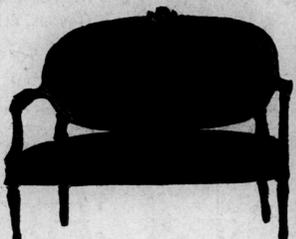


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CHAPTER III.

(Continued.)

"Mr. Talbot Denby, his nephew," said Mrs. Mason, rather stiffly. "Oh! And what kind of a man is he?" asked Ralph, taking out his pipe, but slipping it into his pocket again with an apologetic gesture.

"Oh, please smoke!" murmured Fanny; and, at a nod of permission from Mrs. Mason, he lit up.

"Mr. Talbot is—a proper gentleman," she said. "He's a member of Parliament, and very—clever." She spoke the word as if it were a kind of impertinence to apply the adjective to one of the Lynton family. "He don't often come to the Court, because he and the earl don't get on very well together. In fact, his lordship don't get on very well with anybody. He's quarrelled with all his people, and—that's why he lives alone, barring Miss Veronica."

"Amiable old gentleman!" commented Ralph, smiling.

"His lordship is—his lordship," reported Mrs. Mason, stiffly.

"Quite so," said Ralph. "In Australia we haven't many lords—excepting some 'remittance men'—men who live upon the allowance sent by their people in England—and they don't count much. But I see that here, in England, it's different. Well, I'll go and interview hermit head keeper—what's his name?—Geoffrey Burchett. If I succeed in getting a berth we shall be neighbors, and I shall have time and opportunity for thanking you for your kindness and hospitality, Mrs. Mason."

He rose and held out his hand—Fanny noticed that though rough and brown, it was long and shapely; in fact, like those of the hero in the novelette, and that it closed on hers with a strong and manly grip—and

went towards the door. There he paused, and, looking over his shoulder, said, "By the way, if Miss Veronica should happen to call, you won't mention that I was hurt, will you?" "Oh, mother, what a splendid young fellow!" murmured Fanny with a deep-drawn breath, as he went down the garden path with head erect and a graceful swing.

Mrs. Mason pursed her lips. "Rather free and easy for his station in life, I fancy," she responded. "I reckon Mr. Geoffrey will make short work of him. Come and help me with those collars, Fanny; there's no end to do."

Ralph walked quickly across the moor, and following Veronica's instructions, reached the keeper's hut in the clearing; but the door was closed, and no response came to his knocking; so he seated himself on a rough bench outside and, refilling his pipe, waited.

It had been a morning of adventure—and, to the young, adventure is the most precious thing in life. He thought of the great earl, and the pretty girl with the fair hair and weak mouth and chin; but he thought more of the haughty beauty who had been too proud to accept his glance of gratitude. In a sense, her beauty, her youth, the curve of her proudly turned lips, haunted him; and he almost started when footsteps roused him from his reverie, and a grey-haired but upright old man, with a gun over his shoulder and a couple of dogs at his heels, came from amongst the trees and stood before him, eyeing him with stern interrogation.

Ralph rose and nodded.

"Mr. Burchett?" he said, with his frank smile.

"My name's Burchett," responded the head keeper, grimly. "What's your business with me?"

The response was so uninviting, not to say repellent, that most men would have been daunted; but the young man's smile did not falter, and he met the stern frown with a serene cheerfulness.

"I want a berth—gamekeeper. I met Lord Lynton; he sent me to you."

Geoffrey Burchett eyed the young man critically.

"Oh, he did, did he?" he said, grimly. "Come inside."

They entered the living-room of the hut; it was sparsely but comfortably

furnished, with heads of deer and antlers for ornament; a rack full of guns and another as full of fishing-rods the most conspicuous objects. Geoffrey Burchett motioned the young man to one of the hard rush chairs.

"What's your name and where do you come from?"

Ralph supplied the information for the third time that morning.

"Australia! What do you know about gamekeeping?" queried Geoffrey Burchett, grimly.

Ralph leaned back in his chair with the ease which had astonished the Masons.

"Well, not much," he said; "but I think I know what's wanted, and I'm tolerably quick at learning. If you require a man to take care of the game, to ward off poachers to track a man down—Were you ever in Australia, Mr. Burchett?"

The keeper frowned at him under thick, grey brows.

"No," he replied.

"Ah, well, then, you don't know what scouting means! If that's any use in gamekeeping I'm fairly good at it. I can track a man's footsteps across plains of grass or sandy heath, through anything but water, for—a hundred miles—"

"Not much use to me," he said, curtly, breaking in upon the other's remarks. "Can you shoot?"

"Well, a bit. Got a Winchester here," asked Ralph. He went to the gun-rack. "Ah, yes, here's one! Come outside."

He loaded the rifle and led the way outside—a breach of etiquette—and pointed to a beech a long distance from the hut. "Do you see that knot half way up it? You try it first."

Geoffrey Burchett, who was proud of his shooting, took the proffered Winchester, aided, and fired. When the smoke had cleared away, Ralph said:

"Misses! It's a small mark, and you were a trifle too high. Allow me."

He took the rifle, brought it to his shoulder sharply, and, as it seemed, without taking careful aim, fired. The bullet struck the knot in the tree, plumb.

Geoffrey Burchett looked at him out of the corner of his fierce eyes with reluctant admiration.

"You can shoot," he said, laconically. "Where's your testimonials?"

Ralph took out an old pocket-book and extracted a letter.

"It's from a man, the overseer of a mine in Wally-Wally," he said in explanation.

Geoffrey Burchett read the letter. "Humph! Honest, reliable. Has had charge of men at mine. Can be recommended. Why did you leave Australia—why did you come to England?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "Wanted a change. Wanted to see the old country which all of us, drunk or sober, call 'Home.'"

Geoffrey Burchett still seemed to hesitate. "Anybody here in England know you?" he asked.

"Nary a soul!" replied Ralph. "If you don't take me, I shall go on."

Geoffrey nodded towards the beech. "Do that again," he said curtly. Ralph raised the rifle, and once more the bullet struck the mark. Geoffrey nodded.

"Come inside. Sit down," he said. Ralph resumed his seat, and waited with cheerful patience while Geoffrey Burchett paced up and down frowning thoughtfully.

"I'm running a risk," he said at last, gruffly. "I know nothing about you, young man. That letter may be forged—"

Ralph laughed. "I never thought of that. Oh, it's genuine enough; and, forgive me, but I don't see much risk. I should say you were quite capable of taking care of your property and—yourself."

"I am," said Burchett, grimly. "I'll

try you. I'll have to teach you your work. I'll know in a week if you'll suit me. It's hard work; the covers are well preserved, and poaching's plenty, or would be if we suffered it. You can't call an hour of the day, or the night either, for that matter, your own."

Ralph nodded. "I'm not afraid of work," he said, cheerfully. "And I say 'done.' By the way," as he rose, "perhaps you can tell me where I could lodge? I've got a little money to go on with."

Burchett hesitated for a moment. "There's no place that I know of. You'd better live here: there's another room; at any rate, till you've time to look round."

"You're very kind," said Ralph in his frank, bright way. Burchett emitted a kind of growl as if he rather resented the assertion.

"Where's your things?"

"At the Halsary station. It's only a bag, I'll go and fetch it."

He rose slowly, and as he stood with his face towards the window, Burchett looked up at him with a close but frowning regard.

"Australia," he said, grudgingly. "You look English."

"Oh, I am—rather!" said Ralph, with a laugh.

"You'd better walk round with me," said Burchett. "Take a gun. The carrier can bring your bag. Mind that dog—she bites," he added as they went out, and the dogs, which had been waiting outside, rose from their haunches with suspicious and angry growls.

"Which? This one?" said Ralph, and he sopped and laid his hand on the nozzle of the Irish terrier. She glared up at him for a moment with every hair on end like a wire; then gradually her anger died away, her brown eyes softened, and she thrust out her warm tongue and licked his hand.

Burchett's stern eyes narrowed to slits. "Foolhardy!" he said, curtly.

"Not a bit," retorted Ralph, cheerfully. "Not one dog in a thousand will bite if you cover his nozzle. Besides I can take risk sometimes—like you, Mr. Burchett!" he added, with a laugh.

CHAPTER IV.

That night, about eleven o'clock, the House of Commons, which had been empty a few minutes before, began to fill rapidly, and the jaded and weary members came pouring in from the lobbies, the smoking-room, and the library; for the word had run round, "Talbot Denby is up!" and they were all eager to hear him.

He stood erect, a tall, thin young man with a face almost pallid, contrasting vividly with his smooth black hair and almost black eyes. He was clean-shaven, so that the play of his thin lips could be plainly seen. It was a striking face, one of those faces which once seen are never forgotten; but the impression it created was not altogether a favourable one. You were forced to admit that the countenance was handsome, the eyes brilliant and full of certain power; but they were hard and cold and denoted intellect unhampered by a heart. Talbot Denby's voice matched his face. It was clear and cold and rang metallic. It never rose beyond a certain low tone; but every word, every inflection, reached to the farthest corner of the hot and ill-ventilated chamber in which the collected wisdom of the country makes our laws for us.

His speech was of that kind which delights the House; not eloquent in the ordinary sense of the word, but unflinching in its delivery, admirable in its choice of words, and full of a biting sarcasm, of a polished invective which, to-night, was pouring like a burning lava over the sinking party to which he nominally belonged.

For though Mr. Talbot Denby had been returned for Lyne in the Tory interest, he was too clever not to be aware that your rising politician gains a great deal more by worrying his party than by slavish obedience to its whip. To-night he was speaking on a bill which the government had introduced in haste, and of which they were likely to repent at leisure.

It was clumsily drawn, was full of pitfalls, and delightfully open to adverse criticism; and Mr. Talbot Denby as he stood with one hand resting lightly on the bench in front of him, and the other thrust half into his pocket, was dissecting it with the cold, deliberate incisiveness of a surgeon revealing a human deformity. The opposition were chuckling and cheering and exchanging delighted glances, while his own party, inwardly squirming, tried to look scornful or unconcerned; but Talbot Denby went on his vitriolic way unrelayed by the cheers, undaunted by the murmurs which now and again reached him from the benches behind him.

"Denby's in fine form to-night," said Mr. Boucher, the well-known independent member, to his crosby, Mr. Welch, as they sat in their usual places below the gangway and listened to the cold, metallic voice.

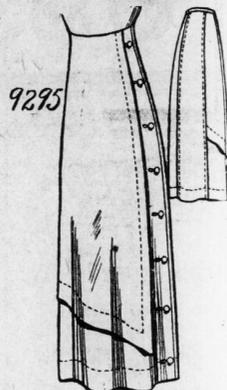
Welch nodded. (To be continued.)

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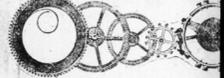
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