



The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Perhaps not one in a million would have so much to live for, Sir Thomas," remarked Ralph, with a grave smile.

"Humph!" said Sir Thomas, in his curt way. "That's it, is it? Well, you will have a good nurse for a wife, as well as one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen." Sir Thomas was a keen admirer of the fair sex. "If that's what you've got to live for, I'm not surprised at your making a fight for it. I'm told that you are to have the society's medal."

"Oh, good Lord, no!" exclaimed Ralph, with dismay. "Let 'em give it to the firemen—they must have done a heap more than I did: I saw them while I was perched up there! Don't—don't, for Heaven's sake, let them bother about me!"

"Who cares a blow about you?" retorted Sir Thomas. "It's those belonging to you, my dear fellow. Give the medal to that sweet young creature: she'll wear it for you, and next her heart, I expect. And now the order of the day is: chops and steaks port and stout, and—Oh, you'll do all right! You're a lucky young dog! Good-bye! She's not come again; but I tell you what, I'll turn up at your wedding, if you'll ask me, for medals or no medals, I like a brave man!"

In a few days Ralph was able to leave his bed. He was as weak as a woman and as shaky as a piece of cheap furniture, much to his surprise and annoyance; but his room was transformed to a paradise by the love of the friends who brightened it for him. To say nothing of Veronica, whose presence filled it with joy, Ada and Mr. Saintsbury were constant visitors, and Martha, whose admiration for Ralph and amiable envy of Veronica were comically obvious, still took her share in the nursing.

Veronica would bring her work and sit beside him, with Ada on a stool at her feet, her head resting against her knee, and Mr. Saintsbury on the other side of the fire—it was well into autumn by now, and somewhat chilly—all their thoughts concentrated on the man who had risked his life—and so nearly lost it—for the sake of the child.

Mr. Saintsbury often sat and smoked in a rambling silence. It had fallen on him the day Ralph's bandages had been removed and Mr. Saintsbury had been able, for the first time, to see his face distinctly. He had looked at Ralph with an air of surprise and bewilderment, as if he were trying to recall something

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to his memory; and one afternoon, when he and Ralph happened to be alone—Veronica and Ada had gone out to buy some of the chops and steaks ordered by the doctor—Mr. Saintsbury began in a hesitating way to speak of the future which Ralph was quietly and remorsefully worrying about.

"You know I'm a rolling-stone, Farrington," he said, "and rolling-stones, as you are aware, do not gather much moss."

"But they have a good time generally," put in Ralph, with a smile.

"That's so," nodded Mr. Saintsbury, as he filled his pipe. "Anyway they get some experience. And that's valuable. Now I chanced to pick up a little moss. I've got a ranch out Ballarat way; it's not a very large affair; but it would give us all a living; I mean you and Miss Veronica, and Ada and me, to say nothing of Martha. The question is whether you would care for it—Oh, Lord, if I'd half the money I've wasted I could make a rich man of you!" he broke off with a groan.

"That's all right," said Ralph. "But you mustn't worry about me. I can go out and rough it, and try to make a fortune, and—then come back for Veronica."

Mr. Saintsbury smiled and shook his head.

"Don't deceive yourself, young man. If I know Miss Veronica, she won't lose sight of you again. No, we must all go together, for Ada—well, Ada wouldn't consent to part with you, and I—It seems to me that in addition to saving lives from fire, you have a peculiarly taking way with you, Ralph. Even if I did not owe my Ada to you, I should be loth to lose you. No, we'll all go over together. I know the game, and you, too, know it."

He stopped abruptly and glanced at Ralph with a reflective frown.

"By the way, what was the name of the place you lived in?"

"I have been in several parts of Australia," said Ralph. He hesitated a moment. "My mother and I had reason to shift our quarters pretty frequently. Her second husband was—a bad lot, and we tried to keep clear of him. She was always afraid that he would find us—he deserted her when I was a child—and she'd take fright now and again and insist upon our moving. He never did find us, I'm thankful to say."

Mr. Saintsbury nodded.

"What was your mother's name, I mean the name of her second husband?" he asked in a low voice.

Ralph smiled bitterly.

"I scarcely know," he said. "As far back as I can remember she used to change her name for fear that he might trace her if she went by the name he bore when she married him. I say when she married him, because he had as many aliases as an habitual criminal."

He spoke so bitterly, with such reluctance, that Mr. Saintsbury forbore asking further questions; but, as he puffed at his pipe he glanced now and again at Ralph with the same uneasy and puzzled air.

That evening they all sat round the fire, and Mr. Saintsbury enlarged upon his ranching plan. Veronica's face was suffused with quiet joy and her eyes stole with bashful stealthiness under their long, dark lashes to Ralph's grave face.

"It is a dream of an earthly paradise!" she whispered.

"You'll be married before you go, of course," said Mr. Saintsbury, whereupon the blush became scarlet and her head drooped still lower over her work. "There's no reason why you shouldn't be; in fact, it would be better."

Her hand trembled so that the needle would not go into the proper place, but ran into her finger instead.

"Of course, we shan't make a fortune; but we ought to do very well and be very happy, eh, Ada? Eh, Miss Veronica?"

"Very happy, like the people in Big Man's fairy stories," said Ada, with tremendous gravity.

Veronica said nothing, but her hand stole out, as stealthily as her glances had done, and sought and found Ralph's, which closed on it with a passionate pressure.

Then, to hide the confusion which such a blissful prospect caused her, she hurried herself into the conversa-

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tion, and, Martha coming in at the moment, they were soon all talking together, making plans for the life of freedom and happiness promised them in that ranch in Australia, which seemed to be the only place of moss Mr. Saintsbury had managed to retain through all his rolling.

But though man disposes, Providence disposes.

While they were talking and laughing hopefully and happily, there came a knock at the door.

"That is the man with Ralph's portrait," said Veronica.

"It's ridiculous, buying port for me!" he said, indignantly. "Why, anyone would think I was an invalid! And I walked quite a couple of miles to-day!"

"First rate!" remarked Mr. Saintsbury, approvingly. "But we'd better take it in, hadn't we? Come in!"

The door opened; but it was not the port. A tall, grave-faced man entered. He was dressed in a dark tux suit which, ordinary as it was, seemed to smack of an official uniform, and he looked round the room and from one person to another with a quick and comprehensive glance which seemed to take everything and everyone in.

"Mr. Ralph Farrington?" he said, quietly, but in a tone that seemed to defy denial.

"I am Ralph Farrington," said Ralph, with surprise, as Veronica's hand slid from his and he rose from his chair.

CHAPTER XXV.

The earl was sitting in the library, his great chair drawn close to the fire; his head was bowed, his thin hands clasped the arms of the chair, and his whole attitude was one of melancholy. Though he would not have admitted it to himself, Veronica's absence was weighing upon him; the solitude of the vast house, the loss of her beautiful presence, her sweet, musical voice, were almost unendurable. He rarely went out, and spent nearly all the day sitting thus, gazing at the fire with heavy brow and brooding eyes.

With Veronica had gone the one gleam of brightness in the life made sombre by how many dark memories!

And it was not only of Veronica that he sat and thought gloomily; for, much to his surprise and annoyance, he could not dismiss Ralph Farrington from his mind. There had been something in the young fellow's personality which had left an impression on the mighty earl, and every time Lord Lynborough had seen him he had been troubled by a vague resurrection of the past, by the memories which he had deemed buried for ever.

As he sat this afternoon listening to the wind in the trees and wondering what had become of Veronica—what had become of Ralph—the door opened and the butler entered.

"Mr. Whetstone, my lord," he said, gravely. "Can he see your lordship?"

"No," said the earl, grimly. "Ask him to write."

"Mr. Whetstone bade me say that it was important business."

"Then why didn't you say Mr. Whetstone insists upon seeing me?" said the earl, with a snarl. "Show him in."

As Mr. Whetstone came in the earl shifted in his chair uneasily and glanced at him under bent brows. He rarely saw Whetstone, and when he was compelled to do so, always made the interview as short as possible; it almost seemed as if the presence of the prematurely broken and white-haired man was an embarrassment to the earl. Whetstone stood with his

hand on the table, and Lord Lynborough saw that he was much agitated; the man's thin voice shook as he said: "I am sorry to trouble your lordship, but—something terrible has happened, and the responsibility is too great for me alone."

The earl glowered at him.

"One of the roofs of those cottages you are always worrying me about fallen in, I suppose," he said.

Sydney Whetstone ignored the heartless sarcasm.

"Burchett—Burchett," he went on, tremulously, "was clearing away some faggots in the western wood this morning—and he made a discovery."

"Has he found a gold mine?" said the earl. "Nothing half so useful, I'll be sworn; some mare's nest with which you think it necessary to trouble me."

"He found a grave, my lord," said Whetstone, solemnly.

The earl peered at him grimly.

"A recent grave in which the body of a man had been buried. We think—"

"—we fear, there has been foul play. Burchett sent for me, and I thought it better to come at once to your lordship."

The earl's usual calmness did not desert him. He frowned at the fire for a moment, then he said:

"Will you order a carriage, Whetstone? I will go with you. Please tell them to send Welford with my outdoor things."

(To be Continued.)

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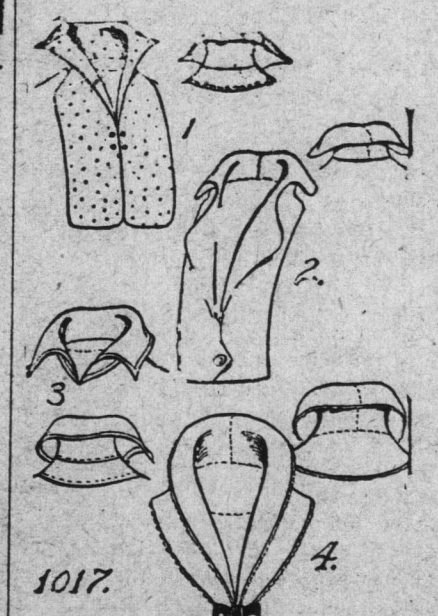
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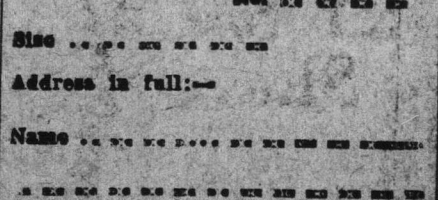
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