

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punctestown Races.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

DAISY.

"I don't make out what fellows mean in that song," answered Daisy. "But I like a good song if it's in English; and I like best of all to hear you play!"

"Now, what on earth has that to do with it," she asked impatiently. "We are talking about the mare. Send round for her to-morrow morning, and you can enter her at once. Has she got a name?"

"It used to be 'The Dark Lady,'" he answered, smiling rather mischievously, "out of compliment to you. But I've changed it now."

"I ought to be very much flattered. And to what?"

"To Satanella."

She bit her lip, and tried to look vexed; but she couldn't be angry with Daisy, so laughed heartily as she waved him a goodbye, and cantered home.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. LUSHINGTON.

With all her independence of spirit, it cannot be supposed that Miss Douglas went to and fro in the world of London without a chaperon. On women, an immunity from supervision, and what we may call the freedom of the city, is conferred by matrimony alone. This franchise seems irrevocable of age. A virgin of fifty gathers confidence under the wing of a bride nineteen years old, shooting her arrows with the more precision that she feels so safe behind the shield of that tender, inexperienced matron. Why are these things so? Why do we dine at nightfall, go to bed at sunrise, and get up at noon? Why do we herd together in narrow staircases and inconvenient rooms at the hottest season of the year? If people bore us, why do we ask them to dinner? and suffer fools gladly, without ourselves being wise? I wonder if we shall ever know.

Blanche Douglas accordingly, with more courage, resolution, and *à propos* fate, than most men out of town, had placed herself under the tutelage of Mrs. Francis Lushington, a lady with a convenient husband, who, like the celebrated courtier, was a vet in the way not out of the way. She talked about Frank, as she called him, every ten minutes; but so that they were seldom seen together, except once a week at afternoon church.

That gentleman himself must either have been the student of mortals, or the most cunning, his wife included to think him the latter.

Mrs. Lushington knew everybody, and with everybody. There was no particular reason why she should have attained popularity, but society had taken her up, and she had no hurry to get her down again.

She was a little fair person, with pretty features and a soft pleading voice, very much dressed, very much painted; as good a fool as could be imagined to such a woman as Blanche Douglas.

They were sitting together in the dining-room of the latter about half past two p.m. There never was such a lady for going out to luncheon as Mrs. Lushington. If you were asked to that pleasant meal at any house within a mile of Hyde Park Corner, it would have been a bad bet to take five to one about not meeting her. She was like a nice luncheon herself. Not much of her; but what there was light, delicate, palatable, with a good deal of garnish.

"And which is it to be, dear?" asked this lady of her hostess, finishing a glass of sherry with considerable enjoyment. "I know I shall have to congratulate one of them soon, and to send you a wedding-present; but it's no use talking about it, till I know which."

"Do you think it a wise thing to marry, Clara?" said the other in reply, fixing her black eyes solemnly on her friend's face.

Mrs. Lushington pondered. "There's a good deal to be said on both sides," she answered; "and I haven't quite made up my mind what I should do if I were you. With me you know, it was different. If I hadn't made a convenience of Frank, I should have been nursing my dreadful old aunt still. You are very independent as you are, and do no end of mischief. But, my dear, you won't last for ever. That's where we fair women have the pull. And then you've so many to chide from. Yes; I think if I were you, I would!"

"And you'll laugh at me, Clara, I feel," said Miss Douglas. "Do you think it's a plan to marry a man one don't care for, an who rather bores one than

own mind. What would you have?"

"My dear, I couldn't!"

"State your objections."

"Well, in the first place, he's very fond of me."

"That shows good taste, but it needn't stand in the way, for you may be sure it won't last."

"But it will last, Clara, because I cannot care for him in return. My dear, if you know what a brute I feel sometimes, when he goes away, looking so proud and unhappy, without ever saying an impatient word. Then I'm sorry for him, I own; but it's no use, and I only wish he would take up with somebody else. Don't you think you could help me? Clara, would you mind? It's uphill work, I know; but you've plenty of others, and it wouldn't tire you, as it does me!"

Miss Douglas looked so pitiful, and so much in earnest, that her friend laughed outright.

"I think I should like it very much," replied the latter, "though I've hardly room for another on the list. But if it's not to be the General, Blanche, we return to the previous question. Who is it?"

"I don't think I shall ever marry at all," answered the younger lady, with a smothered sigh. "If I were a man, I certainly wouldn't; and why wasn't I a man? Why can't we be independent? go where we like, do what we like, and for that matter, choose the people we like?"

"Then you would choose somebody?"

"I didn't say so. No, Clara; the sort of person I should fancy would be sure never to care for me. His character must be so entirely different from mine, and though they say, contrasts generally agree, black and white, after all, only make a feeble kind of grey."

"Whatever you do, dear," expostulated Mrs. Lushington, "don't go and fall in love with a boy! Of all follies on earth, that pays the worst. They are never the same two days together, and not one of them but thinks more of the horse he bought last Monday at Tattersalls, than the woman he 'spooned,' as they call it, last Saturday night at the Opera."

Miss Douglas winced.

"I cannot agree with you," said she, stooping to pick up her handkerchief; "I think men grow worse rather than better, the more they live in the world. I like people to be fresh, and earnest, and hopeful. Perhaps it is because I am none of these myself, that I rather appreciate boys."

Mrs. Lushington clapped her hands. "The very thing!" she exclaimed. "He's made on purpose for you. You ought to know Daisy!"

Miss Douglas drew herself up. "I do know Mr. Writers," she answered coldly; "if you mean him. I believe he is called Daisy in his regiment and by his very particular friends."

"You know him! and you didn't tell me!" replied the other gaily. "Never mind. Then, of course you're devoted to him. I am; we all are. He's so cheery, so imperturbable, and what I like him best for, is, that he has no more heart, than—than—well, than I have myself. There!"

Miss Douglas was on her guard now. The approprative faculty, strong in feminine nature as the maternal instinct, and somewhat akin to it, was fully aroused. Only in London, no doubt, would it have been possible for two such intimates to be ignorant of each other's predilections; but even here it struck Blanche there was something suspicious in her friend's astonishment, something not quite sincere in her enthusiasm and her praise.

So she became exceedingly polite and affectionate, as a fencer goes through a series of courteous salutes, while proposing to himself the honor of running his adversary through the brisquet.

"You make yourself out worse than you are, Clara," said she; "it's lucky I know you so well. Indeed, you mustn't go yet. You always run away before I've said half my say. You'll be sure to come again very soon though. Promise, dear. What a love of a carriage!"

It was, indeed, a very pretty Victoria that stopped at the door—fragile, costly, delicate, like a piece of porcelain on wheels—and very pretty Mrs. Lushington looked thereon, as she drove away.

She had turned the corner of the street some minutes before Miss Douglas left the window. Passing a mirror, that lady caught the reflection of her own face, and stopped, smiling, but not in wrath.

"They may well call you Satanella," she said; "and yet I could have been so good—so good!"

CHAPTER V.

THROUGH THE MILL.

She was iron-dusted and satin-skinned, Ribbed like a drum, and lumbd like a deer, Force as the fire, and fleet as the wind.

expected to flush a black cock rather than to hail a Hansom cab at only two hours' distance from its regular stand in Pall Mall.

The black mare, stripped for a gallop, stood ten yards off in the glow of a morning. That Daisy meant to give her a "spin," was obvious from the texture of his nether garments, and the still silver-mounted whip in his hand.

He had met St. Josephs the night before in the smoking-room of a military club, and, entertaining a profound respect for that veteran, and had taken him into his counsels concerning the preparations and performances of the black mare. Daisy was prudent, but not cunning. The elder man's experience, he considered, might be useful, and so asked frankly for his advice.

The General cared as little for steeple-chasing as for marbles or prisoner's base, but in the present instance felt a morbid attraction towards the younger officer and his venture, because he associated the black mare with certain rides, that dwelt strangely on his memory, and of which he treasured every incident with painful accuracy, sometimes almost wishing they had never been.

There is a disease, from which, like small-pox, immunity can only be purchased by taking it as often as possible in its mildest form. To contract it sooner or later, seems the lot of humanity, and St. Josephs had been no exception to the general rule that ordains men and women shall inflict on each other certain injuries and annoyances, none the less vexatious because flagrantly imaginary and unreal.

The General had loved in his youth, more than once it may be, with the ardour and tenacity of his character; but these follies were now things of the past. In some out-of-the-way corner, perhaps, he preserved a knot of ribbon, a scrap of writing, or a photograph with its hair dressed as before the flood. He could lay his hand on such memorials, no doubt; but he never looked at them now, just as he ignored certain sights and sounds, voices, tones, perfumes, that made him wince like a finger on a raw wound. To save his life, he would not have admitted that the breath of a fresh spring morning depressed his spirits more than the sarocco, that he would rather listen to the pipes of a Highland regiment in a mess-room than to a certain strain of Donizetti, the softest, the saddest, the sweetest of that gifted composer—softer, sweeter, sadder to him, that it was an echo from the past.

Among the advantages of growing old, of which there are more than people usually imagine, none is greater than the repose of mind which comes with advancing years—from fatigue, indeed, rather than satisfaction, but still repose.

It is not for the young to bask in the sun, to sit over the fire, to look forward to dinner as the pleasantest part of the day. These must be always in action, even in their dreams; but at and after middle age comes the pleasure of the ruminating animals, the quiet comfort of content. An elderly gentleman, whose liver has outlasted his heart, is not so much to be pined after all.

Yet must he take exceeding care not to leave go of the rock he clings to, like an oyster, that he may drift back into the fatal flood of sentiment he ought to have baffled, once for all. If he does, assuredly his last state will be worse than his first. Very sweet will be the taste of the well-remembered dram, not so intoxicating as of yore to the seasoned brain; but none the less a stimulant of the senses, a restoration for the frame. Clutching the cup to drain perennial youth, he will empty it to the dregs, till the old sot reels, and the grey hairs fall dishonored in the dust.

If follies perpetrated for women could be counted like runs in a cricket-match, I do believe the men above forty would get the score.

"Let me see her gallop," said the General, with a wistful look at the mare, "and I will tell you what I think."

He too was a fine horseman, but he sighed to reflect he could no longer vault on horseback like Daisy, nor embody himself at once with the animal he bestrode, as did that young and supple light dragoon.

"I never saw a better," said the old officer to himself, as the young one, sitting close into his saddle, set the mare going at three-quarter speed. "And it she's only half as good as her rider, the Irishman will have a job to keep the stakes on their side of the Channel this time! Ah, well. It's no use, we can't hold our own with the young ones, and I suppose we ought not to wish we could!"

The General fell into a very common mistake. We are apt to think women set a high price on the qualities we value in each other, forgetting that as their opinions are chiefly reflected from our own, it is to be talked about, no matter why, that constitutes merit in their eyes. What do they care for a light hand, a firm seat, a vigorous frame, or a keen intellect except in so far as these confer notoriety on their possessor? To be celebrated is enough. If for his virtues,

Approaching the leap, he urged her with voice and limbs. They came at it, racing pace.

"On, you tailor!" muttered the General, holding his breath, in fear of a hideous fall. "I'm wrong!" he added, the next moment. "Beautifully done, and beautifully ridden!"

Even at her utmost speed, the mare sprang upright into the air, like a deer, kicked the farther face of the bank with such lightning quickness that the stroke was almost unperceptible; and, flying far beyond the ditch, seemed rather to have gained than lost ground in this interruption to her stride.

Away she went again! Over two more fences, done at the same headlong pace, round the corner of a high black hedge, down into the hollow, up the opposite rise, and so back into the straight, where Daisy, smiling pleasantly, and much heightened in color, executed an imaginary finish, with his hands down.

"I've not seen a goer for years," observed the General, as her jockey dismounted, and two stable lads scraped a little lather from the mare. "But she seems to take a deal of riding; and I think she is almost too free at her fences, even for a steeplechaser."

"I'm delighted to hear you say so," was the answer. "That where we shall win. When I had her first she was rather cautious; but I hurried and hustled her till I got her temper up, and she puts on the steam now as if she was going to jump into next week. I believe she'd do the great double at Punctestown in her stride."

The older man shook his head. "She has capital forelegs," said he; "but I saw just such another break its neck last year at Lincoln. When they're so free you must catch hold like grim death; for, by Jove, if they overjump themselves at that pace, they're not much use when they get up again."

"That would be hard lines," said Daisy, lighting a cigar. "It's the only good thing I ever had in my life, and it must not boil over. If you come to that, I'd rather she broke my neck than hers. If anything went wrong with Satanella I could never face Blanche Douglas again."

"Blanche Douglas!" The General winced. It was not his habit to call young ladies by their Christian names; and to talk familiarly of this one seemed a desecration indeed.

"I should hope Miss Douglas will never ride that animal now," said he, looking very haughty—"throaty," Daisy called it, in describing the scene afterwards.

"Not ride her?" replied the young gentleman. "You can't know much of Satanella, General, if you suppose she wouldn't ride anything, if you only told her not! She's a tramp of a girl, I admit, but, my eyes, she's a rum one! Why, if there wasn't a law or something against it, I'm blessed if I don't think she'd ride at Punctestown herself—boots and breeches—silk jacket—make all the running, and win as she liked! That's her form, General, you may take my word for it!"

St. Josephs positively stood aghast. Could he believe his ears? Silk jacket! Boots and breeches! And this was the woman he delighted to hunt. To have annihilated his rippant young acquaintance on the spot would have given him intense satisfaction, but he was obliged to content himself with contemptuous silence and sundry glances of scorn. His displeasure, however, seemed quite lost on Daisy, who conversed freely all the way back to town, and took leave of his indignant senior with unimpaired affability when they parted.

CHAPTER VI.

CUTTING FOR PARTNERS.

"Then you'll—ask a man?"

"I'll ask a man."

The first speaker was Miss Douglas, the second Mrs. Lushington. These ladies, having agreed to go to the play together, the former at once secured adjoining stalls, for herself, her admirer, her friend, and her friend's admirer. Only in such little parties of four can the modern drama be appreciated or enjoyed.

Miss Douglas had long promised General St. Josephs that she would accompany him to the performance of a popular farce called Uncle Jack, whereof the humor consisted in an abstraction of "Boots" of a certain traveller's garments at his hotel, and consequent engagement of this denuded wayfarer to the lady in his affections. The general would have walked barefoot to Canterbury for the delight of taking Miss Douglas to the play; and, after many misfires, a night was at length fixed for that treat, of course under the supervision of a chaperon.

Like others who follow "will-o'-the-wisps," St. Josephs was getting deeper into the mire at every step. Day by day this dark bewitching woman occupied more of his thoughts, wound herself tighter round his weary heart. Now for the first time since

Nobody, I suppose, is insane enough to imagine a man feels happier for being in love. There were moments when St. Josephs positively hated himself, and everybody else. Moments of vexation, longing, and a bitter sense of ill-usage, akin to rage, and for the leavening of sadness, that toned it down to grief. He knew from theory and practice how to manage a woman, just as he knew how to bridle and ride a horse. Alas! that each bends only to the careless ease of conscious mastery. He could have controlled the Satanella on four legs almost as well as reckless Daisy. He had no influence whatever over her namesake on two.

Most of us possess the faculty of looking on those affairs in which we are deeply interested, from the outside, as it were, and with the eyes of an unbiassed spectator. Such impartial perception, however, while it increases our self-reproach, seems in no way to affect our conduct. General St. Josephs cursed himself for an old fool twenty times a day, but none the more for that did he strive or wish to put from him the folly he deplored.

It was provoking, degrading, to know that in presence of Miss Douglas he appeared at his very worst; that when he rode out with her, he was either idiotically simple, or morosely preoccupied; that when he called at her house, he could neither find topics for conversation, nor excuses to go away; that in every society, others, whom he rated as his inferiors, must have seemed infinitely pleasanter, wiser, better informed, and more agreeable; and that he, professedly a man of experience, and a man of the world, lost his head, like a raw boy, at the first word she addressed him, with succeeding in convincing her that he had lost her his heart. Then he vowed to rebel—to wean himself by degrees—to break the whole thing off at once—to go out of town, leaving no address—to assert his independence, show he could live without her, and never see her again! But when she asked him to take her to the play, he said he should be delighted, and was!

Among the many strange functions of society, few seem more unaccountable than its tendency to select a theatre as the rendezvous of sincere affection. Of all places, there is none, I should imagine, where people are more *en evidence*—particularly in the stalls, a part of the house especially affected, it would seem, as affording no protection to front or rear. Every gesture is marked, every whisper overheard, and even if you might speak aloud, which you mustn't, during the performances, you could hardly impart to a lady tender truths or falsehoods, as the case may be, while surrounded by a mob of people who have paid money with the view of keeping eyes and ears wide open until they obtain its worth.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all these drawbacks to confidential communication, no sooner does a fair angler of the present day feel that, in fisherman's language, she "has got a bite," than straightway she carries her prey off to a minor theatre, where by some inexplicable method of her own, she proceeds to secure the gudgeon on its hook.

St. Josephs got himself up with extreme care on the evening in question. He was no faded *petit maître*, no wrinkled dandy, curled, padded, girthed, and tottering in polished boots towards his grave. On the contrary he had the wisdom to grow old gracefully, as far as dress and deportment were concerned, rather advancing than putting back the hand of time. Yet to-night he did regret the lines on his worn face, the bald place at the crown of his head. Ten years, he thought, rather bitterly, only give him back ten years, and he could have held his own with the best of them! She might have cared for him ten years ago. Could she care for him? Yes, surely she must, he loved her so!

"Your brougham is at the door, sir," said his servant, once a soldier, like himself, a person of calm temperament and a certain grim humor, whose private opinion it was that his master had of late been conducting himself like an old fool.

The General got into his carriage with an abstracted air, and was driven off to dine nervously and without appetite at the Senior United.

How flabby seemed the fish, how tasteless the cutlets, how insufferably prosy the conversation of an old comrade at the next table—a jovial veteran, who loved highly-seasoned stories, and could still drink of the *quantum* he was pleased to call his "whack of Port." Never before had this worthy's discourse seemed so idiotic, his stomach so obtrusive, his chuckles so fatuous and insane. What did he mean by talking about "fellows of our age," to St. Josephs, who was seven years his junior in the Army List, and five in his baptismal register? Why couldn't he eat without winceing, laugh without coughing; and why, oh! why could he not give a comrade greeting, without slapping him on the back? St. Josephs, drinking scalding coffee before the other ar-