

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXVII.

(CONTINUED)

'Simply because you have adopted a coarse, bullying manner towards the witnesses placed in this box to-day, to which I give you fair notice I shall not submit.'

'I am not responsible to you, Mr. Beauchamp, for the course of examination I choose to pursue towards other witnesses.'

'I am not quite sure of that, Mr. Sergeant Wrangler, when you attempt to take away the character of a poor man whom I have known from boyhood, and whose daily bread depends upon his honesty.'

'And do you call Thomas Carter an honest man, to betray his master?'

'Yes, sir, and a virtuous one too, to incur the risk of losing place and character in his attempt to save an innocent girl from a fate worse than death—from being made the victim of a dark, villainous conspiracy to rob her of her fair name and fortune, and consign her to the power of an unprincipled scoundrel as ever trod the earth.'

A murmur of applause ran through the court at this manly speech, which having subsided, Mr. Sergeant Wrangler continued in a subdued tone: 'I did not ask you for the expression of your own particular opinion on this subject, Mr. Beauchamp, with which we are well acquainted, and the motives which suggested your remarks.'

'My opinion, sir, will be the opinion of a very disinterested person in this court, at the conclusion of the trial, and I warn you to address no further impertinent language to myself, or question my motives, or—'

'What, sir?' interrupted Wrangler, now losing his temper; 'I may expect a horse-whipping, I suppose?'

'Which would not be the first time,' added Beauchamp, 'that a well merited castigation of that kind had been inflicted on the back of Sergeant Wrangler.' A burst of laughter followed this announcement, during which the Sergeant fumed and fretted impatiently, showing by his fierce looks and quivering lips the storm raging within his breast; but the cool, determined eye of Beauchamp fixed steadily upon his face, whilst a contemptuous smile curl'd his upper lip, warned him that he had met his match, and whispering his junior counsel to continue the cross-examination, he sat down, saying he would not submit to these indecorous outbreaks, which were disgraceful to any court of justice.

The junior counsel, Mr. Sweetman, a tall, thin young man, the reverse in appearance and manners to Sergeant Wrangler, then attempted to draw Beauchamp into a confession of being the aggressor in the affray, by first striking Lord Vancourt.

'I was not the aggressor, sir,' replied Beauchamp, in a firm voice; 'for Lord Vancourt had seized Miss Douglas by the arm, and was trying to drag her from the carriage when I reached the spot. I then pushed him away, and attempted to shut the carriage-door, when, instantly drawing a pistol, he fired at me, the ball grazing my face, and seeing him again trying to draw another pistol from his pocket, it was then, and not till then, that in defence of my own life I shot him through the arm, to disable him from committing further outrage, not to take his life; for had I been so inclined, I could, without doubt have shot him dead on the spot.'

'You appear to have been actuated by a very chivalrous feeling, Mr. Beauchamp, in rushing to the rescue of this young lady—perhaps I might say by a stronger impulse.'

'I was actuated by that spirit, sir, which is dominant in the breast of every true Englishman to protect a defenceless woman from insult and outrage. Again a cheer arose from the densely-crowded court.'

'From what occurred, Mr. Beauchamp, after Miss Douglas quitted the witness-box this day, I think there can be little doubt by what feelings you were really actuated.'

'You are now treading on dangerous ground, sir,' replied Beauchamp, 'but out-

'And I think, Mr. Sergeant Wrangler,' retorted Mark, boldly looking his adversary in the face and mimicking him to the life, 'you are a person of that profession which fetches money from gentlemen's pockets, which caused a loud laugh among the crowd.'

'How dare you, sir, speak to me in that disrespectful language?' demanded Wrangler, looking red-hot with passion.

'How dare you, sir, accuse me of robbing gentlemen's purses? I'll make you prove your words, Lawyer Wrangler, trying to take away poor men's characters.'

'Will you tell me, Mr. Rosier, that you have never killed game belonging to some gentlemen even now in this court?'

'I won't tell you, sir, whether I have not, because you haven't any right to ask such questions; but I'll answer that to any real gentleman in this court, or out of it, that puts it in a civil way.'

'So you pretend to swear, Mr. Rosier, that on this dark night, when a man could scarcely see his hand before his face, you saw Lord Vancourt fire at Mr. Beauchamp, you being ten yards distant from him?'

'I didn't say ten yards, sir, as I wasn't five from the young squire at the time, and if 'twere as dark again I could have seen the flash in the pan, and watch side it come from.'

'And how did you know Lord Vancourt so well, Mr. Rosier, as to distinguish him on this dark night from other men?'

'Because I had seen him several times, sir, afore, and he wasn't a man to be mistaken for another.'

'Oh, very handsome, I suppose?'

'No, sir, he wasn't that to my mind; but a tall, long-legged chap, with a large hook nose, and rat's eyes, with shaggy eyebrows, and black whiskers.'

'And pray, Mr. Mark, what was the reward you got from Mr. Beauchamp for preventing this runaway match?'

'Well, sir, I bant quite so sharp a hand as a lawyer to pocket the fee afore-hand, and I hadn't got nothing yet but this scar in the face and a dig in the back from that cowardly valet; and as to Miss Blanche running away with this long-legged lord, she'd ha' served him in the same fashion, if he hadn't held her arm, as the pretty chambermaid at the King's Head served you last night when you took liberties with her, by giving him a good smack in his face.'

Roars of laughter followed, which for some few minutes it was impossible to suppress, and even the grave features of the judge relaxed into a smile.

'I appeal to you lordship,' cried the excited Wrangler, 'to commit this witness for contempt of court!'

'Contempt of counsel, you ought to have said, Mr. Sergeant Wrangler,' replied the judge; 'but if gentlemen of the bar will play with edged tools, they must take the consequences; in such cases I never interfere.'

'Very well, my lord, then I shall sit down.'

The last witness called for the prosecution was the wounded man John Thomson, who underwent a long cross-examination, without his evidence being in the least shaken. His story was too simple and truthful to be contravened. He and his two accomplices received ten pounds each from Lord Vancourt's valet, called Francois le Blanc, to assist his lordship in carrying off Miss Douglas, and were to receive ten pounds more from the head keeper the next morning, when the job was done, who engaged they should not lose their situations, if found out. He did not know whether Lord Mervyn was privy to the plot or not, and would only say what he knew to be true.

No witness being called for the defence, as Sergeant Wrangler had not one he could trust in cross-examination, the judge then addressed the jury, telling them the case was so exceedingly clear against the prisoners, that it was unnecessary for him to detain them with any remarks upon the evidence; and immediately after, the foreman, rising, said they had not a moment's hesitation in returning a verdict of guilty against both prisoners, which was received with loud shouts and waving of ladies' handkerchiefs, and one cheer more from the farmers who thronged the court. When silence was restored, the judge, after a severe lecture to the prisoner on the enormity of the offence, then had him committed to the

tor's evidence, I now submit it to your lordship's perusal.'

The judge having read it carefully through, returned it to Lord Malcolm, saying, 'I fully appreciate your honorable motives, Lord Malcolm, in withholding this incontestable proof of the origin of this disgraceful conspiracy, which fully confirms all Thomas Carter has asserted.'

'May I hope, then, my lord, you will remit a portion of the punishment awarded to the prisoners at the bar, who have both young families depending upon them? and considering that they have already been imprisoned some time, I think six months each will answer the ends of justice.'

'The offence of which they have been convicted is a very serious one, Lord Malcolm, but at your intercession the term shall be abridged.'

The two prisoners fell on their knees, expressing their contrition and gratitude to Lord Malcolm for his kindness, who, after thanking the judge, left the court.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The hunting season had now drawn to its close, the last appointment made for Bampton House, and invitations sent by the old squire to all the neighboring families for a grand dinner party, to conclude with a ball in the evening on the day when the hounds met on the lawn for the last day's hunting. With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, whose conduct in reference to their ward since the trial had been severely commented upon, as highly reprehensible, if nothing worse, no excuses were received from any other family, so that the long dining-table was crowded with guests, a second table being laid out for the juniors, at which Fred Beauchamp presided, as many more arrived than were expected; in fact, the hospitality of the old squire was so unbounded, and his dinner parties so agreeable and devoid of formality, that the heads of families did not scruple to take any friends who might be staying with them at the time.

Constance, supported on one hand by Lord Malcolm, and Sir Lionel on the other, did the honors with her accustomed grace, faced by the old squire, who divided his attentions between Lady Markham and Mrs. Compton. Will Beauchamp sat between Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, the latter having Captain Markham on her right hand; Gwynne, Conyers, Tyler, Coventry, and others ranging themselves in order or out of order, without regard to priority or ceremony, with the partners they had selected. Selina, who always felt more at home with the old squire than in her own house, kept the middle of the table in an uproar by her quaint and witty sayings, which no frowns from Lady Markham could suppress.

'Ah! she remarked to Conyers, 'mamma may shake her head at me till she shakes it off, Bob, but I am on the right side of the fence to-night, with the old squire to back me up. But who on earth is that fright of a woman opposite, with a face like a cook?'

'Hush! Selina; that is Mrs. Winterbottom, the wife of that little round-faced, red-nosed man, sitting next Mrs. Compton; a retired brewer, who has lately purchased a large estate lying between the Holt and the forest, so that the squire was obliged to do the civil thing, and invite him to Bampton, to save the foxes.'

'Goodness! what a name, Bob; she may feel very wintry below, but there is more than summer heat above, to judge by those peony-looking cheeks.'

Gwynne, who sat next the lady, seeing the sort of person he had to deal with, kept plying her with champagne every time it was handed round the table, until she exclaimed, 'Lorks, Sir Lucius, I feel quite swikey already.'

'Oh, never mind,' replied Gwynne, ready to burst with suppressed laughter; 'champagne goes for nothing, just puts people into spirits—that's all.'

'Heavens, what a woman!' exclaimed Selina, in fits of laughter; 'swikey already. Why, Bob, she will be roaring drunk before dinner is over, and under the table.'

'By Jove! Selina, if you run on in this fashion, I must belt, as I am nearly choked

for a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds (so report goes) will make her a very handsome girl.'

'Ay, ay, Bob, money is the magnifying glass, the most plain, disagreeable woman becomes a perfect houri in the eyes of some men, when bedecked with jewels and lacquered very with gold dust; but what would Will Beauchamp say to Miss Winterbottom, with her one hundred thousand pounds?'

'That she might remain Miss Winterbottom to the end of her life, for anything he would insinuate to the contrary, Selina; and Bob Conyer is pretty much of the same opinion.'

'Glad to hear you say so, Bob, for I began to think you might be caught by a golden look at last.'

'No, no, my dear girl; I shall not make a fool of myself in my old age by marrying a person with whom I could have no community of feelings or ideas, and who does not know a duck from a goose, except on the table, perhaps not there.'

'But, Bob, don't you think our funny friend opposite looks rather too much of a chicken about her gills?'

'What can you mean, Selina?'

'Too juvenile about her locks or head gear; don't you understand?—borrowed feathers.'

'Oh! I see, wears a wig—gad! it looks very like one; but, by Jupiter! the mucker's out,' exclaimed he, as one of the footmen, in reaching over Mrs. Winterbottom, to place a dish on the table, caught the button of his sleeve in her hair, dragging off her head-dress, and exposing her closely-cropped cranium to view.

'Drat the man!' cried Mrs. Winterbottom, aiming a blow at the astonished footman, which, taking effect on Gwynne's nose, nearly knocked him out of his chair.

'What's the fool staring at?' (as he stood for a moment perfectly aghast at the exposure he had occasioned, and then tried to repair the mischief by replacing the head-dress, the back part in front, thereby eliciting renewed laughter). 'Let it alone, I say, you fool.'

And, with a jerk or two on either side, the infuriated lady succeeded in adjusting her attire.

'Ah! miss,' she said, addressing Selina, 'you may laugh now, but the time will come when you will be glad enough to sail under false colors, if you don't already, with your pink and white cheeks.'

'If I do paint my face, Mrs. Summertop,' retorted Selina, 'it isn't of one color, like yours, red entire.'

'My name isn't Summertop, Miss Imperance, but Winterbottom.'

'Oh, indeed, ma'am; very aristocratic, euphonious name, no doubt, in the frozen regions of Lapland, whence, I conclude, your origin is derived; but the Fates defend me from being at Winterbottom—half hot, half cold—or a mermaid in petticoats.'

Gwynne, fearing some violent explosion between the now infuriated fair ones, addressed some observation to the excited dame near him, which checked further retorts; and good order once more prevailed, to the great delight of the more staid portion of the company, who began to feel very uncomfortable as to the issue of this combat of words between the two female belligerents.

Beauchamp whispered to Blanche—'I suspect Bob will have his hands over-full, should he prevail on Selina to become Mrs. Conyers—poor fellow! he will be ever in hot water, with her cutting speeches; the 'Taming of the Shrew' is nothing in comparison with the work he will have to perform in reducing Selina to anything like orderly conduct.'

'She is really very provoking sometimes,' replied Blanche; 'and says such extraordinary things, that strangers must think her a very eccentric person, and very ill-natured, but what would you do, William, with such a wife?'

'I should very soon do without her, Blanche, if by any fatality such a lot could be assigned me.'

'You would not feel jealous of her, William, would you?' she inquired, with an arch smile.

'No, my dear; I never could love her sufficiently for that feeling to arise.'

arrive, her attentions were required elsewhere. Miss Honoria Winterbottom, in addition to very pretty, intelligent features, was highly accomplished also, and presented so striking a contrast to her mamma, few could believe her to be descended from stock so plebeian; and both Mrs. Gordon and Blanche were much pleased with her unassuming manners, which, in a great measure, compensated for her mother's great deficiencies in those essentials.

As Beauchamp entered the ball-room, his eyes beamed with delight on beholding Blanche Douglas seated by the side of a young stranger, whom he believed was patronising on his account; and as he was advancing towards her, when Captain Markham arrested his progress for a moment.

'Beauchamp, my good fellow, just induce me to that girl, Miss Winter, will you? Oh! demmit, what a name! eh! ah! pronounceable; but, upon honor, she is a devilish fine girl, notwithstanding that she is a dragon of a mother; they say, lots of fun in the bargain.'

'Come on then, Markham.' And in a few seconds the life-guardman, having made his bow, was parading Miss Honoria round the room, in defiance of the sneers and jesting remarks of his sister, Selina.

On accepting his proffered arm, Beauchamp thanked Blanche for her kind attention to the nameless young lady.

'This I consider, dear girl, as a personal favor to my father and myself, at Selina's rude behavior, at dinner, to her mother.'

'Really, William, she is a well-educated and highly-accomplished girl; speaks French, Italian, and German fluently; and is very unpretending and unaffected.'

'I am delighted to find you are pleased with her, dear Blanche, and as they are to be neighbors, we must endeavor to keep our neighborly terms with the family, however objectionable in some points; which is the usual penalty attached to every master of hounds, and in some instances a very disagreeable one. We are obliged to take fish that come into our net, or within our province—good or coarse alike.'

'Well, William, and a very good thing too; or you might have become very proud and haughty, which I suspect you are naturally inclined to be, from that curl of your upper lip, which I have so often noticed you a boy, and I almost dread you will become a tyrant in your old age.'

'You have had, dear girl, a fair trial of my temper and disposition, and as the by and by will be the man; his natural inclinations, although disguised from the world, remain unaltered—restrained, but not subdued. No man is born without some failings; mine are as well known to you as myself; and although my best efforts are used to conceal them, they are rebellious subjects still, and will burst forth sometimes into open hostility; therefore, dear girl, pause before it is too late. Danby is, although hasty occasionally, perhaps a better temper than myself—not jealous nor captious, and will, no doubt, make an excellent husband. But in high life, where frequently the wife goes one way, and her husband the other, there is little opportunity for conjugal differences to arise. The Marchioness of Danby will have her own establishment of servants and carriages—by box at the opera—go where she likes, and do as she pleases, without consulting her husband's wishes; indeed, except with the chance of meeting at other people's tables or parties, man and wife in fashionable life seldom come in contact with each other, and a tale like this is a thing almost unknown.'

'How very delightful, William! what an interesting picture of domestic felicity! really, I think that sort of life would suit me exactly. What a pity you are not in the peerage! Lady Beauchamp would be such a pretty title.'

'Your jest, dear Blanche, will, in all human probability, be turned into a reality much sooner, perhaps, than you imagine.'

'What can you mean?' she inquired, with surprise.

'I may confide to you now, dear girl, a secret which has been confined to my own breast, and known only to one besides my own father, that he is the nearest relation of the Earl of Annandale, who is now in his eighty-ninth year, and heir to his title and