

# The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

CHAPTER VII.  
(Concluded).

The earl hesitated a moment. "Eh? By gad! I suppose you ought to be sent packing; but—you may remain. Use your time to mend your manners. What have you in that basket?"

"Trout, my lord," replied Ralph, and he came up to the chair, swung his creel round to the front of him and opened it. His lordship bent forward and looked at the fish, then up at the handsome, tanned face.

"That's fine fish. But I caught finer—" He sighed, and his eyes, still on Ralph's face, grew sad with the sadness of age looking back at its youth.

"They'd be finer if the weir were mended," said Ralph, casually.

"Eh, what? What's the matter with the weir?" demanded the earl, with interest.

"It's old and almost useless in this weather. It wants rebuilding," said Ralph.

The earl seemed to be listening to the musical but manly voice.

"Rebuild it," he said, laconically. "Tell Burchett it is to be done. Have you any other suggestion to make?" he added, and though the tone of the question was sarcastic enough, it was not bitter or contemptuous.

"About the fishing, my lord? Oh, well, the weeds in the small pool ought to be cleared. As to the game, it would be a good thing to cut down the trees between our wood and the Saintsburys'. Our birds would keep our side, then."

He spoke respectively enough, but quite frankly and with the self-possession which had surprised Veronica and stirred her pride.

The earl stared at him; then he laughed shortly.

"By gad, the fellow's right! Go in to the house and ask for Miss Veronica—"

"Allow me to go," murmured Talbot; but the earl ignored him.

"—And ask her to give you a letter to the steward. You can take it and explain."

"But Mr. Burchett—he's the head-keeper, my lord," said Ralph.

The earl's face was a study.

"Upon my word, my man, your manners are as much in need of improvement as my preserves appear to be! Go and do as your earl bids! Go in there!"

Ralph raised his cap and entered the hall. Its subdued splendour caught his whole attention and held it, and for a moment or two he was unaware that Veronica was standing looking at him in astonishment; she had not waited to hear the last part of the interview. Ralph started slightly, and, cap in hand, approached her and delivered his message.

Veronica coloured, and seating herself at a writing-table, wrote the note and extended it to him in silence. He had been watching her, with an attention as absorbed as that which had been claimed by the sight of the hall, and he took the note absently and looked round.

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"Can I get this way to the servants' hall?" he asked.

"There are only three, but they are a good size."

With a touch of colour in her face, and her eyes looking straight above his head, she said, icily:

"You may leave two of them, the other you may take to your friend—"

Fanny—Mrs. Mason. I imagine it will not be the first present of fish you have given them."

Now, if she had left out this last sting, the man half frozen by her voice and manner would have gone in silence; but it turned the ice to fire.

"What!" he said, in a low voice, his eyes flashing. "Do you mean that I steal the fish—the game—"

Inwardly Veronica quailed before his just wrath, but outwardly she was calm and scornful indifference.

"This is the door!" she said, haughtily.

Ralph gazed at her indignantly and his lips opened; then he seemed to swallow something, and with one more look he turned on his heel.

### CHAPTER VIII.

Ralph left the Court with every nerve in his body tingling. Of course he knew, he thought, the cause of Miss Gresham's treatment of him. She was a great lady, and resented his rough-and-ready way of protecting her against blood-poisoning.

"I suppose she'd rather have died," he thought, bitterly. "She looked as if I had contaminated her; she spoke to me as if I were a dog, and I suppose, in her estimation, I am very little better."

Then his mood softened a little. "After all," he said to himself, "she's only a girl, though she is the niece of an earl and as proud as a queen; and girls are shy—and touchy. How beautiful she looked! To feel her eyes blazing at you was like having the light from that great painted window in the hall dazzling you! It's lucky that haughty young gentleman, Mr. Talbot Denby, wasn't looking on: I should have been sorry for all the rest of my life. Yes, she's as beautiful as a picture. Strange she didn't seem so angry just after I'd done it. I suppose she'd had time to realize the enormity of my offence. Perhaps she was wild with me for having quarrelled with her cousin; he is her cousin, I suppose. Oh, dash it, I can't fathom a woman's moods! All I know is that I feel as if I'd been beaten all over."

He went quickly to the hut. Burchett was cleaning a gun, and looked up from under his brows as Ralph with a grim interrogation.

"Afraid I shall have to hand in my resignation," said Ralph, with anything but a mirthful glance. "I don't appear to give satisfaction," as the servant-maids say."

Burchett eyed him gravely.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"To the Court; and I wish I hadn't. The fact is, I'm not used to the ways of gentlemen, as you call them. Over there"—he jerked his head—"we don't put up with insolence from any man—or woman, for that matter; and I've had a double dose this morning."

In sharp, laconic phrases he told Burchett of the incidents of the morning, but said nothing of his quick and ready operation for the prevention of blood-poisoning; somehow or other that seemed sacred to himself. "It's strange," he said, with a short laugh.

"You have treated me well enough; it was reserved for these great people to treat me like a dog."

Burchett leaned on his gun.

"You are new to the place and its ways," he said, quietly. "We who

are born here get used to them; yes, and accept them as we do the weather. They treat you like dogs sometimes, but their roughness and contempt is often better than their kindness, and less harmful."

He paused a moment his face growing dark. "They're all alike. Do you think you are the only one to feel it?" He laughed grimly: not a pleasant laugh to hear. "But if you stay—and I don't take much heed of your threat of leaving, lad—pray that you suffer only from their pride and insolence; pray that they may never unbend and grow kind—kind!" my God!—to you or one dear to you! So you've been up to the house; and you've met Mr. Talbot, the next earl, and quarrelled with him, and his lordship stood your friend? Aye, he has a knack of getting his way. I remember years ago when I was eager to shake the dust of the Court from off my feet, that smile, that voice, of his kept me. I chafed against it at the time, but I fell back into the groove, though God knows how hard enough it was to do so, for the wrong done me and mine ached like a bad burn—like a bad burn—"

He stopped suddenly and, awaking from his reverie, seemed conscious of Ralph's presence.

"Better stay on awhile, lad," he said, less grimly. "I've got used to you and we work well together; it's not many men I can live and work with. I'm like the old oak in the south spinney; since it's been stricken with lightning, the other trees seem to grow away from it. Some day I'll tell you my story; not now. Better stay."

"Thank you, I'll stay for the present," said Ralph; "as you say, we've got on very well together, and I'm grateful for your kindness to me and your trust in me. Oh, here's the letter! Perhaps you'd better take it to Mr. Whetstone, the steward."

Burchett shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "His lordship told you to take it, and he likes being obeyed. You'll have some dinner first?"

"Oh, I'm not in the humour for dinner," Ralph responded, with a short, irritable laugh.

"Take that and eat it as you go along. I'll have something ready for your tea," said Burchett, putting a roll into his hand.

Ralph hung on his cap and went out. The steward lived in a small house on the road just above the north lodge, and Ralph, as he went a short cut through the wood, tore impatiently at his roll; but, as he had said, his usually healthy appetite had been destroyed; the dry bread seemed to choke him, and he thrust the greater part of the roll into his pocket. All the way he thought, not of his quarrel with Talbot Denby, but of Veronica's proud disdain and hauteur; and his brow was still heavy when he reached the steward's house.

The door stood open; in answer to his knock someone bade him come in, and going along the narrow passage he entered the room from where the voice had proceeded. An old man, thin and grey-haired, was seated at a table bending over some papers, and without raising his head he asked in a voice which struck Ralph as peculiarly gentle and sad for a man:

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Whetstone?" responded Ralph.

The steward dropped the pen from his hand and turned swiftly, with so strangely startled an expression that Ralph was struck dumb.

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"Who—who—is it?" he demanded, in a voice tremulous with emotion. "Who are you?"

Then, before Ralph could answer, he seemed to recover his equanimity, and rose, but keeping his hand still on the chair, as if to support himself, his eyes still half apprehensively on Ralph's face.

"I'm the new under keeper, Mr. Whetstone," said Ralph; "and I have brought you a letter from Lord Lynborough."

The steward took the letter and read it, after slowly withdrawing his eyes from the bearer's face.

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "I mentioned it to his lordship some time ago, but he gave no orders. It shall be done—"

"At the proper time, which is not now, sir, of course," said Ralph, with, perhaps, more respect than was his wont; for a certain gentle bearing, a vague sadness in the man's accents, affected him.

The steward stood as if he were listening to some echo of the young fellow's musical voice, then he said as if with an effort:

"No, no; of course not. The proper time; yes, yes. I have not seen you before; Mr. Burchett told me he had engaged you, but I have not seen you. Your name is—"

Ralph repressed a smile; it seemed to him that he had spent his time, since he had come to the Court, in telling various persons his name and history.

"Ralph Farrington. Yes, yes!" repeated the steward, with a sigh. "No; I never heard it," he added, rather to himself than Ralph.

"Likely enough, sir. I come from Australia—"

A faint eagerness dawned in the steward's weary-looking eyes, but it faded again as he said in the same low tone:

"Australia! Yes, yes! Many go there; there is a regular stream of young people from the estate; not so many as from most, but still a stream. You look strong—a keeper's life is a hard one at the Court, for there are plenty of poachers."

"So I am aware," said Ralph; "I'm continually finding snares; and I fancy some men have been trying the wood every since I came."

The steward seemed to be still listening to a far away echo, and he nodded his head absently while his eyes rested on the handsome face.

"You don't know these parts at all, then?" he said. "Not till you came. No? Of course not, of course not. I hope you like your situation."

(To be continued.)

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