

Kate Coventry.

CHAPTER I.

(CONTINUED.)

That's the reason why, when he called on that rainy afternoon, he persuaded her to let me go down to Ascot with him all alone by our two selves the following day.

How pleasant it is to wake on the morning of a gala-day, to hear the carts and cabs rumbling in the streets, and to know that you must get up early, and be off directly after breakfast, and will have the whole following day to amuse yourself in. What a bright sunny day it was, and what fun I had going with John in a Hansom cab, to Paddington! I like a Hansom cab, it goes so fast—and then drove to Windsor by the train, in a carriage full of such smart people, some of whom I knew quite well by name, though not to speak to—the slang aristocracy, as they are called, muster in great force at Ascot. Nor could anything be more delightful than the drive through Windsor Forest up to the course—each a neat phaeton and pair, and John and I like regular Darby and Joan sitting side by side. Somehow that drive through Windsor Forest made me think of a great many things I never think of at other times. Though I was going to the races, and fully prepared for a day of gaily and amusements, a half-melancholy feeling stole over me as we rolled along amongst those stately old trees, and that lovely scenery, and those picturesque little places set down in that abode of beauty. I thought how charming it would be to saunter about here in the early summer mornings, or the still summer nights, and listen to the thrush and the blackbird and the nightingale in the copse, and then I thought I would not care to wander here quite alone, and that a whisper might steal on my ear, sweeter than the note of thrush and the nightingale; and that there might be a somebody without whom all that sylvan beauty would be a blank, but with whom any place would become a fairyland. And then I fell to wondering who that somebody would be, and I looked at Cousin John, and felt a little cross—which was very ungrateful and a little disappointed—which was very unjust.

Here we are, Kate, that's the Grand Stand, and we'll have the carriage right opposite, and the Queen's not come, and we're in heaps of time, and there's Frank Lovell, exclaimed the unconscious John, as we drove on to the course, and my day-dreams were effectually dispelled by the gay scene which spread itself before my eyes.

As I took John's arm, and walked into the enclosure in front of the stand, I must confess that the first impression on my mind was this,—never in my life have I seen so many well-dressed people that collected together before; and when the Queen drove up the course, with her brilliant suite of carriages and out-riders, and the mob of gentlemen and ladies cheered her to the echo, I was such a goose that I felt as if I could have cried. After a time I got a little more composed, and looked about at the different toilets that surrounded me. I own I saw nothing much newer than my own; and I was pleased to find it so, as nothing gives one greater confidence in a crowd than the consciousness of being well-dressed. But what I delighted in more than all the bonnets and gowns in the universe were those dear horse boys, with their little darlings of jockeys. If there is one thing I like better than another, it is a thoroughbred horse. What a gentleman he looks amongst the rest of his kind! How he walks down the course, as if he knew his own value—self-confident, but not vain; and goes swinging along in his breathing gallop as easily and as smoothly as if I was riding him myself, and he was proud of his burden! When Colonel won the Cup, I felt again as if I could have cried. It was a near race, and closely contested the whole way from the distance in. I felt my blood creeping quite chill, and I perfectly understand then the infatuation men cherish about racing, and why they run their wives and children at that pursuit

CHAPTER II.

We've got such a sweet little house in Lowndes street, to my mind the very best situation in London. When I say we, of course I mean Aunt Deborah and myself. We live together, as I hope we always shall do, as Aunt Deborah says, till 'one of us is married.' And notwithstanding the difference of our ages we get on as comfortably as any two forlorn maidens can. Though a perfect fairy-palace within, our strong-hold is guarded by no giant, griffin, dragon, or dwarf; nothing more frightful than a policeman, whose measured tread may be heard at the midnight hour pacing up and down beneath our windows. 'It's a great comfort,' says Aunt Deborah, 'to know that assistance is close at hand. I'm a lone woman, Kate, and I confess to feeling nervous when I lie awake.' I quite agree with my aunt, though I am not nervous; but I must say I like the idea of being watched over during the hours of sleep, and there is something romantic in hearing the regular tramp of the sentinel whilst one is curled up snug in bed. I don't much think it always is the policeman—at least I know that one night when I got up to peep if it was a constable, he was wrapped in a very loose cloak, such as is by no means the uniform of the force, and was besides, unquestionably, smoking a cigar, which I am given to understand is not permitted by the regulations when on duty. I watched the glowing light for at least ten minutes, and when I went to bed again, I could not get to sleep for wondering who the amateur policeman could be.

But the house is a perfect jewel of its kind. Such a pretty dining-room, such a lovely drawing-room, opening into a conservatory, with a fountain and gold fish, to say nothing of flowers (I am passionately fond of flowers), and such a boudoir of my own, where nobody ever intrudes except my special favorites—Cousin John, for instance, when he is not in disgrace—and which I have fitted up and furnished quite to my own taste. There's the Amazon in gilt bronze, and a bas-relief from the Elgin Marbles—not colored like those flaxen-haired abominations at Sydenham, but pure and simple as the taste that created it; and an etching Landseer did for me himself of my little Scotch terrier growling; and a veritable original sketch of Horace Vernet—in which nothing is distinguishable save a phantom charger, rearing straight up amongst clouds of smoke. Then I've put up a stand for my riding-whips, and a picture of my own thoroughbred favorite horse over the chimney-piece; altogether Aunt Deborah describes the apartment exactly, when she says to me, as she does about once a week, 'My dear, if you were a man, I should say your room was fitted up in the most perfect taste; but as you happen to be a young lady, I won't say what I think, because I know you won't agree with me,' and I certainly do not agree with Aunt Deborah upon a great many subjects.

However, there's no situation like Lowndes Street. I'm not going to tell the number, nor at which end of the street we live; for it's very disagreeable to have people riding by and stopping to alter their stirrup-leathers, and squinting up at one's drawing-room windows, where one sits working in peace, and then cantering off and trotting by again, as if something had been forgotten. No; if curiosity is so very anxious to know where I live, let it look in the Court Guide; for my part, I say nothing, except that there are always flowers in the balcony; and there's no great singularity about that. But there are two great advantages connected with a residence in Belgravia, which I wonder are not inserted in the advertisements of all houses to let in that locality. In the first place, a lady may walk about all the forenoon quite alone without being hampered by a maid or hunted by a footman; and in the second, she is most conveniently situated for a morning ride or walk in the Park; and those are about the two pleasantest things one does in London.

Well, the same conversation takes place nearly every morning at breakfast, between Aunt Deborah and myself—(we breakfast early never after half-past nine, however late we have been the night before). Aunt Deborah begins—

'My dear, I hope we shall have a quiet morning together; I've directed the servants to deny me to all visitors; and if you get

not to be frightened, gave it a thump, and started me off by myself. I wasn't the least bit afraid, I know that. It was a new sensation, and delightful; and I rolled round the field we went, I shaking my reins with one hand, and holding on a great flapping straw-hat with the other, the pony grunting and squeaking, with his mane and tail floating on the breeze, and papa standing in the middle, waving his hat and applauding with all his might. After that, I was qualified to ride anything; and by the time I was twelve, there wasn't a hunter in the stables that I wouldn't get on at a moment's notice. I am ashamed to confess that I have even caught the loose cart-horses in a field, and ridden them without saddle or bridle. I never was beat but once, and that was at Uncle Horsingham's, when I was about fifteen. He had bought a mare at Tattersall's for his daughter to ride, and brought her down to Dangerfield, thinking she would conduct herself like the rest of her species. How well I remember my governess's face when she gave me leave to go to the stable with Sir Harry, and look over the new purchase. I was a great pet of Uncle Horsingham's; and as Cousin Amelia was not much of an equestrian, he proposed that I should get upon the chestnut mare first, and try her paces and temper before his daughter mounted her. As we neared the stables, out came one of the grooms with a side-saddle on his head, and the longest face I ever beheld.

'Oh! Sir 'Arry,' said he—I quote his exact words—'that new mare's a vicious war-mint; afore I was well in the stable, she ups and lets out at me just above the knee: I do believe as my thigh's broke.'

'Nonsense, man,' said my uncle; 'put the saddle on, and bring her out.' Presently the chestnut mare appeared; and I saw at once that she was not in the best of humors. But I was young, full of spirits, and fresh from lessons; so fearing if one of the men should venture to mount her she might show temper, and I should lose my ride, I made a sign to the head-groom to give me a hand; and, before my uncle had time to exclaim, 'For goodness' sake, Kate! I was scared, muslin dress and all, on the back of the chestnut mare. What she did, I never could quite make out; it seemed to me that she crouched as if she were going to lie down, and then bounded into the air, with all four legs off the ground. I was as near gone as possible; but for the only time in my life, I caught hold of the pommel with my right hand, and that saved me. In another instant she had broke from the groom's hold, and was careering along the approach like a mad thing. If I had pulled at her in the least, she would have run away with me.

Luckily, the park was roomy, and the old trees far apart; so when we got upon the grass, I knew who would be mistress. I gave her a rousing good gallop, shook my reins and patted her, to show her how confident I was, and brought her back to my uncle as quiet as a lamb. Unfortunately, however, the mare had taken a dislike to certain stone pillars which supported the stable gates, and nothing would induce her to pass them. Flushed with success, I borrowed my uncle's riding-whip to punish her; and now began a battle in good earnest. She reared and plunged, and wheeled round and round, and did all she knew to get rid of me; whilst I flogged and jerked, and screamed at her (I didn't swear, because I didn't know how), and vowed in my wicked little heart I would be killed rather than give in. During the tussle, we got nearer and nearer to a certain large pond, about a hundred yards from the stable gates, at which the cattle used to water in the quiet summer afternoons. I knew it wasn't very deep, for I had seen them standing in it often. By the time we were close on the brink, the whole household had turned out to see Miss Kate killed; and just as I hit the mare a finishing cut over the ears, I caught a glimpse of my governess in an attitude of combined shame, horror, and disgust, that I shall never forget. The next moment we were overhead in the pond, the mare having dashed blindly in, caught her fore-feet in the bridle, and rolled completely over. What a ducking I got, to be sure; but it was nothing to the scolding I had to endure afterwards from all the females of the family, including my governess; only Uncle Horsingham stuck up for me, and from that time till the day of his death, vowed he had never known but me plucky fellow in the world, and that was

DIGBY GRAND.

CHAPTER XXV.

HASTE TO THE WEDDING.

I do not know that I walked home on that afternoon alone with Flora Belmont, and that the early winter sun set not the same evening upon a happier man than the bridegroom's assistant.

Love has been written up by enthusiasts and sneered down by cynics, till the very nature of that mysterious phase of the human mind has become shrouded in contradictions and confusion; inflated into folly on the one hand, and scouted as madness on the other, the noble unselfish passion that, hand-in-hand with honor, beckoned the knights of old along the path of fame, is now sneered at as the fond imagining of a romantic boy, the vain delusion of a silly girl. 'Such an one is in love,' is at once an excuse and a reason for any act of folly, extravagance, or self-conceit of which the patient may be guilty. 'They are both very young; they will know better in time,' says Middleage, shrinking back into the coat of mail that Self has for years been hardening for its defence, and the kindest instinct of our wordy nature is ridiculed as a fantasy, or pronounced as an absurdity. Surely this must be wrong; the very essence of true affection for another is a total abnegation and forgetfulness of ourselves, and perhaps the noblest attitude of man is that in which he casts from him the idol to which his fellow-creatures are too prone to bow, and throws off his allegiance to the tyrant Self, whose chains, growing with our growth, and strengthening with our strength, become daily and hourly more galling and more unrelenting. When two people can live for years apart, and never forget—can undergo toil, privation, perhaps cutting sarcasm, and stern rebuke, each for the other's sake; when the watches of the night bring back only the one image; when a strain of music, a glance of sunshine, or a scene of beauty recalls the one loved face; when they are prepared to confront the battle of life under every disadvantage, and take the inevitable journey, weary and afoot, so they may but go hand-in-hand; depend upon it there is something more than human in the instinct which prompts such self-sacrifice and self-denial—depend upon it that when we scout Love from the face of the earth, we are casting off the one last link that connects us with the angels in heaven, we are doing our best to wither the flowrets of Eden; nor can we complain that it is the fault of any but ourselves, if we find, indeed, that the trail of the serpent is over them all.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SETTLED AT LAST.

How different looks the little room in the City now. 'The true that Tom Spencer has deserted me, and is living in a perfect paradise of strawberries at Fulham; that my solitude is darkened by the gloom of a London noon, and refreshed by an atmosphere compounded of gas, dust, and large particles of soot, whilst my view is bounded by a dead wall, not ten feet from the window, and the blue vault above me bent, reduced to a narrow strip of lurid leaden sky; and yet what rosy hues pervade the interior of the small dingy apartment. The dream is at length to be realized. Hope is at last to become fruition, and Flora Belmont has promised, at no very distant period, to share the broken fortunes of the ruined dandy, to superintend the humble establishment of the struggling tradesman. How St. Heliers will laugh, if, indeed, that wasted frame have energy enough left to indulge in merriment. How Mrs. Man-trap will sneer at the eventual fate of that pretty Miss Belmont, who was voted a beauty even in London, and came out of the ordeal unscathed and uncorrupted; who might have married Sir Angelo, and given the very ball which is advertised to take place to-night at his house in Belgrave Square. True, Sir Angelo is old enough to be her father, and, in addition to a somewhat re-

taken to task by the Reverend Amos, on her father's executors, and his oldest friend as to her repugnance to a comfortable settlement in life—the battered, worn, and calculating man of the world thinking him no doubt, capable of fathoming the depth of that priceless heart. Even Julia, who every inch a woman, allows that she saw anything so beautiful as the orphan in her deep mourning, bending, pale and over the inevitable needlework, that sooths and bequeils the cheerless hours of many a weary spirit.

Oh, that needlework! with its proverbial intricacy and slow-growing design—what tears have fallen on those crossing threads, what sorrow-laden eyes have gazed daily unconsciously on that dazzling web, while the fingers plied their mechanical task, as the heart was far away, basking in the vision of the past, or yearning in hopeless misery for the irrevocable! From the large maiden, who sits at the cottage and hems her father's shirt through blind tears, as memory invests John, late listed a soldier, with endearing qualities of what that faithless rustic is altogether guiltless, the peer's daughter, drooping over her broodery, and inhaling with the fragrance the conservatory memories of him who even now presenting the same bouquet, avowing the same vows to another, aggravated by that distant strain of music from the schoolroom, where her little sister is practicing the very waltz that wasted his lips, whippers in her ear,—the canvas is the very essence of true affection for another is a total abnegation and forgetfulness of ourselves, and perhaps the noblest attitude of man is that in which he casts from him the idol to which his fellow-creatures are too prone to bow, and throws off his allegiance to the tyrant Self, whose chains, growing with our growth, and strengthening with our strength, become daily and hourly more galling and more unrelenting. When two people can live for years apart, and never forget—can undergo toil, privation, perhaps cutting sarcasm, and stern rebuke, each for the other's sake; when the watches of the night bring back only the one image; when a strain of music, a glance of sunshine, or a scene of beauty recalls the one loved face; when they are prepared to confront the battle of life under every disadvantage, and take the inevitable journey, weary and afoot, so they may but go hand-in-hand; depend upon it there is something more than human in the instinct which prompts such self-sacrifice and self-denial—depend upon it that when we scout Love from the face of the earth, we are casting off the one last link that connects us with the angels in heaven, we are doing our best to wither the flowrets of Eden; nor can we complain that it is the fault of any but ourselves, if we find, indeed, that the trail of the serpent is over them all.

What smoking is to man, needlework is his helpmate—the same soothing sedative, the same idle occupation. How much needed by the gentler spirit, whose feelings must be more carefully concealed in proportion to their great violence!

Well, even Julia says Flora looked beautiful as she sat in the cheerful drawing-room at the Rectory, with the noonday sun brightening her calm, sad brow, and glancing from the waves of her glossy hair, busied apparently with her stitches, and totally unconscious of the presence of her host, who was watching her with alarming intensity. The Reverend Amos was a short-sighted man, mentally and physically; but when he was determined to see a thing, he brought his corporeal and ideal vision to bear in a peculiarly his own, and the abstracted stress quite started when he addressed her in his abrupt and jerking manner, on a subject not generally entered upon without certain preliminary observations.

'Refused him again, Miss Flora, as I understand? Very ill-judged. What does it mean? Whom are you waiting for?—what the use spluttered the angry divine, he ashamed of his hastiness and the calm surprise with which Flora looked up at him from her work.

'Really, Mr. Batt, you must explain yourself,' she observed, quietly, after a lengthened pause, during which the gentleman pined nervously up and down the room, fidgeting with a flower-stand, and upset a geranium pot—malicious Julia laughing in the garden the while.

'Explain! it can't be explained. Three years before your father's—I mean last year and two since. Never used to be so. Look at Julia—going to settle—quite right; so about you, Miss Flora. I asked Sir Angelo to dinner yesterday on purpose, and I told myself to be civil to him.'

'Well, Mr. Batt,' replied Flora, with a look of comic seriousness, 'and I was civil to him—very.'

'Why didn't you accept him, then?' thundered out the divine, infuriated by his own disappointment in what he honestly thought a delightful arrangement for his fair charge. 'I saw him give you a rosebud; I knew meant something by his coming in the coach with four horses. He took you in to dinner and he sat with you the whole evening, as yet you refused him—refused him, as I stand here; and, for the second time, too. What am I to understand? Once for all, will you marry him, Miss Flora? Be cool—Flora's sake, be cool.' (This was a species of adjuration always addressed to him, and the public by the Reverend Amos, in moments of great excitement.) 'Once for all, and the last time of asking, will you marry him, Miss Flora?'

'Then, once for all, Mr. Batt,' replied she, 'I will not.'