

THE  
Master of the Hounds

CHAPTER VII.

(CONTINUED.)

A move was now made from the supper-table, and the last on the list being a country dance, Beauchamp claimed Blanche's promise, and they were soon engaged with hands across, down the middle, up again, until she nearly exhausted with this incessant work. 'Come, dear Blanche,' he whispered, 'this is too much for you, who have been dancing all night. I will not allow you to go on longer, or you will be quite laid up to-morrow. Take my arm, and we will walk about until you are cooler; for I heard Mrs. Harcourt say the carriage was ordered exactly at the three, and it is now within a quarter of the time.' Beauchamp was leading her to the conservatory again, when she said—

'Not to me, William; my aunt will be angry if she cannot find us when the carriage arrives.'

'Oh, turn only, dear Blanche, to give up my little present to your keeping; but do not trouble or fear me, dearest; this word you apprehend shall not escape my lips again this night.'

When they had reached the upper end, near the orange-trees, Beauchamp, taking Blanche's pocket-handkerchief, tied the little oval case in one corner of it, and returned it to her without another word or comment. 'And now, dear Blanche, we will attend upon your aunt, and I shall send Constance to-morrow to see how you are, as I must be out hunting.'

In a few moments the carriage was announced, and the company began rapidly to disperse.

And now what are we to say of all William Beauchamp's good resolutions, which had been scattered to the winds? and his firm determination not to make Blanche Douglas acquainted with the feelings of his heart until she had mixed more in the world? All had been over-ruled by the dread of not falling into the trap set for her by Lord Mervyn and Vernon. His love, long pent up within his own breast, was now suddenly called forth by the horror of losing her for ever, and her being wedded to such a fate as that designed by those unprincipled plotters against her fortune and happiness. The hours ceased to be remembered as the hours, Beauchamp thought only of that dear, pure-minded girl whose image had been so long entwined about his heart.

'She ought at least to know,' argued he, 'that there is one who loves her dearer than his own life, and would support her through every trial. And he argued still more persuasively to himself that the confession of his love could be no barrier to her rejection of any other person who might bid to her hand. Thus, of course, it would not have been so had Blanche been free to choose; but, fortunately or unfortunately, Beauchamp's expression of love had struck a responsive chord in her heart, which vibrated through her whole frame.'

On the night of Sir Lionel Markham's coming party, Blanche had experienced certain agreeable sensations towards William Beauchamp, which were redoubled on their meeting at the Priory a few days after, and she now felt, after carefully analysing her feelings, that she loved him dearly, intensely—and oh! the delight of that night's revelation that she was beloved in return! Blanche Douglas had received the blessing of a son in religious education from a lady of good family, who had resided many years with her pupil, and who faithfully discharged her duty to her youthful charge by firmly impressing on her mind those high principles of religion and morality, which would prove her greatest comfort and protection during the trials and temptations which she must probably be exposed to in after life. Mrs. Harcourt loved him as her own daughter, and but for, indeed, was the partner between them in the parental affection which she had for the young man, when she knew the art of

child, is William Beauchamp. He is fond of hunting, because it is a bold, manly amusement, in many respects resembling war, and had he adopted the army as a profession, the name of William Beauchamp would have stood conspicuous in his country's defence. With the most chivalrous feelings of honor, a deep sense of religion, a firm and unshaken resolution, and one of the most kind and loving hearts that ever beat in human breast, the woman who shall marry William Beauchamp will draw a prize indeed.

'Dear Mrs. Barratt,' replied Blanche, 'I believe William to be all you represent him, and you know I consider him and Constance as my brother and sister.'

'Yes, dear child, glad am I to leave you with two such friends, to whom I can safely entrust your happiness; prize them, love them, dearest Blanche, as I know they love you, and never keep a secret from your sister Constance, who will ever direct and guide you in the path of duty and religion; and now fare-well, my own long-loved, dearest child, and may Heaven protect you from every evil, and that greatest of all evils, a bad husband; when, straining her to her breast once more, Mrs. Barratt rushed from the room, and poor Blanche sank helpless in her chair, convulsed with sobs and sorrow, where she sat crying until her maid Alice entered, and exerted all her entreaties and kind offices to soothe and comfort her almost broken-hearted young lady.

'Oh, my dear mistress,' cried Alice, kneeling at her feet, 'pray do not give way thus' (at the same time wiping with her apron the tears trickling down her own cheeks). 'Poor, dear, kind Mrs. Barratt, we shall all miss her so,' and she began sobbing herself as if her heart would break. 'Oh, Miss Blanche, this will be a sad day—but there, I declare, is Mrs. Harcourt's step coming this way,' which roused the two young girls to check their emotions.

'Why, Blanche,' exclaimed Mrs. Harcourt, witnessing the traces of her grief, 'I thought you possessed too high a sense of decorum to give way to such sobs and lamentations, and in the presence of your servant, indeed, you ought to rejoice at Mrs. Barratt's good fortune, in having, through your Aunt Gordon's recommendation, obtained such a desirable situation as companion to old Mrs. Dacre, where she will have nothing whatever to do.'

'I cannot, dear aunt,' replied Blanche, still sobbing, 'refrain from grieving at the loss I have sustained in dear Mrs. Barratt, who has ever been to me a second mother; but if you will leave us, I will endeavor to be more composed.'

'Well, my dear, make haste, and wash away all traces of your tears, for I expect some visitors this morning, and you must be in the drawing room to help me to receive them.'

Mrs. Harcourt was one of those cold, unapproachable beings, living within the frigid zone, repellant and impervious to every genial influence; in fact, she belonged to that numerous class denominated the imperturbables, who consider it a breach of decorum to be affected by those common occurrences which excite so foolish an influence over the gentility of the human race. Ever so gentle and so full of friends and relations, a sense of joy at their recovery, to wit, a sense of a weakness of mind in those who indulged in such wayward fancies, and a tendency to variance with the rules of propriety and etiquette to be observed, without exception, upon all occasions. She was one of those persons who would, if engaged in the Satanical pastime of table-turning and table-rapping, have stood as a six-foot-tall wall to prevent any rotatory motion of the said table towards herself, possessing not one atom of electricity in her whole composition.

Blanche Douglas, it need scarcely be said, unfortunately for her own peace of mind and individual happiness, was a native of the torrid zone, and therefore the very opposite in disposition and character to Mrs. Harcourt. Like the young offspring of a vine, stretching forth its tender and pliant tendrils for support, this young, warm-hearted girl (when bereft of the mainstay of her childhood, in the person of Mrs. Barratt) looked around for a support which she could cling to for comfort and support. Her father, indeed, and her mother, were both dead, and she was left to the

'Ah!' remarked Mrs. Compton, playfully, to Bob Conyers, whose eyes were riveted on the game, 'I judge what your feelings are in witnessing this formidable array of your enemies; but come, I will make you a bet of five shillings that there is one of your friends lurking in that bed of laurels, not twenty yards from the spot where the pheasants are now feeding.'

'Thank you, my dear madam, for your kind offer of relieving my pocket of its contents, which may possibly amount to the sum you have named, and which I should most certainly lose, were I rash enough to accept such a wager. As we are all well aware of your and Mr. Compton's liberality in catering for your friends in pink jackets, there is no person to whom I could hand over five shillings with less reluctance than to yourself; but as my purse is not on any day of the week inconveniently burdened with the coin of the realm, and on hunting days contains only sufficient for the contingencies which may occur, such as a feed of corn and a bucket of gruel for my horse, probably a lost shoe or two, and a glass of brandy and water for myself, with a few little extras for ostler and turnpikes on my road to and from hunting, I could not venture on such a hazard as an even bet, although I would not refuse four to one, which I think are the fair odds against a fox being found in the bed of laurels.'

'There, Mr. Conyers, look there,' cried a little girl, running up to him, 'there is a fox just peeping out from the laurels.'

'By Jove, my darling!' exclaimed Bob, taking the child up in his arms and kissing her; 'you have just saved me from losing a shilling to your mamma, which, by the way, I dare say, is very provoking to her; but to pacify her anger, you may whisper to her that Bob's annual, on Christmas Day, will make some amends for her disappointment.'

'Tell me what my present is to be,' said the child.

'No, my dear, you must wait patiently till the basket arrives.'

'Really, Mr. Conyers,' exclaimed Mrs. Compton, 'it is very provoking to see how you spoil my children; they are quite unmanageable when you are here, and I really think I must forbid you the house, or they will be entirely ruined.'

'If indulgence is to cause this,' returned Bob, 'I think their mamma will have much more to answer for than Bob Conyers.'

'Well, Mr. Conyers, we are all now impatient to begin our day's sport, which we can see from the terrace; so give a hint to William Beauchamp, or these increasing new comers will soon clear off our stock of old sherry brandy.'

'Thank you for the hint,' replied Conyers, 'as I have not yet had my glass of jumping powder.'

The hounds having arrived, Mr. Compton's guests quickly dispersed in search of their steeds: the lion of the day, on whom all eyes were turned, being a great Leicestershire squire, who had for many years hunted that country with a splendid pack of hounds, but was now settled down on his own patriarchal estate. It being one of his maxims, that every fence was practicable with a fall, it is almost needless to say, he was a bold and fearless rider, and that no obstacle ever stopped him. In stature, he was about the general standard, with a broad, expansive chest, and features, if not handsome, yet manly, reflecting the spirit, which was working within, of cool determination and undaunted courage. His seat on horseback was neither studied nor graceful, but easy and careless as his manner of riding across country, to which may be attributed many of the severe falls he encountered, which were of such continued occurrence, that he never appeared quite satisfied without his general allowance of half-a-dozen per diem.

'Oh, demmit!' exclaimed Markham, who had been listening to a recital of the great squire's exploits, related by Vernon, 'what a confounded fire-eating monster he looks! he'll pound us all to-day, and ride away from Burnett and Beauchamp too.'

'I hope so,' replied Vernon, 'and that both of them may break their necks in trying to catch him.'

'Eh! indeed, Dick, you're a nice member of the hunt, ain't you, to wish every man of us to be beaten by a strange man? but I'll bet an

in the track of Will Beauchamp, who, with Charley, kept the lead with the hounds, until they ran into their fox, in an open grass field, after a burst of thirty-five minutes, without a check. Sir Francis, Tyler, Gwynne, and Fred Beauchamp were the next four up, and close behind them came the lion of the day, hot and furious.

'Confound that bog!' he exclaimed; 'it spoiled my start completely, and you know, Burnett, five minutes lost are hard to recover in a quick thing like this; but I'll take care the hounds don't get out of my sight with our second fox.'

'Don't make too sure of that,' replied Sir Francis; 'we are not in Leicestershire now, but one of the stiffest vales I ever crossed yet, where hounds can and will beat the horses.'

'They can't beat me,' replied the great squire.

'They have done it once already, and will do it again, I hope,' rejoined Burnett; 'that is, if the scent holds as good with the next fox we find.'

By this time the Captain and Vernon had reached the spot, when the former appealed to Gwynne about his bet.

'You have won this heat clearly enough, Markham,' replied Sir Lucius, 'as Beauchamp had his fox in hand five minutes at least before the great man showed at all, and four of us were before him.'

'Eh! Vernon, 'pon honor, no mistake about it—lost your money, old fellow; but come, I'll let you off for a five pound note—demmed liberal offer, eh?'

'I won't take it, Markham, for I feel certain of winning, as an accident only prevented my man being in his proper place, where he is sure to be the next run.'

'Oh, very well,' replied the Captain; 'as you please.'

The hounds were now taken to one of the finest fox coverts in the world—a large hazel copse of about one hundred acres, situated in the centre of a fine grass country, with large, open pasture fields.

'Ah!' exclaimed the Leicestershire squire, 'this is something like a hunting country, with plenty of room to fall, without half a score fellows being in upon a man when he's down. Now, Burnett, we may fancy ourselves at Billisdon again.'

'With this difference only,' replied Sir Francis, 'that there we can take our fences at a fly; here it cannot be done, with a wide ditch on both sides, and a big, thundering bank and quickset in the middle.'

'I shall try, it, notwithstanding,' rejoined the squire.

'Then you don't see our second fox killed, that's settled; but, bark! by Jove! they have found him.' And with a scream, which thrilled through the hearts of all, Will Beauchamp waved him over the rib. In a moment the whole pack was at work, rattling him round the covert.

'Beautiful!' exclaimed the great squire; 'how those big brutes stick to him! Gad, sir, they squeak like t ricks, light enough in their tongue—eh, Burnett?'

'Yes, there's little cry with them, and when they run hard, you can scarcely hear them at all; up and go is their motto, and I've seen them run half a mile with their fox in view, without a hound giving tongue. But, look! they are away at the bottom of the covert, while we are standing here.'

'Now for it, then,' cried Sir Francis, as sticking his spurs into his horse he dashed down the nearest drive; but Beauchamp, with his whip Charley, had got the start, and kept the lead for three miles of very severe country, until the hounds were brought to a check on the banks of a deep brook, where the fox, having been headed by a man at work in the field opposite, had doubled back, and thrown them into some little confusion. At this moment the Leicestershire squire made his *entree* into the field, in rather an unceremonious manner, by being thrown head for most from his saddle over a high bank, with his horse scrambling after him. Beauchamp, hearing the crash behind him, turned and asked if he was hurt.

'Hurt!' he exclaimed; 'no, I am not often hurt by a fall; but now we are even, sir, addressing Beauchamp, as the hounds settled a man on the scent; 'so come along; and he rode savagely at the brook, cheering Beauchamp to follow. Our young master, with Charley, were quickly by his side, when the great man, looking to pound them, rode

aw! Beauchamp, 'pon honor, gave 'em all the slip—hurrah!—awful pace, 'pon my soul, all right—won my bet!'

'But what a figure you are, Markham! Where's your hat?'

'In the brook, old fellow, where I left half-a-dozen with their horses; got out myself on the right side; up the hill like wild-fire; passed the great man on the road—very squeamish indeed; cut into an old lane, leaving Burnett, Tyler, and Gwynne rasping away cross country to my right, and here I am, first for once in my life; and now, Beauchamp, give me the brush, which I would not lose for a five-pound note.'

'I have promised it to Mrs. Compton,' replied Beauchamp, 'who was first in at the finish.'

'Then,' replied that lady, 'I willingly waive my claim in favor of Captain Markham, as a little compensation for the loss of his hat.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Compton, for your kind consideration,' replied the Captain, with a low bow; and the said appendage was accordingly handed to him by Charley, who pocketed a sovereign for the present.

'Won ten yellow boys to-day,' whispered the Captain.

'How so, sir?' inquired Charley.

'By your master beating the Leicestershire hero.'

'Glad to hear it, sir; wish you had won fifty.'

'Have you seen anything of Rushton?' inquired Mrs. Compton.

'Oh, yaas, replied Markham; 'left him on the road; bad fall—ribs smashed, I suspect, or something of that sort—looked seedy—very.'

'I hope not seriously hurt,' said Mrs. Compton, anxiously.

'Oh, no, can't be—never is hurt, by his own account—only queerish.'

Preceded by Sir Francis, Tyler, Fred Beauchamp, Gwynne, and Conyers, who were in the first light, the lion of the day now hove in sight, looking unutterably disgusted; in fact, his whole frame had received so great a shock from his heavy fall on the hard road, that, although no bones were broken he was fearfully bruised about his head, ribs, and right arm, which was nearly paralysed. Giving his horse to the groom, with sundry anathemas for his want of condition, the great man walked on to the lawn, where he stood for a few moments talking with Mrs. Compton, and then retired to his own room for the luxury of a warm bath.

The fox was now thrown to the hounds, as the heavy weights, including Sir Lionel, Squire Beauchamp, and others, with whom Vernon had been in company, arrived on the scene, and many and hearty were the congratulations on their capital day's sport.

'Ah, Compton!' exclaimed Conyers, 'we have always luck on our side when we meet at your place—no bagmen or three-legged ones here; and now for a glass of sherry to drink your health and a merry Christmas to all your family, with fifty new ones to come, and may they find you still living as heretofore—the friend of fox-hunters.'

'And a right hearty welcome to you all,' replied Mr. Compton, who led the way into the house, followed by a goodly company of pink jackets, who gladly availed themselves of his proffered hospitality. Markham whispered Gwynne, 'A hollow thing, eh? No mistake about first man.'

'None whatever—Vernon must pay.'

'All right, old fellow—tell him what you say.'

The losing man did not relish the Captain's hint; but knowing his good nature, put him off by saying they would settle that another day.

'Play and pay, Vernon, is the rule on such occasions,' said Markham; 'so you must fork out; had I lost, you would have made me pay quickly enough.'

'Oh, very well, I'll send you a draft to-morrow or next day,' with which he turned aside.

On their way home, a comparison was instituted by Sir Francis and Conyers, between the riding of the two rival masters of fox hounds, Rushton and Will Beauchamp.

'In Leicestershire,' remarked Burnett, 'I think Beauchamp would give way to the great squire.'

'I don't think he would,' retorted Conyers; 'for the reason, Will rides with equal cer-