

THE Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER XLII

(CONTINUED.)

"Tell them this land, with all its happiness and joys unspeakable, may be, nay, must be theirs, if they seek, as they would the hidden treasures of this, with diligence and care:—and what will they say in return? "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." Oh, fools! with all your worldly wisdom, blind, besotted fools! who barter a few quickly passing years, with all their short-lived, unsatisfactory pleasures and enjoyments, for eternity!

As Blanche and Beauchamp were kneeling side by side, pouring out their thanks to their Maker, and imploring his protection and blessing through their wedded life, Mrs. Gordon, unperceived, passed noiselessly by, and the devout aspiration of Jabez escaped her lips: "Oh, that Thy will be done, O Lord!"

A month has passed—it is the 1st of August, a bright and lovely morning. Again are the Earl Beauchamp and Blanche kneeling side by side, the latter never more to rise as Blanche Douglas. She is kneeling at the altar, with her hand in his, whose cherished name she now bears, as the wife of William Beauchamp. The village church of Bampton is thronged with spectators, rich and poor, to witness the double marriage of Beauchamp and his sister Lord Malcolm looked serious enough during the ceremony; but his love for teasing Blanche would break out directly after, when he whispered, "The Gordon knot, my love, is tied at last, which dear aunt has been so long in weaving."

"And most thankful am I, Charles, to Heaven," she replied, "and to that dear aunt for such a blessing."

There was not a vacant pew that morning in Bampton Church. For miles around, the farmers, with their wives and daughters, flocked to the scene, to witness the marriage of their favorite (whom they still persisted in calling "the young squire") and his sister; and when the two couples issued from the sacred portals, amid a peal of bells pulled by might vigorous arms, a line was formed from the porch to the churchyard gate; and one long, loud cheer burst forth, as they passed along from all assembled.

A grand breakfast was prepared at Bampton, to which all the neighboring gentry had been invited, to conclude with a farmers' ball on the evening; at which some of the higher orders wished to be present also. Neither were the poor forgotten—tents being erected on the lawn for the whole population of Bampton parish, with the substantial fare of roast beef and plum pudding, supplied by the two principal innkeepers of the village, to which they sat down at two o'clock. Rustic games and pastimes succeeded, with dancing on the green sward in the evening.

The newly married couples, having changed their bridal attire for travelling costume, drove off immediately afterwards en route to the North, Lord Beauchamp and Blanche for Annandale Castle, and Malcolm and Constance for his seat in Scotland. The bitterness of parting with his only daughter was considerably mollified to the old earl by the promise of their returning at the end of a month or six weeks to spend the winter at Bampton; and Mrs. Gordon felt too happy in the attainment of all her wishes, to think so deeply as she otherwise would of the temporary separation from her affectionate niece and newly-made nephew, both of whom she regarded as her own children. Her sister, Lady Malcolm, also, was now staying at the Priory, with Mrs. Fortescue, who accompanied her from town, where she intended to remain until the first week in September, by which time Beauchamp and Blanche were expected home again.

Bob Conyers, with his usual disinterestedness, to prevent his old friend feeling solitary after his children's departure, had invited himself to spend a week at Bampton; and for the present there was no lack of guests, Lord Henry Baynton, Sir William Burnet, Wynne, and Melville having come expressly for the occasion. Fred Beauchamp was there

ed to the lowly cottages of the poor, to console them in their afflictions, and minister to their wants. On this occasion, Mark Rosier was appointed master of the ceremonies, to superintend the whole proceedings and preserve order; and the office could not have devolved on one more zealously affected towards the house of Beauchamp. In fact, since the rescue of Blanche from Lord Vancourt's devices, Mark had become rapidly a man of consequence, and was now under-steward on the Bampton estates, with a salary commensurate with his fidelity and honesty. His father was also once more in a flourishing condition as a farmer.

"Really, Mark," exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, "I hardly knew you again; you look more like a gentleman than a—"

"Poacher, you would have said, my lady," added Mark, good-humoredly, "but if I have got good clothes on my back now, my dearly-respected lady, Mark Rosier is not the man to forget who put him there!"

"Indeed, Mark, I meant no unkind reflection on yourself, and rejoice most truly in your good fortune."

"Ah, my lady! times are altered to me indeed, but far beyond all the money, I value the confidence placed in me by my dear young master, who seems to think he can never repay me for a little bit of service I once did, which was nothing particular, after all."

"To us all, Mark, it was a very particular piece of service, for had you not detected that detestable plot, none of us had now been present at these rejoicings, and sorrow instead of happiness had filled our hearts. You are well chosen, my faithful friend, to preside on this auspicious occasion, and as long as life is spared us, we shall never forget our gratitude for your gallant conduct."

"And mind, Mark," interposed Fred, "these good people don't get tipsy to-night."

"Then, Master Fred, you must come and help me keep the tap, as I suspect, whether I will or no—(with a sly wink at Fred)—it'll be a very wet afternoon."

"Indeed, I hope not," said Mrs. Gordon; "I should be sorry these poor people were deprived of their day's amusement."

"There aint any fear of its being wet overhead, my lady; but then, you know, it is very hot weather, and there be a number of thirsty souls here to-day. Then there'll be Lord and Lady Beauchamp's health to drink—Lord and Lady Malcolm's—my lord's, in course—and your ladyship's, and a few others, with bumpers all round, and I rather think some of these good folk will feel very moist indeed before nightfall."

Leaving our happy rustics to the full enjoyment of their festival, which did not terminate until darkness stole over the scene, which, as might be expected, had long previously stolen over the senses of many of the guests, so as to render them oblivious of time and the road home, we will now transfer our reader to the ball-room at Bampton House, which was crowded to overflowing with the bold yeomen, their wives and daughters, and a fair sprinkling of gentry. Of the latter were Sir Lionel Markham and family, the Comptons, Rollestons, all the bachelors of the hut, with Mr. and Mrs. Winterbottom, who had particularly begged to be present. The earl opened the ball in a country dance with Mrs. Styles, a fine buxom-looking woman of fifty. The other gentlemen selected partners also among the farmers' wives and daughters, this being the rule to be observed in the first dance.

Selina Markham seized upon young Hazel for her partner; and Fred Beauchamp introduced Mrs. Fortescue to the brother of Miss Fairacre, the prettiest girl in the room, whom he had engaged for himself. Bob Conyers, undertaking the part of master of the ceremonies, soon provided for all the dancing youngsters by mutual introductions. Captain Markham, who was playing fierce attention to Miss Honoria, voted it "a demned bore" to be pulled nearly off his legs by a strong young damsel, through every couple, down to the bottom of the room. "I say, Fred," he whispered, when left at ease for a few seconds, "I sha'n't have any more of this fun—don't pay, old fellow—just see my Phillis, a full blown peony's a fool to her—denim! makes one hot to look at her—heavy in hand as a four-year-old. Cut and run, by Jove, Fred."

"Can't be done, Markham—orders from head quarters for one dance with the rustics; then please ourselves afterwards. So here we go at it again—cross hands, down the middle and up again, with which the cap-

pled and crumpled as if it had been taken out of a clothes bag; but here she comes—my gracious! such a figure, and so 'ot, poor thing. And sure enough, Miss Honoria's dress and tresses were rather the worse for the rushing and crushing she had been obliged to undergo when hauled about by young Mr. Harcastle, who was not one of the most graceful in his movements, or very particular about an extra hop or two, whether in or out of time.

With the proverbial unselfishness of women, however, Miss Honoria's first inquiring looks were directed to Markham, whose fall she had witnessed. "I fear," she said, "you have been very much injured by that awkward girl's falling?"

"Much better now, thank you," he replied, "pray take my seat, attempting to rise, when another sharp twinge made the captain twist again."

"Sit still, Captain Markham, I beg and entreat."

"Pon honor, couldn't perpetrate such rudeness, as to sit still whilst you are standing, Miss Honoria."

"Then," she said, "I shall leave you directly, if you make another effort to rise."

At this moment the earl (his dance being finished) came up to inquire about his accident. "Well, Markham, I see how it is, and rest is your only remedy—an easy chair here, or in the drawing-room—which do you prefer?"

"Oh, here, by all means," was the reply, "as I should like to see the fun out."

In a few minutes a low chair was brought in for the captain's especial use, with a footstool to rest his leg upon, and being engaged to Miss Henrietta for the first quadrille, that young lady, in compassion to his misfortunes, insisted on sitting with him during the dance. Now, on what exact terms it was effected we are not at liberty to disclose; but certain it is that this little attention of the young lady, coupled with some melting looks from a pair of very beautiful black eyes, so softened the captain's heart that a declaration of love followed, and crimson cheeks, with down-cast looks, were the only answers returned, which the captain took as intended.

The pressure of her hand, with a few sotto voce whisperings of love and devotion succeeded, with a conclusion more *à l'alto*—"Eh! 'pon honor, how romantic, and all that sort of thing."

Selina, who had been casting searching glances toward the happy pair, felt assured, by the young lady's behaviour, that the die was cast. "Here, Bob," she exclaimed to her partner, "that fool, Ned, has fallen into the mash-tub at last, and I'll bet a pony, as Lord Henry says, that Miss Honoria has booked him. My gracious! what a row there will be, when mamma finds we are to have Mrs. Winter for a mother-in-law."

"Any way, my dear, here is a better name than Hogaflesh, and I know Ned had serious ideas about a young lady of that name in London, this season, the daughter of a retired soap-boiler. Honoria herself is very well—a pretty, unassuming, well-educated girl; and, I can tell you, a brewery is a very lucrative, safe investment, with large returns, and the business itself quite respectable; so, on the whole, Ned has decided wisely, and we must put up with the old lady's vulgarities, if indeed she is disposed to trouble us with them, which I very much question."

"Ah! Bob, you are ever making the best of things."

"And so, my dear, I hope you also, for the future, will look always on the sunny side, which is the wisest thing to do."

CHAPTER L.

We must now turn our attention to Mrs. Fortescue and Fred Beauchamp, who were lounging (the latter at least) through a quadrille.

"What do you think," he was asking her, "of our country practices at a wedding? our rustic games and dances?"

"To me," she replied, "everything I have witnessed to-day has been most delightful. The dear old earl's unaffected, almost parental kindness to his poor neighbours, and their joyous looks, beaming with gratitude, in return, awaken kindred feeling in my own heart, and recall the associations of my earlier years, when I was a country girl. Happy as they, indeed, if they could

either my sentiments or my words. I like you as a friend and companion; but our acquaintance has been of very recent date, and I must see and know more of you before I could entrust my happiness to your keeping."

"Then you will not at once discard me as I dreaded," he murmured, passionately. "A thousand thanks for that concession. I ask no more. I am now content."

"Thus let it be, then," she added. "But mind you are not too sanguine in your hopes—I see the Earl approaching."

"Well, Mrs. Fortescue," he inquired, "what do you think of our country dances?"

"Indeed," she replied, "many of them are exceedingly pretty, genteel-looking girls; and so nicely dressed, with their hair arranged quite *à la mode*, that I should have thought some London milliner and hair-dresser had been engaged preparing them for the occasion."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you are not far from the truth, as Blanche and Constance's maids have been giving them some lessons on these matters, to set them off to the best advantage; but still, there is a natural gracefulness about some which art cannot much improve—for instance, Fred's first partner, Miss Fairacre, who might pass muster even at Almack's—a crafty young scamp he is—always picking out the prettiest girl in the room. Take care of him, Mrs. Fortescue—he is a dangerous fellow, with those glossy curls—but not a bad boy at heart—(patting him on the back)—and I don't know what I could well do without him, sometimes. Well, Fred," addressing him, "I conclude you will be following Will's example pretty soon; and, mind, when you can find one like Blanche, in heart and disposition—fond of the country, and likely to make me a dutiful, affectionate niece, you shall have the Grange, and all the appurtenances belonging thereto, for your home, and something, in addition to your own property, to help to keep house—on these conditions, you may marry with my consent, but I don't intend to trust you out of the parish."

"Many thanks, my dear uncle, for your generous offer. You have ever been to me as a father, and I hope never to be far distant from dear old Bampton, where I have spent so many happy years."

"It will be your own fault if you are, my boy—and don't forget your duties to-night, in seeing that our guests are well cared for."

"No fear of that, uncle. Bob and myself don't intend to be idle."

Neither were they, either before, at, or after supper. At twelve precisely, the large dining-room and library, joined together by wide folding doors, were thrown open, displaying a long table, reaching down the centre, and two cross tables at each end, on which a profusion of good things was spread out, with wines of every description; and it were needless to remark that, the evening being very sultry, Conyers and Fred caused the champagne corks to pop about like irregular musket discharges of infantry. The company had fully discussed the merits of the good things provided for them, when Bob Conyers, as Vice-Chairman, proposed the toast of the evening in a short, appropriate speech:—"Health and happiness to the newly-married couple!" which was received with deafening cheers, lasting for several minutes; and as they were dying away, the stentorian voice of Farmer Stiles was heard: "Now, gentlemen, one cheer more, as you love him, for the young squire; and may God bless them both."

The shout which answered this short address may be imagined, and the Earl, seeing the ladies almost overpowered by the thunder of voices, rose to return thanks, which stilled immediately the raging storm into breathless silence. The short, energetic speech of the old peer again elicited rounds of applause, although more subdued, from a hint passed up the long table by Conyers. "The Ladies," and "The Earl's" health then followed in quick succession, after which dancing recommenced, and continued with unabated strength and resolution until four o'clock in the morning.

With the termination of these festivities and the departure of his guests from Bampton, the Earl relapsed into his usual quiet habits; but as Fred spent the greater part of his time at the Priory, often dining there, the loss of his children's society, and the solitary fireside in the evening, began to produce the effects which might have been expected upon one whose chief happiness depended on do-

his future happiness was now dependent on her consent.

Mrs. Gordon, uninfluenced by worldly considerations or ambitious views, felt sorely perplexed by the Earl's proposal. She was perfectly satisfied with her own position, and the thought of leaving her happy home, with every comfort and all her pets around her, produced such painful sensations, that she had nearly resolved on writing a refusal, although couched in the most friendly language, with cogent reasons for declining the honor he intended conferring upon her when Lady Malcolm, observing her sister's unusual abstraction of thought and nervous manner, at last drew the secret from her, and the confession of the distressing situation in which she felt placed by being compelled to give pain to one she so highly respected, with the dread of that coolness which would naturally arise to destroy the harmony which had hitherto existed between the two families.

"My dear Margaret," continued Lady Malcolm, "you have not advanced one single reasonable excuse for your purposeful rejection of the dear old Earl, to whom, I am convinced, you are much more deeply attached than you like to confess to me: in fact, I have long observed, since his visit to me in London, your evasive partiality for each other. There is no necessity for giving up the Priory or your pets; but even if such a sacrifice were required, I should not hesitate in resigning all, rather than give up you, oldest and dearest friend. Indeed, my dear sister, I am only surprised you could have hesitated for one moment to accept the Earl's offer, independently of the great pleasure it will afford those dear girls, Blanche and Constance, as well as myself. They will be times of course, when Charles and William must be absent from this part of the country, leaving the Earl and yourself two solitary beings, in two old, solitary houses, so, my dear sister, putting feeling out of the question, the most prudent step you can possibly adopt is to marry the Earl, and you will then be a mutual comfort to each other in your declining years. Moreover, I know Charles would be only too glad to see at the Priory during five or six months of the year, if you will allow him, and you can depend on Constance keeping everything precisely in the same order as at present."

Mrs. Gordon, thinking her sister had spoken very sensibly on this subject, without alluding to rank or worldly advantage, thanked her for her good advice, which she agreed to follow, and a neatly-written note was, in accordance therewith, despatched to Bampton, which brought the Earl to the Priory within an hour of its delivery, in high spirits. To those interested in love scenes between the youthful and ardent, the meeting of these two old friends on this important matter, might appear too tame and sedate to be rehearsed; we will, therefore, pass it over *sub silentio*, and merely relate the result, that in a fortnight from that day, the Earl and Mrs. Gordon underwent the ceremony of being joined together in holy matrimony at the altar in Bampton Church, save Lady Malcolm, Mrs. Fortescue, Fred Beauchamp, and Conyers being present, and returned afterwards to Bampton House, if nothing extraordinary had happened, when Aunt Gordon assumed her new dignity of Countess of Annandale, without in any way changing her habitual cheerfulness and saucy temper. There was not one of the old domestics in the Earl's establishment (old servants being generally capacious and impassive of innovations in their departments) who did not receive with unfeigned pleasure their new mistress, whose kindness of heart and generous disposition were well known to all her inferiors. Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Fortescue returned the same day to London for a short time, promising to be at Bampton again the second week in September.

The news of the Earl's marriage with Mrs. Gordon caused very little surprise in the neighbourhood; the general opinion being the reverse of that so often pronounced on elderly persons "making fools of themselves." Here it was admitted to be the wisest thing they could have done, by all save our not over-esteemed friend, Mrs. Harcourt, who was of course prepared with an ill-natured speech for the occasion, envenomed, no doubt, by the consideration of her quondam opponent taking precedence of her in all their country parties.

"Only think," she observed to her husband, "of Mrs. Gordon imposing upon that silly old