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Ralph started. "She was—"

"My sister," said Burchett, hoarsely, his head drooping on his breast.

Ralph coloured and turned his eyes away.

"I'm—I'm very sorry," he murmured, with deep sympathy.

He understood now why Burchett had lived alone and was so grim and taciturn.

Burchett drew a long breath like a man in pain.

"My only sister," he said. "And I loved her. I don't know why I told you— Oh, yes; we were speaking of Sydney Whetstone."

"He was looking at a miniature when I went back," said Ralph in a low voice.

Burchett sighed.

"Yes; he had it drawn from a photograph, and he wears it night and day." He paused a moment or two, then he looked across at Ralph, who sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hand. "I've cause to warn you against the kindness of the gentry, lad," he said, gravely. "It's crueler than their coldness and their neglect. If Janet had been left here with me, and they'd never have taken notice of her, perhaps she'd have been Sydney Whetstone's wife, and happy! Instead of which— I should have left the place, but the countess begged me to stay, and I thought that perhaps Janet might come back and find me gone, and—so I stayed. But she never came back, and I'm thinking she's dead long ago! Yes; their kindness is more cruel than their coldness. Beware of it, lad! Miss Veronica, there—"

Ralph started to his feet, his face ashen, and laughed harshly.

"What has Miss Gresham got to do with me, or I with her?" he said, defiantly.

Burchett raised his thick brows.

"I saw her face as I stood in the doorway this morning; it was all smiles, and you sat there feeding on them, drinking them in—"

Ralph laughed with almost fierce repudiation.

"Why, she thinks of me as the dirt under her feet!" he exclaimed. "Do you take the west spinney to-night, or shall I?"

"I," said Burchett. "You stay in and rest; you've had a long day."

But Ralph shook his head and caught up his gun.

"I'm as fresh as paint," he said, resolutely. "I'll go. Hi, Bess! Hi, Towser!"

The dogs sprang to their feet, yelping delightedly, and Ralph, after pausing to fill his pipe, went out.

The dogs followed him out of the hut, then Bess stopped and ran, sniffing and whining, towards some bushes close at hand. Ralph called to her peremptorily, and she came to heel obediently, but looking over her shoulder wistfully.

When Ralph and the dogs had been gone a few minutes, a man who had been crouching under the bushes which Bess had regarded so suspiciously rose and sneaked off in the opposite direction.

It was the tramp of the bandaged hand and the enquiring mind, and his evil face wore an expression which shifted from one of doubt to intense satisfaction.

"It's the same name," he muttered; "it's the same place! It must be all right. If it is, your fortune's made, Jimmy, my boy! Lord love me, if I ain't struck a streak of pure gold, and no end to it—no end to it!"

Ralph strode quickly through the wood. At another time he would have paid more heed to the disquietude of the dog; but at this moment he was so absorbed by conflicting emotions that his ordinary cautions and alertness were in abeyance.

(To be Continued.)

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CHAPTER XII.

"She was up at the Court, a kind of companion and 'work-girl' to the Countess, the present earl's mother. Her ladyship had taken a great fancy to her and liked to have her always with her, for the girl was bright and cheerful and had nice ways."

His voice grew lower and he gazed grimly at the floor.

"Sydney was a clerk in London, then, but he came down for all his holidays, for his heart was given to the girl, and he could think of nothing and no one else."

"And did she return his affection?" said Ralph trying to concentrate his mind on Burchett's story.

"Yes; for a time, at any rate, and he was the happiest of men. Mind, I am not saying that there was anything definite between them, that there was a formal engagement; but she seemed to like him better than any of the other young fellows, and walked out with him of evenings when she wasn't wanted at the Court. Whetstone was half crazed w' love for her and wanted her to marry him, but she shilly-shalied an' put him off as if she didn't know her own mind; and he'd go back to London half fearful, half hopeful."

"Poor fellow!" said Ralph, with a

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sympathy which surprised himself.

"At that time," Burchett went on, after a pause, "there used to be plenty of company at the Court summer an' shootin' parties, and the big house would be full of visitors, grand gentlemen and fine ladies; and—and they made a good deal of—the girl I said she was pretty and bright, didn't I?"

Ralph nodded.

"Well, one day, just after Sydney Whetstone had gone back to London, with a kind of promise from her that she'd think of marrying him, something—something happened."

Ralph re-lit his pipe and glanced expectantly at the stern face.

"She disappeared," said Burchett, hoarsely.

"Disappeared!" echoed Ralph.

Burchett nodded grimly.

"Yes," he said. "Disappeared; went and left no word behind her."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Ralph, in a low voice. "Do you mean that—that she was murdered? You can't mean that!"

"Worse," said Burchett, thickly. "She'd gone off with one of the grand gentlemen at the Court."

Ralph's face grew red, then paled.

"You—you mean that—that she eloped with someone?"

"Yes; she was led astray," said Burchett, his face darkening.

"But you traced her? You found out who the scoundrel was?"

Burchett shook his head.

"No. The party broke up the day she left. And she left no clue. Sydney Whetstone come down from London heart-broken and tried to find her— What's that?"

One of the dogs had stirred uneasily and, looking towards the door had growled suspiciously. Ralph went to the door and looked round, but nothing was to be seen.

"A bird or a rat, I suppose," he said, and he touched the dog with his foot reprovingly. "Go on," he said, in a low voice. "Poor girl, poor Whetstone!"

"You may well say so," said Burchett, with a heavy sigh. "It was a terrible blow for him. He hunted for her, night and day, for months; Lon-

don, Paris, everywhere, but could find no trace of her. When he came back his hair was as white as you see it now, and he that was so light-some a lad was an aged man."

"He must have loved her," said Ralph, in a low voice. "Quiet, Bess! What ails the dog?" She had growled again and half risen. "Can there be anyone about?"

Burchett shook his head.

"Who should there be?" he replied, absently. "No one would come here so close to the hut, where they'd know the dogs would hear them. It's a rat or a squirrel. Quiet, girl!"

The dog crouched down again obediently but still eyed the door suspiciously as she lay with her nose on her paws.

"Yes; he loved her with all his heart and soul," said Burchett. "I'm thinking that that kind o' love has gone out of fashion, and that men and women have changed, and take it more easily nowadays. It broke up Sydney Whetstone."

"And—and you never discovered with whom she had gone?" asked Ralph.

Burchett shook his head again.

"No. The day she disappeared most of the company had left the Court, as I say. The earl himself left the day afterwards. The countess, his mother, was much grieved, for she was fond of the girl, and did all she could to help find her, but it all came to naught."

"But—but surely she must have been seen with some one of them," said Ralph. "It must have been noticed that one of them was paying her attentions—"

"She was a favorite with them all, and all of them were fond of talking to her and paying her compliments," said Burchett, gloomily.

"And the earl, did he help, too?" asked Ralph.

"He went abroad," replied Burchett. "He was a careless, flighty young man in those days, and a bit heartless."

Ralph looked up quickly, but Burchett shook his head.

"He was engaged to be married to one of Lord Sainsbury's daughters," he said, as if replying to Ralph's questioning glance.

"But he didn't marry her?"

"No; she died. The earl was sorry enough. Sorry for Sydney Whetstone as well as for the girl, for when he came back to the Court—he was away some time—he sent for Sydney Whetstone, who was starving in London—for he was almost demented—and made him steward."


"And nothing was heard of his sweetheart?" asked Ralph.

Burchett shook his head.

"Nothing. She disappeared as completely as if she'd died that night."

"It is a strange story," said Ralph, musingly. "By the way, you haven't told me her name. What was it?"

"Janet Burchett," replied Burchett, almost inaudibly.



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