

...at the box and in fact, to tell you the truth, my dear madam, I do not appear to have gone out hunting.

'Yet Constance does?'

'Oh, no, merely to see the hounds throw off, and then return home; but Blanche is even too kind for that; and certainly I shall never advise her to do anything of the kind, although most husbands, and particularly those of the aristocracy, like to see their wives with a good seat on horseback, to parade them in Rotten Row during the London season; and who knows but Blanche may one day become a countess?' At these words, the lady in question entered the room, and they at once set out for their ride.

When they had passed the lodge gates, Blanche, who had overheard his last words in the drawing-room, inquired what he was saying to Mrs. Harcourt about a countess.

'Why, my dear Blanche,' said Bob, 'your aunt Harcourt intends you shall become a duchess, or a countess, at least.'

'Oh, nonsense, Mr. Conyers; don't play that so foolish.'

'Well, then, let me ask, are you going to-morrow to spend a few days at Marston?'

'Yes, I believe so.'

'Has such an invitation ever been sent before to Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt and yourself?'

'No, I think not.'

'Ah, replied Bob, 'I see it all.'

'What do you see, Mr. Conyers?'

'I will tell you, dear Blanche, on one condition—that you do not reveal what I say to any human being.'

'I should never think of doing so,' replied Blanche.

'Very well; you will find at Marston Castle a certain nobleman, called Lord Vancourt, who will pay you great attention, and whom your aunt will try and persuade you to marry.'

Blanche blushed scarlet at this information, and said, 'This is very improbable, Mr. Conyers.'

'Is Bob Conyers a false prophet, Miss Douglas? But now mark me, if you do not meet this lord, if he does not pay you the greatest attentions, and within a very short time propose for you, you may then call me out. They have had a trap to catch you, my dear girl; and Captain Melville told me at Compton's ball the other night, that a more unprincipled scoundrel (those were his expressions) than this same Lord Vancourt does not exist; and now your old friend and master having done his duty in warning you of the net set to catch you, he has only one word more to say on the subject, and that one word is—*beware!*'

'Oh, Mr. Conyers,' said the young girl, almost in tears, 'how can I repay you for your ever kind interest in my welfare?'

'It would be strange indeed,' replied he, 'if I did not take an interest, and a deep one too, in that sweet girl I have so often nursed when a child, who has neither father nor brother to watch over and protect her; and I am fearful your guardian is too worldly-minded to consult your true happiness (which ought to be his chief consideration) in settling you in her; in fact, I know well that both he and Mrs. Harcourt are resolved on forming some brilliant matrimonial alliance for you amongst the nobility, to which rank they think you have a right to aspire. Perceiving that such are the intentions, as your sincere friend, I wish to caution you to consult your own inclinations before their wishes, and never to be persuaded to marry a young man, however high in rank, unless his character and disposition are such as to ensure you a true happiness. Now, dear Blanche, my dear friend, for which you may perhaps thank old Bob Conyers a fool; but I could not rest happy until I had told you my suspicions, and given you my advice.'

'Indeed, Mr. Conyers,' said Blanche, 'I feel most grateful for your kindness on this and many more occasions, and I shall ever regard you as one of my best friends.'

'Well, whenever you want my advice or assistance, do not hesitate a moment, dear

to which Mrs. Harcourt buys a cat and a dog ring him a most charming, delightful present, so well-informed and unaffected, although of such superior manners and high talents. In short, my dear madam,' said that crafty lady, 'Lord Vancourt is quite the lion in the highest circles in town, and eagerly sought after, also, on account of his splendid fortune.'

'Is it not surprising then,' inquired Mrs. Harcourt, 'that he is still unmarried?'

'Oh, not in the least; his lordship is so very particular in his choice, fearing he may be accepted on account of his title and fortune; and I think it most probable, with his romantic ideas about women and marriage, that he will assume the disguise of a walking tourist some day, in search of a country daisies, and marry her for love only.'

The artful speech struck home to Mrs. Harcourt, who thought earnestly that he would be just the match to suit her niece. Among the company that evening were the Rollestons, who addressed her to them Captain Melville; and Caroline Rolleston was sitting with Blanche, when Miss Harley was paying such high eulogiums on Lord Vancourt.

'Good heavens!' said Caroline, 'how can that woman go on telling such stories about Lord Vancourt, who is one of the most gay, dissipated men about town, and as poor as a country curate; and they do say, my dear' (in a whisper) 'already married to an opera singer? but the latter is a secret, which Melville let fall one day, quite unintentionally, and therefore it may be treason to mention it.'

'Do you think that can really be true?' inquired Blanche.

'Indeed, I do; Captain Melville is a person above the suspicion of uttering a falsehood. And did you observe, before dinner, when Lord Vancourt approached to shake hands with him, that he drew back, making him a very low bow?'

'Perhaps they have had some quarrel,' observed Blanche.

'Most likely,' replied Caroline, 'since no two men can be of more opposite ideas; but papa says that Captain Melville is a perfect gentleman, and of most honorable feelings.'

As they were discussing these points, the gentlemen entered the room, for Lord Mervyn having observed there was something amiss between his protegee, Lord Vancourt, and Captain Melville, proposed their joining the ladies very early, before any unpleasantness could occur.

Lord Vancourt, dreading some exposure from Melville, avoided the heiress that evening, for fear of exciting his remarks, devoting himself chiefly to Lady Mervyn, whilst Melville endeavored to do the agreeable to Miss Douglas. The evening (with Lord Mervyn's dark looks, which exercised a decided influence over the greater part of the company) passed uncomfortably enough to all except Melville, who was quite enchanted with Blanche, thinking her the most lovely, unattached girl he had ever been acquainted with.

The next and three following days, Lord Vancourt paid very assiduous attention to the heiress, for which every opportunity was afforded him by Lord and Lady Mervyn; Mr. Harley and his sister pursuing a like plan with Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, by always speaking of Lord Vancourt in the highest terms.

Poor Blanche was much more frightened than gratified by his lordship's close attendance upon her during the five-long day; but her timid, bashful manner, with downcast eyes and blushing cheek, when his glance met hers, led his lordship to the conclusion that he had made a most decided and favorable impression upon the heart of the youthful heiress, and that the game was now safe in his own hands.

It is quite true that more facilities are afforded to love-making in a quiet country house, during one week, than may occur in a twelvemonth under different circumstances, with the chance of meeting at a dinner

Black Douglas, even if her heart had been entirely free) was a person of such delicate and refined feelings, that Lord Vancourt's conduct (being an acquaintance of only a few days) was becoming quite irksome to her; and for the last day she had avoided being left alone with him, pleading indisposition, to remain in her room until the dinner hour.

Vernon, however, had met with a very different reception from Miss Mervyn, who had fallen desperately in love with him; and thus, whilst apparently playing Lord Mervyn's game, he had been, in fact, most industriously dealing his own cards, and obtained a confession from Miss Mervyn of her attachment, which, as a matter of course, was to remain a profound secret for the present.

On their return to Throsby, the Harcourts found Lord Malcolm, who had arrived just before them, and Blanche was in high spirits on again meeting her cousin.

'Why, dear Blanche, you are wonderfully improved within the last year—become quite the woman. Well, girls do run up in an extraordinary manner, and I suppose you must now be called Miss Douglas.'

'Never by any, Charles, I hope,' she replied, 'or by any of my true friends.'

'Well, dear girl, I am delighted to find you looking so lovely and so happy; but tell me, in a whisper, how is Constance?'

'As beautiful as ever, or more so,' she replied, laughing; 'but we have been staying at that disagreeable place, Marston Castle, nearly a week, and therefore I have seen nothing of her during that time.'

'Well, then, Blanche, we will ride over to Bampton the day after to-morrow.'

'Why not to-morrow, Charles?'

'It won't do, my dear; old Harcourt would take offense at my leaving him the first day; and, besides, I think to-morrow is Beauchamp's hunting day, and I long to shake him by the hand; for, between ourselves, Blanche, my love for Constance arisen partly from my love and esteem for her brother, who is a man after my own heart.'

During the latter part of this speech, Blanche, feeling a little color spreading over her cheek, turned away, and ran upstairs to change her dress.

The next day, while Lord Malcolm was sitting with Mrs. Harcourt and Blanche in the drawing-room, Lord Vancourt was announced, who remained for nearly an hour, paying very pointed attention to Miss Douglas. When he left, Mrs. Harcourt asked Malcolm—

'What do you think of Lord Vancourt? Is he not most polished and agreeable, and strikingly handsome?'

'All that I admit, yet I don't like him.'

'Why?' inquired Mrs. Harcourt.

'I can't say exactly, but he has an expression to me quite repulsive, and from which I should set him down as haughty and bad-tempered.'

'Oh, that is only your fancy, Malcolm.'

'Perhaps so, but I shall not alter my opinion until I know more of him.'

No further remarks were made by Mrs. Harcourt, who did not wish Blanche to be prejudiced against Lord Vancourt, in case her cousin should not now come forward, as was expected. But when Blanche and Malcolm went out afterwards for a walk, the latter remarked upon his lordship's attentions to her, and said—

'I perceive Lord Vancourt is a great admirer of yours, my fair cousin, and first favorite on the list, I should think, from your tell-tale blushes and downcast eyes, when he was addressing you.'

'Indeed, Charles, he is no favorite of mine; and although extremely pleasing, yet I feel quite frightened in his company.'

'Oh, that feeling may wear off on more intimate acquaintance,' rejoined Malcolm; 'but first impressions with me are not easily effaced; and I tell you candidly, dear Blanche, I fear he will make a bad husband; so don't decide in his favor until you have seen more of the world, and a great deal

being called a fortune-hunter haunts me day and night. I have become miserable; what to do, I know not; will you advise me?'

'Yes, Beauchamp, most willingly, when you have answered me one question. Were Blanche Douglas no heiress, would you lay open your heart to her?'

'Yes, Malcolm, for I am sure I can never love another; yet I would still leave her disengaged to me for a twelvemonth.'

'Why so?'

'Because I think she is too young to be tied to any such serious engagement, until she has seen more of the world.'

'Ah!' said Lord Malcolm, 'this is self-denial to excess, and few, except William Beauchamp, could argue thus against themselves. Well, I will consider these points to-night, and advise you how to act to-morrow; and now let us have some luncheon, after which you and Constance must ride part of the way home with us.'

Beauchamp raising some objection to this proposal, was met by Malcolm with these words—'Don't make a greater simpleton of yourself than you have already this morning, in making these silly confessions, or I shall lose all my patience! Come along directly, and order the horses, for I want an opportunity of making love to Constance, if you do not Blanche.'

After luncheon, the party set out for Throsby, but as the road admitted of two only abreast, it is superfluous to say how the two couples were arranged. Lord Malcolm was in high spirits—unpleasantly so to Beauchamp, who, being completely under the influence of the blues, exhibited a sad contrast to his more happy friend; and as he rode thoughtful and abstracted by the side of Blanche, she could not fail to notice his altered looks and manner; still he was, as usual, most friendly, giving her some useful hints in regard to the management of her horse, and speaking on all other subjects except the nearest to his heart. At first, Blanche was timid, and fearful of a repetition of the love professions; but seeing his determination to avoid all such topics, her reserve wore off.

'I hear,' she said, 'you have been staying at Marston Castle; were you pleased with your visit?'

'Oh, no,' she replied; 'Lord and Lady Mervyn are, in my opinion, very stiff, formal, disagreeable people.'

'Did you meet no pleasant persons there?' he inquired; 'I heard the house was full of company.'

'Yes, there was a Lord Vancourt, very agreeable and good-looking, resembling much in manners Mr. Vernon, who was there also; but I must confess I was delighted when our visit was over.'

'Then you did not admire this Lord Vancourt, of whom report speaks so highly as a perfect ladies' man?'

'Oh, no,' replied Blanche; 'he is the counterpart of Mr. Vernon, whom, you know, I dislike exceedingly.'

Beauchamp breathed more freely after this confession from Blanche, and some of his usual frank gaiety of looks and manners returned.

'You, of course, mean to attend our grand ball on the last of this month?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' she replied; 'you know I make my debut in public on that occasion.'

'Then will you allow me the pleasure of bringing your first partner on that eventful night, unless you have already promised that favor to another?'

'Indeed, William, I shall not only be delighted, but shall feel less nervous, in having the support of an old friend on my first introduction to the beau monde.'

'Thank you, dear Blanche,' he replied, with his accustomed warmth; 'and may you never find a friend less staunch and true than William Beauchamp.'

'I neither wish nor expect to find another friend like you; but now I see Constance and Charles are halting for us.'

'Well, Beauchamp,' he exclaimed, as they

have known Beauchamp from a boy; he is high-spirited, of sound principles, honest and open as the day, and generous, even to a fault; yet withal as proud as Lucifer, when his conduct may be questioned as equivocal; and here it is—here's the rub, my dear Blanche—he dreads to be called a fortune-hunter, although ever so attached to you.'

At this moment they were interrupted by Mark Rosier jumping over a stile into the road, close to Lord Malcolm.

'Ah, Mark,' said his lordship, 'how fares it with you since we last met?'

'It would have fared badly enough, my lord, but for the young squire, who saved my poor old father and mother from the workhouse.'

'Indeed, Mark,' said Lord Malcolm, seriously; 'how could this happen?'

'Lord Mervyn there turned us all out in the road, and seized everything we had, even to the bed to lie upon, and all on account of the game, which has been our ruin; but the young squire stood our friend, and has given us a farm from Lady-day next, rent free, stock and all, until we can get round again. God bless him for it, and all belonging to him!' ended Mark, as he wiped a stray tear from his cheek.

'Here, then, Mark,' said his lordship, putting a five-pound note in his hand, 'give that to your father for me, to keep a merry Christmas; and touching his horse with the whip, he and Blanche cantered off.

'There, Blanche,' he said, when they had left Mark behind, 'that act at once explains the character of William Beauchamp; and now I expect a lecture from Mrs. Harcourt for keeping you out late,' as they entered the lodge gates.

## CHAPTER XI.

During the absence of Lord Malcolm and her niece, Mrs. Harcourt had been discussing his lordship rather more pertinently than he surmised; in short, she had insisted on Mr. Harcourt inquiring what his real intentions were towards his cousin. 'It is really high time to know whether Malcolm seriously thinks of marrying Blanche or not,' she remarked to her husband, 'as it is very evident Lord Vancourt is very much taken with her; and, in case of his proposing, we should scarcely know what answer to give him.'

'Very well, my dear, I will take an opportunity of sounding Malcolm the first time we are alone, although I am inclined to think, from my own observation, theirs may be only cousinly affection; but as the family from the castle dines here to-morrow, I will ascertain that point before their arrival, and let you know.'

Accordingly, the next morning, after breakfast, when they were alone, Mr. Harcourt led to the point by asking some questions relative to Blanche's property in Scotland.

'It is in a very flourishing condition,' replied Lord Malcolm; 'and the tenants are improving their farms by draining, which will increase their own returns, as well as improve the value of the estate.'

'Is there any prospect,' inquired Mr. Harcourt, jocosely, 'of the two properties being united under one hand?'

'One manager, do you mean?'

'Yes, Charles; exactly so—in the person of Lord Malcolm,' replied Mr. Harcourt, laughing.

'That,' replied Lord Malcolm, gravely, 'I fear, never can be, as Blanche and myself regard each other as cousins only; and, to confess the truth, my affection has been long engaged elsewhere, although I shall ever love her as a dear sister.'

'I am sorry to hear this confession, Charles, as Blanche's father and your own always expressed a strong desire that their children might some day be united.'