

A RACE FOR A WIFE!

CHAPTER XII.

(CONTINUED.)

Our taciturn British reserve has its advantages. Why should there not be a small coffee-room instituted for sulky members, where attempts at conversation should be penalized with expulsion? There are times when we hate even ourselves, much more our fellow-creatures.

Pearman was imbued with a considerable amount of this latter feeling as he strolled into the Theatre and ordered his dinner. His Nemesis was awaiting him. Ere he had finished his soup, a blue-eyed, fair-haired, vacuous member had greeted him, and asked him what the deuce was the matter with Coriander?

'Nothing. The horse is well enough. Why?'

'Why, haven't you seen the morning papers?'

'No, I have only just got to town. What about it?'

'They are laying all sorts of prices against him. He is quoted at fifteen to one offered, and rumor says, in some cases, twenties have been laid.'

'Ham,' grunted Pearman. 'You'd better lay it, Carzon, if you think he's gone. I can only say, when you see he's about to start for the Two Thousand, I recommend you to hedge every shilling, if you do.'

'Thanks,' drawled the other; and walked away to disseminate what he had gathered from Coriander's owner.

His solicitor the next morning gave Pearman little satisfaction. Messrs. Hawk & Sparrowbill had been most courteous; they had allowed him to see the deed, and also Sergeant Rumford's opinion thereon. In his humble opinion the case was very strong; the writ of seizure they had issued would hold perfectly good; they might take Coriander when they liked. 'And I am afraid, sir,' he concluded, 'that we should only get cast if we tried to upset.'

'Then they can prevent my running the horse next week, if I contest this claim legally at once?'

'I should be afraid so, really; but in negotiation you had better insist upon your right to, of course, do what you like with the horse till their claim to him is established.'

'Very good. Now I am off.'

On arrival at Xminster, Pearman proceeded direct to Glinn, and inquired for Mr. Denison. He was shown into the library, and speedily joined by that gentleman.

'I have come over, Mr. Denison, to have some conversation with you about this somewhat preposterous claim of yours as to 'right of heriot' over Mannersley.'

'I am advised,' replied the squire, 'that the claim is a perfectly valid one, and of course just now valuable.'

'My dear sir, I am not alluding to the right or wrong of the case; but, situated as we are to each other, it seems rather absurd our going to law with each other.'

'Better, Mr. Pearman, say, situated as we were. Moreover, the nearer and dearer the relationship, the more acrimonious the lawsuit; for a bitter quarrel commend me to brothers, from Cain and Abel downward.'

'Then I am to understand that my engagement with Miss Denison is at an end? May I ask upon what grounds it is broken off?'

'My dear sir, your Creator gave you understanding, not I. If you wish to know upon what terms you stand with Miss Denison, see her, and don't trouble me.'

'You said situated as we were.'

'Of course I did. I owed you £10,000, and hadn't got it. Now, it seems you also owe me £10,000, which, of course, makes my not being able to pay you of very little consequence.'

'But you consented to my engagement with your daughter.'

'And would now, if I thought you'd ever want it.'

'I don't understand you.'

'Then it's no use continuing this conversation.'

'Will you answer me a straightforward question? May I ask you if my engagement'

'Yes. You may as well write Pearman a polite dismissal, unless you would rather see him.'

'Oh no! I'd rather write.'

'Well, then, do so at once; and I think there will be no necessity for your seeing him. But if you must—' and he looked a little anxiously toward her.

'I shall know what to say—don't be afraid of that—though I would much rather not.'

Here Harold Denison entered the room, jubilant and triumphant.

'The overture is played out, Grenville, and the real business of the piece is about to begin. I've told him you are my representative in this matter, and that I am entirely in your hands.'

'Thanks, uncle.' And Rose went off to encounter Pearman. He found that gentleman restlessly pacing the library, a curt greeting passed between them.

'Now, Mr. Rose, we had better proceed to business at once. Time is valuable to me upon this occasion.'

'The sooner the better,' rejoined Grenville.

'Since I last saw you I have been to town in connection with this affair, and am prepared to admit that you have a better case than I at first thought you possessed. Under these circumstances, and standing as I do with regard to Miss Denison—'

'Hadn't we better confine ourselves solely to the business in hand, and not advert to contingencies that may never happen?' interrupted Grenville quietly.

'That's it then,' said Pearman coarsely. 'Miss Denison intends cancelling her engagement as part of the programme? I thought as much.'

'Excuse me if I suggest the propriety of keeping Miss Denison's name entirely out of our conversation. This is a matter upon which I have nothing to say. The question lies in a nutshell. Do you intend to ransom your horse, or is that writ of service of which received notice yesterday to be carried into effect?'

'I shall dispute the whole thing, and place the affair in the hands of my solicitor.'

'Very good. Under these circumstances, it is only right to tell you that I have already applied for an injunction to prevent your running Coriander for any race till the case is decided.'

'Ridiculous! Upon what grounds, pray?'

'Upon the grounds of possible injury and probable deterioration of value.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. He might be injured or he beat; in either case, he would not be so valuable a horse as he is now.'

Pearman said nothing for a minute or two; at last he exclaimed abruptly, 'Do you ever bet, Mr. Rose?'

'Certainly not,' was the Jesuitical reply; for, though Grenville Rose never did meddle with turf matters, though he had not made a single bet on the forthcoming 'Two Thousand,' he was yet aware that Dallison was betting for him; albeit he neither knew nor cared to know, so far the particulars of the transaction.

'You can hardly suppose I shall pay such a sum as £10,000. Perhaps you will state what compromise you really intend to offer me?'

'I have none other to propose, than that you sign Mr. Denison a release of the mortgage you hold to that amount upon Glinn.'

'Ah, well! I am afraid you price the horse a little too high.'

'Not at all! We value the horse at £5,000 and the stakes of the 'Two Thousand' at £5,000 more.'

'And who the deuce tells you he is going to win that race?'

'Well, you see,' returned Grenville, smiling, 'we are guided entirely by your own opinion. We are credibly informed that you have thought it worth while to invest a large sum of money on his chance, and we have a high opinion of your judgment in such matters.'

Pearman paused. He was a shrewd man, and he could not help being struck with the ability with which his opponent had got up his case. 'Suppose I let you take the horse?' he said at length.

'Even then he is a valuable horse, and worth just now a fictitious price. There would be people who would give pretty nearly that sum to insure his not starting for that particular race.'

'I'll give you credit, Mr. Rose,' replied

here. 'I'll explain it all to you afterward.'

'And my note?' she said, shyly, holding it up.

'Neither you nor it will be wanted to-day, I think. But come back here when you have seen James off.'

'Perhaps you had rather I should never send it,' she inquired, half timidly, half coquetishly.

'Maude, be serious now, please. You may tease me as much as you like afterward.'

She said nothing, but flitted from the room on her errand.

Grenville Rose, armed with the deed of release of the mortgage, and a similar acquittance of the heriot claim, all drawn up in due legal form, quickly returned to Pearman.

'Here,' he said, 'is your acquittance, signed by my uncle. If you will sign the release, I'll hand it over to you. Shall I ring for a servant as a second witness to your signature?'

Pearman nodded assent, and, upon the appearance of the butler, scrawled his name across the parchment, to which the witnesses signed their attestation. He then placed the acquittance in his pocket, took up his hat and departed, without further demand for an interview with Maude.

Not that the heriot business had for one second put it out of his mind. No; to do him justice, he looked upon the probable rupture of his engagement as a very serious item in the losses the discovery of that mouldy parchment had entailed upon him. If he did not love her he admired her extremely, and looked forward to the connection with great eagerness. But he felt quite convinced that to have moved any further than he had already done would be simply to cancel it at once. He did not wish that. It was but a slender hold, he knew. Still, another shuffle of the pack might change all the hands once more. That slight link was better than none at all.

Thus meditating he drove home, and, having ordered his phaeton to wait while he wrote a couple of letters to save the post, entered the house. In about half an hour he reappeared, stepped into the carriage and drove to Xminster station. His wishing to write those letters at Mannersley had caused him to make a considerable detour to the station from Glinn, Harold Denison's place lying, though off the direct road, somewhere about half way between Mannersley and the railway. On arrival there he went into the telegraph office and despatched a message.

The clerk and Pearman were upon rather intimate relations. The late owner of Mannersley had employed the electric wire pretty freely. His son, also, was wont to use it a good deal. The latter, moreover, constantly sent the clerk game in the season—very often told him he had invested a sovereign for him on one of his horses that he thought was likely to win. It may be conceived that the conductor of the telegraph at Xminster held Mr. Sam Pearman in high esteem.

'You'll be going up by the six train, I suppose, sir? Only half-past three now, but I expect you're going home again first.'

'Just so. I want to have about an hour at the paddocks first.'

'One last look at the crack, eh, sir? Win, won't he, though they do take strange liberties with him in the betting?'

'He's very well, and'll make some of them open their eyes and shut their mouths before many days are over.'

'Well, you'll have company up, sir—Mr. Grenville Rose, from Glinn; he's going by that train. Know him, Mr. Pearman, I suppose?'

'D—n him, yes. I do know him,' said Pearman, as he thought over their recent interview.

'Beg pardon, sir; didn't know you didn't like him; he's usually reckoned a nice gentleman.'

'How do you know he's going to town?'

'Because he sent a message to say so.'

'What, a telegram? How long ago?'

'About an hour and a half; it was about two o'clock.'

'That was the time I left Glinn, and his telegram left Xminster then. Hum! It must have left Denison's while I was there, thought Pearman. 'What the devil could it have been about? I say, what was Mr. Rose's message—exactly?'

'Beg pardon, sir, but you know we ain't allowed—'

'Yes, of course, I know; there's a sovereign for you—go on.'

'Well, it can't be of any consequence, and

news, was that Coriander was once more first favorite for the Two Thousand, at seven to two, taken freely.

'Done again,' he muttered, 'somehow. And I believe that telegram and Rose are at the bottom of it. Curse him!'

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCERNING MRS. HUDSON.

We must now revert to what Mrs. Hudson did upon receipt of her telegram—as harmless, apparently, as 'the pork-chops and tomato-sauce' of Pickwick's immortal history. Yet, even in that case, 'great events from trivial causes sprang.' That lady is destined to be as much disturbed in a monetary point of view, as Mrs. Bardell; but infinitely more to her own advantage.

Mrs. Hudson was lounging pleasantly enough in an arm-chair, reading the diurnal literature of her country in that abode of comfort, bliss, and intelligence, ye old Paper Buildings, when that most domestic of telegrams reached her. That she was attired in a morning-coat, neat trousers, unimpeachable boots, and had a cigar in her mouth, will scarcely astonish the reader, who has probably already surmised that Silky Dallison represented that lady.

'Gad! he exclaimed, after reading the message; 'what a cross it looks like! But I must be off at once to see Plyart. Twenty minutes to three, just catch him before he goes down to Tattersall's.' Mr. Dallison was a man of decision; he was into a Hansom and at the door of the Victoria Club in something less than ten minutes. His conference with the book-maker was short, and then they separated, both to make their way to the Great Turf Exchange at Knightsbridge.

The remarkable feature of the betting on the Two Thousand that afternoon was the extraordinary advance of Coriander. From very long odds offered against him, he rose in the course of the day to be once more first favorite; reaching very nearly to his original price of ten days back. From the opening of the rooms, Dallison was very eager to his offers to back the horse, while it might have been also noticed that Mr. Plyart accepted the long odds against Coriander. 'Just to cover himself,' as he said, 'having laid rather heavily against him.' But it quickly permeates through the subscription-room that a horse is being backed in earnest, and when, about half-past four, Pearman's accredited agent began also to put money on the horse, the furor became intense.

The ring, or stock-brokers of the turf, like their brethren of the eastern exchange, with all their cuteness, are marvellously like sheep in times of panic. The leaders at both places can increase or depreciate property pretty much at their pleasure. As there is, of course, money to be made by such fluctuations, it can scarcely be wondered at that they do it. But why should the one be deemed virtuous and respectable, and the other the contrary? There is little to choose between the scandals of the two betting rings.

Grenville Rose, upon Pearman's departure had carried the release in triumph to the squire. Harold Denison was jubilant beyond measure; free from these difficulties, and to use his own expression, 'out of the hands of those blood-suckers, the Pearmans.' The hopes Grenville had raised had influenced him in his interview with Sam Pearman, and, if a little sarcastic in his retorts, the bitter cynicism of his nature had toned down rather upon that occasion. Rose now thought it time to do a little work for himself, so, without more ado plunged in medias res, reverted to his passion for his cousin, and solicited his uncle's permission for their engagement.

Harold Denison was a good deal taken aback. It must be borne in mind that he had not received the slightest hint of this in any way beforehand, and, to say that he was pleased now he did hear it, would be very far from the truth. He liked his nephew, perhaps, as far as it was in his selfish nature to like anybody; but he still thought that Maude, with her personal attractions, ought to marry money or rank, if not both. Still at the present moment, he was virtually indebted to his nephew for £10,000—a circumstance little likely to help him in the long-run, as men of Harold Denison's calibre hate most heartily those to whom they are deeply beholden. However

of it! Good-by. I will just jump up and see my aunt and Maude, and then I'm off.

Grenville dashed into the drawing-room where he found Mrs. Denison and his cousins.

'I'm just off to town, aunt, and have come to wish you good-by, and tell you I'm to be your son-in-law, after all.'

'Don't believe him, my mother,' laughed Maude; her eyes dancing with him. 'We know better than that, don't we? We mustn't detain him, or he'll be too late for his dinner. You greedy thing; you won't live if you gourmandize so—'

'Come, here, Gren,' said Mrs. Denison, 'has my husband consented to your marrying Maude?'

'Yes, aunt, as soon as I've got bread-and-cheese enough to feed her on.'

'My dear boy, I'm so glad! I was obliged to be your enemy once, Gren, I couldn't help myself; but I'd rather you took her than any one.'

'Oh you, mother!' cried Maude; 'and he says he'll feed me on bread-and-cheese, and I like, I like—strawberries and cream.'

'Sad thing, aunt, but I suppose I'd better break off the match at once. Better that than come to a separate maintenance, you know. Bread-and-cheese is a good last-ing dish, but how she's to get through the winters I don't know, on what she proposes.'

'Ab, well, never mind,' laughed Maude; 'she's yours now, and won't have a separate maintenance. You'll have to feed her some way, and you can't guess how she eats. When are you going, Gren?'

'In a very few minutes. I'm going to walk; will you come with me? Good-by, aunt. Don't be afraid. I won't run away with her, at all events till strawberries are well in, and threepence a pottle.'

'Listen; were lovers like that in your day, mother? I used to dream a little while back, that, when you had a lover, it was all you could do to keep him from running away with you. Now I'm getting quite clever about it, and know that Gren would always much prefer to leave me behind than his portmanteau.'

'Come away, Maude, and let's see if we can shut it; you know we always have a deal of trouble about that.'

'Oh, yes, I always found you and Thomas despairing over it, and it takes all my ingenuity to make those last three or four packages fit in. Don't you think he's making a wife of me, mother, a little before he's entitled to?'

'Go away, you foolish children. I'm tired of your badinage; you can quarrel and make up all the way to the station.'

The refractory portmanteau was soon reduced to subjection under Maude's clever auspices, and then the two cousins walked across the fields to the station.

'Your father's given you to me, Maude, as soon as I can get together an income that we can live upon.'

She might be coquettish before her mother, but she was meek enough to her lover when they were alone together.

'I hope I shall be a good wife to you, Gren. You know I'm not extravagant, however I may laugh about it.'

'No, my darling, I know you better, and, if we have to begin with a little, I hope you'll be able to spend lots of money before long.'

'I never had any money to spend,' said the girl, gravely. 'I've often had to want a five-pound note, both for myself and my poor people in the village.'

'And will have again, pet. Wanting money is the normal condition of ninety-nine hundredths of civilized humanity. But you must turn back now, you have come far enough. Good-by, and God bless you!' said Rose, as he clasped her in his arms.

'Mine now, forever, isn't it?'

'Yes, Gren. Yours or no one's,' she replied, as she lifted her lips shyly to his. 'Please write.'

'Every day, dearest. Good-by,' and, with one more kiss, Grenville Rose tore himself away.'

How he travelled up to town in the same carriage with Pearman, we have already seen. On his arrival at Waterloo Station he jumped into a cab, and proceeded at once to the Temple. On entering his room, the first thing that caught his eye was the figure of Silky Dallison, who, comfortably ensconced in the easiest chair in the room, was