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# Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER X.

Bob Conyers was not in words merely, but in deed also, the firm friend of Will Beauchamp; and accordingly on the following Tuesday, we find him at Throsby Hall, sitting with Mrs. Harcourt in her drawing-room, in the hope of eliciting some information about the invitation to Marston Castle, which he knew had been received the previous day; but that lady evincing no disposition to enlighten him on the subject, Conyers hazarded an experiment at drawing the badger, which fully succeeded, by saying, 'I have promised Blanche another riding lesson, and if she is not otherwise engaged, will come over on Thursday morning for that purpose.'

'We shall not be at home that day,' was the reply.

'Oh, very well, the next morning then,' said Bob.

'We shall be absent, I fear, that day also,' replied Mrs. Harcourt.

'Oh then, I will find Blanche, and give her a lesson now, which will do just as well—there she is, walking in the garden.' And without more ado, Bob took up his hat, and left the room. In a few minutes he was walking by her side to the stables, and having ordered her horse to be saddled, she returned to the house to put on her habit, whilst Bob entered the drawing-room.

'I do not quite approve,' began Mrs. Harcourt, 'of Blanche riding.'

'It is the most healthful recreation in the world, my dear madam,' replied Bob, 'and strongly recommended to your niece by your own physician, as the means of giving her exercise and the benefit of the air, without much fatigue.'

'Yes, I believe in moderation it is very well, but I dread her becoming a second Selma Markham.'

'Then she must change her character entirely,' said Bob, 'and I never wish Blanche to ride after the fox-hounds; in fact, to tell you the truth, my dear madam, I do not approve of ladies going out hunting.'

'Yet Constance does?'

'Oh, no, merely to see the hounds throw off, and then return home, but Blanche is even too fond 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 Kotten 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 the matter.

'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 pray talk 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, I should have seen it all.'

'What do you see, Mr. Conyers?'

'I want to see, my 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 Vancouver, 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, Mrs. Douglas? But now mark me, if you do not'

Blanche, in applying to me; but our conversation to-day must be kept a secret from Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, and do not mention that you heard of Lord Vancouver being expected at Marston, or they will accuse me of intermeddling in what does not concern me.'

'You may depend I shall never reveal what you tell me in confidence.' After which they proceeded on their ride.

A select party had been asked to meet Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt on the day of their arrival at Marston Castle, besides the guests staying in the house, two of whom were Mr. Harley and his sister, a matronly personage of about forty, clever, well informed, and chatty, who, having received her instructions from her brother, was fully prepared to laud Lord Vancouver to the skies; in fact, there was what was termed a packed jury of ladies and gentlemen, carefully chosen by Lord Mervyn from the class *sympathetic*, who never ventured to hold an opinion on any matter adverse to his lordship's—Tyler and Vernon being included.

Lord Vancouver, who had arrived that day, was about twenty-eight years of age, tall, standing over six feet, with a very good, well-proportioned figure, decidedly handsome, of rather aristocratic-looking features, and an aquiline nose. He had also a profusion of curly black hair, with very bushy eyebrows; but there was a sinister expression in the eye, which revealed much of his true character. In disposition, he was naturally haughty, overbearing, passionate, and uncompromising; but having mixed a great deal in good society, his manners were highly polished, and he had the art of rendering himself most agreeable to ladies, with whom he carefully repressed all indications of ill temper or impatience.

During the dinner hour, having travelled a great deal, he related in a pleasant, unostentatious manner his various adventures by sea and land, and even Blanche, notwithstanding Bob's warning, thought him the most agreeable man she had ever met; there was a peculiar expression sometimes in his eyes, so searching and almost fierce, that she felt frightened when they were riveted on her.

On the ladies retiring to the drawing-room, Mrs. Harcourt, who had been exceedingly pleased with Lord Vancouver, could not suppress her expressions of admiration, to which Miss Harley fully assented, declaring him a most charming, delightful person, so well-informed and unaffected, although of such superior manners and high talents. 'In short, my dear madam,' said that crafty lady, 'Lord Vancouver is quite the *ton* 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 damsel, and marry her for love only.'

The artificial speech struck home to Mrs. Harcourt, who thought earnestly that he would be just the man 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 passing such eulogiums on Lord Vancouver.

'Good heavens!' said Caroline, 'how can that woman go on telling such stories about Lord Vancouver, who is one of the most gay, dissipated men about town, and as poor as a country curate; and they do say, my dear (on a whisper) already married to an opera singer; but the latter is a secret, which Mr. Hill let talk 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 Vancouver 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, 'some notion of more opposite ideas:—'

ner party or ball occasionally; which, with so many interruptions and lookers-on, is comparatively a tedious process, and must take a due allowance of time. So prospectively had Vancouver advanced already in the opinion of the conspirators, Mervyn, Vernon and Harley, that they considered the prize as nearly won, and that he had only now to offer his hand to be accepted; forgetting the old adage of 'there's many a slip between the cup and the lip.'

Lord Vancouver objected, however, to such precipitancy, avowing his belief that too much haste would spoil the whole affair.

'Strike while the iron is hot, is my advice,' said Vernon.

'You are mistaken,' replied Vancouver, 'the iron is not half hot yet, and that girl is so timid that I cannot get on with her as I have with other women, and see I must take more time with one of her reserved disposition, and lure her on step by step.'

'Well,' remarked Harley, 'your lordship is a better judge of such matters than I pretend to be; and being the chief person concerned, you have the best reason to act as you think most conducive to your own ends.'

The Harcourts had been invited to spend a week at Marston, but on the fifth morning a letter arrived from Lord Malcolm, saying he should arrive that same day at Throsby Hall, which obliged Mr. Harcourt to curtail his visit very suddenly, and return home immediately, much to Blanche's delight, who, on the plea of a headache, could not be induced to leave her room till the carriage was at the door. During her stay at the castle, whether out walking with Miss Mervyn, or taking a drive in the pony carriage, when the weather would admit, Lord Vancouver contrived to be constantly by her side, Vernon attaching himself to Miss Mervyn; and in their rambles about the grounds, he kept that young lady at a sufficient distance from Blanche, that Vancouver might have every facility for ingratiating himself into her favor; but the thing was overdone, and Blanche having been left several times in this manner by Miss Mervyn, her suspicions were fairly excited by this oft-repeated trick, and Lord Vancouver's increased embarrassment of manner and language, which even her artless nature could not misunderstand. Blanche Douglas (even if her heart had been entirely free) was a person of such delicate and refined feelings, that Lord Vancouver'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 you, 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 offence at my leaving him the first day; and, besides, I think to-morrow is Beauchamp's hunting day, and I would like to shake him by the hand; for, between ourselves, Blanche, my love for Constance has arisen partly from my love and esteem for her brother, who is a man after my own heart.'

more of Lord Vancouver. You will have plenty to pick and choose from, with your large fortune; so take my advice—don't be in a hurry to marry yet.'

'Indeed I shall not, Charles; and I am quite sure Lord Vancouver would never be my choice.'

'Very well, Blanche, wait till next spring, when you come out in town, and I will introduce you to two or three of our young nobility, equally good-looking, with better connections than Lord Vancouver, and really good fellows into the bargain.'

At breakfast, next morning, Malcolm expressed his intention of taking Blanche with him to call at Bampton, to which no objection was raised, as Mrs. Harcourt wished to throw no obstacles in the way of two cousins being together. Lord Malcolm was rejoiced to find his friend Beauchamp at home, and the meeting between his lordship and Constance was what might be expected from two affianced lovers, in which relation they stood to each other, although it was not generally known. Leaving the two girls together, Beauchamp and his friend, who was very fond of hunting, walked off to inspect the kennels and stables, and Lord Malcolm could not help remarking on Beauchamp's altered manner and grave looks.

'What's the matter with you?' inquired his friend; 'all your buoyancy of spirits is gone; are you in love, Beauchamp, or what is it?'

'Oh, I'm only a little out of sorts to-day.'

'Come, come, Beauchamp, that will not pass with me—I know you too well; surely you can trust your own brother elect with anything that lies heavy at your heart. Many a secret have I confided to your keeping, and now, my dear fellow, I expect the same confidence from you. No evasion, if you love me as I do you.'

Beauchamp, thus pressed, confessed his long-growing attachment to Blanche, and reproached himself for having made her acquainted with his love at Mrs. Compton's ball. 'That has hung heavy upon me ever since,' he added; 'for I feel I have done wrong in trying to gain her affections before entering on the world, when she will, of course, see so many, far my superiors in birth, endowments, and fortune. In short, Malcolm, I have no pretensions to one so far beyond my deserts; and then the idea of 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 Will 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 horses, and speaking on all other subjects except those nearest to his heart. At first, Blanche was timid, and fearful of a repetition of some of his professions; but seeing his determination to avoid all such topics, her reserve wore off.

rode up, 'we must now change partners, as Constance wishes to return; but mind you both ride over, and repay our visit the day after to-morrow.'

'I can't promise that exactly,' was Beauchamp's answer, in a very grave tone.

'Oh, indeed! then Constance must ride herself, I suppose,' retorted Malcolm, angrily, 'unless you think she ought not to have promised me to come at all?'

'No, Malcolm; I shall certainly accompany her, if that is so.'

'And be in a better humor next time we meet,' continued Malcolm. 'But now, come shake hands, old fellow; I can't afford to quarrel with you.'

The friendly parting was exchanged on all sides, when Malcolm and Blanche turned their horses' heads, the former suddenly exclaiming, 'What can be the matter with Will Beauchamp Blanche? I never saw such an alteration in any man since we last met; he looks as if he had been crossed in love. What can be the matter with him?'

'I really cannot tell, Charles.'

'Do you think he is in love, Blanche?' he again asked.

'How should I know, Charles?' she answered, while the crimson mounted to her very temples.

'You do know something more than you choose to tell me, dear Blanche,' as he looked inquiringly into her face, which she endeavored to turn away, to conceal her confusion. 'Only tell me one thing, my dearest girl,' continued Malcolm, as he placed his hand affectionately on hers: 'by our friendship and cousinly affection for each other, by my brotherly love for you, tell me, dear Blanche, in confidence, as your own dear brother—can you, do you love Will Beauchamp? There was no reply.'

'Thank heaven!' exclaimed Malcolm, fervently; 'I am now the happiest man in existence. Will Beauchamp's conduct is explained; he loves, as he ever must, deeply and unalterably where his affections have been once bestowed; but, poor fellow, he thinks he loves hopelessly—he is too unpretending and modest to believe that the rich heiress, Miss Douglas, will ever condescend to accept him as a lover. Yes, dear Blanche, this must be the real state of the case. I 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 his niece, Mrs. Harcourt had been discussing his lordship rather more particularly than he surmised; in short, she had insisted