

WON IN A CANTER.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XV.

"Well," he said, as she saw him glancing toward the tower, "I will not let you from your paper any longer, you will have time to read it through before your friends arrive, but tell me before you start if there is any chance of the Liberals going out, if they do I will give a fancy ball in honor of the occasion."

"So you shall, so you shall," said his Lordship, and he buried himself in his arm-chair.

At one o'clock precisely, the magnificently-horsed and handsome barouche of Lady Lavender drove up to Lady Mary Slyfox's.

"I am come, my dear," said Lady Lavender on entering her friend's boudoir, "to take you to see poor Charlie Thornhill; that is the object of my early visit to you."

"I will go with pleasure," returned the other. "Poor fellow, I shall be delighted to see him again, I will dress at once, then we will have some luncheon and start immediately after."

"Mary," said Lady Lavender, "have you ever noticed Miss Sprightly?"

"Yes," replied the other, "I have often remarked her, a very fine stylish-looking girl, rides beautifully, and extremely lady-like."

"Yes," said Lady Lavender, "I think she is all that, she seems well-mannered, as does her mother. I have an idea, and that is that Lord Verriest, is smitten with her."

"How very singular!" remarked the other, "I have come to the same conclusion; but we shall meet them at the Verriests', and then we shall be able to judge if our surmises are correct."

They were alluding to the dinner we have already spoken of, and where Lord Verriest would have proposed to Bessy if he had not been interrupted.

They were sadly shocked at beholding the wreck of the once handsome Charlie, though much stronger, he was fearfully emaciated, and the least thing seemed to excite and unnerve him.

His cousin Mary was reading to him as the ladies entered, but he was in a sort of a fitful daze, and hardly seemed to know that strangers were in the room till he was tapped on the shoulder by his old nurse.

"Master Charlie," said she softly, bending over him, "ladies have come to see you—you are not asleep, are you? Miss Mary has been reading to you this ever so long."

The young man smiled languidly as they approached, and held out his thin wasted hand, more like a lion's than anything else—so white and gauntly did he look, and so changed, with his beard and moustache shaven off, and his hair cropped close, that neither of the ladies recognized him.

"My poor fellow," said Lady Lavender speaking first, "you do indeed look ill."

As for Lady Mary she was speechless, never before having been in a sick-room.

"Nurse," she said, drawing the old woman aside, "you think he possibly can live? How terribly ill he looks;" tears were in her eyes as she asked the question.

"Yes, miss, my lady, I mean, he is far better and stronger to what he was; you should have seen him a fortnight ago."

"I am glad, nurse," I did not."

It was not one of the invalid's strong days, for the weather was cold; so after a few minutes' conversation with him (for they saw he was fatigued and tired) they took their leave.

"I can never," said Lady Mary, entering the carriage, "speak to those two men again (alluding to Bragg and Turtlefat); I am thankful though that this fearful accident has for ever put that out of me being again asked to any shooting parties."

It might have been Lavender's or your husband's fate," remarked her friend; "had as it is, I am glad it is no worse. Poor Mary has worn out and cast down; how truly Lord Lavender said this morning, what misery to carelessness of those two men had caused, and Mary Thornhill is still more wretched because—here the lady hesitated.

"Bessy, what?" asked her friend.

"Because," said Lavender, slowly, and distinctly, "because she sees the man's eyes at death's door."

The keys of her Ladyship had detected what the other had failed to discover.

Colonel Downey was remarkably spruce in his blue buff and up-frock-coat, gray trousers, and shiny "Lincoln and Ben-Hur." He was, as his friend Rasper remarked, not up within an inch of his life.

"When you are really going in for it?" demanded the Major.

"Like a bird," gaily replied the Colonel; "I'm about the tack, the correct card, and I'm ready."

"You look as beaming as the morning sun, Downey; you could not be better; but I give stock in the fund though rather too thick, the whiskers and moustache have too much of the beet-root and pickled cabbage about them."

and good luck, old chap," and the Major snatched away to the stables.

The Colonel was not comfortable as he rode away; his coat was tight and his neck-cloth too stiff; but his nose was what he dreaded the most—the wind was cold, would the cherry brandy give it more colour than usual?—no he held it in his hand as he went along, which was not convenient, for "Jim Crow" was fresh, and pulled a little; so altogether the Colonel's ride was not a pleasant one.

Bessy Sprightly had gone out for a long walk that afternoon, as she could turn matters over in her mind much better by herself, than she could in the company of her mother.

"What on earth," she soliloquized to herself, "will become of mamma when I am married? she will be wretched alone; it would never do to have her living in the house with us, even if he were to allow it" (by the way, she alluded to Lord Verriest) "which I am sure he would not; besides it would never answer, mothers in their married children's houses are a mistake. No, mamma can only come and visit us now and then; that way no discord or seeds of dissension will be sown."

She wandered about and cogitated so long that it was nearly dinner-time before she got home; but running quickly up into her room and dressing, for they dined at five in the winter, she was down before it was announced.

Mamma Sprightly looked singularly elated all dinner-time, and in much better spirits than her daughter had seen her for some time, which Bessy attributed to the news she had imparted to her mother in the morning. Mamma then took a turn at the pathetic, and alluded eagerly to "lonely hearts," hummed snatches of "You'll remember me," "We may be happy yet," and so on, and so excited was she, that her daughter could hardly make her out.

"Why, what on earth is the matter with you, mamma, to-night? you seem quite beside yourself."

"Oh, my darling girl, you have made me so happy by what you told me this morning; do you—do you really think Lord Verriest will propose?"

"Just as surely as you sit there, mamma."

"And when do you think you will be married?" asked her mother.

"I really cannot say, mamma, he has not even proposed yet, but that I know will come; but when I am to be married I cannot possibly tell you; you do not expect me, when I am engaged, to say I must be married on such a particular day."

"Oh! of course not, my love," returned her mother, "I only meant—in fact I should like to know, because—" added the widow, with increasing confusion.

"Because what, mamma?"

"Because, my dear, I am going to be married myself."

"What! exclaimed her daughter, starting back, "married! you going to be married, mamma—who to? Not to wretched Duffer, I hope, or Bluster?" she added, "but are you joking, mamma?"

"I hope, Bessy," said the widow, bristling up, "there is nothing extraordinary in my being married—it is not to either of the gentlemen you have mentioned; but I only wished to know when you are likely to be settled, because I am to be in a month or six weeks, and I don't wish to put it off."

"But who are you going to be married to?" demanded her daughter.

"To an officer and a gentleman, Bessy, Colonel Downey!"

"The man with the nose?" ejaculated the young lady.

"Bessy," said her mother, loftily, "never dare make such a remark again."

"I beg your pardon, mamma, dear," replied her daughter, "I wish you every happiness, I am sure" (kissing her) "but he has such a nose."

"What on earth can there be in this Yorkshire air?" she asked herself, as she was undressing for bed, "every one seems to be in love. I suppose hunting-men have little else to think of; fancy mamma, too, and the man with the nose. Ah well! it is the best thing she could have done. Now my mind is easy; what order the Colonel will be kept in though—he little knows mamma."

CHAPTER XVI.

FERN GORSE.

The Meet at Fern Gorse was a favorite one of the Warcheele hunt, situated in the heart of their best country, and was never known to be drawn blank.

It was not only a favorite meet of the gentlemen, but of the ladies also, for it was a fine open country, with large grass pastures, and those in their carriages could view the hunt for a long way.

Whichever way the fox broke, both equestrians, pedestrians, and those in their carriages could have an uninterrupted view.

Fern Gorse was a fine holding covert for a fox, about forty acres of furz and fern intermingled.

One fine mild morning, about a week or ten days after the Turtlefat's dinner party, old John was jogging along with his hounds the two under-whips in his rear ready to ride

ly, "and so were you; but I'll pay her out, I shall cut her dead."

"The more fool you," replied his friend, "cut her because she would not have you? absurd! I shall be just as friendly with her as ever; why man, by doing that you would only be showing people how annoyed you are."

"Well, Bluster, you do as you like, so shall I," and he relapsed into silence.

There was another carriage not far behind them, which contained old Mr. Thornhill, in his pink, his daughter Mary, who was also going to have a day with the hounds, and beside her sat, well wrapped up with rugs and cushions around him, Charlie Thornhill, it was his first appearance in public.

Shirkington and his friend presently overtook their quondam stud-groom, Mr. Pastern riding Bessy Sprightly's old hunter, and leading an exceedingly handsome gray, who was fitted with a bran low side-saddle, and all the paraphernalia requisite for a hunting lady.

Pastern was smoking a short clay pipe and looking the picture of ease and independence. This morning he was more than usually gracious in his demeanour to his old masters.

"Good morning, gentl'mon," said he, taking his pipe out of his mouth, putting it in his pocket, and touching his hat deferentially, for his young mistress's warning had had a somewhat beneficial effect on the groom, "nice 'unting morning this."

"Very, Pastern; very," replied Bluster, "pray whose gray horse is that you are leading? a very fine animal indeed."

"It's my mistress's, Lady Verriest; leastways, my Lady that is to be, a present from his Lordship, and considered the finest lady's 'unter in Yorkshire."

"In—deed," remarked Shirkington, "you may think so, but Miss Thornhill's chestnut horse 'Sultan' would give him a stone and a beating anywhere; don't see anything in him."

"Really, sir; really, I don't pretend to dictate to a gentleman of your experience" (this he said in the most impudent manner possible) "but my opinion is, he's got the legs of the 'unt, and will show them the way" (he would like to have added "show you the way," but remembering his mistress's warning, kept a silent tongue).

"Oh, dear no," said Shirkington, "your mistress can't hold a candle to Miss Thornhill across country."

"Ah, you jealous beggar," muttered Mr. Pastern to himself as they drove off, "you're bowled out, you carrot-poled snob. I wonder," continued Mr. Pastern to himself, "that a stud-groom like me ever took service under such a huss as you."

Such a number of horsemen and carriages had not been seen at Fern Gorse that season.

Drawn up by the sign-post was the Master and his hounds; Lady Mary Slyfox was there, Lady Lavender, Lady Turtlefat, and many others of the neighboring gentry; Miss Dutch-bild was also present, and mounted on a useful-looking new bay hunter.

Bessy Sprightly had driven her mamma in the pony-carriage, and young Turtlefat had also on this morning put in an appearance; Colonel Downey was also grand in a bran new pink, on the priceless "Jim Crow."

Great was the rush when the Squire of Linden Hall drove up, for all were anxious to say a kind word to Charlie Thornhill.

"My poor dear boy," said the old Master of the hounds, "I am truly delighted to see you out again; would to God you were in the pig-skin, and taking your usual place in a run."

Mary Thornhill was now mounted, and talking to young Turtlefat. Lord Verriest had given Bessy Sprightly a lift on to her new horse, the Colonel was doing the amiable to his fiancée; and Charlie Thornhill had been shunted into the carriage of Lady Lavender, Lady Mary had joined her, so they were a trio by themselves.

Mrs. Allsbro was present, as was her husband and brother.

Charlie Thornhill sighed as he saw the hounds, in obedience to a wave from Mr. Conyer's arm, rush into the covert, and thought how much he should like to be mounted and in for a gallop.

"Don't sigh in that melancholy way, Charlie," exclaimed Lady Lavender, "we know what you are longing for, but you must have patience; look! there goes the fox," she uttered, pointing to an old ruddy fox, with a white tag to his brush, who had broken not a hundred yards from where they were. He well knew the hounds, and was fully aware that his only chance for life was a quick exit from the cover; he had beaten them some two or three times before by this manoeuvre, and hoped to do it again.

Charlie gave a weak "tally ho," but feeble as it was the Master heard it and was soon in the open, and sounding his horn, the hounds were quickly out of cover and on the line of their fox.

"Oh, how beautiful," exclaimed Lady Lavender, pointing towards the fast receding field, "but look at the ladies, they are all in a cluster. Let us go on towards the hill, we shall have a better view there."

"Quite right, Lady Mary," said Charlie, "our foxes seldom care about wind here; the vale foxes, as a rule, point for the hills, and the hill foxes take to the vale."

"There will be a check soon," the Master observed to his first whip, as he remarked the crows circling above a large field in which were some two or three hundred sheep who were looking puzzled and frightened, "he's gone right through the nuttens, we shall throw up there for a gunner." And his words came true.

Here Bessy Sprightly got her second horse; for Mr. Pastern, notwithstanding all his drinking and impudence, was up to his business and nicked in at the exact instant, as did many others; but they little knew how utterly useless their second horses would be to them.

"Brilliant! has hit it off!" exclaimed the old Master enthusiastically, as he saw one of his favorites feathering under the hedge-row, and throwing up her head and giving tongue, was off like a rocket, the eager pack rushing and taking up the scent.

But as all were intent on the beautiful and faultless working of the hounds, none saw that ominous white cloud rolling towards them, and which all, unconsciously, rode into, one of those thick yellow, greasy, stifling fogs our climate is subject to.

Mr. Thornhill vainly endeavored to find his daughter, his daughter him; people were heard calling each other in the distance, but Mary who had been riding well up to the hounds, and some way in advance of most of the others, was quickly lost; and instead of following, as she thought, the line of the hunt, was going exactly opposite to it, but presently getting into a lane, she thought by following it she might come to some sign-post which would direct her towards home.

But this was not to be, she rode and rode for an hour or more, little knowing, poor girl, that she was retracing her steps over and over again she was getting to be somewhat nervous, wet, and cold, even her gallant hunter dropped his ears and tail, and was shivering all over. Of a sudden a gigantic horse and figure appeared close by her, and which proved to be the illustrious Mr. John Turtlefat, lost like herself, and endeavoring to find his way home.

"God bl as my soul!" exclaimed the pasty-faced looking gentleman, who was wet and shivering, with drops of water hanging from his whiskers and hair, "who the deuce would have thought of meeting you here? Where the hounds are I have not the slightest conception; I have been lost for this hour or more; but one can neither see nor hear in this horrible fog, which makes one's horses look as big as elephants. I am drenched through and so must you be. May I offer you some cherry brandy from my flask?" producing a huge horn from his saddle-bow. "It's real Kentish, some of my Governor's old particular. No? Then I'll take some myself." He seemed to have been at it pretty often already, for his face was flushed, and his eyes dull and watery, suiting the action to the word, he tossed off the remainder, and restored the flask to its receptacle.

"It is now just half-past two," said he, looking at his watch. "I am sure I have not the remotest idea where we are, but we must be some ten miles from home."

"Poor papa will be so anxious," exclaimed his companion; "suppose, Mr. Turtlefat, we follow this road."

They rode along for some time in silence, the lady not courting conversation, for she did not like her companion, and the gentleman evidently too timid to commence it.

At last, plucking up courage, for he saw it was useless waiting for the lady to begin, said, "My father, Miss Thornhill, is going to allow me two thousand a year when I marry; very handsome of him, is it not?"

"Very," returned the lady shortly.

"That," continued the young man, "with the five hundred a year I have of my own that my aunt left me, will make a deuced good income, quite enough to keep a wife on."

"That entirely depends," replied Mary, "on what sort of an establishment you intend keeping." She saw what was coming and determined, if possible, to nip it in the bud. "It would not keep hunters, a house in town, and all that sort of thing; now, if I," continued the young lady, with attempted gaiety, "were to marry, I should expect all this." Poor girl, by this little speech she fondly imagined she had settled her companion, but she little knew Mr. John Turtlefat.

"Oh, don't say so, Miss Thornhill; you know—that is—I have long wished for this opportunity; you have not the smallest conception how much I admire you—love you, nothing would please my father and mother better than to know I had succeeded in the object of my greatest ambition?" but seeing that she did not reply—for she was too much surprised to do so, and had no idea the timid young man could come out so strong—drew still nearer, "Mary, Miss Thornhill, answer me."

"I am sure, Mr. Turtlefat," said the young lady at length, finding her voice, "that I have never given you any reason to suppose that I liked you better than any one else, that you should address me in this way."

"That," interrupted the young man, somewhat redly, "is no answer;" his face was very flushed now, and his voice thick. "I must have an answer, yes or no; you have given me every encouragement."

"What, sir?" said the young man, "I have never given you any reason to suppose that I liked you better than any one else, that you should address me in this way."

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treat any lady in this dastardly manner? Never mind, Miss Thornhill, although I am only a girl I will not see you insulted in this brutal manner."

Mary Thornhill looked up, and saw in her deliverer, Bessy Sprightly, whose eyes were flashing with anger and indignation, and her whole body quivering with passion.

"Dare to say another word, sir," she exclaimed standing up in her stirrup, and grasping her hunting-crop as if she were a dragoon going to cut one down from chin to chine, "and I will give you the butt end of my whip, which will possibly do you a little more damage. Come, Miss Thornhill," she added, "I know the road and will see you home."

"Oh! ah, yes, devilish fine," said the half-drunken gentleman, "go on by all means, you'll have your tale, so will I mine—who the devil's afraid?" clutching at his saddle, for he was nearly off. "I'm cut, a deuced fine mess I've made of it; never mind, what's the odds? I am John Turtlefat, I am, and don't care a damn for anybody."

"Do not be afraid, Miss Thornhill," said Bessy, kindly, seeing that her companion's eyes were filled with tears, and she was trembling violently, "I know the road perfectly well; and will, if you will permit me, see you home."

"A thousand thanks, Miss Sprightly, for your kindness, but I have been so insulted that I hardly—hardly know what to say, or how to thank you;" and she burst into a flood of tears.

"Never mind," said Bessy, gallantly, "we shall soon be home; we cannot canter along, for the fog is too thick, but we will trot gently on, and forty minutes will see you at Linden Hall."

True to her word, forty minutes saw them at the Hall; there was no occasion to ring, for the door was open, and voices were heard within.

"Oh! there is papa's voice," exclaimed Mary, joyfully, as she jumped from Sultan's back without the slightest assistance, and giving the reins of her horse to her companion, ran nimbly up the steps.

"My darling girl!" said the old gentleman.

"Never mind, papa dear, Miss Sprightly has brought me home; I will explain all presently, run down and help her off her horse, and send some one for them."

"God bless my soul! Miss Sprightly!" exclaimed the old gentleman, "you don't say so! I have been frightened to death about you, and was just sending off every one I could get hold of. My dear young lady," said the warm-hearted old man, approaching Bessy, who sat shivering on her horse, and holding the rein of Sultan, "this is truly kind of you, to see my poor girl home; here—to one of the men who approached—" take these horses round and see that they are properly done. Is your horse," he continued, "accustomed to a stall or loose box?"

"Oh, do not have him unsaddled, Mr. Thornhill, I shall want him again directly, for mamma will be dreadfully frightened at my being absent so long."

"Nonsense, young lady, you will dine and stay here this evening with Mary. I am just going to send one of the men off in the tax-cart to Mrs. Sprightly for your things, and I dare say you will like to despatch to your mamma at the same time;" and giving his arm, and without allowing her time to reply, led her up the steps to where his daughter was waiting to receive her.

"Papa," said Mary, "come with me and Miss Sprightly into your study, I have something to tell you. Mr. John Turtlefat," she continued, as they entered her father's sanctum, "has been most insolent and rude towards me; meeting him in the fog as I was endeavoring to find my way home, first of all he proposed to me, and on my refusing him was most violent and offensive, and finished up," here her face flushed with anger, "by attempting to kiss me—the only excuse for him was that he was half tipsy. Miss Sprightly, fortunately coming up at the moment, gave him such a blow with her hunting-whip that he will not forget it for some time."

"What!" interrupted her father, clenching his hands tightly, "do you mean to tell me that John Turtlefat, or any one calling himself a gentleman, could be guilty of such a dastardly act, and towards an unprotected girl too. I am, indeed, Miss Sprightly, truly grateful to you. I will consider over this matter," said the old gentleman, sternly, "and reflect well before I act. Take Miss Sprightly to your room, Mary; she will dine and stay the night here. I am just going to send for things, and she wants to write a note to her mamma."

"This is kind and good of you, I am so glad," said Mary, as she linked her arm into that of her new-found friend's, and led her to her boudoir.

Mr. Thornhill sat ruminating in his arm-chair; he was exceedingly angry, and more moved than he chose to show. Such an insult as his darling daughter had received could not be passed over; but he determined that his nephew should know nothing about it, because he felt certain that as soon as he was able, Charlie would horsewhip Mr. John Turtlefat.

As he was cogitating as to the best course