

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XIX.

(CONTINUED.)

It proved of a load of care by these timely and unexpected remittances, Vernon felt more at ease, and next addressed a very pontifical letter to Lord Mervyn, pleading his affection for his daughter as an excuse for his conduct in carrying her off; depicting in glowing colors her incessant care and anxiety about him when at the point of death, and expressing his resolution to lead a new life and devote all his energies to make her happy. He also stated that, to atone for his past conduct, he had made a confession to Lord Malcolm of his participation with Lord Vancourt in the plot to carry off Miss Douglas, without, however, revealing other names, as he had been most inhumanly treated by his lordship, who had conspired against his life, and left him almost dying in Paris without a shilling. On the receipt of this letter from his worthy son-in-law, Lord Mervyn became seriously alarmed, and tearing Vernon's vindictive character, thought he would be safer under his own eye than exposed to that of the opposing party; he therefore enclosed him a handsome sum of money to defray his travelling expenses when able to move, with an invitation to Marston Castle.

CHAPTER XX.

We must now cross the Channel to see what was occurring in the vicinity of Bampton. Thomas Carter, Lord Mervyn's footman, feeling uncomfortable in his situation as a suspected man, gave notice to leave; and Mark Rosier having mentioned this to Lord Malcolm, he was at once engaged by him; Mrs. Gordon willingly agreeing to receive him at the Priory until Malcolm's return to Scotland.

Lord Mervyn had invited as large a party of the neighboring gentry as he could muster to a grand battue at the close of the shooting season, in which hundreds of pheasants and hares fell, the majority of which were packed off to the London markets.

William Beauchamp had assumed the reins of government over the pack, which the reverse of being improved by Charles's mal-administration, who had only succeeded in bringing home the head of one fox after a fortnight's hunting, and, sooth to say, Charles himself was nothing loth to fall back into his old place of whipper-in. What with trying to ride or scream foxes to death (notwithstanding which they could not be prevailed on, like Mrs. Bond's ducks, to come to be killed), the hounds' heads got up to such an alarming height that Will Beauchamp found great difficulty in bringing down their high-wrought expectations to their proper level again, and he experienced almost as much trouble to reduce his field to their usual good order, the majority of the youngsters having, during the master's absence, considered themselves, privileged to enact the part of huntsmen or whippers-in whenever they could get away from the old squire or Bob Conyers. If there were half a dozen foxes on foot in one covert, every one was vociferously cheered by the party who chanced to view his particular favorite across the drive, although the hounds might be running another in the very opposite direction, so pleased had some of these amateur huntsmen become with the sound of their own sweet voices, that the master was treated to such a concert of discordant halloos in all directions on his first appearance at the Barton Woods (where several foxes were on foot), that he sat for a few seconds in amazement, wondering to what extent this might lead; then putting spurs to his horse, and blowing his horn, he got the hounds together, and took them away from the covert to a large field, where he drew up and waited until he was surrounded by the greater portion of his followers.

Now gentlemen, exclaimed Beauchamp, addressing them in a loud voice, as it is

this produced the desired effect, as both man and hounds perceived their huntsman's determination to admit of no interference.

The fox, never having been pressed, jogged leisurely along, the pack improving in their pace until they reached Hazel Wood, where he had lingered for some time, enabling the hounds to get on better terms, when he broke, going straight for the forest six miles a-head.

'Now, then,' shouted Bob Conyers, as he caught sight of the pack streaming away, 'come on, you thrusting scoundrels—now's your time—let 'em go—no more hold backs to-day;' and down rattled the first division of light cavalry, charging their fences with long pent-up impatience. The hounds, however, having got the start, seemed resolved to keep it, and the brook being brim full and over after a heavy night's rain, the casualties which occurred there were rather more numerous than usual, there being *multi*, instead of *rari nantes in gurgite vasto*, few who rode at it escaping without a ducking. The Captain and Coventry took their plunge as usual; some rode at it fast, others walked their horses into the stream, the banks of which could not be discerned; but all landed safely on the other side, and again set to work to catch the hounds, which few were destined to see any more that day. The forest was reached; but the fox, disdainful of its protection, passed through one corner of it, and boldly faced the open, into the neighboring hunt, taking their huntaman entirely out of his reckoning, as to the point he contemplated reaching, and everything now depending on the staunchness of the pack.

Will Beauchamp interfered as little as possible in two or three checks which occurred, and five or six miles of new country had now been crossed at a good hunting pace after leaving the forest.

'Where,' exclaimed Conyers, 'can the fox be travelling to, Will? he must be out of his latitude as well as ourselves; although as to longitude, confound him! he still seems holding on straight enough.'

'He has run me out of my geography, Bob; although there is, I believe, a strong covert somewhere in the direction he is now going, belonging to the H— Hunt, which I conclude is his point.'

'Ah! well, this proves what a good fox can do, when he has a fair start and is not hurried over the first five miles. Your bursts of twenty or thirty minutes are all very well sometimes, but give me a good hunting run like this; look, there is a likely covert, just a few fields ahead—please the pigs, we don't change there.'

'No, no, we shall book him yet. Now, Charley, to the further end of it, and mind you don't halloo a fresh fox.'

Here the hounds, for the first time, got up with their game, and gave him such a rattling, that he broke away again, running for some open downs above the vale. For two miles the pace was terrific; the hounds, with heads up, and sternal down, running hard for their game, which they knew must be sinking, and on ascending the hill side, he was viewed, not a hundred yards before the leading couples, and in a few seconds both disappeared over the brow of the hill. Few were there, however, to witness this sight; Will Beauchamp, Conyers, the whips, Gwynne, and Tyler, with two or three farmers, being all that remained, out of a very large field, to go in and finish. At the foot of the hill, Beauchamp at once dismounted to relieve his horse, which was nearly beaten, leading him up the ascent, his example being followed by all the others, except young Farmer Hazel, who still kept spurring his poor jaded animal.

'Come along, squire,' shouted he, on passing; 'I shall be first to see the finish.'

'O' your horse, Hazel, in five minutes, unless you jump off his back directly.' The words had scarcely passed Beauchamp's lips, before the horse reeled and fell under his rider, who had hardly time to jump from the saddle ere he lay dead before him. 'I hope, Hazel,' said Beauchamp, 'that will be a lesson to you through life, never to ride another willing horse to death,' as the young farmer stood in silent dismay surveying the dead carcass of his too honest animal. The example and warning were not lost on the rest, and Beauchamp exclaimed, 'There is no occasion to hurry now, as the hounds have killed their fox.'

By the exertions of all three, Narcissus was at last dragged out, more dead than alive, and lay at full length on the green sward, it appearing to be a matter of perfect indifference to him whether he made any further effort to rise.

'There, Markham,' said Melville, 'we cannot wait any longer, so you and Narcissus must settle the point between you, whether you sleep here or not; my advice is to put the whip into him, and drive him on before you till you get into the turnpike road, which is within half a mile of us.'

The Captain was not the only person employed in this agreeable occupation of trudging along on foot with a beaten horse, when Beauchamp and the pack, with the fortunate few entered on the high road leading to Snowdon.

'Ah, Markham,' asked the master, 'what's the matter—shoe lost?'

Demanded near a horse lost, Beauchamp; regularly done up—worm crusher now—no Lifeguardsmen—demmit! sha'n't get home for a week at this pace.'

'Here then, Markham, let Jack have your horse to lead into the town, and you shall ride his.'

'Thank'ee, Beauchamp, but I don't like taking away your man.'

'Never mind, we don't want his services now, so get up at once.'

Every stable in Snowdon was occupied that night with horses so thoroughly knocked up that they could proceed no further, traps of all kinds being hired to convey their owners home, whilst others remained there until the next morning; the run from point to point being at least twenty miles, and the ground traversed not less than five or six more.

'Well, Will,' inquired Malcolm, 'what do you propose doing?'

'Give the horses a bucket of gruel each, with a mouthful of hay, and then home-wards.'

'What, thirty miles more to-night for hounds and horses, after such a run?'

'Just so, Malcolm; they are of the right sort not to give in; but it won't do to let them get stiff by loitering about at a public-house. Quick march, is our motto, and I hope to be home before the supper hour in the servant's hall.'

'Very well, then Bob and I will overtake you on the road, and bring Markham with us.'

Beauchamp was too good a sportsman, and by far too fond of his hounds and horses, to consign them to the care of servants, however trustworthy, after a severe day, always accompanying them home, and feeding the hounds himself before he left the kennels. He therefore jogged leisurely along with his pots, which once more cheered by the presence of their young master among them, trotted on with sternal erect, as if ready for a second fox.

The system adopted by Beauchamp in the management of his pack was of the silent order, with as little interference as possible in the field, to which must be attributed their uniform success in killing their foxes. Noise in man or hound being his aversion, he would allow of no halloaing or screaming from his field, which invariably occasions so much confusion, and the hounds were thrown silently into covert, and only spoken to occasionally to assure them of their master's presence. Although a fine melodious voice may be very pleasing to the ear, yet instead of its being (as too often considered) a great recommendation in a huntsman to a pack of fox-hounds, it is most decidedly the reverse, particularly in a woodland country, where, in nine cases out of ten, the fox will be un-kennelled by the huntsman instead of his hounds. We cannot so arrange, when the fixtures are made some time before, always or very often to draw up wind; and a noisy, vociferous huntsman, when taking a line of coverts down wind, will disturb every fox (unquestionably every good one) long before the pack can get upon his drag; in fact, a good fox will be off, and perhaps miles away, before the hounds reach his kennel. It is related of the famous Butterwick Jack, a fox which had beaten Mr. Farquarson's hounds in Dorsetshire for several consecutive seasons, that upon the slamming of a gate or the sound of a horse's hoofs near the covert, he broke instantly away; and notwithstanding every precaution and the entire silence of the huntsman when throwing his pack into covert, Jack was ever on the look-out for squalls, and made so good a start that he

'I ha'n't seed no fox, sur.' 'Then what the devil made you halloo? The old gentleman himself, I do believe; and he'd a made yoh hallo, if you'd seen us, as I did, spring off the out of hay; the hair riz up on my head, like a hog's bristles.'

'What does the fool mean?' asked the huntsman, in a furious passion.

'Why, I do an't know what it manes, but I tell ye, when I put the ladder agin the mow, a long-tailed crittur jumped out of the nich of hay, and out away into yonder copse, and the very sight of us was enow to make anybody hoiler; but, dang it! look—there hur sits in thick big oak.'

And, on the horsemen riding to the wood hedge, a large baboon was seen sitting in the tree, chattering and making faces at his friends below.

'Ha! ha! ha!' shouted Tom Larking, a leading man in the hunt, 'a devilish good joke, Jem, to be halloed on to a monkey! but, hang it, let's have him out. He'll show us a run, now we have lost our fox.'

'My hounds run a monkey, sir!' exclaimed Jem, indignantly. 'They ain't come to that pass yet, any ways.'

'I'll bet five to one they do run him, though, Jem,' persisted Larking; but Jem, fearing mischief, trotted briskly away to find another fox, leaving Jack to be handled by any one else who fancied him.

Whatever may be said of Will Beauchamp's system of hunting, the result was that his pack seldom required, and never expected, assistance from their huntsman; very few foxes being able to escape them.

CHAPTER XXI.

For some days after, the great run from the Barton Woods was the favorite topic among all sportsmen in that locality; but the all-engrossing subject to the ladies was the Grand Union Hunt Ball, under the management of a committee chosen from the members of the four adjoining hunts.

The ball-room at Cherrington being inadequate to contain the company expected on this great occasion, the Town Hall, which stood over the market horse, was put in requisition, and the large space underneath was boarded over and enclosed for a supper-room. The preparations made for this grand re-union of fox-hunters were on a magnificent scale, and the decoration for the rooms costly and appropriate. Being the first thing of the sort attempted in that neighborhood, the committee spared neither trouble nor expense in their arrangements, being determined, in the spirit of true sportsmen, that the thing should be done well—and well it was done. The members of each hunt had the option of appearing in their respective dress coats, but the general company were requested to be in uniform or fancy costume. The highest families for many miles in every direction sought eagerly for cards of admission to this splendid *fete*, which were only obtainable from members of the four hunts; but it was deemed advisable in some cases to depart from this rule, and an additional number was issued for persons of distinction residing within prescribed limits; and more than one fox-killing *pater familias* was fairly run down by wife and daughters all at him at once, and obliged to promise never to destroy another fox.

The gentlemanly conduct of the committee, who did all in their power to accommodate the numerous applicants having any pretensions, from property or influence in the county, to ask for tickets, was the general theme of conversation, and the Grand Union Ball became the subject of great interest in the most fashionable circles for weeks previously.

Beauchamp sent two of his tickets to Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, reserving one for Sir Francis Burnett, who had promised to attend; and Lord Malcolm, to propitiate the Harcourts, enclosed two also for their acceptance. The anxiously expected evening at length arrived, and by ten o'clock the rooms were crowded with as gay and brilliant an assemblage as ever graced a ball-room; the costumes of the ladies being of the most *recherchee* and elegant description.

Blanche and her friend Constance appeared in the simple Scotch costume of white muslin and tartan. Selina Markham assumed the character of a lady of George the Second's reign, figuring away with Bob Con-

for this grand event, with the Marquis of Danby, who was then staying with them, a young nobleman of great promise, now his twenty fourth year, and who held a commission in the Life Guards. Lord Danby was about the general standard as to height, although slightly formed; aristocratic looking, with handsome features and very pleasing manners; and although his father, the Duke of Delamere, was still in the prime of life, the heir to a dukedom was, of course, eagerly coveted by many mammas in the highest circles, who had daughters to dispose of. Lord Danby was, however, too cautious and sensible to be caught by mere personal beauty, or that greater attraction in the present day—money. He was, moreover, very partial to field sports, and a determined fox-hunter; and having heard from Lord Seaton of the Union Hunt Ball, he came down purposely for the occasion.

Mrs. Harcourt, as may be supposed, rose a hundred per cent. in her own estimation, when entering the room that night, leaning on the arm of such a lion as the Marquis of Danby, whom she sought an early opportunity of introducing to Mrs. Gordon and her niece, parading him with an air of dignity and importance, which was considerably diminished when Lord Danby shook hands with Beauchamp in the most friendly manner, who just then approached to claim Blanche for his partner in the opening dance of the night.

Lord Danby, being very much struck at first with Blanche's extreme loveliness (enhanced that evening by her simple, unaffected costume), begged the honor of dancing the next quadrille, which was acceded to. On leading his partner away, she asked Beauchamp the name of the gentleman who had just been introduced by Mr. Harcourt, which she had imperfectly heard.

'The Marquis of Danby, Blanche, son of the Duke of Delamere.'

'You know him, William, I see.'

'Yes, dear girl, I have met him occasionally in the hunting field, and his father and mine are old acquaintances; but I am at a loss to conceive how he can be staying at Throsely—that, however, I will ascertain presently.'

Lord Danby, not seeing much fun in being paraded any longer by Mrs. Harcourt, took the earliest opportunity of consigning her to a seat, and soon after encountered Captain Markham.

'Ah, Danby! 'pon honor—quite astonished to find you here—grand affair, eh! well got up, and all that sort of thing. But where are you staying, old fellow?'

'At the Harcourts, Malcolm, with my friends, the Seaton's, who were invited to Throsely for this ball.'

'Ah! ah! I see. Old Harcourt is well enough in his way—gives good spreads, and keeps a first-rate artist in the culinary; but that match-making, haughty wife of his is my aversion, 'pon honor.'

'Very likely,' replied Danby; 'but I hear you have had splendid sport in this part of the world.'

'Yaas, Danby, first-rate, and no mistake—such a run from our wood—thirty miles at least—every horse beaten—some killed—others can't show—Narcissus regularly flooded.'

'Well, Markham, I feel inclined to send for my horses down here, and have a week or two with you, if I can get good stabling in the neighborhood.'

'That you can, my lord, I will answer for; at Barton Court our stalls are not half filled, and you shall have a stable to yourself, and a right good welcome from my governor.'

'No, no, Markham, I cannot do that,' said Danby.

'And why not, Dandy, eh?—oh, I see—Duke's son—won't condescend—*infra dig*—and all that sort of thing.'

'No, on my honor, Markham, that was not my reason for refusing your friendly offer.'

'Then, demmit, Danby, there can be no other; but here comes Sir Lionel, as game an old cock as ever wore spurs.'

Markham, having introduced his father to Lord Danby, left them together, saying, 'There, governor, Danby wants to see our pack, so hold him by the bottom until he promises to spend a month at Barton Court.'

Lord Danby was so much pleased with the urbanity of the old baronet that he at last