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## The Earl's Son;

OR

## TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER VII.

Ralph set down the rod and, taking up the stick, broke it across his knee and tossed the pieces over his shoulder.

"Some men can't be trusted with even a stick," he said, coolly. "You're one of them, sir. Take my advice and get into the habit of walking without one. Why," he smiled grimly, "do you know that where I come from the quickest and easiest way of losing your life is to threaten another man with a blow. Lucky for you I'm rather a decent-tempered chap, or I should have served you as I served your stick."

Talbot was well-nigh incapable of speech, and stood glowering at his opponent in silence for a moment. Then he said in a low, almost inarticulate voice:

"You will leave this place at once—at once, do you hear? I will see that your wages are paid—though you don't deserve them; and if I find you here after another hour I will have you kicked off the estate."

Ralph appeared to consider the proposition carefully.

"The lord's nephew, I think you

said?" he enquired; "his heir, I suppose. But you're not master yet, I take it? Lord Lynborough's my boss, as we say in Australia. Do you know, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Denby, I'll wait until I get notice from him or Mr. Burchett. I'll risk the kicking."

Talbot Denby uttered an oath under his breath.

"You must be out of your mind," he said, as if he found it hard to credit such insolence. "What is your name?"

"Ralph Farrington," said Ralph. "at your service—no, not at your service! I'd rather starve first! Have you any more questions to ask me?"

Talbot Denby's lips writhed.

"Mad!" he said, as if to himself. Then aloud: "Take my warning, my man, and do not let me see you, or hear of you again. I shall inform Lord Lynborough of your insolent conduct."

Ralph seemed to consider for a moment.

"Do you think you will?" he asked almost pleasantly. "From what I saw of his lordship, and what I've heard, I should imagine him to be rather a well, manly old gentleman. Won't he be a little suspicious when he hears that his nephew allowed his walking stick to be taken from him and broken?"

Talbot's eyes flashed and flew over the tall and slim but muscular frame.

"Yes; we're about the same height and weight," remarked Ralph, as if

he had read Mr. Talbot Denby's thoughts. "If you'd like to fight it out, we'll step behind the hill there—Hush!" He lowered his voice warningly and drew a little closer to Talbot. "We are being watched—ladies! Yes, this is the way to put on a fly. He pretended to show Talbot the one he had just put on. "Good fly, isn't it? Ah, they've gone! Better go now. Mr. Denby. Any time you'd like to take me on I shall be delighted to oblige you. You'll find me at Burchett's or somewhere about the place. Good-morning!"

Talbot stood glaring at him with clenched teeth for a full minute—Ralph having resumed his fishing as if nothing had happened—then turned and walked away.

Now, as Veronica had gone up the bank, offended pride glowing in her eyes—brought there by Talbot's almost insolent question—and a strange wild tumult raging in her heart—caused by the touch of Ralph's lips—a girl darted from behind a clump of trees and ran to her with hands clasped and her fair, rather weak face all amove with fear.

"Fanny!" exclaimed Veronica, in a father displeased voice.

Fanny Mason panted for breath and wringing her hands, looked from Veronica to the stream.

"Oh, Miss Veronica—they're—I'm afraid they're going to fight!"

Veronica turned in time to see Talbot raise his stick. Fanny uttered a low cry and was about to run down to the two men; but Veronica grasped her arm and held her, murmuring in a tone of command:

"Be silent!"

Fanny, gasping and trembling, of course obeyed, and the two girls, so nearly alike in age, so totally different in station and character, stood and looked on at the little scene below. Veronica did not gasp or tremble, but the clear, healthy pallor of her lovely face grew of a warmer tint; and as she saw the outcome of the struggle, her eyes flashed and a long breath came from her parted lips; she was fighting with the sense of triumph which made her heart grow warm and every vein throbb.

Was it not the women who thronged the Coliseum in the days of old when men fought in the arena for their lives? There are still women who gentle though they may be, love a fight—so long as it stops short of bloodshed.

"Come!" she said to Fanny, almost swinging her round and actually drawing her away. "Why are you so frightened?"

Fanny began to whimper shamefacedly.

"I'm—I'm always frightened when there's fighting, Miss Veronica," she said, "and—I saw they were going to quarrel by the way Mr. Talbot spoke to you and walked up to Mr. Ralph."

"Oh! so you were behind the trees—watching?" said Veronica.

The girl shrank from the scornful gaze of the clear, violet eyes.

"Not—not watching, miss," she faltered. "I happened to be in the wood and—I like to see Mr. Ralph fishing, he's so—so—"

"Skillful!" suggested Veronica, with a little smile of scorn. "You know him very well, I suppose?" she added, indifferently, but with a shame that began to creep into the place of the triumph that only a moment or two had filled her heart. There was another girl who was "interested" in Ralph Farrington. But that was natural and proper enough: the laundry maid and the gamekeeper were on a level; while she—

"Yes, miss," said Fanny, slyly avoiding Veronica's gaze. "He—he came to our cottage the first day he came, to bring back the puppy and get his wound dressed."

"His wound? Ah, yes!" breathed Veronica. "Come on. Why are you looking back?"

"To—to see if they are going to quarrel again, miss." Fanny breathed a sigh of relief. "No; Mr. Talbot's gone! I'm so glad! He—he looked so fierce. Not that he'd have hurt Mr. Ralph; he's so strong and— Wasn't it splendid the way he caught Mr. Talbot's arm and broke the stick! Oh, miss, I do beg your pardon! I'd forgot that Mr. Talbot is your ladyship's cousin—the people about the place could never understand why all the family had not titles—and that of course you'd rather be beat."

Veronica bit her lip. "There is no 'of course' about it, Fanny. I think they were both very foolish and both deserve to be beaten. I suppose Mr. Talbot thought that the young fellow was poaching; you see, he did not know he was the new gamekeeper."

"Yes, miss," said Fanny, doubtfully, and with an upward glance at the haughty face, she sighed. "Yes, miss: It—must have been that; for why should he want to quarrel with Mr. Ralph, him as is so quiet and honest spoken?"

"Why do you say 'Mr. Ralph'?" asked Veronica, with a touch of sharpness in her voice. "Why don't you call him 'Ralph Farrington'?"

Fanny hesitated for a moment, her weak mouth half open. "I—I don't know, miss. Mother and me always call him 'Mr.'; he's so like a gentleman. Mother says that even the gentlemen of the Court—oh, I beg your pardon, miss!—couldn't speak better or have nicer manners."

"I suppose he comes to your cottage very often?"

"Oh, yes, miss; that is, rather often. I—I see him passing of an evening when he's going his rounds and sometimes he comes in, and sometimes he just leans on the gate and talks in his pleasant way. You see, miss, he's quite a stranger, and he may be glad to have a chat; and he's friendly because mother saw to his wound—a nasty gash it was!" Fanny shuddered and closed her eyes so that she did not see the transient flushing of Veronica's face.

"Of course, very natural," she said, with an excessive indifference. "Perhaps, Fanny, it will be as well if you do not say anything of—of what we have seen this morning."

"Oh, no, miss, certainly not!" responded Fanny, eagerly; "and I only hope Mr. Ralph didn't see me—us; he wouldn't like to think as we'd been watching him. He's particular, I'm sure. Oh, I'm so glad they didn't fight! Aren't you, Miss Veronica?"

"Very," said Veronica, drily. "Now run home, Fanny. Oh, by the way, I want some old lace washed, and I should like to see you about it before I send it. Will you come up to me to-morrow morning?"

Veronica's eyes flashed and flew over the tall and slim but muscular frame.

"Yes; we're about the same height and weight," remarked Ralph, as if

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The girls had walked slowly, and Veronica found Talbot lounging beside the earl's bath chair, in which, wrapped in furs, he had been wheeled to the sunniest part of the terrace. As Veronica was passing them, her eyes fixed straight before her, she heard the earl say:

(To be Continued.)

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