

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER XI.

CORMAC'S TOWN.

(Continued.)

To Blanche Douglas this lady took a fancy, at first sight, reserving her opinion of Mrs. Lushington for future consideration, but feeling her impulsive Irish heart warm to Satanelle's rich low voice, and the saddened smile that came so rarely, but possessed so strange a charm.

"Mrs. Lushington, Miss Douglas, my daughters.

The introduction was soon over, the tea poured out, and some half-dozen ladies established round the fire to engage in that small talk which never seems to fail them, and for which the duller sex find smoking so poor a substitute.

It appeared there was a large party staying at the castle. Not that the house was full, nor indeed could it be, since only one hall and but one furnished, but there were county neighbors, who came long distances; soldiers, both horse and foot; a "Jackeen" or two, sporting friends of Mr. Macormac; a judicial dignitary, a Roman Catholic bishop, and a cluster of London dandies.

Mrs. Lushington's eyes sparkled, like those of a sportsman who proceeds to beat a turnip field into which the adjoining stubbles have been emptied of their coveys.

"How gay you are, Lady Mary," said she, "on this side of the Channel! I am sure you have much more fun in Ireland than we have in London."

"I think we have," answered her ladyship. "Though my experience of London was only six weeks in my father's time. I liked Paris better, when Macormac took me there, before Louisa was born. But Punchestown, week, Mrs. Lushington, ye'll find Dublin as good as both."

"Sure! I'd like to go to Paris next winter, mamma," exclaimed the second girl, with a smile that lit up eyes and face into sparkling beauty. "Just you and me and Pape, and let the family stay here in the castle, to keep it warm."

"And have your hunting, Norah," replied her mother. "Indeed, then, I wonder to hear you!"

"Are you fond of hunting?" asked Miss Douglas, edging her chair nearer this kindred pursuit.

"It's the only thing worth living for," answered Miss Norah decidedly. "Dancing's not bad, with a real good partner, if he'll hold you up without swing you at the turns; but, see now, when you're riding your own favorite horse, and him leading the hunt, that's what I call the greatest happiness on earth."

Mrs. Lushington stared.

"Ye're a wild girl, Norah!" said Lady Mary, shaking her handsome head. "But, indeed, it's mostly papa's fault. We've something of the savage left in us still, Miss Douglas, and even these children of mine here can't do without their hunt."

"I can feel for them," answered Satanelle earnestly. "It's the one thing I care for myself. The one thing," she added bitterly, "that doesn't disappoint you and make you hate everything else when it's over!"

"You're too young to speak like that," replied the elder lady kindly. "Too young, and too nice-looking, if you'll excuse me for saying it."

"I don't feel young," replied Miss Douglas simply, "but I am glad you think me nice."

If Lady Mary liked her guest before, she could have hugged her now.

"Ye're very pretty, my dear," she whispered, "and I make no doubt ye're as good as ye're good-looking. But that's no reason why ye should live upon air. The gentlemen are still in the dining-room. It's seldom they come out of that before eleven o'clock; but I've ordered some dinner for ye in the library, and it will be laid by the time ye get your bonnets off. Sure it's good of ye both to come so far, and I'm glad to see ye, that's the truth!"

The visitors, however, persistently declined dinner at half-past ten, p. m., petitioning earnestly that they might be allowed to go to bed, a request in which they were perfectly sincere; for Blanche Douglas was really tired, while Mrs. Lushington had no id of appearing before the claret-drinkers at a disadvantage.

To-morrow she would come down to breakfast rested, fresh, radiant, armed at all points, and confident of victory.

Lady Mary herself conducted them to their chambers, peeping into the dining-room on her way back, to hear about the good run that had kept her husband out so late, and

damp where she had hung her lady's dresses in a row like Bluebeard's wives. The morning looked dull, rain beat against the windows, the clouds were spongy and charged with wet. It was not enlivening to have one's hair brushed by an attendant vexed with a swelled face that constantly attracted her own attention in her ladies' looking-glass.

Miss Douglas, I fear, had no more toleration than other mistresses for shortcomings in an inferior. It she passed these over it was less from the forbearance of good-humor than contempt. The toilette progressed slowly, but was completed at last, and even the maid pronounced it very good. Masses of black hair coiled in thick, shining plaits, plain gold earrings, a broad velvet band tight round the neck, supporting a locket like a warning-pan, a cream-colored dress, trimmed with black braid, pulled in here, puffed out there, and looped up over a stuff petticoat of neutral tint, the whole fabric supported on such a pair of Balmoral boots as Cinderella must have worn when she went out walking, formed a sufficiently fascinating picture. Catching sight of her own handsome figure in a full-length glass, her spirits rose, and Miss Douglas began to think better of her Irish expedition, persuading herself that she had crossed the Channel only to accompany her friend, and not because Daisy was going to ride at Punchestown.

She would have liked to see her, nevertheless, she thought, now in her best looks, before she went down to breakfast, and was actually standing, lost in thought, with her hand on the door, when it was opened from without, and Mrs. Lushington entered, likewise in gorgeous apparel; fresh, smiling, beautiful in the gifts of nature as from the resources of art; to use the words of a "jackeen" who described her later in the day, "glittering in paint and varnish, like a new four-in-hand coach!"

"Who do you think is here, dear?" was her morning salutation; "of all people in the world, under this very roof? Now guess!"

"Prester John? The Archbishop of Canterbury? The great Panjaudrum? How should I know?"

"I don't believe you do know. And I don't believe he knows. It will be rather good fun to see you meet."

"Who is it, dear?" (Impatiently.)

"Why, St. Josephs. He came yesterday morning."

Blanche's face fell.

"How very provoking!" she muttered; adding, in a louder voice, and with rather a forced laugh, "That man seems to be my fate! Let's go down to breakfast, dear, and get it over!"

CHAPTER XII.

ONE TOO MANY.

At breakfast, for an old soldier, the General showed considerable want of military skill. Miss Douglas, indeed, assumed an admirable position of defence, flanked by Norah Macormac on one side, and the corner of the table on the other; but her admirer, posting himself exactly opposite, never took his eyes off her face, handed her everything he could reach, and made himself foolishly conspicuous in paying her those attentions to which ladies do not object so much as they profess. Like many other players, he lost his head when risking a large stake.

Had he cared less, he would have remembered that wisest of all maxims in dealing with others—"It faut se faire valoir," and she might have appreciated his good qualities all the more, to mark the esteem in which he was held by her own sex. The General could fix a woman's attention, could even excite her interest, when he chose; and many of these laughing dames would have asked no better cavalier for the approaching races than this handsome, war-worn veteran, who "made such a fool of himself about that tall girl with black hair."

Breakfast in a country house is usually a protracted and elastic meal. The "jackeens," whose habits were tolerably active, came down in good time, but the London young gentleman dropped in, one later than another, gorgeously apparelled, cool, composed, hungry, obviously proud of being up and dressed at eleven o'clock, a. m.

Miss Norah whispered to Satanelle that "she didn't like dandies, and dandies didn't like her."

Looking in the girl's bright, handsome face, the latter proposition seemed to Miss Douglas wholly untenable.

"What sort of people do you like, dear?" said she, in answer to the former.

"The army," replied Miss Norah, with great animation. "And the cavalry, ye know—they're beautiful; but a man must have something besides a fine uniform to please me."

"What more can you want?" asked

"Is he an Irishman?" asked Miss Douglas, amused by her animated manner and perfect good faith.

"An Irishman!" exclaimed Norah. "Did ever ye hear of Walters for an Irishman's name? They call him Daisy that know him best, though mamma says I am never to mention him, only as Captain Walters."

The shot was quite unexpected, but Blanche knew the General's eye was on her, and she neither started nor winced. Sarcely even changed countenance, except that she turned a shade paler, and looked sternly in her admirer's face while he carried on the conversation.

"Not Captain Walters yet, Miss Macormac," said the old soldier stiffly. "First for a troop though, and one going immediately. I know him very well, but never heard so flattering an account of him before. What a thing it is to have a charming young lady for a partisan! We think him a good-humored rattle enough, and he can ride, to do him justice, but surely—ch?—there's not much in him. Miss Douglas here sees him often—than I do, what does she say?"

"A pleasant companion, quite as clever as other people, and a right good fellow!" burst out Blanche, her dark eyes flashing defiance. "That's what she says, General! And what's more, she always stands up for her friends, and hates people who abuse them!"

The General, though he opened his mouth, was stricken dumb. Norah Macormac clapped her hands, and Mrs. Lushington, looking calmly down the table, afforded the discomfited soldier a sweet and reassuring smile.

Lady Mary, reviewing her guests from behind an enormous tea-urn, judged the moment had arrived for a general move, and rose accordingly. As, late in the autumn, coveys get up all over the ground when you flush a single bird, so the whole party followed her example, and made for the door, which was opened by St. Josephs, who sought in vain a responsive glance from Miss Douglas while she passed out, with her head up, and a sure sign she was offended, more swung than usual in the skirts of her dress. He consoled himself by resolving that, if the weather cleared, he would ask her to take a walk, and so make friends before luncheon.

Gleams of sunshine sucking up a mist that hung about the hills over the park, disclosing like islands on a lake, clumps of trees, and patches of verdure, in the valley below, glittering on the surface of a wide and shallow river that circled and broke, over its rocky bed, in ripples of molten gold, would have seemed favorable to his project, but that the fine weather which might enable him to walk abroad with his lady-love, was welcomed by his host for the promotion of a hundred schemes of amusement to while away a non-hunting day after the shooting season had closed.

"It's fairing fast enough," exclaimed the cheerful old man. "We call that a bright sky in Ireland, and why not? Anyhow it's a great light to shoot a match at the pigeons; and if ye'd like to wet a line in the Dabbie there, I'll engage ye'll raise a ten-pound fish before ye'd say 'Paddy Snap.'"

"I'll go bail ye will!" assented a Mr. Murphy, called by his familiars, "Mick," who made a point of agreeing with his host. "I seen them yesterday afternoon as thick as payse, an' me riding by without so much as a lash-whip in me hand."

Two of the party, confirmed anglers, proposed to start forthwith.

"There's a colt by Lord George I'd like ye to look at, General," continued Macormac, who would have each amuse himself in his own way. "We're training him for the hunt next season, and a finer leaper wasn't bred in Kildare. D'ye see that sunk fence now paring the flower garden from the demesne? It's not two years he was when he broke loose from the paddock, and dashed out over it like a wild deer. There's five-and-twenty feet, bank and ditch, ye can measure it for yourself?"

"Thirty! if there's wan!" assented Mr. Murphy. "An' him flyin' over it in his stride, an' niver laid an iron to the sod."

The General, however, declined an inspection of this promising animal, on the plea that he was not much of a walker, and had letters to write.

"The post's gone out this hour and more," said his host. "But ye'd like to ride now. Of course ye would! See, Mick! Sullivan's harriers will be at the kennel as usual. Wait till I tell ye. Why, wouldn't the boys get a fallow deer off the old park, and we'll raise a hunt for ye in less than an hour?"

"I'll engage they can be laid on in twenty minutes from this time," declared Mick. "Say the word, an' I'll run round to the stable, and bid Larry saddle up every beast that can stand."

"The General might ride Whiteboy," said his host, pondering, "and Norah's got her own horse, and I'll try young Orville, and ye shall take the colt yerself, Mick. We'll get a hunt, anyways!"

"Why wouldn't ye?" said he encouragingly. "An' finer pleasure gardens ye'll not see in Ireland than Macormac's. That's for cucumbers, anyhow! An' the ladies will be proud to take a turn with ye, one and all. Devil thank them, then, when they get a convoy to their likin'!"

So the General was allowed to follow his own devices, while his host arranged divers amusements for the other guests according to programme, with the exception of the deer hunt. By the time a fallow buck was secured the hounds had been fed, and, under any circumstances, Larry, the groom, reported so many lame horses in the stable, it would have been impossible to mount one-half of the party in a style befitting the occasion.

St. Josephs walked exultingly into the drawing-room, where he discovered Lady Mary alone, stitching a flannel petticoat for an old woman at the lodge. She thought he wanted the 'Times newspaper, and pointed to it on a writing table.

"Deserted, Lady Mary?" said this crafty hunter of dames, "even by your nearest and dearest. Left, like a good fairy, doing a work of benevolence in solitude."

"Is it the—the skirt you mean?" replied her ladyship, holding up the garm in question without the slightest diffidence. "Sure, then, I'll get it hemmed and done with this afternoon. I'd have asked Norah to help me,—the child was always quick at her needle,—but she's off to show Miss Douglas the waterfall; those two by themselves. It's as much as they'll do to be back by luncheon; though my girl's a jewel of a walker, and the other's as straight as an arrow, and as graceful as a deer."

The General's letters became all at once of vital importance. Excusing himself with extreme politeness to Lady Mary, who kept working on at the petticoat, he hastened to the library, where he did not stay two minutes, but, gliding by a side door into the hall, got his hat, and emerged on the park, with a vague hope of finding some one who would direct him to the waterfall.

The two young ladies, meanwhile, were a good Irish mile from the castle, in an opposite direction. Norah, of course, knew a short cut through the woods, that added about a third to the distance. They walked a good pace, and exhilarated by the air, the scenery, and the sound of their own fresh young voices, skipped along the path, talking, laughing, even jeering each other, as though they had been friends from childhood.

Their conversation, as was natural, turned on the approaching races. To Norah Macormac, Punchestown constituted, perhaps, the chief gala of the year. For those two days, alas! so often rainy, she reserved her freshest gloves, her newest bonnet, her brightest glances and smiles. To the pleasure everybody experiences in witnessing the performances of a good horse, she added the feminine enjoyment of showing her own pretty self in all her native attractions, set off by dress. It was no wonder she should impart to her companion that she wouldn't give up the races even for a trip to Paris. She calculated their delights as equal to a whole month's hunting, and at least twenty balls.

Miss Douglas, too, anticipated no little excitement from the same source. Her trip across the Channel, with its concomitant discipline, a new country, wild scenery, the good humor and cordiality that surrounded her, above all, the prospect of seeing Daisy again, had raised her spirits far above their usual pitch. Her cheek glowed, her eye sparkled, her tongue ran on. She could hardly believe herself the same reserved and haughty dame who was wont to ride from Prince's Gate to Hyde Park Corner, and find nothing worthy to cost her a sigh, or win from her a smile.

"Everybody in Ireland goes there, ab sentees and all," said laughing Norah. "It's such fun, you can't think, with the different turn-outs, from the Lord Lieutenant's half-dozen carriages-and-four to Mr. Murphy's outside car, with Mrs. Murphy and nine children packed all over it. She never goes anywhere else with him; but you shall see her to-morrow in all her glory. We like to be on the course early, it's so amusing to watch the arrivals, and then we get good places on the Stand."

"Can you see well from the Ladies' Stand?" asked Blanche eagerly. "I'm rather interested in one of the races. You'll think me very sporting. I've not exactly got a horse to run, but there's a mare called Satanelle going to start, and I confess I want to see her win."

Norah bounded like a young roe. "Satanelle!" she repeated. "Why, that's Daisy's mount! Is it to win, dear? Oh! then, if she doesn't win, or come very near it, I'll be fit to cry my eyes out, and never ask to go to a race again."

Her color rose, her voice deepened, both gait and accent denoted the sincerity of her good wishes; and Miss Douglas, without quite admitting she had just cause for offence, felt as a dog feels when another dog is sniffing round his dinner.

"I've no doubt the mare will have justice

over the country-side, him and me, the same as if we'd a fox and a pack of hounds before us. It's him that taught me the real right way to hold the bridle, and I never could manage papa's Orville horse till he showed me how. It's not likely I'd forget anything Daisy told me! Here we are at the waterfall. Come off the rock now, or ye'll not have a dry thread on ye in five minutes!"

Miss Douglas, keeping back a good deal of vexation, had the good sense to follow her guide's advice, and leaped lightly down amongst the shingle from a broad flat rock to which she had sprung, as affording a view of the cascade.

It was a fine sight, no doubt. Swelled by the spring rains, and increased by many little tributaries from the neighboring hills, a considerable volume of water came tumbling over a ledge of bold bare rock, to roar and brawl and circle round a basin fifty feet below, not less than ten feet deep, from which it escaped in sheets of foam over certain shallows, till it was lost in a black narrow gorge, crowned by copses already budding and blooming with the first smiles of spring.

"We're mighty proud of the Dabbie in these parts," observed Norah Macormac, when she had withdrawn her friend from the showers of spray that quivered in faint and changing rainbows under the sunshine. "There's not such a river for fish anywhere this side the Shannon. And where there's fish there's mostly fishers. See, now; Captain Walters killed one of nine pounds and a half in the bend by the dead stump there. He'd have lost him only for little Thady Brallaghan and me hurrying to fetch the gaff, and I held it while he landed the beast on the gravel below the rocks."

It was getting unbearable! Blanche had started in such good spirits, full of life and hope, enjoying the air, the scenery, the exercise; but with every word that fell from her companion's lips the landscape faded, the skies turned grey, the very turf beneath her feet seemed to have lost its elasticity. Norah Macormac could not but perceive the change; attributing it, however, to fatigue, and blaming herself severely for thus tempting a helpless London girl into an expedition beyond her strength,—anticipating, at the same time, her mother's displeasure for that which good Lady Mary would consider a breach of the laws of hospitality,—"Sure ye're tired," said she, offering to carry the other's parasol, which might have weighed a pound. "It's myself I blame, to have brought you such a walk as this, and you not used to it, may be, like us that live up here amongst the hills."

But Blanche clung to her parasol, and repudiated the notion of fatigue. "She had never enjoyed a walk so much. It was lovely scenery, and a magnificent waterfall. She had no idea there was anything so fine in Ireland. She would have gone twice the distance to see it. Tired! she wasn't a bit tired, and believed she might be quite as good a walker as Miss Macormac."

There were times when Miss Douglas felt her nick-name not altogether undeserved. She became Satanelle now to the core.

Luncheon was on the table when the young ladies got back to the castle, although several of the guests had absented themselves, the General took his place with those who remained. St. Josephs was not in the best of humor, for a solitary walk in a strange district which had failed in its object. He sat, as it would seem, purposely a long way from Miss Douglas, and the servants were already clearing away before he tried to catch her eye. What he saw, or how he gathered from an instantaneous glance that his company was more welcome now than it had been at breakfast, is one of those mysteries on which it seems useless to speculate; but he never left her side again during the afternoon.

The General was true to his colors, and seldom ventured on the slightest act of disloyalty. When he returned, as in the present instance, to his allegiance, he always found himself under more authority than over for his weak attempt at insubordination.

CHAPTER XIII.

PUNCESTOWN.

"I tell ye, I bred her myself, and it's every hair in her skin I know, when I kept her on the farm till she was better than three year old. Will ye not step in here, and take a dandy o' punch, Mr. Sullivan?"

The invitation was promptly accepted, and its originator, none other than the breeder of Satanelle, dressed in his best clothes, with an alarming waistcoat, and an exceedingly tall hat, conducted his friend into a crowded canvas booth, on the outside of which heavy rain was beating, while its interior steamed with wet garments and hot whiskey punch.

Mr. Sullivan was one of those gentlemen who are never met with but in places where there is money to be made, by the laying against, backing, buying, or selling of horses. From his exterior the uninitiated might have supposed him a land-steward, a watchmaker, or a school-master in reduced circum-