



The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER VI.

The earl's perfect set of white teeth were revealed in a rather ghastly smile.

"By gad, I should think they were glad to be rid of you!" he said, in his thin, metallic voice. "Judging by that speech of yours the other night, I should imagine your party would be better pleased with your absence than your company."

Denby smiled mirthlessly. "One must speak the truth sometimes, sir," he responded.

"Must one? I daresay; though I thought politicians were never guilty of such banality. But no doubt you are right, and things are changed since I sat in the Bauble Shop."

"Dinner is served, miss," announced the butler, solemnly.

"Give Veronica your arm," said the earl. "I will crawl in at my own pace."

They went in and the meal proceeded; a stately and apparently interminable one of innumerable courses, of which the earl chose one or two of cutlets and plainly boiled potatoes. Mr. Talbot Denby, though he accepted plate after plate, only made a pretence of eating them, and Veronica was the only one of the three who did fair justice to the famous chef's efforts.

She sat silent for the greater part of the hour and a quarter, listening to the earl and Talbot at times, but alas! and alas! for her pride!—most thinking of Ralph Farrington, and wondering whether he was disappointed and angry—no, that would be too absurd; a gamekeeper angry!—because she had broken her promise.

The two men talked "society" and politics. Now, you cannot talk "soci-

ety" without talking scandal, and every now and then the earl glanced under his brows at the girl's beautiful face; but he need not have feared: to the pure all things are pure, and, besides, Veronica's mind was otherwise employed; she was thinking, as has been said, of the strange young man who apparently found it so difficult to remember the difference in station between a gamekeeper and the chateaine of Lynne Court.

The noiseless servants at last placed the dessert on the table, the butler reverently carried in a bottle of the famous and priceless Lynne port in its wicker cradle, and Veronica, with an almost audible sigh of relief, rose and went to the drawing-room.

"We shall not be long," Talbot Denby said in his low, clear voice as he opened the door for her. "Perhaps we shall be fortunate enough to persuade you to play for us."

Veronica nodded and smiled as she remembered the cold and condescending way in which he had dismissed her on his last visit.

"I will both play and sing for you," she said, graciously. "Dancing would be rather out of place, wouldn't it?"

Talbot went back to his place at the table. The earl had sunk lower in his chair, and regarded him with an upward glance of cynical anticipation.

"How much is it, Talbot?" he asked, in his thin, half-mocking voice.

Mr. Talbot Denby forced a smile and bit his thin lip.

"You always come to the point, sir," he said.

The earl passed his white, fleshless hand over his bloodless lips.

"Time is too valuable to the old to be wasted," he said. "I am, of course, aware that you wouldn't have honored us"—Talbot noted the "us"—"without an object. And the object is generally—money!"

Mr. Denby crossed his legs and smiled with an affection of ease.

"To be frank as yourself, sir—my balance at the bank is rather low," he said.

The earl toyed with his wine-glass.

"Yes? Let me see, I allow you five thousand a year. Not a meagre sum, Talbot—"

"No, sir, by no means; but you have no idea how the expenses of a man in my position run up—"

"Oh, yes, I have," retorted the earl, if any speech in so cold and impulsive a voice could be called a retort.

"You forget that I played the game myself: and on a much smaller sum.—wonder—what you do with your money? You do not keep an establishment. No, you are not that sort of man. I—excuse me—I sometimes wish you were. But it would interfere with your political career, I suppose. Yes, I wonder what you did with it? Pardon my curiosity! I admit that I have no right to express it.

My privilege is to supply the future Earl of Lynborough with sufficient money to enable him to live up to his position. How much do you want, Talbot? That is really the only question."

Talbot Denby inwardly writhed under the cold cynicism, the almost sardonic indifference.

"My expenses have been very heavy lately. I am afraid I shall have to ask you for a couple of thousand, sir."

"Certainly, certainly! Why not?" said the earl, with ominous cheerfulness. "I'll give you a cheque before you go. When is that? To-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes; I have to speak to-morrow night."

"Just so. Veronica shall make out the cheque in the morning. Oh, by the way, speaking of Veronica, Talbot, I ought to tell you that I made my will the other day and that I have left all my fortune, indeed, every penny I can leave her."

His eyes narrowed to points, rested like gimlets upon his nephew's face; but Talbot Denby did not move a muscle, though his face grew whiter than his wont, especially about the nostrils.



should not."

Talbot's lids almost covered his eyes; the organ he called his heart was thumping like an engine dragging at a weight too heavy for it, the room seemed to spin round. He had always counted on the earl's, so to speak, private fortune: and to be told suddenly that it was to go to the girl, this kind of superior housekeeper!

"You have every right to do what you please with the money, sir," he said at last, wondering whether he had succeeded in keeping the hate and disappointment which raged within him from revealing itself in his voice.

"Quite so, quite so," assented the earl. He was silent for a moment or two, his eyes peering, under the hand that supported his head, at the young man's face; but though no sound reached Talbot, the bloodless lips moved and the old man was saying to himself:

"Why not? He is, I suppose, no worse than the ordinary run of men. She would make a fine Countess of Lynborough. I don't like him: he is not worthy of her. But what man is worthy of any woman? Shall I suggest it? Scarcely necessary: he'll think of it swiftly enough, trust him!" he added with a grim smile, then aloud:

"Veronica has grown into a beautiful woman, don't you think, Talbot?"

Talbot shot a glance at the white, sphinx-like face.

"Into a very lovely one," he said, promptly and warmly. "I was startled when she came into the room this evening; I had not seen her for some time."

"She will be rather a good match," murmured the earl, musingly. "It is scarcely necessary to say that she is very much admired. Even without the fortune she would probably have made a good marriage."

"Most assuredly!" said Talbot, rising. "Shall I give you my arm into the drawing-room, sir?"

"Thanks, no. If you will please ring for my man, I will go to bed. Don't let me keep you from Veronica."

The hall door was open and Talbot went outside and paced up and down for a minute or two before entering the drawing-room. He was still staggering under the blow he had received: he, and only he knew how badly he wanted the money. Indeed, it was absolutely imperative that he should have it. The significance of the earl's encomiums of Veronica were not, of course, lost upon him. Yes; she was a beautiful woman: he hated marriage, would have put it off as long as possible; but—

He looked through the window into the drawing-room. Veronica was seated at the piano, but she was not playing, though one hand was still resting lightly on the keys; the other supported her chin, and she was looking before her as if she were lost in thought. She made a picture lovely enough to thrill any man; but Talbot Denby's cold heart beat with an emotion far different to that of admiration or love. He only saw the girl, the dependent, who had robbed him of his uncle's money. After a moment or two he forced the scowl from his face, and, with a smile, went in through the window.

"Will you play or sing for me, Veronica?" he said.

Veronica was faintly surprised at the softness, the friendliness of his tone. It did not occur to her that the earl had told Talbot that she was an heiress, and if it had she would not have deemed any man of Talbot's class so mean as to be influenced, so quickly influenced, by the fact.

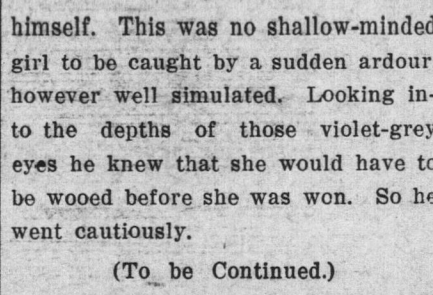
He leant against the piano as she sang for him, and expressed his gratitude in the same softened, ingratiating manner.

"Your voice has immensely improved," he said. "It was always sweet and clear, but you sing like an artist now—"

"I've had good lessons," she said, naturally pleased at his praise, though she did not like him. "Lord Lynborough has been very good to me."

"No wonder!" he said. "How could he—how could anyone, be otherwise?" He bent over towards her as he spoke, his black eyes resting on hers with an expression of admiration. But he saw, by the look of surprise that came into her eyes, that he was going too fast, and, with dexterous facility, he began to talk of the earl's health and the people on the estate. He must stop slowly and guardedly, he told himself. This was no shallow-minded girl to be caught by a sudden ardour, however well simulated. Looking into the depths of those violet-grey eyes he knew that she would have to be wooed before she was won. So he went cautiously.

(To be Continued.)



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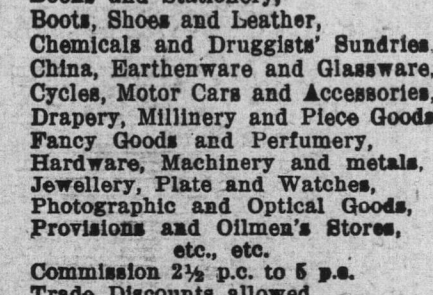
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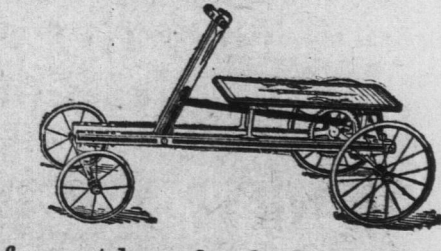
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