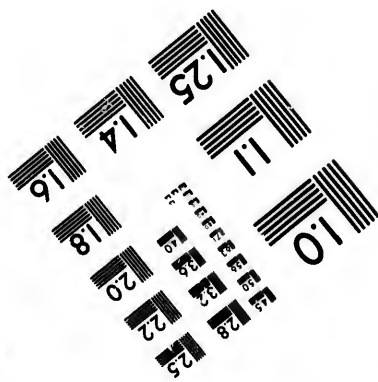
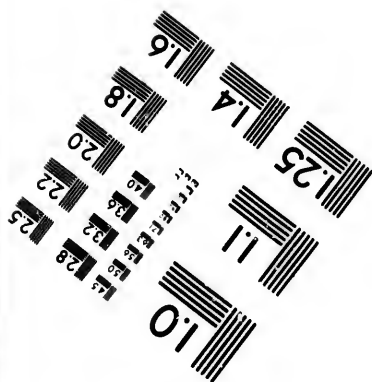
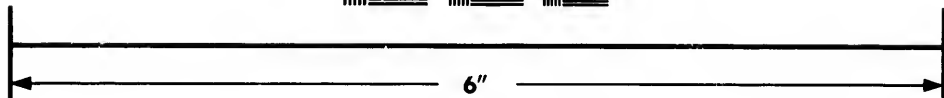
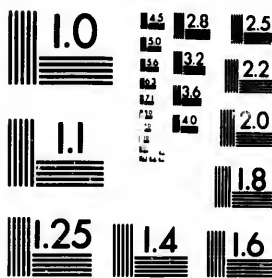


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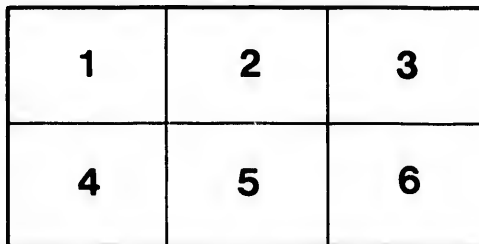
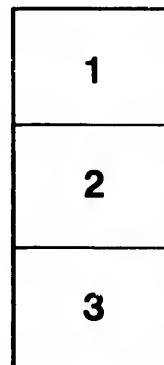
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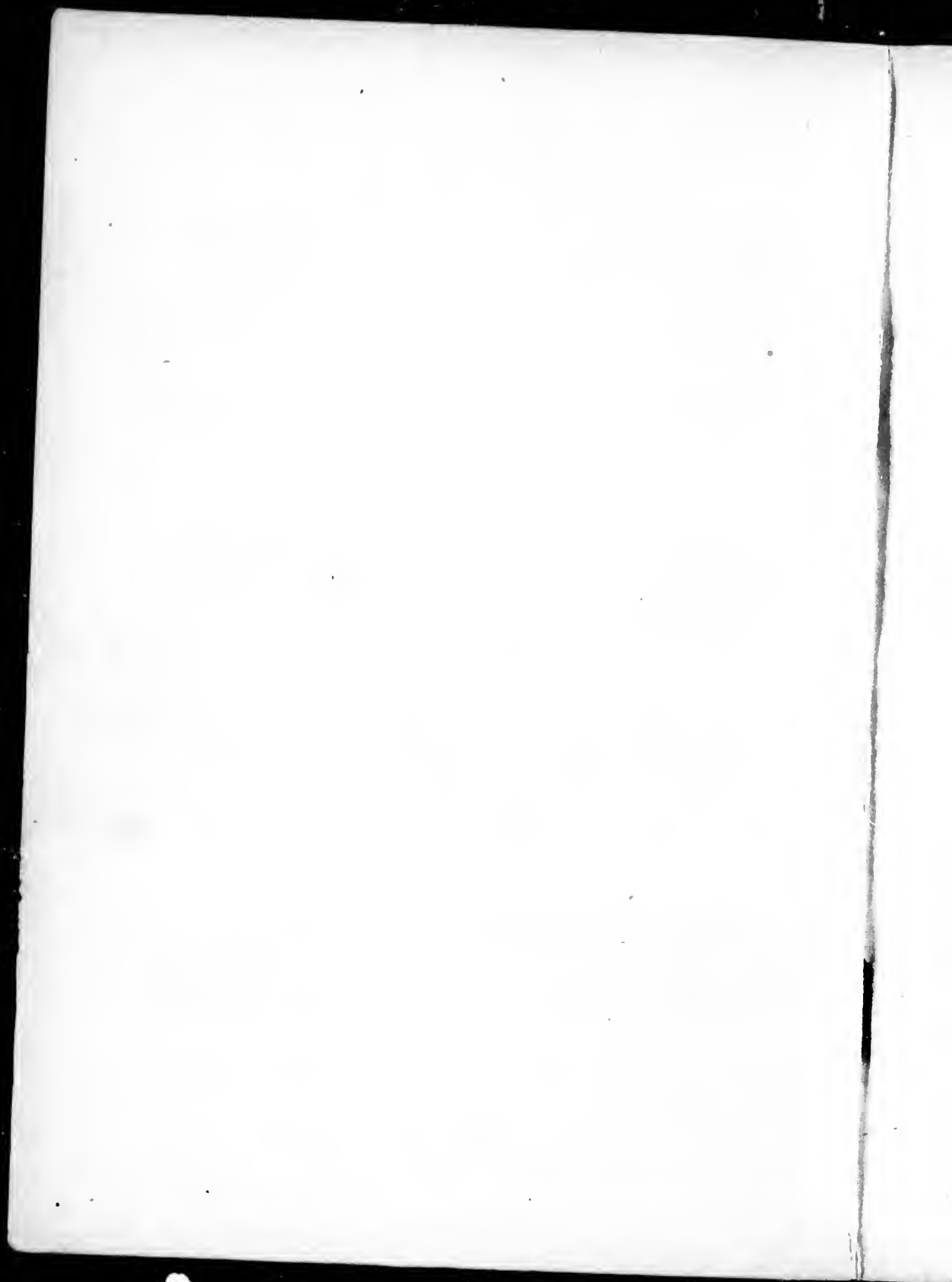
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LONG ODDS.

CHAPTER I.

TAKE CARE OF DAMOCLES.



GLORIOUS night. The moon, pale regent of the sky, with all her glittering court is marching like an army through the heavens. The numberless lights of Cairo twinkle brightly, and the cigars glow like fire-flies under the verandah of Shepherd's Hotel. Just visible from the lounging-chairs there, an unusually brilliant gleam of light catches the eye, evidently proceeding from some large building which is garishly illuminated. From that spot, at that time of night, the most striking object perhaps in the city of the Khedive.

'So you're getting pretty tired of the place you have to save, Jack, eh?'

'Yes,' replied the Honourable Jack Cuxwold of her Majesty's —th Lancers. 'Before Tel-el-Kebir the certainty that we had work before us kept us going. Then the ride down here was glorious, a match against time, whether we reached Cairo in time to save the city.'

'Yes,' said Flood, 'from all accounts you weren't an hour too soon. Arabi's defeated troops would have fired and sacked it in another four-and-twenty-hours.'

'Just so,' replied Jack Cuxwold. 'I fancy that's what would have taken place. Defeated soldiery "out of hand" would probably treat a wealthy city in that way.'

'Well, it's all over now; and I suppose you'll be soon coming home again?'

'Not a chance of our coming home for ever so long,' retorted Cuxwold; 'and as for its being all over, I very much doubt that. We've pooh-poohed the Mahdi, and there being no European troops engaged in it, haven't paid much attention to the annihilation of Hicks' column; but these Arabs are on the boil, and when a fellow calls himself a prophet, if they only take him up, there's no saying where their fanaticism may not carry them.'

'Exactly!' said Flood. 'And I can fancy these fellows thinking a raid from their own sandy deserts into Lower Egypt, in the name of religion, a very profitable speculation. By the way, you were in luck at dinner. That was a deuced pretty girl you contrived to sit next.'

'She was, Master Alec, and very pleasant to talk to besides.'

'Did you make out her name and belongings?'

'She is a Miss Bramton,' replied Cuxwold; 'and that little dark man who sat next her was her uncle. They rather puzzled me. She was as ladylike a girl as you would meet anywhere; but, hang it, I can't make him out.'

'Hardly looked a gentleman,' rejoined Flood.

'No,' said the other, 'whatever he is, he's not that. From what Miss Bramton told me, I gathered that they had come abroad for the benefit of her uncle's health. He is delicate in the chest, and has fled from the rigour of an English winter.'

'Then they're settled here for some time?'

'I suppose so. Miss Bramton told me that they had no intention of leaving till the winter was well over.'

As has been gathered from the previous conversation, the Honourable Jack Cuxwold, second son of the Earl of Ranksborow, was a dragoon, whose regiment had formed part of the original expedition to Egypt. He had been present at the battle of Tel-el-Kebir, and then joined in Stewart's dashing ride to Cairo. Since then he had been kicking his heels about that city, and was now fain to confess that he was most heartily sick of it. He had been up the Great Pyramid, done the Mosques, seen the Sphinx, ransacked the Bazaars, assisted in getting up divisional races, and, in short, to use his own words, had thoroughly exhausted the Khedive's capital. But he

knew there was no prospect of getting away, for with Gordon shut up in Khartoum, and the storm clouds of battle gathering in the desert, no man in health could think of applying for leave. Alec Flood was an old friend of his whom he had come across two or three days before, and with whom this evening he had been dining at Shepherd's Hotel. Flood was one of those men, whom you always do come across, blessed with a comfortable income and a restless disposition; he literally 'wandered up and down upon the earth.' As for his friends, it did not signify what part of the world they had betaken themselves to, they were always prepared to see Alec Flood turn up in his usual listless fashion. He never seemed to know where he was going, and, what was very exasperating to people of ordinarily well-regulated minds, he never seemed to care. If he was late for train or steamer, going to such and such a place, he would get into the next, perfectly regardless of what its destination might be. 'What does it matter,' he said upon one of these occasions, 'I haven't made up my mind, you see, where to go, but I'm quite determined *to go* for the present.' Cairo amused him, it was not that he hadn't done it all before, but he had met Cuxwold and two or three other old friends, and so had resolved to pull up there for a little. Unmarried, and with no profession, he was free to roam wheresoever he would. Like Ulysses he had seen men and cities, and could discourse pleasantly of both, and was cordially welcomed in all such society as he affected; but on this point he was somewhat fastidious, and by no means to be beguiled by all cards of invitation.

'I say,' exclaimed Cuxwold at length, 'we can't spend the whole evening in this drowsy old verandah; what do you say to coming over there?' and he jerked his head, in the direction of the building that shone out so brilliantly against the lights of Cairo.

'Anything to see much?' rejoined the other sententiously.

'Well a music hall is a music hall,' rejoined Jack Cuxwold. 'It's not so entertaining as the Oxford, still one hears a good song sometimes; and they've a girl there

who warbles French *chansons* of the Therése type rather archly. At all events, it is better fun than sitting here.'

Alec Flood said nothing, but rose and prepared to accompany his mercurial guest. Left to himself, he would have smoked passively as an Oriental for the next hour or two, and then retired to bed; but the restless Anglo-Saxon blood of Jack Cuxwold rebelled against such passive enjoyment.

'Come on,' he exclaimed, 'it's no distance; and though the streets of Cairo are not policed like those of London, yet nobody ever presumes to interfere with our insular race in any way.

'No,' rejoined Flood, laughing, 'the conquerors stalk abroad with much majesty at present. It isn't till later on that the conquered avenge their wrongs by midnight assassination.'

Thus jesting, the two young men left their hotel, and made their way to this last exotic of Western civilisation newly grafted on the East. The music hall was, as Cuxwold had explained, of very ordinary type, differing but little from the conventional London entertainment. Only in this wise, that there was a considerable amount of French singing introduced into it. Flood and Cuxwold were perhaps more amused by the queer *mélange* of the audience than in anything they saw upon the stage. The seemingly congregation of all nationalities present, from the Frank in light tweeds to his brother in evening costume; from the Greek of the Levant to the Armenians; from the scarlet fezged officer of the Egyptian army to the undress of his British compeer. Eastern dresses of all kinds were scattered amongst the audience. The hall was crowded and, needless to say, hot.

They had been there for about an hour, and the mercurial Cuxwold was already beginning to doubt whether the game was worth the candle, when they were accosted by a slim dark man of unmistakable Jewish physiognomy, who, in somewhat indifferent English, said,—

'Ah, pouf! Gentlemen, this place is something too hot. What would you think of adjourning to a little establishment that I know of? Ha! we get there something cool to drink, and a leetle amusement. Ha! we see the leetle

ball go round and round, we back the colour, we fill our pockets, we rinse our throats; ah peste! it is more amusing than this place. What say you, gentlemen? Will you stroll across to the establishment of my friend? It is close by. All the best gentlemen of Cairo look in there.'

'Gambling house tout,' said Flood in an undertone.

'No doubt,' rejoined Cuxwold, 'still this is deuced dull. Suppose we go, Alec, and look in for half-an-hour, just to see how they manage these things in the East.'

'All right old man,' rejoined Flood; 'but a gambling-house is a gambling-house, whether you see it in the East or in the West. However, I don't suppose that you or I will hurt ourselves much at it. I am good to go if you like. Show us the way in,' he said, turning to their new acquaintance, 'and we will see if we are in luck's view to-night.'

They emerged from the music hall under the guidance of their new friend, and crossing the road, plunged at once into the labyrinth of small streets that run at the back of the Great Square, till their guide stopped at a low doorway, over which, as has been the fashion of such dens from time immemorial, there blazed a brilliant fanlight. A tap at the door, and the portal was at once opened, and their mentor led the way into a narrow passage which opened into a brilliantly lighted room, wherein a roulette table, surrounded by a throng of eager speculators, was in full swing.

'A queer crowd, by Jove! Jack; some villainous faces as ever I saw,' whispered Flood.

'Yes,' replied the other; 'and look, Alec, I'm blessed if there isn't our invalid. There's Bramton punting, if I know anything about it, like a man who means business.'

'Ah, gentlemen,' exclaimed their conductor, 'never mind that just now; you will allow me to be your guide. I am well known here. I think just a quail *en aspic* and a glass of champagne before we battle the enemy.'

'Right you are,' rejoined Cuxwold; 'I've a prodigious thirst on me.'

'It strikes me we have met before, my friend,' said Alec Flood, as they followed the stranger into an inner room, where a liberally furnished supper-table was laid out. 'I can't quite recollect where.'

'Impossible, monsieur,' interposed the stranger. 'I have an excellent memory for faces, and, monsieur will pardon me,' he continued with a low bow, 'his is not one that we—ah, what you call it?—forget.'

He called to the attendants, and Cuxwold and Flood were speedily supplied with an excellent supper, washed down with equally good wine. That finished, they at once adjourned to the *salon de jeu*.

'Now, messieurs,' said their guide laughing, 'give me a lead. I never do right myself. I will follow your game, gentlemen.'

It was the ordinary roulette as played at Monte Carlo or any other similar establishment; but the eager faces and glittering eyes of the gamblers showed that the play was deep. There was all the silence that would characterise a London card-room, when the battle waged fierce, and if luck went against them, ruin ere daybreak stared some of the combatants in the face. But these Easterns cannot control their physiognomies like the children of the West, and, though nothing but a smothered exclamation or low ejaculation of triumph escaped their lips, the flashing eyes and flushed faces showed that the intoxication of gambling was boiling in their veins.

'A run on the red,' whispered Flood; 'best follow that as far as the colour goes. Back the numbers to suit your own fancy.'

Once more did the ball go circling round, and again did the croupier asseverate that red was the successful colour. It speedily became evident to Flood that what he had first deemed deep play all round was prettily nearly confined in this instance to Bramton, who had been evidently losing heavily, was backing black with dogged persistency, and was evidently equally unfortunate in his selection of the numbers. His face was cool and impassive, but there was an angry light in his eyes. As Flood and Cuxwold could see, he kept on increasing his stake after every rebuff. Once more did the ball spin round, and as it slowly hesitated into which partition to dribble into, the croupier, either accidentally or by design, touched the board with his hand.

'Foul play, by G—d!' shouted Bramton, springing to

his feet. 'No such run as this was ever brought about by fair means ; that thief can pull the strings as he likes. I'll have back every shilling he has won of me.'

In an instant all was confusion. The men of that motley crew not only snatched up their own stakes, but in some instances perhaps as much of their neighbour's as they could lay hands on. The quiet of the chamber was broken, and the room rang with a perfect polyglot of blasphemy. The myrmidons of the establishment, of course, gathered round the bank, and well they might, for there were those in that precious crew who reckoned little of how money was come by.

'Disgorge, you scoundrel !' screamed Bramton. 'If you don't return me the money you've robbed me of, I bring the whole place about your ears. I pay up when I lose ; but I'll be hung if I'll submit to being robbed,' and, in the excitement of the moment, he sprang at the croupier.

For a minute or two the *mêlée* seemed about to be general, and at all events a sharp struggle took place around the bank. Cuxwold and Flood half fought half pushed their way to the scene of action. Suddenly a shriek rang through the room, followed by a cry of 'I am stabbed.' The crowd fell back, and Bramton reeled out of the *mêlée*, bathed in blood, and fell fainting on the floor. In an instant the two Englishmen were at his side. Cuxwold raised his head, and Flood, who in his wanderings had acquired some slight knowledge of surgery, tore open the wounded man's waistcoat only to discover two deep gashes in his chest from which the blood was welling. The tragic ending of the affair seemed to have sobered all those present. They had meddled with an Englishman—meddled with him even to his death—and there was an obvious desire on the part of the company to depart as quickly and privily as might be. A few minutes and the house was cleared of all save the wounded man, Cuxwold, Flood and its proprietors ; and these latter seemed in much perturbation at the untoward occurrence. Cuxwold noticed that the gentleman who had introduced them was amongst those who had disappeared. He had seen him just before the commencement of the fray, apparently staking his money on the game ; but whether

he had taken any part in the scrimmage, or when he disappeared, Jack couldn't say.

'It's no use,' gasped the wounded man; 'there's nothing much to be done for me. I've got my gruel, and I know it. Give me a glass of something, just to keep me going for a few minutes while I say what I've got to say. You're Englishmen, both of you, aren't you?'

Flood nodded assent as he rose to his feet.

'No,' cried the dying man, as Flood turned towards the door; 'doctors are of no use. I shall be gone before they can get here.'

'I regret to say that, Mr Bramton, I agree with you,' replied Flood gravely. 'I am only going to get you some stimulant. We will do what we can to forward your wishes, but I know enough of surgery to warn you that you have no time to lose in telling us what you want.'

'Good chap your pal; but he comes pretty straight to the point, don't he? Well it's best, in cases like mine. Let's see, I've seen your face before. Ah! you're the young chap who was at the hotel, and was so civil to Lucy. She is a good girl that. She and Damocles are the only creatures I care about on earth. What I want you to do is this—is your friend never coming with that brandy, or whatever it is?—I feel so faint.'

'Here he is, here he is,' said Cuxwold softly, as he took the tumbler from Flood's hand, and held it to Bramton's lips.

The man swallowed it eagerly, and then continued,—

'That's what I want you to see about. Just break it to her. Let her down easy. Poor girl, she does care a bit about her old uncle; and then, you see, gentlemen, she's all alone here in a foreign land, and don't know the hang of things. If you'll just put matters straight for her. Manage all about this row; take her passage for England, and all that. There's plenty of money; Dick Bramton ain't dying a pauper by any means. Give me some more brandy. Thanks; that'll do. Will you promise to do what I ask gentlemen? Don't say more about this than you can help. Say I'm dead, stabbed in the streets, anything. Give her my love. Where am I?—it's getting dark. Tell her to take care of Damocles. I wonder what time

it is? I feel awfully sleepy. It's hard, too, with the winner of the Derby in your stable;' and with those words Dick Bramton fell back upon the cushions they had laid on him, and seemed to sleep.

Slowly the blood flowed from the wound, and trickled over the carpet, in spite of all Flood's efforts to staunch it. A quarter of an hour, a slight twitching of the mouth, a faint fluttering of the eyelids, and Dick Bramton's spirit had sped.

CHAPTER II.

GOOD-BYE IN REAL EARNEST.

By this time the gendarmes had made their appearance upon the scene, and at once proceeded to take possession of the house and its occupants. Only for Cuxwold's uniform, there was no doubt but both he and Flood would have found themselves in custody; but the guardians of the law were shy of meddling with anyone wearing the Queen of England's uniform. The preliminary investigation told nothing. The three men, who avowedly were the proprietors of the house, protested their innocence, and neither Flood nor Cuxwold, although they were fighting their way to Bramton's assistance at the time, had seen who it was that had dealt those fatal blows.

They certainly could formulate no accusation against the three men in question. Cuxwold took a high tone with the officer of gendarmes, and that functionary at once proved subservient and willing to do anything the English captain deemed advisable. He acquiesced at once to Cuxwold's proposal that the body of the dead man should be removed to the hotel at daybreak. He would make every effort to discover the murderer, and exert himself to the utmost of his ability in order that justice should be done; but it was difficult. They had many of such cases; so many of these Greeks, Arab dealers, traders, etc., from the Upper Province, carried knives, and were wont to use them freely. He would send down some of his men at daybreak with a hand litter to remove the deceased to Shepheard's Hotel. He would not trouble the gentlemen more than he could

help, but it would be necessary that Captain Cuxwold should give evidence before the Cadi, and then with 'plenty salaam' to the two Englishmen, and a fierce whisper to the proprietors of the house, that if plenty of bakseesh were not forthcoming, it would be the worse for them, the man in authority took his departure.

'This is a nice business we've let ourselves in for,' said Flood in a low tone as they commenced their vigil o'er the dead. 'I wonder what became of that confounded little Semite. I can't help thinking I've seen that fellow's face somewhere before.'

'Well,' said Jack meditatively, 'I suppose all this would have happened whether we had been here or not. The whole thing passed too quick for us to save this poor fellow; but, for all that, it's as well we were here.'

'As you say so, my dear boy, I suppose it is; but upon my life I can't see it.'

'We can do the poor fellow's last bidding,' said Jack. 'It's better that pretty girl at the hotel should have the thing broken gently to her, instead of hearing of it abruptly. She will want someone, too, to help her about all her arrangements to return home, etc.'

Flood eyed his companion curiously for a moment, and then remarked,—

'True; you are a good fellow, Jack, and always had a touch of chivalry in your nature. Consider me as under your orders in every respect about this affair. I wonder who or what is Damocles—a dog, I suppose?'

'I can tell you all about that,' replied Cuxwold. 'That name reveals a good deal to me about the poor fellow who's gone. I don't do very much in the racing way, myself—younger sons can't afford it; but I come, remember, of a regular racing stock. My noble father and Dartree, my eldest brother, are up to their eyes in it. Well, if it's only to see what their horses are doing, I always skim the racing intelligence. Damocles is a two-year-old of whom great things are expected. He was bought for a lot of money last year by Richard Bramton, who is a well-known racing man—began life, I believe, as a stable-boy—and who was yesterday one of the luckiest owners on the turf.'

'Ah! a self-made man?' remarked Flood.

'Quite so; I never saw him before last night at dinner, and never dreamt of his being the man who on the turf they call "Lucky Dick Bramton." How the deuce a niece of his is what Miss Bramton is is somewhat difficult to explain.'

'It is odd,' said Flood. 'She was as refined, ladylike a looking girl as one ever came across, and her poor uncle, even in his last moments, quite justified your opinion of him as to his not being a gentleman; he was very rough of speech.'

'Yes,' replied Cuxwold; 'but here are the first streaks of dawn. Ah! and here come the gendarmes with their stretchers.'

The gendarmes at once entered the house, and the remains of poor Dick Bramton were at once placed reverently on the stretcher by Cuxwold and Flood. Under their auspices, the body was borne back to Shepheard's Hotel, and safely deposited in the dead man's chamber, there to await burial. The proprietor of the hotel was much concerned. Such a thing as the assassination of a guest of his within a mile of his house had never happened before. He could not understand it. When did it take place? But upon this point Cuxwold and his friend were somewhat reticent, preferring at present that the hotel-keeper should believe it to be the result of a street brawl rather than of a *fracas* in a gaming-house.

'Now,' said Jack, 'let's go up to your room. By the time I've made myself a little decent, Miss Bramton, no doubt, will be up, and I've got to tell her then what has happened.'

People rise early in the East. There is not much to induce one generally to sit up in such cities as Cairo. Men will sit up to play under all climes, and under all circumstances. Nothing but the most arbitrary law stops the gambler in his favourite pursuit.

Miss Bramton was up betimes, and flitting about her sitting-room, waiting for her uncle to come to breakfast. They usually took that meal more or less together in their own apartment; but her uncle was habitually unpunctual, and Lucy as often as not had finished breakfast before

Dick Bramton put in his appearance. She was just debating in her own mind whether she should ring for that repast, when a servant entered and said that a gentleman wished to see her. To the very natural request of 'What is the gentleman's name?' the waiter produced an envelope, on the back of which was written, 'Captain Cuxwold requests to see Miss Bramton on business of urgent importance.' That Captain Cuxwold was the name of her neighbour at the *table d'hôte* on the previous night Lucy was aware, and though the request was not a little extraordinary, still, from what she had seen of him, she could not but believe that he must have reasonable grounds for making it.

'Tell the gentleman I shall be very glad to see him.'

Another moment and Jack Cuxwold entered the room, feeling, sooth to say, considerably more nervous than was his wont at being shown into a lady's boudoir.

'Good morning, Captain Cuxwold,' said Miss Bramton. 'The waiter tells me that you wish to see me; but we know how stupid these people at the hotel are. It is far more probable that your business is with my uncle, whose acquaintance seems to me to comprise men of all kinds and conditions.'

'No, Miss Bramton,' returned Jack gravely, 'I regret to say my business is with you. I grieve to say that your uncle was seriously injured in a street fray last night. I was present, and, though I did my best, was unluckily too late to come to his assistance.'

'Uncle Dick hurt!' exclaimed the girl, 'Where is he? I must go to him at once; tell me Captain Cuxwold,' and the dark grey eyes looked keenly into his.

'It's what I've come to do, Miss Bramton. Please be quiet, and sit down, and don't make my task more difficult than it is already. Everything has been done for your Uncle Dick that is possible, and it would be useless your going to him now.'

'Why not?' she exclaimed. 'He may be rough, he may be uncouth, but he has been the best and dearest uncle to me always. He has never grudged any expense if he thought a thing would give me pleasure. If he is seriously hurt, my place is at his bedside; it is trifling

with me, Captain Cuxwold, not to tell me where he is. No one can nurse him as well as me.'

'You have misunderstood me, Miss Bramton. I fear I am doing my errand badly. Cannot you understand, there are cases past all nursing?'

'Past all nursing,' repeated Lucy. 'Do you mean to tell me,' she continued slowly, while her eyes dilated and her voice dropped almost to a whisper, 'that my uncle is *dead*?'

'Even so,' rejoined Jack. 'I saw him struck down with my own eyes—was with him to the last—and have brought his dying message to you.'

'Saw him struck down, sir!' exclaimed the girl indignantly; 'and is the man alive who dealt that felon blow, or is he in the hands of the police?'

'He has escaped justice so far, Miss Bramton,' rejoined Cuxwold in low tones.

'And what were you doing, sir? Did you stand aside and see death dealt out to one of your countrymen without raising your hand? You are a soldier, and a powerful man besides. It surely couldn't be that you were afraid to interfere.'

Cuxwold's face flushed under the undeserved taunt.

'No,' he said quietly, after a moment's hesitation, 'I don't think it was that. It was chance brought me and my friend upon the scene. Your uncle was struck down before we could reach him.'

'Forgive me, I feel that I have done you injustice. I hardly knew what I was saying. You see the shock has come suddenly upon me, and I loved him very dearly; but I must see him. Where is he?'

'There is no difficulty about your seeing him, Miss Bramton. We watched by him through the night, and brought him here at daybreak. We have laid him in his own room.'

'Take me to him, please,' said Lucy, still struggling with her tears.

Jack Cuxwold silently conducted her to the dead man's chamber, and left her on the threshold. Lucy Bramton walked swiftly to the bed, and gently drew back the sheet. One glance was sufficient. There could be no doubt that the destroyer had claimed her uncle. She pressed

her lips to the dead man's forehead, replaced the sheet, and then, falling upon her knees by the bedside, burst into a paroxysm of weeping. The tear-storm did her good, and when some quarter of an hour later she emerged from the silent chamber, her face though very pale, was calm. Somewhat to her surprise when she entered the sitting-room, she found Jack Cuxwold seated there.

'I've no wish to intrude upon your grief, Miss Bramton,' said Jack rising. 'I have only waited to tell you that I will do everything that is necessary about the investigation of this unfortunate occurrence. I will also make every arrangement for the funeral, which, as perhaps you are aware, out here will have to take place at once. I will say no more now, but leave you to collect your thoughts and think over what you wish done. When you want me, you will have nothing to do but to ring the bell and say so. I shall be somewhere about the hotel,' and without waiting for the thanks which Lucy was about to proffer, Jack left the room.

The investigation of the murder proceeded in the leisurely way characteristic of all business in the East. There was no clue to the assassin, and, as was pointed out to Cuxwold, no probability of his being discovered unless a large reward was offered, and as Flood, who knew the East well, observed cynically, 'It will be doubtful whether you get the right man even then, as some of these fellows to obtain money would just as soon swear their fellows' lives away as not.'

Richard Bramton was quietly laid to rest in the English cemetery; and thus terminated the tragedy which was destined to have a singular effect on the future of two of the people indirectly mixed up in it. Lucy Bramton naturally decided to return to England by the very next steamer. Jack Cuxwold took her passage, and even accompanied her by railway to the point of embarkation. As he wished her farewell on the deck of the steamer, Lucy said,—

'I made a shameful accusation against you in the first moment of my agony, but I know you would make every allowance for a grief-stricken girl, and that you have forgiven me. Is it not so?'

'Pray don't mention it,' replied Jack. 'I have forgotten all about it.'

'You have been very kind to me, and if ever you come into Berkshire, I hope you will let papa thank you for all the care you have taken of his daughter.'

'I had no idea you lived in Berkshire,' said Cuxwold.

'We are newcomers in the county,' replied Lucy, 'and know very few people as yet. Good-bye.'

'I am afraid it is good-bye in real earnest now, they've passed the word "All for shore." Good-bye; I hope you'll have a good passage, and next time I'm in Berkshire I shall come and see you. However, I'm not likely to leave this country at present. Once more, good-bye,' and Jack pressed the little hand extended to him, raised his cap, and disappeared across the gangway.

CHAPTER III.

THE TELEGRAM.

A LARGE suburban villa of the very best type, for such really is the only way to describe the house, though it stands many miles away from the metropolis, surrounded by grounds which no doubt in spring and summer were extremely beautiful. One could fancy the horse-chestnuts, copper-coloured beeches and laburnums in all their glory; the great clumps of rhododendrons and azaleas all ablaze; and those trim beds in the parterre, which at the present moment are what the gardeners call 'banked up,' glowing with brilliant flowers, borders of lobelia, golden chain and low scarlet geranium. But this bright March morning the hand of winter still holds nature in its grasp, and though the snowdrops and crocuses are beginning to peep above ground, it is as yet far too early for the unfolding of leaves or the song of the birds, except on behalf of those foolish feathered creatures who, like humanity, are too apt to think that one fine day makes a summer.

Pacing up and down the terrace, outside the drawing-room windows, is a stout, pompous, middle-aged gentleman, who, with his shooting jacket thrown back, and his thumbs stuck into the arms of his waistcoat, is

contemplating the grounds with an air of patronising approval. You can read what he thinks in his face. He is evidently saying to himself, 'Yes, yo^r are mine, and pretty well up to the mark, I believe. I don't suppose in all Barkshire there's a prettier place than Temple Rising.'

If Mr John Bramton's feelings could have been more thoroughly analysed, his reflection would have been somewhat in this wise,—'Yes, it's a pretty place; it's a dooced good house; they are monstrous nice grounds, and so they ought to be, considering I keep four gardeners to look after 'em. Yes, no doubt it's a nice thing to retire, and to become a country gentleman, but I'm not sure whether the old villa at Wimbledon wasn't better fun. I used to see my old friends there. Mrs B. and Matilda said they were vulgar. I don't know about that. Mrs B. tells me I'm vulgar sometimes; perhaps I am. I wasn't brought up among Court circles. If I had been, Mrs B. might have been wearing silk gowns, but she'd have had to do it on credit most likely. Well, she and Matilda have got their way. Here I am, John Bramton of Temple Rising, and enrolled amongst the nobility and gentry of Barkshire,—plenty of money in my pockets, best of wine in my cellar, dry champagne and Madeira that I'd back to knock corners off anything the Right Honourable Earl of Rankesborow can show. Well, as I said before, here we are, here we are likely to remain, but the nobility and gentry of Barkshire don't seem to trouble their heads about us. It's aristocratic no doubt. We're classed in the county blue book amongst the nobs, but that's where it is; we're not classed among them anywhere else. It's aristocratic, as I said before, but it's devilish dull, and what's worse, Mrs B. is always reminding me of that fact. She blows me up about it, as if I could make people call as when I was in the dry goods' business. We put our best goods in the window, and if that didn't fetch customers we couldn't help it. Now, one can't do that socially. If I got up a *tableau* of Matilda in her best frock, and a small table at her right hand containing a vase of hothouse roses, and a bottle of that extra dry champagne, and put it in the dining-room window, nobody would see it; and I don't think I should quite like to propose it to Matilda. She has a soul

above trade, and could never be brought to see the beauty of a good advertisement.'

John Bramton had made a very considerable fortune in a wholesale dry goods' business in the city. A wary man always, when he began to find business irksome to him, he resolved to retire. He had seen too many of his compeers, who, under similar circumstances, had elected to remain in their firms as sleeping partners abandoning the guidance of the ship to other hands, and the result bring utter shipwreck in the course of a few years. When he left the helm, he resolved to have no further share in the cargo. He retired to his villa at Wimbledon, and enjoyed himself immensely, running into the city constantly to have a crack with his old friends, and frequently bringing home stout, plethoric, middle-aged gentlemen to dinner.

But this by no means suited the ambitious views of Mrs Bramton and her eldest daughter. As for Lucy, the youngest, as her mother and sister continually told her, she was a poor, mean-spirited little wretch, who had no proper pride or self-respect. Mrs Bramton panted to mix in county society, to give garden parties to which the *élite* of the neighbourhood would be only too anxious to attend. We know the old story, 'Water wears away the stone, and a woman's tongue by degrees will vanquish a man's will.' In utter defiance of his own judgment, John Bramton sold the snug villa at Wimbledon in which the late prosperous days of his life had been passed, and invested in the far more pretentious manor of Temple Rising.

'John, John, here's a telegram just come for you,' exclaimed a stout, very dressy lady, appearing at one of the French windows opening on to the terrace; 'and have you taken any steps about what I told you?'

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind being a little more explicit. You see, my dear, you tell me a good many things.'

'Now, don't be aggravating; you know what I mean. You must get appointed one of the magistrates of the county. I insist on your being on the bench.'

'It's all very well, Margaret,' replied John Bramton, 'but I can't appoint myself, and what's more, it would not be quite the advantage you expect it to be. Where is this telegram?'

'Don't talk nonsense, John. In attending to your magisterial duties,' continued the lady with great pomposity, 'you would make the acquaintance of all the leading people on this side the county. There's the Earl of Ranksborow, why he lives only four miles from us.'

'Just so, Margaret; but these nob's have a way with them,' replied John Bramton, as he stepped through the window and took the telegram from his wife's hand. 'They would know me on the bench, but not off it.'

As he spoke he tore open the orange envelope, and suddenly exclaimed,—

'Good heavens! it's from Lucy. Poor Dick is dead, and she's coming home by the next steamer. Poor fellow! we haven't seen much of each other of late years. Our ways were so very different.'

'Well, I am very sorry for your brother, John, but I must say the peculiar language he was wont to indulge in always did jar upon my nerves.'

'Poor Uncle Dick,' observed a showy, fashionably dressed young lady, who was seated in a low chair by the fire, as she laid down the book she was reading; 'he was dreadfully slangy, and it always puzzled me how Lucy could like going abroad with him. However, he was very kind-hearted.'

'Poor Dick, he was as kind a fellow as ever stepped,' said John Bramton. 'As for his talk, well I suppose it was the slang of his business. Never understood anything about racing myself, though, mind you, I have been to the Derby. Now, you needn't look, Mrs. B. 'Twas many years ago, long before I was married. The only thing I remember about it is that I came home with a broken hat and a false nose.'

'Uncle Dick's death must have been very sudden,' remarked Miss Bramton. 'In her last letter, Lucy described him as being so much better, and having quite lost his cough. The telegram, I suppose, tells you nothing, papa.'

'It only says this: "Uncle Dick died suddenly; am coming home by next steamer; particulars by mail." The chances are Lucy will be here almost as soon as her letter.'

'There ought to be a bit of money come your way,

John. I should say your brother was a well-to-do man ; and he has nobody but you to leave it to.'

'Goodness knows, my dear,' replied John Bramton. 'I never understood that trade of his ; but it's lightly come lightly go with all those racing fellows ; their pockets are full to-day and empty to-morrow. No need to speculate to what poor Dick has left behind him or where it goes.'

That the dead man's had been as much a business as his own was a thing you couldn't possibly have got into John Bramton's head. In his mind there was no difference between a racecourse and the tables at Monte Carlo. He really was as ignorant about turf matters as it was possible for any man in England to be ; and that visit to Epsom, when he was quite a young man, was the sole instance of his ever being present at a race meeting. He had always regarded his brother as a perfectly unbusinesslike man, upon no other grounds than that he got his living in a way utterly unintelligible to him, John Bramton ; and he honestly thought that the probabilities were the deceased had made no will, and left next to nothing behind him.

But the family at Temple Rising were destined to be still more astonished when the post brought in the evening paper. It had never occurred to the Bramtons that Uncle Richard was a celebrity in his way ; on the contrary, he was a relative of whom, if anything, they were a little ashamed ; and both John Bramton and his wife, especially the lady, had always treated Richard in a more or less patronising way. Their astonishment was boundless when, upon opening the *Globe*, they read the following telegram, dated Cairo :—

'We regret to announce the death here, under most melancholy circumstances, of Mr Richard Bramton, a gentleman well known in turf circles, and who, from the extraordinary good fortune which attended him on the racecourse, had acquired the *sobriquet* of "Lucky Dick Bramton." The deceased gentleman, it seems, had found his way into one of those low gambling-houses, which, to our everlasting disgrace, are still permitted to exist in this city. It seems a *fracas* arose, in the course of which some of the foreigners used their knives freely, and the un-

fortunate gentleman was so fatally stabbed that he expired of his wounds within the hour. The event is calculated to create great excitement in sporting circles. The deceased was the owner, though fortunately not the nominator of Damocles for his numerous engagements, and this dark youngster has the reputation of being a two-year-old very much above the common.'

'Well,' said John Bramton, 'upon my word, it's very handsome of this newspaper fellow to mention poor Dick in that manner, although, perhaps, on the whole, it would have been better if he had not referred to where his death took place! Murdered, poor fellow! God bless me! what else could he expect, going into such a den as that. Poor Dick, he always was venturesome, and never could resist gambling. It's a bad business, a bad business.'

'It must have been a very unpleasant business for Lucy,' chimed in Miss Bramton. 'How dreadful for her, poor girl, to be mixed up in such a horrible story.'

'Now, look here, Matilda,' said her father, 'what do you mean by "mixed up?" You don't suppose Lucy went with her uncle to that den, do you?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' replied Miss Bramton with a toss of her head.

John Bramton was persistently snubbed by his wife and eldest daughter, and as a rule bore it meekly; but there was one thing which they knew by experience invariably provoked retaliation on his part, and that was any abuse of Lucy. John Bramton was very fond of his youngest child, and never failed to take up the cudgels on her behalf, although too easy-going a man to do so on his own. A day or two more, and, not a little to his surprise, Mr Bramton received a letter from Messrs Drysdal and Pecker, solicitors, informing him that they were the legal advisers of Richard Bramton, and requesting to know if he had received any confirmation of the death of their client, adding that they knew no more than what was reported in the papers; but that, upon making inquiry at the office of the journal in which the original paragraph had appeared, they had been informed that the intelligence had been cabled home by an old and trusted correspondent, and that the editor felt no doubt as to its accuracy.

'You may depend upon it, John,' exclaimed Mrs Bramton when she heard of this letter, 'that he has left property behind him. A man who has solicitors is sure to be a man of substance, and, of course, they communicate with you as the next-of kin.'

'You are rather hasty in your conclusions, Mrs B.,' replied her husband. 'Bankrupt firms usually have solicitors. I could fancy poor Dick perpetually wanting a lawyer to get him out of some hobble or other.'

Now this, again, was a perfectly unwarrantable assumption on the part of the elder brother. He had never heard of Dick being in a scrape of any kind; but, in his complete ignorance of the mysteries of a trainer's calling, he looked upon him as one of those who habitually occupied a delicate position with regard to the police. However, of course, he replied to the letter of Messrs Drysdel and Pecker, informing them that he had had a telegram from his daughter which confirmed the news of her uncle's death, that Miss Brampton was on her way home, and was expected at Temple Rising in a few days. His answer produced another letter from Messrs Drysdel and Pecker, in which they briefly requested to be immediately apprised of that young lady's arrival.

'Suspicious chaps these lawyers; must have evidence that poor Dick is dead. I suppose he fancies that Lucy can swear to it.'

CHAPTER IV.

DICK BRAMTON'S WILL.

THERE was a ringing of bells, and a sound as if a tornado had swept through the house, when about a week later Lucy Bramton, in deep mourning, drove up to the door of Temple Rising. It was not in the least that this ostentatious style of arrival accorded with Lucy's ideas, but her father and mother had no notion of paying servitors for nothing. If the man at the lodge didn't make the bell peal again, and thereby give due notice to the outside world that there were visitors at Temple Rising; if the butler did not throw open the door with a crash, and make the very walls resound with the name of those

visitors ; if the very footmen did not in some way contrive to pervade the very stairs with the intelligence that Mr and Mrs So-and-so had *done themselves* the honour to call at Temple Rising, they were of no account, and useless in the eyes of Mr and Mrs Bramton. No people these to conceal their light under a bushel ; and if perchance a duke or very much minor light of the peerage should deign to call upon them, they were most distinctly of opinion that it would be good for all Barkshire to know it. Poor Lucy, terribly shocked at the tragedy which, so to speak, had taken place almost under her own eyes, would have crept quietly enough into her own home, if she could have done so, but the henchmen of Temple Rising were much too well trained for anything of this kind, and before she could clasp her mother's neck, the name of Miss Lucy Bramton was sounded through hall and corridor, and neither the Grand Duchess of Russia, nor the heiress of that mythical monarch Prester John, could have been announced with greater *fanfare* of trumpets. 'Miss Lucy Bramton ! Miss Lucy Bramton !' resounds through hall and staircase, and then the slight girlish figure in black is sobbing on the breast of a middle-aged, bald-headed, prosaic-looking gentleman.

'Very, very glad to see you back my dear !' exclaimed John Bramton. 'It has no doubt been a terrible shock to you and poor Dick. Well, of course, we always knew he carried on anyhow, but I never thought he would make an end of it that way.'

'Once for all, father, understand this,' exclaimed the girl, rapidly releasing herself from his embrace, and drawing her slender figure up to its full height, 'I will listen to no reflections against Uncle Dick. He might be rough, but he was ever to me the kindest and most indulgent of relations ; not a whim or caprice of mine that he would not indulge. You are a kind and a dear father to me, but even you have never humoured me in the way poor Uncle Dick used. How he got into that wretched place, how he met his doom, I can't think. I, at all events, can bear to hear no stones thrown at his memory. I know what mother is, I know what Matilda is, let them think as they like, but please, please father, let them say nothing against Uncle Dick's memory before me.'

'No, no; certainly not, my dear. I'll tell your mother, and I'll speak to Matilda. They sha'n't trouble you, my pet,' and then John Bramton inwardly wondered what deference to his prohibition would be accorded by that dictatorial wife of his.

'It was an awful shock for me when they told me he was dead. He left me after dinner, as he said, to smoke a cigar, as he had done scores of times before. What induced him to go to the villainous den at which he met his death, I can't say. I have been abroad with him often, and feel sure it was contrary to his usual habits; but he's gone. I kissed his dear face, and I can't bear to hear anything said against him. Let it be, father. He has gone; whatever his faults might have been, don't let me hear of them.'

'Quite right, my child, quite right,' said John Bramton, gently patting the head that nestled on his shoulder. 'I'll do my best, but you are aware that your mother, and, I may say, even Matilda are a little trying under these circumstances. Good woman, your mother, very good woman, but she will speak her mind, you know; and Matilda, well Matilda takes a little bit after her mamma. I will do my best. I will speak to them; but bless you, Lucy, you know when your mamma is "on the rampage" she can't hold her tongue; and I wouldn't say a word against Matilda for the world; but whenever she marries, I think her husband will come pretty much to the same conclusion. Good women both, my dear, but rather free of speech.'

The third morning after Lucy's return was signalled by the arrival at Temple Rising of Mr Pecker, junior partner of the firm of Drysdel and Pecker. He was cordially welcomed by Mr Bramton in the first instance, and at once proceeded to unfold the object of his errand.

'We have acted for some years as the legal advisers of the late Mr Richard Bramton. We made his will, which is dated some five years back. It is very simple, and to the best of our belief perfectly incontestable in any court of law. The deceased gentleman was an excellent man of business.'

'What!' exclaimed John Bramton; 'Dick a man of business! Nonsense! don't tell me.'

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

'Ah,' he said, 'I see; like many other people you're

under the delusion that racing men are not men of business. You are wrong; professional racing men are about the most astute men of business I ever come in contact with. I have considerable experience of them, and remember, I draw a great distinction between racing men and men who go racing.'

'Well, to hear that poor Dick was a man of business beats me,' said John Bramton, evidently in utter amazement at the bare idea.

'You must take my word for it,' said Mr Pecker smiling. 'You will perhaps also be surprised to hear that he was a man of considerable property. As the greater part of his securities are deposited in our hands, and as we possess a list of those which he thought fit to keep at his bankers, we can speak confidently on this point. Mr Richard Bramton has left behind him about five-and-thirty thousand pounds, besides his racing stud. What that may be worth, I have no conception. I have no knowledge of such matters.

'Five-and-thirty thousand pounds!' exclaimed John Bramton. 'Why I should never have given Dick credit for as many hundreds; and who has he left it all too?'

'He has left everything, the horses included, to his niece, Miss Lucy Bramton, and you are appointed sole executor. I have brought the will with me for you to read; it's very brief, and cannot well be simpler, with the exception of this codicil; and about this, I must tell you, I'm not quite sure. It says, as you will see,' and Mr Pecker pointed to the place, 'quite clearly that the horses are to be run through their engagements. This, as far as I understand, means that Miss Lucy cannot dispose of the stud till such engagements as have been made for the various horses have been decided. Whoever has charge of them will, I presume, advise her how to manage on that point; but it is open to question whether she has the power of selling them before their engagements have expired.'

'You are aware, Mr Pecker, that my daughter is a minor, that I consequently am her natural trustee, and that what is to be done with those horses will therefore rest in my hands; and I tell you what it is, sir, I don't

want any time to decide. I know nothing about race-horses, and don't want to. I'm not going to take to gambling at my time of life. Those horses go to the hammer before six weeks are over our heads.'

'Ah!' said Mr Pecker, putting his head rather on one side, 'this gives rise to the rather curious question of whether you've the power to act in this way. There is no doubt about the body of the will; but our late client, just before starting on his last unfortunate trip to Egypt, had his will, together with some other papers, back for a night, and has added this codicil himself without consultation with us. It is a delicate and most interesting point to know whether that codicil implies a wish, or imposes a condition.'

'Condition, nonsense,' exclaimed Mr Bramton. 'You can't make it a condition that I'm to keep an expensive lot of animals that I don't want.'

'Oh, yes, my dear sir; excuse me, that's quite possible. Old ladies are very apt to provide for favourite cats in that way. As I told you, I'm not quite prepared to say the codicil does that. You will have to take counsel's opinion on it if necessary; but as you are acting for your daughter, and I can't suppose that Miss Lucy would have any desire to keep on her uncle's stud unless she was obliged, it would be possible perhaps to treat it as merely a wish; and then, my dear sir, it becomes a matter of simply what deference you mean to pay to the desire of your deceased brother.'

'Don't put it in that way,' exclaimed Mr Bramton. 'Of course I am anxious to do everything that poor Dick wished, but he never could have intended that either Lucy or myself were to take to horse-racing. Now come into the other room, and have some lunch.'

'In a few minutes, Mr Bramton, with pleasure; but I shouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't personally read and explain this will to Miss Lucy. It won't take five minutes, if you will only be good enough to fetch her.'

John Bramton rose, and speedily returned, accompanied by his younger daughter. He had briefly explained the fortune she had come in to, and what she was wanted for.

Mr Pecker, on being introduced to her, wasted no time, but proceeded at once to business. He read the will through, codicil and all, and briefly explained to her the doubt which existed in his mind as to which way the codicil was to be regarded, whether as a wish or a condition, winding up with the remark, 'But as this is a matter that lies between you and your father, it is hardly likely to be called into question.' He then briefly congratulated her on her inheritance, looked at his watch, and said,—

'And now, Mr Bramton, if you can, give me something to eat. I've just twenty minutes to spare before starting for the railway station.'

Lucy had made no comment upon the will, except to acknowledge the lawyer's congratulations. She had hardly opened her lips, but for all that, she had listened very attentively to what Mr Pecker had said to her, more especially with regard to that strange codicil. To say that she had come to any resolve concerning it would be absurd. She did not exactly comprehend as yet what it meant. All she knew was this, that the colt called Damocles was one of her uncle's most cherished possessions, and that his dying message had commended Damocles to her care.

About this period it suddenly dawned upon Her Majesty's Government that a person called the Mahdi was about to occasion trouble in Upper Egypt. Her Majesty's Government, with that grand geographical ignorance that usually characterises it, whether Liberal or Conservative, suddenly awoke to the fact that a place called Khartoum was rather an important city in those parts which it behoved them to hold. Her Majesty's Government, furthermore, became somehow aware that a person of the name of Gordon had more knowledge of those parts than anyone living. Further, that the said Gordon was an officer of considerable distinction, and that, if there was anything to be done in the way of saving Khartoum, this was the man to do it. Government, not particularly clear about what the especial object was in saving Khartoum; not in fact very clear about the Soudan and Upper Egypt generally, but hazily aware that the Mahdi promised to be an uncomfortable fact in the case, and give trouble generally, at last gave Gordon

a roving commission to do as he thought best for the pacification of the Soudan, and then, after the usual manner of British Governments, having picked out the very best man for the work, proceeded to tie his hands in all possible directions. They took no notice of what he demanded, although he made his way promptly to Khartoum; informed them at once that it was the key of the Soudan, and that as long as he held that, let what wild work might go on in the desert, he was the virtual ruler of the country. Government read his despatches, said, 'We have bombarded Alexandria, put down Arabi, taken Cairo; good, it will be time enough now to see about Egypt in another year or two.' Letter after letter, despatch after despatch, came from the grand soldier who had taken upon himself this terrible burden. The errand which the Government had sent him on they now sought to repudiate. They tried to make out that his mission had been of his own seeking; but the gathering roar of the British public at last convinced them that they stood bound to fall by the man they had virtually sent to grapple with the insurrection of the Soudan.

By this time all England was aware that Chinese Gordon was shut up in Khartoum, and was defending himself against swarms of fanatical Arabs. Closely beleaguered though he was, he managed to get despatch after despatch through his myriad foes; and those short pithy despatches never varied in their tenor. 'I can hold my own,' he invariably said, 'till the end of December; that passed, we shall be destitute of food, and I can guarantee no more.' Months still intervening between this and December, but the heat of summer having commenced, and the fall of the Nile having begun, it suddenly occurred to the Government that, however late it might be for an expedition of this kind, the irritation of the British public must be appeased. Utterly deaf to the man they had doomed to destruction, the Government yielded to the political outcry of the country, and summoning all the military experts to their councils, debated as to how Khartoum might be most speedily relieved. That they had probably hit upon the best device to achieve that result is possible; we only know two things, they were too late,

and they did not take the route which Gordon, who might be supposed to know something about it, advised.

All this discussion and turmoil as to the relief expedition took place just after Lucy Bramton had come into her inheritance.

CHAPTER V.

THE HELIOTROPE.

A VERY lively club was the Heliotrope, much given to baccarat, poker, and divers games at times not recognised at clubs of greater stability,—one of those mushroom night clubs that spring up and are wont to have the mushroom's ephemeral existence. All London, that is the ten or twelve thousand people who consider themselves all London, would have unanimously admitted that, to put it mildly, the members of the Heliotrope were a 'lively lot.' It was a club with no architectural pretensions whatever; indeed the three hundred members who constituted it contented themselves with a roomy first floor off the Strand. The club, indeed, practically consisted of three rooms; the supper-room, card-room and kitchen. There was much discussion, scandal and tobacco going on in the supper-room one evening, when a studious member, who had pulled himself together and devoted himself to the mastery of the evening papers, suddenly exclaimed,—

'Hallo, Dart, here's something will interest you!'

'Very glad to hear it,' replied a tall, good-looking young fellow about thirty. 'It's such a godsend when anything does, considering the awful way in which those fellows down at St Stephen's bore us. Can't conceive myself what makes the governor so persistent about my going in for representing the county. Suppose he suffered from it himself in his youth, and thinks it a wholesome chastisement for his first-born. What's your news? If you've found anything in that paper, draw it out.'

'Only this,' replied the speaker, 'Dick Bramton has got wiped out in a gambling-house row at Cairo; and considering your father snapped all the yearling books about Damocles when the colt was sold, I thought it might interest you.'

'Interest me, by Jove! I should think it did!' said Lord Dartree. 'I took twenty thousand to three hundred about Damocles once, and the governor took it as often as he could get it. In fact, between us we captured every yearling book there was going. Damocles is entered in the name of his breeder, so that's all right; but what becomes of him is quite another matter. Dick Bramton would have run him as straight as a die. He is an old racing pal of the governor's, and knew he could have any fair share of the plunder that he chose to stipulate for.'

'He'll most likely be sold now, I should think,' observed Anson, the gentleman who had read out the news.

'Suppose he will,' rejoined Lord Dartree. 'I must try and persuade the governor to buy him, though how the deuce we are to lay our hands on ten thousand pounds, or whatever it is they want for him, I'm blest if I know. We have got partridges, we have got stabling, we have got gardens, and no end of a library at Knightshayes, but, my dear Anson, we haven't got any money. Everybody knows that the agricultural interest has gone to the devil, and that your big landowners are merely genteel paupers.'

'Only wish I was one of you genteel paupers, too,' said Anson, who was one of those extraordinary young gentlemen who had knocked about town for years, and couldn't if he tried have explained to his dearest friend how he did it; but he had one of those elastic minds, that was equally prepared to discuss with his friends the raising of ten thousand pounds or a five-pound note. In fact, in his more volatile moments, he had been known to say that 'it was the insignificance of the sum required that made the difficulty. You see,' he would continue, 'when you want a few hundreds, and your name is well known about London, the money-lenders can't believe but what there is some prospect of your paying; but when you go to them for dribblets, they want to know what office you're in, or some rot of that sort. Dribblets are connected with clerkships; hundreds with visionary incomes.'

'It's a deuce of a bore,' said Lord Dartree. 'From all I hear, this is an uncommon smart colt, and the governor stands to win over a hundred thousand pounds on him. Now, if he's put up for sale, it's as likely as not that he will be

bought by the very men who laid the money, under which circumstances it is not likely he'll win the Derby next year.'

'No,' said Anson, 'it's hardly likely they'll win the race for the pleasure of paying you all this money. One don't know but the probability is the horse will be put up for sale. Pretty sure to be, unless there is racing stock in the family; and I always understood that old Dick Bramton had neither chick nor child; never heard he had a relation of any kind. Nobody knows much about him. But he began life as a stable lad, didn't he?'

'Something of that sort,' said Lord Dartree; 'don't know exactly, but he could always win races when he meant business. The governor's no fool; and when he found out that Bramton had bought the colt, he went to him at once, and said point blank, "I have got all the yearling books about Damocles for the Derby. My risk, not yours at present. You have nothing to do but to tell me at the end of his two-year-old career how much you would like of them, and you will find me quite reasonable.'

'And what did he say?' asked Anson.

'All right, my lord,' was his reply. 'If the colt turns out as good as he looks, you will have a rare run for your money.'

'It's uncertain property to invest in, a two-year-old that has never run,' remarked Anson; 'but then people wouldn't lay such liberal odds if there was not all the uncertainty about it. You'll have to buy the colt if you can, or else come to some arrangement with his new owner.'

'I suppose so,' replied Lord Dartree. 'It's a great bore. Can't understand a man like Dick Bramton getting into such a scrape. Should have thought him too clever a man to play against the tables.'

'You might have known better than that,' laughed Anson. 'Who know better the folly of backing horses than the bookmakers, and yet they do it at times.'

'True,' replied Dartree, 'we all deride the idea when in London of playing against the tables, but as soon as we get to Monte Carlo we feel bound to try our luck.'

'Well, what becomes of Damocles must interest you much. Still if anyone can rise to the occasion, it is your noble father.'

'Why, that is just what I tell you he can't,' retorted Dartree irritably. 'You may know what to do, and not be able to do it. This is a question of money, and that is exactly what I have told you the noble house of Ranksborow has not.'

'No,' said Anson quietly; 'but Lord Ranksborow is a man of infinite resources, more especially on the turf. It's very easy to do most things with money, but it takes a clever man to attain his ends without. Now I have a very high opinion of your father's talents in his own line; indeed in any line, years ago, he showed in the House of Lords what he could do, and before that, in the House of Commons, as Lord Dartree, was pronounced one of the most promising young ones out. But he cut politics for racing, and, as we all know, is as good a judge as any man on the turf.'

'Well,' rejoined Lord Dartree, 'he has a great opportunity now for exercising his faculties, and by hook or by crook acquiring the control of Damocles. Buy the colt he can't, unless they are willing to sell on tick, which is not at all likely.'

'No,' rejoined Anson, 'there's not much of that in horse-dealing; still I've great confidence in your father, and only wish I had a bit of your book, for though the colt has never run, I doubt a good man laying you half the odds now.'

But if the members of the Heliotrope were fluttered at the news of the death of Dick Bramton, it made a much more considerable stir down at Newmarket. Stubber the trainer was simply, to use his own expression, 'flabbergasted.' Even his intimate friends, who really were as much puzzled and disappointed about the affair as himself, could not refrain from laughing at Mr Stubber's melancholy refrain of 'What's to become of the hosses?' He discussed the affair with them from every point of view; he vowed that Damocles was the speediest yearling he ever tried; and look at the blood, too, by Tyrant out of Packthread; the Tyrants always stay. He eulogised the dead man, and said, 'There were few shrewder men on a racecourse than Mr Bramton. Why he'd have won a fortune with this colt; and now I should

just like to know what's to become of the hosses? It's cruel I've never had the luck to train the winner of the Derby yet, and I did think I should do it next year.'

The curiosity to know how Dick Bramton had disposed of his property was very great at Newmarket, but none of his friends there seemed to be aware that he had had a brother. In fact, though they might be supposed to be better informed about the dead man's family than the members of the 'Heliotrope,' they seemed equally ignorant that he had either kith or kin belonging to him. Still it is so rarely that a man stands utterly alone in this world, that they all supposed his property would go to some distant relation; but on one point they were unanimous, and in response to the trainer's dolorous question, rejoined that the horses would come to the hammer. Cold comfort all this for Sam Stubber, who really was honestly wrapped up in his charge. He was a conscientious man, and thoroughly to be trusted, or he never would have been employed by Dick Bramton. He was a man of much experience, and though perhaps somewhat sanguine, quite understood how to try a horse. They had very good trying tackle in the stable, and as far as it was possible to test a colt of the age of Damocles, Mr Staples had done so, and with very satisfactory results. In fact, as he told his intimates, he had never tried a youngster so high in his life, and the thought that his favourite would be probably taken out of his charge was gall and wormwood to him; and of course it was probable that whoever bought Damocles would transfer the horse to his own stable. Still at present he heard nothing from anybody on this point, and at this Mr Stubber and his friends marvelled greatly. What could be the meaning of it? Could Richard Bramton have died intestate, and were they searching for his heir, or had he died insolvent? He had made no doubt a good bit of money on the turf, but then there was the manner of his death—killed in a gambling-house; and no people knew better than the Newmarket men how quickly it is possible to knock down any amount of turf winnings in houses of that description. The rooms at Newmarket, like those at Doncaster, had been wont to give instructive lessons on that point. In the meantime

the spring was drawing on. The Two Thousand was a thing of the past, and the New Stakes at Ascot had been selected for the *début* of Damocles, when one morning, after returning from the Heath with his charges, Mr Stubber was informed there was a gentleman in the parlour who had arrived from London and wished to see him: Sam Stubber at once went into the room, found his visitor gazing in an absent way out of the window, and invited him to join him at breakfast.

'I shall be very glad,' replied the latter. 'The morning air gives one an appetite, and we can discuss our business over it as well as anywhere. I must at once introduce myself as Mr Pecker, of the firm of Drysdel and Pecker, solicitors. I have come down to see you about the racing stud of our late client, Mr Richard Bramton.'

'Well, Mr Pecker, I'm right glad to see you, though I am afraid you bring no good news for me. What's to become of those hosses has been a sore puzzle to me. I suppose they're to be sold, and I should very much like to know who'll buy two or three of 'em.'

'Well, we've got no immediate instructions about them,' replied Mr Pecker; 'but I should suppose that would be their destiny, as far as we can guess. What I've come down here for is to make out a list of what horses there actually are, and to ask you to give me a rough valuation of them.'

'And whose property are they at this minute?' inquired Mr Stubber.

'That,' replied the attorney, 'I am not at liberty to mention, and it's possible you will never know. They will be sold as the property of the late Mr Richard Bramton; and how he has disposed of his personal property is, I take it, of not very much consequence to anyone.'

'Before I say anything about the valuation, Mr Pecker,' rejoined the trainer, 'I should like to ask you when you think of selling these horses, because that would make a difference.'

'Oh, I see,' rejoined the lawyer, 'some times are more favourable for that sort of thing than others.'

'Just so,' replied Mr Stubber; 'the most valuable horse, I reckon, in Mr Bramton's stud, is a two-year-old called

Damocles. Now you can dispose of him, no doubt, for a good round sum by private contract; on the other hand, you can run him for the New Stakes at Ascot in about three weeks' time,—a race that he's pretty certain to win, and which if he does win easily, will considerably increase his value.'

'And which course should you recommend, Mr Stubber?'

'That must depend upon what sort of a man the present owner is. In the first method of disposing of the colt there is no risk, in the second there is. The youngsters in the New Stakes are mostly dark, and there may be one, though I don't think it, too good for us. If Damocles got badly beat, the gilt would be off the gingerbread. Then there are the chances of training. Damocles is as sound as a roach, but legs will go, and hosses give trouble when least expected. If his new owner's a sportsman, he'll run him,' and Mr Stubber cast an inquiring look at the lawyer.

'I'm sure I can't say about that,' replied Mr Pecker, with an amazed look. 'I can only report what you tell me to my client. I don't understand anything about these things myself.'

'Then perhaps, sir, you wouldn't care to go round the stables?'

'On the contrary, if not against all rules, that is precisely what I should like to do,' rejoined Pecker.

'Then come along,' said Mr Stubber, 'and I'll show you Damocles, and all the rest of 'em.'

Mr Pecker was excessively pleased with all he saw, and when introduced to Damocles, a lengthy dark chesnut colt, with thighs let down like a greyhound's, not only expressed the greatest admiration for him, but was so pertinent in his remarks about his shape, that the gratified Mr Stubber, when he bade the lawyer good-bye, said,—

'Well, sir, you may know nothing about racing, but you do know a good hoss when you see one.'

CHAPTER VI.

A DELICATE COMMISSION.

'It's all very well, John, but you must exert yourself. Other folks have to do it when they go into a new neighbourhood. You must make acquaintances; people must be made to call. You've dragged us down here to Temple Rising—'

'Upon my soul, Mrs Bramton, I like that,' interrupted her husband. 'Dragged you down here, indeed, when the old villa at Wimbledon was quite good enough for me. You would have me set up as a country gentleman; you said it was more genteel. It strikes me we are not quite genteel enough for the people round here—'

'Pooh, nonsense!' rejoined Mrs Bramton; 'they may be very great swells, but they're a poor lot. As far as I can make out, there's very few of them drive such carriages as I do. I'm sure you could buy most of them up. Even Lord Ranksborow, who has never deigned to take the slightest notion of us, I am told is as hard up as anyone. You surely might scrape acquaintance with him.'

'I tell you it's impossible; it's not the thing, you know, for us to call first. I did tread upon his toe at that meeting about the flower show, and then apologise, and remark it was a fine day. I took off my hat to him quite affable the next time we met, but, Lord! he only just touched his, and evidently didn't recognise me in the slightest degree.'

'Now what did I tell you, John, were my reasons for buying a country place? Simply, I said, to get the girls well married. You've lots of money, John; now what do the girls want?—blood and position.'

'Ah! I know,' returned her husband, 'this blue blood they're always talking about; but I don't know where they sell it, or how to buy it.'

'Don't talk nonsense!' returned the lady sharply. 'There are lots of young men among these county families who would be only too glad to marry a good-looking girl with money; and, though I says it myself, my girls can bear looking at in a ballroom as well as any of them.'

'Well, it's no good talking about it, my dear. I don't see how the girls are to marry without meeting young men; and the people about here apparently don't care about knowing us. Now, when we were at Wimbledon, there were lots of—'

'John! stockbrokers and City men,' interrupted Mrs Bramton. 'Yes, I know that; but I look higher a good deal for my girls, I can tell you. We *must* make the people know us.'

'It's all very well,' replied John Bramton, 'to say we must.'

'Very well,' interposed his wife, 'then I'll put it stronger, and say they *shall*. You know, Mr Bramton, I'm a woman of energy—'

'Ah! yes, my dear, and of great conversational powers. I have never known you without something to say.'

And with this mild sarcasm John Bramton was about to leave the room, when the door opened, and a footman said,—

'There's a gentleman to see you, sir, on business.'

'What have you done with him, William?'

'Shown him into your study, sir.'

'Quite right, William; quite right, William,' said Mr Bramton pompously. 'Visitors to the drawing-room, people on business to my study,' with which remark he followed the servant to the room in question.

A stout, middle-aged man, with grizzled hair, keen eyes, and a shrewd face, who was apparently admiring the pictures on the walls, turned abruptly and greeted him.

'You've a beautiful place here, Mr Bramton. I couldn't help admiring it as I drove up the avenue. These pictures, too, are some of them remarkably fine.'

'Yes, I believe they are. They ought to be. I gave a lot of money for 'em. I left that department when I was furnishing to old Lazarus of Wardour Street, and he assured me they were all gems and all bargains. Ha! ha! I've been too long in business to swallow that last, Mr—' and here John Bramton paused a moment while he glanced at his visitor's card, 'Mr Skinner. Still I don't think old Lazarus would cheat me altogether.'

'I don't think Mr Bramton is a man who is easily got the best of,' replied the stranger, smiling. 'I have no

doubt that you are as good a judge of a horse as you are of a picture.'

'Tol-lol,' said John Bramton, drawing himself up, and falling into his favourite attitude with his thumbs stuck into the armholes of his waistcoat. 'I keep my fellow up to the mark, I can tell you. You'll see some rare, shiny-coated, long-tailed ones in my stables.'

'Ah,' said Mr Skinner, 'I see you know how a horse ought to look. We are a horsey nation, and there never was an Englishman who didn't consider himself a judge of a horse.'

John Bramton was flattered. The stranger had tickled him like a trout.

'A very pleasant, gentlemanly man,' thought the host; 'sees at a glance I'm a judge of pictures and horses. Whatever business he has come about doesn't seem to be urgent. I daresay he would like a walk round the grounds. Hang it! I'll ask him to lunch. We don't see many people; it'll be a change. By the way, Mr Skinner, perhaps you would like to look round the grounds?'

'Of all things,' replied the stranger.

'And will do us the favour of stopping to lunch afterwards?' continued Mr Bramton.

The stranger bowed assent, and in another minute or two they were strolling through the gardens and pleasure. Mr Skinner admired everything, the hothouse, the conservatory, the orchid house, vinery, and stables.

'I think Temple Rising the most perfect gentleman's seat I've ever been over, and I've had some experience. By the way, Mr Bramton, I've been so taken up in admiring the pictures, horses, flowers, etc., I quite forgot to mention that I knew your poor brother Dick very well.'

'Did you, indeed! that's odd. Poor fellow, I never knew exactly how he lived. He was always gambling. Came by his death through it.'

'It was a bad business,' said Mr Skinner; 'and how Dick Bramton came to go in for roulette, rather beats me. I suppose he found it dull out there. Nothing to do, nobody to talk racing with. He wanted a little excitement, and he would know how to take care of himself, too. I don't mean when it came to knives, for he was

a little man, and a delicate man, but he was a very leading man on the turf, I assure you, Mr Bramton.'

'Ah! so I've understood lately. He left a comfortable bit of money behind him. They tell me,' and here John Bramton looked a little inquisitively at his auditor, 'that he made a regular business of it.'

Bramton in fact was not quite sure whether Mr Pecker had not been either mistaken himself or hoaxing him when he said that the turf could be made a business.

'Business of it! I should think he did; and so do most men who are really on it.'

'Come in at this window, Mr Skinner, and let me introduce you to the ladies, and then we'll go in to lunch.'

They stepped through the window.

'Margaret, my dear,' exclaimed John Bramton, 'let me introduce you to a friend of poor Dick's! My daughters, Mr Skinner.'

The visitor bowed, and then, turning to Mrs Bramton, said,—

'Yes, ma'am, Dick Bramton was a very old friend of mine, and was one of the cleverest men we had. No man ever made more dashing *coups* on the turf. I assure you he was well known to all the racing magnates.'

Now Mrs Bramton, who during his lifetime had had the greatest contempt for her brother-in-law, had considerably changed her opinion since she had learnt that he had left five-and-thirty thousand pounds behind him, and left it, as she considered, though not quite properly, still satisfactorily. 'It ought to have been left,' she argued, 'to her husband in the first instance, even if it went to Dick Bramton's favourite niece afterwards.' Then she had been rather struck by the very flattering notices about him that had appeared in the papers.

'Yes,' she murmured, 'I believe he was very well known to the members of the Jockey Club.'

Mr Skinner bowed assent.

'And a very successful man besides.'

'Very,' rejoined their visitor.

'So clever, and so successful,' said Mrs Bramton, smiling sweetly, 'that I believe the Jockey Club paid him the compliment of warning him off the turf.'

Mr Skinner's sole reply was a burst of laughter; and it was a minute or two before he could at all master his risible faculties.

'Ten thousand pardons, my dear madam!' he exclaimed at length, 'but I'm sure you don't understand what you have said. "Warning off the turf" is a punishment for disgraceful practices on it; and poor Dick never did anything to warrant that extreme sentence of the Jockey Club.'

John Bramton, on hearing this explanation, exploded even more boisterously than Mr Skinner, while poor Mrs Bramton blushed as red as a peony, and Miss Bramton bit her lip with vexation, and muttered to herself,—

'Mamma is always committing some *gaucherie* like that.'

'My eye, Margaret, you have put your foot into it!' said John Bramton, as soon as he could speak. 'You see, Mr Skinner, we ain't racing people. We don't know anything about it. Poor Dick and I went different ways in life, and never saw very much of each other. When we met, you see, we had nothing in common. He didn't understand my business, nor I his.' In fact, I thought his business was gambling until the other day. Now let's come in to lunch.'

'Do you live in this neighbourhood, Mr Skinner?' said Miss Bramton as they took their places at table.

'No, I regret to say not. My business compels me to live in London; but it must be a charming part of the country. Thickly populated, so many gentlemen's places, plenty of society, and all that sort of thing.'

'Well, that's just what it isn't,' said Mrs Bramton. 'There are plenty of people, no doubt, but they're not inclined to be sociable, rather stiff and stand-off—'

'Mamma, mamma,' interposed Miss Bramton, 'you forget. The fact is, Mr Skinner, we are newcomers in the country, and, as you know, it always takes time to know people.'

'Yes,' said Mr Bramton, 'your ma is right, Matilda. That's just what they are, 'aughty. Now, here's my neighbour the Earl of Ranksborow, I'm sure I wish to be sociable, but he don't seem to see it.'

'I think, papa,' said Lucy quietly, 'that you're a little impatient. I daresay we shall know people in time, although not perhaps the Earl of Ranksborow.'

'I am staying at Knightshayes,' observed Mr Skinner. 'I'm sure you will find the Earl a very pleasant and courteous neighbour as soon as you know him. Somewhat quick tempered, perhaps, but that's all.'

'Oh! no doubt,' rejoined John Bramton hurriedly. 'I'm sure, when I trod on his toe by accident at the flower show meeting, he accepted my apology quite affable like.'

'Well, I really must be going,' said Mr Skinner, rising. 'What with your charming place, and your kindness, I have quite forgot what I came about. I must ask for a word with you in your study before I leave.'

'Certainly,' replied Mr Bramton, and Mr Skinner having said good-bye to his hostess and her daughters, followed his entertainer to the room in question.

'The fact is,' said the visitor, 'I have been told you have inherited poor Dick Bramton's racing stud. Amongst those horses is a colt called Damocles. It has never run, but I candidly own that it is supposed to be good. I am commissioned to offer you one thousand pounds for him.'

'One thousand pounds!' ejaculated John Bramton. 'I know they give long prices for some of these racers, but a thousand pounds is a mint of money.'

'It is,' replied Mr Skinner drily. 'I have known as much paid many a time for quite as good-looking youngsters as Damocles, and they've turned out not worth a row of gingerbread.'

'Quite so, quite so,' replied John Bramton. 'A thousand pounds!—you're in earnest, Mr Skinner?'

'Never more so,' replied that gentleman. 'I'll write you a cheque for that sum now, and let you know where to send the colt after it's cashed.'

'A thousand pounds!' exclaimed John Bramton, starting to his feet. 'If poor Dick's horses sell like this, he has left a deal more than I reckoned on. Excuse me one moment, Mr Skinner,' and so saying John Bramton dashed off in search of his daughter.

'Lucy, my dear,' he exclaimed, as he pounced upon her in the drawing-room, 'here's such a chance to get rid of one of those horses. Mr Skinner has offered a thousand pounds for Dam—Dam—something.'

'Oh! papa, papa!' cried Lucy.

'No, my dear, I don't mean that. I'm not a damning anything, only I can't recollect the name of the horse.'

'Damocles, I suppose, papa.'

'That's it. Think what a chance, Lucy; a thousand pounds for a wretched brute who does nothing but eat, and, as Mr Skinner says, may turn out good for nothing. You can buy yourself a pair of ponies, or anything you like, and put a lot into the bank besides. We shall never get such a chance again.'

'I don't know, papa; I'm not so sure about that. I know more about the value of racehorses than you do. Mr Skinner, remember, was an intimate friend of poor Uncle Dick's. The probability is that he is a much better judge of what Damocles is worth than either of us. I know Uncle Dick thought a great deal of that horse; besides, what made Mr Skinner come all the way from London to offer you a thousand pounds for that horse, if he didn't think he was going to make a good bargain?'

'Pooh! he didn't come down on purpose. He's staying,' continued Mr Bramton pompously, and sticking his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, 'with my neighbour, the Right Honourable the Earl of Ranksborow.'

'Well, never mind where he came from, papa. He wouldn't come over here quietly and offer you a thousand pounds if he didn't think he was getting Damocles cheaply.'

'Upon my word, Lucy, I believe you're right. You see I never dealt in these kind of goods before. Perhaps that Skinner is trying to "best" me. Never mind, Lucy, you'll find your old father is a match for most of them,' and so saying John Bramton returned to the study.

'Well, Mr Skinner,' he said, as he entered, 'I don't think it'll quite do. My girls have a fancy for that horse. I think it 'ud make a nice lady's 'orse, for instance.'

Mr Skinner opened his eyes wide. That a man should go and consult his wife and daughters about the disposal of a racehorse was to him a thing past all understanding. Recovering himself, with an easy smile, he said,—

'You will have your joke, Mr Bramton. Not quite enough, eh? Well, I'll make it guineas.'

But all John Bramton's business instincts were now

thoroughly awakened. If Mr Skinner could afford to spring in his bidding, it was obvious that he was offering considerably less than the valuation he put upon the colt in question.

'No,' said John Bramton ; 'I won't sell him just at present.'

'Well, no harm done,' replied Mr Skinner, as he rose to go. 'I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, and shall be able to tell Lord Ranksborow what very charming neighbours he has got.'

'Ah! do now, do now. That's kindly of you. Tell him we do the thing tol-lolish. Very glad if his lordship will come in and take a snack with us any time he is passing this way.'

Mr Bramton insisted upon accompanying his guest to the door, where a neat dog-cart was awaiting him. Just before stepping into it, Mr Skinner turned and said,—

'I tell you what, it's overstepping my commission, but I'll take my chance of that. This is my last word. Here's twelve hundred for Damocles, and I'll write you a cheque this minute.'

'No, no, thank ye,' replied Mr Bramton. 'No ; you see we've taken a fancy to the horse—quite a pet in the family—not to be thought of. Good-bye, good-bye ; so glad to have seen you. Remember me to his lordship,' and with these words Mr Bramton bustled back into the house.

'Good Lord!' he muttered, 'to think that I should ever refuse twelve hundred pounds for a horse. If he had buttonholed me a minute longer on the steps, I must have taken it. Oh, dear! if Lucy is wrong, I shall never forgive myself for having missed a chance like that.'

CHAPTER VII.

MR SKINNER REPORTS PROGRESS.

THE Right Honourable the Earl of Ranksborow had been not at all badly described by Anson at the Heliotrope,—an undoubtedly clever man, a brilliant man in pretty nearly everything he essayed, but wanting in one great thing, namely, stability of purpose. He was always disappointing his friends in whatever pursuit he took up. His early

efforts were invariably so crowned with success that great things were expected of him. At one time in the political world he was regarded as one of the most rising young men of his party. He was then Lord Dartree; and it was prophesied of him that, with practice, he would become one of the best speakers in the House. But suddenly he cast politics on one side and took to steeplechasing, and distinguished himself at first by riding with great dash but equal want of judgment. However, he threw himself into his new pursuit with all the ardour habitual to him, and racing men were soon full of astonishment at the way in which he improved. At one time he had dabbled in literature, and some of his hunting and society ballads were in all the world's mouth. One thing after another he took up only to throw upon one side just as he was beginning to make a name in it. As one of his most intimate friends said at the time, 'Dartree is a rare beginner, but he can't stay.' To all the pursuits of his youth the Earl had remained faithful only to the turf and the whist-table. He had lost thousands at the former, but the latter was no doubt worth some hundreds a year to him. He was a scientific player, and nobody had ever seen the Earl lose his head either on the racecourse or at the card-table, which, considering his naturally hot temper, showed that he had considerable strength of mind when his interests required it.

'So you bungled it, Skinner. I gave you a pretty liberal limit, too; and, from all I can hear, this John Bramton was neither likely to want the colt nor to be aware of his value.'

'No, my lord,' rejoined Skinner quietly, 'I have made no mess of it whatever. I did not bid to anything like what you said I might. It would have been no good; it would have been showing one's hand for nothing. This John Bramton knows nothing of horses, but is a shrewd man, with commercial instincts. The minute he found I wanted the colt, he rushed at the conclusion that it was worth more than I bid for it. He doesn't know what it's worth, but he is terribly afraid of letting it go under its full value.'

'And there are plenty of people to tell him that,' growled the Earl.

'Yes,' rejoined Skinner ; 'and you know, my lord, there are plenty of people would go a good deal higher for the colt than you authorised me.'

'Yes! Confound it! I'd bid high enough if I had it, but then I haven't. Damocles is worth more to me than he is to anyone else.'

The scene of the above conversation was Lord Ranksborow's private den at Knightshayes—a very different sanctum from that of Mr Bramton. Instead of pictures, the walls were lined with bookcases containing a curious medley of literature. The *Racing Calendar* stood cheek by jowl with Horace, Juvenal, Tacitus, etc., while the English classics were mixed up with the *Sporting Magazine* and numerous old books which referred to the turf in its earlier days. Above the fireplace was a large oil-painting—the sole one in the room—representing the great match between Voltigeur and the Flying Dutchman, run over the Knavesmire in '52, while opposite this was a tall mahogany cabinet with glass doors, through which you could see trays filled with cigars of every description, something like one of those cabinets in which collectors keep bird's eggs, only on a larger scale.

Mr Skinner had so far told the truth when he had said that he was staying at Knightshayes. Indeed he often came down for a night or two ; but he certainly had not informed Mr Bramton of his exact position there. He was a very leading turf commissioner, and amongst his clients had for many years numbered Lord Ranksborow. In fact, in the early part of his career, Mr Skinner had been indebted to the Earl for many remunerative commissions, and owed his first start in his vocation to that nobleman having taken him up and recommended him to two or three of his racing friends. But the Earl treated him completely as a man of business. He was always comfortably put up, an excellent dinner and bottle of wine was always provided for him, and Lord Ranksborow would sometimes dine with him in the library ; but he would have as soon thought of asking his butler to join the family circle as Mr Skinner.

'What the deuce is to be done? I fancied the looks of that colt immensely when he came into the sale-ring.

When Dick Bramton endorsed my judgment by giving a long sum for him, I fancied him still more, and, as you know, I snapped every yearling book I could get hold of about him. Of course I told Dick he could have as much as he wanted, and he told me, poor fellow, just before he went to Egypt, that he had tried him—"a clipper." Stubber told me the same thing again this spring. I never had such a chance; and now, goodness knows into whose hands the colt will go. What the devil is to be done, Skinner? 'Take a weed, Skinner. Put on your considering cap, and think it out,' and as he spoke the Earl pushed his cigar-box across to his commissioner.

The latter carefully selected a Cabana from the box, lit it, and smoked for two or three minutes in silence.

'There's only one way out of it that I can see, my lord,' he observed at length.

'I suppose you mean a big ten thousand pounds and have done with it. I tell you I can't; I haven't got it.'

'No; I don't mean that exactly. I think I see a way by which you might possibly become owner of Damocles for very much less money than that; say for the fifteen hundred which you authorised me to go to. And you know, my lord, that anybody who knew anything about horse-flesh would simply laugh at such a bid as that. Our only chance of getting hold of Damocles was Mr Bramton's total ignorance of everything connected with racing.'

'All's fair in horse-dealing,' rejoined the Earl sharply. 'Be good enough, Skinner, to remember that I don't employ you to moralise, but to act.'

His lordship was quite aware that, in attempting to buy Damocles at the figure he proposed, he was being guilty of a piece of uncommon sharp practice, and by no means relished being reminded of it by his subordinate.

'Well, my lord,' said Skinner, 'I think if you would drive over to Temple Rising and see Mr Bramton yourself, and offer him the fifteen hundred, he would very likely take it from you.'

'I don't see that he is more likely to take the price from one man than another. If you thought that, why the deuce didn't you offer it him?'

'Because, my lord, I don't want to lose your custom.'

I've heard you say again and again that you never employ fools knowingly. I purposely stopped at twelve hundred, in order to leave you an opening.'

'I'll be hung if I understand you!' exclaimed the Earl.

'Mr Bramton has just bought a property near you, and is simply dying to make your acquaintance. Take my advice; call upon him at once, admire his place and welcome him cordially to the country. Call upon him again two or three days later, offer him fifteen hundred for Damocles, and I'll bet you a level fiver it's a deal.'

'What! call upon that d—d tradesman!' exclaimed the Earl.

'Think of Damocles,' softly murmured Mr Skinner, and then Lord Ranksborow burst into a peal of laughter.

'What on earth put this idea into your head?'

'When one goes horse-dealing, one naturally looks out for the weak points both of the horse and his owner. You know the old cant, my lord, of the dealer's yard, "I wouldn't part with that animal to anyone but a real horseman like yourself." Of course the dealer there is simply tickling his customer's vanity. You must tickle Mr Bramton's vanity. I don't suppose he ever knew a real lord before, and he's simply just death upon knowing one now.'

'By Jove! I'll do it, Skinner!' cried the peer, laughing, 'I'll do it!'

'Remember, the sooner the better. As soon as it oozes out who Damocles belongs to, it's quite likely there will be others as anxious to buy as we are.'

'Yes, and with more money,' muttered the Earl. 'No, you're quite right; it must be done at once. I'll drive over to-morrow afternoon.'

'By the way,' said Skinner, laughing, 'I quite forgot Mr Bramton's message. He sent you his kind regards, and he hoped, any time you were passing, you would drop in and take a snack.'

'Confound his impudence!' exclaimed the Earl.

'He further bid me tell you,' continued Skinner, his mouth twitching with suppressed laughter, 'that they did the thing tol-lolish at Temple Rising.'

For a moment Lord Ranksborow's eyes flashed, and

then the absurdity of the whole thing struck him, and he once more burst out into a peal of laughter.

'I will, Skinner; by heavens, I will! On the strength of that message, I'll go over to lunch there to-morrow. I'll make myself deuced agreeable both to Bramton and all the ladies of the family.'

'There's one thing more, my lord. Do you think the ladies of your family—'

'Stop, sir,' interrupted the Earl. 'My calling is one thing; it does not much matter whom I know. With the Countess and my daughters it's a very different thing.'

'Well, my lord, of course it's not for me even to pretend to know anything about these things, but remember it's a card in your hand. If the Countess would call, and you could just once in a way ask them over to a family dinner, upon my word, when you came to the wine and walnuts, I think Mr Bramton would *give* you Damocles.'

'You mean well, Skinner, but I can't have the Countess and my daughters mixed up with such a menagerie as this.'

'I can be of no further use to you, my lord, in this matter, and will be off by the early train to-morrow morning. Any other instructions you have got to give me, you will of course write or wire to the Victoria Club.'

'Good-night, Skinner; you've done your best, and though you couldn't accomplish the deal, we have at all events got soundings.'

'Good-night, my lord,' rejoined the commissioner, as he threw the end of his cigar into the fireplace and took his bedroom candle.

'A shrewd fellow that,' muttered the Earl, as the door closed behind his agent. 'I always said he would come to the top of the tree; and I suppose he has the working of quite half the big commissions that come into the market, and nobody understands the manipulation of the strings about a big handicap better. That was a masterly stroke of his, stopping at twelve hundred! It leaves me the chance of offering fifteen hundred in an outburst of patrician liberality,' and the Earl chuckled at his own sarcasm. 'What a judge of human nature the beggar is! He turned that John Bramton inside out during the couple of hours he spent at Temple Rising. Poor Moly-

neux! to think that Temple Rising should pass into the hands of a fellow who has made his money in soap boiling, grey shirtings, or some such business. It seems but yesterday Molyneux and I had our cottage at Newmarket, and always took a place at Ascot together. I wonder where he is now. I implored him to hedge his Vanguard money that Cesarewitch day, and I can recollect now the smile with which he said, "It's neck or nothing this time, old man. I've got every acre of Temple Rising on it. I'm going for the gloves, and intend to be a man or a mouse over this," and mouse it was. Ah! well, if Knights-hayes hadn't been strictly entailed, I'm not certain it would be in the family now. Well, to-morrow I must go over and call upon this vulgar tradesman, I suppose. If I could only get Damocles into my own hands, I'd give the ring a shaker. Sharp fellow, Skinner, and not given to make mistakes. I hope he hasn't made one upon this occasion. By the way, I wonder what Skinner was. He must have had a superior education and bringing up, he is so much better mannered than most of his brethren. An odd thing one is always hearing stories of what the leading bookmakers were before they took to their present profession. Heaven knows whether these legends are true or not, but the odd thing is I never heard anybody claim to know what Skinner's antecedents might have been, and absorbed in this conjecture, his lordship betook himself to his chamber.

As for the subject of these speculations, he murmured as he laid his head upon his pillow,—

'He'll only half do it, I know. His confounded pride will stand in his way. Yet, if any man on the turf wants a turn, it's the Earl of Ranksborow. If he would only just put his pride in his pocket, drive over to Temple Rising with the Countess, and be a bit sociable with the Bramtons, he might just now have Damocles at his own price. I'll lay a hundred but he'll only half do it to start with, and before he has thoroughly made up his mind to swallow the Bramtons, John Bramton will have come at the fact that the colt is worth a deal of money.'

CHAPTER VIII.

LORD RANKSBOROW CALLS.

JOHN BRAMTON'S daughters had been, as is so often the case, brought up in a very different style from their father and mother. They were quite ignorant of the genteel poverty in which their parents' early days had been passed. They had never seen anything of that close economy in the household which had been necessary, when they were too young to recollect it, in order to make both ends meet. John Bramton had got his foot upon the ladder when he ventured to marry, and his progress up it had been rapid.

By the time Matilda and Lucy Bramton were children old enough to take note of such things, their father, though not rich, was in comfortable circumstances, and from that time his store increased rapidly year by year. He was a capital business man, and a lucky one to boot, as lucky in one line as his brother had been in another. His daughters were sent to the best of schools, and finished off at a fashionable boarding-school. They were pretty, ladylike girls, but differed a good deal in disposition. Matilda was burning with a desire to push her way into good society, and looked down upon her father's old friends and acquaintance with the greatest contempt. She it was who, working through her mother, had been the main cause of their selling the villa at Wimbledon and purchasing the estate of Temple Rising from its luckless and ruined owner. She wished to sever all connection with what she was pleased to term her father's 'City set,' and had only just discovered that it does not follow that, because you settle in a county, that county will receive you with open arms.

Lucy differed in some respects from her sister. She was quite as much awake to the pleasures of good society as Matilda. It was natural that both girls, refined as they had been by their bringing up, should shrink a little from the boisterous jokes and vulgarity of their father's old friends. He himself often set Matilda's teeth on edge in this wise; and of her mother's *gaucheries* that young lady

had much horror. Lucy was equally alive to her parents' weaknesses in this wise; but the difference between the two girls was this, that whereas Matilda could scarcely conceal her impatience of her father and mother's failings, Lucy never forgot that they were her father and mother—a circumstance which, when irritated, Matilda, if she remembered, was apt to take slight heed of.

The Miss Bramtons, in short, had been educated to a standard considerably above that in which their parents habitually mixed, and it was little wonder that they were both somewhat discontented with their lot. It is hard upon girls who have been brought up as ladies, to be unable to find amongst the men of their acquaintance any whom they can quite regard as gentlemen, and that was one reason that made Lucy so fond of travelling about with her late uncle.

Dick Bramton, although by no means a refined man, was not so essentially vulgar as his brother. If he mixed on the turf with a rough lot, he also associated there with men of undeniable polish and culture, such as the Earl of Ranksborow, to wit. Then, while travelling with him, Lucy came across many pleasant people, who were also wandering, and who, whatever they might be at home, were unmistakably well-bred. A pretty girl like Lucy Bramton was almost sure to attract the best young men, either on the steamers or at the *table d'hôte*, to her side; and she found their society infinitely more pleasant than that of those young gentlemen in business who frequented the villa at Wimbledon.

It would be absurd to suppose that Lucy had forgotten that tall, good-looking dragoon whom she had met at Shephard's Hotel. Captain Cuxwold had stood as far as he could between her and the first great sorrow of her life. She had been inexpressibly shocked and grieved at her uncle's death—an uncle who, let his faults be whatever they might, had always been most kind and indulgent to her. Cuxwold, she knew, had saved her an infinity of trouble, and she felt very grateful to him, not only for the trouble he had taken, but also for the delicate consideration he had shown in all the arrangements he had made for her. It was natural, under these circumstances, that

he should be often present to her thoughts. Moreover, the war clouds were once more rolling up over the desert, and whether the Government liked it or not, whether they cared to save Khartoum, or whether they did not, it was evident to all men that the Mahdi had to be confronted and stemmed. From the sands of the desert, from the waters of the Oxus and Zaxartes, there has never been any difficulty about gathering a horde of warlike adventurers whenever a leader arose who, dubbing himself prophet, fired the fanaticism of his followers, and filled their souls with the lust of plunder. From time immemorial the bait dangled before the eyes of the Turcoman has been India; and again and again has he swept through the wild Afghan country, and spread desolation to the banks of the Ganges. To the Arab, the lure has always been Lower Egypt; and when the green banner of the prophet was first unfurled, it seemed as if little less than the domination of all Europe would content the wild horsemen of the desert.

Little use to say the Mahdi was a mere fakir, an outcast priest come from the scum of the people, what you will. He was a force and a focus for thousands of the wild hordes of the desert; and, undisciplined though they might be, these children of the sandy sea were men of thews and sinews, reckless of life, and could be depended upon to follow their chiefs to the death. Interest began to rise high in England when the fact was grasped that the roar of public indignation had at last made the Government tardily decide to rescue the man whom they had sent to pacify the Soudan, and then apparently forgotten. There was something dramatic in the picture of this one man breasting the full flood of fanaticism; in this leader, abandoned by his chiefs, standing with colossal heroism in the breach against anarchy; in this one man dominating, by sheer ascendancy of will, over the half-hearted and treacherous population of a city, and inducing them to stand the privations of a siege. The attention of England was centred on the hero of Khartoum, and the problem now was by what means could assistance be most speedily conveyed to him; and over this point there was much discussion amongst the great military chiefs of the kingdom. That the expedition would have no easy task

before it was perfectly well recognised, and that the race they were about to encounter were made of very different stuff from the Egyptians they so easily beat at Tel-el-Kebir, was also perfectly well known.

From having been in Egypt, and heard a great deal of course about the first campaign, Lucy naturally took a very deep interest in everything connected with the country. More especially did she feel interested as to what share the 24th Lancers might bear in the forthcoming expedition.

She had promised Captain Cuxwold at parting to let him know of her safe arrival in England. That promise had been duly kept, and she had received in reply a very pleasant, chatty letter, in which the writer, while expressing himself intensely sick of Cairo, wound up by saying,—‘But there surely must be work for some of us before long. The whole world will cry shame on England if she abandon Gordon at Khartoum, though how we are to get to him, I confess I don’t see. However, thank Heaven, that’s a point which our chiefs have to determine; but it is not likely that the Arabs will allow us to promenade the desert without trying what we’re made of.’ And then, congratulating her upon being in England instead of grilling at Cairo, he concluded with ‘Most sincerely yours, Jack Cuxwold.’

We are all apt, on the verge of a campaign, to speculate whether our friends, relations, or even acquaintances will take part in it, and therefore it is small wonder that Lucy Bramton constantly wondered whether the 24th Lancers would take part in this expedition, which the papers foretold was not likely to attain its end without some sharp fighting of the tribes of the desert.

Mr Bramton was sitting in the drawing-room, yawning over the *Times*, and, sooth to say, not a little weary of his new rôle of a country gentleman.

‘It’s all very well, Margaret,’ he observed, ‘but I like Wimbledon better. There were always lots of people to come and see us at Wimbledon, and then I could always run into the City, and have a crack with my old friends. No; I know, my dear, this is very genteel, but it’s devilish dull.’

‘Nonsense! You’ll be all right when we get to know people, and when you’ve been made a magistrate. You

ought to farm a bit; it's the proper thing for a country gentleman to do.'

'Is it? Then for once, Mrs Bramton, I decline to play the part of a country gentleman. Farming means ruin to those who understand it. What it means to those who don't, I'm sure I can't guess. Oh, dear! I wish lunch was ready; it's something to do, at all events.'

Suddenly the door was thrown open, not by a footman, but by the butler in person, who in full unctuous tones rolled out the name of 'The Earl of Ranksborow.' The announcement of their noble neighbour fell like a bombshell upon the worthy pair. Mrs Bramton at once began to shake out her skirts, while as for her husband, he bounced out of his chair, and advancing to the Earl, who was making his way up the room, exclaimed,—

'How d'ye do, my lord? Happy to make your lordship's acquaintance. Lovely day isn't it?'

'How d'ye do, Mrs Bramton?' said the Earl, as, having shaken hands with his host, he crossed to address the lady of the house. 'I got a message from an acquaintance of mine whom you were good enough to show your place to yesterday; and I've taken you at your word you see, Mr Bramton. I was passing, and I've come in to beg some lunch.'

'Only too happy, my lord,' rejoined Bramton, as he made a nervous snatch at the bell. 'Lunch, Peters, at once,' he remarked to the butler, as that functionary entered the room; 'and Peters, a'em!' and here the little man indulged in a perfect code of telegraphic signals, and finally grievously tried Lord Ranksborow's gravity by exclaiming, in a most audible stage whisper, 'the extra dry, remember, Peters.'

'He evidently means doing me tol-lolish,' thought the Earl, struggling hard to restrain his laughter.

'It's a beautiful place your husband has bought, Mrs Bramton. Temple Rising always puts me out of all conceit with Knightshayes. My place is bigger, but it's not half so pretty as this, nor is my old barrack near so comfortable a house as yours.'

'You know it well, of course, my lord?' said Mrs Bramton.

'Known it all my life,' replied the Earl. 'Poor Molyneux was a great friend of mine, and, without the slightest disparagement to you, I own I was very sorry to lose him as a neighbour. However, we must all bow to the inevitable; and I can only hope I shall be on as good terms with his successors as I was with himself.'

Oh! Lord Ranksborow, Lord Ranksborow! Damocles once yours, and it's little you will trouble your head about the newcomers at Temple Rising.

At this moment the two Miss Bramtons entered, and the Earl was most decidedly astonished.

'Two deuced pretty, ladylike girls,' he muttered to himself. 'Who the deuce would ever have thought that a couple of vulgarians like these could have reared two such thoroughbred-looking chicks as those?'

He advanced and shook hands with the young ladies most cordially, welcomed them heartily to the county, and congratulated them upon being the possessors of the prettiest place in it.

'You're laughing at us, Lord Ranksborow,' said Miss Bramton, smiling. 'I fancy we dwindle into insignificance by the side of Knightshayes.'

'That, I trust, you will soon have an opportunity of judging for yourself. As I was telling Mr Bramton just now, my place may be bigger, but yours has it altogether in point of beauty.'

All through luncheon the Earl won golden opinions on all sides. He talked, perhaps, chiefly to Miss Matilda, but he was far too experienced a man of the world not to, as far as possible, make the conversation general. Mrs Bramton, however, could be persuaded to take but little part in it. She was somewhat awestruck by her guest, and still more was she afraid of committing herself and being pounced upon by her eldest daughter. Miss Matilda snubbed her mother rather sharply at times for the solecisms she was wont to commit. The meal over, the Earl wished the ladies good-bye, and said airily,—

'I'll just have a weed in your sanctum, Bramton, before I start.'

'Certainly, my lord, certainly,' was the reply, and that gentleman led the way to his own room at once.

Once seated there, and his cigar comfortably alight, Lord Ranksborow proceeded at once to business.

'Your brother was an old friend of mine,' he said; 'and I hear he has left you all his horses?'

'Well, in a way, so to speak,' replied John Bramton.

'You're not much of a racing man, I think,' continued the Earl, 'or else I must have heard of you before. If it's a fair question, what do you think of doing with them? Will they be for sale?'

'Damocles, Damocles,' muttered Mr Bramton to himself; 'dash my wig, if he ain't after Damocles! Lucy has got some gumption in her; that horse is worth a lot of money. I know he's worth twelve hundred pounds, because I refused that sum for him yesterday.'

'I'm sure I don't know, my lord. I don't know much about such things myself. I don't suppose poor Dick's nags are of much account.'

'The old fox,' thought the Earl, 'is not quite such an innocent as Skinner pronounced him. Yesterday told him that one of them, at all events, was worth money.'

'Ah! well if they are to come to the hammer, I should like to know. There's one or two of them I should like to have. Indeed, if you think of selling them by private contract, shall be very glad to have the refusal of them.'

'Well, my lord, I haven't at all made up my mind as yet.'

'You've a young one called Damocles,' continued the peer, as he flipped the ash off his cigar. 'Now I can give you a good round sum for him, if you like to part with him. Now I'm not going to beat about the bush, or have any shilly-shally about it—that's all very well amongst horse-copers, but it's not the thing between gentlemen. Now, once for all, Bramton, I've taken a fancy to Damocles. Will fifteen hundred pounds buy him? If not, there's no more to be said.'

'Fifteen hundred? That's a deal of money, to say nothing of the opportunity of obliging your lordship. Excuse me for one moment, I'll just go and consult—that is to say, I'll just go and look at some papers. I should just like to mention it. Poor Dick's last will and testament, you know.'

'Now, what in Heaven's name does he mean by all that farrago? He surely can't mean to consult Mrs Bramton about selling a horse. I wonder if he'll bite? By Jove! what a *coup* if he does.'

A few minutes and Mr Bramton re-enters the room.

'I'm very sorry, my lord, awfully sorry,' he exclaimed, 'but I can't give you any decided answer to-day! I won't say no, but I can't say yes.'

'All right,' said the Earl, 'no harm done. Send me a line over to Knightshayes when you've made up your mind. Good-bye; very glad to have made your acquaintance,' and with these words the Earl took his departure.

'There now,' said Mr Bramton, 'Lucy has done it. Fifteen hundred for a horse—the friendship of an earl—a first-class introduction to all the county, and dam'me if the girl hasn't said no to it.'

CHAPTER IX.

JOHN BRAMTON'S EYES ARE OPENED.

No man could be more profoundly ignorant of racing matters than Mr Bramton. He would as soon have thought of reading Horace in the original as the sporting intelligence in the newspapers, and would have understood as much about the one as the other; but John Bramton's trading instincts were much too quick not to see that Damocles was a very valuable colt. What the horse might be worth he had no conception, but he had not been buying and selling all his life not to feel perfectly sure that neither Mr Skinner nor Lord Ranksborow had bid him full value. About the declining of Mr Skinner's offer, he had no doubt but that Lucy had persuaded him to do rightly; but the Earl's was quite another matter. He felt pretty sure that the fifteen hundred was considerably less than the colt ought to fetch; but then there was the contingency. Fifteen hundred pounds and the friendship of the Ranksborow family! Surely it was worth while to let the Earl have a bargain, and by that means arrive at intimacy with him and his. Mr Bramton ought to have known better than to believe that laying a man under an obligation can be

relied on to entail his gratitude and friendship. He had been angry and dumbfounded at Lucy's refusal to at once conclude the sale of Damocles, but there was no time to argue the matter out then, as the Earl was awaiting his decision. There was nothing for it but to temporise, so having briefly informed his daughter that she was a headstrong little fool, he rushed back to his own room, and gave Lord Ranksborow the undecided answer we know of.

Lucy was destined to have a somewhat uncomfortable time of it for the next two days. Her whole family were up in arms against her. In the eyes of her mother and sister, Lord Ranksborow's offer had been princely; and then it was so unkind, so ill-tempered of her to throw obstacles in the way of their entering county society. Such an opening as this might never occur again; and, when the Earl was so anxious to be friendly, it was so ungracious not to part with a horse she had never seen and could not possibly want.

'This Damocles—such a name to give a horse!' cries Miss Matilda, 'is of no use except for racing purposes; and though ladies go racing, yet nobody ever heard of their owning racehorses!'

An observation which once more endorses the correctness of Mr Biglow's famous line, 'That they didn't know everything down in Judee.'

But Lucy was obstinate. She said first of all it was by no means clear that they had a right to dispose of these horses until the engagements they were entered for were over; but, supposing that she had the legal right, her uncle had left her everything, had been very kind to her all his lifetime, and she thought she owed it to his memory to carry out his last wishes as far as she could. She reminded them all that his dying message to her had been to 'take care of Damocles;' then again she argued,—

'Remember what we've heard about the Earl of Ranksborow since we've been here. We know very well that, though he is a nobleman with a large estate, he is a notoriously hard-up man. Nobody suggests for one moment that he is narrow or illiberal in his dealings; it is simply that he has a great deal to keep up, and barely

the money to do it with. Is it likely, father, that he could afford to make you a fair bid for a horse?’

‘As a business man, Lucy, I tell you fairly I think you’re probably right; but this horse is nothing to you, and just think what it means to us all. Why, it’ll lead to you and Matilda making the acquaintance of all the surrounding nobility and gentry.’

But Lucy stuck to her guns, and positively refused to give her consent to the acceptance of Lord Ranksborow’s offer, upon which her father angrily reminded her that she was a minor, and that, as her trustee, he should act as he thought best for her, and take the earliest opportunity of disposing of such a very ticklish property as a stud of racehorses.

How far Mr Bramton would have proceeded to carry out his threat is problematical, but the second day brought help to Lucy from a very unexpected quarter. Mr Bramton was proudly contemplating his domain from the terrace outside the drawing-room window, when a footman came to him, and said,—

‘A gentleman to see you, sir, on business. Hasn’t got a card, sir, but gives the name of Stubber.’

‘Stubber, Stubber,’ said Mr Bramton meditatively; ‘never heard the name in my life. What have you done with him, William?’

‘Shown him into your private room, sir.’

‘Quite right,’ said Mr Bramton. ‘Now I wonder what this fellow can want?’ and so saying, he trotted off to discover.

Stubber was a trainer of the old school. A slight, wiry, keen-eyed man of fifty or thereabouts, attired in a broad-skirted, pepper-and-salt coat, drab breeches and gaiters. He rose from his chair as Mr Bramton entered the room, and said,—

‘Morning, sir; I’d have been down to pay my respects before, only I didn’t know who the horses belonged to. I’m told Mr Richard has left the whole string to you?’

‘Another of them, by gum! He’s come about Damocles,’ muttered John Bramton to himself. ‘I wonder whether he wants to buy him? Not likely I’m going to part with that valuable animal to a fellow like him when there’s an earl

wanting to buy him. Well, yes,' he replied at length, 'that's about the size of it.'

'Well, sir, I always gave your poor brother every satisfaction, and, though I see it myself, I know my business, and can pitch 'em out as fit as any man in England.'

'Quite so, my good man,' replied John Bramton, 'though what you propose to pitch out, and what your business may be, I'm blessed if I've the slightest idea.'

'Why, sir, I'm poor Mr Richard's trainer. I've come down to talk to you about them hosses; and I do hope you'll leave 'em with me.'

'Ah!' rejoined Mr Bramton, with the long-drawn breath of a man who suddenly makes a startling discovery, 'you're the keeper of Damocles? I mean, that you've charge of that valuable animal. Keeper, no; that's what they say of the people in charge of the wild beasts in the Zoological Gardens. You're the—what was it you called yourself?'

'Trainer, sir. I've trained for Mr Richard for the last eight years; and as for Damocles, he's a clinker, he is. I don't think I ever had such a colt in my charge before.'

'Ah!' said Mr Bramton patronisingly, and speaking as if he had been in the habit of winning the Derby every four or five years for some time past, 'I'm told he's a nice 'orse. Why, I was bid fifteen hundred pounds for him the beginning of the week.'

'Fifteen hundred pounds!' ejaculated the trainer, in tones of the most profound contempt.

'Just so, just so,' continued Mr Bramton. 'I thought it wasn't enough. Now, Mr Stubber, what do you consider the value of a "clinker?"'

'Damocles is well worth five thousand pounds this very minute, and will be well worth ten before a fortnight is over our heads.'

John Bramton was thunderstruck. He had been quite prepared to urge his daughter to sacrifice a little money with a view to getting the entrance into the county society they wished. He would have said, and with some reason, to Lucy, 'You're a rich young woman, and it is well worth your while to sacrifice two or three hundred pounds in order to gain a good social position.' But he had made

his own money much too hardly to think of throwing away thousands for any such shadowy idea as that. No man more likely to have said, 'The money will stick to you, my girl, and society perhaps won't.'

'Why do you say, Mr Stubber,' he said, at length, 'that this horse will be worth so much more in a fortnight?'

'Well, sir,' replied the trainer, 'there is no certainty in racing, but I'm as confident as a man can be about anything connected with it, that Damocles will win the New Stakes at Ascot the week after next, and, I think, easily too. If he does, I can only say, in my opinion, considering how heavily he is engaged, he'll be worth double the money he is now. Whatever else you may sell, sir, I do hope you won't sell him, and I further venture to hope you'll leave him in my charge. Be guided by me, sir; don't part with him, at all events till after Ascot; and if you're not satisfied with the way he runs, then say Sam Stubber is an old fool, and isn't fit to look after a horse.'

'Well, Mr Stubber,' said Bramton, 'I promise you, at all events, the horses shall be left with you till after Ascot, and by that time I shall probably have made up my mind what to do about them.'

'Thank'ee, sir. Maybe you'll come down and look at the horses? I should like you to see Damocles have his wind up before Ascot.'

'Thank you,' said Mr Bramton. 'I don't know much about such things myself. Don't quite understand how you wind a horse up either, but I suppose, like clocks, it's a mistake to overdo it.'

The trainer smiled as he replied,—

'Too bad of you, Mr Bramton, to gammon me in this way, and pretend you know nothing about racing. That's just where it is, many a good stake is thrown away by overwinding.'

'It strikes me I'm getting on in this new line of business,' thought Mr Bramton. 'No,' he said, 'Stubber, I don't understand it, and I shall leave you to manage matters for yourself, at all events till after Ascot.'

'Very well, sir,' replied the trainer. 'If you do change your mind, there's my address, and I can give you a comfortable bedroom, and a decent dinner; but now I will

say good-bye. I suppose you would like the result of the New Stakes telegraphed?’

‘Yes, I think so, Stubber. I’m not much of a race-goer myself. Good-bye.’

Mr Bramton sat for some time lost in thought after the trainer had departed. It was quite obvious to him that his noble friend the Earl of Ranksborow had endeavoured to drive an uncommonly good bargain for himself, if from no other point of view than that of buying a thing to-day to sell for two or three times the sum to-morrow. Then it suddenly flashed across him that Mr Skinner was staying at Knightshayes. Of course they were in collusion. What a fool he had been; they had striven to buy Damocles for about a fourth of his value. John Bramton might know nothing about racing, but his business instincts were very wide awake to buying cheap and selling dear, and that the Earl and his confederate saw their way into that he made no doubt.

‘Well,’ he muttered to himself, ‘folks who have tried to best John Bramton have generally got the worst of it. His lordship has tried to “do” me, and, in my way, I’ll just see if I can’t “do” his lordship. He wants something out of me; I want something out of him. A regular game at cribbage between us; but his lordship will find that I can lay out for my crib quite as cleverly as he can,’ and Mr Bramton quite chuckled at the game he was about to play with Lord Ranksborow.’

The first thing he did was to indite a diplomatic letter to the Earl, which, it was rather fortunate for him, did not fall under the eyes of his wife or daughters. He was dreadfully given, on these occasions, to drop into the idioms of his own business, and though somewhat suspicious of what a shrewd correspondent he was dealing with, the peer could not but laugh at some of the expressions in the letter.

‘I’m sorry I cannot yet give your lordship a definite answer about your offer for Damocles, but the fact I have got to consider is whether the goods, that is horses, will not sell better wholesale than by dropping into the retail business. In the event of the latter, your lordship may depend upon having the very first offer of the colt you are anxious to secure.’

Lord Ranksborow laughed when he got this letter, but he was not in the least deceived by it. He was quite as astute a man in his own way as the master of Temple Rising.

'Skinner, my friend,' he muttered, 'you made a great mistake when you thought this man was a fool. He's as sharp as a needle; he has already found out that these horses are valuable, how valuable he don't know, but he is not going to sell them until he does. That he is very anxious to make my acquaintance, and he asked, with his wife and daughters, to Knightshayes is equally clear. Well, we are not in the habit of selling our hospitality, and that's a very ugly name to give the transaction, but for all that, Mr Bramton, my taking you up depends entirely about what arrangement you make about Damocles. I can't pay more for the colt than I have already bid, that's "pos." I wonder if it will be possible to come to some other arrangement about it. Ha! that would do, if he would simply keep him, and let me have the management of him. He's not a man to stand on much delicacy with. I've no doubt, to use his own vernacular, he has done a good deal of "You push my shirtings, and I'll cry up your calicoes." I must make him understand that my taking him up must be a give-and-take arrangement. The only thing is, an understanding must be come to as quickly as possible, or else, tempted by what he considers a rattling good offer, he'll be selling the colt. Hang it! Skinner was right. I shall have to play my trump card after all, and get the Countess to call. I thought I could have managed it alone, but the little dry-goods man is too cunning for me. He means that he and his are to have their legs under my mahogany, before he does what I wish. Yes, that must be my next move. I must tell the Countess to call.'

CHAPTER X.

THE SOUDAN'S ON THE BOIL.

It is the end of the Ascot week, and a depression seems to have fallen over that lively community yclept the Heliotrope. They don't say much, they are mostly too good form not to take their punishment mutely, but there

are wan and weary faces amongst them, that show traces of an unsuccessful week's battling with the bookmakers. The morrow is a day of rest,—little rest indeed to these unfortunates who know that their liabilities have to be adjusted on the Monday.

Sitting in one corner of the smoking-room, holding anxious confabulation on that constantly-recurring problem, ways and means, were Lord Dartree and his equally impecunious friend and mentor, Jim Anson. Suddenly their attention was attracted by a tall, dreamy-looking man, who lounged into the Temple of Nicotine with a bored, languid air, and looked wearily around for somebody on whom to inflict his weariness.

'Alec Flood! by all that's unfathomable!' exclaimed Anson. 'Come here, Alec, and tell us all about your adventures; how you escaped being bowstrung by a pasha, knouted by a Boyard, eaten by a tiger, or knifed by an Italian.'

'How are you two fellows?' replied Flood, as he shook hands with the twain. 'That last shot of yours, Jim, was a shave nearer than your guesses generally are, for I happened to be in Cairo at the time of that gambling-house row in which Dick Bramton was killed.'

'The deuce you were!' exclaimed Anson.

'Yes; your brother Jack and myself, Dart, chanced to be present when the row took place. What took us to that confounded den, I don't know.'

'"Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do,"' quoted Dartree demurely.

'Stuff and nonsense, Dart!' exclaimed Jim Anson. 'Satan never bothers himself about you and Jack. He knows he can rely upon your finding that for yourselves.'

'You fellows knew Bramton, I daresay? I didn't, but Jack did, as soon as he made out who he was.'

'Rather,' said Dartree; 'considering he owned Damocles, the first favourite for the Derby, and was always a prominent figure at Newmarket, etc., we all knew him more or less.'

'Was it a big fight?' inquired Anson.

'No; one of those short, sharp scuffles characteristic of a gaming-house row. This poor fellow was knifed

before we could get to him. Neither of us saw who struck the blow.'

'And how's Jack?' inquired Dartree.

'Oh! flourishing. Uncommon sick of Cairo, which he pronounces a hole. Says the Sphinx and the Pyramids are all very well, once in a way, but they pall on repetition. However, he and some of the other fellows out there think they're going to fight something or somebody somewhere, and are looking forward to it. Awfully bored they must be, you know, when they are looking forward to a campaign as diversion. You fellows have been at Ascot, I suppose?'

'Yes,' replied Jim Anson; 'and, by Jove! don't we wish we hadn't. I never had such a week. Except when Damocles romped in for the New Stakes, I'm blessed if I turned a single trick; and he was only a six to four chance, so there wasn't much money to be made out of that.'

'There, that'll do, Jim; don't bore Flood by enumerating all the losers we backed at Ascot. It's sickening to look back upon. So Jack is pretty fit, is he? When does he talk of coming home?'

'He doesn't see his way to it at all,' rejoined Flood. 'There's trouble brewing up there in the Soudan.'

'Yes; but that's nothing to us,' replied Lord Dartree. 'Government have declared that they are not going to interfere in the Soudan.'

'Yes, I know,' rejoined Flood. 'But when you rule an empire upon which the sun never sets, it's all very well to say you won't interfere with this, and you won't interfere with that; you can't help yourself. Hicks' expedition to relieve El-Obeid, remember, terminated in the annihilation of his whole force. Baker's attempt to relieve Sinkat and Tokar met a precisely similar fate. Now the result of these two disasters is this—an enormous quantity of rifles and several Krupp guns and ammunition have fallen into the hands of the Arabs. Naturally a most courageous race, they have now got their tails up, and there's no holding them. They talk about sweeping the infidels from the face of the earth, and carrying fire and sword to Cairo and the gates of Stamboul. We may say that we won't interfere in the Soudan, but it's very probable that the Soudanese will interfere with us.'

'By Jove!' said Anson, 'that's a view of the case that has never struck our politicians.'

'No; we are always preaching non-intervention, and then wind up by annexing a province two or three sizes bigger than the United Kingdom. We don't want it; but circumstances compel us to take it. We don't want the Soudan, nor does anyone else, I should think, but our philanthropic tendencies have led us to interfere with their favourite pastime of slave hunting, while the Egyptian officials, on the other hand, in their anxiety to enrich themselves, have ground the very souls out of the wretched villagers. No; the Soudan is on the boil, and, to continue the metaphor, sooner or later, it will devolve upon us to take the kettle off.'

'Well, you've been out there,' said Lord Dartree, 'have heard what people say, and therefore ought to know rather more about it than we do; but nobody at home here thinks we are going to interfere in that imbroglio.'

'I suppose not,' rejoined Flood; 'but when the Arabs have got within a couple of hundred miles or so of Cairo, Her Majesty's Government will awake to the situation and exclaim, "Halloa! this sort of thing won't do, you know."'

'Well, you can't be said to take a cheerful view of things,' said Anson.

'Not at all. I'm only taking a common-sense one. Look at the blunder Government has made about the evacuation of the Soudan, loudly proclaiming their intention. When one wants to run away, one does it as quietly as possible. You don't loudly announce that you're going to do it.'

'Yes,' said Dartree, 'to retreat silently is, I believe, an axiom in military tactics.'

'Ah! and there is another axiom in the history of both schoolboys and nations; the boy who won't fight is always kicked. Other countries are always under the impression John Bull won't fight, but too late they discover he won't be kicked. Origin this of half our wars.'

'Pity you're not in the House, Flood,' remarked Anson; 'you would make yourself so jolly unpopular, always carping at the Government arrangements.'

'Never mind,' replied the accused, laughing. 'I'm never likely to be there, and to play the critic is an easy rôle. However, we've talked enough of the East, I think. Tell me a little what you fellows have been doing in the West.'

'Nothing,' rejoined Lord Dartree, 'that is, speaking personally, and doing it, too, with our usual ability; haven't we, Jim?'

'Yes,' said Anson; 'but Dart has done something more than that. He has evinced great diplomatic talent. His father, as you know, is always at him to go in for Parliament. Well, it occurred to Dart this winter that he would rather break his neck than his voice, and that the society on a racecourse was more select than the society at St Stephen's, so he took to steeplechasing, and, I assure you, made a very creditable *début* between flags, carrying off two local steeplechases.'

'Yes,' chimed in Lord Dartree, 'and the best of the joke is this, the governor is so delighted at my taking up one of the favourite hobbies of his youth, that he has ceased to bore me any more about Parliament.'

'Of course he has,' remarked Flood; 'he sees you've taken up with a higher vocation.'

'By the way,' said Anson, 'you had no idea, when you saw Dick Bramton killed at Cairo, what a sensation his death was going to make in the turf world.'

'How is that?' inquired Flood.

'Well, for a long time we couldn't make out what was to become of his horses. At last it oozed out he had left them all to his brother—a chap who don't know a horse from a cow. The obvious inference was that he would sell them, but he somehow discovered that racehorses are valuable property, and he is so afraid of being "done" that he can't make up his mind what to do. He made his money in trade of some sort, and he is terribly afraid of not getting full value for the stud.'

'Racing is not much in my way,' rejoined Flood, 'but one of Bramton's horses should be at all events worth money. It isn't running in his name, but that's nothing. I happened to see in the paper the other morning that Damocles won the New Stakes at Ascot. It's a very odd

thing, but Dick Bramton's dying words were a message to his niece to "take care of Damocles."

'The ruling passion,' muttered Dartree. 'My father, you know, was rather chummy with Dick Bramton, and I know from him that the dead man thought a lot of that colt. Curious, moreover, the present man has just bought a place in our part of the country.'

'Ah! I fancy I heard Jack say something about it. Now I'm off for a rubber,' and, with a nod to his companions, Flood strolled off to the cardroom.

By this time there was a growing feeling in England that, whatever the Government might assert, their interference in the Soudan was not only imperative, but was likely to cost considerable expenditure of life and money. The disasters of Hicks and Baker had been somewhat belittled on account of the troops they were leading. These able and capable leaders, it was urged, could do nothing with the 'stuff they commanded.' We had still hardly grasped the fact that we had to confront an enemy not only of superb fighting capacity, but who, in his own way, showed great powers of strategy. Like most semi-civilised foes, his great idea was an ambushade, and in setting and luring his opponent into his trap he showed marvellous astuteness. It was all very well to say that well-tried chiefs like Hicks and Baker, more especially the latter, whose superb handling of the Turkish rearguard in the retreat from the Balkans is worthy to rank with Ney's similar heroic covering of the Grand Armée's retirement from Moscow, could do nothing with battalions whose nervous affections of the legs impelled them to take an opposite course to that which their commanders would fain lead them. But the fierceness of the foe we were soon destined to comprehend.

The annihilation of Baker's expedition, and the literally painful cowardice displayed by the Egyptian troops upon that occasion, so emboldened Osman Digma and his Arabs that they actually now threatened Suakim; and the British Government could no longer disguise from themselves that, if the way to India by the Suez Canal and Red Sea was to be saved, it was high time that, like

or not, they should intervene. Sir Gerald Graham, at the head of some six thousand British troops, was selected to chastise Osman Digma and his following. This was done, and done effectually ; but the desperate resistance, and the reckless charges of the Arabs, fully explained the crushing defeats of inferior troops. How the Arabs would fight we learnt at El-Teb and Tamai. At the former, indeed, a boy of twelve dauntlessly, knife in hand, attacked two of our soldiers, paying the penalty with his life ; while at the latter, a square composed of some of our best troops was momentarily broken, and the formation not recovered till many of the enemy had got inside, where they 'fighting fell.' But it speedily became evident that, able as was his lieutenant, Osman Digma the slave-dealer, with whose occupation we had interfered, the focus of the rebellion was with the Mahdi himself, and gravitating towards Khartoum. About the same time that Sir Gerald Graham was chastising the tribes round Suakim, Gordon made a sortie from the former place, the result of which was simply to show that the Egyptian troops could not be brought to face the Arabs ; two thousand of them, armed with Remingtons, being upon this occasion scattered and put to flight by some sixty wild horsemen of the desert, which made it pretty clear to Gordon, to whom had been confided the task of withdrawing the Egyptian garrisons from the Soudan, that though it might have been possible once, it was now too late, and without the aid of the British, those Egyptian troops would never return to their homes in Egypt proper. Still the Government is very determined not to intervene in the Soudan, forgetting that it has already done so, and that, having undertaken to prevent anarchy in Egypt, it was difficult to lay down hard and fast rules,—that you could no more say, 'I will be responsible for order in this part of Egypt, but not in that,' than a doctor could say, 'I will have no fever in this part of my patient's body, but will take no heed to the rest.'

However, with the suppression of Osman Digma operations in the Soudan came to a conclusion for the present, the English Government fondly hoping that they were done with that question. True, it was urged that

after the battle of Tamai there was nothing to stop Stewart's cavalry riding into Berber, but it was argued that nothing could come of such an advance; that the road from Suakim to Berber would be no safer after the cavalry had passed than it was at present, and, indeed, except the moral effect, it is hard to see what result could have come of it; but then, in dealing with Eastern nations, moral effect is everything, and if ever there were people in this world who ought to be aware of that, it is ourselves. Again and again have we owed our existence in India to our military prestige; and had the matter been left in the hands of the military chiefs, it is probable that Berber would have been occupied; and who shall say what moral support would have been afforded Gordon at Khartoum by the intelligence that the British horse were in Berber? But no, the British Government were excessively anxious to wash their hands of this question of the Soudan, but found that, once having tarred its fingers, it was a matter of no little difficulty to get rid of it. As it is, the affair does not redound much to our credit, as the problem has been elucidated by the massacre of all the Egyptian garrisons, and the shameful sacrifice of the man we sent out to withdraw them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BRAMTONS MAKE THEIR DÉBUT.

NOT very far from Temple Rising was Roseneath, the residence of Mr and Mrs Berriman. Mr Berriman was a man who somewhat startled the inhabitants of that neighbourhood by his ultra-democratic opinions. It was a strongly Conservative district, and when he first came amongst them there had been some feeling against the master of Roseneath on account of his very Liberal views; but when it was discovered that he was a thorough good sportsman, a staunch preserver of both pheasants and foxes, and that his Radical opinions were chiefly theoretical, he speedily became a popular man in the county. As for Mrs Berriman, she was a jolly, good-tempered woman, who delighted in society, and was very catholic regarding it. There was nothing exclusive about Mrs Berri-

man ; she knew everybody, and dispensed her hospitalities with a free hand. Her manner was just as frank and offhand to the Earl of Ranksborow as it was to the village apothecary. That Mrs Berriman should call upon the newcomers at Temple Rising, was as natural as that Mrs Berriman should give a garden-party. Mrs Berriman's parties were always popular. True some of the more exclusive people of the neighbourhood—the very finest piece of china of the community—turned up their noses at the inferior earthenware they encountered on such occasions, but having remarked that 'poor Mrs Berriman's parties were really getting so very mixed, they didn't know what to say about going,' they went.

The Bramtons looked forward to this entertainment not a little. It was a stepping-stone to making the acquaintance of the neighbourhood. John Bramton and his wife were naturally both sociable and hospitable people, and would be only too happy to dispense cakes and ale to their neighbours, if only those neighbours would let them.

Now a thing had come to pass, the last two or three weeks, at which Mr Bramton hardly knew whether to be pleased or annoyed. When this much-talked-of colt Damocles cantered in for the New Stakes at Ascot, there was of course much talk about whom he belonged to. He had run in the name of the trainer, but it was pretty generally understood that Stubber was not his real owner, and it then transpired that the horse was the property of Mr Bramton. This, as we know, was not exactly the case, but it seemed so natural that the dead man should have left his property to his brother, that nobody dreamt of questioning the statement. Mr Stubber himself was quite under that impression, and saw no object in making a secret of it ; equally are Mr Skinner and the Earl of Ranksborow under that belief, so it is very little wonder that Mr Bramton is regarded as the owner of Damocles.

'Property of a wetired linen-dwaper, I'm told,' ejaculated young Pontifex of the —th Dragoon Guards, as he joined the drag to which he was affiliated for luncheon.

He had not backed the winner, and his own father had been a cheesemonger, whereas Mr Bramton had,

at all events, been a wholesale dealer in such goods as he traded in.

Two or three of the sporting farmers, and some of the few of the gentleman around, when they met Mr Bramton, had congratulated him upon the triumph of his horse at Ascot, some of them adding in a jocular way that they supposed next year the bells would be ringing at Temple Rising, an ox would be roasted whole, and a hogshead of home-brewed broached, in honour of the victory of Damocles at Epsom. Now Mr Bramton took all this very awkwardly. Guided by the lights of his whole life, he felt that to be the possessor of a racehorse boded his destruction; that men would stand aloof from him; and, though he didn't quite understand how, yet that there was a great expenditure of money connected with the ownership of this sort of property. That was his theory, but his shrewd common-sense showed him the reverse was the case. He could not but see that his sporting neighbours looked upon it as quite a feather in his cap to be the owner of such a 'flyer' as Damocles. Mr Stubber, in a letter which he had received from him, congratulated him upon having won fifteen hundred pounds in stakes, on his horse having distinctly established himself as a first-class two-year-old, and again asseverating that the value he had placed upon him a fortnight ago was not a penny too much, and imploring him not to be tempted to sell.

'If, sir,' continued Mr Stubber, 'you will allow me to advise, I would suggest, if you do not want to continue racing, your putting up the stud for sale during the July Week, with the exception of Damocles and old Whitechapel, whom I want to lead him in his work.' ('Now I wonder what he means by that?' muttered Mr Bramton to himself, as he perused the letter.) 'The young one is as sound as a bell, and, I assure you, bids fair to be a perfect gold mine to you.'

Now Mr Bramton could quite understand all this. It was very pleasant to learn that his property was improving in value—or rather his daughter's—to learn that they had won a stake worth fifteen hundred pounds; and then he thought it was very odd that it hadn't been sent to him, and remarked to himself that if that was the way Royalty did

business, he could only remark that it was somewhat lax ; then he wondered whether the Queen or the Chancellor of the Exchequer was the proper person to write to on the subject, and finally concluded that he had better take counsel with the Earl of Ranksborow.

Between this nobleman and Mr Bramton there had been much finessing. The Countess had called, and, loyal to her husband's instructions, had skilfully dangled the bait of a dinner at Knightshayes before the eyes of the family ; but she had not named the day. On the other hand, Mr Bramton had been equally indefinite on the subject of Damocles. He did not altogether decline the Earl's offer, but then he most distinctly did not accept it. The nobleman did not like to stir much in the matter. He had got to the length of his tether, and knew he was offering nothing like the value of the horse. He was afraid that Bramton already suspected as much, and to press the offer would only confirm those suspicions. But time went on. As Artemus Ward remarks, 'It's a way time has.' Damocles won the New Stakes, and then Lord Ranksborow recognised that to purchase him was out of his power. His sole hope now was to get the control of the horse. That, he thought, should not be very difficult. Mr Bramton, knowing nothing about racing, would probably feel flattered and grateful to a man like himself for taking the management of his 'crack' off his hands. Then, again, he knew the Temple Rising people set a high value on the friendship of Knightshayes, so that the Earl announced to his Countess *that dinner* must become a reality, and that as soon as, with regard to due notice being given, could be managed. Having failed to buy the colt himself, the next thing was to persuade John Bramton on no account to part with it.

'We must do it, Louisa. I have too much depending on Damocles winning next year, to throw away any chance conducive to it. It won't bore you very much. As for the Miss Bramtoms, they are pleasant, ladylike girls enough, and though the father and the mother are atrociously vulgar, yet they're so *naïve* with it, that it becomes more amusing than offensive.'

'Oh ! I sha'n't mind it,' laughed her ladyship. 'The only

one trouble about it is their charming *naïveté* is somewhat provocative of laughter, and the Miss Bramtons, bear in mind, are jealously sensitive about their parents' mistakes.'

'You may quite rely upon me upon that point,' rejoined the Earl, 'though they try one rather high at times.'

'That's settled, then,' rejoined the Countess. 'I'll write at once, and ask them to dine here Friday week. I shall meet them, most likely, at the Berrimans'. All the neighbourhood will be there to-morrow, I suppose?'

'Except myself,' replied the Earl. 'However, Berriman does the thing well, and all that can be made of a garden-party will be done.'

The Temple Rising people were very pleased with their *début* at Roseneath. Good-natured Mrs Berriman never did things by halves, and she introduced the Bramtons in all directions. Mark Lind is prone to novelty, and the girls being pretty and attractive, soon drew several admirers to their side; amongst these was Sir Kenneth Sandiman.

Sir Kenneth was a man about forty, who having pretty well dissipated the small inheritance with which he began life, was now seeking to repair his fortunes by a wealthy marriage. He had already heard of the Bramtons, and no sooner did he set his eyes on the girls than he thought his opportunity was come. He was a proud, conceited man, with an exaggerated idea of his own importance. He had never distinguished himself in any way, and really carried very little weight in his own county or anywhere else. The baronetcy was an old one, and had he felt free to wed according to the dictates of his nature, Sir Kenneth would have aspired to alliance with the peerage. As it was, he must marry money, and he considered that the transforming of Miss Bramton into Lady Sandiman was an honour quite sufficient to turn the head of either girl. A tradesman, as he argued superciliously, who could afford to buy Temple Rising must be rich. The girls really were very pretty, and inquiry told him there was no son. Yes, it would do very well; old Bramton would doubtless be delighted to give his daughters handsome *dôts* if they married to his satisfaction, and it wasn't likely they could hope to be anything higher than Lady Sandiman. The idea of a rebuff never even entered Sir Kenneth's head.

There was only one difficulty, which he confidentially told Mrs Berriman.

'I can't see any myself,' returned his hostess bluntly, with all a good-natured woman's wish to forward a suitable marriage. 'You're just the age, Sir Kenneth, that a man ought to settle down. Either of those girls would bring you a good lump of money, and do you credit as a wife.'

'My dear Mrs Berriman, you don't quite understand me,' said the fastidious baronet, 'the trouble is, I can't make up my mind which I admire most.'

'Upon my word,' rejoined his hostess, 'I don't think that need trouble you this afternoon. You can't possibly expect to make such rapid progress as to render any decision on that point necessary to-day.'

'I don't know,' rejoined Sir Kenneth languidly. 'Eligible men with a position to offer are soon snapped up in these times.'

'Pooh! Sir Kenneth,' replied Mrs Berriman, 'don't you talk about position and all that sort of thing to democrats like us. Don't you know that my husband is an advanced Radical, who is all for doing away with titles and such like frivolities.'

'Just so,' replied the imperturbable baronet. 'Government will make him a baronet some day, and then you'll see how he'll change his opinions.'

Mrs Berriman shook her fan merrily at him as she replied,—

'You'd better go and have a good think, and, when you've made up your mind, commence your courtship. I have introduced you, so that everything lies at your own discretion.'

'Well, Mrs B.,' said John Bramton, in an undertone, 'how are you getting on with the aristocracy? A more affable set of gents I never saw in my life; but they seem to think a deal more of me as the owner of Damocles than as the owner of Temple Rising. I'll tell you what, my dear, it's getting awkward. On the strength of that blessed horse, they will have it that I'm a sportsman; one of the right sort they say. Well, I hope so; but I don't feel very sure about keeping it up. What do you think, I have promised to subscribe to the hounds.'

'Oh! John, what made you do that? You know you were never out hunting in your life.'

'No; but I haven't said anything about following them, you know. This keeping up the character of a real sportsman is rather expensive, Margaret. There was another fellow said he knew I'd give them a pony for their local races, and when I said that I didn't happen to have such a thing in the stable at present, he poked me in the ribs, and said, "I would have my little joke, and that he should put me down for twenty-five pounds," and, what is more, he did!'

'Well,' said Mrs Bramton, 'I suppose one must subscribe to all these sort of things when one lives in the country.'

'The country seems to think so. There's a parson who got hold of me, hoped I would allow him to put me down for the cricket club; had no doubt I played. However, I lost no time in dispelling that illusion. I told him he could put me down for the club, but added emphatically that I only looked on. There was another fellow, too, very anxious to discuss a division of the water with me, and when I told him that he might have it all as I didn't do much in that way, he thanked me profusely, and said it was the best stretch of fishing in the county. I'm rather sorry I gave it him now, for if I am to set up as a sportsman, fishing strikes me as the safest line to come out in!' and then Mr Bramton strolled away again, to be once more bewildered by the attentions of his sporting neighbours, who could not be convinced that the brother of so well-known a racing man as Richard Bramton could be anything but a gentleman learned in horse-flesh, and of sporting tendencies.

Sir Kenneth Sandiman, meanwhile, had commenced operations in good earnest. He had walked Miss Bramton clear of the general crowd, and, having disposed of the usual conventionalities customary in our first intercourse with strangers, was fast settling down into an incipient flirtation with his fair companion. Matilda Bramton was no novice at the game—quite able to take care of herself, and as much disposed to while away an hour or two in this harmless amusement as her cavalier.

She laughed at his pretty speeches, and put but little value upon them; and when they parted, mutually well pleased with each other, nobody would have felt more astonished than herself if she had been told that Sir Kenneth Sandiman had serious intentions concerning her.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DINNER AT KNIGHTSHAYES.

‘WELL, Lucy, what did you think of our party to-day?’ inquired Miss Bramton as she came into her sister’s room, just previous to dressing for dinner.

‘They were a pleasant lot of people, and seem inclined to be civil. There was one thing rather interested me, and that was I heard Lady Ranksborow telling Mrs Berriman that Mr Flood had returned to England. He is evidently well known down here.’

‘Flood—Mr Flood? Ah! I remember. One of the gentlemen who took care of you in Cairo. More to the purpose, my sister, if it had been the other who had come home, wouldn’t it?’

‘I don’t suppose it much matters; but I saw a good deal more of Captain Cuxwold than I did of Mr Flood. However, they were both as kind as they knew how to be.’

‘Well, I’ve no experience of soldiers; but they’ve a general reputation for being rather good at making themselves agreeable when they choose. What did you think of my cavalier, Sir Kenneth?’

‘He was extremely attentive; in fact, quite as devoted as it was possible for a man to be at a first interview. I should say, Matilda, he was rather struck with you!’

‘Oh, you goose!’ said Miss Bramton, laughing merrily; ‘that’s only his natural manner. Sir Kenneth can’t help it. He is one of those men who would make love to a petticoat if he met it on a clothes-line. He is a confirmed flirt, and, I should think, never had serious intentions in his life. However, he was very pleasant this afternoon. Was there any talk of Mr Flood’s coming down here?’

‘Not that I heard,’ replied Lucy; ‘in fact, all I discovered about him was what I told you.’

Now it was an odd thing, but it had never as yet occurred to Lucy, to connect the Captain Cuxwold she had met in Cairo with the Ranksborow family; firstly, she had no idea that he was entitled to the preface of the Honourable Captain Cuxwold; and secondly, until this afternoon, she had really not known the Earl of Ranksborow's family name. The presence of Lady Jane and Lady Emily Cuxwold at Mrs Berriman's party had certainly opened her eyes, and made her speculate as to whether the dragoon she had known at Cairo was any connection of the Ranksborow family, but it still never occurred to her that he was a junior scion of the house. Neither she nor her sister were much given to a study of the peerage, although the probability was that they would now, at all events, read up the Ranksborow tree, if only to ascertain the exact ages of Lady Jane and Lady Emily,—there being always much exultation in the feminine mind on convicting a sister of a year or two more than she acknowledges. Lucy most certainly would have liked to meet Mr Flood, if only for the purpose of inquiring about his friend; but she had heard nothing that led her to believe that his appearance in Barkshire was expected at present.

As for Mr Bramton, the result of the Berrimans' party had been most titillating to his vanity. He had found himself looked upon as a man of no little importance, but he was too shrewd not to see that the possession of Damocles weighed heavily in the estimation of his neighbours. There was no question now of selling the horses; on the contrary, he felt so proud of the distinction that the owning of a racing stud seemed to confer upon him, that he quite forgot it was the property of his daughter and not of himself. The neighbourhood was determined to regard him as a sportsman. He was not the first man whom circumstances have thrust into a *rôle* for which they are perfectly unfitted; but it was no use denying it. Disclaims on his part were only met with polite incredulity, and, with the exception perhaps of the Earl of Ranksborow, there were none who did not believe that John Bramton was a good all-round sportsman, but especially that he was a very knowing hand about turf matters. Several men that afternoon had

sought to draw him into racing conversation ; his reticence thereon, which was due merely to ignorance, was put down to astuteness, and they one and all believed that he could tell them a good deal if he chose to speak.

Ah ! how often we are condemned out of our own mouths ; how many of us might be credited with wisdom if we could but hold our tongues.

One thing certainly filled Mr Bramton with misgivings, how was he to keep up this cheaply-won reputation ? He knew he could not sustain it in the saddle, and he was conscious of having accepted sundry hazily-defined invitations to 'shoot when the season began.' True there were rather over two months before, as he remarked to himself, that casualty could occur, but he could not disguise, as he thought of these invitations, that his knowledge of firearms went no further than shooting for nuts at a fair. The last words of the gentleman whom he had unintentionally obliged about the fishing had been, 'Of course I'll drop you a reminder ; but mind you're pledged to come to me on the first.'

'Can't say where I may be on the first,' murmured Mr Bramton, 'but it certainly won't be at the house of that bloodthirsty bird-slayer.'

But there was another section of the turf world vastly moved and puzzled by Mr John Bramton's movements. Mr Skinner had been duly informed by his employer of his utter failure to purchase Damocles, and he in his turn informed the Earl that there was a growing anxiety to know what Mr Bramton meant to do with those horses.

'Resolves itself,' said Mr Skinner, 'into the great fact that your lordship has got all the yearling books about the colt, and, judging by his *début*, it looks very much as if he had a great chance of winning the Derby. Now you will excuse my saying that your lordship didn't exercise your usual discretion when you accepted twenty thousand to three hundred from James Noel. It is very rarely that anybody wins long odds from him, and, though as long as the colt is with Stubber no harm will come to him: that his trainer can possibly guard against, yet there's something in what one of the most straightforward bookmakers said in my hearing only

yesterday about Damocles, "We needn't bother our heads much about that one. Jim Noel has laid him, and it's wonderful how a horse comes to grief when Jim has laid long odds against him."

The Earl was much exercised about this letter. He had never stooed to win such a stake over a horse in his life as he did over Damocles for next year's Derby. He knew Mr James Noel—nobody better—and could but admit that there was reason in what Skinner told him. As for Bramton, he hadn't quite made up his mind about him. That the man was sharp enough he had no doubt, that he knew anything about racing he thought extremely questionable; if he did, then all he could say was that John Bramton played the innocent better than any man he had ever seen. But his own opinion was that his ignorance was not feigned; and yet, the Earl reflected, the owner of Temple Rising seemed to have determined to act on his own judgment in racing matters. However, the Earl's stay at Knightshayes was drawing to a close; but before it was over, it had been arranged that the Bramtons should dine there. The Ranksborows were people who broke the London season by taking an occasional run down to their country seat. On the present occasion the Countess and her daughters had come down for a somewhat prolonged edition of the Whitsuntide holidays, and the Earl had joined them at Knightshayes after the termination of the Ascot week. At this dinner Lord Ranksborow felt that, if possible, he must come to some arrangement with his guest about the control of Damocles. The colt was entered in the July Stakes at Newmarket as well as having two or three engagements at Goodwood; and from the style in which he had won on the Royal Heath, it did not seem likely that the penalty he was rendered liable to by his Ascot victory would interfere with his success for whatever he might be elected to run. Now this was exactly the control that the Earl wished to possess—the deciding for what races Damocles should compete—and although buying the colt was out of his power, he thought it very possible that he might fill the place of turf-adviser to John Bramton. In good sooth no one was better calculated for the post. He was not

only an astute and veteran turfite, but, in the present instance, his interests and John Bramton's lay in the same direction. The Earl had been much too long at the game not to recognise the truth of the old axiom that 'A bet is never a bet till it is hedged.' Standing as he did to win an enormous stake over Damocles, the more that colt distinguished himself in his two-year-old career, the better it would serve his turn; every race the horse won would shorten the price against him for next year's Derby, and afford the Earl the opportunity of attaining that halcyon, though rarely experienced, state of things known as 'standing on velvet,' whereby is, of course, meant the standing to win a comfortable stake with no possibility of loss. As before said, the Earl regarded Mr Bramton as unfeignedly ignorant of racing. He looked on Stubber the trainer as a straightforward, honest man, who could be thoroughly trusted to do his duty with the horses under his charge; but when it came to pitting Stubber against such a perfectly unscrupulous turf tactician as Mr James Noel, Lord Ranksborow regarded it as pretty much the country yokel playing against a thimble-rigger.

'Stubber,' he muttered, 'is no doubt straight enough; but Noel, if he couldn't get at the horse in the stable, would get at the jockey out. No; a man wants to be master of every move on the board to play against him. If I can, I'll play my own hand!'

The dinner party duly came off, and no sooner had the ladies left the room than Lord Ranksborow exclaimed,—

'Come up to my end of the table, Bramton. I want to have a racing palaver with you. Why, I've hardly had an opportunity of congratulating you about Damocles' victory in the New Stakes.'

'Very good of your lordship, I'm sure. I'm sorry I couldn't oblige your lordship; but the fact is—'

'I'd no idea how good he was,' interrupted the Earl, in an easy, off-hand manner; 'and didn't offer you above a quarter his value. Your brother was a rattling good judge, and I knew he had a very high opinion of the colt. I know two things more now; first, that your brother was quite right, and, secondly, that I can't afford to buy Damocles.'

'No judge of these things myself, but I suppose that

horse is worth a tidy sum. Now, what should you say, my lord?’

‘Couldn’t price him at all, Bramton. He’s worth a lot more than I offered you for him; but I hope you’re not thinking of selling him. Let’s bring the Blue Ribbon to Barkshire, though I can’t afford to pay for the luxury of winning it.’

‘Well,’ said John Bramton, as he sipped his port, ‘I’ve always found in business it’s a mistake, you know, to stand out too long. It’s always difficult to know when the top of the market is reached. You make a good spec’ say, and buy goods at 80; they run up to 115, and you say at 120 I’ll sell; then comes a sudden drop, and you are perhaps glad to take 90 or so after all.’

‘I hope you’ll allow me to guide you a little in this matter. You mustn’t think of selling the colt yet. I assure you, there’s a lot of money to be made out of him. Now, for instance, there are the July Stakes next month. I suppose you’ll run him for that?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know. I didn’t know that he was in for such a thing. I’ve never even seen him yet. By the way, I don’t want to make any scandal, but, you know, I haven’t heard anything about that money I won at Ascot yet. I suppose I had better write about it?’

‘I’ve not the slightest doubt Messrs Weatherby in Old Burlington Street have placed it to your account,’ replied the Earl, laughing. ‘You must come down to Newmarket next month and see your colt run.’

‘Ah! I suppose it is the proper thing to do when you’re an owner of racehorses,’ and Mr Bramton thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat and threw himself into his favourite pompous attitude; ‘but I leave most of the arrangements to Stubber, my fellow, you know—sort of medical man in charge of the horses, keeps ’em in health, and all that sort of thing.’

‘I know him. Excellent man. No better trainer at Newmarket; but it is as well to look after these sort of things yourself.’

‘Quite so, quite so,’ replied Mr Bramton. ‘The only thing is when you’re no judge of the goods, by which I mean the horses, it’s best to leave the buying and selling,

by which I mean the settling what they're to do, to somebody who understands the business. Now, my lord, the only thing I can understand is putting these horses up 'o auction, and letting 'em go for what they will fetch. Stubber recommends me to do that, and I've told him to arrange to do it next month.'

'God bless my sou!! man,' exclaimed the Earl excitedly, 'you don't mean to say you are going to put Damocles up for sale next month?'

'Bramton is joking,' cried Mr Berriman, who had been listening to the conversation with no little curiosity. 'You can't mean to deprive Barkshire of the honour of taking its first Derby?'

'You didn't let me finish,' said John Bramton. 'Stubber advised me to sell the whole stud, bar Damocles and a horse called Whitechapel, which, it seems, he thinks necessary to "lead the work," whatever that may mean.'

Mr Berriman and the Earl laughed, and the former said:

'It won't do, Bramton; it won't do. Fellows talk "horse" very often who know precious little about it, but you don't catch me taking long odds from a fellow who pretends to know as little about it as you do. Bless you, my boy, I've been had by the innocents in my day. We know all about the Heathen Chinee and the game "he did not understand."'

If Berriman and the Earl did, Bramton did not. He had been a busy man all his life till quite lately, and his reading had been pretty strictly confined to the daily papers, and, as we know, there were some parts of those at which he never glanced. But one thing Bramton did understand, and that was that the general public were determined to regard him as a sportsman, and that his affectation of ignorance on the subject was regarded as a capital joke. In racing matters this is so constantly the case, that the man who knows nothing, and maintains a rigid silence, is always regarded as a model of astuteness, and when, considerably more to his own surprise than that of anybody else, the horse which he has not backed for a sixpence wins easily, he is credited with having won an enormous stake, and having been a very Mephistophiles in the manipulation of the betting market.

CHAPTER XIII.

LUCY'S INNOCULATION.

LORD RANKSBOROW, as they joined the ladies, was hardly satisfied with the results of his diplomatic dinner. Mr Bramton, while quite admitting that his ignorance of racing distinctly unfitted him to determine for what stakes Damocles should run, yet by no means seemed desirous of handing over such decision to his host. Mr Bramton, in his business days, had been apt to reckon up his fellows pretty accurately. He had come to the conclusion that Mr Stubber was an honest, energetic man, who knew what he was about, and he thought it just as well that the management of the colt should be left entirely to him. The Earl had sounded his guest pretty freely on this point; but though John Bramton temporised, and did not positively decline to accept Lord Ranksborow's proffered services, yet he never for one second committed himself, and boldly made the request which the Earl had hoped, namely, that he would take the entire management of Damocles. He would go no further than saying that he was extremely fortunate to have a friend like his lordship, to whom he could always come for advice, but he would not pledge himself even not to sell the colt. He would go no further than say he should not part with him at present. He would hear what Stubber had to say after the others were sold, etc. In fact, the Earl rather ruefully came to the conclusion that John Bramton meant to take his own way in this business, and that his trainer would probably have more to say to the tactics of the stable than anyone else.

'A deuced knowing shot this,' mused the Earl, 'and perfectly able to take care of himself. They'll not get Temple Rising out of him as they did from poor Molyneux; but, shrewd as he is, he has one weak point, and that point might cost him a lot of money, as it has done many others. He has a tremendous idea of his own importance, and that will be my safeguard about his sticking to Damocles. He has already discovered that owning the first favourite of the Derby adds to his im-

portance. It will be easy to keep that feeling alive in a dozen different ways, and as long as his pocket is not touched too severely, he'll not forego the swagger of the position.'

In the course of the evening the Miss Bramtons were also made conscious of the pleasures of owning successful racehorses. Several trophies in the way of cups decorated both the dinner-table and the sideboard, which had been won by the Earl in the course of his turf career. Lady Jane Cuxwold, too, showed a handsome bracelet which her father had given her upon the occasion of his winning the Chester Cup some four years ago. The Earl was lavish to his family when fortune smiled upon him; and when they saw the interest the Miss Bramtons took in it, the Countess as well as her daughters exhibited various specimens of the spoils of war.

Lady Ranksborow was not a little struck by the keen, sensible inquiries that Lucy Bramton made about turf matters. The girl evidently knew but little about them, but she was very persistent in her endeavours to understand the mysteries of racing. Her sister, on the other hand, gabbled on as young ladies are somewhat wont to do, saying it must be delightful to win races and get bangles, and that she was quite sure that she should delight in it; that she had never seen anything of it yet; but that, now her uncle had left them his stud, of course they should go everywhere.

Now it must be borne in mind that though Mrs and Miss Bramton were perfectly aware that Richard Bramton's property had been all left to Lucy, yet they never proclaimed that fact, and were indeed honestly ignorant that these racehorses were not only hers, but that it was an open question whether they were not under her own immediate control; that she could positively decide for what stakes they should run; and that it would be a fine point for the lawyers whether Lucy, for instance, had not the right to strike Damocles out of all engagements. The young lady was very quiet, but she had a will of her own. Her uncle's money she knew must come positively into her own possession when she came of age, and, besides the desire to carry out her uncle's last wishes,

her imagination had been highly inflamed by the victory of Damocles at Ascot. Then these Ranksborow people, who had all been brought up amidst the racecourse and the hunting field, still further excited her, and she began to think that it would be rather a fine thing to be the owner of a few racehorses. Under the tuition of Lady Jane and Lady Emily, she made considerable progress in turf lore. That evening she ascertained that there was nothing out of the way in a lady keeping some, though they usually ran them in an assumed name; and the result of all this talk was that Lucy resolved to ascertain at once how far her control really extended over Mr Stubber's charges. For instance, she knew her father was contemplating the sale of the greater part of them. At all events she would write to Mr Pecker, and have a legal opinion as to whether this could be done in opposition to her wishes, should she think fit to decree otherwise. However, in the meantime, the appearance of the gentlemen changed the tenor of the conversation, and Miss Bramton, at all events, was soon immersed in her flirtation with Sir Kenneth Sandiman.

'Nice affable people the Ranksborows,' said Mr Bramton, as they drove home. 'Not a bit stuck up. Being an owner of racehorses, you see, gives one a sort of tone in society, I find. Bless you! they all seem to regard me as an authority.'

'I don't see much use in it, if we're never to go and see races,' rejoined Miss Bramton, rather sharply. 'Lady Jane told me they always went to Ascot, and was quite surprised that we were not there to see Damocles win.'

'Yes, papa, and they would not believe that we had never even seen him. I must see Damocles,' said Lucy, with quiet but decided emphasis; and the girl was more than ever confirmed in her resolve to write to Mr Pecker on the morrow.

'Yes, John; we really must go to the next fashionable gathering. I don't know when it is, or where it is, but we must go.'

'Yes; and it's the proper thing to give your daughters bracelets or something of that sort when you win, papa,' exclaimed Matilda.

'Yes; and you must win, and you must do it,' chorussed Lucy.

'I tell you what it is,' said Mr Bramton testily, 'if an owner of racehorses is liable to all these obligations, the sooner I'm out of the lot the better.'

'Oh! you can't do that, papa. Lady Ranksborow said she was sure you were too good a sportsman to part with Damocles before he had won the Derby.'

'Well,' said Mr Bramton, 'I'm not sure I'm quite calculated to make a good sportsman; it seems that there is a little too much expected of one. Now as far as a quiet day's fishing goes, I don't mind; but this subscribing to the hounds, etc., I don't exactly see.'

'All quite necessary in your position, papa dear,' said Miss Matilda. 'I'm sure we've had a most delightful evening, and Sir Kenneth is a most agreeable man, worth a hundred of those old business frumps or young City prigs you used to bring home to dinner at Wimbledon.'

John Bramton relapsed into silence. The contest was too unequal—the ladies were all against him—and he found himself, so to speak, under such a cross-fire of conversation that the holding of his tongue was the most discreet thing he could do; and in spite of the elation the being the reputed owner of Damocles had occasioned him during the evening, he thought, perhaps, that the sooner he got rid of the horses, which he had now quite learnt to consider his own, the better.

'What does Dartree say?' inquired the Earl, as he entered his wife's room, and found the Countess glancing over a letter in her son's handwriting.

'I was so late that I hadn't time to read it before dinner,' replied Lady Ranksborow; 'but there's nothing much in it, unless you consider this message to you of importance. "Tell my father," he says, "that Damocles is very unsteady in the market. There's a tendency to lay against him in somewhat dangerous quarters. No reason that I can hear of except they say that he will be offered for sale during the July week. Ask him if he knows anything about it."'

'Know anything about it,' said the Earl irritably. 'I know as much about it as it's possible to know with such a suspicious, undecided fool as Bramton to deal with.'

'I think you're wrong there, Rank,' said the Count-

ess. 'It strikes me Mr Bramton is no fool, whatever else he may be.'

'No, you're quite right, he isn't; but he's so afraid of anybody getting the better of him, of his not making the very most of these horses, that it's impossible to wring a decided answer out of him about what he's going to do with Damocles. He has eaten my mutton and drank my claret,' continued the Earl, laughing, 'under false pretences to-night. I asked him here for the purpose of getting a distinct declaration of his views on that very point. I wanted him to let me have the management of the horse; but no, all I could get out of him was that he had not as yet made up his mind to sell Damocles, which I knew before.'

'You and Dart stand to win a big stake over this horse, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'And would rather he remained in Mr Bramton's hands than otherwise?'

'Just so,' said the Earl, with a nod.

'Then you leave it to me and the girls, Rank. You needn't laugh; we can do more for you than you think here. Jane and Emily, without intending it, have given the Miss Bramtons the racing fever to-night. We'll take care it don't cool. They'll never let their father sell Damocles.'

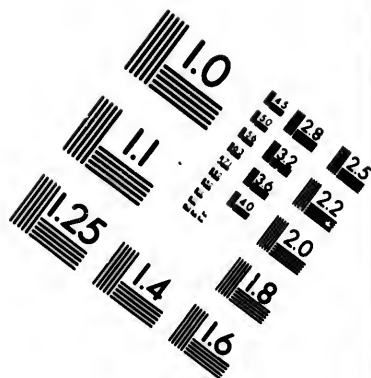
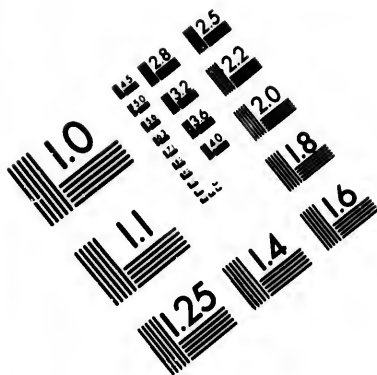
Lord Ranksborow laughed.

'All right,' he rejoined; 'do your best. Remember, if Damocles won, next day there would be an easiness in the money market to which for years we've been unaccustomed.'

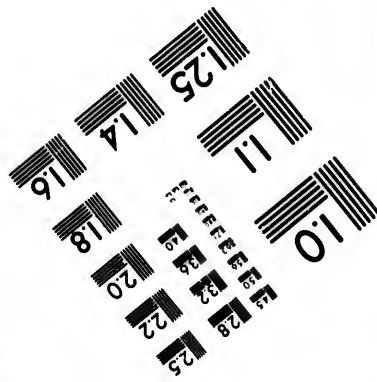
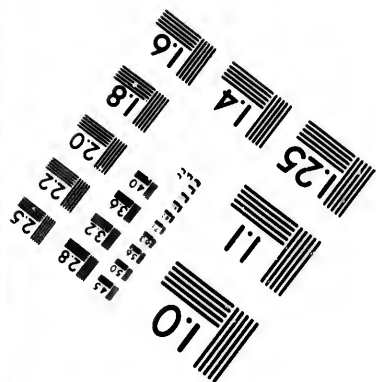
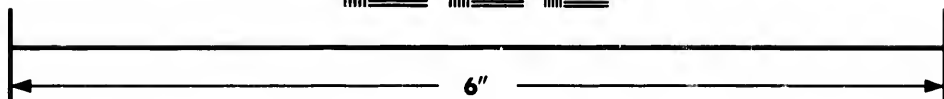
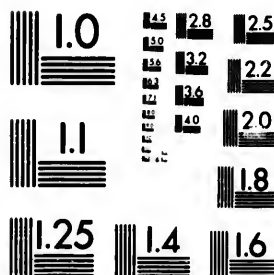
True to her resolve, the next morning Lucy wrote to Mr Pecker to inquire how her powers stood with regard to this proposed sale. Mr Pecker's answer, which arrived in the course of two or three days, was clear and succinct.

'With regard to the greater part of these horses, no question arises. The condition of the will is, till they have run through their engagements. Most of them have been nominated by the late Richard Bramton, and such nominations are void by his death. Damocles and another two-year-old called Lucifer, both heavily engaged, are nominated by Mr Stubber, as also, it appears, is a five-year-old





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named Whitechapel, in one or two instances. The question, therefore, of your power to keep or sell under the codicil are confined to these three ; and, in the case of the latter horse, it will speedily expire, as his engagements will be fulfilled. With Damocles and Lucifer the case is very different, as their engagements extend over the whole of next year, and even into the year beyond. I have taken counsel's opinion, and the result is that, though admittedly a very fine point, the authority I consulted thinks the codicil goes beyond a wish, and implies a condition of inheritance which might be legally disputed if not complied with. As far as we know, there is nobody to raise the question ; but, as a lawyer, I must say, "*Don't give a possible somebody the chance.*" My racing experiences are of little value, but my advice to you would be to let these horses run through engagements at the discretion of their trainer. Mr Stubber has the credit of being a clever, straightforward man in his business, and, from what he told me, Damocles will more than pay all expenses.'

Bitten as Lucy was, but in much more genuine fashion than her father, with a strong inclination to dabble with the turf, this letter was eminently satisfactory. With her father, the possession or control of racehorses was merely a thing he desired because it increased his importance ; but Lucy's imagination had been excited by the Ladies Cuxwold, and she had begun to dream of seeing her own horse and her own colours at Ascot, Goodwood, or some of the great turf social gatherings. Mr Pecker's letter told her that it behoved her to keep three of the horses, and amongst them Damocles, which, from what her uncle had told her, and from what she had heard since, she believed to be much the best horse she possessed ; and, indeed, it was to him she looked for the attainment of such social successes as she might attain on the racecourse. She looked forward to the time when she might become the heroine of the hour ; when she might be pointed out as the owner of Damocles, who had just won the principal race at Sandown. She had read only a little before that the Marchioness of Budleigh had appeared in the royal paddock at Ascot attired in a dress of her husband's racing colours. Then she wondered

what Uncle Dick's colours were; and then came woman's natural hope that they were pretty—thinking over as she was this matter of a dress of the same colours, it was highly essential that they should be so. For instance, she had read in this very account of somebody's well-known jacket of white and green spots proving triumphant. Now, what was any woman to make of a dress of that description? However, she supposed colours could be changed like other things; and then, I'm afraid, it occurred to her feminine and uninstructed mind that it might be nice to change her colours as she did her dresses, or, at all events, once every season. She had yet to learn that a thorough turfite is devoted to his jacket—as proud of the banner which he had seen borne triumphant in a hundred frays as the soldier of the colours under which he has fought and bled.

Then she fell to ruminating on Mr Pecker's letter. Armed with, that she felt she could defy her father, who, though flattered, as above said, by the importance the ownership of Damocles conferred upon him, was too keen a money-maker not to sell the horse for a large sum if the matter rested entirely with him. As a matter of sport, Mr Bramton felt no manner of interest in the inheritance that had come to his daughter; as a matter of swagger, he no doubt did. But Lucy knew that her father's old business habits would eclipse that as soon as the bait dangled before his eyes was big enough. Armed with Mr Pecker's letter, she felt that she could do as she liked with her own, although a good year must elapse before she attained her majority.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR SKINNER IS PUZZLED.

'WELL, Stubber,' exclaimed Mr Skinner, as he encountered the trainer coming home with his string from the Heath on the Monday in the July week, 'I see Dick Bramton's horses are all up for sale, bar Damocles.'

'Not quite,' replied the other as he walked his cob alongside the commissioner's hack. 'My new employer has kept Damocles and Whitechapel to lead him, at my

request; but I'll tell you one thing more, Mr John Bramton may know nothing about things, but there is somebody pulling the strings who does. I wonder who has recommended him to keep Lucifer—never suggested it—but whoever did is a good judge.'

'Promising, eh?' remarked Skinner.

'Yes; he is a smartish colt, though backward. I've never been able to try him properly yet, but I've no doubt, before the end of the season, he will show himself what I tell you.'

'I suppose Mr Bramton never comes down to look at the horses?'

'Never been down since they were his,' rejoined the trainer; 'never had an employer in my life who took so little interest in racing. I went to see him once, and I've written to him several times, and telegraphed to him besides, but I've only had one letter from him, and that was to tell me that I was to put all the horses up for sale this week, with the exception of the three mentioned. I'm very glad he's going to stick to Damocles, and I'm glad he keeps Lucifer; but what prompted him to keep the latter, I'm jiggered if I know.'

'It is odd where he got that hint,' remarked Skinner. 'Why, even I, who am always at it, didn't know that you reckoned Lucifer smart. Of course I knew you had got a colt of that name. Lucifer by Satan, out of Morning Star, is pretty heavily entered, but the very horse-watchers haven't begun to talk about him yet.'

'No; and he won't be seen out till the back end. If Mr Bramton had been a racing gentleman, I should have told him not to part with that one, but I was so afraid of his putting Damocles up for sale, that I didn't like to go too far. Dam'me, he looks upon racehorses as not only expensive, but dangerous besides.'

'Well, good-bye, Stubber. I must go home and get some breakfast. I don't suppose the penalty will stop your colt in the Julys.'

'Not a bit of it,' laughed the trainer; 'he could carry five pound more, and win. Take advice, and though it is contrary to your rule, stand the favourite for once.'

'I think I must,' replied the bookmaker, smiling, 'if the

odds on him are not too expensive. Good-morning. I'd give a sovereign,' muttered Mr Skinner to himself, 'to know what induced John Bramton to keep Lucifer.'

Little escaped Mr Skinner's notice. He would never have obtained the position he held, and the substance he possessed, had it not been for his faculty of close observation. It was a maxim with him that information, however trivial, was always worth picking up. A straw shows which way the wind blows, and racing men are wonderfully quick at catching a hint that will be of use to them in their vocation. Many a trifle like this had, when interpreted, helped Mr Skinner to make money. The mere fact of Lucifer not being offered for sale would suggest that the stable set store upon him; and his trainer freely acknowledged that they were sanguine about his turning out promising. But the bookmaker looked upon it that he had caught a clue to something more than that—a clue to what, he had no idea—but what motive had John Bramton in excepting this colt from his approaching sale? Damocles and Whitechapel he could understand, that was by the advice of his trainer, and it was quite likely that Bramton, after tasting the sweets of winning, might think that there was more money to be made by running Damocles than selling him. But these reasons did not apply to Lucifer. Stubber had most distinctly said that it was by no advice of his that the colt was kept, and whether he could win or not was yet to be seen. A shrewd, suspicious man, but with no great faith in anybody but himself, Mr Skinner turned this puzzle over and over in his mind as he walked his hack home to his lodgings.

Lord Ranksborow had taken a much more correct estimate than his commissioner. True he had had many more opportunities of seeing the owner of Temple Rising than his agent; but Skinner had fallen into the mistake that, because Bramton was simple and ignorant about the affairs of the turf, he was equally simple and foolish in other matters. Lord Ranksborow had divined this; he saw that Bramton was a man who usually acted on his own judgment, and that if he sought advice eagerly about the disposal of these horses, it was not so much that he

meant to take it, but really to learn the worth of and how to make the most of the property that had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands. Could they but have known the real state of the case, and seen Mr Pecker's last letter, both Mr Skinner and the Earl would have been not a little astonished. However, Mr Skinner could make no more of his puzzle at present than that Lord Ranksborow must have been the person who had inspired Bramton to keep Lucifer, and yet, somehow, he felt that was not the true solution. First of all, the Earl usually confided to him any piece of turf strategy which he had planned; and secondly, what object could his patron have in the retention of Lucifer? According to Stubber, they had never as yet fairly tried the colt, and their estimate of his merits was therefore conjectural. He was not a youngster for whom a long price had been paid, as in the case of Damocles, nor had he been talked about, nor his advent on a racecourse expected with all the interest and curiosity that had attended that of the latter. He doubted, indeed, whether Lucifer's career as yet was not a matter of complete indifference to Lord Ranksborow, and then asked himself again, angrily, 'What the deuce made John Bramton keep that colt?' Mr Skinner had passed much time, and not altogether unprofitably, in working out knotty points of this description.

There were two other men also returning from the Heath after watching the gallops that morning, but these young persons were not riding, but trusting to their own legs to bring them back to town.

'It's a little hard, Sim,' said the younger of the two, a fresh-complexioned young fellow of about twenty; 'those horses will fetch a pot of money next week, and by rights I ought to have the biggest part of it.'

'If what you tell me is true,' replied his companion, a sharp, wizened, preternaturally old young man, 'it is rather rough. Richard Bramton must have left a good bit of money behind him, and if what you say is true, and you really are his son, he ought to have done something for you; but nobody ever heard that Dick Bramton was married.'

'Well, it was many years ago, and I don't suppose he was much older than I am now, and then he and mother

soon parted. They couldn't get along together. I don't want to say a word against her, poor thing, but you see, Sim, she had a temper, and what's worse, she couldn't leave the bottle alone. It's not much wonder Bramton couldn't get on with her.'

'You will excuse my asking a question,' said Simon Napper, 'I suppose you've got proof of this marriage?'

'No, I haven't; but mother always declared she was married.'

Mr Napper was an attorney's clerk, and his profession taught him to put but little faith in an assertion that could not be corroborated.

'And you've never been called by any other name than Robbins?'

'No,' returned the other. 'When my father and mother separated, it was a condition that she should resume her maiden name, and live away from Newmarket. He allowed her all he could at first, and latterly made her a fairly liberal allowance; but a little before her death he gave her a lump sum down.'

'I see,' said Mr Napper; 'he capitalised the allowance, and made it over to her to do as she liked with.'

'Not altogether,' replied Robbins; 'she could only touch the interest during her life, but she could will it to whom she liked.'

'And she, I suppose, left it to you?'

'Yes; but what was the good of three thousand pounds?'

'Good of it,' returned Mr Napper; 'why it was enough to start any man with a head on his shoulders in any business. Why your father Dick Bramton began with nothing, and he left, according to all accounts, a pretty good pile behind him.'

'Yes,' returned Robbins; 'but then he had such luck. Now, I never had any luck. If I back a horse, it's sure to break down or do something awkward—go the wrong side of the post, or be disqualified for foul riding.'

'Strikes me, Master Tom, there was just this difference between yourself and your father,—he had a head on his shoulders, and mentally you've not. Didn't he ever take any notice of you? Didn't he ever do anything for you?'

'No; I never knew he was my father even till after

his death. My mother was very ill then, and she told me the story, and vowed that she was really married to him. She said she had kept the secret, as she had promised, and would have still kept it had it not been for his death. A few weeks later, poor soul, and she followed him.'

'And he never did anything for you?'

'Well,' replied Tom Robbins, in a somewhat shamefaced way, 'you know some three years ago, just about the time you were articled, you were astonished at my being taken into the bank. Well, mother said a very old friend of hers had managed that for her, and given her a liberal cheque for me to get a regular rig out with. As you know, it wasn't many months before I got the sack. Mother was in a great taking about it; said I'd quarrelled with the best friend I had, who was very angry, and declared he'd do nothing more for me. Now I don't know for certain, but I think that was my father.'

'Most likely,' rejoined Mr Napper. 'Well, you *were* a fool, though, of course, you didn't know how big a one at the time. Nothing is more likely than that you would have come into a big slice of Dick Bramton's money if you had only kept straight. I suppose you've made a tidy hole in that three thousand pounds your mother left you?'

'Yes,' replied Tom Robbins; 'I'm such an unlucky devil, I never win.'

Mr Tom Robbins was a weak-kneed, foolish young man, with no backbone to his character, with idle and vicious propensities, never likely to do any good for himself in this world, and who, had he had the slightest idea of his claim upon Richard Bramton, would have endeavoured to batten on him like a horse-leech. The very few people who knew anything about this episode in Richard Bramton's earlier life would, I fancy, have put a very different complexion upon it. They would rather have laughed at the idea of there having been any marriage, and pronounced Dick Bramton thoroughly justified in not binding himself for life to a woman of such violent temper and intemperate habits as Mary Robbins. Moreover, it might have been very plausibly argued that, if she had marriage lines to show, such a headstrong woman as Mary

Robbins would never have acquiesced in abandoning her position as a wife. Further, scandal rather credited her with being but a light o' love at the best.

'Well, I did think I should have taken something under his will,' continued Tom, after a short pause. 'As I've never heard from the lawyers anything about it, nor, indeed, what his will was, I suppose there is nothing for me. If I could only find that certificate, I suppose I should come into all.'

'That don't follow at all,' rejoined Mr Napper. 'Richard Bramton could leave his money to whom he pleased, and from all I've heard, Dick Bramton was just the man to leave a son out in the cold who displeased him.'

'But it's deuced unfair!' cried Tom, in a lachrymose tone, 'that everything should go to an uncle whom I've never seen. There might be something left to me; there might be a recommendation to my Uncle John to lend me a hand. I should like to see that will.'

'You are perfectly right there,' rejoined Mr Napper; 'always see a will in which you think there is any possibility of your being interested. It only costs a shilling, and it's worth the trouble and outlay. On the off chance, I don't suppose anything will come of it, but, as I said before, it's worth spending a shilling over.'

'I'll do it,' said Tom; 'and now I must go home and write my report.'

Mr Robbins at present held the responsible position of reporter at headquarters to a London sporting paper, and though so far he had never electrified its readers by any striking intelligence, yet he managed to get through his work well enough to retain his situation.

'He'll never come to any good,' thought Simon Napper, as he mused over the above conversation. 'She didn't like to acknowledge it, no doubt, but depend upon it, his mother never *was* married; and a self-made, reliant man like Richard Bramton would have no patience with a feeble, feckless fool like that. Tom little thought when he was kicked out of that situation, and used to be swaggering and vapouring about what a fast life he had led in London, that he was doing this under the nose of his own father, and a father, too, with a pot of money to leave.'

CHAPTER XV.

THE JULY STAKES.

THE racing world were gathered together at the back of The Ditch for the celebration of one of the pleasantest meetings of the year. After the roar of Epsom and the crowd of Ascot the comparative quiet of the July Meeting is most enjoyable. Held in the midst of summer, and favoured as a rule with splendid weather, it enjoys also another distinct privilege—there is licence in the matter of dress. On the Royal Heath fashion demands the showiest costumes, and is inexorable about the chimney-pot on the part of the male sex. At Newmarket you may do as you please in the matter of attire, and defy the fierce rays of the sun as you so will it. Amongst those who had come for the sport were a considerable section who were quite as much attracted by the sales. To many men the looking over thoroughbred stock, the talking over how the youngsters are bred, the arguing about the different strains of blood, and, above all, how the prices for which the youngsters are sold coincides with their own judgment, is quite as interesting as the racing itself; then there were the buyers always expecting to draw a prize out of that most capricious of lucky-bags, a yearling sale. Often as they have given long prices only to find that the youngsters who had fallen to the auctioneer's hammer for a thousand and upwards were never destined to realise the high hopes entertained of them, still, carried away by the grand looks of some colt, or of a strain of blood that they peculiarly fancy, they take one more ticket in Fortune's wheel, only to find once more that—

‘Legs are not steel, and steel is bent;
Legs are not rocks, and rocks are rent,’

and that the high price purchase succumbs to the exigencies of training.

The sale of the late Richard Bramton's horses was not calculated to attract undue attention. Good, useful horses they were, and likely to sell well; but everybody knew that ‘the pick of the basket,’ Damocles, was not to be put up. That Lucifer also was reserved was noticed only by a few old hands. The colt had never run, and therefore was

almost unknown by name to the racegoers ; but amongst the few people whose attention it did attract were Lord Ranksborow, Mr James Noel, and Mr Simon Napper. For the first time since that memorable visit to Epsom in his youth, John Bramton had been fairly goaded into appearing on a racecourse. He had no idea of being present at Newmarket, or indeed any other race meeting, but the feminine pressure brought to bear had proved too strong for him. In spite of his first curt refusal, accompanied by the comments that he had never heard such preposterous nonsense, and that Newmarket was no place for ladies, Mrs Bramton and her daughters returned again and again to the charge. Those comments of John Bramton had been injudicious. He had advanced reasons for his refusal, which, as Lord Chancellor Thurloe said, 'you should never do.' It was speedily proved to him, on the testimony of the ladies Cuxwold, that there was nothing at all preposterous in the idea, that ladies *did* go to Newmarket, and that very jolly it was.

'Quite lovely!' said Lady Emily. 'Just a sailor hat and a muslin dress ; and you take a big hamper in the carriage, and picnic on the grass ; and you can get about, and haven't all the horrid crowd of Ascot. I only wish papa would take us ; but he says he can't afford a cottage this year.'

Supported by these authorities, Mrs Bramton and her daughters gave the head of the house no peace. He felt that he would have to yield. Mrs Bramton and the girls usually carried their point at last, and, therefore, John Bramton felt he might as well give in as prolong the struggle. Added to which, Lucy privately urged that she ought to be allowed to see her own horses run, more especially as she was in a position, as she said, 'to pay for the lark.' So it had been resolved that the whole party were to make their racing *début* on the Heath, under the auspices of Lord Ranksborow.

One trifling difficulty had presented itself. In the first instance, Lord Ranksborow had suggested a hack to Mr Bramton, but about this the master of Temple Rising was very positive. If it were not possible to see horse-racing except by getting on a horse, then he would contrive to do without that sight.

The Earl laughed, and speedily reassured him, and said, 'that, upon the whole, a good roomy carriage would probably suit the whole party much better,' and reassured for the present about Damocles, the Earl promised to act as a mentor in some sort, to see that their carriage was placed in a proper position, etc., and cordially accepted an invitation to come and pick a bit with them at luncheon time.

A favourite expression of Mr Bramton's was, 'I never go in for things by halves ;' and now, having gone in for racing, he was determined to act up to his favourite maxim. He sent down a roomy barouche and a pair of job-horses from London, and as for hampers, their size and number gave the idea that Bramton contemplated asking half the Heath to lunch with him. He really was of a hospitable disposition, but this result was principally due to the absurd idea he had conceived of his own importance as the *soi-disant* owner of Damocles. He really did conceive that many of the leading patrons of the turf desired to make his acquaintance, and would probably have expected to be at once elected a member of the Jockey Club, had he remembered that such a body existed. His neighbours at Temple Rising had a little fostered this idea. He ignored the well-known axiom, 'You may be a big man in the country, and a very small one in the metropolis.' Newmarket *is* the metropolis of the turf.

The Miss Bramtons experienced much difficulty in restraining their father in the matter of dress. True to his great principle of not going in for things by halves, Mr Bramton was excessively anxious to attire himself as a genuine racing man. How these arrayed themselves he did not know, but his own idea was evolved from his inner consciousness and a hazy recollection of the Hill at Epsom, and, but for the control of his daughters, John Bramton's get-up would have been very striking. He had doubts as to whether top-boots were not a *sine qua non* for a professed owner of racehorses, but this was finally compromised for a pair of extremely tight-fitting, horsey-looking cord trousers and a white hat, which the girls felt it was useless to combat, and, besides, there was nothing remarkable in that, but a dust-coloured coat of very pronounced colour was the occasion of a long struggle, eventually terminating

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in the defeat of Matilda and Lucy. Mr Bramton vowed he would go to Newmarket in that salmon-tinted garment, or he would not go at all; and, thus attired, armed with a Brobdignagian pair of race glasses, made his first appearance on Newmarket Heath.

Mr Bramton was not a little disappointed at the aspect of Newmarket. True to that one racing reminiscence of his juvenile days, he had pictured to himself all the knock-'em-downs, cocoa-nuts, nigger minstrels, and the other eccentric artists that swarm about the Hill at Epsom. The absence of this element depressed him.

'Aristocratic, my dears,' he exclaimed; 'but don't you think it's just a leetle dull? And if these are the swells, all I can say is they don't dress up to the mark.'

And here Mr Bramton pulled up his shirt-collar, as much as to say that he, at all events, was not liable to that accusation.

'That flame-coloured garment of papa's will be our ruin!' whispered Miss Matilda to her sister. 'What a happy thought that was of yours, Lucy, about the gloves.'

Lucy had ingeniously kidnapped a very bright-coloured pair of gloves that her father had elected to wear at the last moment, substituting a more sombre-hued pair in their place.

And now the horses go leisurely down to the post for the Julys.

'Oh! papa,' exclaimed Matilda, 'what a hideous jacket yours is! You really must change it.'

Once more did Lucy, thoroughly agreeing with her sister on this point, inwardly vow that next year should see Damocles run in prettier colours.

But the babel of the ring is stilled, the flag falls, and the field are away for the Julys. Hardly a sound breaks the soft summer air, and every eye is strained upon that cluster of gay jackets so rapidly nearing the spectators. The thud of the advancing hoofs now falls distinctly on the ear, followed by the cry of 'Prize-fighter wins!' 'Harlequin wins!' Mr Bramton feels his head turning. He is fumbling with his glasses, and has lost sight of the horses, when suddenly rings through the air the clear, distinct tones of Lord Ranksborow,—

'A hundred to ten on Damocles! Damocles wins!—wins in a canter!'

A couple of minutes more, up goes the number, and it is evident the Ear's verdict has been confirmed.

'Let me congratulate you, Mr Bramton,' said Lord Ranksborow, as he raised his hat and reined up his horse by the side of the carriage. 'I don't know what the judge's verdict may be, but I'm quite convinced that your horse won easily. I am going to take the liberty of asking you to give an old friend of mine some lunch. Let me introduce you to Mr Flood.'

Alec raised his hat, while a little hand was extended from the carriage to him, and Lucy exclaimed,—

'Mr Flood and I are old acquaintances. I trust you recollect me?'

'Not likely that I should forget you, Miss Bramton,' replied Alec, as he shook hands. 'I have often wondered whether we should meet again, and little thought it would be here. I don't very often trouble a racecourse, though I might have known it was not an unlikely place to meet you.'

She could hardly have explained why, but Lucy felt a little nettled at this remark; and yet she had been dying to pay this visit to Newmarket. Her horse was successful, and everything promised to make the day *couleur de rose*. She wanted to meet Flood, but she was conscious that she would rather have met him anywhere else.

'There you are wrong,' replied Lucy. 'I have never been on a racecourse before, and if it hadn't been for my poor uncle's death, should probably have not been here now; but Damocles, you know, was his horse, and we were all anxious to see him win just once.'

'Of course; I understand now. By the way, I remember hearing that the stud became your father's property. I must congratulate you, Mr Bramton.'

'Very good of you, I'm sure. Yes; they tell me that horse of mine is a regular "sneezer." At all events, he keeps winning, which is satisfactory. But just give your horse to one of the men there to hold, and come up on the box and have some lunch.'

'Don't you think, Mr Flood, we have the most hideous jacket there is registered? Papa, you really must change it.'

'Good heavens! don't be so rash, Miss Bramton,' cried Lord Ranksborow. 'You can't do more than win. Any old race-goer will tell you, as I do, that to change your jacket is to change your luck.'

'Poor Uncle Dick used to say that they might not be pretty, that wasn't in his way; what he liked about them was that they were good to see.'

'Ridiculous!' exclaimed John Bramton. 'Here am I, with a spic-span new pair of Voigtlander's glasses, and I'm blessed if I could ever see 'em at any part of the race.'

'There is a little knack in distinguishing colours through a race-glass,' said Ranksborow; 'you will soon get into it. And now, Mr Bramton, you must come with me, and walk across and say something pretty to Stubber. Quite the correct thing, I assure you, and I must say he has done your colt every justice.'

'Oh! well,' said Mr Bramton, 'I shall be only too happy, if it's the correct thing. I'm always anxious to do the correct thing, your lordship.'

The Earl had given his hack over to his groom while he made his modest lunch at the Bramtons' carriage. Making a sign to the lad to follow him, he and his entertainer now walked off in search of the trainer, upon meeting whom Mr Bramton was destined to be still further astonished. Lord Ranksborow shook hands with Stubber, congratulated him upon landing the Julys, and complimented him upon the condition of his horse, winding up by saying,—

'I have brought Mr Bramton to talk to you.'

'Hope you're satisfied, sir,' said Stubber, as he touched his hat.

'It's the correct thing to be affable; all the swells do it, I see,' muttered Mr Bramton, *sotto voce*, 'so here goes. How d'ye do, Stubber? Very glad to see you, Stubber. You do Damocles great credit, or Damocles does you, which is it? 'Pon my word, I don't know; but if you'll just come across to my carriage we'll have a glass of champagne over this.'

'Yes, and a right good glass, too,' chimed in the Earl. 'You ought to drink Mr Bramton's health on his first appearance on the Heath,' and with these words the Earl

signalled to his groom to bring up his hack, and left Mr Bramton and his trainer to celebrate their victory.

'Have you heard lately from Captain Cuxwold?' asked Lucy, as her father and Lord Ranksborow left the carriage.

'Not very lately,' replied Flood. 'But why don't you apply to headquarters?' and Alec jerked his head in the direction of the retreating Earl.

'I was wondering only the other day,' replied Lucy, 'whether he was connected with the Ranksborow family.'

'Pretty closely,' rejoined Flood, laughing; 'he is a son. I wonder you didn't guess that long ago. Surely you knew he was the Honourable Captain Cuxwold, at Cairo?'

'No,' replied Lucy. 'I only knew that he was Captain Curwold; then, again, we have only known Lord Ranksborow and his family quite lately, and I must plead guilty to being supremely ignorant about the peerage. It was only the other day that I knew Lord Ranksborow's family name. But you have not answered my question?'

'I heard from Jack not long ago. Of course you know he was up with Sir Gerald Graham at Suakim, and you must have read in the papers what the fighting was like up there.'

'Terrible,' rejoined Lucy; 'but I had no idea Captain Cuxwold was in the midst of all that carnage.'

'Yes; it was pretty hard fighting. These Arabs are splendid fellows, and fight like wildcats; but they are likely to see plenty more of it before all is over. We've sent Gordon to Khartoum, and he is besieged there. We are in honour bound to go to his relief, and, what's more, the outcry in the country is getting so strong that Government cannot put off sending an expedition much longer. It doesn't much matter where they start from, but there'll be bitter fighting in the desert between that and Khartoum. But see, they are going down for another race. Do you take much interest in this sort of thing?'

'Yes, I do,' she replied, as she stood up in the carriage, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, though how she could look so excited, considering how little she knew about it, was singular. It is possible she was thinking more about the perils of the Soudan than the mimic warfare of the racecourse. 'How I do wish we had a horse of our own running in this.'

Alec Flood had never been suspected of taking any very great interest in turf matters, but this afternoon he spent watching the racing closely from the box of the Bramtons' carriage.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT NEWMARKET DID FOR THEM.

YOUNG Tom Robbins had after his wont still further decreased his store during the July meeting. Weak in judgment, he was always pursuing that *ignis fatuus* of backers—the backing of something at long odds so as to win a handsome stake at once, although experience might have taught him that, like the zero at roulette, these outsiders won very seldom, and that when they did, they were as a rule as unbacked as their prototype at the roulette board. He was sauntering at the post office one morning, having despatched his usual telegram concerning the morning gallops to the paper he was employed on, when he ran across Mr Napper.

'Ah! Tom, my boy,' said that gentleman, 'how goes it? Anything new on the Heath this morning?'

'No,' replied the other; 'nothing has broke down that I've heard of. There was a trial of some kind on the Bury side, but I couldn't make anything out of it. What are you up to?'

'Well, I'm off to town,' replied Mr Napper. 'There's a matter of business that a London firm is working for us, and they've sent down for fuller information, and as I am well up in the case, my employers thought the best thing they could do was to send me up to talk it over with them, and I've just wired to say I'm on my way. I say, did you ever have a look at your father's will?'

'No,' replied Tom; 'it hardly seemed good enough to go to town about.'

'Well, I don't know that it is,' replied Mr Napper, 'but, as I said to you before, I consider it is worth paying a shilling to see. Stop, I'll tell you what I'll do. I shall have a little time to spare. I'll go and see it for you if you like.'

'I wish you would, like a good fellow,' replied Tom Robbins.

'All right, old chappie. I'll look up the old 'un's last testament, never fear; and now I'm off. By-by.'

Mr Napper was a very astute, crafty young gentleman—one of those young gentlemen who, as the saying goes, are 'quite too clever to live.' Quite too sharp to last is a better rendering of it, for such men, by their extreme scepticism with regard to their neighbours, are apt to overreach themselves. He was a pushing, active, energetic little fellow, anxious to come by money, honestly if he could, but, above all, to come by money. To his clerkship in the solicitor's office at Newmarket he added the post of special agent there for his uncle, Mr James Noel. To have said that he was James Noel's tout would have made him very indignant, but for all that he was only a high development of this order as regards his uncle. He had not the time, nor would it have suited with his other position that he should have been amongst the ordinary gang of horse-watchers, but for all that there was no important trial took place at Newmarket that Mr Napper was not acquainted with the results pretty well as soon as the touts—usually more accurately informed than many of them, such as Tom Robbins, to wit. Mr Noel was no niggard of his gold when useful information was brought to him, and this enabled Sim Napper to be liberal, and as Sim's speculations were usually of a very modest character, the horse-watchers thought there could be no harm in what they told him; and, what was still more to the point, some of the stable boys were equally communicative, with a due regard to the five shillings which rewarded any little bit of equine scandal deemed worthy of note.

In the course of the day Sim Napper found time to call at Somerset House, and examine the will of the late Richard Bramton, and he was not a little astonished upon mastering its contents.

'Well,' he muttered to himself, 'you were quite right, Tom; it wasn't worth your while coming up to London to look at it. It don't benefit you, nor can I see it will be ever likely to, even if you could lay hands on your mother's marriage certificate; but we are all out of it, too. John Bramton, apparently, hasn't come into a shilling. It all

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goes to the young woman. She is worth picking up. Somebody told me the Miss Bramtons were very pretty girls. Now that codicil, I wonder whether there's anything to be done with that? Let's look at it again.

“By my said will I have left all my racehorses to my niece Lucy Bramton; and whereas some of these may be engaged in important stakes, and others untried at my death; and so their value not known, I therefore think they ought to be kept in training for a year or two; and I now authorise executors of this my will, during the minority of my said niece Lucy, to carry on the training of such horses, paying the cost of the same out of the annual income of my estate.

“Signed, sealed, and delivered, etc.”

‘Now, this is a bit of information that might be useful to my Uncle Jim. I can't say I see exactly how, but that's his business. There is one thing pretty clear, that all this talk about Mr Bramton selling Damocles is moonshine. I don't believe he can, according to this. At all events, I should say he can't sell him this year. It would raise a beautiful point if it was ever in dispute.’

From Somerset House Mr Napper went across to the Victoria Club, and called upon his uncle, James Noel. He found the bookmaker in, and over the lunch which the latter proffered, told him of his recent discovery.

‘No; you're right, Sim,’ said Mr Noel. ‘I don't see much to be made out of it; but it's curious the first favourite for the Derby being the property of a lady. As you say, it does away with all these reports about Damocles being for sale. You may be pretty certain that he won't leave his present stable.’

Leaving Mr Noel to cogitate on the information, Mr Napper had brought him, we must now turn round and see what came of the July week to some of the other people in this veracious narrative. The Bramtons were one and all delighted with their first experience of racing. It had been, indeed, a very pleasant day's outing as far as they were concerned. They had carried off the big prize of the day, and Mr Bramton, thanks to the Earl of Ranksborow,

had attracted some little attention. The Earl had introduced him to several young men, prefacing his introduction with the aside, 'Has got the two prettiest daughters and the best glass of champagne on the Heath. If he asks you to lunch, go.'

Mr Bramton was the soul of hospitality, and the consequence was his daughters had quite a little court of young men, who thought there was no pleasanter way of repaying hospitality than by flirting with the young ladies; and though Lucy seemed somewhat absorbed in Alec Flood, yet Matilda showed herself quite equal to the occasion, and coquetted gaily with her sister's as well as her own admirers. Mr Bramton, indeed, was exceedingly pleased with his *début* on the turf. Not only had he thoroughly enjoyed himself, but so far it was a very money-making business to boot. The whole party, indeed, left Newmarket extremely well satisfied with themselves. True Mr Bramton, figuring in the position of owning the winner of the Julys, fell into divers mistakes in attempting to show Damocles to his new acquaintance—pointing out as Damocles various horses that were not the least like him, except, perhaps, in the matter of colour. Mr Bramton found it very difficult to distinguish one racehorse from another; but with all his elation, he was too shrewd a man to pledge himself to Lord Ranksborow, and parried that nobleman's craftily-worded request very cleverly. The Earl had said to him, in airy fashion, after the Julys,—

'Now, Bramton, make our minds easy; all Barkshire, like myself, is on your horse for next year's Derby. Promise us one thing, that you won't sell him.'

'Oh! I couldn't do that. It ain't business, you know. You're bound to realise, you know, when things touch the top of the market. It's a great sport no doubt, my lord, but I don't know that it is altogether prudent to keep so much capital locked up in what is very perishable property.'

It was no use. Try as he might, the Earl could get no positive assurance from John Bramton that he would not part with the horse. On the contrary, he was apparently inclined to do so should he be offered an outside price for him, and that Bramton had arrived at a much clearer idea of the value of Damocles than when Mr Skinner first

John Bramton had gone through two or three different phases of thought on the subject of his brother's stud. His first impulse had been to sell them all, then came the stage of great misgivings, when he first discovered that the horses were so very much more valuable than he had deemed them; then came the distinction of being the supposed owner of a racing crack, which suited a fussy, pompous man like himself exactly; then, again, came the old trading instinct, which told him it was absurd to keep ten thousand pounds locked up in the form of a horse, and he was told that Damocles was worth that at the present moment. It was useless pointing out to him that the horse would probably win as much as that before he was a year older. That, in Bramton's eyes, was sheer gambling, it might or might not be so; he might fall a victim to any of the ills that horseflesh is heir to; he might be beaten, and thus decrease in value. Nobody had offered him ten thousand pounds for Damocles as yet, and although John Bramton was not quite prepared to accept such an offer right off, he was certainly quite prepared to think it over; and I fancy most prudent men would say that he was right. Lucy, on the other hand, had in the first instance been influenced simply by a desire to comply with her uncle's last wish. She would have said, 'Do what you like with the rest, but let me keep Damocles;' but now that she had tasted all the *éclat* of being a successful owner of racehorses, she was by no means disposed to abandon the position. She was so delighted with the glories of the July week that, had it not been too late, she would have expostulated with her father about the sale of the other horses. As it was, she was determined strenuously to oppose any idea of parting with those that remained. It was true that the world regarded Damocles as the property of her father, but that did not signify. She as her father's daughter got quite her share of the honour and glory, and she was firmly convinced that racing in fine weather was the perfection of sports; and, moreover, the girl did take, what none of the rest of the family did, a genuine interest in the sport *itself*.

CHAPTER XVII.

ABU KLEA AND ABU KRU.

THE low growlings of the country have at length deepened to a roar, and the Government no longer dare vacillate about making one supreme effort to save the soldier whom they had hitherto left to his fate in Khartoum. Precious time had been lost, but what has been aptly termed the 'Campaign of the Cataracts,' had at length begun. By day and night the procession of boats swept by, bearing the miscellaneous force who were straining every nerve to reach the leaguered city wherein,

'Like a roebuck at bay,
Flouts our GREAT SOLDIER the Moslem array.'

Closely beset though Gordon is, despatches are yet occasionally received from him, which mention with quiet decision how long his food would hold out, and at the same time state with equal directness that to escape is now impossible, and that, his provisions once exhausted, there is nothing left him but to die sword in hand.

'And leaving in battle no blot on his name,
Look proudly to heaven, from his deathbed of fame.'

Night and day the boats struggle on up the famous river, rowing, sailing, tugging, amidst the laughter, cries, and, I am afraid, occasional curses, of the soldiers, voyageurs, and natives, tumbling up cataracts, goodness knows how, sometimes turning over, and still somehow, a great mass of men and material, makes its way up the old mysterious stream to the rendezvous of Korti. Not a man of them all but knows that they have much hardship, hard fare, and hard fighting before they see the walls of Khartoum; but what reck they of that? The sole thought in all men's minds is, 'Shall we be in time?' Hard work it has been to reach Korti, and everybody knows now that Lord Wolseley has decided upon the daring expedient of a dash across the desert, from that point. Still there is much to be done before Sir Herbert Stewart's force is sufficiently victualled and organised to proceed on its way. That the limit of time to which Gordon had alleged

his ability to hold out, was rapidly drawing to a close, the chiefs of the expedition are painfully aware. That it will be a very close thing, march rapidly as they may, was perfectly clear, and that, should success crown the toils of the column, it would only be by a very narrow margin, was certain. That the Arabs should have allowed the Wells of Jakdul to be seized upon without resistance, showed a supineness on their part so contrary to the energy and activity they had displayed in the neighbourhood of Suakim, as to astonish our leaders not a little. Subsequent events showed that they were probably taken by surprise, and were far from expecting a relieving force to advance from that direction; but as soon as they did understand it, that we were not to have a peaceful promenade to Metammeh, they gave speedy and vigorous proof. However, all is ready at last; another hour, and Sir Herbert Stewart and his soldiers will plunge into the desert.

Standing at the door of one of the tents, and looking, with a mingled expression of disgust and amusement on his face, at the stubborn vagaries of a contumacious camel, stands Jack Cuxwold. If he had made rather light of the Egyptian campaign when we last saw him, at Cairo, he had seen his predictions fulfilled, and enough stern and bitter fighting since then to satisfy most men. He, like his comrades, had carried his life in his hand many a time, in that ceaseless battling with the irrepressible Osman Digma, in the scrub round Suakim. His tall figure looked somewhat leaner than when we last saw it, and his face is burnt by the desert sun to a red brick colour. A puggaree is wound round his pith helmet; and he wears a sort of grey Norfolk jacket, with collar *à la guillotine*; high boots; and a waist-belt, from which hang his revolver and sabre, complete his attire. But the man looks all wire and whipcord, and, if somewhat thinner, apparently none the worse for his campaigning, so far.

'Well, we never know what we may come to,' he mutters. 'When I joined the 24th Lancers, I certainly never dreamt of riding a brute like that; and a more obstinate, pig-headed devil, or one more uncomfortable to ride, I don't suppose exists on the face of the

globe. A mule ! why, a mule is a park hack compared to him. I should just like to give Dart a mount on one. He can ride a bit, and thinks he can ride a good bit more ; but I think he'd own a camel was hard to hold, when it came to a difference of opinion with his rider. Well ! we shouldn't like to have been left out of it, though it is rather rough to send a smart Lancer regiment into the desert, mounted on beasts like that. Their one redeeming quality being a capacity of going without water four or five days.'

Ugly and obstinate the ship of the desert may be, but of a verity the campaign of the Soudan made a very hecatomb of his race.

Covered by a small body of horsemen, the long column winds its weary way across the desert, until it arrived at the Wells of Jakdul. No sign of the Arabs as yet, but, for all that, the leaders in the expedition relax no whit in their vigilance. Soon after leaving the Wells, the horsemen scouting in front report the presence of small parties of Arabs, apparently watching their advance. Warily the column presses forward, and soon the dragoons gallop back from the front, and report large masses of the enemy moving in the scrub. Still pushing forward—ever onward, for every man in that force knows that the hours are precious, the soldiers toil on under the blazing sun, and eke out their limited supply of water as best they may. Then comes the news that the Arabs are massing in their front ; the column halts, forms up, and, after a little, once more advances in an *echelon* of squares. They are not left much longer in doubt about the enemy's proceedings. Already the horsemen covering the advance have ridden in ; a few minutes more, and the scrub becomes alive with the Arab host, who come on like a tidal wave, surging, shrieking, and brandishing their spears. Down go the deadly breechloaders, and as, in response to the bugle call, the withering roll of musketry commences, the daring fanatics fall in scores, and their spirits are wafted to that Paradise where they imagine the dark-eyed houris are awaiting them. As the wave recoils from the rock-bound coast, so the Arabs recoil from the stubborn, impenetrable squares of the British infantry. Bayonets are red, and

swords drip blood, but still the dauntless Moslems, like the ocean surf repelled—like that ocean surf return again and again to the charge. Many of England's best and bravest are down, with their life-blood drenching the desert sands, and amongst them poor Fred Burnaby, as gallant a soldier as ever died a warrior's death. But the onslaught gets slacker and slacker, and at last the Arabs sullenly retire from their hopeless efforts to break those obstinate squares, leaving the ground around them strewn with the dead and dying.

The battle is over, and the conquerors are now left to count the cost of their hard-earned victory. The leaders look with grim dismay at the gaps in the ranks of their little band. They have still far to go, and they are likely to have much more such fighting before they once more strike the waters of the Nile; but their triumph has given them the Wells of Abu Klea.

They are but a handful to accomplish this task, and yet it would have been scarce possible to have carried water for a larger number. Jack Cuxwold, black with powder but all unhurt, looks grimly down at a lithe, powerful young Arab, whose shade his sabre has sent to the realms of bliss.

'A real good-plucked one,' he muttered, as he gazed upon the fine wild dark features of his fallen foe, who, reckless of life, had fought his way into the square. 'Well, they all are; they fight like wild cats.' And then, sad to say, the Honourable Jack's thoughts assume a more material form, and, turning to one of his brother officers, he remarked,—

'It was pretty hot while it lasted, Checquers. I don't know how you feel, but I'd give a tenner for a pot of beer!'

'Yes, it was pretty lively,' observed the young gentleman addressed. 'Yes, Jack, it will be a subject of life-long regret to think of that magnificent thirst that we enjoyed in the Soudan, and which had to remain ungratified. I've been only able to allow myself two mouthfuls of water, to take the dust out of my mouth after that "little kickup."'

'Yes,' replied Jack, 'and, after all, we've only won the

first round, and not the fight. We have given those fellows a terrible dusting, but they take their punishment like men, and will have another shy at us before we reach Metammeh.'

On the column moves again, slowly making its toilsome way, now over the sandy ridges, now through the low scrub, men perspiring, camels grunting, and anxious inquiries passing from mouth to mouth as to how long it will be before they reach the next wells. Misers there are who dole out the drops from their water-bottles a teaspoonful at a time, spendthrifts who have long ago emptied theirs, and who are fain to chew bullets, stones, or bits of the dry scrub, to produce saliva and allay the fierce thirst that possesses them. The scouts ever and anon report that the Arabs in small parties are watching their movements closely. Once more water is reached, there is a halt of some hours, and then the march is once more resumed. A long tedious night tramp, with dire misgivings that the guides have either lost their way or are purposely misleading them. Once more the order is given to halt, the zareba is formed, and preparation is made for the night. The scouts report that the Arabs are gathering thick in their front. They surely cannot be far from the river now. Ah! it is plain. The enemy has intercepted them, and intends to make them fight once more before they get to the water. It is the battle of the other day over again. Once more, led on by their sheikhs, who are chanting texts from the Koran, with loud cries, the Arabs come dauntlessly on. Once more rings out the ceaseless fire of the breechloader, and the deep growlings of the Gatling. The Moslems charge home with all the reckless contempt of death characteristic of their creed, and strew the ground like autumn leaves, while many of them are killed at the very edge of the square and some few of them even inside.

But the leaden hail tells at last, the fierce rushes get weaker and weaker, and finally the enemy retires sullenly, bearing with him as many as he can of his wounded. Victors once more, but, alack! at a terrible price. Stewart, their gallant leader, is severely wounded, destined, sad to say, never to recover from his injuries. And many another

good man and true reck little now as to whether Khartoum is reached in time or no ; many of them, perchance, aware by this that their efforts have been all in vain. A consultation takes place between the chiefs of the expedition, and it is determined that the wounded, under a strong guard, shall be left in the zareba, and the remainder of the force shall fight its way to the river. On they push, the Arabs firing sullenly at them from the scrub. But the fight is out of the foe. He no longer charges in his old dashing fashion up to the very face of the square, and as the breechloaders search the scrub, he flies from his cover to a safer distance.

At last the river lies glittering before them, and, camping on its banks, they prepare to indulge in the luxury of water unlimited. Gordon's steamers are there, and the men in charge of them protest that Khartoum still holds out. All will be known now in a very few hours. Sir Robert Wilson, Lord Charles Beresford, and a handful of soldiers and sailors are to embark in those steamers at daybreak the next morning. In the meantime, the sick, wounded in hospitals, and baggage, have all been brought from the zareba down to the encampment on the river's bank, and now it became necessary to send back a messenger with despatches to the Commander-in-chief, informing him of their having gained the river,—of Gordon's reported safety, to say nothing of that dread list of killed and wounded that always accompanies the news of victories ; and the man selected for this purpose was Jack Cuxwold. He was provided with a picked dromedary, and he was to take an ample supply of food and water. It was not anticipated that he would meet any Arabs on his way back to Korti, but of course he might come across a wandering party. Still, so far as they knew, he ran no more risk than such a messenger might expect to encounter. Jack cursed his luck. At first it seemed to him nothing but a long, dreary, and solitary ride. He was a man of gregarious habits, and did not at all appreciate campaigning by himself. Still, in the old campaigning phrase, 'It was all in the day's work ;' he had got the order, and the thing had got to be done.

'Don't pity you a bit, Jack,' remarked young Checquers,

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'It'll give you a grand time for mental reflection, and a splendid opportunity to think over the errors of your career ; besides, if you can't tell his lordship what gallant service you've rendered in the recent battles, who can, I should like to know? I only wish I had such a chance to hold forth on my own merits.'

'Oh, don't be a fool, Checquers,' was the curt rejoinder.

'No, this child ain't much of one,' was the reply ; 'but, joking apart, Jack, don't you know that the bearers of despatches generally get something out of it? The chances are you will too, old man.'

Cuxwold brightened up at this, and at once commenced his few preparations for departure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOST IN THE DESERT.

A COUPLE of hours later, and Jack Cuxwold, having received his despatches, mounts his dromedary, and once more strikes across the Nubian desert. He is accompanied by Checquers, who, mounted on a camel, proposes to see him fairly on his way.

'Well, they've done the handsome thing for you,' observed that young gentleman, 'and picked you out one of the thoroughbred ones. Those dromedaries can go a rare pace when they're put to it ; not like this lumbering old brute of mine. The only thing I fancy is that they jolt you pretty well all to pieces, when you put 'em into a trot.'

'Fancy they do,' replied Jack ; 'and, as my orders are to lose no time on the way, I shall doubtless be pretty well bumped to pieces before I reach Korti.'

'Well, old fellow, it'll be a pretty dull ride ; but you'll have a chat at the Wells of Jakdul with the people we've left there. As for us, I suppose you'll find us in Khartoum when you get back.'

'I don't think so,' said Jack. 'Whether we've been in time to save Gordon or not we don't yet know ; but we can't do more than bring him off. We can't maintain ourselves at Khartoum, on account of our want of supplies.'

'Right you are,' said Checquers. 'I never thought of

that. I suppose we shall have to tramp our way back across this blessed old sea of sand, with our Arab friends making it as lively for us as ever.'

'Quite likely. Now I think you had better turn back. I'm going to push on, and, I take it, you won't be able to keep up with this dromedary. I'm told he can really go a good pace, and keep it up.'

'Yes,' replied Checquers. 'I know that fellow by sight. He is the best thing in the camel line we've got amongst us. They tell me, over a distance, that breed will wear down any horse.'

'True,' said Jack; 'and one great pull is that, going fast, these fellows make such good time between the wells, that you don't require to carry much water.'

'Well, good-bye, and God bless you!' exclaimed the other; 'hope you'll have a pleasant ride,' and, with a hearty hand-grip, the two men separated.

Checquers looked after his friend for a few minutes, but Cuxwold put his dromedary to its speed, and the animal at once broke into the long shambling run peculiar to his race, which, if not graceful to look at, nevertheless carries them over the ground at a considerable rate, and Jack soon became a mere shadow in the distance.

'Hope he'll pull through all right,' muttered Checquers to himself. 'I shall feel awful bad if my captain leaves his bones in the desert. He is much too good a fellow for that; and, of course, there's always the chance of his falling in with a small band of Arabs—beggars who would cut his throat for fun, let alone to become the possessors of that dromedary;' and thus ruminating, Mr Checquers, keeping his 'eyes pretty well skinned,' to use his own expression, made the best of his way back to camp.

It was night; the heavens were gemmed in all their jewellery; the moon, though not yet fairly risen, cast its soft light over the shadowless desert, as Jack Cuxwold sped onward on his way. If ever a man would think, it would be upon such a solitary ride as this. The time, the mighty silence, the great sandy waste, and, above all, the stirring scenes in which his life had been lately passed, all combined to make Cuxwold look back upon his past life not a little seriously. What a time it seemed since he

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had left England! and yet it was not such a very long time ago either. Between two and three years, that was all. He thought of them all at Knightshayes, and wondered what they were all doing. Dartree was not much of a correspondent: the last letter he had from him he was full of his steeplechases. He wondered how he was getting on with them. It was the winter season now—just the time for them, and the hunting. How he should like a good gallop with the West Barkshire. And then he thought of the luxury of bestriding a thoroughbred horse, in lieu of this rough-going 'ship of the desert' that he was at present riding. He wondered what sort of a year his father and brother had had racing. Really, the most news he had had about his own family, was contained in a letter from Flood. In it he had reminded him of the scene in the gambling-house at Cairo,—of Dick Bramton's last message to his niece, 'to take care of Damocles.' 'It is a curious thing,' wrote Flood, 'that I happened to be at Newmarket, and saw that distinguished animal win the July's. I further made the acquaintance of all the Bramton family, including, of course, our *protégée* of Cairo, who asked a good deal about you. It seems your noble father and Dartree have backed Damocles, at long odds, for next year's Derby. The Earl, indeed, stands to win an immense stake on him. The poor fellow we saw killed at Cairo was rather a racing pal of Lord Ranksborow's, and he's in agonies now as to what John Bramton means to do with that colt. John Bramton, you must know, has bought Temple Rising, and, so to speak, established himself at the doors of Knightshayes. He seems a good-tempered, hospitable old vulgarian, and though he may know nothing about racing, your father told me he was a very sharp man of business, and that he thought nobody would get the best of him, either on the turf or anywhere else.'

The letter then went on with sundry inquiries as to whether there was any chance of their speedily finishing up the Soudan campaign, which, as we are already in possession of Mr Flood's views respecting that embroglio, it is not necessary to particularise.

Jack Cuxwold thought a good deal over this letter,

as he rode on. So that pretty girl with the golden-red hair and blue eyes hadn't quite forgotten him. He thought of that one letter he had received from her; and to think she was established at Temple Rising. Of course, he knew the place well; he had been often there, in the days when it belonged to his father's friend, poor old Molyneux. 'By Jove!' he thought, 'it ought to be a warning to the governor. He and Dart have a weakness for plunging, and between 'em, if they don't mind, they'll bring Knightshayes to the hammer. Of course, it can't personally be of much importance to me; but I'm fond of the old place. I should be awfully cut up to see it go out of the family. It's an awful business to think of Temple Rising going away from the Molyneuxs. Alec don't give a very flattering account of their successors; but Lucy, the one that was at Cairo, was as pretty, lady-like a girl as ever I met.'

Jack, who had been travelling for some hours, now thought it advisable to halt for a little, and refresh both himself and his beast; and here he made two discoveries, which scattered his reflections to the winds. The first of these was, that the large goat-skin which had contained his water, leaked, and that it was now well-nigh exhausted. True, he had his water-bottle, but that was a marvellously short supply upon which to rely until he reached the Abu Klea Wells. The second discovery—hardly to be called a discovery indeed, as yet—was the dread suspicion that he had somehow missed his way. Once get off the route, and it is as easy to lose your way in the desert as to lose your reckoning on the ocean. You are at once placed in the position of men who have abandoned their ship, and taken to their boats. You know not how long you may wander about before help comes to you, but you do know that your food and water will only last so long, and that if help come not to you within that time, or thereabouts, you will be past praying for. The bones of men and beasts have blanched before now on the desert sands, simply because they were out in their reckoning. To these lost ones it had come that they must reach water or perish, and they had perished.

Jack had heard plenty of such stories. Few people

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that have ever crossed the desert but have heard such narratives. The route is, of course, well-known; but still, get but a mile off the track, and it is very easy to make a serious mistake in your efforts to return to it. Jack might well look grave at the situation. First and foremost, if he did not fail, he would be, at all events, slow in the doing of his errand, and that, in a bearer of despatches, is unpardonable; secondly, death by thirst was a mode of leaving this world that nobody would willingly select. Jack Cuxwold sat quietly down to think the thing out. Now it so happened that he had a small compass attached to his watch chain, and though perhaps not very reliable, it would, he thought, give him a general knowledge of his bearings; but then, the worst of it was, he had a very hazy idea of what his course ought to be, and he was quite conscious that much inaccuracy on this point might cost him his life. However, he was soon mounted on his dromedary, and commenced his endeavours to recover the track.

The moon was by this time fading from the hills; the stars twinkled like expiring rushlights, and then went out. It was the dark hour before the dawn; and, as Jack wandered aimlessly along, he felt that he had been foolish,—that it would have been better, both for him and his animal, to have rested until the rising sun had enabled him to take a calm survey of—

'Those sands, by the seas never shaken,
Nor wet from the washing of tides.'

There was not much to be done till the day dawned; and when, like a ball of fire it showed above the distant horizon, Jack Cuxwold was fain to confess that he was lost in the desert. According to his calculation, he should by this have been somewhere in the vicinity of their first fight with the Arabs, and, if that were the case, there would still remain all the *débris* of the fray; and though the vultures, after the manner of the wild dogs, had doubtless

'Stripped the flesh
As you peel the fig, when the fruit is fresh,'

yet the bleaching skeletons of both men and animals would mark the scene of that fierce encounter; but no,

there was not a sign,—nothing but that waste of low scrub and sand. The sun rose higher in the heavens, and again and again did his eyes rove over the pitiless desert, in the hope of recognising some object that might recall to him his whereabouts. Not a rock, not a boulder, nothing could he recognise; there was nothing but that monotonous waste of arid sand or stunted scrub. Swell after swell did he surmount of that dreary plain, but all to no end. More than one sandhill did he ascend, only to see the same prospect on all sides of him. The heat had become intolerable, and his thirst was maddening. He dared not take a thorough good draught, but was forced to moisten his lips with a few drops from his water bottle. In vain he pursued the course, which, by his compass, he thought would lead him to Korti; but he was off the track, and could see nothing which he recognised as having passed on his way up. A horse will find his way in the darkness, or when his rider is perfectly unable to do so. If instinct served horses in such straits, why should it not serve camels? He would leave it to the dromedary; but that hapless brute did not apparently rise to the occasion, and, after wandering aimlessly about for a couple of hours, Jack came to the conclusion that whatever might be the case with his race generally, the beast he bestrode was not gifted with intelligence sufficient to succour them in their need.

Suddenly he espied a massive boulder cropping out of the sand. It was some distance off, but he would make for that. He did not expect much from it: it was very little likely that there was a spring in its neighbourhood; but there was one thing it surely would give, and that was shade. On one side or the other of it there must be some protection from the burning desert sun. His temples throbbed, his lips were parched, but still onwards he toiled. One consolation only was that the patient animal he rode showed no signs of flagging; but how was it all to end? Like the Israelites of old, he was wandering aimlessly in the desert. At length he reached the rock, and, dismounting, took refuge with his dromedary beneath its shadow. He had food, but he had little appetite for it. Water was his great anxiety; and to have lost nearly all

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his supply in such an untoward manner so soon after starting, was a terrible mischance. Jack Cuxwold had looked death undauntedly in the face several times during the past two years, but then it had been in hot blood. The destroyer had never confronted him in such grisly fashion as now.

Worn out with his ride, Jack hobbled his dromedary, indulged himself with a penurious draught from that widow's cruse, his water-bottle, and, stretching himself out, was soon wrapped in a profound slumber. The sun was still high in the heavens when he awoke, consumed with feverish thirst. It did not matter, it had to be endured; what little water he had left must be hoarded to the last extremity. After due study of his compass, he once more mounted his beast, and started, not on his way, but to find it. Three or four hours' aimless wandering, and then he espied a small group of rocks which he thought he recognised. The sun was sinking to his bed in the west ere he reached them, only to discover that the hope he had fostered had probably been father to the thought. Like the mirage, they were a deception—no sign of the track was to be seen from under them; and all he could say was that on his way up he had seen something very like them. He could stand it no longer; his thirst was maddening; it was no use preserving that last modicum of water, and, dismounting, he drained his water-bottle to the dregs, and laid himself down under this fresh group of boulders.

When he awoke about daybreak, the same intolerable thirst possessed him; his lips were dry; his tongue felt as if swollen to double its size, and to have become perfectly hard. Jack Cuxwold was no flincher, but a strange terror crept over him now. That he was far from the end of his physical resources he knew. He was tired, weary, and, to a considerable extent, exhausted by his exertions, but still more by the terrible scarcity of water that he had had to endure under a tropical sun; still, he was a long way off being incapable of exertion. If a good bit beat, there was a good deal of strength left in him still. But the thing that frightened him was that he felt his brain was going. He was conscious that he was getting

light-headed, and this, too, at a time when, if ever a man required the full possession of all his faculties, it was he. That strange jumble of ideas that is wont to surge through a man's brain just before it becomes lost to him, already possessed him. The days of his boyhood were mingled with the strife at Abu Klea, the running of Damocles, the death of Dick Bramton, and the fair face of his niece. He was gradually losing all thought of what he wanted to do, or where he was going. Why didn't Lucy Bramton let Damocles go? What was this hard thing that somebody had put in his youth, and that he could not get rid of? He attempted to shout, but the words would not come. 'Great God! did not Checquers see that tall Arab, spear in hand, who was bounding up on his right? Help him, some of you, or he'll be killed!' And, vainly striving to utter such incoherent cries, Jack Cuxwold fell by the side of the rocks, and relapsed into insensibility.

When he next regained consciousness, his head was on a woman's lap, and it was a woman's hand that held the cup to his blackened lips.

CHAPTER XIX.

TURF TACTICS.

WE must now go back in our story some three months, to see what was happening in England. Mr Bramton had already justified Lord Rankshorow's opinion of him, by showing that though he might know nothing about racing, he was about as shrewd a business man as one could come across. He knew perfectly well that in Damocles he possessed a very valuable property. That the colt was the property of his daughter, was a fact that he was apt to forget; not that he in the slightest degree wished to deprive Lucy of one shilling that might accrue to her, but in all his experience, business affairs had been the prerogative of men. He could not understand a woman interfering in such transactions. He was quite willing to admit that he was only his daughter's steward—and one more alive to her interests no woman need wish to possess; but then John Bramton wished to be a steward of the most autocratic type. He would manage Lucy's affairs

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to the very best of his ability, but it must be in his own way. Women knew nothing of business; and though Lucy was still an infant in the eye of the law, that made very little difference to John Bramton. Had she been five-and-thirty, as long as she was unmarried, he would have conceived that he had a perfect right to administer her affairs.

He gloried, too, not a little in being the presumed owner of Damocles. To be the proprietor of the crack two-year-old of the season, he found conferred upon him an importance that immensely gratified his vanity. People who would have scarcely deigned to look at the retired shopkeeper—wholesale though he might have been—were keenly alive to scrape acquaintance with the owner of the favourite for the coming Derby. It is curious, but it is so. Knowing the owner of a crack race-horse, however slightly, in the estimation of some people, seems to betoken the possibility of money-making; because they are acquainted with the owner of Podusokus, they imagine that they are more intimately acquainted with the merits of that noble animal than the general public, who have nothing but his performances to guide them. Still, for all that, much though it might gratify his pride to rub shoulders with the salt of this world, nothing blinded John Bramton when it became a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. He had been money-grubbing, if you choose to call it so, all his life, which means that he had worked hard and used the clear calculating brain with which nature had gifted him, to the best of his ability. Few people could boast of having got the best of John Bramton in business matters. Although a just man, he was, undoubtedly, a somewhat sharp practitioner in all his dealings; and even the man's natural vanity and pomposity all yielded to that dominant passion, of having the best of a deal. For the rest, he was no niggard; he would wrangle over half-a-crown in a matter of buying or selling, but you might swim in his wine, or revel in the best he had, that half-crown once satisfactorily adjusted. As to his daughters, he grudged them nothing; he had brought them up, as he said, like ladies, and his highest ambition now was to see them make what he called 'splendacious marriages.'

More than one feeler, with regard to the purchase of Damocles, was put out by various members of the turf community. A small syndicate of bookmakers, the moving spirit of which was Mr James Noel, were prepared to make a very handsome bid for the colt; but John Bramton could not as yet make up his mind. Stubber had told him that he possessed a veritable gold-mine in Damocles, and, so far, Mr Stubber had most assuredly told him the truth. Rich stake after rich stake had been credited to Mr Bramton's account at Wetherbys; and had not Damocles just put the final crown of glory upon his two-year-old career, by carrying the extreme penalties and winning the Middle Park Plate in a canter. John Bramton could not make up his mind whether it was not more profitable to keep this horse than to sell it. The continued successful career of Damocles, and the enthusiasm of Mr Stubber about the future of his pet, urged John Bramton to stick closely to his prize: on the other hand, his old business instincts told him there was danger in holding 'perishable goods' too long; and a man may know nothing about horse-flesh, but still be quite aware of the numerous vicissitudes it is subject to.

The luck of the Bramton jacket indeed had occasioned no little talk at Newmarket during October, for no sooner had Damocles won the Middle Park Plate, and established himself fairly in the position of first favourite for the next year's Derby, than the dark Lucifer made his *début*, and won a sweepstakes over the Criterion course in such style as to make many good judges think him also a colt of very superior excellence. True, it was pointed out that the half-dozen behind him had not shown great racing capabilities during the season, but then, on the other hand, the victory was a very hollow one, and there was no denying that the colt was a fine mover. Still, racing men were not likely to jump at the conclusion that Lucifer was as good as Damocles, without much better grounds to go upon than they had at present.

One man, however, had some reason to think this might turn out to be the case, and that was Mr Skinner. The trainer had told him in July that he had a high opinion of Lucifer; that he regarded him as a smart colt, but that

l to the purchase of members of the turf bookmakers, the mov- Noel, were prepared the colt; but John his mind. Stubber heritable gold-mine in had most assuredly r rich stake had been Wetherbys; and had own of glory upon his extreme penalties and canter. John Bram- urther it was not more to sell it. The cons- s, and the enthusiasm his pet, urged John e: on the other hand, there was danger in ng; and a man may t still be quite aware bject to. indeed had occasioned October, for no sooner Plate, and established favourite for the next r made his *début*, and n course in such style nk him also a colt of was pointed out that pt shown great racing en, on the other hand, e, and there was no ver. Still, racing men usion that Lucifer was h better grounds to go son to think this might was Mr Skinner. The e had a high opinion s a smart colt, but that

he was so backward then that he had never been able to rightly take his measure. It was possible Stubber could tell him a good deal more about the colt now, if he chose. Skinner had been an intimate friend of the late Richard Bramton's, and was, consequently, upon friendly terms with Mr Stubber. He determined, the Houghton Meeting being over, to go and have a friendly talk with that gentleman, in the interests of his client, Lord Ranksborow. The Earl was a great favourite of Mr Skinner's: the commissioner never forgot that he was the first man who had helped him climb the ladder. The Earl also always treated him with great consideration. He was rather proud of the privilege of being occasionally asked to Knightshayes. True, he went down there strictly in a business point of view, but still he had always good reason to be satisfied with his quarters.

Mr Stubber welcomed the commissioner to breakfast with great cordiality. He was one of those trainers who never made any mystery about his charges, but from whom, in despite of their apparent candour, you are apt to gain surprisingly little information. In Mr Skinner's case, this would probably be different. He was one of the initiated, and had more than once been entrusted with a commission from the stable.

'Well, Stubber,' said the bookmaker, as he sat down, 'your string is in great form this back end. If poor Dick Bramton were alive, he'd have given the Ring a shaker next year.'

'Yes,' replied the trainer; 'he would have held a nice hand of trumps. As it is, I'm bothered out of my life what to do. You see, there's no knowing what this Mr Bramton will be up to. I ventured to tell him Lord Ranksborow had got most of the long shots about Damocles.'

'You told him that?' asked Skinner sharply.

'Yes; simply to assure him that his lordship would abide by the offer he made Richard Bramton—that is, to let him have what he liked out of them.'

'And what did he say?'

'His eyes twinkled, and then he laughed, and said,—
"Bless you, Stubber, I never bet; and as for the horse, I

shall most likely have sold him before next May." Now what can you do with an owner like that ?'

'Never fear, man,' replied Mr Skinner; 'he won't sell Damocles: his vanity won't let him. You see, he has bought a place close to Knightshayes, and he's mighty anxious to stand well with the Earl and his family. You were right about Lucifer: he's a smart colt that.'

'He is that, and no mistake,' rejoined the trainer. 'I'll tell you what, there's mighty little to choose between the pair, at even weights.'

'What! you mean to tell me you could win the Derby with either of them?'

'I can tell you this,' replied Stubber. 'Lucifer was in the trial just before the Middle Park Plate, and I set Damocles to give him seven pounds, and the dark 'un won clever by half a length.'

'By Jove, it is a hand of trumps, and no mistake!' exclaimed Mr Skinner. 'I only wish poor Dick had been alive to play 'em.'

'Isn't it aggravating,' said the trainer, 'to have to deal with an owner who has the winner of the Derby in his stable, and can't make up his mind as to whether he will sell the horse or win the race?'

'Never you mind that, Stubber,' replied the commissioner; 'a much greater puzzle, to my mind, is who is pulling the strings. The first time I saw John Bramton, I thought he knew nothing about horse-racing; but I'm not at all sure about that now. I'm blessed if I don't think his ignorance is all affectation. Now who put it into his head to keep Lucifer when he sold his horses? Answer me that.'

'Well, as I told you before,' rejoined the trainer, 'I didn't; and it couldn't have been his own judgment, because he had never even seen him.'

'Just so,' replied Mr Skinner meditatively; 'and it isn't likely that it was Lord Ranksborow. If the Earl was managing matters, there would be no question of selling Damocles.'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr Stubber. 'There is no man in England would make such a good thing of it if Damocles is first past the post at Epsom next May.'

'What ought to be done is quite clear,' said Mr Skinner. 'Lord Ranksborow is perfectly reasonable, and would let Mr Bramton take as much as he liked of his book. The game would be to win the Derby with Damocles; he would then naturally be first favourite for the Leger, and one would have the whole summer to bet against him in. Of course, at Doncaster, you would win with Lucifer, and the British public would once more discover that, in their anxiety to find the pea, they had again put their money down on the wrong thimble.'

'It takes my breath away only to think of,' said Stubber. 'There never was such a chance. It would set us all up for life!'

'Ah!' rejoined the commissioner, as he rose, 'if poor Dick had only been alive to, as he used to say, "teach the British public that he didn't keep horses exclusively for their amusement." Well, Stubber, goodbye; we know how the game ought to be played, but it's impossible to guess how it will be played, until we know who persuaded Mr Bramton to keep Lucifer.'

Still ruminating on this problem, Mr Skinner took his departure, destined to be still further astonished when, a little later on, he had elucidated the puzzle. As he said in after years,—'I've seen many queer doings on the turf. I'm not a fool, and can generally get to the bottom of things; but, Lord love me, when a lady owns racehorses, you don't know where you are. They are creatures of impulse, you see, and would stake a horse out of a race, just because they found out that someone who has offended them, had backed it for a five pound note!'

Still turning over in his mind who could be John Bramton's mysterious adviser, Mr Skinner made his way back to London. The only solution of the mystery that he could see, was that Richard Bramton must have left very minute instructions concerning the disposal of his stud; but that such instructions would be embodied in a will, never for one instant crossed Mr Skinner's imagination.

As for Stubber, that veteran trainer had never in all his life been so exercised about all his charges. He was conscious he had the care of probably the two best

two-year-olds of the year,—that there was the possibility of winning a very large sum over them in the ensuing year, if only they were judiciously managed. Skinner had most clearly indicated the tactics that ought to be pursued with them, and nothing could be more plain and straightforward. Mr Stubber had been a hard-working man all his life, he had done his duty fairly and conscientiously by his numerous employers, but he had not as yet succeeded in putting by much money. Now he had a chance of winning a nice little stake, at comparatively small risk, and here he was cursed with an employer to whom common sense—that is, from a racing point of view—seemed absolutely wanting.

Well, it was no use; he had done his duty by the 'osses, and meant doing it, but it was exasperating to think that they were the property of a man who took no pride in their victories, and did not, he veritably believed, know them apart. Besides the solid pudding, Mr Stubber further coveted a share of the laurels of his profession. He had never trained a winner of the classic races, and it was the first time that even the opportunity had been vouched him. Let alone the money, it was hard to be denied the chance of leading the winner of the Derby in, for once in his life.

CHAPTER XX.

'I'LL MAKE LOVE TO ONE.

As Mr Skinner had surmised, Stubber's incautious admission that Lord Ranksborow had backed Damocles to win an enormous stake at Epsom, let a flood of light into the mind of John Bramton. He had often chuckled over his noble neighbour's attempt to buy the colt from him at very much less than his value; but he thought that was all, and in business, John Bramton looked upon that as a perfectly justifiable thing to do. Had he not been all his life endeavouring, and pretty successfully too, to buy in a cheap market and sell in a dear one. If Lord Ranksborow had contrived to have bought Damocles for a low sum, Bramton would merely have said, 'Smart man his lordship, had me about that horse pretty tidily,' and

he would have set himself steadily to see how it was possible to get the best of his lordship; but he saw clearly now that Damocles represented quite a fortune to the Earl, and that the possession or control of the colt was a matter of the highest importance to him. This, then, was the reason why he so earnestly advised him not to part with the horse; this was the reason why, in the first place, he had been so anxious to buy, and this was the reason why the Knightshayes people had been so wondrous civil to them. Well, he was not a thin-skinned man; his wife and daughters wanted to know the county magnates, and by what means it was brought about, was of little consequence. Mr Bramton chuckled much over his discovery, though, like a wise man, he did not think it necessary to acquaint his wife or daughters with it.

Now if there was one thing likely to determine John Bramton not to part with Damocles, it was the fact of two or three people endeavouring to buy him. So much money had been made out of the colt's successes, and his value had so evidently increased, that Bramton was afraid of not getting a sufficiently large sum for the horse. He felt that he did not as yet understand this new business that he had entered upon, but he had a leading idea that it was a business in which every man's hand was against his neighbour. He was an active, good-natured man, devotedly attached to his daughters, next to which, his prevailing passion was money making. He was no niggard with his wealth, and spent it freely, but he never could resist the temptation of turning a penny, and had more than once—since he had been wealthy—purchased property solely with the view of selling it again. This propensity made him coquette with the offers about Damocles; he would not positively refuse to sell the colt, but always answered that he hadn't made up his mind,—that he thought the horse was worth more than was bid. Pressed to say what he would take, he would reply vaguely that he would think it over, and let the bidder know. So that, during these winter months, the turf was much exercised about the fate of the favourite for next year's Derby, while as for Mr Stubber, he declared 'he could not rest o' nights for thinking of what news the post might

bring in the morning,—for thinking that at any moment he might hear the 'osses were to leave his stable !'

In the meantime, he complied punctually with the instructions of his new master, by despatching him a bulletin of the health of his charges, or, as Mr Bramton put it, an 'invoice of the stocks.'

West Barkshire was very gay that winter, and the Bramtons by this time were well received in the county. Although John Bramton had not sustained the character of a sportsman, with which it had pleased his neighbours to endow him, yet he had made himself popular with that class. He had subscribed liberally to the hounds, and though he was never seen outside of a horse, a fox was always to be found in his coverts. Similarly, though he never shot himself, he was liberal in allowing other people to shoot over his estate, which, though not a large one, was well stocked with game. The daughters, too, were pretty, popular girls, and though they did not pretend to ride to hounds, were graceful and accomplished horsewomen, and constantly to be seen at the covert side, attended by a sedate-looking groom, when the hounds met their side of the county. Then Temple Rising was a house in which things were well done. John Bramton, and his better-half also, were not the people for one instant to sanction lavish expenditure, but, on the other hand, if there was sharp supervision, there was no parsimony. The host knew what good wine was, and kept a good cook, so that Temple Rising speedily obtained the reputation of being a house worth staying in. Then the Ranksborows having taken them up, of course, gave the Bramtons a great lift in the county society, and it became the fashion to regard the vulgarisms of the parent Bramtons as mere eccentricities. The shrewd business capacities, too, of the master of Temple Rising, were becoming known in his neighbourhood, and he began to play his part in various local boards and directions, and had good reason to suppose that he would shortly be appointed a magistrate of the county.

Knightshayes, too, had seen a good deal of company that winter, and amongst other men who had spent much time there, were Lord Dartree and Alec Flood. The

eldest scion of the house of Ranksborow did not, as a rule, much trouble the paternal roof-tree. He usually came down there to shoot a little in the winter,—was apt to speak rather contemptuously of the West Barkshire hunt, and declared that the shires was the only place in which that sport was worth pursuing. But this year, motives of economy had compelled him to give up all idea of Leicestershire. Lord Dartree, indeed, was a gentleman who burnt the candle at both ends. He liked to race and bet heavily all the summer season, and to hunt all day, and play whist all night, at Melton, during the winter. He was no fool, but 'cards will run the contrary way, as well is known to all who play,' and racehorses do not always do what is expected of them; and so Lord Dartree, who had had what is termed 'a bad year,' found himself constrained to either hunt from Knightshayes, or not hunt at all, so, after bitter repinings at his confounded luck, Dartree made up his mind to betake himself for this winter to the paternal roof-tree.

The father and son were very good friends, but between the reigning monarch and the heir-apparent there is constantly friction about that little matter of the supplies. Dartree had always capacity for spending two or three times his income, while, on the other hand, if there was any excess of expenditure of that kind to be accomplished, the Earl was quite capable of doing it himself; however, Lord Dartree and his father had never quarrelled much upon this point, as the former knew too well the true state of the case was that the Earl positively could not find the money if he tried. Father and son had had more than one serious talk over the situation, and they both agreed that there was nothing but the victory of Damocles could keep their heads above water much longer.

'There can be no doubt about it,' said the Earl; 'it behoves us to be mighty civil to those Temple Rising people, and, if possible, make Bramton keep Damocles till after Epsom. Stubber will do him every justice, and he told me, last time I saw him, that the colt was thoroughly sound, wind and limb.'

'Surely Bramton would only be too glad to rely upon

the experience of an old turfite like yourself,' observed Dartree.

'I'm not at all sure about that,' replied the Earl. 'He is sharp enough, and given to decide things for himself. His weak point is a desire to get into society. He thinks a deal of knowing us; and what influence I possess over him, comes from that; and it tickles the vanity of his wife and daughters to be taken up by a countess.'

Dartree laughed, as he replied,—

'The wind sets in that quarter, does it? My mother, I think, can be safely left to manage all that.'

'Yes; she told me so, and she has done her spiriting very well. She has managed to infuse considerable enthusiasm for the turf into the two Miss Bramtons. By the way, as you're going to be down here for the winter, you might do your part. I've known you pretty good at the philandering business, when there was no good to be gained by it.'

'All right, sir,' replied Lord Dartree gaily. 'I'll make love to one, or both the young ladies, if you like. Not an unpleasant task that, for they are a couple of very pretty girls.'

'Yes, they are that; but mind, Dart, don't be a fool, and go too far, or else it'll end in a row,—the very thing we want to avoid.'

In compliance with this conversation, Lord Dartree took every opportunity of making himself agreeable to the Miss Bramtons. At first he was perfectly indiscriminate in his attentions, but the character of the two girls soon decided him on confining himself to one.

Miss Bramton was a coquette to the tips of her fingers, a thorough adept in the art of flirtation, and always ready to respond to any challenge of that nature. Then another thing that swayed the mischievous Dartree in his choice of the two girls, was the discovery, to his delight, that he was making Sir Kenneth Sandeman jealous; for that gentleman, after much vacillation, had thoroughly settled down as Miss Matilda's admirer. Sir Kenneth had made up his mind to prosecute his suit in real earnest, and he viewed with some dismay the appearance in the field of so formidable an antagonist. He counted so immensely

upon the position that he could confer upon any lady he might make his wife, but he was forced to admit that to be Lady Sandeman could not compare with the prospect of becoming Countess of Ranksborow. As for Miss Matilda, she was in high glee, smiled sweetly on both her admirers, and played them off against each other, like the accomplished actress a woman of her nature invariably is.

The Knightshayes people mixed freely in all the gaieties of the winter. The Ladies Cuxwold were girls really fond of dancing, and went to most of the county balls in their vicinity; they also were constantly to be found at the covert side, so that altogether the Bramtons saw a good deal of their noble neighbours.

A man who apparently paid a good deal of attention to Lucy, was Alec Flood. Nobody had ever suspected Alec of being a marrying man—not that he was in the slightest degree a misogynist. On the contrary, he could talk pleasantly enough with women, and rather affected their society; but Alec Flood was a man with queer ways and whims. You must not think from this that he was eccentric in his manners or dress. He was as conventional, pleasant, gentlemanly a man as you would meet in any London drawing-room; but then he would disappear from his friends without notice, and for an indefinite period. He would pack his portmanteau, and depart for the other side of the world, just as the whim seized him. He got tired of a place, or it might be with the people he was associating with; and the absurd reasons he gave for his caprices, were the delight of his friends. Sometimes he could no longer stand the prevailing fashion in dress: he had been known to assert that he had left England because he could really bear the sight of red parasols no longer! He had gone to the East, at another time, to escape from the intolerable garrulity of the House of Commons, as administered to him by the daily journals.

'I started,' he said, on that occasion, 'simply in search of a place without a paper.'

'And you found it?' inquired one of his auditors.

'Oh, yes, I found it; there's not much trouble about finding such a place in the East. No, you need not ask

where it is. You're quite capable of going out and setting up a local paper, if you knew that!

The real fact of the matter was, that Alec Flood was an idle man with independent means, and an inexhaustible lust of travel. He kept a permanent set of rooms in London, which, as Dartree said, was the one place on the globe in which you need never expect to find him.

Lucy Bramton most certainly attracted him. There was a certain bond of sympathy between them, in the remembrance of the peculiar circumstances under which they had first met; and Lucy liked to hear him talk of the queer adventures he had met with, and the strange places he had been in. Alec, when he liked, was a good talker, and also had the faculty of narration; he was by no means always to be induced to recount his own experiences, but, when he was, he usually held his hearers enchained for the time. Then they had another point of mutual interest, and that was no other than the Honourable Jack Cuxwold. Jack was one of Alec Flood's special friends. They had been travelling companions many a time and oft, and had stood side by side in more than one of those awkward incidents that turn up when you abandon the railways of civilisation, and betake yourself to camels, mules, and the charge of Bedouins or other scarce dependable escort. It might have been supposed that Lucy would have heard much more of Jack from his own people, but it was not so. Jack Cuxwold was not much given to letter writing, and wrote far more frequently to Alec Flood than he did to anyone else. Alec was, it need hardly be said, on the best of terms with them all, and a favoured visitor at Knightshayes; but it was as Jack's especial friend that he was always regarded, and it was indeed through his friendship for the latter that he first became acquainted with the Ranksborow family. Both Flood and Lucy followed the accounts of the great procession of boats up the Nile with the keenest interest, and this again, perhaps, drew them somewhat together. Still, it never occurred for one instant to any of the Knightshayes people that there could be anything between Alec Flood and Lucy Bramton.

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER BID FOR DAMOCLES.

'It's absurd,' exclaimed Miss Bramton, 'but it is so like papa! As Lord Dartree said the other day, he does not seem to comprehend his obligations. As an owner of racehorses, he is a public character. People look at him, as the owner of the favourite for the Derby, with great interest, and now he talks of selling Damocles. Why, it would be to lose all our prestige in the county. It mustn't be, mamma!'

'I quite agree with you, Matilda; but you know what your father is! He is such a one for turning a penny.'

'Still,' said Lucy quietly, 'if the horse wins the race, we shall get the stakes, and still have him to sell.'

'Just what I pointed out to your father,' said Mrs Bramton. 'But he says he is no gambler, and that should Damocles be beat, he won't be worth so much as he is now. He declares if he gets a good bid, from a good man, he shall close.'

'It's really too bad of him,' said Miss Bramton, in mortified tones.

Lucy knit her brows, and then remarked quietly,—

'Don't fret about it, Matilda; I will speak to papa. I think, when I remind him that Damocles was Uncle Dick's dying bequest, he won't insist upon it. My wishes surely ought to be consulted in the matter, and they are to carry out Uncle Dick's intentions to the best of my ability.'

'Quite right, Lucy,' said Miss Bramton. 'Of course your wishes ought to be considered; and I am sure you would not be, what Lord Dartree calls so "unsportsman-like," as to part with the favourite on the eve of a big race.'

'Of course not,' cried Lucy, laughing. 'England expects that every sportsman shall do his duty, if he can; and we really must amongst us keep papa up to the mark; at least that is what Lord Dartree says, is it not?'

'Yes,' replied Miss Bramton. 'It's what everyone says; and it can't be too much impressed on papa that he is now a public character,—that what he did when he was

nobody at Wimbledon didn't matter, but it's very different now he is Mr Bramton of Temple Rising.'

'Why, do you know, mamma, I overheard Mr Berri-man say that he wondered whether Mr Bramton had any idea of coming forward for the county.'

'Lor'!' said Mrs Bramton; 'just fancy your father an M.P.'

'I trust he won't think of it,' said Lucy. 'We shall most likely get into hot water with the Knightshayes people.'

'How so?' inquired Miss Bramton.

'Why, papa's politics are different from Lord Ranksborow's; and I have an idea that the Earl considers this division of the county should be represented by someone who meets with his approval. I have an idea that the noble lord can be very awkward when he is thwarted.'

'Did you get your information from Mr Flood, my dear?' asked Miss Bramton, somewhat maliciously

'In part,' rejoined Lucy. 'However, I don't suppose we need trouble our heads about that yet. The main thing is at present, that we keep Damocles.'

'Carried, *nem. con.*!' exclaimed Miss Bramton.

The scene of the above conversation was the drawing-room at Temple Rising, and, as may be gathered from it, neither Mrs Bramton nor her eldest daughter were aware that the absolute control of Damocles rested with Lucy. They had seen John Bramton authorise the sale of several horses in July, and they looked upon it that, as Lucy's trustee, it was quite at his discretion to do as he liked about the three remaining ones. The girl herself knew better, but she made no mention of her powers to anyone. But, for all that, she is very determined on the one point,—that Damocles should run for the Derby, and that they shall be all there to see. With the exception of the one experience of the Julys, Lucy has as yet seen nothing of her horses; but she was fully determined that should not be the case next year. As before said, she differed much from her sister with regard to racing. To Matilda Bramton it was simply a matter of an outing,—a picnic, a garden-party, what you will; but Lucy, as far as she understood it, felt a genuine interest in it. However, this was all over for the present, and her interests

just now were far more centred in the great expedition up the Nile, than in the gallops of Mr Stubber's charges.

An event looked forward to with great interest in the neighbourhood was the Hunt Ball, and steeplechases at Wroxeter. This was an annual business which usually attracted a large gathering, and filled the hotels. The country gentlemen, with their wives and daughters, all flocked into the county town to enjoy a ball in the evening, and to wind up with a day's cross-country racing on the morrow. Both at Knightshayes and Temple Rising great interest was manifested about the steeplechases, for Lord Dartree was going to run a horse, which he had been duly qualifying with the West Berkshire hounds, and meant to ride himself. And as he had already shown himself a promising horseman, his family were all sanguine of his success. In fact, it had been settled between the two families that they should join forces, and put up at the same hotel at Wroxeter for the affair. Both the Earl and John Bramton were stewards of the races,—the former according to annual custom; while as to the latter, as the clerk of the course put it,—‘How could you leave out the owner of the favourite for the coming Derby?’ more especially when, as in John Bramton's case, he was in a position to give a liberal donation to the Race Fund.

The vanity of the master of Temple Rising was not a little tickled by the compliment. He liked to be considered a patron of horse-racing. One thing about which impressed him very favourably, namely, that it involved no suggestion of his getting on a horse himself. As in the summer time he was exercised on the subject of his get-up, and had some thoughts of consulting Lord Dartree on the subject. But that young gentleman had recently horrified him by suggesting that he, Mr Bramton, should pick up a steeplechaser, and run it at Wroxeter; and a horse for any purposes of racing Mr Bramton looked upon as a very unprofitable investment. However, he need not have taken alarm, as Lord Dartree's was one of those idle suggestions men make vaguely for mere conversation. In the meantime, Mr Stubber's weekly reports from Newmarket were of the most glowing description. Mr

Bramton was quite unaware of it, but it was a standing jest amongst the sporting men of West Berkshire to ask after the health of Damocles, Mr Bramton's quaint replies to such interrogations being always a source of amusement. He would reply, 'He was doing nicely,' that 'he was as well as could be expected,' which, though not absolutely wrong, is hardly the way men express themselves about horses. But there was one thing John Bramton knew better than to say about Damocles, to wit, that he had the slightest idea of selling him. True, he had told the Earl of Ranksborow that he had some thoughts of it, and said so openly at the dinner-table at Knightshayes, but it was tacitly understood in the neighbourhood that he had abandoned his intention. And the Earl probably was the only man in Berkshire who still suspected him of that idea.

One afternoon the Earl rode over to Temple Rising, and, after paying his respects to the ladies, told John Bramton that he wanted to say a word to him on business. Mr Bramton at once led the way to his study.

'Now, my lord,' he said, 'there's nobody will interrupt us here. I am at your service.'

'I heard this morning, from a man in whom I place the greatest confidence, that you were about to receive, if you've not already received, a very liberal offer for Damocles. You would, I fancy, find the money all right, and the nominal purchaser would be a Mr Robertson. I trust you won't make up your mind to sell.'

'I don't know,' replied Mr Bramton. 'I really could not give you an answer on that point at present.'

'Well, whatever you do,' replied Lord Ranksborow, 'you ought to know fairly what you're doing, which will very possibly not be the case.'

'I don't understand you,' replied Mr Bramton. 'Surely I can dispose of property to anyone I like? And this Mr Robertson, you say, could be relied on to pay for the goods?'

'Quite so, I fancy; but he will make one condition.'

'What is that?' asked Bramton.

'That you say nothing to anyone about having parted with the horse.'

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'Well,' rejoined Bramton, 'I see no great harm in that. I have bought myself occasionally under somewhat similar conditions, such as saying nothing about the price, etc.'

'No ; but you will have sold him into the hands of a set of bookmakers, who will not start him for the Derby.'

'Oh, come, my lord, that's not likely. Men don't buy horses at the sort of price they'll have to give for Damocles, just to keep him to look at.'

'They will bid against him all the spring,' returned the Earl, 'and then not run him.'

'That wouldn't matter to me,' replied Bramton. 'I don't bet, and they would have a right to do what they like with their own.'

'The public thinks there is a limit to that, when it comes to racing,' replied the Earl ; 'and you must bear in mind that if this sale is kept a secret, the horse will be regarded as yours till such time as it pleases them to strike it out. All the obloquy of the transaction would rest on your head.'

'Well, my lord, that, of course, will be considered in the price.'

'You don't quite understand me, Mr Bramton.'

'Better than you think, my lord,' mentally ejaculated the owner of Temple Rising, who, placed through Stubber in possession of the fact that the Earl had backed Damocles at long odds to win an enormous stake, conceived himself perfectly aware of the Earl's object in preventing any sale of the horse.

'Allow me to point out to you,' continued Lord Ranksborow, 'that it will destroy your social position here. There are lots of people all over England, not in the least to be called betting men, who always have a modest bet upon the Derby. Your friend Berriman, for instance, always goes up to see it, and has a tenner on the race. You don't understand racing, Mr Bramton, but you will find yourself very much cold-shouldered if you part with your horse to these people.'

'Then you mean to say,' rejoined Mr Bramton testily, 'that I'm expected not to part with the horse.'

'I don't say that,' rejoined Lord Ranksborow. 'I think you'll be unwise if you part with him to these people.'

But, sell to whom you may, mind it is quite an open transaction, and don't leave it till too late.'

'You think, then, Mr Berriman would cut me ; and I suppose you and all the other folks round about would do the same ?'

'That, Mr Bramton,' replied the Earl, with studied politeness, 'is a point on which it is quite unnecessary to give an opinion. I have backed your horse myself, and feel sure that such a mistake as you might have made through ignorance in selling him to Mr Robertson, will never be committed. I shall be sorry if you sell him at all, but perfectly acknowledge your right to dispose of him in an open way. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, my lord,' rejoined Bramton, 'and you may rest quite satisfied that I shall bear in mind what you say.'

Mr Bramton meditated for some time upon his visitor's remarks. He had quite made up his mind, at the beginning of the conversation, that the Earl was speaking entirely in his own interests ; and so he owned he was ; but it had occurred to that astute diplomatist that this was a sale which it was quite possible for him to prevent. As he rightly conjectured, John Bramton, in his ignorance of racing, had no idea of the social slur that would attach to him had he parted with *Damocles* under such conditions ; and in his own county Lord Ranksborow knew very well that the people would side with him if he pronounced social ostracism on John Bramton should he act in this manner. As for the latter, it need scarcely be said that this was a view of things that had never presented itself to him before. He was getting not a little puffed up by the position he had succeeded in obtaining in the county, and the idea of forfeiting all that was not only repugnant to him, but he knew would produce a frightful storm in his family. Mr Bramton was an obstinate man, and generally pretty resolute in what he meant to do, but he rather feared a battle-royal with his wife, and, in a more modified degree, with his eldest daughter, and he knew the mouths of the ladies would be filled with bitter reproach should he jeopardise their popularity in the neighbourhood.

'No,' he muttered to himself ; 'it's possible to cut your fingers over a smart stroke of business, and I think I'll

have nothing to do with this. When Lord Ranksborow wanted to buy Damocles himself, he was offering a deal less than the horse was worth. In short,' chuckled Mr Bramton to himself, 'was trying to take advantage of my youth and inexperience. He was not likely to blazon that story abroad, as it rather told against himself; while the neighbourhood could only laugh, and say, that I was not such a fool as the noble Earl took me for. But I understand now that to part with this horse before the Derby, will occasion all sorts of nasty remarks about me; and, by George! it's no use getting into society, only to be kicked out of it. And then—oh my! just think of Margaret and Matilda on the rampage! No—I'm dashed! We'll stick to Damocles, and win the Derby.'

Lord Ranksborow had struck the keynote at last, and would have been highly delighted with his morning's work, had he but known it.

CHAPTER XXII.

FRONT DE BŒUF.

WHEN Jack Cuxwold struggled back to consciousness, a soft hand was laving his temples and moistening his swollen lips. He knew not where he was, he knew not into whose hands he had fallen, and had but a vague remembrance of what had happened to him. He strove to speak, but his tongue, swollen to an unnatural size, and hard as iron, refused to articulate. He had, in the course of the campaign, picked up a smattering of Arabic, and therefore quite comprehended when a woman's voice said to him gently,—'Be still; try and swallow this.' With some difficulty at first he gulped down some half-dozen mouthfuls of water, then the rigid muscles began to relax, and he drank copiously. He was soon so far revived as to be able to assist his preserver, and to bathe his own face; and then he tried to raise himself, and to see who it was that had come to his rescue.

It was an Arab girl who, having strayed some slight distance from her tribe, had unexpectedly come across him. Her horse was standing some few paces off, attentively

watching the proceedings of his young mistress. Jack strove to rise to his feet, but was unable.

'Lie still,' said the girl; 'continue bathing your face and body, and drink when you feel inclined. Some of my people will soon find us, and they will have plenty more water. Stay! I had best leave you for a few minutes. Do as I tell you, and don't stir until I come back: I go for further help.'

She was true to her word. In less than ten minutes she returned with some four or five fine-looking Arabs, who throwing themselves from their horses, at once began to render assistance to the unfortunate waif who had fallen into their hands. Cuxwold was, by this time, sufficiently recovered to sit up. By perpetually rubbing him, by perpetually bathing his face and temples, and by constant draughts of cold water, Jack at length was so far himself again as to struggle to his feet. That the Arabs were quite aware that he was an English officer, he gathered from their gestures, and, though they showed no inclination to plunder or ill-use him, he had a strong impression that he was a prisoner in their hands. He noticed that the men paid great deference to the girl who had at first discovered him, so he appealed to her to replenish his water bottle, restore him his dromedary, and put him on his way to the Wells of Abu Klea or Jakdul, whichever he might be nearest. But her answer was prompt, though gentle,—

'Englishman,' said she, 'you are not strong enough to proceed, nor would you ever find your way across the trackless sands to the route you have strayed from. You must stay in our tents for a day or two, till you have recovered. And then my father Mohammed Sebekh, sheikh of the Halawins, will consider what is best to be done with you; but I will answer for your safety.'

Jack Cuxwold felt there was nothing for it but to submit. He was making a terrible mess of his errand; but what could he do? His clear duty was to deliver those despatches as quickly as might be, and to fight his way through any Arabs who might try to meddle with him, let the odds against him be ever so great. His captors had not disarmed him, but it was little likely that

they would permit him to mount his dromedary. They had saved his life undoubtedly, and he could hardly repay them by, in his endeavour to escape, taking theirs. Then, again, he was completely lost in the desert, and little likely to recover the track without their assistance. All these things ran rapidly through his mind, and led to the only conclusion possible,—that he must give up all thoughts for the present of continuing his journey, and merely await such time as it pleased his captors to give him permission to proceed. They seated him once more upon his dromedary, and the girl then sprang lightly on her horse, and led the way. Jack noticed that the Arabs, although apparently leaving him at liberty, clustered round him in such manner as would make escape excessively difficult; and after riding some five or six miles, he was fain to confess that he was hardly in a fit state for a sharp hand-to-hand fight. Consumed with thirst, he had been utterly unable to eat, and this, with the agony he had endured, had temporarily exhausted his strength. A very little further, and they came to the Arab encampment.

The dusky tents of the children of Ishmael were situated in a ravine, at the bottom of which was the most precious of all discoveries in the desert, namely water. The destruction of wells is, by the unwritten law of the desert, the one thing prohibited in warfare, and the fierce battle of Abu Klea, like the fierce struggle of Abu Kru, were both fought in the main to keep the infidels from the water. The Arab will callously condemn you to perish by thirst, but it must be by other means than tampering with the wells.

And now his captors signed to Cuxwold to dismount, and no sooner was that accomplished than they conducted him towards a tent, which, from its standing a little apart from the others, and from its larger size, proclaims itself the dwelling of someone of importance.

‘Englishman,’ said the girl, ‘you must first be brought before my father, and then you shall have the food and rest, of which you doubtless stand in need.’

Raising the curtain of the tent, his conductor motioned him to follow her, and then Cuxwold was simply struck dumb with astonishment. A man, something

over six feet high, rose to receive him, clad in a complete suit of chain armour. A singularly handsome man, whose black moustache and beard were but slightly grizzled. A superbly-built fellow, who wore his panoply of the Middle Ages as if to the manner born, looking every inch a chief, and one destined from birth to rule his brethren. He rose at Cuxwold's approach, and, fixing his dark eyes keenly upon Jack, said, in a courteous voice, 'Stranger, you are welcome to our tents,' and then glanced at his daughter for an explanation.

'Father,' she said, 'I found this Englishman lost in the desert and dying of thirst. I have saved him, and my word is pledged for his life; but all else is left in your hands.'

'Englishman, you have heard,' said the Sheikh. 'Your life is my daughter's, as, but for her, you would have perchance fed the birds of the air by this; for the rest, you are my prisoner.'

Jack bent his head in reply, and once more gazed in astonishment at the Sheikh. He thought of the 'Talisman,' for the man whom he stood before might, as far as his attire went, have been the Knight of the Leopard himself.

'You have come into a country,' continued the chief, 'to interfere with a quarrel that does not concern you. What are those dogs of Egyptians to you, that you should espouse their quarrel?—white-livered hounds, who have always fled before our spears. If I have not taken part against you, it is because that I believe that there is but one God, and Mahomet is His prophet, and that the Mahdi is but a lying prophet; but had it been a mere question of the Arab fighting against the Egyptian, my tribe should have fought against you at Abu Klea, and died to the last man, before you drank the blue waters of the Nile.'

'Father,' interfered the girl, 'the Englishman is faint from hunger and fatigue; let him rest now, I beseech you.'

'It is good. Take him, Zelnè, and see that his wants are attended to.'

The girl made a sign to him that his audience was

over, and after bowing to the Sheikh, Jack Cuxwold followed his conductress out of the tent. They were no sooner outside, than Zelnè made a sign to him to give up his arms, which she at once handed to one of the attendant Arabs. Then, leading the way to a similar, though smaller, canvas dwelling, she threw open the door and said, 'Rest, Englishman, food and water shall be brought to you immediately.'

Left to himself, Jack Cuxwold began to muse over the situation. He certainly felt that his life was safe enough, but he was probably destined to undergo a considerable captivity. He had heard numerous stories of these restless children of the desert. How bitter they could be in fight, how reckless of their own lives, and merciless to their foes in the hour of victory, he knew well. They neither asked nor gave quarter. In all the hard fighting he had seen, not once had he observed the stricken Arab,

'Raise the craven cry *Aman!*'

but, once within their tents, he knew his life was sacred, and that unless he attempted to escape he ran no danger whatever. Still they could have no object in detaining him for any length of time, unless, it suddenly flashed across him, they put a pretty heavy ransom on his head. That stately warrior of the Middle Ages, Mohammed Sebekh, might be as mediæval in his habits as Front de Bœuf; but here the arrival of an Arab maiden with his repast put an end to his reflections, and, his meal once finished, Jack Cuxwold sank into a dreamless slumber.

When Jack awoke the next morning, that light-hearted Lancer felt quite himself again, and once more reverted to his reflections of the previous evening. 'Hum,' he muttered, 'that brevet Majority for the carrying of despatches has dissolved itself into a mere mental delusion, and here is one of the brightest ornaments of Her Majesty's service, a prisoner in the tents of Shem. How that blessed old Crusader came by his rig-out I'd give something to know. There was no look of Birmingham about, that sheet of mail. Indeed, in no old armoury I ever was in, did I see more beautiful steel links. I wonder whether the old legend is true, that when the

Saracens were driven out of Palestine by the Crusaders they crossed into the Soudan. Anyway, my friend here who seems to regret he was not leading his merry men against us at Abu Klea, seems to have just come out of that campaign of eight centuries ago. A Saladin in Cœur de Leon armour; and, by Jove! I wonder what he intends to do with me. Deuced pretty girl his daughter; in short, the family is good-looking, and seems well-mannered, as far as I have got, but a chieftain who wears a steel frock coat, may be expected to develop a touch of Front de Bœuf at any moment.

Jack Cuxwold is making no very wild conjectures, as there are certainly good grounds for supposing that the Arabs, when driven out of Palestine, overran the Soudan, and drove out or made slaves of the negroes, both there and in the northern part of Kordofan, the warrior race, as usual, making short work of the inferior.

Two things Jack was very anxious to discover. The first was his whereabouts, and the second was how he had got off the route. The first of these questions was speedily cleared up, the Arab girl who brought him his food informing him, in reply to his questions, that they were camped by the Wells of Bayuda; and this made clear to Jack how it was that he had lost his way, for although he had never seen or been near those wells, he, like most other officers, had pored over such charts of the desert as the force had with them; and there were a good many of such charts. The desert was pretty well known, and it is almost unnecessary to say that the situation of the wells were among the most prominent landmarks. Cuxwold knew very well that the Bayuda Wells were about fifty miles south-west of the Wells of Jakdul, and that, therefore, when he had been discovered by Zelnè, he had been in all probability somewhere about forty miles from these latter wells. On leaving Metammeh, he must very soon have struck too much to the west, thereby missing the Wells of Abu Klea, and so, getting off the regular route, he had drifted hopelessly and aimlessly into the desert. He strolled out of the tent and gazed about him. The number of camels and horses betokened a wealthy and powerful tribe. The men, too, were tall,

one-looking fellows, exceedingly well-armed, and Jack could not help thinking that it was quite as well his religious convictions had made Mohammed Sebekh hold aloof from the fray. 'A very dangerous contingent to have had against us at Abu Kru,' muttered Jack.

He had not been strolling about very long, indulging in all the luxury of a pipe, when a wild-looking Arab came up and made him understand that the Sheikh wanted to speak to him.

After a courteous salutation, Mohammed said to him,—

'I want you to explain to me why you English have come into the Soudan. We came from across the sea, and won the land by our swords from the Ethiopians, a far bolder race than these miserable Egyptians, who have ever since been endeavouring to take it from us. With the help of Turkish soldiers, they have sometimes succeeded, but only to pay bitterly for it in the long run. Now you have come to help them, and none of you will ever see Korti again.'

'As far as I am concerned, it depends pretty much upon yourself,' replied Jack, in a devil-may-care sort of way, 'but I fancy my comrades will come through all right, although I'm quite willing to admit your people fight splendidly.'

'You think so, Englishman,' replied the Sheikh. 'You think to find your great Pasha alive in Khartoum. He is dead; and the city in the hands of the Mahdi.'

'If what you tell me is true,' replied Jack, 'I can only say a grand soldier has gone to his death, and that every Englishman will be sorry we were too late to save him.'

'An Arab has not two tongues: what he speaks is the truth,' rejoined the Sheikh.

'By Jove! that is pretty tall talking,' muttered Jack to himself. 'At lying and thieving, I should say an Arab is quite as good as his neighbours.'

'Yes,' continued the Sheikh, 'you were too late to save him, and you are too late to save yourselves. An Arab knows how to revenge himself. You know the story of Nimr, the tiger of Shendy. When Mahomet Ali sent his son Ismail down to Shendy to collect tribute, Ismail treated Nimr, the Sheikh of the Shaygyehs with contempt,

and even went so far as to strike him with the stem of his chibouk. He had better have struck a tiger. He no longer pleaded for time to meet Ismail's demands, but promised that all should be gathered at once. Camels, sheep, horses, corn, *dhurra* money, were collected and brought to the Pasha with the greatest alacrity and cheerfulness. Ismail and his troops were invited to partake of a great banquet. The merissa was handed freely about to both guards and sentries; at midnight, a great cry arose, a circle of flame surrounded the town, for the Shaygyehs had fired the corn. Ismail and his guard were burnt to cinders, and not one of his followers escaped the claws of the "tiger of Shendy."

'It is just as well that bloodthirsty old ruffian died a good many years ago,' thought Jack. 'Well, Sheikh,' he remarked aloud, 'my countrymen are in the open, and, if Gordon Pasha is dead, will return to Korti; and,' he concluded haughtily, 'all the Arabs in the Soudan won't stop them.'

Mohammed gave a contemptuous smile as he replied,—
'For the present, Englishman, you are safer in my hands than anywhere else. Your life is safe, but if your friends desire to see you again, they will have to pay for it,' and, with a stately wave of his hand, the Sheikh intimated that their interview was over.

'Ah,' said Jack to himself, as he stepped out of the tent, 'thoroughly mediæval in his ideas, as I anticipated. Now, as there is no knowing what old Front de Bœuf will ask, and no knowing what ready money the contingencies of Newmarket have left the governor, my ransom will be a complicated affair. 'Tisn't likely a grateful country is going to pay a lot of money to recover a fellow who was d—d fool enough to lose his way.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRONT DE BŒUF'S LITTLE BILL.

AFTER leaving the Sheikh, Jack Cuxwold strolled to the verge of the encampment. Though he had nominally no guard over him, yet he had little doubt but that a keen eye was kept on his movements. Moreover, had he been

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III.

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free to start that moment, he had no knowledge of which way to travel. He strolled idly on to the edge of the encampment, when suddenly he came upon Zelnè, who, with one or two other maidens, was sitting gossiping at a tent door. The girl rose when she perceived him, and advanced to meet him, with the firm step and assured air of one who is a great lady amongst her people. Jack had thought her pretty the previous day, but he had then been too exhausted to take due notice of her charms. Now he did her full justice. As he gazed on the lithe straight figure, the glossy dark hair, all broidered with gold coins, the soft, liquid black eyes, and delicately-chiselled features, Jack was fain to admit that in her own style he had seldom seen so handsome a girl as this Eastern beauty.

'You are rested, Englishman, and have seen my father?'

'Yes,' replied Jack. 'I have to thank you for saving my life. But for you, I must have perished in the desert.'

'And what said my father to you?' asked Zelnè.

'That I must remain his prisoner. He seems angry at our presence in the desert, and says that my countrymen will never leave it,—that they are destined to lay their bones here.'

'What my father says will probably happen,' replied Zelnè. 'It is well for you that you are with us. When you have breathed the air of the desert for a few months, you will no longer desire to dwell in cities. Come and sit down with us. You shall tell us all about your own country. I have seen but few of your people.'

So the Lancer seated himself on the carpet by the side of the group of girls, devoutly wishing that he could only tuck his long legs away as cleverly as his companions, and good-humouredly submitted to a severe cross-examination about the habits and customs of his country.

Zelnè was treated with considerable deference by the other maidens, and was indeed the principal spokeswoman. But, much to Jack's astonishment, he found another of the girls, who, like Zelnè, knew a little English. The conversation, indeed, was carried on in a species of polyglot of English, Arabic, and pantomime, attended by much laughter. And Cuxwold began to think that his cap-

tivity would be at all events not hard to bear. Suddenly the tinkling of bells fell upon the ear. The girls stopped their chattering, and Zelnè exclaimed,—

‘It is odd; strangers are approaching the wells. It is singular, for the Wells of Bayuda lie apart from any recognised track, and are seldom visited by caravans or traders.

‘There would hardly be traders about in such times as these,’ remarked Cuxwold.

‘See,’ rejoined Zelnè, ‘those are traders,’ and she pointed to a small string of camels that were rapidly approaching. The newcomers were four in number, and consisted apparently of three Arabs and a European. ‘They are probably on their way to join the Mahdi. They would never be out here if they were seeking your countrymen, Englishman.’

In the meantime, the new arrivals had made their way up to the wells, and were busy quenching their own thirst, and watering their beasts. Jack’s attention was speedily attracted by the European, a slight dark man, with a decidedly Jewish cast of countenance. He evidently spoke Arabic fluently, for he conversed freely with his companions, as he did also with some of the Halawin Arabs. But Jack’s interest was thoroughly aroused when the Jewish-looking man’s wrath became aroused by a refractory camel. He cursed it, to Jack’s amusement, in an infinite variety of languages, and, amongst others, English. Now if there is one thing dwells in the memory, it is apt to be the human voice; the voice will often recall a person to one’s recollection when the face has failed to do so. Jack Cuxwold had a misty idea of having seen the man’s face before, but when he heard him vociferate ‘You damned pig-headed brute!’ it all flashed across him. The last time he had heard that voice, and seen that face, was in the gambling house at Cairo! and equally well he remembered that the introducer of Flood and himself to that den had never been seen or heard of afterwards. Who had actually struck the fatal blow, neither he nor Flood had seen, but he did know that his Jewish-looking acquaintance had been one of those who closed around Bramton just before it was struck.

Walking up to the man he remarked,—

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'They are obstinate brutes, are they not?'
The Jew looked round at him quick as lightning, and
ejaculated,—

'An Inglesse in the tents of the Bagarras! How have
you come here?'

'No matter, my friend. Pray, what is your name?'

'*Peste!* it is not usual to ask for the name in the
desert. I have many. I travel what you call *incog.*
often. Ben Israel will do as well as another just now.
And you; what you do here?'

'Where are you going? where are you bound for?'
asked Jack, utterly ignoring the other's question.

'We are peaceful traders, carrying our goods where
we may find the best market,' returned the other evasively.

'*Chut!* Captain Cuxwold, what is the use of fencing?'
continued Ben Israel; 'you are a prisoner here.'

'True,' rejoined Jack, 'and you are the scamp who led me
to that den in Cairo where the murder was committed.'

'Bygones are bygones,' rejoined the other. 'I can do
you a good turn now. You pay me well, of course.'

'What is it?' inquired Cuxwold.

'I will let them know in Cairo where you are.'

'When shall you be in Cairo?' asked Jack.

'How should I know?' demanded Ben Israel testily.
If we do good business, quick; if not, *quien sabe?*' and
he gave a thoroughly French shrug of his shoulders.

The man was a Levantine Jew, and like many of his
race, had he been at the building of the Tower of Babel
would have been on colloquial terms with all the workmen,
and have obtained possession of the main part of their
weekly wages. One of that marvellous race that are
selling oranges or acting as couriers to-day, and are im-
pressarios of the opera, leading operators of finance,
prominent turfites, or keepers of a gambling-house, on
the morrow—a shrewd-brained, loose-principled race,
with as many lives as cats, and a power of adapting them-
selves to the making of money under any form. And Ben
Israel, as he chose for the present to call himself, had
tried his hand at many pursuits, and usually with more or
less success. In short, he might have been a man of sub-
stance by this, had he not been an incorrigible gambler.

He played, metaphorically, with clogged dice at one and all of his many vocations; but in the Levant, in Cairo, Alexandria, etc., so do your neighbours, and when it came to sheer gambling, it was usually a case of which player concealed most aces up his sleeve.

'Think over what I say, Captain. But I know the Bagarras. You will pay dear before they will bring themselves to part with you. As for your friends who have gone to Khartoum, they will no more return.'

'It was curious,' Jack thought, 'the unanimous belief there was amongst these children of the desert that the British force was doomed to destruction; he could not but believe that hard fighting there might be, but surely his old comrades would be equal to the occasion.'

'You overlook one thing, my friend,' he said at length. 'If Mohammed Sebekh intends my being ransomed, he must let me communicate with the people who have got to find the money.'

For a minute or two the rapacious Jew was silent, and then he replied,—

'It is as you will, Captain. The air of the desert is very healthful, but the life is a little, what you call, all the same—ah! I have him, *dull*.'

'That doesn't bear much upon the point,' returned Jack. 'I shall have to lead it until I am ransomed. I don't see any particular point in paying you to carry a message which the Sheikh must send for me himself,' and so saying, Jack turned away, and rejoined Zelnè.

'*Chut!*' muttered the Jew to himself. 'The Captain has a very pretty notion of making his sojourn here as endurable as possible. The Sheikh had better look to his daughter, or when that ransom comes, it will, perchance, give liberty to two.'

'You know that man?' said Zelnè.

'I met him once about two years ago in Cairo. He is a thorough scoundrel, and, I should think, capable of anything.'

'You are right,' replied the girl. 'He has visited us two or three times. He is an emissary of the Madhi's. He has tried to persuade my father to take part against your people; but my father says the Mahdi is a lying

prophet; and though he too defies the authority of the Khedive, he will none of the Mahdi. He says the sons of the desert have ever been free, and that their only lawful suzerain in this world is the Caliph, as head of their religion.'

'Does your father place trust in this Ben Israel, as he calls himself?' asked Jack.

'Yes; far more than I like,' replied Zelnè. 'Ben Israel is a man who appears in the desert only in times of commotion, and it is odd how the sheikhs trust him, though they know he is here only to serve his own interests. Trust him not, Englishman; he would betray man, woman, or child, if he could obtain a piastre by doing so.'

'You must not call me Englishman,' said Jack.

'What am I to call you then,' replied the girl, smiling. 'I do not know your name, nor your rank. Are you a sheikh amongst your own people?'

'I am a soldier,' rejoined Jack, 'and captain of a band of sixty or seventy horsemen.'

'Ah! then I shall call you Captain—that is your title. And now, Captain, what did that man say to you? Stop, I will tell you partly what he did say to you. Whatever it was, you were to give him money for something or other.'

'Quite right, Zelnè,' replied Jack, laughing. 'He offered to take a letter to my friends, to let them know where I was, if I would pay him for taking it.'

'Once again I say don't trust that man,' and with a warning gesture Zelnè glided rapidly away to her own tent.

In the course of the afternoon, Jack Cuxwold received a message from the Sheikh, to the effect that he wished to speak to him. Jack hastened to comply, and found Mohammed Sebekh in close conference with Ben Israel.

'Englishman,' said the former, 'I have had much talk about you with my friend here, and he has told me of the rank you hold amongst your own people. This has enabled me to fix the number of piastres, I shall demand for your redemption. It is you who have disturbed the peace of the desert. My countrymen would long ago have settled with these dogs of Egyptians, had you not supported them.'

If you did not make the war in the Soudan, it is your men and your gold which has prolonged it. It is fit that you should pay for disturbing the peace of the country.'

'Front de Bœuf might have been brought up in an attorney's office,' thought Jack, as he listened to the Sheikh's specious pleading.

'In the money of your own country, I demand five thousand pounds.'

'Good Sheikh,' returned Jack sententiously, 'I don't pretend that I want either to live or to die in the desert, but whether my friends can or will pay that amount of money, I can't say.'

'If they don't, Captain Cuxwold, then I think you will die in the desert.'

'Ah!' chimed in Ben Israel, 'life is sweet; what is five thousand pounds to a rich Englishman? You destroy, deface, this beautiful country *Sacré*, you must pay for him.'

'My friend,' continued the Sheikh, 'is willing to take a letter for you to Cairo. As I have told you, Khartoum has fallen, and you English will never return to Korti. Write then and tell your friends in Cairo to make arrangements to send this money up to Khartoum.'

'I will not write by that messenger, Sheikh. I will not trust him.'

'You are foolish, Captain,' replied the attacked, with the utmost indifference to the accusation against his good faith. 'Bah!' he exclaimed, turning to the Sheikh, 'the Captain got into a little disturbance, unfortunately, under my guidance, in Cairo. It was not my fault. It was one of his own countrymen caused the disturbance.'

'Who was first cheated, and then murdered there,' interposed Jack sharply.

'Hard words, hard words, Captain,' said Ben Israel. 'He lose his temper when he lose his money. There was a row, and somebody stabbed him.'

'When men quarrel they use steel,' remarked the Sheikh sententiously. 'I suppose you Englishmen, when you differ, don't settle it with your tongues, like a pack of old women?'

'I should have thought the last few weeks might have

taught your countrymen to tell a different tale. Ask those who met us at Abu Klea, or fought against us at Abu Kru, whether Englishmen were old women to fight against,' said Jack haughtily.

The Sheikh's eyes blazed with anger for a moment, and he bit his moustache, while, as for Ben Israel, he looked as amused as a mischievous monkey.

'You will do as you like,' remarked Mohammed Sebekh at length; 'but I warn you, it may be some time before you will have another opportunity of sending a letter.'

'I trust that man with no letter of mine,' returned Jack curtly, and, saluting the chief, he turned and left the tent.

CHAPTER XXIV.

'I SHALL NEVER FORGET YOU, ZELNÈ.'

JACK CUXWOLD abided stubbornly by his expressed resolve. It surely could not be long before he had an opportunity of communicating with his friends; besides, he had experience of the mysterious way in which news spread in the East, and was not without hope that intelligence of his captivity would speedily reach Korti. Mohammed Sebekh seemed quite positive that Khartoum had fallen, and yet when Jack left the banks of the Nile, none of them were aware of Gordon's fate. Sir Charles Wilson had not even left Metammeh, when he came away. Still he mistrusted the Jew, and Zelnè's warning only confirmed him in this opinion. His impression was that Ben Israel would seize upon any money that might pass through his hands, but would be utterly indifferent about procuring his release. During the short time of their halt, he noticed that worthy was upon extremely friendly terms with the Sheikh; and from what he had gathered, Jack rapidly came to the conclusion that Front de Bœuf was a regular trimmer, and only awaiting events to take part with the winning side; equally ready to fall upon the flank of Wilson's shattered column, if it met with disaster, or to join with the Mahdi in the plundering of Khartoum.

'Yes,' said Jack to himself, 'Front de Bœuf's aspect is

warlike, and his manners stately ; but appearances are deceitful. His grandiloquent speech took me in at first. I thought him a grand type of mediæval chivalry, brave as his sword, and a man whose word was his bond, but I regret to say that I begin to think Zelnè's father is a mendacious, double-faced cateran, quite of the old Highland type. I should fancy thieving, cattle-lifting, and black-mailing passing caravans, were his chief avocations.'

After a halt of a good twenty-four hours, Ben Israel and his friends proceeded on their journey.

'You're wrong, Captain,' said the Jew, as he mounted his camel, 'not to take my offer. Be sure Khartoum has fallen, and there is no more business to be done in the Soudan. If your people get away, they will be lucky. I hope we shall meet again in Cairo.'

'You impudent scoundrel !' replied Jack. But the Jew made no reply, except to smile and wave his hand, and again stretched forth in the desert with his companions.

Meanwhile the Halawins continued to linger near the Wells of Bayuda. Jack Cuxwold, at the time, had no idea of what was the Sheikh's motive for remaining ; but the fact was, Mohammed Sebekh was awaiting the turn of events. He knew perfectly well that his countrymen had been badly beaten at Abu Klea, and had failed to prevent the English from reaching the Nile. He felt sure that the English would go up to Khartoum before they left, to discover Gordon's fate, and he thought that during that time the Mahdi would have rallied his forces, and, taking advantage of his great superiority in numbers, would yet again try conclusions with the English ; and on the result of that battle rested Mohammed Sebekh's decision. If, as he fully anticipated, it went against the English, then he and his powerful tribe were prepared to swoop down on the flank of the broken column, and take part in its annihilation. If, on the other hand, the English should be victorious, then the crafty Sheikh had made up his mind there would be no use in his mixing himself up in this imbroglio. These English, he knew, were a powerful nation, with numbers of fighting men at their disposal, and in their hour of victory they might inflict bitter vengeance on those who had warred against them, and exact

terrible atonement for the death of their great Chief who had fallen at Khartoum.

But, as we know, Wilson had fought his way up to that city, and ascertained that Gordon was slain. Redvers Buller had arrived at Metammeh with instructions, now that Gordon's fate was ascertained, to withdraw the column as speedily as might be; and the Mahdi's men had been too roughly handled lately, to as yet venture to interfere with the foe on his retreat. Contrary to all Mohammed Sebekh's calculations, the news reached him that the English were retreating unpursued, and had actually once more reached the Wells of Jakdul. It was his own scouts who brought him this intelligence, for it may be remembered he was only a long day's ride from that place. As Jack had surmised, his fate by this time had, to some extent, become known. It was perfectly clear that he had left Metammeh with despatches, that he had never been seen at the Wells of Jakdul by the detachment there, and that he had never arrived at Korti; that he had fallen into the hands of the Arabs was obvious, and already inquiries were being made about him, although with small hope of his ever being heard of alive again. The war had been conducted in such sanguinary fashion, the Arabs neither asking nor giving quarter, that it was scarce likely he had been spared, and for the present Jack Cuxwold figured in the returns under the ominous list of 'missing.'

During these two or three weeks Jack became on excellent terms both with his host and his host's daughter. The Sheikh kept up all the stately air of a great noble, and a very mirror of chivalry, but the marauding side of his character constantly cropped up, and upon one occasion he told Jack in confidence that he had been foolish in not placing a far higher price upon him.

'I have paid you a very bad compliment, Effendi, in not naming a much higher sum for your ransom. You are not only a great chief amongst your warriors, but also you belong to one of your great English houses. Ben Israel told me all about you.'

'I should like to twist that little miscreant's neck,' muttered Jack, between his teeth. 'You mistaké, Sheikh,'

he said aloud. 'True, my father is a noble, but he is a poor man. As you know, it is not the best born always who are the wealthiest.'

'I have no doubt he has broad lands and large herds,' said the Sheikh sententiously; 'and he will willingly spare of his herds to have his son safe back with him. In a few days now, I will send a messenger to Korti, so have your letter ready.'

'All right,' replied Jack. 'And now, Sheikh, I should like to ask you one question:—Where did you get your armour?'

'It has been in my family for centuries, and passed down regularly from father to son. There is a tradition that my ancestors brought it with them from across the sea many hundred years ago, when they were at war with some of your western tribes, who all wore such protection in battle.'

'It is beautifully made,' remarked Jack.

The Sheikh glanced down at his shirt of mail in unmistakable pride, and said,—

'Yes; it will turn either spear or sword; and I have the horse furniture to match.'

'I suppose you set very high value on your horses?' said Jack; 'you Arabs are famous for them, you know. No doubt yours are of some celebrated breed?'

'They are of the pure blood of the desert—the famous Nedgid race; swift as the wind, and tireless as the wolf. You English have no such horses as we own.'

'Oh, come, Sheikh; I like that,' retorted Jack Cuxwold, who could not stand this imputation on English horseflesh. 'Why, an English thoroughbred would simply make the best you've got lie down, over either one mile or ten!'

The Sheikh shook his head incredulously.

'Bismillah!' he exclaimed; 'you talk of what you know not. None of your English horses can match with the pure-born steeds of the desert.'

'Well, if I only had a good thoroughbred here, Sheikh, I'd ask nothing better than to make a match with you.'

'Race with me! It is a pity you cannot.'

Ben Israel's malicious story had spread amongst the Halawins, and the whole tribe, from the Sheikh downwards, believed that Jack was a great English noble. The Jew

had told Mohammed Sebekh that his captive was a man of great consequence, chiefly out of spite because Cuxwold had refused to employ him in the negotiation of his ransom. Though he had disappeared after the murder, he had not left Cairo, and had made many inquiries about the two Englishmen, and had ascertained that Jack was what is vaguely termed in the East an English lord; and his rank and position he now purposely exaggerated, for the reason above stated. Of course Zelnè speedily became aware of this rumour, and it raised Jack still higher in her esteem. The chiefs of the desert place a high value on their descent, and think much of purity of race, both in themselves and their horses. A woman will always take an interest in a man whose life she has saved, and none the less because he happened to be young and good looking. The whole tribe now treated Jack with much consideration, and looked upon it that his rank in his own country warranted his associating with the Sheikh's daughter, so Jack and Zelnè were left a good deal to their own devices.

'Will my lord be very pleased when the time comes to return to his own people?'

'Naturally,' replied Jack. 'If you were among strangers, would you not also be glad to return to the tents of the Halawins?'

'My lord is anxious to once more gaze upon his wives?' replied the girl.

'Not altogether,' rejoined Jack; 'considering I have none. Besides, Zelnè, we are not quite so liberal in these matters as you are. It is contrary to our custom and religion to have more than one wife.'

'It is so with us sometimes,' replied the girl, after a pause, 'but our law allows more. Will you go back at once to your own country, or shall you still tarry in Egypt? You see you were unable to save your great chief at Khartoum, and you will never conquer us Arabs.'

'I am not sure, Zelnè, that we much want to; but though we may leave the Soudan, I don't think we shall leave Egypt for some time.'

'And will my lord ever come back to visit his friends in the desert?'

'It's all very well, Zelnè. I owe you my life, and shall never forget it; but your father is rather an expensive man to pay a visit to! He don't condescend to items, but he has put a pretty big price upon his hospitality.'

'Ah,' rejoined the girl, as a pained expression swept across her face, 'I wish it were not so. A short time back, and the stranger who sought our tents would have shared what we had; and when he left us, we should have prayed Allah to speed him on his way. We had quarrels amongst ourselves, it is true, but it is you strangers who make all the mischief in our country.'

'How do you make that out?' inquired Jack.

'You come into the Soudan, to which you had no right. The Egyptians pretend that they have conquered it, and you send pashas to lead them; and then you interfere with our customs.'

'How so?' asked Jack.

'We have made slaves from time immemorial. It is our custom,—allowed by our religion. The negroes were born to be the slaves of the Arabs, and you say it shall not be so.'

Jack Cuxwold felt that it would be useless to argue the question of slavery with this proud Arab girl, who evidently believed that the negroes were a most inferior race, and that the kidnapping and selling of them was a lawful industry.

'Yes,' continued Zelnè, 'you hinder us from making money, and that makes our sheikhs rapacious. I would it were not so. Father was not greedy of money once.'

Zelnè no doubt believed that she was speaking the honest truth about Mohammed Sebekh; but the facts of the case were, that in those days she had been too young to be cognisant of his doings, the Sheikh having been a levier of black mail from his youth up.

'When shall we leave here?' observed Jack, with a view to changing the subject.

'In a few days now, I think. Some of our men brought in word last night that you English were on your way back to Korti.'

'Then it seems,' said Cuxwold, 'that they will get back after all.'

'I don't know,' replied the girl. 'They are a long way from Korti yet. It is natural you should be glad your countrymen are safe. Shall you be very pleased to re-join them?' and Zelnè gazed wistfully into his face, as she asked the question.

'Never mind talking about that, Zelnè, dear,' answered Jack, a little diplomatically, and thinking how fair a picture the girl made, in her silk-embroidered jacket, tunic-like skirt, and flowing trousers. 'I am not likely to leave you for some time.'

'It won't be very long,' said the girl, as she shook her head sadly. 'Father will be too anxious to get possession of your ransom, not to make an opportunity for you to communicate with your friends ere long.'

'And suppose he does,' replied Jack; 'even if my friends are willing to pay that money for me, it will take them some time to collect it.'

The girl laughed merrily.

'Do not mock your poor Zelnè. Such a sum as that seems much to the poor Arab, but it is nothing to my lord, who owns many flocks and herds.'

'You are wrong, Zelnè,' replied Jack. 'I am not a rich man; but,' he said, drawing the girl nearer to him, 'I shall be very sorry to leave my preserver,—to say good-bye to the sweet girl who has lightened my captivity. I shall never forget you, Zelnè; and you will think of me sometimes, too, will you not?'

'I shall never forget my lord,' said the girl, weeping, and the dark eyes gazed up into his, brimming with love and devotion.

Of course he shouldn't have done it. He was more than half in love with a girl in England. He was laying the seeds of a sore heart for one to whom he owed a debt he could never repay. He was likely to involve himself in a great scrape, and, perchance, pay for his folly with his life, and yet Jack did what I suppose nineteen men out of twenty would have done,—clasped the Arab maiden in his arms, and pressed his lips passionately to hers.

CHAPTER XXV.

REPORTED MISSING.

THE telegrams from the Soudan were watched with feverish interest at Knightshayes. Was not the younger scion of the house in the thick of the fray? and after the fierce fighting round Suakim, in the previous year, no one doubted that the dash across the desert would be hotly contested. As is often the case, Jack Cuxwold was perhaps the best-loved son of his parents; and with his sisters, he certainly took higher rank in their affections than his elder brother. Jack's bright, good-tempered nature was more likely to ingratiate him with his fellows than the somewhat cynical disposition of Lord Dartree; and with women, Jack was invariably a favourite. Besides all this, with the Countess he held the claim of being her younger son; and, with the Earl, the invaluable recommendation of being not nearly so exacting in his demands for money as his brother. The news of Abu Klea was flashed across the wires with the sad tidings of how some of our best and bravest had met their doom. Then came the bloody struggle of Abu Kru, and the wires told how our men battled their way to the Nile. With anxious eyes and beating hearts the ladies at Knightshayes scanned the dreaded telegrams. No, hurrah! Jack was all right so far; his name was not among those terrible lists of killed and wounded. However, it wasn't all over yet. The column had got to go to Khartoum, and how that was to be accomplished, was by the main portion of the British public not in the least understood. Then came the intelligence that Khartoum had fallen, and that the indomitable Gordon was slain. Too late, too late! and a wail went through the country when it knew that the hero to save whom so many lives had been dauntlessly laid down, had perished.

With a feeling of relief, the nation learnt that Lord Wolseley had issued orders for the prompt return of the column to Korti, and with anxious eyes it looked for news that the backward march had been accomplished without further fighting. Gordon was dead; let us have

no more waste of life and money, and, in Heaven's name, let us wash our hands of the Soudan! The electric wire reports the safe arrival of the column at Jakdul,—that there is no fear of further fighting, but ah! there is a line at the bottom of the telegram, which blanches the Countess's cheek, and makes her heart stand still.

'We regret to say that Captain Cuxwold, who started with despatches from Metammeh, on the night of the twentieth, has not since been heard of.'

She had flown with the paper to her husband, and, pointing to the telegram, said, in a low voice,—

'What does it mean, Rank? Do you think he is killed?'

The Earl glanced at the paper for a moment, and then replied,—

'It looks very bad, but we must hope for the best. I shall run up to town by the next train, and see if I can learn anything more at the War Office.'

Of all the terrible records of the battlefield that those to whom he is dear have to read, none, perhaps, is more heart-sickening, and carries more desolation of woe with it, than the dread return of 'missing.' If the loved one is amongst the killed, there's nought to be done but weep o'er his memory. If he is amongst the wounded, a few weeks' suspense, and it terminates in joy or sadness; but *missing*, alas! so often proves that hope deferred that maketh the heart so sorely sick,—most sorrowful of all, perhaps, when, despite weary waiting, the missing man's fate is never ascertained.

Then the Countess in her misery sought Alec Flood, who was still staying at Knightshayes. He was constantly apologising for the positively unreasonable length of his visit; but not only was he an immense favourite with them all, and one, moreover, by no means easy to lay hands on, but I think that the Countess and her daughter had a tolerable inkling of what it was that induced the prolonged stay of this irreclaimable Bedouin.

Flood at once announced his intention of accompanying the Earl to town.

'My dear Lady Ranksborow,' he said, 'Jack, you know, is the dearest friend I have, and I may be of use

in this matter; and, let the chance be ever so slight, I would not for the world miss it. You see I've wandered a good deal in the East, and have many acquaintances in those parts. I will telegraph to some of the traders I know on the Upper Nile. I have no doubt I shall get news of Jack sooner or later; but remember, Countess, don't be disheartened because we get no news for some weeks. Every week that passes, adds to the chance that he is alive, though a prisoner. I know the Arabs well. If he was not killed on first falling into their hands, the probability is his life will be spared; and if he was, we shall soon hear of it. That sort of news flies fast in the desert. Rely upon it, I will never rest till his fate is cleared up, even if I have to go to the Soudan for the purpose.'

But the papers were read at Temple Rising as well as at Knights'hayes, and there was another face which, although the owner uttered never a word, turned almost as pale as the Countess's when she read that fatal telegram. No love words had ever been exchanged between Lucy and Jack Cuxwold, but he had made a very deep impression on her during the Cairo episode.

Then she had followed his career in the Soudan with the deepest interest, and, girl-like, had magnified his deeds there, and pictured him to herself as a very paladin. She was always leading on Alec Flood to talk about his friend, and Alec had many a story to tell of Jack's readiness in resource, and *sang froid* in difficulties, which served to fan the flame. Love may be described as a passion which invariably leads the opposite sexes to invest each other with attributes which they neither of them possess. And though Jack was a very good specimen of the light-hearted dragoon, he would have been much amazed could he have known the pedestal upon which Lucy had placed him. Perhaps, could that young lady's vision have extended to the tents of the Halawins, her views might have undergone considerable modification. The whole family at Temple Rising were aware that Captain Cuxwold was among the missing, and knew that this must be a source of terrible trouble to the Knights'hayes people.

That, with the exception of Lucy, the Bramtons could feel much grievous anxiety about Jack Cuxwold's probable fate, could hardly be expected. They sympathised in the sorrow of the Ranksborow family, as all kind-hearted people naturally would, and it was resolved, in a family council, that a note expressing that sympathy and their sincere hopes that intelligence of the missing man would shortly arrive, should be sent over to Knightshayes; Miss Bramton, as usual, undertaking to write it, for that young lady had gradually constituted herself the sole arbiter of social tactics at Temple Rising. True, Lucy asserted herself occasionally, and then her sister knew better than to oppose her, for, under her somewhat quiet exterior, Lucy carried a very resolute will of her own, and upon this occasion the girl chose to supplement Miss Bramton's highly-monogrammed epistle to the Countess, with a short note of her own addressed to Alec Flood.

The groom speedily returned, with a line of thanks from Lady Jane Cuxwold, on her mother's behalf, and an intimation that the Earl and Mr Flood had gone to town to ascertain what information the authorities really were in possession of. Two or three days passed, the Earl had returned to Knightshayes, but it was known through the neighbourhood that he had brought back no consolation with him. Captain Cuxwold's fate was still a mystery. Lucy had received no reply to her note, but was aware that Flood had not returned with the Earl.

She was sitting alone in the drawing-room, one February afternoon, her mother and sister having driven in to Wroxeter for shopping purposes, when the butler threw open the door, and, a little to her surprise, announced 'Mr Flood.'

'Why, when did you get back?' she exclaimed, as she rose to greet him; 'and do you bring good news with you?'

Alec shook his head as he replied,—

'I only got back to Knightshayes last night, when I found your note, and I'm here to answer it in person. I lingered in London to push inquiries in every direction I could think of.'

'Is there no hope?' she inquired anxiously. And

had it not been for the fading light of the winter afternoon, the pallor of her cheeks must have attracted Flood's attention.

'Ah, yes,' he replied; 'pray don't think that. The authorities have told us all they know as yet; but we need not altogether despair. That Jack left with despatches; as the telegraph stated, is quite true, as it is also that he never arrived at Korti, nor has he ever been seen since; but then, on the other hand, there is no rumour whatever of a solitary British officer having been killed in the desert, and my own impression is that he is a prisoner in the hands of some roving band of Arabs.'

'Is his life safe, do you think?' asked Lucy, somewhat eagerly.

'Yes; if my surmise is true, I should say so. You see they can make money by holding him to ransom, and that will prove a safeguard to him.'

'You're a true friend to him, Mr Flood, and, I feel certain, if he is a captive, will leave no stone unturned to obtain his release. Yes,' she continued, interrupting him, as he was about to speak, 'I know perfectly well that Lord Ranksborow will do all he can—one does not want to be long acquainted with the family, to see how very fond they all are of him—but the Earl does not understand the ways of the Arabs as you do. Humanly speaking, his trust is in you, and I think you would be true as steel to a comrade.'

'I hope so,' said Flood, 'not that there is very much credit in that. If your "pals" don't stand by you in a scrape, they're not of much account. I'm glad, though, you think that of me. I wonder whether I can make you believe something more.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the girl, with a rather forced hilarity, 'don't try my credulity too far.'

'It's not much strain upon a girl's belief, when a man speaks seriously to her upon one point.'

'No,' she interposed hurriedly; 'but there are things better left unsaid,—serious subjects better not touched upon.'

'I can't help that, Lucy,' he replied. 'I'm not an emotional man, but what I've got in my heart, I'm determined

to say, although I must own you have given me scant encouragement. Lucy, I love you. I don't want an answer now, but do you think you can ever love me well enough to be my wife?'

'Oh, Mr Flood, how could you?' cried the girl. 'I like you so much, and I tried so hard to prevent your speaking. Yes, an answer you must have, and at once. It cannot be. I shall regard you always, if you will permit me, as one of my best and dearest friends, but I cannot be your wife.'

'I am too late, I suppose,' rejoined Flood sadly; 'and yet I had thought that there was no one about here that you seemed to care about.'

'Unfair, unfair,' she cried. 'You have no right to demand more than a frank and honest answer to your question. I esteem, and ever shall esteem, you highly; but it can never be, and I can only thank you for the compliment you have paid me.'

Flood rose to take his departure, and as he wished her good-bye, she put her hand frankly into his, and said, in low, earnest tones,—

'Friends ever; is it not so?'

'Yes,' he rejoined, as he pressed her hand; 'if it may be no better. Good-bye, and God bless you.'

Flood pondered over his defeat as he rode slowly home.

'It is the first time I ever coveted a woman's love,' he muttered. 'It's the old story, I suppose. There are men born that ever hanker after the grapes beyond their reach, and that I am one of them; and yet I thought my chance a fair one, till I began to speak. Well, it is best I did. There's nothing to be ashamed of in having honestly loved a girl like that. If she sees fit to change her mind, a woman can always easily let you know she has done so; but no, she is not that sort. She seemed to take a tremendous interest in poor Jack's fate. I wonder—by heavens, I believe it is so! Can it be that she has lost her heart to Jack Cuxwold? Now I remember, she never tires of talking about him. It's possible that in that short time at Cairo something passed between them. They saw a good deal of each other; but she has never mentioned having heard of him between then and meet

ing me at Newmarket. Ah well,' continued Alec Flood, with a grim smile, 'if Jack was first in the field, that would account for my defeat. I was a dullard not to have seen it, when she tried to prevent my having it out with her. She's straightforward and true, anyway. Time I cut all the Western so-called civilisation and went back to the glorious dreamy life of the East, where telegrams and even newspapers are nearly unknown; where you are seldom pestered with letters, and never with conventional visitors. Yes, that girl was right. What had a vagrant like me to do with respectability and matrimony? Think I'll go back to Egypt, and find out what has become of dear old Jack.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

'WHAT NONSENSE YOU TALK!'

THE Bramtons were regarded with somewhat mixed feelings by the Knightshayes family. Had it not been for his turf policy, it is highly probable that neither the Earl nor Lady Ranksborow would have endured the irreclaimable vulgarity of John Bramton and his wife for a moment; but when you knew them, they were such thoroughly good-hearted, hospitable people, that one was apt to condone their solecisms. As for Lord Dartree and his sisters, the *consigne* had gone forth that they were to be civil to the Bramtons. The eldest son of the house quite admitted the expediency of doing as his father wished, but the Ladies Cuxwold were much exercised in their minds for the reason of taking up such people. They didn't so much mind Mr and Mrs Bramton, and they really had got quite fond of Lucy, but they most decidedly disliked Matilda. They did not deny but that she was a pretty, ladylike girl enough, but they thought she was a very pretentious one. Miss Bramton decidedly gave herself airs! Her parents were good-natured, honest vulgarians, but in her there was a certain amount of ingrained snobbishness, if I may be allowed the term with reference to a young lady. As for Lord Dartree, Miss Bramton amused him a good deal: his flirtation with her had progressed apace. Matilda Bramton was possessed of

unbounded faith in her own attractions, and she coquetted boldly with both him and Sir Kenneth, and would have laughed to scorn anyone who had presumed to tell her that the choice of her two admirers was not at her own discretion.

But though Miss Bramton had her own hands pretty full, she still had time to keep an eye upon what she was pleased to call her sister's flirtations, and had more than once rallied Lucy about her *tendresse* for Mr Flood. When Lucy assured her that there was nothing in it,—that she and Alec Flood were good friends, and nothing more, Miss Bramton rejoined haughtily, 'I should hope so.'

'Mr Flood, my dear, is, of course, all very well to amuse yourself with, but I should hope, when it comes to seriously settling in life, that you can do better for yourself than that.'

Miss Bramton's vanity utterly precluded the idea that any man could possibly presume to amuse himself at her expense, but she nevertheless held to her own opinion of Alec Flood being in genuine earnest as regards her sister, and, as we know, she was right.

'It's a great nuisance,' said Miss Bramton, on her return from her drive, 'this business of poor Captain Cuxwold.'

'Well,' replied Lucy hotly, 'that is not the term exactly to apply to it. The poor fellow has given up his life, in all probability, as so many more of them have done out there.'

'Ah! by the way, I forgot for the moment that you knew him, and that he was rather civil to you that time in Cairo. I'm sure I'm sorry enough for him, considering I never set eyes on him. What I mean is this, that it will terribly break up our party at Wroxeter Race Ball. I heard this afternoon that the Ranksborows, unless they have good news, have determined not to be present.'

'I hadn't thought of it before,' rejoined Lucy; 'but, of course, it's not likely.'

'It's a great bore!' exclaimed Matilda Bramton, as she threw herself into an arm-chair. 'It will take away half the fun of the thing. Knightshayes was to have been full for the occasion, and they were coming in quite a

strong party to Wroxeter. Now Lord Dartree tells me it is all knocked on the head.'

'You saw him to-day then?' said Lucy.

'Yes; he was in Wroxeter; and he also told me that if they had bad news about his brother, he should not even run his horse for the steeplechase. In fact, all the fun will be out of the thing. It is most unfortunate!'

Miss Bramton was not more selfish than her sisters generally, but when a death interferes with our amusements—I am talking, remember, of the death of a person of whom we have no personal knowledge—I think we are apt to feel more sorry for our own disappointment, than for the affliction of the relations, even though they be friends of our own.

'Well,' replied Lucy, 'we needn't go; and, if you don't think it will be pleasant, perhaps we had better not. It would be a graceful mark of sympathy to the Ranksborow family.'

'What nonsense you talk!' cried Miss Bramton pettishly. 'Of course we must go. It would never do for people of our position in the county to stay away upon such an occasion. Because the Ranksborows can't go, it is just the more reason we must.'

This was just one of the speeches which Miss Bramton was in the habit of making, and which filled the breasts of the Ladies Cuxwold with mixed amusement and indignation. Eldest daughter of a *parvenu* of little more than a year's standing in the county, Miss Bramton was always vapouring about their county position. John Bramton posing as a sporting man moved them to laughter, but his daughter claiming the position of the ruined Molyneuxs, jarred terribly on their feelings.

For the next two or three days, telegrams came pretty thick to Knightshayes, for Alec Flood, and one morning at lunch-time he said calmly,—

'I am off to London to-morrow, Lady Ranksborow, and to Cairo the next day. I've just received a most lengthy telegram from the *Standard* office. While in London, I got them to allow me to telegraph to their correspondent in the Soudan, to make all inquiries concerning poor Jack, and the return wire has just come to hand. It is so far

satisfactory, that it confirms my hope that he is merely a prisoner. If that is so, his release is a question of money and arrangement. I've had a long talk with the Earl, and all that can be done about that in this country, we have settled between us.'

'God bless you, Alec,' said the Countess, as she pressed his hand. 'It is very good of you to go; but I know to serve any of us, and more especially Jack, we can always rely upon you.'

'I shall ride over to Temple Rising, and say good-bye to them there this afternoon; and to-morrow I'll bid you all good-bye; and when I see you again, God grant I shall bring back the stray sheep with me.'

The women pressed round him, and made much of him during that meal. As Alec said, 'No man starting for a trip up the Mediterranean ever was made such a fuss with.' They accompanied him to the hall door even, when he went to get on his hat, and the Countess whispered in his ear, 'May good fortune attend you.' While Lady Emily murmured to her sister,—'If Lucy Bramton is such a fool as to say him no, she never deserves to be asked by a good fellow again.'

You see they all thought they knew what it was that took Alec Flood to Temple Rising, and little dreamt Alec had put his fate to the test some days before, and sadly regarded Lucy's decision as final.

'I must be pretty far gone,' he muttered, as he rode across the park, 'when all the women can see the state of the case. However, it's no use; if I have guessed aright, Lucy Bramton's heart is no longer in her own keeping. Well, if I can rescue my old chum from the hands of the Arabs, she'll owe me a debt of gratitude, and with that I must be perforce content. There's nothing like having some hard work before one to make one forget the disappointments of life, and it is possible I may have to wander about in the desert, after the manner of the children of Israel, before I clear up poor Jack's fate.'

Upon his arrival at Temple Rising, Alec Flood was, of course, overwhelmed with questions on the subject of Captain Cuxwold. Had anything been heard of him? Was there any news whatever? The family were dread

fully cut up, of course. And then Miss Bramton could not help reverting to her old mournful cry, to wit, that it would be the ruin of the Wroxeter Ball, though the slightly contemptuous expression that swept for a moment across Flood's face, warned her not to continue in that strain. Then Flood briefly acquainted them that he had come to say good-bye, and that he was off to Cairo the next morning, with a view to discovering what had become of Jack Cuxwold. His adieux were soon made, though he detained Lucy's hand in his perhaps a little longer than was necessary. 'Remember, friends ever,' she said, in a low tone, and Alec bowed his head in silent assent.

A fortnight later, and he was once more standing in the verandah of Shephard's Hotel, and wondering how best to prosecute his search. He had, of course, been, within a few hours of his arrival, to the military authorities, who regretted deeply that no intelligence of any kind had been received regarding Captain Cuxwold. Suddenly he became conscious that he was being watched by a little, slight, wiry man, whose piercing black eyes seemed riveted upon him. Flood returned the stare with interest, and in another minute or two recollection dawned upon him. 'The villainous gambling-house tout,' he muttered, 'who lured us off to his den, the night Dick Bramton was killed.'

In an instant he had strode across to the pillar against which the man was leaning, and said,—

'So, sir, we meet again. I have never set eyes on you since the night—'

'Hush!' interrupted the other deprecatingly. 'It was not my fault. I could not help the row. The Englishman, he lose his money, he lose his temper. He call the other players liars, cheats. Ah! what wonder blows were struck; and in these parts men use the knife. I had to hide, or they would have put me in prison.'

'And a deuced good thing too,' rejoined Flood. 'You would have been where I've not the slightest doubt you deserved to be, and have often been before.'

'No, it was not me. I declare it was not me who struck the Englishman; but, bah! this is not business. I have something to tell you.'

'And think, perhaps, that I am going to be fool enough to accompany you into some confounded den or other to look at it.'

'No, Mr Flood.'

'Ah! you know my name; how is that?'

'I was dragoman to Sir John Kenyon, when you travelled up the Nile with him three or four years ago.'

'I thought I recollected your face last March!' exclaimed Flood; and then he remembered that Kenyon had a dragoman of very doubtful honesty in his employ.

'What would you give,' asked Ben Israel, 'to know where the Captain who was with you that time, is now? You pay well for that, eh?'

'Do you mean to say that you know where Captain Cuxwold is?' exclaimed Flood.

Ben Israel nodded.

'You pay me well, I tell you. What you give?'

'I will give you a ten-pound note now, and one hundred more, should your information prove true.'

'Ah! it is too little. His friends would surely give more than that to know what is come of him.'

'That is quite enough to pay you,' replied Flood, 'simply to learn the details of his murder.'

'Ah! but he is not dead; he is alive. What you pay to know where he is now?'

'I will give you ten pounds, and two hundred if your information prove correct.'

'It is too little,' replied Ben Israel, shaking his head.

'He is alive; I saw him three weeks ago.'

'I'll give you no more,' rejoined Flood. 'If he really is alive, I shall speedily get information from some other source. In the meantime, you had best remember the *kurbash* is not altogether abolished.'

Ben Israel, though he had a very great regard for his own hide, was not much influenced by this threat. He knew that the English now ruled in Cairo, and that the use of the *kurbash* was much restricted. But what did bear upon his mind was Flood's suggestion that he might get his information from other sources. His cupidity was struggling with the too probable realisation of that coming to pass. He knew Mahommed Sebekh far too

well to suppose that he would not endeavour 'to realise his prisoner' as soon as possible. If he did not snatch at this opportunity, he would very possibly obtain nothing, and the man had been consistent through life in endeavouring to fill his own pockets at the expense of his neighbours.

'Well, sir,' said the ex-dragoman, 'it's very little for such news as I bring you; but I must take it,' and the man held out his hand.

Flood took a note-case from the breast-pocket of his coat, and, producing an English ten-pound note, put it into Ben Israel's hand, saying, as he did so,—

'There; the two hundred pounds shall be paid you here, personally, or at any address you may name, as soon as I have ascertained that your information is correct.'

'Good!' replied the other. 'That is the address to which please pay the money. The Captain is in the hands of the Halawin tribe of the Bagarra Arabs.'

'What is the name of their sheikh? and where shall I find them?'

'Mohammed Sebekh. And they will most likely be now somewhere between Korti and Berber.'

'And his life, I presume, is quite safe in their hands?'

'*Chut!*' rejoined Ben Israel, with a rapid gesture of his hands. 'Mohammed looks to selling him his liberty. He loves money.'

'Ah! I understand,' said Flood; 'he holds Cuxwold up for ransom.'

'Yes! Cunning old fox, Mohammed! He will want a deal of money for the Captain.'

'That's a matter that doesn't concern you,' said Flood sharply. 'If your information prove correct, you will have the remainder of your money;' and then, with a short nod of dismissal, he turned on his heel and walked into the hotel.

'Two things to be settled at once,' thought Flood 'First, to telegraph to Knightshayes that Jack is all safe, though a prisoner; and, secondly, whether I had better make my way to Suakim or Korti.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR NOEL LAYS LONG ODDS.

IT is close upon the verge of the racing season. Already the acceptances are out for the Lincolnshire Handicap and the Grand National, and speculation on both events is spirited and heavy. The Derby, too, comes in for a fair share of attention at intervals. Notably is there a strong disposition to lay against the favourite ; and yet those connected with him declare that Damocles has wintered well. Mr James Noel is still a persistent opponent of that noble animal ; indeed his brethren of the ring vow he must be in possession of some exclusive information, to bet against him in the way he does. The Earl of Ranksborow, albeit well used to battling with the book-makers, and well known as an impassive loser, begins to wear a harassed expression. The Earl not only had never stood to win so large a stake as he did over this Derby, but the landing of it had never before been of so dire a necessity. In good truth, the Earl was most desperately pressed for money, and, as he brooded over the state of his affairs in his own den, began to think he should share the fate of his friend Molyneux and that the broad lands of Knightshayes would come to the hammer. He had received Flood's telegram, which had spread great joy through the house of Ranksborow ; but Lord Ranksborow grimly reflected that Jack was held to ransom. Flood, before leaving, had warned him that that would probably be the case, and, further, that the sum named would be probably very considerable ; *what*, of course, the Earl did not know, but he *did* know that it was most difficult to find money to carry on with, and that this supplementary sum would be something like the proverbial last straw. True, Flood, who was perfectly aware of his host's embarrassments, had offered, in the most delicate way, to assist in making up whatever might be required ; but of course Alec Flood would have to be repaid, and how that was to be managed he couldn't for the life of him see. If this *coup* would only come off, then he should pull through ; but he mused sadly,—'What man ever

threw in who called "a main," with his back metaphorically to the wall?' And now Damocles, just as speculation had begun again, was travelling very badly in the market. He had written to Stubber, and received a reply that there was nothing whatever wrong with the colt. He had written to Mr Skinner, and that gentleman had written word that he could not account for the hostility displayed towards the favourite, unless it was the introduction of Lucifer into the betting, and a prevalent idea that Damocles was liable to change hands at any moment. Then, again, the Earl wondered what this backing of Lucifer might portend. Stubber had never said anything to him about that colt. Could it be that he had any pretensions to be a race-horse of the first class? True, he had won that race at Newmarket in the autumn in a canter; but then his antagonists had been of very moderate calibre! Pooh! it was all nonsense. It was not likely that they had another colt in the stable pretty near as good as Damocles! But if Lord Ranksborow was puzzled at the backing of Lucifer, the trainer was infinitely more perplexed. Stubber, with the exception of Mr Skinner, had confided to no one the secret of what a good colt this was. He had taken especial pains, when he tried him, to prevent the result of that trial leaking out. Now he and that worthy had arranged that the way to make most money out of these two colts, was to reserve Lucifer for the St Leger. Mr Stubber quite intended to thoroughly do his duty by his employer, but as Mr Bramton did not bet, he argued that, as long as he won both the Derby and Leger, it could not matter to him with which horses he won them; and, as the commissioner had pointed out, that arrangement would be most conducive to their joint interests. The trainer was kept in a state of perpetual fidget by his employer. As he confided to sympathetic friends,—

'There's no knowing where to have this Mr Bramton. When you trains for a gentleman as *owns* he knows nothing about it, why, of course, the best thing he can do, and the thing he ought to do, is to leave it all to the trainer. But this Mr Bramton, he's taking to shoving his bar in! I never get up in the morning without feeling that maybe the 'osses will have left my stable before night.

He's always talking of selling them, and though in his last letter he said he had made up his mind to keep Damocles, it's my belief he don't know his own mind three days together. Well, there's one comfort, whoever is backing Lucifer, will burn his fingers, if things are left to me.'

Could either Lord Ranksborow or Mr Stubber have been present at an interview that took place in one of the numerous lodgings at Newmarket, towards the close of the Houghton week, things would have been all perfectly plain to them. Sim Napper had come up there, in obedience to a message from his uncle, Mr James Noel, who, as he expressed it, 'wished to have a talk with him.'

'Now, Sim,' said the bookmaker, 'I look upon you as my agent here, and I'm bound to say you keep me pretty well posted. What news you send is reliable, and not merely hearsay! Now I've no doubt that Damocles is the best of his year, and that he will win at Epsom next May, if all goes well with him. Now, that would never suit my book, as things stand at present. I'll pay for it, but remember I must have very accurate information of all that goes on in Stubber's stable!'

'I'll do my best, Uncle James; but remember, he added meaningly, 'I can't prevent Damocles winning the Derby.'

'No,' replied the bookmaker; 'I'm not likely to ask you to do that. Anything of that sort is very awkward to be mixed up in! But, if I'm not very much mistaken, they've got another pretty good colt in that stable, in Lucifer. I don't for an instant suppose he is as good as the crack, but he's good enough to serve my turn. What I mean is this: sometime during the winter, these two horses must change places in the betting market. If anything happened to Damocles, that confined him to his box for a few days, it would go a good way to assist my plans!' and here Mr James Noel looked excessively hard at his nephew. 'Luck stands to us at times, in these things,' he continued. 'A careless stable-boy leaves a window open at night, and horses catch cold.'

'Well!' rejoined Mr Napper, 'I can only hope luck will befriend you. I can promise you one thing, I'll do my best to keep you accurately informed of the doings of

Stubber's horses; by which I presume you mean Damocles and Lucifer.'

Mr Noel nodded.

'It will cost you *some* money, but not so very much. If I can, I'll get hold of the boy who looks after one or other of them.'

'All right!' said Mr Noel. 'I can trust all that and other arrangements to you. I don't wish the horse any harm; and it would be like my luck, they are all so beastly healthy when I bet against them. *Why, I'll lay you five hundred pounds to ten that Damocles hasn't even a temporary ailment between this and next May.*'

'Well!' said Mr Napper, laughing, 'you can put that down. It's never fifty to one against anything or anybody catching cold during a winter and spring at Newmarket.'

'Now there's nothing,' said Mr Noel, 'like turning a thing like this over from every point of view. If I want Damocles to go back in the betting,—to be what we call pretty near "knocked out," it might also suit me to pull the strings the other way later on, and put pressure upon Mr Bramton to ensure his starting. Now you lawyer chaps are 'cute. Can that will business we know of be brought to bear in any way?'

'Wait a bit till I think it out,' rejoined Mr Napper, and for some minutes there was a dead silence between them. At last Sim Napper opened his lips and said,—'It's not very much of a chance, and, remember, it's a mere matter of bounce. There's a young fellow here who claims to be a legitimate son of Richard Bramton. Son he may be, but I fancy he can't prove his mother's marriage. Well, you could certainly let Bramton know, before the race, that his not running Damocles would be regarded as a violation of the conditions of the will, and that this young fellow, as heir-at-law, would then dispute it. You are giving him a friendly tip, mind. I could arrange everything with Tom Robbins easy enough; but it all depends upon what sort of chap this Bramton is. If he's a nervous, timid sort, when he found you knew all about the will, he'd sooner run the horse than chance a lawsuit. If, on the other hand, he is a cool, business-like fellow, he'll tell you to go to the devil, and that he shall

do as he pleases. Legally, I don't think you've a leg to stand on, even if Tom Robbins could prove his mother's marriage. It all depends on what sort of a man Bramton is.'

'I haven't an idea,' replied Mr Noel. 'All I ever heard about him was that he knew nothing of racing; but Stubber, or whoever manages for him, hasn't much to learn.'

'Perhaps you could find out,' said Mr Napper. 'It all depends upon that. As I said before, my idea is a mere game of bounce.'

'Quite so, my boy,' rejoined Mr Noel quietly; 'and I landed the biggest stake I ever won by bounce. It was in this way. I had backed a horse for the Chester Cup to win me a raker, and, about a week before the race, found the owner and his friends hadn't a piece on. The horse was "put up" at Tattersall's, that is "what will anyone take about him for the race?" There was not a bid. The owner was present, and I suddenly thundered out,— "Ten monkeys to one he don't start." The owner shot me at once, and I had the best race I ever had; but if it hadn't been for that bit of bounce on my part, the horse would never have seen Chester.'

'I suppose you stand to lose a lot of money over Damocles?' said Mr Napper.

'Not near so much as you might suppose. It's true I laid twenty thousand to three hundred against him as a yearling, but then I laid the same against a great many more. I haven't got round, but I shouldn't be hit very heavily. No; if Damocles was stopped in his work for a few days—if we can get up a bit of a scare, so as to drive him to an outside price in the market, then I should back him, and it would very likely suit me better that he should win than lose.'

'I understand,' said Mr Napper; 'and I tell you, Uncle James, he will win if he keeps well. I will keep a sharp look-out on Lucifer; but, though no doubt he's a nice colt, depend upon it he's not so good as the favourite.'

'Perhaps not; still he might prove a good second string, if anything happened to the favourite; and, as you say, Newmarket is a terribly catch-cold place,' and here Mr Noel winked pleasantly at his precious nephew.

The conflicting interests that surround the favourite for a big race are always somewhat difficult to reconcile, and yet it did seem at present as if it might be fairly to the interest of everyone concerned that Damocles should win the Derby. Mr Bramton, his nominal owner, desires the colt to win, on account of the social importance that will accrue to him, John Bramton. Lucy, his real owner, wishes him to win, for the honour and glory of the thing, and also because she knows it was the dying desire of her dead uncle. Lord Ranksborow hopes for Damocles' success, as offering the one possible hope of extrication from the quagmire of financial difficulties in which he is floundering. Stubber, the trainer, is looking forward to both fame in his calling and profit from the victory. Even Mr Noel could be content to see the colt triumphant, if only he could be driven to a long price in the betting market for two or three weeks; but that *if*, when you interfere with the natural course of events, and take steps to bring it about, may be fraught with circumstances beyond human control.

Mr Skinner, still brooding over that to him puzzling problem as to whose prompting it was that Mr Bramton owed the inspiration of keeping Lucifer, watches the turf market like a cat, and takes speedy cognisance of Mr Noel's operations therein. Thoroughly initiated in all the mysteries of bulling and bearing on the great turf exchange of Tattersall's, and being further in the confidence of Mr Stubber, the well-known commissioner is somewhat staggered at the determined hostility shown to Damocles by Mr Noel and the little clique of bookmakers of whom he is the guiding spirit. He knows the colt is well, and, as all the racing world knows, on his two-year-old form ought to be hailed winner of the Blue Ribbon. He knows Mr Noel and his following already stand to lose heavily by his success. What can they be going on? On what ground do they still steadfastly oppose Damocles for the Derby? 'Everything comes to him who knows how to wait,' is a maxim especially applicable to the unravelling of turf mysteries, and a past master of those mysteries like Mr Skinner felt little doubt that the cause of this persistent 'bearing' of the favourite would be

made manifest to him before long. It was not that he stood to win any large stake over the race on his own account at present, but he knew what it meant to the Earl of Ranksborow, and for past favours he was anxious to pull his first patron through, if possible. Add to which, he saw his way into making a very good thing out of the Epsom race and the St Leger.

Mr Skinner, therefore, at present is keeping a vigilant eye upon Mr Noel, whom, by the way, he cordially dislikes, and his proceedings.

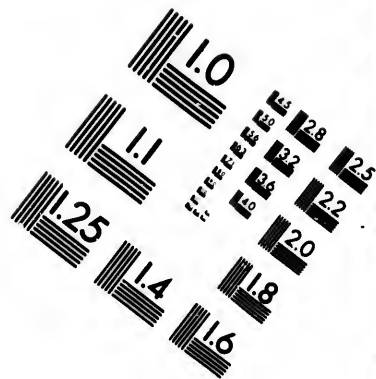
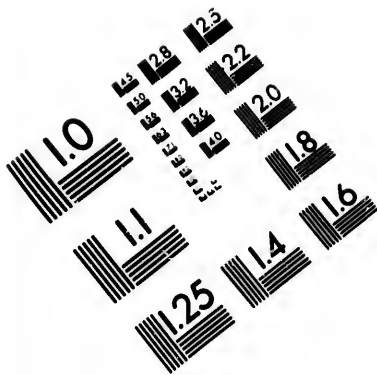
CHAPTER XXVIII.

LORD DARTREE'S MISTAKE.

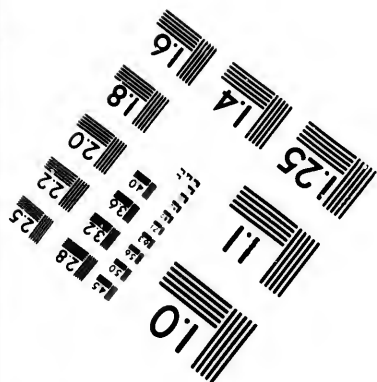
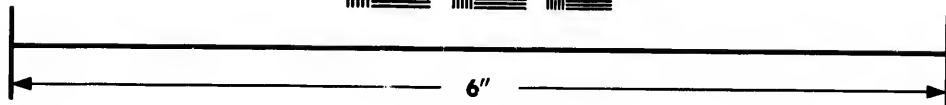
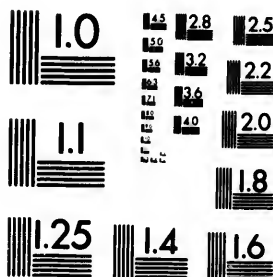
THE Bramtons were all unfeignedly glad when Lord Dartree brought the news of his brother's safety to Temple Rising. Lucy thanked Heaven that a life which had grown strangely dear to her had been, so far, mercifully spared, while as for Matilda, she was thankful that it was so, because she thought that now the Ranksborows might be regarded as sure to attend the Wroxeter ball, and Miss Bramton had made up her mind that was to eventuate in a great social triumph on her part. She pictured herself the belle of socially the crack party in the room. She had had a ball dress made expressly for the occasion, which, as she said, 'was a very dream of loveliness' She knew that in the matter of good looks she outshone the Ladies Cuxwold, and though there were people who regarded Lucy as the prettier of the two sisters, they were in a minority, and with that minority Matilda Bramton by no means agreed. Mr Bramton was glad that his neighbour had been spared a severe domestic affliction, but his relations with Lord Ranksborow had been a little strained at their last interview, and Mr Bramton had never forgotten that, in his own vernacular, the Earl had tried to 'best' him about the purchase of Damocles.

'Well, Lord Dartree,' exclaimed Miss Matilda, when she was made acquainted with Captain Cuxwold's comparative safety, 'now you have such much better accounts from the Soudan, of course we shall see you and you





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party at the Wroxeter ball. Your brother's exchange as a prisoner is, I presume, a mere matter of a few weeks or so.'

'Sorry to say it's not quite such plain sailing as you think, Miss Bramton. You see, these Arabs are not exactly civilised enemies. They don't often make prisoners, and, when they do, they don't part with them except for a stiffish ransom.'

'Mere brigands,' said Lucy, in low, earnest tones, 'and, like the Greek or Italian bandits, capable of proceeding to extremities if their rapacity is not speedily gratified. Oh, it's too horrible! Remember the massacre of Marathon.'

'For Heaven's sake, Miss Lucy, don't suggest such a thing—at all events, don't put such a parallel into the head of my mother or sisters. The business is bad enough, goodness knows, but Alec Flood seems to think Jack is in no danger, although he makes no disguise about his release costing us dear.'

'I don't want to be a prophetic of ill-omen,' rejoined Lucy, 'but recollect there's always terrible danger to the captives in those cases. The wretches in whose hands they are, wax impatient if their cupidity is not promptly satisfied, or get suspicious of being surrounded and made to pay the penalty of their brigandage.'

'Quite so,' replied Lord Dartree; 'but this is not exactly a case in point. We are *at war* with the Arabs of the Soudan. They are not given to the making of prisoners, but, when they do, to hold them to ransom has been their custom from time immemorial. Alec told us all this before he started—'

'Just so,' interrupted Miss Bramton; 'and I have no doubt we shall hear of Captain Cuxwold's release before a month is over! Lucy always takes the darkest possible view of everything. So, Lord Dartree, unless you have bad news between this and then, you must promise me to come to the ball.'

'If you wish it,' rejoined Dartree, with an admiring glance at the girl's handsome face, 'why, it becomes a command.'

'Of course I wish it,' answered Miss Bramton promptly, with a coquettish flash of her somewhat bold black eyes.

'And you will promise me plenty of dances?'

'You shall write your name down on my programme for anything in reason,' rejoined Miss Bramton, as she flashed another look at him.

'No man could resist such temptation!' cried Lord Dartree gaily; 'and, providing there's no bad news of Jack, it's a match.'

'What! without my consent?' exclaimed John Bramton, who at that moment entered the room. 'Pooh, my lord, you must have bless you my *children*, and all that sort of thing. But I suppose you and Matilda have got to some of your sporting nonsense; but I say, gals, lunch should be about ready, and his lordship no doubt will come in and peck a bit. Just ring, Lucy, will you?'

'Papa is simply incorrigible,' murmured Miss Bramton to herself.

'What an irreclaimable vulgarian,' thought Dartree, as he rejoined,—'Very good of you, Mr Bramton. I shall be only too delighted to—to peck a bit.'

Lucy's eyes flashed, and Matilda's cheeks flushed scarlet. Neither of them were blind to the covert sneer contained in Lord Dartree's acceptance of their father's invitation. It was rarely that nobleman indulged in his naturally sarcastic nature, at the expense of John Bramton. He was quite aware that it was much to the interest of himself as well as his father, to keep on terms of intimacy with the Temple Rising people, and he was too shrewd a man of the world not to see that the young ladies were very sensitive about the solecisms of their father, and disposed—especially Lucy—to resent any ridicule vehemently; but nature is difficult to control, and Lord Dartree, though he did his best, was unable always to control his sarcastic tongue. He had never quite got on with Lucy, although the interest she took in his brother had prepared her to like him; but Lucy never could get over a vague feeling that he was laughing at them, and we none of us like people who produce that impression. His open admiration for Matilda so gratified the girl's vanity, that, quick-witted as she was, she had not formed that idea of him; but she was no more blind than her sister, when Lord Dartree allowed his mocking tongue to get the better of him.

'Well, Mr Bramton, you must be almost sick of being asked the question, but how is Damocles?' asked Lord Dartree, when they had got into the dining-room.

'Oh, he's first-rate. By the way, I wish you'd tell your noble father I've thought over what he said, and have determined to keep the horse.'

'Ah! he will be very glad to hear that,' said Lord Dartree, 'as he has an interest in Damocles winning. He mentioned that a very shady lot were trying to buy him from you.'

'When do you expect to hear again from Mr Flood?' inquired Lucy.

'Difficult to say. Of course, by post we can't hear for some time, but Alec will telegraph as soon as he has anything to communicate. It was great news he sent us, but he has got to get up into the Sudan before he can put himself into communication with these Halawin Arabs, in whose hands Jack is. It ought not to be difficult then, because I take it these fellows are as anxious to get our money into their hands, as we are to get poor Jack out of theirs.'

'Just so! just so!' said Mr Bramton; 'that's a maxim as governs all trade. People who want to buy, and people who want to sell, are sure to come together and do business; it's only a question of terms.'

'Hardly!' exclaimed Lucy. 'I'm sure Lord Dartree will echo my words, when I say there can be no making terms about Captain Cuxwold's life.'

'Quite right, Miss Lucy. We must pay whatever they choose to ask us; and come by the money how best we can.'

'As far as we can judge by the papers, everything will be speedily over out there,' observed Miss Bramton. 'The expedition has failed, and I suppose there is nothing left for us to do but to come away again. Why, we may have Captain Cuxwold home in time for the Wroxeter ball after all.'

'I'm afraid you are a little too sanguine,' rejoined Lord Dartree, smiling, 'but I do hope that we may hear everything has been arranged for his release before that. And now, Mr Bramton, I must be off. You, in common with

most of our neighbours, have sympathised with us so kindly in our trouble, that I thought I would ride over myself, and let you know of our good news.'

'Very good of you indeed,' chorussed the whole party. 'I'm sure we were most anxious to hear;' to which Lucy, as she said 'good-bye,' added, 'And the next time you hear from Mr Flood, you will let us know at once, won't you?'

Lord Dartree, of course, promised to comply with her request, and as he rode down the drive thought to himself,—'I wonder if there is anything between that girl and Alec Flood! I'm blest if I don't think that she's engaged to him.'

It may seem odd that Lord Dartree did not accompany Flood on his mission in search of Jack Cuxwold, and it was no want of brotherly affection that caused him to abstain from doing so; but Lord Dartree was a Guardsman, although he has figured but little in his military capacity in these pages, and the War Office had been rather overdone of late in the matter of applications for service in, or leave to go to, the Soudan. The feeling was strong amongst the officers in the army to be employed in the expedition for the rescue of Gordon, and, failing that, to be allowed to go out as a volunteer. The military authorities are bound to check such enthusiasm, and to consider that as soon as they have what they consider the requisite number of men and officers for the work to be done, the surplus simply represent an unemployed contingent, that require transport and feeding. That Lord Dartree would have obtained leave to go to Egypt in search of his brother, there was little doubt, but it would have involved some little delay, and, as Alec Flood pointed out, that was not to be thought of.

'No official, no general, likes to make himself responsible for a large sum of money in these democratic days, and that is what we shall have to do, if Jack's a prisoner. No, Dart, you'd be no good to me in the East, and, believe me, I'd best be off at once. You can, very likely, be of use here, and you can't there. If Jack's alive, you can trust me to do all man can for him.'

So it was settled that Flood should go alone to the East, with what results we have already seen.

Lord Ranksborow was highly elated when his son gave him Mr Bramton's message.

'By Jove, Dart, upon my soul, I think it will come off!' he exclaimed, after dinner, as he raised a bumper of claret to his lips. 'As the old turf refrain has it—

"Here's the big stake we never yet landed,
Here's hoping we'll do it this time."

Do you know what this means to me?'

'Attaining the very garden of Bendemere,' rejoined his son, laughing; 'a gratifying of the hopes and fears of numberless worthy people, whose patience has been probably tried to its utmost limit.'

'It means landing eighty thousand pounds,' rejoined Lord Ranksborow. 'And you yourself—you'll do pretty well, eh?'

'I should win twenty thousand pounds,' rejoined Lord Dartree, 'and could afford then to cut racing, and turn respectable.'

'I suppose you'll win the Wroxeter Hunt Steeplechase the end of next month?'

'Yes; I think so; but there won't be much money to make out of it.'

'Yes, it will take clever financing to knock a thousand out of it, I suppose,' rejoined the Earl, and then they both relapsed into silence.

No one knew better the wondrous uncertainty of racing than Lord Ranksborow. He had seen the horse that carried his fortunes knocked over at Tattenham Corner; he had known the flyer he had backed for the Hunt Cup reach Ascot only to cough, instead of race; he had seen 'the good thing' he was on for the Cambridgeshire, hopelessly shut in at the critical moment. No one of the dire casualties of the race-course but what he had endured personal experience of; but it did look this time as if Fortune meant to shine upon him. All the antecedents of Damocles quite justified the supposition that he was considerably superior to anything of his year. The colt had wintered well, and his trainer was full of confidence; and now his owner, as Lord Ranksborow believed, had dispelled the one cloud that dimmed that gallant animal's horizon, by declaring that he would not

part with him, at all events before the Derby. Only three months now to the great race, and the colt never was better. The Earl might well feel sanguine, and he was of that disposition. Despite years of experience of the many equine maladies that three months may unfold, Lord Ranksborow fell to building 'castles in the air,' and indulged himself in that most glorious of all gambling fallacies, to wit, resolving how you will spend your money, before you have even won it.

'I think, Matilda,' said Lucy Bramton, when she found herself alone with her sister on the day of Lord Dartree's visit, 'it is incumbent on you to give your admirer a lesson in good manners. He was downright impertinent to papa to-day.'

'Yes,' said Miss Bramton, 'it was rude of him, no doubt; but papa is—well, you know what papa is.'

'Not so polished as he might be, no doubt,' rejoined Lucy, 'but I am not going to stand his being laughed at before me, by Lord Dartree or anyone else.'

'You are making an unnecessary fuss about a trifle,' retorted Miss Bramton, 'I admit Lord Dartree was somewhat impertinent in the way he accepted papa's extremely vulgarly given invitation to lunch; but it's the first time I have ever noticed such a thing, or you may be sure I should have called him to order long ago.'

'I can only say, Matilda, I have, two or three times. Lord Dartree strikes me as a man who exercises considerable repression on himself, to prevent making constant fun of dear papa. He's more your affair than mine, but if he commits himself again, and you don't put him down, I shall.'

'My dear Lucy,' replied Miss Bramton loftily, 'you need not distress yourself about upholding the dignity of the family. You can't suppose I would allow papa to be made a subject of ridicule? I shall be perfectly competent to put down Lord Dartree, should it become necessary. He is rather given to badinage, and is, perhaps, at times tempted to go too far. You, on the other hand, are absurdly sensitive. Don't you disturb yourself, my dear; I am quite equal to the situation.'

'Very well,' rejoined Lucy; 'I don't want to interfere; but bear in mind, Matilda, no one shall laugh at papa before me.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

ENGLISH HORSES *VERSUS* ARABS.

THE Halawin Arabs lingered still at the Bayuda Wells, and Jack Cuxwold was puzzled as to Mohammed Sebekh's motive in so doing. That the Sheikh was a regular trimmer, Jack had no doubt, but if he had not taken part against the English, as yet, he surely could hardly intend to do so now. Some of Mohammed's followers were daily away scouting, and from their reports the Sheikh was at length convinced that the British column would be permitted to retreat unmolested. The Mahdi had captured Khartoum, and slain the famous English pasha, who had so long defied him therein; and his troops, after the rough handling they had received of late, had no stomach for further fighting. In short, as the English were apparently evacuating the country, it was deemed inexpedient to interfere with the infidel dogs further, nor to hinder their going. Mohammed Sebekh, now he saw which way the game was going, was clearly not likely to commit himself. He could, if he chose, pose as 'friendly,' and, whatever the English chiefs might really think concerning him, it was not likely that they would treat him as otherwise. His intention now was to strike across the desert to Jakdul, as soon as he had ascertained that the English had left it, and then, pushing on to the Wells of Howeyat, the nearest water to Korti, from thence negotiate for the ransom of his prisoner.

If Jack did not understand all this at the time, yet he did the greater part of it. He quite guessed that the Sheikh only tarried to see which way the wind blew, and that as soon as he was convinced it was not to his interest to take part in the fray, that he would be speedily anxious to have that matter of his, Jack Cuxwold's, ransom settled and done with. In the meantime, Mohammed Sebekh was very fond of conversing with his prisoner, and one question with which the twain had much discussion and argument, was upon the supremacy of the English or Arab horses. Mohammed, as might have been expected, stoutly upheld the superiority of the steeds of

the desert, while Jack Cuxwold laughed at the idea of any Arab horse that ever was foaled holding his own with a moderate English thoroughbred.

'Why, Sheikh,' he exclaimed, on one of these occasions, 'we have horses in our camp that would carry two men, and leave you, and the best horse you own, far behind in a race of two or three miles over the desert.'

'I have heard,' answered Mohammed, 'that you English are very proud of your breed of horses,—that you vaunt they can outstrip the wind,—that you have a tradition amongst you, that years ago you had a famous steed that could gallop a mile in one minute, but such English horses as I have seen, I am sure could not do that. They are big, but they are not of pure blood. We Arabs think more of blood than of size, both in man and horse. It's the blood tells when the strain comes.'

'Quite so; but you have never seen an English thoroughbred horse. The few you have seen, have only been half-bred horses. We preserve the blood of our highly-bred horses as jealously as you do.'

'The blood of the Nedgid Arabs has run unstained in their veins for centuries,' rejoined Mohammed proudly.

'Well, if it comes to that,' rejoined Jack, rather nettled, 'we can trace the pedigree of our racers back for a couple of hundred years, and I fancy our stud-book is more rigidly kept than yours.'

'What do you mean by a stud-book?' asked Mohammed.

Jack Cuxwold then proceeded to explain to the Sheikh that the birth of every thoroughbred horse in England, as well as the name of the sire and dam, were registered in a volume kept by people appointed for that purpose.

Mohammed listened to this explanation with a face of polite incredulity, and at the finish of it, stroked his beard, and exclaimed,—'It is very wonderful!'

This was only a sample of many conversations of the same kind that passed between Mohammed and his prisoner. The Sheikh, indeed, though evidently extremely sceptical, seemed never to weary of the subject, and showed Jack the pick of his own stable—if I may use the term to horses who had no experience of such a

building—with as much pride as the famous Kingsclerc trainer was wont to throw open the door of Ormond's box; and they were horses to be proud of. Pure-bred Arabs, and looking it all over; small, like all Arab horses, but the fineness of the skin, through which the veins could be clearly traced; the lean, thorough-bred head, with its bold, open nostril, and large, soft eyes, all spoke to the purity of their descent. The Sheikh's curiosity to see one of these English thoroughbreds grew apace. He sounded Jack upon the subject, and even hinted that it would be a delicate attention on the part of his guest—as he was most scrupulous about regarding Jack—to present him with one before he left, pointing out that to an English 'my lord'—such as Captain Cuxwold was in his own country,—five thousand pounds was a very paltry sum to demand for saving his life and keeping him out of harm's way during such dangerous times as they had just passed through. Then, seeing that Jack did not altogether receive this proposition with enthusiasm, he suggested that if the Englishman could procure from his friends such a horse as he described, it would be a graceful courtesy at parting if they should exchange horses; and then the wily old horse-coper bethought him of one of his stud, well stricken in years, that would do admirably as a parting gift for Jack Cuxwold.

That gallant dragoon was beginning to wish most devoutly that the days of his captivity were numbered. His position was getting exceedingly awkward. He had nothing to do in camp, and in great measure it fell to Zelnè to entertain him. What was he to do? He was perpetually sauntering about with a maiden who made no disguise of her love for him. He had lost his head about the girl once, and there was nothing for it now but to go on love-making. Yet when the time of his release came, it would be impossible for him to take her away with him. 'Fancy the explosion there would be at Knightshayes if he turned up with such an appanage as this Arab maiden!' He certainly was not prepared to turn Mahometan, be adopted into the tribe of the Halawins, and pass the remainder of his life in the desert; and yet he remembered remorsefully that Zelnè had saved his life.

It was not his fault altogether—he could hardly help it, but he had returned that boon, by stealing her heart. He was not more punctilious in his loves than men of his class generally, holding that women, as a rule, could take pretty good care of themselves, and that it behoved a soldier to accept his *bonnes fortunes* as they came to him; but this was different. He could not wrong this girl, to whom he owed his very existence; and yet he had, as he knew, unwittingly done so in some measure.

‘They’re so deuced inflammable in these tropical climates,’ he muttered; ‘and when a girl with such glorious eyes as Zelnè looks up into one’s face, and lets it be seen that she’s spoons on a fellow, what is he to do but kiss her? There is but one way out of the scrape. It sounds rather mean, but the best thing for both of us would be if I could make a clean bolt of it. Not so easy, though. I am apparently under no restraint, but unless I am with Zelnè, my friends here keep a pretty sharp eye on me.’

Here his meditations were interrupted by the maiden in question, who said archly,—

‘My lord looks grave. Is it that he is tired of his long stay by the Wells of Bayuda?’

‘No, Zelnè dearest, it is not that; but I am not, like you, used to the monotony of the desert.’

‘Monotony! What! the desert, with its ever-changing shadows, with its pure air, its glorious nights! It’s very little I have seen of towns, but they seemed so close, confused, so pitiful, after the free expanse of the desert.’

‘But we are about to leave this, Zelnè; is it not so? Even you Arabs will admit that it is the wandering life you lead, constitutes the great charm of the desert.’

‘Yes; it is rarely we stay so long in one place as we have here. This is out of the regular routes, and my father cared not to be mixed up with all the fighting. He is no believer in the Mahdi, but would never range himself under your flag. The desert belongs to her children,’ concluded Zelnè proudly.

‘As I told you before,’ rejoined Jack, ‘we English make no claim to the Soudan. We came to rescue our great chief, who was shut up in Khartoum. We have failed—he is dead. We have no further quarrel with your people.’

'I am glad to hear you say that,' replied Zelnè. 'Your tribe in England, they don't live in tents as we do. Your climate is too cold for that. I suppose you have one great castle, and huts, and sheds round, for your dependants and cattle?'

'Something of that kind, Zelnè,' returned Jack, smiling as he thought of Knightshayes.

'Yes; and you think much of your breed of horses,' continued the girl, 'and even believe, my father tells me, that they could outstrip the famous breed that has been in our house for centuries.'

'Would go a monkey on the match!' ejaculated Jack. 'I mean—I haven't the slightest doubt of it.'

'I should like to see one of these horses of the wind,' whispered Zelnè.

'And so you shall, darling, as quickly as I can lay my hands on one. It is difficult now, while I am a prisoner.'

'Ah! but you will not be that much longer. We leave here to-morrow for the Wells of Jakdul. Is my lord glad?'

'Am I not a prisoner for life to your bright eyes, my sweet Zelnè?' rejoined Jack, developing an unexpected and most injudicious turn for Eastern hyperbole; but, as he remarked afterwards, 'there is no doing this sort of thing by halves.'

'My father will want to speak to you this afternoon. He will wish you to get ready the letter you must send to Korti; he is very anxious to see one of these famous horses that can gallop down the steeds of the Halawins.'

'There may not be a horse of the race I mean at Korti, but if there is, the eyes of yourself and your father shall be gratified, Zelnè. Now, I must go and get this letter ready.'

The girl sighed as she walked away towards her own tent, and said to herself, 'He loves me, but, ah! not as I love him. I could give up my father, my people, the desert life I love so well, and cling to him; but men are different. They will not renounce their creed and country for the love of woman.'

Jack sat down as he proposed, to write to the Colonel of his regiment, and inform him of his situation,—how that he was a prisoner in the hands of the Arabs, and that

Mohammed Sebekh demanded five thousand pounds to set him free. 'If that is not forthcoming, the said Sheikh threatens to carry me off with him into the wilds of the Soudan. Whether it is possible to raise the money I must leave for you and others to determine, but I see no possibility of extricating myself from my present scrape otherwise. A small party would run no risk in coming out to confer with Mohammed Sebekh, but to come out in force, would only be a signal for the Halawins to disappear in the desert. My family will, of course, repay what money may be advanced for me.'

When he had got that far, Jack thought he would go to the Sheikh's tent, and read it to him. Mohammed listened to him attentively, and when he had finished said,—

'It is good. My lord's ransom will be doubtless soon ready, but he has said nothing about the horse.'

'No,' replied Jack; 'I am going to write another letter about that,' and suddenly an idea flashed through his brain, that he determined was worth working out.

Returning to his tent, he sat down and composed another epistle, this time to his subaltern Checquers. That young gentleman he knew to be as cool and quick-witted as anyone in the force. He had to be careful as to what he said, as it was quite possible there was someone amongst the tribe who could read English. Zelnè, for instance, spoke it a little, and, for all he knew to the contrary, read it. He could only trust that Checquers might be able to read between the lines.

'DEAR CHECQUERS,' he wrote,—'The Colonel will tell you that I have fallen into the hands of the Philistines, that they have put a price upon my head, and have appraised your noble captain considerably higher than he has ever been valued as yet. My *host*, Sheikh Mohammed Sebekh, possesses crude ideas on the matter of horse flesh, and persistently maintains that an Arab steed can outrun an English thoroughbred. It would *facilitate* my release if I could convince him that he is wrong. He will doubtless expect a present at parting, in addition to his tribute. If you can pick up a fair thoroughbred horse, send him out. Is The Bantam—the horse that won

the Khedive's Cup at Cairo last spring—anywhere about Korti? If so, tell his owner he may put his own price on him, but that I want him for a special purpose. Love to everyone.—Yours ever, JACK CUXWOLD.'

'There,' said Jack, as he folded the epistle, 'that's as plain as I dare make it. If Checquers can't understand *I've a game on*, I can't help it!'

CHAPTER XXX.

'THE MUMMER.'

EARLY the next morning the camp was astir, tents were struck, camels were loaded, and all the preparations for the march made, with that rapidity and facility to which dwellers in tents get so soon habituated. Jack rode apparently, though unarmed, perfectly free in the midst of the band, but they had taken very good care not to mount him on his own dromedary, nor had he any reason to believe that his host had by any means picked out the best horse in the stable for his riding. However, the Halawins moved rapidly, and, though it was a long way, with the exception of two halts, and those of short duration, the Arabs never drew bridle till they reached the Wells of Jakdul. There the tents were once more pitched, and it was evident that a somewhat prolonged halt was intended. Mohammed Sebekh indeed informed Jack that he should remain there twenty-four hours, but that as soon as they were rested, two of his young men should carry Jack's letter into Korti, and that he and his tribe would then proceed to the Wells of Howeyyat, to await the English General's answer to his demand.

Jack slept soundly that night, and, as he idled about by the Wells the next morning, congratulated himself upon one thing,—if anything should come of the daring scheme that he had conceived, he had, at all events, achieved one great point,—he was no longer lost, he was on the known desert route, and could find his way to Korti; could he but escape, he was no longer astray as to the road he had to travel; add to which, when they reached the Wells of Howeyyat, he would be still nearer,—in short, within one long day's ride of

his old comrades. He was sanguine that Checquers would understand his note; but the great difficulty lay in this: Was The Bantam forthcoming, or was it possible for Checquers to find him such a horse as he required? If he could get an English thoroughbred, Jack felt that it depended solely on his own dexterity and horsemanship to laugh at Mohammed Sebekh's beard; but it was useless to attempt to escape, unless he felt pretty sure he was on a good horse.

'Five thousand pounds,' he muttered, 'is worth risking my skin for. If my scheme succeeds, I shall save my ransom, and what, upon my word, I regard almost as much, I shall avoid saying farewell to Zelnè.'

Great was the excitement amongst his old comrades when Jack's letter arrived at Korti. They had long given him up for lost, and supposed that he had the mischance to fall in with a small party of wandering Arabs somewhere between Metammeh and Jakdul, and that his bones were now, like those of many others, bleaching amid the sands of the Soudan.

'Hurrah!' cried Checquers, when the Colonel handed him his note. 'Why, Jack's alive, and not only alive, but very much alive. I don't know what he says to you, sir, but he's at the old game again, as I read his letter, and he's got a match on with the venerable old robber into whose hands he has fallen. The English horse against the Arab, catch weights, owners up.'

'Let me see your letter, Checquers,' returned the Colonel. 'This Mohammed Sebekh, to whom he is paying this involuntary visit, is determined not to part with him until he gets five thousand pounds. Of course it has got to be paid, but it has to be raised first. Whether they could spare such a sum from the military chest, and whether Lord Wolseley would authorise it if they could, is doubtful; and it will take some little time to arrange otherwise. I have no doubt the Earl of Ranksborow, as Cuxwold says, will repay it, but it will take weeks before he could remit the money. I must go and take counsel with the authorities.'

'One moment, sir,' said Checquers. 'Under any circumstances, we must temporise; is it not so?'

‘Certainly,’ rejoined the Colonel.

‘Very well, sir. If I understand Jack Cuxwold—and I know my dear old skipper pretty well—he sees his way into fooling old Mohammed some. I know the sort of horse he wants. One that can gallop, stay, and is pretty fit. Jack means the winning-post of that race to be Korti. Now, he and I, as you know, are always mad about garrison races, regimental matches, etc. We always know in whose hands every *race-horse* in the army is. All the fighting has rather disturbed the diffusion of such useful knowledge, but I think I know where to lay hands on The Bantam.’

‘You young robber,’ rejoined his chief, laughing; ‘I believe you dream of matches with 7 lbs. in hand.’

‘If The Bantam is only fit, he’s the very horse for Jack’s business,’ rejoined Checquers; ‘and Tom Donaldson, to help Jack *do* an Arab, in a match of £5000 a-side—for that’s what it amounts to—would let him have him, I’m sure. Temporise a week or two, sir. Give me time to get The Bantam, and give him a gallop or two, and I only wish I’d a monkey on the match, and a photograph of old Mohammed’s face, when Jack leaves him at the winning-post, and, feigning he can’t pull his horse up, gallops straight into Korti.’

‘You’re a sanguine young man,’ rejoined the Colonel; ‘however, there’s never any harm in having two strings to one’s bow. You see about your mission, and I’ll see about mine. We must, of course, send an answer of some sort at once to the Wells of Howeyiat, where Mohammed Sebekh is waiting our reply.’

The Sheikh carried out his intentions, and, after twenty-four hours’ halt at Jakdul, pushed on to the Wells of Howeyiat. He had his spies and scouts close around, and even at Korti, so as to have speedy intelligence of any contemplated expedition against himself and his tribe. But the authorities there had no such intention. There were but two ways, they thought, to rescue Jack Cuxwold—either by money or by stratagem. They were quite aware that the Halawins were a powerful and well-armed tribe, who were supposed to have taken a prominent part in the massacre of Hicks’ army two years before; and to

attack them with any hope of success, would require a considerable force,—not such a column as had been despatched to Metammeh, but still a force of some strength. If Cuxwold could escape by strategy, they could but provide him with the horse he asked for : the rest must be his own doing. As for the money, that would take some few days to arrange. A diplomatic answer was accordingly sent to Mohammed Sebekh, to the effect that the money would be sent to him as soon as it could be collected, while it was further intimated that if an English horse could be procured, it would also be forwarded, to enable Captain Cuxwold to make a suitable *nuzzur* to his host. Accompanying this missive, was a note from Checquers, which ran as follows,—

‘DEAR JACK,—We are all awfully glad to hear that you’ve turned up, though what happened to you exactly, puzzles us extremely. The chief has told you all about the money arrangements, but the horse is my business. I can’t get hold of The Bantam, and he has got a doubtful leg, even if I could, but I’ve got my eye on the very horse you want, and am going to send him to you in a few days. I don’t think you ever saw The Mummer, by Adventurer out of Footlights. He’s a rare stayer, very fit, and I think just the horse you want. I fancy his long raking stride will smash up the best Arab that ever was foaled.—Ever yours,
JIM CHECQUERS.

‘P.S.—I should like to stand some of your money on the match.’

Jack laughed when he read his sub’s letter. It was quite evident that Checquers thoroughly took in the whole scheme ; indeed, the idea commended itself not a little to that dare-devil young gentleman, and Jack felt that he could confidently rely upon Checquers sending such a horse as he wanted. The next thing was to communicate the contents of these letters to Mohammed, who, with Eastern gravity, was waiting till it should please his guest to speak.

Jack first read him out his Colonel’s letter, and, commenting upon it, said,—

'You see, O Sheikh, that such a large sum as this must take some little time to collect. This war has impoverished us English. The sum is large, and you must grant a few days' delay.'

'It is just,' replied Mohammed. 'I and my people will tarry for a week by the Wells of Howeyat; but there is no mention of the horse.'

The desire to possess an English horse had seized upon Mohammed's mind very strongly, and Jack saw that he might as well make a virtue of necessity, and present it to the chief, unless he succeeded in escaping on it, as it was quite clear to him that the Sheikh would never allow him to take the horse away with him, pay in every pound of the sum demanded as his ransom though he might.

'Now,' thought Jack, 'is my time to chaff old Front de Bœuf into a match. Brag, I must brag—there's nothing like brag. He don't believe a word I say about English thoroughbreds, and, though he is too polite to say so, thinks me a most stupendous liar.'

'This other letter is about the horse, Sheikh. One of my friends writes confidently that he will be able to send me a pure-bred English horse in a few days, and laughs at the idea of there being an Arab horse capable of contending with him.'

'It is not always the cock that crows the loudest that wins the battle. The ass is more noisy than the horse, but he is neither so swift nor so strong, for all that.'

'By Jove!' muttered Jack, 'I'm not to have all the chaff my own side. Old Front de Bœuf seems a "nailer" at it, in his own way.'

'Well,' he replied at length, 'we English are very confident of the superiority of our horses, and, beautiful and high-bred as I admit yours are, I still maintain they would have no chance whatever with a pure-bred English horse.'

'We shall see—we shall try.'

'Then, Sheikh, before I leave you, you will run a race with me—you on the best horse you own, I riding that my friend has sent me, for five miles. Will that suit you?'

'Not quite,' replied Mohammed. 'I will run you five miles out, and five miles home again.'

'What an old leg it is!' thought Jack to himself. 'Upon my soul, before he had been a year at Newmarket, I believe he'd hold his own with the best of them. He knows this much about English horses, that they are big and long striding. Of course, that turn round the post at the end of the five miles is all against the long-striding English thoroughbred, whilst the little handy Arab would gain an advantage of many lengths as he slips round. However, it won't be the pull he thinks.'

'All right, Sheikh,' he said; 'I shall beat you, either five miles or ten—it don't matter which.'

'So be it; we shall see,' rejoined the imperturbable Mohammed.

During the next few days, Zelnè was in a great state of mind. She knew the negotiations for the release of her lover were going on,—that they were only awaiting their successful conclusion in their present encampment,—that a few days more and she would have said "good-bye" to the man whose life she had saved, and learned to love, probably for ever. It was very bitter, but she knew that it must be so. She would have fled with him, or to him, and even given up the wild desert life, which was as the breath of her nostrils, to live amongst aliens and cities, if he had but held up his finger. But she knew he would not do so. She felt that he loved her in a way, but with no such wild, passionate love as she craved from him,—a love that could give up everything for her sake. There had been such men, she had heard. Was there not the legend of some great prince who gave up the empire of the world for the love of Egypt's great queen? But, she was fain to confess, she had never known one of these men. She had, of course, heard of the match between her father and his guest, and was as incredulous as Mohammed himself, in the first instance; but latterly she had begun to change her opinion. Her lover had assured her that the English horse would prove triumphant, and what will not a woman believe when her lover tells her a thing is so? She was in a state of feverish unrest. Was not the one romance of her young life about to terminate miserably? Ransom? There was little doubt about that: these English had so much money. Ah, how she wished her father had not de-

manded that! Was he not hers?—her captive, whose very life she had saved?—and it was pitiful of Mohammed Sebekh to demand salvage for complying with the mere laws of humanity, she felt. Her captive!—what mockery!—a captive she was powerless to hold in bondage in the sole way she cared for. Her captive, alas! Shame on her that it was so, but she was his. Well, she must steel her heart to the inevitable. There could be no union between the infidel and the true believer. Why not? There was a Paradise for the Christian as well as the Moslem, but for the Mahommedan woman, there was no hereafter, so what need it matter? She might be his leman, for the matter of that; and then Zelnè sobbed herself to sleep, still wondering by what mischance she stumbled on the dying Englishman in the desert. It was her kismet, but it was none the less hard to bear.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHAFFED INTO A MATCH.

A FEW days later, and a small detachment of dragoons, from Korti—not above half a score troopers—under a non-commissioned officer, ride into the camp of the Halawins, bringing with them a carefully-sheeted quadruped, which it is at once whispered about amongst the tribe, is the pure-bred English horse that is destined to compete with the desert-born horses of their Sheikh. Not an Arab amongst them but believes this race to be but the craze of the mad Englishman who has fallen into their hands. But, if they were sceptical before, they broke into derisive laughter when, at the desire of Mohammed, The Mummer was stripped for inspection. In good truth, he was not a taking horse, with his plain head, lop ears—which, to an English racing man, would have told of the Melbourne strain in his blood—and slightly Roman nose. His great ragged hips, and thighs let low down, might have attracted the attention of an expert in racing matters, but it assuredly required some credulity to believe that The Mummer was clean bred. Nobody, not even his greatest admirers, not even those who had more than once won their money over him, could call him a handsome horse,

There he stood, a great, leathering bright bay of sixteen hands, quiet as a sheep, and with apparently about as much go in him. He was aged, and, only two or three years ago, at Lichfield, a prominent member of the Ring, on The Mummer being pointed out to him as a probable winner of the Queen's Plate, exclaimed,—‘What! that exaggerated old clothes-horse win. Rubbish! Here's six monkeys, The Mummer, or any part of it.’ *But he paid.*

To say Jack Cuxwold was impressed with his horse, would hardly express his feelings. His first ejaculation was, ‘What an old scarecrow!’ but then he called to mind some rather redoubtable performances of The Mummer, of which, though he had not witnessed them, he had read. Then it flashed across him that if ever there was an English horse calculated to throw dust in the eyes of the Halawins, it was this one. Then he reflected that his astute subaltern was the last man in the world to make a mistake about such a matter; and finally came from the non-commissioned officer in charge of the party, a whisper, in Checquers' well-known tones,—

‘It's all right, Jack. If he's a rum un to look at, he's also a rum un to go.’

But now, strange to say, another most unforeseen difficulty sprang up, and this was, that, after looking the English horse over, Mohammed Sebekh was furious.

‘This your boasted breed!’ he said. ‘You laugh at my beard. You bring that thing into the desert which is as much like a camel as a horse. Go to! To bring out one of the pure Nedjid line to contend against a mere beast of burthen like that, would be to be laughed at by my whole tribe.’

‘You must do as you like, Sheikh,’ rejoined Jack curtly. ‘In my country, we claim forfeit for a match, when a man's *afraid* to run. That under-sized camel, as you call him, will beat any four-footed beast in your tents, if you have the courage to run against him.’

This, as was intended, only made the Sheikh still more angry.

‘Beware how far you go. Look to it, Englishman, that you make not Mohammed Sebekh a laughing-stock in

front of his tribe. An Arab brooks not insult, and loves revenge dearer than gold.'

'Pleasant this,' thought Jack, 'if I happen to make a mess of it.'

'If to beat you in a race, Sheikh, is to spit upon your beard, you had best not run,' he said aloud, somewhat contemptuously.

'I shall race with you, Englishman,' replied Mohammed, 'and if I find your boasted steed to be no quicker than a donkey, on your head be it.'

'Ask for three days' delay,' said Checquers; but, low as the tone was, it reached Mohammed's ears.

'What is it he says?' asked the Sheikh.

'He advises me to ask for three days' grace. You can see why. My horse has travelled far; he wants that much rest, before he is called upon to contend against the fleetest horses of the desert.'

'It is jus.,' replied Mohammed. 'On the third day from this, we will see whether your mouth has spoken the thing that is, or whether it is the mere boasting of a braggart.'

Jack Cuxwold simply bowed his head in sign of assent, and then proceeded to see after the requirements of Checquers and his men. But he speedily perceived he was jealously watched, and that it would be imprudent to indulge in talk with his subaltern. The Arabs were evidently suspicious, and it was necessary for his scheme to lull those suspicions to sleep, as far as possible. Checquers, on his part, was quick to apprehend the situation, and made not the slightest attempt to converse with his Captain. He felt pretty certain that he thoroughly understood Jack's scheme. He knew that to aid him further than he had done was nearly impossible, and determined that, after his men had been fed and enjoyed a few hours' good sleep, the best thing he could do was to return to Korti, and await the result of the race.

As he bade Jack good-bye the next morning, he saluted punctiliously, in accordance with his assumed rank, and said,—'I hope and think you will win, sir;' and, dropping his tone, he added, '*Help half-way.*'

Closely as the Arabs watched over the departure of the dragoons—and there were purposely one or two amongst them with some knowledge of English—those three last words escaped their vigilant ears; and as Checquers and his troopers disappeared in the distance, Jack felt that, though an eye was kept upon his movements, he was no longer under strict supervision.

The next day Jack demanded Mohammed's permission to exercise *The Mummer*, and give him a gallop. The Sheikh admitted the fairness of the request, agreeing with Jack that horses required plenty of healthy exercise to keep them in good condition. The Arabs are horse-dealers by nature, and there was much curiosity amidst the tribe to see the Englishman's horse gallop; but Jack very soon found that the direction in which that gallop was to be, was carefully marked out for him, and that small parties of mounted horsemen were stationed here and there, carelessly, as if to see how *The Mummer* went when extended, but, at the same time, in such manner that one party or another would be able to intercept him, should he be rash enough to attempt an escape. This did not look very promising, he thought, for his scheme. If he was thus guarded on the day of the race, it would be almost madness to put it into execution. However, he had made up his mind about one thing, and that was not to expose his horse until the actual day came. The Hala-wins, therefore, to their great disgust, were treated to nothing but a long, slow gallop, quickened a little during the last mile or so, but giving no idea of what the horse's actual powers might be. But that gallop had taught Jack something, and that was that *The Mummer* was a powerful, lazy horse, quite content to lob along, unless called on.

Zelnè had ridden out to see how the English horse went, but she, like all her tribe, knew that no idea of what *The Mummer* could do, was to be gathered from what they had seen. Accustomed to 'buckét' their own horses unmercifully, except on long journeys, the Arabs could not understand a long, slow training gallop. Their idea was that the first impulse of the Englishman would be to try this new horse, which was confessedly unknown

to him. That was what any one of themselves would have done. They would first have endeavoured to form some estimate of his fleetness, and, secondly, of his bottom. Surely the Englishman could not be so mad as to think he could wear their horses down at that pace? Yet, unless his horse could gallop a little quicker, why did he hesitate to put him to the speed? The consensus of opinion amongst the Hawwins was that this English paragon was an immensely over-estimated animal. And they came finally to the conclusion that if it was not all braggadocio that the English possessed such wonderful horses, then had the English lord been grossly imposed upon; and some of the elders of the tribe smiled, as they remembered how often they had sold inferior horses as the pure-bred steeds of the desert. Zelnè alone, of all her tribe, believed in the powers of *The Mummer*. She watched her lover closely during these two days; he was kinder and more devoted to her than ever, but she noticed that he was sad and pre-occupied. That they must part, he made no disguise, though he refused to admit that it was never to meet again; but she knew better—she did not deceive herself upon that point. It is hard to blind the keen eyes of affection, and Zelnè by this knew every trick of his countenance,—could interpret every smile or shadow that crossed his face. Mercifully, till the finish comes to all of us, we rarely realise in this world how often we are fated to say ‘good-bye,’ for ever!

The next day, Jack again rode *The Mummer*, and once more did the tribe turn out to see the performance. It was a mere repetition of the day before, except in one particular. As Jack commenced the last mile of his gallop, a well-mounted young Arab suddenly conceived the idea of, in racing parlance, ‘getting a line,’ by bustling *The Mummer* up a bit. No sooner did this brilliant thought strike him, than he put spurs to his horse, dashed alongside of Jack, and commenced a race with him. Jack apparently fell into the trap, and, laughing in his sleeve, determined to show the Arab one of the tricks of English jockeyship. He affected to bustle his horse. He got up his hand, and administered two or three decided cuts with the whip—to his boot; but it was all of

no use. The Mummer quickened his pace not an iota ; he fell further and further behind, and, finally, the Arab dashed his horse triumphantly past the assumed winning-post, at least a dozen lengths in advance.

Screams, yells of delight, burst from the throats of the Halawins, as they witnessed the success of their own champion, though, as Jack said to Mr Checquers afterwards, when describing the pseudo trial, 'Such a shameless bit of "kidding" would have ensured my being hooted off the course at Stockbridge or Croydon.' But the niceties of jockeyship are as yet not understood in the Soudan, keen horse-copers though the Arabs of that region for the most part are. That the incident was duly reported to Mohammed Sebekh, was matter of course, and once more was that fiery chieftain roused to wrath. His was a singularly composite character. He had all the rapacity and fearlessness of a *Front de Bœuf*, conjoined with the cunning and avarice of old *Trapbois*. A schemer, intriguer, and liar, he feared but one thing, and that was the being made ridiculous. We writhe under that even in the West, but, to the grave, dignified Eastern, to be laughed at is a great humiliation,—a thing, as a matter of policy, too, not to be endured. An Arab sheikh who once becomes an object of derision, it is likely will not remain chief of his tribe much longer ; and Mohammed, from what he heard, had a strong idea that Jack Cuxwold was jesting with him, and, as I have said, they have a scant appreciation of humour in the East.

Once more did Mohammed send for his prisoner, and haughtily menace him with the consequences of making him a laughing-stock in the face of the assembled Halawins, and again did Jack taunt the Sheikh with wanting to back out of the match, and declare that, if he refused to run, he, Cuxwold, was entitled to claim the best horse the Sheikh possessed. No such condition as this had been made, but when aggravation is the main object we have in view, veracity becomes a very minor consideration. Stung by his prisoner's jibes, once more did Mohammed Sebekh vow that the match should stand, but that it did so at his, Cuxwold's, peril.

'I'm quite aware of that,' thought Jack, as he walked

away from the Sheikh's tent. 'If it comes off, your temper won't be heavenly—but that won't matter; and if it don't, well, I don't think you'll cut off your nose to spite your face, or lose five thousand pounds to indulge in the luxury of cutting my head off. No, I don't run half the risk I've done a score of times of late, to say nothing of never having had anything like such a stake on it.'

At this moment he encountered Zelnè, and, despite himself, the smile with which he was picturing Mohammed's rage at finding himself outwitted, faded from his countenance, and his face fell. This was the terrible trouble of his situation. He not only had a strong affection for the girl, but he most conscientiously recognised that he owed his life to her to boot. He had not sought, in the first instance, to win her affections, but when he found that she was won,—that she was wildly in love with the man she had saved, what could he do but swim with the stream? How it was all to end, had troubled him not a little. To make her his wife was an impossibility, even had he wished it, and to carry her off under any other condition, was to repay all he owed her by the basest ingratitude, albeit he knew Eastern women do not attach so much importance to the marriage service as their sisters of the West.

'My lord looks sad,' said Zelnè. 'Is he afraid of the result of to-morrow's race?'

'No, Zelnè dearest. I feel as confident of winning as ever, in spite of the apparent beating I received to-day.'

'It was as I thought, you did not wish to beat my countryman; but to-morrow, I know it will be different.'

'I think so. I feel sure that you have none of you any idea what an English horse can do, when he is ridden in earnest.'

'Ah, dearest, I know you so well. I can see the finish of to-morrow's race. You are about to leave me. Will you grant me a favour?'

'Anything I can do for you, Zelnè, you know I will,' replied Jack.

'It is not much. Will you swear to carry this note that I have written, about you to-morrow, and not to read it or open it till the race is over?'

'Certainly, Zelnè. But what can you mean? What is it?'

'A charm—an amulet, perhaps; who knows? We believe in such things. I may wish you to beat my father, and in my little way would arm you for the contest. Will you swear?'

'Yes,' said Jack, as he took the note. 'I swear not to read it till after the race.'

'That is good of you,' said Zelnè. 'Now, kiss me, darling, and good-night.'

A fond embrace, and the lovers parted. Jack Cuxwold went to his tent more remorseful than ever at the love-passages which had passed between himself and this Arab maiden.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RACE IN THE DESERT.

THE next day was quite a gala day amongst the Halawins. The tribe was all *en fête*, and had organised a series of sports and races amongst themselves; but the great event of the day was to be, of course, the match between their Sheikh and the Englishman. Their pickets reported there was no sign of the enemy to be seen along the route to Korti. Lances stuck into the ground, with pennons fluttering from their heads, indicated the track. These lances were to be kept to the left hand, both going and returning, and at the turning point two lances had been tied together, so as to distinguish that point from the other landmarks. The course chosen ran from the Wells into the desert towards Korti, but in an oblique direction from the regular route. All this had been carefully explained to Jack, and it had been decided that the race should be run in the afternoon, as soon as the sun got a little low in the heavens.

Jack Cuxwold had looked after The Mummer himself, and had spent the morning puzzling over many things. None, perhaps, had mystified him more than this note that Zelnè had placed in his hands. What could it mean? Was it really an amulet, as she had said? Did she really wish her father to be beaten in this match? He had promised not to look at it till after the race, and he would keep his word. It should rest in the breast-pocket of his jacket, till either he had escaped or found

that escape was impracticable. Jack knew that if he succeeded in getting through the Arabs, he had still a very stiff job before him,—the Halawins would be sure to hang like very wolves upon his trail up to within a mile or two of Korti. From the Wells to that place was about fifty miles, and Jack knew that this would have to be done almost without drawing bridle. He had no doubt whatever that The Mummer would have the speed of the Arabs, but those wiry desert-born steeds had great powers of endurance, and greater capacity, perhaps from habit, of doing better for a long time without food and water, than an English horse. Such halts as he might make, he knew must be exceeding brief, even under the most favourable circumstances. He felt sure that his pursuers would never be very far behind him, and that even with what looked like a long lead, a few minutes out of the saddle would be the utmost he could do to ease The Mummer between this and Korti. Then suddenly flashed across him Checquers' whisper, 'Help half way.' Ah! he could trust to Jim Checquers! They had fought side by side in too many hot fights of late, to fear that he wouldn't stand to him. Yes, that would make it easier. A troop of dragoons at the end of thirty miles would mean safety. 'Ah,' he thought, with a smile, 'if I haven't, in racing parlance, spread-eagled my field, by that time, The Mummer is not at all the horse I take him to be. There will probably not be above a dozen fellows within hail of me by that, and if Checquers turns up with even a score of troopers, it would be enough. What a row the beggars are making already. That they've made it a regular *fête* day, I think is in my favour. There never were a lot of Arabs together, on such an occasion, who did not set to work shouting, galloping their horses about, and generally showing off. There's a chance that they'll be watching each other more than me.'

However, at last the time came when Jack was politely informed that it behoved him to get into the saddle. He had saddled The Mummer some little time before, and now went to tighten his girths, and to cast a last scrutinising look over all his appointments. That done, he swung himself into the saddle, and proceeded leisurely

down to the starting-post, where Mohammed Sebekh, with a large group of the leading men of his tribe, were already assembled. Cheap as the Sheikh held the English horse, he was not going to throw away a point in the game. He had divested himself of his customary steel shirt and headpiece, and was clad in light attire.

'Front de Bœuf knows something about it,' thought Jack, 'and is not going to throw away a pound, if he knows it.'

The Sheikh motioned Jack to bring The Mummer alongside the beautiful little Arab that he himself was riding. The two horses offered a most striking contrast. The English, a great slashing bay, standing sixteen hands high, looked fit to carry his diminutive rival, who was a bare fourteen two. But certainly for looks the Arab had it. He was handsome as a picture, while The Mummer could only be described as a big, plain, powerful horse, whose good qualities were hardly visible, except to a practised eye.

'The start in a long race of this description is not a matter of much importance,' said Mohammed Sebekh. 'Will you give the word, or shall I?'

'You give it,' replied Jack.

'Then go!' exclaimed the Sheikh, and, quick on his legs as a cat, the little Arab shot to the front like an arrow, and stole something like six lengths' start. Of no great importance this in a ten-mile race. Jack, too, had been in no hurry to get off. He knew The Mummer was a slow beginner, but that in due course his stride must tell, and therefore he followed leisurely along in the wake of his leader. But Mohammed was no fool; and though, Arab like, he had dashed off with a tremendous spurt, he knew well enough that no horse that ever was foaled could go pretty nearly at his best for such a distance as lay before him to-day. Before he had gone half a mile, he had pulled his horse up to a hand-gallop, while The Mummer, who was lying some twenty lengths behind him, and had now settled into his stride, was doing a mere exercise canter.

Jack paid very little attention to his antagonist. His eye was roving keenly around in all directions, to see what place offered him the easiest opportunity of breaking through the assembled Arabs. These clustered thick

round the starting which was also the winning-post ; there were lots of groups, too, all the way along that side of the course which ran obliquely to the road to Korti, and that he must break through them somewhere on that side, was essential. They ran in these relative positions for the next two miles, and then Jack saw when his opportunity must come. It must be remembered that the Halawins were in scattered groups extending over five miles, consequently there were numerous and extensive gaps between these groups. The Arabs kept galloping about from one to another, and the groups therefore varied considerably in size. Sometimes they congregated in great force in one, while the next did not consist of half a dozen. As they sped on, Jack noticed that the group next the turning-post was very numerous, but the next knot to it had dwindled down to some three or four, most of the men who had originally constituted this latter having galloped across to the turning-post group to see the competing horses come round that post, and between those two Jack determined his rush should be made. They were a good half-mile apart, and The Mummer had not been called upon to gallop as yet. As they entered upon the fifth mile, Jack began to steal up to his antagonist, and as they neared the turning-post, had got within two lengths of him. Mohammed became startled. He had thought the English horse done with, and toiling hopelessly along in his rear by this. He put on a tremendous spurt, while Jack for the first time let The Mummer out in earnest, and for a few strides forged ahead. Then he pulled his horse back again, as the Arabs supposed, to enable him to lose as little ground as possible in rounding the post. Mohammed came on again with the lead, and, with the sharp Arab bit swung his horse round the post with marvellously little loss of ground. As for The Mummer, he came again suddenly with a wet sail, shot past the post, without attempting to turn it, and, to all appearance, having overpowered his rider, bolted in the direction of Korti, Jack sitting well back in his saddle, making, as they thought, the most frantic efforts to stop him.

It was some seconds before the Arabs comprehended the

fuse, and by that time Jack was once more leaning forward in his stirrups, and stretching away towards Korti with a lead of something like half a mile. Then from many a throat burst forth a cry of anger that they should have been made such fools of, and into many a steed the rowels were sharply driven, as his rider started forth in pursuit of the mad Englishman who had so laughed at their beards.

Away stretches The Mummer, running parallel to the regular route to Korti, and for the first time the Halawins become cognisant of the long, swinging stride of an English throughbred. Vainly do they press their desert-born steeds in pursuit; the English horse is leaving them further and further every minute, and, as those in the van see plainly, is going quite at his ease, and well within himself. As for Mohammed Sebekh, he had sped almost a mile in the opposite direction before the cries of his people made him look round for his antagonist, and brought to him a knowledge of what had happened. Then he pulled up, and, proving how little custom differs amongst nations, when you once get at human passions, called his followers 'pigs, camels, and sons of burnt mothers!' for having allowed the infidel to throw dust in their eyes, quite after the manner of ourselves. He might, in the words of a popular song of the present day, have been:—

'Quite English, you know. Quite English, you know.'

But curses don't hatch chickens, and Mohammed Sebekh's swearing at his own children did not much affect Jack Cuxwold, who felt The Mummer going strong under him, in his race for freedom without ransom. He knew he'd a long gallop before him, and was hurrying his horse not a whit; but his heart bounded as The Mummer strode along, and he felt that Checquers had made no mistake in his pick,—that he was mounted on a fair second-class Queen's Plater, in very decent condition. He was leaving the Halawins steadily further and further behind him, but Jack knew better than to suppose his pursuers were men to be disheartened by having the worst of it thus far. It was a long way to Korti. They were many, he was alone; and though he might have the heels of them, he was quite

aware of the endurance of those tireless little Arab horses. Still onward, onward he galloped, and The Mummer never faltered in his stride. Jack looked back—he had put the best part of a mile between himself and the foremost of his pursuers, and saw now that they were greatly reduced in numbers; still he roughly estimated that there were a good score sticking doggedly to his skirts. He pulled up at the top of a small swell in his sandy path, to give The Mummer a chance to catch his wind, but saw that his halt must be short. His relentless foes, encouraged by his drawing bridle, pressed forward with exulting cries still more hotly in pursuit. He sets The Mummer going again, and the old horse strides away, easy as ever. Jack roughly reckons that he has now put a good fifteen miles between himself and the Wells of Howeyat. Another ten are traversed without a check, and then Jack feels, with dismay, that his horse begins to hang heavily on his bridle,—to answer with little life to his hand. He looks back; in that clear sky and over those sandy steppes it is possible to see vast distances. Yes, there come the Halawins, not more than half a mile behind him; but their numbers have diminished slightly, and there are a bare dozen of them now visible on his track. He halts his horse once more for a few minutes, which, of course, lessens the space between himself and his foes. ‘Where is Checquers?’ he muttered. ‘If he don’t turn up soon, I’m done. My horse will never last into Korti.’

Once more he starts, but The Mummer hangs heavily on his bit, and, after another four miles have been traversed, begins to pitch in his gallop in a way that, to a horseman like Jack, heralds that, nurse his steed carefully as he may, he has about got to the end of him. He hears the exulting yells of his pursuers, already regarding him as a pack of hounds might their sinking fox. He pulls The Mummer together, and for the first time sends the spurs sharply home. He will cross that sand bluff in front of him, and then, if there is no help visible, well! he will distress a good horse no longer. But ere he reaches his goal, some thirty or forty British horsemen top the ridge, and Jack knows that Checquers has kept his word, and brought ‘*help half-way.*’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WROXETER BALL.

THE day of the Wroxeter Ball had come at last, and Miss Bramton was in the highest possible spirits. That poem in tulle and satin is to be exhibited in all its splendour. The news from Egypt is excellent concerning Captain Cuxwold. Alec Flood has telegraphed that Jack is well and unhurt, though at present a prisoner in the hands of the Halawin Arabs; that no doubt a heavy price will have to be paid for his freedom, but that he is in no personal danger whatever, at present. With their minds set so far at rest, the Ranksborow family saw no reason for absenting themselves from either the Wroxeter Ball or Races. The Countess of late had been extremely civil to the Bramtons. Lord Dartree had asked three or four men down for the ball, and Lady Ranksborow, with a view to doing the young ladies a good turn, had invited the Bramton family over to dinner, so that both girls felt already ensured against a dull ball. Amongst the visitors at Knightshayes was Jim Anson, who, unwittingly, was destined to be the cause of a most awkward complication for the Ranksborow family.

Luncheon over at Temple Rising, the britska came round to the door, and, swathed in furs and rugs, to protect them from the biting March wind, the family started to drive to Wroxeter, where it had been settled that they should stay the night. The Ranksborows also, with their party, were at 'The George,' which was regarded as the leading hotel of the little town. According to annual custom, that hostelry was in a state of prodigious fuss and bustle; smart chambermaids, bedizened with gay ribbons, coquettish-looking lady's-maids, and gentlemen's valets, were darting up and down the passages, apparently without a moment to spare. Bells were ringing in all directions; in the coffee-room the waiters knew no rest; and if there were people at 'The George' who were taking their ease at their inn, there was most decidedly a numerous contingent who were not. In pursuance of a long-standing engagement, the Knightshayes party and

the Bramtons had joined forces, and formed all together quite a large party. They had taken private sitting-rooms, and agreed to dine all together. On their arrival, the Bramtons were shown to their rooms, and the smart chambermaid who waited on them assured them the house was full to the attics ; that every hotel in the place was crowded ; that the town had never been known to be so full, and that it was expected to be the best ball and best day's racing Wroxeter had ever seen.

'This will be great fun, Lucy !' exclaimed Miss Bramton, as they sat sipping their tea before a blazing fire, after their drive. 'We shall be a real cheery party. Mr Anson and all those friends of Lord Dartree's are nice. I have not had a good dance for ever so long ; and if you can only make up your mind to get over the loss of Mr Flood for one night, we ought to have a good time.'

Lucy laughed merrily as she replied,—

'Mr Flood and I understand each other. We are good friends, nothing more. You make a mistake when you think otherwise. Like you, I'm looking forward to a real good dance.'

But balls, like other diversions, are often fraught with disappointment. One can't say how it is, but the evening we have reckoned on so eagerly, comes off all wrong. The room is good, the music is excellent, but somehow we bungled our programme ; we have been let in for dancing with the people we didn't want to, and made our prayer too late to those for whose assent we craved. A friend of mine, a confirmed ball-goer, once summed up the situation in these words,—'It's no use without an object.' I fancy he regarded a pretty hot flirtation as part of the programme, and that *she* was not there that evening.

'I wonder whether Lord Dartree will win to-morrow ?' observed Matilda, after a slight pause. 'I hope so, for I've not only got lots of gloves on The Robber, and he has promised to put me a ten-pound note on in the ring before starting. However, I like Lord Dartree ; independently of that, I should like to see him win.'

'Do you think, Matilda, that he likes you ?' asked Lucy.

'Yes, my dear,' replied Miss Bramton, with a saucy smile, as she raised her dark eyes from the fire, and looked her sister steadily in the face; 'I think he does.'

'Ah! but well enough to marry you?' said Lucy.

'I can't quite say. You might have put it more nicely—Do I like him well enough to say yes if he asks me? Well, a sensible girl would think twice before she said no to the chance of being Countess of Ranksborow.'

'Well, I don't like him,' said Lucy emphatically. 'I never can get over the impression that he is laughing in his sleeve at us all the time. You recollect his sneer at papa the other day. It is true, papa is terribly vulgar at times, but I won't have him laughed at. If it wasn't the conventional way of asking Lord Dartree to lunch, still he was asking him to lunch, and no gentleman would have made such a reply as he did.'

Miss Bramton said nothing. In her heart of hearts she felt sure that the choice of becoming Lady Dartree would be vouchsafed her. - And she was not at all pleased that her sister should think that it was possible that nobleman might not be in earnest in his attentions. It is true that she numbered another string to her bow in Sir Kenneth Sandeman, and that her heart was no more involved in the one case than in the other. As long as she had the chance of becoming Lady Dartree, she had determined that, if possible, Sir Kenneth should not come to the point.

'Well, Lucy,' she said at length, 'if we mean dressing before dinner, it is about time we began to see about it,' and with these words Miss Bramton led the way, and the two sisters were soon involved in all the mysteries of the toilet.

We all know them! those dear old fiddles of the provincial ballroom, which play the dance-music of two years or so past, but, for all that, contrive to put much more go into the tunes than ever the crack bands of the metropolis seemed capable of doing. Perhaps it lies in ourselves,—in the different and more healthy life we lead in the country, but men too languid to walk through a quadrille in London, will throw themselves into all the *abandon* of a country ball, and dance as if bitten of the

Tarantula. The Wroxminster Ball, as rumour had predicted, was an immense success. There were a good hundred and fifty people present, and that was a gathering very considerably above the average. The combined party from Knightshayes and Temple Rising were the centre of attraction to the whole room. The Ranksborows, to begin upon, were popular, and few who could aspire to the privilege failed to avail themselves of a turn with the ladies Cuxwold, notoriously two of the best valsers in the county. Then everybody was thirsting for news of their brother, 'the Honourable Jack,' whom Berkshire regarded as their hero of the Soudan, with a lurking suspicion that had he only been at the head of affairs, Khartoum might have been saved, and the desert campaign had a different ending. Then everybody wanted to know how The Robber was? Did Lord Dartree fancy his chance, and did he still intend to ride him himself? in which case, all the young ladies felt quite sure he would win. Then the two Misses Bramton were far away the prettiest girls in the room; and what did their father say about Damocles? Their partners supposed he would win the Derby; of course, they were awfully interested in it, etc., etc. In fact, Miss Bramton was in the seventh heaven—belle of the ball, and the prettiest girl of the crack party present at the County Assembly Rooms that evening, and no rival to challenge her pertensions, unless it was her own sister.

Miss Bramton was in the very highest possible spirits, and she had good right to be. She was conscious of looking her best, and she was getting plenty both of dancing and admiration. Lord Dartree especially had engaged her for valse after valse, and Sir Kenneth Sandeman had found it hard work to inscribe his name upon her programme. She whispered to Lucy, as she passed on Mr Anson's arm, in the full flush of her triumph,—

'The best ball I ever was at; isn't it lovely?'

After supper, the fun became fast and furious. Wroxeter was one of those old-fashioned balls at which the custom of drinking healths was indulged in, and upon this occasion the health of the Countess of Ranksborow.

as lady patroness, and of Lord Dartree, Mr Bramton, and Mr Berriman, as stewards of the ball and races, were duly honoured. Lord Dartree returned thanks for his mother and himself in a few well-chosen words; and then for a minute or two Miss Bramton thought 'the something bitter' ever dreaded had arisen in her cup, as she saw her father rise to reply to his health. She knew his weakness, and her ears tingled in anticipation of the facetious speech he delighted to indulge in when such an opportunity presented itself. But for once John Bramton refrained. It may be that he was awed by the brevity of Lord Dartree, but at all events he returned thanks in the shortest possible manner. Valse followed valse, and galop followed galop. At last there was a temporary lull, and then the band burst out again into the rollicking air of 'Sir Roger de Coverley.'

'Where shall I leave you, Miss Bramton?' said Lord Dartree. 'I don't know whether you intend to dance Sir Roger, but Wroxeter expects me to do my duty, and, as the dancing steward, I am told off to lead the romp.'

'Well, I've promised Sir Kenneth to join in it, but I hope he won't hold me to my promise. I see Lucy sitting there; take me across to her.'

The Miss Bramtons sat for some little time watching the turmoil of Sir Roger. Sir Kenneth had duly made his appearance, but Miss Bramton pleaded fatigue, and, after talking to them for a little, he left the two sisters to their own devices. Tired of the hubbub of the dance, Matilda at last proposed that they should change their places, and the two girls made their way to a cosy recess just off the door of the supper-room, and took possession of the comfortable sofa it contained. It really was a small room communicating with the larger one, but the door had been taken off and the opening draped with coloured muslin and evergreens. Seated there, they begun chatting over the events of the evening, and comparing notes. They were both very pleased with their ball, and agreed it had been a capital dance.

'It is getting time to withdraw,' said Lucy. 'Will they ever make an end of this apparently interminable Sir Roger?'

'It's no use going to bed, my dear,' replied Matilda, 'until they do. There can be no sleep for anybody in the house till the music is finished. I presume this is the last dance, Sir Roger is usually the end of everything.'

'Yes,' said Lucy, laughing; 'especially one's dress. Tired, hot, and a perfect wreck with regard to skirts, is the appearance one usually presents at the close of that reckless romp.'

At this moment there came a rush of young men to the supper-room, which they entered by the ordinary door, and without passing through the recess in which the Miss Bramtons were seated. Revellers these who had been in the van of the fray, and had acquired a thirst which, as one of them exclaimed, 'brooked no delay in satisfying.' It was evident, from their conversation, that they were composed of the Knightshayes party, and Lord Dartree's voice was prominent as he ordered the waiters to get champagne and tumblers.

'Glasses like these are no good,' he exclaimed, 'for men who have borne the burden and heat of the day; are they, Jim?'

'No,' replied Anson. 'I think that was about the quickest thing in Sir Rogers ever I went. By Jove, Dart, you set us a cracker, from start to finish! If you make running to-morrow in the way you did to-night, The Robber will be done crisp as biscuits long before he turns into the straight.'

'He has been at it all the evening,' ejaculated another of the party. 'He was making play, to a disgraceful extent, with that handsome, dark-eyed girl all the first part of the evening. I don't know her name, but she and her sister are the two prettiest girls in the room.'

'Yes,' said Anson, 'it's getting about time you settled down, Dart; you might go farther and fare worse.'

'Come away,' whispered Lucy. 'Let us go.'

Matilda Bramton made a gesture of dissent, and grasped her sister firmly by the wrist.

'You might indeed,' continued Anson. 'Old Dry-goods, at Temple Rising there, could plank down a good bit of money with his daughter, depend upon it.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Jim,' rejoined Lord Dartree, as

he tossed off a tumbler of champagne. 'It is necessary to keep the Bramtons in good humour till Damocles has won the Derby. And Miss Drygoods is a very jolly girl to flirt with; but when you come to marrying, that's quite another pair of shoes. We Cuxwolds haven't gone in for trade yet.'

'Now it's you who are talking rubbish,' replied Jim Anson. 'The amalgamation of the aristocratic and commercial classes is one of the features of the age in which we live, sir.'

'Oh, get out!' replied Lord Dartree, in the midst of a roar of laughter. 'When Jim begins to lecture in that way, it's a sign that the night is no longer young, and that the wine has flowed freely!'

Lucy cast one glance at her sister's face as the two hurried from the recess. The dark eyes were lightening with wrath, and Matilda's face was crimson to the very roots of her hair.

'Insulting wretches,' she hissed, between her teeth; 'did you hear what they called us?'

'Yes,' rejoined Lucy, who was very pale, and whose mouth was set in determined fashion, 'I did; but Lord Dartree has made one mistake, *Damocles will not win the Derby!*'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A VERY PRETTY QUARREL.

THE two girls made the best of their way to their bedroom, and no sooner had they entered it, than Matilda burst into a fit of passionate sobbing. It was a miserable ending to a most successful evening. Lord Dartree's insulting words had stung Miss Bramton to the quick. Her pride was wounded, her vanity outraged; she who had thought that she had this man at her feet, had now discovered that he was only amusing himself with her.

'What does it all mean, Lucy?' she cried. 'He should be a gentleman, and yet no gentleman would make such a brutal speech about a girl he had been dancing with.'

'I think I understand it, in part,' said Lucy indignantly. 'I suppose Lord Dartree and his father have backed

Damocles for the Derby, and therefore have affected an interest in us which in reality they only feel in the horse. I always told you I never could get over the feeling that Lord Dartree was laughing at us. After the way he spoke of us, we can never set foot in Knightshayes again.'

'If papa did make his money in trade, I'm sure it's nothing to be ashamed of.'

'No, dearest,' said Lucy soothingly. 'You heard what Mr Anson said afterwards, nobody thinks anything of it in these days.'

'Papa is trying,' moaned Miss Bramton; 'I wish he wasn't. I wish his talk didn't savour quite so much of "the shop;" but to accept his hospitality, and call him—' and Miss Matilda wept afresh at the bare recollection of the dreadful name.

Lucy Bramton was, if anything, more indignant than her sister. True, they had not been intended to overhear Lord Dartree's speech, but it had been addressed quite openly to his companions. He might or might not have been serious in regard to his views of Matilda, but he had undoubtedly paid her great attention. A man had no right to do that, and then hold the object of such attention up to ridicule. He had dined continually at Temple Rising, dropped in to luncheon whenever it had happened to suit his convenience, and yet here he was holding up his host to the derision of his companions. Lucy had plenty of spirit, and knew that, in spite of her father's vulgarity, they were not regarded in this light by their acquaintances generally. True, people might smile occasionally at Mr Bramton's solecisms, but the better points in his character were by no means overlooked; and had not Lucy herself, only a few weeks back, received the most convincing tribute to her natural pride and attractions that can be laid at any girl's feet? Had not a loyal and gallant gentleman asked her to marry him, and did not Knightshayes delight to honour Alec Flood?

'I shall not go to the races to-morrow!' suddenly exclaimed Miss Bramton. 'After Lord Dartree's insulting words, I couldn't look any one of the Knightshayes men in the face. You must do as you like, Lucy.'

'We will go home after breakfast, you, I, and mamma. As for papa, if he is obliged to attend the races as steward, he can come home by himself later on;' and then the two girls proceeded rapidly to disrobe, and Matilda Bramton soon forgot her troubles in slumber.

As for Lord Dartree, he was in blissful ignorance of the mischief he had done. He knew what pains the Earl and all the family had been at to conciliate the Bramtons, and, knowingly, would have been the last person in the world to offend them. Did not he and his father both stand to win heavy sums upon the victory of Damocles? Was he not aware that John Bramton never betted a shilling, but was quite the man to be furious at any affront offered to his daughters, and to endeavour to avenge such insult by any means that lay in his power. It would be sheer midsummer madness to offend any of the family; but Lord Dartree had a wicked tongue that he could not always control, and was much given to ridiculing the weak points of his fellow-creatures. He had, too, when he made the gibling speech in the supper-room, drank a good deal of champagne, or else perhaps he had not been so incautious. He was now horrifying Anson and one or two more of his companions, by obstinately refusing to go to bed till he had had one cigar and a soda-and-brandy to top up with.

'It won't do, Dart—it won't do,' said Anson. 'How do you suppose that you're to ride over three miles of country, with such training as this? You'll be blown long before The Robber is,—be sitting like a sack of wheat on the horse, and spill all our money.'

'Don't you fuss, Jim,' replied Lord Dartree. 'I'm off to bed as soon as I've finished this cigar, and shall do the old horse every justice, you'll see, to-morrow.'

As for 'The George,' it never went to bed itself upon this annual festival. Some of its myrmidons were up and about all night. And there were always some festive spirits who haunted the smoking-room till daybreak.

It was very well for Miss Bramton, in all the anguish of her outraged pride and vanity, to declare that she would go home and not attend the races next day. It was natural that Lucy should sympathise with her sister,

which she did most thoroughly, and declare she would aid and abet her in her resolution, but when calm reflection came with the morning, both girls recollected that some reason must be assigned for this sudden change of front,—that their very parents would expect some explanation as to the why of this hasty return to Temple Rising. Now Miss Bramton shrank even from telling the story of her mortification to her own father, and—as Lucy said—still less could they publish to the world the insolence of Lord Dartree.

‘There is nothing for it, Matilda, but you will have to “go sick,” and, of course, I shall play the dutiful sister, and accompany you home. There’s one thing, my dear. I think we had better give the same explanation to papa and mamma that we do to the world generally. Mamma might boil, but she would have the sense to hold her tongue; but poor dear father—we know him so well—if he gets an inkling of the case, depend on it, he will have it out with the Ranksborows! He loves us very dearly, but he is not judicious, and in his first wrath at hearing that his daughter has been insulted, he will be “neither to haud nor to bind.”’

‘Yes!’ replied Miss Bramton; ‘that is the worst of papa. He is no respecter of persons; and I’m bound to say, when his blood is up, it doesn’t greatly matter to him whether the object of his wrath is an earl or a chimney-sweep.’

The two girls estimated their father’s character very correctly. John Bramton was a good-natured man in the main, but, like many of these good-natured men, when he did lose his temper he lost it very thoroughly; and if there was one point upon which he was thin-skinned, it was upon the subject of his daughters. He was immensely proud of them—proud of their good-looks—proud of their bringing-up.

‘My wife and I hadn’t their advantages, you see,’ he was wont to say. ‘I had to be earning a living instead of going in for accomplishments, but my girls they’ve been brought up real ladies, from bonnet to slipper, and, considering the tidy pile I can give ’em, are fit to marry anyone.’

It was not likely that anyone would disparage the Miss

Bramtons in their father's presence, but John Bramton quite expected visitors to gratify his pride, by showing open admiration for the young ladies; and the master of Temple Rising, cordial though he might be, never really took folks to his heart who had not, by words or looks, displayed high appreciation of his daughters. They might well think it better that he should not be told the real state of the case, but be simply informed of Matilda's indisposition, and consequent inability to attend Wroxeter Races.

'That walls have ears,' we've all heard, and of a surety there is much overhearing in this world of that not intended for us to know; the acquirement of such unbidden knowledge being productive of much heart-burning usually, from the days of the Garden of Eden down to the present time. The 'George Hotel' was destined to develop into a very 'whispering gallery,' and the last people that should have arrived at 'confidences,' seemed destined to become possessed of them. Mr Bramton has been duly informed by his wife of Matilda's indisposition; he fussed and fumed, said it was preposterous, that girls were full of whimsies, that they owed it to the county to put in an appearance. A great idea of what he owed to the county has grown up of late in John Bramton's mind, but, for all that, he knew that opposition to his women-kind was fatal. When the ladies of his family had decided upon their line of conduct, he was aware that no words of his would dissuade them from their intention.

'But why is it?' he asked his wife; 'what is the meaning of it? Matilda is not so ill that there's any need to make a fuss about it. If she don't feel up to going to the races, surely that needn't hinder the rest of us. Let her keep quiet here, and then we can all go home together, after the day's fun, as we settled to do.'

'No, no, John,' replied his wife; 'it won't do. We've all our reasons for going home, and go we must.'

'That's where it is,' replied Mr Bramton. 'What are your reasons? Such a success, too, as the gals were last night. Why, here's Matilda half a countess already. I mean that Dartree chap's over head and ears in love with her. What do you do it for?' and here Mr Bramton,

sticking his thumb in the armholes of his waistcoat, walked up and down the room swelling with irritation and importance, like an angry turkey-cock. 'Yes,' he continued, 'you were all at me, niggle naggles, to push my way into society; and now I've landed you all amongst the tip-toppers, why, you want to go home.'

'Indeed, John, I think we had better.'

'And if you think so, Margaret, of course you will. Home! I've no patience with you. Why, you can always go home,' and so saying, Mr Bramton bounced indignantly out of the room.

The truth was, Mr Bramton's head had been a little turned of late. He had made himself extremely popular in the county; he had laid himself out to do so; he had been liberal in the matter of subscriptions to hounds, races, hospitals, etc.; he had entertained well and freely at Temple Rising, so that it had become the fashion to vote him a very good fellow, and to pronounce him not so much vulgar as *eccentric*. Then he was extremely proud of the success of his daughters; and the idea that Matilda might some day blossom into a countess, made his heart swell with exultation, and 'Here he is,' he thought irritably, 'throwing away her chances in this foolish fashion.' Here Mr Bramton paused, and shook his head solemnly. 'Maybe she ain't, after all,' he muttered. 'P'raps she thinks a little holding off like, will make him speak out. Women understand these things better than we do;' and then, feeling certain that Mrs Bramton and his daughters would adhere to their resolution of returning home, John Bramton bustled off to secure a fly to take himself to the racecourse, and give orders that it should be freighted with a liberal luncheon.

Mr Bramton's arrangements were soon made, but happening to pass through the stable-yard, he espied his own carriage in course of getting ready. He resolved to go and say goodbye to his family before they started, and, re-entering the hotel, ascended the stairs for that purpose. As he turned the handle of the sitting-room door, the tones of Matilda's voice raised in passionate indignation struck upon his ear. He opened the door softly, and paused for a moment behind a large screen,

placed there to protect the inmates of the room from the draught of the door.

'No, mamma,' exclaimed Miss Bramton, 'I'll never speak to any of the Ranksborows again. No girl was ever insulted so grossly as I was by Lord Dartree last night. After paying me great attention all the evening, to boast to his friends in the supper-room that he was only amusing himself with old Drygoods' daughter, until Damocles had won the Derby.'

Mr Bramton's face was a study, as he for the first time heard the sportive nickname which his noble friend had bestowed upon him.

'It is too true, mamma,' said Lucy. 'Lord Ranksborow and his son are deeply interested in the success of Damocles. They have only taken us up for fear we should part with the horse. And you will see that they will drop us as suddenly as they took us up, their end once accomplished.'

In this she did the Ranksborows injustice. Their great interest in the victory of Damocles had undoubtedly induced the intimacy with the Temple Rising people in the first place, but neither Lord Ranksborow nor any of his family had any intention of behaving in such vulgarian fashion. Lord Dartree, no doubt, was merely flirting with Miss Matilda, and, under the influence of champagne, had made a foolish braggadoccio speech in the supper-room, never intended to reach their ears, but this was the front of their offending.

'So that is your reason,' said John Bramton, as he emerged from behind the screen. 'Lord Dartree dared to say that of you publicly, Matilda, did he? You have determined to go home, merely for that. You're wrong. You must take your own line, but I know you had better have faced it out; but the man who puts an affront upon one of my girls, settles with me.'

'Oh, John, John,' exclaimed Mrs Bramton, 'don't do anything rash! Don't let him go, girls. He'll go fighting, and get shot. Oh, oh! what am I to do?'

'Oh, papa dear, think of the scandal,' moaned Miss Bramton.

'Pray do keep cool, papa!' exclaimed Lucy.

'Cool! Damn it!' cried John Bramton, 'what's come to the women? What do you mean talking of being shot? I never fired anything but a pop-gun in my life. Keep cool! Why, damme, do you suppose I'm in a passion?'

It would have been a very allowable supposition for anybody who saw Mr Bramton just then, to have arrived at.

'No,' he continued. 'You've determined to go home; very good, go; but when a man insults my family, I know how to deal with him.,

'Oh, papa, dear, you are dreadfully excited; promise us, promise us you will do nothing rash!' cried Lucy.

'Pooh, pooh, child; don't you fret yourself. I'm not going punching heads, or any nonsense of that kind; but I'll give that Dartree chap a bit of my mind, before many hours are over, I'm determined.'

It was in vain that Mrs Bramton and her daughters tried to induce John Bramton to come home with them, and abandon his purpose. In vain Matilda pleaded that she should die of shame if the story came out, John Bramton was dogged, angry, and immovable in a way of which his family had had no former experience; and with a dread sense of impending disaster, Mrs Bramton and her daughters drove back to Temple Rising.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DEATH OF LORD DARTREE.

HAVING seen his family depart, Mr Bramton was more than ever resolute to have this affair out with Lord Dartree, the Earl of Ranksborow, or, for the matter of that indeed, with the first of the Cuxwold family he could lay hands upon, sooner than not speak. He was boiling with indignation. He, the shrewd, sharp, business man, whose boast it was that people rarely got the best of him, had been socially made a downright fool of by this arrogant Ranksborow lot. He who had flattered himself that he and his were upon friendly terms with the great magnates of the county, had suddenly discovered that he was a mere cat's paw for their convenience,—that neither his wealth, sagacity, nor the good looks of his daughters

counted an iota in their eyes,—that it was as the mere owner of Damocles—a horse upon which the Earl and his son stood to win an enormous stake—that he possessed any value in their eyes,—that had Mr Stubber, the trainer, commanded entire control over the animal, he would have been of more importance in their sight. He chafed; he raged horribly. He did not understand this accursed game of society. What did he want with Temple Rising, and the acquaintance of all these great people, who ate his dinners, drank his wine, pressed him to subscribe to this, that, and the other, tugged at his purse strings in all directions, and wound up by calling him ‘Old Drygoods’ behind his back?

He was a little new, you see, in the great game of social amenities,—not quite prepared to hear with a pleasant smile that the dear friend who had sat at his table on the Monday had made merry at his expense before the week was over. But it is so, my brothers, and ever will be. What does it matter? Let them be pleasant in our houses, or pleasant to us in theirs, and let us reckon little what their opinion concerning us may be. Let us remember only that our pleasant acquaintances are pleasant as the sweet-throated songsters of the spring, but that the words of true friends, like the song of the nightingale, are heard but seldom.

Mr Bramton’s first move was to send word to Lord Dartree to say that he should be glad to speak to him. In reply, he was informed that his Lordship had not as yet risen, which, although it served to further increase the irritation of Mr Bramton, was as nothing to the irritation it was causing Jim Anson, and two or three others who had backed *The Robber* for the Hunt Steeplechase. As Anson pleasantly put it to his companions,—

‘We’re in the hole, my boys. Dart is a tolerable performer when he keeps straight; his dancing all night wouldn’t have hurt him, but lashings of champagne and buckets of brandy and soda-water would settle any man’s wind for three miles of racing-pace across country next day.’ And then lamentations sadder than those of Jeremiah arose over the backsliding of one of the leaders of the people, and these nineteenth-century Gentiles hastened to hedge their money to the extent of their ability.

Mr Bramton, still fuming, still fussing, and by no means sweetening in temper, hovered about the landings, hung about the corridors, asked petulant questions, and glared with angry eyes in the direction from which that peccant nobleman, Lord Dartree, might be expected to emerge; but, oblivious of the impending storm, my lord slept sweetly on, and neither the riding of The Robber nor the wedding of Matilda Bramton, troubled his slumbers. At length Mr Bramton encountered Lord Ranksborow, and, in default of Lord Dartree, determined to speak his mind to him.

'I'm sorry to hear of Miss Bramton's indisposition,' said the Earl courteously. 'I hope it is nothing serious; but I am afraid she must be very unwell, as Mrs Bramton and her sister thought it necessary to accompany her home.'

'Yes, it is serious,' replied John Bramton. 'In the meantime, I have just a few words to say to you, if you'll oblige me by stepping into this room for a few minutes.' The Earl looked somewhat astonished, but at once complied with the request. 'Now, my lord,' continued Bramton, as he closed the door behind him, 'I've come and settled down in these parts as a neighbour of yours, and with a wish to be neighbourly. I'm a plain man, and ain't had the advantage of polish, I know, still I thought the two families were friendly. You and yours were always welcome at Temple Rising, and the best there was in the house was freely placed at your disposal.'

'I really don't know what all this tends to, Mr Bramton,' rejoined the Earl. 'Nobody, I am sure, has ever questioned the hospitality of Temple Rising.'

'I hope not—I trust not,' replied Mr Bramton hurriedly. 'What do you think of this, my lord? A young man, whom I have welcomed to my house; who knew that there was, so to speak, a knife and fork for him whenever he chose; who professed great admiration for my daughter, and friendship for all of us, turns us all into ridicule over the supper-table last night,—laughs at the idea of his attentions to Old Drygoods' daughter—that's me, my lord—being serious, and saying that he was only amusing himself, and keeping Old Drygoods in good

humour until Damocles had won the Derby. I ask, what would you say to that? I ask you,' continued Bramton, raising his voice, 'what *do* you say to that, Lord Ranksborow?'

A horrible suspicion that Dartree had made a fool of himself shot across the Earl's mind, but it was with the utmost unmoved courtesy that he replied,—

'I cannot but think that you have been misinformed, Mr Bramton. You are surely not speaking from your own personal knowledge. This must be the malicious report of some woman, who is annoyed at the success your daughters were at the ball.'

'It is no malicious report, my lord!' cried Bramton passionately. 'But you're right; the story was told me by a woman, and that woman was my own daughter, who unknowingly found herself and her father held up as an object of ridicule by Lord Dartree for the amusement of his friends.'

'You must be mistaken, Mr Bramton,' replied the Earl. 'The allusion was probably to somebody else, and Miss Bramton, in her natural indignation at conceiving these remarks meant for herself, has probably very much exaggerated what actually was said.' The Earl might endeavour to gloss over what had passed as best he might, but in reality he felt no doubt that Dartree had what is termed 'put his foot in it.' 'The confounded fool,' he muttered, 'knowing what we have at stake, to dream of breathing anything but admiration about the Bramtons.'

'Oh, no, my lord, I've made no mistake about it. Your son has grossly insulted my daughter, and no man does that without my having satisfaction for it.'

'It is rather obsolete,' rejoined the Earl, with considerable hauteur, 'but I will take upon myself to assure you that Dartree will meet your wishes in any way upon that point.'

'Pooh! pooh! my lord, now you're talking pistols. You don't suppose I'm going to make a cock pheasant of myself and get up to be shot at, do you? No, my lord, when a swell like you puts an insult on a man like me, we make him pay for it,—pay for it, d'ye hear?' And

with the last words John Bramton's voice rose almost to a scream.

'You are exciting yourself very needlessly, Mr Bramton,' returned the Earl sternly; 'and are better aware than I am of what grounds you have to go upon. Since you prefer to take it in that way, allow me to point out that the matter now becomes one for our respective solicitors to determine.'

'You don't understand me,' retorted Bramton. 'Do you think I'd drag my girl through all the publicity of a law court, even supposing your son was engaged to her—which I don't at all hint that he is.'

'Excuse me, Mr Bramton,' said the Earl haughtily; 'don't you think we had better come to the point at once. What is it you want Dartree to do?'

'I told you you shall pay for it, and you shall,' rejoined John Bramton, almost fiercely. 'Damocles shall not start for the Derby. And I know what that means to both you and your son.'

The Earl simply shrugged his shoulders, as he remarked,—

'That is a point, Mr Bramton, upon which you will, of course, exercise your own discretion. Bear in mind what I told you. Do it, and you will find yourself the most unpopular man in England;' and with this curt observation Lord Ranksborow strolled leisurely out of the apartment.

'They're grit, they are, these swells, and no mistake,' murmured John Bramton, as he looked vindictively after the Earl's retreating figure. 'That's as good, pretty nearly, as a hundred thousand pounds out of his pocket, and yet he don't make so much fuss about it as I've seen a fellow make over a losing deal at penny Van John.'

Mr Bramton started for the races in gloomy dudgeon. He had meant to have gone there in his own carriage, with posters, and kept a sort of open house to all comers during the afternoon. He had looked forward to their all enjoying it—to his daughters being surrounded with admirers,—to having a real afternoon's fun, and a jolly gossip over everything, as, the races done with, they

drove back to Temple Rising; and now all was changed. He was going there alone, the insult to his daughter was rankling in his breast, and his quarrel with the Ranksborows was not cheering to look back upon. He had liked his noble neighbours, and, though repenting him not one syllable of what he had said, was sorry to find they were so utterly false. 'The most unpopular man in England,' he muttered to himself. 'Damme, to avenge an insult to a gal of mine, I'd stand being boycotted by the whole kingdom.'

'Well, Dart, how do you feel?' inquired Jim Anson, as his lordship, after weighing in, emerged from the room at the bottom of the Stewards' stand. 'Do you feel like landing the chips?'

'I feel chippy enough,' replied Dartree, 'though not quite in that sense. You were right, Jim, I had just one cigar too many last night.'

'A little too much of everything,' replied Anson drily. 'Never mind, old fellow; you pull yourself together, and if you can only hold The Robber for the first mile, you'll be there or thereabouts at the finish.'

'He does pull,' replied Dartree; 'but he won't get away with me, though he's not a pleasant horse to ride till he has settled down.'

John Bramton was destined to have a very uncomfortable time of it that afternoon. Lots of his acquaintance gathered, as may be easily supposed, round the well-known, hospitable carriage, where a cheery word, a snack, or a glass of sherry, were certain to be forthcoming. That these friends should manifest much surprise at the absence of Mrs and the Miss Bramtons, was only natural; and—this was gall and wormwood to John Bramton—his visitors were all full of The Robber. 'A good man and a good horse. Lord Dartree rides much better than most of those engaged against him.' So often was this reiterated, that John Bramton, a man who never bet from sheer temper, could not resist laying short odds against The Robber, to a mild extent. It was the mount, remember, of the man who had insulted his daughter, and, let the result of the race be what it might, John Bramton most fervently hoped that The Robber might be hand-

somely beaten. But the saddling-bell rings out, and the horses for the open Hunt Steeplechase pace slowly past the stand. None, perhaps, look better than *The Robber*. A low, lengthy brown horse, trained evidently to perfection, and whose rider is attired in the very acme of a gentleman jockey's get-up; sits his horse, too, like a workman; and, as is well known in the countryside, *Lord Dartree* is bad to beat when hounds are running in earnest. As he brings his horse down a good swinging breather in the preliminary, more than one fair denizen of the stand offers to back him recklessly for gloves, challenges which those cavaliers in their vicinity have no option but to accept. The horses cluster round the starting-post, and although for a few minutes *The Robber* shows a little temper, that difficulty is speedily overcome, and the lot are despatched in an excellent start. Before they had gone a few hundred yards, it is evident that *The Robber* is fighting for his head, but so far his owner holds him in a vice, and compels him to display a decent amount of sobriety at his fences. But *Jim Anson* and other experts, whose race-glasses are riveted upon him, can see clearly that the horse is both fractious and pulling terribly.

'By Gad!' exclaimed *Jim*, 'I trust *Dart* will come well out of it; but that devil will require all the man's muscles to hold to-day; and if he does get away, well, *Dart* may write to his friends.'

Fence after fence is passed, but it is evident that upon more than one occasion *The Robber*, in his impetuosity, has gone wondrous near making a mistake. Still, pull as he may, as yet his owner holds him in a grip of iron; but *Dartree* is painfully conscious that he can maintain the strain but little longer. If the pulling is not out of his horse, he knows very well that the counter resistance is pretty well out of his arms. Let *The Robber* but pull in this way for another half-mile, and, as *Dartree* grimly ejaculates to himself, he must just 'gang his ain gait, and will probably lose the race, and give me a rattling cropper.' 'Steady, you brute, steady,' he continues, but, despite all he could do, *The Robber* rushed a stake and binder, and sent the splinters flying in all directions,

The horse was near upon his knees that time, and his rider fondly hoped it had settled him ; but he only shook his head sullenly, and tore at his bit more savagely than before.

'I'm clean beat,' muttered Lord Dartree, 'and he must have this in his own fashion.'

It was a low rail and ditch, and the horse took it in his stride. The strain upon his jaws once relaxed, his rider found it impossible to get another pull at him ; the horse raced along like a mad thing. The next fence was a big bank, with a ditch on either side. Vainly did Lord Dartree try to steady him at it ; it was useless ; the horse was quite out of hand, and, tearing down at the fence as hard as he could lay legs to the ground, endeavoured to compass it in one jump. He hit the crest of the bank heavily, and turning a complete somersault in the opposite field, fell heavily upon his rider.

A low ejaculation of horror ran through the stand, chiefly on the part of the ladies. The men were too used to croppers in the hunting-field to attach much importance to a fall, bad though it might be to look upon ; but another minute, and the men looked grave, and asked each other in bated whispers what had happened, for both horse and man laid motionless where they had fallen.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SOMETHING WRONG WITH DAMOCLES.

NOT a sign, not a move—man and horse lay there so still they might have been turned to stone, and an awestruck whisper runs through the stand that both are resolved once more to the clay from which they sprung. Already the mysterious crowd that springs up from nobody knows whither, as the sequence of a bad accident, has gathered round the prostrate forms of man and horse. There is little thought now of the race ; all eyes are strained to the spot where the tragedy has taken place, which, though some little distance off, is still distinctly visible from the stand. Another instant, and Jim Anson dashes from the lawn, exchanges a few words with one of the

'whips' employed in keeping the course, which results in that official jumping off his horse and giving Anson a leg up on it. The latter gallops off in the direction of the accident, and is speedily seen to arrive there. A little more, and the spectators can make out that a group of men, headed by Anson, are making their way slowly towards the stand. Everybody by this time knows what has happened. Even from the white lips of the Countess comes the pitiful moan—'Badly hurt. Ah, yes, crushed, frightfully mangled, but not *dead*, for Heaven's sake, say not dead!' But the fiat has gone forth. Lord Dartree has met his doom, under the very eyes of his mother and sisters, and The Robber has broken his own neck and his master's.

That an occurrence like this should cast a gloom over the day's sport, may be easily supposed. Several families left the course, out of respect for Lord and Lady Ranksborow. Many a head was bared as the Knightshayes carriage passed slowly off the course, bearing with it the sore-stricken Countess and her dead; but the set, stern face of the grim Earl took no heed of such marks of reverence, rightly interpreting them as homage due solely to the Destroyer. Amongst all the spectators who had witnessed Lord Dartree's tragical end, none had perhaps been more shocked than Mr Bramton. The dead man had insulted him in his most vulnerable point. He had come there hoping to see him defeated; he who had never bet had even laid a few trifling wagers against The Robber, and had looked forward to the winning of such bets with no little exultation. Not an hour ago he was filled with rage against Lord Dartree. He hated him; he thought only of how to avenge himself on him—and now there was no Lord Dartree. Prompt though he might be to resent any affront offered to his daughters, John Bramton could not be termed a vindictive man. Besides, few men carry their enmity beyond the grave. John Bramton half wished now that he had not been in such a hurry to speak his mind. Only a few weeks ago messages of sympathy and condolence had been constantly sent over from Temple Rising to Knightshayes, on account of the younger son;

and now that this inexorable affliction had befallen the elder, he did not see how it was possible, after his interview with the Earl that morning, to tender such neighbourly offices.

Now, when a man feels that he has allowed his temper to get the better of him, and done that which in his cooler moments he is conscious is neither fair nor just, there is only one way to stifle regret, and that is, to nurse his wrath, to be constantly lashing himself into a rage over the subject, whatever it may be. Mr Bramton is quite aware that he has threatened to punish Lord Ranksborow for his son's actions. He knows it is preposterous to hold the Earl responsible for Lord Dartree's words. The latter was a man about thirty, and therefore legally and morally liable for what his hand might do or his tongue might say. That Lord Dartree's offence had been very gross there was no denying, but still his father was not to blame for it. Upon the whole, Mr Bramton was sorry that he had not had a little more patience, and waited till he could have had speech with Lord Dartree himself. Had he done that, little as it was possible to foresee it, there would have been probably no reason to give utterance to such words at all.

Mr Bramton, on his way home to Temple Rising, marvels much as to what his wife and daughters will say to the news he brings them, and reflects somewhat ruefully that the death of Lord Dartree will probably lead to a reaction in favour of the Knightshayes people, and that it is more than possible that the ladies of his household will be unanimous in condemning him for his ill-timed interference, and once more impress upon his mind how very much better it would be if he would leave all social questions for them to deal with. Yet, for all that, Mr Bramton faltered not a whit as yet in his resolve that Damocles should not run for the Derby. And as we know, in her hot wrath, Lucy had decidedly come to the same conclusion, it must be admitted that Lord Ranksborow's great *coup* looked at present very unlikely to come off.

When John Bramton reached home, he found his family all agog to know what had taken place between

him and Lord Dartree ; and when he briefly narrated the tragedy of the day, a great silence fell upon them all. It was so utterly unexpected, that they knew not what to think. It seemed as if their anger of the previous night, and the whole scene in the supper-room, were as things far off ; in fact, as Lucy said,—‘It seemed months ago since they had happened.’

The death of Lord Dartree operated in a way which even his father, the most interested person in the affair, had failed to realise upon the occasion. Commonplace, prosaic enough, but, nevertheless, when, deeply indebted, we shuffle off this mortal coil, it is to our nearest relatives that our creditors look for payment. Legally responsible they may not be, but when there are means, it is seldom the moral obligation is disputed ; and short, indeed, was the time permitted to elapse before the main part of his dead son’s liabilities were respectfully submitted to Lord Ranksborow. The Earl made no complaint : he was of that kind that meet all such engagements to the very best of their ability. He had no thought of repudiating the responsibility of his son’s debts for a moment. He muttered grimly,—‘Dipped deeper, my poor Dart, than even I ever dreamed of, and yet I guessed that you were burning both ends of the candle as gaily as I did mine in my own youth. It’s a case of Knightshayes to the hammer, and, I suppose, a dull, dreary life in some continental town for the remainder of my existence. There was just one chance left us, and poor dear Dart’s foolish tongue has effectually extinguished that. I know how young men, after supper, will talk of these things ; but it’s bad form to begin with, and, knowing the stake we had on it, poor Dart ought to have been more careful.’

In the meantime, Mr Stubber is perfectly aghast at the contents of a letter he has received from his new employer. It is seldom Mr Bramton deigns to write concerning the horses trained in his name, but the note which has thrown Mr Stubber into such a state of perturbation, while expressing much pleasure at hearing from his—Stubber’s—weekly bulletin that the horses were in excellent health, and doing well, further says that he—John Bramton—has pretty well made up his mind to part

with Damocles, providing he gets an eligible offer, rather regretting that he has not already done so, and saying that, fortunate as that colt has hitherto been, yet the vicissitudes of a race-horse's career are such as would justify no non-racing man in not taking the earliest opportunity of disposing of such property.

To say that Mr Stubber, in sporting metaphor, positively 'valed round' upon the receipt of this intelligence, barely describes his state. Here he was within three weeks of the Two Thousand, with the first real Derby crack it had ever been his fortune to train galloping strong as a lion, and now he was told that the colt would not be wanted; or, at all events, if he was, it would be from other hands than his. It was heartbreaking. He had watched over Damocles as if he had been a child of his own,—given much more care to, and been much more anxious about him, indeed, than he had ever been about his own ruddy, rosy-cheeked, boisterous progeny. In his hands, the colt had won every race he had ever started for. He had looked forward to being crowned this spring with the Isthmian wreath, and now some other was to benefit by the fruits of all his trouble and experience.

'It's heartbreaking,' he murmured. 'I've run straight through all my life, but, dash me! if this ain't enough to justify a chap in sending away an 'oss with a bucket of "something" and water inside him that would effectually stop his galloping for the next six weeks. Oh, Lord! if poor Richard Bramton had only lived; but this shopkeeping chap—as they tell me he is—well, he knows nothing about sport, and, as far as he's concerned, the 'oss is of no more account than the goods in his ware'us.'

Mr Stubber, in his anxiety, wired a message to Mr Skinner, requesting that gentleman to come down and see him at once. Mr Skinner promptly complied with the request, and during his brief visit occurred an incident that had the effect of, for a time, revolutionising the betting on the Derby

Although it was the first week in April, the fierce nor'easter, which had menaced both men and horses during the past month, searching out most bitterly all those deli-

cate of chest, or deficient of lung-power, had not yet relaxed its grip of the country one whit. If the mornings were bright, they were biting; and when, a little before eight, on the morning after Mr Skinner's arrival, the trainer entered the stables, with a view to accompanying his charges up on to the Heath, he was met by his head lad, who exclaimed,—

'This is a rum start, sir, and I'm blessed if I know what to make of it! It looks very much to me as if there had been an attempt to try some little hanky-panky business with Damocles.'

'Why, what's the matter?' exclaimed the trainer breathlessly.

'Well, when I got down this morning, I found the window of his box wide open.

'And it was a sharp frost, too, last night!' ejaculated Mr Stubber. 'Does the horse look any the worse?'

'Not that I can see, sir; nor are there any signs that anybody passed through the window.'

Mr Stubber said nothing more, but walked straight to the box, and carefully examined the colt. No, as far as he could see, the horse was in perfect health. He examined the box narrowly, but if any pernicious food had been thrown into the box through the window, there was no trace of it left. There were no marks on the sill or sides of the window to indicate the passage of anybody through it; and, though quite big enough for anyone of diminutive stature to effect an entrance by, yet it was not so easy but what he would probably have left scratches on the paint; but no, the only two facts that could be ascertained were that the window had been found open in the morning, and that the horse was apparently none the worse for it. Mr Stubber, in his bewilderment, at once rushed off to consult his guest. He had an immense opinion of Skinner's astuteness. The commissioner heard the trainer's story without a single comment, and then merely said, 'Let me look at the horse and the box.'

By the time they came out, the whole string of horses, with their respective boys on their backs, were pacing round the yard in Indian file, awaiting the mandate to go

on to the Heath. Mr Skinner eyed the horse narrowly, and remarking, 'There doesn't look anything the matter with him, certainly; now, let's see the box.' But Mr Skinner, though he inspected it very closely, could make no more out of it than the trainer had done. For a minute or two, after he had finished, he was apparently lost in thought, and then said, 'Now, Stubber, I'll tell you what I should do if I were in your place. First of all, put Damocles back in his box. He's not in the Two Thousand, so the loss of a day's work won't matter to him. If he has caught cold, or swallowed anything likely to disagree with him, you will know all about it by to-morrow morning at latest. It's possible that window might have been an accident; but even if it was blown in, the bolts must have been withdrawn from the inside. It's a curious coincidence, but those bolts have evidently been recently oiled. Come into the house; I want to speak to you for a moment.' Following the commissioner's advice, the trainer gave orders that Damocles should be unsaddled and replaced in his box, and then followed Mr Skinner into the house. 'Now,' continued the commissioner, as they found themselves once more in the parlour, 'those bolts were drawn by one of your own people, with what object we don't know, but it's not likely for any good. I'm off to town as soon as we've had some breakfast. Damocles not being on the Heath will be known in town, you bet, before I get there. I'm curious to see what Mr Noel and his pals do on receipt of the news. If they had anything to do with the opening of that window, they will argue, from Damocles not appearing at exercise this morning, that, whatever their object might be, it has been effected. We sha'n't know for four-and-twenty hours. The horse may have a drugged apple inside him, for aught we know, at this very moment.'

'You don't think they've poisoned him?' asked the trainer.

'No; but they may have drugged him, for mere market purposes,—just made him unable to do his work for a day or two. I shall learn more in town than I should here. Let me have a wire to-night, and another to-morrow morn-

ing, just to say how the horse is. And now, if the trap's ready to drive me to the station, I'll be off ;' and in a few minutes Mr Skinner was speeding on his way to catch the London train.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ZELNÉ'S LETTER.

'ALL right, Jack ; it has come off,' was Mr Checquers' greeting ; 'but there wasn't much to spare. The Mummer is pretty well done.'

'Quite,' said Jack, as he jumped off his horse. 'I'd just made up my mind that it was all up, when you appeared.'

As for the Halawins, they had promptly pulled up when catching sight of the English dragoons. They would have attacked as dauntlessly as any of their countrymen, and risked their lives for the recovery of their prisoner, had there been the slightest probability of success ; but with blown horses to charge an enemy of thrice their numbers, and of the fighting capacities which they knew the English possessed, would have been sheer madness. They retired sullenly, and as Checquers' sole object was to rescue Jack Cuxwold, he made no attempt to interfere with them.

'What, Alec Flood !' suddenly exclaimed Jack. 'That you should turn up where least expected is all in accordance with your usual habits, but I *did* think that you were in England.'

'So I was,' replied Flood, 'and only came out to Egypt on your account ; however, you have done for yourself what I came to do for you, and are a free man again.'

'Yes, thanks to Checquers and the "help half way," it has come off.' And here Jack and his subaltern exchanged a hearty hand-grip.

No sooner had Jack shaken hands, and received the congratulations of some of his old comrades, than the word was given to march, and the party was soon leisurely pursuing its road to Korti.

'It was awfully good of you to come out, Alec,' said Cuxwold ; 'though how the deuce you learnt what had

become of me, beats me altogether. Why, they didn't know here at Korti till only a few days ago.'

'You were reported "missing" a good while back, and I started from Knightshayes pretty nearly as soon as I heard it. As to your whereabouts, I picked that up at Cairo. You recollect the gambling house tout whom we met there the night Dick Brampton was killed?'

'Ah! of course. He came across my friends that I have just left at the Wells of Bayuda, and saw that I was a prisoner in the hands of the Halawins. The scoundrel! It was thanks to him that their sheikh named so heavy a sum for my ransom.'

'It *was* rather stiff,' replied Flood; 'but that would account for it. That fellow had picked up a lot of information about you at Cairo. He had made out that you were the son of an English "my lord," and, as you know, fellows of his type always imagine an English "my lord" is rolling in riches.'

'And I presume,' said Cuxwold, 'he acquainted you with my whereabouts for a consideration.'

'Ah, yes,' said Flood, laughing; 'he sold his knowledge. He has had, I fancy, as many trades as names, and, I should say, was always prepared to sell the interests of anyone connected with him, the moment he was bid money for it.'

'And how did you leave them all at Knightshayes?'

'They were all very well when I left, but in a deuce of a state about you, naturally. All that was known about you was that you were "missing"—a very ominous word to have opposite your name, in such fighting as you've had lately.'

'Well, old fellow, it's all over now; but it was a case of touch and go. I was lost in the desert, had come to the end of my water, was dying of thirst, and insensible, when the Halawins picked me up. I never suffered such agony in my life, I think, and I fancy a very few hours more would have settled me.'

'Well, Jack, my boy!' exclaimed the irrepressible Checquers, as he ranged up alongside his captain, 'what does that old robber, Mohammed Sebekh, think of English horses *versus* Arabs, now? I should like to have seen the match very much.'

'I'm sure I wish you had,' rejoined Cuxwold. 'I'd give a good deal to hear how the Sheikh took the "sell" I played upon him. It was a ten-mile match—five out and five in; and when he slipped round the turning-post, I came straight on, and the consequence was we were both tearing away from each other in opposite directions. I daresay we were a mile apart before he awoke to the trick that had been played upon him.'

'Ah! And then, after the manner of humanity, I should be afraid he swore fluently,' remarked Checquers. 'However, the whole game is played out here. We were too late to save Gordon, and, as far as we can make out, there's nobody else left to save. The Arabs seem to have finished off all the Egyptian garrisons, and we are simply clearing out of Korti as quick as we can do. Can't imagine anybody wanting the Soudan myself, more especially when its present possessors are disposed to fight for it as they have done.'

'Yes,' rejoined Flood; 'we've made a pretty hopeless muddle of the whole business from first to last;' and then the conversation turned on the doings of the West Barkshire, and Jack was made acquainted with how Dartree had got The Robber in training for the Wroxeter Hunt Steeplechase, little thinking how tragically that race was destined to end for his luckless brother. And then Jack asked if Flood had ever come across that pretty Miss Bramton; he was, of course, aware that they had bought Temple Rising. Did his own people know anything of them?

'Know anything of them,' replied Flood, laughing. 'Fancy your noble father not knowing a man within a few miles of his house who owned the first favourite for the Derby. No, joking apart, your people see a good bit of the Bramtons. A strong flavour of the shop lingers about old Bramton, but he is hospitable as an Arab.'

'Oh! come now, Alec, none of your chaff; I've just had experience of their hospitality!'

'Well,' replied the other, laughing, 'I don't mean that exactly. Old Bramton will give you of the best, and you need be under no fear that he'll send in a bill. As for the daughters, they are as pretty, ladylike girls as need

be. Dartree is always philandering about the elder girl. I don't suppose he's in earnest, but he might do worse, for those girls, I should think, will come into a lot of money some day.'

The conversation here dropped, for, to tell the truth, the thought of Zelnè shot across Jack's brain, and he felt ashamed to evince any interest in another so immediately after parting with the girl who had saved his life and given him her love. And then he recollected her letter; he was free to read it now. But, no; he would wait till he was alone. He had an instinctive feeling that it would be better there should be no eye to watch his face when he perused that missive. He felt that he should read it with bitter pangs of regret that he had so ill requited her for the gift of life that she had restored to him. True, it had been hardly his fault: he could scarcely have helped it; but, nevertheless, the fact remained that he had stolen his preserver's love, and had had no such love to give her in return. As for Checquers, he was in the highest spirits; he not only was extremely elated at having contributed to the successful escape of his dearest friend and captain, but he was also endowed with a keen sense of humour; and the more he thought of the dignified Sheikh—and Mohammed Sebekh had impressed the graceless Checquers rather strongly in that particular—"finishing artistically" whilst his antagonist was scudding away in an opposite direction, the more uncontrollable became that young gentleman's peals of laughter.

'I can see him now!' he cried. 'All these Easterns ride with deuced short stirrups, and get their hands up and their noses down, in moments of excitement. I've not the slightest doubt he indulged in demoniacal whoops—they always do. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what that dignified chieftain's face must have been like, when he suddenly discovered that his adversary had taken a different view of the winning-post, must have been a sight for Homeric laughter. I say, Jack,' he continued, 'I've never told you what you've got to pay for The Mummer. Ponsonby set five hundred on him, but, when he heard what he was wanted for, said if he pulled through and you returned him sound in wind and limb, there was nothing

to pay. He was only too glad to have helped a friend out of a scrape.'

'Very good of him,' replied Cuxwold; 'it shall be as he likes. I'll either write him a cheque, or he can take him back.'

'Pooh!' replied Checquers, laughing. 'Why, it's a couple of hundred pounds on his price. A horse that has polished off the best blood in the Soudan, and left the lightning steeds of the Halawins as if they were a parcel of hacks, has, so to speak, improved his record. I'll tell you what, old man,' continued Checquers, with a wink, 'we might send word to Mohammed Sebekh, that though he lost five thousand on the match, he can have The Mummer at the same figure, if he likes;' and once more Mr Checquers burst into peals of laughter.

'All right, my boy,' retorted Jack dryly. 'Perhaps you would like to take the message—rather that you took it than me, you know. I have some idea that you would not find Mohanimed good to jest with on the subject.'

'Perhaps not, perhaps not,' said Mr Checquers demurely. 'They are devils to fight, these Arabs, but they've no idea of fun.'

With this and similar light badinage was the way into Korti beguiled. The ride was nothing to the entire party, with two exceptions—Jack and his horse. The Mummer was very leg-weary before they reached the lines, and the ride and the excitement had told a bit on even Jack Cuxwold's vigorous frame. Once arrived, he not only had to report himself to the officer commanding in chief, and explain the mystery of the missing despatches, but further to receive the congratulations of lots of old friends. One way and the other, it was late before Jack found himself alone in the tent allotted to him, and sat down to smoke a final pipe and read Zelnè's letter.

'When you open up this,' it ran, 'you will be far away, and we shall have said good-bye for ever! Well, it is best so—men cannot love like women. With us it is everything; with you it is only a part of your life. We should have had to part soon: as well now as a little later. What you are going to do I don't know exactly, but I know every turn of your countenance, and can read

what is written there. I feel that this race is a mere pretext, and that you are about to endeavour to trick my father in some way. If I gave but a hint that you dreamt of escaping, it would be impossible; but I could not betray you if I would. When you read this, the risk you run will be over; and you do run some risk, for the Halawins are not wont to stay their hands when their blood is up, nor is my father a man to be mocked in the face of his tribe. But you are strong and you are brave, and I feel you will succeed. I found you, and I loved you from the first. It was my Kismet. I shall look back upon it as a sweet dream all my life. No, I do not regret it. I would rather have lived this brief delirium than have never known what it was to have really loved. Farewell! May Allah bless and prosper you; and, in the years to come, spare a thought now and again for—ZELNÈ.'

There was a queer gurgle in Jack's pipe as he finished, and the tobacco seemed ail to have gone the wrong way. He thought sorrowfully of what a pretty girl she was, and how the probabilities were that he should never set eyes on her again. Better indeed he should not, as he was forced to admit; nothing but misery could come of it to Zelnè. Poor girl! it was a bad find for her when she came across him in the desert; she would have done better to have left him to perish.

Although Jack Cuxwold naturally takes much blame to himself about the winning of Zelnè's heart, I think that, after all, he was no such very great sinner in the whole affair. It was by no means the first time that the prisoner had found favour in the eyes of his jailer's daughter, and that the captive in his turn had proved captor. It is very natural. Throw a young man and a young woman together, with much idle time on their hands, and a love tale is sure to come of it. But when the man is a good-looking dragoon, and the maiden has the hot, passionate blood of the East in her veins, the fire has met the maize, and a speedy conflagration is the result. It was some consolation to Jack Cuxwold, as he threw himself on his bed, to know that he had done the very best thing possible under the circumstances, namely,

that he had ran away from a great temptation ; and, as Alec Flood said to him, when years after he heard the story, 'Yes, Jack, you might have done worse. You ran away from a great temptation ; *you might have ran away with it.*'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOMeward BOUND.

THAT the fighting was all over in the Soudan was clear as daylight, at all events for the present. With the death of Gordon, the fall of Khartoum, the massacre of the last Egyptian garrison, our sole reasons for being in the Soudan came to an end. There was nothing left for us but to make moan for our dead, and to count up the bill which our vacillating conduct in those parts had cost us. Unavailing though the work had been, it had been thoroughly done, and now there was nought left the desert column but to make its way back to Lower Egypt as quick as might be.

The news of Jack Cuxwold's escape from captivity had been telegraphed to Knightshayes, with the welcome intelligence that no ransom had been required, and the Lancer himself was thinking, after such a spell of active service, whether he might not take advantage of the present lull in affairs, and apply for leave to go home to England. His mind is speedily made up on that point. He and Flood have once more got down to Cairo, and are located at Shepherd's Hotel, when a telegram is placed in Jack's hands, which, with the exclamation of 'Good God, how terrible!' he hands across to Alec.

'Come home at once,' it said. 'Much wanted. Dartree killed by a fall from his horse. Come quickly.—ANSON.'

'It'll half kill your mother, Jack,' was Flood's brief comment. 'She fretted her heart well nigh out about you. This will be a terrible shock to her. Pull yourself together, old man, and run off and see about leave at once. They are sure to make no trouble about that, I suppose. I'll pay the bill, take passages, and see our traps packed. If we look sharp, we shall just catch the next steamer.'

Under the circumstances, Jack Cuxwold had no difficulty in obtaining three months' leave, and twenty-four hours later saw him and Flood on their way to England. They had cabled to Lord Ranksborow before starting, so their arrival at Knightshayes could be calculated within a day or two. The news was kept no secret, and in due time became known at Temple Rising. Although all communication between the two houses had ceased, it was not to be supposed that the Bramtons were not still deeply interested in the great sorrow of their neighbours. Mr Bramton, although he had hardened his heart and said that such an insult as the dead man's speech was not to be forgiven, and could not be passed over, still kept his lips closed with regard to his rupture with the Ranksborows, and the fact of the quarrel between the two families was even unsuspected in the neighbourhood generally. The Ranksborow family were naturally not seen in public at present, and therefore there was nothing to draw people's attention to the sudden cessation of the intimacy between themselves and the Bramtons. On one thing Mr Bramton and his daughter Lucy were thoroughly in accord; they would have no more to do with races or racing. Damocles and Lucifer should both go as soon as purchasers could be found for them.

Lucy heard the news of Flood and the Honourable Captain Cuxwold being on their way to England, with mingled feelings of pain and pleasure. Her pulses beat fast at the idea of meeting Jack again, and then she thought of how alike their destinies had been. Each had come home from Cairo at brief notice, in consequence of the awfully sudden death of a near and dear relation. Would he remember her? She sympathised with him in his trouble now, as he had sympathised with her then. How kind he had been. How hard he had striven to save her from all such worry and annoyance as lay in his power; and then the thought flashed across her, that between them now there was a great gulf fixed. No, she should never even see him. He was bound to side with his family; and after that cruel speech of Lord Dartree's, it was impossible for themselves and the Ranksborows to ever again exchange kindly greetings. Lord Dartree!

Why he was Lord Dartree now. And then Lucy burst into a flood of tears. 'Oh why,' she moaned, 'did Uncle Dick leave me these dreadful horses. If it hadn't been for that, all this would never have happened. People would have known us as we are, and not sought our acquaintance simply because we owned the favourite for the Derby.' Then she wondered whether Mr Flood would come and see her, so intimate as he was with all the Knightshayes family, he would be sure to side with them. Besides, staying there as he would be, he could not very well call at Temple Rising, after what had happened. No, she should never meet Jack Cuxwold again. She was sorry for that. She would have liked to have thanked him properly for all his kindness during that time at Cairo, a twelvemonth ago. And then the blood dyed her cheeks as she muttered to herself, 'You little humbug, you know no man ever interested you nearly as much as Jack Cuxwold!' And as she murmured his name, her cheeks took even a guiltier tinge.

To Miss Bramton the whole business had been a great shock. The blow to her pride and vanity had been, in the first instance, unmistakably severe. Always with a disposition to give herself airs, Miss Bramton had of late established herself on a pedestal of her own creating, from which she looked patronisingly down upon her sisters who were less favoured by nature and fortune. She had rocked herself into the belief that half the peerage would be at her feet, if she chose to hold up her finger, and the awaking from this dream of self-adulation had been both rude and abrupt. Then, again, the tragic ending of Lord Dartree, so suddenly coming on the top of it, had been a severe blow to her nerves. She had not been in love with him, but she had liked him—ay, liked him so well as to have made up her mind to marry him. Until overhearing that fatal speech in the supper-room, Miss Bramton had looked upon that as a mere matter of time. She was not altogether unjustified in regarding such a thing as likely. She knew she was an heiress; she knew that the Earl of Ranksborow was an embarrassed man, and the amalgamation of coronets with commerce she knew was often found a fitting solution of such diffi-

culties. But at present she took a much humbler view of her beauty, wealth, and accomplishments. In these days of her humiliation, Miss Bramton considerably abated her pretensions, and was far less chary of the smiles that she bestowed on Sir Kenneth Sandeman. That gentleman, although not very demonstrative, was very genuinely in earnest. A passionate lover he could not be called. Perhaps a more cool, calculating man never essayed to get married. He was the sort of man who was certain to speak to the father in the first place; and that he had not as yet interviewed Mr Bramton on the subject, was due to two causes. In the first place, he had learnt that Miss Lucy had acquired an extensive heritage from her uncle, which was hers already in her own right, in addition to what she might eventually expect to inherit from her father. To a man regarding matrimony from Sir Kenneth's point of view, this naturally made Lucy a more eligible *parti* than her sister, and it was not until he had convinced himself that he had no chance with Lucy, and this—in the outrageous pride that he regarded his position as a Scottish baronet—took some time for him to arrive at, that he sat down in regular form to pay his addresses to Miss Bramton; secondly, Lord Dartree had appeared on the scene, and Matilda had welcomed his attentions so favourably that it had made Sir Kenneth pause. Much as he thought of his own status in the world, he was not in the least blind to the superior advantages Lord Dartree could confer. The Earl of Ranksborow might be a needy peer, but then he was simply a needy baronet. As regarded personal advantages, Sir Kenneth was by no means disposed to underrate his own. He was a tall, good-looking man, about forty—the age of all others that Sir Kenneth, in his phlegmatic nature, deemed the fittest for a man to marry. To say that he considered himself 'a most superior person,' is hardly necessary—men of his stamp always do: an idea not to be got out of their heads by any amount of demonstration to the contrary—but he was far too much a man of the world not to admit that though that would be the view of any sensible woman, yet women were not all sensible, and he had known them prefer the greener

wood, with its light and frivolous shoots, to the more seasoned tree, and its more sombre foliage. But now this latter impediment had been removed from his path, Sir Kenneth had resolved to speak up as soon as he decently could do; and as Lord Dartree had been really nothing to Miss Bramton but an admirer, there was no reason he should delay his explanation beyond a few weeks.

Lord Ranksborow had laid his first-born in his grave, and now sat at Knightshayes brooding over the fire, smoking sullenly, thinking of the ruin hanging over him, and awaiting the arrival of the sole son left to him. Till the awful catastrophe at Wroxeter, he had no idea of how fond he was of Dartree. They had had so many wrangles—quarrels they could not be called—over financial matters, that he had latterly taught himself to believe that he and 'poor Dart' were good friends and nothing more. The dead man's cynical, self-contained nature had naturally contributed much to this belief. It is astonishing how often that mask of cynicism covers a shy and sensitive nature; and for a kindly action, or help in time of need, look to the most cynical of your acquaintance that you wot of. I don't mean to say that the deceased Lord Dartree was quite of that type, but, for all that, he was a better-hearted man than the world generally gave him credit for, that brutal speech in the Wroxeter supper-room being duly taken into account. As Flood had foreseen, to the Countess and her daughters the shock had been terrible. Jack might be the favourite brother—and Heaven only knows how a few weeks back they had sorrowed for him—but the heir of the house had of late been sojourning under the family roof-tree; and had he not gone forth full of health and spirits, exulting in doing battle under the old racing banner of his people, and perished in the fray?

That Mr Bramton is resolute in his intention of not running *Damocles* for the Derby, the Earl now entertains no doubt. The betting at Tattersall's is quite sufficient to tell him that; the whilom favourite for the great race now figuring at twenty to one, while, to Lord Ranksborow's astonishment, *Lucifer* occupies a promin-

ent place in the quotations. Still the fluctuations in the market are at the present moment a puzzle to most racing men, as well as to the Earl. The sporting papers announce variously that Damocles has met with an accident—that he is suffering from that scourge of the training stable, influenza, differing much in the ailments they assign to him. On one point only do they concur, that for the last two mornings he has been absent from exercise, and that the operations in the money market indicate that Lucifer is likely to take the place of his stable companion. The Earl hardly knows what to think as he reads these varied reports. At first he made no doubt but that John Bramton had carried out his threat, and had either made arrangements for the sale of the horse, or announced publicly that he would not be sent to Epsom. But now he began to wonder whether accident might not have taken the whole matter out of Bramton's hands, and the colt have fallen a victim to some one of the many vicissitudes of training. As to the market, it puzzled the most astute turf speculators. Damocles went up and down like the Funds in a panic,—was knocked about indeed like a very shuttlecock. No sooner was he driven to 20 to 1 than Mr Noel and some of the leading men of the ring, not given to throw their money away, stepped in and commenced backing him, with the result of rapidly bringing him back to about half that price, and yet but slightly shaking the stability of his stable companion.

One sporting article indeed spoke contemptuously of him as a 'book horse,'—that is to say, a horse whose name has been introduced into the betting for mere gambling purposes, and to serve bookmakers; one probably never even intended to take actual part in the race. Merrily the game went on, and yet even those taking part in it, and having, as they thought, special knowledge of their own concerning Damocles, were not altogether at their ease about it. Mr Noel, for instance, knows that his design has been accomplished, insomuch as something has happened to the horse which has had the desired effect of shaking his *status* in the market; but then he does not know, nor can Mr Napper succeed in

discovering for him, whether Damocles is seriously affected or not. The boy who had been bribed to draw the bolts of the window, had been promptly removed from the charge of the colt. Mr Stubber assigned no reason, but gave him another horse to take care of. Mr Skinner, on the other hand, knows perfectly well that the horse is all right as far as health is concerned, but he is further aware that Mr Bramton has made up his mind to part with him. In fact, both these shrewd practitioners, Mr Noel and Mr Skinner, feel by no means certain whether those who back Damocles, or those who lay against him for the big race, will find they have burnt their fingers by the end of May.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT KNIGHTSHAYES ONCE MORE.

DOWN the Mediterranean drives the *Sumatra*, making so good a passage that even at Malta they find no letters awaiting them, and only a brief telegraphic message describing the catastrophe that had befallen them. Three or four lines describe how Lord Dartree's horse seemed to get the better of him in the Wroxeter Steeplechase, and how, at a stiff fence, horse and man fell never to rise again. Death must have been instantaneous, as neither The Robber nor his rider ever moved more. This telegram is not from Knightshayes, but is in the regular Reuter's tissue received at Malta.

'It's but grim consolation,' said Alec Flood; 'still, such as it is, you have it. Poor Dartree seems to have been spared all suffering.'

'Yes,' replied Jack; 'not even in the Soudan could he have found a speedier or more painless death.'

Jack meditated upon a good many things on his homeward journey. He was honestly and most sincerely sorry for the loss of his brother, but he naturally could not shut his eyes to the difference that it made in his own position. Before this, he had been scrambling along as a captain of Lancers, with an allowance of four or five hundred a year besides his pay. Knightshayes was never likely to be his, nor did he know very much of the financial embarrassments of his father—a needy man he knew

he was, with a faculty for spending money, only to be out-Heroded by his eldest son. What those two had done to make ducks and drakes of the property, he did not know, but he had a dim foreboding that it was awfully encumbered. There was no mercenary feeling in all this; he was honestly fond of the place, and was quite as much distressed about the possibility of its going to the hammer, after the manner of Temple Rising, when he was only Jack Cuxwold, as he is now that he is Lord Dartree, and its heir. But there is one thing which is very different. Now, he may be in a position possibly to avert it; at all events, he could claim to look into things, and endeavour to assist the Earl to stave off any such disaster as that.

On they drive through the dark blue waters till the Rock looms rugged and grim before them. 'They roll through the Gut of Gibraltar,' past Cape St Vincent, and then stand out across the boisterous Bay. That angry piece of water happens to be in good humour, and they run across it with a fair wind on their quarter.

'You say the Bramtons are very well received in Berkshire?' said Jack, one evening as he and Flood were pacing the deck, enjoying a last cigar before they turned in.

'Very,' replied Flood. 'He is a little queer in his language, as I told you, but he is a wealthy, hospitable man, and his daughters are very pretty, lady-like girls; he is a shrewd, sharp, useful man too in all matters of business, full of "go" and energy. By the way, poor Dartree used to flirt rather heavily with the eldest girl. Jim Anson used always to chaff him, and tell him he had better go in seriously for the business; that it was good goods; that some of these days the Miss Bramtons would come into a pot of money between them.'

And then the thought shot simultaneously through both men's minds, although neither of them gave utterance to it. Jack could not help the thought, if it would have been a good thing for poor Dart to have married one of those sisters, now I stand in his place, it would be an equally good thing for me, to say nothing of my being already half in love with the Miss Bramton I met in Cairo.

Jack Cuxwold had no intention of marrying for money,

but he was pretty certain, from what he knew of the Earl's affairs, he most distinctly could not marry without it. It behoved him to marry, in order that there might be a continuity of the direct line of Cuxwolds, and that such marriage must be accompanied by money, the exigencies of the estate made compulsory.

As for Alec Flood, he knew that there was no chance for himself. He had a strong suspicion that Lucy was already half in love with Jack Cuxwold, and with a rare abnegation of self, he thought that if the dearest friend he had and the one girl he had ever cared about showed an inclination to come together, he would sooner assist than thwart them. Such self-sacrifice in love affairs is not in accordance with human nature, but it must be borne in mind that Alec Flood's is no such heroic immolation all the same, as he had already convinced himself that his own chance was hopeless.

'Then again,' said Flood, after a long pause, 'Barkshire is rather proud of having the owner of the first favourite for the Derby amongst her children; and though, as poor Dart used to say, "John Bramton doesn't know a race-horse from a kangaroo," yet still he is the owner of Damocles, and I suppose the success of that horse will make an immense difference to your father.'

'Yes, I believe he stands to win something colossal on it.'

'Dartree told me himself that he had backed it to win him twenty thousand pounds, but the Earl has plunged much more heavily than that,' continued Flood.

'Well, he stood very firm at the top of the tree the last betting I saw,' said Jack Cuxwold musingly.

He was thinking, perhaps a great *coup* of this kind might redeem the broad lands of Knightshayes.

The bay is crossed at last, and the *Sumatra* steams up channel, passes the Isle of Wight, rounds the South Foreland, and lays her head steadily for the Thames. A little more and Flood and Cuxwold have bestowed themselves and their traps in the Gravesend Railway, and are being whirled away to London. At one of the stations they temporarily paused at, a boy walks down the train, exclaiming in a shrill voice,—

'Papers, papers; here ye are, morning papers.'

'Give me a *Telegraph*,' cried Jack.

The boy handed him the journal, and the train whirls on.

Jack opens his paper, and in another few minutes exclaimed,—'By Jove! this looks fishy for the governor's *coup*,' and, so saying, he hands the paper across to Flood, who, under the head of 'Latest betting at Tattersall's,' reads the ominous words, '20 to 1 Damocles offered.'

They sped rapidly through town. The ever-useful telegraph had given notice of their coming, and the carriage was waiting for them at the little station, about two miles from Knightshayes, which the company had made principally to propitiate the Earl of Ranksborow. What a rush there was, on the part of the women, to welcome Jack. How they alternately kissed and cried over him. It was not so long, remember, that they had pictured him lying in his bloody grave 'midst the desert sands, and the Countess's tears might well flow as she thanked God that one, at all events, of her sons had been spared to her. For weeks she had mourned for her youngest boy, nor dared trust herself to hope, even when told that, until positive intelligence of his death reached them, she might do so. Then no sooner was she assured of his safety, than she went out to one of the revels of the county, and carried home her eldest born dead. Flood was right. The second shock on the top of the first had sorely stricken her, and Alec was grieved to see how broken she looked to what she had been when he had parted with her a few weeks back. Still there was a flush on her face to-night, and a light in her eyes, that no one had seen since Jack's name had figured in the list of 'missing.' Had she not got her boy home again? And would she not make him promise, before many days were over, to go back to soldiering and to Egypt no more.

That had been debated in the family councils immediately after Dartree's death. Jack had done his turn of hard fighting; there was a cessation of all operations in the Soudan, if not for good, at all events for the present; and, as their only son, it had been determined that Jack must at once assume his position of heir-apparent.

Leaving Jack to talk with his mother and sisters, Flood made his way to his own room. It wanted a good hour to the dinner-time yet, and, sitting down in an arm-chair in front of the fire, he was thinking sadly of how very pale and worn Lady Ranksborow looked, when there was a tap at the door, which was followed by the entrance of the Earl.

'I couldn't help coming up for a few minutes to tell you, my dear Alec, how very much we all feel indebted to you. Staunch we knew you were, but how tender and true, I don't think even we guessed.'

'You're making much of little. Jack managed the whole thing himself; and all I did was to throw away two hundred pounds in finding out where he was.'

'Throw it away!' exclaimed Lord Ranksborow. 'No two hundred pounds was ever better laid out in this world than that. If we hadn't received that first telegram of yours, and so known that Jack was comparatively safe, before Dartree's terrible accident, I think the Countess would have gone clean out of her mind. It was the one thing that seemed to rouse her from her stupor, the impressing upon her that if her eldest son had been taken, the younger had been restored to her.'

'She looks dreadfully changed,' replied Alec. 'I knew, the minute I got Anson's message, that it would be an awful shock to her; but we must hope that, now she has got Jack here at home and before her eyes again, she will begin to get over it.'

The Earl made no reply, but wrung Alec's hand silently, and then left the room.

To say that they were a cheerful party that night at Knightshayes would be incorrect. The shadow of their great loss was still over the house, but there was undoubtedly far more conversation than had been heard there since the night before the Wroxeter ball. The young ladies were very curious about their brother's adventures in the Soudan, and questioned him incessantly. And Jack really had a wondrous tale to narrate. The Countess said little, but both she and Lord Ranksborow listened with breathless interest to Jack's story of the desperate fighting down at Metammeh,—to his account of that

lonely desert ride,—how he was utterly lost in that endless sea of sand, and lay down at last to die under the shadow of a rock,—how he was rescued by the Halawin Arabs. And very humorous was Jack in his description of the Arabian Front de Bœuf. But when he told the story of his match with Mohammed Sebekh, which ended in his escape, the Earl fairly laughed outright, and even a faint smile flitted across the Countess's face. More than once in the smoking-room that evening did the Earl revert to Jack's match with Mohammed Sebekh.

'Of course, I don't know what weights you rode, but I suppose you had a lot in hand.'

'Any amount,' said Jack. 'As for weights, I don't suppose there was very much difference between us. He was as near my height as may be, and I couldn't have had more than a few pounds the worst of it. With his handy Arab, he would have got the best of me round the turning-post, but, even if he had made a quarter of a mile out of that, I should have caught him long before he reached home.'

'Ah! I wish you could have ridden it out,' remarked the Earl.

'With five thousand depending upon my beating the Halawins from there to Korti, I couldn't afford any experiments,' rejoined Jack, laughing. 'By the way, father, I'm afraid there is something wrong with your own prospects, isn't there?'

'Yes,' replied the Earl. 'I stand to win an immense stake on Damocles, and no one can say his chance looks rosy now.'

'What's the matter,' inquired his son curtly. 'Influenza, hit his leg, or what?'

'What has happened I can't exactly arrive at,' replied Lord Ranksborow, 'and, what is more, nobody seems able to explain. A week ago, and I thought some casualty had happened to him, but his trainer assures me there is nothing wrong with him. Skinner says the same, and that he cannot understand the meaning of all the hostility to him.'

'What does his owner say about it?' inquired Jack.

'I am unfortunately not on terms with Mr Bramton at present, and therefore it is impossible for me to ask him.'

'Not on terms with the Bramtons!' exclaimed Flood; 'why, you were the best of friends when I left; what on earth has happened?'

'I'll tell you the whole story,' returned the Earl. 'I think it will explain to you both what has happened to Damocles. It seems that at the end of the Wroxeter ball poor Dartree and two or three of his friends got together in the supper-room, and had another bottle or two of champagne. They began chaffing him about his flirtation with Miss Bramton, and Dartree—who, I fancy, had drank a little more wine than was prudent—repudiated the idea, said that he had no serious intentions, but that Miss Drygoods "did very well to amuse himself with." Unfortunately this was overheard by the Miss Bramtons. That it made the young ladies very angry, I need scarcely say. It was a stupid observation, and in very bad taste. They, I suppose, told their father, and he was furious. He came to me the next morning, and declared he would have satisfaction for such an insult. I told him that although the days for that sort of thing were gone by, I could assure him that Dartree would be perfectly willing to meet him on that point. Blunder the first on my part. Then he screamed that that wasn't what he meant,—that he would make me pay for it. Thinking he meant that he had grounds to go on for a breach of promise against Dartree, I said that was a matter best left to our solicitors. Blunder the second on my part,' said the Earl, whilst a low laugh burst from Flood's mouth; 'then, frantic with passion, he let the cat out of the bag,—said that he knew I stood to win an enormous stake on Damocles, and that the colt should not start for the Derby. I presume he has told some of his friends so, and that from them the information has reached the Ring. What do you think, Alec?'

'It is a bad business,' replied Flood, 'and it's not much use thinking over it any more, at all events to-night. John Bramton is wonderfully fond and proud of his daughters, and such an unlucky spech as that would be difficult to gloss over. Time to be off to bed, isn't it?' And with that the trio shook hands and took up their bedroom candlesticks.

CHAPTER XL.

TOM ROBBINS GROWS GARRULOUS.

THE circumstance now attracting considerable attention in the London betting world is the extraordinary duel about Damocles waged between Messrs Noel and Skinner. No sooner did the colt go very badly in the betting market than Mr Skinner would come in to the rescue and offer to back it so vigorously that the layers drew in their horns. But no sooner did Damocles take an upward tendency in the market, than nobody seemed so inclined to lay against the colt as Mr Skinner. The tactics of Noel and his confederates seemed just the reverse of this. It was their persistent betting against Damocles that drove the colt back in the market, and threatened to drive him to outside odds. It was Mr Skinner's support that rescued him from that fatality, and gave him once more an upward tendency. Then Mr Noel and his confederates tried to back the horse, and were immediately confronted by Mr Skinner, then, apparently, resolved to lay freely. The result, of course, of this game of see-saw was that neither party was doing much in the way of business. Mr Noel succeeded in his object, but, with all that, thanks to the irrepressible Skinner, he could neither back him nor lay against him satisfactorily. No sooner had he got the horse to the price he wanted, than Mr Skinner stepped in, and began to appropriate the long odds, while no sooner had the horse, in consequence, ascended some points in the betting, than Mr Skinner persistently laid against him. Neither party could benefit themselves much by these transactions, as the sum they backed him to win one day they laid against him the next. There was an antipathy between the two men. Mr Noel had more than once interfered with Skinner's working of a commission, and the latter worthy was now only paying him off in his own coin. He knew of what had happened at Newmarket, —how the window of the box of Damocles had been designedly opened. It was clear, to a practised hand like himself, that Noel desired to back that colt for the Derby.

He did not exactly know why,—he could not be quite sure that Noel was connected with that open window, which had driven Damocles from his pride of place in the market in the first instance, but back Damocles to any extent Mr Skinner determined his antagonist should not, and the result of all the fencing between these past masters was that, in spite of the horse being apparently driven to an outside price, it was quite impossible, at even half his nominal quotation, to back him to any extent. Mr Noel was horribly disgusted at the result of all his clever manœuvring. He cursed his adversary by all the cathes in his vocabulary, and, when thwarted, he was much gifted in powers of malediction. As for Skinner, he simply persistently blocked his antagonist's game, saying to himself he must show his hand at last. Stubber, in the meantime, goes about with a face as long as if his pet charge had met with the fate that the market indicated. It is no use the horse-watchers at Newmarket reporting that Damocles is going well and strong, the general public have taken fright, and show no disposition to accept any price about him ; indeed, if it was not for the support of Skinner, and a few of his brethren, having much confidence in the commissioner's shrewdness, Noel would have the game entirely in his own hands. But there is another man who is infinitely surprised at the state of affairs. Mr Bramton twelve months ago would have as soon thought of reading the 'sporting intelligence' in the daily papers as studying Milton or Shakespeare. Now he glances at it pretty regularly, and is much puzzled at the extraordinary fluctuation of Damocles in the market. He certainly has written to Stubber to say that he thinks he shall sell the colt at the first favourable opportunity, but he deems, and very fairly, that the trainer would not publish this intention to the world. He has told Lord Ranksborow, in his wrath, also pretty much the same thing, but he still can't believe that such confidences as these could affect the price list of the turf. He did not comprehend how in these days a racing man's intentions with regard to his horses, even if whispered, are flashed through the land. Still, in this case, it was not so ; the downfall of Damocles was due to the machinations of

Noel, and his inscrutable vacillations in the betting were owing to the singular antagonism going on between that gentleman and Skinner.

Before he had been at home a couple of days, Jack Cuxwold had a long talk with his father as to the actual condition of the property, and found his worst anticipations realised. The Earl told him frankly that the encumbrances were such that, unless a large sum was raised to meet them, foreclosure on the bulk of the mortgages on the estate would become pretty well a certainty in the autumn. 'Dartree and I,' he continued, 'had a long talk over it, and had finally settled that unless something turned up to save us, we must cut the entail, and sell quite half the estate. It would probably enable us to save Knightshayes and all the land immediately surrounding. It is a terrible thing, Jack, to think that you should eventually succeed to such a shrunken kingdom, but your grandfather dipped it a bit, I a good deal more, and poor Dart didn't mend matters; however, it's no good crying over spilt milk.'

In this the noble Earl was most assuredly right, more especially when the milk has been spilt at somebody else's expense.

Then Jack took counsel with Flood, and talked matters over with him.

'It's worse even than I thought, Alec. There's not only all the encumbrances on the property, but Dartree has left a stiffish crop of debts, which have got to be paid somehow. It grieves me bitterly to think of the old place going out of the family. Even if we succeed in saving Knightshayes, the lands left to us will be very limited.'

'It's a thousand pities your father has quarrelled with John Bramton.'

'Yes,' replied Jack; 'next month might have put things straight for us; but I suppose there's no chance of that breach being healed?'

'I am afraid not. Bramton is a man who can stand a good-humoured laugh at his own peculiarities. But Dartree, you see, hit him upon his most sensitive point—his daughters. He is extremely proud of those two girls, and he has a right to be. To ridicule them would be to

incur all his enmity; and I don't know but Bramton gives me the idea of a man who could be pretty relentless in his wrath.

'Ah, well! I suppose it's no use thinking anything more about it. Those things very rarely come off, when there's nothing else can save you. Otherwise, looking over the returns of last year's racing, as I was doing this morning in the governor's den, it does look as if, fit and well, nothing could beat Damocles at Epsom.'

'I'm not much of a judge,' rejoined Flood, 'but he certainly won last year at Newmarket very easily.'

'Poor Dart! He was always the same. Chaff with him always turned into sarcasm.'

The conversation here dropped; and although Alec Flood turned the whole business anxiously over in his brain, he could not see how such a quarrel as this was to be healed. That there is no worse man to have connection with in business or other designs than a coward with a weakness for the wine-cup, the great Mr Noel was shortly destined to discover. A pretty good judge of human nature, he made very little mistake about choosing his own instruments, but he could not occasionally depend upon his subordinates acting with equal discretion. His nephew, Mr Napper, for instance, was a man he could thoroughly trust—keen, sharp, and unscrupulous, and one who, in a witness-box, would defy cross-examination, with eyes and ears ever on the alert. Mr Noel could hardly have selected anyone more suited to keep him informed of what was doing at Newmarket than his nephew; but if, later on, it should prove necessary to frighten Mr Bramton into starting Damocles, then Tom Robbins would have to be put forward as prepared to claim Richard Bramton's property, because the conditions of the will had not been complied with. Mr Napper had already expressed his opinion that there was no real case, and that there was no chance of success unless Mr Bramton was a weak-minded, nervous man. Unfortunately, Mr Napper thought it expedient to point out to John Robbins that if this rumour that Damocles was not going to start should prove true, it would be worth his (Rob-

bins) while to threaten Mr Bramton with an action at law for the recovery of the property.

'Not a bit of use your going into Court, you know, Tom; but it's just possible you might wring a bit of money out of him by way of compromise.'

Mr Napper had thought it expedient to prepare Tom Robbins for the part he might have to play. He ought to have known better; he might have known that a vain-glorious braggart like Robbins would be certain to let the cat out of the bag the first time his tongue was loosed by drink, and that was not likely to be very long in happening. Sure enough, a few days afterwards, Mr Robbins, after his third tumbler of 'hot Scotch,' might have been heard holding forth in the bar-parlour of a very second-rate hostelry at Newmarket:—

'Damocles, I tell you,' he says. 'Don't you believe in anything else; there's nothing the matter with Damocles; he'll start, and win the Derby right enough, you take my word for it. It isn't *v*. t old Bramton likes—he's got to do it, mind you. He! pooh! he's only the nominal owner of those horses. There's a deal cleverer chaps than him pulling the strings.'

'Who are they, Tom? tell us!' exclaimed one of his convives.

'No, no, my beauty,' rejoined Tom, with drunken gravity; 'you don't draw me. There's secrets in all stables. It wouldn't astonish you to know who was the real owner of Damocles. Oh no, not at all; you'd never guess it, so don't try. But mind what I tell you, you back Damocles, and nothing else,' and with a wink of preternatural solemnity, Tom Robbins reeled out into the night air.

A rumour of this sort soon gathers strength, and though his hearers, in the first instance, regarded it as merely the idle vapourings of a drunken man, yet they mentioned it to various acquaintances, and so the rumour got about, while the source from which it emanated became lost sight of. It wasn't long before it reached the ears of Mr Stubber, and the trainer's surprise and disbelief was unbounded.

'Pubbish!' he said. 'It has never been questioned

before, and there is nothing unlikely in Dick Bramton leaving all his property and horses to this brother. If anybody had had a right to pull the strings, I should have heard of it last year. Mr John Bramton don't know anything about racing, and he left it to me to run the horses when and where I thought best. If anybody had had a right to interfere, they would have done it. I haven't been a trainer for close upon thirty years without knowing that.'

Very troubled, indeed, was Mr Stubber about his charges at this time. He had two rattling good three-year-olds, doing just as well as the most exacting trainer could wish. Damocles had proved himself the best two-year-old of his year, and Stubber knew that Lucifer was but a very few pounds behind his stable companion. Here was such a chance to sweep the board of all the great three-year-old prizes as seldom falls to the lot of man. And here was Mr John Bramton, who apparently regarded the winning of the Derby as a matter of no consequence. Stubber had trained for many varieties of racing men, but only once in his experience had he had an employer who had dreamt of foregoing that glory. And to this day the trainer spoke of that man with loathing. It was the one time in Stubber's career that he had held the key of the situation, the king card, and a colt who indubitably could have won the blue ribbon had been in his stables. And then the cynical, money-loving owner had said, 'Damn the Derby, Stubber. I shall win ever so much more if I keep him for the Cambridgeshire.' And he did. To this hour, the Ring remembered Mr Stubber's outsider for that big handicap, who had won with heaven knows how much in hand, and nearly broke them. So bewildered is the trainer at the present time, that his sole reliance is placed upon Skinner. The trusty commissioner has not been down to Newmarket since, and has written to say that he is quite certain that the attempt to meddle with Damocles was due to the instigation of Mr Noel.

'Whatever was intended,' he wrote, 'it is evident from what you say, that they did no more than open the window and how; Mr Noel meant to profit by it, I, of

course, can't be sure at present. I should say he simply seems desirous of backing Damocles—a thing that, thanks to me, he finds at present difficult to accomplish to any extent.'

It is needless to say that in his perplexity Mr Stubber speedily made the commissioner acquainted with the rumour that was now current at Newmarket. Skinner was a man who, in business, never pool-pooched rumours. He at once set to work to test them to the extent of his ability, and after a few minutes' cogitation, he came to the same conclusion as Mr Napper, that it would be worth while to spend a shilling at Somerset House for the purpose of reading Richard Bramton's will. If the horses had not been left to John Bramton, it would be clearly stated in that document to whom they had been bequeathed. When the commissioner had perused Richard Bramton's last testament, although not a little surprised, he did not see that it made much difference in the situation. That they were Miss Lucy's horses, instead of her father's, was small matter. And though Richard Bramton apparently desired they should be run through their engagements, it did not strike him as at all obligatory. However, he should be down at Newmarket in a few days, in the regular course of business, and then he would have a talk with Stubber over the affair.

CHAPTER XLI.

SEMI-BOYCOTTING OF BRAMTON.

MR BRAMTON is very much disgusted with the turn things have taken. He could not have believed that the neighbourhood would have taken the part of Lord Ranksborow so promptly and so generally in their quarrel. He did not quote Burns, and exclaim,

'Do you see yon birkie ca'ed a lord!'

for the best of all possible reasons—he had never read Burns, but he raged against the aristocracy generally, and was filled with the feeling that

'A man's a man for a' that.'

It was monstrous, it was outrageous. Was a man, by virtue of his birth, privileged to insult his fellow, and because that other, prompted by the passions common to humanity, resented it, were all the community to take part against him? Yet John Bramton could not disguise from himself that the genial greetings of a week or two back had been in more cases than one exchanged for a chilly salute. Nobody inquired now after the health of Damocles, and John Bramton, who was shrewd enough, was by no means blind to the fact that his world looked askance upon him.

On one point, however, he was much mistaken. That he was being looked coldly upon in that sporting county was undoubtedly true, but he was all wrong about the cause. Men were not treating him coolly on account of his quarrel with Lord Ranksborow, for truth to tell that was a thing unknown. Here and there it might be barely suspected, but this had nothing to do with the indignation of the people of Barkshire. No, Damocles was the reason. Barkshire had been excessively proud of claiming the owner of the first favourite for the Derby—the best horse of his year, as they all vowed—as one of themselves. Most of them had got a modest bet upon the race. Then came the revulsion in the betting market, and it was rumoured that he had broken down. Then came the sinister report that that was all moonshine—the horse was as well as ever he had been in his life; that the real cause of his retrogression in the betting was that his owner had made up his mind to sell him. On the first blush West Barkshire declined to believe it. Communication between the metropolis and the country in these days, is both rapid and regular. Before the week was out, the turpitude of the master of Temple Rising was confirmed, and then contemptuous indignation took the place of sneaking admiration; and the belief that John Bramton was at heart a sportsman, was scattered to the winds. He is in the like position of the man who, as tradition tells us, set up as a squire in a hunting country, and inaugurated his reign by shooting a fox! West Barkshire regarded John Bramton's conduct in a somewhat similar light.

In his resentment, Bramton utterly forgot the Earl's warning that this would probably occur, if he disposed of Damocles injudiciously. His sole feeling now, as Lucy's, was to get rid of the horses as soon as they possibly could. He had broken off all negotiations with Mr Noel and that little syndicate of bookmakers of which he was the head, but he had written again to a wealthy young man who had only made his appearance on the turf a year or two previously, to tell him that if he chose to renew the offer made some five months ago for Damocles, he, Mr Bramton, was disposed to deal, and to that letter John Bramton had as yet received no reply. The reason was simple. Mr Verreker, the gentleman in question, had been wintering in Algeria, and had not as yet returned. This, however, Bramton was not aware of, and that he received no answer to his letter troubled him not a little. Still, such was his ignorance of the ways of the turf, that he had actually supposed that Mr Verreker, providing he was given a handsome offset in reduction of price, would submit to the condition that Damocles should not start for the Derby. John Bramton was utterly incapable of entering into a sportsman's ambitions. To him, racing seemed simply a matter of money, but that Mr Verreker's chief object in bidding a long price for the horse was for the express purpose of winning that great prize of the turf in the eyes of all racing men, and which many of them, after a lifetime spent in the pastime, never succeed in carrying off, was a thing beyond John Bramton's comprehension. There is no certainty in anything, more especially in racing, and if there was a certain pecuniary *solatium* allowed as a set-off against the possibility of winning the Derby stakes, he could not conceive Mr Verreker having any objection to the condition that Damocles should not start.

John Bramton, though a good-natured man, was an obstinate one; he moreover particularly plumed himself in being a man of his word, which meant, that having once said a thing, he doggedly adhered to it. He had told Lord Ranksborow that Damocles should not start for the Derby, and he was determined to keep his word.

Mr Bramton wondered at times whether the neigh-

hours knew the real truth about his quarrel with the Ranksborow family, whether they had got hold of some garbled story concerning it, or whether they really were aware of the shameful way in which the late Lord Dartree had spoken in the supper-room at Wroxeter. If they were really aware of the true state of the case, then he could only say they were a parcel of chickenhearted minions—very pleased with this phrase was Mr Bramton—a memory of a bygone Surrey melodrama—bending before the great aristocrat of their neighbourhood, and after his second glass of port wine Mr Bramton vowed that he was made of sterner stuff, and would have satisfaction in some shape for such an outrage as that 'from any *dook* in the peerage, let alone an *earl!*' Then Mr Bramton would exceed to the extent of another glass or so of port, and finally fall asleep in the drawing-room, in a most defiant frame of mind with regard to the house of Lords, the Royal Family, and all the powers that be. The good man's worries, too, increased day by day. It was becoming an open question whether he would be able to dispose of the col before the end of May and, under those circumstances the odium of Damocles not running at Epsom must fall upon him. Lord Ranksborow's prophecy now recurred to him, and he could not but see that Mr Verreker or anybody else might well hesitate about bidding for a seat with such a distasteful condition attached to its purchase. Mr Stubber also, he could see, was extremely disgusted at the idea of his charge not being started at Epsom, and yet it never occurred to John Bramton to change his resolution, any more than it did that the extreme coolness with which he was now treated by his neighbours, was the result of his unsportsman-like turpitude. With the ladies, it was, of course, very different. Such a breach of turf etiquette would not affect them, nor, in the main, could they be brought to understand it. Women, as a rule, don't understand much about racing. They enjoy it in the summer as a pleasant outing, and, when present, are delighted if the gay jacket which carries their fortunes proves successful; but, of course, there are exceptions to this, and the Ladies Cuxwold were amongst them. Lady Jane and Lady

Emily were very angry indeed upon hearing of John Bramton's intentions regarding Damocles. They knew that their father stood to win a very large stake upon that horse, that there had been a quarrel between him and Mr Bramton on the morning after the Wroxeter Ball, and that the latter in his anger had declared his colt should not run at Epsom. Of the particulars of the quarrel they were utterly ignorant. The Earl had told the whole story to his wife, and they had decided the affair had better be kept to themselves. Jack's arrival had so far changed this, in so much as he and Flood were now also acquainted with the real state of the case, and Jack had already decided that any approach to the Bramtons on his part was impossible, whilst Flood felt not only would interference on his part be excessively awkward, but, in all probability, useless. Had things been as they were when he had left for Cairo, it would have been pleasant to canter over to Temple Rising and announce that he had brought the ~~lost~~ sheep home again, to have recounted the story of Jack's escape from the Halawes, and to tell Lucy that for the account of this nineteenth century Front de Bœuf, and the habits of the Bagarra Arabs, she must consult Captain Cuxwold himself.

• There was one person, however, who, although he had no knowledge of what gave rise to it, had penetrated the fact that there had been a bitter quarrel between John Bramton and the Knightshayes people, and that was Sir Kenneth Sandeman. He was a pretty constant visitor at Temple Rising, and had perhaps been more than ever so since the death of Lord Dartree. John Bramton rather clung to him, as the one man to whom this quarrel appeared to have made no difference. It was not likely to do so, any more than the striking of Damocles out of the Derby. Sir Kenneth was a man keenly alive to his own interests, and not likely to let either whims or fantasies stand between him and them. Further, he had taken a great dislike to Lord Ranksborow. One of Sir Kenneth's weaknesses was an exaggerated idea of his own importance, and that was a point which he considered had never been sufficiently recognised by the Knightshayes people. He frequently came into West Barkshire, taking

rooms at Wroxeter, and doing a little mild hunting from thence. He had many acquaintances in the county, and, of course, knew the Ranksborows; but that family did not take to him, and he had never been asked to Knightshayes. He said nothing about this, but in his heart he bitterly resented it. That Mr Bramton should speak in angry terms of the Earl at times was only natural, and as Sir Kenneth chimed in, and expressed his opinion that Lord Ranksborow was an arrogant beast, it was no wonder that Mr Bramton still further unbosomed himself, and made no secret about there being fierce enmity between him and the Earl.

Sir Kenneth, too, had cordially detested the late Lord Dartree; he had once or twice winced under the dead man's sarcasms. Sir Kenneth was a grand man across country, over the dinner-table, but in the actual field he never took his place among the straight goers. Now there is no reason a man should not enjoy hunting in his own way, only, when he devotes himself to the coffee-house phase of it, don't let him claim to be one of the hard-riding brigade. Dartree and his companions had been rather wont to make fun of Sir Kenneth's pretensions in this respect. Further, had he not rivalled him in seeking to win the regard of Miss Bramton? Taking all these things into consideration, and bearing in mind that Sir Kenneth, though of a phlegmatic was of a somewhat vindictive disposition, and it is easy to see that he would entertain the most sincere dislike to the house of Ranksborow.

The death of Lord Dartree had cleared the way for Sir Kenneth. He prosecuted his suit to Miss Bramton vigorously, and, after the rude shock her vanity had lately sustained, it was soothing and gratifying to the fair Matilda to find that she had an eligible admirer who was thoroughly in earnest; and, only for the vision of a coronet that had so lately dazzled her eyes, Miss Bramton would have been fain to admit from the first that Sir Kenneth was a very eligible *parti*. Love, as her father might have said, was no *item* in Miss Bramton's scheme of matrimony. She was much too worldly and sensible a young woman to trouble her head about any such sentimental nonsense.

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She had made up her mind to settle herself, as soon as opportunity presented itself, and had made up her mind that what she emphatically required was a gentleman of good social position. Sir Kenneth thoroughly fulfilled these requirements, and now that the glamour of the more lofty position was removed, she had quite decided to say yes whenever he should ask the question. Sir Kenneth was a prudent man. He had quite made up his mind to marry Miss Bramton, and he came to the conclusion that the sooner he formally proposed for her hand the better. A little later, and the Bramtons would very likely be going to town, and then Sir Kenneth thought there might be other candidates in the field. No, a handsome girl like Miss Bramton, with the very handsome expectations that were attached to her, was, if she got properly introduced, not likely to be without aspirants for her hand. Lord Dartree had occasioned him dire misgivings; he would not risk that sort of thing again. No, he had things all his own way just at present, he would clench matters at once; and he did. A couple of days after Jack Cuxwold's return, and the news came to Knightshayes that Miss Bramton was engaged to be married to Sir Kenneth Sandeman.

CHAPTER XLII.

MR NAPPER'S LITTLE COMEDY.

MR SKINNER has come down to Newmarket, and is speedily in possession of the just now popular rumour, in that place of many rumours. Mr Stubber was perfectly right, it is currently reported that all Mr Bramton's horses are only nominally his, that the real owner has been kept perfectly dark, and that Mr Bramton is a mere puppet in his hands.

'Quite right, Stubber,' observed the commissioner. 'They've got it all over the town, and, though they don't exactly know what they're talking about, for a wonder this time there's a suspicion of truth in their story. I can tell you now, Stubber, why Mr Bramton didn't sell Lucifer. The fact is, it is open to question whether

he can, just as it is equally open to question whether he can sell Damocles.'

'Well, this beats me altogether,' rejoined the trainer, looking at the commissioner with undisguised admiration; how on earth did you work out the whole business?'

'Never mind,' replied Mr Skinner loftily. Like other great men, he had no idea of underrating his faculties, and of confiding to Mr Stubber that on the payment of one shilling at Somerset House he might test the accuracy of his, Skinner's, information. 'Now,' continued the commissioner, having, as I say, worked out the first part of the problem, the question is to get at the second. What I want to ascertain now is who set this rumour afloat at Newmarket, and, secondly, what his object was in doing so? I have made several inquiries since I've been down here, but though everybody is full of the story, nobody knows who originated it, whether it's true or false.'

'Well,' said the trainer, 'it's not very likely any of my people know where the story sprang from, but there ain't any harm in asking my head lad.'

But, contrary to Stubber's expectation, the head lad, upon being spoken to, speedily returned, after making due inquiries, and said,—

'Lord, sir, all the boys seem to know about it. It seems that drunken fool Tom Robbins has been gassing about; he has been swelling away like a bull frog with this important secret, and when he's two or three sheets in the wind, which I fancy is pretty nearly every night, he tells all his cronies to back Damocles,—that Mr Bramton's got nothing to do with it, but it will be all right on the day.'

'And who is Tom Robbins?' inquired Mr Skinner sentimentously.

'Well,' replied the trainer, laughing, 'that would be a little difficult to say, supposing you mean what is his pedigree. Most of us old hands here know who his mother was, but who was his father is somewhat doubtful; anyhow, he got a good send-off here—a start in a solicitor's office—but was too irregular in his habits to keep his place. When his mother died, he came into a small bit of money, though how she got it nobody knows.

Backing horses on the Heath, and brandy and water at the bars, I should think has got through most of that. What he does now I cannot say exactly, but I fancy he's a horse-watcher.'

'The thing begins to clear itself up a little, Stubber. A drunken tout in possession of the information I hold, would be quite sufficient to set such a rumour going. But he thought to himself, 'How the deuce does a man like Tom Robbins gain his information. It is very unlikely that he would pay his shilling and go to Somerset House. Stop, I have it! Though the idea would never have occurred to Tom Robbins, it's quite possible it might to Noel. Then, again, what did that open window mean? If Noel was at the bottom of that, his intention would surely have been to prevent Damocles running for the Derby. My impression is that something prejudicial to the health of Damocles was intended to have been thrown through that window—a drugged apple, or something of that sort. For some reason, however, it didn't come off, I suppose, as the horse has been neither sick nor sorry. No, I don't see it as yet. Pieces in the game, though, are no doubt Noel and Robbins. but how to connect them I don't see. Well! we must await the next move in the game. This report has not been set going in Newmarket for nothing.'

Mr Skinner had not long to wait for that, for the evening papers apprised him, under the head of sporting intelligence, 'that there had been a tremendous run on Damocles for the big race at Epsom, that he had been backed for all the money that could be secured, from 20 to 1 down to 10, and that his supporters would have gone on at that if the fielders had not cried 'Hold, enough,' declining in many cases to offer more than 8 to 1, and in others refusing to bet against the colt at all.' The commissioner began to see Noel's game a little more clearly now. It was quite evident that, from being an opponent of the horse, he had changed sides, and was now one of its strongest supporters. Still, if he had anything to do with the setting afloat of this rumour, what could be his object in doing so? It was true the horses were not absolutely the property of Mr Bramton, but they

undoubtedly belonged to his daughter, and she was not likely to interfere with her father's control over them. Mr Bramton had informed Stubber that he should sell the horse, if possible, before his Epsom engagement, but that, in any case, it would not start for that race. Certainly Mr Noel did not know this, but that it was currently rumoured in turf circles that Damocles would not run for the Derby, he did know. What could have induced such a wary speculator to change sides just when it looked as if the opponents of Damocles were going to have so much the best of it? However, the commissioner could make nothing of this, and as it only wanted a few days to the first Spring meeting, Mr Skinner determined to stay on where he was.

That allusion should be made in the sporting papers about the absurd report of Mr Bramton's horses not being Mr Bramton's property, was matter of course, and excited considerable surprise to Lord Ranksborow when he read it. Then came the extraordinary recovery of Damocles in the betting market, and once more hope was rekindled in the bosom of that sanguine peer. He wrote off at once to Skinner, to inquire concerning these things, and his face fell when that gentleman's reply reached him. Mr Skinner told him what he had discovered, and said that, so far, the report was true; that the people who had backed the colt so heavily, were those who so far had been his bitterest opponents, but that upon what grounds they were doing so, he was at a loss to conjecture.

In conclusion, he remarked that the horse was extremely well, and he thought would probably win at Epsom if only allowed to compete.

'Cold comfort this,' muttered the Earl. 'The colt, it seems, is the property of one of the insulted ladies, instead of her father. No, I don't think I could look for much mercy at a woman's hands, under the circumstances. One don't expect forgiveness from a scorned woman.' And then the Earl once more abandoned the idea of having the knot of his difficulties cut in this wise.

At Temple Rising, they took at present but very little notice of the racing intelligence and fluctuations of the

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betting market. But Mr Bramton's attention was suddenly recalled to turf matters by the receipt of the following letter :—

'SIR,—It being currently reported that it is your intention to strike Damocles out of the Derby, I beg leave to call your attention to a clause in the late Richard Bramton's will, which makes your running his horses through their engagements a condition of Miss Lucy Bramton's engagements. As his nearest of kin, I need hardly say that I have been shamefully treated in not being even mentioned in it. On the strength of that will, I have backed Damocles for the Derby, and can only assure you that if I lose my money in consequences of his not running, I shall see what compensation a law court will award me. If the condition of inheritance is not carried out, then I am advised that Richard Bramton's will can be set aside, and that, as next-of-kin, I inherit his horses and estate.—I am, sir, faithfully yours,

'THOMAS ROBBINS.

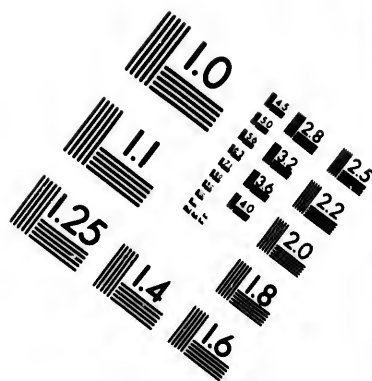
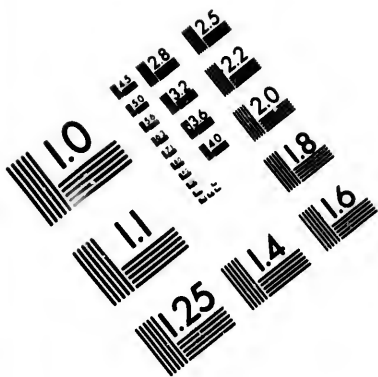
'7 Skelton Villa Newmarket.'

Mr Bramton was not at all the man to be frightened by a letter of this sort, but it did recall to him what he had almost forgotten, namely, that the horses were his daughter's and not his. He read the letter over twice, and then said to himself,—

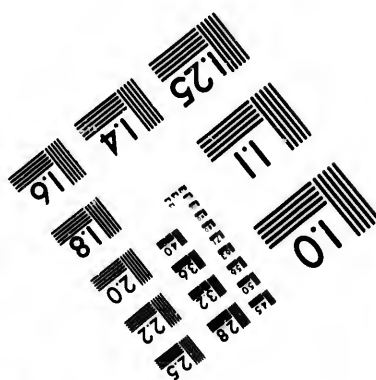
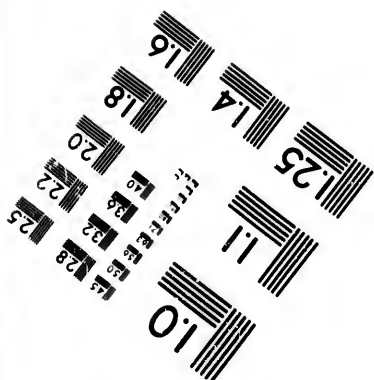
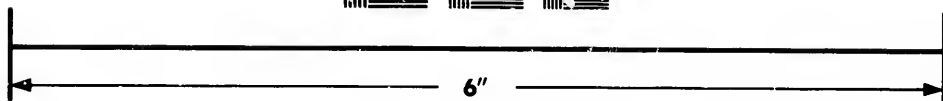
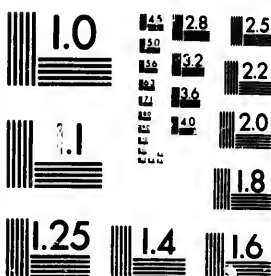
'Kin. I never heard that Dick left kith or kin behind him, except ourselves. No,' he continued, 'this is a "try on," that's what it is. If this chap had anything to go upon, he would have waited till the Derby was over, and then set his lawyers to work. No, Robbins has backed my horse for the Derby, and thinks he is going to bounce me into starting it, whether I like it or no. I'm sorry for Robbins, but Damocles don't run. I haven't been all these years in business, to be bamboozled by a bogus letter like that. I shall simply take no notice of it,' and so saying, Mr Bramton tore up the epistle and threw the fragments into the waste-paper basket.

Tom Robbins had written under the dictation of Mr





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Napper, who had been told by his uncle to begin to put such machinery as he could manufacture out of Richard Bramton's will in motion at once, as in the course of the next month it might be necessary to exercise all the pressure they could command to induce Mr Bramton to start Damocles at Epsom. Tom Robbins' letter was a mere pilot balloon,—a mere throwing up of straws to see how the wind blew.

'Unless he is one of the regular weak-kneed sort, he'll take no notice of this, Tom. If he does, it is a nice little sum into your pocket, depend upon it, whatever turns up ; but whatever he may do about this, when I write the next letter, as your solicitor, I shall draw him. At all events, there is a good chance of making something out of it, one way or the other.'

And so poor silly Tom Robbins, who was as mere dough in the hands of his cunning and unscrupulous confederate, stopped nightly about the bars at Newmarket, babbling of what he could tell if he chose, and wrapped in the pleasant conviction that there would be a thousand or so offered him eventually to withdraw his claim on Richard Bramton's estate.

One of the great features of that First Spring meeting at Newmarket, was the *furor* for Damocles. The horse was seen striding along in his gallops every morning in splendid style, and, despite that old rumour of a few weeks ago that he would not start, the cleverest men on the turf were backing him for his Epsom engagement, ay, and backing him heavily too. Five to one against Damocles for the Derby was a thing difficult to obtain now, and undoubtedly not to be got in any large sum.

With the resuscitation of Damocles there comes a change over the neighbourhood in their conduct to John Bramton. Once again they became more genial in their 'good days,' and once more came such cheery comments as 'Glad to see the colt's going again like great guns, Mr Bramton,' or 'The Derby's coming to West Barkshire after all, sir ;' but the owner of Temple Rising is sore at heart, and bitterly resents the part he deems the county have taken against him in his quarrel with Lord Ranksborow. He does not openly avow his intention of not

starting the horse for the race, but he is more determined than ever not to do so,—kept up to his resolve, too, by that implacable son-in-law of his that is to be, who cannot forgive the Ranksborows for not welcoming him with the warmth he conceives due to a man in his position. Angry, passionately angry, as Miss Bramton had been at the time, her animosity would have been buried in Lord Dartree's grave, had it not been for her *fiancée*. No sooner was he engaged to her, than he easily extracted from her if not the exact story, a version near enough to serve his turn. He burned to pay off some of the slights he considered he had received from the house of Ranksborow, and he took very good care that the wound Matilda's pride had suffered should not be allowed to heal. It is ever easy to remind anyone of their wrongs, but to keep a woman alive to a cruel blow to her vanity, is perhaps the easiest form of this most unpleasant mode of condolence. With a view to gratifying his own dislike to the Knightshayes people, Sir Kenneth took very good care that Matilda Bramton should not forget the night of the Wroxeter Ball. He remembered bitterly how very much the best of their struggle for the young lady's favour the dead man had had that night. He knew something of the embarrassments of Lord Ranksborow, and vowed that no help should come to him in his necessity, which it lay within his power to prevent. Not a forgiving man Sir Kenneth,—one of those fine old Scotch families not given to let the century close in on their wrath, but willing to prosecute a blood feud or a lawsuit as long as they have a life to lose, or a bawbee to spend.

Loyally as Lucy meant to stand to her sister, and heartily sick as she was of owning racehorses, which seemed to produce nothing but quarrels and estrangements from her dearest friends, still the fires of her wrath were burning much fainter than they had done in the beginning. In her eyes, the terrible fate which had so speedily befallen the culprit, had done away with much of his offending. She knew, as they all did, what the victory of this horse meant to the Earl, and she could but recall the friendly terms she had been on with

the Knightshayes people, and especially how kind and thoughtful Captain Cuxwold had been in the days of her sore trouble. The insult had been more directly levelled at her sister than herself, yet, for all that, Lucy had no idea of not exacting quite as severe reparation for it as if it had been directly personal. She did very much wish to see Mr Flood. Captain Cuxwold, of course, she was not likely to meet again, except as a mere stranger, but Mr Flood was different. Of course, he might include himself in their quarrel with the Ranksborows, but he need not necessarily do so. It depended upon himself what line he chose to take. Whether it was in consequence of their quarrel with Knightshayes, she could not say, but it certainly did seem that the visitors at Temple Rising were not so numerous as they had been a short time back. She had thought her sister's engagement would have produced a great many visits of congratulation. It had brought about a good many, but fewer than she had expected. The truth was, though well known, Sir Kenneth was by no means a popular man in West Barkshire, and people felt somewhat indifferent to his having a prosperous future before him, in consequence.

CHAPTER XLIII.

BRAMTON NOT TO BE DRIVEN.

'Now, my lad,' said Mr Noel, as he and his precious nephew sat smoking in the little sitting-room which appertained to the domicile in which the bookmaker was accustomed to take up his quarters for the New-market meetings, 'you are a better judge of the inclemency of the climate here than I am. Lucky for me I've had a good week, for I've got to fork out that five hundred to you. Now just you pay attention to what I'm saying to you. That cold was very well managed, and there is no mistake about my game now. I'm going for Damocles. You see, it was Lord Dartree took my yearling book about him, and, of course, his death scratched that bet. I've backed him for a lot of money this

week, and shall make a much better thing of his winning than losing. It was troublesome work too. That beggar Skinner got in my way at first: he often does. He hates me, and I—I don't feel heavenly towards him; however, it's all right now, and I don't think Mr Bramton would have the cheek to withdraw the colt at this time of day; still, perhaps, there would be no harm in putting the screw on a little.'

Mr Napper's eyes twinkled with greed of gain as he clasped the crisp roll of notes in his hand.

'It might be as well,' he said at last, 'to fire another shot. He has taken no notice of the first letter, but that is nothing. A legal notice that proceedings will be taken against his daughter, under the provisions of Richard Bramton's will, should the colt not start for the Derby, might determine him; but I should think there is no doubt about it, is there? He is sure to run, isn't he?'

'I hope so, and I think so,' replied Noel. 'But I can't forget that I heard from very good authority,—from a man who is always well up in the ins and outs of Stubber's stable, that the colt wouldn't start. Now it was the day before that window was found open, so that could have nothing to say to it. He could give me no reason, but said shortly I might take the hint or leave it alone, but that I had known him long enough to be aware that he was not speaking at random.'

'It's odd,' said Napper. 'There was a deal of betting this week. Who were the principal backers of Damocles?'

'Myself and immediate friends,' replied Mr Noel; 'there was also a small section of the *racing* public. But the public that *go* racing never take kindly to a horse that has been much knocked about in the betting; and then, of course, a great many of them were sweet upon Rhoderic Dhu, the winner of the Two Thousand.'

'Perhaps it would be as well to fire another shot,' said Mr Napper. 'It's only a sheet of paper, though, looked at in a business way, it ought to be six-and-eightpence. As I have told you, we couldn't really take any legal proceedings; we haven't a leg to stand upon.'

'Legal proceedings be d—d!' interrupted Mr Noel roughly. 'If you had the best case that ever went into

a law court, what good would that be to me? Why it wouldn't even begin for a month, and the race would be all over by that time. No, what you said yourself at first, bounce Bramton into running his colt, by hinting that his girl will lose all the property if he don't. That's what you've got to do. People are rather shy of meddling with the law, as far as my experience goes.'

'All right,' rejoined Mr Napper, who was far too politic to quarrel with his wealthy relative. 'I'll see to it at once;' and, according to this arrangement, the next day Mr Napper indited a letter which began, 'I am instructed to take proceedings,' and embodied the substance of Tom Robbins' epistle in legal formula.

It perhaps did not make much difference, but Messrs Noel and Napper were wrong in one particular. However well you may know human nature, its infinite variety constantly upsets the man of the world's calculations. Messrs Noel and Napper are right. The threat of legal proceedings exercises a great terror upon weak and nervous persons; but there are other men born with a naturally combative and litigious temperament,—men who are always spoiling for a fight, and held in the greatest esteem and reverence by the lawyers. Now, John Bramton was exactly one of these men. To threaten him with the law was equivalent to putting a pistol to his head. As you made your demand, he was a man who would certainly have rejected any advice to compromise, and who would have contested a very indifferent case, sooner than give in. It was not likely that he was going to knuckle under, to commence with, before such a feeble attack as his common sense told him this to be. But, for all that, he was far too business-like a man to endanger his daughter's inheritance. If they decided to avenge the insult put upon them by the Ranksborows, then Lucy, at all events, must be made clearly to understand at what risk she did so.

'The scoundrels!' muttered Mr Bramton. 'The idea of their endeavouring to dictate to me whether the horses shall run or not. I'll write a line to this Mr Napper at once, and just give him one for himself; and

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perhaps it would be as well at the same time to drop Drysdel & Pecker a line, and tell them they had better inquire into this claim, and ascertain who Mr Robbins is.' And then Mr Bramton, in a fine glow of indignation, seated himself at his writing-table, and prepared, as he expressed it, 'to let off the steam.'

'SIR,' he wrote,—'You can inform your client, Mr Thomas Robbins, that his having backed my horse for the Derby is a matter about which I feel no interest. That Damocles will run or not run just as I think best; but you can further inform Mr Robbins that I shall probably decide upon the latter,—that I don't bet myself, and feel no pity for those who lose money by doing so. My solicitors are Messrs Drysdel & Pecker, Lincoln's Inn Fields, to whom you are requested to address all further communications.'

Mr Napper gave vent to a long whistle when this epistle reached him.

'This will be pleasant news for Uncle Noel when he hears it,' he muttered. 'I should say, from this letter, Damocles won't run. Refers us, too, to Drysdel & Pecker. Thoroughly respectable, and, besides that, as smart a going firm of solicitors as there is in all London. That Pecker is as sharp as a needle. If he don't come down himself, he'll have a clerk down here to-day or to-morrow, who will have reckoned up Tom Robbins in less than no time, and know that we have no case whatever. Then he is safe to call here, and find out that I'm not the firm, but only a clerk, and that my employers know nothing whatever of the business. How I wish I hadn't been so sharp. Oh, Sim Napper, what a hundering ass you've made of yourself! I suppose I shall get the sack, and Uncle Noel a real nose-ender. Whew, I wish this brute Damocles was dead!'

In the course of the next day or two, Mr Bramton confided the story of Napper's letter to his future son-in-law. Sir Kenneth was much interested in the whole thing, as this was the first time he had become acquainted with the peculiar conditions of Dick Bramton's will.

'It's a deuced odd will,' he remarked at last, with his

slow, somewhat peculiar draw, 'but you are quite right. I have no doubt that is a mere impudent attempt to extort money from you, by somebody who has become acquainted with the terms of Richard Bramton's last testament. Of course, you don't mean to take any notice of what this fellow says, and will strike Damocles out of the Derby, all the same.'

There was a touch of true Scotch caution about Sir Kenneth, and he had been careful to ascertain that the fortunes of his *fiancée* Matilda would be in no wise influenced by any legal consequences that came of bidding Robbins defiance. He had considerable admiration for his wife that was to be, but Sir Kenneth was not the sort of man, even in his youth, to have made a love match. If, like the Laird of Cockpen,

'He wanted a wife his brow hoose to keep,'

he was fully determined that she must do her share pecuniarily towards keeping it.

'I should tell my lawyer, if I were you, to inquire pretty closely into the life and doings of Tom Robbins, and what sort of a solicitor this Mr Napper is. A little investigation of this kind will probably squelch the case before ten days are over.'

'Just so, just so, Sir Kenneth. I'll make it hot for him. I'll make Mr Robbins sit up, before I've done with him; and if he has backed Damocles, I only hope it's for all he is worth.'

'That will probably turn out to be not much,' rejoined Sir Kenneth, with a dry laugh. 'It's much more likely that he is an impudent vagabond, who, upon the strength of being some distant connection to your late brother, thinks it might be possible to frighten you into buying his silence.'

And then Sir Kenneth was suddenly struck with a new aspect of the affair. Yes, he thought, it was absolutely necessary that he should know the story of Tom Robbins. He was about to marry Miss Bramton, a pretty, ladylike young woman, who would pass anywhere as Lady Sandeman. His sister-in-law he felt, would also do him credit. Bramton, father and mother, had been accepted by Barkshire, and, in consideration of their

wealth, Barkshire had tacitly agreed to vote their vulgarity merely eccentricity. But needy, poor relations of the Tom Robbins type in the background, was a thing to be inquired into. Tom Robbins might be only one of a very vagabond crew who could claim kinship with the family he proposed to marry into; racing men like Dick Bramton were likely to be loose fishes, and Heaven knows what queer connection this man might have formed in his youth. Sir Kenneth felt he should be more comfortable when the Tom Robbins mystery was cleared up. He was not to blame altogether. It must be remembered he was a proud man, and that though money was an important factor in his matrimonial views, still no amount of it would have compensated him for the discovery that his wife had a lot of poor and vagrant cousins, claiming privilege, on the strength of that cousinship, to call her 'Tilda.' Yes, decidedly the mystery of Tom Robbins must be cleared up.

As far as that latter worthy was concerned, the collapse of Mr Napper's ingenious scheme would matter little. Like most votaries of horse-racing, he constantly indulged in dreams of suddenly-acquired wealth. This would only be another of these golden visions dissolved. But to Mr Napper it was otherwise. He saw, too late, the pains and penalties attaching to his audacious attempt, and that the end of the business might be the cancelling of his articles, and dismissal by his employers. This disconcerted Mr Napper not a little. He had marked out his future, and was only longing for the time when he should be able to set up as an attorney on his own account. He thought he saw his way into a snug little business, under the guise of a sporting solicitor, combining a little money-lending, at somewhat usurious interest, with it. He had scraped together two or three hundred, to which his uncle's five would make a very comfortable addition, and now this career of prosperous industry stood in some danger of being nipped in the bud.

Mr Noel, too, when he received his nephew's letter, uttered a malediction, and then proceeded to invoke very questionable blessings on the head of Mr Bramton. He had thrown on one side the hint that had been vouch-

safed him, and, taking advantage of the report of the accident to Damocles, which he had been instrumental in bringing about, had thoroughly upset the colt's status in the market for the time. He now stood a very good stake with the colt, and though, in consequence of having a book based upon sound mathematical principles, he would be no heavy loser by the horse's failure, yet Mr Noel loved money, and was bitterly annoyed at the idea of the comfortable stake he had marked out for himself slipping through his fingers. He would have repudiated the idea that he had ever placed much dependence on this scheme for terrorising Mr Bramton, but in his heart of hearts he had, and was frightfully disgusted at his complete failure, and still more at Mr Bramton's intimation that he should probably not run the horse at Epsom.

Mr Pecker, on receiving Bramton's letter, resolved to go down to Newmarket at once, and found very little difficulty, in the course of three or four hours, in finding out as much as he thought it necessary to know about Tom Robbins.

'I went to see,' he wrote, 'Stubber, in the first place. I found he knew nothing of Richard Bramton's will, nor of the threat that had been launched against you in the event of your deciding not to run Damocles for the Derby. I thought it best not to enlighten him. But he did know all about Mr Tom Robbins, and readily told all he knew. It seems Robbins has lately claimed to be a son of the late Richard Bramton. Your brother never acknowledged him in the slightest way, when he was alive, nor is he, as we know, mentioned in the will. Richard Bramton spent his life at Newmarket, and there are many who, like Stubber, have known him from a boy. They have all the greatest doubts of Robbins having the slightest claim to calling the deceased gentleman his father. And bear in mind that he never ventured to do so while Richard Bramton was alive. Further, in any case, they are quite convinced that he was never born in wedlock,—that the mother in her youth was well known at Newmarket, and reputed to be by no means straitlaced of character; in short, I am quite convinced

that the whole affair is a mere trumped-up charge, for the purpose of extorting money, and, in my opinion, quite unworthy of consideration. Remember, as I told you before, that if a legitimate claimant came forward with an apparently legitimate case, I should advise you to run Damocles sooner than give him a pretext for litigation; but in the present instance I am sure you need not trouble yourself.—Your obedient servant,
R. PECKER.'

'That settles it!' exclaimed Sir Kenneth, when Bramton showed him the letter. 'You'll strike out Damocles, if it is only to pay out Mr Tom Robbins for his compounded impudence.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

FLOOD CALLS AT TEMPLE RISING.

A MAN sorely exercised in his mind at this time was Alec Flood. He had said, in the first instance, that it was impossible for him to go to Temple Rising,—that he could not possibly venture to expostulate with Mr Bramton on what he might choose to do with his horses; but now, through Skinner, had come to the Earl the curious information that Lucy Bramton was the actual owner of the horses, and not her father. Skinner had written, after the Two Thousand week, to his old patron, and told him the exact state of the case, so far as he could understand it. He mentioned that it was rumoured the horses were not the property of Mr Bramton, and that he was a mere name in the whole business. 'Such is the rumour ringing all through the racing world at this minute, and it is so far true, that the horses, like all the rest of the property, were bequeathed to Miss Lucy Bramton. I have been at the trouble of seeing the will, and know that this is so, but this, I should imagine, does not in the least affect Mr Bramton's control of Damocles. Noel, formerly his greatest opponent, has turned round, and is now one of the horse's most substantial supporters. Stubber tells me the colt never was better, and I can personally vouch that he is doing his work in grand

form. The whole thing seems to me to lie in a nutshell. Damocles will, I fancy, win the Derby, should he start; and the betting, like everything else, tends to show that he will. There is nothing but that temporary rumour that Mr Bramton did not mean to run him, and which, though scotched for the present, still crops up again at intervals, to make his backers in the least uneasy.'

Alec Flood knew by this time what a very serious matter the victory of this colt was to the Earl of Ranksborow, and indeed to all his family. He did not want to interfere; he most assuredly shrank, knowing what he did, from going over to Temple Rising, especially with any view to discussing this subject with Mr Bramton. At present there seemed no cause for his interference. According to Skinner, it looked as if Mr Bramton had forgotten the words spoken in his wrath, and, though no racing or betting man, was going to pick up as many big stakes with the horses committed to his charge as his trainer deemed practicable. And yet Alec felt uneasy. He knew John Bramton, and he felt intuitively that Matilda's was no forgiving nature; and then he began to wonder what he ought to do, should they be informed on good authority that Mr Bramton was resolved not to run Damocles.

He argued it out with himself, in clear, logical fashion. His love for Lucy had faltered not one whit. He knew very well that nothing but the success of this horse could possibly stop the sale of a great part of the Knighthayes estate. He knew, of course, that this would so widen the breach between the Ranksborows and Bramtons, that there would be slight chance of Jack and Lucy ever meeting. It would be, in all probability, to extinguish the chance of his most formidable rival; and though he was a rejected suitor now, who should say that his chance might not come, once Jack Cuxwold was satisfactorily disposed of. And yet, Jack was his dearest friend, and Lucy the one girl he had ever cared about; and he believed thoroughly that her liking for Jack Cuxwold was the cause of her own indifference to himself. 'Friends ever,' she had said earnestly at parting, and, as Alec thought it all over, he began to doubt whether, if it

became advisable to interfere, he shouldn't be acting a mean part in adhering to the doctrine of non-intervention.

At the present moment, to judge from Mr Skinner's letter, there was no call for his interference ; but, supposing between this and the race things went wrong again, was he justified in standing aloof, and making no attempt to heal the breach between the two families? He had nothing to do but to take a passive part. Neither Lord Ranksborow nor Jack had suggested that he should undertake the *rôle* of the peacemaker ; but if his lips had not spoken it, Jack Cuxwold's eyes, when the subject was being discussed, had more than once hinted it. He could see clearly that if Mr Bramton fulfilled his threat, the quarrel between Lord Ranksborow and the master of Temple Rising would never be made up. And Jack Cuxwold could not but side with his father. On board ship that night, it had been clear to him that the person of all others Jack ought to marry, was Lucy Bramton. She was a charming girl, and half in love with him already, as he with her. And she would bring a rare dowry with her with which to prop up the tottering Ranksborow peerage. Let this Derby but come off right, and that ricketty coronet would be so far buttressed as to save Jack from going wooing *in formā pauperis*. It was obvious to him that this might very likely depend upon himself to bring about. For the first time, they had become aware that Miss Lucy was the real owner of the horses, and upon her dictum it really depended whether Damocles ran for the Derby or not

'All's fair in love or war,' they say, and Flood felt that it was within his power to keep Jack and Lucy permanently apart. But for what good? He had had his chance,—a fair field, and no competitor from whom he had cause to apprehend danger, on the scene. He had put his fortune to the test, and received a firm but courteous refusal. True, girls did change their minds, and many a maiden has been wooed and won by the rejected of former days. Friendship is of small account when weighed against love ; but still, Alec could but feel he had no right to stand between these two, on the

somewhat shadowy chance of forwarding his own prospects. No, he made up his mind that if it became expedient, he would go over to Temple Rising, and, at all events, see if there was anything to be done.

He had not long to wait, for in a very few days Damocles once more began to decline in the betting. Mr Noel, at the present moment, was in possession of what he considered the best possible information about the intentions of the owner of that colt. It was most improbable that Miss Lucy would differ from her father in her views about the running of the horse. He has it in John Bramton's own handwriting that the colt will probably not run for the Derby, and Mr Noel considers that quite sufficient to justify him in taking back his money, that is to say, in once more laying against Damocles, to recover what he has backed him for. Gloomily the Earl beholds the horse recede, point by point, in the betting, dropping from fours gradually to tens and twelves to one. He knows that the colt is well, and that this can be nothing but the foreshadowed result of Mr Bramton's vow of vengeance. Paragraphs began to appear in the sporting papers, commenting on the extraordinary manner in which Mr Bramton's horse was knocked about in the market, and upon the revival of the old rumour that he would not be seen at Epsom. 'Mr Bramton, we understand, is no sportsman, and utterly unversed in the mysteries of the turf; but we presume he is gifted with common sense, and he must know that for the tricks being played in his name he will be held responsible, and that the striking out of a horse from a great race at the eleventh hour is conduct utterly inadmissible, if that horse is fit to run. Damocles was quite at the top of the tree as a two-year-old, and should give a rare account of himself, if he has done well since we saw him at Newmarket in the Two Thousand week. We thought we had never seen a colt more improved. That Mr Bramton is not going to run his colt at Epsom we cannot bring ourselves to believe; but if he carries out the intention which rumour ascribes to him, we can only say that he will have made a name in turf history which no man need envy him, and which will be

enough to make poor Dick Bramton lie uneasy in his grave.'

But these severe strictures were as yet confined to the sporting press, and that was a literature not patronised at Temple Rising.

'Poor Dartree,' said Jack, after reading the above; 'he certainly did upset the coach with a vengeance. Shylock means having his pound of flesh and no mistake about it. He won't be deterred by the threatened anger of the British public, because he'il never picture what a storm of abuse will descend upon him if he scratches the colt now.'

'I suppose he will get pretty handsomely slated by the press,' replied Flood.

'Yes,' rejoined Cuxwold. 'The Derby is one of our national institutions, and Englishmen don't stand tricks played with those. The favourite for the Derby becomes public property. The public sympathise with you if your horse comes to grief,—are very angry on your behalf should he be tampered with, but play tricks with him yourself, and you've about brought down Niagara on your devoted head.'

Flood said no more, but muttering something about having letters to write, walked off to the library. A few turns up and down the deserted room and he had made up his mind. If he was to interfere, there was no time to be lost, for the horse might be struck out now at any moment, and then the case was past remedy. He would ride over to Temple Rising that afternoon, and see what could be done. No need to take anyone into his confidence; far better not, he thought, at all events certainly in the first place. Alec Flood was accustomed to do pretty much as he liked at Knightshayes, and therefore his asking at luncheon if he could have a hack for the afternoon created no sort of surprise, and, that meal disposed of, Alec was soon cantering towards Temple Rising.

He found Mr and Mrs Bramton with Lucy in the drawing-room. Miss Bramton and her *fiancé* were gone out for a ride, but the remainder of the family, although with a certain air of constraint, welcomed him cordially. They were unfeignedly glad to see him, and were particularly

anxious not to include him in their quarrel with Knightshayes, but, for all that, they could not forget that he came from the enemy's camp. Mr Bramton, after a few fatuous remarks about the weather, drifted on into anxious inquiry about Flood's health, finally blurting out the hope that Captain Cuxwold was pretty well, and then, becoming suddenly conscious that the very name of that family was tabooed at Temple Rising, muttered something about important directions to give to the gardeners, and made his escape from the room. Poor Mrs Bramton was dying to do the same: she honestly didn't know what to say to her guest. The quarrel with the Knightshayes people was a continual topic of conversation amongst them, and yet she was quite aware that she must not touch upon that topic this afternoon. Alec cut the Gordian knot for them. He boldly said,—

'Can I speak to you alone, Miss Lucy? I have something to say for your ears only.'

'All right, Mr Flood!' exclaimed Mrs Bramton. 'I have two or three things to look after, and will leave you two together,' and, only too delighted to make her escape, Mrs Bramton withdrew.

'You can guess what I've come to talk about, Lucy,' said Flood, as the door closed. 'I want to speak to you about this quarrel between your father and Lord Ranksborow.'

'That is hardly stating the case correctly,' replied Lucy. 'It is not with my father but with the whole family that the quarrel lies. Have they told you the truth about it? Are you aware that Lord Dartree, a constant and favoured guest, mind, at our house, held us all up to ridicule in the supper-room, at the conclusion of the Wroxeter Ball?'

'Yes, I have heard it,' rejoined Flood quietly, 'and regret it as much as any other member of the Ranksborow family. Poor Dartree has gone to his account, and is no more to be reckoned with in this world. He was not quite himself when he made that foolish speech. Not that, were he alive, I would plead that in his defence. A man must abide by his actions, whether he has taken too much wine or not.'

'He made us generally, and my sister in particular, the laughing-stock of the ballroom,' rejoined Lucy, with tingling cheeks and flashing eyes.

'As I said before,' replied Alec, 'I have nothing to say in his defence. But don't you think you're pursuing a sheer Corsican vendetta against the Cuxwolds? Lord Ranksborow is entirely innocent of uttering one word to your disparagement. You are holding him accountable for his son's words; and, as Mr Bramton has rightly guessed, whether Damocles wins or does not win the Derby, makes a difference so serious to him that I don't mind admitting to you, in confidence, that half the Knightshayes estate must come to the hammer should this their last hope fail them.'

'We can't, Mr Flood, we can't indeed. What papa has said, you may depend upon it he will stick to; he is a man who prides himself upon keeping to his word.'

'No, Lucy, that won't do,' replied Flood. 'We know, indeed everybody knows now, that the horses are your property. I happen to know, moreover, that you came of age six weeks ago, and can do absolutely what you like in this matter. If you choose to say Damocles shall run, he must run, whatever your father may say to the contrary. I only ask you to remember two things—first, that you're ruining Lord Ranksborow, against whom you have personally no grudge; further, that in his ruin you involve that of his son, Jack Cuxwold, who certainly upon one occasion did his best to stand between you and trouble; secondly, you have no idea of the storm of abuse that will descend upon your father's head, should he persist in his determination.'

'I don't know what to do!' cried Lucy. 'I wish poor Uncle Dick had never left his dreadful horses to me. Matilda will never forgive me if I flinch now; and Sir Kenneth—he, too, is as unsparing in his resentment as my father and sister.'

'I can fancy that,' rejoined Flood. 'Sir Kenneth is no friend to any of the Ranksborow family.'

'Stop!' cried Lucy. 'Leave me now; I must have time to think. Tell Captain Cuxwold to ride over

time to think. 'Tell Captain Cuxwold to ride over here and see me himself. He owes us, at all events, some amends for his brother's speech.'

Alec Flood said no more; he was far too practised a diplomatist not to refrain from further words, when he found his point was gained. He bent over Lucy's hand for a moment, then raised it to his lips, said, in a low tone, 'Friends ever!' and disappeared.

CHAPTER XLV.

LUCY ASSERTS HERSELF.

ALEC FLOOD rode back to Knights Hayes in a high state of elation. He had done what, in the vernacular of his set, was termed 'the straight thing,' and, say what he will, man is usually well satisfied with himself when that is the case. Then he had succeeded beyond his expectations. He felt perfectly certain that Lucy would never have told him to send Jack to her, unless she had made up her mind that Damocles should start for the Derby. Further, he would have brought those two together. 'And now,' he said to himself, with a half smile, 'I wash my hands of their affairs from this out: they will get on far better without my meddling.' But if his interview had turned out very satisfactory, it had taken a turn for which Alec Flood was not at all prepared. Keeping his visit to Temple Rising a secret was now no longer possible; and, in Flood's eyes, the interests at stake were so large, that Jack Cuxwold could not attend to Lucy's commands too quickly. Jack Cuxwold's astonishment when he heard the news was something more than great. He could hardly believe it. He had made up his mind that the best part of the old acres must go, and that Bramton would carry out his vow of vengeance to the letter.

'It's awfully good of you, old man,' he said, 'to go over

there and open negotiations ; but when did you ever fail to stand by a pal in difficulties ?'

'Don't talk rot,' rejoined Flood bluntly. 'Just bear this in mind. I have smoothed the way for you, but I can't do any more. The lady declines to treat, you see, except with the principal. Mind you ride over there in good time to-morrow.'

'Yes. I've got a good deal of humble pie to eat, I know.'

'You've got to do nothing of the sort,' replied Alec. 'You've got to apologise for poor Dartree's insulting speech, which you know he never ought to have made, and which I am sure he never would have made, except under the influence of wine. But there's another thing, Jack. Do you recollect our conversation that last night on board ship ?'

'Yes,' rejoined Cuxwold.

'Well, you had better take it seriously into consideration. Lucy Bramton is far the nicer sister of the two, and he will be a fortunate man who wins her for a wife. This is quite disinterested on my part, for if I thought I had the slightest chance myself, I would ask her to-morrow !'

'I couldn't touch upon that at present,' replied Cuxwold. She *is* a nice girl, as I remember,—far too nice to be offered the reversion of a pauper peerage. If she gives us a last chance to emerge from the slough of our difficulties, it's as much as we can expect.'

However, it was settled between the two young men that the Earl should be told nothing of the new hopes that had dawned concerning Damocles, at all events till after Jack's visits to Temple Rising.

Lucy that evening had a hard time of it with her own family. They were naturally boiling over with curiosity to know why Mr Flood had desired a private interview with Lucy. What had he to say ? What did he want. And when she informed them of what Alec Flood had said, their indignation knew no bounds.

'Of course, of course,' said Mr Bramton angrily, taking up a position on the hearthrug, and sticking his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and setting his head defiantly on one side. We give them the best we have, and

'Well, Lucy,' remarked Miss Bramton, 'if you can forget that insulting speech, you have more charity in your composition than I have.'

'The Ranksborows are all supercilious beasts,' said Sir Kenneth, who happened to be staying at Temple Rising. 'They never thought of tendering an apology until it was close upon the verge of the big race, and they find Mr Bramton is in earnest about what he threatened.'

'Still,' replied Lucy, 'I say again this is to punish Lord Ranksborow for something he did not do.'

'He was very insolent to me,' rejoined Mr Bramton. 'And I don't care what you say, I'll have no more shilly-shallying about it. I shall write to the proper people to-morrow, and tell them to take Damocles out of the race.'

Lucy said nothing. She could be very determined when she chose, and she had made up her mind to have her own way in this matter. She would say nothing until she had seen Jack Cuxwold; but she knew that these horses were hers, that she was of age, and that it depended entirely upon herself to say whether they should run or not. Although the nominations stood in Stubber's name, yet the racing world had for the last year regarded the horses as Mr Bramton's property, and it was only quite lately the fact had leaked out that they were really the property of his daughter. Now though her father did not, Lucy Bramton knew perfectly well who were the proper people to write to to strike Damocles out of the Derby. She foresaw exactly what was taking place,—that her father would endeavour to assume the control of her horses, and do what he thought fit. And to guard against that, she had herself written a line by that evening's post to Messrs Weatherby, to say that she had authorised nobody to strike her horses out of their engagements, and that they were to pay no attention to any instructions, except under her own hand.

In the meantime, the discussion went on, although Lucy took no further part in it, and it was finally agreed in the family conclave, that the apology had come far too late, and that the Earl of Ranksborow must take the consequences of the ungentlemanly language it had pleased his son to use at the Wroxeter Ball. Lucy was so quiet

in her manner compared with the rest of her family, that her father had never recognised that she could be much more determined than either her mother or sister when it came to the point. John Bramton had stood to a certain extent in awe of what he termed his wife's 'fantags' all his life, but he looked upon her whims as a mere nothing compared to the wishes and fancies of his daughter Matilda. Although Miss Bramton dexterously concealed it in society, yet in the domestic circle she was gifted with a tongue given to run riot when things were not going to her liking. She stood in not the slightest awe of her parents, and expressed her feelings with a breadth which, though unpleasant, was gratifying to hear in these days of the advancing freedom of woman. Mr Bramton ventured at times to cross swords with his wife—he was somewhat wary even of that encounter—but a downright forcible difference with his elder daughter John Bramton was exceedingly shy of. As he once put it confidentially to a crony,—‘She’s a nice gal Matilda,—good-looking, sensible gal, but I tell you what, Bubbleton, she has her ma’s temper, brewed a trifle over proof. And it’s a real hot ’un when you come to differ with her.’

Now the opinion of his wife, the opinion of Matilda, and also the opinion of Sir Kenneth, all coincided with Mr Bramton’s own, and no gentleman who ever owned a racehorse went to bed more determined to strike a horse out of a race than Mr Bramton did to excise Damocles from the Derby the next day.

Mr Stubber, as well as Messrs Weatherby, was somewhat astonished the next morning by a letter he received from Lucy Bramton. It was very brief; it only reminded him that she was the real owner of the horse, that he was to continue his preparations of the colt for Epsom, and to take instructions from no one but herself concerning him in the future. That Stubber was delighted with the receipt of this letter, it is almost needless to mention. His horse was doing as well as anybody could wish, and let him only be allowed to start at Epsom, and Stubber looked forward to all the glory of leading in the first winner of the Derby he had ever trained. That this

continue his preparations of the colt for Epsom, and to take instructions from no one but herself concerning him in the future. That Stubber was delighted with the receipt of this letter, it is almost needless to mention. His horse was doing as well as anybody could wish, and let him only be allowed to start at Epsom, and Stubber looked forward to all the glory of leading in the first winner of the Derby he had ever trained. That this intelligence was speedily conveyed to Mr Skinner was matter of course, and then once again Tattersall's and the Victoria Club were wondrously puzzled at the shiftness of the betting market. Mr Noel and his friends, acting on the former's information, in their anxiety to save their money, had driven Damocles once more to almost an outside price in the market. Suddenly came the reaction, and Mr Skinner and his friends snapped at every offer they could get against the colt, till he was once more established in the price-list at 6 or 7 to 1. Noel could not understand it. His own information he considered beyond dispute, but he was quite aware that his opponent was not the man to throw a chance away, and it was little likely that he had 'rushed' Damocles in the market in this fashion, unless he also had pretty good grounds for what he was doing. Noel knew that the horse was well, and doing capital work. The question was, did these Bramtons mean him to run at Epsom? According to what he knew, they did not, but Skinner's new tactics pointed to his having information he could rely upon that the horse would start. Mr Noel remarked testily to one of his intimates that it was about the queerest game he had ever seen, and that it was devoutly to be trusted that gentlemen who understood nothing about racing might never own racehorses for the future.

Had a bomb-shell fallen into the breakfast-table at Temple Rising, it could not have created greater consternation than did Lucy's announcement that she expected Captain Cuxwold—they had none of them got into the habit of calling him Lord Dartree as yet—over to see her in the course of the afternoon.

'Well, I couldn't have believed it!' exclaimed Mr

Bramton. 'After the scandalous way in which we have been treated by his family, that that young man should attempt to force his way into our house, beats me, it does.'

'Should have thought he might have waited till he was asked,' sneered Sir Kenneth.

'It's the same old story,' snapped Miss Bramton. 'You were quite right, papa, the only way to touch these people is through their pocket; and, now Lord Ranksborow finds he is likely to pay dear for the insult that was put upon us, he is mean enough to cringe and seek our friendship.'

'You have no business to say that!' exclaimed Lucy warmly. 'Captain Cuxwold is coming here because I told Mr Flood I wished him to come and see me.'

'And I should like to know, miss,' cried Mrs Bramton, 'what reason you have for asking a man we dislike to your father's house?'

'I don't well know how you can dislike a man you never saw,' retorted Lucy; 'at all events, I have something to say to him, and I don't see where else I am to say it.'

'I couldn't have believed it of you; I couldn't indeed!' exclaimed Mr Bramton. 'Asking a man who called your sister—'

'Papa!' suddenly cried Miss Bramton, and Mr Bramton suddenly gave a gulp, as if he had swallowed an orange.

Sir Kenneth's face wore a look of disappointed curiosity. He had never been able to make out what this insulting speech had been precisely. Miss Bramton had sworn her whole family to secrecy on the appellation that had been conferred on her.

'You would surely never be so mean,' continued Matilda, 'to start that horse after all. You won't let her, papa, surely?'

'I have not made up my mind,' rejoined Lucy; 'but I can tell you this: I am of age, and the horse is mine, and I shall certainly do as I think best with my own. Had Lord Dartree lived, Matilda, it would have been different. The insult, remember, was almost as

great to me as to yourself, but the man who uttered it is gone.'

'I can't say, Lucy,' remarked Mr Bramton severely, 'that you are showing much consideration for the feelings of your family. I never thought you, at all events, would turn out a headstrong daughter.'

'I must think for myself on this point,' rejoined Lucy. 'Captain Cuxwold, remember, was very kind to me that time I was at Cairo; and it's hardly fair to punish him for an offence which he did not commit; and, as Mr Flood pointed out the day before yesterday, it is he who will eventually suffer for the words his brother spoke. Secondly, our name will be brought into terrible disrepute if Damocles does not start. All sorts of nasty things will be written against you, papa, for the odium of the horse not running will be put down to you; and lastly, had poor Uncle Dick lived, I'm sure his earnest wish would have been that Damocles might win the Derby.'

'You must go your own way; henceforth I wash my hands of you,' retorted Mr Bramton feebly. And then the conclave broke up, with a tacit understanding that none of them, at all events, would extend the hand of friendship to the Honourable Captain Cuxwold.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DAMOCLES SHALL RUN.

JACK CUXWOLD started for his visit to Temple Rising in due course, but he by no means liked the doing of this thing that he had to do. It was all very well to apologise for poor Dartree's reckless words, but it was another thing to come asking a favour at the same time. Such assistance as he had been able to give Lucy Bramton at Cairo, he had been only too pleased to bestow; but that he should ever make capital of it, and ask her, in return for such trifle, to do him a great favour, had never

crossed his mind. That a Cuxwold could possibly look for assistance from a niece of Dick Bramton—the half bookmaker, half owner of racehorses—was a thing Jack Cuxwold would have derided. Yet now it was so ; and the last chance of Knightshayes escaping from the vultures that already crowded the air, lay in the decision of this girl of one-and-twenty. The fiat of herself and family had gone forth, and Knightshayes, metaphorically, was given to the crows, or, to speak more prosaically, the broad acres of the Ranksborows must go to those from whom they had borrowed moneys—not wisely, but too freely. It wasn't a pleasant task that lay before him. He recollected the bright, bonny English girl that stood before him on the deck of the steamer, as he pressed her hand in bidding her adieu. He had looked forward, many a time, to what fun it would be their meeting again ; but there seemed to be very little fun about it now. True, he had no fear of being met in any hostile spirit. It was little likely that any woman, much less a girl like Lucy Bramton, would send for him to pour forth the vials of her wrath on his head for the offending of his dead brother ; but he had looked forward to meeting her so differently. He was to have been the prince descending from his platform to welcome the humble maiden he had met in foreign lands ; and now, he was riding forth as the bankrupt noble, humbly imploring Lucy to, if possible, save him from the effects of the improvidence of his ancestors.

He had argued it out more than once, and he argued it out yet again, as he rode slowly towards Temple Rising. No, the more he looked at it the less he liked it. Nothing was more repugnant to him than this visit, and yet he felt that it was his bounden duty to make it, for the sake of his family.

It *was* a chance—only a chance, if you like—but the last chance of averting the final crash. To say that those words which his brother had uttered were a mistake, words uttered when his brother was not quite himself, and which all his family deeply regretted, was easy enough. But it was difficult to ask a favour on the top of this. As far as he remembered Lucy Bramton, she

was a girl to whom it would be easier to make this request than to many. But Jack was far too much a man of the world not to know how circumstances change people, and that the heiress of West Barkshire might prove very different from the pleasant, unassuming girl he had met with in the land of the Pharaohs. He had Alec Flood's word for it that she was not changed. But ah! he sighed, with a dreary smile, Alec wanted nothing from her, little thinking that Alec had asked for far more than he dreamt of doing to-day, and had ridden home with his petition rejected. He reached Temple Rising at last, jumped off his hack, rang the bell, and inquired for Miss Lucy Bramton.

It takes a good deal to stagger the *aplomb* of a light dragoon, more especially when dealing with flunkeydom; but even Jack Cuxwold was staggered at the extraordinary interest he seemed to excite in the butler and one or two footmen, who invariably paraded upon the arrival of a visitor at Temple Rising. In the first place, Jack was a hero from the Soudan, reputed to have slain heaps of 'them there Arabs' with his own hand; and, secondly, it is not to be supposed that all the household were not perfectly aware of the feud that existed between their master and Knightshayes. The tragic death of Lord Dartree, and the sudden accession of 'that there captive of the Arabs' to his place, had produced endless discussion in the servants' hall; and that the wild warriors of the Soudan tattooed their captives, had been most emphatically laid down by the butler.

In Barkshire Jack Cuxwold was regarded as a hero, and wondrous were the tales told of his escape from the Arabs, and the numbers he had slain in achieving it. The servants at Temple Rising were all agog to get a peep at the man who, in West Barkshire eyes, was the hero of the Soudan. However, Cuxwold, after some slight delay, is ushered into the pretty morning-room, and there he finds Lucy awaiting him. There was considerable constraint about their manner to begin with; but, for a wonder, the Lancer is the first to recover his *sang froid*.

'I should never have ventured to intrude upon you

Miss Bramton,' he said, in a low tone, 'if Alec Flood had not assured me that you would see me. As it is, the first thing I have to do is to apologise for my poor brother's unfortunate speech at Wroxeter. I am sure he was not expressing his real feelings, and what he said was wrung from him because he lost his temper at being rallied by Anson and the rest of them about his attentions to your sister.'

'I heard what he said, and nothing can excuse his words,' replied Lucy.

'I don't pretend that I can. I don't even pretend that its being never meant for your ears was much palliation of the offence; but he's gone, poor fellow, and I can only urge what little there is in his defence. Remember how often men talk at random after a few glasses of wine, and say what they never seriously intended.'

'Captain Cuxwold,' said Lucy quietly, 'you were very kind to me last year at Cairo, and I have not forgotten it; but can you honestly say that this apology would have been tendered us, even thus late in the day, if your father had not been so heavily interested in the running of Damocles at Epsom?'

'I can say this,' replied Jack, 'that we should probably never have ventured to come near Temple Rising if you had not given me the opening you did; but, now that I am here, I can say honestly that I am very glad to have the opportunity of expressing our great regret at what has occurred, and to assure you that it has never been our habit to ridicule your family.'

'Lord Ranksborow, I am told, will win an enormous sum of money if Damocles should win.'

'Yes,' replied Jack.

'And yourself?'

'Nothing; I haven't a shilling on the race,' said Cuxwold.

'And—I don't want to pry into your affairs—but is it true that Lord Ranksborow is in great need of a lot of money?'

'It's no great secret, and I daresay all the county know we've nearly come to the end of our tether; but

remember you promise that it shall never pass your lips that I admitted it to you.'

Lucy nodded.

'Then nothing but Damocles winning the Derby can possibly avert our smash; there'll be nothing for it but to sell half the property, shut up Knightshayes, and go abroad.'

For a few minutes Lucy was silent. She felt she must make up her mind for good now; and, on the other hand, if she thought Jack Cuxwold was going to say a word more on the subject, she was grievously mistaken. Jack had been very straightforward about it all. He had answered her questions, and made no disguise of what a great thing it would be for his father, and, of course, indirectly for himself, that Damocles should win the Derby, but he was not going to plead with her for the horse's starting.

Suddenly she raised her head.

'Tell Lord Ranksborow,' she said, 'from me, *Damocles shall run for the Derby*, and that if he wins I shall expect you all to call at Temple Rising. Good-bye;' and Lucy extended her hand, in token that their interview was ended.

'It is very very good of you,' he murmured, as he pressed the small palm within his own, and in another minute or two he was outside the house.

'Alec's right,' he muttered, as he rode home; 'that's a girl in a hundred. If she hadn't such a lot of money, I'm blessed if I wouldn't try my luck. However, it's no good thinking about that. We must see what Damocles can do to put us on our legs to start with. This will be great news for the governor.'

When Alec Flood heard Jack's story, he said quietly,—

'I thought it would come out all right. The speed and gameness of one horse saved your paying that unconscionable hotel bill that old Front de Bœuf had made out for you, and we must simply trust that Damocles will prove as good a horse to the Earl as The Mummer was to you. There is only one thing I hope.'

'What's that?' inquired Jack.

'That you'll stick to what Lucy Bramton told you.'

Don't go near Temple Rising till after the Derby, and then, win or lose, your father *must* call. He can say then what he cannot quite say now.'

'I understand,' said Jack. 'An apology now would look as if made with the one object.'

'Exactly. Another thing, don't you suppose that girl has got things quite her own way. When you determine to do a thing which meets the direct disapproval of all your family, the domestic circle is apt to get a little unpleasant. Leave her to play her cards in her own way.'

'Right you are, old man,' said Jack; 'but I must tell my father. He is very down in his luck just now, and though nothing may come of it, still the knowledge that Damocles is to run will be like a gleam of sunshine to him.'

'Not a doubt about it,' replied Alec, laughing. 'Like the war-horse, he will scent the battle from afar, and be sanguine as ever of success.'

Flood was perfectly right. No sooner was it imparted to the Earl that Damocles positively would start, than that veteran plunger's eye sparkled, and he became quite as confident of victory as he had ever been in his palmiest days. But he quite saw the wisdom of adhering strictly to the programme that Lucy Bramton had laid down. He thoroughly relied upon the young lady's word, but it was a ticklish business even yet, and any movement on his part might be a wrong one. Much better to do nothing than make any such mistake.

Mr Stubber, in the meanwhile, has been lifted into the seventh heaven. He has received a letter from Miss Lucy Bramton, in which she informs him that these horses—as indeed the sporting papers had previously informed him—are her property solely, and that he is to take orders from nobody else concerning them; that Damocles is to run at Epsom, and, she trusts, win, but that the colt is to run, well or not well. He naturally writes off the news to the commissioner, and winds up his letter with,—
'It's all right now; the horse never was better, and I'll walk in at the head of a Derby winner just for once; you see if I don't.'

It wanted now only about a week to the great race, and Mr Noel was more than ever disconcerted at the rush there was to get on Damocles. What it was he did not know ; even the public seemed at last to have caught the infection. What they knew, and what they were going on, Mr Noel could not conceive ; but one thing was quite certain, that the backers had quite tired out the layers, that Damocles had quite recovered his pride of place in the market, and bid fair to start one of the hottest favourites for the great race ever known. As for Skinner, his commissions seemed inexhaustible. Curious to see what they would close at, Mr Noel proffered 2 to 1 against Damocles, towards the close of that afternoon. It was the shortest price that the colt had yet touched ; but Skinner shot him at once.

‘I’ll take it in hundreds, Noel,’ he cried, ‘and will go on at the price, if you like !’ But Mr Noel shook his head. He was beginning bitterly to repent of his change of tactics. He had begun by betting heavily against the horse, then, taking advantage of the scare produced by the horse’s rumoured illness, which he had himself brought about, he had turned round and become one of its heaviest supporters. Then, acting on the exclusive information which he had derived from John Bramton’s letter, he had again turned round, and ranged himself against the horse’s bitterest opponents. Mr Noel began to be dimly conscious that he had made a fool of himself, and changed sides once too often. Why had he ever suffered himself to be gulled into supporting that specious scheme of his precious nephew’s ? If it hadn’t been for that, he would never have got John Bramton’s letter, and would have acted quite differently. True, Mr Napper had only acted in accordance with his uncle’s orders ; but when their schemes go awry, men are apt to forget that such schemes were of their own prompting, and cast round upon whose shoulders it is most feasible to lay the blame.

CHAPTER XLVII.

WINNING THE DERBY.

FIRM as a rock at the termination of his two-year-old career had Damocles been in the betting for the Derby, and with good warrant from his performances; tossed like a cork hither and thither as the Spring drew on, till even those wiliest in turf lore and the vagaries of the betting market shook their heads, and said there was either something wrong with the horse or with those connected with him. Suddenly both those reputed clever, and that great general public who know nothing further than what the calendar teaches them, but who, for all that, are much oftener right than those who have obtained '*information*,' were astounded at finding Damocles once more installed first favourite for the Derby, and with so much money behind him that any shaking of his position before the race seemed most improbable. There were sinister rumours about the horse, and many were the whispers that 'It had been a pretty game, and the young lady's friends ought to be ashamed of themselves.' It was, of course, now generally known that Damocles was the property of a lady. Nobody for one moment connected Lucy Bramton with any fraud or wrong-doing; while as for John Bramton, the racing world had already come to the conclusion that his being a rogue on the turf was all nonsense,—that, even if he wished to be one, he knew so little about the mysteries of that famous pastime, 'that he didn't know how,' and therefore his unfortunate trainer fell in for all the odium of the situation. Yes, this was Stubber's doing. Stubber had pulled the strings. Stubber, for many years, had delighted in playing the game of thimble-rig with the public. Stubber, as of yore, had served them up a mock favourite in Lucifer, and pretended that Damocles had gone amiss, when the colt had never been sick or sorry. Stubber was accountable for the whole unsavoury business that had been pursued in connection with the horse, and it

was much to be desired that that scoundrel Stubber should profit nothing by all his hanky-panky tricks.

Poor Stubber! He was an honest enough hard-working trainer, but it had been his misfortune to have a few masters to whom racehorses were nothing but instruments for gaming. He had said once before in melancholy tones to a few of his cronies, that he was 'tired to death of getting hosses ready for races, for which it was never intended they should run.' And now, poor man, he was accused of manipulating Damocles in the turf market, a thing with which we know he had nothing whatever to do. But the trainer very often bears the blame upon these occasions; and should, at the last moment, the horse not justify the confidence displayed in him, it's odds that the jockey also is deemed to have contributed to his defeat. In a case like this, the actual result of the race matters very little. Win or lose, the public are wont to believe that those connected with the horse that has been knocked about in the market after the manner of Damocles, have made their money out of it; and the popular verdict of approval or disapproval, whether they cheer the winner, or receive his victory with a groan, depends principally upon how far his triumph has profited that great force—the British public. They are a tremendous force, this British public, and guided in the main by a marvellous sense of fair play,—apt always to identify themselves with the weaker side. In opposition to the authorities, if they have the slightest idea that there has been undue exercise of the prerogative. Their appreciation of pluck—of what I must term 'straight going,' is extraordinary. Few who ever witnessed it can forget the cheer that met the late Marquis of Hastings as he walked into the ring on Ascot Heath after that, for him, disastrous Derby of '67, his face—cool, calm, dauntless as ever—leaving no clue to the spectator of what a terrible inroad into a fine property the great race at Epsom of ten days before had resulted in.

The Derby week has arrived at last, and the market indicates that Damocles is as well as his admirers could desire. Even Mr Noel is quite convinced now that he

will run, although his name is not yet mentioned among the arrivals at Epsom. Noel has resigned himself to lose his money. The bookmaker does not like this—nobody does, for the matter of that—but still it is all in the way of business, and it by no means signifies ruin to him. Lord Ranksborow's case is very different: the colt's victory for him means salvation.

As Flood had surmised, Lucy Bramton had a hard time of it with her family, when she asserted her intention of doing what she liked with her own. Miss Bramton and Sir Kenneth strongly opposed it, and, urged by them, Mr Bramton was very obstinate about the matter. But there was no contesting her right, and Mr Bramton was quite aware now that to give orders in opposition to his daughter's, would be to make himself ridiculous. Driven to bay, she told him what she had written to Messrs Weatherby, and also to Stubber.

'It would be useless interfering, papa,' she said. 'Messrs Weatherby will not strike Damocles out of his engagements for anybody but myself; and now I have told Stubber the horse is to go to Epsom, you may depend upon it he will go. You will all thank me for it afterwards, and you, papa, as much as anybody.'

'Very kind of you to take care of our reputations, my dear,' said Miss Bramton; 'but people are not so forgiving, unless they have some *personal* interest in making friends again.'

'I don't understand you,' rejoined Lucy.

'Oh, yes, you do,' said Miss Bramton. 'You know very well that if you had not seen something of Captain Cuxwold at Cairo, you would not have passed over the insult offered to your family.'

Miss Bramton had taken care, in the interim between Cuxwold's visit and the Derby week, to plant several such pin-pricks, but that did not prevent her, any more than the rest of the family, from going up to town for the great race, and taking advantage of the capital box in the grand-stand which Lucy had commissioned Alec Flood to procure for them. So, in spite of the family jars which had preceded it, when the saddling-bell rang for the Derby, the Bramtons were all there to see.

The contest itself proved as prosaic an affair as ever was witnessed for the great race of the world. Damocles got well off, and always held a good place; got safely round Tattenham Corner, and when, fairly in the straight, his jockey brought him to the front, the battle seemed won. It was not, however, destined to be quite so hollow a victory as it then looked, for the horse was called upon to stall off two determined challenges between the half distance and the winning-post. But he ran the longest, and eventually won very cleverly by a good length.

There was an ominous silence in the ring, which proclaimed that that fraternity, as a body, were no winners by the result. Not that they will not, even when losers, often cheer a popular owner's triumph. But in this case Mr John Bramton was unknown to them. They only knew that he did not bet, and that the winner had, for some inscrutable reasons, been played great pranks with in the betting. But a cheer did break out at last, and what gave rise to it was this. It was suddenly remembered that though the horse figured in the card as the property of Mr Stubber, he really belonged to Miss Lucy Bramton; and then, as Stubber proudly led his charge in, there burst forth a ringing cheer for the first lady who had ever carried off the Blue Ribbon of the turf.

As for Lucy, she witnessed the race with mixed feelings. She was glad her horse had won. She was glad to think that Knightshayes was rescued from impatient creditors. Jack Cuxwold might never care for her, but he could never forget in days to come that he owed house and lands almost to her. And then the 'something bitter,' of a peculiarly feminine nature, was mingled in the cup of her triumph. They *were* such ugly colours. She felt quite sure that all the ladies of her acquaintance, when they congratulated her, would supplement it with the exclamation of 'What a hideous jacket! Do, pray, Miss Bramton, change your colours for something prettier.' She couldn't explain that, though urged not to do so, on the ground that changing her colours meant changing her luck, she had fully determined to adopt some prettier combination, but that her feeling for her poor Uncle Dick prevented it. She knew, had he lived,

how proud he would have been to see his old racing banner first pass the post on the Derby day. One person appeared in the box to tender his congratulations, whom Lucy was very glad to see, and that was Alec Flood.

'Did you hear them cheer you?' he observed, the first congratulations over.

'But they always do that at the Derby, don't they?'

'Generally,' he rejoined; 'but on this occasion they were cheering you personally, as the only lady who has ever won it.'

Lucy laughed merrily, as she rejoined,—

'I had no idea I was rendering myself famous.'

'Yes, you will find plenty about yourself in the papers for the next two or three days.'

'And Lord Ranksborow?' inquired Lucy, in a low whisper.

'You have saved him. He has won an enormous stake.* You see, he never laid any of his money off. It wasn't worth while. It was a case of neck or nothing. And as for Mr Stubber, it's the proudest moment of his life. I've just been told that he is in the trainers' stand, distributing unlimited champagne to everybody who likes to call for it. But I must be off now. Do you stay in town, or are you going back to Temple Rising?'

'We shall remain in town for the next month or six weeks,' replied Lucy, 'and then go home again.'

And Alec Flood, having elicited the information which he had pledged himself to obtain, shook hands with the Bramtons, and departed.

Alec had promised Jack to discover the intentions of the family about returning to Temple Rising."

There were two other spectators who had looked on at the race with feverish interest. These were the Earl of Ranksborow and Jack. Clad in deep mourning, for it was only some six or seven weeks since he had laid his eldest son in the grave, the Earl had taken up a retired position, and rather shrank from recognition.

* No such betting was possible in '84 and '85, but twenty years ago yearling books were not uncommon—20,000 to 300 the recognised bet.

He had gambled boldly many a time, indeed had been a plunger from the days of his youth up, but this was his Bosworth field. Like the crook-backed Richard, he had set his crown upon the die, and, by heavens, it had come off! He had won such a sum of money as, even in the days of heavy betting, had rarely been taken out of the Ring. Jack had looked on by his side, and personally won a mere trifle on the race; but he knew, nobody better, what the victory of Damocles meant. He knew that Knightshayes was saved; and though quite aware that many people would prophesy that the Earl would never receive his money,—that he had fairly broke the Ring, and could not expect it, Jack knew better. He knew quite enough about racing to know how often that had been said falsely,—that the Ring, as a body, always settled, and that, though here and there a man might fail temporarily to meet his liabilities, as a rule they were more to be depended on than most business men. What puzzled Jack most was when and how he was next to meet Lucy Bramton? He was bound to call and thank her as soon as he possibly could. No man more thoroughly recognised the great obligation under which he lay to her; but he felt that he should meet her on somewhat different grounds this time. And then he wondered how she would receive him. Surely she must have some kind of feeling for him, or she would never have condoned his brother's imprudent speech. He did not want the girl for her money, although, like any other man of the world, he could not be blind to the advantages it brought with it. Till the victory of Damocles, if he married, that was a *sine qua non*. Now, though highly desirable, it was no longer a necessity. That the Ranksborow peerage could still stand much buttressing in that respect, he was quite aware; but before the Derby, it had looked like crumbling to the ground.

When he met Alec Flood that evening at the Heliotrope, and heard his report, he resolved, at all events, to call on the Bramtons without delay, and he thought it expedient, in the first instance, to write a note and request permission to do so.

‘Nothing succeeds like success.’

And when the Bramtons found themselves generally congratulated, and made a fuss with on having won the Derby, they began upon the whole to think perhaps after all that Lucy had acted rightly, and to enlarge upon charity towards their neighbours, and the not carrying of animosities beyond the grave. John Bramton indeed found himself quite a man of importance, and, much to his astonishment, was more than once complimented upon the way he had out-manceuvred a crew of blacklegs, who had intended putting his horse *hors de combat*, by pretending to chime in with their plans. John Bramton didn't quite understand what they meant, but he did understand that on this subject silence was discretion, and discovered that an expressive wink was a rejoinder suitable to the occasion, which usually sent the speaker away like a man who had solved an abstruse conundrum. As for Lucy Bramton, nothing puzzled her more than the enormous number of letters that followed her Epsom triumph. The begging letters that poured in upon her came like a heavy snowstorm, and would have made a considerable hole even in the Earl of Ranksborow's winnings. As Lucy said, 'I had no idea of the obligations of winning the Derby.' It seems a fourth of the churches in England are out of repair, and look to me to assist in their restoration, while as for the widows, orphans, and gentlemen of university education who "are in want of temporary assistance to enable them to make a fresh start in life," their name is legion, and I am sure the stakes for the Derby would never suffice to set them on their legs.'

CONCLUSION.

NOT only with John Bramton, but through the whole family, a decided reaction had set in in favour of Lucy's conduct. The thing was done now, for good or for evil, and Matilda Bramton saw that it was decidedly advisable to make the best of it. If she was a little sharp in her

temper, Miss Bramton was wise in her generation. She had had bitter provocation, and certainly would have avenged herself had the control of Damocles rested with her; while the way Lucy behaved at the finish strengthened her suspicions that there was a tacit understanding between her and Jack Cuxwold. Matilda was very fond of her sister, and a worldly-minded young woman to boot, and was not at all insensible to the social advantage of having a sister who, in due course, would become Countess of Ranksborow. She accordingly gave the word to Sir Kenneth, and though that somewhat narrow-minded baronet was wont to be implacable in his animosities, yet he had by this time discovered that his *fiancée* had a will of her own. Add to which, it was no use protesting against accomplished facts, and therefore the baronet was quite content to let bygones be bygones; indeed, there was open speculation in the family as to whether the Knightshayes people would make overtures of reconciliation. Lucy, of course, was constantly appealed to on that point; she declined to give any opinion, until one morning at breakfast she remarked casually,—

‘Captain Cuxwold has written me a line that he will call here at three o’clock this afternoon.’

‘Well, I think,’ said Mr Bramton, a little pompously, ‘he might have sent that information to me.’

‘Don’t be a goose, you dear old papa!’ exclaimed Matilda, resolved to be thoroughly sisterly, at all events; ‘he wants to see Lucy in the first place, to thank her. All the world knows now it’s her horse, and no one knows better than Captain Cuxwold that he is indebted to Lucy for Damocles going to Epsom.’

‘I think,’ said Lucy, ‘he will want to see you all; but perhaps I had better see him in the first place.’

And so it was settled, as so many of our social comedies are, that when Captain Cuxwold called, Lucy should receive him, and that the family should drop in promiscuously, as if unaware that there was anybody particular in the drawing-room.

True to his time, Jack made his appearance in Stanhope Place, where the Bramtons had rented a house for

the remainder of the season. Lucy rose to welcome him. As Jack shook hands, he congratulated her on her success.

'Not,' he continued, 'that my congratulations are worth having, for they can but sound thoroughly selfish in your ears.'

'Hush!' replied the girl; 'no more of that. I was only too glad to pay service for service.'

'You saved us from ruin,' replied Jack, in a low voice, 'and no thanks I can express are adequate—'

'Stop!' she interrupted, a little imperiously; 'I won't listen to another word of thanks. It is quite understood between us, if you have it in your power to do me a good turn, you will. Well, perhaps I shall ask you some day. In the first place, I shall expect you to make friends with my people. You have never seen them as yet, remember.'

'But that I shall hope to do now,' said Cuxwold.

'Now,' she continued, 'sit down and tell me all about yourself. Mr Flood tells me you led a life of wonderful adventure in the Soudan, and that your escape from the Arabs was a most ludicrous stratagem. I want to hear all about it.'

Once more Jack found himself recounting how he had been picked up for dead by the Halawins; how he eventually laughed at the beard of Mohammed Sebekh; and if he had said nothing about the episode of Zelnè at Knightshayes, it was still less likely he would allude to it in Stanhope Place. By the time he had finished, the family had gradually sauntered into the room, and Jack was rapidly on excellent terms with all of them, with, perhaps, the exception of Sir Kenneth, who being blessed with a very in-expansive disposition, took, as his friends said, 'a deal of knowing.'

A few days afterwards the Earl of Ranksborow called, and expressed his great regret for all that had occurred, and the reconciliation was general, although the peer rather winced when John Bramton, with a wink and a chuckle, said,—

'I say, my lord, you'd have bought a cheap horse from

me if you had got Damocles on your terms that day you first came over to Temple Rising.'

Both the Ranksborows and the Bramtons still lingered on in town till far into July, and by that time there were very few concerned who had not quite made up their minds about what would be the end of the Damocles-Derby, as far as Jack and Lucy Bramton were concerned. Matilda said she had guessed it, before she ever set eyes on the Lancer. And as for the Ladies Cuxwold, they were quite aware it was impending, and thought it would all do very nicely. This was just as well, for Jack was given to going his own way, whether his family liked it or no.

One evening in July, when the trees in Hyde Park were clothed in their fullest foliage, when not a breath was stirring, and the moon flooded the whole town with her queenly light, Lucy and Jack stood out on the balcony in Stanhope Place, and gazed on, perhaps, the most picturesque park in England. They had lingered in town far longer than they had intended, these two families, for was there not once again gold galore in the coffers of the spendthrift house of Ranksborow? while thrifty John Bramton, had he not always a warm balance at his bankers? There had been merry days at Ascot, where the gentlemen had bet only to amuse themselves, and not with the feverish thirst of gambling; afternoons at Hurlingham; dinners at Richmond and many a pleasant garden-party, both in and out of the metropolis; but now it was all to come to an end, and both families were about to wend their way back to Berkshire. Jack had never spoken outright, nor did it seem to occur to anybody, even including Lucy, that there was any necessity for his doing so. If a thorough understanding did not exist between those two, well then appearances can never be relied on again; but this evening, as they stood looking over the park from the Bayswater Road end of Stanhope Place, it did occur to Jack that the tacit engagement existing between them ought to be properly formulated.

'What a jolly season it has been,' he observed. 'If I live to be a hundred, I shall never expect to live two such

months again. It only wants one thing more ; you know what I mean, Lucy. Once more I'm a beggar. I am begging this time more earnestly than I have ever done yet. You know what I would ask. Will you give me this?' and as he spoke, Jack imprisoned Lucy's little hand within his own.

The girl looked straight out at the moonlight for a minute or two before she answered, and then said,—

'Yes, Jack, if you're quite sure you want it, it's yours.'

Jack's arm stole round her waist, and as his lips met hers, I think he felt that the London season had no further gift to shower on his head.

As for Mr Napper, he escaped better than he deserved to do. Mr Pecker, having ascertained that Tom Robbins was an arrant impostor, and also that Mr Napper was really nothing but an understrapper in the firm he pretended to represent, had not deemed it worth while to expose him to his employers. And as for Tom Robbins, to the end of his days he enjoyed a certain celebrity amongst his fellows as having, in the horse's most up and down days, positively maintained that Damocles would win the Derby. It was two or three years afterwards that the Earl told Skinner, on one of his periodical visits to Knightshayes, the real history of that famous Derby, and how very much Lady Dartree had had finally to say to it.

The sagacious commissioner shook his head as he replied,—

'Ah! my lord, ladies shouldn't be allowed to own race-horses—the Jockey Club ought to see to it. They are too emotional, too impulsive. What a business this Damocles was,—puzzled the cleverest men in the ring; and the grandest *coup* I ever planned was as near as possible bowled over because a young man was overheard to make a rude remark about a young woman, instead of asking her to marry him.'

Anyone that has read the numerous narratives of the Soudan campaign, and studied the maps, must come to the conclusion that the advance from Korti was admir-

ably planned, and infinitely superior to that from Suakim and Berber, advocated by Gordon. That it was too late, was due to the miserable vacillation of a Government that reckoned party and politics of more account than human life or the honour of their country.

THE END.

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