

# The Snake Scotched Justice Done.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Oh, perhaps not," she assented, easily, her heart beating with a mixture of grief and shame, grief at his going, shame that she should be bent on keeping him. "And have you decided where to go yet?"

"Yes, I've been thinking it out. I'll go back to Australia, to the ranching or the gold-digging; it does not matter. There one feels as if one were a man, one man's as good as another there."

"Here?" she echoed, invitingly, in the voice that could be so sweet and soft when she chose.

"Here it is different. One is no longer a man, but a servant—an inferior."

"Have you no masters and servants in Australia?" she asked.

"Yes; but the difference is not so great, the gulf not so wide and deep. We are both men, master and servant of the same flesh and blood; and the man may become master; but here—Ah, well! surely God used different clay for the gentleman and the man—"

"That is—nonsense," she said. "It is wicked!"

"I daresay," he said, with a grim smile; "but it's true. I have decided to go to-morrow."

"Have you told Burchett—her voice was very low, her eyes downcast—that you are going, and your reason?"

"No," he said. "There is time enough. He will be no worse of than before I came."

"And will you not tell me?" she asked in liquid tones. "I may be able to remove the obstacle to your remaining, to make it possible, pleasant for you to stay?"

Her eyes, violet of violet, were raised to his face; her heart was beating fast; she could see his broad chest heaving under the strain; but she had no mercy; she was not torturing herself.

"No," he replied, almost roughly. "You have no right to ask—"

"I know," she admitted, meekly, so that he felt like a brute; "but you have been very kind to me, and we women are not all ungrateful, proud, and contemptuous, as we may be thought. Fate has thrown us together—"

The shame dyed her face, then left it pale; but still, "Tell me!" she murmured.

Ralph was but human.

"You force me!" he said, hoarsely. "Why don't you let me go without—without any more words? I want to go with the memory of your good-will, your kindness, not with your scorn and contempt! But you won't let me. You won't be content till you've wrung my secret out of me. Take it then!"

He leant against the side of the arbour, his arms folded, his eyes fixed on her sternly, and yet with a reluctant tenderness which thrilled while it frightened her.

"I am going because I cannot remain here any longer—near you! I think of you all day, and dream of you all night! Yes, I, the gamekeeper; you, the great lady of the Court! I'm mad, of course! Why don't you laugh? I'm waiting for it! You want to hear the whole of it! You shall; then you can enjoy your laugh to the full. I'm so glad that I love you. That first day, on the moor, your face, your voice, rang to my heart; and they've stopped there. I can't throw them out. And since the day I saw you in my arms my madness has grown until it has taken possession of me. And you have been kind to me—God knows whether you were playing with me, whether you were only amusing yourself—"

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"Oh, it's hard, hard to go!" broke from him.

Her face dropped lower like a beautiful flower, until it was close to his. "Then—don't go!" she whispered.

For a moment doubt, incredulity, held him, then his soul leapt to the heights her whisper had opened to him, and springing to his feet he clasped her in his arms.

She did not repulse him. Her head drooped, as it had drooped the day he had carried her, and when his lips sought hers, she did not refuse them.

"I'm—I'm dreaming!" he said, hoarsely. "You can't—you can't—"

Her face lightened with a divine smile.

"Is it so pleasant a dream?" she murmured. "Let me share it for—I love you!"

He cried out inarticulately and pressed her to him; and she still yielded herself. Then she suddenly grew rigid, her eyes became fixed and fearful, and turning he saw the earl standing at the entrance to the arbour and regarding them with a face like that of one of the stone statues on the terrace.

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The crimson dyed her cheek, then left it paler than before, and her lips quivered. Every word he spoke, every intonation of the deep, musical voice awakened an echo in her heart.

"Perhaps so. It's likely. Even when you were telling me that you were once poor like myself, you may have been leading me on—No, no, won't say that! I can't believe it. You don't know, didn't guess—how should you? I, the gamekeeper, the servant, the serf—it's little better here in this cursed England—to be in love with my master's niece! It too fantastic to be dreamed of! And yet it's true! All the heart's gone out of me—and you have got it! I'd go to win a word from you! I'd go to the stake for just a smile from those beautiful lips—Oh, forgive me! I'm sorry, sorry! Why did you force me to speak?"

His face was white and wan, his chest heaved.

"You won't forgive me, I know that. And that will haunt me! If I could have got away without speaking, with out offending you, I should have had nothing but pleasant memories of you of your kindness to me, of your gracefulness—but now!"

He sighed heavily and made a despairing gesture with his hand.

"But it's too late for regrets. I've blurted out the truth, and—and I'll take my punishment like a man. Why don't you laugh?" he broke out desperately.

But there was no laughter in her heart, only a delicious joy which shamed while it downed her.

"I'm sorry!" at last broke tremulously from her lips.

"Sorry!" he echoed, penitently, his mood changing to bitter self-reproach. "Why should you be sorry? Why should the star be sorry it shines on a puddle? You can't help being what you are! God made you so. You are a queen of women, while I am just worthy to kneel at your feet and adore, and that's all."

There was a moment of silence when he raised his head which had sunk on his chest.

"I'll say good-bye. I don't expect you to forgive me—"

The note in his broken voice went straight to Veronica's heart and said, "Here is your master."

The woman's longing, craving to yield possessed her.

"Forgive!" she murmured, scarcely conscious that she had spoken.

He drew a step nearer, all his being tense and strained.

"You—you forgive me! You do not laugh!" he breathed. "Then—then I can go away happy—with pleasant memories—"

He was silent a moment, then he went on in a low voice. "I shan't be able to believe this. Will you give me some sign? That handkerchief; I've worn it next my heart—give it back to me—"

She took the handkerchief from her bosom and held it out to him, her eyes on his.

He came near and stretched out his hand for it. His hand touched hers and an electric thrill ran like lightning through both of them. Unconsciously he fell on his knees, his hand and hers still touching.

"Oh, it's hard, hard to go!" broke from him.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

There was something in the old man's grotesque face, in the rigid, colourless lips, the face in which the only living thing seemed the eyes, that gleamed like mica under the bent brows.

Veronica shrank back for a moment and caught her breath, but Ralph, after an instant of stupefaction, drew himself up and met the terrible eyes steadily.

The earl's glance passed from him and rested like a blight on Veronica. "I beg your pardon for this intrusion," he said in a voice that struck like ice and cut like a whip in its infinite scorn. "I do not usually play the eavesdropper; but I may, perhaps, be excused on this occasion, seeing that the lady who has disgraced herself shares my name, and is—or was—under my care and in my charge."

Ralph's face grew dark and his eyes flashed.

"Disgraced my lord—" broke from him.

"Silence!" interrupted the earl, as icily impassive as before. "I wish to speak to this lady. Leave us."

Ralph shook his head.

"No," he said. "My place is by her side, my lord—until she tells me to go."

Lord Lynborough bent his gaze on Veronica.

"Do you accept that?" he asked, sternly, but with a kind of contemptuous indifference.

Veronica held out her hand to Ralph, and he took it.

"I do, my lord," she said in a low voice. "The fault is mine. I accept all the responsibility—"

For the first time the earl smiled; a bitter smile.

"I agree," he said. "It is always the woman's fault, and she bears the consequences. That you encouraged this man I have no doubt. I had intended to address you alone; but, as you chose that he should remain—"

He shrugged his shoulders, paused a moment, then went on: "I gather from the words I heard to-day and yesterday—yes, I was here—that you have condescended to plight your troth to my gamekeeper?"

Veronica raised her head and regarded him steadily.

"Yes," she said, quietly, but as proudly as if Ralph had been her equal, her superior.

The earl inclined his head. "Thank you. You are candid. I gather, from my eavesdropping, that this—intrigue has been in progress for some time."

"If you mean that I have met him, have grown to love him, yes," replied Veronica. Each moment her courage was rising, the Denby spirit, was in her low, clear voice, in her star-like eyes, and Ralph's heart was throbbing with pride in her. "You do not know all; you do not know that he saved my life—"

"No, no!" Ralph murmured; but she went on steadily, though her lips trembled.

"That of all the men I have met, he is the bravest, the most kindly—"

"I will ask you to spare me your rhapsodies," broke in the earl, with a wave of his hand. "We will accept your infatuation as an established fact. I merely asked for curiosity, and, yes, a desire to ascertain if it were possible for me to stretch out a hand and save you from the degradation to which you are sinking."

Veronica's eyes flashed and the colour dyed her cheek.

"Degradation, my lord?"

"Do you wish to argue the point?" he said, deliberately. "You had best be seated, for it will take some few minutes."

She sank onto the seat, but motioned Ralph to stand near her. As he did so he turned to the earl.

"The fault is mine—I am answerable," he began, hoarsely, but the earl would not hear him.

"Be silent," he said, sternly. "I will address myself to you presently. Now, Veronica, we will take your infatuation for granted. I will do this the justice to admit that the blame rests with you. I have heard every word. I know that he has struggled to resist you—that he failed is a tribute to your charms—"

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She made to rise, stung by the cold, impassive voice, but sank down again with a gesture of forced patience.

"That you have exerted these charms to fascinate him, I can well believe; no man forgets his place so soon unless he has had great encouragement, provocation. The devil made woman to tempt, the man to yield—"

Ralph's face flamed and he opened his lips, but the earl motioned him to silence.

"You have tempted this man to the utmost—that he has yielded is no marvel. But have you considered the consequences? I think not. Women rarely do. Have you considered that if you carry this thing to its mad conclusion you leave the Court and my protection, you lose Waynford, all I have willed to you, that you relinquish your place in society, that you become an outcast and a pariah—"

Ralph uttered an explanation, but Veronica took his hand and pressed it, and a heavenly smile shone in her eyes.

"They are terrible words, my lord," she said; "but they do not frighten me. I shall not become an outcast by marrying an honest man. Her voice trembled with suppressed passion, then grew steady. "My lord, I am not ungrateful—"

He made a gesture of contemptuous repudiation.

"I do not forget all your kindness to me. I do not forget that you lifted me from a life of poverty to one of ease and luxury. You have been very good to me and—the tears rose to her eyes—"It hurts me that I should seem indifferent, ungrateful. But, oh, my lord, I—I cannot help it! I—I love him with all my heart and soul and the consequences be what they may. I can not give him up. All the luxury in the world would be of no use to me without him. The consequences? Yes, I accept them. I am ready to share his life, to return to the old poverty, the old hard life—"

sh, but it will be no longer hard if he will share it with me!"

Ralph's heart throbbled, and he marvelled how any man could look upon that lovely face, listen to the sweet voice unmoved; the earl was still like a stone as he bent his head with icy courtesy.

"And I thought you proud?" he said, as if with self-contempt.

"Proud!" she echoed, as if she were looking back on her past life, a self that had slipped from her for ever. "Yes, I suppose I was," a smile shone in her eyes. "Love casts out Pride, my lord," she added, softly.

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

(To be continued.)

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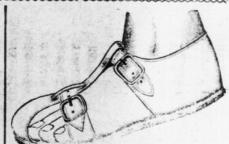
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