

The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Not safe—(Continued)
"Come questions," said Burchett. "A man knows his own business. But I'm sorry, lad. Is there anything I can do?"

Ralph shook his head again and sighed.

"Nothing. There is nothing anyone can do," he responded. "I am going to start presently. I have made a bundle of the things I must take and can carry. You'll let the rest stay until I send for them—it may be a long day, perhaps—never, I think."

Burchett nodded, and stood watching him for a moment; then he drew out his old leather purse and laid it on the table.

"Your wages," he said.

Ralph examined the contents.

"There is more than's due to me," he said.

"Take it," ejaculated Burchett, laconically. "Take it, or you'll offend me. You'll want money, wherever you're going. And I've no use for it."

There are ten sovereigns and some silver in the purse. Ralph took out five pounds, and was about to return the purse; but, changing his mind, he put the balance of the money on the table and the purse in his pocket.

"I'll keep this, if you'll let me," he said. "It will remind me of all your kindness to me—not that I shall want reminding. I shan't forget it, Mr. Burchett."

He turned away to fasten the bundle and to hide the misery in his eyes; then he looked around the room.

"There was a knife, an old friend—"

he said.

"I used it to cut some tobacco this morning," said Burchett. He took from the mantel-shelf a long clasp-knife with a black horn handle, with the initials "R. F." on it, and handed it to Ralph, who opened it and shut it mechanically.

"It is a very old friend," he said. "I should have been sorry to leave it behind. No I will give it to you if you will have it."

Burchett shook his head.

"You'll want it, lad," he said.

Ralph took a small gold pin of little worth from his scarf.

"I'd like you to have that," he said, simply; and, as simply, Burchett accepted it.

"You look tired out," he said. "You will have something to eat and drink before you go?"

"Yes; I'm tired," said Ralph. "I've had a bad time—"

He checked himself. Not even to Burchett could he hint of his trouble. "I shall be all right when I get out of this place—though God knows I have been happier here than I have ever been—all my life!"

Burchett made some tea, and put it with some food on the table, and Ralph sat down. He drank a cup of

tea, but he could not eat, and he sat with his head resting on his hand, staring at the fire as if he were lost in gloomy thought. Burchett did not break the silence for some time, but at last he said in a low voice:

"I suppose I can ask where you're going?"

Ralph started as if from a dream, and rose with a heavy sigh.

"Back to Australia, I think. But I've made no decided plans yet; there hasn't been time. I'll start now, I think."

He thrust a stick through the handle of the bundle and held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said hoarsely.

Burchett gripped his hand—it was burning hot and quivering—and looked grimly into Ralph's face.

"I'm sorry to lose you, lad," he said, gruffly. "I've grown—used to you. But if you must go you must; I've no right to keep you. Life's made up of partings—"

he sighed, dropped Ralph's hand and turned to the fire.

As Ralph went out he turned and looked back at the cosy room, the grim bent figure then he strode away with a heavy and weary step. The dogs followed him, whining, and he paused a moment to pat them and send them back.

The moon had not yet risen, but the night was clear and light, and he took the narrow path across the woods towards the high road. At a spot in the road from which he could catch a glimpse of the Court he stopped, and leaning against a tree looked long and yearningly at the great house, the casket that held his treasure. Treasure indeed! gem fit for a king's crown, and not to be worn in the rustian jacket of a gamekeeper. As he stood there a slim, girlish figure was passing at a turn in the road. It was Fanny Mason. She happened to glance in his direction and saw him. She stopped and looked—as longingly as he was looking at the Court—then took a step towards him; but her feet were arrested by the sound of others.

A man was lurching along the road, coming from the opposite direction. It was the tramp. She saw him stop at sight of the tall figure by the tree and heard him address Ralph with a tipsy insolence.

"What—what are you a-star-gazing at, my young spark?" he said, with a leer.

Ralph, thus roughly awakened, looked at him and was passing on; Oatway stretched out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"Whatch your hurry?" he demanded, wagging his head at him with exaggerated gravity of semi-intoxication.

"Looks as if you was a-goin' on a journey, s'elp me!"

"Mind your own business, my man, and take your hand off my arm," said Ralph, quietly enough; and he shook the hand off.

"Oh, we're hotly-toity, are we?" jeered Oatway. "We think we're somebody, don't we? Goin' on a journey, eh? Got your bundle on yer back? 'Tis like a common tramp! Why—"

with a sudden laugh of insolent triumph—"curse me, if I don't think you've got the sack!" He peered into Ralph's face with eager, wolfish curiosity. "That's it right enough! I can

see it in your face! You've got the sack, been kicked out—"

his voice rose gloatingly and he snapped his fingers in Ralph's face. "It's up and down with us, mister; you was up the other day and I was down; but its wicey wery now, and I'm on top; higher on top than you've a notion of, my young cockerel."

Ralph had walked on, the man following him; but suddenly Ralph turned and Fanny saw the white, haggard face plainly. She was frightened and waited for no more, but ran on, stopping at the end of the road which she expected Ralph to pass presently.

Ralph looked at the man steadily but not angrily; his heart was too sore for him to be angered with the fellow.

"Go your way my man, and let me go mine," he said; but, as Oatway still seemed inclined to bother him, he left the road and entered the wood. Oatway, with a laugh of drunken audacity followed him; but Ralph walked quickly, and Oatway presently gave up the aimless pursuit, and seating himself on a tree to get his breath, drew out his pipe and, after several ineffectual attempts, lit it.

"He's goin'," he muttered, with portentous gravity and a would-be cunning leer. "Now, what does that mean? Hash the other fellow been up to any tricks, hash he been a-gettin' at him? If I thought so, if I thought as there'd been any underhand work, s'elp me, I'd step in an' interfere. What did he say to-morrow night for? Why not to-night? This 'ere game's er payin' one, an' I'm goin' to play it for all it's worth, an' I ain't goin' to be interfered with. I don't know as I want that young chap out o' my sight, though I hate him, hate him! Seems to me that I'd better see about it. I will, too!"

He rose unsteadily, but sank down again, began to yawn, and very soon fell asleep.

Ralph went on his way. Presently the bundle struck against a tree. His stick was too long for its purpose, and he took out his knife to shorten it. As he was doing so the knife fell from his hand, struck his boot, and bounced to some distance. Ralph searched for it, but the undergrowth was thick, and though he groped in the darkness, he could not find the knife. He knew that he might grope till morning, and at last, with a sigh, he gave up the search.

"Burchett might as well have had it," he said to himself, as he left the spot. "It was the oldest friend I had."

Fanny waited at the corner for some time, but she concluded that Ralph had gone through the wood, and being afraid to linger longer lest Oatway should see her, she went reluctantly homewards.

CHAPTER XIX.

While the tragic act in the drama of two lives was being enacted in the harbour, Talbot Denby, was shut up in his own room trying to face the knowledge which had come to him from Jim Oatway.

Even yet he could scarcely bring himself to believe in the man's statement, in the fact that this gamekeeper fellow was the earl's son and heir. But he knew that the thing would have to be faced, that he must either set at defiance this man who possessed the secret, or make terms with him. Make terms with a man who would probably blackmail him for the rest of his life! He thought of a dozen plans for circumventing the man, of rendering the identification of Ralph Farringdon impossible; but one and all had to be

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discarded as impracticable. There seemed only one way, and that was to submit to the blackmailing. Confused and bewildered by the terrible problem, he paced up and down the room until it was time to dress for dinner. He had left his man in town, for the silent Gibbon was not a favorite with the Court servants who were as sociable crew and eyed the taciturn Gibbon with a kind of uneasy suspicion; and Talbot, on his visits to the Court, either availed himself of the services of the earl's man or was valeted by an intelligent young footman.

He was, therefore, surprised and, in his overwrought condition, startled, when, in answer to his ring, Gibbon himself appeared in the doorway, with his expressionless face and downcast eyes.

"You here! Well?" said Talbot, with the cold insolence which is harder to bear than overt brutality.

Gibbon raised his eyes and held out a letter.

"It came this morning, sir; and as it was marked 'important and immediate,' I thought I'd better come down with it."

Talbot took the letter and opened it. It was from a famous money-lender, and its peremptory contents made Talbot's face grow even darker than it had been.

"I wish to Heaven you would obey my orders and remain where you are until you are sent for. The thing's of no consequence," he said, not angrily, but with the same cold insolence.

Gibbon dropped his eyes; they were scanning his master's face while the latter had been reading.

(To be continued.)

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