

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXVIII.

(CONTINUED.)

"Well, I'd care," exclaimed Mrs. Winterbottom, as her daughter was led away, "young Squire Beauchamp is the handsomest, best-mannered man in the room; but you think so, Miss Douglas?"

"He is considered rather good-looking," replied Blanche, with a slight blush, and an expression towards her aunt.

"Rather good looking, indeed—hoity, hoity," he is downright handsome, miss, and carries himself like a lord. I only wish he'd take a fancy to our Honoria; and a hundred thousand pounds down ain't to be sneered at."

"That's more than I do," thought Blanche, as she rose to take the arm of Sir Lucius, to whom she was engaged for the next quadrille.

"Well, ma'am," continued Mrs. Winterbottom to Aunt Gordon, "that Sir Lucius seems a good sort of a body—looks and speaks like a gentleman, but he is a plain piece of goods, and won't do a ter the young squire. Lady Gyvone would sound very well, no doubt, but then Honoria says she won't marry any one she don't fall desperately in love with, and I shouldn't fancy the Baronet myself, even at my time of life."

"Then," asked Aunt Gordon, "not a little amused, what do you think of Captain Markham? he is heir to a baronetcy, and will succeed to a beautiful place and large fortune on Sir Lionel's decease."

"He's too much of a fop to please me, Mrs. Gordon, although tolerably good-looking and gentleman-like; but papa can't endure dandies, and they would never agree, I'm sure. No, ma'am, if I had the pick and choose of the room, the young squire would come out first; and as you and he seem great friends, can't you just give him a hint that we shall be particular about a few odd thousand, if he fancies our Honoria?"

"You may rest assured on one point," replied Mrs. Gordon, "that Mr. William Beauchamp will never marry for money, and any allusion to your daughter's large expectations would be quite sufficient to keep him at a distance from her."

"Oh, goodness me! then pray don't mention the subject, my dear madam," said Mrs. Winterbottom, "for here he comes with Honoria."

After addressing a few words to the mamma on resigning her daughter, Beauchamp sat down by Mrs. Gordon, saying, "You must not think me rude, dear aunt, if I do not remain very long with you, since I have to conduct the part of master of the ceremonies to-night, but I shall come for you and Blanche when supper is ready."

"William," whispered Mrs. Gordon, "have you been lecturing Blanche again? she looks very serious."

"No, dear aunt, but I told her a secret which she is to reveal to yourself only, and that which made me feel very happy has rendered her sad, but now she is coming, and will tell you herself—so I must be off."

As Blanche resumed her seat, Mrs. Gordon inquired in a low tone what had caused her such anxious looks, when speaking with Beauchamp.

"Something which William has been telling me, dear aunt, but you must not divulge the secret. His father is now next heir to an earldom."

"Good Heavens! Blanche, you are joking!"

"No, aunt, indeed I am not," and she then repeated Beauchamp's communication.

"And has this made you look so serious to-night, you silly child?" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon.

"Yes, dear aunt; I fear he may become a man of the world, and all my dreams of happiness with him, as my constant friend and companion, would then be at an end."

"My dear Blanche, do not worry yourself thus unnecessarily. William Beauchamp will never change—why should he more than Charles? you don't like him less because he is Lord Malcolm's or Constance's daughter—poussense, dear child, you ought to

when you and Blanche are to be married, as since the trial, when you took her up in your arms and carried her out of court, every one says it is a settled thing, the affair with Hooknose created a suspicion, which you or other not confirmed."

"Every one is wrong, then, Selina, for it is not a settled thing yet; and I can no more tell you when we are to be married than you can."

"Ah, Master Will, it's no use attempting to throw dust in my eyes, for Blanche tells by her looks what she will not confess with her lips; and that little affair with Lord Dauby satisfied him, as well as myself, that you are the winner of the prize."

"Should that be the case, Selina, you will not be kept in the dark; but we are now talking of what never may and cannot happen for some time, knowing the Harcourt's love and esteem for your valuable servant. But people say that you and Conyers are down on the list matrimonial—what say you, guilty or not guilty?"

"I shall not plead at all, Will, and keep you in the dark, as you do me."

"Well, Selina, curiosity is not one of my besetting sins; so I can afford to wait, and will only add, that, were I a woman, I should prefer Bob Conyers to every other man in the county—but here he comes—don't tell him, however, what I say, and I will go and hunt for Blanche, to stand your *vis-a-vis*."

Beauchamp soon returned with his fair partner, now radiant with smiles and in high spirits, leaning on his arm in all the confidence of her deep and all-absorbing affection.

"Now, dear girl," he whispered, "you look again like my own dear Blanche, as her eyes met his with an expression of soft, unutterable love; and don't ever doubt the power of fascination you possess to hold me for ever to your side."

"If you begin to flatter me, I shall begin to doubt you Mr. Will."

"Well, then, I will lecture you instead."

"No, William, I will listen to no lectures to-night."

"Then I will advise you that Selina has been trying to fish out of me all about our engagement, on which I have given her no information; so be on your guard, although she suspects how the case stands."

"But surely, William, you may now safely speak to Mr. Harcourt; he will not refuse the heir presumptive to an earldom."

"Me he would refuse, were I heir to a dukedom, under his present lacerated feelings, which must have time to subside; but we will consult Aunt Gordon on the subject, although my own impression is, that he will most decidedly refuse my proposals, and I fear, dear Blanche, that we must have a little more patience."

"For myself, I do not care," she replied; "but it vexes me to see you obliged to use subterfuge and evasion, which imply a doubt of my true feelings towards you, and place you in such a humiliating position."

"Talk not of humiliation, dear Blanche; you have made me one of the proudest men in existence, and you alone can humble me; for the rest, remember, 'the course of true love never did run smooth,' and I am content to suffer anything for you, so that I am sure of your love."

"Of that you ought to be doubly assured, since I have the prospect of becoming Lady Beauchamp. You are quite safe now, William, if not before—so don't feel jealous again," she replied with a laugh. "Now let us go and sit with Aunt Gordon until supper time, for I shall not dance again till I have had a glass of wine, and aunt says she shall drink the health of Lord and Lady Beauchamp in a bumper."

As Blanche and Beauchamp were approaching Mrs. Gordon, they observed the old squire and her in earnest conversation, evidently engrossed with each other.

"Stay, Blanche," whispered Beauchamp; "my governor looks as if he were making love to aunt; let us turn aside elsewhere."

"Oh, William, how can you talk such nonsense?"

"My dear girl, there is no nonsense in the case, but just the reverse; the squire considers your aunt perfection, and there we must both concede he is not far out in his reckoning. Well, then, what are they both to do, when Malcolm carries off Constance from Bampton, and I run away with you from the Priory? which I propose doing on the very first fitting opportunity, provided you don't give me the slip in London, and run away with some one else first. There will be an

"Then you are fit company for that I do, William."

"Very well, my dear, if such is your opinion I will go and make love to her daughter forthwith, as Aunt Gordon tells me I am a great favourite with the young lady. What say you to that proposition?"

"Oh, go, by all means, if you prefer her society to mine," replied Blanche, rather testily.

"That not being exactly the case, you naughty child, I shall keep your arm, and torment you until the supper hour; nevertheless, I am not swayed, although intoxicated with delight at seeing Lady Beauchamp, that is to be, in such buoyant spirits. That's all, my dear; so now we will just take a peep into the dining-room, and see how things are arranged for the supper. Where you may leave the company to the enjoyment of the good things provided for them, and jump at once to the conclusion of the ball, when the old Squire of Bampton was joining with Mrs. Gordon in the last dance of the night—'Sir Roger de Coverley,' as it has been generally called, though by some considered a misnomer."

CHAPTER XXIX.

The month of May, with its balmy breezes, had arrived, and Mrs. Gordon, with Blanche and Constance, were preparing to change their quiet, rural enjoyments for the bustle and fever of London life, Malcolm having insisted on all three taking up their abode with her, for the season, in her old family mansion in Grosvenor Square. The streets of London were not wholly unknown to Blanche Douglas, who had spent the two previous summers with Mrs. Harcourt, for the benefit of the masters, to complete her education; but the gaieties, festivities, and places of amusement in the mighty Babylon had hitherto remained as a sealed picture-book, which was now to be opened to her expectant view, and already excited imagination.

A first season in London, to young girls generally, is, like the 'Open Sesame' in the Arabian Nights, looked forward to with as much curious avidity as the opening of a Pandorean box, which is to display to view a perfect fairy scene, for enjoyment of the most exalted description; and it must be admitted that Blanche Douglas was not devoid of pleasurable anticipations from a visit to the gay metropolis, that pleasure being greatly enhanced by having her friend Constance as a participator in all her contemplated gaieties and amusements. There was one great drawback, however, acting as a drag on the wheels of her fancy, which otherwise might have run on without a check—the thought of leaving William Beauchamp (who had now become her second self) alone in the country. There was another unpleasant reflection which would sometimes intrude. Constance had invited Miss Honoria, at the ball, to stay a few days at Bampton; and that romantic young person having taken it into her head or heart to fall desperately in love with her brother (as a grateful return, I suppose, for his sister's kindness), had let fall certain hints in her confidential communications to Constance, which revealed the nature of her feelings towards William Beauchamp. Constance again, in joke, had warned Blanche of the danger to be apprehended from this formidable rival.

"Really, Blanche," she observed one day, "I don't like leaving William behind us, at the mercy of mother and daughter; for what with bags of money on one side, which are daily increasing in number, and such winning smiles, on the other, from the young lady, who has evidently made up her mind to have the young squire, whether he will or no, we are in what I call rather a disagreeable fix."

"Don't talk so absurdly, Constance," replied Blanche; "as if William would marry a brewer's daughter, to be saddled with such a vulgar mother-in-law, for a hundred thousand a year, instead of as many thousand pounds."

"I'm not afraid of his being tempted by money bags, my dear Blanche, but by the bewitching smiles of that serene Honoria, who, it must be confessed sings and plays beautifully, and is much more highly accomplished than I had any conception of before her first appearance."

music of the Opera, which are, of course, of the very highest order, I have nothing to urge; but the after-piece, or ballet, is an exhibition from which every pure-minded woman must turn with shame and disgust, and I am quite sure that, if perforce obliged to witness one scene of this kind, you will never be induced to be present at another. Although I hope you may be safely trusted to Malcolm's or Aunt Gordon's care, who will protect you from witnessing all such objectionable exhibitions."

"And yet, dear William, without you I shall feel desolate and lonely; and you know, but for your promise of joining me in town, I could never have accepted Lady Malcolm's invitation. Tell me, then, when I may expect you there; and if you love, do not disappoint me."

"Will this day week, Blanche, satisfy you, giving time for a few arrangements which I must make before leaving home?"

"Yes, William, I will be content, if you cannot name an earlier day."

"If possible, dear girl, I will leave home sooner; but by this day week, if living and well, you shall see me at this hour in Grosvenor Square."

"Thank you, my own dear William, for your kind compliance with my wishes, which has made me quite happy; although I now sincerely wish I had never consented to leave the Priory, for I have no pleasure anywhere without you."

"For which pretty little complimentary speech, my love, I must reward you in my usual way. And now, recollect, I shall expect every day a true and particular account of all your thoughts and doings in London, until you are once more under my individual espionage."

The promise being given, terminated the interview between the lovers; and Blanche returned to the house to complete her preparations for the morrow, Beauchamp having agreed to dine and sleep at the Priory that night, and see them off on their journey early the next morning.

Beauchamp, being of a very reflective and rather melancholy turn of mind, was sitting before dinner in an easy chair, with his face buried in his hands, absorbed in sad forebodings, a heavy sigh just having escaped his lips, when a gentle hand was laid upon his arm, and a sweet voice whispered in his ear—

"Dear William, what has caused that deep sigh?"

"The thought, my own precious child," said he, rising and clasping her to his heart, "of the many miles by which I shall be separated, this time to-morrow, from her I love so dearly; and the dread, which I cannot dispel, of that change which may be effected in your present pure feelings by dissipation and worldly influences. Many an innocent, chaste girl like yourself, hitherto cheerful, happy, and contented in her rural home, has, after a season in town, returned thither an altered being—peevish, fretful, unhappy, and discontented—longing again for the excitement of those scenes which have rendered her dissatisfied and miserable in domestic life."

"You think, then, William, that I have no self-control or strength of mind, but like a child shall be led astray and taken captive by the glittering allurements of the fashionable world?"

"Heaven grant, dear girl, that you may ever continue, as now, a child in simplicity of heart and thought; yet how few of the greatest and best of mankind, even the most favored children of the Almighty, have been able to resist temptation in their hour of trial, or whose minds have not been affected by those follies and vices to which all human nature is so prone to yield? Lady Malcolm is, I fear, a votary of fashion; and when once engaged in that vortex of dissipation, of balls, routs, plays, operas, concerts, dinner-parties, &c., your mind having become enervated or overstrained by unnatural excitement, you will find yourself imperceptibly gliding down that current which has carried thousands to destruction. Flattery also, which none can wholly withstand, will lend her aid to beguile and reconcile you to this mode of life. Can you wonder, then, dear girl, that my thoughts are troubled at the risk you will incur when entering so young and inexperienced on these treacherous and deceptive scenes? Were you to be changed from that dear, artless, unaffected girl I now hold in my arms, into a dashing, heartless woman of fashion, the now bright dawning of my earthly happiness would sink into darkness."

"There goes," said Malcolm, "a man whose deep feelings are almost, if not quite, a misery to himself; and I fear Will Beauchamp is more to be pitied than envied in the possession of too sensitive a heart."

"Oh, no, Charles," replied Mrs. Gordon; "it is that very profound depth and delicacy of feeling which has so endeared him to me since a boy, and made me love him as my own son."

"Ah, aunt dear, he is, I know, a paragon of perfection in your eyes; but notwithstanding his heart is in the right place, he is exceedingly jealous and haughty too; and I suspect we shall have a scene or two with him in town, if my sweet cousin there attracts many admirers."

"I do not wish to have any more admirers, Charles," replied Blanche; "and will take care never again to give William the slightest cause for uneasiness on that account."

to have it before we are married, and if so disposed to turn restive, the blow won't fall so heavily upon me now as it would later when we are coupled together."

"You can do as you please with Constance, who is strong and able to take care of herself; but I must entreat, Malcolm, Blanche may not be dragged here, there, and everywhere, for her constitution will not endure much dissipation."

"Well, Beauchamp, then come up and take care yourself of the dear, precious little soul. Why, Blanche, he seems to think you are made of barley-sugar. What a life you will lead when married to such a fussy, prosy, particular old fellow. Take my advice, child, and marry some dashing, high-spirited young man about town."

"Who would try to kill me with dissipation, Charles, that he might spend my fortune on himself—that would be a canine thing for a Scotchwoman. No, no, Charles dear; I prefer being my old man's darling, to any gay young man's slave."

"Quite right, my prudent little cousin; and a precious darling you will be, no doubt, in his opinion. But now let us have dinner, ringing the bell; 'Aunt and Con are uncommonly late, and I can wait no longer.'"

The dinner-hour passed heavily away, Lord Malcolm making ineffectual efforts to enliven the party; but nothing could rouse Beauchamp from his abstraction, and his sorrowful looks, fixed alternately on Blanche and Mrs. Gordon, infected them all.

"Confound your sour-ovut visage," exclaimed Malcolm. "Why, Beauchamp, you are like a wet blanket in a frosty night—enough to congeal one's blood. Rouse, rouse yourself, my dear fellow; and here, Blanche, fill his glass, to our next merry meeting at the Priory."

"May that meeting find us all unchanged in hearts and feelings," exclaimed Beauchamp, impressively, as he placed his empty glass on the table.

"And Will Beauchamp," added Malcolm, gaily, "in a more lively humor. And now, aunt, with your leave, I will ring for another bottle of wine; or, by Jove! we shall find him suspended by the neck from the chestnut tree on the lawn to-morrow morning—or stay—his razors—egad! aunt, you and Blanche had better take them away and hide them—no saying what he may do, now this blue fit is upon him."

"Do leave William alone, Charles," replied Mrs. Gordon.

"I dare not, aunt dear, until he has swallowed a bottle of which may keep him from committing *felo-de-se* until to-morrow evening, when Miss Honoria Winterbottom will perhaps enliven him with her innocent prattle and sweet musical strains, or her ma'nd the old squire may, all four, get comfortably merry together."

"Charles," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, rising to leave the room, "you are incorrigible—but remember, we must return early to-night."

They will draw a veil over the parting scene between Blanche and Beauchamp the following morning, after which he handed her to the carriage in silence, not daring to trust his voice in a last farewell; and Blanche sunk back on the cushion to conceal her fast falling tears. When shaking hands with Mrs. Gordon, Constance, and Malcolm, the firm grasping of their hands in his proved, more than words could tell, what his feelings were, although utterance failed him from emotion, which, unable longer to control, he turned quickly away, and rushed towards the stables for his horse.

"There goes," said Malcolm, "a man whose deep feelings are almost, if not quite, a misery to himself; and I fear Will Beauchamp is more to be pitied than envied in the possession of too sensitive a heart."

"Oh, no, Charles," replied Mrs. Gordon; "it is that very profound depth and delicacy of feeling which has so endeared him to me since a boy, and made me love him as my own son."

"Ah, aunt dear, he is, I know, a paragon of perfection in your eyes; but notwithstanding his heart is in the right place, he is exceedingly jealous and haughty too; and I suspect we shall have a scene or two with him in town, if my sweet cousin there attracts many admirers."

"I do not wish to have any more admirers, Charles," replied Blanche; "and will take care never again to give William the slightest cause for uneasiness on that account."