

THE  
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XVI.

(CONTINUED.)

'Would you like to have them at the window, dear Blanche?' whispered Beauchamp.

'Oh, yes, William, pray let me come! The window was raised directly, and at their master's call, the whole pack rushed to his summons, jumping up, and licking his hand in exuberant delight, and ready to devour him with caresses.

'How those faithful hounds must love you, William!' murmured Blanche, as she leaned out to pat their honest heads.

'Yes, dear girl, there is no flattery in their professions, but genuine true affection, and now, as the gentlemen are all ready, I must close the window, and you will see them walk reluctantly away with the whipper-in, casting many a long and lingering look behind.'

The appearance of Beauchamp with Miss Douglas, patting and fondling the hounds together, could not fail to attract all eyes towards them; and many and sincere were the aspirations breathed by their true friends, the farmers especially, for the future happiness of the pair, who appeared formed for each other.

'Ah,' muttered Stiles to young Hazel, as they rode away, 'what a sweet-tempered beautiful young lady Miss Blanche is, and I'll warrant the Squire loves her as the apple of his eye—how happy they both looked! Blessings on 'em both, say I, and may they soon become man and wife.'

The company had now taken their leave, as the hounds disappeared from the scene, and Beauchamp remained with Mrs. Gordon and Blanche, Constance having galloped off with Malcolm and Conyers, promising, however, to return early.

'Well, dear aunt,' said Beauchamp, 'your presence at our home meet was quite an unexpected honour, and to me a most delightful surprise.'

'Why, William, to tell you the truth, I rather suspected the temptation would be too great, and I feared you would be rash enough to join the hounds, unless myself and Blanche drove over in time to prevent you; and another reason was, that if you were a good boy, and kept your promise, I would reward you for your dutiful conduct, by spending the day with you; there, William, was not that very good and considerate in me?'

'Yes, dear aunt, as you ever are to one who does not deserve half your kindness.'

'Of that I suppose I may be the best judge, Mr. William; and now, having breakfasted very early on your account, I and Blanche shall not object to another cup of tea or coffee, and a slice of cold fowl, if there is such a thing left in the breakfast room; to which they immediately repaired, but found no eatables remaining, except part of a cold round of spiced beef and a knuckle of ham, which had still held out against the repeated attacks of the hungry fox-hunters; all the more delicate viands having entirely vanished. Ringing the bell, the old butler appeared, when Beauchamp inquired if there was any cold fowl or game left in the house, desiring him to bring in also some fresh tea for the ladies.

'I think, sir,' said the old man, 'we can find something the ladies would quite like as well as cold fowl, if they can wait a short time.' Accordingly, in about twenty minutes the butler reappeared, with a brace of grilled partridges, split down the back, and a few small cakes of a peculiar sausage prepared at Bampton House.

'There, aunt,' said Beauchamp, 'is a sportsman's breakfast for you and Blanche, to which I hope you will do justice.'

'Really, William, it looks very inviting, and I never saw game sent up to table in that fashion before.'

'It is one of our old fashions, aunt, and a much quicker way of dressing game or poultry than roasting, and in my opinion the flavour is far superior.'

The merits of the dish were tested, and approved of by both the ladies, who pronounced it a decided improvement over the usual mode of cooking; and after breakfast

never intended to keep back anything from though I hold myself firmly and irrevocably bound to her; but if, at the end of the London season, she still prefers me to any other, I will then claim her hand, on the condition that her whole fortune shall be settled upon hers. If.'

'Really, William, you are so ridiculously romantic, and particular also, I shall advise Blanche to give you up altogether.'

'Indeed, aunt, I only urge this from my deep love to her, and the fear that she may be too hastily committed under her present excited feelings.'

'Well, then, you and Blanche must settle these childish objections between yourselves; and when you have made up your minds whether you are really in love or not, let me know. For the present I shall say nothing to any other person on the subject, not even to Malcolm and Constance, who would only laugh at your folly; but bear in mind, you have both my free consent to marry when you please; and under present circumstances, I do not consider it necessary to consult Mr. Harcourt. There—that will do; so now be off and take a short walk, while I finish writing my letters; but remember, William must not go very far.'

On their return, Mrs. Gordon asked if they had made up their first quarrel. 'Nearly, if not quite, dear aunt; although Blanche was very indignant at being considered so childish or so fickle as not to know her own mind; but as she would not consent either to marry or run away with me before this day week, the matter remains in abeyance. Still on one point we are agreed, that it will be more prudent to make an effort to obtain Mr. Harcourt's approbation before our engagement is made known to any other person, or he might consider such an act, without consulting him, a most serious and unpardonable offence.'

'You, who have been to me as a second mother?'

'Well, poor fellow! you have suffered too much pain lately for me to inflict more; and dear Blanche, if you do really love this wayward, worthless boy, I shall not add to your nervousness either by withholding my approval of your choice, so come here both of you; when, joining their hands together, Mrs. Gordon, in the most affectionate and impressive manner, invoked a blessing on their union, and, overcome by her own as well as Blanche's emotion, hastily left them together, telling them they would find her in the drawing-room. In half an hour they rejoined her, when Beauchamp told her, as Blanche was still so young, he did not wish her to be bound by any formal engagement to himself thus early, especially as she was to be presented at court in the spring, and make her *debut* in the London fashionable circles.

'That entirely depends upon Blanche's own feelings,' replied Mrs. Gordon; 'but, were I in her place, William, I would not afford you even this little loop-hole for escape; you want, I suppose, sir, to have a season in town, too, and if you met with a prettier girl than Blanche, intend to put her aside.'

'Dear, dear aunt!' exclaimed Beauchamp, 'how can you utter such a libel on my constancy and devotion to her I prefer above all the treasures on earth?'

'Then what do you mean, you silly boy?'

'I do not wish our attachment to each other to be made public at present, or any engagement, on Blanche's part, to exist, at least, until this unfortunate trial is over, any application on your part would be perfectly fruitless on your part, and in the meantime I will endeavor to smooth the way, and call at Throsby's; as it is far better for us all to keep on good terms with the Harcourts, if possible.'

The morning passed away rapidly to the two lovers, and Blanche discarding further reserve, her usual cheerful buoyancy of spirits once more gladdened the heart of William Beauchamp, and her light, playful laugh rang through the old Hall, where she was engaged at a game of billiards with him when Lord Malcolm and Constance returned.

'Ah, my pet,' exclaimed her cousin, 'so this is the way you have been killing time, which, of course, has passed very heavily since we left you; but I need not ask who wins?'

'And why not, Charles?'

—raising his own glass—"is long life and happiness to you, my dear girl, and confusion to all your enemies; and the contents instantly disappeared. 'Come, Blanche,' observing her sipping her wine, 'don't make two bites of a cherry—off with it, child—a bottle of this sort would do you no harm. Don't look at Aunt Gordon; you are not under petticoat government here; and now, Malcolm, fill your aunt's glass, as her turn comes next.'

'It's no use trying to refuse,' said Malcolm, as she withdrew her glass; 'the governor will have his own way at Bampton.'

'Oh, I see,' said the squire; 'Mrs. Gordon likes something lighter; champagne or burgundy—which shall it be?'

'Neither for me, Mr. Beauchamp, as I have taken enough already.'

'Poo! puch! you shall taste both. Thomas, a bottle of champagne and one of burgundy; and mind the cork is sound.'

'Yes, sir,' as the old butler toddled out of the room.

'That's right, squire!' exclaimed Conyers; 'ladies never refuse champagne, and I am just in the humor for one or two myself.'

'Really, Mr. Conyers, you seem to have joined in a conspiracy to make us all tipsy to-night,' replied Mrs. Gordon.

'Oh, no, my dear Madam; we only wish to make your eyes and dear Blanche's sparkle a little more brilliantly.'

'Now, Mrs. Gordon,' said Mr. Beauchamp, as Thomas appeared with two long-necked bottles, 'which first—champagne or burgundy?'

'Champagne, if I must take any; and immediately a tall glass sparkled by the side of each lady, which in courtesy could not be refused.

'We shall do now,' said the old squire, 'and the ladies shall not be obliged by me to take any more than one glass of burgundy after dinner.'

When the ladies were rising from the table, Mrs. Gordon said, 'Malcolm, you must not be late to-night, as I have once or twice observed, in our drives, a tall, stout man on horseback loitering behind the carriage, which makes me feel rather nervous.' A quiet smile passed over William Beauchamp's features as she said this, which Blanche noticing, asked in a low tone if he knew who this person was.

'Yes, my dear girl,' as he rose to open the door, and stood with her for a moment outside; 'you need not feel alarmed. It is Mark Rosier, who is your guard day and night whenever you go.'

'Oh, dear William,' she said, putting her hand in his, 'how kind and considerate thus to watch over me.'

'Mark is only my substitute whilst I am disabled, and when able I shall guard you myself.'

'No, dear William; that you must not do. I never can repay you for all your anxiety and trouble about me.'

'You can guess the reward, dear girl, which will more than repay me.'

'I am all your own now, William,' she said, blushing, 'and therefore I suppose you will claim it, whether I like to give it or not.' And he folded her in his arms, saying, 'My own dearest treasure! how undeserving am I of such a blessing as your love!'

'Dear William, you deserve more than I can give; but now let me go.'

'Tell Aunt Gordon and Constance, then, if you like, about Mark Rosier, but no one else.'

As she tripped after her friends into the drawing-room, Mrs. Gordon asked the cause of her detention by Beauchamp, which was explained by Blanche telling her the name of the dark man who had been noticed following the carriage.

'Just like my dear brother,' exclaimed Constance; 'ever too anxious about those he loves. Ah, Blanche, you will have a sad time of it when you are married; he will never let you out of his sight except on hunting days, when you may have the opportunity of a little quiet flirtation with others, but rest assured he will never let you go alone to any dinner-party or ball; in fact, my dear girl, my only fear is that you may have too much of his agreeable company.'

'Of that I have no fear, dear Constance'

CHAPTER XVII.

We must now look into the dining-room, where Conyers was relating the events of the day.

'We have had,' said Bob, 'very unsatisfactory work. Found, of course, in Park-wood, directly, and went away fast for about twenty minutes, when the hounds, coming to a check in a large field stamied by a flock of sheep, Charley seized upon them instantly, and thought to make a display of his genius by making a forward cast, taking it for granted the fox had gone straight to the Holt; but the fox, having changed his mind and turned away short to the left for the turze hills, our run was spoilt. Found again in the turze hills, a thorough good traveller, who went straight through the Holt, and then faced the open for Barton Court covert, which he skirted, and held on his course over the downs to Stanton village, where we were at fault for the first time among some small enclosures. For fifty minutes the pace had been first-rate, few being able to live with the hounds; and from a shepherd we heard the fox was not half a mile before us, and no doubt lay down somewhere; but Charley, all eagerness, would not give them time, and again made a forward cast through the village towards Staunton Wood, still persisting (notwithstanding my remonstrances) in holding the hounds a good mile in that direction. Whilst occupied in this wild-goose chase, our hunted fox was viewed away from a ditch, where the hounds first threw up, and met by several of the heavy brigade in his way back to Barton Woods. Hallooing and screaming were now the order of the day, in which Charley took the lead, rattling, with the hounds all gallop, back through the village; but the fox had made good his retreat, and we soon had two or three fresh ones on foot, when we reached Barton Court, where I left Mr. Charley thoroughly disgusted. 'Halloo! here; tally ho!' there; hounds' heads up, looking about, and wandering what it all meant; in short, Will, your old friend Stiles remarked, 'It will not do, Mr. Conyers—the pack will be run d, if the young squire don't take them in hand again, and that pretty soon.' The fact is, Charley is too much in a hurry, and tries to kill his fox before he is half beaten; and, like many other young huntsmen, depends more upon his own assumed knowledge than the hounds' noses.'

'You must remember,' said Beauchamp, 'it is his first day, and he will improve.'

'I don't think it, Will; his ideas are all wrong at present, and he will certainly spoil the hounds by trying to ride away from the field, which appears to be his chief consideration. The more haste the less speed; and a thorough good huntsman, however quick, ought never to be in a hurry. It is the same with hounds—a fast and a quick hound are very distinct animals; and a harry starey fellow, who, as Beckford says, would ride over a church if it came in his way, is generally the reverse of quick.'

'Well, Bob, I hope to be in the saddle again the beginning of next week; and now, as I know Mrs. Gordon will be in a fidget about leaving, we must cut short our discussion about the merits of hounds and huntsmen—what say you, Malcolm?'

'Always as ready to attend the ladies, my dear fellow, as yourself; so come along.'

'Well, aunt,' said he, as they entered the drawing-room, 'don't you think me a very good obedient nephew, to break up our after-dinner sitting so early?'

'Yes Charles, you have behaved very well indeed to-night.'

'Oh! very little merit is due to me, for Will Beauchamp, being restricted from wine, hurried us off before our second bottle was finished, for which Conyers and myself voted him a confounded bore, and a very selfish fellow to boot; so now, to be revenged, I shall make Constance and Blanche sing till midnight.'

'Indeed, Charles, you will do no such thing; I shall order the carriage in half an hour, as, after what has happened, I feel very nervous in being out late; but if Mr. Beauchamp and William will dine with us on Monday next, by which time I hope he will be nearly recovered, you shall sit up till two in the morning, if you like.'

'Agreed aunt; we will have a regular night of it at the Priory on Monday, won't we, Bob?'

'As Mr. Malcolm; and raise such a din

of carrying off your ward, and Lord Mervyn knew him to be a poor, good-for-nothing, fortune-hunting rake about town. The whole thing was planned by Lord Mervyn and Mr. Farley (whom you will remember meeting at the castle, and who was positively instructed to laud this Lord Vancour and represent him as a person of high character and large fortune); these two, with that worthy person, Richard Vernon, arranged the whole proceedings; and as this will come out upon the trial, Mr. Harcourt, if you have any regard for your position in the county, my advice to you is, to avoid further intimacy with the contemptible owner of Marston Castle.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Gordon, I am perfectly astonished at your account of this matter, but still you must be in error as to Lord Mervyn having so grossly committed himself.'

'You are in error, Mr. Harcourt, I am not,' replied Mrs. Gordon, as she rose to take her leave; 'but I hope we shall see you on Monday at the Priory, where I have asked a few friends in the evening.'

The invitation being accepted, was considered as the outward adjustment of any personal differences between the two aunts, although their inward feelings remained in *statu quo*. In direct refutation of the scandalous reports spread by Lord Mervyn and his partisans, Mrs. Gordon determined, therefore, on giving as large a party as her house could contain, with a dance afterwards, as a testimony of rejoicing for Blanche's happy escape; and the invitation to her neighbors, Lady Markham, Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Compton, and others, were expressive for her feelings on this point. The Beauchamps, with Conyers, were her only guests at the dinner-table; but a splendid supper was provided for the other company, who began to arrive about half-past nine, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt being almost the first to make their appearance, and constrained, then, to listen to the felicitations offered to Mrs. Gordon and her niece.

'Ah, my dear girl!' said Selina Markham, kissing Blanche, 'so this is an occasion for your escape from Hooknose, Mervyn and Co.?'

'Hush, Selina!'

'I shall not be hushed, poor child, from expressing my congratulations, and only regret Mark did not send a ball through the coachman's leg, to prevent his running. By how fares our champion, Will Beauchamp? I intend heading a subscription to present him with a piece of plate, in token of his gallant conduct in defending the rights of women to choose their own husbands.'

'What will you give, Blanche? or—(sinking her voice to a whisper)—do you propose rewarding him in another way?'

'Oh, nonsense, Selina; how foolish you talk to-night!'

'I should not call it foolish, child, to reward my preserver with something more substantial than gold and silver, and I rather suspect, from those tell-tale eyes, Blanche Douglas is of the same opinion; but as the subject appears so disagreeable, let us talk of something else—this grand hunt ball, which is now fixed to take place on the fourteenth of next month, St. Valentine's day. That is to be a splendid affair, as all are required to appear in characters or fancy dresses. What is yours to be, Blanche?'

'I really have not thought much about it yet, Selina; but here comes your brother.'

'Eh—Miss Douglas—glad to see you looking so bewitching to-night. 'Pon honor, room all returned—frightened enough, I dare say, at first; demned disagreeable affair—lucky it's no worse—journey to Scotland no joke at this time of year—*volens volens*, and all that sort of thing. But Dick did the thing cleverly—all *volens* in his case. Demned! how old Mervyn stormed and raved—cracked, they say, ever since. Lost five hundred pounds as well as his daughter—deserved the old villain right—regularly flogged—wish he'd been shot instead of Will Beauchamp. Poor fellow! looks very white about the gills still.'

'There, Ned, that will do,' said his sister; 'we have had enough of that story.'

'Then, Miss Douglas, may I have the honor—first quadrille, or second, eh?'

'Neither,' replied Blanche, laughing, 'but the fourth, if you particularly desire it.'

'Thank you, Miss Douglas, feel greatly honored, and all that sort of thing,' which the captain walked off.