



The Green Dressing Gown.

By FINCH MASON.

I HAVE come across a good many charming old ladies in my time, but never, no never, have I ever met one who, in racing parlance, could give so much weight away to the rest of her sex as my paternal grandmother, who not only in my own estimation was the very dearest old soul that ever drew breath, but—and it does my heart good to record it—was beloved by every one—man, woman, and child—she came into contact with. I say, was advisedly, for, to my sorrow, she has been dead now these five years.

When a boy at school I never missed a holiday without paying her a visit at the old Manor House, and the pleasurable anticipation with which I looked forward to these visits no word of mine can express. More than that, the older I got, the more I enjoyed them.

The Manor House is mine now, and I make it my home, when I am at home; but somehow, fond though I am of the place, it never seems quite the same, deprived as it is of the presence of the white-haired chatelaine who became it so well. The old butler still remains, and he and I occasionally try and talk over old times, but it is but a poor attempt at a rule.

"My dear old mistress," he begins,—and then the poor old man breaks down and leaves the room abruptly; and I—well, I make a fool of myself, and am not ashamed to own it. There was one particular room in the Manor House which always had a particular charm for me, and that was the one known to me from early boyhood as "grandpapa's room," and since I arrived at man's estate as my grandfather's room.

After his death his widow would not allow a thing in it to be touched. Everything was in its place just as he left it; and there she would sit for hours thinking of her "man," as she always called the husband who was as devoted to her in his lifetime as she was to him.

Notwithstanding its heavy old-fashioned furniture, it was the cheeriest and brightest of rooms, with its French windows opening on to the mistress's rose garden, with a view of the park and the country beyond, which would have gladdened the heart of a landscape painter. But its special charm for me was the decidedly sporting tone that prevailed.

Two of its sides were given up to bookshelves, which, with the exception of a hundred volumes or so of the "Annual Register," were entirely devoted to books of sport of every kind.

Over the mantelpiece hung a portrait in oil of Sir Harry, the winner of the Chester Cup, and the best racehorse my grandfather ever owned; over that again a fox's mask and a couple of brushes to match; while scattered about the room in rich profusion were other paintings, by Herring and Ferneley, of favorite racehorses and hunters; sundry shooting bits by Cooper, and numerous smaller fry in the shape of highly colored prints after Alken and others. A capacious gun cupboard occupied one recess, and an old-fashioned fold-up bedstead, to which my grandfather was in the habit of taking himself off when laid low by the periodical attacks of gout he was subject to, another. Last, but not least, there hung on a hook on the door a bright green pink-flowered silk dressing gown. An ordinary garment enough, but one which for years had a peculiar fascination for me, for the reason that I felt there was a history of some sort attached to it. I never remember my grandmother angry with me but once, and that was one wet day during my periodical visits in the Eton holidays, when, having nothing better to do, it occurred to me to "dress up," as I called it, in grandpapa's dressing gown, and, having done so, away I danced to the drawing-room in high glee to show myself off.

To my intense astonishment, instead of being amused, as I had fully expected she would have been, my grandmother was downright angry. Divesting me of the sacred garment on the spot, she made me promise there and then—the tears were in her eyes as she did so, I noticed—never to lay my sacrilegious hands upon it again.

Many a time after this did I endeavor to extract from my grandmother the mystery in which I felt sure the green dressing gown was enshrouded, but I was invariably met with the same answer.

"Not now, my dear; not now. Wait until you are a man, and then I'll tell you all about it."

And the dear old lady kept her word to the letter. I spoke no more of holidays now, for I had not only left Eton, but said "good bye" to Oxford as well when I once more arrived at the Manor House to spend my twenty-first birthday, in accordance with a long-standing agreement with my grandmother. And in keeping my promise I may men-

tion that I made a small sacrifice, inasmuch that I had received a most pressing invitation to make one of a house party to attend the Chester races, which were on that very week, the time-honored Chester Cup, now no longer the important event in the racing world it was in former years, being run, oddly enough as it turned out, on my birthday.

I had never been to Chester, and in a way I was disappointed. But my dear grandmother's happiness at "having me all to myself," as she said, more than made up for it. An additional salve too arrived in the shape of a telegram during the afternoon, informing me that the horse I had backed had won; so that it was in a very contented frame of mind that I sat down to dinner that night, tête-à-tête with the best loved relative, barring my mother, I had in the world.

"And now, my dear," said my grandmother as she rose to leave the room, "when you have finished your wine, join me in your grandfather's room, and I'll keep my promise of years ago to you, and tell you the story of the green dressing gown."

It may readily be imagined that my grandmother's excellent claret and still more excellent port had little or no attraction for me that night, so great was my anxiety to get at the bottom of the mystery; and my aged relative, I fear, had hardly time to settle herself in her easy chair before I joined her. Her dear old face brightened up as I entered.

"I thought you wouldn't be long, my dear," she said, adding: "And now, sit down opposite me in my dear old man's own particular chair, light a cigar, then listen to me whilst I tell my tale; I should say, make my confession." Like a good boy, I did as I was told, and as soon as she saw my cigar was well under way my grandmother commenced as follows:—

"You know, my dear, by hearsay at least, for you were only a baby when he died, what a keen sportsman your grandfather was. Hunting, shooting, fishing,—he was an adept at them all. The Turf too he had been fond of all his life. But it was not until his hereditary enemy the gout laid such a heavy hand upon him, putting a stop in a great measure to an active participation in all the amusements which I have mentioned, that he embarked upon it in earnest.

"You see, my dear," explained my grandmother, "you can't do your shooting or fishing from a carriage very well,

though you can your hunting after a fashion, that is to say if pounding along a road and looking on at hounds running in the distance, with every chance of your heading the fox into the bargain, is good enough.

"But that sort of thing didn't suit your grandfather at all. He was one of those sort of men who if he couldn't do a thing thoroughly, would let it alone. Consequently he gave up—and, ah me! how reluctantly!—all his favorite field sports one by one, and went in for racing—the only amusement, as he said, which was left to him—heart and soul. In a very short time indeed he was thoroughly infatuated with it; and I am afraid," sighed my grandmother, shaking her head with a self-reproaching air, "that I was as bad as he was."

"Oh, if my dear old man could have only won the Derby," she exclaimed, "what a happy day it would have been for both of us!"

"But we never had the good fortune," she went on. Everything we bred, promising though many of them looked when sent to the trainer, turned out moderate to a degree, to the great detriment of your grandfather's pocket as you may imagine; and it was not until he claimed Sir Harry there" (pointing to the portrait over the mantelpiece) "out of a small selling race at Newmarket, that the luck began to change. Dear Sir Harry! How few people—not even the cleverest—ever imagined that the despised selling plater, hitherto trained for short-distance races, very few of which he succeeded in winning, and those only in indifferent company, would turn out to be one of the best stayers in England, and a Cup horse of the first quality. How proud we were of him, and best of all, my dear, how fond the general public were of him. The scene when he won the Northumberland Plate I shall never forget to my dying day. How the rough pitmen cheered as your grandfather led the winner back to scale!

"Three cheers for t' best horse i' t' coonty!" shouted one grimy giant.

"Three more for t' mon that owns him!" bellowed another.

"And then when your grandfather returned to the carriage, after the welcome 'All right,' had been announced by the clerk of the scales, the crowd started cheering me. As for Sir Harry, the only wonder is that he had any hairs left in his tail, poor dear! such a quantity were pulled out as souvenirs of the occasion by his countless ad-