

"The old riches will never alter either one or the other," Charles said. Mrs. Gordon and I am quite sure that William will never give up at any man's death, although that should open his path to title and wealth.

"Of course not, my dear aunt, but as I am now a days do not attain the age of Methuselah, when a man has counted ninety years, he cannot reasonably complain that his span of life has been cut very short, and the event, whenever it may happen, will place Beauchamp in a position to render Blanche independent of her guardian's powers or favors."

Immediately after breakfast, Malcolm conveyed the news to his mother, who could not suppress her delight at the prospect of her future daughter-in-law's advancement, as well as at Beauchamp's elevation to a higher sphere. "And now, Charles," she added, "I suppose the secret may be disclosed?"

"Oh, no, my dear mother, our lips are sealed until Beauchamp allows us to open them—that was the condition; and our promises must be faithfully maintained. Moreover, the event has not yet happened, and should the old peer take a fresh lease, we cannot only be regarded as and despised for revealing our confidences before they are disclosed."

The same afternoon, when Blanche and Constance, with Malcolm and Fred, had set out for their usual ride, Mr. Harcourt called on Grosvenor Square, and, finding Lady Malcolm at home, opened his commission by informing her of the joyful realisation of his and Mrs. Harcourt's wishes, that morning, by a proposal from the Marquis of Ayrshire to her niece's hand. "This is really quite beyond our expectations, Lady Malcolm, as the Marquis is extremely rich, and he has married in the most handsome manner, to settle the whole of her fortune, with a large addition from his own, strictly upon herself, in case of his decease, and five thousand a year entirely at her own disposal during her life."

"Very liberal indeed," replied Lady Malcolm, rather coolly.

"Then I presume, on the part of your niece, your indispense will at once accept Lord Ayrshire's proposals, as I believe she has already given sufficient encouragement to expect a favorable answer."

"There, Mr. Harcourt, I think Lord Ayrshire must be under some delusion, as, from my own observation, Blanche has not given me any encouragement at all, in fact, from my lordship's well known character of playing too fast with young girls, she received a caution from me at first to be on her guard, and I do not believe she entertained the most remote idea of accepting his attentions, as a suitor, although finding him agreeable enough as an acquaintance."

"I am quite astonished, Lady Malcolm, at this unexpected intelligence. What can any girl be thinking of, to refuse such an offer?"

"Perhaps, Mr. Harcourt, she may be thinking of some one else she likes better."

"May I beg the favor, then, of your ladyship informing me of the name of the person whom Miss Douglas prefers to the Marquis of Ayrshire?"

"That, at present, I am not in a position to reveal, Mr. Harcourt."

It is wonderful, however, that your ladyship is aware there is such a person, as the guardian of Miss Douglas, I hope Lady Beauchamp will not think me too presuming in saying that I have a right to know the gentleman's name, probably Mr. Beauchamp, as the usual advocate in want of her fortune."

"Nearly identical," Mr. Harcourt, are not very nearly so certain my sanctity, any more than your own, and it is neither decorous nor complimentary in you to speak in such terms to me, who take an equal, if not a superior, interest in my niece's welfare. Yet, as her guardian, I will tell you thus much; the person to whom I allude has as yet made no direct proposal to me for her hand, and

When Blanche returned from her ride, Lady Malcolm told her of Mr. Harcourt's visit, and the answer she had given him.

"Have I done right, my love, in peremptorily refusing the Marquis?"

"Oh, yes, dear Aunt Malcolm, I am so much obliged by your great kindness in saving me from a scene with Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, but I am surprised at Lord Ayrshire addressing them on such a subject, after I have so frequently checked every advance he has made to a more intimate acquaintance. Indeed, the night of Mrs. Harcourt's ball, when making some allusion to my friends, I gave him distinctly to understand that the Marquis of Ayrshire had never been considered by me one of that number."

"Well, my dear, you acted quite right in undressing him, and if he was wittily blind, you cannot be blamed for leading him astray."

On the third evening after this communication, as they were all sitting together, with the dessert, the butler entered the room, saying, "There is a man, my lord, in the hall, with a parcel, which he will not deliver to any one but your lordship."

"What the deuce does the fellow mean?" exclaimed Malcolm, springing up from his chair.

"I think he said, my lord, he was the guard of the Northern mail."

"Show him in here, then."

The man, entering with a low bow, said, "I am intrusted with a parcel to deliver only to the hands of Lord Malcolm, from Annandale Castle, who is to pay me a sovereign, and send back an answer by myself; as I shall be on the road again to-morrow morning by four o'clock."

"I am the person," replied Malcolm, "so sit down a moment in that chair, and here's something to wash the cobwebs out of your throat," placing a bottle of wine and a glass in his hands.

Tearing open the parcel, three letters appeared, all in Beauchamp's hand writing. "Here, aunt, and Blanche, one apiece for you, and the other for myself," the contents of which he hastily ran through, and then handing it to his mother, observed, "No ball-going to-night, my dear mother, as Con must be off."

"Who gave you the parcel, my man?" inquired Malcolm.

"A young gentleman at the Lodge gate gave it to my fellow guard, my lord, and I think they called him Mr. or Lord Beauchamp, I won't be sure which, so if your lordship will be kind enough to send a receipt of the contents inside that same paper, I shall be glad, as I've got a cab waiting to go back into the City."

This was soon done by Malcolm writing a few lines and sealing up the parcel as before, which he handed to the guard, with a couple of sovereigns. "You will be sure this is delivered safe?"

"No fear of that, my lord, when sent by such paymaster—save like this suits my complaint exactly, my lord," with which, and a low bow to the ladies, the guard disappeared.

The purport of Beauchamp's three letters was the same—that the Earl of Annandale, having heard from him about his sister, was very desirous of seeing her, and had, to defray her expenses, insisted on sending her a draft on London for two hundred pounds. A postscript was added, in which Beauchamp advised her setting off immediately, as the poor old Earl was evidently declining very fast.

"Well, Con," exclaimed Malcolm, "we must leave at daybreak to-morrow, if dear aunt will go with us?"

"Indeed I will, Charles, most gladly; so now, my dears, we had better at once prepare for our journey."

Beauchamp's letter to Blanche was very long and very affectionate, which caused her

mind—the fresh breeze fanning our faces as we whirl along? Oh! it will be quite delightful after the hot, dusty ride through the suburbs of this mighty, smoky Babylon—and the hauling of some of those thundering big trout in the large lake before the castle! By Jove I ainty, but that will be fine fun, and supply her ladyship's table without sending to the fishmongers."

The next morning our travellers set out on their journey at five o'clock, and reached their destination the second evening. The old Earl was greatly pleased with Constance, and received Mrs. Gordon and Malcolm in the most friendly manner and from that time the two ladies, from their gentle unremitting attentions, became two ministering angels in his sight.

"Ah, my dear, kind friends," exclaimed the old man, a few days after their arrival, "how many years have I lost, by not being acquainted with you before, and all owing to my old-fashioned, crabbed habits, in living more like a hermit in this cell than a reasonable being."

Finding his end drawing near, the Earl sent for a legal adviser, and made great alterations in his will, appointing Mr. Beauchamp and his son sole executors, and bequeathing after a few legacies to distant connections and his old domestics the residue of his personal estate, amounting to upwards of two hundred thousand pounds in the funds, to Constance. William Beauchamp having become a great favourite, was sent for to the Earl's private room, to ascertain his views on particular points, and to be entrusted with some confidential communications.

"I wish to know my young friend, your opinion how the services of my old faithful servants should be rewarded, and to see if your ideas agree with mine. The old housekeeper will wait another home when I am gone."

"No, my lord," replied Beauchamp, "that she shall never require as long as she prefers remaining here. My father and myself will never dismiss one of your old favorites. The butler, housekeeper, head keeper, and gardener shall never leave their present situations, except at their own desire."

"But I have left each of them a hundred a-year after my decease."

"Well, my lord," replied Beauchamp, "I think they well deserve it, and should they prefer living by themselves, instead of occupying their present apartments in the castle (in which it is our wish to continue them), we will add another fifty pounds yearly to each, in place of wages."

"Then, my dear boy, there are my old pets, horses, dogs, and I know not what, and the books and furniture in my own sitting-room which I do not wish removed."

"All shall remain in their present position, my dear lord—even the sparrows at your window shall not be molested. But why trouble yourself with these harrowing details? for believe me, on the word of a true Beauchamp, very wish of your heart shall be religiously observed by my father and myself. Give me only your instructions, and they shall be carefully carried out."

"I am content, my dear boy, for I see in your face candour and kindness of disposition combined, and I will trust you implicitly."

"Thank you, my dear lord, for that confidence, which shall never be abused."

"One wish still remains ungratified, William—can it be realised?"

"If in my power, you have only to mention it."

"I long to see your future bride, of whom Constance and Mrs. Gordon have given me such a glowing description."

"You shall see her, by God's permission, as soon as horses can convey her to Annandale Castle; and I am sure Lord Malcolm will most willingly set out to London for that purpose."

Malcolm, who enjoyed travelling, left by the mail that same night, and returned the third evening with Blanche, who was delighted to leave London, and join once

more with her.

"And why not, my child?"

No answer was returned; but a deep blush overspread her face, suffusing her very brow, and her eyes were riveted on the ground.

"I know what is passing in your thoughts, my dear girl," added the Earl; "you are not yet Beauchamp's wife; but tell me truly, do you prefer another to him?"

"Oh! no, no, my lord—all my hopes of happiness are centred in him alone; but perhaps he may—"

"What, my child! prefer another to you? Does he, did he ever love any other but yourself?"

"Indeed I believe he never has my lord."

"Then rest assured, my child, he never can—for where would he find a second Blanche Douglas? So do now as I desire, and let us compare the list with the contents."

"I will willingly assist you, my lord, in that work, if you desire; but in my present position, I trust you will pardon me for maintaining my purpose or declining to accept the family jewels."

"Well, child, I respect your delicacy, and will not press you farther now, only assist me in my examination," which occupied them for some considerable time, the Earl noticing and commenting on the value of each ornament; and when all were found correct, and returned to the closet, the key was again offered to Blanche, who, with tears in her eyes, begged to be excused taking it.

"Indeed, my lord, I feel your kindness more than I possibly can express, and it pains me to refuse you; but I cannot overcome my repugnance to presume on a situation which, by some unforeseen event, perhaps may never be my lot to fill."

"Well, well, my child," said the Earl, rather impatiently, "you have disappointed me in the pleasure I anticipated; but your Aunt Gordon will not refuse the confidence I shall repose in her, and keep this for you. So now give me your arm down stairs, but not another word, unless you would distress me more than you have done already."

With Beauchamp and the ladies' assistance, the Earl had been enabled to walk up and down stairs, and after breakfast was generally wheeled in his easy garden chair about the lawn, which was several acres in extent, reaching down to the lake, over whose waters silvery swans (one nearly his equal in age) asserted their dignified supremacy, holding the other wildfowl in terror of their sway. A servant carried a small basket filled with corn and bread, with which his pets were fed from the Earl's own hand, and with Blanche and Constance on either side his morning was thus spent; whilst the old squire, Malcolm, and Beauchamp rode about the country, visiting the farm houses belonging to the domain. The reaction from this temporary excitement was soon, however, apparent to all, and the poor old man, becoming exhausted by his forced exertions, was, at the end of ten days after Blanche's arrival, obliged, from excessive weakness, to keep his own apartment, which he was never again destined to leave; Mrs. Gordon and Beauchamp sitting and reading to him, by turns, portions of Scripture and religious books, from which he derived much consolation and support.

The night in which the earl breathed his last, the aged Earl called the family to his bedside, and joining the hands of the two affianced couples together, invoked (like the patriarchs of olden times) a blessing on their heads. Taking then an affectionate and impressive leave of Mr. Beauchamp and Mrs. Gordon, he sank on his pillow, exhausted of his last remaining strength, and continued in a state of stupor for some hours, William Beauchamp sitting by his bedside; his name was more uttered in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper.

"I am here, my dear lord; do you want anything? Pray take this cordial to revive you."

"No, my dear boy; I have done with the

Beauchamp, of Lampton House (now seventh Earl of Annandale), who, with his son and daughter, have been staying at the Castle for some time."

"Impossible! this must be a hoax!"

"A hoax, my dear! Who do you think would put such a thing in print, unless it were true?"

"Oh! Selina Markham; just to annoy me."

"Pooh! no sense! but now Lady Malcolm's mystery is explained—of her never being attached to the heir of one of the richest earldoms in the kingdom—here he is—William Beauchamp; then Mrs. Gordon's departure with Constance and Blanche, following so soon after—why, the fact is, no doubt, they have all been staying at Annandale Castle."

"Well, I think it is unpardonable in Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Gordon keeping us in the dark so long."

"That is our own fault, my dear, for speaking so often in a derogatory tone of Mr. Beauchamp, who is a great favorite with both those ladies; and therefore they have kept the secret to themselves."

"Till, Mr. Harcourt, were he a duke, instead of Lord Beauchamp, as I suppose he must now be called, he shall never have my consent to marry my niece."

"You need not trouble yourself, my dear, as your consent is not necessary."

"Then yours, as her guardian, is; and if you have the spirit of a mouse, when I sometimes doubt, you will not submit to be insulted and despised in this barefaced manner."

"I must be guided by circumstances, Mr. Harcourt, and do not intend to follow your example, by losing my temper where there is no occasion for it. You appear to forget all about the trial, and are blind to the fact that Mrs. Gordon is joint guardian with myself to Miss Douglas. What would my opposition be now worth, with Lady Malcolm's influence thrown into the scale against me? Nothing, Mr. Harcourt; literally worse than nothing! I should, in that case, be insulted and despised to my face, as you are pleased to say I have been already."

"Oh, I see. You wish to curry favour with the ruling powers; and the Earl of Annandale is, of course, a very different person to the old fox-hunting Earl of Lampton."

"Undoubtedly, my dear, he is, as a peer of the realm; and Lord Beauchamp is now entitled to demand of Miss Douglas. In short, the Lord Chancellor, if appealed to on the subject, would, without hesitation, give his approval to the marriage."

"I hate those Beauchamps, Mr. Harcourt—the son particularly, who has occasioned as such disgrace in that trial; and I had rather have seen Blanche Douglas Lord Vancourt's wife, had as he was, than William Beauchamp's bride."

"You ought to be ashamed to express such feelings, whatever may be your secret thoughts, Mrs. Harcourt. Mr. Beauchamp behaved with great courage and forbearance throughout that unfortunate affair, and acted as I should myself."

"As you would, indeed; why, at the very sight of Lord Vancourt's pistol, you would have fallen into a fit."

"I shall not submit to your taunts a moment longer, madam, exclaimed her indignant husband, rising from his chair, and if Lord Beauchamp were to become plain Mr. Beauchamp again to-morrow, he should marry my ward with my full consent; saying which, he left the room in a furious passion."

The day after Lord Malcolm's return to London, he met Mr. Harcourt at his own door, when walking through Brook Street.

"Ah, my lord," exclaimed he, "I'm glad to see you in town again; we wondered where you had all gone to."