

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

(CONTINUED.)

'What Marquis are you talking of, Selma?'

'Oh, the Marquis par excellence—the accomplished, adored, most agreeable, most noble Marquis of Ayrshire; who, report says, has laid all his honors, riches, and his own proud, supercilious, pretentious person, at your feet.'

'My dear Selma, you are talking great nonsense; he has done nothing of the kind.'

'Ah, well, my dear, then that honor is bestowed for you. A pleasure only deferred.'

'You are quite mistaken, Selma; such an idea perhaps has never entered his head; but our tête-à-tête is an end, and I see Lord Henry approaching.'

Selma, with the curiosity natural to her sex, was very anxious to ascertain how her friend stood in regard to Beauchamp and Lord Ayrshire; the latter being openly spoken of as the object of her selection from the host of her other admirers. But Blanche possessed sufficient caution never to betray her secret, and left Selma in the dark as to her true feelings.

The next morning, at breakfast, she received a few hurried lines from Beauchamp, informing her that his father had just been summoned to attend the Earl of Annandale, who, being considered by his physician in a declining state, and not likely to recover, they were setting off immediately for the North; but that she should hear from him again, on his arrival at Annandale Castle.

On this intelligence being communicated to Malcolm, he exclaimed:—

'My stars! Blanche, here's a goal as Selma says, Lord Beauchamp and my Lady Constance! Why, Con, I suppose you will order me to the right-about at once; and as to my Lord Beauchamp, there will be no tearing him now.'

'Titles or riches will never alter either one or the other, Charles,' said Mrs. Gordon; 'and I am quite sure that William will never give up at any man's death, although it should open his path to title and wealth.'

Of course, not, my dear aunt, but as people now-a-days do not attain the age of Methuselah, when a man has counted ninety years, he cannot reasonably complain that the span of life has been cut very short, and the event, whenever it may happen, will find Beauchamp in a position to render assistance and prudent of her guardian's powers or favors.'

Immediately after breakfast, Malcolm conveyed the news to his mother, who could not suppress her delight at the prospect of her late daughter-in-law's advancement, as well as at Beauchamp's elevation to a higher sphere. 'And now, Charles,' she added, 'I suppose the secret may be disclosed?'

'Oh, no, my dear mother, our lips are sealed until Beauchamp allows us to open them—that was the condition; and our promise must be faithfully maintained. More than the event has not yet happened; and should the old peer take a fresh turn, we could only be laughed at and despised for carrying our chickens before they are hatched.'

The same afternoon, when Blanche and Constance, with Malcolm and Fred, had set out for their usual ride, Mr. Harcourt called at Grosvenor Square, and, finding Lady Malcolm at home, opened his commission by stating her of the joyful realisation of his and Mrs. Harcourt's wishes, that morning, a proposal from the Marquis of Ayrshire had been put in her hands. 'This is really quite beyond our expectations, Lady Malcolm, as the Marquis is ever so rich; and he has a title, in the most handsome manner, to settle the whole of her fortune, with a large addition from his own, strictly upon her, in case of his decease, and five thousand pounds annually at her own disposal during her life.'

'Very liberal indeed,' replied Lady Malcolm, rather coolly.

therefore it would be premature to mention his name; but I may say that he is heir to one of the richest earldoms in England, and in other respects quite unexceptionable.'

'I am to understand, then, that your ladyship, for my ward, positively declines the Marquis of Ayrshire?'

'Believing that her affections are engaged elsewhere, and certainly knowing that his lordship would not be accepted, I think it would be needless to give any other answer, replied Lady Malcolm, 'although we both must feel highly flattered at his lordship's preference.'

Mr. Harcourt, failing to obtain any further information, soon after took his leave, and communicated the result of his interview with Lady Malcolm by letter to his lordship, whose annoyance and irritation at being rejected was so visible that his sister divined the cause.

'I guess the contents of the letter just delivered, George,' she said—'a refusal from Miss Douglas.'

'Yes, my dear Charlotte, it is indeed true, and I feel more chagrined and angry than I can express, although I must confess to have taken a deeper interest in Miss Douglas than any girl I have ever known; but pray, for my reputation at the clubs, don't give a hint even to Annmore about this business, and I will see Harcourts directly, and obtain his silence also. Were it known in fashionable circles, my travels must be resumed, as I should be the laughing-stock of half London. The fastidious Marquis rejected by a country girl I would be handed and barbed about by all the Lady Marys and Lady Faluys, rendering my presence here quite insupportable.'

'Well, George, on my own account, as well as on yours, not a word shall escape my lips; but Lord Malcolm and his mother, how will you manage with them?'

'Oh, very well; Malcolm and I are old friends.'

'And the young lady herself?'

'With her, I am quite safe; she has too much good sense and proper feeling ever to utter a word derogatory to any person, and notwithstanding my rejection, I must still esteem her.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

When Blanche returned from her ride, Lady Malcolm told her of Mr. Harcourt's visit, and the answer she had given him.

'Have I done right, my love, in peremptorily refusing the Marquis?'

'Oh, yes, dear Aunt Malcolm, I am so much obliged by your great kindness in saving me from a scene with Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt; but I am surprised at Lord Ayrshire addressing them on such a subject, after I have so frequently checked every advance he has made to a more intimate acquaintance. Indeed, the night of Mrs. Harcourt's ball, when making some allusion to my friends, I gave him distinctly to understand that the Marquis of Ayrshire had never been considered by me one of that number.'

'Well, my dear, you acted quite right in undeciding him, and if he was wilfully blind, you cannot be blamed for leading him astray.'

On the third evening after this communication, as they were all sitting together, with the dessert, the butler cut red the room, saying, 'There is a man, my lord, in the hall, with a parcel, which he will not deliver to any one but your lordship.'

'What the deuce does the fellow mean?' exclaimed Malcolm, springing up from his chair.

'I think he said, my lord, he was the guard of the Northern mail.'

'Show him in here, then.'

The man, entering with a low bow, said, 'I am instructed with a parcel to deliver only to the hands of Lord Malcolm, from Annandale Castle, who is to pay me a sovereign, and send back an answer by myself; as I shall be on the road again to-morrow morning by four o'clock.'

'I am the person,' replied Malcolm, 'so sit down a moment in that chair, and here's something to wash the cobwebs out of your throat,' placing a bottle of wine and a glass in his hands.

Tearing open the parcel, three letters ap-

eyes to fill with tears as she handed it to Lady Malcolm, saying, 'Dear aunt, you may judge now whether I ought to love him as I do.'

Lady Malcolm took the letter with her to the drawing-room to read, whilst the two girls went upstairs to make the necessary preparations.

Beauchamp gave an account of their arrival at the castle, and the affecting meeting of his father and the old Earl, who had been great friends in early life. Then his scrutiny of himself, to see if he could discover any family likeness—his being made to sit down by his side and give a full description of his sister, with the Earl's impatience to have her sent for without delay; 'and now, my own dear girl,' continued Beauchamp, 'I must finish this letter, reserving a description of the place till another day, and, in conclusion, I only add that, for your own dear sake, I cannot forbear feeling elated at the prospect of that barrier being removed to our union, which, with your guardian's prejudices and worldly ideas, never could have been passed with Mr. William Beauchamp, although, on his own account, he would as soon remain plain Mr. Beauchamp to the end of his life than by one ambitious or avaricious thought do violence to his own feelings by desiring the death of the poor old Earl. He appears, though eccentric, very warm-hearted, and of a generous, noble mind, and it shall be my study to afford him every comfort and consolation which a young man may offer, during the short time which, I fear, remains to him of his now fast waning mortal career.'

When Blanche descended to the drawing-room, Lady Malcolm returned the letter with the remark, 'Were anything, my dear girl, wanting to confirm my high opinion of your lover's worth, the beautiful sentiments there expressed would be more than sufficient, and to convince me also that you cannot love him more than he deserves.'

Malcolm, that evening, was more like a boy packing up on leaving school for the holidays, and Aunt Gordon was obliged several times to reprove him for his levity.

'Well, but, aunts dear, who would not enjoy the prospect of a two hundred-mile journey, with four posters rattling along fourteen miles an hour, and all the expenses paid—the fresh breeze fanning our faces as we whirl along? Oh! it will be quite delightful after the hot, dusty rides through the suburbs of this mighty, smoky Babylon—and the handling of some of those thundering big trout in the large lake before the castle! By Jove! aunts, but that will be fine fun, and supply her ladyship's table without sending to the fishmongers.'

The next morning our travellers set out on their journey at five o'clock, and reached their destination the second evening. The old Earl was greatly pleased with Constance, and received Mrs. Gordon and Malcolm in the most friendly manner and from that time the two ladies, from their gentle unremitting attentions, became two mastering angels in his sight.

'Ah, my dear, kind friends,' exclaimed the old man, a few days after their arrival, 'how many years have I lost, by not being acquainted with you before, and all owing to my old-fashioned, cracked habits, in living more like a hermit in this cell than a reasonable being.'

Finding his end drawing near, the Earl sent for a legal adviser, and made great alterations in his will, appointing Mr. Beauchamp and his son sole executors, and bequeathing (after a few legacies to distant connections and his old domestics) the residue of his personal estate, amounting to upwards of two hundred thousand pounds in the funds, to Constance. William Beauchamp having become a great favourite, was sent for to the Earl's private room, to ascertain his views on particular points, and to be entrusted with some confidential communications.

'I wish to know my young friend, your opinion how the services of my old faithful servants should be rewarded, and to see if your ideas agree with mine. The old house-keeper will wait another hour when I am gone.'

'No, my lord,' replied Beauchamp, 'that she shall never require as long as she prefers remaining here. My father and myself will never dismiss one of your old favorites. The butler, house-keeper, head keeper, and gardener shall never leave their pre-

more in the country all those she loved. As the old Earl, holding her hand in his, gazed on her lovely features and soft, beaming eyes, he exclaimed, 'your friends, my dear, have done you in justice—even their glowing description comes far short of the reality. Accept an old man's thanks for complying with his last earthly wish, although it was not from mere curiosity alone I desired to see you here, and have occasioned you a long, tiresome journey.'

'To afford you the least comfort of satisfaction, my lord, I would willingly have travelled twice that distance.'

'Thank you, my dear, for that pretty speech, and now Mrs. Gordon will kindly show you to your room.'

'Well, my dear boy,' remarked the Earl, when she had left them, 'you are one of the most fortunate men in the world to have secured the affections of that sweet, lovely girl.'

'Indeed, my dear lord she is far beyond my deserts, and I am most thankful and grateful for such a treasure.'

'Yes, my boy, and so you ought to be, although in my opinion you both appear exactly suited to each other.'

The next morning Blanche took a short stroll with Beauchamp before breakfast, and on returning with the colour mantling her cheek, the old Earl appeared fascinated with her radiant beauty, and unable to withdraw his eyes from her face. He whispered to Mrs. Gordon, 'your dear, gentle niece looks like a being from a brighter sphere, with that angelic smile and dazzling complexion.' The society of these cheerful guests gave a momentary impulse to the expiring energies of the aged peer, and for some days he appeared to be gaining strength. One morning he took Blanche to his private room, and unlocking an iron closet, showed her the family jewels, which had been deposited there since the death of the late countess.

'There, my dear girl, are diamonds and other precious stones, and valuable trinkets, which once belonged to my poor, dear, departed wife, and into your keeping I now entrust them, for which purpose I wished to see you here and give them into your own hands; there is an inventory, my love—we must assure ourselves that none are missing, so lay them out on the table.'

'Indeed, my lord, I cannot accept your too munificent offer.'

'And why not, my child?'

No answer was returned; but a deep blush overspread her face, suffusing her very brow, and her eyes were riveted on the ground.

'I know what is passing in your thoughts, my dear girl,' added the Earl; 'you are not yet Beauchamp's wife; but tell me truly, do you prefer another to him?'

'Oh! no, no, my lord—all my hopes of happiness are centred in him alone, but perhaps he may—'

'What, my child! prefer another to you? Does he, did he ever love any other but yourself?'

'Indeed I believe he never has my lord.'

'Then rest assured, my child, he never can—for where would he find a second Blanche Douglas? So do now as I desire, and let us compare the list with the contents.'

'I will willingly assist you, my lord, in that work, if you desire; but in my present position, I trust you will pardon me for maintaining my purpose or declining to accept the family jewels.'

'Well, child, I respect your delicacy, and will not press you further now, only assist me in my examination,' which occupied them for some considerable time, the Earl noticing and commenting on the value of each ornament; and when all were found correct, and returned to the closet, the key was again offered to Blanche, who, with tears in her eyes, begged to be excused taking it.

'Indeed, my lord, I feel your kindness more than I possibly can express, and it pains me to refuse you; but I cannot overcome my repugnance to presume on a situation which, by some unforeseen event, perhaps may never be my lot to fill.'

'Well, well, my child,' said the Earl, rather impatiently, 'you have disappointed me in the pleasure I anticipated; but your Aunt Gordon will not refuse the confidence I shall repose in her, and keep this for you. So now give me your arm down stairs, but not another word, unless you would distress me more than you have done already.'

things of this world. O! what will be the next?'

'A far more glorious one than this, where, by God's mercy, we shall all meet again, never more to part.'

'William,' he whispered, 'I almost despair of reaching that better world.'

'Oh! my dear lord,' replied Beauchamp, in an impressive voice; 'let not the Christian despair, who has God for his Father, Christ for his Saviour, and heaven for his home.'

A smile for a moment stole over the attenuated features of the dying peer; his hold on Beauchamp's hand relaxed, and he fell asleep, to wake no more in this world of sorrow.

CHAPTER XL.

After the last rites had been paid to the deceased Earl, and his remains deposited in the family vault, Mrs. Gordon, with Constance, Blanche, and Malcolm, set out on their return to London, leaving Beauchamp and his father at the castle.

We must now take a retrospective view of what had been occurring in town since their hasty departure, which, of course, being soon known, created no little curiosity in fashionable circles, as well as among Blanche's admirers, to ascertain the cause of their sudden flight. But Lady Malcolm, at her son's desire, would afford no further information (neither would Fred Beauchamp) than they had gone into the country for a few days, but would return to town again shortly; with which all were obliged to rest contented.

As Mrs. Harcourt was sitting at breakfast one morning, scanning the columns of the Morning Post appropriated to births, to which her attention was always first directed, as customary with many of her sex, she exclaimed:—

'Goodness, Mr. Harcourt; wonders will never cease. Only hear this:—'

'At Annandale Castle, the Earl of Annandale, in his ninety-six year. He is succeeded in his title and his vast estates by Mr. Beauchamp, of Lampton House (now seventh Earl of Annandale), who, with his son and daughter, have been staying at the Castle for some time.'

'Impossible! this must be a hoax!'

'A hoax, my dear! Who do you think would put such a thing in print, unless it were true?'

'Oh! Selma Markham; just to annoy me.'

'Pooh! nonsense! but now Lady Malcolm's mystery is explained—of her never being attached to the heir of one of the richest earldoms in the kingdom—here we see—William Beauchamp; then Mrs. Gordon's departure with Constance and Blanche, following so soon after—why, the fact is, no doubt, they have all been staying at Annandale Castle.'

'Well, I think it is unpardonable in Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon keeping us in the dark so long.'

'That is our own fault, my dear, for speaking so often in a derogatory tone of Mr. Beauchamp, who is a great favorite with both those ladies; and therefore they have kept the secret to themselves.'

'Still, Mr. Harcourt, were he a duke, instead of Lord Beauchamp, as I suppose he must now be called, he shall never have my consent to marry my niece.'

'You need not trouble yourself, my dear, as your consent is not necessary.'

'Then yours, as her guardian, is; and if you have the spirit of a mouse, which I sometimes doubt, you will not submit to be insulted and despised in this barefaced manner.'

'I must be guided by circumstances, Mrs. Harcourt, and do not intend to follow your example, by losing my temper where there is no occasion for it. You appear to forget all about the trial, and are blind to the fact that Mrs. Gordon is joint guardian with myself to Miss Douglas. What would my opposition be now worth, with Lady Malcolm's influence thrown into the scale against me? Nothing, Mrs. Harcourt; literally worse than nothing! I should, in that case, be insulted and despised to my face, as you are pleased to say I have