

THE
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXXV.

(CONTINUED.)

But having known Lord Danby quite as long, if not longer, than your lordship has, and coupling his late very distant behavior scarcely recognising me, except by a stiff, formal bow with the present exclusion from his mother's party, to whom you all (more recent acquaintances) are invited, I must be wilfully blind not to perceive the intended slight.

'In my opinion,' observed Conyers, 'will be acting perfectly right, and if I saw any man inclined to cut me, I would save the necessity of our acquaintance dying such a lingering death by cutting him dead at once. Some of these grandees condescend to be very sociable, and shake hands with us country fellows on our own ground, where we may help in their amusement of hunting, or serve them for electioneering purposes; but when they meet us in town, the fog, I suppose, prevents them distinguishing such insignificant Lilliputians, except through a magnifying glass, and then a very distant bow is the only sign of recognition.'

'But I heard Lord Danby invite you to this ball myself,' said Malcolm.

'Very true, my lord, and the same honor was conferred on Melville, Markham, and others, in my hearing. Beauchamp's exclusion, therefore, is more pointed; and as I am one of those old-fashioned fellows who act upon the love me, love my dog principle, and consider a slight to my best friend as an insult to myself, the conclusion to which I have come is very obvious—the duchess will not be incommoded by my presence to-night, and Lord Danby will be spared the trouble of raising his hat to me for the future.'

'By Jove! Conyers,' exclaimed Malcolm, 'you are as ticklish as Beauchamp.'

'If by ticklish, my lord, you mean sensitive to unprovoked insult, or contemptuous conduct towards myself or my friends, you have judged rightly of my character. Not for one moment will I submit to either; and as Beauchamp cannot go to Castleton House to-night, I certainly shall not.'

'Then, what do you propose doing?'
Oh, whilst you and the ladies are scanning the beauties masculine and feminine in high life, I will take Beauchamp to the green-room, behind the scenes, in Covent Garden, and have a look at the beauties in low life, and finish up with a lobster supper.'

This conversation having commenced after the dessert was placed on the table, Lady Malcolm now rose, leaving the gentlemen to finish their discussion, when Lord Malcolm, tiring to alter the two friends' determination, and beginning to lose his temper, proposed joining the ladies. Lady Malcolm had retired to dress; but Constance, taking Malcolm aside, began speaking to him in a low, earnest tone, stating her determination, after what had occurred, of not going to the ball.

'Pooh! nonsense, my dear,' exclaimed Malcolm; 'you must not adopt your brother's foolish crotchets; surely my wishes ought to be consulted now, as well as his, although I certainly shall ask Danby some explanation why he was not invited.'

'On my account,' said Beauchamp, who overheard these words, 'I must beg, Lord Malcolm, you will not even hint at an explanation, as I neither require, nor will I accept any Lord Danby and I understand each other quite well enough already; and now, my dear Constance, you must do violence to your own proper feelings, in taking your brother's part, by complying with my desire to accompany Lady Malcolm to the ball.'

'Indeed, William, I had much rather not go,' pleaded Constance; 'and Lady Malcolm has been kind enough to excuse me.'

'My dear girl,' replied Beauchamp, 'for Lady Malcolm's sake, who has, no doubt, accepted the invitation on your account and Blanche's, I must desire you will go, so

'Oh, pray, dear William, do not go with him to those horrid places he spoke of. Promise me not to go there.'

'If you will promise me to dance two quadrilles with any one partner to-night, I will give up going to the theatre, and sit with Aunt Gordon instead.'

'The promise is yours, although you know there was no occasion to ask it; and I thank you, my own dear William, for resigning your amusement to please me. I shall not forget your kindness,' saying which, she tripped out of the room.

Malcolm and Constance had both left, and Conyers being engaged in conversation with Mrs. Gordon, Blanche and Beauchamp had an uninterrupted tete-a-tete.

'Well, Beauchamp,' exclaimed Conyers, 'what does Blanche think of our intended visit to the green-room to-night? A little filip of that sort was not out of place, as she appeared to take it so coolly, going to Castleton House, without uttering a syllable, pro or con.'

'Poor child! what could she have said?' asked Mrs. Gordon, 'in her present situation? But I can tell you, William, that she does feel very acutely, and so do I, Lord Danby's behaviour to you, and you may rest assured she will resent it also.'

'I am glad to hear it,' replied Conyers, 'for I hate half measures with friends or lovers, and Malcolm has fallen fifty per cent. in my estimation, by trying to throw dust in Will Beauchamp's eyes.'

'Charles is very perverse sometimes,' added Mrs. Gordon; 'and he felt to-night his mother could not well decline going to the duchess's first ball; but we shall find him different to-morrow.'

'I hope so,' said Conyers, 'or he'll find me very different for the time to come, and so I shall tell him plainly enough. I don't like being told black is white; but the fact is, Beauchamp, you and I have outstayed our welcome; and our visits to Grosvenor Square have ceased to be agreeable.'

'Who told you so, Mr. Conyers?' asked Malcolm, having, unperceived, entered the room.

'My own common sense, Lord Malcolm, tells me that when an old, tried friend's conduct for acting consistently and uprightly is ridiculed and pooh-poohed, as your lordship has thought proper to do this evening, his presence can be no longer desirable.'

'I do not choose to be dictated to, Mr. Conyers, by you or any man, in the course I ought to pursue.'

'I have never ventured to dictate to your lordship since the time I took the liberty of giving you a few lessons in riding and other athletic exercises; and these, perhaps, are pooh-poohed now as antiquated precepts.'

'I shall never forget your many acts of kindness to me when a boy, Mr. Conyers, or those of late years,' replied Malcolm, considerably mollified.

'Very well, my lord; then if you will balance them against the attentions I have received from Lady Malcolm and yourself since my short stay in town, our account perhaps will stand nearly cancelled. And now, my lord, as you prefer new acquaintances to old faces, Beauchamp and myself propose returning home to-morrow.'

'Stay, Conyers,' as he was rising to leave the room, 'I cannot part thus with one who has been to me like an elder brother. What would you have me do?'

'Nothing, my lord. You know as well as myself what you ought to do; and if you have that respect and regard for Will Beauchamp and his sister which you profess, you know perfectly well what your behavior should be to any man who had dared to pass a premeditated slight upon your future brother-in-law; and now, Mrs. Gordon,' said Conyers, shaking her by the hand, 'I must wish you good-bye, and beg you to thank Lady Malcolm for all her kindness and hospitality,' with which he hastily left the room, exclaiming, 'Come, Beauchamp, I will wait two minutes for you in the hall.'

Beauchamp rose quickly, and, taking Aunt Gordon's hand, said—

'I shall call to-morrow at twelve to see Lady Malcolm, and wish Constance good-bye before I leave town.'

'And won't you wish me good-night?' asked Malcolm, as he was turning towards the door.

'Yes, Malcolm,' offering his hand, 'I do wish you a good night, and regret I have

might have given up one ball to oblige those friends who have so often obliged him. But dry your tears, as my sister has left her room; and I will see William early to-morrow, and prevent his leaving town.'

When the ladies descended to the drawing-room, Lord Malcolm, observing his aunt's grave looks, said they had resolved on going to the duchess's ball, chiefly to ascertain the truth of Beauchamp's surmises; and, if correct, they should leave with the hour. Mrs. Gordon taking no notice of this remark, Malcolm remarked, 'Does not this proposal please you, aunt?'

'It is of little consequence what pleases me, Charles.'

'Then you think, aunt, I suppose, we ought not to go at all?'

'There was no reply, as at this moment the carriage was announced; but Malcolm, on taking his mother's arm, said—

'We shall be home in an hour, aunt, if you will sit up till we return.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

On their arrival at Castleton House, Lords Ayrshire and Danby were waiting near the door of the reception-room, and asked Blanche for the honor of her hand. Lord Ayrshire, being the first, was not refused.

'May I plead for the second, then, Miss Douglas?' inquired Lord Danby.

'I cannot engage myself for more than one dance,' was the reply, 'as Lady Malcolm intends remaining a very short time,' with which she and Constance passed on to be presented to the Duchess, Lord Ayrshire following, who, after the ceremony of introduction, offered his arm to Blanche. Lord Danby, directly afterwards meeting Malcolm, remarked on Miss Douglas's cool reception of him, and asked if he knew the cause.

'Why, to tell you the truth, Danby, Miss Beauchamp feels hurt at her brother not being invited to your party; and these two girls, having been brought up together as sisters, share in each other's feelings and fancies; and an indignity offered to one is felt by the other.'

'Oh, indeed, Malcolm, it was quite an oversight of my own in not sending Mr. Beauchamp a card for the occasion; but, from his almost living in Grosvenor Square, I thought he would consider himself included in the invitation to your family.'

'Would you have presented yourself at any house, where you were almost a stranger to the heads of the family, on such an implied invitation?'

'Why, I scarcely know, Malcolm.'

'Then I can tell you that Beauchamp is quite as proud as yourself; and having overheard you ask Conyers and Melville, he, of course, concluded he was purposely excluded.'

'Oh, quite an oversight, Malcolm! I am sorry he should take offence; but our rooms are not spacious enough to contain all our country acquaintances.'

'Depend upon it, my lord,' replied Malcolm, nettled by this confirmation of Beauchamp's well-grounded deductions, 'they will never be large enough to contain Will Beauchamp; with which he turned away; and seeking Blanche, who was dancing, whispered, 'Beauchamp is right. We shall leave as soon as the carriage arrives; so sit with my mother after this quadrille, and I will join you directly it is announced.'

Lord Danby muttered to himself, 'Could that Beauchamp! he is ever in the way somewhere, and I suspect it is all true about his engagement to Miss Douglas; but I will find it out; and hovering near her, he again renewed his suit for the next dance, which was again declined. 'How have I been so unfortunate as to incur your displeasure, Miss Douglas? Is it because I omitted to invite Mr. Beauchamp to the ball, which I fear is the case from Mrs. Lord Malcolm has been telling me'

'I have informed you, my lord, that Lady Malcolm has ordered the carriage to be sent, and my cousin begged me to remain with my mother until it arrives, and not to accept another partner.'

'And I can answer,' replied Lord Ayrshire, 'that she has refused a second time, and others since we have been en-

openly, this change in your conduct; the result of which will be the rupture of that friendship which I had hoped and prayed might exist between you to the end of your lives.'

'Indeed, aunt, I should be grieved to think, as you do, that anything I have said or done could destroy our regard for each other!'

'Then, Charles, be more cautious for the future, and bear in mind that true friendship admits of no assumed superiority of one person over another; you have assumed that superiority; and observe, it is, as I say, assumed, since in not one single particular are you superior to him you condescend to call your friend; no, not even in—'

'In what?' inquired Lord Malcolm, as his aunt stopped short.

'I was going to reveal what, perhaps, I ought not to have mentioned; but as this is the last time I shall ever address you on this subject, I will trust to your honor not to disclose the secret without my permission.'

'It shall be strictly observed, aunt; so, pray, proceed!'

'Then, William will become, on the death of an old relative, now near ninety, Lord Beauchamp; and his worthy father, Earl of Annandale.'

'What!' exclaimed Malcolm, in astonishment; 'are you serious, Aunt Gordon?'

'I was never more so, Charles.'

'Then why has he never confided this to me?'

'Because he has seen lately that you rejected his confidence.'

Malcolm paced up and down the room in violent agitation, exclaiming, 'What a fool! what a madman I have been!'

'Pray, Charles,' said Constance, placing her hand on his arm, 'pray, do not agitate yourself thus; all will be explained, I hope, to-morrow.'

'Yes, my dear girl, indeed it shall; for I feel now how deeply I have wronged your brother, or he had never withheld his confidence from me; and you, Constance, you have known this secret?'

'Yes, Charles, on the condition I did not divulge it even to you.'

'And Blanche, too?'

'Of course, Charles.'

'To three women has Beauchamp, then, entrusted its keeping, but not to me!'

'And it has ceased, therefore,' rejoined Mrs. Gordon, 'to be a wonder, that a woman can keep a secret!'

'Yet I have kept one secret inviolably!' added Malcolm.

'Yes, Charles, you have; although poor Blanche has often trembled when its disclosure appeared hovering on your lips.'

'My folly and thoughtlessness have been sufficiently punished now, dear aunt, to forbid a repetition of that badinage which has caused terror to my cousin, and misery of heart to my friend. Will you forgive me, dear Blanche, for the anxiety I have so thoughtlessly caused you?'

'Indeed I do, dear Charles,' taking his proffered hand, 'with all my heart.'

'Thank you, my dear girl; it shall never be repeated; and can you forgive me also my unjust, unpardonable conduct to that noble-minded, generous fellow, who, of all men I have ever yet known, is alone deserving of your love?'

'Willingly, most willingly, dear Charles, do I forgive all that needs forgiveness from me!'

'And now, dear Aunt Gordon, I thank you most heartily for removing the veil from my eyes, and showing me the many faults I possess.'

'Not many, Charles, I am happy to say; only learn henceforth to respect the feelings and opinions of others, if you wish them to respect yours.'

'Let my future conduct prove the deep contrition I feel for the injustice I have done my friends; and now, aunt,' ringing the bell, 'I will order up some wine and water for these dear girls, who have been worried enough to-night, and then we will all retire to rest.'

The next day Beauchamp kept his appointment with Mrs. Gordon, and arriving in Grosvenor Square about twelve o'clock, he was ushered into the drawing-room, where Lady Malcolm was sitting with her son, Mrs. Gordon, and the two girls. After shaking hands with all, he approached Lady Malcolm

'Most willingly, Malcolm.' He then left the room.

'Can I not prevail on you to prolong your stay, Beauchamp?' inquired Lady Malcolm; 'must I also plead in vain?'

'Do not distress me, dear Lady Malcolm, by asking me to do that which every feeling of my heart prompts me to do; but, indeed, it is best for us all that I should now leave you, although it, at the end of a fortnight, you wish to recall me, your summons shall be obeyed.'

A double knock at the door being heard, Beauchamp rose quickly, and wished Lady Malcolm good-bye.

'Come with me into the next room for a few minutes,' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; 'the girls and myself must trouble you with a few commissions. You are acting quite right,' continued Mrs. Gordon, when the door was closed; 'and much as we shall lament your absence, I approve your resolution to go, as it is quite necessary to convince Charles that your feelings are not to be outraged with impunity, although I believe his conduct has only proceeded from thoughtless waywardness. And now, my dear boy, not to prolong the misery of parting, God bless you, good-bye; write to me to-morrow, and let me know how your father is, and ride over to the Priory to see how things are going on. Blanche and I are tired of London, and shall soon return; then folding him in her arms, Mrs. Gordon rushed from the room.'

It was some little time before Beauchamp could tear himself away from Blanche, whose tears and sobs choked all utterance.

'My own, dear, precious girl, do not give way thus,' he murmured, pressing her to his heart; 'on my word of honor, I promise you to return any day you wish, if only for a few hours, to see you and Constance. Your summons shall be obeyed without an hour's delay; so if you require my presence, promise to write me without fail.'

'I will promise to do so, my own, dearly-loved William.'

'Now, then, dear girl, farewell; and with another fervent embrace bestowed on her and Constance, Beauchamp was gone. Lord Malcolm used every entreaty in vain to divert his friend from his purpose.

'It must be so now, Malcolm,' was his reply; 'but I have promised your mother to return at the end of a fortnight, if she sends me an invitation; but really now I must spend a few days with my father, who has been so long solitary in the country; so good-bye, my dear Malcolm, and take care of those two warm-hearted, affectionate girls, for my sake. They have had too much gaiety lately; and if you will oblige me, do not let them go to more than two or three parties in the week—indeed, they cannot stand this unceasing round of dissipation. Am I asking too great a favor, or will it offend Lady Malcolm, to decline some invitations for them on my account?'

'My dear fellow, the three parties a week shall be strictly attended to,' replied Lord Malcolm, 'if I offend all London. The three parties a week shall not be exceeded—there is my hand upon it.'

'Many thanks, Malcolm, for your promise, and I hope you will now walk with me to the stables, as I purpose riding home with Conyers, who has, I fear, been kept waiting there a long time.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

After having made up his difference with Conyers, and seen the two friends in their saddles, Malcolm returned to Grosvenor Square, and found his mother alone, Mrs. Gordon having taken the two girls for a quiet drive in the country.

'Beauchamp, my dear mother, has commissioned me to entrust two secrets to your keeping—one being considered of too little moment for any woman to preserve. The first is, that he is heir presumptive to an earldom—the other, that he is in love with Blanche, and she with him.'

'The latter, Charles, I have long suspected; but the former I am surprised to hear, although well aware that the Beauchamps are of a very old and high family.'

After a full explanation on these points, Malcolm added, 'Now, my dear mother,