

HALTERED AND ALTAR'D.

A TALE OF THE HUNTING FIELD.

CHAPTER I.



HERE is perhaps no person in Society of which Society—and that possibly with reason—is more afraid of than the heiress-hunter. The hawk which hovers over the barnyard does not inspire more terror in the breast of the old hen with her chickens gathered round her than his presence does in the mind of the matron who has a family of grown-up daughters, all ticketed for the matrimonial market. Though it is by no means necessary that an heiress-hunter should be handsome, as a rule he will, even if ugly, consider himself to be so. Good looks render him more than usually dangerous, and when backed up by fascinating manners and accomplishments he may be said to be irresistible.

Heaven help the man who brings him to the house which contains such a family as I have mentioned, for he will have a bad time of it ever afterwards, and the man who takes him on board the yacht of his friend who has daughters portioned or portionless may look out for squalls. But while heiress-hunters are despised by the fair sex, heir-hunters are allowed to try every device, and throw out every allurements for the purpose of bringing their game to hand. They are privileged to “set their cap,” as they call it, to catch anyone, and, though we look at a man who is caught by a cap-setting woman, however captivating, as a kind of hen-pecked bachelor only fit for exhibition at a poultry show, we must say that they are exceedingly successful; far more so indeed than those of the opposite sex whom we read of occasionally as marrying fortunes and getting a girl thrown into the bargain, like a Scottish cattle dealer’s luck-penny. In matrimony, as in everything else in these days of huckstering, there is no doubt a market in which the law of supply and demand works the same as on the Stock Exchange, the scarcity of what are known as eligible men having a tendency towards the increasing of the stock of what are known to married folks and bachelors as old maids.

Heir-hunting—I hope no one will have the audacity to make a pun upon the word—though common in all ranks of Society, is best pursued in the country, where, from the small curate, the purest man in the provinces according to the cloth he wears, up to the squire of broad acres, every bachelor is considered fair game, and that, too, at all seasons of the year, for there is no Close Time allowed them. Lucky indeed is the man who eludes their grasp, and the hard-riding hunter has never had more narrow escapes in the field to tell to his friends in the smoking-room after a good run than the ones he gasps over and gulps down with a glass of wine in his ruminations, which he has had from marriage. “So-and-So, take a wife! My boy, don’t tell me. I’ve known him from his youth. He’s not the marrying sort,” you hear every day; and if you leave your old place for a year or two on duty or on sport, you come back to find him driving his own Perambulator as tame as the elephant in the Zoo when the keeper is kind enough to give the children a ride on his back.

“What a nasty, selfish, bachelor-like sentiment!” do we hear some lady reader exclaim? Just so, but is it not all true? However, to the commencement of our story.

It was a cold, dampish, raw afternoon in December, when with that particular jog-trot with which hunters like their horses to sling along homewards after a hard day, the huntsman of the Blankshire trotted into the little village of Cloverside, the pack tired and weary at his heels. The first whip was, as usual, within conversation distance, and the talk in which the pair were indulging was, as usual, of the day’s sport, mixed up with remarks about the members of the field and the horses they rode, with divers opinions rudely expressed about the new comers, broken at times by sharp calls to transgressing hounds.

“Don’t know what she be at all, Jack,” said the huntsman, “but she don’t need no heddicating, I can see, as to crossing a country, and she know more about ’unting than some o’ the young swells as thinks they does. Wonder what she’s here for, eh?”

“Don’t know. Can’t make her out, but there ain’t been such a flier as rides in a ’abit since I come to this country.”

“Nor I. When I was in Berkshire and a bit nearer Lunnon, we used to have some rum ’uns, them, you knows, Jack, as

ain't married or ain't single. You knows the sort I mean, Jack?"

"Course I does," was the whip's reply. "Good to look at and rum un's to go too, they was."

"Well, Jack, but she ain't that; maybe she's one o' them as you sees when you goes to the play."

"Just what I was a thinkin', sir; but, bless yer, how could she handle a hoss the way she does unless she had been a brought up to it? Lor, you should a seed how she saved her hoss over the plough and how she picked him up now and then at the awkward places, an', Lor bless yer, a' couldn't ha' done it myself, sir,—I was a thinkin' she might ha' been a circus."

"Circus be blowed, Jack; she's too clever for a sawdust; them circus girls is good enough jumpers on a hoss's back, but they ain't no use on the back of a jumpin' hoss. No, no; she ain't a sawdust. Hang me, but I'll give it up. 'Ere we are at the Bull."

As the old huntsman drew bridle he looked round in the saddle, and saw to his surprise the lady of whom they had been talking so freely, just drawing her horse from a trot into a walk. They made way for her, and she called upon the groom to bring her some gruel of lukewarm meal and water for her steed, a nice bay, with neat head, clean short limbs, and a look of breeding all over. In a few moments the lad returned with a pail containing the desired mixture, and the animal having satisfied itself, she passed a coin to the boy, and bowing to the huntsman, who was handing back an empty pewter jug, passed on.

"Blowed, Jack, if she don't look thoroughbred all over," said the huntsman to his companion, who was blowing the froth from off a jug of bitter; "ain't no sawdust about her, eh?"

"Rattling good sort, no matter for what country."

"Looks a little curby about the hocks, didn't she?" said whip No. 2, who had closed up for his turn of refreshment, and was of course ignorant of the previous conversation.

"Curby-hocked, Bill! what be you a talking of?"

"Why the chestnut mare as she's a riding."

"Bill! Didn't I allus say you had only a heye for one thing—that was a hoss; but for a 'ound or the next thing as is most beautiful or 'andsome—women—you ain't in it, nohow. We

was talking about the girl herself, man. Where does she 'ang about, I say, Master Strapper?"

"Just come to Lilyoak Hall, about five miles on. Don't know much about her save as she goes out ridin' sometimes with somebody as looks like her father, or her uncle, or summat. They rides allus good horses."

"And they rides 'em well," was the remark of the old huntsman, as he knocked his horse into its old jog trot, and set off home for the kennels.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLANKSHIRE HOUNDS

WILL MEET

FRIDAY, 18TH DECEMBER, HAZELTREE HALL, 11.30.

THIS was the top line in the card of fixtures which the country postman had just brought to Lilyoak House at noon on the day on which our story opened.

"Hazeltree Hall," said the tall military-looking gentleman with grey hair and grizzled moustache, who received it at the door, "why, that is the residence of this young Sir Benjamin Hazel, who has just come into the property. Ahem! good looking if he's like his father; rare old family, and with the acres unburdened should be worth twenty thousand a-year. Well, if she does not manage to put the halter on there I'll give it up—the jade, she's every bit as skittish as her mother. Three offers she's thrown away in thrice as many months, and the worst of the lot wasn't worth less than £10,000 a year.

"The first was a snob, she said, and she was not far wrong; the second was a complete muff, not fit to be the husband of any woman; and when I talked about the third she laughed at me and asked if I did not think of taking a wife myself, a nice remark for a girl to make to her widowed father who has steered clear of all feminine temptations for her own sake. As he was five years my senior, and was foolish enough not to hide it in our conversations about old times, so anxious was he to show off his military knowledge, I daresay she was quite right. But let her have her own way—just let her have her own choice, a young good-looking 'sub,' not half as well off as the sergeant-major of

his r egiment, and not as much money as would pay a turnpike, let alone keep a horse. Hazeltree Hall! whew!" whistled the Colonel, as he finished his ruminations and placed his card on the dining-room mantelpiece, "that looks a likely place for a find, anyway, of some kind, though it may not hold a fox."

Colonel Dexter was not a poor man, though he could not be called a man of means. He had his half-pay at the time, and a bit of money invested in a Welsh lead-mine brought always as much to him annually as would allow him to steer his way clear of debt. In a "horse" sense he was rather accomplished, being gifted with what is known as good hands, a nice, well-balanced temper, and a capital eye for choosing a hunter. Horses "made" by him rarely made mistakes, and always fetched more at the end of a season than the beginning, else possibly there would not have been much to invest in mining shares. His accomplished daughter, the subject of the huntsman's remarks, inherited her father's love of horseflesh, and having been carefully educated in cross-country work, few of her sex dared to try a cutting-down match with her in the hunting-field.

"Nothing like the saddle for squire-catching," said the old fellow to himself many a time as he watched her, in a style which was worthy of a jockey at Aintree or Croydon, land clear over everything, and choose her own line again with reins held as lightly as a lad would angle a minnow.

It was a lovely forenoon, that of the 18th of December, when the fixture for the Blankshire was set down for Hazeltree Hall, whose youthful heir had just attained his majority, his father having died and left him a minor when he was but twelve years of age. The estates had not only been left unburdened but there was a large sum of money over and above—something quite unusual now-a-days—and this had been so well managed by the executors that young Sir Benjie, as he was called sometimes, was worth when he was twenty-one years of age something like £15,000 per annum. There was, therefore, a considerable amount of cap-setting amongst the ladies of the country, and rumour—busy, as usual—had given his hand away several times. Rather gay and rather good-looking, he was not, however, to be caught by stale bait, nor was he to be matched or mated like a prize dog by the group of maiden aunts who made him their sole study. With joyous face he received each party as they

drove up to the "muster place," we do not like the word "meet," but when Miss Dexter, in the neatest of hats and hunting costumes, drove up a stately stepping little bay mare, in a nice little dog-cart, her father seated on her left hand, and a natty groom behind, he uttered an exclamation of surprise, while he blushed a deeper shade of crimson than that of the coat he wore.

Miss Dexter seemed also a little surprised in turn, but with a considerable amount of tact contrived to conceal it by directing her eyes straight between the ears of the mare, which fidgeted a little as the groom jumped to its head.

Fortunately a gentleman on horseback, who knew the Colonel, as also the young Squire, well, and guessed that they must be strangers to each other, was wise enough to step forward and introduce them. What was the cause of the blushing? the reader will ask. The answer must be given by the soliloquies of the lady and gentleman.

"My fair companion in my railway journey!" said young Hazel to himself.

"The gentleman I met in the railway carriage!" said Miss Dexter, finishing up with the lady-like remark to herself, "How funny!"

"Your father and I were boys together at Eton, Sir Benjamin, but fortune willed it so that we never met more than twice afterwards, but those meetings were always happy ones, and the partings were very sorrowful. You very much resemble him—very much indeed," and the Colonel, as he held the young fellow's hand in his own, looked straight into the honest face of the curly-headed youth, whose bright eyes could scarcely keep from wandering in another direction. "Your face almost makes me feel a boy again, but gout and rheumatism are all here to give me the contradiction, let alone Nellie here, who is about the same age as yourself, if my memory serves me right."

Had Miss Dexter looked up to the windows and seen the cold grey eyes of the maiden aunts fixed upon her she might for a moment or two have felt somewhat abashed; but with a merry little laugh, a smile, and a twinkle of the eye which seemed to say, "How do you like railway travelling?" she was soon as much at her ease as if she had known the young Squire all her lifetime.



The whole field moved to an outlying covert

see page 199

In a few minutes afterwards all were in the saddle, and the whole field moved forward to an outlying covert which rarely failed to hold a fox, and was so situated that if the varmint did get away he was bound to give them a good clear five miles. Miss Dexter was riding her favourite—a nice little mare full of breeding, with the neatest of heads and necks, shortbacked, and neatly turned in all her joints, while the Colonel was upon a genuine specimen of an English hunter, long, low, and strong, and full of spirit. The movement forward was a sharp one, something indeed like a cavalry attack, and, to the joy of all, hounds streamed in one side of the covert to dash right out on the other behind a gallant old dog-fox, which was said to have yielded many a good run in the previous season. Never minding the bustle, the Colonel, with his daughter at his side, chose his own line, and after going a field or two they found themselves nicely placed with the hounds, having as companions in the first flight the M.F.H., the huntsman, and whips, and to the delight of the military veteran, the young baronet going hard and well on a big striding thoroughbred. With a burning scent the pace was very fast, and soon the crowd were left far behind. Like the finished horsewoman she was, Miss Dexter on her spirited little mare showed the way at times over the biggest of jumps (for the country was noted for big jumps), with an ease and a gracefulness which would have delighted a Mason or an Oliver, and which quite captivated the young baronet, as it also did the old huntsman and the first whip on a previous day. After going about four miles, Reynard, finding the earths stopped, no doubt, bent sharp to the left, making his point for Barnock, a covert away on the rising ground five miles off, and huntsmen, whips, and all knew they were in for a regular stretcher. Yet the pace did not slacken in the least, and the Colonel, who rode fifteen stone, saddle and all, found that he would have to part company with his daughter, who was still going like a bird. So he dropped back, and left the baronet to go on in attendance, a duty which the latter seemed to be very anxious for. Dipping into the hollows, they rose the slight hill faces, still going straight and steady, till the next point was reached. Reynard found no rest there, however, and was forced onward, though tired and weary.

When the Colonel reached the covert on the hill he strained his eyes right and left, and at last, shading them with his hand, he could detect something away in the far distance like a flock of pigeons. Disappearing, he saw two or three objects, which might have been cows or horses, rise the slopes and go out of view again.

"Well, good horse, that fox deserves to live at any rate, though these hounds deserve his carcass, but you and I'll gently make for home; we have had enough for one day."

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While the Colonel in the shades of the evening was pacing up and down the gravel walk by the lodge at Lilyoak gate, anxious to know about his daughter, and hearkening at times for the sound of horses' feet, he saw the lights of lamps about a mile down on the road, and the next minute he heard the "crunching" sound of wheels upon the strewn "macadam." In a few minutes it had reached the lodge, and great was his delight at finding that it contained his daughter and the young baronet. "Sixteen miles, what do you think? and only ourselves left in at the finish! Pulled him down in the open, too."

"You don't say so!" said the Colonel.

"There it is, papa; will you believe it now?" she said, holding up the brush, but poor Fanny was so dead beat that I was obliged to leave her behind. She could scarcely move a leg, but she is being well cared for."

"Drive up to the house," said the Colonel, "you must be as tired as your horses," and as the carriage moved off he muttered to himself, "She's put the halter over at last."

CHAPTER III.

THERE is not much of our little story to tell. It is eight years now since bonfires blazed brightly on every hillside in the country, but it is only three months since I last saw them. I was steering close to the wind down through the lively Sound of Sleat in the Western Highlands, when we met a yawl carrying at her mizen the white ensign, which proclaimed her to belong to one of the Royal Yacht Squadron. Steering near, I could observe a lady

seated on the weather side with a child on either side, while a gentleman, whose features I thought I knew, held the tiller. "Get your foresail to windward, dip your flag, and run up your number," I said to the skipper, and it was done in a twinkling, for we carried our signal flags.

The yawl "dipped" in return, then ran up her signals. Making out the numbers, I turned up Hunt's List and found that she was the *Nellie Dexter*, 120 tons, Sir Benjamin Hazel.

"Ease off the fore sheet," I shouted, as I shoved the tiller from me, and looked round on the fast-fading yacht, as I thought to myself of the way the baronet has been

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