the moor—a rich purplish-brown flecked here and there with jewel-like pools. Towards the uplands, and in the woods, the wet bracken had changed its usual autumnal orange for a rich sienna. Once Peter glimpsed a pony, all deep chestnut, with mane and tail of the same, a "self-coloured" animal, hardly visible against a bank of bracken. Only its movements betrayed it, and then its foal, dark of hue, was discovered where before it had been "lost" in the obscurity of a holly-brake.

Out in the open, the lad took all to his heart, its beauty and its appeal. A green woodpecker loped away from an ant heap where it had been probing, and a covey of partridges scattered from the pony's hoofs. The forest ponies, singly or in groups, gave life and focus to the landscape, and Peter saw that it was good.

Then as the mare started to run again, his hat was twitched from his head by a holly-branch. He reined the pony in, and essayed to pick up the hat with his whip, but having no crook to the butt, could not manage it. "Hold on, old girl," he said, dismounting. But it was precisely at this moment that Skewbald, now a three-year-old, grazing at a little distance by himself, and feeling lonely, gave vent to a loud call. The grey whinnied, and began to move off, just as Peter retrieved his hat, then, as he pulled on the reins, she kicked sharply, getting the lad on the right shin. There was a

sharp crack, and Peter let go the reins with a grunt, stood motionless a moment, and then slithered gently to the ground. As he did so and disturbed the broken leg, he shouted with pain, and the mare, already making off, increased her pace, the reins dangling from her neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

A girl was bowling along a forest road on a bicycle. Joan Barton, V.A.D. nurse in the forest hospital, had changed out of her uniform, and was taking advantage of her spell off to get some open-air exercise. She admitted to herself, as she spun along, that her own Surrey commons, beautiful as they are, could not compare in extent and wildness with the forest. She noted how the road wound, and led the eye over the moors and hills, and what a fine surface mere sand and gravel made, resilient and mudless in spite of recent heavy rain. As the forest people say, the more it rains, the better the going. Much better than in dry weather, when the surface gets loose and covered with stones.

Presently a grey pony, saddled yet riderless, and standing by a dead tree a little from the road, caught her eye.

She looked right and left for a rider, but saw no one. Then, acting on an impulse, she got off her bicycle, and went up to the pony. It moved as she came close, and she saw that the reins were held on a snag. "Funny way to tie up a pony," she said half-aloud; she knew something about horses, and had acted as groom in a remount stable while waiting for a vacancy in a hospital.

Some distance away was a herd of ponies scattered over the moor. Among them she noticed one patterned in bright chestnut and white, with the passing thought, that she had not before seen this striking coloration among all the forest pony hues. She went to her bicycle and stood scrutinizing the landscape, but she saw no one. Then her attention was drawn to a patch of white like a piece of paper dangling on a bush. But as she looked she saw the white patch wave to and fro like a flag, and with a sudden jump of the heart she realized that it *was* a flag, and spelling out letters. She knew the code, being an enthusiastic leader of Girl Guides, and watched the flag spell out the letters *h-e-l-p*. That was enough for Joan. Close to where she stood, a pony track meandered in the direction of the signal, and mounting her bicycle she bumped along it, almost falling off in her anxiety to watch the flag. It disappeared, but again showed itself wagging to and fro, then wavered and fell. She had to get off her bicycle, and pushed it hurriedly along. There behind a bush lay Peter, his face wrinkled with pain, yet full of relief at the welcome sound of



the girl's approach. He was the first to speak. "Morning, miss;" and he made shift to smile. "My pony got me on the right tibia. But a clean fracture, I think." Peter got this out all in a breath. He had had enough warning of the girl's approach to concoct his speech, and was rather proud of his knowledge of anatomy picked up in the first-aid class. Joan smiled too, pleased to find her new patient collected and cheerful. "Been here long?" she asked. "Not more than an hour, miss. I live over there," he went on, "but it's a matter of three or four miles away." "All right," said Joan, "but your leg had better go in some sort of splints before we can think of your being moved."

Then in response to a certain shade of anxiety on Peter's face, she added, "It's all right, I won't hurt you more than I can help. I'm a nurse at a V.A.D. hospital." "A nurse," chortled Peter; "it seems I'm having all the luck."

"Well," she laughed, "it doesn't seem like it. I don't think I'll take the puttee off. I'll look for some stuff for splints." She hunted round for some straight sticks, and Peter lent her his great knife, which he had to open for her, so that she could remove the knots. Then she put on the splints, using Peter's other puttee. "Don't be afraid to make a noise if I hurt you," she said, but Peter made no sign of pain except for a grunt or two. As she worked she talked. "It was clever of you to signal," she remarked. "Cleverer of you, miss, to see and understand," responded Peter; "'twas a good job Mother put out white hankies for me this morning. My khaki ones went into the washtub."

Joan told him of the grey pony on the hill, and Peter recounted the cause of his accident. "How long, nurse, before I'm able to go back?" he asked.

"You'll not be much use under two months. Your stay in Blighty will be longer than you expected."

"What'll my sergeant say?" chuckled Peter. Joan made a cushion of bracken for the injured leg and put another armful under his head. "Now," she said, "I'll go back to the road for help."

"But what's that, nurse?" exclaimed Peter, and Joan also heard a man's call. A moment later a waggon laden with logs emerged from a wood, some distance away, a man and a boy in attendance. Joan ran across to them, and explained the situation. "Why, that must be young Peter," said the man; "I met him yesterday, all loaded up, on his way home. We'll do what we can, miss, but our wood-waggon ain't no use, you see, for it's got no bottom. What'll we do about shifting him on to the road?"

But the boy was not a Scout for nothing. This was his moment, and he made the most of it. "Why, dad," he said, "that's easy. You cuts down two poles, and I gets them two sacks we've got on the seat, and makes holes in the corners. Then we puts the poles through the holes to make a stretcher, and carries him up to the road."

The elders agreed that this was feasible, but without enthusiasm, for fear of engendering pride in the young.

The man got his axe and cut down two young birches, remarking that he s'posed "they" wouldn't mind his cutting green wood for once, while Joan and the boy prepared the sacks. When the stretcher was ready, they laid it on the ground beside Peter, and carefully placed him in it, packing his legs and feet with bracken, so that the injured limb should not be jolted.

Then the man taking the poles at the head, and Joan and the boy a pole each at the other end, they marched slowly up the hill, Peter insisting on their keeping step, and giving an imitation of his sergeant's pronunciation. Once, as they crossed a little forest bridge, he gave the order, "Break step," but they refused, for fear of jarring his leg, whereupon he promised them all C.B.

When nearly at the road, they heard the noise of an approaching car, and all shouted together, the boy nearly letting go in the excitement of the moment. The driver both heard and saw. He stopped, and matters were soon arranged. The patient was carefully deposited in the car with Joan as attendant. The boy was to go back to fetch Joan's bicycle and ride it to the hospital, then, returning, would ride the grey mare back to Peter's home. Joan was much averse to this arrangement, protesting that the pony had done enough mischief already that day. But the boy grinned, for he could ride anything in the forest barebacked, and his family mantelpiece was adorned with cups and trophies won in the forest junior competitions. Remarking that he wouldn't "come to no harm," he dashed down the hill for the bicycle, while the man, after seeing that the grey pony was properly tied, returned to his waiting team.

Then came Armistice Day, or rather, in this quiet corner of Britain, Armistice Night, for in the forest was not to be seen such ebullition of spirits as in Regent Street, where, for instance, two middle-aged clergymen, with ribbons in their clerical hats, danced along the pavement playing tin whistle-pipes. But a great fire was to be lit on the hill above Peter's home, and all that afternoon men and boys had been carting up logs and branches gleaned from the woods.

Most of the local forest people were there, including Tom, Molly, and the two small children. Peter, now getting about with a stick, having discarded his crutches, was sent up in the pony-trap, the hill being deemed too steep for him.

When the fire died down and people were beginning to disperse, a girl wheeling a bicycle passed Peter and his family. Tom let out a shout: "Miss Barton!" and she stopped. She had seen Peter several times since he had left hospital; indeed, he said his leg wouldn't get well unless she continued to take a friendly interest in his case.

So she had paid visits, when not on duty, Peter and she sitting in the porch, looking on to the forest, talking and reading.

Peter was saying that the hill was too steep and rough to cycle down at night, and his leg felt well enough for him to walk down if Miss Barton would lend him an arm in case he stumbled. Tom would walk the bicycle down, which he was glad to do, though directly he was out of sight he got on, and nearly came a cropper avoiding some people going home.

So Joan and Peter went down together, taking a little path he knew of, and on the way they saw the dim forms of ponies on either side, all with heads down, browsing. Only one, the nearest, looked up, and snorted as they passed. It was Skewbald, and Peter suddenly found his tongue, for neither he nor Joan had had much to say to one another.

“Why, that’s the beggar that upset my applecart,” he said, and proceeded to narrate for the twentieth time how the call of the three-year-old had caused his accident. Then with a flash of inspiration he continued: “Lucky for me that he called when he did.”

“Yes,” said Joan, though she felt in her bones what was coming; “you mean he got you a long leave.”

“I mean,” declared Peter, though his heart thumped, and he had a strange difficulty in articulating, “that if it hadn’t happened, we might never have met.” And so on, but as this is a tale about ponies and not people, it will suffice to say that before they reached the bottom of the hill, they were Joan and Peter to one another, and that soon after Peter was demobilized the wedding took place.



#### XIV.—HOW SKEWBALD RANG THE FIREBELL

THE summer had been hot and rainless, and the beginning of August found the moorland of the forest drier than the oldest commoner had known it. Boggy places which had formerly to be skirted with care were now firm under foot. The tussock grass was white and sear, the fern orange and brown, while the leaves of the oaks were eaten by myriads of caterpillars into delicate lace-like filigree.

The blackberries withered without ripening, except where they grew in the meadow bottoms, still green, though the streams dwindled, until in the gravelly, quick-running parts, there was hardly enough water for the troutlets to scuttle past into the deeper pools.

One midday, on the road between Southampton and Lymington, a tramping sailor was resting by the roadside. He lit his pipe, and being a careful man, blew at the match before he threw it down. Then he rose, and continued his journey. But the end of the match still glowed, and the dry grass in contact with it, fanned by the wind, began to smoke, and then to ignite with a tiny flame, which crawled along the ground, until it came to the dry stump of a fir, its base littered with bits of bark and dead branches. These sputtered, and the fire began to spread. The wayfarer had passed on unheeding, for he was facing the wind, and therefore received no warning of what was happening behind him.

Down under the big trees the colt-hunter and his two boys were cutting the fern for stable bedding. He had the right to get all he wanted, though authority decreed that he was not to pick and choose, not to cut only where the fern grew thick and tall. He must clear his way steadily, even where it was sparse and stunted. This year it was pretty short everywhere. The man used a scythe, the boys were armed with

sickles. At intervals they drew the fodder into small heaps for carting.

The father straightened himself and sniffed. "Seems like burning. Another heath fire, I expect. Glad if it burnt up the gorse, but sometimes it burns up other things." "What things, dad?" asked the younger boy. "Trees which we want for firewood, and barns, ricks, and sometimes homes. Run up the hill, sonny, and see if you can make out whereabouts the fire is." The boy did not run; it was too hot. As he walked away, a shrill whinny was heard, then repeated again and again. "My word!" exclaimed the man; "that pony is some excited. Seems as if it came from the farm. What's a forest stallion doing there?" Just then in the quiet air a prolonged whistle was heard. The father laid his scythe at the foot of a tree. "Come on, Tom. Something's the matter, or mother wouldn't have blown the whistle." It was an agreed-on signal. Back the two went, and the younger boy caught them up, saying he had seen a great cloud of smoke, and it seemed right over the house.

"Nonsense," said his father; "more like five miles away." They walked quickly along the forest avenue of gnarled oaks, tall beeches, and odds and ends of hollies of no especial shape. "Look at all those ponies outside the gate!" exclaimed Tom. There was a restless, pawing, snorting, whinnying troop of mares and youngsters, but all with head over or turned towards the closed gate. When the three reached the farm, they saw Skewbald standing on the straw heap, surrounded by pigs, poultry, and ducks. Mother was standing at the garden gate with the baby in her arms. The skewbald whinnied when he saw the arrivals and stamped impatiently. The man sniffed again and muttered: "That fire seems closer than I thought. How'd he get in?" he called. "He jumped it," his wife replied. "I saw him."

They opened the gate, and the ponies surged in after them. Tom ran to slide back the big door, and had just time to flatten himself against the wall, when Skewbald thundered past, followed by the herd, right across the meadow to the ford, which they crossed. Then they turned, faced the wind, and snuffed the air.

"Boys," the father was saying, "this fire must be nearer than we want. The smoke's getting thicker every minute. Both of you get a broom, and let's get beyond the wood."

The homestead was enclosed to the south-west by groves of hollies and a plantation of firs. If these began to burn, sparks might set the thatched roof and hayricks on fire. Beyond the wood was a level tract of heather and gorse. The fire might not have caught this, and there might yet be time to stop it spreading to the wood. When they got beyond the trees, the gorse bushes at the far end of the open space were burning with a loud crackling, and on the ground a line of smoke, with here and there a sputter of flame, showed that the fire was crawling towards them.

“Spread out, boys, and smack away at it,” was the order.

Then commenced a fight with the advancing enemy, in the face of sparks and thick, pungent smoke. The boys worked bravely, but the wind fanned the embers, and, often, after they had beaten down the flames they had to run back, and put out a fresh outburst. Then, where the grass and heather was longer, the fire began to burn more vigorously.

“Get back, boys; we’ll wait and fight it where it’s shorter,” said the father. “Hooray!” Tom exclaimed; “here they come!” First a man on a pony, then a boy on a bicycle, two more friendly helpers in a trap, all coming to help as fast as they could; and later, a motor-car from the big house on a hill miles away, and crammed with helpers, hooted its arrival.

Some had brooms or beaters, and some took branches, but all fell to with a will, yet as they worked, the cloud of smoke seemed to get blacker and heavier. Instead of mounting into the sky like a pillar of cloud, it hung about their heads until they could hardly breathe. The sky became black, and still the fire defied their efforts.

A boy looked up and yelled, “Rain!” He had felt a drop on his face. Someone felt another, but they were not leaving anything to chance, and smacked steadily away at the smouldering herbage.

Then the rain began to come down steadily until everyone had a wet shirt. When the danger was over the volunteers began to move off, saying they must be going, in spite of entreaties to come back to the farmstead. They knew that the wife with her baby would be sore put to it to entertain so many. But one or two who lived farther off were persuaded to come along, and to these the colt-hunter expatiated a dozen times on the fortunate circumstance of the ponies running from the fire, and taking the road through the wood to the farm. As Tom said, the skewbald rang the firebell for them.



## XV.—THE WANDERERS

SKWEBALD, now a four-year-old, had in late August succeeded to the leadership of the company with which he had been running. The stallion which had lorded it over the herd had been “caught in,” and Skewbald had stepped into his place as the acknowledged superior of the young males. It was destined to be a temporary supremacy, for, as a skewbald, he could not be welcomed as a breeding stallion; his coloration was too pronounced. Self-coloured browns and bays were considered to be truer to the forest type. Skewbald’s lot was to be that of a pit pony.

No young stallion challenged him to battle twice, for Skewbald possessed, besides strength, a spirit, a quickness of movement together with a power of deciding rapidly, and when roused, a fighting temper which boded ill for an enemy.

As a future pit pony he had the merit of not being too tall, but he was perfectly proportioned, and his carriage and ease of movement proclaimed his fitness as an instrument of strength and speed.

Patterned as he was in bold chestnut and cream-white, his coat did not show the high lights rippling over the muscles of a bay or black, but the slinging of his barrel between his shoulders and flanks, the arch of his neck and withers, the action of his fore-legs, and the tension of his hocks, marked him as beyond the ordinary.

His mane, very bushy, and like his tail waved as with a lady’s curling-irons, was white nearly to the regions of his ears, where it turned to chestnut with an intervening streak of purplish-black. His long, ample tail, carried in a drooping curve, was white above and dark below. His on-side had one great chestnut patch covering most of his barrel and flank, and extending below the hock. From a distance, this side was deceptive, because the great brown blotch looked like a pony standing end on. The

offside had the neck and face chestnut, and a spot of the same on his barrel smaller in area than on the other side, and leaving his hind-leg white.

But although he looked and acted like a born leader, kept the yearlings and two-year-olds in their places, rounded up the mares and saw that all were on the move when the herd was changing quarters, and, last but not least, glanced continually round the horizon for enemies in the shape of agisters or other colt-hunters, it must not be supposed that he decided all the movements of his company.

Some of the mares were years older than he, and knew the forest infinitely better—the grassy lawns and bottoms, the bare “plains,” wind-swept in hot weather, and the great woods with sheltered recesses in drenching rain. So they, as a rule, took the initiative and decided when to move and where to go. But the direction once indicated, Skewbald took charge and acted as convoy.

In the herd was an old rusty-black mare with white forehead blaze and off hind-sock. She had been broken in for riding and was shod, as might be seen by her footprints, the imprint of the double line of the shoe showing out among the single, nearly circular curves of the unshod ponies.

In her time she had assisted in the “catching in” of many a pony, and now that she was again in the forest, although she had lost the timidity of the uncaught beasts, she made up for this by the wiliness of one who knew the ways of man. Time and time again the colt-hunters wished her far away, when they found her in company with ponies they wanted. They might manœuvre the group at a gentle trot across the moor, but just as they approached a tempting open gateway, the mare would check, toss her head, snort, and break away at a gallop, followed by the rest, in spite of shouts and cracking of whips.

She was also a persistent wanderer, a “lane haunter,” “lane creeper” or “romeo” (an atrocious Forest pun)—that is, a pony which escapes from the forest into the lanes to munch the sweet grass of the hedgerows. This is considered one of the worst vices in a forest pony, because she leads others with her. Then the agister may impound the culprits, and the owners have to pay for any depredations, as fence-breaking and crop-spoiling, that may have been committed. Prizes are offered for well-bred ponies in good condition, but are likely to be withheld unless the agister certifies that the selected beasts are no “lane haunters.” Some think that the introduction of alien blood has brought into existence a type of animal unsuited to the rigours of the forest, too delicate to flourish on the meagre fare, and therefore inclined to wander away in search of richer food.

By a mischance, the mare’s last foal had died soon after birth, and because of this, perhaps, she was this season unsettled, restless, and still more inclined to



wander. The summer, too, had been hot and dry, so the forest pasturage was meagre and scanty, the ponies having to search continually for their fare.

Whereas a herd keeps usually within an area of four or five square miles, this mare, whether owing to the above reasons or her innate tendency to wander, during this season kept the company on the move by her restlessness and persistence, so that without hurry, or causing fatigue to the youngest, and feeding as they went, the forest was explored from end to end. She was Skewbald's favourite mare; when she went ahead, he followed, and the herd fell in behind, in the usual column of route.

She knew the forest roads and lanes both as a riding pony and a "lane creeper," the short-cuts, the hunting bridges, the deep recesses of the woods, and the narrow winding pony paths across the upland "plains," as if she had the ordnance map in her head.

After whiling away a hot afternoon cooling their fetlocks at Potterne Ford, the herd spent the evening on Blackdown near the great round barrow, and in the early morning, before dawn, the mare led the way southward over bare ridge and through thick woods, until coming out on the Beaulieu road they found the manor gate left open by a sleepy carter, and trooped down in the early morning, past Beaulieu Abbey gateway, pausing at the margin of the beautiful estuary with its wooded banks, and yachts anchored at the bend. All was quiet except for the yelping of a few black-headed gulls questing for food among the pools, fringed with tawny seaweed left by the tide.

Skewbald advanced to sample the water, then snorted with disgust, and retreated, driving his company on to the road again. The old mare had a good drinking-place in mind, and led them up the street until they were stopped by Hatchet Gate. The gatekeeper, just getting up, heard the clatter of hoofs. "More lane hunters," she said; "I must let them into the forest again, or they will get into trouble." She hastened down, the herd passed through, trotted on to Hatchet Pond and slaked their thirst.

They spent some days on the great aerodrome of Beaulieu Heath, whence, in the days of war, the aeroplanes buzzed on their way across Blackdown to attack an imaginary enemy plane marked as a cross of white gravel on the ground. Now all was quiet, rows of huts and buildings stood silent and deserted. The lane creeper took the road again and led the troop towards Lymington. Down the hill they went, past the monument to the gallant admiral of the many virtues duly set forth, and hesitated at the toll-bridge, where the collector, waiting awhile to see if any human was following with the toll dues, drove them back. They turned up the road bordering the left bank of the Lymington River, and soon found themselves in the

forest again, but on the other side, for they forded the river, went over Sandy Down and crossed the Brockenhurst road, where a sorrel mare nearly lost her foal, which insisted on nosing a chunk of bread oblivious of a charabanc of excursionists. They scattered over Setley Plain, where are the two tumuli with intersecting rings, and crossing under the railway, wandered about the uplands above Sway, with its tall tower, a landmark visible far out to sea. Here, sunning themselves by a narrow forest railway bridge, they encountered another herd, a mere group, with that rarest of forest ponies—a white stallion—in charge. He was white, of course, because of his age; his backbone stood up and his ribs showed; but though he snuffed the air, there was no trouble, for the old fellow had no thought of showing fight, nor was this the season for dissension. All Skewbald wanted, for his part, was to get his company over the bridge, and when the others understood this, they made way willingly enough.



The wanderers straggled with many stoppages over the great open moors and uplands of the Rhinefield Walk. In the forest a “walk” is not a pathway, but a district of several square miles, formerly presided over by a ranger, an office now abolished.

They crossed Black Knowl, forded the pretty stream gurgling over its gravelled bed, and were soon cropping the fine greensward of beautiful Balmer Lawn. Here Skewbald had a tussle with a young iron grey who thought the lawn belonged to him.

After a short passage of arms, Skewbald disabused him of this notion, and the youngster retired hurriedly.

The herd wandered through the picturesque drives leading from the lawn, and drank at the little pond on the golf-links, set like a jewel on the breast of the moor.

The young grey stallion had some cause for jealousy, for Skewbald noticed a white mare with a great blotch of jet black on her neck and fore-quarters, and she took his eye, being spotted himself; but she refused to leave her beloved pastures; she was no wanderer, and never had been known to stray more than half a mile from her birthplace, a field by the lawn.



*The Naked Man.*

Then rain came at last, and the mare crossed the river again and led her party into the woods. They wandered through the glade of the Queen Bower, with its great beeches, crossed the Blackwater, and so into the thick woods of Vinney Ridge. Here they had a fright one midday, for the baying of hounds, tootling of horns, and tramping of hoofs dismayed all but the old mare, who had often ridden with the buck-hounds. She led her party, which were inclined to scatter, down a drive away from the noise. Later in the week the rain ceased, and leaving the woods, they crossed the Ober and slowly climbed the hill to Wilverley Post, the young foals even daring to rub themselves against the "Naked Man"—a dead tree reduced to a bare trunk and a couple of armlike branches stretched out imploringly. Here they crossed the black tarred road between Southampton and Bournemouth. It was Sunday afternoon and the cars were almost in procession, so numerous were they, the noisy

little sidecar predominating; but the ponies took small account of wheels. Horns might blow and chauffeurs curse, but the mares, and especially the foals, were not to be hurried. As the herd crossed head to tail, so that there was not room for even a motor-cycle to pass, the road looked like Piccadilly at its narrowest part, when the policemen stop the traffic. All sorts of cars were there, from Fords to a Rolls-Royce; great charabancs full of trippers, who threw crumpled paper balls at the ponies to hurry them up, but without avail, and the drivers, remembering the warning signs put up by the R.S.P.C.A., had to curb their impatience until the last foal had crossed.

The ponies spread themselves over Clay Hill, went down into the bottoms and up by the steep road from Holmsley Station into Burley, and drank at the pond fringed with hollies, on the golf-links, where one Christmas the scarlet berries hid the leaves, as the golfers, if they notice such things, can testify.

They cropped the lawn outside the school, until the noise of the children coming out sent them into the woods. They missed Burley, fortunately, for one of the old forest pounds stands close by, crossed the road at Vereley, passed the gipsy encampment, and then reaching another black road leading to Ringwood, spread out over the open ground of Picket Post, one of the finest spots in the forest, because of its altitude and its views towards the sea. Here one can see clearly the flanks of the forest hills rising from the level bottom like hills out of a lake. The ponies munched the sweet grass on the lawn with its beautiful little tumulus crowned with hollies, but unfortunately dwarfed by the great modern house close by.

Then the unsatisfied maternal instincts of the old mare surged up within her, an irresistible impulse to action, and she did what horses, dogs, and other animals will do—set her face towards her birthplace. She had been born at Brook, and old memories of her present surroundings may have suggested to her the route to the village. At any rate, the herd were soon travelling slowly to the north-east. Over Handy Cross Plain they went, through King's Garden and so to Stoney Cross, where, from the hill leading down to the dell of the Rufus Stone, one gets the fine view across to Brook and beyond.

The mare wandered about several days visiting the haunts of her youth; then again her loss came upon her, and she started off across country, for the spot where last she had seen her foal.

All this time the wanderings of the ponies had not been unnoted. People owning ponies had seen them here and there, and in passing a friend's house would call and remark, "I saw your chestnut mare over by Castle Malwood the other day," or the owner of Skewbald might be greeted with, "Your four-year-old seems a bit of a wanderer." If the herd strayed on to a public road where the agisters might catch

them, and involve their owners in expense, a forest man would spend a little time chivying them back into the forest. So they had committed no damage in their fleeting disappearances from the forest proper. They had not been impounded, and apparently they were free as air, yet the owner of any pony there, with a little trouble and inquiry, could ascertain its whereabouts and could get it either personally or by deputy.

The herd came back over Emery Down, the great gaps in its wooded sides showing where the Canadian gangs had cleared the timber during the war. Cleared it in a lazy way, the forest men remarked, for instead of bending to cut the tree at its base, they had left many stumps waist-high. But then, timber is cheap in the West.

Missing Lyndhurst, by devious ways the ponies came out on the golf-links, where a yearling got a smack on the flank from the ball of an impatient golfer. They crossed the road, and tried the sweet grass of Pondhead. It was a bright Saturday afternoon, and a boy with a camera, catching sight of Skewbald, tried for a snapshot. He stalked him backwards and forwards, manœuvring for a good pose and lighting, until the stallion got suspicious and annoyed. Disdaining the bridge, he jumped the streamlet, mounted the hill a few paces, and called loudly. The mares, not unmindful of the intruder with his flashing camera, understood. Without undue haste they gathered their foals, crossed the little bridge and took the path up the hill, Skewbald standing sentinel until he saw they were all on the move, then, pressing forward, he overtook the head of the column, and led the way.

Soon there was a quarter of a mile of ponies of all colours, following the meanderings of the path, the mares with lowered heads, foals trotting to left and right. Last of all went an old white mare with a black sucker silhouetted against her side. It was a pretty picture. Even in the distance the energetic action of Skewbald could be noted; his tossing mane proclaimed him the leader. It *was* a picture, and the boy could not help snapping it, although he knew the distance was too great.

The old mare no longer led the way, for the herd had reached its home pasturage. Indeed, Skewbald's owner had already noted his return. The ponies crossed the road looking down on Longwater, and passed a night among the lush bottoms. The next day they wandered eastwards over Matley Heath. As they approached the railway embankment to cross under the forest viaduct, they passed an area of a few acres, which would have looked strangely familiar to millions of men of military age. During the war the trench mortar force had used the place as a training-ground, and at every few yards a hole gaped, several feet across and a yard deep.

That afternoon the herd was again at the ford, having completed their circular

tour.



*The Black and White Mare.*



## XVI.—SKEWBALD THE SWIFT

IT WAS early in September, and Skewbald's owner, who had seen him only once during the summer, but had had reports of his having been found in various parts of the forest from agisters and keepers, decided that he would "catch in" the four-year-old, and get a good price for him as a pit pony. He settled to do the job himself, and, with two neighbours who volunteered to give up a Saturday afternoon, started off in the direction where the herd had been seen last. It was fine and clear ("visibility very good"), and Skewbald was plainly in view more than a mile away. The ponies were scattered along a ridge above a narrow valley, the floor of which was largely occupied by a deep bog.

It was decided to keep out of sight as long as possible, and come at the stallion from over the hill, in the hope that he could be driven down to the bog and surrounded.

But if the horsemen could see Skewbald at a distance, because of his bold colouring, he could detect them by reason of his good sight, and though they had apparently gone right away, he remained uneasy, marching from one mare to another. Presently he heard the muffled beat of hoofs on turf, and called loudly to his companions. When the three hunters reached the crest of the hill and looked down, Skewbald and several mares, with their offspring, were trotting away towards the head of the valley.

There was nothing for the hunters to do but to go for it at their best speed. Skewbald, they knew, like any stallion true to his herd, would not leave the mares, if he could help it. When they tired was the chance to get him. But as the horsemen galloped, the trot of the fugitives changed to the quicker step also, and though the riders gained on the herd, Skewbald was always on the far side, protected, as it

were, by the column of mares, foals, and younger ponies.

Some of the foals soon stopped, and, with their mothers, fell out of the chase. The other mares and youngsters carried on, and the pursuit went on along the ridge, until the bog was turned, and Skewbald led the way back on the other side. Then the ponies with him began to slacken, and the pursuers' hopes ran high, but Skewbald increased his speed, and leaving his fatigued company, galloped on alone. Some little distance ahead, the bog narrowed considerably, and here a causeway of gravel had been constructed. Along this the stallion dashed, and ascended the hill to where the rest of his leaderless herd had collected. They began to move as he approached, and stretching into a gallop, they went with him, this time down the valley, and being untired, began to increase the distance from their pursuers. "Hang it!" cried the owner; "when these are tired, and he gets to the other lot after they've breathed, he may keep this up all the evening."

Then things happened. One of the riders essayed to cut off a corner by crossing a marshy bit. His pony hesitated, and when struck, put her feet together and shot her rider into the bog. The others halted, and with shouts of laughter, watched the muddy figure thrashing about, then, as he sank deeper, hastily took measures to help him out. They tossed him a rope and fastened their end to one of the ponies. Then chaffing him about keeping his legs straight, they shouted, "Hold tight, Jim!" and setting the pony going, out came the man with a great squelch. "Well," said Jim, as he looked at himself ruefully, "my own fault entirely. I ought to have known better than beat a forest pony baulking at boggy ground."

It was getting late, and Skewbald was out of sight. They decided to abandon the chase and try again another day.

Then the rain came, filling the bogs and flooding the streams, and the ponies, according to their habit, left the open moorlands for the woods, where they were invisible, save to the forest keepers, clad in khaki with brass buttons bearing the crown and stirrup, the latter device derived from the gigantic stirrup hanging in the court hall at Lyndhurst.

Skewbald's owner made inquiries. A keeper had seen the stallion in a great wood of oaks and beeches. The next Saturday afternoon the three riders again set off. The rain had ceased, and the sun shone, although the going was heavy. In the woods the forest paths were churned into quagmires, but on pony-back it does not matter if the forest be a bit damp. The pony's legs get the mud.

Skewbald's company were grazing in the open, but in the shelter of the wood, bordered with groves of silver birches. From afar the hunters thought out a plan of action. "Best go back," said one, "and come at them from behind. P'raps we can



drive them down the moor and away from the woods." As the riders, after a long detour, were approaching their quarry, having got almost to the confines of the wood, a party of jays set up a clamour. "No use going quietly now," grumbled the leader; "better push on as fast as we can." The ponies had heard the raucous noise of the jays, and then the trample of hoofs. When the hunters emerged from the wood, they were in time to see the last of the herd dashing in among the trees, hundreds of yards ahead.

"Come on, lads," was the cry, and the pursuers did their best to overtake the fugitives, who had chosen their country with skill, for they had fled into a great wood with plenty of undergrowth, and trees so thick that no background of sky gave the ponies away. Hollies grew in dense masses, and clinging honeysuckle and brier impeded progress. Quick going was impossible, and every dense brake had to be examined for a lurking beast. Mares and colts they overtook, and once they thought they had found Skewbald, but it was an old white mare running among the trees. As they got nearer the river, the wood grew wilder and more difficult, while their ponies sunk below the fetlocks in the soft stuff. "Let's go into the drive and see if we can head them off," suggested a faint-hearted one. In the sticky drive were more ponies, but no Skewbald. With the old black mare he was sheltering behind a thick clump of hollies, ready, if he heard the riders approaching, to move quietly off.

Night came on and the riders gave up the chase in disgust, vowing that they had had the worst of luck.

After this, the services of the colt-hunter were sought. He listened to the tale of Skewbald's evasions. "Seems a speedy one, and artful. I'll get him, never fear."

The next morning, the colt-hunter, going out to shoot a rabbit for dinner, was delighted to see Skewbald with his mares, placidly wandering on the moor outside his holding. The rabbit must wait, and he returned to collect his two helpers and get the ponies ready. When the three were mounted, he sent the boy and girl by a circuitous route to get behind the herd. He himself rode through the gate which opened on the moor, and went towards the woods, as being the most difficult part of the country.

Presently, as he watched the herd, he saw the stallion raise his head, and a moment later Tom appeared on the ridge beyond the moor, and came down the hill at a trot. Skewbald called to his mares, and set off at a gallop towards the far end of the moor, where it was crossed by the stream. The man saw the herd rapidly dwindling in the distance, and noted with satisfaction that the boy made no attempt to rush the fugitives, but contented himself with trotting along the edge of the moor in the direction they had taken. "Saving his mount," the father muttered, and then heard

faint sounds in the distance, which he knew came from Molly, who had crossed the stream, and with shouts and gestures was stopping the fugitives. The ponies halted; then, as their new pursuer rode at them, they turned, and fled in the opposite direction. Skewbald had an eye to the hill, its summit covered with trees, but Tom on guard saw a suggestion of breaking away, and stopped it with waving arms and fiendish yells. As the ponies, apparently free from strenuous pursuit, slackened to a trot, the colt-hunter met them, and turning them, quietly followed. Tom and his sister closed in, and the ponies, in an invisible net, were shepherded towards the gate, left wide open. Skewbald, restless and suspicious, turned and faced the riders gently trotting towards him at some distance. This left the old "lane haunter" in front, and as she approached the opening, she shied, and broke away, keeping near the hedge, where there was no rider to forestall her. The herd turned also, and prepared to follow, but an unexpected intervention checked them. The two smallest children had been awakened by the bustle of getting the ponies ready, and guessed what was afoot. They had not been asked to help, but thinking there might be some fun, they dressed, slipped out, and hid in the hollies a hundred feet from the gate. As the mare came towards them they darted out, and, brandishing sticks, rushed at the herd, meanwhile letting off blood-curdling shrieks. The old mare, indeed, used to children, brushed past, but the ponies following were brought to a standstill, and as the youngsters jumped into the air, their arms and legs going all ways at once, making of themselves frantic instruments of movement and sound, the nerves of the ponies failed them, Skewbald turning tail with the rest, and the three riders, closing in, had no difficulty in passing their quarry through the gate and into the paddock. "Well done, kids!" called the father. "Close the gate! Let's ride 'em into the yard before they know where they are." But Skewbald had turned after passing through the gate, and the herd was now at the far end of the field. The hunters tried all ways to get the ponies into the stable yard, but in vain; they tore past the inviting opening, but enter they would not. Then the mare left outside, hearing the trampling of hoofs, and feeling lonely, gave a loud whinny. Skewbald caught it amid the noise of tumult. He broke from the herd, dashed across the field, through the gravelly ford, then, as he neared the gate, collected himself, cleared it at a bound, and joined his partner.

"My word!" exclaimed the colt-hunter, with a rueful laugh. "Can't that skewbald jump! One of you open the gate so that the other ponies can get back into the forest again. All our trouble for nothing. Well, we'd better go and have breakfast."

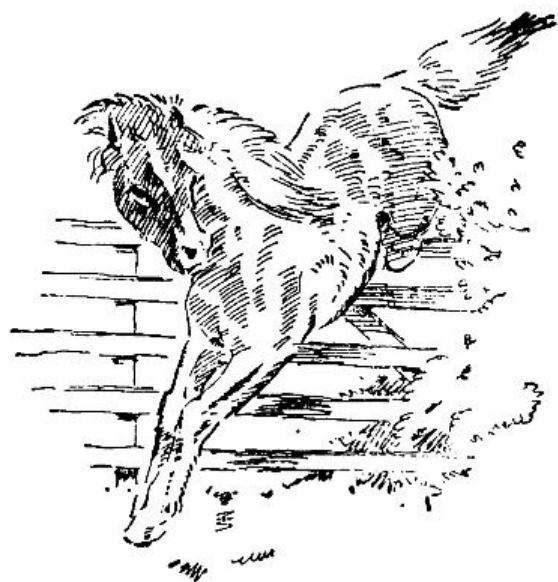
The colt-hunter began to fear that his old skill was deserting him, for in spite of his efforts, the four-year-old was not yet in the stable yard. At the first opportunity, the man went out again, this time alone. The old mare gave the alarm, on seeing him,

and the whole herd was soon trotting away from their pursuer, who, as they were going directly from his open gate, refrained from pressing them too closely, hoping that he might be able to turn them before long. But the mare led the way right across the open ground towards the river where it flowed between densely wooded banks. They entered the wood, and the pursuer increased his pace, for in such country unriden ponies can move much more quickly than a rider. Directly he got into the deep wood, he had to twist, and break back for feasible routes, and go slowly for fear of being wiped off his seat by a branch. He passed several of the ponies, but they were not what he sought, and as he got deeper in the recesses of the wood, he became puzzled. After some tedious wandering, scratched and torn by holly, brier, and bramble, he confessed himself at a loss. "They may have crossed the stream again," he considered. "This thick stuff is the worst of all to find him in. I wish I had my old dog." Nell had had to be destroyed, after an accident, but when in her prime had shown a capacity for following the fugitives as they threaded through the woods, and on reaching them, by barking loudly, indicated their position to the pursuers. The man gave up the chase reluctantly, promising himself to try again.

He did so the next evening with his boy and girl. The herd was in sight a mile down the moor. "When we get near them," said the father, "we must hustle, and head them off from the woods." But the ponies took the alarm at sight of the riders, and the old mare, without waiting for the chase to become hot, set off at full speed for the woods, followed by Skewbald and a few other ponies. "We shall lose them," said the colt-hunter, and sure enough, after much wandering and thrashing the woods, darkness set in, and the hunters returned, weary and empty-handed.

Again and again they tried to head off Skewbald from his protector. The mare, from being disturbed, got so nervous that, at the first sight of the hunters, she would dart for the coverts, followed by Skewbald. The colt-hunter cudgelled his brains in vain for a plan to secure the stallion, and began to sigh for the good old days when the forest men, mounted and blowing horns, encircled a wide area, then with outcry and galloping, drove all the ponies grazing therein into a great pound. But, as he said, that would have made an end of his bread and cheese.

September was three parts through, and still Skewbald pastured on his native heath.





## XVII.—HOW SKEWBALD ESCAPED THE MINES

THE sun, breaking through the mist of a September morning, shone on a grassy knoll by a great wood, where a man was cooking his breakfast. He was tall, ruddy, with a clear-cut profile and black hair cut close at the back. He wore a soft shirt, breeches, and stout boots. His wide-brimmed hat, jacket, and a towel hung on a bush close by. As he made his preparations he whistled "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Breakfast in the woods presupposes camping; no tent, however, showed itself, but a few paces off was an erection in the form of a lean-to, of dead branches interlaced with brushwood, and the whole well thatched with heather and bracken. Looking up from within, no peep of sky could be seen; the shack was, in fact, watertight.

The breakfast utensils were placed on a newspaper spread on the turf. A fire of sticks crackled in a hollow. Three aluminium saucepans were on the fire, and the man was stirring porridge in one. "Nearly ready," he muttered; "now for the bacon." He opened a package, took out two rashers, placed them in a small frying-pan, took the porridge-pan off the fire, removed the detachable handle and fitted the latter to the frying-pan, which he placed on the fire, now a mass of glowing embers.

Then he found sugar, poured in milk from an aluminium milk-can, and ate his porridge out of the pan while watching the rashers. When these were turned, he took an egg from each of two egg-shaped aluminium cases, broke the shells, and poured the contents on the rashers. When cooked to a turn, he took the frying-pan off the fire, and ate the bacon and eggs out of it. Then one of the remaining saucepans boiled, and he made coffee. The bread and coffee he took out of waterproof bags, butter from a small aluminium box. His first course had been of blackberries picked from a bush near by. Blackberries are not plentiful in the New Forest, but

occasionally they are found of a size and lusciousness rarely equalled elsewhere.

After finishing his breakfast, he took out a cigar, and began to smoke. As he mused he talked to himself for company. "Guess this is some quiet spot: not many birds except woodpeckers, jays, stonechats, and meadow-pipits, though I saw a whinchat, a redstart, and two wheatears yesterday. But I expect they were on migration. Nothing much to be heard in English woods after the first week in June. And except for the kingfisher, they can't hold a candle for colour against our cardinals and bluebirds.

"And no beasts worth mentioning. No bears, wolves, moose, or porcupines, and only rarely one sees a fox or a hedgehog. Of course, the deer show themselves now and then, and there are always the ponies. A viper here and there, perhaps, but no rattlers.

"Well, thank goodness, there are no mosquitoes, and however warm it is, the heat doesn't amount to much. And the views! Superb! That walk over Emery Down was delightful. I wish Sadie was here. Plenty of room in that shack, and how she would enjoy it. Hard lines, marrying, and having to leave one's wife almost on the church step." Here he broke off, and took out a letter, which he read as one does when there is no need to hurry, turning back occasionally to earlier passages, though the letter already seemed well thumbed. Then he replaced the missive—which was a long one, and called forth a smile now and then—in its envelope, and set himself to wash up, grumbling at the tenacity of the remnant of porridge; for once he had forgotten to fill the pan with water. The bacon rinds and crumbs he left for any furred or feathered epicures which might be about; the egg-shells, tea-leaves, and other rubbish he put down a hole.

Then he began to pack. He had no blankets, heavy and not too efficient conservators of heat. His only bed covering was an eiderdown quilt, which went into marvellously small compass. He had no less than three air-pillows—a tiny one for his head, one in the form of a ring for his hip, and a pleated one for his shoulder. These and a pair of plimsolls, with his sleeping suit, went into his ground-sheet, which he rolled into a long bundle round a light fishing-rod, with a strap attached to either end so that he could sling it like a rifle.

The other details of his equipment—bath and bucket, of the thinnest and lightest material, which had been emptied of water and hung up to dry; milk-can, collapsible cup, plates, saucepans, each of which he wrapped in paper before putting one within the other, not forgetting to place the handle inside—went into his waterproof knapsack with food-bag, tins, etc. In a little bag he put comb, brush, and mirror, all of diminutive proportions, from which the greater part of the handles had been

removed, in order to reduce weight, for this was a walking tour, where every ounce makes a difference. Even a pocket Primus would have added too much to the burden of the day. And in the forest, firewood is plentiful.

Once he ceased packing and raised a tiny prism glass of the most recent pattern, which was slung round his neck, quickly to his eye, in order to identify a passing bird. "Have learned quite a lot about English birds," he said to himself. "When I go back I shall be able to tell the Western Reserve Ornithological something about the English warblers. The nightingale's song is very fine, I'll admit, especially at night, but give me the blackcap in clear daylight. He beats the band."

When everything was packed, he turned towards the shack. "Better leave it as it is," he muttered; "I might come back this way and put in another night."

As he turned into the woodland path, the bushes parted and a man dressed in tattered khaki emerged. He carried a coil of rope over his shoulder and in his hand a stout cudgel. "Got the time on ye, sir?" he asked. The camper took out a gold watch. "I make it nine o'clock. But I should have thought that you forest men were in no need of watches with the sun shining." "Oh, ay!" muttered the man in khaki evasively. "Ah, what's this?" he exclaimed, pointing to the shack. "Sleeping rough? Why, that's punishable at the magistrates' court," he added with a grin. "Not at all," said the other. "I have my permission, duly signed from Lyndhurst, to camp in the forest, also a licence to fish in the streams, although up to the present I've caught nothing but minnows. This is how we camp out West. Saves lugging a tent about." "Oh," said the man in khaki, "you be an Amurrican; I thought so, by your twang. What puzzles me," he continued, "is why you should be tramping about here. Most of the Yankees at Winchester never set foot in the forest. They see it all from the car. But," with a sneer, "p'raps you can't afford it?" The American noticed, but answered with a smile: "Why, friend, I could afford it very well, but all my life I have loved open spaces and fresh air, and I like to do things for myself. I am what you might call a cattle-farmer, and have a ranch in the West."

"Indeed," said the other, "and how many cattle might ye own?" "Well, I am not sure, anyway," answered the American, "but I suppose, if things are going all right, that my men have charge of 10,000 head of stock." "Well, I'm ——," exclaimed his questioner. "And to think, if you're worth all that money, you care to sleep on damp ground with a bit of brushwood overhead."

"I said just now," laughed the other, "that I'm used to outdoor life. When I came over with my regiment, we were sent to the camp at Winchester. You know that city?" and the other nodded. He did not deem it necessary to say that the last stay he put in there was in the city gaol. "Well, I got interested in this locality, because there

seemed room to move in it, as there is at home; and in my spare time I used to come down here and look about me. Then one afternoon when I was sitting in the cathedral, while hundreds of our men, from all over the States, were being taken round in parties to see the sights, I had some talk with a man and a boy who looked in. They were cycling with camping luggage, and were to spend a holiday in the forest. I guess they were some novices, for I went outside to see them off. Never saw such poor, ill-used, overladen bicycles before or since. Afterwards I got my knock in the big push, and they sent me to the hospital at Brockenhurst, where I saw more of the forest. Just now family business is keeping me in London, so I thought I would spend a few days down here, in my own way."

The man in khaki became effusive. He thrust out a dirty tattered sleeve. "We ought to be pals, mister. See my wound stripes? Wipers, Loos. Been through the lot and glad to be back for good. I suppose you can't raise a drink for a pore comrade? You gentlemen generally have a whisky-flask on you."

"No, my friend," replied the American. "You'll find no intoxicating liquor in this outfit. I'm a prohibitionist, what you call a teetotaler." Then, as waves of incredulity, derision, and horror crossed the other's face, he added: "You'll find a lot more of us across the Pond. And now, friend," he continued, "I've told you as much about myself as if you were an agister, as I think you call him. Why do you appear, like a jack-in-the-box, and so anxious to know the time?"

"Not much of an agister," grumbled the man. "Miserable cusses, I calls 'em, interfering with a pore man's living. I comes from Romsey way, but settled down here since the war. A suspicious lot," he added surlily. "I drives cattle, carts wood, breaks in horses, and that's what I'm going to do this morning," and he held out the rope. "Ah," said the American, "that reminds me of home. None of my cowboys ride anywhere without a coil hanging to their saddles. They never know when they may want to rope a steer or a mustang." "Well," said the man in khaki, "I've heer'd tell that the forest people used ropes in the old days, but they never do now."

While talking, they had reached the edge of the wood, and the road, thick with dust, lay before them. "Well, friend," said the American, "you'll be taking the road; I wish you good-day. I am keeping to the forest paths."

"Why, mister," said the man with the rope, "you'll lose yourself." "Not with a good English ordnance map," answered the other, taking from his breast pocket a folded map. As he did so, a bulky pocket-book fell to the ground. "Thanks, don't trouble," as the man in khaki made a movement, and bending down himself, picked up and restored his property to his pocket.

But the man with the cudgel was not to be shaken off. In spite of the American's



obvious reluctance to have his company, he declared that he had plenty of time and that he would see him a piece of the way. Once started, the intruder on the visitor's privacy became boastful of his prowess and that of his companions in arms, and began to decry the American forces, but his hearer good-humouredly parried his clumsy onslaughts.

As they passed over the moor they came upon a group of ponies. It was Skewbald's herd. He was grazing, and as the two men passed within a short distance, he raised his head and looked at them. But, as they were on foot, and seemed to have no ill designs on ponies, he turned again to his own business.

"Now, mister," said the man with the rope, "you Amurricans talk very big about lassoing wild steers and hosses. What about giving us a show of your skill? Let's see you catch one of these ponies."

"No, friend," replied the American, putting aside the proffered coil; "I don't rope other people's beasts without their permission, nor do I wish to show off." "All right, mister, don't be huffy about it," said the man; "but that there stallion"—indicating Skewbald—"is worth five bob to me, if you can rope him. Joe Smith has been wild to get him for weeks past, but the skewbald has gone away every time. Only a rope will get him. You might help a pore man," he urged with garrulous earnestness.

"Well," hesitated the other, "the ground is soft, and I am not likely to hurt him, but this rope is all wrong and may put me off. However, I can try." They walked on a little and the American stopped and deposited his luggage at the foot of a holly. He tied the noose and re-coiled the rope to his liking. Then they walked back so as to pass within a few yards of the stallion. The man in khaki walked a pace or so behind the other, gripping his cudgel. He breathed heavily, looked around him and seemed excited. The stallion raised his head suspiciously, turned, and at the same moment the rope shot out and encircled his neck. Before the pony knew what was happening to him, the American, bending down, was taking several turns of the rope round a stump.

Then two things happened. The stallion, making off, was brought up short and fell on his side, half-choked by the tightening of the rope, and at the same moment, the cudgel fell with a thud on the head of the man bending at the rope. He fell forward on his face without a cry. His assailant looked around hurriedly, then took the gold watch, pocket-book and loose cash, and having picked up his stick, was making off without a second glance at his victim.

But Skewbald struggling on the ground caught his eye. "Why," he muttered, "I nearly forgot the rope. Good job I didn't quite. Might have give me away." He dropped the cudgel, unwound the rope from the stump, and approached the stallion.

Directly the pressure of the noose was removed from the pony's windpipe, he revived, and rose to his feet breathing hard. Then as the man reached him and took hold of the noose, he reared, pulling his liberator off his feet, to fall beneath the plunging hoofs. The stallion, seeing a persecutor lying prostrate, and being full of anger at his treatment, with a scream of fury, flew at him, kicking and biting. Then he seized an arm in his teeth and savaged it. Launching a final kick, he galloped to his herd, the rope trailing on the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

The American groaned. He thought himself again in the trenches, with the enemy "putting some hot stuff over." He was sure he had received a wound at the back of his head, and was lying face down in mud and blood, dying, yet no one came to his aid. Then his nose tickled, he sneezed, and sat up. He felt the back of his head and looked at the blood on his fingers. He remembered roping the pony, but rope and stallion were both gone. What was that lying in a trampled bush of bog myrtle? He got up and walked unsteadily to the prostrate form. The face was marked with cuts and bruises, while one sleeve was torn, the arm bleeding and hanging oddly. The American turned him over carefully, and as he did so, his gold watch fell out of a pocket, its glass smashed, and here was his pocket-book lying on the ground. Then he began to understand somewhat of what had happened to himself and to the man, for the hoof-marks around told their own tale. His face set hard, but this ruffian was in a bad way, perhaps dying. He would do what he could for him. He went to his knapsack and took out a first-aid outfit. He bandaged the torn and broken arm, using sticks for splints. The pain roused the patient and he began to groan and curse disjointedly, the phrase "—— skewbald" recurring like a refrain.

The American carried the man to the shade of a tree. He heard the chink of coin, which he divined to be his own property, especially when he found his pockets empty. Then he waited. The man opened his eyes, and looked at his preserver. "What?" he spluttered, having lost some front teeth. "Yes, my friend," said the other, "I am still here, and a good job for you. I might have left you to bleed to death, and serve you right. I think you took rather more risk than you knew," producing a revolver from a hip pocket and replacing it. "Well, your legs and back seem all right, and after a rest you should be able to make the road and get help. You don't deserve it, but I think I had better see you there. No, don't worry," as the man's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to give you up. You seem to have been well beaten about, without my trying to get you more punishment."

The man sat motionless; the double shock of the stallion's attack, and being confronted by the victim of his brutal violence, for the moment bereft him of speech and power to stir.

After a while, he attempted to rise, stammering that it was time he made a move. His rescuer helped him up, and the man tried to feel in his pockets. "All right, friend," said the American, "I have got my own back."

As the injured man proceeded, his strength failed and he began to stumble. The other had to support him, to prevent further injury to the shattered arm. The road reached, the man sank by the wayside, exhausted.

A cart drawn by a forest pony came along. The driver stopped. "Why, who be this? Not Bill Nokes again? What's he been up to this time?" he asked with emphasis. The American hastily explained that he had found the man lying injured in the forest. "Put him in. I'll soon have him in the hospital at Lyndhurst."

They laid the man on the floor and made him as comfortable as possible. "You coming, sir?"—to the American. "No," he replied. "I cannot be of any further use, and I have to return for my property."

He walked back with a splitting headache, a sore head, and a wonder in his heart that among the kindly forest folk he should have encountered an alien, and a black sheep at that. He found his goods where he had left them, and seeing the cudgel lying near, added it to his burden as a memento. He spied also a lock of chestnut and white hair, sawn from the skewbald's mane by the rope, and put it into an envelope. Then he said to himself: "Better get out of this. My scalp wants seeing to, and the people may wonder how I came by a broken head."

He consulted a time-table and estimated (there were no hands to his watch) that he could catch a train by walking across country, to Southampton. "I'll hunt up that doctor who treated me before, and get my head patched up."

When the American went to the surgery two days later for a final inspection the doctor held out a local paper, saying, "Here are some items which may interest you." A pencil mark stood against a paragraph entitled, "Strange Death of a Forest Pony," which related how Skewbald had been found by a keeper. The rope had caught in a snag near a deep pit, and in his efforts to free himself, the pony had fallen down, and broken his neck. "Well, doc.," said the patient, "I did more mischief than I expected, when I fooled around with that rope, but I will put it right when I get to town."

"Look at the next page," said the other. This item was headed, "Forest Man injured by a Pony?" and narrated that a man picked up grievously injured, was doing well in hospital and pronounced out of danger. It went on to say: "He is a somewhat notorious character and well known to the police. Curiously, after his injuries had

been seen to, and while in a state of delirium, he frequently muttered imprecations on 'that —— skewbald.' Elsewhere we detail particulars of the mysterious death of a fine skewbald forest stallion belonging to a well-known forest commoner, Mr. J. Smith. It is conjectured that the man may have lassoed the pony (though it is not known that he possessed any such skill with a rope), and in some way was taken at a disadvantage by the animal, which attacked him, and escaped, only to meet its death shortly afterwards. The man's injuries are such as might have been caused by a stallion's teeth and hoofs. Such aggressive behaviour on the part of a forest pony is of the rarest."

A few days later, Skewbald's owner received a letter with a London postmark. "Dang me!" he said, turning it over; "who be this from?" and getting no answer from the envelope, opened it, when out came a draft for £40, and a letter in business terminology from a firm of solicitors intimating that a client of theirs, having heard through the Press of the death of his pony, hoped that the owner would accept the enclosed sum as indemnity for his loss. "Well, well!" exclaimed the delighted but bewildered man, "this beats all. The thing gets stranger and stranger. I'm sure that varmint Bill Nokes never roped the poor beast. Now, these people write as if someone owed me the money. I'd better harness the pony and get this in the bank before anything else happens." And not until he had got the draft safely to the bank, and had seen the clerk initial it, did he really believe that the skewbald's loss had been made good.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Skewbald, the New Forest Pony* by Allen W. Seaby]