

THE
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XLII

(CONTINUED.)

"Hush, hush! my own dear girl," he murmured; "still that beating heart—you are mine once more—mine now and for ever!"

"Oh, no, dear William, it cannot be—pray release me."

"No, Blanche, never until you promise to become my wife, or you will never see me alive again; my arm shall hold you till you tear it from your side; so now, my love, let me lead you to the sofa, and listen calmly to what I have to say. Do you see that ring on my finger dear girl, placed there by your own hand, with the vow that by that symbol you would be mine for ever?"

"Yes, William, I remember it well—the past is a happy dream, the present a sad reality. I never thought then how different our positions might become; but still my vow remains unaltered—I will never marry another."

"To that I cannot, will not hold you, dear Blanche; take the ring from my finger, and take with it all my hopes of earthly happiness."

"That I cannot do, William."

"Then listen to reason, Blanche; at least, you ought to be consistent. When you placed that ring upon my finger, you were a rich heiress, and I (by Mrs. Harcourt's account) a poor, penniless fox-hunter; you would have married me then could I have obtained your guardian's consent."

"Yes, William, indeed I would."

"Alas should I have been degraded in your eyes by accepting your hand, although then represented to you without fortune?"

"Oh, no, dearest William; nothing could ever degrade you in my sight."

"Our positions now, dear girl, are apparently, but not really reversed, and Blanche Douglas is too proud to make that concession she expected of William Beauchamp. I might and must have been humbled then in your opinion, and now your false sense of honour would trample all my feelings and fondly cherished expectations in the dust."

"No, William; the time may arrive when I will no longer oppose your wishes; but should all be lost to me, I shall ever love and esteem you as my own dear brother."

"Will nothing change your purpose, Blanche? Will no feeling of compassion or compunction induce you to avert my doom?"

"Do not urge me further, dear William in pity to my agony of mind and dreadful sufferings these last few days. Oh, spare me the misery of listening to your reproaches, which, believe me, I do not deserve—we may meet again as before—as brother and sister."

"Never Blanche, that time is past. Now hear the sentence you have pronounced; if we part now, we never meet again, for I will leave my native land, and return to it no more, unless this night you promise to be mine."

"Oh, William, recall that rash vow; think of your poor father, who would be broken-hearted if you left him; think of your sister and dear Aunt Gordon."

"It is too late, Blanche; I have sworn to do so, and will keep my oath. You have forced me in despair to utter these hasty words; your false pride will entail this misery on us all."

"It was now Blanche's turn to beg and implore her lover to alter his determination; but her voice fell unheeded on his ear, and leaning his head on his hand, he seemed lost in thought, and deaf to her entreaties."

"Oh, William," she exclaimed, "why will you not speak to me? only to say you will not go."

"Go, yes, I know I must go," he muttered, without regarding her. Blanche Douglas sends me forth an outcast from my home, to die among strangers, scorned, despised, and neglected by her, for whom I would have sacrificed a hundred lives, had I them to give. Let me go, he cried, springing wildly from his seat as she attempted to lay his hand. "I am crazed, maddened;

and Beauchamp, knowing what that implied, asked—

"Is that mine, Blanche, without conditions of any kind?"

"Yes, my own dear William—your very own."

"Then give me a kiss to confirm your promise."

Leaning over him, she said—

"Will you forgive me?"

His reply was given by another warm embrace, when Mrs. Gordon appeared.

"Ah, William! you do not want me now, I suppose; but I will have no more scenes to-night—and here is Charles come to see you."

"Ah! my dear fellow," exclaimed Malcolm, taking his hand; "so Blanche has thrown you over at last—a regular back-fall. I thought how it would end with her ridiculous notions. She won't be satisfied, I suppose, till she has killed you outright; but how do you feel now, old fellow?"

"Much better, Malcolm, thank you, since taking that glass of wine."

"Then just take another, Beauchamp—or stay—a glass of brandy and water will do you more service, with a couple of biscuits. You are overdone—that's the fact; and, dare say, have stopped neither to eat nor drink on the road since you left the stable."

"That is true enough, Malcolm."

"Ay, ay, there it is—starring, fretting, and travelling, without rest for two days, are quite enough to derange any fellow's digestive organs; and this back-handed blow from Blanche knocked you clean off your legs, old fellow. Well, my dear, obstinate, little cousin, it is lucky he is no worse, but don't try this game again, or you will have him in an apoplectic fit, my love, and that will be beyond our remedies. It's all your doing, Blanche—worrying, vexing, and tormenting him and yourself about these confounded rascals: why, what on earth is the difference between you—even if you had lost your money? (which you won't a shilling of it.) When you were rich, you would have married him; and now he is rich, he would marry you. If Con had acted in this foolhardy manner, I should have thought her cracked, and I verily believe all this confounded business has turned your head, my dear girl, and that you will be in a raging fever to-morrow morning."

"Oh, Charles, pray spare me—I will never vex him again."

"That's right, my dear. Keep to that resolution, and all will be well. And now, give Beauchamp his glass of brandy and water, and make him eat a biscuit also."

CHAPTER XLIII.

Malcolm's anticipations were realised about his cousin, who was in a burning fever all night; and towards morning, becoming delirious, the family physician was sent for by Mrs. Gordon, who, with Constance, remained by her bedside, listening with tearful eyes to her ravings about her lover. Mrs. Gordon explained to the doctor what had occurred, as far as she deemed necessary, who prescribed the usual remedies in such cases, desiring she might be kept perfectly quiet, and no other person admitted to her room.

"But stay, my dear madam," as he was leaving; "if she should particularly want to see Lord Beauchamp on regaining consciousness, let him be sent for directly, as his presence will go far to allay this feverish excitement."

After taking the medicine, Blanche fell into a fitful doze for two hours, from which, awaking with a sudden start, she exclaimed—

"Oh, aunt, he is gone—gone for ever; I sent him away never to return."

"No, my love, he is not gone; you have been wandering, he is still here, in this house."

"Oh, no, dear aunt; do not deceive me. I know he is gone."

"Then, my dear, promise to be calm and not speak, and you shall see him directly. Constance, will you call your brother?"

In a few seconds, Beauchamp, was kneeling by her bedside, with her hand in his.

"You will not leave me, dear William," she murmured, "as you said you would, oh,

my dear madam, better than all my medicine; pray don't disturb them."

Blanche was the first to awake, with all her faculties restored, and great was her astonishment on finding her lover's head resting by her side, in perfect unconsciousness.

"Oh, aunt," was her sudden exclamation, "where am I?"

"In your own bed, my dear; but as you would have William's hand in yours, he has fallen asleep too, and, thank goodness, you have both slept soundly for these last three hours; so now, my love, if you will let him go, it is time you had a cup of tea, and he will not be sorry to have some breakfast."

From this time her fever began to abate, and in three days Blanche made her appearance once more in the drawing-room, and Beauchamp thinking the present a most favorable opportunity for making his proposals for her hand, obtained her consent to apply to her guardian for his formal approval of their marriage.

"Out of evil good often proceeds, dear Blanche," he observed, and Mr. Harcourt may be induced now to give his consent, which, under different circumstances, he would have refused; for I believe he is so worried by the thought of being called on to refund the rents, that he will be too happy to shift any further responsibility off his own shoulders on to mine, or any man of substance you might select; and as you have promised never to turn restive again, you will, I trust, my own dearest Blanche, no longer hesitate to invest me with the title to defend your rights and protect you from all further annoyance. In me you shall ever find a true friend and brother, as well as husband, and all my energies shall be directed to promote your happiness."

"That, dear William, I can never doubt; and I quite agree with you that the present is a propitious time to obtain Mr. Harcourt's consent."

"We must now relate what was passing elsewhere. The news of Miss Douglas's loss of fortune spread with the rapidity of ill news is ever wont to travel with. Lord Henry Bayntun having ascertained the fact from Mr. Mangle, whom he had been consulting on some little affair of his own, and meeting Lord Ayrshire at his club, all the particulars were communicated to the marquis, at the conclusion of which recital Lord Henry observed, "A deuced lucky escape for you, Ayrshire."

"What do you allude to, Bayntun?"

"Oh, Danby thinks their heiress threw you over."

"Danby had better attend to his own affairs, Bayntun, and not meddle with other men's concerns; because he has been overturned, as you call it, I suppose he wishes to make it appear that I have had no better success; but who is his authority? That I shall expect to know, not choosing my name to go the round of all the clubs as a rejected man."

"Tut! tut! Ayrshire, don't flare up in that fashion. Danby merely expressed that as his opinion; for he said he had tried to ascertain whether you had proposed or not, from Malcolm, who refused to give him any information; so it is merely conjecture on his part."

"Very likely, Bayntun; but I shall be obliged by your telling him, with my compliments, to keep his conjectures to himself for the future. You know, when I set my mind on buying a horse, price will not stop me; and if I should bid for a woman, the chances are in my favor, I think; eh, Bayntun?"

"Oh, of course, we all know that your rent roll is as long as this room; but you would not marry a girl without any fortune at all, would you?"

"That would make no difference to me, if, in all other respects, she comes up to my standard."

"Oh, very well; then I conclude the heiress may be had now for asking, as Mangle tells me old Harcourt is in a proper funk about refunding all the money he has received."

This last piece of information suggested an idea to the Marquis, who, taking his hat, wished Lord Henry good morning. Lord Ayrshire possessed a proud, haughty temper, and he could ill endure being foiled in anything he undertook, or being outdone or outbid by any other man. If he had set his mind on purchasing a horse at Tattersall's,

bet a pony, notwithstanding, he is a dark bay."

"How so, Bayntun? you want your spectacles this morning."

"More likely you want yours, Ayrshire, for the horse you have just bought is as blind as a bat, or will be so very shortly."

"I don't care if he is," replied the marquis, impatiently; "having resolved that fellow who bid against me should not have him, for his insolence in running him up."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Lord Henry; "done, my lord, done brown, as well as bay; that was only a puff r."

This little anecdote will suffice to show the animus by which the marquis was actuated, when any one or anything ran counter to his determination. We must now follow him from the club house, after his conversation with Lord Henry Bayntun, and reveal what was passing in his mind, as he took his way direct to Upper Brook Street. His thoughts were bent on redeeming the prestige he had lost by being set down as a rejected man, and knowing Mr. Harcourt's weak points, he resolved to re-open the negotiation about his ward. "It is not the question whether her affections are wholly mine or not," he muttered, as he rode along; "that with me is now quite a secondary consideration; but having committed the error of proposing, and rendered myself conspicuous by paying her more attention than I ever did any other woman, she shall be mine at any cost, if possible, and when once my wife, she may repent her waywardness in declining my first overtures."

As drowning men will catch at straws, so Mr. Harcourt caught at Lord Ayrshire's proposition, to bear the blunt of the trial, and make good any deficiencies that could be legally claimed, on the condition that he obtained the consent of his ward to become Lord Ayrshire's wife. "I do not believe," replied that worthy gentleman, "your lordship will incur much risk, as counsel's opinion is decidedly in our favor, and possession is nine points of the law. But if you are really serious in the matter, and choose to take the lady with her liabilities and rights, as they stand, I will use all my influence with Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon to effect your object, although I fear there may be still one obstacle in our way."

"And what is that, my dear sir?"

"The same that I mentioned before—some prior attachment."

"That I do not think of much moment just now, as I believe few men, if any, would marry Miss Douglas under her present circumstances. Why, my dear sir, it would ruin any man of moderate fortune, if her cause were lost. But to save my credit in the fashionable world, I will take my chance, as I never can endure to be beaten, Mr. Harcourt; and cost what it may, I am resolved to marry your ward, now that I have gone so far."

"Very well, my lord, then I think a little memorandum may be as well drawn up between us, just a few lines."

"Oh, certainly, my dear sir; pray write down what you think necessary, and I will sign the paper."

Mr. Harcourt, being what is called a shrewd man of business (which means, in plain language, one who will take advantage of any weakness or blindness in his neighbor to drive a good bargain for himself), took care so to word this little document, that all responsibilities, past, present, and to come, incurred by himself, and the refunding of all rents received since her father's death, on his ward's account, should devolve on Lord Ayrshire's shoulders.

The marquis having hastily scanned the contents, signed the paper; and rising, said, "Now, my dear sir, I rely entirely on your honor to keep this arrangement a profound secret."

"Of course, my lord; on my own account only I should never mention it, or our plans would at once be defeated."

Mr. Harcourt had just carefully deposited this little document in his writing-desk, when the servant entered with Lord Beauchamp's card, saying his lordship wished to see him a few minutes alone.

"Show Lord Beauchamp into my private room," was the reply; and in a few moments Beauchamp was receiving the warm congratulations of his *soldisant* friend, which were estimated at their full value. Circumlocution or evasion being equally distasteful to Beauchamp's mind, the purport of his

true, and that has never yet been questioned by any man."

"Oh, that is quite sufficient my dear friend; and if my ward is really attached to you—"

"Of which, dear sir, there can be no doubt since she has accepted and referred me to you."

"Then, my dear Beauchamp, I have further objection to urge, except that in taking her, you must also take all her liabilities upon yourself."

"Most willingly my dear sir, were they twice as great."

Mr. Harcourt then suggested he should sign a little memorandum to that effect, which was worded in similar terms to that he had produced for Lord Ayrshire, and having called in the butler to write Beauchamp's signature to this document, he was about to lead the way to the drawing-room, when Beauchamp interposed.

"You have forgotten to give me your written consent, my dear sir, which will ratify a bargain on both sides; and if you lend me a moment, I will trace a few lines which you can sign." Appearing not to notice Mr. Harcourt's evident annoyance at this request, Beauchamp wrote a few lines, in which, among other things, Mr. Harcourt gave his full, unconditional consent to the marriage of his ward with Lord Beauchamp, and resigned all right and control over her person, goods, and chattels, from that day, in favor of her affianced husband.

"Rather stringent conditions, Beauchamp, he observed, on reading them."

"Not half so stringent as yours, my dear sir."

"Oh! very well, give me the pen, I can resign her safely to your care."

"Yes, that you certainly may, as I have always regarded each other from childhood as brother and sister; and now, my own dear friend, placing the paper in his pocket, "as I have a pressing engagement just now, I will call on Mrs. Harcourt another day."

Beauchamp hastened directly to Beady, who was impatiently awaiting his return, and catching her in his arms, exclaimed, "Now you are indeed my very own dear Blanche! I have your guardian's consent, my love, at last, and here it is in writing, producing the paper from his pocket, Beauchamp, read that precious document, and say you will keep it, and all my goods and chattels, and my sole keeping. Well, child, is not this doing business in Harcourt's own style? It did not half like the conditions, yet I will sign them."

"But I fear, William, he made you say something too?"

"Yes, my love, he did, by which I have taken all the responsibility of this suit, and rejoiced am I to get the control of these matters into my own hands, or he and his sister, Bortun, would have sacrificed their rights to their blundering. Now, my dear darling girl, I am the happiest fellow in existence, and you shall sing me that song this evening. Oh, leave the gay and lively scene! Yes, my love, we will leave the murky atmosphere, and be off to the old Priory again."

"Oh, when shall we go, dear William? I shall be so delighted to be in the country once more."

"Then you do not wish to attend any gay balls, or even have another night at the opera?"

"No, no—I am tired to death almost of dissipation."

"And won't you miss that gay throng of courtiers and admirers, who declared they could exist only in the sunshine of your smiles?"

"Falsome flatterers all, dear William; my love and smiles are for you only, and I either wish to see London again."

"Well, then, my love, run off to Lord Gordon, and ask her to prepare for me as soon as convenient to herself—the day after to-morrow, if possible."

All the party in Grosvenor Square were much amused, if not edified, with Beauchamp's description of her interview with Mr. Harcourt, and his beating about the bush to ascertain whether he had money enough to bear the brunt of the fight now pending; and Malcolm shook with laughter at the wording of the paper Beauchamp had induced him to sign.

"Why, my dear girl, old Harcourt, by this document, has assigned and made over to Beauchamp all his right and title to the property, as if you were a floating cargo of goods or merchandise. What put it in your head,