

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A GOOD THING."

(Continued.)

"In two words, Mr. Walters, you're ruined!" She spoke almost angrily in her effort at self-control.

"That's the way to say it!" was his careless reply. "General break-up—horse, foot, and drapery. No reason, though, you should call me Mr. Walters."

"Well, Daisy, then," she murmured, with a loving, lingering tenderness on those syllables she was resolved never to utter above her breath again. "You know how I hoped you'd win. You know how vexed I am. You know—or rather I don't, and never shall know—that it's worse for me than for you!"

The last sentence she spoke so low he did not catch its purport, but thinking she regretted the loss of her own wagers, he began to express sorrow for having advised her so badly.

She stopped him angrily. "I would have backed her for thousands," she exclaimed. "I would have laid my life on her. I believe I have!"

"Then you don't owe the mare a grudge!" he answered cheerily. "I thought you wouldn't. She's not a pin the worse for training. You'll take her back, won't you?—and—and—you'll be kind to her for her own sake?"

She seemed to waver a moment, as if she weighed some doubtful matter in her mind. Presently with cleared brow, and frank, open, looks, she caught his hand.

"And for yours!" said she. "I'll never part with her. So long as we three are above ground, Satanella—my name-sake—will be a—remembrance between you and me!"

Then she beckoned the General, who was talking to some ladies behind her, and asked for information about the next race, with a kindness of tone and manner that elevated the old soldier to the seventh heaven.

Meanwhile, Miss Macormac had found time to recover her composure. Turning to Mr. Walters she showed him a bright and pretty face, with just such traces of the vexation that had clouded it as are left by passing showers on an April sky. Her eyes looked deeper and darker for their late moisture, her little nose all the daintier that its transparent nostrils were tinged with pink.

She gave him her hand frankly, as though to express silent sympathy and friendship. Sinking into a seat by her side, Daisy embarked on a long and detailed account of the race, the way he had ridden it, the performances of St. George, Leprauchan, Shaneen, and his own black mare.

Though he seldom got excited, he could not but break into a glowing description, as he warmed with his narrative. "When I came to the wall," he declared, "I was as sure of winning as I am of sitting by you now. St. George had been disposed of, and he was the only horse in the race whose form I did not know to a pound. Leprauchan, I felt satisfied, could never live the pace, if I made it hot enough. And as for little Shaneen, the mare's stride would be safe to beat him, if he finished with a set-to, in the run-in. Everything had come off exactly to suit me, and when we rounded the last turn but one I caught hold of Satanella, and set her going down the hill like an express-train!"

"Did ye now?" she murmured, her deep grey eyes looking earnestly into his, her sweet lips parted as though with a breathless interest that drank in every syllable he spoke.

"Did ye now?" Only three words, yet carrying with them a charm to convince the most practical of men that the days of spells and witchcraft are not yet gone by. An Englishwoman would have observed, "Really! Oh, indeed!" "You don't say so!" or made use of some such cold conventional expression to denote languid attention, not thoroughly aroused; but the Irish girl's "Did ye now?" identified her at once with her companion and his doubts, started them both momentarily on that path of congenial partnership, which is so seductive to the traveller, smooth, pleasant all down hill, and leading—who knows where?

Perhaps neither deep liquid eyes, nor dark lashes, nor arched brows, nor even smiles and blushes, and shapely graceful forms, would arm these Irish ladies with such unequalled and irresistible powers, were it not for their kindly womanly nature that adapts itself so graciously to those with whom it comes in contact—that encouraging "Did ye now?" that despises no trifle, is wearied with no details, and asks only for his confidence whom it honors with their regard. Perhaps, also,

herself heard the whisper, in which he asked— "Then you don't despise a fellow for losing, Miss Macormac, do you?"

"Despise him?" she answered with flashing eyes. "Never say the word! If I liked him before, I'd think I wouldn't like him ten times better after he'd been vexed by such a disappointment as that! Ye're not understanding what I mean, and maybe I'm not putting it into right words, but it seems to me— Yes, dear mamma, I'm minding what you say! Sure enough, it is raining in here fit to drown a fish! I'm obliged to ye, Captain. Will ye kindly shift the cloak and cushions to that dry place yonder by Lady Mary. How wet the poor riders will be in their silk jackets! I'm pleased and thankful now—indeed I am—that ye're sheltered and dry in the stand."

The last remark in a whisper, because of Lady Mary's supervision, who thinking the *tele-a-tele* between Daisy and her daughter had lasted long enough, took advantage of a driving shower and the state of the roof to call pretty Miss Norah into a part of the stand which she considered in every respect more secure.

The sky had now darkened, the afternoon promised to be w. t. Punchestown weather is proverbial for sunshine, and Mrs. Lushington, who had done less execution than she considered rightly due to a new toilette of violet and swansdown, voted the whole thing a failure and a bore. The last race was run off in a pelting shower, the Lord Lieutenant's carriages and escort had departed, people gathered up their shawls and wrappings with little interest in anything but the preservation of dry skins. Ladies yawned and began to look tired, gentlemen picked their way through the course ankle-deep in mud, to order up their several vehicles, horse and foot scattered themselves over the country in every direction from a common centre, the canvas booths flapped, wind blew, the rain fell, the great day's racing was over, and it was time to go home.

Norah Macormac's ears were very sharp, but they listened in vain for the expected invitation from Lady Mary, asking Daisy to spend a few days with them at the castle. Papa, whose hospitality was unbounded and uncontrollable, would have taken no denial, under any circumstances; but papa was engaged with the race committee, and intended, moreover, to gallop home across country by himself. There seemed nothing for it but to put as much cordiality into her farewell as was compatible with the presence of bystanders and the usages of society.

Miss Norah no doubt acquitted herself to Daisy's satisfaction—and her own. Mr. Sullivan, whose experience enabled him to recover his losses on the great handicap by a judicious selection of winners in two succeeding races, did not, therefore, depart without a final glass of comfort, which he swallowed in company with the Rosecommon farmer. To him he expounded his views on steeple-chasing, and horses in general, at far greater length than in the forenoon. It is a matter of regret that, owing to excitement, vexation, and very strong punch, Denis should have been much too drunk to understand a word he said. The only idea this worthy seemed clearly to take in, he repeated over and over again in varying tones of grief and astonishment, but always in the same terms:—

"The mare can do it, I tell ye! an' the Captain rode her beautiful! Isn't it strange now, to see little Shaneen come in like that at the finish, an' given' her a batin' by a neck!"

CHAPTER XV.

WINNERS AND LOSERS.

Dinner that day at the castle seemed less lively than usual. Macormac, indeed, whose joviality was invincible, ate, drank, laughed, and talked for a dozen; but Lady Mary's spirits were obviously depressed; and the guests, perhaps not without private vexation of their own, took their cue rather from hostess than host. An unaccountable sense of gloom and disappointment pervaded the whole party. The General having come down early, in hopes of a few minutes with Miss Douglas in the drawing-room before the others were dressed, had been disappointed by the protracted toilette and tardy appearance of that provoking young lady, with whom he parted an hour before on terms of mutual sympathy and tenderness, but who now sat pale and silent, while the thunder clouds he knew and dreaded gathered ominously on her brow. His preoccupation necessarily affected his neighbor—a budding beauty fresh from the school-room, full of fun and good humor, that her sense of propriety kept down, unless judiciously encouraged and drawn out. Most of the gentlemen had been wet to the skin, many had lost money, all were tired, and Norah Macormac's eyes filled every now and then with tears. These discoveries Mrs. Lushington

his glass in his eye, observant, imperturbable, and thinking, no doubt, a great deal.

It was rumored, indeed, that on one memorable occasion he got drunk at Cambridge, and kept a supper-party in rhapsody of laughter till four, a. m. If so, he must have fired all his jokes off at once, so to speak, and blown the magazine up afterwards; for he never blazed forth in such lustre again. He came out a Wrangler of his year, notwithstanding, and the best modern linguist, as well as classical scholar, in the university. Though the world of ball-goers and dined-out ignores such distinctions, a strong political party, hungering for office, had its eye on him already. As his father voted for Government in the Upper House, a provident director of the Opposition lost no time in sounding him on his views, should he become a member of the Lower. How little, to use his own words, the whip "took by his motion" may be gathered from the opinion he expressed in confidence to his chief, that "St. Abbs was (either as close as wax or the biggest fool (and it's saying a great deal) who ever came out of Cambridge with a degree!"

Gloomy as a dinner-party may appear at first, if the champagne circulates freely, people begin to talk long before the repast is laid over. What must children think of their seniors when the dining-room door opens for an instant, and trailing up-stairs unwillingly to bed, they linger to catch that discordant unintelligible gabble going on within? During a lull Mrs. Lushington made one more effort to arouse the attention of Lord St. Abbs.

"We're all getting better by degrees," said she, with a comic little sigh. "But it has been a disastrous day, and I believe everybody feels just as I do myself."

"How?" demanded his lordship, while the eye-glass bounced into his plate.

"Like the man who won a shilling and lost eightpence," she answered, laughing. "Why?" he asked, yet more austerely, screwing the instrument into position the while with a defiant scowl.

"She was out of patience—no wonder. "Good gracious, Lord St. Abbs!" said she. "Haven't we all been on the wrong horse? Haven't we all been backing Daisy?"

She spoke rather loud, and was amused to observe the effect of her observation. It was like dropping a squib in a boy's school during lessons. Everybody must needs join in the excitement.

"A bad job indeed!" said one.

"A great race entirely!" added another.

"Run fairly out from end to end, and only a neck between first and second at the finish!"

"I wish I'd taken old Sullivan's advice," moaned a third; or backed the mare for a place, anyhow."

"Ye might have been wrong even then, me boy," interrupted a jolly, red-faced gentleman, unless ye squared the odd woman! I wonder would she take three half-crowns a day to come with me twice a year to the Curragh?"

"I know of the mare's trial," drawled one of the London dandies, "and backed her to win me a monkey. Daisy put me on at once, like a tramp. It was a real good thing—and it has boiled over. (Champagne, please.) Such is life Miss Douglas. We have no hope of getting home now till Epson Spring."

Miss Douglas, not the least to his discomfiture, stared him scornfully in the face without reply.

"I'm afraid it's a severe blow to young Walters," observed the General. "They tell me he has lost a good deal more than he can afford."

"Got it, I fancy, very hot!" said the dandy. "Gad, he rode as if he'd backed his mount. I thought his finish one of the best I ever saw."

Norah Macormac threw him the greatest of glances, and wondered why she had considered him so very uninteresting till now.

"They say he hasn't a shilling left," continued the General, but stopped short when he caught the flash of Satanella's eye, under its dark, frowning brow.

"I dare say he'll pull through," said she bitterly, "and disappoint his dearest friends, after all."

"I'll engage he will, Miss Douglas!" exclaimed Macormac's hearty voice from the end of the table. "It's yourself wouldn't turn your back on a friend, lose or win. Take a glass of that claret, now. It'll not hurt ye. Here's the boy's health, and good luck to him! A pleasanter fellow, to my mind, never emptied a bottle, and a better rider never sat in a saddle, than he's proved himself this day!"

Norah would have liked to jump up and hug papa's white head in her embrace on the spot, but Lady Mary had been watching the girl to-night with a mother's anxiety, and fearful lest her daughter should betray herself if subjected to further trial, gave the signal rather prematurely for the ladies to withdraw.

While they trooped gracefully out, the gen-

life, but the Dublin Evening Mail lay close at hand on a writing-table. She became suddenly interested in a Tipperary election, and the price of pigs at Belfast.

Lady Mary's accents were low, grave, even sorrowful. It was difficult to catch more than a sentence here and there; but, judging by the short, quick sobs that replied to these, they seemed to produce no slight effect on the other party to the conversation.

Mrs. Lushington smiled behind her paper. What she heard only confirmed what she suspected. Her eyes shone, her brow cleared. She felt like a child that has put its puzzle together at last.

Lady Mary warmed with her subject; presently she declared, distinctly enough, that something was "not like you, my dear. In any other girl I'd have called it cold, forward, unwomanly!"

"Oh, mamma! mamma! don't say that!" pleaded a voice that could only belong to poor Norah. "If you think so, what must he have thought? Oh dear! oh dear! what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"It's never too late to remember your duty, my child," answered Lady Mary, "and I'm sure your father thinks as I do;" but though the words sounded brave enough, there was a tremble in the mother's voice that vibrated from the mother's heart.

"And I'll never see him again now, I know!" murmured Norah so piteously, that Lady Mary could hardly keep back her tears.

"Well, it's not come to that yet," said she kindly. "Anyways, it's wise to make ready for the worst. Kiss me, dear, and mind what I've been telling ye. See now, stay here a bit, till you're more composed. I'll send in little Ella to keep ye company. The child won't take notice, and ye can both come back together into the drawing-room, and no more said."

But long ere Lady Mary could finish her caresses, and get her motherly person under weigh, Mrs. Lushington had slipped into the billiard-room, where she was found by the gentlemen practising winning hazards in solitude, and where, challenging Lord St. Abbs to a game, she was left discomfited by his very uncivil rejoinder—

"I don't play billiards," said his lordship, and turned on his heel without further comment or excuse.

It was a new sensation for Mrs. Lushington to find herself thus thrown on general society, without at least one particular admirer on whose devotion she could rely. She didn't like it. She longed to have a finger in that mischief which is proverbially ready for "idle hands to do." On three people she now resolved to keep close and vigilant watch. These were Norah, St. Josephs, and Satanella.

The conduct of this last seemed baffling in the extreme. She had scarce vouchsafed a word to the General during dinner, had scowled at him more than once with the blackest of her black looks, and comforted herself altogether like the handsome vixen she could be when she chose. Now, under pretence of setting down her coffee-cup, she had brought him to her side, and was whispering confidences in his ear, with a tenderness of tone and bearing he accepted gratefully, and repaid a hundred-fold.

"How tolerant are these old men!" thought Mrs. Lushington, "and how kind! What lovers they make, if only one can bring oneself not to mind wrinkles, and rheumatism, and grey hair! How gentle and how chivalrous! What patience and consideration! They don't expect a woman to be an angel, because they do know a little about us; and perhaps because it is only a little, they believe there is more than one degree between absolute perfection and utter depravity. If jealous, they have the grace to hide it; if encouraged, they do not presume. They know when and where to speak, and hold their tongues; to act, and to refrain. Besides, if one wants to make them unhappy, they are so sensitive, yet so quiet. A word or a look stings them to the quick, but they take their punishment with dignity; and though the blow be sharp and unprovoked, they never strike again. Let me see. I don't think I've had an admirer above forty—not one who owned to it, at least. It's a new experience. I declare, I'll try! This romantic old General would suit the place exactly, and I couldn't do a kinder thing for both, than to detach him from Blanche. The man is regularly wasted and thrown away. My gracious! isn't it ridiculous? If he could see us as we really are! If he only knew how much more willing a woman is to be controlled than a violent horse; how much easier to capture than a Sepoy column or a Russian gun. And there he sits, a man who has ridden fearlessly against both, shrinking, hesitating, before a girl who might be his daughter—afraid, absolutely afraid, the gallant, heroic coward, to look her in the face! Is she blind? Is she a fool, not knowing what she throws away? or is she really over head and ears in love with somebody else? She can't be breaking her heart for Daisy, surely; or why has she taken the General

Ella, a flaxen-haired romp of eleven, he jumped off a log ago with a message to sister Norah, but neither having yet returned the mother's heart ached to think of her handsome darling, smarting, perhaps, even under the mild reproof she had thought wise to administer, perhaps weeping bitterly to her little sister's consternation, because the pain that burns so fiercely in a young and wearied heart—the longing for a happiness that can never be.

Presently Lady Mary's brow cleared, as she gave a little sigh of relief, for Miss Ella's voice was heard, as usual, chattering loud in the passage; and that young person much elated at being still out of bed, came dancing into the room, followed by Norah from whose countenance all traces of recent emotion had disappeared, and who looked in her mother's eyes, only the prettier, though she was a shade paler than usual. With the younger child laughed and romped with the company, fighting shy of Lord St. Abbs but hovering with great glee about papa, and entreating not to be sent upstairs for more minutes. Her sister stole quietly off to a lonely corner, where she subsided into an unoccupied sofa, with the air of being thoroughly fatigued.

Mrs. Lushington, covertly watching Satanella, wondered more and more.

Breaking away from her General, her silk and her unfinished cup of tea, Miss Douglas walked across the room like a queen, took Norah's head in both hands, kissed her exactly between her eyebrows, and sat down composedly by her side.

CHAPTER XVI.

A GARDEN OF EDEN.

In a comic opera, once much appreciated by soldiers of the French nation, there occurs a quaint refrain, to the effect that the gathering of strawberries in a certain wood at Malicieux is a delightful pastime,

"Quand on est deux,
Quand on est deux—"

and the sentiment, thus expressed, seems applicable to all solitudes, suburban or otherwise, where winding paths and rustic seats admit of two abreast. But however favored by nature, the very smoothest of lawns and leafiest of glades surely lose more than half their beauty, if we must traverse them unaccompanied by somebody who makes all the sunshine, and perhaps all the shade, of our daily life.

To wait for such a companion, is nevertheless an irritating ordeal, even amidst the fairest scenery, trying both to temper and nerves. It has been said that none realize the pace at which time gallops, till they have a bill coming due. On the other hand none know how slow he can crawl, who have not kept an uncertain tryst with over-punctuality "under the greenwood tree!"

General St. Josephs was not a man to be late for any preconcerted meeting, either with friend or foe. It is a long way from Mayfair to Kensington Gardens; it seemed none the shorter for an impatient spirit and a heart beating with anxiety and hope. Yet the old soldier arrived at the appointed spot twenty minutes too soon, there to suffer torments from a truly British malady called "the figlets," while diligently consulting his watch and reconnoitering his ground.

How many turns he made, pacing to and fro round pond and the grove, till he longed to behold his godfather in a halo of light and beauty, he never can be in time for a lover; and after that seemed a week, he drew it from his breast-pocket, kissed it reverently, and read it once more from end to end.

"I will arrive five o'clock, no doubt, and certainly was a very short epistle to be esteemed so sweet. This is what, through many perusals, he had literally learned by heart—

"MY DEAR GENERAL,

"I want a long talk. Shall I meet you in Kensington Gardens, where you say it's so pretty, at twelve o'clock?"

"Ever yours,

"BLANCHE."

Now, in the composition, there appeared one or two peculiarities that especially delighted its recipient.

She had hitherto signed herself B. Douglas, never so much as writing her Christian name at length; and here she jumped boldly to "Blanche," the prettiest word, to his mind, in the English language, when standing thus, like Falstaff's sack, "simple of itself." Also, he had not forgotten the practice adopted by ladies in general by crossing a page on which there is plenty of space, to enhance its value, as you cross a cheque on your banker, that it may be honored in the right quarter. One line had Satanella scrawled transversely across the bottom of the page.