

The Old Grey Mare



BY CHARLES FRANCIS



FUNNY HOW you meet people. Now, if both our tractors had been working, and what with old Joe and Prince our two horses, we could have brought the wheat into the mill in good time; but, blow me, if the pistons of one of the tractors don't go phut on us just the day the mill arrives. We were going to carry on with the one tractor and two horses till the boss of the mill heard about it. No show, he says, he wasn't going to have the mill idling while we fellows brought in the wheat from the paddock way down the terrace. So we scout around the countryside to borrow a tractor, or at worst, a horse and dray. Then we find old man Blackmore up the road has an old mare he borrowed from Jimmy Styles, and when we ring Jimmy he says we can borrow his mare, for what it's worth.

Well, when you're stuck, as we were, any horse is a horse, so we thank him, and we guess old man Blackmore is

listening in on the party line so there's no need to ring him especially to tell him we'll be up for it.

That evening, while the mill hands were strolling about smoking and yarning with the boss, I set off on my bike to pick up the old mare from Blackmore's. That's how I come to meet Matilda. When I see her I wonder what I've struck. She's an old white horse, a dirty white, and I don't think she's ever been groomed, and her back sags way down in the middle as though she's too tired to hold herself up, and I wonder if at any moment she won't collapse altogether. But she's mighty quiet, and when I go up to her and throw a piece of twine round her neck she calmly follows me out of the paddock and into the yard, where I harness her and back her into the dray.

Going home she walks along as though she's no idea where she's going nor why, a real dejected walk, so that I don't like to crack her with the reins, but just speak kindly to her. "Come on, Olga, old girl," I say, or "Just a little faster, Bette," but all to no avail. And I can't whack her—she looks so sad. So when it's really dark and I should be sitting by my fire having a good hot cup of coffee, there I am in the stable undressing her while she snorts and blows away at the chaff I've put in her box.

She stayed with us for two days. She was a good mill horse, the noise of the engines didn't disturb her in any way; she just stood quietly as we forked the sheaves on to the feeder. The only trouble was that she wasn't much more energetic when I drove her out to the wheat-field. I cracked her with the handle of my fork once, but she only looked round at me in

