

## THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punctestown Races.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AFTERNOON TEA.

(Continued.)

The General had gone to look for his lady love's carriage. They were alone in Mr. Lushington's snug room, converted (though not innocent of tobacco-smoke) into a cloak room for the occasion.

"So good of you to come, dear Blanche, and to bring him," (with a meaning smile.) "I waited to pounce on you here. I've got such a piece of news for you!"

Miss Douglas looked as if nothing above, upon, or under the earth could afford her the slightest interest, but she was obliged to profess a polite curiosity.

"Who do you think is going to be married? Immediately next week, I believe. Who but our friend Daisy?"

The shot told. Though Miss Douglas received it with this self-command of a practised duelist, so keen an observer as her friend did not fail to mark a quiver of the eye-lids, a tightening of the lips, and a grey hue creeping gradually over the whole face.

"Our kello friend Daisy, or all people in the world!" continued Mrs. Lushington. "It only shows how we poor women can be deceived. I sometimes fancied he admired me, and I never doubted but he cared for you whereas he has gone and fallen a victim that wild Irish girl of Ludy Mary Macormac's—the pretty one—that was such a friend of yours."

"I always thought he admired her," answered Miss Douglas in a very feeble voice. "I ought to write and wish Norah joy. Are you quite sure it's true?"

"Quite!" was the reply. "My authority is his own best man."

Instantly the General appeared at this juncture, with tidings of the carriage, while through a vista of footmen might be seen at the open door a brougham-horse on his hind legs, impatient of delay.

"Good-bye, dear Blanche! You look so tired. I hope you haven't done too much."

"Good-bye, dear Clara! I've had such a pleasant afternoon."

Putting her into the carriage, the General's kind heart melted within him. She looked so pale and worn. She clung so confidently, so dejectedly to his arm. She pressed his hand so affectionately when he bade her good-bye, and seemed so loth to let it go that, but for the eyes of all England, which every man believes are fixed on himself alone, he would have sprung in too, and driven off with her then and there.

But he consoled himself with the certainty of seeing her next day. That comfort accompanied him to his bachelor lodgings, where he dressed, and lasted all through a regimental dinner at the London Tavern.

While a distinguished leader proposed his health, alluding in flattering terms to the services he had rendered, and the dangers he had faced, General St. Joseph was thinking far less of his short soldier-like reply than of the pale face and the dark eyes that would so surely greet him on the morrow; of the future about to open before him at last, that should make amends for a life of war and turmoil, with its gentle solace of love, and confidence, and repose.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HARD MORSEL.

Like the feasts of Apicius, that dinner at the London Tavern was protracted to an unconscionable length. Its dishes were rich, various, and indigestible, nothing being served *au naturel* and without "garnish" out the brave simplicity of the guests.

"Wines too there were, that would have slain young Ammon."

and old comrades seldom part under such conditions without the consumption of much tobacco in the small hours. Nevertheless, St. Joseph rose next morning fresh and hopeful as a boy. He ordered his horse for an early canter in the Park, and shared the Row with divers young ladies of tender years but dauntless courage, who crammed their ponies along at a pace that caused manes, and tails, and golden hair to float horizontal in the breeze, defiant even of that mounted spectator, whose heart though professionally tolerant of "furious riding," softened to a piquancy with snub nose and rosy cheeks, on a grey quadruped as round, as fat, and as young-looking as itself.

St. Joseph felt in clarity with all mankind, and returned to breakfast so light of heart that he ought to have known, under the usual law of compensation, some

"Miss Douglas b'aint here," was the startling answer to his inquiries. "She be gone away for good. Joff this morning, I shouldn't wonder, afore you was out of bed."

"Gone!" he gasped. "This mornin' did she leave no message?"

"None that I knows of. The serv'nt didn't say nothink about it; leastways, to me."

"But she's coming back?"

"Not likely! The maid did suppose they was a-going for good and all. It's no business of mine. I'm not Miss Douglas's servant. I'm a taking care of the 'ouse for the landlord, I am. It's time I was a-tidy-ing of it up now."

With this broad hint, she proceeded to shut the door in his face, when the General, recovering his presence of mind, made use of the only argument his experience had taught him was universal and conclusive.

Her frown relaxed with the touch of money on her palm. "You're a gentleman, you are," she observed approvingly. "Won't ye step in, sir? It's bad talking with the door in your 'and."

He complied, and sat down on one of the bare hall-chairs, feeling as he had felt once before, when lady kit, in the Punjab.

She went on with her dusting, talking all the time. "You see they sent round for me first thing in the morning; and I says to Mrs. Jones—that's my land-lady, sir,—(dropping a courtesy), 'Mrs. Jones, says I, whatever they can be up to,' says I, 'making such an early fitting?' says I—"

"But do you mean they've left no letter?" he interrupted, starting from his seat; "no directions—no address? Are all the servants gone? Has Miss Douglas taken much luggage with her. Did she go away in a cab? Oh, woman! woman! tell me all you know! It's a matter of life and death!"

She looked at him askance, privately opining that, early as it was, the gentleman had been drinking, and sympathising with him none the less for that impression.

"They're off," said she stubbornly; "and they've took everything along with them—bags boxes, and what not. There was a man round after the keys—not half an hour gone. I should say as they wasn't coming back, none of 'em, no more."

This redundancy of negatives forcibly expressed her hopelessness of their return, and the General's good sense told him it was time wasted to cross-question his informant any further. Summoning his energies, he reflected that the post office would be the best place whereto to prosecute inquiries, so he bade the old woman farewell, with all the fortitude he could muster, leaving her much impressed by his manners, bearing, and profuse liberality.

At the post-office, however (an Italian warehouse round the corner), they knew nothing. The General, at his wits' end, thought him of those livery-stables where Satarella kept her namesake, the redoubtable black mare.

Here his plight excited the utmost interest and commiseration. "Certainly. The General should have all the assistance in their power. Of course, the lady had forgotten to leave her address, no doubt. Ladies was careless, sometimes, in such matters. A beautiful 'orse-woman," the livery-stable keeper understood, "an' kep' two remarkably clever ones for her own riding. Had an idea they went away this very morning. Might be mistaken. John could tell. John was the head-ostler. It was John's business to know." So a bell rang, and John, in a long-sleeved waistcoat, sleeking a close-cropped head, appeared forthwith.

"Black mare and chestnut 'oss," said John decidedly. "Gone this morning; groom took with him saddles, clothing, and everything. Paid up to the end of their week. Looked like travelling—had their knuce-caps on. Groom a close chap; wouldn't say where. Wish he (John) could find out. Left a setting-muzzle behind, and would like to send it after him."

There seemed nothing to be done here, and the General was fain to retrace his steps, hurt, anxious, angry, and more puzzled when he reached home than he had ever been in his life.

For an hour or two, the whole thing seemed so impossible, and the absurdity of the situation struck him as so ridiculous, that he sat idly in his chair to wait for tidings. In this nineteenth century, he told himself, people could not disappear from the surface of society, and leave no sign. Rather, like the sea-bird diving in the waves, if they go down in one place, they must come up in another. There were no kidnappings now, no sendings off to the Plantations, no forcible abductions of ladies young or old. Then his heart turned sick, and his blood ran cold, while he recalled more than one instance in his own experience, where individuals had suddenly vanished from their homes and never been heard of again.

Stung to action by such thoughts, he collected his ideas to organize a comprehensive system of pursuit, that should embrace enquiries at all the railway stations, cab-stands and turupikes in and about the metropolis.

There several pages, some of them crossed. He retired to the strangers' room, and sat down to peruse the death-warrant of his happiness.

"You will forgive me," it began, "because you are the kindest, the best, the most generous of men; but I should never forgive myself the blow I feel I am now inflicting, were it not that I regard your pride, your character, your high sense of honor, before your happiness. General, I am unfit to be your wife; not because my antecedents are somewhat obscure—you know my history, and that I have my reason to be ashamed of it; not because I undervalue the happiness of so high and enviable a lot—any woman, as I have told you more than once, would be proud of your choice; but because you deserve, and could so well appreciate, the unalloyed affection, the utter devotion, that are not mine to give. Your wife should have no thought but for you, no hopes independent of you, no memories in which you do not form a part. She should be wrapped up in your existence, identified with you body and soul. All this I am not. I never have been—I never can be now. Had I entertained a lower opinion of your merits, admired and cared for you less, I would have kept my promise faithfully, and we might have jogged on like many another couple, comfortably enough. But you ought to win more than mere comfort in married life. You merit, and would expect, happiness. How could I bear to see my hero disappointed? For you are my hero—my beau-ideal of a gentleman—and my standard is a very high one, or you and I had never been so unhappy as I firmly believe we both are at this moment. It is in vain to regret, and murmur, and speculate on what might have been, if everything, including one's own identity, were different. There is but one line to take now, even at the eleventh hour. Some day you will acknowledge that I was right. We must never meet again. I have taken such precautions as can baffle, I do believe, even your energy and resource. You have often said nobody was so determined when I had made up my mind. I am resolved that you shall never find out what has become of me; and I entreat you—I adjure you—if you love me—nay, as you love me—not to try! So now, farewell—a long farewell, that it pains me sore to say. I shall never forget you. In all my conflict of feelings, in all my self-reproach and bitter sorrow, when I think of your pain, I cannot bring myself to wish we had never met. I am proud of your notice and your regard—proud to remain under obligations to you—proud to have loved you so far as my false, wicked nature had the power. Even now I can say, though you put me out of your heart, do not let me pass entirely from your memory. Think sometimes, and not unkindly, of your wilful, wayward—"

"BLANCHE."

So it was all over.

"It's a good letter," murmured the General; "but I prefer the one Julia wrote to Juan." Then he read it through again, and found, as is usually the case, that the second perusal reversed his impression of the first. Did she really mean he was to abstain from all attempt to follow her? He examined the envelope; it bore the stamp of the General Post Office; the contents certainly afforded him no clue, yet, judging by analogy, he argued that no woman would lay such stress on the precautions she had taken if she did not wish their efficacy to be proved. When he found, however, that nothing short of police-detectives and newspaper advertisements would avail him, he took a juster view of her intentions, and in the chivalry of his nature resolved that under this great affliction, as in every other condition of their acquaintance, he would yield implicitly to her wish.

So he went back into the world, grave, kindly, and courteous as before. There were a few more grey hairs in his whiskers, and he avoided ladies' society altogether; otherwise, to the unobservant eye, he was little altered: but a dear old friend whom he had nursed through cholera at Varna, and dragged from under a dead horse at Lucknow, took him into a bay-window of the club-library, and thus addressed him—

"My good fellow, you're looking shamefully seedy. Idleness never suited you. Nothing like work to keep old horses sound. Why don't you apply for employment? There's always something to do in the East."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"SEEKING REST AND FINDING NONE."

But great nations do not plunge recklessly into war, nor even do mountain tribes rise suddenly in rebellion because an elderly gentleman is suffering like some sentimental school-girl from a disappointment of the heart. General St. Joseph's extorted, indeed, from a great personage the promise that if anything turned up he would not be forgotten, and was fain to content himself for the time, with a pledge in which he knew he could place implicit trust. So the weary, hot

tortured him. He pitied the wild old cock, flapping his life out on its own purple heather, fifty yards off, mowed down by his deadly barrel, even as it rose. When he had stalked the "muckle red hart" with antlered front of royalty, and three inches of fat on those portly sides, up the burn, and under the waterfall, and through the huge grey boulders of eternal rock, to sight the noble beast fairly from a leeward ambush, and bring it down, pierced through the heart with a long and "kittle" shot, his triumph was all merged in sorrow for the dead monarch lying so calm and stately in the quiet glen, not perhaps without a smothering of envy, for a creature thus insensible, and at rest for evermore.

The foresters wondered to see him in no way triumphant, and when they heard next morning he was gone, shook their heads, opining that "It was a petty! She was a pratty shot, and a fery tight shentlemans on a hill."

It was work the general required, not amusement; so he journeyed sadly back, to await in London the command he hoped would ere long recall him to a profession he had always loved, that seemed now to offer the sympathy and solace of a home.

Sometimes, but this only in moments of which he was ashamed, he would speculate on the possibility of meeting Miss Douglas by accident in the great city, and it soothed him to fancy the explanations that would ensue. He never dreamed of their resuming their old sooting; for the General's forbearance hitherto had sprung from the strength, not the weakness of his character, and the same stubborn gallantry that held his position available to cover his defeat; but it would be a keen pleasure, he thought, though a sad one, to look in her face just once more. After that he might turn contentedly Eastward, go back into harness, and never come to England again.

In the meantime, the days that dragged so wearily with St. Joseph, danced like waves in the sunshine through many of those other lives with which he had been associated in his history. Amongst all gregarious animals, it is the custom for a sick or wounded beast to withdraw from the herd, who in no way concern themselves about its fate, but continue their browsings, baskings, croppings, waterings, and friskings, with a well-bred resignation to another's plight worthy of the human race. If the General's friends and acquaintances asked each other what had become of him, and waited for an answer, they were satisfied with the conventional surmise—

"Gone to Scotland, I fancy. They tell me it's a wonderful year for grouse!"

Mrs. Lushington, yachting at Cowes, and remaining a good deal at anchor, because it was "blowing fresh outside," thought of him perhaps more than anybody else. Not that she felt the least remorseful for the break-up she believed to have originated solely in her own manoeuvres. She was persuaded that her information conveyed through the anonymous letter had aroused suspicions which, becoming certainties on inquiry, detached him from Satarella, and, completely mistaking his character, considered it impossible, but that their dissolution of partnership originated with the gentleman. How the lady fared interested her but little, and in conversation with other dearest friends, she usually summed up the fate of this one by explaining—

"It was impossible to keep poor Blanche straight. Always excitable, and unlike other people, you know. Lately, I am afraid, more than flighty, my dear, and more than odd."

Besides, Mrs. Lushington, as usual had a great deal of business on hand. For herself and her set Cowes was nothing in the world but London gone down to the sea. Shorter petticoats, and hats instead of bonnets, made the whole difference. There were the same attractions, the same interests, the same intrigues. Ever the same horses went to and fro, and bored, as they breathed, more freely in the soft, Channel air. Altogether, it was fresher and quieter, but, if possible, stupider than Pall Mall.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Lushington being in her natural element, exercised her natural functions. She was hard at work, trying to mate Bessie Gordon, nothing loth, with a crafty widower, who seemed as shy of the bait as an old grudgeon under Kew Bridge. She had undertaken, in conspiracy with other friaky matrons, to spoil poor Rosie Barton's game with young Wideacres, the catch of the season; and they liked each other so well that this job alone kept her in constant employment. She had picnics to organize, yachting parties to arrange, and Frank to keep in good humor; the latter no easy task, for Cowes bored him extremely, and, to use his own words, "he wished the whole place at the devil!" She felt also vexed and disappointed that the General had withdrawn himself so entirely from the sphere of her attractions, reflecting that she saw a great deal more of him before he was free. Added to her other troubles was the unpardonable defection of Soldier Bill. That volatile light dragoon had never been near her since Daisy's marriage—a ceremony in

pressed intention of turning over a new leaf, found no reason to be dissatisfied with his lot. You might search Ireland through, and it is saying a good deal, without finding a more joyous couple than Captain and Mrs. Walters. The looked for promotion arrived at last, and the bridegroom had the satisfaction of seeing himself gazetted to a troop on the very morning that provided him with a wife. Old Macormac was pleased, Lady Mary was pleased, everybody was pleased. The Castle blazed with light and revelry, the tenants drank, danced, and shouted. The "boys" burnt the mountain with a score of bonfires, consuming whisky, and breaking each other's heads to their own unbounded satisfaction. In short, to use the words of Peter Corrigan, the oldest solvent tenant on the estate, "The masher's wedding was a fool to't! May I never see glory av' it wasn't better diversion than a wake!"

But Norah's gentle heart, even in her own new-found happiness, had a thought for the beautiful and stately Englishwoman, whom, if she somewhat feared her as a rival, she yet loved dearly as a friend.

"What's gone with her, Daisy?" she asked her young husband, before they had been married a fortnight. "Sure she would never take up with the nice old gentleman, a general he was, that marked the race-cards for us at Punctestown. Oh, Daisy! how I cried that night because you didn't win!"

They were walking by the river-side, where they landed the big fish at an early period of their acquaintance, and Norah brought the gaff to bear in more ways than she suspected; where they parted so hopelessly, when, because of his very desolation, the true and generous girl had consented to plight him her troth; and where they had hardly dared to hope they would meet again in such a glow of happiness as shone round them to-day. It was bright spring weather when they wished each other that sorrowful good-bye. Now, the dead leaves were falling thick and fast in the grey autumn gloom. Nevertheless, this was the real vernal season of joy and promise for both those loving hearts.

"What a goose you were to back me!" observed Daisy, with a pressure of the arm that clung so tight round his own. "It served you right, and I hope cured you of betting once for all!"

"That's no answer to my question," persisted Mrs. Walters. "I'm asking you to tell me about my beautiful Blanche Douglas, and why wouldn't the old General marry her if she'd have him?"

"That's it, dear!" replied her husband. "She wouldn't have him! She—she accepted him, I know, and then she threw him over."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Norah. "Thought, to be sure, he might have been her father." Then a shadow passed over her fair young brow, and she added wistfully, "Ah, Daisy! I'm thinking I know who she wanted all the time."

"Meaning me?" said Daisy, with a frank, saucy smile, that brought the mirth back to her face, and the sunshine to her heart.

"Meaning you, sir!" she repeated playfully. "But it's very conceited of you to think it, and very wrong to let it out. It's not so wonderful, after all," she added, looking proudly in his handsome young face. "I suppose I'm not the only girl that's liked you, dear, by a many. I oughtn't to expect it!"

"The only one that's landed the fish," laughed Daisy, stopping in the most effectual manner a little at a time with which she was about to conclude her peroration. "You're mistaken about Miss Douglas, though," he added, "I give you my word. She hadn't your good taste, my dear, and didn't see it! Look, Norah, there's the very place I left Sullivan's fishing-rod. He'll never get it again, so it's lucky I bought his little brown horse. I wonder who found it. What a day that was! Norah do you remember?"

"Remember!"

So the conversation turned on that most interesting of topics—themselves, and did not revert to Satarella nor her doing. If Norah was satisfied, Daisy felt no wish to pursue this subject. However indiscreet concerning his successes, I think when a man has been refused by another lady, he says nothing about it to his wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNDIVIDED.

The late autumn was merging into early winter, that pleasantest of all seasons for those sportsmen who exult in the stride of a good horse, and the stirring music of the hound. Even in Pall Mall true lovers of the chase felt stealing over them the annual epidemic, which winter after rages with unabated virulence, incurable by any known remedy. A sufferer—it would be a misnomer to call him a patient—from this November malady was gaping at a print-shop