

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN EXPERT.

(Continued.)

Mrs. Lushington, while remaining, in a modified sense, mistress of the position—for Frank retired to his own den, when the servants came to take away breakfast—found her curiosity keenly stimulated by the little piece of gossip thus let fall under the excitement of a conjugal wrangle. What on earth could St. Josephs want with three thousand pounds? She had never heard he was a gambler. On a race-course, she knew, from personal observation, that beyond a few half-crowns with the ladies, he would not venture a shilling. He had told her repeatedly how he abhorred foreign loans, joint-stock companies, lucrative investments of all sorts, and money speculations of any kind whatever; yet here, if she believed her husband, was this wise and cautious veteran plunging overhead in a transaction wholly out of keeping with his character and habits. "There must be a woman at the bottom of it!" thought Mrs. Lushington, not unreasonably, resolving at the same time never to rest till she had sifted the whole mystery from beginning to end.

She felt so keen on her quest, that she could even have found it in her heart to seek Frank in his own snuggery, and, sinking her dignity, there endeavor to worm out of him farther particulars, when Catamount was pulled up with some difficulty at her door, and his master's card sent in, accompanied by a humble petition that the early visitor might be admitted. Having darkened her eyelashes just before breakfast, and being, moreover, dressed in an unusually becoming morning toilet, she returned a favorable answer, so that Soldier Bill, glowing from his ride, was ushered into her boudoir without delay.

Her womanly tact observed his fussed and anxious looks. She assumed, therefore, an air of interest and gravity in her own.

"There's some bother," said she kindly; "I see it in your face. How can I help you, and what can I do?"

"You're a conjuror, by Jove!" gasped Bill, in a paroxysm of admiration at her omniscience.

"You're not, at any rate!" she replied, smiling. "But, come, tell me all about it. You're in a scrape? You've been a naughty boy. What have you been doing? Out with it!"

"It's nothing of my own; I give you my honor," replied Bill. "It's Daisy's turn now. Look here, Mrs. Lushington. I'm completely puzzled—regularly knocked out of time. Read that. I can't make head or tail of it."

He handed her the telegram, which she perused in silence, then burst out laughing, and read it again aloud for his edification.

"Very strong Honey just arrived—bulls a-bight on Bank of Ireland—Sent by an unknown Friend—fail immediately—Sell Chief—consult a Gent, and strip Aaron at once—Do not lose a moment."

"Mr. Walters must be gone raving mad, or is this a practical joke, and why do you bring it here?"

"I don't think it's a joke," answered Bill ruefully. "I brought it because you know everything. If you can't help me, I'm done!"

"Quite right," said she. "Always consult a woman in a tangle. Now this thing is just like a skein of silk. If we can't unravel it at one end, we begin at the other. In the first place, who is Aaron? and how would you proceed to strip him?"

"Aaron," repeated Bill thoughtfully. "Aaron, I never heard of such a person. There's Sharon, you know; but stripping him would be out of the question. It's generally the other way!"

"Sharon's a money-lender, isn't he?" she asked. "What business have you to know anything about him, you wicked young man!"

"Never borrowed a sixpence in my life," protested Bill, which was perfectly true. "But I've been to him often enough lately about this business of Daisy's. We've arranged to get fifteen hundred from him alone. Perhaps this is what is meant by stripping him. But it was all to be in hard money; and though I know Sharon sometimes makes you take goods, I never heard of him doing such a thing."

"I should think I would just!" he protested, still in his paroxysm of admiration. "You know more than the examiners at Sandhurst! You could give pounds to the senior department! If you weren't so—I mean if you were old and ugly—I should really believe what I said at first, that you're a witch!"

my hat in the street, please, and put my head out of the window to shout!"

"I beg you'll put out nothing of the kind!" she answered, laughing. "If you must be a boy, at least be a good boy, and do what I tell you."

"I should think I would just!" he protested, still in his paroxysm of admiration. "You know more than the examiners at Sandhurst! You could give pounds to the senior department! If you weren't so—I mean if you were old and ugly—I should really believe what I said at first, that you're a witch!"

She smiled on him in a very bewitching manner; but her brains were hard at work the while recapitulating all she had learned in the last twenty-four hours, with a pleasant conviction that she had her puzzle put together at last. Yes, she saw it clearly now. The registered envelope of which she found the address, in reverse, on Blanche's blotting paper, must have contained those very bills, mentioned in Daisy's telegram. It had struck her at the time that the handwriting was stiff and formal, as if disguised; but this served to account for the mysterious announcement of an "unknown friend!" She was satisfied that Miss Douglas had sent anonymously the sum he wanted to the man she loved. And that sum Bill had already told her was three thousand pounds—exactly the amount, according to her husband's version, lately borrowed by the General from a notorious money-lender. Was it possible, Satanella could thus have stripped one admirer to benefit another? It must be so. Such treachery deserved no mercy, and Mrs. Lushington determined to show none.

She considered how far her visitor might be trusted with this startling discovery. It was as well, she thought, that he should be at least partially enlightened, particularly as the transaction was but little to the credit of any one concerned, and could not, therefore, be made public too soon. So she laid her hand on Bill's coat-sleeve, and observed impressively—

"Never mind about my being old and ugly, but attend to what I say. Daisy, as you call him, has evidently found a good friend. Now I know who that friend is. Don't ask me how I found it out. I never speak without being sure. That money came from Miss Douglas."

Bill opened his eyes and mouth. "Miss Douglas!" he repeated. "Not the black girl with the black mare?"

"The black girl with the black mare, and no other," she answered. "Miss Douglas has paid his debts, and saved him from ruin. What return can a man make for such generosity as that?"

"She's a tramp, and he ought to marry her!" exclaimed the young officer. "No great sacrifice either. Only," he added, on reflection, "she looks a bit of a Tartar—wants her head let quite alone at her fences, I should think. She'd be rather a handful; but Daisy wouldn't mind that. Yes; he's bound to marry her, no doubt; and I'll see him through it."

"I quite agree with you," responded Mrs. Lushington, "but I won't have you talk about ladies as if they were hunters. It's bad style, young gentleman, so don't do it again. Now, attend to what I tell you. Jump on that poor horse of yours; it must be very tired of staring into my dining-room windows. Go to your agent, and send him to Sharon. Let your Colonel know at once. When Daisy arrives, impress on him all that he is bound in honor to do, and you may come and see me again, whenever you like, to report progress."

So Bill leapt into the saddle in exceedingly good spirits, while Mrs. Lushington sat down to her writing-table, with the self-satisfied sensations of one who has performed an action of provident kindness and goodwill.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DEBT OF HONOR.

Daisy's astonishment, on receiving by post those documents that restored him to the world from his vegetation in Roscommon, was no less unbounded than his joy. When he opened the registered letter, and bills for the whole amount of his liabilities fluttered out, he could scarcely believe his eyes. Then he puzzled himself to no purpose, in wild speculations as to the friend who had thus dropped from the skies at his utmost need. He had an uncle prosperous enough in worldly matters, but this uncle hated parting with his money, and was, moreover, abroad, whereas the welcome letter bore a London post-mark. He could think of no other relative nor friend rich enough, even if willing, to assist him in so serious a difficulty. The more he considered his good luck, the more

a strange step on the stairs. Immediately Daisy rushed into the room, vociferated for Barney to look after his "traps" and pay the cab, seized a hot plate, wagged his head at his host, and began breakfast without further ceremony.

"Seem peckish, young man," observed Bill, contemplating his friend with extreme satisfaction. "Sick as a fool last night, no doubt, and sharp-set this morning in consequence. Go in for a outlet, my boy. Another kidney, then. That's right. Have a suck of the lemon, and at him again!"

Munching steadily, Daisy repudiated the imputation of sea-sickness, with the scorn of a practised mariner. "It seems to me that I live on the Channel," said he, "like a ship's steward, Bill, or a horse-mariné! Well, I've done with it now, I hope, for sometime. How jolly it is to feel straight again! It's like your horse getting up, when he's been on his head, without giving the crowner you deserve. It was touch-and-go this time, old chap. I say, you got my telegram?"

Bill laughed. "I did indeed!" he answered; "and a nice mull they made. Read it for yourself."

Thus speaking, he tossed across the breakfast table that singular communication which his unassisted ingenuity had so failed to comprehend.

Daisy perused it with no little astonishment. "The fools!" he exclaimed. "Why, Bill, you must have thought I'd gone mad."

"We did," replied Bill gravely. "Stark staring, my boy. We said we had always considered you 'a badder,' but no so bad as this."

"We," repeated his friend. "What d'ye mean by we? You didn't go jawing about it in the regiment, Bill?"

"When I say we," answered the other, with something of a blush, "I mean me and Mrs. Lushington."

"What had she to do with it?" asked Daisy, pushing his plate away, and lighting a cigar. "She didn't send the stuff, I'll take my oath!"

"But she knows who did," said Bill, filling a meerschaum pipe of liberal dimensions, with profound gravity.

Then they smoked in silence for several minutes.

"It's a very rum go," observed Daisy, after a prolonged and a thoughtful puff. "I don't know when I've been so completely at fault. Tell me what you've heard, Bill, for you have heard something, I'm sure. In the first place how came you to take counsel with Mrs. Lushington?"

"Because she is up to every move in the game," was the answer. "Because she's the cleverest woman in London, and the nicest. Because I was regularly beat, and could think of nobody else to help me at short notice. The telegram said, 'Do not lose a moment.'"

"And what did she make of it?" asked Daisy.

"Tumbled to the whole plant in three minutes," answered Bill. "Put the telegram straight—bulls, honey and all—as easy as wheeling into line. I tell you, we know as much as you do now, and more. You've got three 'thons, Daisy, ready-money down, to do what you like with. Isn't that right?"

Daisy nodded assent.

"The Chief's delighted, and I've sent the agent to Sharon. Luckily, the little beggar's not so unreasonable as we thought he'd be. That reckons up the telegram, doesn't it?"

Again Daisy nodded, smoking serenely.

"Then there's nothing more for you to bother about," continued his host; "and I'm glad of it. Only, next time, Daisy, you won't pull for an old woman, I fancy, in a winning race."

"Not a young one either," said his friend. "But you haven't told me now who the money came from."

"Can't you guess? Have you no idea?"

"Not the faintest."

"What should you say to Miss Douglas?"

"Miss Douglas!"

By the tone in which Daisy repeated her name, that young lady was obviously the last person in the world from whom he expected to receive pecuniary assistance.

Though no longer peaceful, his meditations seemed deeper than ever. At length he threw away the end of his cigar with a gesture of impatience and vexation.

"This is a very disagreeable business," said he. "Hang it, Bill, I almost wish the money had never come. I can't send it back, for a thousand's gone already to our kind old major, who promised to settle my book at Tattersall's. I wonder where she got such a sum. By Jove, it's the handsomest thing I ever heard of! What would you do, Bill, if you were in my place?"

"Do," repeated his friend; "I've no doubt what I should do. I should order Catamount round at once; then I think I'd have

Before Daisy's eyes rose the vision of an Irish river glancing in the sunshine, with banks of tender green and ripples of molten gold, and a fishing-rod lying neglected on its margin, while a fair, fond face looked loving and trustful in his own.

There are certain hopes akin to the child's soap-bubble which we cherish insensibly, admiring their airy grace and radiant coloring, almost persuading ourselves of their reality, till we apply to them some practical test—then behold! at a touch, the bubble bursts, the dream vanishes, to leave us only a vague sense of injustice, an uncomfortable consciousness of disappointment and disgust.

"I conclude Mrs. Lushington understands these things, and knows exactly what a fellow ought to do," said Daisy, after another pause that denoted he was in no indiscreet hurry to act on that lady's decision.

"Of course she does!" answered Bill. "She's a regular authority, you know, or I wouldn't have gone to her. You couldn't be in safer hands."

Both young men seemed to look on the whole transaction in the light of a duel, or some such affair of honor, requiring caution no less than courage, and in the conduct of which the opinion of a celebrated practitioner like Mrs. Lushington was invaluable and unimpeachable.

"But if I—I don't like her well enough," said poor Daisy, looking very uncomfortable. "Hang it, Bill, when one marries a woman, you know, one's obliged to be always with her. Early breakfast, home to luncheon, family dinner, smoke out of doors, and in by ten o'clock. I shouldn't like it at all; and then perhaps she'd take me to morning visits and croquet parties. Think of that, Bill! Like poor Martingale, whose only holiday is when he gets the belt on, and can't stir out of barracks for four-and-twenty hours. To be sure, Miss Douglas is a good many cuts above Mrs. Martingale!"

"To be sure she is!" echoed his adviser. "And I dare say, after all, Daisy, it is not quite so bad as we think. Wet days and that you'd have to yourself, you know, and she wouldn't want you when she had a headache. Mrs. Martingale often has headaches, and so should I if I liquored up as freely!"

"But supposing," argued Daisy, "I say only supposing, Bill, one liked another girl better; oughtn't that to make a difference?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Bill, shaking his head. "I didn't think of putting the case in that way to Mrs. Lushington, but I don't imagine she'd admit the objection. No, no, my boy, it's no use being shifty about it. You've got to jump, and the longer you look, the less you'll like it! If it was a mere matter of business, I wouldn't say a word, but see how the case stands. There are no receipts, no vouchers; she has kept everything dark, that you might feel under no obligation. Hang it, old fellow, it's a regular debt of honor; and there's no way of paying up, that I can see, but this."

"Such an argument was felt to be unanswerable."

"A debt of honour," repeated Daisy. "I suppose it is. Very well; I'll set about it at once. I can't begin to-day though."

"Why not?" asked his friend.

"Notime," answered the other, who in many respects was a true Englishman. "I've got lots of things to do. In the first place, I must have my hair cut, of course!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PERTINENT QUESTION.

A letter, without date or signature, written in an upright, clerical hand, correctly spelt, sufficiently well expressed, and stamped at the General Post Office! St. Joseph had no clue to his correspondent, and could but read the following production over and over again with feeling of irritation and annoyance that increased at each perusal:—

"You have been grossly ill-treated and deceived. A sense of justice compels the writer of these lines to warn you before it is too late. You are the victim of a conspiracy to plunder and defraud. One cannot bear to see a man of honour robbed by the grossest foul play. General St. Josephs is not asked to believe a bare and unsupported statement. Let him recapitulate certain facts, and judge for himself. He best knows whether he did not lately borrow a large sum of money. He can easily discover if that amount corresponds, to a fraction, with the losses of a young officer celebrated for his horsemanship. Let him ascertain why that person's debts have stood over till now; also, how and when they have been settled. Will he have courage to ask himself, or somebody he trusts as himself, whence came these funds that have placed his rival in a position to return to England? Will he weigh the answer in the balance of common-sense; or is

annoyances inseparable from the love affairs of young and old.

"Ah me! what perils do environ, The man who meddles with cold iron."

quoth Hudibras, but surely his risk is yet greater, who elects to heat the metal from hilt to point in the furnace of his own affections, and burns his fingers every time he draws the sword, even in self defence. To St. Josephs who, after a manhood of hardship, excitement, and some military renown, had arrived at a time of life when comfort and repose are more appreciated, and more desirable every day, nothing could have been so distasteful as the character he now chose to enact, but for her charms, who had cast the part for him, and with whom, by dint of perseverance and fidelity, he hoped to play out the game.

Though he often sighed to remember how heavily he was weighed with his extra burden of years, he never dreamed of retiring from the contest, nor relaxed for one moment in his efforts to attain the goal.

Twenty times was he on the point of destroying a letter that so annoyed him, and twenty times he checked himself, with the reflection, that even the treacherous weapon might be wrested from the enemy, and turned to his own advantage by sincerity and truth. After much cogitation, he ordered his horse, dressed himself carefully, and rode to Miss Douglas's door.

That lady was at home. Luncheon, coming out of the dining-room untouched, met him as he crossed the hall, and the tones of her pianoforte rang in his ears, while he went upstairs. When the door opened she rose from the instrument and turned to greet him with a pale face, showing traces of recent tears.

All his self-command vanished at these tokens of her distress.

"You've been crying, my darling," said he, and taking her hand in both his own, he pressed it fondly to his lips.

It was not a bad beginning. Hitherto he had always been so formal, so respectful, so unlike a lover; now, when he saw she was unhappy, the man's real nature broke out, and she liked him none the worse.

Withdrawing her hand, but looking very kindly, and speaking in a softer tone than usual, she bade him take no notice of her agitation.

"I'm nervous," said she. "I often am. You men can't understand these things, but it's better than being cross at any rate."

"Cross!" he repeated. "Be as cross and as nervous as you like, only make me the prop when you require support, and the scapegoat when you want to scold."

"You're too good," said she, her dark eyes filling again, whereat he placed himself very close and took her hand once more. "Far too good for me! I've told you so a hundred times. General; shall I confess why I was—was making such a fool of myself, and what I was thinking of when you came in?"

"If it's painful to you, I'd rather not hear it," was his answer. "I want to be associated with the sunshine of your life, Blanche, not the shade."

She shook her head.

"Whoever takes that part in my life," she replied, "must remain a good deal in the dark. That's what I was coming to. General, it is time you and I should understand each other. I feel I could tell you things I would not breathe to any other living being. You're so safe, so honorable, so punctiliously, so ridiculously honorable, and I like you for it."

He looked grateful.

"I want you to like me," said he. "Better and better every day. I'll try to deserve it."

"They say time works wonders," she answered wistfully, "and I feel I shall. I know I shall. But there are some things I must tell you now, while I have the courage. Mind, I am prepared to take all consequences. I have deceived you, General. Deceived you in a way you could never imagine nor forgive."

"So people seem to think," he observed coolly, producing, at the same time, the anonymous letter from his pocket. "I should not have troubled you with such trash, but as you have chosen to make me your father-confessor, perhaps I ought to say your grand-father confessor, this morning, you may as well look through it, before we put that precious production in the fire."

He walked to the window, so as not to see her face while she read it, nor was this little act of delicacy and forbearance lost on such a woman as Blanche Douglas.

Her temper nevertheless, became thoroughly roused before she got to the end of the letter, causing her to place herself once more in the position of an adversary. Her eyes shone, her brows lowered, and her words came in the tight concentrated accents of bitter anger while she bade him turn round