



The Countess of Landon.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"No," he said, as if it were a matter of course. "Then Landon must let me help him to look after you. He has a habit of going straight after the hounds as if he were the only man in the affair. However, he is not likely to forget you," he added, with a little bow, and he continued by her side, talking to her with that devoted attention which proclaims a man's admiration.

The crowd watched them covertly. "She is what I call right down beautiful," said a man, in a low tone, to several ladies.

"Oh, yes, she is good-looking enough," assented one of them. "But who is she? All kinds of stories are going the rounds."

"It doesn't much matter," responded the man. "She's Mrs. Landon now and the daughter-in-law of a countess, and that and her good looks will carry her through. Besides, if Rochester is going to take her up—"

He stopped and nodded significantly. My Lord Rochester had been known to raise a woman to the rank of a professional beauty with a word. Was he going to utter that word on behalf of Mrs. Landon, they wondered. Soon, like sheep following a leader, they gathered round Madge, and before the hounds found and started their fox she had quite a little court about her. They started, and Royce whispered:

"Let her have her head, as I told you, Madge."

She nodded and settled herself in her seat, and went away with Royce on one side and Lord Rochester on the other; and presently Madge understood the charm of fox-hunting.

The color came to her face, her heart beat with a delicious rapidity; she felt as if she were floating on a cloud, and as they neared the first fence and she saw it rise before her, she felt no fear, but a kind of wild excitement, which rose into exultation as the mare rose and went over it like a bird.

"Your first run, did you say?" said Lord Rochester. "Were you making fun of us, Mrs. Landon?"

Madge shook her head, and laughed as she had not done for—how long? "Oh, don't talk!" she said. "It is too beautiful!"

The two men had some difficulty in keeping up with her as the run proceeded, for the hounds were going

straight, and Madge, with her light weight and thorough-bred, went at racing speed.

"Take care of your wife, Landon!" said Lord Rochester, once as Madge flew over a hedge from which many of the field had turned aside.

"She will take care of herself," said Royce, proudly.

"Where did she learn to ride like that?" said Rochester, presently, as they rode after her.

Royce flushed.

"She has ridden from a girl," he said, laconically.

Rochester glanced at him.

"Any one can see that," he said, courteously. "But I thought she was thrown that time. She would have been if she hadn't the pluck of the dev—I beg your pardon."

Royce laughed, and his eyes flashed.

"Thank you, old fellow," he said. "I'll tell her. It's the biggest compliment even you ever paid."

There were others as much amazed at Lord Rochester—those few others who were in the field that which Madge was among the first. Lord Balfarras, the master of the hounds, got off his horse as the fox was killed and came up to Madge with the brush in his hand—that trophy which is as eagerly coveted by the sportsman as is the blue ribbon by the politician.

"This belongs to you, Mrs. Landon," he said, "and it was never more honestly earned. If I were your husband, I should be the proudest man in the field to-day, as he doubtless is, and the courtly old man bowed, half in hand, half in awe, as he called at the Towers, but we shall have the pleasure of meeting you again at the ball, I hope."

This was a long and significant speech from the old nobleman, and those who heard it exchanged glances. It meant that this girl whom Royce Landon had married, and of whose antecedents no one knew anything, was to be received into country society.

That was a happy hour in which Madge rode home between Royce and Lord Rochester, who went out of his way to accompany them. As they entered the hall, in which Irene, the countess, and Seymour were at afternoon tea, Royce, with his face flushed with pride, said:

"Mother, Madge was in at the death, and Balfarras has given her the brush."

The countess looked up at Madge as she stood with blushing face and downcast eyes, the habit splashed with mud, the brush in her hand.

"Will you have some tea?" she said, coldly.

But Irene came to her and drew her to a chair.

"I knew you would be among the first, dear," she said. "I am so glad and proud."

"I wish you had been there," said Madge in her low voice. "It is you who should have had it—not I."

Irene shook her head.

"No, no; I do not think there is any one who can ride like you, Madge. And your first run, too. Aren't you brimful of pride?"

Seymour looked from one to the other, with a half-sneer on his face.

"It must have seemed so strange to her!" he murmured—fortunately, for him, too low for Royce to hear. "Olympics, as a rule, I believe, trap foxes, do not hunt them."

But, though Royce did not hear the malignant sneer, Madge did, and the color fled from her face. She put down her tea-cup, and rose.

"I think I will go straight to my room," she said.

He had destroyed all her innocent pleasure.

Irene put down her cup also, and followed her.

The countess looked at Seymour. Royce had gone through the hall to see after the horses.

"How long do you intend to torture that girl?" she asked, calmly.

He smiled.

"My dear mother, isn't torture rather an exaggeration? People of that class do not feel very keenly alas! Besides, it was a harmless pleasure. Now, if I had said that she should have had too much fellow-hunting with the fox to join in the hunt—because both foxes and gypsies are partial to other people's poultry—I say, if I had uttered this little epigram, which came into my mind, our charming and really interesting grey-bride might have felt a little annoyed; but I refrained."

The countess regarded him sternly.

"Sometimes I think you have no heart!" she said, sternly.

"Oh, believe me, madame," he said, with a sneer. "And, if I may ask the question, whence this newly born consideration for Royce's wife? If there has been any torture applied to her, I should decidedly say that it has been of the treading kind. I fancy, my dear mother, that you have stung her with your icy looks far worse than I can have done."

The countess bit her lip and looked straight before her.

"What is done, is done," she said. "Spare her for the future. I make it a request."

"My dear mother, a request from you?" he said, with a sneer.

She turned upon him with a look that startled him, so intense was its scorn and haughty.

"It is a command!" she said, and, rising, left the hall with slow, imperious gait.

Seymour leaned back and looked after her.

"So madame is going to side with Royce's vagabond wife, is she?" he muttered. "If so, I think I can pay you back, dear mother, in your own coin. There should be some fun to be got out of Madge at the ball, and if so, I'll get it."

When Madge got up to her room, she found Marion on her knees before a couple of huge wooden boxes.

"Oh, madame, pray do not come near until I get off your riding-habit. It is dreadful to think of such mud coming near these beautiful dresses!"

"Beautiful dresses!" repeated Madge, wearily.

"The ball-dresses, madame," explained Marion. "I was just unpacking them. Lady Irene's—Irene preferred to drop her courtesy title and liked to be called 'miss,' but she was as often called one as the other—"

"Lady Irene ordered her box to be sent in here, so that you might see them together."

Irene knocked at the door at Marion was getting Madge out of her habit.

"I thought it would be a good time to try these dresses on, dear, if you are not too tired," she said.

She thought it better not to refer to Seymour's cruel sarcasm.

"Very well," said Madge, indifferently. "No, I am not too tired."

"And madame has had such a hard run," said Marion, smiling at Madge with affectionate admiration and respect. "Giles told me all about it, madame, and he said that it was the finest bit of riding he had ever seen—a perfect triumph, he called it, begging your pardon, ma'am."

(to be continued.)

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