

DIGBY GRAND.

CHAPTER X.

THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME.

He returned upon a view of the house, and there, in truth, looks the massive grey old hall, of that particular order of architecture which, for want of professional knowledge, I am wont to call the 'composite irregular, mas-much as it had been built in the fourteenth century, added to in the sixteenth, much damaged during the civil wars, and very inefficiently repaired at the Restoration, partially burned down in the reign of Queen Anne, and reconstructed upon an enormous scale by the spirited proprietor, who, however, did not live to complete his intentions. Since then rooms had been added and others built, to suited the exigencies of the moment or the taste of 'the Grands'; and now the very irregularity of the mass gave to the old place a picturesque, even a romantic appearance, at least to my eyes, which I have looked for in vain elsewhere.

As I drove up to the house, my better nature, influenced as usual by the accidental circumstances, was in the ascendant, and I felt that I could indeed love my home, that I was capable of any sacrifice for such a place, and how readily at that moment would I have exchanged the false glare and heartless frivolity of the world for a peaceful country life in these long-loved haunts, with farming, field sports, and rural duties to occupy my mornings, and Flora's thrilling smile to welcome my return. But that might never be now, and as I felt in my own heart I was forced back upon a career that in these more rational moments I loathed, I had the same upon my destiny, that conventional respect on which a weak spirit places all the misfortunes and miseries brought about by its own incapacity or misconduct. Destiny, indeed! as though Providence had not arranged that every man should be the framer of his own destiny, and that the strong firm mind, the unblemished, fearless heart, should shape its own steady and persevering to the end, though exposed to the storms of obloquy and buffeted by the waves of misfortune.

'Welcome home, Master Digby,' said old Soames, chief butler ever since I could remember, and on whom the course of time seemed powerless to imprint marks of decay. His hair had been white and his face red when I used to run up and down stairs after him in a frock and bare legs, holding on by those broad coat tails, or petitioning for a ride on that sturdy shoulder; and now, though the countenance had deepened in hue, and the waistcoat increased if possible in volume, he was the same Soames still.

'Welcome home, indeed, sir. This way, if you please, Master Digby. Sir Peregrine has been expecting you since three o'clock.' And he ushered me down the well-known passage leading to my father's study, adorned with paternal affection, enhanced by anxiety. 'How you have grown, Master Digby, quite a fine gentleman, and I trust not the other day as I made the bishop to your christening,' alluding to the exhibition of compound dignified by that ecclesiastic. Ere Soames had concluded his remarks, my father, and my heart melted to think of my initial behavior and systematic neglect of him, when I saw so visible an alteration in the form and features of the old man. He was much bent and wasted in figure, whilst a drawn look about the eyes and sharp expression of the whole countenance, betokened increasing feebleness and decay. Still there was the same proud bearing, the same courtly gestures, above all, the same concise, forcible, and rather satirical manner, which marks the former associates of the Prince Regent, and which is fast dying out with the names of the Carlton House School. Sir Peregrine was kindred to us, but his affectionate demonstrations were tempered with reserve and self-respect, his politeness and courtesy was something more than that of father and son, more reserved and dignified. One, and once only, I had seen him in a moment of passion, and he had been so angry, and so much so, that he had

mot d by sack-racing, polo-climbing, beer-drinking, and other rustic sports. There was to be a grand dinner to the tenantry, and a ball for their wives and daughters, in the evening; whilst the remainder of the week was to be devoted to those guests of higher rank who were staying with us to shoot our pheasants, ride our horses, drink our champagne, and, in all probability, repay our hospitality by voting the son a puppy and the father a bore!

The morning came, and bright and beautiful 'the glorious sun uprist,' promising us one more fine day in October. Breakfast was hardly concluded, and I was struggling to obtain sufficient sustenance for the fatigues of the future, between the ceaseless chatter of Mrs. Ramrod (who, in consideration of having known me as a boy, had taken possession of me, body and soul), and the long sunny ringlets of Miss Batt, who was obliged to sit so near me that they were continually interfering with my egg and dropping into my plate, an arrangement I should have less disliked had the keen country air not made me so voracious. Well, breakfast was coming to an end, and I was striking up a great friendship with the damsel of the long locks, when a powerful band, much out of tune, and performing an air commonly known in agricultural districts as that which destroyed one of 'the milky mothers of the herd,' marshalled down the avenue a sturdy throng of ruddy faces and stalwart forms, known as the Odd Fellows' Friendly Society, who, with military precision, formed a circle in front of the house, while the oldest and oddest fellow of the lot, whom I recognized as the clerk of an adjoining parish, read from a much-thumbed paper a congratulatory address in verse, vigorous in conception, and somewhat startling in rhyme, as the concluding stanza sufficiently exemplifies:—

Then, Captain Grand, accept our heartiest wishes,
And do not deem your humble friends officious.
Health, length of days, a fair and blooming bride,
And bless'd with babes and sucklings too beside.
Such is our prayer; before we do adourn,
Accept our welcome, as we hope for yours.

How could humble prose, even the prose of a Demosthenes or a Cicero, reply to such 'winged words' as these? Nevertheless I stood under the old portico, and with bared head and respectful gestures, thanked my well-wishers for their courtesy, preserving a gravity for which I have ever since enjoyed the reward of an approving conscience. The Odd Fellows cheered my speech heartily, for which, as a very young orator, I was much obliged to them, since it requires a long apprenticeship indeed among the practical and experienced of our senate to bear unabashed the chilling silence, or worse still, the sarcastic applause, with which a brilliant and long-studied oration is so often received in that assembly.

This ceremony well over, the slaughtered ox was borne in procession, the attorned band performing in divers keys the air of 'Oh, the roast beef of Old England!' and having been about as much roasted as the woodcock which is allowed to see the fire ere introduced to a thorough epicure, was cut up and distributed in no very appetizing-looking morsels to the poor of the parish, whilst stentorian voices pledged health and prosperity to the young squire, in floods of good strong Haverley ale. After which the shouters recreated themselves with wheel barrow races, the charioteers being blindfolded, and creating no small confusion from their furious driving; the thirty climbed a pole, when emblem of ambition was well greased within a few feet of the top, and he who had struggled manfully to within an arm's length of his aim, found that when almost within his grasp he was doomed to be disappointed, and to go down, as is usual in real life, a good deal faster than he came up. The prize surmounting this perpendicular difficulty, was at length wrested by a cunning chimney sweep, who, taking a pocketful of soot up with him, and refreshing his palms therewith, that nut rials, got them so completely grimed at last as to render any amount of soap of no effect, and thus succeeded in carrying off the huge log of mutton that had tempted him so long. Nor were the far daunts of the district excluded from their share in these rural sports, an undergarment of snowy texture being provided for use whose dainty feet could touch the dew quickest from the lawn. This race, to use a turlap expression, brought forth 'a capital entry,' and after a very little struggle, and the sprinkling of both wing and ground game,

terod—early boyhood—familiar faces—agricultural prosperity—yomanry of old England—no place like home—kind father—(cheers)—indulgent landlord—(more cheers)—hope often to be thus surrounded—allusion to the old roof-tree, and the Greek quotation taken at random from Thucydides (the latter as being perfectly unintelligible is received with uproarious applause), serve to express the heartfelt sentiments of gratitude with which I beg to drink all their good healths; and down I sit, having 'done it' to a turn. The mirth gets fast and furious; the county member sings a capital song; Sir Peregrine executes an oration, such as might have been made by Leonidas to his doomed band, so pompous, so imposing, so almost funeral as it is in its grandeur. We drink the Earl's health; we drink the member's health; we drink Dr. Driveller's, who weeps tears of port in his reply; we drink the fox-hounds, and the wokin rings with every cheer and holla known to the votaries of Diana; we drink the 'Merry Harriers,' and Mr. Motles, the sporting manager of that rather 'scratch' establishment, is so overpowered by his feelings as to be obliged to be taken away senseless, a broad hint, which suggests to us the propriety of breaking up the present sitting, and adjoining to the ball-room, where we are followed by all but a few steady old sexagenarians, whose clay, probably in consideration of there being no time to be lost, requires a deal of moistening ere it returns to its parent soil.

There is much beauty amongst the farmers' wives and daughters; and I may fairly hope that my powers of endurance and activity on that laborious evening won me golden opinions from them all. Country dances without end, waltzes, galops, polkas unnumbered, a cotillion with pretty Miss Batt as a great treat, and a cigar to wind up the night at six in the morning with the Marquis de Carambole, a good-humored Frenchman, who had come all the way from London to 'assist at our festivities,' concluded for me the hardest twenty-four hours I can recollect to have ever experienced.

The sun was rising ere I sought my pillow and, looking out over the expanse of hill and dale, wood and water, growing into life under his beams, I turned away with a sickening feeling at my heart as I thought, 'Flora, Flora, what is all this, when thou art lost to me for ever? What are wealth, magnificence, and merry-making without thee? What care I for the old hall, the rich and lovely domain? There is no beauty where thou art not!'

Mournful thoughts for twenty-one! Happy is he who hath not out-lived his boyhood, till ripened Prime brings with it the conviction that all is vanity; the experience that teaches us to expect no resting-place here below, to look steadfastly forward to the future—not the immediate future of our short span of existence, but the real future of eternity. Some men are boys all their lives, and as such are envied and enviable for the lightness of their spirits, their keen enjoyment of life. But these can never know the stern, severe training that leads direct to Truth. Perhaps for them such ordeal may not be necessary, and is mercifully dispensed with. For beneficial as may be the ultimate effects of disappointment and unhappiness, it cannot but seem hard that the unfurrowed brow should ache with thought, the beardless cheek waste and pale with care. Nor can we expect the youth, however fast he may have spent his boyhood, however dearly he may have purchased his knowledge, to arrive at once at that resigned and happy period, when man is enabled to say, in heartfelt thankfulness and humble confidence, 'It is good for me that I have been in trouble.'

Who is there that delights in the deadly tubes, levelled with accuracy and quickness against the flying covery or the dodging covery. Who is there that loves to range the rich stubbles and the russet coppice, to start the frightened hare from her form, or flush the gaudy pheasant from his covert, and dot now welcome with all his heart the keen, purr of a bracing morning in October, when the outlying spinnies are to be beat, and the scattered partridges, wild, wary, and quick upon the wing, will prove no unworthy triumph? Haverly was the place of all others for a varied and enjoyable day's shooting. Without the masses of game which swarm like locusts upon a Norfolk manor—with bouquets of pheasants, radiating in all directions from what is appropriately termed a 'hot corner,'—there was a fair sprinkling of both wing and ground game,

a golden benefit received and expected—'and here he comes,' as my old schoolfellow, Tom Spencer, a first-rate shot, and the pleasantest undergraduate Oxford could boast, cantered up to our party, and apologizing for the delay, more especially to Mr. Batt—on whose daughter, the damsel of the long locks, I soon found out my old chum was sweet—announced his readiness to commence.

Guns were shouldered, dogs strained in their couples, Marquis began to sing, and we were soon in the thick of it.

'L'affaire commence,' said Carambole, as we heard a shot upon our right, probably from the unerring weapon of Tom Spencer, who was always placed where the shooting was most difficult, and had now been detached by Flint on particular service, to stop any wandering pheasants that might take a fancy 'a prolonged flight into a neighboring manor.

'Voyons,' added the Frenchman, as an over-anxious hare cantered leisurely across the ride, and he tumbled her heels-over-head into the opposite brushwood.

'Mark!' sang out Ramrod, and a magnificent cock-pheasant came sailing down the wind on his broad pinions, right above our heads, and 'rocket' as he was, I brought him to the ground.

'Tenez ce n'est pas mal,' said my talkative companion; and his observation lost him a double shot at a couple of rabbits that were stealing warily on towards us.

And now the constant rustle among the dried leaves, and occasional snap of a rotten twig in the cover, show us that the beaters are approaching; and the pheasants, unwilling to rise, are hurrying to and fro in an unenviable state of uncertainty. Carambole and I get outside the fence, and standing well away from the plantation, prepare for action.

They must leave home at last, for the beaters are drawing near, and the hedge prevents their running any further. Up they get by twos and threes, amongst cries of 'mark!' 'hen!' 'rabbit to the right!' 'hare back!' and down they come, before the Marquis and myself—the former, I must confess, shooting like a trump, and smoking away the whole time like a steam-engine. Presently, Flint appears through the thickest part of the hedge, and with strict injunctions to a ragged little urchin, holding on by a stick as long as himself, to 'beat it out,' touches his hat, and inquires into the amount of slaughter. Of course, a good many pheasants 'went back,' to that mysterious bourne from which no game ever returns; and of course, we ought to have an additional man somewhere else, 'to stop,' for who ever yet knew a keeper satisfied with the list of killed? But our party were flushed with success; and, walking in a line over a few intervening fields to the next covert, we picked up a stray hare, and two or three brace of wild partridges, that did credit to our aim, ere we again entered upon the woodland chasse.

A fabulous report of a woodcock supposed to have been seen by Mr. Batt! created much excitement in this locality, not diminished by 'viewing away' a magnificent old fox, which I had great difficulty in preventing Carambole from shooting. It did me good to see the gallant animal gliding easily along over the ridge and furrow of the adjoining field, his bright rich coat glistening in the sun, and his stealthy form the very impersonation of speed and symmetry. Ere I could give him a second 'view holla,' he had disappeared, and I felt half-ashamed of my enthusiasm when I saw 'the Marquis's look of astonishment at an excitement he could not the least comprehend.

The love of fox-hunting is indeed an inexorable passion; the man who has once really felt it, never forgets his attachment to the cause. Let him leave off his favorite pursuit for years—put him to any other sport, business, or excitement you will—place him in any position, or under any circumstances, which render it impossible for him to gratify his prevailing taste—but only mention the word 'fox-hunting,' only lead to some subject connected with that fascinating sport, and you will bring the color to his cheek, and the light to his eye, though age may have dimmed the one, and sorrow furrowed the other. But in the meantime, walking knee-deep in stubble, and straggling waist-deep through tangled brier and impervious covert, had made us all excessively hungry. Nor were we sorry to behold, on the lee-side of Upper Long-wood, a gipsy fire cheerfully

his keenness, which always increased as the day drew towards its close, was suddenly seized with a strong inclination for ground game, having discovered that he was most successful in that style of gunning. As long as he was close to me I prevented his shooting back amongst the beaters, loading one barrel with the other at full-cock, and a few like eccentricities, in which it was his habit to indulge; but on my leaving him to take up a position a few yards further down the ride, what was my horror to behold him deliberately level and fire both barrels in the direction where I knew Flint must have placed a gentleman, or, as he called it, 'a gun.'

A simultaneous roar of agony from old Ramrod, and exclamation of satisfaction from Mr. Batt, 'Poor thing, I thought it best to put it out of its pain!' convinced me that the Major's York-tan gaiters must have received a charge of No. 6 from the short-sighted divine; and on rushing up to the sufferer, who fortunately, from the distance at which he 'stood fire,' though much stung at the moment, was not seriously injured, a general explanation took place, from which it appeared that the yellow-gaiters, peeping through a hole in the lower part of the hedge, presented to the clergyman's imperfect vision the image of a fine old hare sitting! This was an opportunity not to be lost, and taking a deliberate, point-blank aim, the eager sportsman pulled. The writhing of the object attested the accuracy of his eye; and in his merciful intention of putting the animal out of its pain, and anxiety not to lose this addition to his 'bag,' he hesitatingly gave the sufferer the contents of his other barrel.

No wonder the Major halloed; and when he found that the accident had taken place, as he called it, 'on purpose,' his wrath was not to be appeased. We sent him home in the game-cart, swearing horribly; and as it was by this time quite dark, we here terminated our unlucky day's shooting.

I fear the old warrior's ire would not have been mollified could he have heard Tom Spencer and myself laughing over the catastrophe, as smoking our cigars we walked home behind the rest of our companions. There is nothing like 'a weed' in the dark to draw on confidential communication between two long-parted friends; and, ere the lights of the Hall twinkled on us through the shades of night, we had touched upon one subject after another, made reciprocal disclosures in the strictest confidence, as to our respective studs, and interchanged an abbreviated history of our first loves, till Tom at last intrusted me, in the openness of his heart, with the important secret that he was over head and ears in love with the fair Julia Batt; that he resolved to marry her as soon as he had taken orders and got 'a living'—two events that young men, till undeceived by experience, are apt to consider synonymous—but that he had not yet declared his attachment to his lady-love; and he had a shrewd suspicion that, however agreeable they might be to the daughter, the Reverend Amos, in his paternal care, highly disapproved of my friend's attentions.

'If I can assist you any way, my dear Tom, command me,' said I, as we entered the house, and stumped off to our respective dressing rooms. 'To-morrow is our county ball, as you know, and you will have every opportunity of making play with the dearest as I can undertake to keep papa in conversation, as to the respective merits of heavy and light guns, self-primers, revolvers, and other deadly weapons, I am enough to enable you to propose, be accepted, ay, and carry her off in a postchaise-and-four boot.'

So saying I opened the door of my comfortable snugery, where hot water, dry things, and a blazing fire, presented all the materials for restoring the outward man to the state of gentlemanlike sleekness and order.

But, alas! the post—that remorseless emblem of Fate—had arrived during my absence; and with a blush of shame and remorse, with a vague feeling of unaccountable apprehension that made my heart beat and my breath come quick, I recognized, as a foreign letter that lay upon my bill-table and will known handwriting of Zoe de Grand-Martigny.

When Soames knocked at my door an hour afterwards to say dinner was on the table, I was still sitting at my