

A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

(Continued.)

Maggie and her three sisters are out, as a matter of course, as is also Captain Falconer, looking brave and handsome in his pink coat and snowy leathers. Geraldine ought to have been quite happy, but she isn't, although mounted on her show horse, Galopard. Under Baines' judicious stable treatment he has improved immensely in the last week, and appears full of life. Too full of it, indeed, for his rider, who is desperately afraid of him. He has already given one or two light-hearted bucks, and she is in mortal fear of what may happen next, imagining every possible catastrophe, yet trying heroically to keep up a conversation with the Honorable Keith, and to seem at her ease. It requires an immense amount of courage to conceal one's cowardice, and this was precisely what the poor girl was endeavoring to do. When you know no fear, it is little credit to be brave, but great praise is due to those who, out hunting, can manage to hide their anxiety, and who wear a bold front, whilst all the time their hearts are sinking and their pulses quivering.

As Galopard canters gaily along, quickening his stride, and snatching resolutely at his bit, Geraldine is overcome by a horrible suspicion, soon reduced to a certainty, that she cannot hold him. He pulls a great deal more than Paragon, and jumps about in quite a detestable fashion. But as yet she is ashamed to confess her nervousness, and valiantly tries to screen it from her companion. She derives some consolation too, from the admiring glances cast at the horse, a portion of which, she is distinctly aware, belongs to herself. At the meet, she had been very much gratified by observing a young man look Galopard over from top to toe, approach, as if about to address her, then turn away, apparently too shy to introduce himself. He was a complete stranger, and she would not have been a bit angry if he had spoken, being evidently a gentleman. At the same time it was quite clear she had made an impression which was very flattering, if only her arms did not ache so! Fortunately they got a rest at the Fishpond.

The others, it is true, soon furnished a fox, but the poor creature was so surrounded, whenever he attempted to break covert, that nearly an hour elapsed before he was finally persuaded of two evils to choose the lesser. Those on foot set up a ringing cheer, as they obtained a full view of terrified Pug, stealing swiftly across the Park, in an attempt to gain some laurel spinneys at the further end of it. Hounds, long baulked of their prey, dashed out close at his brush, and made the whole air vibrate with the mad music of their tongues. Order went to the winds, and everyone now joined indiscriminately in the pursuit. For about five minutes there was sharp galloping, as the fox, nerved at last to effort, raced gallantly on, gliding over the short grass at astonishing speed, with the bristling pack close at his heels. It was an exciting moment, and no doubt the yelling and hooting, the hubbub and confusion which greeted Reynard's appearance, caused him to lose his head. At any rate, he did not appear to observe the fact that the spinneys were formidably guarded by a row of stable helpers and female servants, who had turned out to see the fun, and who, on his approach, greeted him with a series of frantic gesticulations, accompanied by discordant cries. His retreat was cut off, escape became impossible, when so mercilessly hunted by foes human as well as canine. With the venom of Death upon him, this stay-at-home fox turned sharp back into the very jaws of the hounds, and made his glistening teeth meet in the throat of his foremost enemy. But alas! he had not one to contend with, but many, and they were too numerous for him. The air was filled with hideous sounds that deafened his ears—a sharp, short agony, and then he succumbed, rolling over and over on the grass, with a dozen hounds quarrelling about his remains, before they were yet cold, and tearing them to pieces.

And now the foot people came thronging around, viewing the final obsequies with coarse delight, whilst the horsemen, after having experienced much difficulty in bringing their eager horses to a standstill, murmured discontentedly among themselves:

"A regular Fishpond fox! Thank goodness! there's one less of them. Those beggars get so many wild duck and fat moorhens that they can't run a yard. Let us hope now the farce is over that we may have a good afternoon to make up for the morning."

If the great bulk of the field were disappointed at not getting a run, Geraldine, on the contrary, was truly thankful. The little scurry across the Park, short as it had been, confirmed her doubts of not being able to hold Galopard. He had taken the bit between his teeth, and raced after the hounds in a strong, determined fashion, infinitely alarming. She lost all control over him. He tore under the trees, and her best Heath hat was battered out of every semblance of shape, and the only wonder was that her head did not follow suit. In fact she was positively in fear of her life, and experienced the most awful sensations, during those few brief moments—sensations full of exquisite terror.

She was not a strong girl, either physically, or mentally and when Galopard pulled up short in the midst of the hounds, having trampled on one and let fly at another, she was trembling from head to foot.

Curiously enough, in an emergency she never dreamt of applying to "Rusher and Crusher," although they were nearer her own age, but invariably sought Maggie.

It was an immense relief to her, on looking round, to see her younger sister coming cantering leisurely up; for Maggie was much too experienced a hand to take anything out of her horse over a Fishpond fox, knowing that they rarely, if ever, left the Park. On the opening day of the season, the "Ripper" seldom showed much sport until the afternoon.

"Well, Geraldine," she said cheerfully, "How are you getting on? Do you like your new horse?"

"Hush, Maggie!" answered the beauty, looking cautiously round. "I'm not getting on at all, and I don't like him one bit."

"Indeed, how's that?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! I never felt so miserable in my life."

"Why, what's the matter, Geraldine? You're all of a shake."

"And well I may be. I can't hold the brute. He has pulled my arms off, and nearly dashed me to pieces against the trees. Three times I thought I was killed. His mouth is just like iron."

Maggie looked at the bit.

"You have got a very light bridle on," she said, "and only a leather curb. Perhaps that has something to do with it."

"If he had a ton of lead in his mouth, I don't believe it would make any difference," rejoined Geraldine, with the tears springing to her eyes. "Every muscle in my body is quivering. The beast makes me feel quite ill."

"I expect he's fresh. He has done no work since he left Foxington. Very likely he'll settle down bye-and-bye."

"I wish to goodness I had never bought him, Maggie. I was a perfect fool to be so smitten with his looks."

"You were in rather too much of a hurry, certainly, but it's too late to wish that now, and we must make the best of our bargain."

She generously said "we," though she had been no party to Galopard's purchase, in order to soothe Geraldine's feelings. It was no use telling her she had been foolish now that she was beginning to find it out for herself.

"Maggie," whispered the other solemnly. "I don't mind confessing the truth to you, because I know you won't laugh at me. I can't go on hunting this horse. I'm frightened even to ride him home."

And the poor thing looked it. Her face had grown quite pale, and her blue eyes wore a startled expression, and all her pretty air of conceit and self-satisfaction had vanished. Maggie's compassion, which never required a very serious appeal, was fully aroused.

"Don't distress yourself, dear," she said, more like a mother speaking to a nervous child than a younger sister addressing an elder. "Galopard wants work, and he is evidently a little above himself. I'll get on him, and you shall ride The Fizzer instead. He was out cub-hunting on Saturday, and is quite quiet and well-behaved. You need not jump him unless you like, and he does not pull an ounce."

"Oh! but Maggie, what about your day's hunting? I shall spoil it."

"Not you. To be frank, I always doubted the wisdom of your riding Galopard before he had been properly tried, only I did not like to say anything, as I knew your heart was set on having him out to-day. But never fear, he'll soon quiet down."

"If he were as quiet as a sheep dog nothing would ever induce me to get on his back again," said Geraldine, whose fears had quite overcome every vestige of pride.

"Nonsense; you must not talk like that. You wait till you see him after he's had a good gallop."

And so saying Maggie jumped from her horse and held his head, whilst their small attendant, who for once turned up when wanted, assisted Geraldine to the ground.

"The fact is," said Maggie, "old Paragon has spoilt you for riding a strange horse. You and he have got so used to one another. But I'll give Galopard a good trial to-day, and find out whether he is fit for you to hunt or not. If he isn't, we must part with him as best we can, and one comfort is, you are not likely to lose much money, since he was a very cheap purchase, especially if I can find nothing more the matter with him than a hard mouth." For Maggie still had her suspicions, being convinced there must be a screw loose for so handsome an animal to have found his way into the sporting tailor's stables. Horses worth two hundred guineas are not to be bought for fifty-five unless there is something he matter.

"Thank you awfully," said Geraldine, as she settled herself comfortably on The Fizzer's broad back. "It really is very kind of you, Maggie, to give me your horse, and if I can do you a good turn any time to make up for it, I will."

There was something so unselfish, so solid and dependable about this little sister of hers, that for once Geraldine felt really grateful, and forgot to think herself the superior. She allowed that, in spite of her looks, Maggie had two great points in her favor.

She never lost her temper or her presence of mind. You could always rely upon her when a difficulty arose, and on such occasions she did not collapse at the critical moment, like so many of her sex.

So the slight, small, eighteen-year-old girl, with the cool head and the dauntless nerve, mounted the great strapping thoroughbred as confidently as if he had been a lamb, and betrayed no symptom of fear. Galopard was quivering with excitement. His proud nostrils showed their crimson linings, and every vein on his swelling neck and tapering head stood out like silken ropes.

Her first act was to take up the reins gently, and speak to him in a soothing voice. Directly he began to walk she knew him to be a keen, bold resolute horse. His springy gait told of a willing spirit, and if only she could succeed in holding him, she felt tolerably certain all would be well.

As for his jumping, it would not take her long to find out that. A couple of Flatshire hedges would soon settle that question. But she felt sure his heart was in the right place, and, for her own part, infinitely preferred a hunter who would not be denied at his fences to one whose courage was open to suspicion.

As she playfully remarked, "it was bad enough to have to make up your own mind, without your horse's, whilst the smallest divergence of opinion on either side astonishingly reduced the common stock of valor."

Ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, now elapsed, during which Maggie kept Galopard gently moving up and down. He was very gay, but she