

# The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

(Continued)  
CHAPTER XXI.

"I cannot—I cannot!" she said to herself, between her clenched teeth. "I should die of shame, of the ignominy of such a life. Why, the old one would do better!"

She stopped, her heart suddenly arrested by a thought born of her words. Why not cast off this existence of dependence, of slavish luxury, and go back to the old life? "Better still, why not follow Ralph and join him? The idea sent the blood rushing through her veins and the light to her eyes, aching with unshed tears. The chill grey vista opened, and Hope shone like a star at the end of it. To find Ralph, to see him again!

She sprang out of bed and began to dress herself. In one of the wardrobes still hung the plain, ready-made serge costume in which she had come to the Court. She found it and put it on. Then she went to the Sherraton bureau and wrote a letter, and addressing it to the earl, laid it on the dressing-table, and beside it her jewelry case, in which she placed all the costly gems and trinkets which he had given her. She emptied her purse and counted the contents.

She had, fortunately, just drawn her quarterly allowance, and she had several pounds left from her last quarter's; so that she was fairly well supplied—better off, she thought, than Ralph! She pondered over the question as to whether she could retain the money; but as it was paid her as a kind of salary, she concluded that she could do so conscientiously. In a small bag she packed a few necessary articles, put on her plainest hat and jacket, and drawing a veil over her face, opened the door and listened.

Goodwin was moving in the next room; there was no other sound in the great house. With her bag in her hand she stole down the stairs, and noiselessly looked around the vast dim hall. She had been proud of it, proud of every inch of it, proud of every inch of the stately old house but that kind of pride had died. The place had assumed the likeness of a prison, a gilded, but a shameful one; and she left it without a pang.

The cool air met her and lent her fresh courage. She went down the broad steps and was crossing the lawn for the highroad when she remembered her horse. She loved the faithful devoted animal, and knew that it would fret after her. It would only take her a minute or two to say "Good-bye."

She went to the stables and to the loose box where Sally was luxuriously housed, and the mare pricked up its ears and "breathed" as she heard her mistress's footsteps. Veronica put her arm around the proudly arched head and lovingly stroked the satin nose. Sally nibbled playfully at her mistress's sleeve and Veronica drew the sleek head down and whispered a "Good-bye." "I'm sorry to leave you.

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Sally," she murmured; "but I am going to one who loves me better than even you do."

The thought gave a flip to her resolution, and she left the stable and walked boldly across the park towards the station. There was, as she knew, an early market train that morning; and when she ascended to the platform there were half a dozen or so farmers and farmer's wives, with their baskets covered by a snowy cloth, on their arms. They were far too well bred to show any surprise at the presence, at that early hour, of the young mistress of the Court, and Veronica nodded to them generally and spoke to one or two quite easily, as if it were not at all extraordinary for her to be travelling by so early a train.

Without thinking of the cost, she took a first-class carriage and, of course, had it to herself. Not until the train had started did she realize that she had left her life of luxury for ever, and that once more she had engaged in the old struggle for her daily bread. But no! for was she not going to join Ralph, going to help him in the struggle! And how different now very different a thing that was! She laughed softly and blushed as she thought of how he would look, what he would say when she found him, when she put her hands in his and said:

"I have followed you, Ralph, because I find that I cannot live without you. Please take me!"

Talbot rose as the dressing-bell rang. He had laid awake staring at the wall on which, as if they were painted by a relentless hand, had passed lurid pictures of the incidents in the wood. The face of the murdered man glared at him from that wall, the echo of his death-cry sounded in the thick of the orrery clock on the mantel-shelf.

He would like to have kept to his room, to have avoided, for a space, the eyes of his fellow-men; but he knew that any divergence from his usual habits might excite remark, and therefore he was dangerous; so he put on his dressing-gown and rang for Gibbon.

Gibbon came in, noiseless, respectful as usual, and just glanced momentarily at his master's white face.

"The bath is ready, sir." It was the ordinary formula, but he pronounced it more meekly, toneless than ever.

"Thanks," said Talbot. He looked round as Gibbon collected the evening things. "I'm afraid you will find my clothes and boots in rather a bad state, Gibbon. I got into a rough bit of the woods last night and stumbled. You may keep them for yourself and get me some new ones."

Gibbon eyed the still earth-stained clothes under his lids with a gleam of satisfaction.

"Thank you, sir," he said, gratefully. "Am I to go up to town this morning?"

"Oh! No, I don't know," replied Talbot. "Better stay, perhaps. I may go up myself some time to-day and may need you."

"Yes, sir," said Gibbon, with profound respect; and he carried off the clothes, and packed them, unbrushed and exactly as they were, in the bottom of his own box.

Talbot went down to breakfast. Veronica was not in the room.

"Miss Veronica not down yet?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied the butler. "Not yet. She may breakfast in her room. I'll send to enquire."

Talbot helped himself to the dish offered, and endeavoured to eat; but his throat felt so parched and sore that every morsel of food he tried to

swallow threatened to choke him. He drank half a cup of tea and made another effort; but presently he pushed his plate aside and began to open his letters.

While he was doing so Gibbon came into the room.

"His lordship would like to see you, sir," he said.

Talbot started and looked up at the man's pale, impassive face.

"Like to see—what is it—what—I mean, certainly, certainly!"

Gibbon, with respectfully bent head and lowered eyes, opened the door, and Talbot went up the stairs to the earl's room. The earl was sitting up in bed, an open letter in his hand.

"Good-morning, Talbot," he said in a dry voice. "I am sorry to disturb you at breakfast; but something has happened—"

"Something—something happened?" he echoed, hoarsely.

The earl eyed him with cold surprise.

"Yes, you seem—agitated. Do you know anything about it, may I ask?"

"I! How should I?" said Talbot, quickly and with an attempted dignity.

"I went to bed quite early last night—Gibbon could tell you the hour—no, I sent him to bed, I remember. I—What is it, sir?"

The earl's eyes were fixed on him with a cold scrutiny.

"It is not very important," he said, calmly. "It is only that Veronica has left the Court."

Talbot stared at him in a stupefied way, and yet with a kind of relief in his face.

"Veronica—left—the Court?"

"For God's sake don't repeat my words like a parrot!" said the earl, not angrily, but with icy contempt. "It is as I state. She has gone. She left this morning—or last night—I do not know; this morning, I should say. This letter, with her jewelry-case, presents I made her, were on the dressing-table."

He glanced at the letter.

"She expresses herself plainly. It is an admirably composed letter. I will not read it to you: I am a bad reader, and should not do it justice. To summarise it, she says that she is tired of a life of dependence, and has resigned it in favour of one of—think she says honest and self-respecting toil."

"Why did she go?" asked Talbot who had recovered his presence of mind by this time.

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"Does it matter? Women's reasons are, seldom of much importance. She has gone, and that is sufficient. Of course, I alter my will. It is only fair to you that, Veronica having left the Court—and me—you should have Wayneford and my fortune."

Talbot's face flushed and his eyes gleamed.

"I—I," he stammered.

"Oh, no thanks, please!" said the earl, coldly, as he sank on the pillows. "At least, if you feel grateful to anyone, let it be to Veronica, who has, so to speak, resigned them to you. May I ask you to be good enough to send my man to me?"

Talbot went outside, the blood surging through his veins. Surely his star was in the ascendant. That vile wretch Outway was—gone, Veronica dethroned, and he, Talbot, was master of the situation! He laughed noiselessly; but the laugh died on his lips as he met Gibbon on the stairs.

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"Send his lordship's man to him," he said.

And Gibbon, drawing close to the wall to allow his master to pass, lowered his eyes and murmured, as usual, quite usual:

"Yes, sir."

To be continued.

## On Second Thought.

BY JAY E. HOUSE.

The old-fashioned pitcher who was an "enigma" to the opposing club, what became of him?

If the members of the band have new uniforms they are always willing to cut the rate a little for the privilege of playing in public.

The Boy Scouts are to be put to work swatting flies. Which, in the penultimate analysis, means fewer Boy Scouts and about the same number of flies.

The man who goes to trial without an attorney not only saves money, but he gets the answer in half the time.

Every eighteen-year-old girl believes her parents to be her greatest drawback.

A farmer's idea of a good dog is one that will go down to the pasture in the evening and drive in the cows. A town man's idea of a good dog is one that is entered in the stud book.

After the people have learned the amount of life insurance carried by the deceased they ask when the funeral is going to be held.

The barber who expects to be "tipped" has done more to help the trade in safety razors than any other agency.

The man who attempts to cover it up is, generally speaking, the one who gets caught. Little attention is paid to the one who pulls it off without attempting to conceal it.



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