

THE Master of the Hounds.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

(CONTINUED.)

'Thank you, William, I see it is intended for myself, which I from the first suspected; and having read the contents, she said—"So you proposed punishing poor me and Blanche by leaving us so abruptly, merely on account of your difference with Malcolm yesterday?"

'I will tell you all that passed between us, dear aunt, and then you will judge whether I could feel quite at home with Lady Malcolm or himself, unless I submit to be considered a nonentity.'

After hearing his recital, Mrs. Gordon said, 'Charles has expressed his deep regret at having offended you by his unguarded expression; and as I and Blanche have been looking forward to your arrival in town with so much delight, you will not, I hope, allow this trifling affair to deprive us of the pleasure of your company. In short, my dear boy, our chief enjoyment will be at an end, if you leave us.'

'There needs no other inducement for me to remain, dear aunt, if I can contribute in any way to your happiness; but I shall not avail myself of Lady Malcolm's general invitation to her house.'

'As you please, William; but I wish you to call on my sister this morning, as she is not a little vexed with Charles because you did not dine with her yesterday; so put away your writing materials, and come with me.'

Lady Malcolm received Beauchamp rather formally at first, saying she had expected him at dinner the evening before.

'I was not honored with an invitation to your ladyship's table yesterday, that I am aware of,' replied Beauchamp, very quietly.

'I gave you a general invitation, Mr. Beauchamp, and I meant that to include breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, every day in the week, when not engaged myself from home, as long as you remain in town.'

'I feel deeply indebted for your ladyship's most friendly offer of hospitality, although I cannot think of obtruding myself so unceremoniously, when my place at your table ought to be required for some distinguished guest.'

'Very well, Mr. William, then you will place me under the necessity of writing a formal note every morning to request the honor of Mr. Beauchamp's company at dinner. So you do not approve of young ladies remaining to see the ballet, it seems, what Charles has told me?'

'Certainly not, Lady Malcolm,' was the quiet though firm response.

'Will you state your reasons for holding this opinion?'

'With pleasure, to Lady Malcolm when alone, and I believe I may trust to her impartial judgment to decide whether they are intrinsically right or wrong, without regard to fashion or the world's verdict. Those who think seriously will not follow a multitude to do evil.'

'Well, Mr. William, I believe I never have thought as seriously on this subject, or perhaps on many others, as I ought; but I respect your scruples and honor your principles; and you have my promise that your sister and Blanche shall never again be condemned by me to witness another ballet; will that satisfy you?'

'Yes, indeed, dear Lady Malcolm,' rising and taking her hand; 'I do indeed thank you for this kind concession.'

'Then now, you foolish boy, will you make my house your home?'

'As far as I consistently can, with the greatest pleasure. You will dine with us to-day, then, to begin? to which a most willing assent was given. Malcolm now burst into the room, exclaiming, 'Why, Beauchamp, they told me at Long's you were about to leave town immediately; how is this, old fellow?' offering his hand; 'surely you are not so

without any serious intentions, in my opinion deserving censure, if nothing stronger.'

'You are quite right, Beauchamp, and I shall certainly give Ayrshire a quiet hint on this subject, which will be quite sufficient; so now come with me to Tattersall's for an hour, and after lunch we will be at the command of the ladies.'

On turning into the yard, they encountered Lord Ayrshire, with whom Malcolm shook hands, and taking him aside said, 'You will excuse the privilege of an old acquaintance, Ayrshire; but of the two young ladies you were so closely besieging in my mother's carriage yesterday, one is, as I believe you are aware, my cousin, and the other the sister of my friend Beauchamp, standing opposite, who is rather particular about such things, as well as myself.'

'Oh! I understand, Malcolm; you think, I suppose, I am playing the old game; but, on my word, my dear fellow, I am positively in raptures with your cousin, and never felt so serious in my life.'

'Then take my advice, Ayrshire, and go no further, for your attentions will be thrown away.'

'How so, Malcolm?'

'Simply because I believe her affections are engaged elsewhere.'

'Is Danby, then, the happy man?'

'Not that I am aware of.'

'Who is, then, Malcolm?'

'I can afford you no further information, Ayrshire; so good-morning. A word to a wise man is enough.'

'But not enough for me,' muttered the Marquis, as he walked thoughtfully out of the yard. 'It is evident Malcolm does not favor my pretensions to his cousin—thinks I am not in earnest, perhaps; but I shall not withdraw, although from his peppery disposition much caution must be observed for the future.'

When the gentlemen had left Grosvenor Square, Lady Malcolm remarked, 'Lord Ayrshire's propensity to such decided flirtation is very unfortunate, as he is a most agreeable, well-informed person, and in other respects quite unexceptionable; but his sister being a particular favorite of mine, I had invited both to dine with me to-morrow, to meet a few other friends, before Charles and Beauchamp had expressed themselves so warmly on his conduct, which I fear may lead to some unpleasantness.'

'Not on William's part, I will engage,' replied Mrs. Gordon, 'from whom your guests will always receive every consideration, and you can of course give Charles a hint, if you think one necessary, which I do not, both so thoroughly appreciating the rights of hospitality.'

After luncheon, Mrs. Gordon took Blanche and Constance with her to a flower-show at Chiswick, Malcolm and Beauchamp following on horseback; and they had scarcely left the square, when Mrs. Harcourt called on Lady Malcolm, and opened her budget of grievances about Blanche, commenting severely on her refusal of Lord Danby, and Mrs. Gordon's defence of her conduct. Lady Malcolm upheld her sister, saying she was quite right in allowing Blanche to exercise her own discretion, as any attempt to coerce her feelings would be attended with the usual result. 'But I may tell you, Mrs. Harcourt, for your satisfaction, that Lord Danby is still particularly attentive to her, and the Marquis of Ayrshire most unpleasantly so, considering his well-known character for flirtation; but as both dine here to-morrow, you can form your own judgment.'

It was then decided that Blanche should be presented at the next drawing-room, the ensuing week. Soon after which, Mrs. Harcourt, on other visitors being announced, took her leave.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The select dinner party at Lady Malcolm's the following day, consisted of Lord and Lady Armore, Marquises of Ayrshire and Danby, Sir Lionel Markham and Lady, with two daughters, Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Fortescue, with the Captain and Mrs. Conyers. Beauchamp was not at first in a very

before leaving. Have you seen her lately?'

'Yes, in the further room, surrounded by a host of admirers. By Jove, Beauchamp, her head will be turned with so much adulation! I thought how it would be when she came to London.'

'Wait a moment, Conyers, I will soon return,' replied Beauchamp, and he began to work his way through the crowd, until he discovered the object of his search sitting at the extreme end of the room, with Lords Ayrshire and Danby standing before her, vying in their efforts to obtain the greatest share of her smiles. Beauchamp stood for a short time behind them, unable to approach nearer; but Danby turning, on observing her change of color and eyes directed beyond him, he gained a nearer position, and was able to address her.

'I think you will find it cooler and more agreeable in one of the other rooms.'

'If Miss Douglas will be guided by my opinion,' added Lord Ayrshire, 'she will not run the risk of losing her seat for the chance of a more refreshing atmosphere, which is very doubtful; and I really think this the coolest place in the whole suite of apartments.'

'If Miss Douglas will trust to my escort,' said Beauchamp, advancing and offering his arm, 'she will find my representation correct.'

Blanche rose directly, and taking his arm, left Lord Ayrshire, who could scarcely suppress his mortification at Beauchamp's coolness in leading her off. On elbowing his way through the opposing masses, Beauchamp took Blanche to a small back drawing-room, where they found Constance and Malcolm.

'Have I deceived you?' inquired he, 'or would you prefer the heated atmosphere you have left, which perhaps the flattering speeches of Lord Ayrshire may have compensated for?'

'Oh, no, William; I am too delighted to escape both, and wondered why you have kept so much aloof from me to-night.'

'I thought you had been too agreeably entertained at dinner, and since by others, to need my presence.'

'I may make the same reply, William, as to your flirtation with Mrs. Fortescue, which others have noticed besides myself.'

'You set the example, Blanche, and I suppose flirting is infectious.'

'Indeed, I am not conscious of having done so, although I did feel a little piqued by your gaiety.'

'Then, my dear girl, pray do not let us vex each other again by such absurd fancies; and now, as Conyers is here—who had followed them, and was talking to Malcolm—I propose we all have a quiet ride together to-morrow, somewhere in the country, as I detest the heat and dust of the Park. What say you, Malcolm?'

'Just the thing, Beauchamp, to cool our heated frames after this baking; to which Conyers assented, and two o'clock being fixed, Malcolm said, 'Now, Constance, with your bad headache, pray go to your room, or you will not be fit for anything to-morrow, and I will tell my mother that I insisted on your doing so.'

'I fear she will be offended, Charles.'

'Pooh! nonsense, my dear girl; run away, and take Blanche with you, unless she prefers listening to Ayrshire's sweet voice a little longer.'

'Not another second, Charles.'

'Then be off, both of you—with which the two girls, after an affectionate 'good night' from their lovers, made their escape; Conyers and Beauchamp taking their departure at the same time to their hotel.'

Lord Ayrshire remarked to Danby, as Beauchamp walked off with Blanche, 'That Mr. Beauchamp is a monstrous cool hand, Danby.'

'Yes, and a very determined one as well; and you had better be cautious how you contradict or stand in his way; for I know him well, and he will bear no trifling from any man. When put on his mettle, it is a word and a blow with him—and the blow generally comes first.'

'Indeed! but what is Miss Douglas to him?'

'That I cannot tell you, except that they have been brought up together almost as brother and sister.'

'And her ladyship, your mamma?'

'Rather allig, this morning, from an attack of hypochondriasis.'

'Oh, indeed! sorry to hear it, my lord—but never heard of the complaint before.'

'It is chiefly confined, I believe,' replied Malcolm, 'to persons in fashionable life.'

'But lauks, my dear,' turning to Constance, 'you and Miss Douglas look uncommon peaky—hope you won't catch the same disease.'

'Nothing more likely,' added Malcolm; 'I suspect they are are sickening with it already—or the scarlet fever.'

'My gracious! my lord—I hope not—Honorias has never had that dreadful disease—or the small-pox either;—but I heard both the young ladies were going to court next week.'

'If not prevented by illness, such is their intention, I believe,' replied Lord Malcolm.

'Well, my lord, I was just a thinking, if her ladyship would be so very obliging as to take me and Honorias under her wing at the same time, I should consider it a very great favor.'

'I really cannot say what arrangements Lady Malcolm has made; nor am I aware if she has positively decided on being present at the next drawing-room.'

'Well, my dear,' turning to Constance, 'I dare say you will let Honorias know her ladyship's intentions; and as we have taken a house for the season, in Albemarle Street, not far off, you know, just a nice little walk from Grosvenor Square, I hope you and Miss Douglas will look in upon us just in a friendly way, and Mrs. Gordon, too. Happy to see you at all times; so don't make any bones about fashionable hours. Papa is so fond of the theatre in Covent Garden that we always dine a quarter before six, to be ready for the play; so pray come when agreeable. Going for a ride, I suppose, Miss Douglas, in the Park? won't detain you any longer this fine day?' with which Mrs. Winterbottom bustled off.

'Ha! ha! ha!' cried Selina, 'pon honor, here's a treat in store for her ladyship—Mrs. and Miss Winterbottom, by Lady Malcolm!—my gracious! what a sensation such an announcement will produce!'

'Confound her impudence!' exclaimed Malcolm; 'but it is an impossibility.'

'Of course it is,' replied Constance; 'at least, I should never dream of hinting such a thing.'

'This comes, my dear Con,' said Selina, 'of patronizing such vulgar people, and asking the young lady to spend a few days at Bampton.'

'It was done by my father's desire, Selina, and you know the reason why we endeavor to be on good terms with all our neighbors, even at some individual sacrifice; but this a most unexpected proposition, which I shall positively decline to make to Lady Malcolm.'

'Well, come along,' cried Malcolm, 'Beauchamp and Conyers have just arrived; and Aunt Gordon can tell my mother as much as she likes about Mrs. Winterbottom, on which they descended into the hall, and the ladies were placed on their steeds by their respective cavaliers.'

Of all recreations, there is not one more exhilarating than a ride in the country on a fine May morning, when the weather is in that delightful temperature experienced generally in that genial month. May is the season of youth to all vegetable nature, then just bursting forth with all the freshness and fragrance of its early bloom. Even the leaves of the trees possess a softness of touch, and a lively, glossy verdure, which is not to be found in any other month.

As Beauchamp rode by the side of Blanche, he plucked a beech leaf from a bough overhanging the road, and placing it in her hand, said, 'There, Blanche, is an emblem of yourself; can anything be more soft and delicate than the down of that pretty leaf, now just expanded in its youthful loveliness? Yet two months hence, after the dust and heat of the summer's sun, all this freshness and glossiness will be gone; so will, I fear, dear girl, the bloom now mantling in those glowing cheeks be destroyed by the overheated, unhealthy atmosphere of these fashionable assemblies, which is more destructive to youthful complexions than the burning rays of the midsummer sun to the

'But you might get Lord Malcolm or Miss Douglas to speak for you, my dear,' replied Mrs. Winterbottom; 'or what's the use of friends and relations, if they won't do kind acts for one another?'

'Lord Malcolm makes a point of never interfering with his mother's arrangements in any way,' continued Constance, 'as she is very particular in some respects, even with her own son; and Miss Douglas is equally averse to asking such a favor of her aunt, to whom she is at present under so many obligations, as well as myself.'

'Oh, very well, Miss Beauchamp; it don't signify making such a fuss about a trifle; but we aint grand enough for you quality folk, that's the secret.'

'You have no reason to say that,' replied Constance, rather indignantly, 'of me or any of my family, as we have all shown you every attention in our power.'

'Well, my dear, I did not mean to make any reflections against your worthy father, yourself, or young Squire Beauchamp; so don't be angry with me. And as you can't speak to Lady Malcolm, I must make papa look out for somebody else to present us at Court. Most things to be had in London for a consideration.'

'No doubt,' replied Constance, as she rose to take her leave.

CHAPTER XXXV.

We must now pass over a month. Blanche and Constance had been presented; but being much admired—but the former, from her superiority of height, brilliant, sparkling eyes, combined with her faultless formal graceful demeanor, attracted very general attention, to which the fact of her being heiress, and Lady Malcolm's niece, gave additional charms. And after her inauguration at Almack's, she was unhesitatingly pronounced by the cognoscenti in female beauty, such as Lord Ayrshire, Danby, and other, the belle of the season.

Beauchamp witnessed with secret alarm the increasing number of Blanche's admirers and the adulation paid her, which he was powerless to avert, although his influence was still unsparingly exerted on every fitting occasion, to counteract the effects of the poison continually poured into her ears. To his quick, observant eye (and what perception is more acute than a lover's?) her repugnance to flattery began to yield, first to its endurance, and then to a more qualified reception of its pestilential breathings. Vanity is, without doubt, one of the chief compounds of human nature, by which all even the very best of mankind, are influenced, although almost imperceptibly to themselves; and it would be absurd to say that Blanche Douglas did not feel pleased, perhaps rather elated, by the homage paid to her charms, although too pure in mind and innocent in heart to throw out the least lure by words or actions to attract it. There is an excitement in dissipation which drags its youthful votaries, first reluctantly, perhaps, then almost irresistibly, along its slippery path, until they become so thoroughly entangled in its mazes, as to be incapable of extricating themselves.

The London season was now in the zenith of its splendor, and invitations continued pouring in to Lady Malcolm in such rapid succession, that even her ladyship, though long inured and case-hardened to dissipation, began to feel wearied with its constant repetition. New additions had been made to her already extended list of acquaintances; the instigation of Blanche's admirers, many of whom, moving in the highest circles, had induced their mamma to send cards of invitation to Lady Malcolm and Miss Douglas. Amongst others, the Duchess of Castleton invited them to a grand ball, in which Malcolm and Constance were included; but Beauchamp, although long known to Lord Danby, and meeting him constantly at parties, was passed over. On the evening of this ball, he was dining in Grosvenor Square, when Malcolm observed, 'We shall meet you, of course, to-night; Beauchamp, at Castleton House?'

'I have not received an invitation,' was the short reply.

'How is this, Beauchamp? I took it for granted Danby had asked you long ago