

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XLVII.

(CONTINUED.)

Having handsomely rewarded the officer for his trouble, and given him his address in the country, Beauchamp sought Blanche to consult her about Mr. Douglas. "I do not like the mother at all," he said; "she is a bold, impudent woman; but the two daughters are genteel looking, handsome girls, with the Douglas features, and being your uncle's children, I suggest setting them up in some business together as milliners, or allowing their mother three hundred a year to maintain them until they marry, when I will give each a good marriage portion, if they form respectable connections."

Your proposal is very liberal. Dear William, and you will of course take this money from my income."

"We will talk of that another day, my dear girl, as I have only consulted you now to know if you approve my plans; and as we have nothing to detain us in London, my father and myself intend leaving the day after to-morrow; and I need not say what pleasure it would give us both, if Aunt Gordon and yourself will travel with us; the two couples that are to be can occupy one carriage, and aunt and the governor the other, which will afford our venerable earl an opportunity of popping the question—only fancy aunt Countess of Annandale."

"Oh, William, how can you be so silly?" "Silly, you stupid child! you are silly not to perceive the unmistakable signs of the governor's penchant, which I have particularly noticed for the last six months; the fire has been smouldering for some time, and you will soon see it burst forth into a flame; so now we have had our spell of love-making, we will give them an opportunity of playing the same game; but not a word or hint to aunt, Blanche; leave all the arrangements to me; only go now and prepare her for leaving, whilst I drive down to Islington and to-morrow I will take you with me to do a little shopping for ourselves."

Beauchamp gave Mrs. Douglas a severe lecture for her past infamous conduct, and then explained his intentions towards herself and children, for which she expressed her grateful thanks.

"It will now, he said depend on your future conduct whether you receive any further assistance from Miss Douglas and myself, and desiring then to see her daughters, he told them also the allowance he had made their mother for their joint benefit, and his promise of a marriage portion to each; "but bear in mind, young ladies," he continued, "I do not wish you to marry in haste and repent at leisure, merely for the sake of money, which I intend shall be yours, whether you marry or not, at the expiration of two years from this time; and if I hear a good account of you, that sum may be increased." Then, placing twenty pounds in the hand of each, with a handsome present to the mother, Beauchamp withdrew.

He was followed down-stairs by the younger girl, Margaret, who, on opening the street door, said, "Will you tell me where you live, Lord Beauchamp?"

"Why do you wish to know?" was the enquiry.

"That I may write you those thanks which I cannot now express; indeed, my lord, I feel most grateful for your great kindness, which has saved us from misery and disgrace."

"Your name is—"

"Margaret," she replied.

"There, then, Margaret, is my card and address; write me your thoughts, not your thanks—the latter I can dispense with."

"Oh, thank you, my lord," she replied, raised her eyes, glistening with tears, to his. There was so much in that appealing look which reminded Beauchamp so forcibly of his own dear Blanche, that he said, in his soothing tones, "Are you not happy here, my poor girl?"

She burst instantly into tears, but made no reply.

"Come, Margaret, suppress your sobs; I will call for you to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and be ready for me, and I will take you a drive where you can tell me your wishes."

never be left long alone by your dear child ren, as you call us, for you must either be with us, or we with you, so don't, my dear aunt think of taking this girl on that account."

"Well, well, William, then I can have her for a month or two occasionally; so let me see her to-morrow morning."

It is almost needless to add that, from Mrs. Gordon, being already prepossessed in her favor, Margaret was received very kindly by that lady and Blanche; and after a long conversation about family matters, in which, with good taste and feeling, she spoke as little as necessary of her mother's character and conduct, sufficient transpired to induce Mrs. Gordon to take her as companion; and she accordingly gave her directions how to reach the Priory, with money enough to pay her expenses by coach the beginning of the following week. Nothing could exceed the delight of the poor girl at this arrangement, who, it appears, was very unhappy with her mother and sister, from causes which it is unnecessary to mention. Beauchamp, after an interview with Mrs. Gordon, escorted Margaret to a cab; and having received her grateful thanks for his extreme kindness, gave directions to the driver where to go, and returned, according to his promise, to take Blanche for a walk. The first shop they entered was Turner's the jeweller, where Beauchamp had ordered a pair of bracelets, set with precious stones, of great value, with a beautiful necklace to correspond.

"There, Blanche," he whispered, "is a little wedding present, which you must accept at my hands, unless you prefer something else."

"Indeed, William," she replied, "I have quite sufficient jewellery already; and do not like putting you to greater expense on my account, after the immense sum you have paid Lord Henry."

"I have ordered these purposely for you, dear girl, and you seriously offend me by refusing them;—they are fetters for your hands, and a chain for your neck, by which I shall bind you in cruel bondage to me for ever. Now, Blanche, there is one other purchase I must make, of unspeakable value to me, though of little value in itself—a plain ring for your finger which I shall keep until a certain auspicious morning."

And Beauchamp, desiring a tray of rings to be brought and laid on the counter, told the foreman to leave them for their inspection, whilst he attended to his other customers.

"Now, my dear girl, take off your left-hand glove, try one of these on your third finger."

Blanche blushed deeply, and her hand trembled so, that Beauchamp tried the rings for her; and selecting the one which fitted had best, said softly—"Why do you tremble thus, my own dearest love? Do you repent your choice?"

"Oh no, no, William; never can I do that; but I am rather nervous this morning."

"Then look at those jewels further down, my love, whilst I have these things put up," which being done, he returned to her. "Now, Blanche, which of those trinkets would suit dear aunt best? for I must and will make her a present worth her acceptance."

"I fear she will think us both very extravagant children, William, and lecture us instead of receiving a present; but I was just thinking of buying those bracelets (pointing them out) for her."

"Then I shall take that trouble off your hands, Blanche, and you shall give this brooch instead; but you need not now pay for it, as Mr. Turner has my name on his books, and I have desired him to send in my account, with these articles included."

Blanche remonstrated but in vain; when Beauchamp, taking up the two cases containing the brooch and the ring, desired the other things might be sent to Grosvenor Square by six o'clock at the latest that evening.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

The next morning, after an early breakfast, as Beauchamp and Blanche, equipped in travelling costume, were looking out of the window of Lady Malcolm's house, a

for the old pair; so now let us be off, as I have taken leave of my mother, who has not yet left her room, but has promised to join us at the Priory, within the month."

Constance now appeared, saying her father and Aunt Gordon were ready, and waiting below.

"Well, Malcolm," said the old peer, "what do you think of Will taking us all by surprise with that smart equipage for Blanche, and not to tell even his old father what he was about?"

"Just like him, my dear governor—always doing things on the sly."

"And always thinking of those he loves, before himself," added Mrs. Gordon.

"Now then, Will, off with your party," cried his father, "while Mrs. Gordon and myself bring up the rear."

In ten minutes the four bays were trotting majestically through Hyde Park, making light of the barouche which followed at their heels, and the four happy occupants of its inside seats, whose cheerful voices and smiles betokened their joy of being once more "homeward bound." No two schoolboys could be in higher spirits than Malcolm and Beauchamp; nor were Constance and Blanche less happy at their emancipation from the thralldom of town life.

"Now, then," cried Malcolm, when they had left the streets behind them, "let us see what Blanche's bays can do; put them along, Beauchamp."

"Pray don't let them go too fast, William," she cried, as he rose to speak to the postilions; "pray don't, to oblige me."

"Well, my love, then they shall only canter up the next rising ground, to show Malcolm how they can go together," which direction was given; but when once put on their mettle, the horses increased their speed to a full gallop, and raced away for a couple of miles, in spite of every effort to stop them. "Hurrah!" exclaimed Malcolm; "now we go Leger pace, by jingo! Blanche, they can gallop a few."

"Oh, William," cried both the girls at once, now seriously alarmed, "pray stop them, or we shall be dashed to pieces."

"Sooner said than done, my dears," said Malcolm; "but sit still, or you will be thrown out, you two silly girls."

Beauchamp, occupying the front seat with Blanche, and seeing the boys straining in vain to pull up their horses, shouted out, "Steady, my lads, let them go, but hold their heads near together, and sit firm in your seats."

To Beauchamp's horror, they were now rapidly approaching a broad-wheeled waggon occupying the centre of the road, with its jingling bells, and no appearance of a driver, who was, he concluded, as usual, half asleep inside. Destruction to them all seemed almost inevitable, and he turned deadly pale, when a sudden thought struck him. He had a new hunting-horn in the pocket of the carriage, which had been sent home from Percival's that morning, just before he left Grosvenor Square, which instantly seizing, he sent forth a blast so shrill and loud, that it penetrated the waggoner's dull ear amidst his din of bells, and the heavy vehicle was seen turning slowly aside. Still there seemed scarcely a chance of its giving room to pass before the leaders would be even with its hind wheels, and Beauchamp, fearing the crisis was at hand, and telling Malcolm to do the same to Constance, seized Blanche firmly with his right arm round the waist, taking tight hold of the handle of the carriage door with his left. The act was instantaneous, and as they passed the heavy, lumbering machine, the exclamation escaped him, "Thank God! we are saved." Blanche neither moved nor spoke, overcome by Beauchamp's manner, and the dread of some imminent peril.

"Now, my love," he whispered, "we have escaped the danger, sit firm a few minutes longer, and I will soon stop your fiery bays." They are already beginning to slacken their pace a little, which was evident to Beauchamp's quick eye, their heads being raised, and their ears becoming erect, when raising his voice he shouted out, "Hold hard!" In a moment their speed diminished. "Hold hard!" again cried Beauchamp, "you runaway brutes! hold hard!" These words seemed magical. The race was over; and all four horses stood still.

"Let them stand till I get out, my lads," Beauchamp cried. He then folded Blanche in his arms, who burst into tears.

liam, by the awful position in which you were placed, and you have shown very little consideration for my feelings, when I entreated you not to allow the horses to go so fast."

"I merely thought of giving them a canter against the hill, dear girl, and am fully sensible now of my excessive folly in rousing the spirits of four thorough-bred horses; but my agony of mind on passing that waggon, words cannot describe. Had an accident occurred, I never could have forgiven myself that boyish freak. Even now, the thought of it makes me shudder, and it will be a lesson to me as long as I live. I do not ask your forgiveness, Blanche, for I do not deserve it; and he turned round, leaning over the front, to order the lads to go slower. Blanche turned also towards the horses, and placing her hand on his arm, said affectionately, "I am not angry with you, dear William, only I felt hurt at your disregarding my wishes; but give me your hand, and let us say no more on the subject."

"Ay, ay," cried Malcolm, "that's the plan, Blanche, begin with him early, my love, and let him know at once that the grey mare is more than a match for the four bays. Egad! Beauchamp, I never saw a fellow knock under so quickly as you do; if Con was to lecture me for a spree of that sort, I would set them going again like mad; and now, I suppose, seven miles an hour is to be our pace for the remainder of the day."

"Not so, Malcolm, when we have posters of whose running away there is little danger. Rather, however, than frighten Blanche again, I would be two days on the journey, instead of one; but if our pace does not suit you, you and Constance can join the governor, and let us have Aunt Gordon."

"And not a bad move either, with two such slow coaches as yourself and Blanche," replied Malcolm. "Egad, old fellow! that girl will soon make a regular Molly Coddle of you; and as for hunting, riding over five-barred gates and double ditches, after you are married, don't again think of such dangerous exploits; but if my timid little cousin had accepted Danby or Ayrshire, she would have been bowled along thirty miles an hour, *malgre* her tears and entreaties, which they would only have laughed at."

"I never would have accepted either, Charles, which you know very well," replied Blanche, indignantly.

"Lucky for you you did not, my love, as no one would have suited you but this soft-hearted fellow Beauchamp, who is ever giving in to your whims and fancies."

"And ever will, Malcolm, when they are not unreasonable," added Beauchamp; "so a truce to further badinage. Blanche shall do as she likes with her own."

"And that means you, as well as her horses, old fellow."

"Exactly so, Malcolm," was the good-humored reply, which restored the party to their usual cheerfulness; and after changing horses at Hounslow, they again set forth on their journey, and halted not on the road until they reached Newbury, where Beauchamp, seeing some beautiful trout, ordered them for an early dinner, and waited for his father, and Mrs. Gordon, a stroll being proposed in the meantime.

On returning to the inn, after a short walk, they found the venerable earl with his companion, both of whom inflicted a sharp lecture on Beauchamp and Malcolm for leaving them so far behind.

"No help for it, governor," said Malcolm; "those fiery bays of Lady Beauchamp's ran away with us, and very nearly capsize the whole lot into a broad-wheeled waggon—just the nearest thing imaginable, half an inch more, and—oh, my, what a scrimmage!"

"I will engage, Charles, you had something to do with it, replied Mrs. Gordon."

"Just the smallest, littlest finger in the pie only, this time, aunt dear—merely asked Beauchamp to put them out a wee bit to try their paces, and off we went at Derby speed."

"Away, away, our steeds and we, Upon the pinions of the wind, All human dwellings left behind; We speed like meteors through the sky, Until Will Beauchamp raised a cry, And checked our couriers, fast and furious, Which made Miss Douglas look quite curious."

"Charles you are quite incorrigible," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; "always engaged in some mischief or freak, like a school-boy."

"Only in a little recreation to-day, dear aunt; it was very hot and the ladies wanted

fool like the little boy after eating more than a *quantum suff.* of plum pudding, as if a jacket was buttoned."

"Will you ever cease to be a boy, Charles? Never, aunt dear, until I am buckled up, when, according to the old song,

"Needles and pins—needles and pins; When a man marries, his trouble begins;

But, my 'tracious' (as the waiter brought a basket of live cray fish, ordered by Beauchamp), 'here's another little present to Lady Beauchamp. Come, my love, Blanche, 'just look at these pretty little creatures, so lively and sportive; just toss them, my dear, so nice and cool;' and putting her hand in the basket, she was seized by the finger, which caused more than an exclamation of surprise—on which Malcolm rushed from the room, and did not appear again until the carriages stood at the door. "Has it hurt you much, dear girl?" asked Beauchamp, jumping up from his chair, and running to her rescue.

"Oh, no, William, it only pinched my finger rather hard."

"Really it is too bad of Malcolm, with such practical jokes' (seeing her finger bleeding), 'which I will not put up with.'

"Pray don't be angry with him, William," she pleaded; "it was my own fault, for being so silly as to put my hand in the basket."

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said Malcolm, peeping in at the door and touching his hat, "time's up, and the coach is awaiting."

"Ah, you young scamp," shouted the old earl, "I'll double-thong you, when I catch you at Bampton, for serving Blanche that trick."

"She wouldn't open her mouth to me, daddy dear, so I wished to know if she had lost her voice; but she spoke quick enough to the cray fish when he asked her a question. Did he bite very sharp, my love?" he inquired, in a pitying tone, of Blanche.

"So sharp, Charles, that he made my finger bleed."

"Did he indeed, dear girl? I beg a thousand pardons for my foolery, as I thought they could only squeeze a little."

Malcolm having feelingly expressed contrition for his offence, which was readily forgiven, their seats were resumed in the carriage as before, until the last stage on the road, where Malcolm and Blanche joined Mrs. Gordon for the Priory, and the old earl drove off, with his son and daughter, to Bampton.

CHAPTER XLIX.

The following morning, very early, Blanche was in the full enjoyment of the flower-garden; buoyant in spirits, light of heart, and as perfectly happy as it is possible for any human being to be. Soon after breakfast, Beauchamp rode over to see his beloved, with whom he spent the day. How different were his feelings now to the last time he had wandered through the grounds of the Priory, accompanied by Blanche Douglas—then with the feverish, restless anxiety about her first entrance on a new sphere of life, and the dreadful influence of the world on her guileless, unsuspecting mind. The ordeal had now passed, temptation resisted, and her constancy to him proved beyond doubt or cavil. Beauchamp had cause to be proud of all this. He was not proud, however, but thankful—deeply thankful to the Almighty Power by whose grace and protection she had been preserved from falling into those errors and follies by which so many young girls are influenced.

They were sitting now in the old arbor during the heat of the day, Blanche reclining on a rustic chair, whilst these thoughts were passing through Beauchamp's mind. He was silent for a few moments, which she noticed. "Of what are you thinking, dear William? Still there was no reply."

"Will you not tell me," she inquired, "what has caused this sudden thoughtfulness? Surely, I may now share in all your cares, as well as pleasures. Tell me, then, my dear William, what has made you look so serious?"

"I was thinking, my dearest girl, of the deep debt of gratitude I owe to God for the ineffable and undeserved happiness I now enjoy in having you restored to me again, unaffected and unspotted by the world, as when we last sat together here; and I thought crossed my mind, to pour out my thanks to our Merciful Father for this day."