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HUGH DAMER'S LAST LEGER.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON.

CHAPTER IV.

"Fill the can, and fill the cup;
All the windy ways of men
Are but dust that rises up,
And is lightly laid again."

WE went to the races in great style, Hugh Damer driving a drag, with the majority of his masculine guests on the roof, and a merry party of ladies inside, Mr. Dashwood travelling in his handsome barouche with Laura, the county matron, and one of her daughters—Laura a vision of loveliness, in some cloudy costume of mauve and white, under a big white silk umbrella. Arrived on the course, Hugh posted both vehicles in an admirable position for seeing the race, and then speedily disappeared with the Squire, and a good many of his friends. I, to whom the things of the Turf were utterly indifferent, remained with the ladies, but was not the less anxious for him whose fortune depended so much on the hazards of the day.

I knew nothing of Damer's engagements—what horses he had backed, or how the numerous events of the day were likely to affect him, but I heard from several quarters that the running was of an unexpected character, calculated to cause disappointment to the majority.

Hugh came to us several times in the course of the day, and, though he talked and laughed with Miss Dashwood and the rest, and might have seemed, to a casual observer, to be in excellent spirits, I saw that in his face which looked ill for the issue of the day. He drank a great deal of brandy and soda—drank with a feverish eagerness; but I noticed that he ate nothing all through the day. I secured a seat on the box for the return journey, anxious to know the worst, and at once.

"Well, Hugh?" I asked, in a low voice, when we were clear of the crowd, and bowling rapidly along a smooth high road, bordered with noble old timber.

"Well, Fred, I told you about that rooted conviction of mine. It was pretty correct—that's all."

"Then the day has been a bad one?"

"About as bad as it could be."

"But there's to-morrow," I said, with a faint attempt at hopefulness.

"Yes; and my luck will be about the same to-morrow that it has been to-day, I have no doubt. Did you ever see anything like the running to-day? No man can stand against such a collapse as that. Ptarmigan won the Chester as easily as these four bays of mine could win a race against a costermonger's donkey, and to-day he let himself be passed by a plater. If I didn't know the character of his stable, I could swear the brute had been got at."

"Was the day good for the ring or the public?"

"Oh, the bookmen get the best of it of course. None of the favourites won."

"Were you unfortunate in everything?" I asked.

"Yes, everything."

"You don't know the trouble it cost me to make my book, Fred. It was a great combination, which might have made my fortune—the last venture of a desperate man, who wanted to redeem all by one great coup. But I have no further faith in it now. The campaign has opened with defeat. To-day has been my Moscow; to-morrow will be Waterloo."

I tried to cheer him, in a few low words. I don't think there was anything but gloom and bitterness in his mind: but he had that natural pride which shrinks from the revelation of misfortune. He roused himself with an effort, and talked loudly and cheerily all the way home, and I doubt if any one upon the drag except myself suspected that he had been a heavy loser by that day's work.

And by and by at the composite meal, half dinner and half supper, which awaited us at Churleigh—a sumptuous banquet in its way, at which the men drank deep of Badminton and Moselle cup in huge silver tankards of the Georgian era, while the ladies sipped tea and coffee, or trifled with a glass of Cliequot—the gayest at the long oak table was the host, who led every peal of laughter, and said the best things that were uttered that night. We sat long and late, the ladies only retiring at midnight, Miss Dashwood declaring, as she bade her host good night, that she had never in her life spent so delightful a day. "I was always fond of races," she said, with a deprecating air. "I suppose it is a pernicious taste that is natural to a Yorkshirewoman—but I never enjoyed anything as much as the racing to-day."

"I hope it is not the last by a great many that you will spend at Churleigh Wood," Hugh said, with a strange smile.

Late as it was when our party broke up that night, Hugh Damer and Mr. Dashwood were closeted together in the library for a full hour after the rest had gone to their rooms. I heard their voices as they wished each other

good night on the stairs, and heard my friend's step as he walked slowly and heavily along the corridor leading to his own quarters. It was not like his accustomed footfall, and I knew that interview in the library must have been an unpleasant one.

"You've sold Churleigh Wood, Hugh," I said to him, as we drove to the races next day.

"Yes, old fellow, the deed is done. The old place is gone from me for ever and ever. There was no time to lose. I may want the money before the week is out. The manufacturer was very liberal; has paid me a splendid price for his fancy; and the place is gone—and Laura's children will play under the oaks I used to climb fifteen years ago."

"God grant they may be your children as well as Laura's," I said. "I cannot bear to think your birthplace is quite gone from you."

"Rather hard lines, wasn't it? But a man must reap what he has sown, Fred, and I have scattered the evil seed with a free hand. I don't deserve anything better."

The next day was the Leger. That clean, airy little town, which is, in its normal condition, one of the quietest and dullest in England, brimmed over with human life, and rang loud with the buzz and clamour of innumerable tongues. This great autumnal meeting is the saturnalia of the North, and looking at it from the outside, a pleasant festival enough; but I contemplated that noisy gathering with a jaundiced eye and my heart sickened as I thought how the day might end for Hugh Damer.

I was too anxious to remain with the ladies to-day. Though Lucy Dashwood, in a fresh toilette of pale blue and a dainty bonnet that was all forget-me-nots—as if that floral reminder were needed—who could forget Lucy, once having known her?—was lovely and fascinating enough to have held any man—not bitten by the scorpion of the Turf—bound like a slave to the wheel of her barouche. I was very uneasy about my friend, and followed him everywhere, with the air of a meek Pylades dancing attendance on a very fiery Orestes—into the ring—into the paddock—and out into the pleasant stretch of turf on the other side of the course to see the horses take their show-off canter.

"There she goes," he cried: "Baron Von Bourse's Jezebel—that bay yonder with the small head—green body and pink sleeves. I wonder how many men's hearts she carries at her hoofs. My future depends on her, Norris. I saw her win the Guineas. I'd put every sixpence I could stand upon Pasteboard—the bony grey that had been winning everything in the autumn—and she flew by him like a bird. Look at her, old boy! By Jove, she's a clipper. Isn't it a graceful action? There was a confounded lot of rain last night, and the grounds heavier than I like to see it. But I think she must win—there's nothing that can touch her, to my mind."

"Not Conjuror, your great Yorkshire horse?"

"Conjuror is as fat as a pig."

"There's a brute yonder—with the Jockey in black and crimson—that I hardly like the look of, Hugh," I said, doubtfully. "He's got a splendid stride. See what a lot of ground he covers."

"That!" cried Hugh, contemptuously: "a raw-boned beast that never won a race in his life, unless it was some pettifogging plate at the Curragh."

We posted ourselves about a quarter of a mile from the stand, just outside the phalanx of carriages, drags, waggonettes, barouches, family omnibusses, landaus, Whitechapel carts, and the rest: posted ourselves at a point from which we could get a very fair view of the finish—Hugh standing on an old cask, looming gigantic above the rails; I just in front of his knees. There was a cold, dead weight at my breast, as the flag dropped and the hoarse, clamorous cry arose—

"They're off!"

The start was beautiful. For the first quarter of a mile you might have covered the field with a tablecloth. Then some obscure animal got away, and began to make the running. Then half a dozen more crept after him; then the favourite, Jezebel, shot forward to the front, and took a lead which she held steadily till she was within something less than half a mile of the judge's chair.

"She wins!" roared that mighty chorus; "the mare wins!"

Hugh Damer clapped his hand on my shoulder—such a muscular grip—it felt like a hand in an iron glove.

"God bless her!" he cried—not inapishly, I hope; "she has saved Churleigh."

"Alas! too soon had they cheered the victor—that raw-boned plater of which Damer had spoken so scornfully came tearing over the heavy ground, with a thud upon the turf that was like distant thunder, and gained on the graceful Jezebel. There was earhorse blood in him, I believe—nothing thorough-bred could have pounded over the clay like that."

I looked up at Damer. Oh, God, what a white agonised face I saw—fixed and rigid—with the eyes glaring at the winner.

"Good bye, Churleigh," he cried, with a choking sound, that was half laugh, half sob. "That brute has ridden away with my birthplace and my wife. The ring has got the day,

old fellow. There'll be boasting and rejoicing in the tents of Kedar to-night. Come along, old chap. Let's go back to the women and hear their pretty baby-talk about it's being such a splendid race—and, oh, please, which is the Leger, Mr. Damer; is it an epergne or a tankard, and may we go and see it?"

He put his arm in mine and dragged me off, after he had given that feeble cask a kick that sent it spinning into space. This hollow-hearted gaiety which he put on seemed to me very piteous. I think I would rather have seen him cast himself prone upon the turf and weep aloud.

On this last night I had contrived to secure the seat beside him as we drove home, and once more, and in the same spot, I asked him the question I had asked at the end of the first day:

"Well, Hugh?"

"It's all over, dear boy. I am done for."

"Quite ruined, Hugh?"

"Past all possibility of redemption."

"It can't surely be so bad as that," I said;

"let me help you. I am better off than you give me credit for being, I dare say. I can do something at the worst."

"No, no, my dear fellow. Anything you lent me would only be a drop in the ocean. It's like you to make the offer, but it would be letting you in for a loss without doing me any good. I must make the best settlement I can with my creditors, and then —"

He paused, and I waited in vain for the end of that sentence.

"And then what, Hugh?" I asked, anxiously.

"Who knows? Who knows what becomes of all the men who go to the dogs? They go across the seas somewhere, I suppose, and drop out of the knowledge of the circle they have lived in. Anything is better than the chance of being met in Oxford Street by an old acquaintance, out at elbows and with boots that are in themselves a history."

"Then you mean that you will emigrate, Hugh?"

"I mean nothing at present—except to make the best settlement of my debts that I can."

"Hugh Damer, give me your honour as a gentleman that you will do nothing rash."

"Rash! you mean that I mustn't make a sudden end of a worthless life. Don't be afraid, Fred, men have a weak way of clinging to existence, let it be ever so troublesome. Life is a habit, you see, and sometimes a very bad habit, but it's not one of which a man can easily cure himself. I shall go on living, depend upon it, somehow."

"And remember, Hugh, how many men have to face the world without a sixpence, to trust to their own talents alone for success. And you have powers so much above the ruck. You are young enough to begin life again."

"At thirty, Fred, and after living at the rate I have lived. I doubt it. But don't waste any thought upon my future, dear boy—I'm not worth it."

My heart bled for him as we drove up the long avenue leading to Churleigh, and I saw the old Tudor mansion, with its many-shaped windows flashing brightness upon the autumn night. Within there was the glow and warmth of fires, welcome even at this early season. The flash and glitter of rare old glass and silver on the long dining-table, and withal that air of mingled repose and grandeur only to be found to perfection in an old house, where every object has the grace and charm of an age that has gone by.

The Dashwoods, and all the rest of the guests, were to leave next day, but, at Hugh's earnest request, the manufacturer consented to stay till the following Monday morning.

"Let us have one quiet Sunday together," my poor friend pleaded, glancing from George Dashwood to his daughter, who stood a little way apart, watching him, with parted, faintly tremulous lips, and a somewhat richer bloom than usual on her cheeks; "just one quiet Sunday. You see the house has been so full of people that I have really been scarcely able to enjoy your society—and we are something more than ordinary acquaintances. We are friends, are we not? and I should like for us to have just one quiet day together."

"Friends! yes, I should think we are," the manufacturer answered, heartily; "and I hope we shall pass many days together. However, as you make such a point of Sunday, why we'll stay; you don't mind, do you, Laura?"

She shook her head, with a gracious smile, and a still deeper blush, and then bent down to caress a favourite pointer of Hugh's.

"I shall be glad to have a walk round the grounds and a little serious talk with you, Damer!" her father went on. "There are some alterations I think of making, and I should like your opinion about them."

"Alterations!" cried Laura; "surely you wouldn't change anything where all is so perfect."

Hugh gave her a grateful look—only one brief glance, but it expressed a great deal, I thought.

(To be continued.)

The author of "Ginx's Baby" has a new volume ready, entitled *The Clogs: His Rights and Wrongs*.

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TALES

OF THE

LINKS OF LOVE.

BY ALEXANDER SOMERVILLE.

LILLYMERE.

CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued.

Reverting to the bed-chamber on the occasion when Tilda, wife of the silken reins, got up at dead of night—intent on carrying her point, and brought Tommy "soommat to eat," conjoined with other arts all her own. Arts which governed an obstinate, avaricious miser. A man of insatiable greed of appetite, and greed of mind; one of far reaching sagacity; keen perception; measureless cunning. Mr. Inkle having eaten, and returned to bed, spoke:

"That mortgage of Rasper Clynych covers good property. It has been offered Coney's friend for the marriage settlement; but is refused. The establishment must be mine one of those days, now Clynych is dead."

"What mortgage do you mean?"

"Dunderdyke and Willinhurst. They are like to strike oil there; but I've an injunction preventing. Will at once foreclose that mortgage. Then go in for oil."

"It was but yesterday you said Clynych had made a Will, leaving all estate, after the widow's dower, to Lully Lundy, a neighbour. Why was that property mortgaged?"

"Clynych speculated much, and gambled some. He but to have shares in all new projects, and came to me for money. You knew what Rasper was in fowd country afore we came away."

"Was that the son of Rasper Clynych of Werneth, as was so grit with Uncle Clegg?"

"Aye, sure. He made a sight of money in Canada, but were given a deal too much to speculating. Anyhow he mortgaged his land; and now it's bound to be mine."

"If that Lully Lundy be sole legatee he may administer and at once pay off the mortgage?"

"He's already administering, greatly to the surprise of the widow, and every one else in Dunderdyke. But I'm not surprised."

"Tommy, darling, you know a sight of people's secrets?"

"Would need to, Tilda. Am like to know a sight of secrets. With three detectives on the track of the bank customers, and detecting one another, Lundy will be allowed to proceed with the fictitious Will, stolen as we believe from Clynych. He may be arrested for stealing the document, or procuring its abduction. He may be arrested for conspiring to forge it. If he defends himself he will come up on a more serious charge; a greatly more serious charge, Tilda."

"Tommy, darling, what may that be?"

"The murder of Rasper Clynych. Sending Clynych and companions into the torrent with purposely broken oars."

"Dear Tommy, what a sight of secrets you do know!"

"The Bank of Inkle wouldn't stand long if I didn't know secrets a bit. Well, Tilda, what is it? This isn't winter, you know; why come so close?"

"Tommy! Her own Tommy! Tilda's own dear Tommy! You'll give Captain Coney's friend instruction to insert one hundred thousand dollars in Emily's marriage papers, won't you dear?"

"I see keep to the fifty thousand in cash down, and fifty thousand real property. None could be a better security than that Dunderdyke and Willinhurst estate."

"But the Captain cannot remain in Canada to fight all those people with arrests and trials, proofs of forgery, proofs of murder; besides compelling foreclosure of mortgage. Captain Coney is a gentleman."

"So am I, Tilda, else thou wouldn't be a lady. It would do the Captain good to remain in this country and take to business."

"Willt thou give him a co-partnership?"

"What! in the Bank of Inkle?"

"Yes, in the Bank of Inkle. The Captain's friend informed me that would not be refused."

"Tilda, as well ask me to skin the hide off my body and put Coney into it."

"You're a savage, Tom. Coarse and brutal. There!"

"Ah, well, Tilda, turn thy back, lass. Weather's hot. Thou's turn thy face when winter comes. Thou's face round when something's to be coaxed out of Tommy again."

"Look thee, Tommy, I'm out of bed. Never do I enter it again with Tom Inkle; never. If thou rouses the blood of the Cloggs of Oldham in me, Tom, thou's be worried out of thy life. Come out of bed right away, and in black and white with thy name, give in my hand the instruction for Emily's settlement, one hundred thousand dollars cash down."

"And if I don't, thou'll never come in thy bed again?"