

THE BARRINGTON GRAND STEEPLECHASE.

BY "PORKERU."

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

Presently some of the others rode up and poured in their congratulations upon Mark, who was standing beside Di Vernon the reins loosely thrown over her neck, and she, who had been like a tigress a little over half an hour ago was now as quiet as a lamb, actually rubbing her head lovingly against Mark's chest.

"How did you manage to keep up so close Mrs. Talbot?" asked Lord Starlingford as he dismounted and loosened his saddle girth.

"Oh I am only a lightweight you see" replied Harriet smiling, and then Bob (patting her horse) always knows he must follow Mark."

"And you too I presume" said his lordship bowing.

"Certainly" replied Harriet laughing, "as long as Bob lasts, but had not the kill taken place when it did, Mark would have been the only one in at the death.

She glanced proudly at her husband, who had just remounted the mare. Di Vernon was perfectly passive in Mark's hands and that night, Talbot had agreed to take her home with him and put both her and himself into training for the Steeplechase which was fixed for the 18th of the following month.

"I do not guarantee she will win" he said to Lord Starlingford "but—bar accidents—it will be a mighty good horse that will beat her, especially if she will do her best, as I promise I will do mine."

"That is quite satisfactory, and she shall be entered for the race at once" was Lord Starlingford's answer.

CHAPTER II.—THE RACE.

The race about to be described is still remembered as one of the most celebrated in the annals of Barrington, and to this day the year, among the inhabitants of that town and neighborhood, is referred to as Di Vernon's year. It was a race worth going miles to see, a race in which the judgment of the rider, and the powers of horse were both brought prominently forward, and held the spectators fascinated from the start to the finish. The course lies a short distance out of the town, and the steeplechase is from four to four and a-half miles in length, having some fairly big jumps, but none of them very extraordinary, with the exception of one or two. It was the pace however, which tried both horses and riders, for it is a different matter gathering your horse together and leisurely taking a fence in the hunting field, to what it is when you ride over similar obstacles at racing speed, and many a gallant

steed had ended its career over the Barrington course. There were over a dozens starters for the Grand steeplechase, but it will only be necessary to enumerate five, in the following order:

1. Sir John Hawkland's B. H. "Bluebeard" 4 years, 11 stone scarlet—Benson.

2. Lord Starlingford's ch. m. "Di Vernon" aged, 11½ stone, blue—Mr. Talbot.

3. Capt. Ashton's grey h. "Mahomet" 3 years 10½ stone, yellow—Owner.

4. Mr. Milton's br. h. "The Baron" 5 years 11 stone, black—Grindley.

5. Earl Ulswater's bl. h. "Beelzebub" aged 11½ stone, pink—Cannon.

Bluebeard, the winner of the Grand Military and steered by the renowned jockey Benson, was the favorite in the betting, at five to two, but Lord Starlingford was prepared for this, and his equanimity was not at all upset. The time for the great race was three o'clock long previous to which, both the grand stand and the course were crowded. Lord Starlingford's party, among which were Squire Effingham, and his daughter Mrs. Talbot, were seated on his lordship's drag immediately opposite the winning post, Lord Starlingford himself having gone to the paddock to look after his mare and her rider.

Presently the bell rang to clear the course, and immediately all eyes turned towards the enclosure from whence the horses were to issue forth. After a few minutes suspense The Baron made his appearance, not by any means a bad looking horse though perhaps a trifle heavy, which caused the knowing ones to doubt his having the necessary speed, but he was an honest horse, and ran straight. Next came Beelzebub, whose jockey Cannon, of steeplechase fame, had enough to do to sit as he bucked and pranced past the stand. Then Mahomet, a light fast horse, the exact opposite of The Baron, stepped forth cleverly ridden by his owner. Several more follow, until at length Di Vernon, with Mark Talbot on her back giving a last nod to Lord Starlingford, came on to the course, and as the well known colors of his lordship, were caught sight of, men pressed forward to examine both the mare and her rider. A lovely animal was Di Vernon on that day, her condition absolutely perfect, so that in her coat shining like satin, you could trace the lines of her hard strong muscles as she moved along, holding her beautiful head erect, and gazing fearlessly upon the crowd on either side of her. Talbot put the mare into a gentle canter, showing off her splendid action and sending her up a point in the betting, but he pulled up shortly, being desirous of noting the preliminary gallop of Bluebeard, the only horse he had any fear of, and at

that moment the winner of the Grand Military walked quietly on to the course. His jockey, Benson, had a calm self-satisfied smile on his clean shaven countenance for he was one of those, who having been at most born in the saddle, knew by instinct every horse he put his leg across; could tell exactly what the animal he bestrode could do, and always fixed the right second when to call upon him. Nothing would make Mr. Benson lose his head, and he would win by a neck, as coolly when he had it all his own way. Bluebeard was not a handsome horse; his head was too large and though well set on to his neck, it was an ugly neck, so that at first sight the animal created a feeling of disappointment. But that feeling was only momentary, for it was quickly perceived what magnificent limbs, and what a swinging stride, the beast had while his eye was as true as steel.

"Di old girl, you will have to clap on all you know" remarked Mark patting the mare, as he rapidly took in all the good points of their opponents.

In the steeplechase the horses had to pass the grand stand twice, first shortly after the start, and again at the finish. The competitors were now all cut, and slowly moving towards the post. After one or two delays and a false start, "Off!" rang through the air, and the race had really begun. Immediately opposite the grand stand in the first round was a fairly big jump sufficient to warm up the blood of the "well plucked" ones, or to dishearten the curs. They came flying towards it, a number of them rushing along at a pace too fast to last, some refused, and others bungled over, then Grindley's black jacket appeared in view and The Baron sailed over the leap in his quiet methodical manner. Next Mahomet, who never saw the fence till close upon it, scrambled clumsily through, while Beelzebub with his ears thrown back, meant to refuse, but Cannon made such good play with the spurs that he was forced over. Di Vernon going easily with her rider gently feeling her mouth sprang lightly over. The mare's round eyes were blazing and all could see that she meant to do her best. Last of all Bluebeard, held well in hand, took the leap almost in his stride. Away they went and opera glasses were raised to watch them as they flew along. The second fence was an easy one, and only a couple of worthless brutes refused, but those who made the running at first, were now gradually falling behind. Mahomet was leading, closely followed by Beelzebub, next The Baron, and then Di Vernon and Bluebeard side by side. They were approaching the great water jump—a nasty place for a fall, and splash! Mahomet who had fought shy