

MR. HARDCASTLE'S FRIENDLY ATTENTIONS, AND WHAT CAME OF THEM.

(From London Society.)

CHAPTER I.

BEWILDERMENT AT BRIGHTON.

'If the gentleman who found the lady's glove at the ball of the—th Dragoon Guards at Brighton on Wednesday last will be at the Zoological Gardens in London on Sunday next, he may hear of something to his advantage.'

The 'Southdown Reporter and Devil's Dyke Free Press,' in which the above advertisement was contained, fell from the hands of a gentleman who was reading that enterprising print in the coffee-room of an hotel in the town first referred to—the Sybarite Hotel, facing the sea. I suppose it was the advertisement that caused the surprise, not to say emotion, which evidently possessed him. It could not be the attack upon the Mayor, nor the denunciation of the Town Council, nor the exposure of the Gas Company, nor the clever article upon the dearth of local amusements, nor the pleasant reference to 'Our Autumn Visitors,' nor the eulogistic review of 'Our talented fellow-townsmen's' volume of poems, nor even the facetious letters about ladies' bonnets and high-heeled boots. Yes, it must have been the advertisement.

There is one thing that a man is sure to do when an announcement in a newspaper exercises upon him such an effect that he drops the newspaper upon the floor. The odds are at least Lombard street to a China orange that he picks the newspaper up and reads the announcement again. The gentleman in question adopted this inevitable course of action; and while he is engaged in mastering the interesting paragraph, and making his reflections thereupon, I will tell you who he was and all I knew about him up to this period of his career.

You could see for yourself, as he sat in the bow-window in the twilight, with the broad sheet spread before him, that he was a gentleman, in the conventional sense of the term: that he was a well-made, manly-looking fellow of unmistakably military cut, with a leisurely expression of countenance suggestive of the fact that he need be in no hurry to assert his good looks, as they were sufficient to assert themselves; and if he kept curling that long tawny moustache round his thumb and finger you might be sure that it was an action caused by nervous anxiety rather than by any thought of improving that appendage. If you guessed his age to be somewhere between twenty and thirty you would not be mistaken; and if you made a bet that he was the Hon. Harry Doncaster, brother to Lord St. Leger, and a captain of light dragoons on leave from India, you would win your bet beyond all chance of dispute.

But you would never suppose, unless you happened to know, what a troubled life Harry Doncaster was leading. Money had never been the strong point of his family, at least during the last two generations. His brother the Viscount had not much, and what he had he wanted—for viscounts must have money, of course, come what may. His family set Harry up in the cavalry—he took a great deal of setting up, by the way, though he got his promotion by luck—and he inherited some private means from his mother. But in reference to the latter he made the not uncommon mistake of confounding capital with income; and the original sum, after several abortive settlements in life, refused at last to be made the sport of an unscrupulous cheque-book, and disappeared indignantly below the financial horizon. After this pecuniary crisis Harry Doncaster, as far as any additions to his pay were concerned, was supported, like the hospitals, by voluntary contributions. But the voluntary system was no substitute for an establishment in his case; and in a thorough state of disendowment, without edifices, glebes, or any consolation of the kind, he found himself in a state which he described as 'dependent on the generosity of my family, who refuse to give me anything.' Then he began to borrow, which was crisis the second in his career. He began by merely overdrawn with his agents; and Cox, it must be said for that obliging firm, allowed him a considerable fling. But there is a point when even Cox loses patience; and Harry Doncaster, when he found his pay looking very small in perspective, compared with the massive foreground of liability, did not relish the effect of the picture, and squared up with Cox by a great convulsive effort. It was then that he took to borrowing in a direct manner, and came to crisis the second, as I have said. Now crisis the second would not much matter; but it is very apt to lead to crisis the third, when borrowing becomes so difficult as to approach the confines of impossibility. And to this gloomy boundary, I regret to say, Harry Doncaster had arrived at the period in question. He did not know, as he declared, how to turn himself round, and performed the process only, like the scorpion girt by financial fire, the circle narrowing with every successive turn. He began serious borrowing in India—that gorgeous land which has the fatal gift of credit in a bewildering degree—and where the trail of the serpent (of high interest) extends from the rice-fields of Bengal to the rose-gardens of Cashmere. He had a few debts in England at the time. He thought they would not matter; but they did. And he soon found that the process which follows non-payment in the one country is much the same as the process which follows non-payment in the other; the principal difference being that in India you are arrested by a bailiff in a looser pair of trousers. On coming home upon leave he made another discovery—that Eastern impetuosity is a tree of hardy growth, and will bear transplanting to the West with considerable success. It was with a profound conviction of this important truth that he began serious borrowing in his native land; and for a time his native land treated him with her well-known liberality in the way of advances, and equally well-known consideration with regard to their return. But there is a time for all things, and that for payment comes with remarkable punctuality, and when it really means business is apt to be a difficult customer. This is just what Harry Doncaster is beginning to discover when we find him at the Brighton hotel conning over the advertisement. He

has exhausted worlds of leave, and will have to imagine new if he wants much more of it. But he dares not return to his regiment under present circumstances, and remaining in England seems equally out of the question. He has an idea that the interior of Africa would be a proper part of the world for his future sojourn; but a recent event has made him reluctant to turn his back upon the land of his youth; and the latter feeling, I fancy, has some connection with the advertisement.

Were I to follow the example of many misguided novelists I should represent Harry Doncaster, at this juncture, as soliloquizing aloud, and giving a summary of his past life and present prospects, with a statement of the nature of the question which occupies his attention, for the benefit of anybody who might happen to be listening. But people never do this in real life; and, confining myself to facts, I shall simply mention that a few muttered words escape him to this effect,—

'Must be meant for me—will risk it—can't come to any grief on a Sunday.'

And with the newspaper still in his hand he rises, with the intention of making for the fireplace, by the side of which is the only bell-handle he happens to call to mind, though there are half a dozen about the room. But he pauses in the act, for there is a stranger sitting with his back to the bell-handle, finishing his dinner in a leisurely manner; and it is evident that Harry Doncaster cannot get to the bell without disturbing the stranger. The two have been taking their respective repasts a few paces apart. Each has been well aware of the presence of the other, but each has ignored the other's existence, as in conventional duty bound—a very proper arrangement, by the way, in a public room, which ought to be a private room to anybody who pleases to make it so.



MR. HARDCASTLE'S FRIENDLY ATTENTIONS.

Having an object in so doing, Harry Doncaster considers himself warranted in addressing the stranger, which he does by asking him to ring the bell.

There are various ways of asking a man to ring a bell, and Harry's, upon this occasion, was a little unceremonious—unintentionally so. But the stranger obeyed the mandate, and had evidently no intention of ordering the other stranger's carriage, as the superb gentleman who invented Brighton did with Mr. Brummell under similar circumstances; for before the waiter could obey the summons he remarked to Captain Doncaster—

'It is not the first time that I have obeyed your orders.'

'Indeed,' said Harry; 'I don't remember that you have served with me.'

'No, but I have served things for you at Harrow; don't you remember your fag, Jack Shorncliffe?'

'Of course I do, and I am very glad to see you again, but should not have known you, you're so altered.' Mr. Shorncliffe, as he now appeared, was a person of small stature, particularly neatly and compactly built, with a face that was particularly neat and compact also, and the same character belonged to his hair and adornments. He had a very keen eye, and was very decided in speech and manner.

'Well, you don't expect me to look such a fool as I was then,' said he. 'I knew you at once; saw you the night before last at the Plungers' ball, but couldn't speak to you—always with some girl.'

'You mean you were.'

'Yes, of course; you seemed to be mooning about doing nothing.'

'And what are you doing yourself, in another sense? You were going into the service, but I never heard of you, or noticed your name in Hart.'

'No; the paternity changed his mind about me. He made the discovery that at least nine out of ten of our immediate family who have gone into the army have

punctually come to grief, and are at the present time head over ears in debt.'

Harry could not deny that there are officers of the army in such a predicament.

'So he put me in his bank instead, where I am a partner—awfully rich—want a few hundreds, eh?'

Harry started at the question—jestingly put as it was—for he was by no means used to such pleasant inquiries. For a moment he felt a fiendish temptation, but he restrained himself. The thing would never do, at any rate it would be premature at the present time. Mr. Shorncliffe abruptly returned to the subject of the ball.

'I saw who you were looking after there, the unknown enchantress with the pompous papa. Did you find out who they were? I couldn't. Governor must be an alderman, I suspect; they came from London, that was all I could pick up.'

Harry Doncaster looked a little confused, but he answered carelessly—

'Ah! I know the people you mean, but I did not find out their names. Of course I admired the lady, like everybody else.'

'Superb creature,' pursued Mr. Shorncliffe. 'It would be invidious to particularise where all is perfection, as puffing critics say in the papers; but I think her great points are her eyes and shoulders—it would be difficult to say which are the brightest of the two.'

Harry Doncaster pretended to laugh at this criticism, but did not half like it. Jack Shorncliffe proceeded—

'I suspect her eyes are too blue to be very bright by day; but there is no mistake about her shoulders. Alabaster is a ridiculous comparison. There are no complexions like alabaster, and I should be very sorry if there were; her shoulders are simply like ivory, and the elephant tribe ought to be much obliged to me for the comparison.'

Harry was getting angry by this time, but he refrained from any manifestation which might betray his secret (you know as well as I do that he *had* a secret), or, still worse, make him appear ridiculous. The subject of conversation, too, was pleasant to him upon any terms, so he allowed Shorncliffe to proceed.

'I should like very much to know who found her glove,' pursued that gentleman. 'I know that she lost one, for a man who saw her leaving the ball said she turned round to look for it while stepping into her carriage, and that the governor said, "Oh, it doesn't matter, you are close at home." You have seen the advertisement in the paper, of course? Ah! you have the paper in your hand.'

Harry Doncaster, at the commencement of this colloquy, had taken his seat at Shorncliffe's table, and had brought the 'South Down Reporter and Devil's Dyke Free Press' with him, for the simple reason that he did not think of laying it down. However, there was no betrayal involved, and Harry simply said that he had seen the advertisement, adding, what was strictly true, that he was as much mystified by it as his companion.

But I am sorry to say that the matter did not end here. The two gentlemen spent the evening together, as well as that process could be performed in the absence of private engagements; that is to say, they walked out upon the new pier, and returned at ten o'clock or so to the hotel, where they were both staying. During their walk the conversation had not fallen upon the lady of the lost glove, but it did so when they returned, and Jack Shorncliffe, growing confidential, avowed himself an ardent admirer of the lady, whose acquaintance, he said, he was determined to make. The family lived in London, he knew, and if nobody would introduce him he would introduce himself. He was possessed, he added, of 'a genial audacity which might be mistaken for cheek,' that never failed in such cases. This was not at all pleasant to Harry Doncaster; but he could not help remembering that one stranger has as much right to be in love with a lady as another stranger. When, however, Jack Shorncliffe grew bold over his not unqualified seltzer, and began to express his admiration in a similar strain to that in which he had previously indulged, Harry remonstrated, somewhat to the speaker's astonishment—

'Why, the lady is nothing to you?' said Shorncliffe, inquiringly.

'I am not sure,' replied Harry. And then, I regret to say, he was weak enough to own the state of his own feelings, and, what was worse, to acknowledge himself as the finder of the glove, which article he produced from his breast-pocket in proof of the assertion.

Mr. Shorncliffe was very far from relishing this revelation, and the pair presently found one another's society not quite so pleasant as it had been before. They discovered, in fact, that sitting up was a bore, and determined to go to bed. Harry Doncaster was the first to leave. He did not go to bed, but went out for another walk by the sea.

When he returned to his room he felt in the breast-pocket of his coat, remembering that it would not be well for its contents to come under the notice of his servant in the morning.

The glove was gone!

CHAPTER II.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS.

Sunday at the Zoological. The season is drawing to a close, but the day is one of the fullest that there has been since its beginning. Everybody is there; but that is not saying enough. There are all the necessary nobodies to keep the everybodies in countenance, and save them from staring at one another like idiots. There is even a Royal Prince and a Royal Princess, and these illustrious personages actually seem to like being present, for nobody bores them with intrusive attentions.

The day is one of the finest as well as one of the fullest of the season, and the one fact, I suppose, accounts considerably for the other. It has doubtless influenced the toilettes, which are lighter and airier than ever, as far as the ladies are concerned; and what wonderful coiffures these same ladies wear! Coiffures seem to reach their culminating point at the Zoological; go anywhere afterwards and you always notice a declension.