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The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XXVII.

"I have only just come home," he said. "Yes, yes, I know all; my clerk was in court. Why do you not take some rest, my lord; why not go to your room?"

The earl ignored the advice.

"There—there is no time," he said. "I—may die—good God, at any moment! before—before things are put straight! I want your help, Bolton."

He looked up and saw Talbot.

"Ah," he said in his faint, weak voice. "There is Talbot. What do you say, what do you mean to do? You know that it is true—he is my son!"

To the surprise of everyone, Talbot replied, gravely:

"You should be the best judge of that, sir. If you acknowledge his identity, his claim, I should not dream of disputing it."

The earl looked at him keenly, then drew a breath of relief.

"You—you are acting as a man of honour, a Denby, should act!" he said. "I—I am grateful to you. I need not say that you will—will be

provided for. There is Wayneford, and—yes, yes, there will be enough for you both."

Talbot started and involuntarily glanced towards the safe. Had the earl destroyed the will in Veronica's favor? If he had not and he were to die suddenly, this fellow, this vagrant would take everything.

"Do not let my position cause you any anxiety, sir," he said. "We have to think of—my cousin." He brought out the word with a difficulty which the listeners understood and appreciated. Really, Mr. Talbot Denby was behaving remarkably well, with a generosity which could scarcely have been expected! "He is lying under a grave charge—"

"He is innocent—he is innocent!" breathed the earl, proudly. "My son commit murder."

"I have declared my belief in his innocence, sir, and I declare it still," said Talbot. "But—but you have remanded him, he may be sent for trial, and—and the evidence—"

"The earl groaned.

"I am rightly punished! Bolton, Saintsbury, what is to be done?"

"Everything shall be done that can be done to help him, my lord," said Mr. Bolton, soothingly. "We will have down the best counsel. We will—"

He stammered and faltered. His clerk, during their drive to Lynne Court, had impressed him with the gravity of the evidence. "Here is Doctor Campbell. You will follow his advice—"

"Campbell, I—I want to see my son!" said the earl, his fiery spirit battling with his physical weakness.

"Presently, presently, my lord!" said the doctor. "Just now you are not strong enough to risk an interview that would be trying to both of you. How soon you will be depends on yourself; you must rest, rest."

His stereotyped formula did not raise a smile at that moment.

"Presently, presently!" said the earl, echoing his words. "I want to speak to Bolton."

They all went out but the lawyer.

"Bolton," said the earl, in his feeble voice, "that—that will I made after Veronica left me, the will leaving Wayneford and my money to Talbot, where is it?"

"You have it; it is in the safe," said Bolton.

"Get it; let me see it. I want Tal-

bot to be provided for. There are the keys."

Bolton opened the safe.

"Here it is, my lord," he said. "and here is the will you made in Miss Veronica's favor. That should have been destroyed. I will do it now."

"Not now—to-morrow. It did not matter. The latest will, leaving Talbot Wayneford and the money would stand, of course. He put both wills back in the safe."

Talbot had gone out with the others, who regarded him in an uneasy silence. But he seemed in no way cast down by the sudden turn of fortune's wheel.

"Of course you are sure of the accuracy of your statement, your memory, Mr. Saintsbury?" he said.

George Saintsbury inclined his head.

"Quite, Mr. Denby. I was present at the clandestine marriage. It was—I am ashamed to say—excellently planned. No one had the least suspicion that it was the earl who had been courting Janet; in fact, suspicion was directed in other quarters; I myself did not escape. As to the identity of the lady I saw in Australia there can be no doubt. We spoke of the wedding and she bound me to secrecy. She had sacrificed herself as the earl had said. Pride is not the monopoly of the upper classes, Mr. Denby; and Janet, I mean the countess, was as proud in her way as the earl himself."

Talbot nodded.

"But the identity of—of this young man?"

"That can be established," said Saintsbury. "There must be many

persons who could help him to trace his history and connect it with that of his mother. In my own mind there is no doubt whatever."

Talbot smiled gravely.

"Then I am disinherited!" he said.

"Well, gentlemen, we are all in the hands of Providence. I—I think, if you will excuse me, I will take a turn in the open air."

It was only natural that he should desire to be alone, to face the blow in solitude; and the glances that followed him as he went out were not without sympathy.

He paced up and down the terrace for a time, then went across the lawn and entered the wood. The possession of the pocket-book could not be of much importance now, for there would be no great difficulty in procuring copies of the certificates, but he felt a strange desire to secure the thing, to know what had become of it.

He reached the fatal spot and, looking furtively round, began his search. His nerves had been severely tried of late, and every now and then there crept over him a subtle terror. It seemed to him that the ghost of the murdered man was hovering about the place; he heard his hoarse, husky voice in the rustle of the leaves; the grave still open was a terrible sight, and in imagination he went over every incident of the struggle and again bore the repulsive body in his arms and cast it into the grave. Trembling with a deathly sickness he hunted amongst the bracken and newly fallen leaves; but after awhile he realized the futility of his search, and reflected that the detectives would have left no inch of the ground near the grave unexamined. He rose and went slowly back to the Court, anxiously reviewing his position: After all he still stood to win. Even if the earl acknowledged Ralph Farington as his son and he were proved to be Viscount Lynborough, he was still lying under the charge of murder and might be convicted. How could any jury disregard the evidence? Yes, he would surely be hanged! But even if he were not, if he were proved not guilty, there was nothing, absolutely nothing to direct suspicion towards himself, Talbot; and he still had the world before him. He was a successful politician, was sure of office, perhaps very high of office while his party was in power. And the earl had promised to provide

for him. There was Wayneford and the earl's private fortune. But though he had seemed to acquiesce in the earl's acknowledgment of Ralph Farington, he would only remain passive while the earl lived. Should the earl die before the legal recognition of Ralph he, Talbot, would fight for the earldom to the bitter end; and at the worst he might be able to effect a compromise.

Then, suddenly, his mind shifted to another subject: Fanny Mason. He had wearied of her very quickly, wearied of her so completely that he had discarded her and closed the house at St. John's Wood. He had endeavored to effect the separation "amiably," but Fanny in a fit of passion had refused the money he had offered her and had disappeared.

He dismissed her from his thoughts. After all, she could do him no harm. It was very unlikely that she would return to Lynne. She must have saved money from her allowance, and she had, of course, taken the jewelry he had given her. No; there was no need to worry himself about Fanny Mason. He forgot that she was wanted as a witness, and that detectives were searching for her.

He went slowly back to the house and met Doctor Campbell coming out of the library.

"The earl?" asked Talbot, with every appearance of affectionate anxiety.

"He is asleep. I was going to fetch Welford to sit with him."

"I will stay with him," said Talbot. "I would rather; he would like it."

"I am going for some medicine," said Doctor Campbell, "and I shall not be long. Don't let him agitate himself; if he should wake, keep him quiet."

Talbot stole in. The old man was lying back in his big chair sleeping the sleep of mental and physical exhaustion. Talbot sat down and looked at him keenly. He might die at any moment, in this death-like slumber. Was the will in Veronica's favor destroyed? His eyes went to the safe, and he started. The keys were in the lock. It would only take a moment.

He stole to the safe and, glancing over his shoulder at the earl, opened it. There was a number of papers and deeds filed methodically inside, and with noiseless haste he turned them over. Presently he found one endorsed "Will."

He untied the red tape and ran his eyes over the document. It was a will made soon after Veronica's flight, and left him Wayneford and the money! He smiled with satisfaction, then searched for the Veronica ment was on the top of the fire. It was just as he had found it, he heard a step outside, and with a start he tossed the wills back into the safe and stole to a chair. The step passed and he went back to the safe. A moment afterwards the folded parchment was on the top of the fire. It caught at once, and he watched it until it had smoldered into a heap of charcoal. He was gently and cautiously stirring it into the body of the fire when the earl awoke with a deep sigh and looked round him confusedly.

"Talbot!" he said.

Talbot got up and went to him with affectionate anxiety.

"Are you better, sir? Will you come to bed now; is there anything I can get you?"

(To be Continued.)

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