

DIGBY GRAND.

CHAPTER X.

THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME.

Simply and kindly, with no soreness of mind, with no affectation of indifference, she pointed out to me the instability of my character, the heartiness of my conduct. She had long discovered—so she went on to say—she had long discovered by my letters that such a weak and wavering affection as mine was no equivalent for the loving heart which she surrendered so wholly and unalterably; but while no other shared my love, no other ment as it was, she was content. When, however, my letters got fewer and cooler, when she heard not only of follies and vices in my London career, but likewise coupled with those of sirens celebrated for the destruction to which they lured their votaries, she resolved, with a firmness and determination that marked her character, and made her the resolute though feminine being that she was, to judge for herself. An opportunity offered her to come to England, and of that she took advantage. She was in London for more than a fortnight, without interrupting me of her whereabouts; and 'Judge,' Captain Grand, she wrote, 'whether that was not a struggle. At last came the night of the Asphy House ball. I need not repeat what I heard and saw there, nor how evident it was to me that the absent Zoe was at length completely forgotten. I left the ball, and in a week was crossing the Atlantic on my homeward voyage. I had satisfied myself of the reality of my worst fears, and it was evident to me that a continuance of our acquaintance would be to you a source of restraint and annoyance, as of utter misery to myself. It is better for us both that we should part, and much as it has cost me, long as I have pondered, ere I could make up my mind to write this letter, I feel less unhappy now that it is accomplished. Perhaps it would have been better had we never met; but it is useless to look back into the past, or speculate upon what might or might not have been. You have my best wishes, my earnest prayers for your future welfare and success. It will be better that you should not answer this letter; and as this is the last time I shall ever write to you, forgive me if I venture to offer a few words of humble advice to one in whom I shall always feel deeply interested. The fault of your character is want of purpose. Do not make the impulse of the moment for the true impulse of your heart, and do not throw away a year's pursuit as soon as success dawns upon your pursuit. Bend those talents which I know you to possess to some definite object, and do not longer to embark on some new career. Had I been a man, I should have been a man of business. Forgive me, my dear Digby, for the last time I call you son, forgive me for thus presuming to dictate to one whom I so kindly regard, and believe me your true well-wisher,

ZOE DE GRAND-MARTIGNY.

And this was the woman I had thrown overboard. Mrs. Mantrop, this was the true and noble heart I had disregarded and forgotten. And now, forsooth, I had my reward. I should never see her more. I had left her, and was unworthy of her forgetfulness. Ah! 'twas 'twould indeed have been better had we never met. I was worthy of a young man in my thoughtless and unpolluted by bliss, and now, alas! how can I dare to think of such purity as yours! My weak and vacillating character, ever acted upon by the influence of the moment, could never have matched with your high resolve, your nobility and unselfish spirit. I am in truth, a being of an inferior order. Ay, even now, when I am fresh from the pursuit of your generous and forgiving father—when my heart is act with the thought of your utter sacrifice of all your hopes—a sacrifice which I am incapable of making, but which I can still appreciate. The image of Flora Belmont's—amidst the wreck of your happiness, and out of the wreck, I am glad to say, your beauty my earliest and my truest friend, my dearly loved, my heart's home, my truest friend, my truest friend, my truest friend.

decided intentions of not going. Nevertheless, post horses were ordered as on all previous occasions, every vehicle and carriage horse in the stable was put in requisition; and half-past nine p.m. saw the whole party, all but Sir Peregrine, whose infirmities would have made it imprudent to venture, cloaking and flirting in the hall previous to a dark drive of ten or eleven miles. Julia Batt looked excessively pretty. I thought her eyes were all the brighter for an anticipated waltz with Tom Spencer; and I could take my oath, by the care with which that worthy was pinning a carnation in his button-hole, that the long-haired dandy had the same morning purloined it from the conservatory. I think I earned her eternal gratitude; I know how Tom Spencer told me I was 'a brick,' when I arranged that they should go together in the chariot, with only sleepy Mrs. Ramrod as a chaperon. Her injured lord, with Carambol and another dancing-man, trusted themselves to my guidance in the phaeton. I believe that had old Ramrod known the off-horse was a four-year-old, harness for the second time, he would have preferred walking; however, where 'ignorance is bliss,' people are easily satisfied: and we rattled over the ill-paved streets of the county-town and up to the crowded door, from whence strains of ceaseless music were issuing, in perfect safety, having done the distance handsomely in seven minutes under the hour.

Why it is incumbent on every one to come so late to a ball? Or when in his peculiar disgrace attached to being among the first arrivals? Our party, on entering, found the room but thinly sprinkled, and chattered with people on whom, as they had not the advantage of our acquaintance, we held ourselves privileged to make impertinent remarks.

'What a gown!' said Tom Spencer to his goddess, as he hovered round her like an unquiet spirit, directing her attention to a young lady hardly out of ear-shot.

'Shocking!' replied the fair Julia; 'and how badly her hair is done!'

'Mais elle n'est pas mal, cette petite,' said Carambol, who was also pleased; 'quelle fraîcheur, quelle chevelure.'

'Middling!' responded the dandy to whom he addressed himself, looking at his boots on profile; 'but no action.'

In the meantime the plot thickened, and the room gradually filled. Ample mammae fluttered in with their mignon broods; elderly young ladies, whose mouths, as Lavish would have said, don't bear looking into, smiled behind their fans, and seemed as if they wished somebody would ask them to dance; and while the country damsels blushed and giggled, the London girls stood erect and scornful, under the conscious advantage of having experienced a season in town. Elderly gentlemen toddled comfortably up to the fireplace, and smiled blandly from behind their white waistcoats. I maintain that nobody enjoys a ball so much as a quiet old gentleman. Young would be dandies, stood in the doorway, and the more aspiring clung tenaciously to their hats; and still fresh arrivals kept pouring in, and quadrilles were being formed down the whole length of the room.

I had already executed sundry duty-dances, thereto strictly enjoined by Sir Peregrine previous to my departure, and was in the midst of what has always been to me a favorite amusement—namely, watching the histronic powers of my fellow-creatures when on their best behavior and attired in their company manners—I had never been rewarded by witnessing a beautiful piece of acting on the part of Mrs. Grump, who was addressing 'dear Ang-lima' in an affectate whisper that would never have led one to suppose she worried the poor girl's life out at home—when, far off amongst the crowd turning away from me, I caught the outline of a graceful head, the droop of a glossy ringlet that could belong to none upon earth but Flora Belmont. My head swam—I felt almost sick with excitement; but muzzling myself by a severe effort, I blotted my way across the room. I found myself face to face with Flora. I know not what I said—I have no recollection of what took place; but a few minutes later found me standing opposite to her in a quadrille, trembling like a gul, but moving myself to the utmost to share to my utmost which I could see was shared to a small extent by my partner. Hardly a word did we exchange—hardly a smile exchanged—we danced through the

interest save to the couple immediately concerned. Suffice it to say, that words were spoken which the lapse of years might never teach us to forget; feelings given way to which no hope deferred, no coming trials and disappointments, should have power to efface.

I put Flora into her carriage with all the tender care, all the conscious ownership of an accepted lover; and as I drove the phaeton home, cheered by Carambol's unceasing melodies, a fresh love song, rich and mellow as his native South, for every glimmering milestone that flitted by, accompanied by the prolonged bass of Ramrod's truly British snores, the stars looked down upon a different world from that which had surrounded me a few short hours ago. Hope, more than hope—a feeling of blessed certainty—thrilled through my inmost heart; and though my joy was jeered by the merry Frenchman for being contrary to my custom, silent and distrust—who shall say that, notwithstanding all their noisy hilarity, I was not in truth far, far the happiest of the home-returning party.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RUN OF THE SEASON.

Amongst all the heathen gods and goddesses to whom we sacrificed so liberally at Haverley, Morpheus was the only one that could with reason complain of systematic neglect. Diana we worshipped most perseveringly during the day—Bacchus could boast a phalanx of unflinching votaries in the evening; for who might resist Sir Peregrine's dry champagne, or pass untasted by the silky twenty-five with a magnum of which Soams, no unworthy representative of the wine-god, appeared punctually every quarter of an hour? Nor was Venus forgotten; when mirth, music, singing, and ecstasies in the drawing-room, with an occasional impromptu as midnight approached, showed how willingly we yielded ourselves to her rosy fetters. But for the god of sleep we professed, one and all, but little regard; the only time at which he seemed to vindicate his power being that too-fleeting twenty minutes which elapsed between the summons of one's vigilant domestic, and the painful effort, so dreaded by the sluggard, termed 'getting out of bed.'

I could have sworn, on the morning after the ball, that my repose had only lasted five minutes—a brilliant five minutes truly, illuminated as it was by the image of my affianced Flora—when my uncompromising servant entered the room, under a burden of hot water, clean linen, top-boots and spurs, and snowy appliances thereto belonging, wherein it was my intention to over-ride as much as possible the Hark-Holloa hounds, advertised to 'meet' on that day at Haverley Hall. Oh the delight of that first moment of consciousness, ere I could gather from my scattered faculties what it was that made my heart bound so lightly in my bosom—the first dawning of 'the sober certainty of waking bliss,' worth all the dreams ever yet sent by Proserpine through her 'ivory gate.' Could mortal man be happier than I was on that auspicious morning? Debts, difficulties, and annoyances were all forgotten; if I thought of Zoe, it was but a twinge of reproach which enhanced the joy succeeding so momentarily a pang. Flora was mine! Such a thought alone was sufficient to fill my mental atmosphere with sunshine, nor was it an unpleasant under-current of ideas that I was that day to ride a capital horse, with as crack a pack of hounds as England could produce. The original young thoroughbred one, whose tuition first brought about that interview with old Bugon-t which obtained for me a commission in Her Majesty's Service, was now an experienced, steady, and very capital hunter—

'A matchless steed, though somewhat old, Pupt in his paces, cool and bold.'

and, in honor of the friendly old general, denominated 'Sir Benjamin.' Such a mount was in itself an anticipation of success; and who that remembered the ideal hour in which 'going well' through 'a fine run' confers upon the brow of imaginative twenty-one, will refuse to sympathize with my feelings.

'Here they come!—here they come! Oh, how pretty!' exclaim the ladies; and 'O you darlin' s'! chimos in the enthusiastic Miss Batt, as the clean and various-colored pack are seen trotting on to the lawn; where, grouping themselves round their huntsman, they take up a highly picturesque position in front of the house. No provincial establishment is that of the Hark-Holloa hounds. In all its various gradations, from the noble master down to the feeder's assistant, 'paco' is indelibly stamped upon every individual, every article connected with the kennels.

Joy, the huntsman, a snake-headed, wiry, active man, devoted to his profession, and a first-rate horseman, looked as game and undeniable as the two thoroughbred ones provided to carry him through the day. Quickness of thought and action, energy of mind and body, were impersonated in Will Part-ridge, his first whip, a man whom nature must have framed for the express office he he filled so well. No anatomist could venture to doubt that those limbs were made on purpose for the boots and breeches which fitted them so wonderfully; and the general opinion amongst ourselves was that Will must have been born in these sporting appliances. Nimrod was doubtless an adept in all the practices of the chase; but I question if Nimrod, though mounted on Pegasus, the greatest flyer on record—ay, even had Mercury lent him the use of his heels—could have slipped away to the 'down-wind' end of a woodland, and when there bored through the blackest and bitterest thorn-fence that ever staked a hunter, with half the ease or half the rapidity of Tom Prince—whose duty it was, as second whip, to enforce upon the younger members of the pack the propriety of their 'barking forward' and 'getting together,' and the necessity of abstaining entirely from 'hare.'

Woe to the robbing puppy that should indiscreetly proclaim his discovery of the forbidden fruit. Tom's thong was 'swit to smite, and never to spare'; and it was quite unnecessary to request that functionary to 'ride at him and cut him in two,' so rapidly did summary punishment follow the eager culprit's offence. The hounds themselves were level in size, and faultless in frame and symmetry; their condition was perfect, as was shown by their quick earnest movements and the bloom upon their skins; some of the old school might have thought them a little too light, but even such critical veterans must have confessed that they they looked 'all over like going.' The horses were well-bred, powerful animals, unusually sound, and with action that promised jumping capabilities to take them over that strongly-enclosed country. All the minor appliances were in keeping with the more important items of the establishment; and though last, not least, the noble master himself, a perfect specimen of his class, the high-bred English gentleman, was every inch a sportsman. Look at him now, as he comes galloping up, a little late; for a seat in Parliament entails its duties as well as its advantages, and letters must be answered, even though a field of eager horse-men may be kept waiting by the delay. Look at him now, with his manly, open bearing, his fine athletic form, the flush of health upon his cheek, and the sparkle of pleasure in his eye, as with frank courtesy and hearty good-humour he exchanges greetings with one and all, from the stately peer to the burly yeoman, ere he rides into the middle of the pack, who, with fawning countenances and waving sterna welcome that well known voice, and say if Lord Rasperdale is not the *beau ideal* of what a master of hounds should be. Joy to his eyes, glad to see him at first, for now we shall begin. My lord exchanges his back for his hunter—a powerful, thoroughbred chesnut, that it is not every man who could ride, but who, when handled by a workman, can show 'how fields are crossed.' At that signal, there is a general move, and in the midst of flinging-horses, mutual greeting, and much cigar-smoke, the hounds trot away to draw Haverley Gorse.

'How are you, Digby, my boy?' burst on my ear in well-remembered tones; and turning sharply round, I recognized my old friend Cartouch—the last person I expected to see at that particular moment. Heartly was our mutual greeting, and many were the inquiries as to our doings—past, present, and to come. Cartouch was fond of hunting as ever, and having got together a capital

Haverley pastures, and he must cross vale after that; by Jove, we are in a tickler' as I caught fast hold of 'Sir Benjamin's' head, and sinking the wind to make up for the badness of my star, and an awkward 'hog-backed' stile, a fairish ox-fence between myself and a crowd, who as usual rushed violently on the gateways, where they herded in a chaotic confusion. My manoeuvre was admirably; for ere another field was crossed, the hounds, turning at right angles down the fence, enabled me to get along-side of them, and short as was the distance we had come, the pace at which they were going gave me ample room to look about. They were streaming like a meteor, running perfectly mute, so that after a row and turmoil created by the trampling crowd from which I had just escaped, all seemed silent as a grave. On the right was Joy, still in his hand, skimming the large fences, like a low on the wing, whilst, stride for stride, leap for leap, Cartouch was riding by side, sitting down in his saddle, and holding the powerful bay horse under the most masterly manner. On the left, a little in advance of these, was Lord Rasperdale, going straight as a line, in his own determined way, swerving neither to the left nor right, for gate or gap, but taking everything as it came, and to use a forcible expression, apparently 'glued to the hound.' A loud crack broken rail made me look behind, to see Tom Spencer, just save his head landed in the field. He told me afterwards that he was in such a hurry he would like to 'shut off the steam,' as he called it, by collecting his horse for the effort, and the pace carried him through four strong fields if they had been paper. A moment he hovered, which one could hardly call a quiet, and another turn to the left showed me ten or twelve more men, in red, black, or green, who, although not so forward as themselves, were still going gallantly with the hounds; whilst a loose grey horse, on a streaming rein and flapping stirrup leathers, who seemed determined to see as much of the fun as he could, now that he had got of his encumbrance, completed the picture which I obtained a momentary glimpse of; was but for a moment, as I had soon seen to do again to keep my own place. Alas! my horse was fast as the wind, and over everything a quadruped might; and in condition was fit to run for the night with all these advantages, and no weight upon his back, the deep ridge of furrow, the wet holding soil of Haverley tures, large enclosures of from 50 to 200 acres, together with thick, blackthorn hedges, sometimes adorned with two ditches, occasionally forfeited by a strong east gave him, clipper as he was, quite a do at the extra pace created by that scouting ground. I fancy none of us felt the delay, when a plough-field, just in front of Waterley Ash-bank, was the hounds and horses to a check, and a little breathing time, sadly required by us latter.

'What a capital thing,' said Cartouch, 'such a country.'

'The fastest fifteen minutes I ever saw in my life,' remarked Lord Rasperdale, out his watch; to which Tom Spencer responded, as he jumped off for one moment to relieve his panting steed, 'We have done yet; I'll bet my future bishopric over the vale, and we shall have the right to negotiate, twenty feet of water and banks!'

Sure enough Joy hit off his fox, in a masterly manner, at the further end of the hill at a somewhat reduced rate, they over an easier country—the hounds, they had proved to us the pace at which they could run, now showing to admiration their closeness with which they could hunt, far in the distance, amidst the wild the fertile water-meadows, a line of disclosed the winding course of the less Squelech. Deep, silent, and the waters of the vale is that forbidden. Many a gallant hunter has cooled his sides in its broad wave, and, with difficulty by a team of his fellow-shooters and a stout cart-rop, has acquired high-bred disgust at the pure enjoyment never cleared a brook again. My pining youth, whose vaulting ambition