

# THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXIV.

(CONTINUED)

As the time had for holding the assizes now near, Beauchamp's tenderness and encouragement to strengthen her for the coming trial; and every hour he could spare was devoted to her.

"Oh, William!" she exclaimed one day when they were walking arm-in-arm in the garden, "I have such a dread of appearing in court, that I wish Charles would give up all further proceedings, and let the matter rest as it is. Will you ask him to do so, as he will not listen to me?"

"My dearest girl, you know I would do anything to spare your feelings; but you must consider, if the trial is vented taking place, your fair name will be tarnished for ever, and people will say you consented to elope with Lord Vancourt; this will be undoubtedly the opinion of the world, and the reflection cast upon your character for such an act will follow you through life. Would you consent to lie under such an imputation, merely to avoid a little unpleasantness for a few minutes? as you have little more to depose to than your honor, and surprise at Lord Vancourt's attempt to hurry you off."

"If not for my own sake, yet for yours, dear William, must I summon then all my courage, as no reflections shall ever be cast on your wife, which I now consider myself to be, in the sight of Heaven, having vowed never to marry another, if it pleases the Almighty to spare our lives until that event takes place."

"My own dearest Blanche, on my account you shall never be subjected to one moment's inquietude, which it may be in my power to prevent. The world is nothing to me. I care neither for its favors nor its frowns; it is for yourself only I am thinking, should any unfortunate circumstance prevent our union; for without Mrs. Harcourt's consent, I cannot claim your hand until two long years have elapsed; and how many things may happen in that time to dash the cup of happiness from my lips!"

"Nothing, William, but the hand of death can ever prevent me fulfilling my engagement, although I fear you will never believe me sincere in this oft-expressed determination. Oh, would that you could read every secret feeling of my heart, which beats for you only! Indeed, indeed, dear William, your doubts and suspicions make me very miserable; for three long weeks, day after day, hour after hour, I sat wondering why you never came, watching and hoping that the sound of every horse I heard approaching might be yours. Oh, had you come as usual, I had been spared that unpleasant scene with Lord Danby, and you the agony of believing for one moment that I could prefer him or any other human being to yourself."

"Dear, dear Blanche, pray spare me those bitter reflections which my past conduct calls up; but, indeed, I could not help thinking, from what occurred at the ball, and afterwards at Barton Court, when you were sitting so long with Lord Danby, and so evidently pleased with his society, that his attentions must be most agreeable to you; and it was on that account solely, and lest my presence might influence you, or deter him from an expression of his sentiments, that I absented myself so long from the Priory."

"Well, dear William, you do not now, I hope, believe that I ever intended anything more than common civility to Lord Danby; but to console you of my unwavering attachment to yourself, here is a little present which I had purchased expressly for your own hand—producing a beautiful diamond ring, with a small lock of her hair inside—and which you must wear as a symbol of my love. Come, give me your hand—I shall place it myself on your finger, and when I cease to be your own dear Blanche, as you so often call me, then return this ring to me

person and being in love with him; and it would be great vanity in a girl to suppose that every man, who tries to make himself agreeable, must necessarily be in love with her."

"Not so very wide a distinction, dear girl, as the one often leads to the other, and men certainly consider these smiling receptions of their attentions as an encouragement to proceed further."

"Then, you gentlemen, William, are very vain, unreasonable animals; for girls, if distant or reserved in their manners, are accused of hauteur, stupidity, or ill temper; and if socially disposed, of flirting, or leading you to imagine they are more seriously affected."

"Well, dear Blanche, it is, I concluded rather a difficult matter for young ladies to draw the line of distinction, but you have seen two instances of men's vanity and unreasonableness in the conduct of Vernon and Lord Danby, who both aspired to your hand without you having given them, as you believe, any just or reasonable grounds for thinking that you accepted their devoirs in any other light than mere politeness; so you must perceive, my dear girl, that my opinion of men's feelings in such cases is tolerably correct; and I would only suggest, to spare yourself the unpleasantness of similar scenes in future, a more guarded and reserved manner towards any man who shows you any unusual attentions, unless you really mean to encourage his addresses."

"Then, Mr. Will, I suppose I must appear as 'deuivre' as a 'Quakeress' in society; neither smile, nor look pleased, scarcely speak, and consent to be set down as a most stupid, dull girl, without two ideas in my head, and treat all men alike, whether agreeable or the reverse, merely to avoid the possibility of their failing in love with me. Really, if men are such foolish, sensitive creatures, they must take care of themselves; but I rather suspect the majority are not very scrupulous in trying to win the affections of unsuspecting girls, without intending anything more."

"It is quite true, dear girl, that men of the world care no more about breaking girls' hearts than they do about breaking their fans, and such deserve no mercy; but I am perfectly satisfied my dear Blanche will never encourage flirtations with men of this description."

"So you really can repose some little confidence in me after all your lecturing, Mr. William?"

"Yes, Blanche, I do, indeed, believe you incapable of wilfully misleading any one; and as you know the happiness or misery of my future life now rests in your keeping, you will not, I am convinced, think lightly of that trust which from this hour is so implicitly confided in you; and if I am a little jealous sometimes, set it down to the right account—my sole, undivided love and anxious solicitude about one who is, and ever must be, far dearer to me than my own life. And now, dear girl, let us return to Aunt Gordon, who, I dare say, begins to think we have been a most unreasonable time love-making this morning."

"Well, children," remarked that lady, "your delightful little topic appears quite inexhaustible."

"My dear aunt," replied Blanche, laughing, "you are greatly deceived in thinking William has been talking love to me all this time, whereas he has been giving me a most severe lecture on flirtation; in fact, dear aunt, his speeches are often the reverse of romantic, pathetic, or even complimentary."

"So much the better, my love; it is the greatest proof that he has formed a high and true estimate of your own good sense. The silly trash talked by most lovers is perfectly sickening, and I never thought William would pour into your ears such fulsome, unmeaning stuff, which even a child of twelve years old might feel ashamed of listening to."

"There is no fear of that, dear aunt; only just give him a hint not to lecture me quite so much for the future."

"Return the compliment, my love, as he requires some sharp admonitions on his weak point—jealousy. And now, I want you both to assist me in the conservatory."

CHAPTER XXV.

could assume, for detaining her from her friends a few minutes longer.

"You were acquainted, I believe, Miss Douglas, with Lord Vancourt some time previously to this unfortunate affair on Marston Common?"

"A very short time only, sir," was the reply.

"You met his lordship, I think, first at Marston Castle, where you were staying on a visit to Lord and Lady Mervyn?"

"Yes," was the faint response.

"You found him, I dare say, as others have, a very agreeable, entertaining companion, extremely courteous and deferential to ladies, and in no wise forward or presuming in their society?"

No answer being returned, Sergeant Wrangler paused a moment, directing a smiling, self-satisfied look at the jury, to attract their attention to this admission in his favor, adjusting, at the same time, his gown with the air of counsel when confident of success.

"Confound that knave!" whispered Malcolm to Mrs. Gordon; "he will lead that timorous, unsuspecting girl into admissions which will play the devil with us, and herself also; but stay here a moment, aunt, whilst I hand a huc or two to Whalley, which he wrote on the crown of his hat, and the next moment a little cramped note was handed up on the point of a stick by Malcolm's attorney to his counsel, which being read, was answered by a nod of the head. Sergeant Wrangler was meanwhile attempting to improve the case by other exertions."

"There's no doubt, Miss Douglas, you felt pleased and gratified, perhaps something more, by the polite attentions of this handsome, highly-gifted young nobleman?"

"My lord," exclaimed Whalley, suddenly rising before his opponent's question could be answered, "I object to that question and the course of cross-examination adopted by my learned friend, who is trying to obtain admissions from Miss Douglas, which, from her youth and inexperience of practice in law courts, will be used to her disadvantage; and I must caution her not to notice these impertinent insinuations."

"The last question," said the judge, "was scarcely fair, Mr. Wrangler; conveying an inference which you had no right to make."

"I bow your decision, my lord," replied Wrangler, no wise disconcerted by this rebuke. "I can easily obtain my point in another way."

This little altercation had opened Blanche's eyes and understanding as to what Mr. Sergeant Wrangler was aiming at; and the spirit of the Douglasses came to her rescue, to retort upon her crafty interrogator.

"You were in the habit, Miss Douglas, I believe, when at Marston Castle, of frequently driving and walking alone with Lord Vancourt?"

"No, I was not," answered Blanche, in a firm voice, which was distinctly audible in the court.

"Bravo! Miss Blanche," shouted a voice from the crowd near the door; "give it the rascally lawyer in turn."

"I beg pardon, Miss Douglas," continued her tormentor; "but we have evidence to prove you were seen several times walking alone with his lordship."

"Twice only—when invited to take a walk by Miss Mervyn, I was left alone, as I believed, purposely, to Lord Vancourt's attentions, which being disagreeable to me, I never again accompanied Miss Mervyn in her walks."

"Still, Miss Douglas, notwithstanding Lord Vancourt's attentions being, as you state, so disagreeable, you accepted him as a partner at the Cherrington Ball, not for one only, but for two quadrilles; and dancing twice the same evening with the same partner is generally considered a very particular favor."

"I accepted Lord Vancourt for the second dance in obedience to my aunt Mrs. Harcourt's commands, and most certainly contrary to my own inclination, being previously engaged to Major Hammond for that set."

"Well, Miss Douglas, we, who cannot enter into the fancies and feelings of young ladies, must judge by their acts; and I should certainly consider it an act of encouragement in any lady accepting me twice for a partner. Mammams and aunts are very convenient personages sometimes to fall back upon."

concocted at Mervyn Castle to impose such a worthless person as Lord Vancourt upon an artless, unsuspecting young lady; into which, I am sorry to add, Miss Douglas's guardian was unwittingly dragged by the false representations made to him there of Lord Vancourt's high character and large fortune; the latter, no doubt, of great weight with guardians generally."

During this short address, Sergeant Wrangler sat down; and Mr. Whalley, politely apologising to Miss Douglas for the annoyance she had experienced from her cross-examination, said she was now at liberty to rejoin her friends. Poor Blanche, as soon as handed down from the witness-box to a seat below, occupied by her aunt and Constance, overcame by the excessive heat of the court, as well as overpowered by her outraged feelings, fell into a swoon, from which Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon were attempting to rouse her, when Beauchamp (followed by Stiles and young Hazel) sprang to her relief.

Without a moment's hesitation, and before Malcolm could guess his intentions, the fainting form of Blanche Douglas was quickly raised in Beauchamp's arms (the two bold yeomen making way for his advance) carried out of court, and placed on a sofa in the magistrates' waiting-room.

"Quick, neighbor Hazel," cried Stiles, "for a jug of cold water, whilst I throw up the windows."

Blanche, unconscious of what had occurred, soon revived by the cold air and still colder water applied to her forehead and face, and Mrs. Gordon's carriage being in waiting, she was driven immediately home to the Priory, accompanied by her aunt and Constance; Malcolm and Beauchamp being obliged to return to the court.

The next witness called by Mr. Whalley was Alice Hayward, Blanche's maid.

"You went with your young mistress, I believe, to Marston Castle, in the month of — last?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw Lord Vancourt there, I conclude?"

"Yes, sir—several times."

"So that you would be sure to know him again?"

"Oh, yes; he was a very particular-looking gentleman."

"Was he very particular in his attentions to your young lady, Miss Douglas?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Did she ever go out walking or driving with him alone?"

"No, sir; Miss Blanche would never dream of doing such a thing with a stranger."

"With whom then did she generally set out for a walk?"

"With Miss Mervyn, sir, accompanied sometimes by Lord Vancourt and Mr. Vernon."

"Did Miss Douglas ever allude to these walks on returning to her room?"

"Yes, sir; the day before we left the Castle, she told me she felt so annoyed by Miss Mervyn and Mr. Vernon's conduct, in leaving her purposely, as she believed, twice alone with Lord Vancourt, that she would never walk with her again."

"Did she keep to this resolution?"

"Yes, sir; the next morning, when Miss Mervyn entered her room, asking her to walk, she pleaded a bad headache, and would not go down-stairs till Mrs. Harcourt's carriage came to the door to take us home."

"Did Miss Douglas ever make any other remarks to you about Lord Vancourt?"

"She said, the night before she quitted Marston Castle, that she was very glad their visit was finished; that although entertaining sometimes, she had taken a great dislike to Lord Vancourt, and hoped never to meet him again."

"Do you remember anything particular occurring two days after the ball at Cherrington?"

"Yes, sir; after luncheon, Miss Blanche on that day ran up to her room, and began sobbing and crying as if her heart would break, because Mrs. Harcourt called her an ungrateful girl for refusing Lord Vancourt; 'but I could not marry such a man, Alice; indeed, I never would,' she said, 'if Aunt Harcourt turned me out of her house for refusing him.' 'No more wouldn't I, my dear young mistress,' said I, 'even to be made a lady of.' Then, the next morning

lans of the plot which had been concerted to ensnare her, and the character I had heard of Lord Vancourt, at which she was exceedingly astonished."

"You attended, I believe, the ball at Cherrington, and overheard a conversation between Lord Vancourt and Mr. Vernon there, relative to this attempted abduction?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you notice Miss Douglas's behavior, whilst dancing with Lord Vancourt?"

"Particularly; well knowing her dislike to the man, and the imploring look she cast on me, when he came to claim her hand for the dance, determined me to take my position close to her, whilst dancing with his lordship."

"Thank you, Mr. Conyers," said as Whalley sat down, up rose the Serjeant instantly.

"You say, Mr. Conyers, you warned Miss Douglas of the plot contrived against her, and of Lord Vancourt's character, two days before she went to stay at the castle? I should have thought, sir, the first person you ought to have made acquainted with this pretended plot was Mr. Harcourt, the young lady's guardian?"

"I thought differently, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler; but I directly informed Mrs. Gordon, her other guardian, of all I had heard, to whose discretion I could more safely confide this matter; and from what occurred subsequently, I am quite satisfied that she was the most proper person to be consulted."

"You had good reasons, no doubt, sir, for trying to prevent Miss Douglas marrying Lord Vancourt? you have heard of a friend in need being a friend indeed, and Mr. William Beauchamp is, I am told, a very particular friend of yours?"

"Mr. Beauchamp is, sir, I am proud to say, a very particular friend of mine; a man of high principles, honorable feelings, and sound, good sense—the latter much needed by Mr. Serjeant Wrangler; for how a learned barrister could have labored, as you have done this day, to prove an absurdity, patent to the commonest understanding, I cannot comprehend; you are striving to prove the consent of Miss Douglas to elope with Lord Vancourt. Now, sir, giving you the admission you try in vain to obtain, that she was a silly girl, caught at first sight by the handsome person of this man, and despising all the warnings she had received of his true character, want of fortune, and lastly, of his actually being a married man; why, what on earth should induce her to elope with him—her guardian consenting to his proposal for Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, blind to the revelations made to them, persisted to the last in taking his lordship's part, and the lady almost insisted on her niece marrying him. With these facts clear before you, how can you hope to persuade a child of ten years old, much less twelve men of common sense, that there existed any pretence whatever for Miss Douglas consenting to run away with Lord Vancourt, nearly four hundred miles, to be married, when she could have been married at the parish church with her guardian's approval? This is all nonsense, Mr. Serjeant Wrangler, perfectly absurd; and you are wasting the time of the court to no purpose."

"Such is not my opinion, Mr. Conyers; but I do not wish to occupy more of your time, which seems so precious to you; nor to be favored with another long-winded citation, which I have in vain attempted to interrupt."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Thomas Carter next deposed to the conversation he overheard between Vernon and Harley on the evening of the day on which the hounds met at Marston Castle, and having given his evidence, was turning to go down, when Serjeant Wrangler exclaimed—"Stop, Mr. Carter, I have a word or two to say to you. So, you audacious traitor and eavesdropper, you have had the assurance to swear that you heard all this trumped-up story through a thick mahogany door?"

"Yes, sir, I did—every word of it."

"Then you were in the habit, I conclude,