

# The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

CHAPTER XI.

(Continued.)

"She was a favorite with them all, and all of them were fond of talking to her and paying her compliments," said Burchett, gloomily.

"And the earl, did he help, too?" asked Ralph.

"He went abroad," replied Burchett. "He was a careless, flighty young man in those days, and a bit heartless."

Ralph looked up quickly, but Burchett shook his head.

"He was engaged to be married to one of Lord Saintsbury's daughters," he said, as if replying to Ralph's questioning glance.

"But he didn't marry her?"

"No; she died. The earl was sorry enough. Sorry for Sydney Whetstone as well as the girl, for when he came back to the Court—he was away some time—he sent for Sydney Whetstone, who was starving in London—for he was almost demented—and made him steward."

"And nothing was heard of his sweetheart?" asked Ralph.

Burchett shook his head.

"Nothing. She disappeared as completely as if she'd died that night."

"It is a strange story," said Ralph, musingly. "By the way, you haven't told me her name. What was it?"

"Janet Burchett," replied Burchett, almost inaudibly.

Ralph started. "She was—"

"My sister," said Burchett, hoarsely, his head drooping on his breast.

Ralph coloured and turned his eyes away.

"I'm—I'm very sorry," he murmured, with deep sympathy.

He understood now why Burchett had lived alone and was so grim and taciturn.

Burchett drew a long breath like a man in pain.

"My only sister," he said. "And I loved her. I don't know why I told you—Oh, yes; we were speaking of Sydney Whetstone."

"He was looking at a miniature when I went back," said Ralph, in a low voice.

Burchett sighed.

"Yes; he had it drawn from a photograph, and he wears it night and day."

He paused a moment or two, then he looked across at Ralph, who sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hand. "I've cause to warn you against the kindness of the gentry, lad," he said, gravely. "It's crueler than their coldness and their neglect. If Janet had been left here with me, and they'd never have taken notice of her, perhaps she'd have been Sydney Whetstone's wife, and happy! Instead of which—I should have left the place, but the countess begged me to stay, and I thought that perhaps Janet might come back and find me gone, and—so I stayed. But she never came back, and I'm thinking she's dead long ago! Yes; their kindness is more cruel than their coldness. Beware of it, lad! Miss Veroulca, there—"

Ralph started to his feet, his face ashen, and laughed harshly.

"What has Miss Gresham got to do

with me, or I with her?" he said, defiantly.

Burchett raised his thick brows.

"I saw her face as I stood in the door-way this morning; it was all smiles, and you sat there feeding on them, drinking them in—"

Ralph laughed with almost fierce repudiation.

"Why, she thinks of me as the dirt under her feet!" he exclaimed. "Do you take the west spinney to-night, or shall I?"

"I," said Burchett. "You stay in and rest; you've had a long day."

But Ralph shook his head and caught up his gun.

"I'm as fresh as paint," he said, resolutely. "I'll go. Hi, Bess! Hi, Towser!"

The dogs sprang to their feet, yelping delightedly, and Ralph, after pausing to fill his pipe, went out.

The dogs followed him out of the hut, then Bess stopped and ran, sniffing and whining, towards some bushes close at hand. Ralph called to her, but she came to heel obediently, but looking over her shoulder wistfully.

When Ralph and the dogs had been gone a few minutes, a man who had been crouching under the bushes which Bess had regarded so suspiciously rose and sneaked off in the opposite direction.

It was the tramp of the bandaged hand and the enquiring mind, and his evil face wore an expression which shifted from one of doubt to intense satisfaction.

"It's the same name," he muttered; "it's the same place! It must be all right. If it is, your fortune's made, Jimmy, my boy! Lord love me, if I ain't struck a streak of pure gold, and no end of it—no end of it!"

Ralph strode quickly through the wood. An another time he would have paid more heed to the disquietude of the dog; but at this moment he was so absorbed by conflicting emotions that his ordinary caution and alertness were in abeyance.

Burchett's warning rang in his ears. Notwithstanding his almost fierce repudiation of the suggestion that he was unduly interested in Miss Veroulca, he had an easy sense that Burchett was right. He tried to laugh at the idea, but the laugh was a failure, and so he fell to self-scorn and inwardly called himself a fool.

"Yes, that is what I am," he mused, bitterly. "The worst kind of fool and idiot. What have I got to do with the great lady of the Court? 'Been kind to me.' Of course! Why not? She'd be kind to a—to a dog, if she was in the mood. And she was in the mood to be kind to-day, as it was her whim to be cold and insolent yesterday—as it will be to-morrow. Perhaps she was feeling a little grateful because she was in pain and I'd come up the right moment to help her. How gentle she was when she told me that she had been poor, how soft her voice grew! One would never believe it could be so soft! And her face was quite altered, with all the pride gone out of it and her eyes like—like—what

are the lines?—like violets washed in dew—"

He stopped short and drew his hand across his brow with a gesture that was very nearly one of dismay.

"There I am again, notwithstanding Burchett's warning, thinking of her, picturing her! It seems as if I could not get her out of my mind! The whole place seems full of her—"

He glanced round him confusedly; then he frowned and swore under his breath. "Why shouldn't I think of her! Thought is free. The lowest of men can think if he likes. And what harm can it do her if I consider her to be the loveliest, the sweetest—Oh, great Heaven, what is the matter with me? Is there something in the air of this place which robs a fellow of his strength and grit? If so, the sooner I clear out the better. 'Will you move your chair so that I can see you, please?' How sweetly she said that; not proudly, as if she were addressing a servant, but an equal—"

He swore again and reddened with shame for his weakness. "There I am again! Oh, I'll have to go, that's evident!"

He laughed with self-contempt and walked on still more quickly, trying to concentrate his attention on his work.

He had nearly traversed the wood when the dog which, unnoticed by him, had been running hither and thither and whimpering, set up a sharp yap of warning and dashed in front of him; and he saw a man running smartly for the fence which divided the wood from the road.

Ralph set off after him, calling to him to stop; but the man gained the fence and half leapt, half stumbled, over it, as Ralph, clearing the rails almost at the same moment, seized him by the collar. The man struggled, but Ralph's grip was like that of a vice, and after a moment he stood still, swearing under his breath.

Ralph dragged him from under the shadow of the trees and saw that it was the man with the bandaged hand.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, rather glad to find someone he could be angry with beside himself.

"Do you know that you are trespassing?"

"Am I?" replied the man, with covert insolence. "Lor', now! I thought as how this was the high-road, mister!"

"You were in the woods a moment ago when I called to you," said Ralph, sternly.

"Was I? I think you're mistook," said the man, with a laugh. "The light ain't very good and I think it kind of deceived you. Don't you shake me, mister!"—Ralph had given him a nistler!—Ralph had given him a 'ake your 'and off me; you're spoiling my collar. D'ye 'ear? Let me go, or I'll have the law on you! This is the king's highway, and nobody hasn't the right to interfere with a man when 'e's done no 'arm on it. Leggo!"

Ralph forced him up against a tree, and, holding him, eyed him keenly.

"I believe you were poaching," he said, sternly.

The man grinned.

"Oh, you do, do you! Then you're wrong—Take your hand out of my collar; I'm 'alf choked. Poschin! Where's my gun? I ain't so much as a stick!"

"But you may have a snare," said Ralph; "and I'm going to search you."

The man laughed defiantly.

"Now, don't you be so uppish, young man," he said, with a mixture of defiance and cajolery. "I suppose a man can take a walk in your blasted

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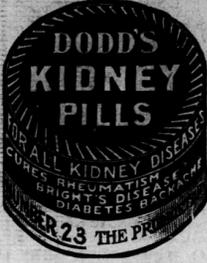
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"Turn out your pockets," said Ralph, who had grown cooler by this time. "If you refuse, I'll keep you here until the policeman comes along—it's about this time—and give you in charge as a suspicious character."

The man's evil face was twisted into a leer that was intended to be irritating.

(To be continued.)

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