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**The Snake
Scotched
—AND—
Justice Done.**

(Continued)
CHAPTER XXII.

Fanny Mason heard of Ralph's departure when she went down to the hut the next morning to "tidy up."

"Gone!" she cried, almost dropping her broom and staring at Burchett with pale, aghast face. "—I saw him last night with a bundle on his back; but I thought he was going to the town—I didn't think—" She turned her head away to hide her face. "Why whatever made him go, and so sudden, Mr. Burchett?"

"That's his business, not mine, nor yours," he replied, grimly. "When the last woman's dead curiosity will be buried with her. You're late this morning."

"I overstepped myself and mother was busy," said Fanny, sullenly. She was suffering badly, but from wounded pride rather than love; for it is not given to her kind to love deeply. "If I'd known he was going I'd have spoken to him, and perhaps—"

She tossed her head and bit her lip. "Nothing you could have said would have kept him back. He went on important business," said Burchett.

He was leaving the hut when Mr. Talbot Denby came through the clearing. He looked particularly well; the pallor and haggard expression had left his face, and there was a touch of colour in his pallid cheeks and his eyes were bright. Everything had gone well with him, and he was to hear yet further good news.

"Good-morning, Burchett," he said. "I just looked in to ask you how the birds were doing. I rather think we may have a shooting-party this season."

"Things are looking very well, sir," replied Burchett. "A shooting-party! I shall have to get an extra hand or two, and I've just lost one. Farrington's gone."

Talbot didn't start, but his face became like a mask.

"Indeed!" he said. "Disappointed, I suppose? Well, I should think he was a good riddance. Where has he gone? Another situation?"

"No, sir. I think he's making for Australia, where he came from."

Talbot's heart leapt with relief and satisfaction. Certainly his lucky star was in the ascendant, and Fate seemed to be removing, with one sweep of the hand, every obstacle in his path.

Burchett was passing on, but paused. "Perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell Miss Veronica that I'll send up the roots of the wall flowers she asked me for, sir," he said. "I can move 'em now."

Veronica had some time ago admired some gentian and wild orchids which she had seen near the hut. Talbot nodded.

"You need not trouble. Miss Veronica has left the Court," he said, casually. "She has gone to pay some visits, and will be away some time."

Burchett touched his cap and walked away, and Talbot was following, when Fanny, who had been listening, came to the door. She looked very pretty, with the sunlight falling on her face and golden hair; her cheeks were flushed with the emotion which had been evoked by the tidings of Ralph's departure, and Talbot, in this moment of his elation, was in the humor to admire her. Usually he was quite unimpressible.

"Good-morning," he said, ingratiatingly. "You are Fanny Mason, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," assented Fanny, dropping a courtesy and blushing with pleasure at the notice of the great Mr. Talbot.

"Ah, yes, I remember! Of course! I remember you when you were quite a little girl, you were pretty even then. You and I used to play together when we were children. I haven't seen very much of you lately, but that is because I am so seldom at the Court. How hot it is! I think I will come in and rest for a little while."

He went into the hut and sat down, and continued to talk to her as she worked. The relief from the awful strain was so great that he felt delighted with himself, with the girl, with the very air he breathed. Presently he asked for some water; but Fanny brought him a glass of milk, and, as he took it from her hand, he looked up at her with a smile that set poor, weak Fanny's heart in a flutter. And the heart, sore with Ralph's desertion, was, so to speak, on the rebound; it was not difficult for Talbot Denby to catch it.

"You're too pretty and—and clever a girl to waste your sweetness on the desert air of Lynne, Fanny," he said. "You ought to be in London. You would see something of life then; you are buried alive down here amongst a set of yokels and chawbacons. You've never been to London, I suppose?"

At the moment he had no definite object in view, and the desire to flirt

with the girl was born of his mood, of his sudden exaltation; but Fanny's downcast looks and blushes flattered him.

"Oh, no, no!" she said, timidly. "But I've heard of it; and, oh, how I should like to go!"

"Well, we must see about it," he said. "I will try and find a place for you. I think I know a lady who would take you."

Fanny blushed still more deeply and her pretty face was alight with the pleasurable emotions that chased over it.

"Oh, if you would, sir!" she breathed. "I'm so tired of this place! It isn't life, as you say, sir—"

"And you ought to see life," he put in, smoothly; really with her complexion of milk and roses and her foolish childish eyes she was very pretty! "I'll see what I can do. But I think I wouldn't say anything about it, Fanny, in case it came to nothing. I daresay we shall meet again. Let me see, you live in the cottage on the hill? There's a lane behind it, I remember. Now, suppose you meet me there some evening; shall we say to-morrow, after dinner?"

Fanny nodded eagerly. To meet the great Mr. Talbot of the Court, and secretly! The honour of it nearly turned her weak little brain.

"Oh, I'm so grateful; it's so kind of you, sir!" she murmured, with suppressed excitement. "I can't thank you, sir!"

"Oh, yes, you can!" he said, with a smile. "There are better ways of expressing one's thanks than by words. Fanny, don't you know one of them? Let me teach you."

He put his arm round her and, raising her face, looked down at her with a smile and kissed her.

"Oh, I forgot!" he said, in a low voice. "It was you who should have done that, wasn't it?"

She hung her head for a moment, then raised it slowly and kissed him.

Mr. Talbot left the hut with the smile still on his face. The little flirtation with Fanny had made his heart still lighter. After all, there were other ways of amusing oneself than at the gaming-table. And she really was very pretty and tempting; not an icicle of a woman, like Veronica, for instance. For a moment or two he asked himself why she had gone—had her disappearance anything to do with Ralph Farrington's? The question drove the smile from his face and drew his dark brows together; but he thrust it from him. It was sufficient for him she had gone and left the field clear for him.

As for Fanny, Mr. Talbot's "kindness" had soothed the wound inflicted on her vanity by Ralph's departure. She could almost think of him contemptuously, for what was a game-keeper compared to Mr. Talbot of the Court! And Mr. Talbot had kissed her, whereas Ralph had actually refused her proffered lips.

She met Mr. Talbot in the lane the next evening and for several following evenings, for he lingered at the Court, though the whip of his party sent him the usual imperative notices from the House of Commons.

A week later Fanny showed her mother a letter she had received from a lady in London, a lady in St. John's Wood, who required a servant. Mrs. Mason was opposed to Fanny's accepting the offer, but Fanny overrode her mother's opposition and one morning she started for her "situation."

Mr. Talbot had left the Court the preceding night.

On the following evening, a little later, he was in his place at the House and spoke in support of a bill introduced by his party, spoke with more than his usual force and eloquence. Once only did the low, clear, level voice pause and the impassive face change. The pause was only for a moment, but in that short space of

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time the House, crowded with members eager to hear Denby speaking on his side, saw a strange and subtle expression in the mask-like face. It seemed to grow set and rigid, the dark eyes were fixed on the opposite wall as if the speaker had suddenly seen something terrible, awe-inspiring; the faint colour caused by the heat and excitement of debate gave place to a death-like pallor; and the spectators almost held their breath as they looked at him.

But, whatever the emotion might have been, it passed in an instant; the face again grew impassive, the clear, level voice flowed on in fluent, rhythmic sentences which carried conviction with them.

The two old members, Mr. Welch and Mr. Boucher, had exchanged glances, as the change had come over Mr. Talbot Denby's face, and when the speech was over and the government side of the House was cheering wildly, Mr. Boucher whispered:

"What was the matter with Denby just now?"

Mr. Welch shook his head.

"I don't know. A splendid speech. It will help them to carry the bill. But he looked—bad, just then, didn't he? I've not forgotten what you said about him some time ago; and to-night it seemed to me that you were right. That man has something on his mind or conscience—"

(To be continued.)

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