

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XIII.

(CONTINUED.)

Blanche being greatly surprised at this information, was hesitating how to act, when Mr. Harcourt's coachman said, 'It's all right, miss, you may depend.'

'Now, ma'am, quick, if you please,' interposed the valet; 'I hear some farmers riding this way from market, and we are blocking up the road.'

Still poor Blanche hesitated, having an instinctive dread of some evil impending over her.

'Stay till the farmers have passed,' quickly whispered Alice to her mistress.

'We shall be run over,' exclaimed the valet, 'if you don't come directly, ma'am.'

'Stay one minute longer, my dear young lady,' again whispered her faithful servant, 'I'm sure there's something wrong.'

At this instant Beauchamp reached the scene, and, riding furiously up to the carriage, asked, in a stern voice, 'What are you doing here, you scoundrels?'

The same story was again quickly repeated by coachman and valet, when Beauchamp exclaimed to the former, 'Turn your horses' heads, this instant, back to the Priory, or I'll send this bullet,' drawing a pistol, 'through your treacherous brains; and you, my Lord Vancouver's valet, are my prisoner,' said Beauchamp, so saying him by the collar.

'Not if I can prevent it,' said Lord Vancouver, suddenly presenting himself. 'How dare you, sir, touch my servant, or interfere between Miss Douglas and her guardian's orders? She shall return to Marston Castle, even if force is necessary.'

'Ha! ha!' shouted Mark, who had just reached the spot, 'To Marston Castle, indeed you mean Gretna Green! ha! ha! caught, my Lord Vancouver! caught at last!'

'Stand aside,' said Beauchamp, jumping on the ground, and attempting to close the carriage door. 'Miss Douglas is under my protection now.'

'She is not, and never shall be,' exclaimed Vancouver, vehemently, thrusting him violently away; and seizing Blanche by the arm, he tried to drag her forth.

William! shouted Beauchamp, now thoroughly roused, 'take that for your insolence,' and he felled him with his fist, instantly, to the ground. At the same moment, Mark, putting his fingers to his mouth, sent forth a whistle, which echoed far through hill and dale, making the horses almost spring out of their harness.

'Hold them tight, Job,' cried Mark to Mr. Harcourt's coachman; 'you don't move what are the squire, mind, again to-night, or it shall be your last move on earth. Keep your box and sit still, or I'll knock you out of it, as I would a pheasant from a roost.'

Lord Vancouver, recovering his feet, instantly levelled his pistol and fired, without effect, at Beauchamp, who, returning the compliment, shot Lord Vancouver through the left arm, breaking the bone above the elbow.

'Look out, sir!' shouted Mark, 'here's more of the blackguards coming on,' as three men rushed down upon them, who were soon in fierce conflict hand to hand. Mark plying his dagger so effectively as to knock the foremost instantly off his legs, and Beauchamp conferring a similar favor on the next with the muzzle of his pistol; when the third, tearing the fate of his companions, drew his pistol and shot Beauchamp through the fleshy part of his body, under the shoulder blade. He staggered, but did not fall; and Mark, receiving at the same time a dig in the back from the dagger of the valet, smarting and rendered savage by the pain, shot Beauchamp's antagonist through the body. Meanwhile, Lord Vancouver, disabled but not subdued, with his right hand renewed his efforts to drag Miss Douglas from the carriage. Assisted by Alice, she was resisting with her utmost strength, when Beauchamp dealt him a blow on the face, which

'That you shall, directly; I will be with you again in a moment.'

Ordering Mark to bring the prisoners 'with the horses to the Priory,' and telling the coachman to drive back there immediately, Beauchamp entered the carriage; and Alice, saying she would rather be outside to see they did not take a wrong turn again, left the lovers together, and got up behind with the footman, who had all the time been standing at the horses' heads, to prevent their running away during the fight.

As they sat side by side, the blood from Beauchamp's wound trickled down on Blanche's arm, who, feeling the moisture, raised it to the light of the lamp. 'Good heavens, William!' she exclaimed, turning pale, and in great alarm, 'you are bleeding! oh, tell me where you are hurt!'

'Only a scratch, dear girl. Don't look so frightened—I assure you it is nothing of consequence!'

'Oh, what can I do for you, dear William?' she exclaimed, still in great terror.

'Nothing, dearest Blanche, but this—if you really love me, may I have one kiss, which will heal all my wounds?'

No reply being given, Beauchamp strained her to his heart, whispering, 'Oh, how thankful I am for this reward, dear Blanche! and for having saved you from such a fate.'

'How thankful ought I to feel to you, dear William, for risking your life to protect me from that dreadful man!'

They had now reached the Priory, when, at the sound of the wheels, all the servants, with Mrs. Gordon also, rushed to the hall door in a body, having been terrified by Mark's sudden appearance at the back door an hour before, and fearing some dreadful work was going on, from the distant report of fire-arms which had been heard at the Priory.

When the steps were let down, Beauchamp hailed Blanche from the carriage, who, throwing herself into her aunt's arms, burst into tears, sobbing convulsively on her bosom.

'My dear, dear child,' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, trembling with apprehension, 'what frightful thing has happened? Your dress is covered with blood! Where are you injured, my dearest love?'

'Oh, nowhere, dearest aunt! I am not injured—but poor William!—bursting again into tears—is, I fear, badly wounded. It is the blood from his side. Pray attend to him, and do not regard me.'

'Run then to the dining-room, dear Blanche, with Alice, and get some wine directly, while I bring him there. Now William,' said Mrs. Gordon, taking him by the arm, 'what can have happened? And where are you hurt, my dear boy? You look faint and exhausted.'

'Only a crack on the ribs, dear aunt,' replied Beauchamp, smiling, 'from that scoundrel Vancouver, who tried to carry off Blanche—nothing more; and a little bleeding will do me good after this hot, exciting work.'

'Don't be foolish, William. A glass of wine will do you most good at present. So come with me, and then I must examine your wound, whilst you tell me more of this horrid outrage.'

Saying which, she led him into the dining-room, and made him lie down on the sofa, where Blanche brought him a glass of wine, trembling still, and shaking so much that she split half of it on the floor.

'Drink it yourself, dear Blanche,' said Beauchamp, springing up, 'and another, too, or I will not touch a drop. Sit down, my dear girl. I am not much hurt.' Saying which, he poured her out a full glass, which he made her take, and then filling one himself, said, before raising it to his lips, 'Here's health and long life to Mark Rosier, the poacher, who has saved dear Blanche from that rascally lord's clutches!'

'Now, dear child,' said Mrs. Gordon, 'run up-stairs, and change your dress, whilst I order tea to be taken into the drawing-room.'

CHAPTER XIV.

As soon as she had left the room, Beauchamp was obliged to take off his coat and waistcoat and submit to Mrs. Gordon's inspection, who, cutting a strip from under his

'Yes, my love, I can and will do so, being your guardian equally with Mr. Harcourt.'

A servant at this moment entered the room to say that Mr. Harcourt's coachman had run away, leaving the carriage and horses in the stable-yard.

'Run away, did you say?' asked Mrs. Gordon in amazement.

'Yes, ma'am,' replied the man; 'and Robert the footman says he thinks he was bribed by Lord Vancouver to drive Miss Douglas to meet his lordship's carriage on the common.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, 'what a villain! you may go, John, and send the footman to me.'

'Please, sir,' said the man, addressing Beauchamp, 'Mark Rosier wants to speak to you.'

'Then send him here,' replied Mrs. Gordon, 'for Mr. Beauchamp shall not leave the sofa.'

The tall, athletic, handsome poacher was soon ushered into the drawing-room, where he stood near the door, with a low bow to the ladies.

'Come here, Mark,' cried Beauchamp, extending his hand, which the poacher seized and pressed to his lips; 'you are a brave, honest fellow; and to your courage this night am I indebted for my life, and the safety of Miss Douglas. My gratitude for this service will end only with my own existence.'

'Master William,' said Mark, 'I loved you when a boy, and have had much more cause to love you since I became a man, and I would willingly lay down my life to serve you at any time. But what's the matter, sir? where were you wounded by that rascally lord?'

'He missed me, Mark, but the other villain you knocked over shot me through the fleshy part over the ribs.'

'Let me see, sir,' said Mark, kneeling down by the sofa; 'I have known something about gunshot wounds before today.'

'It is all right,' said Beauchamp; 'Mrs. Gordon has kindly fomented and bound it up; besides, Mark,' he whispered, 'there are ladies in the room.'

'I beg pardon, sir,' said the poacher, rising, 'but I was only thinking of you.'

'Now, Mark,' said Mrs. Gordon, leading up Blanche, 'it is our turn to thank you, my kind friend, for your valuable assistance this night; and both shook him cordially by the hand.'

'Welcome, right welcome, ladies,' replied Mark, 'and glad am I to see that dear young lady once more happy and safe; but, my dear, it were a near thing—that long-legged lord were just a-going to drag Miss Blanche from the carriage, when the young squire (God bless him!) knocked him off his pins like a baby, and shut the door. Then up jumps my lord, and let fly a bullet at Mr. William (the Lord be praised for it!) missed unclean. The squire then broke his arm—served him right—and with another rattler in the face, sent my Lord Longlegs spinning across the road; and I'll wager a pound he remembers the young squire to his dying day. So you see, my lady, it warn't Mark, but Mr. William, that saved Miss Blanche from being half way on her road to Scotland by this time.'

'There, Mark, that will do,' interposed Beauchamp; 'now sit down, and Miss Blanche will give you a cup of tea; and tell me about your own wound in the back.'

'Ah, sir, that foreign coward thought he had me there nicely, but the velvet and badger waistcoat stood my friends, and it's only a scratch after all—not half so bad as yours, sir. But what d'ye think, squire? dang it all! our three prisoners are my Lord Mervyn's night watchers.'

'What, Mark?' exclaimed Beauchamp.

'As true as you be lying on that sofa, sir; we knowed 'em directly we got to the light, sir; and one on 'em, that chap that shot you, squire, has got something in his carcass, which don't quite agree with 'un quite so well as a figgy pudding.'

'I hope he's not seriously hurt, though, Mark, and that he has been attended to?'

'Yes, yes, squire; don't fidget about him, for all the servants in the house have been waiting on and pitying the rascal, and we can't do more till the doctor comes; and then to think, squire, that Mr. Job, the coachman, should have been in the plot, and sell his young mistress for fifty pounds!'

the servants' hall, there's a worse case there mine will keep. After that, I will go with you into the dining-room, where you can examine my scratch.'

'Well, as you please,' replied Morgan, 'if Mrs. Gordon has no objection.'

'William appears much easier now,' she said; 'and as he wishes it, perhaps you had better go there first.'

The doctor soon returned, telling Mr. Gordon, with a very grave face, that the man was dangerously wounded by a ball through his body, although he believed no vital part had been injured; yet that he required great care and attention, and ought immediately to be placed in bed.

'Do exactly as you consider best,' replied Mrs. Gordon, 'and tell the housekeeper to have everything prepared for him without delay.'

'Thank you, my dear madam, for your kindness,' said Morgan, as he again left the room; when Malcolm rushed in, with consternation depicted on his face, and instantly folded Blanche in his embrace, exclaiming, 'My poor, dear girl! what an escape you have had from that villain! But, Wil Beauchamp, are you much hurt, my brave, noble fellow? I heard the whole account from Harcourt's footman.'

'Oh, not much, Malcolm, as you may see, by my enjoying a cup of tea.'

The story was again told, when Malcolm said—

'Upon my word! what with Lord Mervyn's keepers, and Mr. Harcourt's coachman, this is a most serious affair, and I will have it sifted to the bottom.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Mrs. Gordon, 'for dear Blanche's sake, we had better let it pass as quiet as possible, and keep a strict watch over her for the future.'

'And allow these villains to escape exposure! But, besides, dear aunt, Lord Mervyn would assuredly take advantage of our weakness, and say the matter was hushed up by mutual consent; that Blanche was a consenting party to an elopement with Lord Vancouver, and which, he would assert, was only prevented by Beauchamp's interference—and this Lord Vancouver reported to be a married man! My dear aunt, you must see, Blanche's fair fame would be tarnished by such an insinuation even. No, no! it's impossible to compromise this business; and I am resolved, for the honor of both our families—my cousin's and my own—that a thorough investigation shall take place. It is my province, as one of her nearest relatives, to clear her from all complicity or connivance with Lord Vancouver; and, my dear aunt, it must and shall be done!'

'Well, Charles, I believe you take the right view of the case, which is too serious to be passed over; but I think Mr. Harcourt will endeavor to hush it up on account of his friend, Lord Mervyn, and to screen himself, as his servant was concerned also.'

'No doubt, aunt; but half a score Harcourts and Mervyns shall not prevent me discharging my duty to dear Blanche, and protecting her fair name from pollution with such a man as Vancouver.'

Mr. Morgan put a stop to further conversation by just then returning to the drawing-room.

'Now, squire, he said, 'it is your turn, as my other patient is as comfortable as he has any right to expect, if you and Lord Malcolm will walk with me into the other room.'

Mrs. Gordon looking anxious, and Blanche pale, at this announcement, from fear of Beauchamp's being subjected to more pain, Morgan assured them they need not be alarmed; adding, with a smile—

'Rest satisfied, ladies; I will not hurt him for my own sake, as I don't want to be double-thonged when he gets into the saddle once more; with which the three gentlemen walked off together.'

After examining and probing the wound, which caused Wil Beauchamp to wince a little, Morgan expressed his opinion that rest and quiet must be observed for some days; and added—

'You may thank your lucky stars, or your guardian angel, that the ball struck your rib in the centre, my young friend, or you had been past all surgical aid. It's a confounded rascally business, altogether; and I hope, my lord, turning to Malcolm, 'you won't let that old fox-killer up at the castle escape probing a little.'

'There's no mistaking that voice!' exclaimed Malcolm, darting from the room. 'It is the old squire.'

'How is my dear boy?' inquired Beauchamp, as he met Malcolm in the hall.

'Not much the matter, my dear sir, he is lying on the sofa, drinking tea, and quoting poetry.'

'Quick! where is he?' he said to Malcolm, who was now speaking to Constance.

'In the drawing-room; here, this way—'

And in a moment, Mr. Beauchamp, regardless of the ladies, was kneeling by the son, ejaculating—

'Thank God! thank God! the Father of all mercies, that you are spared to me, my own darling boy.'

And the old man burst into a flood of tears, still repeating his thanks to God for preserving his son's life. Constance, throwing herself into Blanche's arms, gave vent also to her pent-up feelings, which she had repressed to keep up her father; but now the tears of all three ladies fell uncontrolled, and even Malcolm was obliged to turn aside to conceal his emotion at witnessing this affecting interview between father and son.

'Come, come, my dear father,' at length said Beauchamp, 'this agitation hurts my side; and you have not spoken a word to dear, kind Mrs. Gordon or Blanche.'

The old man rose slowly from his knees, and going up to Mrs. Gordon, took her hand in his, which he held for some time, but all utterance failed him.

'I can't thank you now,' he at last said, as the tears still rolled down his cheek; 'and poor Blanche!' whose hand he next seized, 'thank Heaven! you are saved, dear child, from a fate worse than death!'

'Oh, Mr. Beauchamp, she sobbed, 'I am the wretched cause of all our grief. What would I not give to save William one moment's pain?'

'Would you give this, dear girl?' he whispered in a low tone, pressing her hand to his, 'to make my poor boy happy?'

'Yes,' she replied, softly, and blushing deeply; 'all I possess in the world.'

'The wound in his side,' said Mr. Beauchamp, 'will, I trust, yield to the doctor's skill; but he has another, I suspect, which only this little hand can heal. Come with me, then, my own dear child, and be William's comforter.'

Saying which, he led her to the sofa; and placing her hand in that of his son, said, in a whisper—

'There, Will; that will heal all your wounds; and may the Almighty bless you both.'

'Oh, Blanche,' murmured Beauchamp, as he pressed her hand to his lips, 'how far beyond all my fondest hopes is this reward! but, dearest, I must not claim it now, when you are overpowered with gratitude.'

'Will you refuse, then,' she said, softly, 'to make me happy?'

'No, no, my own dearest girl; and if love only prompts you to bestow this on me, looked for blessing on me. Is it so, dear Blanche?'

'Yes,' was the faint response.

'Then am I blessed indeed,' replied Beauchamp; 'and now, dearest, you have been so excited to-night, I hope you will return to your room with Constance. I shall quickly follow your example, as I know Aunt Gordon is gone to order beds for us.'

During this scene, Mrs. Gordon and Malcolm had silently left the apartment, leaving Mr. Beauchamp and Constance only with the two lovers. The former now appeared, saying, 'I have ordered a double-bedded room, Mr. Beauchamp, for you and William, as I knew you would not like to leave him to-night; and the tray to be brought in directly, with something more substantial than tea. An now, dear William, you must go with me to your room, where Malcolm is preparing everything for your comfort, with a large basin of gruel, which he declares none but a Scotchman can make.'

'Oh, very well,' cried Mr. Beauchamp, gaily; 'then you are going to desert me entirely, I conclude?'

'Only for a short time, as Charles will join you directly, who declares he is as numerous as one of his own mountain eagles. Now, children,' continued Mrs. Gordon, 'she led Beauchamp out of the room; 'his your father, Constance, and follow me.'