

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXX.

(CONTINUED.)

The shadows of evening were lengthening, as the heavy double-bodied carriage containing the late inmates of the Priory, rattled through the streets of London, and drew up in Grosvenor Square. The door of Lady Malcolm's mansion was immediately thrown open by the expectant porter, and Malcolm leading the way to the drawing-room, was soon folded in his mother's arms, Mrs. Gordon, Blanche, and Constance following closely upon his footsteps, and each greeted in turn by a warm embrace and most cordial reception.

'Really, Margaret,' exclaimed Lady Malcolm, 'I could scarcely have recognized Blanche again, she is become such a tall, handsome, stately girl; well, I declare, my love,' taking her hand in hers, and earnestly scanning her features, 'you will create quite a sensation in the beau monde, and I shall feel justly proud of my protégée. But now, my dears, you must be greatly fatigued after your long journey, and I will show you your rooms. Dinner will be ready at eight o'clock precisely, and as we are quite *en famille* this evening, you need not bestow much time on your toilet.'

Lady Malcolm being Mrs. Gordon's eldest sister, resembled her very much in personal appearance, and disposition also, although taller, and more fashionable in manners, from her constantly mixing in the first circles in London society; and it must be confessed, she was at heart rather a woman of the world, deriving her chief enjoyment from its gaieties.

Although much pleased with her niece's first appearance, she was in raptures when Blanche entered the drawing-room the second time, dressed for dinner.

'Why, my dear girl,' she exclaimed, 'you are really quite enchanting when divested of your travelling dress; I had no idea of that beautiful figure and graceful demeanor; you will be the belle of the season; and with your fortune and position, dukes and earls will be paying homage at your feet.'

'Indeed, I hope not, Aunt Malcolm,' replied Blanche, blushing deeply.

'And why not, my dear? it is nothing more than your due, and what I fully expect; so get rid of your country diffidence and blushes as soon as you possibly can, which here would only pass for *gaucherie* or *mauvaise honte*.'

Constance in her turn elicited some very flattering encomiums from Lady Malcolm, exceedingly gratifying to her son, who replied, 'Well, my dear mother, I think we may show our two girls against any two in London; but they must not be spoiled by too many compliments or too much indulgence, as we keep them pretty strict in the country—don't we, Aunt Gordon?—for fear of their running away.'

'Oh, Charles,' interposed Lady Malcolm, 'you must give me a full account of all those dreadful proceedings with that *mauvais sujet*, Lord Vancourt. The maddest scheme I ever heard of; but he has always been a wild, reckless man, and living almost by his wits the last three or four seasons.'

'It was a well planned scheme, though, my dear mother, and Blanche had a narrow escape from being whipped off to the land of oaks; for had Will Beauchamp arrived ten minutes later, that villain would have had her safe enough in his travelling carriage.'

'Well, Charles, you must tell me all particulars after dinner; and how are my friends, the old and young squires of Bampton, and Sir Lionel?'

'Well and hearty; and you may expect the honor of a visit from Will next week, who is coming up to town to look after us all, and prevent these girls being ruined by too much dissipation; as he does not consider a couple of aunts and one man cousin sufficient to keep them within proper bounds.'

'I shall be delighted, Charles, to see my young friend again, as you know he has ever

would fall in love with, as she dislikes her present set of admirers, all being too foppish or fashionable for her ideas of a husband; in fact she declared to me the other day, the character she would select would be a manly, unaffected person, of firm principles and unblemished reputation, whom she could respect as well as love.'

'Well, then, Blanche, your old playmate, Will Beauchamp, is the very man to suit her—don't you think so, my dear?'

'I really cannot say, Charles,' she replied, very shortly.

'At any rate, pray write to-morrow,' resumed Lady Malcolm, 'and save him from the brewery;—Beauchamp, Winterbottom, and Co. I this would be dreadful.'

'It shall be done, my dear mother, if you particularly desire it; but Will Beauchamp is a very obstinate, perverse young fellow; and if he has set his affections on Miss Honoria or any other young lady—with a smile at Blanche—all the widows in London won't turn him.'

The announcement of dinner was a reproach to poor Blanche, who dreaded lest her cousin's railery might lead Lady Malcolm to suspect her attachment to Beauchamp, as the Harcourts, who had just arrived in London, would of course be frequent visitors at her house; and it had been resolved by Mrs. Gordon, before leaving the Priory, to keep her engagement a profound secret for the present—even from her own sister. Lord Malcolm, notwithstanding his love of fun and frolic, with which he could not forbear teasing Blanche occasionally, was too sincerely attached to her and Beauchamp to betray their position, even to his own mother; and although sometimes venturing within the precincts of the forbidden ground, yet he possessed sufficient tact to perceive how far he could advance without discovery, and made amends for any little escapade of this kind, by his unwavering determination to serve his friend in more important points.

The next day Lady Malcolm was not at home to visitors, thinking that her sister would prefer one day's quietude after her journey; but she could not resist the temptation of taking Blanche and Constance for what is termed an airing (although generally proving a dusting) in the park, at the fashionable hour, when, from the multiplicity of carriages, anything beyond a walking pace is extremely problematical. The slow order of rotation in which the wheels move serves, however, in place of a conversation for the equestrians who are seen lounging by the side of those wheels which contain anything like a pretty face, or a partie in other respects desirable, discussing the fashionable topics of the day. Numerous were the polite bows of recognition directed to Lady Malcolm by her aristocratic acquaintances on passing her carriage. But the two most pertinacious affixions to each side of the carriage were Lord Henry Baynton (second son of the Duke of R—) and Sir John Martingale, a young sporting baronet of large fortune, both well known to Lord Malcolm, who being introduced to Blanche and Constance, maintained their position for some time to the exclusion of several others, equally attracted by the beauty of their fair occupants of Lady Malcolm's carriage, and hovering near in the hopes of an introduction.

Lord Henry having exhausted his fund of topics, generally considered so entertaining and interesting to young ladies, about the opera, balls, parties, reunions, receptions, and other gaieties, *quocunque nomine gaudent*, and receiving very unsatisfactory replies from Blanche to his various inquiries as to meeting her at the Duchess of C—'s party on the 10th; the Countess of D—'s ball on the 14th; or Lady Mary W—'s grand concert at the Hanover Square Rooms on the 14th, he raised his hat and withdrew; being soon after joined by the baronet, who had likewise expended his stock of ammunition on Constance with little better success.

'Well, Baynton,' inquired Martingale, 'what do you think of the heiress?'

'Nonplussed, my dear fellow—can't make her out; fine, handsome girl, with splendid eyes and beautiful complexion, that is all I know; but for conversation, whether from reserve or shyness, I could not get her to speak a dozen words.'

'She don't fancy you, I suppose, Baynton—not good looking enough.'

'Well, as to that, Martingale, I flatter

witnessing her confusion at first and subsequent reserve, was almost puzzled how to interpret her reception of him; but, after several ineffectual attempts to draw her into conversation, he thought it more prudent to withdraw for the present; and Blanche, leaning back in the carriage, with her parasol before her face, resolved thereby to exclude any further advances from other attendant cavaliers. Lady Malcolm said—

'I fear, my dear girl, you have not yet recovered from your fatigue of yesterday; we will therefore return home. But how did you become acquainted with Lord Dauby?'

'I was introduced to him first at the Hunt ball, Aunt Malcolm; and met him often afterwards whilst he was staying at Barton Court.'

'Well, my dear, being heir to a rich dukedom, he is very much courted, and highly spoken of as a most agreeable, unaffected young man; and, of course, a most desirable acquaintance.'

Blanche not appearing disposed to continue the conversation about Lord Dauby, Constance interposed some other remarks to save her friend; and the carriage soon after set them down in Grosvenor Square.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Mrs. Gordon having her own carriage and horses in London, to prevent interference with her sister's arrangements, the two next days were chiefly devoted to calls on her particular friends, shopping, sight-seeing, &c., in which she was accompanied by Blanche and Constance, Lady Malcolm seldom going out until three or four o'clock in the afternoon. But her ladyship, after having conceded thus much to her sister, feeling pardonably proud of her niece, and ignorant of her attachment to Beauchamp, now became anxious to exhibit her in public, as well as among her own aristocratic set—hoping and believing that Blanche would, from her personal charms and large fortune, soon have an opportunity of forming some splendid alliance.

The next night, therefore, found her sitting with Lady Malcolm in the front row of her opera-box, towards which many inquisitive glances were directed from those on the opposite side of the house, many of whom were personally known to Lady Malcolm.

'Who can that be,' inquired the Duchess of B— of Lord Henry Baynton, who had just entered her box, sitting with Lady Malcolm? She appears very young, and very pretty, although evidently new to London life, from her bashful and timid looks.'

'That is Miss Douglas, your grace, Lady Malcolm's niece, who makes her first appearance to-night in the fashionable world.'

'Oh, I remember now the name—the young lady whom Lord Vancourt attempted to run away with.'

'The same,' replied Lord Henry, 'and, by all accounts, Vancourt made a very near thing of it.'

'Pray lend me your glass a moment,' exclaimed Lady Mary, the Duchess's eldest daughter (who had now entered on her fifth London season), 'I really must have a thorough scrutiny of Danby's idol; for no one, in his opinion, can be compared to Miss Douglas—and there, I declare, is that foolish boy just entering their box.'

'Well, Lady Mary, what is your opinion?' asked Lord Henry, 'as I should think you must by this time have scanned her features sufficiently to know her again.'

'Pretty, rather, though country-looking, with a super-abundance of pink.'

'Occasioned, perhaps,' suggested Lord Henry, 'by Danby's appearance; but look again—there is not too much vermilion now, or my vision is defective. She has fine eyes and handsome features, certainly.'

'Oh—so, so,' replied Lady Mary, rather contemptuously, returning the glass to her mother; 'but Danby takes extraordinary fancies into his head about women.'

Being offered a seat, Lord Dauby remained some time in Lady Malcolm's box, conversing with the ladies, and occasionally addressing observations on the opera to Blanche, which were rather more courteously received than at their first meeting in the park. In fact, Blanche, reproaching herself, on reflection, for her very distant behavior to him on that occasion, now relaxed into a more friendly mood, seeing her repulsion of him then had been noticed by her aunt, whose

foolish manner.'

'Oh, nonsense, aunty dear; Blanche will soon become accustomed to such sights, and then think nothing of them, as others do.'

'Indeed, I shall not, Charles,' replied Blanche, firmly, 'and I hope never to witness another ballet.'

Sir John Martingale now entering the box, Malcolm was diverted from further attacks on poor Blanche, who, leaning back against the side of the box, showed her fixed determination to withdraw her eyes from the stage, in which she was seconded by Mrs. Gordon, who began conversing with her on other subjects. Great was the relief to both when this indelicate performance ceased, and they were once more safe in the carriage, through all the draughts, hustlings, and bustlings consequent on the last falling of the curtain.

Although custom reconciles us to many strange sights, that is not the question to be considered, but the first effect produced on the mind of the beholder. What are our first impressions? These will be found generally to be our best guides in most cases. What, then, are the natural feelings of every modest girl on witnessing, for the first time, the ballet at the Opera House? Those of offended delicacy and disgust. The attitudes assumed by the dancers, and their indecent dress, are not only often inelegant but perfectly revolting. For instance, what can be more absurd than the very favorite position of standing on one leg, with the other thrown out at right angles with the body? (not to mention its horrible immodesty)—why, a swan or a goose performs this grand feat without any effort at all. By the general patronizers of the ballet, the same answer may be returned as by the girl skimming live eels—they are used to it. That is true enough of the ladies who can witness, apparently unmoved, night after night, although false as regards the eels. In fact, the habitués of the Opera House, after having undergone the operation of being flayed of the first outer soft outlets of delicacy, lose or suppress all further feeling in the matter; at least, they pretend to great indifference or callousness, which, in the majority of cases, I fear, is not assumed, but really experienced. But the same cannot be said of the male portion of the spectators, who have no modesty at all, and on whose account principally this detestable exhibition is still fostered in a professedly Christian community; for my impression is decidedly that these immodest displays fan the flame of passion of men, and tend to keep alive those unbalanced desires which sensualists only will and do so freely indulge. To such the ballet at the Opera House is the grand attraction; and so long as it is countenanced by those ladies in the higher sphere of life who give the tone to fashion, so long will it continue a reflection on their own characters and a disgrace to a civilized nation. Can it be a matter of surprise that right-thinking Christian ministers inveigh so bitterly against theatrical exhibitions and balls, when their tendency is so palpably to debase and demoralize the minds of young persons of both sexes? Were plays divested of coarse jokes and double entendres, they would be restored to their primitive province, as a medium of instruction and amusement, instead of, as now, the means of corruption to youth; and of balls it may be said, there is nothing objectionable in our country dances or quadrilles; but the foreign introduction of waltzes and polkas, now so universally adopted, tends to great laxity of manners, and of morals also. Human nature is ever prone to evil, and needs no excitement to vice; the difficulty is to check these inclinations. But in the cases alluded to, as if natural passions were not strong enough and hard enough to subdue, additional excitations are added. Modesty is like the fresh bloom on a plum, which, when once rubbed off, never returns.

Blanche and Constance, when they had retired to their rooms at night, although delighted with the orchestra and the singing of Grisi and Lablache, could not repress their feelings of repugnance to the ballet, and Constance resolved to entreat Malcolm to spare them both the repetition of such a scene. The next night there was a ball at the Countess of Armore's, in the same square, for which Lady Malcolm, in anticipation of her niece's arrival in town, had accepted cards of invitation some time previously. Lady Armore being still young and handsome

lassie, from having introduced her and her aunt to the Duchess the moment they entered the room this evening. Now you see, Fanny, between ourselves, this young lady's money would just suit a poor devil of a younger son like myself, and some people do say she was not an unwilling party to Lord Danby's attempted abduction, only that her cousin Malcolm, for the credit of the family, took up with a high hand. A few hints to your friend, Lady Mary, on this point won't lose their effect when repeated to the Duchess, and may serve us both.'

'Thank you for the suggestion, Henry, which shall be acted upon without delay.'

The other great attraction of the evening to the unmarried ladies was Lady Armore's brother, the rich and fastidious Marquis of Ayrshire, now in his thirty-fifth year, whom the smiles of the fair sex had hitherto completely thrown away. He was although not handsome, most distinguished in appearance, and highly polished in manners, with a literary turn of mind. Being master of several languages, and having travelled over half the globe, he was well informed on most subjects, and in conversation most agreeable. Possessing, in addition to these recommendations, a princely fortune, he had been for the last two seasons a grand speculator in the higher circles. Although a great admirer of beauty, his requirements in other respects were so multifarious that it seemed almost impossible they could be realized in any one woman; still he was on the look-out for the person pictured in the mind's eye as the future Marchioness of Ayrshire, and it was his invariable custom to go the round of balls and parties of every description, in the hope of finding at last the being whom his fancy had portrayed. The form and features of every new debutante in the fashionable world were eagerly scanned, and if sufficiently attractive, an introduction was immediately obtained through some of his numerous acquaintances. On this night, when, with glass to eye, he was taking a survey of the dancers, his attention was arrested by the modest looks, handsome features, and graceful movements of Blanche Douglas; and Lord Malcolm happening at that moment to be passing him, he asked, 'Can you tell me, Malcolm, who that pretty, interesting young girl is, dancing with Danby; she is evidently new to London life.'

'Yes,' replied Malcolm, 'she is my cousin, and this is her first appearance on the London boards.'

'Well, I thought so, Malcolm, and all the better, in my opinion, on that account. Will you introduce me?'

'With pleasure, if we can work our way round to where she stands.'

This being effected after some trouble, Malcolm presented Lord Ayrshire to Blanche, and he at once begged the honor of her hand for the next dance. This being granted, he remained standing near her until the quadrille was finished, when his arm was offered and accepted. Great was the dismay of Blanche when a waltz tune struck her ear, and her partner was proceeding to take up his position in the circle now quickly forming.

'I beg your pardon,' she said; 'but instead of the next dance, I ought to have said the next quadrille, as I do not waltz.'

'Surely you will not decline one or two turns to this enchanting air, Miss Douglas?'

'Yes, my lord,' Blanche replied, firmly; 'indeed I must, and shall be obliged if you will conduct me to my aunt, Lady Malcolm—or, as I see my cousin opposite, I can take his arm.'

'Indeed, Miss Douglas, I will with great pleasure conduct you to Lady Malcolm, whom I have the honor of knowing.'

On finding her aunt, she expressed her surprise at Blanche not joining in the dance, exclaiming, 'Why, my dear, your country notions on this and some other points are rather too particular, and you really must give up these old-fashioned fancies.'

'I hope not, dear aunt,' was the quiet reply, as she sat down by her side.

'I am sorry to differ with your ladyship upon such an important point,' added Lord Ayrshire, good-humoredly; 'but I must applaud Miss Douglas' resolution to act as her