

M. Vance, and wreaked his vengeance by defamations against his character, which Mrs. Harcourt readily believed, and the more so, because he was represented as possessing nothing in the world but his pay. But Vance determined in his own mind that moments were now of precious importance to himself; and that he must win as much favour as possible with Mrs. Harcourt, who was his chief supporter; and he played his part accordingly, being with her the greater part of the evening, handing her into the supper-room, and paying her every possible attention, which gratified her vanity to the greatest possible degree.

William Beauchamp, being a great favorite with the young ladies, contrived to join in every set with his beloved Blanche, and sat next to her and Mrs. Gordon at the supper-table, with Lord Malcolm and Constance opposite; so that they thoroughly enjoyed this little respite from their almost incessant exertions.

'Blanche,' said Malcolm, 'you looked fogged and tired to death already; and I hope Aunt Gordon will not allow you to dance any more to night.'

'Oh, nonsense, Charles, I shall be as fresh as ever after supper; and I have enjoyed this ball so much.'

'Very well, child, as you please; but mind, Beauchamp, you take care of her, and give her half a bottle of champagne, for she looks like a ghost.'

No hint of this sort was necessary, and Beauchamp had the pleasure of seeing the roses return to her cheeks on again entering the ball-room, where they were met by Lord Vance and Mrs. Harcourt, who expressed herself much displeased with her niece for having deserted her protection that evening. Blanche quietly replied that she had been sitting with her aunt Gordon during the intervals between the dances.

'Very well, my dear, then I expect you will remain with me now until the ball is over; and offering her arm, Blanche was obliged to accept it. Lord Vance then begged for another dance to which Blanche replied that she was engaged to Major Hammond, a friend of Captain Melville's. 'I don't know him,' observed Mrs. Harcourt, 'and as he is not here, now the sets are formed, you cannot refuse Lord Vance; and who immediately offered his arm, and walked off with her.'

Her dancing twice with him did not fail to elicit the usual comments, which Mrs. Harcourt was delighted to hear; and Blanche's timid looks and heightened color, when addressed by his lordship, led many to draw inferences, the reverse of true, that Lord Vance was the favored man; and sure, with his title and handsome person, to carry off the heiress.

'Ah,' said Selina Markham, who was dancing with Beauchamp in the same set, 'it is really a reflection upon all the young men in the country, to allow that whiskeraudo lord to pounce upon, like a great overgrown kit amongst a timid flock of pigeons, and carry off our young heiress! What are they all thinking of? Even my brother Ned, the hieguardsman, seems to quail beneath his look, and keeps saying, "Eh, demmit, but what can a man do?" "Do?" I said, "why, demmit, Ned, pick a quarrel and shoot the fellow; or lend me the uniform, and I will do it for you." Poor dear Blanche! with those odious Harcourts, she will be sacrificed, poor child, to that fierce-looking, rat-eyed Bonassus.'

'Hush, Selina,' said Beauchamp, 'he will overhear you.'

'So much the better,' replied the wayward, high-spirited girl; 'I hate him equally with Vernon, who is his great ally.'

'Who is that forward, pert young lady dancing with Mr. Beauchamp?' inquired Lord Vance, who overheard some of his remarks.

'Miss Markham,' replied Blanche.

'Who is that look-nosed, monkey-legged fellow dancing with Miss Douglas?'

Vance, with Vernon, held a consultation on the state of affairs; and it was determined that Vance should write a proposal to Mr. Harcourt, the next day, for his ward.

'I think it would be best to call at Throsby,' observed Lord Vance.

'No,' said Vernon, 'that will not answer the same purpose as writing—*littera scripta manet*. Get Harcourt to give his consent black and white, and then you are safe for any contingency.'

'You are quite right, Vernon,' said Lord Mervyn, 'and a capital adviser in such matters.'

Accordingly, the next day, about the hour of luncheon, a servant was sent over on horseback from the castle, with the proposal in due form, and worded after the most approved fashion, with the usual protestations of love and devotion to the young lady.

Mr. Harcourt was in the dining-room with Blanche, Mrs. Harcourt, and Malcolm, when the letter was delivered to him; and having glanced over the contents, he put it into his pocket.

'My lord's servant is waiting for an answer, sir,' said the footman.

'An answer shall be sent this afternoon,' was the reply. No further comment was made on the contents of the letter until after luncheon, when Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt retired to their own private sitting-room to deliberate.

'I think, my dear,' said the gentleman (after they had decided to accept his lordship's offer), 'you are the most proper person to speak to Blanche on this subject, and of course can explain our wishes much better than I can—pointing out the many advantages, in point of title and connection, and pressing Blanche not to refuse so flattering a proposal.'

'Indeed,' replied the lady, 'I cannot think my niece will act so contrary to our advice and her own interests as to refuse Lord Vance.'

No sooner had Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt left the dining-room than Blanche, with the foreboding of evil, the influence of which no mortal can either explain or escape, turning to her cousin, said, 'I wonder, Charles, what that letter from Lord Vance contains?'

'A proposal for your hand, dear girl—that is my impression.'

'Oh, Charles,' exclaimed the poor girl, almost in tears, and turning deadly pale, 'what can I say?'

'Say I my dear Blanche, what you think you ought to say.'

'Oh, indeed, Charles! I never could accept such a man.'

'Heaven forbid you should,' returned Malcolm, 'for by all accounts a worse character does not exist. Refuse him, my dear girl, point blank—no evasions or after considerations—and don't listen a moment to Mrs. Harcourt's persuasions. You don't like him, and won't marry him; stick to that, and mind, I will stick to you through thick and thin.'

At this moment a servant entered, saying Mrs. Harcourt wished to see Miss Douglas in her morning-room.

'Very well,' replied Malcolm, 'she will be there directly. Now Blanche,' said he, pouring out a glass of wine, 'drink that, my dear girl, to keep up your courage; and recollect I shall be listening to hear what you say; be firm and decided, and we will take a walk together afterwards.'

Poor Blanche, dreading a lecture as well as a proposal, entered her aunt's room, trembling with apprehension, and being offered a chair, was obliged to listen to the contents of Lord Vance's letter, with many comments thereon from Mrs. Harcourt.

'And now, my dear child,' continued her aunt, most affectionately, 'you will, of course, not decline such an unexceptionable offer. Lord Vance is so handsome, so agreeable and talented in addition to his rank, that you really ought to feel highly flattered by the

proposition—positively tempting to any pur-suited woman; and if either your guardian or aunt venture on this subject with me, they shall have a lecture they will not very easily forget.'

'Oh, don't say anything about it to them, Charles.'

'Not unless they begin, depend upon it; but now we will talk of something else, as I feel thoroughly disgusted with the whole affair.'

Whilst the two cousins were enjoying their walk, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt were concocting their reply to Lord Vance, and verifying the old adage of 'too many cooks spoiling the broth'; for with the lady's interference and amendments, the meaning of the letter was so ambiguous, that it might be taken either as a refusal or acceptance of his lordship's proposals. The document, however, such as it was, was at length despatched, and received by Lord Vance, who was sitting over the fire with Lord Mervyn and Vernon in the library, previous to dressing for dinner.

His lordship hastily broke the seal and scanned rapidly the contents—he read them a second time more carefully—turned the letter over and over, and was commencing another perusal, when Lord Mervyn asked impatiently, 'What is it, Vance, a refusal or acceptance?'

'Pon my life, I can scarcely tell,' replied Vance, 'There,' handing it across to him, 'give me your opinion, for I cannot make head or tail of it.'

Lord Mervyn was equally puzzled, and handed it in turn to Vernon, saying, 'There, you are a diplomatist, Vernon, and may perhaps unravel the language of this mystical compound.'

Vernon, knowing the character of the writers, rightly interpreted their meaning, and said, 'Here have been two heads at work with this composition. Harcourt intended it as a refusal from Miss Douglas but the lady, having set her mind on accepting Lord Vance, has endeavored to nullify his intentions, and so far has succeeded that any man may take it as an acceptance from her guardian, and in that light I should certainly recommend Lord Vance to consider it. The last sentence, "That Lord Vance has both Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt's best wishes for his ultimate success in obtaining their niece's hand, and that no persuasions on their part shall be wanting to effect so desirable a consummation," is the very admission we desired. My advice, therefore, is, that Lord Vance should ride over to-morrow, express his warm obligations to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt for their friendly sentiments towards himself, and endeavor to obtain an interview with the young lady; and I doubt not, from her timidity and fear of her aunt's displeasure, such an answer may be extorted from her own lips as to be construed into an acceptance, or, at least, so Lord Vance will interpret it, and then what is to follow will appear almost as a natural consequence, for on one point I am thoroughly satisfied, from what I overheard mentioned by several persons in the ball-room the other night, that Lord Vance has not a day to spare; in fact, Melville told Bob Conyers that he was going to town the next day on purpose to collect information about the Italian and a certain person's affairs, which he was determined to communicate to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt without delay, for he swore Miss Douglas should never marry such an imposter. Those were his words, my lord, although they must be very unpalatable for you to hear. The blacksmith, therefore, is your only chance. Independent of which, you are already blown upon by Markham, whose sister, Selina, spoke pretty plain, as she always does.'

'I heard her,' replied Vance, 'and suspect, as you say, my chief dependence now is on two pair of posters and my travelling carriage.'

'That is the thing, my lord—the only thing to be done under your circumstances; and having this letter in your possession

is now gone to London to obtain the necessary proof of what he has asserted, as Mr. Conyers questioned the truth of these reports. His last words to him were—"As you doubt my word, I engage to return at the end of a week, and prove Lord Vance an imposter, or forfeit my honor as a gentleman." Having spoken this in a public ball-room, Captain Melville must (holding a commission in the army) maintain or retract his assertions; and, in the meantime, under these unpleasant circumstances, Blanche will find it more comfortable at the Priory than here, where, of course (after your sanction to his addresses), Lord Vance will be calling again.'

Mrs. Harcourt, feeling alarmed at these revelations, and thinking that perhaps she had been too precipitate in the affair, raised no further objections to Blanche's return with Mrs. Gordon, and within half an hour they were in her carriage on the road to the Priory, Lord Malcolm promising to ride over after luncheon and dine with them.

Malcolm had scarcely disappeared through the lower lodge gates of Throsby, before Lord Vance entered by the upper. He was rather more formally received by the lady of the mansion than he expected, which, notwithstanding all his complimentary speeches and expressions of deep obligation for Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt's most flattering approval of his proposals, did not wear away.

'May I hope,' inquired his lordship, in the most deferential tone, 'for a short interview with Miss Douglas, as I have not had the opportunity of making my proposal to her in person?'

'She left us this morning to remain with her aunt, Mrs. Gordon, for a week,' was the reply.

Lord Vance bit his lip at this intelligence, and looked exceedingly mortified, which Mrs. Harcourt noticing, said—

'Your lordship must have gathered from Mr. Harcourt's letter that we had failed to obtain the consent of Miss Douglas to receive your addresses.'

'Indeed! I did not interpret its contents,' replied Lord Vance, 'but was induced to think a personal interview with your niece might have led to a better understanding between us, and a confirmation of my most sanguine hopes.'

'At present,' replied Mrs. Harcourt, 'Miss Douglas would, I am quite sure, decline such an interview, although time may possibly effect some change in her sentiments.'

'Am I to consider, then,' inquired Lord Vance, 'this as my final answer, that Miss Douglas positively declines my future addresses?'

'Oh, dear, no!' replied Mrs. Harcourt (feeling she was now verging on the other extreme, and taking Mrs. Gordon's communications for granted); 'we shall be most happy to receive you here as usual on my niece's return, although, from her natural shyness of character, too much precipitation on your lordship's part would produce the contrary effect to that which you have our best wishes to accomplish.'

With many thanks for this friendly concession, Lord Vance politely took his leave, leaving Mrs. Harcourt in a most unenviable state of mind, doubting whether she had said too much or too little. On Mr. Harcourt's return, the occurrences of the day were duly related, and that worthy gentleman began to doubt his own want of proper precaution in not first investigating Lord Vance's affairs, merely relying on Lord Mervyn's representations.

'We have been too hasty, my dear,' observed Mr. Harcourt; 'and I now truly regret having penned that letter, chiefly at your dictation.'

'Oh, it is of little consequence,' returned his spouse; 'Blanche does not like him, and so ends the business, since with her fortune there will be no lack of suitors.'

Poor Blanche, when safe at Priory, felt like a bird escaped from its cage, and her happiness was increased by the arrival of

and jumping from a horse he had borrowed of a farmer, rushed into the servant's hall.

'Where is Mr. William?' he inquired, in breathless haste, of his friend, John, the footman.

'In the drawing-room,' was the reply.

'Quick then, John, and whisper in his ear, "Mark must see him this moment"—lose not a second.'

The message was delivered, and Beauchamp, springing from his chair, instantly darted from the room. Mark met him in the passage. 'Quick, sir,' he said, in a low voice. 'Your pistols, or Miss Blanche is lost!'

'Get my horse, Mark, and one for yourself, saddled directly, and I will down to the stable-yard.'

In five minutes, Beauchamp had put on a strong dark-colored shooting-jacket, with two brace of pistols in his pockets, and was galloping with Mark Rosier up the ride leading to the lodge gate. 'Now, Mark, tell me what has happened, as we go along—where is Miss Douglas?'

'At the Priory, sir, I hope, yet; but Mrs. Harcourt's carriage is sent to take her home at ten; and that damned rascally lord has got his travelling chariot, with four posters, waiting on the common, to intercept and carry her off to Scotland.'

'How do you know this, Mark?'

'The ostler at Cherrington, sir, is an old friend of mine, and told me all about the horses being ordered, and fresh relays bespoken on the North Road; and Tom Carter, my lord's footman, fished out something about it, too, and ran out to my hiding-place, behind the castle (where I have been the last three nights, from dark till nearly daylight), about six o'clock this evening, telling me he overheard the valet and Lord Vance saying something about Marston Common, at ten o'clock to-night. "They are off, Mark," said he, "trunks packed and all, and you haven't a minute to spare;" so, sir, I ran down to the village, where my partners were, ordered them to go to the steep hill beyond the common, with their air-guns, and hide themselves behind the hedge, to knock over the leading horses, and rescue the young lady, if we did not arrive in time.'

'Well done, Mark,' exclaimed Beauchamp. 'Here, take these two pistols, but don't use them, unless obliged to do so, to save your life; now come along,' as, setting spurs to his horse, Beauchamp rode rapidly on towards the Priory. 'Quick, to the back door, Mark, and learn of the servants if the carriage has left with Miss Douglas; if it has, give a whistle, and follow me as fast as you can; I shall keep on the road.'

In a few minutes the shrill whistle of the poacher was heard, piercing through the house, even to where Mrs. Gordon was sitting. At the signal, Beauchamp almost flew along, at such a pace that Mark strove in vain to overtake him.

We must now relate what was occurring to Blanche Douglas, who, accompanied by her maid, Alice, had left the Priory in Mrs. Harcourt's carriage, twenty minutes before Beauchamp's calling there. They had proceeded three miles: the night, although very misty, was (from the moon beginning to rise) sufficiently light to distinguish objects in passing, when Alice, who was looking through the window suddenly exclaimed—"The coachman has passed the turning-off to Throsby, miss, and is driving on towards the common."

'Good heavens!' replied Blanche, 'where can he be going to? Quick, Alice, put your head out of the window, and ask him.'

She had just done so, when the carriage stooped on the edge of the common, near a clump of beech trees, and Vance's valet, coming to the door, said Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt had dined, and were going to stay that night at the castle, and had sent Lord Mervyn's carriage to meet her there; the other being ordered to return home, and come to Marston in the morning.

To be Continued.