

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XI.

(CONTINUED.)

At that moment Blanche entered the room, prepared for a walk.

'I am interrupting you,' she replied.

'Oh, no,' replied Lord Malcolm; 'I am quite ready to attend you, dear Blanche.'

When they had left the house, Malcolm said, 'It is just what I expected from old Harcourt's serious looks at breakfast. He has been asking me whether you were likely to be a Lady Malcolm, and of course I told him we loved each other as cousins only. But there is more manoeuvring in this than you suspect, my fair cousin. What should have induced old Harcourt to broach this subject so hastily and, I think, indelicately, when I had been only three days in his house? The answer to me is plain enough: that ill-conditioned Mervyn, with his own Vancourt, dines here to-day, and Harcourt wished to ascertain my sentiments, in case my Lord Mervyn should make any allusion to his friend coming forward for the honor of the secret, my dear girl; and, were it not for your sake, I feel so indignant at Harcourt's treatment, that I would leave his roof this very day.'

'Oh, pray, Charles, don't think of doing that!'

'No, Blanche; I certainly will not for the next month, at least, although I know now he would be rejoiced to get rid of me; but nothing shall induce me, my dear girl, to leave you to be tormented by these plotters; and Harcourt shall rue the day he treated me with so little ceremony. But, for your sake, as I said before, I will smother my resentment, and pay him off in his own false coin.'

The same afternoon Beauchamp and his sister rode over to return Lord Malcolm and Blanche's visit; and, after sitting some time with the ladies, the two friends sauntered out, at Malcolm's request, to see a new horse he had lately purchased. From the stables they took a stroll through the grounds, when Lord Malcolm told Beauchamp what had passed between himself and Mr. Harcourt, and his discovery of Blanche's love for him. 'And now, my dear fellow, I congratulate you with all my heart; and it has made me one of the happiest of men to know that Blanche has bestowed her affections on him whom I would have selected from all the world to be her husband.'

'But, my dear Malcolm,' Beauchamp was beginning, when he was cut short by his friend.

'Not another word, Beauchamp. I know you and Blanche thoroughly, and your deep strong feelings; you are both alike. Therefore, I insist on your proposing to her, allowing a little scope for your romantic idea of giving her a few moments for consideration; but if at the end of that time you don't marry her—not supposing an impossibility, that she will ever change, though you may—I give you fair notice, old fellow, that I will call you out, and shoot you, too, if I can, for breaking my dear cousin's heart. That is the result of my cogitations on this subject. With Beauchamp, since we last parted at Bampton; and this is my advice, which, for both our happiness, I trust and believe you will adopt. Now let us return to the ladies, or old Harcourt will think we are plotting some mischief; but had I no other reason for wishing you to marry her, Blanche Douglas shall never be sold, like a sheep in the shambles, to the highest bidder, by that wily-headed pair, under whose roof she has the misfortune to be living. Lucky, indeed, is it that I happened to arrive just at this critical moment, when poor Blanche's happiness might have been wrecked for ever; wretched, she is but a timid child, and requires a steady friend and strong arm to protect her, such as she ought to find in Will Beauchamp.'

'That she shall never want, whilst I live,' he replied.

'Thank you, Beauchamp; you now speak like a sensible man.'

At last relieved when the ladies rose from the table to leave the dining-room, but little more advanced in their conviviality followed after their departure among the gentlemen, who seemed resolved to keep at a respectful distance from each other.

Lord Vancourt made two or three unsuccessful attempts to draw Malcolm into conversation, but his almost monosyllabic answers deterred him from indulging further hopes of being on good terms with his lordship, which he was most anxious to be, as living under the same roof with Miss Douglas, his friend Vernon having assured him there was no truth in the report that he was engaged to, or ever likely to marry, his cousin.

Sir Lionel and Mr. Compton, sitting together, were the only two who had any community of feelings or ideas, and even they were delighted when coffee was introduced, and a move made to join the ladies. Lord Vancourt was resolved, if possible, that evening, to find out how the case really stood between Lord Malcolm and the heiress; for which purpose, on entering the drawing-room, he attached himself to Mrs. Harcourt, and soon after, observing Blanche in low and earnest conversation with her cousin, apart from the company, he remarked upon their being so much interested in each other's society, and said, in a low tone, 'The report of their engagement seems fully confirmed, Mrs. Harcourt.'

'There is no engagement between them, my lord,' replied that lady, 'although both Mr. Harcourt and myself have long indulged such hopes, from their estates in Scotland joining each other, and also because we have the greatest regard for Lord Malcolm.'

'I should judge from appearances,' said Lord Vancourt, 'that they were most unquestionably attached to each other.'

'Merely cousinly affection,' was the answer. 'Malcolm has expressed himself so unequivocally on the subject, that it admits of no doubt.'

A triumphant smile played for a moment over the features of Lord Vancourt at this announcement, but he immediately turned the conversation into another channel. Malcolm maintained his position near Blanche the whole evening, accompanying her to the piano (when requested by Mrs. Harcourt to sing), and Lord Vancourt, perceiving his intention to prevent his advances that night, prudently gave way, and consoled himself with Mrs. Harcourt's society, in whose good opinion he had already made rapid progress.

The common topic of conversation was the annual ball which was to take place at Cherrington on the thirty-first of the month, now quickly approaching.

'I shall certainly attend that ball,' said Mrs. Gordon, who had now joined Blanche and Malcolm, 'to witness your introduction to the world, my dear girl; and you will find me always ready to act as your chaperon, as Mrs. Harcourt. I dare say, will be engaged with her numerous friends.'

'I am so happy to hear you will be there, dear aunt,' said Malcolm, laughing, 'than if she were at the Priory; for, rest assured, your numerous admirers will engage the waltz for every dance.'

'She shall not dance more than she likes,' replied Mrs. Gordon; 'and, when fatigued, she will find a seat by my side.'

'By all means, Blanche,' said Malcolm, 'I must claim the privilege of trotting out my fair cousin on that auspicious occasion, by dancing the first dance with her, as my duty bound.'

Blanche blushed deeply, and not replying, her cousin said, 'Then you decline my handsome offer, eh, Blanche?'

'Mr. Beauchamp asked me the other day for the first, but I shall be most happy to dance with you the second.'

'Well, dear girl, that will do equally well, and Constance shall be my first partner, so that point is settled beforehand, and you shall be our *vis-à-vis* with Will Beauchamp; there, aunt, that will do nicely, and of course all eyes will be directed towards the two handsomest couples in the room. Don't you think, aunt, I am an uncommonly smart, good-looking fellow, just as described in the old ballad?—

'He's as tall and as straight as a poplar tree, and his cheeks are as red as the rose; and he looks like a squire of high degree, when dressed in his Sunday's clothes.'

'When dressed in his Sunday's clothes?'

'Oh, indeed! that is your reason, is it, Mrs. Harcourt? Then allow me to observe, that I do not think Blanche Douglas will be ever in such a position as to feel degraded by or ashamed of the society of Lady Malcolm.'

'I do not understand you, Charles.' 'Very likely, but when I state my hopes that Constance Beauchamp will ere long become my wife, my meaning is explicit enough.'

'Are you really serious, Lord Malcolm?' 'Never more so. Mr. Beauchamp, after a good deal of opposition, gave his consent to our marriage, but only on the condition that we spend half the year at Bampton during his life.'

'In place of giving his daughter any fortune, I suppose?' replied Mrs. Harcourt, with a sneer.

'No, not exactly that, either, my dear madam, as the day I marry his daughter, he transfers into my name thirty thousand pounds, which he showed by his banker's books are now in the funds.'

'Really, Malcolm, I did not think Mr. Beauchamp had any money at all there, as people say he is very poor.'

'People say what they wish others to believe, out of spite, envy, or malice,' replied Malcolm; 'but as I am satisfied, that is quite sufficient.'

'Oh, of course,' rejoined Mrs. Harcourt; 'but since I do not intend Blanche to marry a Beauchamp, I shall be obliged by your not taking her to Bampton again.'

'William Beauchamp,' said Malcolm, 'is of as high and good connections, and of a prouder spirit than yours—If, and you may rest assured will never obtrude himself into any family where he does not meet a welcome reception; with which he rose, and left the room.'

Lord Vancourt had called twice whilst Blanche was out riding with her cousin, which annoyed Mrs. Harcourt, and she resolved, therefore, for the future, to keep her more at home, in the hope of his lordship proposing, as both Mr. Harcourt and herself were so pleased with him, and assured by Lord Mervyn of his large fortune also, that they had made up their minds to accept his proposal for their niece; and Mrs. Harcourt, dreading lest Malcolm might influence his cousin in favor of Beauchamp, thought the sooner this thing could be settled the better.

The next day, when Malcolm was out shooting, Lord Vancourt, under the pretence of inviting him to a shooting party at the castle (which he knew very well he would not accept), called again at Throsby, and found the ladies at home; and after sitting some time, Mrs. Harcourt rose, under the excuse of having mislaid her handkerchief, leaving poor Blanche alone with her unwelcome admirer.

Her embarrassment and varying color having impressed his lordship with the belief of his having inspired her with an interest in his favor, he began at first speaking of the ball, to lead her on, expressing a hope that she would honor him with her hand in the first dance.

'For that I am engaged,' she replied.

'The second, then, Miss Douglas?' The same answer, at which my lord bit his lip, and fire flashed from his dark, piercing eye, which did not escape Blanche's notice.

'May I plead, then, for the next, Miss Douglas? in which I hope for better success.'

'I do not recollect that I am engaged for that, and shall be happy to dance with you, provided it is a quadrille, as I do not waltz.'

'I must, of course, submit to your own terms,' remarked his lordship; 'and among so many advocates for your hand, I consider myself highly honored by your accepting me for your partner; and he was proceeding in a strain of flattery and adulation, every moment becoming more irksome to poor Blanche, when Lord Malcolm entered the room, and she instantly hurried up-stairs. To account for his lordship's unexpected entrance, we must explain, that having gone out shooting that morning, and posted himself on the outside of a small gorse covert on the hill above the house, his attention was attracted by a horse galloping on the hard gravel road, and looking down he beheld Lord Vancourt rapidly riding up to the door. Telling the keeper to go on beating until his return, he ran down the hill,

and saw...

and saw...

and saw...

and saw...

But I am engaged to Charles for the second,' whispered Blanche.

'Well, my dear, it cannot be helped, as I really must present you to some of my particular friends first; there will be ample time for dancing afterwards.'

Beauchamp, however, would not be thrown off by these manoeuvres, and doggedly following Mrs. Harcourt, that lady, now thinking she had deprived him of his chance, at last resigned her niece's arm. As Beauchamp walked away with her, he said, rather indignantly—

'Mrs. Harcourt has purposely prevented me enjoying this dance with you, dear Blanche. I will not be disappointed, however, in the next; we are too late now to join in this set, which, if I could, I would not.'

'But I have promised Charles the second.'

'Oh, never mind; he will give that to me when he hears how badly I have been treated—that is, unless you would prefer dancing with him.'

'Oh, no,' she replied, 'if Charles will not be offended.'

'Now then, Blanche, I see Aunt Gordon looking towards us. We must go and speak to her.'

Her surprise at seeing Blanche walking about, instead of dancing, was increased to indignation when told by Beauchamp of Mrs. Harcourt's behaviour.

'Sit down here, my love, and I will be your chaperon for the rest of the evening.'

'I must leave her a moment with you, dear aunt,' said Beauchamp, 'whilst I speak a few words with Malcolm; after which he immediately returned, and sat down by Blanche, telling her Malcolm had kindly waived his claim to her hand for the next dance. They were joined by Constance and her partner soon after, when Malcolm said she must now dance the third with him.'

'I am sorry to say, Charles, I am engaged for that to Lord Vancourt.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Malcolm, whilst his brow contracted with anger; 'then the fourth, Blanche?'

'Yes, Charles, with pleasure.'

'How provoking,' said Malcolm to Constance, 'that we cannot have a dance together with Blanche and Beauchamp; but I won't be done in this manner, so you must stand up with me again, Constance, as their *vis-à-vis*.'

'Oh,' said Constance, laughing, 'it is not etiquette, Charles, to dance two quadrilles in succession with the same person.'

'Nonsense about etiquette, Constance! will you refuse me for form's sake?'

'Certainly not, if you particularly wish it.'

'That I do, dear girl, and mind we all four join again in the last dance. Do you agree to this, Blanche?' he inquired.

'If Mrs. Harcourt will not be angry at my dancing twice with William.'

'You are no longer a child,' replied Malcolm, 'to be tied to Mrs. Harcourt's apron strings, and have a right now to please yourself; but what say, Aunt Gordon, whose id-as on such subjects are quite as correct as Mrs. Harcourt's?'

'I see no impropriety in such arrangement if Blanche has no other objection.'

'None whatever, dear aunt; and I shall be delighted to join Charles and Constance in the last dance of the evening.'

'Thank you, dear Blanche,' whispered Beauchamp, 'and now we must take our places.'

Many scrutinizing and invidious glances were directed towards the heiress and her partner as they glided gracefully through the figure, too much pleased in each other's company to bestow a thought or care for the lookers-on. Lord Vancourt remarked to Vernon—'You have underrated him.'

'Not much, I think,' was the reply.

'Decidedly, Vernon, he is very gentlemanly in manners, good-looking, and altogether the sort of man any young girl would fall desperately in love with; in short, I must be quick; and even now, from what I see, my impression is that I am too late in the field.'

'You have two to one on your side, my lord, and Beauchamp has no more chance'

watching the horses and Beauchamp dancing, that they did not perceive Bob Coopers, who sat stationed in a seat behind the window-curtains, and was therefore nearly sufficient to apprise him of their intentions.

'Ha! ha!' thought Bob, 'a rascally trick, my lord and Mr. Vernon, between you; but I'll put Beauchamp and Malcolm up to the dodge, and Aunt Gordon, too, before this time to-morrow night.'

As Beauchamp, after the quadrille, was making his way with Blanche to where Mrs. Gordon was sitting, Lord Vancourt presented himself before her, saying she had promised him the honor of her hand for the next dance, and offered his arm, which Blanche, not knowing the rules on such occasions, was hesitating whether to accept or not, when Beauchamp said quickly to her—'I must consign you first to your aunt, as a waltz succeeds this quadrille, in which you do not join.'

'I shall not brook your interference, sir,' said Vancourt, haughtily.

'Nor I yours, Lord Vancourt,' retorted Beauchamp, as, drawing himself up, he resolutely passed on.

'William,' said Blanche, earnestly looking in his face, and pressing her hand upon his arm, 'I hope you will not quarrel with Lord Vancourt.'

'No, dear Blanche, if possible to avoid it; but you shall not be imposed upon or insulted by any human being.'

'Oh, he did not intend that, I hope,' said Blanche.

'There was an impertinence in his manner, by stopping you when leaning on my arm, and knowing well he had no right then to interrupt us or claim your hand, which I could not submit to.'

'But, William, promise me it shall go no further—promise me not to quarrel with him—for my sake, William, will you do this?' she inquired, beseechingly, as he seemed to hesitate.

'Yes, dearest Blanche,' in a low tone, 'for your dear sake will I do anything.'

'Thank you,' she replied, with one of her sweet smiles, 'and remember, if you forget your promise, you will make me wretched, as she relinquished his arm, and sat down by her aunt.'

'Why, Beauchamp,' said Lord Malcolm, who had been following close behind him, 'that hot-headed Irish lord seemed disposed to pick a quarrel with you, did he not?'

'I rather suspected something of the kind from Vernon's tutoring, as I saw those worthies in deep consultation together whilst we were dancing, and casting ominous looks towards me; and but for dear Blanche I would have knocked that insolent lord across the room for daring to stand in her way.'

'Egad, I believe you, Beauchamp,' replied Malcolm; 'but it won't do to talk of these things now.'

'No, no, it is all over an I past, and, as I have promised Mrs. Gordon never to fight a duel, we must say no more about it.'

'William,' said Mrs. Gordon, 'you know your promise, and the penalty of breaking it?'

'Indeed I do, dear aunt, which I will never incur; and therefore, Malcolm,' said Beauchamp, laughing, 'I am restricted to a game of fives or cudgols, with the choice of which I will favor any man who purposely insults me.'

'And I for one,' added Malcolm, jocosely, 'would not be in the skin of your opponent, in a ten-foot ring, for a hundred pounds, although we Scots are known to be unco'fords of the siller.'

'What does a game of fives mean, William?' inquired Blanche.

'This,' said Beauchamp, good-humoredly, placing his clenched hand in hers; 'four fingers and a thumb make a bunch of five or a fist, which is man's natural weapon of defence; but don't be alarmed, dear Blanche,' he said, lowering his voice. 'I will promise not to fight, if you will promise not to flirt with him, or let him make love to you.'

'That he shall not do, if I can prevent it, William, rest assured.'

Lord Vancourt now advanced, with a very