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The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XX.

The next instant he had started to his feet with a low cry.

Great God! It was incredible, but—the man was dead!

He felt for the heart again, felt through the blood that had welled from the wound. There was no movement. The man was dead! And he—he, Talbot Denby, had killed him, was a murderer!

A deathly sickness, an actual physical sickness, came over him, all the strength seemed to have left his limbs, and he staggered to a tree, groping for its support with his hands as if he had gone suddenly blind. He leant there, shaking as if with cold, for some minutes, trying to look away from the hideous object stretched out there in the bracken; but his eyes were drawn to it as if by some hideous fascination. A hundred times he muttered to himself:

"His own fault, his own fault! It was in self-defense—if he had not struck me—His own fault, curse him!"

Then a terrible lethargy seemed to be stealing over him, as if he were losing the power to move, to leave the spot; but he fought against it, tried to force himself to realize that he was in danger. Danger of the hangman!

After a time he succeeded in casting off the awful apathy. He must think, think! He must not remain there, cowering like a coward, must not wait to be caught in these shambles. What should he do? The man was dead. Well, well, he thought, impatiently, as if he were striving to work out a formula, when a man was dead he had to be buried. Yes, yes buried! That was it, of course! He must have been mad not to think of that at once!

He drew himself up with a snudder and looked round. Gibbon was almost as still as the dead man, and he held his breath as he watched and waited. He knew what was passing in his master's mind as well as if it were an open book; indeed, the white, livid face was eloquent enough for anyone to read.

Talbot, with his teeth set, his eyes glaring with the horror that possessed him, stole towards the body; but as he approached his courage failed him. He could not look again until he had found some place in which to hide it. He looked round. At a little distance was one of those pits which gamekeepers dig for purposes of concealment when they are watching for game or poachers; near it

stood a pile of faggots which had been thrown there years ago and would, in the ordinary course, probably remain in the spot until they rotted. Talbot went and looked at the pit. It was not deep enough. He came back, hunted for the knife, found it, and began to dig at the bottom of the hole; but he soon convinced himself that it would take too long to deepen the pit with so ineffectual a tool. He rose, struck a match, and looked at his watch, then got his cap and set off with something between a run and a walk through the wood in the direction of the Court.

Gibbon lay quite still until the sound of his master's footsteps had died away, then he rose and, walking gingerly, approached the corpse. The upturned face, with its sightless eyes, was enough to strike terror into the flintiest heart, but Gibbon looked down at it unmoved and untouched.

He was not thinking of the murdered man, but the murderer, and his soul was steeped in malignant satisfaction. Suddenly he remembered that Mr. Talbot was trying to steal something when the man awoke and the struggle began. What was it? As gingerly as he had walked, he knelt down, opened the coat, and saw the pocket book.

He reflected a moment. Mr. Talbot would be back presently—he knew that—and would miss the book. Well, he would think it had dropped out during the struggle. As delicately as Talbot could have done it, Gibbon drew out the pocket book, and transferred it to his own pocket; then he went back to his old place and, making himself comfortable, quite comfortably, waited. He had not long to wait. Talbot had gone to a tool shed at the end of the garden, and he came back, running now, with a spade over his shoulder. Working with the feverish haste and demoniac energy of a gold-digger, he deepened the pit, paused to wipe the sweat from his livid face, then went towards the corpse.

He lifted it with the strength with which a madman is credited, and

lowered it into the pit. After he had covered the body and filled in the pit he set to work at the pile of faggots, tearing at them with hysterical fury, and piled them over the grave. His strength still seemed superhuman, and Gibbon noticed that this delicate, dilettante master of his lifted and carried the heavy bundles of wood as if they were straw. When he had finished this part of his task, Talbot set to work and arranged the bracken, and so successfully that an unobservant eye would not have detected that any of it had been disturbed.

Then Gibbon saw him stop suddenly and start. He had remembered the pocket book! He had buried it with the corpse! His face worked, his eyes grew distended with the horror of fear and doubt; then he drew a long breath. After all, it was for the best. At any rate, he could not—he could not—dig the body up again.

He straightened his back, aching with the unusual exertion, and looked down at himself. His hands were stained with earth and blood. There was a red mark on his cuff and on his shirt-front; his evening shoes were scratched and dirtied. He re-

garded these evidences of his crime with a kind of dogged despair and drew a long breath.

"He's clever; but how'll he get 'em clean?" thought Gibbon, and he grinned. "What will he do with 'em?"

Talbot threw himself down at the foot of a tree and covered his face with his hands. He was worn out, exhausted, body and mind and spirit. He had committed a murder, and disposed of the body in so short a time that a jury would have found it difficult to credit the performance, and now the re-action was setting in. For some minutes he remained absolutely motionless; but he rose at last and, shouldering his spade, went slowly, not hurriedly, towards the Court, as if, now the tension was relaxed, he had become indifferent.

Gibbon waited for a while, then he also rose from his lair, and running, but stealthily, reached the house.

Talbot cleaned the spade carefully and placed it in the shed in the position in which he had found it, the stole across the garden and up to his room.

Mention has been made of the "chilliness" of the Denby family. Talbot inherited it, and a fire was always ready laid in his room. He was chilled to the bone, and, when he entered the room, he mechanically looked at the fire-place, and as mechanically took out his match box, and lighting the fire, drew a chair to it and covered over it.

He saw the dead man's face in the flames, heard his death-cry—that awful "low-bred, mongrel" cry—in the crackling and hissing of the wood. When he got warmer he began to undress. The dead—his dead—was still with him, and he felt as if he were unclothing a corpse. He caught sight of the red spots on his shirt-front and cuffs, and he stood still, his heart beating thickly. In another moment the shirt was on the fire.

As he watched it burning there came a knock at the door. His heart seemed to cease beating, and his knees shook together. He slipped on his dressing-gown, and going to the door, opened it. Gibbon stood there, respectful as usual, but with a slightly anxious look in his colorless eyes.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, in passively, "but I thought I smelt a smell of burning."

Talbot distorted his face into a smile.

"Burning? Oh, yes, I was wakeful, and I have been going through my correspondence, Gibbon. I've been burning some letters; that is what you smelt, no doubt."

"Quite so, sir," said Gibbon respectfully. "I beg your pardon, sir. I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"No, not at all, Gibbon," responded Talbot, with an amiability as marked as it was strange.

"Burnt 'em. But he can't burn everything!" said Gibbon, as he went back to his room. "He can't burn everything," and he patted his breast coat pocket, in which lay the grimy pocket book for which Mr. Talbot Denby had committed murder.

(To be Continued.)

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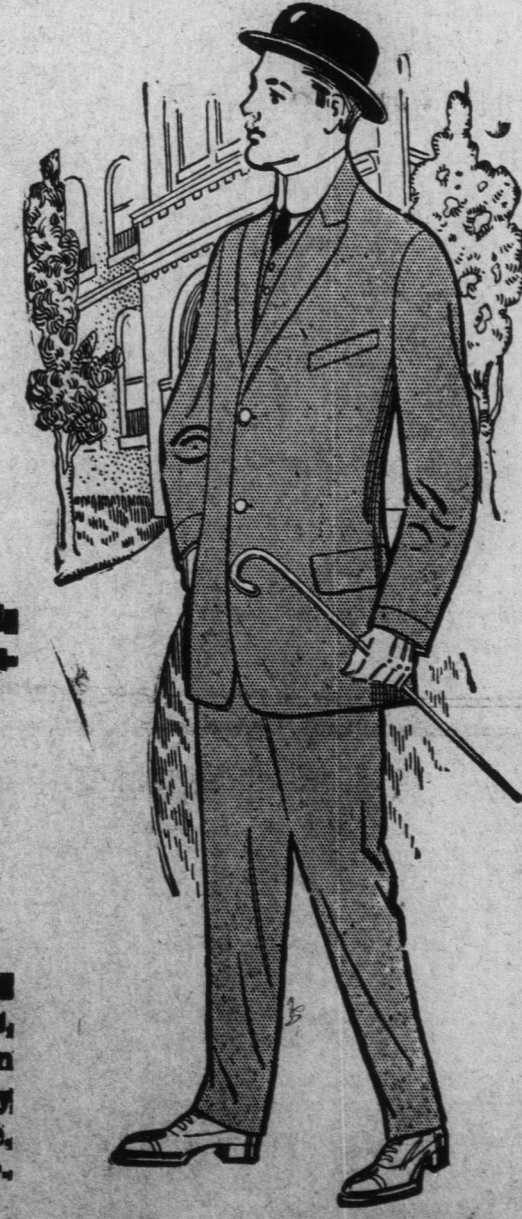
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