

DIBBY GRAND.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME.

Flattery Hall was indeed a house of mourning, when I entered the fine old avenue, climbed and wound with my journey down from London, this time effected in a third-class railway carriage. From the airy looks of the old woman at the lodge, to the worshipping countenance of poor Soames at the house-door, everything betokened the presence of some great and unlooked-for affliction—the sombre over-shadowing of some mighty calamity.

O Master Digby! said the old butler, if you find but com—when I wrote to you, you might have seen master before he did depart.

‘Good heavens! Soames,’ I exclaimed, ‘I never got your letter, when did you write, and where did you address to?’

‘Mr. Mortmain will explain all,’ said poor Soames; ‘he is in the library now, will you please step this way?’

And as the old man used his accustomed phrase, with shaking voice and quivering eyelid, I felt a solemn satisfaction in knowing that my poor father was at least regretted by one faithful domestic, who had eaten his bread for forty years.

In the library I found Mr. Mortmain, our own family man of business, unusually a rosy, merry, kind-hearted, and jovial bachelor; now, in the hour of need, a true and steadfast friend. From him I learned the suddenness of my parent's disease, and the impossibility, even if I had received Soames' incoherent scrawl, of my having reached Flattery in time to find Sir Peregrine conscious, if alive.

Sad and gloomy was the present—sadder and gloomier the prospects of the future. For a few days the multitude of arrangements which necessarily devolved upon myself served to shut out from my view, in the exigencies of the hour, the dark horizon that was gathering around. Vain pomp and senseless pageantry followed him to the grave, who had in life been ever too much wedded to the outward semblances of greatness—too careless of its real duties and responsibilities. Arms and accoutrements, empty carriages, and hired mourners, trailed their mimic grief down the stately avenue, the pride of so many possessors, over whose unanimous remains it had waved its gigantic branches, gorgeous in the hues of but a temporary decay, or blossoming in the promise of an oft-recurring spring. Doctor Driveller, ten years older than his deceased patron, read the time-table service with a steady voice and an unimpaired bearing, as calm as though his time must be very near, ay, even at the door. The vault was opened, the ceremony concluded, and mourners took off their scarfs and unpinched their hat-bands, and those at a distance hastened home to be in time for dinner. Black horses snorted and shook their plumes—mutes smiled and whispered, as though thankful for relief from their enforced silence—the bird carolled on the bough—the bee hummed in the sunshine—and Sir Peregrine was laid with the Grands.

Old customs, feudal hospitality, and the position of the family, demanded a certain amount of decorous feasting and subdued merrymaking, which reminded me, with a mockery hardly to be borne, of my own coming age in those very halls. But this, too, was at length over, and the stern realities of business left me small leisure to listen to the reproaches of conscience, or yield to the unavailing yearnings of regret. Half an hour after Mr. Mortmain and I were closeted in the library; and as we went deeper and deeper into the details of some ostentatious and youthful recklessness, so it became more and more obvious that the ruin was as irretrievable as the awful blindness which led to it was unaccountable.

‘It is evident to me, Sir Digby,’ said Mortmain, addressing me for the first time by my new title, the only by which it appeared to be a comfort, ‘that in addition to the difficulties which your poor father has entailed upon you, and of which it is only due to my duty to say I have till now been kept in total

obscurity and luxury in his own chamber made the theme of rude jest or ignorant criticism; pictures of value selling for nothing, from want of competition; rare old wines bought with depreciating comments by neighboring connoisseurs, who had been good enough to laud it highly when, in former days, in that very room, their flowing bumpers pledged health and long life to him who was now no more; lamps dethroned from their pedestals, curious necklaces scattered about in all kinds of incongruous places; straw littered everywhere, and the ancestral home of the Grands become a fleeting possession, passing from lip to lip as the fervor of competition overcame the scruples of prudence; and the dignity of centuries, the associations of history, hung trembling upon the word of an auctioneer!

But one article was saved from the general wreck, and I shall be ever grateful for the kindness and consideration with which that memento of the past was rescued. Old Doctor Driveller, with the avowed determination of presenting it to his descendant whenever that unfortunate should have a house to put it in, purchased the old family picture of Sir Hugo le Grand; and the representation of that chivalrous warrior, which my poor father valued, I believe, more than any other earthly possession, was spared the degradation of a tradesman's parlour or a dealer's show-room.

The sale continued for days. From the neighboring earl to the humble mechanic, every rank sent its representative to the auction at Flattery. Old oak chairs, quaint and curiously-carved chests and wardrobes, are still to be picked up by the virtuoso, in the humble cottages and retired farmhouses for many a mile round what was once known as the Hall. How the eagles gathered to the slaughter! Vulgar, flashily-dressed men in black attire, relieved by a profusion of electro-plated jewellery, traversed the passages with pencils in their mouths, and seemed immersed in calculations of incomprehensible magnitude.

Ere many days had elapsed, a post-chaise drove up to the door containing (strange alliance!) the persons of Mr. Shadrach and my former friend Levanter. The latter appeared somewhat confused at my meeting him in the society of such a companion, but swaggered off his embarrassment with his usual assurance.

‘Sad thing this, my dear Grand,’ said the turfite; ‘I trust only a passing cloud. I have come down to look at the yearlings, and got a cast from this gentleman, pointing to the Jew, who was staring about him with a rueful air, that seemed compounded partly of anxiety as to his own profits, and partly, to do him justice, of commiseration for the pilage going on around.’

With a blush of conscious humiliation, I was forced to present the money-lender to Mr. Mortmain; and it might have amused an uninterested observer to mark the cold reserve with which the shrewd upright man of business, the regular of the profession, saluted one of its foraging condottieri, to whose despoiling talents he could not but yield his meed of approval, whilst for his practice he betrayed, as he entertained, a high-minded contempt.

Whilst I took Levanter to the paddocks and stables, as containing those articles of barter with which I was conversant, Mortmain, in whom I had placed unreserved confidence, and to whose guidance I had completely committed my affairs, invited the Jew to a conference in the library, where he hoped to be able to make some terms with the usurer short of his actual and exorbitant demands. As we lounged here and there through the park and grounds, and criticised the make and shape of this yearling, or the pedigree and probable performances of that foal, I observed in my companion's manner a degree of restlessness, and want of self-possession, which I had never before remarked to the same extent in one who was proverbially known as a cool hand. True, he had never, even in former days, that unassuming ease which marks the high-bred gentleman; but now the abruptness of his manner, veiled as it was by occasional bursts of enforced levity, was positively startling. So was it now with Levanter; and long as we had known each other, old brother officers and cronies as we were, our conversation was restricted to a few of the merest commonplaces; and we both felt it a relief when a passing shower drove us back into the now dismantled hall. Mortmain and Shadrach

it of him as a bad debt, for probably as many shillings as it numbered pounds, and would likewise use his influence with those parties to induce them to come to a speedy and liberal arrangement, which should be satisfactory to all parties. With which peroration Mr. Shadrach, having offered each of us a cigar the size of a rolling-pin, shook Mortmain cordially by the hand, much to the disgust of my old friend, and mounted into his post-chaise—to which, by his orders, a pair of leaders had been added with the air of an emperor, uttering a word or two, the slightest clue as to the genus of this gaudy but unwashed magnifico, who travelled with four horses, but wore a shirt that would have disgraced a chimney-sweep.

Levantur was likewise to go back to town, not could I understand why he was not to return, as he had come, with the luxurious Israhite. He himself explained his movements by a friendly remark that I should accompany him to his lodgings at Fulham.

‘A little way out of town, Grand, for the sake of the air, where I shall be happy to give you a bed, till you can make your arrangements pretty square.’

‘My dear Levanter,’ said I, ‘I have no arrangements, and I think it only fair to tell you that I am completely and irretrievably flooded!’

‘Never say die,’ was his answer. ‘Our sorrows are getting up like smoke, so you will have plenty of capital in the meantime; besides, Fulham is not London, and nobody will know you.’

No more dignified plan seemed to offer itself, and after a consultation with Mortmain, who was himself not above the general weakness of mankind, in placing a belief, as implicit as it is unaccountable, in the vague superstition that something will turn up, I resolved upon accepting Levanter's invitation, and taking my place in the great metropolis amongst those suppliant ranks who beg almost on their knees that they may obtain a share in the curse of our first parents, and earn their bread in the sweat of their brow.

Little, truly, was there for me to regret when I turned my back upon those grey old towers. Was I leaving home as I shrank into the corner of the post-chaise that took Levanter and myself to the nearest railway station? What did I leave behind me? A dead father, alas! unreconciled; oh, how bitter that thought!—how hopeless the conviction that we can never make reparation!—that the past can never be undone! A desolate hearth, from which the few poor old retainers who had all their lives been taught to consider it as a home, must now be driven forth into the world, at an age when they ought to be reaping repose and comfort as the reward of years spent in faithful toil. A beautiful domain to lie waste and neglected till some future possessor should be found ready with the axe to the avenue, and the architect to the mansion, and dear old Flattery should be clipped and opened out into an unsightly desert, and plastered and stuck into a prime representation of an ill-built almshouse. And I, the heir, that should have been even now walking that park as its actual possessor—that should have been even now maturing plans of economy and improvement, to realize, eventually all the former affluence of the family—what was I but the guilty author of all this devastation; for I could not conceal from myself—and bitter was the reflection—that, like the last feather to which the uncomplaining camel succumbs upon the sand, it was my own imprudence, added to my poor father's extravagance, that had necessitated my exile from the home of my ancestors. Once before, and not so long ago, in the rosy hues of early morning, I had surveyed that glorious scene, and turned from it in disgust, because I deemed myself destined never to share it with her I loved; now, I looked my last upon it in the mellow radiance of a declining sun, and how would the sensations, which I once thought misery, be now courted for tumultuous happiness! Then, what was I but the spoiled child of prosperity? Now, fame, fortune, all were blighted for ever, and Flora as hopelessly removed from me as if she had never been.

‘Great bore, an old family-place,’ said Levanter, with a well-meant attempt at consolation. ‘Were it not for the rents, I really think you would be well out of it!’

‘There is no accounting for tastes,’ was my reply; and I mentally added, ‘willingly would I give the best part of my life if I

You will no more welcome; if you like to come. I know you are a quick dresser; so, jump into your dinner things, and let us be off!’

I had by this time arrived at that state when one is surprised at nothing—ceases to be a free agent, or to speculate on what is to come next; and yields unhesitatingly to the tide of circumstances, with a drowsy conviction that, when things are at their worst, any change must be an improvement. Had Levanter desired me to step up to the chimney, instead of three doors off, I should have probably complied without the slightest hesitation; and ten minutes had not elapsed before we were picking our way in the dark up the mimic avenue which led to a cosy little picturesque residence, with French windows down to the ground, and all the necessary accessories of laurels, roses, horse-chestnut trees, and damp, which make up a London country-house; whilst Levanter explained to me, in a most mystifying manner, that we were going to dine with that Lady Burgonet—Miss Jones, you know—who is living here in retirement whilst Sir Benjamin is in India.

That the lady was surprised to see me I gathered from her contracted brow and flush of astonishment, which, however, on the exchange of a meaning glance with Levanter, gave place to the smooth and graceful demeanor that becomes a courteous hostess. Fanny Jones had learned her lesson to perfection, and did the great lady, only with a little too much dignity. Everything was extremely well done, and quite in the quiet, unostentatious style of an affectionate wife pining for her husband's return. Pictures of Sir Benjamin multiplied the person of that corpulent warrior in unlimited profusion, and a bust of the absent one quite blocked up one end of the little dining-room. A miniature of Fanny lay on the drawing room table, with the drooping ringlets, the sweet girlish expression, of auld lang syne. My heart ached whilst I gazed on it, and thought how changed we all are now.

Dinner and Mr. De Tassells were announced at the same instant; and as I offered my arm to our hostess, the Little Nell of the K. O. Dragons, now rolling out into a strapping, handsome young fellow, seized my unoccupied hand with a grasp of cordial affection, and whispered in a tone that reminded me of my escape from Canterbury. ‘You here, Dandy!—this is, indeed, no end of a go!’ Could I do less than take the first opportunity of making enquiry after the health of Jenny Jumps, who was, as usual, in strong training for a private match.

I have already said, I was not in a mood to be surprised at anything; but as dinner progressed, I confess I began to open my eyes wider and wider. The first thing struck me was the excellence of the wine, far more choice in its flavor than would be provided by the most confidential wine-merchant for a lady's consumption, and of which Mr. De Tassells, thereto incited by Levanter, filled and emptied more bumpers than is usually considered decorous at a lady's table. Then my fair hostess and her former admirer seemed to have the most perfect understanding of each other's plans and arrangements; and were both warmly hospitable to Little Nell, and obsequiously polite and deferential to myself. The young one, between drinking and talking, was getting almost uproarious, whilst a stolen look, interchanged occasionally between Levanter and Fanny, appeared to evince their mutual satisfaction at the whole proceedings. ‘What can it all mean?’ thought I. *Excusus propriis, aliena negotia cura.* I resolved, having managed matters so cleverly for myself, to devote my talent to the observation of my friends' affairs. Lady Burgonet retired, with an injunction to Levanter to take care of his friends. And the Cornet, what between claret and cordiality, reminiscences of what he, poor boy! called old times, and mighty potation of what our host assured us was a perfectly pure and harmless vintage, got gradually ripe for any and all kinds of mischief, readily provided, according to Dr. Watts, by a certain contractor for idle hands to do. Coffee and curacao, cut the jolly subaltern short in a hospitable invitation addressed to myself, to come and stay six months with him at his father's place, backed by an apocryphal assurance that the Governor would be delighted. And with all my faculties on the alert for what was to come next, I accompanied the unsuspecting lad

‘They staked ‘double or quits.’

Levantur turned up a king.

‘Little Nell’ remarked, ‘There goes a fifty.’

I could bear it no longer, and, marching up to the astonished boy, I laid my hand upon his arm and walked him out of the room ere he had time to remonstrate, nor, till I had him safe outside the house, did I explain to him the cause of so unusual a proceeding. Levanter interposed his person to bar our egress, with a furious oath, that confirmed my suspicions. But I had known my man for years. Though of powerful frame, he was a cur when collared; and though he shook with wrath, he ventured upon no personal violence, and we walked out unmolested. Never shall I forget Lady Burgonet's face of shame, consternation, and dismay, as she stood in the corner of her drawing-room, a second Arachne, contemplating the web that had failed in its obvious purpose. Besides, she felt she was found out; and, true to her woman-nature, that was the bitterest drop of all. I can see her now—the pale face—the deep-set flashing eyes—the sneering nostril—the quivering ashy lip. She was beautiful even then; but it was the hateful beauty of a fiend.

Of course Little Nell, being up for a fortnight's leave from his regiment, hung out, as he called it, at Limer's, which is some considerable distance from Fulham; and as the night air sobered my former subaltern, and the whole truth dawned upon him by degrees under my elaborate explanations, the good-hearted lad's gratitude knew no bounds, and, but that I was ashamed to be indebted for assistance where I had just conferred a benefit, I might have found a home wherever the Cornet had a roof to cover him, or, as he metaphorically expressed it, ‘a crib to get his health in.’ But I was too proud to confess my indigence, and taking leave of my *protege* at the door of his hotel, I started to walk back again to Fulham, revolving many troublesome considerations in my mind. Remain as Levanter's guest, of course I could not, although, under the circumstances, I felt it was imperative on me to be in the way, should he think well to call me to account for my late proceedings. Truly I had little anxiety as to the consequences; my antagonist was not a thoroughly good-plucked one, and if he were, lie had but little charm for me. But my slender stock of money would soon be exhausted, and what would become of me then? In the meantime, I was fagged out, and a good night's rest became a primary consideration. I would make the best of my way back to Fulham; bakers never go to bed, so I should not be locked out, and in the morning I would face Levanter at once—demand the proceeds of those shares in his mining concern to which I had a right, and then repudiating all connection with the sharper, start afresh in any line of life which promised an honest livelihood.

Tired and exhausted, I slept till noon, and my first inquiries when I was up and dressed were for my temporary host. Mr. Smith had left at eight, and was gone out of town.

‘Any address?’

‘No, sir; Mr. Smith left no address—but maybe they could tell at the Laburnums.’ To the Laburnums I accordingly betook myself, and found it to be the villa of the previous evening's exposure. Here likewise there seemed to have been a late departure. No tall footman, no portly butler, answered my summons, but the old woman in a black bonnet, who with the moth and the spider shares the solitude of all deserted houses in and around the metropolis, made her appearance, and was as sparing of information as that female anchorite when put to the test invariably proves to be:—

‘Did not know Mr. Smith—had never heard of Captain Levanter—there was a Major Stopper over the way, but of course it could not be him—this was Lady Burgonet's house—her Ladyship had left at half after eight this morning—did not know where the family were gone—believed it was either Scarborough or Southampton—and slammed the door in my face. Though vague, this was conclusive, and I had nothing for it but to trudge into the city to Levanter's offices, upon the hopeless chance of saving something from what I felt to be a general wreck. Of all toilsome pilgrimages, none is to me so painful as a long walk upon the hot unyielding pavement, a fitting substitute for the glowing ploughshares of the ancient ordeal. Take it easy, and you seem to make