

A RACE FOR A WIFE!

CHAPTER I.

THE BELLE OF THE BALL.

Xminster is all alive, simmering, bubbling over with excitement, the magnates or potentates of Xminster are adjusting ribbons, fitting wreaths, scenting pocket handkerchiefs, stretching gloves, tying white neckcloths, and otherwise preparing for the momentous evening. The inferior class of Xminster is all that exhilaration of spirits that gratuitous sight-seeing is wont to produce among the multitude, and while away the time with pipes, flirtation, *al fresco* jigs, and badinage. It is but a momentary glimpse of some hundred or so of ladies and gentlemen in evening attire that is destined to be the reward of their patience, but then, you see, Xminster is a town in which the stream of life runs sluggishly. Circuses, conjurers, lecturers, monologue entertainers, etc., are rather shy of Xminster, the little town is so thoroughly habituated to retiring to rest at an early hour, that even the visits of some of these talented and adventurous beings have failed to tempt the inhabitants to forego their beds or to expend their silver. Such people speak disparagingly of Xminster as a town with no artistic tastes.

But the dullest village in England recognizes some two or three occasions in the year on which dreary mirth takes the place of melancholy stagnation. It was not, therefore, likely that Xminster, which in a quiet way labored under the impression that it was rather a bright, lively, go-ahead town than otherwise, should be without its carnivals. They were two: the fair, on which occasion the inferior clay and intermediate earthenware got drunk and did business at intervals for the week; and the dispensary ball, at which the porcelain portion of the community danced and enjoyed the inestimable privilege of, for two or three hours, breathing the same heated air as the country families. It is the latter carnival which is at present causing the pulse of Xminster to beat with feverish rapidity, and the population are already waiting to display their critical acumen on the belles of town and country. A noted beauty once said that, though many a compliment has been paid her in her day, none ever equalled that of the murmur which ran through the crowd around "The George" as she descended from her carriage for the Xminster ball, while above it came the shrill exclamation of "What's the use of lamps with such eyes as hers in the carriage?"

The dear old country fiddles are playing their somewhat superannuated dance-music with all the wonted animation and disregard of the niceties of tune which is so much the characteristic of provincial bands. There is no lack of pretty girls, tastefully dressed, doing their devoir in valse and quadrille, in the queer old room with its still queerer attempts at decoration in those gaudy festoons of artificial flowers. But a stately young lady, dressed in white, with green-and-gold trimmings, seems to bear away the palm and utterly eclipse her sister Pleides. More than one murmured tribute to her beauty escapes the lips of the lookers-on as she whirls by in the valse or glides in front of them in the Lancers.

"Who is she?—there's not a girl in the room can hold a candle to her! By Jove, she is handsome! Thorough-bred to the tips of her fingers! She moves like a queen among the rest, and they are good-looking girls too, some of them." And the speaker, a rather coarse-looking, dark man, a little the wrong side of thirty, turned for information to the knot of men he was lounging with at the door.

"Haven't you seen her before, Pearman? No, I suppose you hardly could have done. She goes out but little—that's Maude Denison."

"What!—daughter of old Denison of Glinn?"

"Just so former owner of all those fat estates which have since fallen into your respected progenitor's possession, and a slight collection of voice just italicized the fact, for Gus Braden was of a good old family, and had little to say about it."

back to her chaperone, she certainly thought he was by no means the least agreeable partner she had had that evening. She had just resumed her seat, when a tall, fair man was by her side. His brow was slightly knit, and his eyes sparkled angrily, as he exclaimed, "My dear Maude, how could you dance with that man?"

"Which, Grenville?" inquired Miss Denison, smiling. "I have danced with a good many to-night, including your sweet self, cousin, mine."

"Don't be absurd, Maude; you know very well whom I mean—that dark man—your last partner."

"And wherefore should I not dance with him?" inquired Miss Denison.

"For a hundred reasons. His name alone should have sufficed to prevent it."

"Dear me!" laughed the young lady, merrily. "You have piqued my woman's curiosity. Do tell me who this monster of iniquity is, for, truth to say, I did not catch his name when introduced to me. Is he a noted radical, or murderer, or what? He was rather more amusing than some of the men I have chanced on this evening."

"You didn't know who he was? I thought not. That's young Pearman—the unmitigated cad; and Grenville Rose pulled his long yellow moustache, as some slight solace in his irritation of mind."

"So that was Mr. Pearman, was it?" remarked Maude, musingly. "Well, Grenville, I don't think I should have danced with him had I known who he was; but, you see, I didn't, and I cannot see that it is of much consequence now. One is not obliged to recognize the partner of a quadrille again unless one likes, you know; and, though I'll plead guilty to finding him amusing, I don't think I wish to prosecute the acquaintance. But don't you think it is getting time to leave?—Mrs. Learmont, you are as good as gold," said Maude, turning to her chaperone, "waiting in this resigned manner for me. However, I am quite at your disposal now."

"Pray, don't think of me; I want you to thoroughly enjoy your ball, and I am quite willing to look on at your valising for another hour. I have lots of people to come and talk to me, you know."

"Yes," laughed Maude, "I am quite aware that you have lots of old friends, only too glad to have the chance of a quiet chat with you, and know, also, that you would sit here and pinch yourself to keep awake, sooner than debar your goddaughter of five minutes gratification, but I also have a conscience. Perhaps my motives are interested ones, and I am thinking that you might hesitate next time I demand your kind offices, if I try you too severely now."

"My dear Maude, you don't surely—"

"Yes, your dear Maude does surely think that you and she have had enough of this.—Go and see about the carriage, Grenville—will you, please? And, despite many assaults from young men, who produced cards on which her name was pencilled, and pleaded hard for the fulfillment of the contract, Maude Denison steadily refused to dance any more that evening. Grenville Rose saw them in their carriage, and laughingly declined the honor of the back seat, saying that he should return as he came, in the dog-cart, so that no destruction of flounces could be attributed to him."

It is very curious to watch what trifling affairs influence the tenor of our lives. Maude Denison has deemed it of little consequence that she has danced a quadrille with Samuel Pearman; and yet that dance is fated to draw many a tear from the proud gray eyes—to occasion many a bitter tug at her heartstrings. Grenville Rose has refused the back seat in the roomy old carriage, yet, ere thirty minutes are over, his nerves will be tortured in a way which he is powerless to resist; he will take his seat in a dog-cart, with a prevalent impression of having made a fool of himself, than which nothing, perhaps, is more galling to the vanity of man."

The ball is well nigh over. Men are congratulating about the refreshment-buffet for another sherry-and-seltzer, while their vehicles are getting ready. They are talking over the evening, in the careless way men are apt to on such occasions. More than one beauty is discussed. It was not likely that the *belles par excellence* should be left out of such converse.

"What a clipper Maude Denison is!" said one young gentleman, somewhat gone in

the lady's present; in the second, I think I merely observed that I had the good fortune of dancing with her, and she was an extremely nice girl, and that he would be a fortunate man who should win her. The supposition that a young lady will be some day be married can hardly be deemed insulting."

Grenville bowed, muttered something about thinking it best to announce his kinship ere more should be said, and left the apartment discomfited. Mr. Pearman's modification of his first speech was ingenious though there was nothing really tangible even in that. Grenville's knuckles literally tingled as he descended the staircase, and he thought vindictively how it would have conduced to his night's rest to have knocked Pearman down. A burst of distant laughter, as he lit a huge cabana previous to stopping into the dog-cart, was not calculated to soothe his irritated feelings. He put that laugh down as at his expense, as men will do whether or no under such circumstances. He muttered to himself as he drove off, "Right or wrong, Sam Pearman, I hold myself in your debt, and if I don't pay it religiously, should the time ever come, my name is not Grenville Rose." She was a free goer, that little bay mare. Seldom did driver have to call upon her to quicken her pace; as a rule, she trotted as quick as she honestly knew how, but more than once that evening did Grenville lightly draw the whip across her. She could not, you see, trot away from the reflections just behind her, which was, in truth, what she was being asked to do. Many a good horse has had hard justice meted out to him after this wise. Quick as he came, yet Mrs. Learmont had dropped Maude at Glinn, and the latter had retired to her own room, before Grenville Rose, in a far from genial frame of mind lit his candlestick in the hall. "Shan't see her again," he muttered, "before I start. I must go by that cursed early train, hours before there's a chance of any one being down. Made a fool of myself with that beast Pearman into the bargain; and closing his door with an angry slam, Grenville prepared to seek his pillow."

It happens to all of us in our turn. There are many chances of doing so. You've neglected to sore your king at escarot—you've revoked at whist—have gone too far with Miss Smith—or you have missed an opportunity with pretty Miss Jones, whose father has found out the old alchemist problem, and is transmitting pig-iron into ingots with marvellous celerity; you've quarrelled with your dearest friend—wounded your rich aunt on her tender point—talked rampant Radicalism before the Conservative member, whose interest you were especially anxious to obtain—unwittingly subjugated an unknown gentleman who turns out to be the editor of the magazine or manager of the theatre that you trust will introduce to the public the last spirited effusion of your pen. Ah me it is always so. Rochefoucauld tells us, "There are people fated to be fools; they not only commit follies by choice, but even constrained to do so by fortune." It is a sad moment that, laying the head upon the pillow with a vivid consciousness of having made a fool of one's self.

It behooveth now that I should give some slight description of the Pearmans of Mannersley, the younger of whom we have encountered at the Xminster ball.

The sire of the dark-featured young man who had expressed such admiration for Maude Denison, had begun life as a solicitor's clerk, from which in due course of time he blossomed forth into an attorney, and sat himself down in the little town of Bury St. Edmunds, with a view to the persecution of mankind or the redressing of his fellow-men's grievances, as circumstances and the presentation of six and-eight pence might direct. But it need hardly be observed that the ancient town was already adorned with two or three of the fraternity, and the older practitioners found no more business going on that they were perfectly competent to cope with. Consequently, Pearman senior found himself in possession of a business very much of the "Sawyer late Nockemorf" type, the annual receipts of which, it may be remembered, could be placed in a wineglass and covered up with a gooseberry leaf—a balancing of the ledger which represents more portability than profit.

I shall not say, "it may be remembered by the reader, because the faculty for ignorance" that we will display with reference to

any lack of supply regarding the article. Gradually members of 'the upper ten,' whom more sanguine than prudent speculations had reduced to this category, consulted the attorney anent their necessities. They found him the treasure he had been described. He could not always prevent the user claiming his bond, it is true, but he always managed to temporize; and when the pill had to be swallowed, it was nicely gilt outside, after the manner of the economists of St. James'.

Now, as in the whole of all this business, Mr. Pearman never for one moment lost sight of the main point—that whether the transaction might be small or great, whether in hundreds or thousands, the first interest it was his particular duty to attend to was that of Samuel Pearman—I need scarcely say that he gradually waxed rich. Those merciless money-lenders he took good care should let him have very fair pickings off the foolish bones they so often stripped clean between them; and finally, he achieved the proud position of being such a necessity, that no magnate of the London world whom 'plunging' or reckless expenditure had brought to grief, deemed it was possible he could be straight with the intervention of Sam Pearman.

In due course Harold Denison, Maude's father, had passed through his hands. Denison had started in life with a fine property; but burning the candle, not only at both ends, but a little in the middle besides, he had soon done away with that. Pearman was every thing he should be on the occasion; but when his client emerged from his sea of troubles, two-thirds of the Glinn estate were in the hands of the solicitor. Still, every one said Denison's had been a very bad break-up; that the property had been sold at a fair valuation; and that, but for Pearman, Harold Denison would not have been able to keep Glinn and such acres as were still left to him. By this time Pearman was an owner of race-horses, and kept a stud of his own. He had married a lady in some way connected with usury, and, having altogether acquired a considerable fortune made the first mistake in his career, and set up for a country gentleman.

He built a big house on the estate so recently lopped off the Glinn property; he built large stables; he laid down a tan-gallop; he filled his cellars with choice wines, and gave Gregory *carte blanche* as to furnishing. He named his house Mannersley, after the manor it stood upon. He established a crest and coat-of-arms; he had his cards engraved "Mr. and Mrs. Pearman, Mannersley;" he sat himself down to wait—but nobody called.

Money will do and does do a good deal, but here and there blood respects its rights. The county were not going to welcome what they designated as 'a money-grubbing attorney, who was fattening on the necessities of Harold Denison of Glinn.' The Master of the Hounds, it was true, called upon him; but even Pearman could regard that in no other light but that of a business transaction. He asked and obtained leave to draw the covers, gave the solicitor a capital luncheon on his return visit, but had steadily refused all invitations to dinner.

In due course of time Mrs. Pearman died. Whether, chagrined at her position not being properly recognized in this world, she hurried her departure to another, I cannot say; but some few years after their establishment in Mannersley she was laid in her grave. Her death but one son, who at the period of her death was an undergraduate at Cambridge, but who, now many years older, is the gentleman who danced that quadrille with handsome Maude Denison.

Young Pearman has succeeded far better than his progenitor in making his way in the county. A generation, you see, makes a vast difference. We hob and nob with the son, though we turned our supercilious noses up at the horny hand of the father. It don't do to know Giles the weaver who made the money, and does not the least know what to do with it; but young Giles, without an idea in his skull beyond the dissipation of the hard-won gear—ah! that is very different. We sip his claret at six guineas the dozen with infinite gusto. I suppose it is a reflex law of Nature that the accumulators of wealth should be generally succeeded by the distributors thereof—a piece of physiological study that might go far to quiet the apprehensions of the secretary of the Board of Trade anent the acquisition of large landed properties in

CHAPTER II.

THE DENISONS OF GLINN.

A fine old place was Glinn, although it had no pretensions to any very great antiquity: a large pile of brickwork, in the form of a longish parallelogram, relieved at the entrance side by one of those massive pillared porches under which carriages drive and deposit their freight at the low doorways in luxurious comfort, or the eastern gate of an English spring or the fierce howling of an autumnal equinox are prevalent in the land. At those times one appreciates the great porch on emerging from one's chamber as much as a good fire in frosty weather. There is nothing remarkable in the house internally, beyond the open gallery that runs round the inner hall, much after the manner that some hundred years ago galleries were wont to run round the court-yards of the great coaching inns—a description of hostelry now so scarce that we know them, one may say, only in pictures. But, externally, the place boasted some beautiful timber. Long stately avenues of lime, elm, and hornbeam diverged to three points of the compass. On the western side, looking over the wire-fence that bounded the garden, the eye fell upon a perfect sea of laurels, studded with forest trees. Through this wilderness of evergreen had been cut in days long since broad vistas, now perfectly tarried over, and on which countless rabbits grazed with the immunity of cherished pets. And yet it was not altogether so; for at the fall of the leaf, stalwart beaters crasped through those laurels, deadly breachloaders swept these grassy rides, and fur and feathers had a bad time of it for a day or two.

In these days of narrowness of means a good bit of the house was shut up. The drawing-room was rarely opened, except for sanitary purposes regarding the furniture. Harold Denison, his wife, and daughter, lived in the morning-room, the billiard-room—now, alas! denuded of the green-cloth table—and the dining-room. Denison was an embittered, disappointed man—far too clever not to see how he had thrown his game of life away by the turf-follies and extravagances of his early days; far too proud to take a reduced status in the county in which he had been at one time a leading magnate; far too selfish to sacrifice an iota of that pride to enhance the pleasure of either his wife or his daughter. He had married early in life a lady of good family in his own county—a sweet, lovable girl, who had yielded to his smallest caprice. It had been better for Harold Denison had she been constituted of sterner stuff. She never crossed her husband in word or deed. She wept at tears in the solitude of her own chamber when the reverses came. She sacrificed her own fortune as far as she could. She would have immolated herself if that would have tended to the furtherance of the interests of the man she still loved with all her girl's adoration. That being impossible, after the manner of such women, she sat down and wept again. No word of reproach ever escaped her lips. She gave up her season in London; she murmured not when the poor phæton was put down. She reduced her milliner's bills to the minimum power, and maddled her poor head in vain attempts to control the expenditure of an arbitrary house-keeper. She was one of those women who seem born to suffer. There are many such, and a brutal husband is usually their destiny. In this respect she was fortunate, for Harold Denison, making all allowance for his selfish nature, sincerely loved his wife. It grieved him much to curtail the luxuries she had been accustomed to; but it would never have entered his head to commence rigid economy on his side of the ledger.

Maude was their only child, and this perhaps still more fostered the intense selfishness of Mr. Denison's disposition. A girl was of course, sure to marry. There would, perhaps, be some little difficulty about the dot; but that was all. He had none of his stock to come after him; and though he little relished the idea of the Denison's of Glinn being blotted out of the county red-book, he could not be expected to feel much interest for that boyish nephew he had barely seen. On one point only did poor Mr. Denison ever venture to contradict her lord's wishes; that was about Maude. The girl was all in all to her mother. Maude's woman's wit had early made her understand