

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punctestown Races.

CHAPTER IX.

OFF AND ON.

(Continued.)

All details of love making are probably much alike, nor is there great room for variety in the putting of that direct question, to which the path of courtship necessarily conducts its drape. General St. Josephs kept no copy of the letter which he solicited Miss Douglas to become his wife. That lady took it immediately into shreds, that went fluttering up the chimney. Doubtless it was sincere and dignified, even if diffuse; worthy, too, of a more elaborate answer than the single line she scribbled in reply.

"Come and talk it over. I am at home till seven."

His courage rose, however, now he had got fairly into action, and never had he felt less nervous while dismounting at the well-known door, than on this supreme occasion, when he was to learn his fate, as he believed, once for all, from the lips of the woman he loved.

Like most men trained in the school of danger, strong excitement strung his nerves and obliterated his vision; he no longer averted his eyes from the face that heretofore so dazzled them, on the contrary, entering the presence of Miss Douglas, he took in her form and features as a glance, as a man scans the figure of an adversary, while he prepares for attack.

It did not escape him that she looked flushed and depressed, that her hand trembled, and her color went and came. Arguing favorably from these symptoms, he was somewhat disappointed with the first sentence she addressed to him.

"You wrote me a letter, General," said she, forcing a very little laugh. "Such a funny letter! I didn't quite know what to make of it!"

A funny letter! And his heart had beat, his eyes had filled, his highest, noblest feelings had been stirred with every line!

He was conscious that his bow seemed stern, even pompous, while he answered with exceeding gravity.

"Surely I made my meaning clear enough. Surely, Miss Douglas—Blanche; may I not call you Blanche?"

"Yes, if you like," said she impatiently. "It's a hateful name, I think. That's not my fault. Well, General, what were you going to say?"

He looked and indeed felt perplexed. "I was going to observe," said he, "that as my question was very straightforward, and very much in earnest, so all my future happiness depends on your reply."

"I wonder what there is you can see in me to like!" she retorted, with an impatient movement of her whole body, as if she was in fetters, and felt the restraint. "I'm not good enough for anybody to care for, that's the truth, General. There's hardly a girl in London who wouldn't suit you better than me."

He was looking in her face with sincere admiration. "That is not the question," he replied. "Surely I am old enough to know my own mind. Besides, you do not seem conscious of your power. You could make a bishop tall in love with you in ten minutes, if you chose!"

There came a depth of tenderness in her eyes, a smile, half sad, half sweet, about her lips, which he interpreted in his own way.

"Do you think so?" said she. "I wish I could believe you. I've not had a happy youth, and I've not been brought up in a very good school. I often tell myself I could, and ought to have been better, but somehow one's whole life seems to be a mistake!"

"A mistake I could rectify, if you would give me the right," answered St. Josephs, disheartened, but not despairing. "I only ask you to judge me fairly, to trust me honestly, and to love me some day, if you can."

She gave him her hand. He drew her towards him, and pressed his lips to her cold smooth brow. No more, and yet he fancied she was his own at last. Already half pledged, already half an affianced wife. She released herself quickly, and sat down on the further side of her work-table.

"You are very generous," she said, "and every good. I still maintain you deserve somebody far superior to me. How odd those sort of things are and why do they never turn out as one expects."

She was going to say "wishes," but stopped herself in time.

He would not understand.

"Life is made up of hopes and disappointments," he observed. "You do not seem to have much of either."

What do you say to Punctestown? It's next week, and I'm sure to be there!"

He turned pale, seeming no whit reassured. "Punctestown," he repeated. "What on earth takes you to Punctestown?"

"Don't you know I've got a horse to run?" she said lightly. "I should like to see it win, and I do not believe they have anything in Ireland half as good as my beautiful Satanella!"

"Is that all?" he asked in a disturbed voice. "It seems such an odd reason for a lady; and it's a long journey, you know, with a horrible crossing at this time of year! Blanche, Miss Douglas, can you not stay away, as—as a favor to me?"

There was an angry flush on her cheek, an angry glitter in her eyes, but she kept her temper bravely, and only said in mocking accents—

"Already, General! No; if you mean to be a tyrant, you must wait till you come to the throne. I intend to show at Punctestown the first day of the races. I have made an assignment with you. If you like to keep it, well and good; if you like to let it alone, do! I shall not break my heart!"

He felt at a disadvantage. She seemed so cool, so unimpressible, so devoid of the sentiment and sensibility he longed to kindle in her nature. For a moment, he could almost have wished to draw back, to resume his freedom, while there was yet time; but no, she looked so handsome, so queenly—he had rather be wretched with her than happy with any other woman in the world!

"Of course, I will not fail," he answered. "I would go a deal farther than Punctestown, only to be within hearing of your voice."

When do you start? If Mrs. Lushington, or anybody you knew well, would accompany you, why should we not cross over together?"

"Now, you're too exacting," she replied. "Haven't I told you we shall meet on the course, when the saddling-bell rings for the first race. Not a moment sooner, and my wish is the law of the Medes and Persians—as y t!"

The last two words carried a powerful charm. Had he been mature in wisdom as in years, he ought never to have thought of marrying a woman who could influence him so easily.

"I shall count the days till then," he replied gallantly. "They will pass very slowly, but, as the turnspit says in the Spanish proverb, 'the largest leg of mutton must get done in time!' Good-bye, Miss Douglas. Good luck to you; and I hope Satanella will win!"

He bowed over the hand she gave him, but did not attempt to kiss it, taking his leave with a mingled deference and interest she could not but appreciate and admire. "Why can't I care for him?" she murmured, passionately, as the street-door closed with a bang. "He's good, he's generous, he's a gentleman! Poor fellow, he loves me devotedly; he's by no means ugly, and he's not so very old! Yet I can't, I can't! And I've promised him, almost promised him! Well, come what may, I've got a clear week of freedom still. But what a fool I've been, and oh! what a fool I am!"

Then she sent her excuse to Mrs. Lushington, declined dinner at home, ordered tea, didn't drink any, and so crept sorrowful and supperless to bed.

CHAPTER X.

AT SEA.

In the British army, notwithstanding the phases and vicissitudes to which it is subjected, discipline still remains a paramount consideration—the keystone of its whole fabric. Come what may, the duty must be done. This is the great principle of action; and, in obedience to its law, young officers, who combine pleasure with military avocations, are continually on the move to and from headquarters, by road, railway, or steamboat—here to-day, gone to-morrow; proposing for themselves, indeed, many schemes of sport and pastime, but disposed of, morally and physically, by the regimental orders and the colonel's will.

Daisy, buried in Kildare, rising at day-break, going to bed at nine, looking sharply after the preparation of Satanella, could not avoid crossing the channel for "muster," to re-cross it within twenty-four hours, that he might take part in the great race on which his fortunes now depended—to use his own expression, which was to "make him a man or a mouse."

Thus it fell out that he found himself embarking at Holyhead amongst a stream of passengers in the mid-day boat for Dublin, having caught the mail-train at Chester by a series of intricate combinations, and an implicit reliance on the veracity of Bradshaw. It rained a little, of course—it always does rain at Holyhead—and was blowing fresh from the south-west. The sea "danced," as the French say; ladies expressed a fear "it would be very much" their usual destination, they must be inseparable as the Siamese twins, or the double-headed Nightingale. Therefore were they more than usually endearing and affectionate, therefore the earl who drove them through Dublin, from station to station, approved heartily of their "maternal affection," as he called it, wishing, to use his own words, that he was "brother to either of them, or husband to both."

order for landing, before he ran down to fetch certain articles of his own personal property out of the cabin.

They were in smooth water now. Pale faces appeared from the different recesses opening on the saloon. People who had been sick tried to look as if they had been sleeping, and the sleepers as if they had been wide-awake all the way from Holyhead. A child who cried incessantly during the passage, now ran laughing in and out of the steward's pantry; and two sporting gentlemen from the West—one with a bright blue coat, the other with a bright red face—finished their punch at a gulp, without concluding a deal that had lasted through six tumblers, for a certain "bay brown horse by Elvas—an illigant-topped wan," to use the red-faced gentleman's own words, "an' the boultiest ever y' see. Wait till I tell y' now. He's fit to carry the Lord-Lifitinn himself. Show him his fence, and howld him if y' can!" As the possible purchaser for whom blue-coat acted, was a timid rider hunting in a blind country, it seemed doubtful whether so resolute an animal was likely to convey him as temperately as he might wish.

"Ah! it's the Captain," exclaimed both those sitters in a breath, as Daisy slid behind them in search of his dressing-case and his tall hat. "See now, Captain, will the mare win? Faith, she's clean-bred, I know well, for I trained her dam myself, when she cleaned out the whole south of Ireland at Limerick for the Ladies' Plate!" exclaimed one.

"You ride her, Captain," added the other. "It's herself that can do it! They're a taste of temper, have all that bred; but you sit still, an' ride aisy, Captain. Keep her back till they come to race and loose her off then like shot from a gun. Whew! She'll come out in wan blaze, and lave thim all behind, as I'd lave that tumbler there, more by token it's been empty this ten minutes. Ye'll take a taste of punch now, Captain, for good luck, and to drink to the black mare's chance?"

But Daisy excused himself, shaking hands repeatedly with his cordial well-wishers ere he hurried on deck to disembark. Moving listlessly and languidly into upper air, the figure of a lady preceded him by a few steps. All he saw was the corner of a shawl, the skirt of a dress, and a foot and ankle; but that foot and ankle could only belong to Blanche Douglas, and in three bounds he was at her side. A moment before, she had been pale, languid, dejected. Now, she brightened up into all the flush and brilliancy of her usual beauty, like a fair landscape when the sun shines out from behind a cloud. Mrs. Lushington, standing opposite the companion-way, noted the change. Daisy, in happy ignorance, expressed the pleasure, which no doubt he felt, at a meeting with his handsome friend on the Irish shore.

No woman, probably, likes anything she does like, one whit the worse because deprived of it by force of circumstances. The fox in the fable that protested the grapes were sour, depend upon it, was not a vixen. Satanella thoroughly appreciated her friend's kindness and consideration, when Mrs. Lushington consoled with her on her past sufferings, and rejoiced in her recovery, informing her at the same time that Daisy was a capital travelling companion.

"He takes such care of one, my dear." (She spoke in a very audible aside.) "So gentle and thoughtful; it's like having one's own maid. I enjoyed the crossing thoroughly. Poor dear! I wish you could have been on deck to enjoy it too."

Done into plain English, the above really meant—"I have been having great fun flirt with your admirer. He's very nice, and perhaps I shall take him away from you some day when I have a chance."

By certain twinges that shot through every nerve and fibre, Blanche Douglas knew she had let her foolish heart go out of her own keeping. If she doubted previously whether or not she had fallen in love with Daisy, she was sure of it now, while wrung by these pangs of an unreasoning jealousy, that grudged his society for an hour, even to her dearest friend.

There was but little time, however, for indulgence of the emotions. Mrs. Lushington's footman, imposing, broad-breasted, and buttoned to the chin, touched his hat as a signal that he had all his paraphernalia ready for departure. Two ladies' maids, limp and dragged, trotted helplessly in his footsteps. The steward, who knew everybody, had taken a respectful farewell of his most distinguished passengers, the captain had done shouting from his perch behind the funnel, and the raw youth in high-lows, casting one despairing look at Mrs. Lushington, had disappeared in the embrace of a voluninous matron the moment he set foot on shore. There was nothing left but to say good bye!

Satanella's voice faltered, and her hand shook. How she had wasted the preceding three hours that she might have spent on deck with Daisy! and how mean of Clara to take advantage of her friend's indisposition by making up to him, as she did to every man she came near!

Practice, no doubt, makes perfect. With this flattering acknowledgment, she put just the right amount of interest into her glance, let it dwell on him the right time, and averted it at the right moment.

"She's a deuced pretty woman!" thought Daisy. "How well she looks with her hair blown all about her face, and her cloak gathered up under her dear little chin." He felt quite sorry that the Wicklow range was already looming through its rain-charged atmosphere as they neared the Irish coast.

"I should like to win," said he, after a pause, "particularly if you're looking on!" "Don't say me," she murmured, adding in a louder and merrier voice, "You cannot deny you're devoted to Blanche; and I dare say, if the truth were known, she has made you a jacket and cap of her own colors, worked with her own hands."

"I like her very much," he answered frankly. "It's partly on her account I want to land this race. She's so fond of the mare, you know. Not but what I've gone a cracker on it myself; and if it don't come off, there'll be a general break-up! But I beg your pardon, I don't see why that should interest you."

"Don't you?" said she earnestly. "Then you're as blind as a bat. Everything interests me that concerns people I like."

"Does that mean you like me?" asked Daisy with a saucy smile, enhanced by a prolonged lurch of the steamer, and the blow of a wave on her quarter, that drenched them both in a shower of spray.

She was silent while he wrung the wet from her cloak and hood, but when he had wrapped her up once more, and re-adjusted her cushions, she looked gravely in his face.

"It's an odd question, Mr. Walters," said she, "but I'm not afraid to answer it, and I should much rather hear of your own."

destination, they must be inseparable as the Siamese twins, or the double-headed Nightingale. Therefore were they more than usually endearing and affectionate, therefore the earl who drove them through Dublin, from station to station, approved heartily of their "maternal affection," as he called it, wishing, to use his own words, that he was "brother to either of them, or husband to both."

If they sparred at all, it was with the gloves—light hitting, and only to measure each other's reach. Some day—the same idea occurred to them at the same moment—they meant to "have it out" in earnest, and it should be no child's play then. Meantime they proceeded to take their places in a fast train which seemed to have no particular hour of departure, so long was it drawn up beside the platform after the passengers had seated themselves and the doors were locked. Miss Douglas possessed good nerves, no doubt, yet were they somewhat shaken by a dialogue she overheard between guard and station-master, carried on through many shrieks and puffings of the engine at the first halt they made, a few miles down the line.

"Is the express due, Denis?"

"She is."

"Is the mail gone by?"

"She would be, but she's broke entirely."

"Is the line clear?"

"It is not."

"Go on, boys, an' trust in God!"

Nevertheless, in accordance with an adage which must be of Irish extraction, "Where there is no fear there is no danger," our two ladies, their two maids, and Mrs. Lushington's footman, were all deposited safely at a wayside station in the dark; the last-named functionary, a regular London servant, who had never before been ten miles from the Standard, Cornhill, arriving in the last stage of astonishment and disgust. He cheered up, however, to find a man, in a livery something like his own, waiting on the platform, with welcome news of a carriage for the ladies, a car for the luggage, and a castle not more than three miles off.

"You must be tired, dear," said Mrs. Lushington, sinking back among the cushions of an easy London-built brougham. "But, thank goodness, here we are at last. Three miles will soon be over on so good a road as this."

But three Irish miles, after a long journey, are not so quickly accomplished on a dark night in a carriage with one of its lamps gone out. It seemed to the ladies they had been driven at least six, when they arrived at a pork wall, some ten feet high, which they skirted for a considerable distance ere they entered the demense through a stately gateway, flanked by imposing castellated lodges on either side.

Here a pair of white breeches, and the indistinct figure of a horseman, passed the carriage-window, flitting noiselessly over the mossy sward.

"Did you see it, Blanche?" asked Mrs. Lushington, who had been in Ireland before. "It's a banshee!"

"Or a Whiteboy!" said Miss Douglas laughing. "Only I didn't know they wore even boots, to say nothing of the other things!"

But the London footman, balancing himself with difficulty amongst his luggage on the outside car, was more curious, or less courageous.

"What's that?" he exclaimed, in the disturbed accents of one who fears a ghost only less than a highwayman.

"Which?" said the driver, tugging and flogging with all his might to raise a gallop for the avenue.

"That—that object!" answered the other.

"Ah! that's the master. More power to him!" replied the carman. "It's the foxin' he'll have been likely, on the mountain, an' him nivir off the point o' the hunt. Divil thank him with the cattle he rides! Begorra! ye nivir see the master, but ye see a great baste!"

All this was Greek to his listener, whose mind however, became easier, with the crunching of gravel under their wheels, and the looming of a large, irregular mass of building, about which lights were flashing in all directions, showing not only that they were expected and welcome.

As Blanche Douglas stepped out of the brougham, she found her hand resting in that of the supposed banshee, who had dismounted not a minute before to receive his guests. He was a tall, handsome old gentleman, fresh-colored and grey-haired, with that happy mixture of cordiality and good-breeding in his manner, to be found in the Emerald Isle alone; yet was there but the slightest touch of brogue on the deep melow accents that proffered their hospitable greeting.

"You've had a long journey, Miss Douglas and a dark drive, but glad I am to see you, and welcome you are to the castle at Cormac's town."

Then he conducted the ladies across a fine

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