

# THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XXIII.

(CONTINUED.)

'What is the matter with you to-night, Will Beauchamp? You look like a judge with his black cap on, about to pronounce sentence of death on some unhappy culprit. I read your thoughts—the culprit is Danby—another lord to shoot, eh, Will?'

'Nonsense, Selina.' Sense, Will Beauchamp; I have been watching your savage looks at the little flirtation going on in that quiet corner between Blanche and Danby; but don't be alarmed—all right and above board this time. But seriously speaking, Beauchamp, if you are, as I believe, truly in love with Blanche, make me your confidant, and I will soon check my lord from further advances.'

'Thank you, Selina, for your friendly intentions, but Blanche is free to choose whom she pleases.'

'Is it so, William? Are you not already engaged?' There was no reply. 'I had hoped,' added Selina, 'that you were; but take my advice, don't be a spooney, but propose at once.'

'And he at once rejected by Harcourt. No, no, Selina, I have too much pride for that; but say no more now, or we shall be overheard.'

From that night Lord Danby became a frequent visitor at the Priory, where his very quiet, gentlemanly manners and amiable disposition soon won upon all the family; so much so, that even Mrs. Gordon felt very much pleased with his company, although never failing in her loyalty to Beauchamp, of whom she now saw so little as to excite great misgivings in her mind. Lord Danby was at first generally accompanied by Markham or his sister, but now often rode over there alone, and sometimes on hunting days, which at last excited Mrs. Gordon's suspicions that he entertained serious intentions towards her niece.

'Blanche,' she said, one day, after finding on her return to the house that he had been sitting with her some time in the drawing-room while she was occupied in the garden, 'Lord Danby has paid a long visit. I hear he has been here more than an hour, and I begin to think with Charles, his attentions to you, my dear girl, can admit of only one interpretation. But seriously, Blanche, what do you think of him?'

'He is very agreeable, dear aunt, pleasant, and good-humored, and I like him very much. Charles also appears to be on friendly terms with him, and speaks highly in his praise.'

'Yes, my dear, he is certainly, as far as I can judge from our short acquaintance, a very unaffected, excellent young man; but it is quite clear now that his visits here are unquestionably on your account, and William, from his unusual absence, has evidently heard and believes the same. Are you prepared, therefore, my dear girl (as I will never influence you in the choice of a husband), to receive him as a suitor for your hand, to the exclusion of Beauchamp, whom, after due reflection, you may only love as a brother? If so, dear Blanche, knowing William's deep, disinterested regard for you, pray be candid with me, as your true welfare is my first consideration; so do not hesitate in telling me if you prefer Lord Danby, that I may break to William that his hopes are at an end.'

'Oh, no, my dearest aunt,' exclaimed Blanche, throwing her arms round her neck; 'I never did, never can love any other than dear William; but he has been so distant lately that I almost fear he has ceased to love me.'

'Then had he ceased to love you, dear girl, would you accept Lord Danby?'

'No, dear aunt, that is impossible; I could not love again so soon, if ever.'

'My own dear child, then rest assured you are as secure of William's affection as of my own, which neither time nor absence can ever change; but you know his keen, sensitive feelings, and often expressed resolution never to stand in your way, if he thought you

Lord Danby directed his course to the Priory. Blanche was sitting by herself in the drawing room (her aunt having, as usual after breakfast, gone to her poultry-yard), when the door opened, and he was announced. She would gladly have made any excuse to leave the room, but that being impossible without great apparent rudeness, she sat down with a tremor and embarrassment so very visible and unlike her usual manner, that it could not escape the notice of Lord Danby, who felt his hopes rise at what he very naturally concluded evinced a warmer feeling towards him than that of a mere acquaintance; and thus encouraged, he took advantage of the present opportunity to press his suit and avow the feelings of love and affection, which ever since his first introduction to her had been daily increasing.

After a few common-place remarks, his lordship observed that his visit to Barton Court was drawing to a close. 'A visit, Miss Douglas, which has been productive of more pleasure to me than I can express, but from which the happiness or misery of my future life will be dated; need I say that on you that happiness depends? Wealth and rank I offer you (though I feel these would have little weight), but what is far beyond these, a heart deeply and devotedly your own, and which has never been given to another. Say, Miss Douglas, taking her hand, 'if I may hope to be fortunate enough to possess this treasure?'

Poor Blanche was quite overwhelmed with pain and confusion at this unequivocal proposal, but, quickly recovering herself, she withdrew her hand, saying, 'Indeed, Lord Danby, I very much regret this avowal of your sentiments towards me.'

'Oh, recall that word—regret, Miss Douglas; for though our acquaintance has been short, let me still hope that in time my devoted affection may induce you to give me a more favorable answer than that I now dread.'

'Pray cease, my lord; indeed, you distress me; I never imagined your attentions were more than those of a friend.'

'Every one must have divined the nature of those attentions but yourself; and now, dear Miss Douglas, listen, I entreat, to one who has never known what love was till he knew you, and whose whole happiness rests on your reply. Give me ever so distant a hope that I may win that hand I would give all I possess to obtain.'

'Indeed, Lord Danby, I cannot be ever more to you than a friend, flattered as I feel by your preference for me. But it is impossible; my feelings will not change.'

'Then,' cried he, turning very pale, 'my worst forebodings are verified; you love another?'

Blanche blushed crimson, and rising, said, 'I know not by what right Lord Danby presumes to question my feelings.'

'Oh, forgive me, Miss Douglas. I never meant to offend, but have some pity on this bitter disappointment to all my long-cherished hopes, and at least do not discard me as a friend, though you will not now listen to me as a lover. I can never, while life lasts, cease to be deeply interested in one to whom I would have devoted that life, if permitted.'

But Blanche, hearing footsteps in the hall, fled hastily through another door, and sought her own room.

It is always a painful thing for a woman to refuse any man, but doubly so when that man has qualities to command esteem and admiration; and Blanche now devoutly wished Lord Danby had never been known to her, or that she had been spared the necessity of inflicting pain on one so truly estimable. Little did she think, at that very moment, how agonising were the feelings of that dear one for whom she had rejected him; but we must now relate what caused Beauchamp to feel thus.

It so happened that he arrived at the Priory about ten minutes after Lord Danby, and giving his horse to a servant in the stable-yard, walked round to the hall door. In doing so, he passed the drawing-room window, and a glance into the room revealed to his astonished sight Lord Danby sitting on the sofa with Blanche, and holding her hand in his. Beauchamp's brain was almost on fire at the sight; he rushed back into the stable-yard, seized his horse from the astonished groom, who was taking him into the

the furious galloping of horses up the carriage drive, entered the house hastily, and inquired of the footman what it meant, and who had been calling there.

'The Marquis of Danby, ma'am, has been here and is just gone. Mr. William Beauchamp rode into the yard, and left his horse, but before it could be put into the stable, he returned and took him from John's hand, and rode off as fast as he could go. My lord has also ridden full gallop up to the lodge.'

'What can have happened, Thomas?' asked Mrs. Gordon, anxiously.

'Nothing that I know of, ma'am; but John said Master William was in a terrible way about something, and looked like a ghost.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; 'but where is Miss Douglas?'

'In her own room, I believe, ma'am; and immediately Mrs. Gordon rushed up stairs, and found Blanche in an agony of grief.

'My own child' (throwing her arms round her niece), 'what on earth has happened? what is the meaning of all I heard about Lord Danby, Beauchamp, and Malcolm riding so furiously away, and you in tears too? Dear Blanche, pray tell me what has caused this dreadful commotion?'

'Dear, dear aunt,' replied Blanche, crying bitterly, 'I am the unfortunate cause of all.'

Blanche then related what had occurred between herself and Lord Danby, and that Beauchamp having, on passing the window, seen him take her hand, rode away, as her cousin told her, in a distracted state, refusing to stop or listen to him a moment; and that Charles, learning the truth from her own lips, immediately followed him, fearing he might commit some rash act.

'May Heaven avert such a calamity, my dear child!' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon; 'but pray do not give way thus; we can trust Charles, and, oh! how fortunate he was here.'

'Indeed, dear aunt, I should never forgive myself were anything to befall poor William, for I fear I may have treated Lord Danby in too friendly a manner, as we all liked him so much; but, until yesterday, I never thought he intended more than common attention to me, and indeed, dear aunt, this morning he was so suddenly announced that I could not escape from the room, though, after what you told me yesterday, I had resolved never to be left alone with him again.'

'My dear love, do not distress yourself so, it could not be avoided, and I hope Charles will prevail on William to return.'

Fast as Lord Malcolm rode, and he slackened not his speed for a moment, Beauchamp far outstripped him, and having put his horse in the stable, ordered a fresh one to be saddled immediately, going up the back stairs to his room, where, having packed up a carpet bag, he sat writing a few hasty lines to his father, explaining what had taken place, and his intention of leaving home for a short time; when Malcolm, bursting open the door, exclaimed, 'Beauchamp, why this folly, this madness? Danby has proposed, and is rejected!—how could you think Blanche would act otherwise?'

'On your honor, Malcolm, is this true?'

'On my life, it is; Blanche has told me all; that, urging his suit, he seized her hand for a moment, but that she immediately withdrew it, and positively refused his addresses.'

Beauchamp stood as if electrified, his lips and frame quivering with agitation, and then sunk back into a chair, overpowered by conflicting sensations.

'Here, Beauchamp,' said Malcolm, pouring out a glass of water, 'drink this, my dear fellow; all is well, believe me, and now you must return to poor dear Blanche, who is almost broken-hearted, fearing you have left her for ever.'

'Oh, Malcolm! the agony of that moment; I thought my heart would burst, and now see how my hand trembles; I am quite bewildered still.'

'Then come with me, my dear Beauchamp; a glass of wine first, and then our horses.'

'I cannot go just yet, Malcolm; my head throbs so.'

'The air will revive you, Beauchamp, so come along directly; and taking his friend's arm, Malcolm led him down stairs, and having forced him to drink a glass of wine, they mounted their horses. Beauchamp

out a glass of wine. 'Why, my dear boy, you look quite wretched, with that pale, wan face; pray take something, if on a biscuit; and mind, my love, you have a good long walk afterwards, to give him an appetite for his dinner.'

'I fear, dear aunt, I cannot dine with you to-day.'

'I fear, dear William, you must,' was the playful reply; 'and as you are so dainty, I shall order a couple of my spring chickens to be dressed for you.'

'Then I must send to let my father and Constance know I do not dine at home.'

'Oh, yes, of course,' replied Malcolm, 'and I shall go over and dine at Bampton in your place, my boy, and make love to Constance all the evening, as you were in such a state this morning I could not speak a word to her.'

After luncheon, Malcolm again mounted his horse to allay the old squire's apprehensions about his son, not doubting the servants had noticed his very excited manner; and Beauchamp with Blanche strolled out together for a walk, and did not return until nearly five o'clock; so agreeably passed the time, that they were scarcely aware of the lateness of the hour. It would be difficult to point out the happiest of those three persons, who after dinner drew round to the fireside at the Priory that evening. Mrs. Gordon being in high spirits, could not forbear joking Beauchamp on his jealousy.

'Why, William, at this rate you will be in a lunatic asylum within a week of Blanche's first appearance at Almack's; you really must school yourself to meet these things with complacency, if not with indifference; for Blanche will undoubtedly attract many admirers (irrespective of her fortune), and she cannot prevent people falling in love with her, or proposing.'

'Indeed, dear aunt, I feel more and more every day how undeserving I am of her preference, and that feeling makes me wretched; she is so far, so very far beyond my deserts, that I know I have no right to aspire to that dear hand, which I dread sometimes to think can never be mine.'

'Never, dear William, believe me,' replied Blanche, 'shall this hand (placing it in his) belong to any other than yourself; titles, rank, honors are nothing to me, in comparison with your love. Oh! William, don't again doubt my entire devotion to yourself, or you will, indeed, make me miserable.'

'Heaven bless you, my own darling girl, for that avowal,' as he raised her hand to his lips, and the tears started to his eyes from uncontrollable emotion.

'Come, come, my dear boy,' said Mrs. Gordon, 'your nerves are sadly shattered by this morning's work; pray do not torment yourself any more in this foolish manner.'

'I will not go to London, aunt,' added Blanche, 'unless William goes too; and to save him any anxiety, I had rather not go at all.'

'Well, dear child, no one can oblige you to go, unless you like it; so we will say no more on the subject. And now, William, I hope you will not be sparing of your visits to the Priory for the future; and to make up for your bad conduct, I expect you will come over here at least two or three days in the week, if not oftener.'

'You will, I fear, dear aunt, be sooner tired of my company than I shall be of yours; as I have promised this dear girl to be here as often as possible.'

'I am delighted to hear it, William; so now take another glass of wine, and we will then go to the ladies' drawing-room, and Blanche will sing a few songs to enliven us.'

It was a late hour before Beauchamp could tear himself away from her he loved so enthusiastically; when, after folding her once more in a long and fervent embrace, invoking every blessing on her head, and then pressing Aunt Gordon's hand to his lips, he bade them both good night.

'Dear, kind, affectionate boy!' exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, when he left the room, 'who could fail to love you, even though ten times more jealous than you are?'

'Oh, dear aunt, you do not, cannot know how dearly I do love him.'

'Indeed, my darling girl, I do believe it, and Heaven grant you may ever love him! as now, or, poor fellow, I believe he would never survive a change.'

'Never, dearest aunt, shall he find any

Blanche, Blanche!' ejaculated Lord Danby as he spurred forward from the lodge, which so short a time before he had been cheerful and happy; 'all I possess a world—rank, honors, and riches—resign; all, all—everything, for the precious to me of all earthly treasures dear hand. But it cannot be—not at least—if ever! She loves, I fear, and that man is William Beauchamp must be so, and Harcourt has decided. Indulging in such melancholy reflections Lord Danby reached Barton Court, and immediately repaired to his own room, when feeling more composed, he sat and wrote a few lines to Mr. Harcourt, pressing of his feelings of unfeigned and most poignant grief in having thus failed to interest Miss Douglas in favor; although acknowledging kind consideration in endeavoring spare him as much as possible the pain refusal.

Having dispatched this letter by hand to Throesby, Lord Danby sought Idone, and made known his intention leaving Barton Court the following morning, as his excuse for curtailing his stay, that an unexpected event required his immediate return home. Lord Danby's commotion excited no little surprise and trifling indignation on the part of Mr. Mrs. Harcourt, who, attributing Blanche's refusal of such an unexceptionable offer Mrs. Gordon's influence over her in favor Beauchamp, drove her in hot haste to Priory, vowing vengeance, and resolved to insist on Blanche being restored to protection.

Mrs. Gordon was sitting alone at her in the drawing room (Malcolm and Blanche having ridden over to Bampton), when and Mrs. Harcourt pounced in upon her, and with scarcely the usual civility of kind hands, the gentleman rushed in, res, or in plainer terms, was at her will, circumlocution, boiling to deliver himself his angry thoughts.

'So, Mrs. Gordon, I find you have persuaded your niece to reject the Marquis Danby; a young nobleman of unblemished character, large fortune, and heir to a dukedom! What fault could you find with Mrs. Gordon? He is handsome, most capable in disposition (Sir Lionel and all family speak in raptures of his looks and agreeable; in short, perfectly unimpeachable in every respect. But I suppose did not suit your views that my ward should accept his lordship; and therefore her prospects in life are to be sacrificed that you carry out your own plans.'

'My plans! Mr. Harcourt, I find you have persuaded your niece to reject the Marquis Danby; a young nobleman of unblemished character, large fortune, and heir to a dukedom! What fault could you find with Mrs. Gordon? He is handsome, most capable in disposition (Sir Lionel and all family speak in raptures of his looks and agreeable; in short, perfectly unimpeachable in every respect. But I suppose did not suit your views that my ward should accept his lordship; and therefore her prospects in life are to be sacrificed that you carry out your own plans.'

'It appears most extraordinary to me,' replied Mrs. Harcourt, 'quite inexplicable how Blanche could refuse such a person