

A RACE FOR A WIFE!

CHAPTER II.

A man of five-and-twenty, some eight- or ten months or so called to the bar, may be said to have a great opening; but it is an opening, and nothing more. Like the immortal Micawber's opening in the coal-trade, its of a very precarious description, and hardly warrants setting up as a married householder and responsible citizen. And such, at present, were Grenville's prospects. Of course, the woollack was all before him; but there are such a deuce of a lot of these things before us, and which remain so, and in lengthening perspective, till the little volume of our lives is closed. It is only in pantomime that you ever can calculate with certainty upon coming to 'the halls of dazzling light' at the conclusion of the performance. Many of us in life are bonneted by the clown, upset by the pantaloons, or disappear down unexpected traps from which there is no redemption. We cast away the bright aspirations of our youth, and are quite contented if we can but get our bread and cheese honestly, and meekly deprecate all those schemes for firing the Thames which we were once so hot upon.

Grenville Rose, meanwhile, is continuing his struggle with the difficulties incidental to those who pursue 'the early worm.' He has meditated, as many of us have also done, on—why does a servant never seem to think it necessary to light your dressing-candles when preparing for these before-sunrise excursions? He has endeavored to part his back-hair with a candlestick in one hand and a hair-brush in the other, and just escaped the usual near misapplication of those articles. He has tumbled over his boots and into his open portmanteau. Early risers should not dres. Get up, put on your clothes, and vow to become a Christian at the first favorable opportunity, but tamper not with the solemnities of the toilet. I hold myself it should be part of a valet's duty on these dire occasions to put one bodily into the frigid hip or more icy-looking sponge-bath, if the usual dressing-routine is to be pursued; otherwise the flesh is weak, and my first theory will be found infinitely to be most relied on.

However, Grenville at last enters the old dining-room to gulp his scalding coffee, and recognizes the utter futility of attempting to eat at abnormal hours. He is suffering altogether from considerable mental depression—prominent ideas, perhaps, 'What a farce all country balls are!' Suddenly the door opens, and Maude Denison glides into the room.

Good-morning, Grenville. Isn't this good of me—to make such a struggle, and rush down to give you your coffee? Ah, I see you've got it! Never mind, *amico mio*, you must take this will for the deed. At all events, I'm in time to say good-bye.

His face lit up as he shook hands with her. 'Very kind indeed, Maude, to come down and give me a last glimpse of you—so tired, too, as you must be after your triumphs of last night.'

'Triumphs! What do you mean?' replied Miss Denison, in sweet humility, though a coquettish smile and flash of the deep-gray eyes showed that she was perfectly conscious of her ball-room success.

'Oh, the hypocrisy of women!' laughed her cousin. 'As if you did not know perfectly well that all the men were raving with admiration, and that the ladies could find no words to express their opinions of you! And if you could not imagine you were pronounced handsome, lovely, graceful—stigmatized as over-dressed, under-dressed, and awkward! While your admirers on one side of the room vowed so light a foot never across the boards at Xminster, your detractors on the other were speculating as to how much of your hair and complexion were really your birthright. I heard one hideous old woman confide to this mother of three red haired daughters, that you squinted in the bottom of your family, although it was not enough to be perceptible in public. Pooh, Maude! As if you did not know you were the belle of the ball, and enjoyed all the rights and privileges of the distinction.'

'Ah, well,' she rejoined, with a saucy smile. 'I am going to be a humbug to you, Grenville. I know some people thought I looked nice, and I know others disliked me for doing so. Why should they? A woman

perhaps never. At the worst, recognition of his existence on meeting is all that quadrille entails.'

'Well, I suppose you are right, Maude; but it is time I was off. Good-by!' And Grenville's fair cheek a little as his lips touched the pulse tingled so quietly yielded to him. 'Kind regards to my uncle and aunt, and drop me a line now and then.'

'Don't be afraid of that,' laughed Miss Denison. 'Don't I always write to you when I want anything? And am I not always wanting something? I think the past might testify in my favor. Good-by; don't be long before you come and see us again.'

Grenville Rose pondered moodily over his visit as he drove to the station. He had not quite mastered the fact that he was in love with his cousin, but he had arrived at some close apprehensions on the subject. He felt that he would have been a great deal better satisfied had his parting salute been much less easily accorded. The sisterly way in which Maude Denison had bid him 'God speed' could have been misunderstood by no one out of his boyhood. He had the satisfaction of thinking that, at all events, she cared for nobody else; but there was also the chilling conviction that she regarded him more, if any thing, in the light of a brother than a cousin. He didn't himself quite know what he meant, or what he wanted. He had a confused idea that something was going wrong, as far as he was concerned. This erratic fashion of ideas is common enough in every day life. Boys fall in love, and rave about it; a few years later we are very shy and diffident on the subject—we are even loath to admit it to ourselves. This is the time at which women marry us instead of our marrying them. It may be denominated as the 'helpless epoch,' and varies quite half a score of years in different individuals. 'Nonsense!' you will say. I can only reason that in the lives of the majority of men there will be a time, before five-and-thirty, when it will be at the command of some woman to wed them or leave them. And when you meet those pleasant old bachelors, depend upon it, the Eve who had the chance did not consider the apple worth picking.

The pale February sun is shining down the grassy vistas, and a few sanguine rabbits scamper about in a jocund manner way, as if there were no such thing as English spring in prospective, rabbits that probably first saw the light in the preceding year, and are therefore in happy ignorance of what March can be capable of. Maude, fresh as a rose, after a turn round the garden, comes in just in time to greet her mother on her return to the dining-room. Petting her mother is one of the chief pleasures of Maude Denison's life. On this occasion she conducts her into the easy-chair next to the fire, makes the tea, and then, drawing a stool near, seats herself at Mrs. Denison's feet, and, with girlish delight, recounts all her successes of the previous night; to which the fond mother listens with quiet happiness, as her hand plays with her daughter's silken tresses. That nobody could ever eclipse, that nobody could ever be worthy of mating with her peerless Maude, was a thing that Mrs. Denison would have deemed it absurd to argue.

'And mother dear,' said the girl at last, 'Grenville said, before he went away this morning—'for I saw him off, you know—he said I was quite 'the belle of the ball.' What do you think of your daughter now? Won't that satisfy paps, although he did grumble so about the expense of the dress?'

'Yes, love. He will be quite contented when he hears how thoroughly you enjoyed yourself, I am only so sorry that I was not strong enough to have been present myself at my darling's success.'

'Yes,' said the girl, thoughtfully, 'it wanted that. I did want you to come back to and talk to between the dances. It was not near so well worth while being admired, with you not there to see. Oh, mother!' said Maude, laughing, 'I do believe you would have felt more conceited about it than I did.'

'I have not the slightest doubt about it my dear. When we have nothing left to be vain of ourselves, we are apt to get very proud of our daughters.'

'I won't have you talk like that, mother, as if you were over so old, when you know you're not,' retorted Maude.

'Well, dear, if not quite an old woman, I have got to that age when I am quite content to look at the success of my child as a soft

hundred to sell that I looked to to help me through with this.'

Mrs. Denison sighed. She had gone through a good many good breakfasts in her time, and felt as helpless as ever in suggesting expedients for the occasion.

'It's very unfortunate,' she said, at length. 'Mr. Pearman is not pressing, at all events, I hope.'

'No, curse him! he has the grace to remember that two-thirds of the property have already fallen into his hands. He is always tolerably lenient about his money. The fellow knows, moreover, that his is the first mortgage on the estate; and, I dare say, at times looks forward to being the eventual owner of the Glinn. Shouldn't wonder if it was, too, some of these days,' muttered Denison, bitterly. 'I used to grieve once, Nell, that we hadn't a son; I begin to think now it was all for the best. I should feel it more if I had to think that my boy would never be master here. Yet that is pretty well how the case would stand if we had one.'

Providence knows what is best for us, Harold,' returned his wife, softly; 'it is a sore course of trouble to us once; but, as you say, it spares us some bitter thoughts now.'

She associated herself with him in his career of extravagance as if she had been equally to blame, though, as far as her gentle nature dared, she had entered more than one meek remonstrance at his reckless career. But Mrs. Denison was not the woman to throw her husband's faults continually in his teeth. It was all done now, past recall; still, as far as it lay within her power, the wife was willing to bear her share of the burden Harold Denison's folly had entailed on his family.

'And pray, Maude, did Mr. Pearman honor Xminster with his presence last night?' inquired her father, sarcastically.

'Young Mr. Pearman was there, but not the old man. He seemed to know a good many people there. Mr. Brisden—'

'Yes, it's the old story. The old county families are swept away by these spinners, brewers, solicitors, and such like. Another hundred years and there won't be one of the old names left in the neighborhood.'

Mr. Denison a little forgot that, if the brewers, spinners, etc., did buy and succeed to the old estates, it was on account, generally, of the folly and extravagance of the said fine old county families. You can't buy what is not in the market; and had Mr. Denison in his early career simply spent the eight thousand a year he was born to, instead of the twenty thousand he was not, Glinn might not have looked now as if liable to become the property of the highest bidder. One looks sadly on as one of those hereditary estates changes hands; but, alas, it must always be so. Descent from the Conqueror is no safeguard against a man being an incurable fool, and, in the vernacular of the day, 'going an inextricable mucker.'

But breakfast is over. Maude flits away to her own little sanctum, with its piano, books, and budding camellias; Mrs. Denison goes off for a conference with the old housekeeper; while the squire betakes himself to his study, to struggle with figures and hold gloomy converse with Thompson, his farm-bloomer. The mother and daughter do not feel much mental perturbation about the difficulties that threaten them. For the last five years have they not heard Mr. Denison's discourse in the same melancholy strain? Constant jeremiads lose their effect, they thought little of the growling of the storm. But Harold Denison, as he sat puzzling his head in his room over that complication of figures, knew that things had pretty well reached that climax, and that it would be hard to predicate even how many months he should still remain Denison of Glinn.

CHAPTER III.

A PROJECTED ALLIANCE.

In the modern but extremely comfortable dining-room of Mannersley, the Pearmans, father and son, are sitting over that wine. The old man has turned seventy, and can hardly be said to look as if his money-grubbing career had agreed with him. He is shrunk and worn, with a stoop in his shoulders, and his hand shakes a little as he lifts his glass to his lips. Altogether, he wears the aspect of a man whose constitution is beginning to break up. The insurance-offices, I fancy, would reject him now, upon almost any terms. Wealth is not amassed

Old Pearman smiled, and seemed to sip his port with additional relish. 'Oh,' he said, 'and he's peppered Coriander, has he? He's the biggest thief in England; but he'll pay me, though he don't everybody.'

'And why you, in particular?' inquired his son.

'Because he made a mistake about his name in early life, Sam; and he is quite aware that I know it, and could rake up evidence enough against him, if he irritated me, to make things, to say the least of it, very unpleasant, as far as he is concerned.'

'Good. Then, with a little pressure, that'll be good money, if it is won, eh?'

'Just so,' nodded the father.

'Now we'll come to something else. Just listen to this with all your brains. I've pretty well come to the conclusion that I had better get married.'

'I don't see any reason you should not; on the contrary, I should like to see it. Not going to make a fool of yourself, I suppose?' and the old man looked keenly at his son.

'Tell you more about it when it comes off; but certainly not, I think, in the design. We've made a good bit of money between us. I'm not going to say it isn't most of it yours; still, since I have been having a share in the concern, I've put some together myself. Now what I want in marriage is connection more than money. These thick-skulled county bigwigs won't recognize us, who have made our own way in the world, and built up our own fortunes, because, forsooth, they have kept their registers more carefully, and are able to give more accurate descriptions of their grandfathers and grandmothers than we can. In short, their names are in the "stud-book," and ours are not.'

Sam Pearman said all this as if he and his father were two honest traders who had acquired a fortune by skill and industry, and paused for a reply.

'Yes—yes, I think you are right; but there will be difficulties—difficulties, I fear.'

'Of course there will, to a certain extent; there always is about getting anything worth having in this world; but money is a key to most things nowadays. An acknowledged axiom of the age is, that rank is money; and vice versa, £. s. d. goes for position. Tottering coronets must be propped by wealthy alliances. The parson or doctor marries the rich tallow-chandler's widow. Marriage is a social contract in these times. A hundred thousand pounds from Manchester stands out for strawberry-leaves in the coronet, while a fifth of the money from Birmingham is quite content to put up with an honorable.'

'Gad, you're right, Sam. I've seen something of these things, and pretty squabbling there is over the settlements generally. The moneyed side never think they can be tied tight enough, while the other are usually so sensitive about the absence of trust that is to be reposed in them. It does one good to look at, Sam—it does, indeed. To think they can be so fond of each other, and such men and women of business at the same time! I've seen 'em vow to love, cherish, and all the rest of it, when a week before a dispute about how a mere couple of thousand in the settlements should be disposed of had all but upset the match! And the old gentleman chucked so after his little joke that he was in considerable danger of choking.'

'What an old image it is,' muttered his dutiful son, rather disgusted at the untimely interruption occasioned by his parent's jocularity. However, as his sire recovered, he merely observed—'Better have another glass of port after that, father; it will do you good.'

'You're right, Sam, right; we get thin in the blood as we grow old, and want stimulants to make it circulate. This irritation in the throat, though, rather grows upon me. I can't stand any exposure nowadays, though in my time I have thought little of the bleakest wind that ever blew across Newmarket Heath.'

'Well,' resumed his son, 'to return to what I was saying, you agree with me that I must look out more for connection than money, don't you?'

'Yes, I think that's best; but it would do no harm if you could see your way into a trifle of property besides,' and the old man looked keenly across at the seed he had begotten.

Exactly. Now I am coming to the marrow of any project. I was at the Xminster ball last night; and the prettiest girl in the room was the daughter of old Denison of Glinn. I got introduced to her; danced with her, and did quite as well as any one could expect to do at a first dance. I

understand, and look to 'have twenty lings' worth for a sovereign on all occasions. Don't you make yourself uneasy about governor.'

This idea seemed to tickle Mr. Pearman more on the eve of choking—a catastrophe indeed, that was not evaded without considerable coughing and some involuntary tears.

'It's my throat, Sam,' he gasped at last. 'I feel a good deal of irritation about it at times.'

'Now,' continued his son, without heeding the interruption, 'we'll reckon our trumps in our hand; they're not many. First, Denison is a poor man, isn't he?'

'Yes, he has well on to three thousand year nominal rental left still; but more than one mortgage on the property let alone other charges. I doubt his fifteen hundred a year clear; that's enough to keep up Glinn on—let alone pretty well in debt besides.'

'Haven't you some money on the property yourself?'

'Ten thousand, Sam, and I'm first mortgage; but I know there's a second mortgage of the same amount, and there's more for all I know.'

'Well, these, you see, are all points in favor. We could make this first mortgage quite easy for him, at all events.'

'It's a deal of money—ten thousand pounds; but of course it would be easy if the whole property looked like ours, you at last.'

'Well, then, we must take the mortgage also into our own hands, and it stand at very easy interest. It's virtually allowing Denison so much during his lifetime, and in the long run fall principally upon me.'

'Yes; but I don't follow the meaning all this, Sam.'

'That's just what I am about to explain to you. My chances of meeting Miss Denison are so extremely few that it is hardly possible I can arrive at asking for her in that way. My only chance is by proposing it to her father, and asking him to cord me permission to try and win his daughter's hand. Mind, that is the way you must put it; but don't forget that you have to bring your pecuniary hold over into play also—only do it gently.'

'You may trust me, I have pulled strings in so many ways in my time that I've learned to be pretty cute about doing with a delicate touch. Jerking 'em's talk only allowable in the beginning of the bit, Sam. I'll help you all I can when I made my mind quite up about it.'

'All right;' and Pearman left the room in quest of a cigar. With regard to his venerable sire's last remark, he thought little about it. He knew perfectly that he meant the old gentleman was craving for his after-dinner nap, and considered he had talked business enough for the present.

It is a curious anomaly in our social framework, how loath we all are to take the fact of going to sleep at abnormal periods. Friends, or acquaintances, relatives, and even strangers, whom you have met most palpably in the arms of a woman, indignantly repudiate the insinuation. It is known one of the latter even take the trouble to explain in a railway-carriage that he is the motion less with his eyes shut. As a friend of mine, with a great natural talent for studying the eccentricities of character, when down by rail one golden spring day, viewed the horse-chestnuts at Boscley Park, then of course in all their glory. In the carriage with him was a stout man, apparently a well-to-do London tradesman. Ere the end of their journey they discovered they were bound much upon the same errand.

'Yes, I often come down here,' greeted the stout gentleman, 'to get away from the great hire, and enjoy a few quiet hours of intellectual thought.'

On arrival they separated; but, in the course of his wanderings through the park that afternoon, my friend came upon his low-traveller lying flat upon his back under one of the grand old horse-chestnuts. An empty bottle of beer lay on the grass on one side of him, and a half-smoked cigar in a veritable church-warden on the other. The deep bass music that he discerned from his nose told how he renovated his intellect for further struggles with this wicked world. Perhaps he was right. Stopping the