

## THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE RIVER'S BRIM."

(Continued.)

Ere he had clasped the farmer's hand, at his own gate, and heard his cheery hospitable greeting, he wondered how he could feel so happy.

"I'm proud to see you, Captain!" said Denma, flourishing his hat round his head, as if it was a slip of blackthorn. "Proud as I am pleased to see you back again—an't that the truth? You're welcome, I tell you! Step in, now, an' take something at waist. See, Captain, there's a two-year old in that stable; the very moral of your black mare. Ye never seen her likes for leppin'! Ye'll try the bastie this very afternoon, with the blessin'! I've had the ould saddle mounded, an' the stirrups altered to your length."

CHAPTER XX.

TAKING THE COLLAR.

The General thought he had never been so happy in his life. His voice, his bearing, his very dress seemed to partake of the delusion that gilded existence. Sprung down the steps of his club, with more waisting in his coat, more pretension in his hat, more agility in his gait, than was considered usual, or even decorous, amongst its frequenters, he wondered they passed their comments freely enough on their old comrade, ridiculing or deploring his fate, according to the various opinions and temper of the conclave.

"What's up with St. Josephs now?" asked a white whiskered veteran of his neighbor, whose bluff, whether-beaten face proclaimed him an Admiral of the Red. "He's turned quite flighty and queer of late. Nothing wrong here, is there," and the speaker pointed a shaking finger to the apex of his own bald head.

"Not there, but here," answered the sailor, laying his remaining arm across his breast. "Goin' to be splined, they tell me. Sorry for it. He's not a bad sort; and a smartish officer, as I've heard, in your service."

"Pretty well—so, so. Nothing extraordinary for that," answered the first speaker, commonly called by irreverent juniors "Old Straps." "He hadn't much to do in India, I fancy; but he's been lucky sir, lucky, and luck's the thing! Luck against the world, Admiral, by sea or land!"

"Well, his luck's over now, it seems," grunted the Admiral, whose views on matrimony appeared to differ from those of his profession in general. "I'm told he's been fairly hooked by that Miss Douglas. Black-eyed girl, with black hair—black, and all black, d—me!—and rides a black mare in the park. Hey! Why she might be his daughter. How d'ye mean?"

"More fool he," replied "Straps," with a leer and a grin that disclosed his yellow tusks. "A fellow like St. Josephs ought to know better."

"I'm not so sure of that," growled the Admiral. "Gad, sir, if I was idiot enough to do the same thing, d'ye think I'd take a d—d old catamaran, that know every move in the game? No, no, sir; youth and innocence, hey? A clean bill of health, a fair wind, and a pleasant voyage, you know!"

"In my opinion, there's devilish little youth left, and no innocence," answered "Straps." "If that's the girl, she's been hawked about, to my certain knowledge, for the last three seasons; and I suppose our friend is the only chance left—what we used to call a "forlorn hope" when I was an ensign. He's got a little money, and they might give him a command. You never know what this government will do. It's my belief they'd give that crossing-sweeper a command if they were only sure he was quite unfit for it."

"Command be d—d!" swore the Admiral. "He'll have enough to do to command his young wife. What? She's a lively craft, I'll be bound, with her black eyes. Carries a weather-helm, and steers as wild as you please in a sea-way. I'll tell you what it is—Here, waiter! bring me the Globe. Why the— are the evening papers so late?"

box at the Opera, so far unobserved that the couple who had accompanied them seemed wholly engrossed with each other. Satanella longed to make her confession—ease her conscience of its burden, perhaps, though such a thought was cruel and unjust—shake the yoke from off his neck. She had even got as far as, "I've never half thanked you, General—" when there came a tap at the box door. Enter an irreproachable dandy, then a confusion of tongues, a laugh, a solo, injunctions to silence, and the opportunity was gone. Could she ever find courage to seek for it again?

Nevertheless, day by day she dwelt more on her admirer's forbearance, his care, his tenderness, his chivalrous devotion. Though he never pressed the point, it seemed an understood thing that they were engaged. She had forbidden him to visit her before luncheon, but he spent his afternoon in her drawing-room; and, on rare occasions, was admitted in the evening, when an elderly lady, supposed to be Blanche's cousin, came to act chaperone. Two walks in Kensington Gardens had been discontinued. Her heart could not but smite her sometimes, to think that she never gave him but one, when she wanted him to do her a favor.

Had he been more exacting, she would have felt less self-reproach, but his patience and good humor cut her to the quick.

"You brute!" she would say, pushing her hair back, and frowning at her own handsome face in the glass. "You worse than brute! Unfeeling, unfeminine, I wish you were dead!—I wish you were dead!"

She had lost her rich color now, and the hollow eyes were beginning to look very large and sad, under their black arching brows.

Perhaps it was the General's greatest delight to hear her sing. This indulgence she accorded him only on an evening, when the cousin invariably went to sleep, and her admirer sat in an arm-chair with the daily paper before his face. She insisted on this screen, and this attitude, never permitting him to stand by the pianoforte, nor turn over the leaves, nor undergo any exertion of mind or body that should break the charm. Who knows what golden visions gladdened the war-worn soldier's heart while he leaned back and listened, spellbound by the tones he loved? Dreams of domestic happiness and peaceful joys, and a calm untroubled future, when doubts and fears should be over, and he could make this glorious creature wholly and exclusively his own.

Did he ever wonder why in certain songs the dear voice thrilled with a sweetness almost akin to pain ere it was drowned in a loud and brilliant accompaniment, that foiled the possibility of remonstrance, while the ditty was thrown aside to be replaced by another, less fraught, perhaps, with painful memories and associations? If so, he hazarded no remark nor conjecture, satisfied, as it seemed, to wait her pleasure, and in all things bow his will to hers, sacrificing his desires, his pride, his very self-respect to the woman he adored.

For a time nothing occurred to disturb the General's enforced tranquility, and he pursued the course he seemed to have marked out for himself with a calm perseverance that deserved success. In public, people glanced and whispered when they saw Miss Douglas on his arm; in private, he called daily at her house, talked much small-talk and drank a great deal of weak tea; while in solitude he asked himself how long this probation was to last, resolving nevertheless to curb his impatience, control his temper, and if the prize was only to be won by waiting, wait for it to the end!

Leaving his club, then, unconscious of the Admiral's pity and the sarcasms of "Old Straps," St. Josephs walked jauntily through Mayfair, till he came to the well-known street, which seemed to him to now even as a gladiolus in Paradise. The crossing-sweeper blessed with considerable emphasis, brushing energetically in his path; for when going the General was invariably good for sixpence, and on propitious days would add thereto a shilling as he returned.

On the present occasion, though his hand was in his pocket, it remained there with the coin in its finger and thumb; for the wayfarer stopped petrified in the middle of the street; the sweeper held his tattered hat at arm's-length, motionless as a statue; and a bare-headed butcher's boy, standing erect in a light cart, pulled his horse on its haunches, and called out—

"Now then, stupid! d'ye want all the road to yourself?" grazing the old officer's coat tails as he drove by with a brutal laugh.

But neither irreverence nor outrage served to divert the General's attention from the sight that so disturbed his equanimity.

"There's that d—d black mare again!" he muttered, while he clenched his teeth, and his cheek turned pale. "I'll put a stop to this one way or the other. Steady, steady! No; my game is to be won by pluck and

## CHAPTER XXI.

## A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

His studies were soon interrupted by the rustle of a dress on the staircase. With difficulty he forebore rushing out to meet its wearer, but managed to preserve the composure of an ordinary morning visitor, when the door opened, and—enter Mrs. Lushington! She must have read his disappointment in his face; for she looked half-amused half-provoked, and there was no less malice than wrath in her eyes while she observed—

"Blanche will be down directly, General, and don't be afraid I shall interrupt your *tele-a-tele*, for I am going away as soon as I've written a note. You can rehearse all the charming things you have got to say in the meantime."

He had recovered his *savoir-faire*. "Release me to you?" he asked, laughing. "It would be pretty practice, no doubt. Shall I begin?"

"Not now," she answered, in the same tone. "There is hardly time; though Blanche wouldn't be very cross about it, I dare say. She is liberal enough, and knows she can trust me."

"I am sure you are a true friend," he returned gravely. "Miss Douglas—Blanche—has not too many. I hope you will always remain one of her staunchest and best."

She smiled sadly. "Do you really mean it?" said she, taking his hand. "You can't imagine how happy it makes me to hear you say so. I thought you considered me a vain, ignorant, frivolous little woman, like the rest."

Perhaps he did, but this was not the moment to confess it.

"What a strange world it would be," he answered, "if we knew the real opinions of our friends. In this case, Mrs. Lushington, you see how wrong you were about mine."

"I believe you, General," she exclaimed. "I feel that you are true itself. I am sure you never deceived a woman in your life, and I cannot understand how any woman could find it in her heart to deceive you. One ought never to forgive such an offence, and I can believe that you never would."

He thought her earnestness unaccountable, and wholly uncalled for; but his senses were on the alert to catch the first symptoms of Blanche's approach, and he answered rather absently—

"Quite right! Of course not. Double-dealing is the thing I hate. You may cheat me once; that is your fault. It is my own if you ever take me in again."

"No wonder Blanche values your good opinion," said Mrs. Lushington meaningly. "She has not spent her life amongst people whose standard is so high. Hush! here she comes. Ah! General, you won't care about talking to me now."

She gave him one reproachful glance in which there was a little merriment, a little pique, and a great deal of tender interest, ere she departed to write her note in the back drawing-room.

It was impossible not to contrast her kind and deferential manner with the cold, collected bearing of Miss Douglas, who entered the room, like a queen about to hold her court, rather than a loving maiden, hurrying to meet her lord.

She had always been remarkable for quiet dignity in motion or repose.

It was one of the many charms on which the General lavished his admiration, but he could have dispensed with this royal composure now. It seemed a little out of place in their relative positions. Also he would have liked to see the color deepen in her proud impassive face, though his honest heart ached while he reflected how the bright tints had faded of late, how the glory of her beauty had departed, leaving her always pale and saddened now.

He would have asked a leading question, hazarded a gentle reproach, or in some way made allusion to the arrival of his *belle noir*, but her altered looks disarmed him; and it was Satanella herself who broached the subject, by quietly informing her visitor she had just returned from riding the black mare in the Park. "Do you mind?" she added, rising in some confusion to pull a blind down, while she spoke.

Here would have been an opportunity for a confession of jealousy, an appeal to her feelings, pleading, promises, protestations,—to use the General's own metaphor,— "an attack along the whole line;" but how was he thus to offer decisive battle, with his flank exposed and threatened, with Mrs. Lushington's ears wide open and attentive, while her pen went scribble, scribble, almost in the same room?

"I mind everything you do," said he gallantly, "and object to nothing! If I did want to get up a grievance, I should quarrel with you for not ordering me to parade in attendance on you in the Park. My time, as you know, is always yours, and I am never

them, was perhaps the more disposed to throw difficulties in his path. He should have remembered that in love as in war, a rapid flank movement and complete change of tactics will often prevail, when vigilance, endurance, and honest courage have been tried in vain.

Satanella could not but appreciate a delicacy that forbade further inquiry about the black mare. No sooner had she given vent to her feelings, in the little explosion recorded above, than she bitterly regretted their expression, comparing her wayward petulant disposition with the temper and constancy displayed by her admirer. Sorrowful, softened, filled with self-reproach, she gave him one of her winning smiles, and bade him forgive her display of ill-humor, or bear with it, as one of many evil qualities, the result of her morbid temperament and isolated lot.

"Then I slept badly, and went out tired. The Ride was crowded, the sun broiling, the mare disagreeable. Altogether, I came back as cross as two sticks. General, are you never out of humor? And how do you get rid of your ill-temper? You certainly don't visit them on me!"

"How could I?" he asked in return. "How can I ever be anything but your servant, your slave? Oh! Blanche, you must believe me now. How much longer is my probation to last? Is the time to be always put off from day to day, and must I—"

"Clara! Clara!" exclaimed Miss Douglas to her friend in the back drawing-room; "shall you never have done with those tiresome letters? Have you any idea what o'clock it is? And the carriage was ordered at five!"

The General smothered a curse. It was invariably so. No sooner did he think he had gained a secure footing, wrested a position of advantage, than she cut the ground from under him, pushed him down the hill, and his labour was lost, his task all to begin again! It seemed as if she could not bear to face her real position, glancing off at a tangent, without the slightest compunction, from the one important topic he was constantly watching an opportunity to broach.

"Just done! and a good day's work too!" replied Mrs. Lushington's silver tones from the writing-table, and it must have been a quicker ear than either Satanella's or the General's to detect in that playful sentence the spirit of mischievous triumph it conveyed.

Mrs. Lushington was delighted. She felt sure she had fathomed a secret, discovered the clue to an intrigue, and by such means as seemed perfectly fair and justifiable to her warped sense of right and wrong.

Finding herself the third person in a small party that should have been limited to two, she made urgent correspondence her excuse for withdrawing to such a distance as might admit of overhearing their conversation, while the lovers, if lovers indeed they were, should think themselves unobserved.

So she opened Satanella's blotting-book, and spread a sheet of note-paper on its folds.

Mrs. Lushington had a quick eye, no less than a ready wit, Blanche's blotting-paper was of the best quality, soft, thin, and absorbent. Where the writing-book opened, so shrewd an observer did not fail to detect the words "Roscommon, Ireland," traced clear and distinct as a lithograph, though reversed. Looking through the page, against the light, she read Daisy's address in his hiding-place with his humble friend Denis plainly enough, and the one word "Registered" underlined at the corner.

"*Enfin je te pince!*" she muttered below her breath. It was evident Satanella was in Daisy's confidence, that she knew his address—which had been extorted indeed with infinite trouble from a lad whom he had sent to England in charge of the precious mare—and had written to him within the last day or two. It was a great discovery! Her hand shook from sheer excitement, while she considered how best it could be turned to account, how it might serve to wean the General of his infatuation, to detach him from her friend, perhaps at last to secure him for herself. But she must proceed cautiously: make every step good, as she went on; prove each link of the chain, while she forged it; and when Blanche was fairly in the toils, show her the usual mercy extended by one woman to another.

Of course, she wrote her notes on a fresh page of the blotting-book. Of course, she rose from her employment frank, smiling, unsuspecting. Of course, she was more than usually affectionate to Blanche and that young lady, well-skilled in the wiles of her own sex, wondering what had happened, watched her friend's conduct with some anxiety and yet more contempt.

"Good-bye, Blanche."  
"Good-bye, Clara."  
"Come again soon, dear!"  
"You may depend upon me, love!"  
And they kissed each other with a warmth

smiles and wiles, and meretricious ways? She had never valued her lover higher than at the moment Mrs. Lushington left the room; but he destroyed his advantage, kicked down all his good fortune, by looking in Miss Douglas's face with an expression of slavish devotion, while he exclaimed—

"How different that woman is from you, Blanche. Surely, my queen, there is nobody like you in the world!"

CHAPTER XXII.

AN EXPERT.

Returning from morning stables to his barrack-room, Soldier Bill found on his table a document that puzzled him exceedingly. He read it a dozen times, turned it upside down, smoothed it out with his riding-whip, all in vain. He could make nothing of it; then he summoned Barney.

"When did this thing come, and who brought it?" "Five minutes back," answered the batman. "Left by a young man on fatigue duty."

So Barney, with exactitude, described a government official, in the costume of its telegraphic department.

"Did the man leave no message?" continued Bill.

"Said as there was nothing to pay," answered Barney, standing at "attention" and obviously considering this part of his communication satisfactory in the extreme.

"Said there was nothing to pay!" mused his master, "and I would have given him a guinea to explain any two words of it." Then he took his coat off, and sat doggedly down to read the mysterious sentences again, and again.

The soldier, as he expressed it, was "up a tree!" That the message be of importance, he argued, from its mode of transmission. The sender's name was legible enough, and his own address perfectly correct. He felt sure Daisy would not have telegraphed from the wilds of Roscommon but on a matter of urgency; and it did seem provoking that the only sense to be got out of the whole composition, was in the sentence with which it concluded—"Do not lose a moment." In his perplexity, he could think of no one so likely to help him as Mrs. Lushington.

"She has more 'mous' in that pretty little head of hers," thought Bill, as he planged into a suit of plain clothes, "than the Horse Guards and the War Office put together. She'll knock the marrow out of this, if anybody can! I've heard her guess riddles right off, the first time she heard them; and there isn't her equal in London for acting charades and games of that kind, where you must be down to it, before they can say 'knife.' By Jove, I shouldn't wonder if this was a double acrostic after all? Only Daisy wouldn't be such a flat as to telegraph it all the way from Ireland to me. I hope she'll see me? It's awfully early. I wonder if she'll blow me up for coming so soon."

These reflections, and Catamount's thorough-bred canter, soon brought him to Mrs. Lushington's door. She was at home, and sufficiently well prepared for exercises of ingenuity, having been engaged, after breakfast—though it is but fair to say, such skirmishes were of unusual occurrence—in a passage-of-arms with Frank.

The latter was a good-natured man, with a bad temper. His wife's temper was excellent; but her enemies, and indeed her friends, said she was ill-natured. Though scarcely to be called an attached couple, these two seldom found it worth while to quarrel, and so long as the selfishness of each did not clash with the other, they jogged on quietly enough. It was only when domestic affairs threw them together more than common, that the contact elicited certain sparks, such as cracked on occasion into what observers below stairs called a "flare-up."

To-day they happened to breakfast together. After a few "back-handers," and some rapid exchanges, in which the husband came by the worst, their conversation turned on money-matters—always a sore subject, as each considered that the other spent more than a due share of their joint income. Complaints led to recriminations, until at length goaded by the sharpness of his wife's tongue, Mr. Lushington exclaimed: "Narrow-minded, indeed! Paltry economy! I can tell you, if I didn't keep a precious tight hand, and deny myself—well—lots of things, I say if I didn't deny myself lots of things, I should be in the Bench—that's all."

"Then you are a very bad financier," she retorted, "worse than the Chancellor of the Exchequer even. But I don't believe it. I believe you're saving money every day."

He rose from his chair in a transport of irritation, the skirts of his dressing-gown floating round him, like the rags of a whirling dervish.

"Saving money!" he repeated, in a sort of suppressed scream. "I can only tell you