

The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

CHAPTER XXVI

(Continued)

"A knock came at the door and the butler entered.

"The carriage, my lord—I beg your lordship's pardon, but I fear your lordship will be late."

The earl passed his hand across his brow with a bewildered gaze. Talbot stood in the doorway, and the earl looked at him with a strange expression.

"I would like a glass of wine," said Mr. Saintsbury; but it was of the stricken old man he was thinking, and he poured out a glass for him.

The earl understood and, with a slight inclination of his head drank the wine.

"We must go now; I cannot wait!" he said, hoarsely. "After the examination—you must tell me all!"

Saintsbury did not know what to do, and could only stand and watch the old man as, leaning on Talbot's arm, he went out to the carriage.

The court was crammed, but the earl got in by the magistrates' entrance and took his place on the bench. As he did so he looked towards the dock, and his and the prisoner's eyes met. The old man started and gazed long and steadily at Ralph's pale but calm face. Their eyes dropped to Veronica who sat just beneath the dock. She met the glance sadly, and the tears sprang to her eyes, but she turned them to Ralph swiftly—and kept them there while Grey gave his evidence. A murmur ran round the court as he unfolded as much of the case as was necessary. Already it seemed as if the prisoner's guilt were proven. The knife, the quarrel, his unexplained flight that night they turned to Mr. Selby eagerly, but almost pityingly, for what defence had he?

He rose in a leisurely fashion and arranged his eyeglasses.

"One moment, Mr. Grey, if you please. We will have evidence of the arrest, I think."

The London detective who had arrested Ralph came into the box.

"Quite so. You found the prisoner just recovered from an illness, the result of his rescue of a little child from a burning house?"

"Yes, sir; it is the same man."

"Thanks. He offered no resistance?"

"No, sir. He behaved like a gentleman."

"Quite so. No doubt your worship has read the account of the prisoner's heroism. The father of the child is in court."

All eyes went to Mr. Saintsbury and then, with a feeling of admiration and sympathy, to Ralph, who frowned at his reference to his "heroism."



ference to his "heroism."

"Now, Mr. Grey, again, if you please," said Mr. Selby. "You found the knife on the body. I—the knife—will be sworn to no doubt. It does not matter. We admit that it is the prisoner's. You know him. Did he bear a good character while a Lynne Court?"

"Yes, sir; excellent. He was one of the best-liked keepers we've had."

"Ah, yes! You would not have suspected him of a cowardly murder if you had not found the knife and heard of the quarrel?"

The clerk interposed. "We can scarcely accept Grey's opinion as evidence—"

"Quite so," assented Mr. Selby, blandly. "About the quarrel: do you give evidence of that this morning? Where is Fanny Mason?"

Talbot, who was sitting at the end of the magistrates' bench took out his handkerchief and blew his nose at that moment.

"No, sir. I can't put my hand on her just yet. We found the house, where she'd given her address, empty and to let. I'm trying to trace her, sir."

"Ah! Then, as a matter of fact, you are relying this morning on the knife only?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Selby turned swiftly to the bench. "I shall have to ask your worships for a discharge," he said, coolly. "My client drops his knife—it is picked up by some enemy, some man who owes the deceased a grudge, and probably murders him. The evidence is not strong enough, my lord." He looked hard at the earl. "Here is a young man, with an unexceptional character, a man in the pride of youth and—at that time—as strong as an athlete, accused of stabbing—stabbing, forsooth!—a man old enough to be his father, and a man weakened by drink and dissipation! Surely I am within my right in asking for a discharge. Where is the motive? The motive is the pivot on which the charge must turn! There is none, absolutely none! A quarrel! Between a game-keeper and a suspected poacher! Well! Grant it! Why, this young man in the dock could have felled the deceased with one blow. Why use a knife? Is this the kind of man—an Englishman and a brave man, remember!—to commit a cowardly and unnecessary—unnecessary—murder?"

There was a murmur of assent, of approval, and a police man called sternly for silence. Two or three of the magistrates drew together in a whispered conference.

"We think there is sufficient evidence for a remand, at any rate," said one.

The earl seemed to wake from a dream.

"The prisoner is remanded," he said. "Has he anything to say?"

He looked at Ralph and, as if responding to the look rather than the words, he said in a clear, though low voice:

"I am innocent, my lord. We quarrelled—"

Mr. Selby sprang up as if to interrupt him, then fell back with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But I walked away. I wanted to catch the train—I

was leaving Lynne Court. I dropped the knife as I was cutting the stick on which I carried my bundle—"

Every eye every ear was strained in an almost painful attention; but suddenly, in the midst of the prisoner's speech, the earl rose, his face white as leath, his hand outstretched towards the prisoner, who had stopped, arrested by the uprising of the earl's gaunt figure, the ashen face, the outstretched hand.

"Who—who are you?" came at last in hoarse, broken tones. The spectators held their breath and looked from one to the other. Talbot rose and approached the earl, but he waived him away imperiously.

"Ralph Farrington," said Ralph in a low voice, and with surprise.

The earl passed his hand over his trembling lips and fell back. "The prisoner is remanded," said one of the other magistrates. "Clear the court! Lord Lynborough is ill!"

Talbot bent over the earl whose head was on his breast and his fellow magistrates gathered round him with expressions of sympathy and fear.

"He ought not to have been here, his age—he is not strong enough."

But the earl heard them and, rising, beckoned to Mr. Saintsbury, who was standing by the solicitor's table.

"Have—have I guessed the truth?" he demanded, struggling for breath. "Tell me—do not be afraid! The truth—the truth! I want it now—at once here! You say you have seen my—son. Is—is—it he?"

Mr. Saintsbury stepped up to the bench and laid a hand upon the old man's arm.

"Not here, Lynborough!" he pleaded, with agitation. "Come home—"

"Yes, here, here!"

With a gesture of resignation Saintsbury put the miniature in his hand. As he did so Whetstone came faltering from the group of persons that had been left in the court and, trembling in every limb, stood confronting the earl.

The earl drew his hand across his eyes, then looked at the miniature. A cry rose from his lips.

"It is Janet!"

Whetstone drew nearer.

"You know it! Then—then—it was you who betrayed her! Oh, my God!"

The earl's gaze rested on him for a moment, then he drew himself up.

"It is the portrait of my wife, gentlemen!" he said proudly. "We were married—there stands"—he pointed to Saintsbury—"one of the witnesses!"

There was a murmur, a movement of amazement, then an intense silence. It was broken by George Saintsbury.

"Yes," he said. "I was present, and—and—Lynborough, be

calm! You force me to speak—the prisoner—Ralph Farrington, has recognized that portrait as that of his mother!"

The earl looked as if he was about to collapse, then he drew himself up.

"I knew it—I knew it!" he said, hoarsely. "He is my son!"

He would have fallen, but some of them caught him. He had not fainted, and presently in a weak voice he said:

"Take me home. My son! My son!"

(To be continued.)

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