

THE  
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXXVII.

(CONTINUED.)

"All smooth again, aunt dear, with your hair braided rephew, and you shall see if I don't attend to orders about those two girls."

Lady Malcolm, although rather too much addicted to gaiety and dissipation, was very warm-hearted, and almost foolishly fond of her son Charles, who had been a spoiled child as only children generally are, when left solely to a mother's care. Both naturally attached to her own order, and her acquaintance lying chiefly among the nobility, Lady Malcolm had at first resisted her son's proposal of marriage with Miss Beauchamp, in the hope of forming a higher connection; but finding remonstrance unavailing, her consent was at last obtained, and she had become every day since more convinced of the wisdom of her son's choice, loving Constance as her own daughter. Her delight, therefore, may be imagined, when so unexpectedly informed of Mr. Beauchamp's certain advancement to the peerage, and William rose considerably in her estimation as a desirable match for her niece; the Earl of Annandale being known as the possessor of very large landed property which went with the title.

Of the small family party at dinner that evening, Lady Malcolm was the only person in buoyant spirits, poor Blanche sitting stiffly and depressed. When the servants withdrew, she rallied her niece on her desponding looks. "Come, my dear, cheer up; you will scarcely be presentable at Lady Armorer's to-night."

"Indeed, dear aunt, I hope you will excuse me going with you there, as I am quite unequal to any exertion this evening."

"Well, my love, you are to do exactly as you please now, in accepting or receiving any invitations; for, to confess the truth, I have accepted more than I usually do, entirely on your account, in the full expectation, after the impression you have made, of seeing an announcement in the papers, before the conclusion of the season, of a certain little ceremony having been performed at St. George's Hanover Square, between the Marquis of A. or D. and the beautiful and accomplished Miss Douglas, niece to Lady Malcolm of Grosvenor Square. Of course, my dear, there was a little pardonable vanity on my side, mixed up in this anticipated denouement, but as you appear to think Lady Beauchamp a much prettier name—to which I quite agree—with the Countess of Annandale in prospective, I have only been building castles in the air to little purpose, like other enthusiastic people. Yet, joking apart, my dear Blanche, I thoroughly approve your choice."

Blanche, blushing excessively, expressed her thanks for her aunt's kindness and commendation of her lover, when Malcolm added, "Ah my dear, that Will Beauchamp is a very Bluebear already, and what will he become with a title tacked to his name? My gracious! as Mrs. Summertop says, there will be no living in the same house with him. To begin, my love, he has had an embargo on you, that you do not attend more than three balls or parties per week, and appointed me keeper of the seals, or private turnkey, to lock you up in your own room every other night after eleven, and it shall be done, Blanche, by Jupiter Amun, as the old squire says. Will Beauchamp is a long-headed fellow, and his edicts and opinions are not to be gaisayed; so now, my love, as you don't go with us to-night, I will see you to your room before I have the house, and take the key in my pocket. Just fancy Ayrshire's astonishment, anticipating, no doubt, a little *tert-a-tete* in the sister's boudoir. 'Are we not to have the honor of seeing Miss Douglas to-night?' 'Oh, no, my lord, can't come—very naughty—locked in her room—here's the key.'" "Oh, Charles, Charles," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon: "can't you spare your cousin this one night—are your promises so soon forgotten?"

Blanche burst into tears, and was escaping from the table, when Malcolm sprang from his chair, and throwing himself before her on one knee, seized her hand, exclaiming

endeavoring by every attention to make amends for his late conduct to herself and her lover, who it must be confessed, from the recent disclosure of his high expectations, had become a person of much greater importance than heretofore. Instead of confining them to the hot, dusty ride in the Park, Malcolm now accompanied the two girls on horseback into the country almost every day, and Lord Ayrshire, noticing the hour at which they generally left Grosvenor Square, frequently joined them, although Malcolm gave him no cause for encouragement, pertinaciously adhering to his cousin's side, leaving Constance to be entertained by the Marquis.

As the family in Grosvenor Square was loitering over a late breakfast, a few days after Beauchamp's departure from town, an unexpected visitor was ushered into the room in the person of his cousin. "Why, Fred!" exclaimed Malcolm, greeting him warmly, "who would have thought of seeing you in the mighty Babylon—anything amiss at Bampton?"

"Oh, no, Malcolm! all right in that quarter."

"Then what brought you here, if it is not an impertinent question?"

"A certain vehicle called a coach, with four as spicy nags as you could wish to sit behind, from our last stage at Hounslow."

"Well, that I can suppose; but you are not much of a city mouse."

"True enough, Malcolm; but you know one fool makes many, and as Bob Conyers and all the rest of our country neighbors have set the example, you see I have been fool enough to follow it, and take a peep at London life, since it's deemed dull work in the provinces just now. Will returning to do a bit of kennel with the young entry, I've got leave of absence from the governor to have a shy at the Londoners."

"Ay, ay, Fred, I see how it is; Beauchamp has sent you up here to look after us all."

"Begging your pardon, my lord, Will is too knowing a fellow to send a madcap like myself on such an errand, lest I might do a little business on my account in a certain quarter," with a smile and look at Blanche.

"No, no, Malcolm; I should in that case be like the monkey roasting chestnuts."

"Well, Fred, we are all right glad to see you; and as Will won't look at a certain young widow in a matrimonial point of view, egad, I think she will just suit your book, *id. est*, if you can take up the running."

"Then, Malcolm, I've no objection to try my luck, provided she is likely to suit."

During this dialogue, broken at intervals, Fred had shaken hands with the ladies, and answered various little inquiries of country friends and country affairs, when Malcolm rising, said, "Well, Fred, you dine with us this evening, as a matter of course, and we go to Almack's afterwards, when I will introduce you to the widow."

"I hardly knew what to say to that proposition, and don't think I can sport brass enough for such an august assembly."

"Pooh, pooh, Fred! you have brass enough for anything—faint heart, you know, won't do in these cases."

Constance here interposed, saying, "If he would accompany them, Blanche would accept him as her first partner."

"Well, Con, that of course decides the matter."

"And if not willfully disposed to turn restive," she added, "we will enlist you in our service for the whole of the day, as I have a hundred little things to talk about before the dinner hour."

"I am quite at your service, my fair cousin," replied Fred; "so do with me as you please."

"Well, then, we will take a drive after luncheon, in Aunt Gordon's carriage, as I know your dislike to drawing room work, and show you the belles in the park on our return."

Malcolm, having an engagement, soon after left the ladies and Fred to get through their time until the carriage came to the door. Various conjectures were hazarded on Fred Beauchamp's appearance in Mrs. Gordon's carriage, by the noble Marquis, until he encountered Captain Markham, who at once solved the mystery. "What! another bumpkin of the Beauchamp family, Markham?"

"Lad; pon honor, Ayrshire, s a dolt,

"Oh, very well; but I wonder of whom poor Will, in his solitary den, is thinking at this moment?"

A shadow passed over the features of Blanche Douglas at these words, which was broken by Fred's saying—

"Don't distrust me, dear Blanche, for Fred Beauchamp can jump over or see through a stone wall as quickly as most people; although neither Will nor yourself will honor me with your confidence; but there—perhaps you are right, as I am a giddy, thoughtless fellow, and might let the cat's head peep out of the bag."

"I do not doubt your sincerity, Fred—but this is forbidden ground."

"I know it, Blanche; and my sincere hope is, it may not be so much longer."

The dance over, Constance introduced her cousin to Mrs. Fortescue, with whom he seemed much struck; and they were soon seen dancing together in high good humor. The widow endeavored, ineffectually, to ascertain the cause of his cousin's abrupt departure from London. "It is rumored," she remarked, "he had left in consequence of being rejected by a certain young lady, with whom you were dancing this evening."

"That, you may take my word," replied Fred, "is a deliberate falsehood. Will Beauchamp never has been, and never will be, rejected by any woman."

"Do you consider him perfectly irresistible?" with an arch smile.

"Oh, no, not quite that; but he has good sense enough never to propose before being quite certain that he would be accepted."

"Then he did not propose to Miss Douglas before leaving town?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, really, the world is very ill-natured, but perhaps he is engaged to some one else?"

"Not to my knowledge; although he does not confide secrets of this kind to me."

"Probably he has a penchant for some young lady who lives in your neighborhood?"

"That, I suspect, is the case," replied Fred; "but more I cannot, if I would, tell."

Mrs. Fortescue had heard too much now, and relapsed into a thoughtful mood, from which she was rallied in turn, by Fred Beauchamp saying, "You appear to take rather a deep interest in my cousin's love affairs. Is he a very old friend of yours?"

"Not very," was the reply; "and a deeper tint stole over her cheeks; but we met several times during his short stay in town, and I liked him very much, from being so different to the generality of our fops and fine gentlemen. But don't you think Miss Douglas exceedingly lovely?"

"Ah, yes," replied Fred: "beautiful—too beautiful—but I look at her as I do at a splendid three hundred-guinea horse—beyond my reach: and her guardian, Harcourt, will have a peer for his ward—nothing short will do for the heiress. So you see my falling in love with her is a nopeless affair."

"Then you confess to being in love with her, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"I won't deny," he replied, "that I have been in that predicament; but the fit has passed, as others have before; in short, since the age of fourteen I have always been the slave of Cupid. First, I was smitten by a housemaid at our school, a buxom young lady, nearly six feet high, who knocked out the first flame by knocking me out of a high-backed chair, on which I had perched myself to snatch a kiss from my enchantress. In falling against the edge of the table, a black eye was the consequence, for which, not being able to give a satisfactory explanation to our master, who declared I had been fighting with another boy, I got a thorough good flogging. This cooled my courage for a twelvemonth; after which I had a desperate affair with the daughter of the village schoolmaster—possessing a very red face, snub nose, and black, glossy ruglets. The flame being reciprocal, clandestine meetings, billets doux, and little presents followed; but one from my Dulcinea, a lock of hair, nearly extinguished the fire, as well as your humble servant at the same time."

"Pray may I ask how, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"Oh, certainly, if it will afford you any satisfaction to know how silly I was in my

Douglas in the same light as a cat is said to look at a king, from a respectful distance, I have preserved a very decided antipathy to throw myself at any young lady's feet. In short, before committing myself the third time, which it is said pays for all, but how is not sufficiently explained, I purpose advancing very cautiously, by asking the third flame, as a preliminary to further proceedings, whether I may fall in love with her or not."

"You have given me a very amusing account of yourself, Mr. Beauchamp; and I can only wish you success in your next adventure."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fortescue; but will you assist me also, in case I meet a lady here tonight, who takes my fancy?"

"Oh, certainly," she replied, laughing; "if I have any influence with the fair one."

"A thousand thanks," he replied, gaily. "I shall not forget your promise; and now, I conclude, our dance being ended, I must thank you for the honor you have done me in accepting my hand, and wish you good night."

They thus parted, and it must be confessed that Fred's handsome person and unaffected manners made a favorable impression on the young widow.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Beauchamp's sudden disappearance from London, coupled with the unusual gravity of Blanche's demeanor since his departure, gave weight to the rumor originating with Lord Ayrshire, that he had been rejected by the heiress, which imparted fresh impulse to his hopes, as well as to her other admirers—except Lord Danby, who was puzzled how to account for Lord Malcolm's coolness to him since his mother's ball.

"I cannot understand them," observed Lord Danby to Ayrshire one day, when they were discussing the subject. "Malcolm has certainly taken offence at my not inviting Beauchamp; and Miss Douglas, too, by her altered manner when we meet—in fact, she will scarcely speak to me; how then can Beauchamp be rejected?"

"Simply enough, my dear fellow. Malcolm and his cousin may both like Beauchamp well enough—too well to pass over any slight offered to him; but, depend upon it, Lady Malcolm looks higher for her niece, and therefore the young country squire has had his dismissal—nothing more likely, and I am satisfied in my own mind this is the fact."

"Well, Ayrshire, I quite agree with you that this is a very natural solution of the mystery; and knowing before her guardian's decided objection to this young pretender, I think it more than probable that he has been ordered to the right-about."

Blanche's returning cheerfulness, after the receipt of Beauchamp's letter, tendered also to impress Lord Ayrshire (who had joined them again in their ride that afternoon) with the idea that the wound inflicted on the heart of Miss Douglas by her lover's dismissal was one of a very superficial character, and he argued with himself—

"Ah, young girls brought up in the country have always some bumpkin hankering about them, with whom they fancy themselves terribly in love, until the delusion is dispelled by their coming to London and meeting well-bred, polite men of the world; they then wonder at the absurdity of their first foolish, romantic penchant for a fellow who has not two ideas in his head, beyond the price of corn and cattle; and whose fund of entertainment consists of a few threadbare sporting anecdotes, too coarse for a lady's ear. A few tears, of course, at parting; and, by the end of the first week, Colin is forgotten!"

There was another cause, also, for Blanche's cheerfulness—Lady Malcolm's knowledge and full approval of her choice, which she believed would carry great weight with her guardian; so that she felt comparatively at ease on that point, and in good humor with every one and every thing around her. On this morning her pretty Arab obtained an unusual share of caresses and pattings from the hand of his fair mistress, and Lord Ayrshire's sparkling conversation elicited her approving smiles.

It was now the Harcourt's turn for a grand display—invitations having been issued a month previously, to ensure a full attendance for a ball to take place that night; and it being well known by this time that Mr. Harcourt was Miss Douglas's guardian,

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"Will really, Mrs. Harcourt, they appear mutually pleased with each other at present. Miss Douglas is the very person to suit my brother, and provided he is sufficiently agreeable to her, I think it will be a case for St. George's Chapel ere long."

The fact was that Blanche, having met several of her old country friends that night—The Marchams, Rollestons, Comp-ton, and others—felt more at home and in higher spirits than usual, which Lord Ayrshire interpreting in his favour, and attributing to his own very delightful society, presumed to ask for a second dance. That request, reminding her at once of her absent lover's advice on this point, caused an instantaneous revulsion of feeling and gravity of features. The thought passed like a flash of lightning through her mind—'What would he say to my gaiety tonight, while he is sitting at his lonely fireside, thinking of his own dear Blanche?' For a moment she became lost in reverie, but on the question being repeated by Lord Ayrshire, she replied, with some appearance of hauteur, "I have made a rule, my lord, never to dance twice on the same night with any partner."

"There are exceptions to all general rules, Miss Douglas, and I hope you will permit me to claim the privilege of being an exception to yours."

"I am sorry, my lord, I cannot grant you that privilege," was the reply.

"Then do you really never make an exception to this rigid rule?"

"Very rarely, and only in favor of very old friends."

"Of whom, Miss Douglas, I conceive you must know very few who would be likely to ask for you hand in a ball-room."

"Whether few or many," replied Blanche, highly offended, "the Marquis of Ayrshire has not been known to me long enough to be included in that number."

"I beg a thousand pardons for giving this unintentional offence, but my meaning was that very old people are so generally partial to dancing."

"And yet, my lord, my very old friends need not necessarily be very old persons; for instance, my cousin Malcolm, who is only a few years younger than myself; but having known him from childhood, he is one of my very oldest friends."

"I stand corrected, Miss Douglas, for my futile attempt at jocularity, which appears to have been exceedingly ill-timed; but, believe me, no reflection whatever was intended on your friends."

Blanche made no reply, and Lord Ayrshire puzzled his brain in vain to account for her unexpected transition from light good humor to grave formality. But the dance being concluded, he was obliged to resign her hand without the opportunity of obtaining any further elucidation.

On entering the room that night, Selina Markham had suggested that they should sit through one quadrille together to have a chat, to which Blanche assented. "You are almost danced off your legs, my dear, and were I in your place, I would see half these fine fellows smothered in the Serpentine mud before I would fag myself to death by accepting them for partners, night after night, as you do. So hold yourself engaged to me—as I have a little bit of gossip to talk about—for one quadrille."

"Won't it look very strange, Selina, for us both to be sitting together?"

"Not in the least, my dear, only missed our partners, or they missed us—nothing more common in such crowds as these."

At the appointed time, therefore, the two girls encased themselves in the most retired seats of the apartments they could select, hoping to escape observation.

"There, I declare," exclaimed Selina, "that jackanapes Bayntum has found us out already; as he appeared with: May I have the honor, Miss Douglas?"

"No, you can't," said Selina, "she's engaged as well as myself."

"Very odd, Miss Markham, that you should both have lost your partners."

"Your lordship is always thinking about the odds," replied Selina; "but, whether odd or even, we haven't lost our partners, and as you can keep a stable secret, I will tell you a ball-room one. We are both tired of dancing, and therefore have decided on a little respite. You know what running a horse off his legs means, so have a little compas-

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