

THE
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER IV.

On returning to the drawing-room, Captain Markham immediately sought Miss Douglas, who was sitting with her aunt Gordon and Constance. "Thought we had forgotten you, Mrs. Gordon. I suppose—very late, I know; but all owing to that spiteful old Mervyn—called us ragamuffins, and that sort of thing—Gwynne wouldn't stand it—Welsh blood up—threatened to knock his brains out with the bottle. 'Pon honour, such a scene, very disagreeable indeed—Will Beauchamp pulled him up—thought he would have to fight to-morrow morning—eh—eh—Miss Douglas—demmit all—beg pardon, but you look like a ghost."

Mrs. Gordon's eyes were instantly turned to her niece, who was deadly pale, and appeared near fainting.

"My dearest Blanche, what is the matter? Here, my love, smell at these salts."

"A sudden faintness came over me, dear aunt, but I shall soon be better."

Conyers now came up with "Well, ladies, it's well that ends well; and, now that we are all friends again, I may just tell you what detained us so long in the dining-room—which he did as shortly as possible, speaking in high terms of Beauchamp's cool and gentlemanly conduct.

"Then there is to be no duel to-morrow?" inquired Mrs. Gordon, anxiously.

"None, my dear madam, I assure you; everything is amicably settled; and, instead of fighting, Will has accepted an invitation to breakfast with Lord Mervyn on this day month."

"Are you not deceiving me, Mr. Conyers?"

"No, on my honor, Mrs. Gordon; and to satisfy you still further, I will send Beauchamp here directly, to show you the entry in his pocket-book."

As Beauchamp approached them, the color suddenly returned to Miss Douglas's face, suffusing her cheeks and brow, which, not unnoticed by Mrs. Gordon, revealed to her a secret unknown to Blanche herself until that moment, that she loved William Beauchamp. She had long looked upon him as a dear friend, but had hitherto remained totally unconscious of any deeper feeling towards him, when the sudden revelation made by Captain Markham of his life, perhaps, being at stake, sent a thrilling suffocating sensation circling round her heart, to which she had hitherto been a stranger. Her ill-concealed trepidation at his approach delightfully confirmed Mrs. Gordon in her long indulged hopes that William Beauchamp might become the object of her niece's choice.

"William," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, as he stood before her, "I have sent for you to hear an account from your own lips of this attack about Francis with Lord Mervyn, whom, I am told, it was your intention to challenge to-morrow morning."

For a moment Blanche's face was raised to his to scan his looks. Their eyes met, and by that quick, hurried glance, Beauchamp seemed entranced, riveted to the spot, for a moment the full spell of fascination was upon him, as he gazed in silent surprise on the varying color and trembling form of Blanche Douglas.

"William!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, in a sharp tone, "what ails you tonight?—are you tipsy or crazy?"

"Neither tipsy nor crazy, dear Mrs. Gordon, but a fit of abstraction seized me, my thoughts were wandering; pray forgive me."

"A pretty confession, Mr. William, in the presence of three ladies," added Constance; "so now, to make your peace with Aunt Gordon, just have the goodness to occupy my seat till I return, and make a full confession of what wicked conduct you have been guilty of."

"Oh! certainly, a much better one," replied Vernon, with a sneer. "Heir to a baronetcy—life guardsman—fine figure—lots of small talk, and all that sort of thing; but I hate Will Beauchamp, and intend to pick a quarrel with him, to get him out of the way. Will you be my second?"

"No, Richard Vernon, I will not; that's plain enough, I suppose." With which the Captain walked away.

A voice from behind whispered in his ear, "Don't despair, Dick. I will supply Edward's place; and turn out to-morrow morning, and

beat the hounds."

bloodthirsty intention," replied Beauchamp. "The greatest provocation would never induce me to take any man's life, unless in the unavoidable defence of my own."

"That's equivocal, William—"

"Then, is this plain enough? I will never deliberately fire at any opponent with the aim of shooting him."

"Oh! then, I suppose, you are to stand as his target, to be murdered in cold blood; but you are deceiving yourself, not me, William, in this fine-drawn distinction. No person has a right rashly to throw his life away, since it is God's loan, and He only has the right to dispose of it. Remember His commands on this point—'At the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man.' Again; 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath; and there are hundreds of the same injunctions throughout the New Testament."

"I will consider well your objections, dear Aunt Gordon, although I believe you are quite right."

"Then why hesitate to follow the promptings of your own conscience?"

"There is a listener," he whispered, "who would not be slow to avail himself of my confessions."

"Ah! I see—we will change the subject."

Vernon had slowly and stealthily approached the back of the sofa where Blanche was sitting, in the hope of overhearing the nature of her conversation with Beauchamp.

"Aside the devil turned
For envy yet with jealous leer malign
Eyed them askance."

Leaning on the back of the sofa, Vernon now requested the honor of Miss Douglas favoring him with the song she had promised at dinner.

"I made no such promise, Mr. Vernon," was her reply, and he was again urging his suit with flattering persuasions, when Mrs. Gordon, seeing Blanche annoyed with his importunities, interfered, saying her niece was very far from well, and she had laid an interdiction upon her singing that evening.

"I could scarcely expect," he retorted, with a sneer, "to detach Miss Douglas from such delightful society."

"Except by the aid of an Ant-eater," replied Mrs. Gordon; on which Vernon turned abruptly away.

Soon after he was engaged in an animated conversation with Captain Markham, the nature of which will transpire in the following colloquy.

"What makes you look so demmed pleasant to-night—claret sour, or what—with that vinegar countenance?"

"That old aunt's enough to put any man out of temper," replied Vernon; "and that fellow, Beauchamp, thinking they are going to have it all their own way with the heiress."

"Eh! 'pon honor—what d'ye mean?"

"I have been watching Beauchamp very intently since he joined her on the sofa, and her looks, when he ventured on some soft speech, betrayed the nature of it; in fact, I believe he is making up to her."

"Well, why shouldn't he? She is fair game to any man to try for without poaching on your ground. Demmit, Vernon, you seem to think no fellow has a right to speak to her but yourself. Eh, 'pon my soul, that's a good joke!—and, if that's your humor, just give me leave to observe, my fine fellow, that Ned Markham considers he has quite as good a chance for the heiress as Dick Vernon."

"Oh! certainly, a much better one," replied Vernon, with a sneer. "Heir to a baronetcy—life guardsman—fine figure—lots of small talk, and all that sort of thing; but I hate Will Beauchamp, and intend to pick a quarrel with him, to get him out of the way. Will you be my second?"

"No, Richard Vernon, I will not; that's plain enough, I suppose." With which the Captain walked away.

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"A little exaggerated, I hope, though not perhaps intentional; but Mrs. Gordon is well aware of our views with regard to her niece." The latter part of her speech was delivered as a check to Mr. Vernon's future attentions to Blanche, which Mrs. Harcourt had observed more than once before, and particularly at dinner that evening—so that the crafty plotter received a rebuke where he at least expected one.

Whilst we have been relating these conversations, the company had been enlivened by music and singing; the principal performers being Miss Caroline Markham, Constance, and two Misses Rolleston, with Captain Markham and Robert Conyers; and the evening thus passed pleasantly away, without further incidents, until the carriages were announced.

During their drive home, Constance rallied her brother on his abstraction, saying, "We have gone at least three miles, William, and three words have not passed your lips; what are you thinking of, my sapient brother?"

"Of nothing particular, Con, dear."

"Yes, William, you are (excuse my rudeness in contradicting you); and I will tell you the subject of your meditations, if you promise to confess whether I have guessed rightly or not."

"Well, dear Con, what is it then?"

"Blanche Douglas."

Beauchamp was silent for a moment, then added—

"Yes, Constance, your guess is right; but there is nothing very particular in my thinking about Blanche, of whom I so often think, and her future prospects in life; you know the interest I have long taken in her, and my brotherly affection; she is to me a second sister."

"Yes, dear William, but in that relation she cannot much longer stand to you, although I hope she may to me."

"That, I fear, can never be, dear Constance."

"And why not, my own true kind-hearted brother?"

"The rich heiress, when once launched on the world, and surrounded by the titled, the rich, and the gay, trying for her hand, will soon forget the humble companion of her earlier and happier years."

"Never, William, believe me, if I know her as I ought to do; although so young, she thinks deeply, judges carefully, and where she does love, intensely; and of this I am quite convinced, that an impression upon her heart, once made, will never be obliterated."

"Well, my dear, enthusiastic sister, time is said to prove the constancy of faithful love."

"William," she said, "will you answer me one question, sincerely and confidentially—for you know me too well to believe that I ever would betray your confidence—do you love Blanche as a sister only?"

"Until this night, dear Con, I believed I did regard her in that light only; but now, my feelings have undergone a change—would that they never had!"

"Why say this, my own darling brother, and in so sad a tone?"

"Because from this hour they must be suppressed, if not extinguished. What! Will Beauchamp a fortune hunter! never," he replied with emphasis; "perish the thought!"

"And perish thus," added Constance, "the happy dreams, the brightening hopes of that dear confiding girl, who thinks she has found a responding pulse to her own feelings in the breast of Will Beauchamp."

"Constance," exclaimed her brother in surprise, "what does it mean?"

"Simply this, William; I know the language of the eyes, the looks of love; and if the latter were not exhibited to me this night by Blanche Douglas, when Markham spoke of your quarrel with Lord Mervyn, I know nothing nothing of womankind."

"Oh, say not so, Constance."

"It is said and done," she replied; "the die is cast: the happiness or misery of her you love now rests in your keeping, to whom she has intrusted, though not yet revealed,

"Where? where?" exclaimed Newman Butler, "I don't see him."

"But I did, sir, and hope never to see him again until he is brought to hand, now for the cobbler's wax, sir," as the hounds came tearing out of covert, and settled down to the scent. "Give Foreman his head, sir, and come along; we've got them all to ourselves." Saying which he cleared the first fence, with a yawning ditch on the other side."

"All right, sir; come along!" cried Charley, as looking back he saw Foreman blundering on his nose, with his master clinging round his neck. "Pick him up, sir, and put more powder in next time."

For five-and-twenty minutes Charley had it all his own way; and so great was the pace, that the hounds ran into their fox before he could reach the next covert. Sir Francis, with his arm in a sling, rode furiously throughout this quick burst, and was one of the first up with Will Beauchamp, Sir Lucius, and Tyler.

"Pretty thing, indeed!" exclaimed the baronet. "Well done, Charley."

"Not much for me to do, Sir Francis," replied Charles, touching his cap, "except going as straight and fast as I ever rode in life."

"Just treat us to another of the same sort; and here, Charley—putting a sovereign into his hand—"I'll double if I you do."

Will Beauchamp waited until Sir Lionel and his father came up, when the fox was thrown to the hounds, and a discussion took place as to the next draw. "There is a bit of nice lying in the gorse on Brendon Down, sir," suggested Charley to his master; "just suit the ladies and Sir Francis."

"And so it will, Charley."

"Well, William," inquired Sir Lionel, "where now?"

"Brendon Gorse holds a fox, I think, sir; a gallop over the open will suit the ladies better than tearing through these blackthorn fences."

"Bravo," exclaimed Selina Markham; "who says you are not a ladies' man, Will Beauchamp? I am tattered and torn, but not forlorn, from riding a race with Dick Vernon, and beating him, too, at the expense of half my skirt."

"Really, Selina," exclaimed her father, "you had better adopt skins and jack-boots at once."

"I have done it already, daddy dear!" she replied, laughing, and patting her boot with her riding-whip.

"Oh, you hoiden!" laughed Sir Lionel, "what next?"

"Don't exactly know, papa, after riding over Dick Vernon's horse, and a five-barred gate at one swoop."

"The devil she did!" remarked Sir Francis; "that beats Leicestershire hollow."

"And a demmed scurvy trick to play a fellow who was politely stooping to open the gate for you," put in the Captain.

"Think so, Ned? 'pon honor, eh! Now for a scamper on the open; come on, Will Beauchamp, while my blood is up!" saying which, she cantered off towards the downs.

Before throwing the hounds into the gorse, at Will Beauchamp's request, the horsemen ranged themselves in line, to prevent the fox breaking towards the valley, an extent of open downs stretching for several miles in the opposite direction. A brace of foxes were on foot directly, one breaking through the horsemen, with the body of the pack upon his scent, and just emerging from the gorse, where a rate from Charley stopped them in a moment, and they were immediately capped by William Beauchamp on to the line of the other, which had gone straight away at the right point.

"Hold hard one minute, gentlemen!" shouted Beauchamp; "let them get their heads well down first, then ride as hard as you please." But none heeded him, every man going off at score, and leaving the hounds to get together as they could, threading their way with inconceivable dexterity through nearly two hundred horses, without a hound being disabled. The pack got together like a flash of lightning, and took up

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed; "Selina and myself raced the whole distance, leaving dozens behind."

"'Pon honour, I am afraid, got a bad nose in trying to beat us," laughed his sister. "Narcissus put his foot in a rut, and, oh, demmit, what a roll he gave his master, the life guardsman, going down the hill—thought he'd never have done turning over. 'Hurt?' I cried out as we passed him, 'Eh!—aw!—'pon my soul, can't tell yet.' Then, when you've found out, let me know—but here he comes to answer the question."

Roars of laughter followed Miss Markham's description of her brother's spill, which had not subsided when he arrived.

"Well, Ned," inquired his sister, "have you found out yet whether you are hurt or not?"

"Demmed stiff somewhere," replied the Captain.

"'Pon honor, where?" cried Selina, choking with laughter at his grotesque appearance, with his coat split entirely up his back, and his hat crushed to pieces. "A fox had a wound, but he couldn't tell where—'s that your case, Neddy, dear?" she inquired in a pitying tone.

Roars of merriment again burst forth. "Eh!—aw!—demmit! what are all you fellows laughing at? Can't see the joke."

"Demmed surprised if you could," added his sister.

"Really, Selina," exclaimed Sir Lionel, "you are too bad, and if you don't behave better in the hunting-field, I shall not allow you to meet the hounds again."

"Don't be ill-tempered, daddy, dear," she said, coaxingly, riding up and putting her hand on his shoulder. "I enjoy a bit of fun, or a good run, as well as you do, my dear dad."

"You are too witty by half, my dear," replied Sir Lionel.

"Then I'll give the spars half to Edward papa—will that do?"

"Incorrigible!" exclaimed her father in despair. "Will you lecture her a little Sir Francis?"

"Rather be excused, Sir Lionel, as I have an idea she would give me a thorough good laughing in return. But now, what's the next move?"

"Homo, I should think; but what says Will Beauchamp?"

"We think of travelling in that direction," replied the master huntsman, "seeing we are now eighteen miles from the kennels."

"Of course you do," added Bob Conyers; "I'd never risk the spoiling such a day's sport as this by drawing again. There are some fellows who hunt by the day, and don't know what to do with themselves until the day is over; which puts me in mind of an answer given by Lord Mervyn to a gentleman who asked him for a day's shooting."

"Not an hour's sir," was the reply, and a fair rebuke; for a good shot in half an hour would bag more game in my lord's preserves than he could within a week in common shooting. Sport cannot be measured by time; that's my idea of it."

"And a very correct one, Bob," replied Sir Francis. "I have enjoyed these fifteen minutes over the turf at this spitting pace, more—ten times more—than I should the longest woodland run."

"Come along then, Burnett," exclaimed Mr. Beauchamp, and their horses' heads were turned homewards. As the square moved off, Sir Lionel shouted, "Mind you dine with us to-morrow, Beauchamp, with Will and Constance."

"Not likely to forget that, Markham," was the response.

On their ride home they met Newman Butler galloping towards them, puffing and blowing like a grampus.

"Eh! well! Will Beauchamp, what have you done with him?" inquired the master of the barriers.

"Carrying him home, Newman," pointing to the hounds with his whip.

"Ab, indeed! too fast for old Foreman—couldn't hold the pace; obliged to give in."

"You are not singular, Newman," replied Will Beauchamp; "scores of others were