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"Seems in a hurry," Lesley heard one man say to another. Then somebody laughed, and staring in amazement at Ronny she saw him clinch his teeth, while the riders who knew and passed him observed that glory evidently did not suit his constitution.

"What made you go off with Yelverton like that?" he said abruptly. "And on his horse! How dare the fellow!" he muttered furiously. "Was not the horse I sent round for you good enough?"

Lesley checked the mare so suddenly that a less perfect rider would have been unseated, and with Miss Coquette standing stock still called after Ronny without raising her voice.

Ronny, who had shot beyond, came back with a very bad grace indeed.

"I did the best I could," he said coldly. "In the height of the season it is



"Was not the horse good enough?" not easy to pick up what one wants. But what made you slip off with Yelverton like that? I was delayed!"

"Slip off!"

Lesley positively quivered with rage as, resting her hand on the back of her saddle, she faced round on Ronny.

"How dare you!" she said very low.

"But this is dad's doing. At home no one would dare to insult me so! Slip off! As if I were a kitchen maid sneaking out of a back door!"

"Lesley," said the young man sternly, "there isn't a soul who has seen you this morning alone with Yelverton and riding his horse but thinks either that you are engaged to him—or want to be."

Lesley put her horse at a walk, trembled violently and turned away her head so that he could not see her face. He thought she was crying, and his anger showed to him altogether disproportionate against this young thing—his guest.

"Don't cry," he said, more kindly. "We must make the best of it."

She turned round then, and he saw she was laughing fit to kill herself and looking at him with a sort of pity.

"Oh, it's such a joke," she said when she was able to stop, "my wanting to be—engaged to anybody! It's just the other way round!" and she wiped her eyes and laughed again, having now completely recovered her good humor.

But Ronny did not let himself be lulled by the angry man she had made him.

"And don't you think," she went on, "that it's rather absurd for a—hero—to bully a girl for doing in the park, with people all around, what she would not think twice about doing in the country quite alone? Why, I've often shown dad's friends the way from the start to the kill and he never thought of getting blue in the face from shock!"

"That's Somersetshire," said Ronny curtly, "and this is town. Ladies don't do such things here."

"No. They do worse," said Lesley smartly. "I didn't shut my eyes the other night at the menagerie, or last night at dinner, or yesterday at Ranelagh, and a country girl would blush to behave as some of your town ladies do!"

They had got to Knightsbridge by now, and the snub was smiting down on them with rays fierce as the wrath that was burning in their young undisciplined hearts.

"But appearances must be respected," began Ronny, then stopped, for he was preaching a gospel the reverse of what he believed in, only he was his mother's mouthpiece just then and reflecting some of her anger and worry when on his return home he had discovered through Charville how matters lay.

"Poor hero!" said Lesley, with gentle contempt in her tone. "After all, dad was right in hating town and calling it the city of shams—you don't seem able to think or see straight here from your heart, I mean. It's all from outside, through other people's eyes!"

She shook her head so sorrowfully that Ronny burst out laughing, whereupon she joined in, saying encouragingly, "It's so stupid to make a fuss about little things when there are such lots of big ones to cry over, isn't it? But I'm very glad you've got a temper," confidentially. "You were getting very trying with your everlasting goodness! Isn't it almost time to turn back?"

"And I am afraid you will never die of goodness, Lesley," he said. "Won't you go home this way?" he added disingenuously. "It's much prettier, and it must be nearly lunchtime now."

"No, I won't," said Lesley, turning the mare and throwing him a bewildering smile over her shoulder that, for the first time, convinced him she was a born girl.

"I haven't," said Lesley to Mr. Yelverton or thanked him for the treat I've had on this beauty," and she whispered

something in the beauty's ear that made her dance sidelong and arch her neck and play off as many tricks as a belle at her first ball.

Ronny said nothing, adapting his horse's pace to Miss Coquette's, till the pair, tired of caper, descended to the range themselves sedately by his side, and the first remark, as is usual when a woman is entirely in the wrong, came from Lesley.

"I'm glad Bob is not a cousin," she said.

"Why?"

"He might think himself privileged to be—horrid!"

"I think Mr. Bob has got his work cut out for him," said Ronny, who looked so disturbed, so altogether unlike his usual careless self, that Cynthia, in a deliciously cool, blue cambric gown, who saw them coming, told herself that the blow had fallen at last, and this girl, who was turning all the men's heads, was turning his also.

"Goodby, Mr. Yelverton! Thank you so much for the treat you have given me!" she heard Lesley say in that spontaneous, sincere way natural to her, and then Ronny's voice, inquiring, "Could you look me up at the Rag after lunch, Yelverton?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he galloped off after Lesley, who had, as was generally admitted among the left behinds, "taken the cake" in all round cheek that morning.

CHAPTER VI.

"Ronny," said Lesley when he joined her (and it struck him that this was the first time she had thus addressed him), "will—will she be very angry, do you think? The mare just danced off with me when I was trying her paces, and I didn't think—no more did she!"

She looked then as she had done on her arrival, apprehensive and proud and shy, all in one, and Ronny's heart smote her. She had no mother, and a mother is able to teach her daughter so much and keep from her so much that she may not learn, and the girl had been thrown entirely among men; so much was apparent in her supreme mastery of their little ways and the lightness of her hand with them. Perhaps, if she had been constantly with nice women—

But here he stopped, knowing that, in that case, the originality, the freshness of her mind would have been lost, and to Ronny originality of character was the one precious mental good on earth.

"It is a pity," he began, then paused again. Really, for such a remarkably cool young man, Ronny was getting himself into a good many holes that morning.

"Would you like to take a ride with me, Lesley?" he said in so reasonable and kind a voice that tears started into her proud eyes. "She isn't up to Yelverton's weight, I know, and he might sell her—to please you," he added, with a smile that made his glance pure sunshine.

"Oh, Ronny!" exclaimed the girl, turning upon him a little face whose delicious glow of color dazzled his eyes. "How lovely that would be! I'll write home today and ask dad to buy her for me!"

"But I want her for myself," said Ronny—Lesley's face fell—telling the lie without winking, "and meanwhile I'll lend her to you. But, of course, I don't know if Yelverton will part with her till I've asked him."

Lesley leaned over and stroked Coquette's gleaming neck, and when Lesley confidently informed her that she was much too beautiful to be ridden by a rude, cross, heavy man Ronny smiled away the last remnants of his ill humor, and they arrived at Park Lane in the best of spirits, a good deal to Lady Appuldurcombe's wrath, as she watched the return of the prodigal (for once, a female—why are most flagitious examples and emblems of rascaldom invariably of the masculine gender in grammar?) from the balcony.

Since Ronny had rushed in to announce the full measure of Lesley's delinquencies and rushed out again to get a horse saddled to follow her his mother had been enduring not one but nearly four shocking quarters of an hour, and now, culprit and envoy came home laughing, on the best of terms evidently with each other!

To an outsider it all looked so entirely right, the two young aristocrats, with the groom behind them, whose face wore that air of impenetrable calm peculiar to all well bred servants and only faintly to be imitated by their masters, though inside Carleton was one broad grin and wished the young lady well out of the "row."

Ronny begged the girl off all he could. Still for a nasty five minutes Lesley's youth suffered eclipse and she winced under her aunt's icy reproach like a child who, not knowing the meaning of blows, suddenly finds them showered upon him by a hand that he trusted.

She made no defense. She shed no tears, and Ronny admired her pluck heartily as she sat at table making a pretense of eating what was put before her, her proud little head held as high as ever, the only scrap of color in her face being her blue eyes.

Perhaps a little ache of jealousy in the mother's heart helped to harden it against the girl, for was not Ronny hers, her very own boy, who had never left her like her other children, and now was she to lose all his time and company because Malincourt had fished on

her a female scamp whose only accomplishment seemed to lie in getting the length of every man's foot that approached her?

"Annie," said Lesley very quietly when the servants had withdrawn, "I am going to write to father and ask him to let me go home. I don't want to disgrace you any more."

Her voice was quite steady, and her eyes as she looked at her aunt were just as indomitable in their sheer, downright, dogged British pluck as Ronny's own at times. Indeed for a moment a strong likeness flashed out between the cousins and Lady Appuldurcombe saw it, colored, wavered and suddenly faded in. She was of a different order from Ronny and Lesley and consequently much more easy to manage, a fact of which her servants took liberal advantage.

"Have we been so inhospitable, then?" said the poor lady and sank into tears behind her dinner napkin, which in her flurry she mistook for her pocket handkerchief. But Lesley jumped up so quickly as to upset her chair, and crying out "No, no, no!" threw her warm arms round her aunt's neck. "It isn't you—it is I—who have been mean and rude and wicked and got into maddles wherever I go!"

Ronny softly closed the door on them, and as he did so heard his mother say plaintively:

"My dear, if only people did not know you as Lady Appuldurcombe's niece!" Whereupon he smiled, though there had been something suspiciously like moisture in his eyes. He thought of how Lesley and she had looked together; of the girl's swaying figure, as, beneath the trees, she talked alternately to her admirers and Coquette, but he cleared his throat as he said:

"I'm awfully sorry, Kilnurray," said that gentleman, with a good deal of color in his face. "The fact is, the mare started of her own accord, and what could I do but follow? I ought to have staid behind, I suppose, but I felt uneasy at Miss Malincourt's going into the park alone. I told the groom to come on as sharp as possible, and he did."

Ronny nodded; he looked quite his usual, good tempered self again, to Yelverton's intense relief.

"I suppose you wouldn't part with the mare?" he said tentatively.

Yelverton's face fell, and he hesitated. The mare was the apple of his eye, and only yesterday he would have refused a kingdom for her. Then he thought of how Lesley and she had looked together; of the girl's swaying figure, as, beneath the trees, she talked alternately to her admirers and Coquette, but he cleared his throat as he said:

"She's really not up to my weight, you know, and I shan't hunt this winter. Off to India, with some other fellows, shooting big game. I'll take a hundred for her, if you really fancy her."

But he spoke heavily, and Ronny, as men will understand men, thoroughly understood him. After all, what was a girl's caprice to come between a man and that trusty friend, his horse? Lesley must make shift to do without her.

"That's unwise, Yelverton," said Ronny. "She is worth at least 300 guineas, and I couldn't take her as a gift. We lay it is not a gift," said Yelverton stubbornly. "I'm pretty sure she's a bit grumpy in that off leg. Did you notice? And you will really confer a personal favor on me by buying her. Stony broke, you know," he mumbled. "Money an object just now."

For half a minute the two looked straight into each other's eyes. Then Ronny said kindly:

"So hard hit, old man? Well, then, if you'll take a couple of hundred, you'll lay me under no end of an obligation and make Miss Malincourt supremely happy."

Then ensued a somewhat protracted and animated wrangle, but the end of it all was that Miss Coquette ate her corn in Ronny Kilnurray's stable that night; also several pies and sugar.

Lesley fell asleep happy, while Lady Appuldurcombe, waking frequently, congratulated herself on a scandal having been neatly nipped in the bud by Ronny's admirable generalship.

And to all whom it might concern was made known in the park next morning that Ronny Kilnurray had bought Yelverton's famous mare for his cousin, Miss Malincourt, who liked her paces, while report added that Yelverton would have parted with her under any consideration but that he was head over ears in love with the Malincourt. Ever certainly did wear the smartest waistcoats and own the best seat in the saddle in town.

CHAPTER VII.

"Heaven," said Lady Appuldurcombe to her old crony, Lady de Salis, "must certainly be a place where there are no relations!"

And she glanced across to where, by the open bow window, Lesley, quite out of earshot, was drinking tea with Cynthia and talking with keenest interest to her companion, who on her side was smiling and without the weary air that usually distinguished her.

"Who is she going to marry?" said Lady de Salis, putting up her pince nez to look at the pair. "Yelverton seems a little in advance of the rest. But the noble army of lovers swells daily."

"I don't know," said Lady Appuldurcombe. "I wish I did. It isn't how can ye gang lassie?" with her. "It's 'Where will ye gang, lassie?'—you see I can't help occasionally dropping into Scotch—and where she chooses to gang, she will gang, and there's an end of it."

"Console yourself," said Lady de Salis. "There are only three weeks more of the season. And where is Ronny today?" she added, with an effort, he being the one subject who was never discussed on plain cover between the two friends.

"Oh, home, as usual. He can't keep out of the saddle, and I believe is going to ride some trumpery race at Sandown next week. He and Lesley are decidedly blood relations in one particular—their

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both preter horses to humans. It's very trying for him that there are no race meetings now worth mentioning, nothing before Doncaster," added his mother, who would cheerfully have seen the seasons advanced or put back to please him.

"The cousins seem to be great friends," said Lady de Salis, with something peculiar in her tone. "I seldom see one without the other nowadays."

"Ronny is more at home than usual certainly," said Lady Appuldurcombe, hastily, "but that is only to help me look after her, because neither of us knows what she will do next! After her boxing that man's ears at Berkshire House the other night!"

"He is a nasty man!" said Lady de Salis, with a gesture and look of disgust. "All the other women, including Cynthia, had longed to do it, but they had not Lesley's courage. A few hundred girls like her would work a wholesale reformation in the men's manners, and unconventional as she is, from head to foot and in every word and action she is a thoroughbred, like all your family, Jane," she added, smiling.

"A buck," Lesley was saying meditatively; "wouldn't it be nice to have an admirer who was a young buck of the old school, white satin continuations, seals and embroidered waistcoat of the briefest, a rolled stock and a gorgeous coat, like the lovers in Marcus Stone's pictures?"

"They would usurp our privileges," said Cynthia, whose coldness was fast melting before Lesley's friendliness. "and think how it would look a woman's clothes if two sumptuous wardrobes had to be provided!"

"Well, the men are dreadfully monotonous," said Lesley, with a dissatisfied air. "If they would only wear red ties or something to prevent one's mistaking them for the waiters! And often the waiters look so much more like gentlemen than the real ones do! It's a treat to see a man in his racing colors. Are you going to see Ronny ride at Sandown?" she added, looking away from Cynthia, who was beautiful today in a tawny pink muslin gown that made one think of a softly glowing topaz as one looked at her.

"Does he ride?"

Cynthia's voice was steady, but into her dark eyes splendor.

Where the warm light loves to dwell, came the look that only Ronny Kilnurray out of all men living had been able to bring there and bid stay.

"Yes. Isn't it a pity he is so spoiled? Because he is the first gentleman rider in England, and because he just did his duty, it seems to me he is in danger of becoming a very selfish, disagreeable young man indeed."

"It isn't either of those things," said Cynthia, coloring and looking out at the park. "It is because he is such a splendid fellow all round. He is the very type of the best sort of Englishman."

"He is just an extremely clean looking, obstinate, high principled, masterful Briton," said Lesley, nodding, "and if some woman who didn't care a button for him looked him into shape he might make a fairly decent husband to some other woman some day, but his mother and sisters have spoiled him, and he'll want no end of discipline first."

Lesley wagged her head with an air of the deepest conviction, and Cynthia's spirits flew up as she said, laughing:

"You know a great deal for 18, Miss Malincourt."

"I'm 20. Annie was a good bit out in my age, but it isn't necessary for me to disabuse her mind of the error. It's the country life I've led. And to do whatever you like, and how you like, and have no one to hamper or oppose you in any of your whims, is the finest recipe for bloom and good temper imaginable."

Cynthia sighed.

"We can't all let ourselves go," she said. "Some people have got to have self control, and once they've thoroughly learned that lesson," she added in a lower tone, "they have about learned all there is to know."

"I think I could learn that lesson, too, if I'd got to," said Lesley, with something strenuous in her young face and voice. "And I suppose I shall have to some day, for all the women must, and the men, never!"

"Ronny has learned it," said Cynthia. And Lesley longed to shake this glorious creature whom love had humbled to the point of making herself cheap.

"And it is wise to tell him so?" she said. "You must keep a man hungry—hungry—or he will never do this best, or love you his best—never! A man's self control lasts just so long as he does not want a thing. He clamors and cries for it like a child when once his eye has coveted it."

"How you hate men!" said Cynthia, under her breath.

"I do. Whenever I find a bad woman, I say, 'A bad man has passed by there!'" Lady Cranston says I am mad on that point, and they are all so good to me. But it isn't me; it's my little face! When it gets broad and middle aged, men's eyes will look past it, with their life love seeking for some delicate morsel to satisfy their pleasure!"

"But some men will love you for your heart—yourself!" cried out Cynthia, to whom this country girl was a revelation. "And you always look so boundlessly, intoxicatingly happy!"

"Yes, I am happy. But I go much among the poor at Malincourt. I see life as it is, and perhaps for good, perhaps for ill—who knows?—I have been the close companion for years of a woman who knows the world and turns it inside out for me like a glove, with every seam showing. So I have youth and no illusions."

"And, thus paucified, your friend has let you forth as a scourge on mankind," said Cynthia, who had heard of Lesley's exploits in the country. "And yet—I am sorry!"

"Don't be!" cried Lesley earnestly. "I feel—I know—I shall come out all right in the end. Would you send a soldier unprepared into battle? And I find teaching invaluable now that dad has launched me on my relations in town."

They were so engrossed in each other that they did not hear the door open or see Ronny, who stopped short at sight of Lady de Salis.

possible, and being received with cool salutations he advanced to the balcony, where a white and a topaz colored back just then presented themselves for his inspection.

They looked friendly, intimate even, those two girlish backs, and he surveyed one of them with that ferocity, displayed only to reptiles and the woman who has given him a love, he does not want, that "young man feels and displays to his inward shame and astonishment on occasions."

The weak man is flattered; he sometimes dallies with the suppliant and rewards the woman by becoming her tyrant. But the virile, selfish, masterful man will stoop to pick up no handkerchief dropped to him; he will throw his own wheresoever and howsoever he best pleases, and usually it is picked up by the right woman.

It was Lesley who turned, feeling some one near her, and exclaimed tartly, "Why didn't you speak?" and looking so decidedly sorry to see him that Ronny felt it a relief to turn to Cynthia, who, for once, showed no undue joy at his approach, though under the broad, black lace hat her face was full of most delicate color.

"Oh, horses, as usual. He can't keep out of the saddle, and I believe is going to ride some trumpery race at Sandown next week. He and Lesley are decidedly blood relations in one particular—their

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"We were abusing men," said Lesley calmly. "Did you—hear us?"