

"Take care of yourself," he says, gathering up the reins and giving them into her hands. "Pray don't be rash in riding. I wish the others were not so far ahead."

"Oh, I shall soon find them," she answers. "Thank you again—thank you so much! If I run in at the death, I'll bring you the fox's brush."

She flourishes her whip over Lightfoot's head, and that eager steed needs no farther admonition. Before Mr. Proctor can utter another word, horse and rider are flying down the road, and, as they vanish around a curve, Kate turns and waves her hand in gay good-by. After that he sees no more of her, and the only thing which remains for him to do is to mount Diana and slowly take the homeward route.

While he is doing this, and feeling, it is to be hoped, that virtue is its own reward, since just now he certainly has no other, Kate, on excellent terms with Lightfoot and herself, is galloping forward in search of the hounds. The delightful freshness of the early morning air, and the wide beauty of the prospect, flooded with radiant light and crossed by tender shadows, together with the sense of absolute freedom, and that elation of feeling which is communicated by the movement of a good horse, fill her with an exhilaration beyond anything which she has ever felt before.

But to gallop along with her horse's hoofs beating out music on the hard, smooth ground, is not in itself a sufficient end; and before long she begins to fear that, owing to her delay, she has hopelessly lost the rest of the party. She draws up and listens intently, but no sound of the chase comes to her ear for some time. Finally, however, the breeze bears to her a far-off echo of the baying of the dogs, and, turning, she rides in the direction from which the sound proceeds.

Her shortest way thither lies directly across some intervening fields; and, without a thought of the fences that divide these, she opens a convenient plantation-gate, turns in, and puts Lightfoot to his best pace.

This is so absorbing, that she does not hear the sound of another hoof-stroke on the road she has quitted, nor observe a rider who, coming along at a rapid canter, involuntarily pulls up his horse in amazement when he sees the figure borne at such speed across the fields. He is a slender, graceful man, who sits his horse admirably, and has a face that no one could see once and ever afterward forget, so handsome and spirited is it, so full of distinction are the clear-cut features, so full of joyous daring the sunny eyes.

It does not take this new-comer long to decide what he will do. As he gazes in astonishment at the flying equestrian, with her easy, buoyant seat in the saddle, and wonders what on earth she can be about, a distant sound of the chase comes to his ear, and makes his face light with pleasure.

"A fox-hunt, by Jove!" he says to himself. "That girl will break her neck as certain as fate!" he exclaims the next instant, as he sees Lightfoot rise into the air on one side of a fence, and resume his headlong speed on the other. "She is entirely alone, and though she rides like Di Vernon, if that horse should throw her—By heavens, this will not do! I must look after her, even if I miss my train in consequence."

Action follows quick upon thought, especially since the freak of following an unknown woman upon a fox-chase, or in search of a fox-chase, commends itself greatly to his fancy. He turns into the gate through which Kate passed, and a touch of the spur sets his horse at full gallop. The latter has not been out of the stable half an hour, and is therefore perfectly fresh, besides possessing unusual qualities of speed. He dashes across the field, clears the fence, and, despite the fact that Lightfoot, becoming conscious of pursuit, puts forth all his power, gains rapidly upon him, as they cross the second field, which chances to be a very large one.

By this time Kate is aware of the fact that she has a pursuer. She glances back, and, to her surprise, sees a perfect stranger riding hard and fast after her. There is no time for conjecture regarding him, however, since it requires all her attention and all her strength to preserve even a semblance of control over Lightfoot's course—which she can still direct, but has no power to restrain; and so they fly onward, their rapid motion cutting the air until it seems to whiz past like a high wind.

Meanwhile, in that single glance over her shoulder, the man behind recognized a face which has haunted his dreams all night. As it flashes upon him for a single instant, he starts, and says, under his breath, "How strange!" Few of us are not superstitious enough to be thrilled by such coincidences, however slight may be the circumstances which have brought them about. To meet at a critical time some person of whom our thoughts are full, is often enough to influence the whole course of life for us—as this chance meeting is destined to influence these two lives.

Filled with new interest by the discovery he has just made, and seeing that the fence which they are approaching is a mere formidable barrier than the one they have just passed, the young man again spurs his horse, and with a final effort reaches Kate's side.

"Pardon me," he says, quickly, but you had better stop. That fence before you is too high for your horse to take with safety."

"I can't stop," she answers. "You have set him wild by coming up so fast behind. He is beyond my control now."

"Then, shall I attempt to stop him?"

"No; that would make the matter worse. He can take the fence, I am sure."

"Will he be likely to take it better if I give him a lead?"

"Perhaps so. You can try."

This conversation is very quiet on both sides, but the man's heart is beating fast as he rides forward to give the promised lead, and Kate braces her lips together, and tightens her grasp on the rein as she sees fully the nature of the obstacle before her. It is the most desperate feat in which she has ever been engaged, and she clearly appreciates what the consequences may be. "If Lightfoot falls, I shall be killed—or worse," she says to herself. Yet even at this moment she is able to think, "How splendid!" as the stranger goes straight at the fence and clears it without touching a rail. The instant he lands on the other side, he turns in his saddle and looks back. It is not likely that he will ever forget the suspense of that instant—nor yet the picture of Lightfoot as he rises in the air with his graceful rider, and brings her safely over the fence, falling again into his stride as soon as he touches the ground.

Watching this, the stranger has involuntarily slackened his speed, so Kate flies past him with a bright smile of triumph. But this triumph is of short duration. A minute later she feels with consternation that her saddle is turning, the strain of the last leap having proved too much for the girths. To stop her horse's headlong speed is impossible. She has barely time to draw her foot out of the stirrup, when her weight turns the saddle farther, she is conscious of falling, and knows no more.

CHAPTER V.

"Love, if thy tresses be so dark,
How dark those hidden eyes must be!"

To fall directly upon one's head from a horse going at full speed, cannot fail to produce insensibility as its least consequence; and the person who suffers an accident of the kind may be very grateful if it is the only consequence. Fracture of the skull and concussion of the brain are results likely to occur, and thoughts of them press strongly upon Kate's self-constituted escort, as, with an exclamation of dismay, he draws up his horse, and, springing from his saddle, kneels by the side of the prostrate girl, who after her fall does not stir.

The first thing which he does is to lift her head, fearing lest the fair countenance may be disfigured; but, to his great relief, he finds that this is not the case. The only injury to the face is on the temple, where from one small cut the blood is flowing freely. He draws out his handkerchief and staunches this, observing the while all the delicate grace of her features, the fineness of her skin, the sweetness of her brow and lips.

"It is the same face," he mutters to himself, "and how lovely!—lovelier even than I thought! Who can she be!—and in the name of all that is wonderful, how did she chance to be riding such a steeplechase alone!"

There is no answer. Kate is mute as if she were dead, and, with the exception of the horses, there is not a living creature visible on the wide scene of spreading fields and belting woods. The knight-errant on whose hands Fate has thrown an unknown, an unconscious woman, gazes around with a feeling of utter helplessness. What is he to do? It would be well, he knows, to apply water to her face; but where is he to find any? There is certainly none at hand, and to leave her, to go in search of some, is not to be thought of. He feels her wrist, and, finding the pulse beating strongly enough, he knows that she is only stunned. Then it occurs to him to examine her head and see if it has been injured; so he removes the hat—which, being of soft, thick felt, has probably saved her life—and, in doing so, brings off the net which confines her hair, and the comb which holds it, letting its silken abundance free. As it falls in a dark, rich shower over her arm, its beauty fills him with admiration, and involuntarily he lifts a handful of the locks, which toward the end fall into careless, curling waves, just as the shorter hairs make pretty rings upon the temples and neck. Truly, the glory of a woman—now as of old—is in her hair, when it does not chance to be like that of

"Charming Miss Cox,
Who carried her locks
About in a box—
'For such is the fashion,' she said."

Kate's is all her own, and its vigorous luxuriance shows the abounding vitality which at this time of her life distinguished her whole physical being. "What a quantity she has!" thinks the gentleman; then he considers how much he should like to possess one small lock out of all this abundance; and finally—such are the easy steps of crime—he asks himself, "Why not?"

Conscience, according to its habit, is silent when its admonition would be of use, and, some evil spirit prompting him, it is the work of an instant to draw forth a knife and cut off one curling end. Hardly has he done so, however, when conscience rouses with a start, and smites him so keenly, that he would give anything of which he is possessed if the severed hairs could be reunited. A stinging sense of having taken base advantage of helplessness, makes him feel utterly contemptible; but the deed is done, and it is too late for anything save regret, since at this moment Kate stirs, and he has barely time to thrust the stolen trophy into his pocket, be-

fore the dark fringes of her eyes lift, and she looks up with a bewildered gaze into his face.

"Are you much hurt?" he asks, anxiously, for she does not utter a word—only draws away from him, and puts her hand to her head.

"No—yes—that is, I don't know," she answers, slowly. "I have been stunned, have I not? It was a dreadful fall!"

"It was a very dreadful fall!" he says, emphatically. "I was horribly frightened when I saw you go headlong. I should not have been surprised to find you killed."

"I am glad I was not killed," she says. "But my head feels very badly. I wonder if I have broken it."

"I hardly think so. I was examining it, when you came to yourself," he replies, with a very guilty feeling. "You are suffering from the shock, which must be great. It was a wonderful pity that your saddle should have turned just then."

"Yes, I was going finely, was I not?" she says, regretfully. "After all this, I shall never find the chase.—And, oh! where is Lightfoot?"

"Do you mean your horse? He is running about the field somewhere; he soon quieted down after he lost you."

"And your horse has gone, too, has he not?" she says, glancing around. "It was kind of you to stop and pick me up—especially since I am afraid you have altogether lost the hounds by it."

"I am not in search of the hounds," he answers. "I was passing along the road, when I saw you riding across the fields, and, fearing that some accident might befall you, I took the liberty of following, since you seemed entirely alone. I was almost sorry that I had done so, when you said that, by coming up behind, I made your horse run away; but I hope that the end justifies me, and that you will pardon me."

"I should be very ungrateful if I did not thank you," she says. "Lightfoot had grown so excited before you came up, that I could not control him; and if you had not come, I should have been in a sad plight indeed, for I suppose those wretched girths would have given way in any case. Fancy me lying here all alone, with Lightfoot at large without a saddle!"

"I cannot fancy anything of the kind," he replies. "Fortune arranges things better. Even the fickle goddess must have a care for some people. You see, she sent me in the nick of time to be of use to you, and I hope that you will command me. My name is Tarleton. Perhaps I should have mentioned that before."

"Oh!" says Kate. A rosy flush comes into her face, while she marvels within herself that she did not suspect this. Of course it is Tarleton! How could she imagine that anybody else would be so handsome and graceful, so bold a rider, so gallant a gentleman?

"You must excuse me," she says, looking at him with what he feels to be the most wonderful eyes he ever gazed into. "If I had not been so dazed, I should have known at once that you must be Mr. Tarleton, for I have heard of you so much. I am Kate Lawrence, and your name is a household word with my cousins at Fairfields."

As she speaks, the whole matter of her identity flashes on him. Did not some one mention in a letter, three or four years ago, that Mr. Tarleton had added a niece to his household—the orphan daughter of his brilliant, worthless brother? He had forgotten the item of information utterly until now—now that this girl with her charming face recalls it to his memory.

"I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Lawrence," he says—and of his sincerity there cannot be a doubt. "I have been indebted to luck several times in my life before, but never to such a degree as this morning. I tremble to think that I might have been ten minutes earlier or later along that road, and then—"

"Then you would have been spared an adventure of questionable pleasure," she says, with a laugh, as he pauses. "I am very grateful that you were not ten minutes earlier or later; but you might have wished devoutly that you had been, if I had been killed. The situation would then have proved more thrilling than agreeable."

"You were very near death," he says, with a gravity which surprises herself; "too near, believe me, to think lightly of your danger. Do you often ride alone—and so recklessly?"

"I never rode so before," she answers. "It was entirely an accident that I chanced to be alone on Lightfoot either. I came out with a party fox-hunting; but, in following the hounds, my horse fell lame, so the gentleman who was with me insisted that I should mount his horse, and let him take the other home. I agreed to do so, and this is the way in which I am punished for my selfishness."

"I don't think you need look on the accident exactly in that light," says Tarleton. "It was more likely the fault of your escort in not fastening the girths properly."

"Don't say that to anybody else—pray don't!" she says, eagerly. "Mr. Proctor would reproach himself so much, and I am sure it was not his fault. I watched him buckling the girths, and I know he did it securely. He will be sorry enough that he let me have Lightfoot, when he hears the result; and yet it was not Lightfoot's fault."

"Whose fault was it, then?" asks her companion, in a tone of amazement.

"I don't think that it was anybody's fault. Cannot things be pure accident, sometimes?"

"Sometimes, yes; but there is generally carelessness at the bottom of most accidents."

"That is Will's idea," she says, despondently, "so I do not know when I shall hear the last of having been thrown."

"Then why tell it?" suggests Tarleton. "Fortunately, Lightfoot cannot relate his share of the adventure, and I hope you believe that I am mute, unless you desire me to speak."

"You don't think it would be wrong to conceal it?" she asks, with the weakest possible resistance to such an agreeable idea.

"How could it be wrong? What is done is done; and if to speak of it would prove embarrassing in any way, the resource is simple—not to speak of it at all."

"Then I won't," she says, readily, "for it would be very embarrassing to poor Mr. Proctor to learn that his horse had thrown me. I know he would feel wretchedly. But if I do not mention the matter, how can I account for where I have been all this time?"

"Oh, it is quite enough to say that you were not able to find the hounds; that covers everything, from a fox-hunting point of view. And now, for fear somebody should arrive on the scene, I will go and catch your horse."

This, however, proves to be much more easily said than done. Lightfoot has no mind to be caught, and he gives Mr. Tarleton (whose own horse comes to his whistle like a dog) a very pretty chase indeed. Round and round, over and across the field they go, while Kate watches anxiously, fearful that Lightfoot may leap the fence and take his way home. But this Lightfoot does not think of doing, and he finally submits to be cornered and caught with an air as of one who has had his little game and enjoyed it, but is now ready for earnest.

When Tarleton brings up the captive in triumph, his face is flushed as only a naturally fair complexion can flush from excessive exercise, and his hair clings to his brow in damp rings as he takes off his hat. Kate looks at him sympathetically.

"How desperately over-heated you are!" she says; "and what an amount of trouble I have caused you!"

"The trouble is not worth considering," he replies. "I like horses, and everything connected with them; and I like an *impromptu* steeple-chase best of all. How do you feel—thoroughly recovered?"

"Oh, yes. I am bruised, of course, and my head still has an odd feeling; but that will pass, no doubt."

"I was immensely relieved when I found that you had not scarred your face in any way. But there is a small cut on your temple; are you aware of it?"

"No," she answers, and her hand goes thither in dismay. "Is it much of a cut? If it is, it will tell the story of my accident."

"It is only a small cut, and when you see it, I am sure you will be able to conceal it with your hair."

"And, meanwhile, I can put on a veil," she says, drawing one from her pocket and tying it over her face.

Tarleton thinks that he would not have spoken of the cut if he had anticipated this, but to renege would be too great a liberty; therefore he makes the best of the matter, by saying, cheerfully:

"That is capital! I defy anybody to tell whether you have received one cut or twenty. Now, can you hold this rascal while I put on the saddle? I am afraid to give him a chance of getting away again."

Kate willingly holds the rascal, and for the second time watches the saddle girted securely on. That matter finished, Tarleton extends his hand.

"Can you mount in this way?" he asks.

"I seldom mount in any other," she answers; and the next instant she is settling herself in the saddle, and stroking Lightfoot's neck, while Tarleton gives her the stirrup.

"Now," he says, as he mounts, "shall we return as we came, or am I right in thinking that there is a more direct way to Fairfields—since I take it for granted that you have had enough of following the hounds for one morning?"

"Not enough of following, but enough of losing them," she answers. "Yes, I think I had better turn my face homeward; and you are right—there is a much more direct way than the one we came. Over yonder"—she points across the field with her whip—"we can strike a plantation-road which will take us straight down the valley. I mean—" Here she pauses abruptly.

"Well," says Tarleton, after waiting an instant for her to proceed, "what is it you mean?"

"Only," she says, with a slight laugh, "that I should not take it so entirely for granted that you intend to continue your service as an escort. Perhaps our roads lie in different directions. If so, pray don't think it necessary to come with me. I shall do very well, now."

"My road lies in the same direction as yours, as far as Fairfields," if you will allow me to accompany you," he replies. "In fact, if you are hard-hearted enough to refuse to let me accompany you, I shall be constrained to follow you, for I do not trust our friend Lightfoot at all."

"There is no danger of my being hard-hearted," she says. "They will all be delighted to see you at Fairfields. But are you sure you are not neglecting something you would rather do, by coming with me? You must have been going *somewhere* when I met you. It was early to be abroad, unless you were on business, or a fox-hunt."

"I suppose the object of my ride would come