

THE  
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XV.

(CONTINUED.)

'It shall be done, doctor,' said the man, 'let the consequences be what they may!'

Blanche Douglas was so fevered from the fright and excitement of the previous night, as to be unable to leave her room until late in the day. After eleven o'clock, visitors began to pour in from the neighborhood; the news of Blanche's attempted abduction spread like wildfire. Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt drove to the Priory immediately after breakfast, and were loud in their expressions of astonishment at Lord Vancourt's conduct.

'And what could you expect, asked Mrs. Gordon, 'after making such a fuss with that good-for-nothing man, and accepting him as my niece's suitor without making the least inquiry about his character or connections? I am quite surprised at you, Mr. Harcourt, acting so rashly; who as her guardian, were bound to make the strictest investigation into the affairs of any stranger who proposed for your ward's hand!'

'I confess,' replied Mr. Harcourt, 'I trusted too much to Lord Mervyn's representations, but although Lord Vancourt has acted so precipitately in this matter, yet there is no proof that he is such character as you represent him to be.'

'That proof will not be long wanting,' retorted Mrs. Gordon.

'We need not now enter into these discussions,' replied Mr. Harcourt, 'as we have come to take Blanche home.'

'Her home,' said Mrs. Gordon, 'for the future, will be at the Priory; or at least until such time as the fullest inquiry is made into this business, which Lord Malcolm is determined to prosecute to the utmost.'

'And pray, what has Lord Malcolm to do with it, Mrs. Gordon? I am her guardian, and the proper person to act in her defence.'

'You cannot be surprised, Mr. Harcourt, that Lord Malcolm should entertain some doubts on that head, when he finds your own coachman implicated in the attempted abduction of his cousin, as well as Lord Mervyn's under-keepers, who are now in custody. In short, under these circumstances, Lord Malcolm, as her nearest relative, has resolved that Blanche shall remain under my protection, as I also am her guardian; but should you think proper to question our authority for so acting, last night's transactions shall be laid before the Lord Chancellor, and we do not fear the result.'

'Oh! I suppose,' said Mrs. Harcourt, sneeringly, 'Mrs. Gordon intends to keep her niece here to marry her favorite, Mr. Beauchamp.'

'Even if I did, replied Mrs. Gordon, 'it would not be quite so bad as conniving at her being carried away by a married man!'

'Lord Vancourt is not a married man, and I defy you to the proof, madam!'

'Here it is, then,' exclaimed Melville, who had entered the room with Bob Conyers, and heard the last sentence. 'Here is a copy of the marriage certificate of Edward, Lord Vancourt, and Signora Marinetta, solemnized at Florence five years ago, and duly attested by witnesses. I have seen the original from which this is taken, and have already written to a friend at Florence to send me all further particulars.'

'And what business is this of yours, sir?' demanded Mrs. Harcourt, rising in great indignation from her chair.

'It became my business, madam,' replied Melville, 'when my word was questioned the other night by Lord Vancourt at the ball, and it shall be my business still, to prove him what I then asserted he was—a married man.'

'Oh, very well, sir,' said the lady, ringing the bell violently for her carriage; 'but you shall not marry my niece, notwithstanding.'

'Were I so disposed,' replied the captain, 'I should not be obliged, after what occurred last night, to obtain your consent; at which the lady bounced out of the room into the hall, followed by her husband, where she remained until the carriage came round.'

'Now, Aunt Gordon,' said Conyers, 'it

'Can I have what we haven't got,' replied the ostler, sulkily; 'there's only one pair left.'

'Then the same leaders must go the next stage,' said the valet.

'Speak to the master about that,' replied the man, as he turned away.

'The facts of the case were these. Vernon had resolved to carry off Miss Mervyn the same night, and having been annoyed by Lord Vancourt's refusal to pay him down the sum he had promised for his co-operation in the plot, calculating also on the hour Lord Vancourt would reach Cherrington, he determined to be beforehand with his lordship, and, by assuming the same name, to take advantage of the relays of horses ordered on the road, thinking by this ruse to baffle all pursuit of himself; in short, it was diamond cut diamond, Vernon proving the sharper of the two. This I have since learnt,' said Captain Melville, 'but I remained at Cherrington until I saw Lord Vancourt (after having his arm set and bandaged up, with a large plaster on his nose) enter his carriage, notwithstanding the surgeon's remonstrances, and drive rapidly on the road to London.'

Whilst Melville was telling his story to Mrs. Gordon, Malcolm, Beauchamp, and Conyers were in consultation about the prisoners, who had been kept at the Priory all night with a constable.

'Being a magistrate for the county,' said Beauchamp, 'Bob can take down the wounded man's depositions, who is willing to confess everything, by Morgan's account; and upon this, the other two, with Mark's statement and mine, can be remanded and brought before the Bench, which sits the day after tomorrow, when I will endeavor to attend. But bear in mind they are well handcuffed, or a rescue will be attempted by Lord Mervyn's agents, although I shall give Mark some hints also.'

'Who is to prosecute?' asked Bob Conyers.

'I shall, of course,' replied Malcolm, 'for I know Harcourt will shirk, to save his own and Mervyn's character. And now, Beauchamp, I think, if well enough, you had better return home to-day with your father, or that spiteful Mrs. Harcourt will declare we are only keeping you here on account of Blanche. I intend to take up my abode at the Priory, and shall remain until all this is settled; in short, I am so disgusted with the Harcourts that I have sent for all my traps, and do not intend just yet, if ever again, to enter their house.'

'Quite right, Malcolm,' replied Bob; 'it is the most shameful, disgraceful affair I have ever known, and no one will believe but that Harcourt and Mervyn had some concern in the plot; and my dear pet Blanche! what a fate has she escaped with that damned rascal! Melville says you served my lord out for it, however, Will, with a split nose and a broken arm. Gad! I should like to have seen you hit him off his legs, as Mark tells, like a ninepin.'

'I was mad enough to have killed him,' replied Beauchamp.

'And I wish you had,' interposed Malcolm, 'as he tried hard to murder you.'

'I am thankful no lives are lost; and now we will go down till the governor is ready; but recollect, Malcolm, Blanche is now under your protection.'

'It is not likely I shall forget either her interest or yours, old fellow,' replied Malcolm; 'and I expect you to take care of Constance for me.'

'No fear of that,' was the reply, as the two friends and Conyers descended the staircase.

Mrs. Gordon was much vexed at hearing Beauchamp's intention to leave the Priory with his father, but on his motives being made known, she was constrained to admit their force, and a compromise was effected by Constance remaining in his place.

The rage of Lord Mervyn on the discovery of his daughter's elopement with Vernon would be difficult to describe. This agreeable piece of information was communicated to him at breakfast next morning, when the housemaid, entering the young lady's room to light the fire, found the bird had flown, and her bed had been unoccupied. She had pleaded a bad headache the night before, and retired with her maid about nine o'clock, when, immediately bolting the door, she descended the back staircase whilst the servants were at upper, and running across two fields, she reached a railway led to the

of the wounded man, was sufficient to obtain the commitment of the other two watchers to take their trial at the ensuing assizes, to be held in March; Lord Malcolm being the prosecutor, who declared that every effort in the meantime should be made to arrest Lord Vancourt for his dastardly attempt to carry off his cousin.

'You must not suppose, gentlemen,' said Lord Malcolm, addressing the Bench, 'that I, or any of Miss Douglas's family are actuated by the spirit of revenge in this prosecution; but for the honor of my family and hers, and to protect her from any further attempts of this sort, I feel bound to use my best exertions in bringing the chief perpetrators of such a cowardly, unmanly act to justice, and not allow the law to take its course only against the least guilty parties. The crime of abduction, bad enough in itself, has also in this case been most seriously aggravated by shedding of blood, and the very near sacrifice of two lives.'

'You are most fully justified, Lord Malcolm,' said Sir Lionel Markham, who presided, 'in the course you intend to pursue, which is highly necessary, in a public point of view, to uphold the laws of the country, and prevent such outrages on civilised society.' With which Malcolm, bowing to the Bench, withdrew with his friend Beauchamp.

During this investigation, the large room of the Fox (a way-side inn, in the parish of Marston, where the petty sessions were held) was crowded to overflowing, and Lord Malcolm's determination to arrest Lord Vancourt was loudly applauded by the farmers and poorer classes.

'That's right, my lord,' said Farmer Stubbins, as he was leaving the room, 'don't ye let the biggest villain of the lot escape just because he's a lord; and there, to tempt to murder the young squire, too—dang it all, my lord, it be too bad; hanging ain't too great a punishment for such as he.'

The result of these proceedings was quickly conveyed to Lord Mervyn by one of his emissaries who attended to watch the case, although no attempt was made by his lordship to screen his men from the consequences of their aiding and abetting Lord Vancourt; in fact, he repudiated the whole thing, and openly expressed his hope that the watchers would be severely punished for daring to leave their places on such an errand. This avowal he deemed necessary, to prove, as he expected, his entire ignorance of Lord Vancourt's intentions.

The next morning, Mrs. Gordon, with Blanche and Constance, drove over to Bampton, where they found Will Beauchamp lying on the sofa in the library. 'I am come over on purpose to give you a severe lecture, William,' said Aunt Gordon, 'for going yesterday to the magistrates' meeting, which, Mr. Gordon tells me, was a very imprudent act, and has increased the inflammation in your side. Indeed, if your father cannot keep you at home, I shall insist on taking you back to the Priory to see what I can do with such a wayward boy.'

'My dear aunt,' replied Beauchamp, 'my presence was absolutely necessary yesterday, or I should not have ventured out on so cold a day; but I will now be a good boy, and will remain in the house until my wound is healed.'

'Will you promise me to keep this resolution?'

'Yes, certainly, dear aunt, if it will afford you any satisfaction.'

'Very well, sir; and now, Constance, we will take off our bonnets, as I intend remaining here till after luncheon.'

As they were leaving the room, Beauchamp said, in what was intended for an injured tone, 'Blanche, you have not shaken hands with me; have I offended you?'

'Oh, no,' she replied, turning back and offering her hand; 'how could you think so, William?'

'Then I will not think so,' still holding her hand, 'if you will shut the door and sit with me a few minutes till Aunt Gordon returns. A deep blush mantled in her cheek, and her eyes were cast towards the door, as if wishing to escape. 'Go, then, dear Blanche,' said Beauchamp; 'I read your thoughts—you would leave me; but why should you thus avoid me? Have I ever uttered one word in your presence offensive or repulsive to your feelings?'

'Oh, no, William, never; but I have been so nervous and agitated ever since that

has ever been pressed to my heart—the first and last.'

'Oh, dear William, then why should you doubt my love for you, or think me less constant than yourself?'

'I don't doubt you dear girl, but feared gratitude might now influence you.'

'William, you are only now wishing me to confess I felt love for you before gratitude, so, to relieve your mind from all further anxiety in your present state of suffering, I will make that confession. Dear William, she said, blushing, 'I have indeed long loved you, and can never love another.'

The words had scarcely passed her lips, before she was caught in his arms and pressed to his heart in a long embrace.

'This happiness quite overpowers me,' he whispered; 'a thousand thanks, my own, very own, dearest Blanche, for your generous candour; and now run up and take off your bonnet, and come sit by and comfort me. Will you, dear girl, without fear and trembling?'

'Yes,' she replied, with a sweet, radiant smile, 'until you are quite tired of my company.'

'That will never be, Blanche; so make haste and return to me again.'

The ladies now entered the room with Mr. Beauchamp, who met them in the hall.

'But where,' he inquired, 'is Malcolm?'

'He is gone over this morning to call on Mr. Conyers,' replied Mrs. Gordon, 'but will be here presently to escort us home after luncheon, as we intend, Mr. Beauchamp, to taste some of your metheglin, which Constance says is equal to any Frontignac.'

'Of course,' said the old squire; 'you would not suppose I should treat you and Blanche as morning visitors; but sitting within doors this fine day does not quite suit me; what say you to a walk instead?'

'Most willingly,' replied Mrs. Gordon, 'although we have only just taken off our bonnets, with the intention of sitting with William.'

'One at a time is more than enough for him, and the most silent of the party the best, in his present state, whoever that may be; but on such a delicate point of distinction between ladies I shall prudently forbear to hazard an opinion; you must settle it, therefore, among yourselves, or cast lots who shall be the victim to listen to Will's complaints, while the rest are enjoying themselves in the open air.'

'I think,' said Constance, looking archly at her brother, 'Blanche is decidedly the most prudent and silent of our party, and therefore I propose her remaining with William, only on the condition that she does not allow him to speak on any exciting subject; do you both agree to this?'

'Most willingly and cheerfully do I submit to these conditions, if Blanche will not think it too great a penance to sit by a sick man's couch.'

'No, William, indeed I shall not; so now, Constance, you may run away as fast as you please with Aunt Gordon and Mr. Beauchamp.'

'My dear, kind-hearted, and affectionate girl,' said Beauchamp, when the others had quitted the room, 'and do you think I would trespass on your gentle nature by detaining you here, when Constance and Mrs. Gordon are enjoying this beautiful sunny morning? No, no, dear Blanche, you will be happier with them.'

'Do you wish me to leave you?'

'What a question!'

'Well, then,' she said, 'I would rather remain with you, if I may, and as I promised to do.'

'And you shall, my own dear Blanche, and now sit down in this chair, and tell me all about your friend Vernon's runaway match with Miss Mervyn, the particulars of which I have not yet heard. Come nearer, Blanche,—indeed I won't bite,' said Beauchamp, laughing; 'and having promised Constance not to speak on any exciting subject, I must not make love; so you are quite safe, dear girl.'

Encouraged by his frank though gentle manner, Blanche no longer dreaded being left alone with her lover; and their happy, confiding looks, when Mrs. Gordon returned from her walk, convinced her how pleasantly had passed the time they had been left together. Lord Malcolm arrived in time for luncheon, soon after which, in consideration of Will Beauchamp's inflammatory symptoms, Mrs. Gordon took her leave, forbidding him to leave the house until she called

site papers according to the editor's political opinions. The heading in the Tory journal standing thus, 'Daring outrage and attempted abduction of Miss Douglas' which was modified by the Radical organ into, 'Failure of a runaway match between Lord Vancourt and Miss Douglas,' with comments thereon insinuating that the young lady had been foiled in her attempted and willing flight with her noble and highly gifted lover by the intervention of some meddling friends.'

Lord Malcolm, on reading the latter paragraph, wrote immediately to the editor giving him a true statement of the case, and insisting on an immediate contradiction of the untrue and offensive article, which, under the threat of an action for libel, was repudiated as emanating from an anonymous correspondent.

The concourse of horse and footmen together at Bampton on this occasion far exceeded any former gathering—numbers flocking there from curiosity only, to know the true facts of the case; and every sportsman in the neighborhood deeming it an act of imperative courtesy to father and son of the fortunate termination of the affair. A group of pedestrians also assembled round Mark Rosier, who detailed the events of that night's adventure, extolling Beauchamp's courage to the skies, telling them how he knocked the big lord twice off his legs like a ninepin.

While Beauchamp was standing talking on the lawn to the gentlemen and farmers Mrs. Gordon's carriage drove up to the door with Blanche and Constance; and as soon as Farmer Stiles recognized the harness than raising his hat high in the air, he shouted from his stentorian lungs, 'Now gentlemen, three cheers for Miss Douglas and her happy escape from that villainous lord! All hats were off in a moment, and Blanche stepped from the carriage, a shout loud, long and hearty, arose, which vibrated through her very heart, and was again and again repeated by the enthusiastic Stiles and his brother farmers; during which Beauchamp made his way into the house.'

'William,' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, 'what was the meaning of that terrific shouting on the lawn?'

'The farmers' welcome to dear Blanche on her happy escape. The moment she was recognized, these honest, kind-hearted fellows could not suppress their feelings of delight at her rescue from Lord Vancourt's cowardly attack; but see, Malcolm is now returning thanks.'

Lord Malcolm had just ridden up as the cheers subsided, and learning the cause spoke thus: 'Gentlemen, I thank you all from my heart for your loudly expressed and, I am sure, warmly-felt congratulations on my cousin's escape from the dastardly attempt at her abduction by a cowardly and unprincipled scoundrel, which I have a hesitation in pronouncing Lord Vancourt to be—' ('Hear! hear!' shouted Stiles)—'and I take this opportunity,' continued Malcolm, 'of stating here publicly, that so far from Miss Douglas being a willing participant in this vile plot (which has been insinuated by leading Radical paper in this county), she would have preferred death to such a fate; and for myself, gentlemen, as one of her nearest and dearest relatives, I assert that I would rather have seen her consigned to the grave than married to such a man as Lord Vancourt.'

At the termination of this brief harangue during which a dead silence prevailed, a loud 'hurrah!' again burst forth, amid cries of 'Shame! shame!'

'Now, then,' Stiles vociferated, 'one cheer more for Lord Malcolm and the young squire, with long lives and good wives to each both!' and another cheer, the strongest and loudest of all, echoed far and wide, making the very armor rattle in the old oak hall.

'Eh! pon honor!' exclaimed Captain Markham, who was pouring out some cherry brandy, 'those fellows make the very glasses dance on the table. Demmit, Bob, I wish you would stop their brazen throats; we shall have the old building about our ears like the walls of Jericho.'

'Ha! ha! not bad for you, Markham,' said Conyers; 'but these fellows are intent on propping up, not pulling down, the House of Beauchamp; let them cheer on, and I only hope the sound of their sweet voices may be borne on the breeze to Marston Castle.'

Whilst the old squire and Bob Conyers