DIGBY GRAND.

CHAPTER XVI.

CROXTON PARK.

'Oh!' said the fine lady, turning away with a look of contemptuous *mechancete* that annoyed me, I am ashamed to say, more than the occasion deserved.

But the bell rings for saddling; gentlemen riders are seen hurrying to and fro, with long great coats concealing their professional attire, and magnificent silver-mounted jockey whips in their hands. Prosperous-looking yeomen are crowding round the strong symmetrical race-horses, on whom five and six summers have bestowed the muscular proportions and rounded beauty of form, denied to their early appearance before the public as three-year old competitors for the Derby and St. Leger, and propounding pithy questions to the short business-like grooms, whose responses are delivered with a positive ambiguity worthy of an ancient oracle.

'Plantagenet ought to win, Mr. Wisp?' says a good looking young farmer, in an interrogative tone, glancing down at the same time towards the boots and breeches in which he is attired as though his attire gave him a right to the best information on the subject.

'He did ought if the mare don't beat him,' replies a short, pimply-faced man, with miraculously fitting gaiters, who is leading by a snaffle bridle a quiet, good-looking bay horse, swathed in body clothes from his little pointed ears to the end of his long square tail. 'Nor she didn't ought to have much the best of him, if you look at their "running," Mr. Squiers;' and having vouchsafed thus much information for Mr. Squiers to make the best of, which that worthy's total ignorance of the previous performances of either animal renders him utterly incapable of doing, the short man, yawning audibly, expresses his opinion that it will be dark before they begin, and that 'he's bless'd if he thinks the gentlemen ever will get weighed.' Nor is the groom's impatience unreasonable; for inside the weighing enclosure there is much crowding and confusion, consequent upon the uncertainty of the aristocratic jockeys as to their specific gravity, all preconceived calculations based upon yesterday's discipline having been upset by a large dinner party last night, at the Old Club. Seven pound saddles must accordingly be substituted for the more roomy seat on which gentlemen are wont to accommodate their lengthier proportions; and in one instance not even that last resource of pigskin, which weighs exactly five pounds, and on which it is physically impossible he can sit down, will make amends for the evening's indulgence to Yen vigorous computer. However, there is no great hurry, people who do things for pleasure sought not to be tied to time; and after many a hasty message and whispered conclave, the turmoil seems to regret itself, and one after another the whole troop at length mount, and displaying their preparatory canters for the edification of the ladies.

And now do bright eyes scan the cards, and taper fingers point to the names, weights, and colors of the racers, as each fair one review with favoring eye the man and horse that approach nearest to her own peculiar ideas of excellence. Plantagenet gallops thrice past the stand, his bright bay coat and glossy quarters glistening in the sun, whilst his own beauty and the graceful ease with which Mr. Wilson yields so pliantly to every motion of his long, lashing stride, find him popular favor in the eyes of the softer sex. Gloves Nelly's cousin cannot hope to compete with such artistical horsemen as are watching him from behind, knowing far better than himself the speed at which he is going, and the powers of his animal. 'He is in too great a hurry to get home,' and disposes of the little mare accordingly, who is passed by the favorites as though she were standing still, Plantagenet having come up with a tremendous rush when opposite the distance-post, closely waited on by the no longer impetuous Fakeaway. Fifty yards from home Captain Black gets at the latter with whip and spurs, nor could a Centaur urge his equine half to its utmost speed with more perfect sympathy and unison of motion than that which exists between Fakeaway and the jockey who is cheering him. In vain; he reaches Plantagenet's quarters—his girths—his shoulder—but no further. Mr. Wilson never appears to move a muscle, so equably and pliantly does he adapt himself to every effort of his horse. His nice judgment of his pace tells him that he must win; and calmly, as if cantering in the park, his body slightly bent forward, his hands low upon his horse's withers, a quiet smile upon his countenance, he glides by the goal, a winner by a neck, whilst amongst the plaudits which greet his triumph may be heard such expressions as the following: 'Capital race!'—'Beautiful finish!'—'Perfection of riding!'—'I win a hundred pounds.'

Although, contrary to my wont, I was neglecting the important business of money-making in the ring, let it not be supposed that I was by any means idle during this and the succeeding races. Far from it; with a provident eye to future well-being, I was exerting myself to the utmost in making the agreeable to the wealthy heiress, and bringing to bear all my previous experience and fancied knowledge of the sex on the unsophisticated Nelly. Strange it is, that the man whose heart is in reality untouched by her charms, should ever have the greatest facility in winning his way to a woman's good graces, while he whose whole soul is bound up in her, finds the very intensity of his devotion the greatest obstacle in his path. How the latter pounces upon every word he might, could, would, or should say, and every construction it can bear, till, in sheer indecision, he finds himself confined to the most constrained commonplaces, or the most irksome silence! whilst his careless rival, liking or admiring no one half as much as himself rattles gaily on through all the gradations of lively, agreeable, confidential, and affectionate, till he slips into a declaration of love, with half the trouble it costs the sincerest worshipper to ask his goddess to 'drink a glass of wine.' So was it with me; the progress I made, when I paused to reflect upon it, was positively alarming. As I hied me home to Melton for dinner, and reviewed the morning I had just spent, I determined that the following day should witness my honorable capitulation, and the twenty four hours more should see Digby Grand in the fetters of an 'engagement'—the accepted suitor of the sporting heiress.

'You must have won a bag of money to-day, Grand, for I never saw you in such spirits,' remarked Maltby to me, as we wended our homeward way in company, after an unusually glorious evening of mirth, wine, and jollity; nor could the straightforward Yorkshire peer conceive any other cause for wild hilarity than contentment of mind produced by successful speculation. Little did he know the feelings of a man who, involved in difficulties, and at enmity with himself, is fain to snatch at the excitement of the passing moment as a means of temporary forgetfulness, and whose laughter, even at its merriest, runs sad for the under for its accompanying strain of secret woe; and when I wished him good-night, and offered to lay him the odds against a hack he had to run on the morrow, my old friend turned away with a smile, and gave me credit for being one of the most uproarious and happy dogs of his acquaintance.

Amongst the letters which awaited me on my return home was one from my brother, which I opened with a sinking heart, fearing lest it should contain some account of my positive engagement to Miss Spinnithorne, as well as a caricatured description of her person and family, with a fabulous detail of her wealth, and he now wrote to me, adjuring me, by everything I regarded as most sacred, to pause before irretrievably taking that step which he held in such aversion—to wit, marrying for money. Generous and open-hearted as he was, he offered to do anything in his power that one brother might for another to save me from this union. He proposed an immediate loan, which I well knew would swallow up the whole of his disposable capital, and offered to become security for my liabilities to an amount that would have endangered all his remaining property. There was no sacrifice which he was not prepared to make to save his only friend, as he called me, from so degrading a fate, and then he argued nobly and chivalrously upon the duties owed by a gentleman to society and to himself. 'If you are in difficulties,' he wrote, 'stand up to them like a man, look them boldly in the face, and whatever may be the consequences, fight them out to the last. For worldly wealth I have, as you know, the utmost contempt; therefore, to tell you that you shall command the last farthing I possess, is no more than you have a right to expect; but I should indeed be ashamed if I were not ready to sacrifice far more than mere money in the cause of my friend. You will have to return to town immediately for our Court-martial, and let me entreat of you to come to no conclusion with this Miss Spinnithorne till you have seen me. If you are already committed, draw back, do anything but marry her. Better to behave badly now than for a lifetime; and whatever may be the girl's present feelings to find herself undeceived, think how trifling must be her sorrow now compared to the anguish with which she would one day discover, in this world or the next, that she had been a victim for years to the imposture of him to whom she had given the purest, freshest affections of her heart.' Hillingdon went on to say—and this, perhaps, more than any other part of his letter had an effect upon my determination—that he had seen Miss Belmont in London, that she was evidently ignorant of this reported marriage, and that she still spoke of me with a regard and affection she strove in vain to conceal. He concluded with the kindest expressions of interest in my welfare, and a repetition of his generous and munificent offer, urging me to come and see him immediately on my arrival in town, and declaring he should not be comfortable till some arrangements had been made to extricate me from my pecuniary annoyances and embarrasments. Painful, too painful was it for me to feel, as I perused his warm-hearted letter, that breathing, as it did, the sincerest friendship, the noblest sentiments, there was yet running through the whole of it a strain of exaggerated sensibility, a morbid tone of over-excited feeling, which brought to my mind, for the first time, a startling doubt, upon which I had never before allowed myself to dwell, as to Hillingdon's sanity. It was too dreadful to contemplate. The noble, the generous, the true-hearted, and brave—that he, of all others, should be the monster's victim!—his glorious intellect even now tainted with that spot, which should waste and corrode as it spread, till the reasoning creature, the image of God upon earth, should become an insensate maniac. Horrible!—Gracious Heaven, how horrible! And yet, drive it from my mind as I would, ever and anon the dread suspicion flashed across me, and sent the life-blood back, thick and chilly, to my heart. I determined to see him as soon as my military engagements would allow; and in return for his brotherly affection I resolved to watch over him with a brother's care. In the meantime, I wrote an excuse to Squire Spinnithorne, with whom I had engaged myself to spend a few days at his place in Charnwood Forest, with a polite message to his daughter, to the effect, that there was Mr. Price, composed and respectful as usual, in waiting to preside over his arrangements, and minister to his wants. Nor was this matutinal vigil consequent upon his retirement betimes, and long night's rest, as I have myself had occasion to witness. For once, when staying with a large party for some extraordinary shooting at St. Heliers' old family place, I was interrupted in my dinner toilette by Mr. Price's knock, with a hospitable invitation to his party after 'my lord's' had concluded. 'There will be a little dancing this evening in the steward's room, sir,' he began, with as matter-of-fact an air as if he were announcing my carriage—'and as there will not be much whist upstairs, and you will probably object to retiring so early, we should feel highly honored if you would do us the favor of looking in for a few minutes. You must not expect much, sir, but take us quite in the rough, as this is entirely an impromptu affair!' I accepted, of course, with many acknowledgements, and galloped, waltzed, and polkaed with ladies'-maids and other functionaries, in low gowns and satin shoes, till five in the morning; whilst the rough of this impromptu festivity I found to consist of the best supper Truffles could dish up (which accounted for the dinner that day having been less meritorious than usual), washed down by 'sweet' and 'dry,' such as my lord's gnostic guests upstairs had often pronounced to be the very perfection of champagne. So much for Mr. Price, who shut me into my post-chaise with the most deferential attention, and looked at his watch, while he bade the postboy drive on, as though I were not out of his care till safely at the termination of my journey.

Much food had I for reflection, and into many a reverie did I drop, on my way to the metropolis. Flora Belmont and Hillingdon were the subjects uppermost in my mind; and doubts, scruples, and anxieties chased each other like clouds across my mental atmosphere, as to to the course I should pursue with regard to Miss Spinnithorne. What a deal of trouble it would have saved me had I known that in one short month from that time the little jilt would marry her boorish cousin—that she was even then eating sandwiches out of the same box, and talking with the presuming snob about Polly Popples and Dandy Grand!

CHAPTER XVII.

DEEPER AND DEEPER STILL.

I arrived at my lodgings as the day was closing in, with a raw chilly spring rain slopping the pavement, and bringing down the 'blacks,' those aborigines of the metropolis, so inimical to one fresh from the country, in a stream of liquid soot. I was not expected; my fire was unlit, my books shut up, my pictures covered, and my things not yet unpacked. On the table were a host of letters, bills, &c., amongst which I recognized Hillingdon's well-known hand. Alas! he had been obliged to leave London on duty that very afternoon. My regimental order-book, open on the table, appeared the only thing that had anticipated my coming; and on its rather illegible page I read the unwelcome intelligence that I, too, was for duty the following day. Everything appeared thoroughly uncomfortable, and, for the first time in my life, I loathed the selfish *vie de garcon*, and pined for the endearments of a home. Whilst my servant was getting out my things, I proceeded to open my letters, the contents of which filled me with dismay. Tradesmen were clamorous for payment; and bills, amongst others that to which Tom Spencer had put his name, were coming due. A few lines from Newmarket told me that Tumbledown Dick was lame, and would probably not start for the Derby. ooking, well-dressed man; if anything more *pronounce* in his attire than formerly; but the restless eager expression of his countenance was now sharper than ever, and this it was, with a certain forward air, as of one who assumes rather than maintains his position in society, which prevented his ever appearing thoroughly as a gentleman. He had left the army for some time, and was now fully occupied in following out the business of the turf—for, truth to say, book-making is a business of the most laborious kind; and whatever amount of capital he might possess was chiefly invested in such speculations. He had lately been admitted a member of Crockford's, a proof that the original exclusiveness of the club was far relaxing in its vigilance; for there was no denying that Levanter was 'bad style,' and this equivocal offence knows no forgiveness in the suffrages of society. After recapitulating our 'tandem' catastrophe, and other freaks of early life, when in the 101st Foot, we became gradually more and more confidential as to our present resources and pursuits; and whilst I detailed runs in Leicestershire, successes at hazard, and triumphs at billiards, my companion opened to my astonished view golden ways and means, royal roads to wealth and fortune, of which, with all my fancied knowledge of the world, I had hitherto been totally ignorant.

'I made two thousand last week, in the funds,' said he, with the careless air of a man who tells you how many brace of partridges he shot on the 1st; 'and realized fifteen hundred more by the sale of some shares in the Great Unnecessary, and, as I have got ten thousand pound book on the Derby, these little windfalls may be useful; but next year I hope to begin on a larger scale, and make a really "good thing."'

'You must have a good deal of capital to work upon,' said I, somewhat astounded at the new-born magnificence of my friend's ideas.

'Not much of that,' he replied, 'but I never throw a chance away: as in speculating, so in betting, I trust entirely to figures—the only horses that always run honest—and, barring bad debts, in which I have been tolerably lucky, I never ought to lose. Could anything induce me to depart from my rule, and back an animal on account of its merit, I should this year be tempted to do so. There is a horse engaged in the Derby, that at twenty to one, that, as far as pace and powers go, is as sure of winning the race as I am of finishing this cup of coffee. His name is Oriel; and I can tell you, of course in the strictest confidence, that he was tried with 'Flat-fish,' and beat him as far as he could see. But what are you going to do to-night, Grand? I remember, of old, you were given to early hours. I am going to Mrs. Man-trap's for some whist, and a chance pool at *ecarte*. Have you a mind to come? She mentioned your name, among others, whom I was to ask if I happened to meet them.'

So, thought I, either my friend here has got on wonderfully in the world, or Mrs. Man-trap must be going down-hill very fast if such a second-rater as this has the management of her invitations. There was a time when I might walk into her house at all hours, welcome and unasked; however, I should like to see how my old flame looks, I'll go. Accordingly, I promised to accompany Levanter, only stipulating that, as there was sure to be some card-playing, I should run upstairs for ten minutes, to get a little small change.

Twelve o'clock struck, the Temple of Chance was open, and, in a shorter time than I have named, I was by Levanter's side, in his quiet dark-colored brougham, with a fifty pound note in my waistcoat pocket, the product of three timely 'sevens,' that, with Glendower's spirits, *came* 'came when I did call for them.'

'My dear Grand, I am so charmed to