THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE AND THE HEIR APPARENT

BY

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Table of Contents

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CHAPTER I.

LORD FROGMORE was about sixty when his step-brother, John Parke, his heir presumptive, announced to him one day his desire to marry. John was thirty-five, the son of another mother, with whom, however, Lord Frogmore had always lived in the best intelligence. A more indulgent elder brother could not be. He had never himself married, or even thought of doing so, so far as anybody knew. He had considered John's interests in everything. Had he been his father instead of his elder brother he could not have been more thoughtful. Whether perhaps it was John's advantage he was thinking of when he remained unmarried was another matter, though you would have supposed that was the elderly peer's only notion to hear how John's mother spoke of it. At all events it was very much to John Parke's advantage. His creditors did not press him, his tailor and he were the best friends in the world, everything was in his favor in life, and in London, where even his little extravagancies were greatly encouraged and smiled upon. Heir presumptive, the Honorable John Parke: that one line in the "Peerage" made life very smooth for John.

Lord Frogmore was not, however, so entirely actuated by consideration for his brother as his stepmother thought. He was a man who took, and had taken all his life, very great care of himself. Whatever was his reason for not marrying, it was not on account of his brother John. No doubt he was aware that in all probability his brother would be his heir: but he did not dwell on that thought, or indeed contemplate the necessity of an heir at all. He took great care of his health, which was perfect, and had a system of life which secured him the utmost possible comfort and pleasure with

the least possible trouble. A man who has no family to interfere with his liberty, plenty of money, perfect control of his own time and actions, and no duties to speak of, can make himself exceedingly comfortable when he sets his mind to it, and this was what Lord Frogmore had done.

He was, however, a little startled but much more amused when John announced to him his intentions. It was at the beginning of the season, before as yet Mr. Parke could have been endangered by any of the blandishments of society, and Lord Frogmore's mind, which was a very lively one, made a sweep over the country houses at which he knew his brother to have been staying. "Do I know the lady?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eye. He had not a very high opinion of his brother John, in point of intellect at least, and he immediately leapt to the conclusion that it was not John's intention so much as the lady's which had decided this important step.

"I don't think so," said John. "She is of a good family, but very fond of the country, and they don't come much to town. She is a Miss Ravelstone, of Grocombe—Yorkshire people—perhaps you may never even have heard the name."

"No, I can't say I have ever heard the name," said Lord Frogmore, with his face lengthening: for there is this unconscious arrogance in people who belong to what is called society that it seems to them as if it was the same as not to exist at all, if you are not at once recognized and identified by the mention of your name.

"No," said John with something of a blush, "I did not expect you would. Her father has got a nice little estate, but they don't much mind society. There's several brothers. I don't suppose I

shall have very much money with her. They're chiefly a hunting family," John said.

"Well, that is no harm. But it's a pity if there is no money," said Lord Frogmore calmly. "You have not money enough yourself to make you independent of that. What do you mean to do?"

Lord Frogmore looked with great composure at John, who in his turn looked very blank at his brother. John was very much more warmly conscious of being Frogmore's heir than Frogmore was. He had taken it for granted, though not without cold sensations, that Frogmore would do something, nay, much for him in this emergency. The old gentleman would feel that John was fulfilling a duty to the common family which he himself (thank heaven!) had never taken the trouble to do. John felt indeed that Frogmore ought to be grateful to him for marrying, which was clearly a duty as he was almost the last of the race. Lord Frogmore saw through this with very lively perceptions, but it amused him to play a little on his brother's fears.

"You will wish to get an appointment of some sort or another," he said. "It is a thing not very easy to get, but still we must see what can be done for you. But I don't know how you are to pull through those examinations which are necessary for everything, John."

John kept silence for a time with a very disconcerted countenance, then he burst forth almost with an explosion. "I thought you would have been pleased, Frogmore——"

"I am not displeased: you are old enough to judge for yourself, and to choose for yourself. Of course, I am delighted that you should be happy," said Lord Frogmore with his bland smile which

always took the fortitude out of John. But when he had reduced the poor fellow almost to a jelly, and made his purpose and his prospects look equally impossible, which was not difficult to do, the elder brother relented: or else it would be better to say he did for John what he had always intended to do, notwithstanding that he could not resist the temptation of turning him outside in. He inquired into the antecedents, or rather into the family of Miss Ravelstone, for she had no antecedents, happily for herself—and discovered that there was at least nothing against them if they were scarcely of the caste of those who usually gave heirs to Frogmore. Her father was a squire in Yorkshire though but of small estate; whose family had been Ravelstones of Grocombe long before the Parkes had ever been heard of. Unfortunately ancient family does not always give refinement or elevation either of mind or manners, and horses, though most estimable animals and the favorite pursuit of the English aristocracy, have still less influence of that description. Horses were the devotion, the vocation, and more or less the living of the Ravelstone family. From father to son all the men of the house were absorbed in the cultivation, the production, the worship of that noble animal. Women there were none in the house save Miss Letitia, who was only so far of the prevailing persuasion that she was an admirable horsewoman. But in her heart she never desired to see a horse again, so long as she lived. She had heard them talked of so long and so much that she hated the very name. The stable talk and the hunting talk were a weariness to her. Her mind was set on altogether different things. To get into society and to make some sort of figure in the world was what she longed for and aspired to. The county society was all she knew of, and that was at first the limit of her wishes. But these desires rose to higher levels after awhile as will hereafter be seen. She had as little prospect of admission into the elevated society of the county

as she had of access to the Queen's court at the moment when kind fate called her forth from her obscurity.

This happened in the following way. A very kind and good-natured family of the neighborhood, one of the few county people who knew the Ravelstones, had as usual a party for the Doncaster races. It was not a good year. There were no horses running which excited the general expectation, nothing very good looked for, and various misfortunes had occurred in the Sillingers' usual circle. Some were ill and some were in mourning, and some had lost money—more potent reasons for refraining from their usual festivities than the buying of oxen or even the marrying of wives—and the party at Cuppland was reduced in consequence below its usual numbers. It was then that Lady Sillinger, always good-natured, suggested to her daughters that they should ask "Tisch"—which was the very unlucky diminution by which Letitia was known. Poor Tisch had few pleasures in life. She had no mother to take her about—hardly even an aunt. She would enjoy the races for their own sake, the family being so horsey—and she could come in nobody's way. The Sillinger girls were young and pretty and careless, quite unconcerned about the chance of anyone coming in their way, and very sure that Tisch Ravelstone was the last person in the world to fear as a rival. They agreed to the invitation with the utmost alacrity. Poor Tisch never went anywhere. They were as pleased to give her a holiday as if it had been of some advantage to themselves. And Letitia came much excited and very grateful, with one new dress and something done to each of the old ones to make them more presentable. The result was not very satisfactory among all the fresh toilettes from London and Paris which the Sillingers and their friends had for the races, but Letitia had the good sense to wear dresses of subdued colors which were not much remarked.

She was not pretty. She had light hair without color enough in it to be remarkable, and scanty in volume—hair that never could be made to look anything. Her nose was turned up a little at the tip, and was slightly red when the weather was cold. Her lips were thin. She herself was thin, with an absence of roundness and softness which is even more disadvantageous than the want of a pretty face. She was said by everybody to be marked out for an old maid. So it may easily be perceived that Lady Sillinger was right when she said that poor Tisch would come in nobody's way.

On the other hand, John Parke was a very eligible person, highly presentable, and Lord Frogmore's heir presumptive, a man about town who knew everybody and who never could have been expected in the ordinary course of affairs to be aware of the existence of such a homely person as Tisch Ravelstone. He did not indeed notice her at all except to say good-morning when they met, and good-night when she joined the procession of ladies with candlesticks going to bed, until the third day. On that fatal morning, before the party set out for the Races, Mr. Parke had an accident. He twisted his foot upon the slippery *parquet* of the breakfast-room, which was only partially covered by the thick Turkey carpet; and though the twist was supposed not to be serious, it prevented him from accompanying the party. He was very much annoyed by this *contretemps*, but there was nothing for it but to submit. Before Lady Sillinger set out for Doncaster she had everything arranged for his comfort, so far as it could be foreseen. He was put on a sofa in the library, with a table by his elbow covered with all the morning papers, with the last English novels out of Mudie's box, and the last yellow books from Paris which had reached the country. There was an inkstand, also a blotting book, pens and pencils—everything a disabled man would be supposed to want.

“I would stay to take care of you,” said kind Lady Sillinger, “but Sir Thomas——”

“Oh, don’t think of such a thing,” said John, “I shall be very comfortable.”

They all came to pity and console him before they drove away—the girls in their pretty dresses, the men all spruce and fresh. He felt it a little hard upon him that after having been invited specially for the Races he should have to stay at home, and he felt very angry with the silly fashion, as he thought it for the moment, of those uncovered floors and slippery polished boards. “What the blank did people have those things for?” he said to himself. Still he did his best to grin and bear it. He settled himself on his sofa and listened to the distant sounds of the setting off, the voices and the calls to one and another. “Tom will come with us——” “No, but I am to have the vacant place in the landau.” “Oh, now, Dora, there is room for you here.” Dora was the youngest of the Sillingers and the one he liked best. He wondered with whom she was to be during the drive. There was another vacancy besides his own. One of the ladies had stayed behind as well as himself. He wondered which it was. If it was Mrs. Vivian, for example, he wished she would come and keep him company. But, perhaps, it was some horrid cold or other which would make her keep her bed.

The sound of their departure died away. They had all gone. No chance of anyone now coming into the room to deliver John Parke from his own society. He would have to make up his mind to spend his day alone. With a great sigh, which nearly blew the paper which he held so carelessly out of his hand, John betook himself to this unusual occupation. He read the whole of the *Morning Post* and *Standard* from beginning to end, and then he began upon the

Times. There was nothing in the papers. It is astonishing how little there is in them when you particularly want to find something that will amuse you for an hour or two. He felt inclined to fling them to the other corner of the room after he had gone over everything from the beginning to the end. And it was just at this moment, when he was thoroughly tired of himself and would have welcomed anybody, that he heard a movement at the door. He looked up very eagerly and Miss Ravelstone came in. To do her justice Letitia was quite ignorant of the accident and that Mr. Parke had been left behind. She had woke with a violent cold—so bad that she too had been compelled to give up the idea of going out. She had put on her plainest dress, knowing that no one would be back till it was time for dinner, and feeling that her gray gown was quite good enough for the governess and the children with whom she would have to lunch: she had indulged herself by having breakfast in bed, which was quite an unusual luxury. Her nose was more red than usual through the cold, her eyes were suffused with unintended tears. She did not want to see anyone. When she met John Parke's eager look, Miss Ravelstone would have liked the substantial library floor to open and swallow her up. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she cried.

"Is that you, Miss Ravelstone," said John. "Is it possible that you have not gone with the rest?"

"I had such a bad cold," stammered Tisch—for a moment she actually felt as if she had done something wrong in going into the room.

"And here am I laid by the leg—I mean by the ankle," said Mr. Parke. Even then Letitia was not fully awakened to the magnitude of the chance which her good fortune had thus put into her hands.

She said she was very sorry, and for a moment stood hovering at the door uncertain whether she ought not to retire at once. But John was so much delighted to have somebody to tell his story to that he would not let her go.

"It was all those confounded boards in the breakfast-room," he said. "Why can't they have carpets all over the room. When one is abroad one makes up one's mind to that sort of thing, everything's slippery and shiny there: but in a house in Yorkshire! I came down like an elephant, Miss Ravelstone. I wonder you did not feel the whole house shake."

"I was in bed," said Letitia, "nursing a bad cold."

"A bad cold is a nasty thing," said John, "but it is not so bad as a twist in the foot. You can move about at least—and here am I stuck on a sofa—not able even to ring the bell."

"I will ring the bell for you with pleasure, Mr. Parke."

"That's just one of the last things one would ask a lady to do," cried John, "and I don't know why you should ring the bell for me. If the fellow was here I don't know what I want. I couldn't tell him to sit down and talk to me. It's such a bore to be left here alone, and everyone else away."

"I'll sit down and talk to you if you like," said Tisch, with a laugh. Her eyes recovered in the most marvelous manner. She felt inclined to sneeze, but shook it off. She began to wake up and see what was before her. Heir presumptive to Lord Frogmore! She had made up her mind that she was likely to meet somebody of importance on this great visit—and had no intention of neglecting any opportunity—though she had never even supposed, never

hoped, to have such a captive delivered into her hands in this easy way.

"I wish you would," said John. "I'm afraid I'm not very lively, and this confounded ankle hurts; but perhaps we can find something to talk about. Are you fond of playing games, Miss Ravelstone? I wonder if there are any here?"

"There is a chess board, I know," said Letitia; "but I don't know much about chess: and there's bezique, and I have a 'go bang' of my own."

"Oh, if it's not too much to ask, please fetch the go bang," cried John.

Miss Letitia nodded her head, she disappeared, and in two minutes returned a little out of breath with the box containing that intellectual amusement in her hand. She had done something to herself in the meantime, John felt, but though he was trained in the things that ladies "do" to make themselves more attractive he could not make out what it was. They played about twenty games at go bang, and time which had been so leaden-footed flew. But everything exhausts itself after a while. When an hour and a half had passed thus, John began to fidget again, and wonder what o'clock it was, and if it would soon be time for luncheon—which was at two in this late house: and it was now only one o'clock, another lingering hour.

"Should you like," said Miss Ravelstone, "to hear a great secret about Cobweb?" Now Cobweb was the favorite for the next day's race, and John Parke had, as he would himself have said, a pot of money on that horse.

“Anything about the race? Why, to be sure, of all things in the world,” he said.

It has already been mentioned that the Ravelstones were all horsey to the last degree except Tisch, who was not of that persuasion; but she had heard horses talked of all her life, and while she entered into the biography of Cobweb, John Parke listened with eager eyes.

CHAPTER II.

THIS was how it all began; how it went on was more than anyone could say, certainly not John himself, who woke up one morning to feel himself an engaged man with a more startled sensation than words could express. He knew that it was all right; that Letitia had been everything that was nice and proper, and had even spoken humbly of her own merits as not good enough for such a distinguished person as himself; but what were the steps that lead up to it, or how it had come about, John could give no clear account. He spoke of the incident with a kind of awe. How it happened, or what had come to pass before it happened, was something too great for him, which he could not follow; but from the very first moment he was aware that it was, and could neither be got rid of nor explained away. John was not a very triumphant lover. He was a little subdued indeed, scarcely knowing how to announce it to his friends; but Letitia took it upon her instantly to bear his burdens, and it was she who told Lady Sillinger, who told everybody, and so that matter was got over. I do not mean to say that it was all settled during the Doncaster week at the Sillingers; for however Letitia might have felt, John could never have been got to be so prompt as that. But another benevolent lady who saw how the tide was turning, and who thought it a great pity that a girl should not have her chance, invited Letitia and also John, who happened to have no other pressing engagement, and in a fortnight more great things were done. I have said before that he never could tell how it was, but he very soon came to understand that it was all settled, and that it necessitated a great many other arrangements. One of them was the conversation with Lord Frogmore with which