

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Penchostown Races.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PERTINENT QUESTION.

(Continued.)

"I ask for no explanation, and will listen to none. Suppose me to repose implicit confidence in the vague accusations of an anonymous slander. Suppose me to believe you false and fickle, a shameless coquette, and myself an infatuated old fool. Suppose anything and everything you please; but first answer the question I ask you from the bottom of my heart, with this anonymous statement, false or true, I care not a jot which, in my hand."

He held it as if about to tear it across and fling it in the grate. She laid a gentle touch on his arm and whispered softly:

"Don't destroy it till I've answered your question. Yes. There is nobody like you in the world!"

We need not stop to repeat a proverb touching the irreverent persistency of Folly in travelling hand-in-hand with Age; and of what extravagances the General might have been guilty, in his exceeding joy, it is impossible to guess, had she not stopped him at the outset.

"Sit down there," she said, pointing to a corner of the sofa, while establishing herself in an armchair on the other side of the fireplace. "Now that you have had your say, perhaps you will let me have mine! Hush! I know what you mean. I take all that for granted. Stay where you are, hold your tongue, and listen to me."

"The first duty of a soldier is obedience," he answered in great glee. "I'll be as steady as I can."

"It is my right now to explain," she continued gravely. "Believe me. I most fully appreciate. I never can forget. Whatever happened I never could forget the confidence you have shown in me to-day. Depend upon it, when you trust people so unreservedly, you make it impossible for them to deceive. I have always honored and admired you. During the last hour I have learned to—to well—to think you deserve more than honor and esteem. Any woman might be proud and happy—yes—happy to belong to you. But no, if I am to be your wife—don't interrupt. Well, as I am to be your wife, you must let me tell you everything—everything—or I recall my promise."

"Don't do that," he answered playfully. "But mind, I'm quite satisfied with you as you are, and ask to know nothing."

She hesitated, and the color came to her brow while she completed her confession. "You—you lent me some money, you know; gave it me, I ought to say, for I'm quite sure you never expected to see it back again. It was a good deal. Don't contradict. It was a good deal, and I wonder how I could have the face to ask for it. But I didn't want it for myself. It was to save from utter ruin a very old and dear friend."

"I know all about it," said he, cheerfully. "At least, I can guess. Very glad it should be so well employed. But all that was your business, not mine."

"And you never even asked who got it!" she continued, while again there gathered a mist to veil her large dark eyes.

"My dear Blanche," he answered, "I was only too happy to be of service to you. Surely it was your own, to employ as you liked. I don't want to know any more about it, even now."

"But you must know," she urged. "I've been going to tell you ever so often, but something always interrupted us; and once, when I had almost got it out, the words seemed to die away on my lips. Listen. You know I'm not very young."

He bowed in silence. The reflection naturally presented itself that if she was not very young, he must be very old.

Miss Douglas proceeded, with her eyes fixed on her listener, as if she was looking at something a long way off.

"Of course I've seen and known lots of people in my life, and had great friends—I mean real friends—that I would have made any sacrifice to serve. Amongst these was Mr. Walters. I used to call him Daisy. General, I—I liked him better than all the rest. Better than anybody in the world—"

"And now?" asked the General anxiously, but carrying a bold front notwithstanding.

"Now, I know I was mistaken," she replied. "Though that's not the question."

both to herself and him, took a courteous leave of his hostess, and gave a hearty greeting to the new-comer as they passed each other on the threshold.

"I think I've won the battle," muttered the old soldier, mounting his horse briskly in the street; "though I've left the enemy in possession of the ground!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A SATISFACTORY ANSWER.

Daisy, with his hair cut exceedingly short, as denoting that he was on the eve of some great crisis in life, entered the apartment in the sheepish manner of a visitor who is not quite sure about his reception. Though usually of cheerful and confident bearing, denoting no want of a certain self-assertion, which the present generation call "cheek," all his audacity seemed to have deserted him, and he planted himself in the centre of the carpet, with his hat in his hand, like the poor, spiritless bridegroom at Netherby, who stood "dangling his bonnet and plume" while his affianced and her bridesmaids were making eyes at young Lochinvar.

Miss Douglas, too, required a breathing-space to restore her self-command. When they had shaken hands, it was at least a minute before either could find anything to say.

The absurdity of the situation struck them both, but the lady was the first to recover her presence of mind; and, with a laugh not the least genuine, welcomed him back to England, demanding the latest news from Paddyland.

"You've been at Cormac's town, of course," said she. "You can tell us all about dear Lady Mary, and your pretty friend Norah. I hope she asked to be remembered to me."

He blushed up to his eyes, turning his hat in his hands, as if he would creep into it bodily and hide himself from notice in the crown.

She saw her advantage, and gained courage every minute, so as to stifle and keep down the gnawing pain that made her so sick at heart.

"I wonder Norah trusts you in London," she continued, with another of those forced smiles. "I suppose you're only on short leave, as you call it, and mean to go back directly. Will you have the black mare to ride while you are in town? I've taken great care of her, and she's looking beautiful!"

To her own ear, if not to his, there was a catch in her breath while she spoke the last words, that warned her she would need all her self-command before the play was played out.

He thanked her kindly enough, while he declined the offer; but his tone was so grave, so sorrowful, that she could keep up the affectation of levity no longer.

"What is it?" she asked, in an altered voice. "Daisy!—Mr. Walters! What is the matter? Are you offended? I was only joking about Norah."

"Offended!" he repeated. "How could I ever be offended with you? But I didn't come here to talk about Miss Macormac, nor even Satanella, except in so far as the mare is connected with your generosity and kindness."

"What do you mean?" she asked, in considerable trepidation. "You were the generous one, for you gave me the best hunter in your stable, without being asked."

"As if you had not bought her over and over again!" he exclaimed, finding voice and words and courage now that he was approaching the important topic. "Miss Douglas, it's no use denying your good deeds, nor pretending to ignore their magnificence. It was only yesterday I learned the real name of my unknown friend! I tell you that money of yours saved me from utter ruin—worse than ruin, from such disgrace as if I had committed a felony, and been sent to prison!"

"I'm sure you look as if you had just come out of one," she interposed, "with that cropped head. Why do you let them cut your hair so short? It makes you hideous!"

"Never mind my cropped head," he continued, somewhat baffled by the interruption. "I hurried here at once, to thank you with all my heart, as the best friend I ever had in the world."

"Well, you've done it," said she. "That's quite enough. Now let us talk of something else."

"But I haven't done it," protested Daisy, gathering, from the obstacles in his way, a certain inclination to his task or at least a determination to go through with it. "I haven't said half what I've got to say, nor a quarter of what I feel. You have shown that you consider me a near and dear friend. You have given me the plainest possible

was flatter than it should be, as if the bottle had been already opened to slake another's thirst.

"Better not ask," she said, "if the words don't come naturally,—if the answer is sure to be no."

In his intense relief he never marked the piteous tone of her voice, nor the tremble of agony passing over her face, like the flicker of a fire on a marble bust, to leave its features more fixed and rigid than before.

Even in her keen suffering she wished to spare him. Already she was beginning to long for the dull insensibility that must succeed this hour of mental pain. She dreaded the possibility that his disappointment should be anything like her own, and would fain have modified the blow she had no choice but to inflict.

Daisy, however, with good reason no doubt, was resolved to rush on his fate the more absolutely, as it seemed, because of the endeavors to spare both him and herself.

"I am a plain-spoken fellow," said he, "and—and—tolerably straightforward, as times go. I'm not much used to this kind of thing—at least, I've never regularly asked such a question before. You mustn't be offended, Miss Douglas, if I don't see the right way to work. But—but—it seems so odd that you should have come in and paid my debts for me! Don't you think I ought—or don't you think you ought—in short, I've come here on purpose to ask you marry me. I'm not half good enough, I know, and lots of fellows would make you better husbands, I'm afraid. But, really now—without joking—won't you try?"

He had got into the spirit of the thing, and went on more swimmingly than he could have hoped. There was almost a ring of truth in his appeal, for Daisy's was a temperament that flung itself keenly into the excitement of the moment, gathering ardor from the very sense of pursuit. As he said himself, "He never could help riding, if he got a start!"

And Miss Douglas shook in every limb while she listened with a wan, weary face and white lips, parted in a rigid smile. It was not that she was unaccustomed to solicitations of a like nature; whatever might be her previous experience, scarcely an hour had passed since she sustained a similar attack—and surely to accept an offer of marriage ought to be more subversive of the nervous system than to refuse; yet she could hardly have betrayed deeper emotion had she been trembling in the balance between life and death.

That was a brave heart of hers, or it must have failed to keep its own rebellion down so firmly, and gather strength to answer in a calm, collected voice—

"There are some things it is better not to think about, for they can never be, and this is one of them."

How little she knew what was passing in his mind! How little she suspected that her sentence was his reprieve! And yet his self-love was galled. He had made a narrow escape, and was thankful, no doubt, but felt somewhat disappointed, too, that his danger had not been greater still.

"Do you mean it?" said he. "Well, you'll forgive my presumption, and—and—you won't forget I asked you."

"Forget!"

It was all she said; but a man must have been both blind and deaf not to have marked the tone in which those syllables were uttered, the look which accompanied them. Daisy brandished his hat, thinking it time to go, lest his sentence should be commuted, and his doom revoked.

She put her hand to her throat, as if she must choke; but mastered her feelings with an effort, forcing herself to speak calmly and distinctly now, on a subject that must never be approached again.

"Do you think I undervalue your offer," she said, gathering fortitude with every word; "do you think me changeable, or unfeeling. If you must not make me happy, at least you have made me very proud; and if everything had turned out differently, I do hope I might have proved worthy to be your wife. You're not angry with me, are you? And you won't hate me because it's impossible?"

"Not the least!" exclaimed Daisy, eagerly. "Don't think it for a moment! Please not to make yourself unhappy about me."

"I am worthy to be your friend," she continued, saddened, and it may be a little vexed by this remarkable exhibition of self-denial; "and as a friend I feel I owe you some explanation, beyond a bare 'No, I won't.' It ought rather to be 'No, I can't,' because, to tell you the honest truth, I have promised somebody else!"

"I wish you joy, with all my heart!" he exclaimed, gaily, and not the least like an unhappy suitor. "I hope you'll be as happy as the day is long! When is it to be? You'll send me an invitation to the wedding,

"I have not the cheek," was Daisy's reply. "They would chaff one so awfully, if they knew. No, Bill, I'll see you through anything but that."

"Then I must show the best front I can without a support," said the other ruefully. "Why can't she let me off these tea-fights? They're cruelly slow. I don't see the good of them."

"She does," replied Daisy. "Not a woman in London knows what she's about better than Mrs. Lushington."

"How do you mean?" asked his less worldly-minded friend.

"Why, you see," explained Daisy, "one great advantage of living in this wicked town is, that you've no duty towards your neighbor. People don't care two straws what you do, or how you do it, so long as you keep your own line, without crossing theirs. They'll give you the best of everything, and ask for no return, if only you'll pretend to be glad to see them when met, and not forget them when you go away. That's the secret of morning-visits, card-leaving, wedding-presents, and the whole of the sham. Now Mrs. Lushington goes everywhere, and never has a ball, nor a drum, nor even a large dinner-party of her own, but she says to her friends, 'I love you dearly, I can't exist without you. Come and see me every Wednesday, except the Derby Day, all the London season through, from five to seven p.m. I'll swear to be at home, and I'll give you a cup of tea! So, for nine pen'orth of milk, and some hot water, she repays the hospitalities of a nation. She's pleased, the world is gratified, and nobody's bored but you. It's all humbug, that's the truth, and I'm very glad I'm so soon to be out of it!"

"But you won't leave the Regiment?" said his brother officer kindly.

"Not if I know it!" was the hearty response. "Norah likes soldiering, and old Macormac doesn't care what we do, if we only visit him in the hunting season. Besides, my uncle put that in the conditions when he 'parted,' which he did freely enough, I am bound to admit, considering all things."

"You've not been long about it," observed Soldier Bill in a tone of admiration. "It's little more than a month since you pulled through after that 'sacar' at Penchostown; and now, here you are booked to one lady, after proposing to another, provided with settlements, *trousseau*, bridesmaids, and very likely a bishop to marry you. Hang it, Daisy, I've got an uncle smothered in lawn; I'll give him the straight tip, and ask him to tie you up fast."

"You'll have to leave the Park at once," was Daisy's reply, "or you'll be returned absent when the parade is formed. You know, Bill you daren't be late, for your life."

The two young men were by this time at Albert Gate, having spent a pleasant half-hour together on a couple of penny chairs, while the strange medley passed before them that throngs Hyde Park on every summer's afternoon. Daisy was far happier than he either hoped or deserved. After Satanella's refusal, he had felt at liberty to follow the dictates of his own heart, and lost no time in prosecuting his suit with Norah Macormac. The objections that might have arisen from want of means were anticipated by his uncle's unlooked for liberality, and he was to be married as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made, though, in consideration of his late doings, the engagement was at present to be kept a profound secret.

Notwithstanding some worldly wisdom, Daisy could believe that such secrets divided amongst half-a-dozen people, would not become the property of half-a-hundred.

In mood like his, a man requires no companion but his own thoughts. We will rather accompany Soldier Bill, as he picks his way into Belgrave, stepping daintily over the muddy crossings, cursing the water-carts, and trying to preserve the polish of his boots, up to Mrs. Lushington's door.

Yet into those shining boots his heart seemed almost sinking, when he marked a long line of carriages in the streets, a crowd of footmen on the steps and pavement. No man alive had better nerve than Bill, to ride, or fight, or swim, or face any physical danger; but his hands turned cold, and his face hot, when about to confront strange ladies, either singly or in masses; and for him, the rustling of muslin was as the shaking of a standard to the inexperienced charger, a signal of unknown danger, a flutter of terror and dismay.

Nevertheless, he mastered his weakness, following his own name resolutely up-stairs, in a white heat no doubt, yet supported by the calmness of despair. Fortunately, he found his hostess at her drawing-room door. The favorable greeting she accorded him would have reassured the most diffident of men.

"You're a good boy," she whispered, with

duchess aforesaid: a missionary, who had been tortured by the Chinese, dark, sallow, and of a physiognomy that went far to extenuate the cruelty of the Celestials; a lady who had spent two years at Thebes, and, perhaps for that reason, dressed almost as low as the Egyptian Sphinx; a statesman out of office; a celebrated preacher at issue with his bishop; a foreign minister; a London banker; and a man everybody knew, who wrote books nobody read. Besides these, there was the usual complement of ladies who gave, and ladies who went to, balls; married women addicted to flirting; single ladies not averse to it; stout mammas in gorgeous apparel; tall girls with baby faces promising future beauty; a powdered footman winding, like an eel, through the throng; Frank Lushington himself, looking at his watch to see how soon it would be over; and pretty Bessie Gordon, fresh and smiling, superintending the tea.

All this Bill took in, wondering. It seemed such a strange way of spending a bright summer's afternoon, in weather that had come on purpose for cricket, boating, yachting, all sorts of out-of-door pursuits. Putting himself beside the question, for he felt as much on duty as if had the belt on in a barracks-yard, it puzzled him to discover the spell that brought all these people together, in a hot room, at six o'clock in the day. Was it sheer idleness, or the love of talking, or only the follow-my-leader instinct of pigs and sheep? Catching sight of General St. Josephs and Miss Douglas conversing apart in a corner, he determined that it must be a motive stronger than any of these, and looking down on her broad deep shoulders, marvelled how such motive might affect his next neighbor, a lady of sixty years, weighing some sixteen stone.

It is fair to suppose, therefore, that Bill was as yet himself untouched. His intimacy with Mrs. Lushington, while sharpening his wits and polishing his manners, served, no doubt, to dispel those illusions of romance that all young men are prone to cherish, more or less; and Soldier Bill, with his fresh cheeks and simple heart, believed he was becoming a thorough philosopher, an experienced man-of-the-world, rather human weaknesses at their real value, and walking about the battle of life sheathed in armor-of-proof. Honest Bill! How little he dreamt that his immunity was only a question of time. The hour had not yet come—nor the woman!

Far different was St. Josephs. If ever man exulted in bondage and seemed proud to rattle his chains, that man was the captive General. He never missed an opportunity of attending his conqueror: riding in the Park—"walking the Zoo"—waiting about at balls, drums, crash-rooms, and play-houses,—he never left her side.

Miss Douglas, loathing her own ingratitude, was weary of her life. Even Bill could not help remarking the pale cheeks, the heavy eyes, the dull lassitude of gait and bearing, that denoted the feverish unrest of one who is sick at heart.

He trod on a chaperone's skirt; and omitted to beg pardon; he stumbled against his uncle, the bishop, and forgot to ask after his aunt. So taken up was he with the faded looks of Miss Douglas, that he neither remembered where he was, nor why he came, and only recovered consciousness with the rustle of Mrs. Lushington's dress and her pleasant voice in his ear.

"Give me your arm," said she, pushing on through her guests, with many winning smiles, "and take me into the little room for some tea."

Though a short distance, it was a long passage. She had something pleasant to say to everybody, as she threaded the crowd; but it could be no difficult task for so experienced a campaigner, on her own ground, to take up any position she required. And Bill found himself established at last by her side, in a corner, where they were neither overlooked nor overheard.

"Now I want to know if it's true?" said she, *dashing into the subject at once*. "You can tell, if anybody can, and I'm sure you have no secrets from me."

"If what's true?" asked Bill, gulping tea that made him duller than ever.

"Don't be stupid!" was her reply. "Why about Daisy of course. Is he going to marry that Irish girl? I want to find out at once."

"Well, it's no use denying it," stammered Bill, somewhat unwillingly. "But it's a dead secret, Mrs. Lushington, and of course it goes no farther."

"Oh, of course!" she repeated. "Don't you know how safe I am? But you're quite sure of it? You have it from himself?"

"I've got to be his best man," returned Bill, by no means triumphantly. "You'll coach me up a little, won't you, before the day? I haven't an idea what to do."

She laughed merrily.