

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER VI.

CUTTING FOR PARTNERS.

(Continued.)

Satanella seemed tired and abstracted. "Uncle Jack's" jokes fell pointless on her ear. When St. Josephs could at last think of something to say, she bent her head kindly enough, but persistently refused to accept or understand his tender allusions, interesting herself, then, and then only, in the business of the stage. In sheer self defence, the General felt obliged to do the same.

The house roared with laughter. A celebrated low comedian was running up and down before the foot-lights in shirt and drawers. The scene represented a bed-room at an inn. The actor rang his bell, tripped over his coal scuttle, finally upset his water-jug. Everybody went into convulsions, and St. Josephs found himself thinking of the immortal Pickwick, who "envied the facility with which the friends of Mr. Peter Magnus were amused." Turning to his tormentor, he observed the place by her side no longer vacant, and its occupant was—Daisy!

Mischievous Mrs. Lushington had "asked a man," you see, and this was the man she asked.

Captious, jealous, sensitive, because he really cared for her, St. Josephs' vexation seemed out of all proportion to its cause. He felt it would have relieved him intensely to "have it out" with Miss Douglas—to scold her, take her to task, reproach her roundly—and for what? She had never asked Daisy to come, she had not kept a seat for him at her elbow. From her flushed cheek, her bright smile, it could not but be inferred that this was an unexpected meeting a delightful surprise.

Calm and imperturbable, Daisy settled himself as if he were sitting by his grandmother. Not till he had smoothed his moustache, buttoned his gloves, and adjusted his glasses, did he find time to inform Miss Douglas "that he knew she would be here, but did not think she could have got away from dinner so soon; that the house was hot, the stalls were uncomfortable, and this thing was not half bad fun if you'd never seen it before." The General, cursing him for "a cub," wondered she could find anything in such conversation to provoke a smile on that proud beautiful face.

What was it she whispered behind her fan?—the fan he loved to hold because of the fragrance it seemed to breathe from her. He scarcely knew whether to be relieved or irritated when he overheard certain questions as to the progress of the black mare. It vexed him to think these two should have a common interest, should find it so engrossing, should talk about it so low. Why couldn't they attend to the farce they had come on purpose to see?

Mrs. Lushington, although she must have been surfeited with that unmeaning and rather tiresome admiration which such ladies find floating in abundance on the surface of London society, was yet ready at all times to accept fresh homage, add another captive to the net she dragged so diligently through smooth and troubled waters alike. Till the suggestion came from her friend, it had never occurred to her that the General was worth capturing. She began now in the usual way.

"What a number of pretty women!" she whispered, "Don't you think so, General? I haven't seen as much beauty under one roof since Lady Scavenger's ball."

Abstracted though he was, her companion had those habits of society which of all others seem to be second nature, so he answered: "There are only two pretty women in the house as far as I see; and they asked me to come to the play with them to-night."

She had a fascinating way of looking down and up again, very quick, with a glance, half shy, half funny, but altogether deadly. Even her preoccupied neighbor felt its influence, while she replied:—

"You say so because you think all women are vain, and like to be flattered, and have no heart. It only shows how little you know us. Do you mean to tell me," she added, in a lighter tone, "that's not a pretty girl in the second row there, with a mauve ribbon through her hair?"

She was pretty, and he thought so; but St. Josephs, being an old soldier in more senses than one, observed sententiously:— "Wants coloring—too pale—too sandy, and I should say freckled by daylight."

"We all know you admire dark beauties," retorted the lady, "or you wouldn't be here now."

"You're not a dark beauty," returned the ready General; "and I knew you were coming too."

"That's too good to be true," said she, with another of those glances. "Hark! you

more to be said. I must leave the regiment. 'Soldier Bill' gets the troop; and I am simply chewed up."

"Oh, Daisy," she exclaimed earnestly, "how much would it take to set you straight?"

Mr. Walters worked an imaginary sum on the gloved fingers of his right hand, carried over a balance of liabilities to his left, looked as grave as he could, and replied, briefly: "Two thou—would tide me over. It would take three to pull me through."

Her face fell, and the rich color faded in her cheek. He did not notice her vexation; for the crisis of the farce had now arrived, and the stage was crowded with all its *dramatis personae*, tumbling each other about in the intensely humorous dilemma of a hunt for the traveller's clothes; but he did remark how grave and sorrowful was her "good night," while she took the General's proffered arm with an alacrity extremely gratifying to that love-stricken veteran. She had never before seemed so womanly, so tender, so confiding. St. Josephs, pressing her elbow very cautiously against her beating heart, almost fancied the pressure returned. He was sure her hand had clung longer than usual in his clasp when the time came to say "Good-bye."

In spite of a headache and certain angry twinges of rheumatism, this gallant officer had never felt so happy in his life.

CHAPTER VII.

GETTING ON.

Outside the theatre the pavement was dry, the air seemed frosty, and the moon shone bright and cold. With head down, hands in pockets, and a large cigar in his mouth, Daisy meditated gravely enough on the untoward changes a lowered temperature might produce in his own fortunes. Hard ground would put a stop to Satanella's gallops, and the horses trained in Ireland—where it seldom freezes—would have an un-speakable advantage. Thinking of the black mare somehow reminded him of Miss Douglas, and pacing thoughtfully along Pall Mall, he recalled their first meeting, tracing through many an hour of sunshine and lamplight the links that had riveted their intimacy and made them fast friends.

It was about two years ago—though it seemed like yesterday—that, driving the regimental coach to Ascot, he had stopped his team with considerable risk at an awkward turn on the Heath, to make room for her pony-carriage; a courtzney soon followed by an introduction in the enclosure, not without many thanks and acknowledgements from the fair charioteer and her companion. He could remember how she kept him talking till it was too late to back Judæus for the Cup, and recalled his own vexation when that gallant animal galloped freely in, to the delight of the chosen people.

He had not forgotten how she asked him to call on her in London, nor how he went riding with her in the morning, meeting her at balls and parties by night, inaugurating a picnic at Hampton Court for her especial benefit, while always esteeming her the nicest girl out, and the best horse-woman in the world. He would have liked her to be his sister, or his sister-in-law; but of marrying her himself, the idea never entered Daisy's head. Thinking of her now he could "put her on" for a good stake, and send her back their mutual favorite none the worse in limbs or temper for the great race he hoped to win!

All Light Dragoons are not equally susceptible, and Mr. Walters was a difficult subject, partly from his active habits of mind and body, partly from the energy with which he threw himself into the business of the moment whatever it might be.

Satanella's work, her shoeing, her feed, her water, were such engrossing topics now, that, but for her connection with the mare, the lady from whom that animal took its name would have had no chance of occupying a place in his thoughts. He had got back to the probability of frost, and the possibility of making a tan-gallop, when he turned out of St. James's street into one of those pleasant haunts where men congregate after nightfall to smoke and talk, accosting each other with the easy good-fellowship that springs from community of tastes, and generous dinners washed down with rosy wine.

Notwithstanding the time of year, a member in his shirt-sleeves was sprawling over the billiard-table; a dozen more were sprinkled about the room. Acclamations, less loud than earnest, greeted Daisy's entrance, and tumbler of cunning drinks were raised to her lips, in mute but hearty welcome.

"You young beggar, you've made me miss my stroke!" exclaimed the billiard player, failing egregiously to score an obvious and easy hazard. "Daisy, you're always in the way, and you're always welcome. But what are you doing of the Shires in such weather as this?"

"Daisy never cared a hang for hunting," said a tall stout man on the sofa. "He's

to go faster than a Paddy driving a pig. That's why I've never been paying you a visit."

"D—n your impudence!" was all the other could find breath to retort, adding, after a pause of admiration, "What a beggar it is to chaff! But I won't let you off all the same. Come to me directly after Northampton. It's right in your way home."

"Nothing I should like better," answered Daisy. "But it can't be done. I'm due at Punchestown on the seventeenth, and I ought to be in Ireland at least a fortnight before the race."

"At Punchestown!" exclaimed half a dozen voices. "There's something up! You've got a good thing, cut and dried. It's no use Daisy! Tell us all about it!"

Walters turned from one to another with an expression of innocent surprise. He looked as if he had never heard of a steeple-chase in his life.

"I don't know what you fellows call 'a good thing,'" said he. "When I drop into one I'll put you all on, you may be sure. No. I must be at Punchestown simply because I've got to ride there."

"I'm sorry for the nag," observed the billiard-player, who had finished (and lost) his game. "What is it?"

"She's a mare none of you ever heard of," answered Daisy. "They call her Satanella. She can gallop a little, I think."

"Is she going for this new handicap?" asked a shrill voice out of a cloud of tobacco smoke in the corner.

"It's her best chance, if she ever comes to the post," replied Daisy. "They're crushing weights though, and the course is over four miles."

"Back her, me boy! And I'll stand in with ye!" exclaimed an Irish peer, handsome in spite of years, jovial in spite of gout, good-hearted in spite of fashion, and good-humored in spite of everything. "Is she an Irish-bred one? Roscommon did ye say? Ah, now, back for a monkey, and I'll go ye halves! We'll let them see how they do't in Kildare!"

Daisy would have liked nothing better; but people do not lay "monkeys" on steeple-chases at one o'clock in the morning. Nevertheless curiosity had been excited about Satanella, and his cross-examination continued.

"Is she a thoroughbred?" asked a cornet of the household cavalry, whose simple creed for man and beast, or rather horse and woman, was summed up in the two articles—blood and good looks.

"Thoroughbred?" repeated Daisy thoughtfully. "Her sire is I'm sure, and she's out of a 'Connemara mare,' as they say in Ireland, whatever that may be."

"I know," observed the peer, with a wink. "Ah, ye devil, ye've got your lesson perfect annyhow."

"Do you want to back her?" asked a tall, thin man, who had hitherto kept silence, drawing at the same time a very business-like betting-book from his breast-pocket. "You ought to lay long odds," answered Daisy. "The race will fill well. There are sure to be a lot of starters, and no end of falls. Hang it! I suppose I am bound to have something on. I'll tell you what. I'll take twelve to one in hundreds—there!"

"I'll lay you ten," said the other.

"Done!" replied Daisy. "A thousand to a hundred." And he entered it methodically in his book, looking round, pencil in mouth, to know "if anybody would do it again?"

"I'll lay you eight to one in ponies," Daisy nodded, and put down the name of the billiard-player. "And I in tens!" exclaimed another. "And I don't mind laying you seven!" screamed a shrill voice from the corner, "if you have it in fifties." Whereat Daisy shook his head, but accepted the offer nevertheless, ere he shut up his book, observing calmly that "he was full now, and must have something more to drink."

"And who does this mare belong to?" asked a man who had just come in. "It's a queer game, steeple-chasing, even with gentlemen up. I like to know something about owners before I back my little fancy, for or against."

"Well, she's more mine than anybody else's," answered Daisy, buttoning his overcoat to depart. "There's only one thing certain about her, and that is—she'll start if she's alive, and she'll win if she can!" With these words he disappeared through the swing-doors into the empty street, walking leisurely homeward, with the contented step of one who has done a good day's work, and earned his repose.

In Piccadilly he met a drunken woman; in Curzon Street, a single policeman; in Audley Square a libertine cat darted swiftly and noiselessly across his path. Working steadily northward, he perceived another passenger on the opposite side of the way. Passing under a lamp, this figure, in spite of hat pushed down and collar pulled up, proved to be none other than St. Josephs, wrapped in a brown study, and proceeding as slowly as if it was the hottest night in June.

"Now what can he be up to?" thought

No date, of course. The General, nevertheless, ordered his hack at half-past two, in confident expectation of finding his correspondent at home.

He was ushered into, perhaps, the prettiest *boudoir* in London—a nest of muslin, fillagree, porcelain, and exotics, with a miniature aquarium in the other, a curtain over the door, and a fountain opposite the fireplace. Here he had an opportunity of admiring her taste before the fair owner appeared, examining intently all the ornaments on her chimney-piece and writing-table, amongst which, with pardonable ostentation, a beautifully-mounted photograph of her husband was put in the most conspicuous place.

He was considering what on earth could have induced her to marry its original, when the door opened for the lady in person, who appeared, fresh, smiling, and exceedingly well dressed. Though she had kept her visitor waiting, he could not grudge the time thus spent, when he observed how successfully it had been turned to account.

"You got my note," said she, pulling a low chair for him close to the sofa on which she seated herself. "I wonder, if you wondered why I wanted to see you?"

"The experience of St. Josephs had taught him it is well to let these lively fish run out plenty of line before they are checked, so he bowed, and said, "He hoped she had found something in which he could be of use."

"Use!" repeated the lady. "Then, you want me to think you consider yourself more useful than ornamental. General, I should like to know if you are the least bit vain."

"A little, perhaps, of your taking me up," he added, laughing; "of nothing else, I think, in the world."

She stole a sly glance at him from under her eyelashes, none the less effective that these had been darkened before she came down. "And yet, I am sure, you might be," she said softly, with something of a sigh.

The process, he thought, was by no means unpleasant; a man could undergo it a long time without being tired.

"Do you know I'm interested about you?" she continued, looking frankly in his face. "For your own sake—a little; for somebody else's—a great deal. Have you never heard of flowers that waste their 'sweetness on the desert air'?"

"And blush unseen?" he replied. "I'm blushing now. Don't you think it's becoming?"

"Do be serious!" she interposed, laying a slim hand on his sleeve. "I tell you I have your welfare at heart. That's the reason you are here now. If I cannot be happy myself, at least I like to help others. Everybody ought to marry the right person. Don't you think so? You've got a right person. Why don't you marry her?"

Watching him narrowly, she perceived, by the catch of his breath, the quiver of his eyelid, that for all his self-command her thrust had gone straight home.

His was too manly a nature to deny its allegiance. "Do you think she would love me," said he simply and frankly, "if I was to ask her?"

Mrs. Lushington never liked him better than now. To this worldly, weary, manœuvreing woman, there was something inexpressibly refreshing in his unaffected self-depreciation. "What a fool the girl is!" she thought; "why, she ought to jump at him!" But what she said, was—" *Qui cherche trouve*. If you don't put the question, how can you expect to have an answer? Are you so spoilt, my dear General, that you expect women to drop into your mouth like over-ripe fruit? What we enjoy is, to be worried and tensed over and over again, till at last we are bored in saying "Yes" in sheer weariness, and to get rid of the subject. How can you be refused, much more accepted, if you won't even make an offer?"

"Do you know what it is to care for somebody very much?" said she, smoothing his hat with his elbow, as a village-maiden on the stage plaits the hem of her apron. "What you suggest, seems the boldest game, no doubt; but it is like putting all one's fortune on a single throw. Suppose the dice come up against me—can you wonder I am a little afraid to lift the box?"

"I cannot fancy you afraid of anything," she answered with an admiring glance; "not even of failure, though it would probably be a new sensation. You know what Mr. Walters says—he wined, and she saw it)—When you go to a fighting-house, you should take a fighting man." So I say, "When you are in a tangle about women, ask a woman to get you out of it." Put yourself in my hands, and when you dress for dinner, you shall be a proud and a happy General!"

His face brightened. "I should be very happy," said he, "I honestly confess, if Miss Douglas would consent to be my wife. Do you advise me to ask her at once?"

"This very day, without losing a minute," was the answer. "Let me have to congratulate her, when I call to drive her out at half-past five."

you on your guard. The General, your General, has been here for an hour. He seems to have made up his mind, so prepare yourself for it at any moment. I think you ought to accept him. He would relapse into a quiet, kind, and respectable husband. Your own position, too, would be improved and what I call established. Don't be obstinate, there's a dear. In haste. Ever your own loving

CLARA L.—

"You musn't forget you dine here. Nobody but ourselves, Uncle John, the two Gordon girls (Bessie has grown so pretty), and Daisy Walters, who starts for Ireland to-morrow. As soon after eight as you can."

Then she rang the bell, and sent off her note with directions for its immediate transmission. Henry must take it at once. If Miss Douglas was not at home, let him find out where she had gone, and follow her. There was no answer. Only he must be quite sure he got it;—and pretty Mrs. Lushington sank back on her sofa, with the pleasing reflection that she had done what she called "a neat stroke of business, vigorous, conclusive, and compromising nobody if it was ever found out."

She saw her way now clearly enough. On Satanella's refusal of her veteran admirer, she calculated as surely as on her acceptance of an invitation to meet Daisy at dinner, particularly with so dangerous a competitor as Bessie Gordon in the field. That last touch she considered worthy of her diplomacy. But, judging by herself, she was of opinion that Miss Douglas would so modify her negative as to retain the General in the vicinity of her charms, contemplating from day to day the fair prospect that was never to be his own. In such an ignominious state men are to be caught on the rebound, and he must ere long prove an easy victim to her kinder fascinations, take his place, submissively enough, with the other captives in the train of his conqueror. It would be very nice, she thought, to secure him, and after that she could turn her attention to Daisy, for Mrs. Lushington was never so happy as when she had succeeded in detaching a gentleman from the lady of his affections, if, in so doing, she inflicted on the latter the sorrow of a wounded spirit and the pain of a vexed heart.

Therefore had she many enemies of her own sex, ever on the watch to catch her tripping, and once down must have expected no quarter from these gentle combatants.

A generous, masculine-minded woman, who is above these petty vanities and rivalries, enjoys considerable immunity in that society, of which the laws are made by her sisters-in-arms, but they will not forgive the greedy, unreasonable spoiler, who eyes, covets, and abstracts the property of others—who, to use their own expressive words, "takes their men from them, while all the time she has got enough and to spare of her own!"

CHAPTER IX.

OFF AND ON.

But even a woman cannot calculate with certainty on what another woman will or will not do under given circumstances. The greatest generals have been defeated by unforeseen obstacles. A night's rain or a sandy road may foil the wisest strategy, destroy the nicest combinations.

Miss Douglas never came to dinner after all, and Daisy, too, was absent. Mrs. Lushington, outwardly deploring the want of a "young man" for the "Gordon girls," inwardly puzzled her brains to account for the joint desertion of her principal performers, a frightful suspicion crossing her mind that she might have been too vigorous in her measures, and so frightened Satanella into carrying Daisy off with her, *volens volens*, once for all. She had short notes of excuse, indeed, from both; but with these she was by no means satisfied: the lady pleading headache, the gentleman a pre-engagement, since called to mind—this might mean anything. But if they had gone away together, she thought, never would she meddle in such matters again!

Not till dinner was over, and Bessie Gordon had sat down to sing plaintive ballads in the drawing-room, did she feel reassured; but the last post brought a few lines from the General in fulfilment of his pledge to let her know how his wooing had sped.

"Congratulate me," he wrote, "my dear Mrs. Lushington, on having taken your advice. You were right about procrastination (the General loved a long word, and was indeed somewhat pompous when he put pen to paper). I am convinced that but for your kind counsels I should hardly have done justice to myself or the lady for whom I entertain so deep and lasting a regard. I feel