

DIGBY GRAND.

CHAPTER XV.

RAISING THE WIND.

Tom and I parted, with our usual hilarity and good spirits—he to return to Oxford; I to spend a month with St. Heliers at Melton, little anticipating under what different auspices we two should meet again.

The prejudice has long faded into oblivion which looked upon all devoted to the sport of fox-hunting as so many Squire Westons of the old school; nor can luxury and refinement best more ardent worshippers, in any locality, than at Melton Mowbray, or Melton, as that stronghold of the chase is called by frequenters. As the Duke of Wellington used to say, that his greatest dandies were usually his best officers, so it would appear that he whose daring is most determined in the hunting field, whose figure is ever seen gliding for most with the hounds, whose nerve is unshaken by all the obstacles to be met with in crossing a stiff country, as his stalwart frame rises uninjured from a rattling fall, is still the most polished in the drawing-room, the most courteous in his manners throughout all the occasions of life. Nor must it be supposed that he who devotes his leisure to this most fascinating pursuit is, on that account, incapable of bearing an important part in the graver business of the world, or that the ardent and manly disposition, whose enthusiasm flags not to hunt six days a week when opportunity offers, is unable, or unwilling, to pursue its weightier avocations in the court, the camp, or the senate, with equal energy and success.

Many a famous warrior, many an astute politician and distinguished statesman, has disported himself in the merry pastures of undulating Leicestershire; and the voice that has rung above the din of battle, the accents that have thrilled through the hearts of our senators, pleading for a world's welfare, have not despised to cheer the echoing hound in the depths of Barkby Holt, to swell the gladdening halloo that cheers away a fine old fox from his impervious lair in the thickest corner of Glen Gorse.

The court of St. Peterburg has never been supposed entirely deficient in intrigue; to represent that court as a minister in England would argue no slight share of diplomatic dexterity, and no small tax upon the time and talents of the individual holding that responsible situation. But what shall we say of a statesman whose office it was to reside in this country as a check upon the Russian minister, to watch the workings of that machinery, the wheels within wheels of which carry on the negotiations of the world, and to report to an irresponsible and absolute master every shadow of change that might arise, every breath that might ruffle the treacherous surface over which it was his duty to keep so vigilant an eye? Such an one can have had but small leisure to spare upon his own amusements; such an one would be the last man in the world whom you would expect to see day after day enjoying with enthusiasm the delights of the chase, night after night entering with careless merriment into the conviviality of the dinner-table. Yet so it was—the Russian diplomatist would steal these hours from sleep that he was compelled to devote to his professional duties, and after riding all day in front rank, dining at eve amongst spirits jovial and light-hearted as himself, playing a sociable game at whist till far into the night, would sit up till the grey dawn of morning inditing (in somewhat tetchful lucubrations) a state paper to his superior. Peace be to his ashes! Melton has known and appreciated many a talented sportsman, many an agreeable comrade, but none so clever, none so popular as he! One anecdote that St. Heliers told me of his good-humour and *sang froid* so completely illustrates the character of the man, that I cannot resist repeating it. He had

the same open, indistinct, hunting-like background. The adventures of the equestrians represented were diversified as they were humorous. Here you had a short-tailed horse falling neck and crop over a flight of rails, whilst a thoroughbred one, who ought to be advancing, was kicking viciously at the leap his rider intended him to face. There, three or four gentlemen, in high collars and pinched-up hats, were labouring along upon horses reduced to the last extremity of distress, whilst the white hounds, relieved by a lowering sky, were toiling on before them, as though the end must be near at hand. In another graphic representation, a wide and deep brook is creating rout and consternation amongst a numerous and well-mounted field of cavalry. A heavy man is charging it as though he must get in, one horse is clearing it gallantly, whilst another is refusing with equal determination, and a sportsman immersed, all but the tiny hat before mentioned, peeps from the Lethæan wave; one hound running one fox is the object to which the whole attention of the equestrians is directed, whilst with a dash of sly satire worthy of Hogarth, the body of the pack are represented streaming away in a directly contrary direction, unfollowed or unnoticed by a single soul. All these vigorous sketches were likenesses as well of the riders as of their steeds, and many a good anecdote had St. Heliers to tell of such candidates for pictorial immortality. Our sport was but moderate, nor must the less ambitious Nimrod, whose fate it is to follow hounds over what his Meltonian brother calls a 'provincial country,' suppose that the country is exempt from the same disappointments as to bad scent, bad weather, and bad foxes, which render his own achievements so gloriously uncertain. Bursts we had, of twenty minutes at a time, into which short space, by dint of reckless horsemanship and jealous riding, we crowded the events and catastrophes of a long and severe run; whilst every now and then a large brook, or nearly insurmountable obstacle, gave an opportunity of distinguishing themselves to those who aspired to the title of 'customers.' But whatever might be the failure of our morning's amusement, we were certain that when seven o'clock arrived, an agreeable party and a good dinner would console us for previous disappointments, whilst 'whist,' that resource without which society must speedily come to a 'standstill'—whist proffered her attractions, and dealt her honors upon no ungrateful or inconstant votaries. I had not been long at Melton, before I saw that this scientific game, played as it was there regularly every night, and always by the same individuals, average good performers, but nothing more, must, if persevered in, prove a mine of gold to one, who, like myself, was a player of the first-class, and who knew exactly his own strength. Alas, thus early in life had I learned the predatory lesson of turning to advantage the weaknesses of my companions, of adhering to the 'sharp practice,' which holds for its chief maxim, 'never throw a chance away.' Here was I living with an open-hearted, jovial, hospitable set of fellows, whose horses I rode (for my own four were of course insufficient) for six days a week, whose dinners I ate daily, and whose claret night after night moistened my ungrateful throat, and yet it was from these very benefactors that I hesitated not to win as large sums as they could be induced to stake, at a game in which my own superiority made a certainty in my favor. Yet, had I not done so, had I not hit upon ways and means such as these to replenish my exhaustive coffers, I could not have lived among these very people, who seemed on their part to recognise the right, which a 'young fellow,' as they called me, of fast habits and no capital, had to lay them under contribution. Accordingly, regularly as tea and coffee made their appearance in the drawing-room, so regularly did I adjourn to the lucrative task, where shaded lights and a green-covered table were prepared for the thoughtful pastime; so regularly did care, science, and memory reap that golden harvest which, in the long run, they never fail to secure.

But the returns arising from successful whist are not best but slow, though tolerable

company; no fellow here can cut you out if you only like to try; and if you will take my advice, you'll begin to-morrow.

'But,' said I, 'granted that I could come over the young lady, for girls are seldom overburdened with sense, there is that red-faced father of hers, who understands fat cattle, and considers himself a thorough country gentleman, I should never go down with him. I know nothing of farming, and my civilized habits and refined ideas would equally excite his anger and contempt.'

'You might learn as much agriculture in a week,' cried St. Heliers, as would make you a match for any gentleman farmer. And you may depend upon it, that such a man as old Squire Spinnithorne, or any other who boasts himself "one of the rough sort," esteems no character so highly as that which he affects to run down, by calling its owner "a fine gentleman," the more so as it is one to which he can never by possibility aspire. No, no, Digby, "faint heart," you know—Enter for the stakes, and you will come in a winner, as sure as poor old Gallopade will take the next turn, which she knows right well leads to her own welcome stable, and I shall have the satisfaction of feeling that for once in my life I have given good advice, and more wonderful still, that my friend has taken it.'

With these words we parted, and long and deeply did I cogitate upon the future thus shadowed out by the suggestions of St. Heliers, and well did I balance the *pros* and *cons*, the respective advices of wedlock, well-gilt, and made to fit as easily as possible, and of my present unfettered, though precarious position, 'the hollow tree of liberty,' which wanted only the certainty of the latter being a permanent blessing to make me decide in favor and the *vic de garcon*. But let it not be supposed that for one instant I had forgotten my beloved Flora, that my heart was ever touched by the ruder beauties of this Leicestershire Diana, or my allegiance shaken to her whom alone, amongst all the follies and passing phantasies of youth, I had truly loved. Not so; could I have seen any possibility of marrying Flora, I would have given up that world, the frivolities of which constituted my whole existence. I would have given up position, profession, friends, all and everything, without a murmur, for her. But this was a mere day dream—thus did I argue with my dishonest heart—my father would never consent to my marriage with Miss Belmont. Should I carry her off in defiance of the opposition of our respective families, how were we to live? I could not bear to see that gentle girl subjected to the inconveniences and annoyances, if not the actual hardships of poverty; I could not stand a 'boy in buttons' waiting as her only servant on my aristocratic darling. Setting aside my own fastidiousness and false ideas of comfort, it would have annoyed me dreadfully to see her trailing about in all weathers, with muddy feet and dragged gown, because I could not keep her a carriage; to see her wearing dark gloves and faded bonnets; to know that she was forced by necessity to deny herself those little luxuries which to a high-bred woman may be considered almost the essentials of life. All this would have been to me a source of real grief; and even as I thought over the possibility of such a marriage, these imaginary evils rankled by anticipation in my heart. I only mention this to show how much of real happiness may be, nay, often is, destroyed by the false ideas of refinement which are acquired by too many of us in early youth, and which are never afterwards to be wholly got rid of. Besides, I reasoned, surely it is my duty to abstain from drawing her I love into such discomfort, merely for my own selfish delight in her society. Far better would it be for her to remain single, or even to marry another who could support her in that station to which she has always been accustomed. Such is the sacrifice that honour and right feeling imperatively demand of me, and such is the sacrifice that I will not hesitate to make. And if I am never to possess Flora, if the force of circumstances compels me to

gratulate myself on my success. But how ever good might be the opinion Miss Spinnithorne entertained of her devoted knight, I am bound to confess that it was not without many a secret pang, without many an unfavourable comparison, that I carried on this by no means spontaneous attachment. How often did my heart sicken within me as I contrasted my gentle, high-bred, lovely Flora with the boisterous hoydenish girl at whose side I rode so assiduously, and in whom good looks and good humor were the only qualities that could pretend in the slightest degree to charm or captivate? For the only time in my life I kept a journal, originally intended as a mere hunting diary, but which became gradually an analysis of thoughts and feelings, as well as a catalogue of hounds and horses. A few extracts from its pages may perhaps serve better than a simple narrative to give an idea of my state of mind at this eventful period; and as such I give some verbatim:—

March 2.—The Quorn at Belton. Good fox—over a fox a fine country with a bad scent. Rode all day with Miss Spinnithorne, who tore her habit sadly in an ox-fence. Good foot and ankle concealed by trousers, boots, and spurs. Query—Have ladies any business out hunting?

March 3.—The Cottesmore, at Woodwell Head. Miss S. out again. What can she be made of? Looked tired and complained of sleeplessness. I believe she was thinking of a certain person—jumped a gate and found she had followed me over it. St. Heliers laughed, and I looked foolish. Got well abused for over-riding the hounds. Miss Spinnithorne voted the master a very disagreeable man. I think that girl is hooked.

March 4.—The Celvoir, at Piper's Hole. A wet morning, and, thank Heaven! no ladies out. An hour without a check, and killed. Rode two of St. Heliers' horses, and 'pumped' them both out, but went first from end to end. Delightful day.

March 5.—The Quorn at Barkby. Miss Spinnithorne out again—call her 'Nelly' now. Papa asked me what I thought of the new turnip-cutter; posed him by asking him to explain its mechanical principles. Rode with them all day. Nelly adores London, but would be happy anywhere with a person she liked—making frightful running!

March 6.—The Cottesmore at Roecart. Miss S. got an ugly fall in Owston Wood; picked her up and consoled her—leaned on me, feeling so faint. Lost a capital thing towards Somerby, and got rather compromised. Flora! Flora! one look of thine would save me, even now!

March 7.—The Quorn at Widmerpool. No sport; rode with Nelly all day. Her father praising her heavily whenever she rode before us. 'This looks like business. The girl is evidently smitten, but I cannot help drawing comparisons between her and Flora; the latter so gentle, so beautiful, so bewitching, with her large melancholy eyes and thoughtful brow,—the former so boisterous, so prosperous looking, so noisy. I believe I shall always hate fine teeth, fresh complexions, and sunny riugetlets. Besides, nothing frightens her. She was riding a violent five-year-old horse, and sat him as if he was a shooting pony—complimented her on her prowess, and she looked so pleased. It must come off sooner or later, and I shall lose Flora for ever. Such is fate! Dined with Salamander, and drank oceans of claret—fellows all very noisy. Won £87 at whist.

March 8, Sunday—Lay in bed till one p.m. Fearful dreams. Flora on a runaway horse—stopped her, and found she was suddenly transformed into old Mr. Spinnithorne—who gave me his daughter and his blessing. Breakfasted, and made up my whist-book. Shocking bad week—only won £46 on the six nights. Shall wait to marry the heiress, after all. Put it off till after Croxton Park.

CHAPTER XVI.

ence and agility?

Who is the foremost horseman in your less crowd, all maddening for a start, enthusiasm of the chase? Who is the rider guiding that impetuous and untrammelled animal, with many a hairbreadth over the intricacies of a strongly-enclosed country, and as he obtained it, still by nerve and determination, keeping the lead? Not the professional rough-rider, paid as deserves to be, at the rate of a field officer's army; not the keen and skilful sportsman, with horse of his master's and upon his own, albeit he is somewhere very near upon his heels; no, it is none of these, some scion of nobility, some gentleman's name, brought up in all the habits of refinement, nurtured in wealth, and cradled in luxury, but neither softened in frame, dulled in courage by the enervating effects of idleness and vice. The same spirit pervades all classes of English society, a chain links together the highest and lowest of land, that, promoting field-sports, trios, quoits, games, and gatherings, unites in many bond the peer and the peasant, merchant and the mechanic, gentle and plebeian, rich and poor. Long may it last! so long shall our glorious country vindicate her right to the endearing appellation Merry England. Amongst no other under the sun, I think we may safely count such a race-meeting as that of Croxton Park, avowedly held for the purpose of enabling gentlemen to figure in the charade of jockeys, have received the support and encouragement which has ever been accorded to it. And although the higher classes do not excel their inferiors in this particular description of horsemanship, still very attempts speaks volumes in favor of fearless and manly spirit of its promoters. Nor have some of our most distinguished men in arms, politics, and literature, dained to don the many colored jockey's silken cap, that should become the focus of attraction to a thousand eyes, as they their giddy course around that ample main. I have seen on these plains a white-haired general, whose name the Sikh blanches to pronounce, bestride an imperious steed, whose youthful ardor was to be expected by the cool determination of that old man; I have seen one on whom the mantle has since descended, and whose name will be remembered while French holds a bivouac—whilst the unconquered hero of the desert—rehearsing in reality, his gorgeous vesture fluttered in the breeze, those stirring gallops that he has since described so thrillingly in winged verse. I have seen the graceful representative of England's most chivalrous horses, without effort past the stand, and hailed by a thousand voices the artist's conqueror by a length, whilst the cordial congratulations he received on all sides proved the popularity of the equestrian; and I have seen a young man, let utilitarians cavil as they will, the spirit of their forefathers is dormant in the gentlemen of England, sit at home at ease. Besides such reflections as these, can anything be more delightful than a fine day in early spring, on a breezy eminence commanding a rich and wooded country, and surrounded by friends and acquaintances, male and female, in such numbers as to enable one to feel the pleasantest as one's associates, without risk of affronting the less gifted? Or should wooing be the object of the day, and the fair object a lady of heart and soul in horses, horsemanship, the mysteries of the saddle, could position be so advantageous for the promotion of one's suit as a place at her corner of the grand stand during the Croxton Park?

Such was my position as regarded Spinnithorne, with whom I was now, the best of terms, and who, I thought, was only waiting for the proper words that should bind me to her. These words I had quite made up my mind to speak, and was now only putting day to day the ir retrievable loss of my liberty, and my eternal separation from