

Kate Coventry.

CHAPTER XII.

(CONTINUED.)

“Come away! I exclaim Squire Haycock, lifting his cap high above his red head, “you’ll be gone! Don’t you see him, Miss Coventry, now whisking under the gate?”

“Forward, forward! motions Frank, giving vent to his excitement in one of those prolonged screams that proclaim how the astonished sportsman has actually seen the fox with his own eyes. The next instant he is through the hand-gate at the end of the race, and rising in his stirrups, with the wicked obstinate hold hard by the head, is speeding away over the adjoining pasture, alongside of the two or three couples of leading hounds that have just emerged from the covert. Ah! we are all forgotten now, women, children, everything is fast in that first delicious first minutes when the hounds are really away. Frank was gazing at me a minute ago as if his very life was at my disposal, and now he is speeding away a field ahead of me, and don’t care whether I break my neck following him or not. But this is no time for such thoughts as these, the drunken huntsman is sounding his horn in our rear. Will, the whip, up in hand, is bringing up the body of the pack. Squire Haycock holds the gate open for me to pass, Cousin John goes by me like a flash of lightning, White Stockings with a loose rein, submits to be kicked along at any pace I like to ask him, the fence at the end of the field is nothing, I shall go exactly where Frank did; my blood thrills with ecstasy in my veins, moments of moments! I have got a capital start, and we are in for a run.

As I sit here in my arm-chair and dressing gown, I see the whole panorama of to-day passing once more before my eyes. I see that dark, wet, ploughed field, with the white hounds slipping noiselessly over its fur and surface. I can almost perceive the fresh, wholesome smell of the newly turned earth. I see the rugged, overgrown, straggling fence at the far end, glistening with morning dew, and green with formidable bristles. I see Frank Lovell’s chestnut rising at the weakest place, the rider sitting well back, his pair of stirrups shining in the sun, I see Squire Haycock’s square seat, I see his dress, to a well known courtier, his friendly eyes, I hear Cousin John’s voice shouting, “Give him his back, Kate!” As White Stockings and I rapidly approach the gap, my horse relapses into a canter, and into the very middle of the field, and as I give myself up for lost, makes a second bound that settles me once more in the saddle, and lands gallantly in the leading field, Frank looking back over his shoulder in evident anxiety and admiration, whilst John’s cheery voice, with its “Bravo, Kate!” rings in my delighted ears. We then slow down at the bounds, a long string of leading hounds before us, the pack trailing along the side of a high thick hedge that bounds it on our left, the south wind fans my face and lifts my hair, as I slacken my horse’s rein and urge him to hasten. I am alongside of Frank. I could ride anywhere now, or do anything. I pass him with a smile and a jest. I am the foremost with the chase. What is ten years of common life, one’s feet upon the leader, compared to five such golden minutes? The hounds stop suddenly, a half a call ring and spreading their lives out to the left, far, far, far, look up into my face with an air of mute bewilderment. The huntsman and the field came up, the gentleman in a high state of delight and confusion, but Mr. Tippler in the worst of humors, and muttering as he trotted to a corner of the meadow with the pack about his horse’s heels.

“Red! red! slap of the seat drove ‘em to a check, wish she was at home and a bed and a nap, and be d—d to her!”

A grim old lady who has but one eye, and answers to the name of ‘Jezebel,’ has threaded the fence, and proclaims in a sweet voice to her comrades, and she has discovered the line of our fox. They join her in an instant, down to their heads in court, and

behind the hounds. White Stockings is going very pleasantly, but the ground is now entirely on the rise, and he indulges occasionally in a trot without any hint on my part; the fences fortunately got weaker and weaker; the fields are covered with stones, and are light good galloping enough, but the rise gets steeper every yard, round hills are closing in about us; we are now on the Downs, and the pack is still fleeting ahead, like a body of hounds in a dream, every moment increasing their distance from us, and making them more and more indistinct. Frank Lovell disappears over the brow of that hill, and I urge White Stockings to overtake my only companion. He don’t seem to go much faster, for all that. I strike him once or twice with my light riding-whip; I shake my reins, and he comes back into a trot, I rise in my stirrup and rouse his energies in every way I can think of. I am afraid he must be ill; the trot degenerates into a jog, a walk; he carries his head further out from him than his wont, and treats curb and snaffle with a like disregard and callousness of mouth. Now he stops altogether, and catching a side view of his head, his eye appears to be more prominent than usual, and the whole animal seems changed, till I can hardly fancy it is my own horse. I get a little frightened now, and look round for assistance. I am quite alone. Hounds, horsemen, all have disappeared; the wide, dreary, solitary Downs stretch around me, and I begin to have misgivings as to how I am to get back to Dangerfield Hall. Cousin John has explained it all to me since.

“Nothing could be simpler, Kate,” said he, this evening, when I handed him his tea; “you stopped your horse. If ladies will go in front with a loose rein for five and forty minutes, riding jealous of such a first-rate performer as Frank Lovell, it is not an unlikely thing to happen. If you could have lasted ten minutes longer, you would have seen them kill their fox. Frank was the only one there, but he assures me he could not have gone another hundred yards. Never mind, Kate, better look next time!”

Well, to return to my day. After a while, White Stockings began to recover himself; I’m sure I didn’t know what to do for him. I got off, and loosened his girths as well as I could, and turned his head to the wind, and wiped his poor nose with my pocket handkerchief. I hadn’t any eau de Cologne, and if I had, it might not have done him much good. At last he got better, and I got on again (all my life I’ve been used to mounting and dismounting without assistance). Thinking down-hill must be the way home, down-hill I turned him, and proceeded slowly on, now running over in my own mind the glorious hour I have just spent, now wondering whether I should be lost and have to sleep amongst the Downs, and anon coming back to the old subject, and resolving that hunting was the only thing to live for, and that for the future I would devote my whole time and energies to that pursuit. At last I got into a steep chalky lane, and at a turn a little further on espied, to my great relief, a red coated back joggling leisurely home. White Stockings pricked his ears and mended his pace, so I soon overtook the returning sportsman, who proved to be no other than Squire Haycock, thrown out like the rest of the heavy-top gentlemen, and only too happy to take care of me, and show me the shortest way (eleven miles as the crow flies) back to Dangerfield Hall.

We jogged on amicably enough, the Squire complimenting me much on my prowess, and not half so shy as usual—very often the case with a diffident man when on horseback. We were forced to go very slow, both our horses being pretty well tired; and to make matters better, we were caught in a tremendous hail storm about two miles from home, just as it was getting dark, and close to the spot where our respective roads diverged. I could not possibly miss mine, as it was perfectly straight. Ah! that hail storm has a deal to answer for. We were forced to turn through a hand-gate, and take shelter in a friendly wood. What a ridiculous position, pitch dark, pelting with rain, an elderly gentleman and a young lady on horseback under a fir-tree! The Squire had been getting more incoherent for some time; I couldn’t think what he was driving at.

“You like our country, Miss Coventry?” inquired, excellent soil, nice and dry for ladies.

CHAPTER XIII.

My diary continued—
Saturday.—Well it is over at last; and upon my word, I begin to think I am capable of anything after all I have got through to-day since breakfast. Scarcely had I finished the slice of toast and single cup of tea that constitute my morning meal, before I heard the tramp of a horse on the ground in front of the house, followed by the ominous sound of the door-bell. I have remarked that, in all country families, a ring at the door bell brings everybody’s heart into everybody’s mouth. Aunt Horsingham, brooding over the tea pot as usual, had been in her worst of humors ever since she came down, and tried to look as if no bell that ever was cast had power to move her grim resolve.

“A message by electric telegraph,” exclaimed Cousin Amelia, who is always anticipating some catastrophe; “no visitor would ever call at such a time.”

“Unless he came to propose for one of us,” suggested John, who was carving a ham at the side-table.

“Some one on business for me, probably,” remarked Aunt Horsingham, drawing herself up and looking more stately than usual.

“Mr Haycock!” announced the butler throwing open the door, with a flourish; and while all our untimely visitor’s preparations, such as wiping his shoes, arranging his dress, &c., were distinctly audible outside, we looked at each other in mute astonishment, and I own I did feel the guilty one amongst the party.

The Squire made his entrance in a state of intense trepidation; having been forcibly deprived of his white hat in the hall, he had nothing but natural means to resort to for concealment of his confusion. Had it not been for an enormous silk handkerchief (white spots on yellow ground) with which he blew his nose and wiped his brow at short and startling intervals, his condition would have been pitiable in the extreme. The Squire’s dress, too, was of a more florid style than is usual in these days of sad colored attire. A bright blue neckcloth, well starched, and of great depth and volume; a buff waistcoat, with massive gilt buttons; a grass-green riding-coat, of peculiar shape, and somewhat scanty material; white cord trousers, York ‘an gaiters, and enormous double-soled shooting-shoes, pierced and strapped, and clamped and hob-nailed, completing a *tout ensemble* that almost upset my aunt’s gravity, and made me, nervous as I felt, stuff my pocket handkerchief into my mouth, that I might not laugh outright.

“Fine morning, Lady Horsingham,” observed the Squire, as if he had come all that distance at this early hour on purpose to impart so valuable a piece of information—“fine morning, but cold,” he repeated, rubbing his hands together, though the perspiration stood on his brow. “I don’t recollect a much finer morning at this time of year,” he resumed, addressing Cousin John after a pause, during which he had ceremoniously shaken hands with each of us in succession.

“Will you have some breakfast?” asked Lady Horsingham, whose cold and formal demeanor contrasted strangely with the nervous excitement of her visitor.

“No, thank you—if you please,” answered the Squire, in a breath, “I breakfasted before I left home; early hours, Lady Horsingham—I think your ladyship approves of early hours—but I’ll ask for a cup of tea, if you please;” so he sat down to a weak cup of lukewarm tea with much assumed gusto and satisfaction.

It was now time for Cousin Amelia to turn her battery on the Squire, so she presently attacked him about his poultry, and his garden, and his farm; the honest gentleman’s absent and inconsequent replies causing my aunt and John to regard him with silent astonishment, as one who was rapidly taking leave of his senses; whilst I, who knew, or at least guessed, the cause of his extraordinary behaviour, began heartily to wish myself back in London Street, and to wonder how this absurd scene was going to end.

“Your dabbias must have suffered dreadfully from these early frosts,” said Cousin Amelia, staking her ringlets at the poor man in what she fancies her most bewitching style.

“Beautifully,” was the bewildered reply, “particularly the short-hor s.”

“You never sent us over the Alderney calf

Game after game they played, the gentleman apparently abandoning himself to his fate. Sprawling over the table, making the most ridiculous blunders in counting, missing the most palpable of cannons, and failing to effect the easiest of hazards, the lady brandishing her mace in the most becoming attitudes, drooping her long hair over the cushions, and displaying the whiteness of her hand and slender symmetry of her fingers, as she requested her astonished adversary to teach her how to make a bridge, or pocket the red, or screw it off the white, and lisped out how hard it was to be disappointed by that provoking kiss! The Squire made one or two futile attempts to engage me in a game, but Cousin Amelia was determined to have him all to herself; and it was getting near the time at which I take Aunt Deborah her broth—for poor Aunt Deborah, I am sorry to say, is very ill in bed—I made my escape, and as I ran up-stairs, heard the billiard-room bell ring, and Squire Haycock summon up courage to know if Lady Horsingham was at leisure, as he wished to see her for five minutes alone in the drawing-room.”

People may say what they like about superstition, and credulity, and old women’s tales, but I have faith in presentiments. Didn’t I get up from my work and walk to the window at least a dozen times, to watch for Cousin John coming home, that wet day two years ago, when he broke his leg with the barriers, and yet he had only gone out for a morning’s canter on the best horse he ever had in his life? Didn’t I feel for eight-and-forty hours as if something too delightful was going to happen to me the week that Brilliant was bought and sent home, looking like an angel in a horse’s skin? That reminds me I never go to see him now, I hope I am not inconstant to my old friends. And what was it but a presentiment that made my heart beat and my knees knock together when I entered my own room to-day before luncheon, and saw a brown paper parcel on the table, addressed, evidently by the shop people, to Miss Coventry, Dangerfield Hall? How my fingers trembled as I untied the thread and unfolded the paper, after all, it was nothing but a packet of worsteds! To be sure, I hadn’t ordered my worsteds, but there might possibly be a note to explain; so I shook every skein carefully, and turned the covering inside out, that the document, if there should be one, might not escape my vigilance. How could my presentiments deceive me. Of course there was a note—after all, where was the harm? Captain Lovell had most politely sent me all these worsteds for a cushion I had once talked about working, and very naturally had enclosed a note to say so; and nothing to my mind could be kinder or more welcome than the contents. I am not going to say what they are, of course; though for that matter I easily could, since I have got the note by me at this moment, and have read it over to-day, besides, more than once. After all, there is nothing like a letter.

Who does not remember the first letter received in one’s childish days, written in a fair round text for childish eyes, or, perhaps, even printed by the kind and painstaking correspondent for the little dunces of a recipient? Who has not slept with such a letter carefully hoarded away under the pillow, that morning’s first light might give positive assurance of the actual existence of our treasure? Nor is the little urchin the only glad supporter of our admirable postal institutions. Many eyes moisten with tears of joy over those faint delicate lines traced by her hand whose gentle influence has found the one soft place. Woman hides away in her bosom, close to her loving heart, the precious scrap which assures her visibly, tangibly, unerringly, that he is hers, and hers alone. Words may deceive, scenes of bliss pass away like a dream. Though ever present to the mind, it requires an effort to disentangle the realities of memory from the illusions of imagination; but a letter is proof positive; there it is in black and white. You may read it again and again; you may kiss it as often as you please; you may prize it, and study it, and pore over it and find a new meaning in every fresh perusal, a hidden interpretation for every magic word; nothing can unsay it, nothing can deprive you of it—only don’t forget to lock it up carefully, and mind you don’t go leaving about your keys.

I had already read my note over a second time, before Cousin Amelia bounced into the room without knocking. I should have

Just then Gertrude tapped at the door. “Miss Coventry, if you please, her ladyship wishes to see you in the drawing-room.”

My cousin’s face fell several inches. “Some mistake, Gertrude,” she exclaimed. “It’s me, isn’t it, that mamma wants?”

“Her ladyship bid me tell Miss Kate she wished to see her immediately,” was my maid’s reply; so I tripped down-stairs with a beating heart, and crossed the hall just in time to see Squire Haycock riding leisurely away from the house (though it was bitter cold, and a hard frost, the first of the season), and looking up at the window, doubtless in hopes of an encouraging wave from the white handkerchief of his fiancée’s presumptive. Short as was the interval between my own door and that of the drawing-room, I had time to run over in my mind, the whole advantages and disadvantages of the flattering proposal which I was now convinced had been made on my behalf. If I became Mrs. Haycock (and I saw clearly that I had not mistaken the Squire’s meaning on our return from hunting), I should be at the head of a handsome establishment, should have a good-tempered, easy-going, pleasant husband, who would let me do just what I liked, and hunt to my heart’s content; should live in the country, and look after the poor, and feed hens and chickens, and sink down comfortably into a cushioned old age. I need not separate from Aunt Deborah, who would never be able to do without me; and I might, I am sure, turn the Squire with the greatest ease round my little finger; but then there certainly was great objections I could have got over the colour of his hair, though a red head opposite me every morning would undoubtedly be a trial, but the freckles! No, I do not think I could do my duty as a wife by a man so dreadfully freckled. I’m certain I couldn’t love him, and if I didn’t love him I oughtn’t to marry him; and I thought of the sad, sad tale of Lucy, Lady Horsingham, whose guest was now in the nightly habit of haunting Dangerfield Hall; the struggles that poor thing must have gone through, the leaden hours of dull, torpid misery, the agonizing moments of acute remorse, the perpetual spitting-conflict between duty and inclination, much to the discomfort of the former; and the haunting face of Cousin Edward continually rising on that heated imagination, pleading, reproaching, seeing the one loved him, if possibly more madly in his absence than when he was by her side. I, too, was beginning to have a Cousin Edward of my own; Frank Lovell’s image was far too often present in my mind. I did not choose to confess to myself how much I liked him; but the more I reflected on Mr. Haycock’s proposal, the more I felt how impossible it would be never to think of Frank any more.

“No!” I said inwardly, with my hand on the drawing-room door, “I will not give him up. I have his note even now in my bosom; he cares for me at any rate. I am a happier to-day than I have been for months, and I will not go and destroy it all with my own hand.” I opened the door and found myself in the formidable presence of Aunt Horsingham.

Her ladyship looked colder and more reserved, if possible, than ever. She motioned me stiffly to take a chair, and plunged at once into the subject in her dry, measured tones.

“Before I congratulate you, Kate,” she began, “on such an unlooked-for piece of good fortune as has just come to my knowledge, I am bound to confess, much to my astonishment.”

“Thank you, aunt,” I put in; “that’s complimentary, at any rate.”

“I should wish to say a few words,” proceeded my aunt, without heeding the interruption, “on the duties which will now devolve upon you, and the line of conduct which I should advise you to pursue in your new sphere. These hoydenish manners, these ridiculous expeditions, these scampers all over the country, must be renounced forthwith. Unbecoming as they are in a young unmarried female, a much stricter sense of decorum, a vastly different repose and reserve of manner, are absolutely essential in a wife; and it is as a wife, Kate, that I am addressing you.”

“A wife, aunt!” I exclaimed; “whose, I should like to know?”

“This is an ill-chosen time for jesting, Kate,” said my aunt, with a frown; “I can-