



"NATIONAL HERO SERIES" NO. 2

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The Earl's Son; OR TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER VII.

"Oh, he's a kind of protegee of Veronica's. Don't like his manner?" "Discharge him?" My dear Talbot, if we discharged every servant whose manner we didn't like we should be left to wait upon ourselves, clean our own boots, and protect our own game. What the devil has a keeper to do with manners?"

Talbot bit his lip. "I told the fellow he was to go," he said, suavely enough; but the earl looked from under his shaggy brows at him with a grim smile.

"My dear Talbot, you really must not trouble yourself with the servants—yet. You will find it bad enough when you are obliged to do so! I have a fancy—a foolish one, no doubt—for employing and discharging my own servants, or having it done by the proper persons. In this case, Burchett will—Who's that crossing at the end of the lawn?" he broke off shading his eyes with his hand.

Talbot frowned. "The fellow himself," he said, with an affectation of indifference.

"Ah! Call him!" said his lordship. Reluctantly, Talbot sauntered to the head of the steps and called to Ralph in a voice that he sincerely trusted would not be heard; but Ralph's ears were those of a scout, and he looked up and came towards them. Veronica, from where she stood hidden from the two men in the stone door-way, saw that Ralph's face was perfectly calm and serene, fancied, indeed, that she detected, even in that distance, a faint smile of humor in the eloquent eyes.

Ralph came up the steps and stood waiting, his eyes fixed on the earl's which peered at him angrily.

"So, sir," he said, sternly, in his thin, clear voice, "you are pleased to be insolent, it seems!"

Ralph's gaze did not falter from the earl's or turn to Talbot, who stood behind the chair eyeing him with a haughty displeasure which was only thinly divided from hate.

"Who says so, my lord?" he asked. The earl leant forward suddenly and gazed at him still more intently. "Do you bandy questions with me, sir?" he said. "My nephew, Mr. Talbot, here, complains of your manners."

"I'm sorry, my lord," said Ralph, quietly. "I think Mr. Talbot has made a mistake. I was never insolent but once; that was when I was a boy: I suppose it was the licking I got then that taught me not to try it again. I fancy Mr. Talbot took me for a poach-

er; and of course that's enough to upset the temper of any man, especially a gamekeeper."

"Eh, Talbot? What? What do you say?" asked the earl. Talbot Denby forced a smile.

"Perhaps that explains it," he said. "at any rate, I accept the man's apology, sir."

At the word "apology," Ralph's brows went up, and his eyes leapt to the dark ones above the chair, then he smiled and looked at the earl again.

"Do I understand that I am to leave, my lord?" he said. The earl hesitated a moment. "Eh? By gad! I suppose you ought to be sent packing; but—you may remain. Use your time to mend your manners. What have you in that basket?"

"Trout, my lord," replied Ralph, and he came up to the chair, swung his creel round to the front of him and opened it. His Lordship bent forward and looked at the fish, then up at the handsome, tanned face.

"That's a fine fish. But I've caught finer—" He sighed, and his eyes, still on Ralph's face, grew sad with the sadness of age looking back at its youth.

"They'd be finer if the weir were mended," said Ralph, casually. "Eh, what? What's the matter with the weir?" demanded the earl, with interest.

"It's old and almost useless in this weather. It wants rebuilding," said Ralph. The earl seemed to be listening to the musical but manly voice.

"Rebuild it," he said, laconically. "Tell Burchett it is to be done. Have you any other suggestions to make?" he added, and though the tone of the question was sarcastic enough, it was not bitter nor contemptuous.

"About the fishing, my lord? Oh, well, the weeds in the small pool ought to be cleared. As to the game, it would be a good thing to cut down the trees between our wood and the Saintsbury's. Our birds would keep our side, then."

He spoke respectfully enough, but quite frankly, and with the self-possession which had surprised Veronica and stirred her pride. The earl stared at him; then he laughed shortly.

"By gad, the fellow's right! Go in to the house and ask for Miss Veronica."

"Allow me to go," murmured Tal-

bot; but the earl ignored him. —"And ask her to give you a letter to the steward. You can take it and explain."

"But Mr. Burchett—he's the head-keeper, my lord," said Ralph. The earl's face was a study.

"Upon my word, my man, your manners are as much in need of improvement as my preserves appear to be! Go and do as you are bid! Go in there!"

Ralph raised his cap and entered the hall. Its subdued splendour caught his whole attention and held it; and for a moment or two he was unaware that Veronica was standing looking at him with astonishment: she had not waited to hear the last part of the interview. Ralph started

slightly, and, cap in hand, approached her and delivered his message.

Veronica colored, and seating herself at a writing-table, wrote the note and extended it to him in silence. He had been watching her, with an attention as absorbed as that which had been claimed by the sight of the hall, and he took the note rather absently and looked round.

"Can I get this way to the servants' hall?" he asked. She pointed to a door without a word, and with a "Thank you," he was going, but she stopped him by a gesture.

"Why are you going there?" she asked. "To take these trout," he said. "There are only three, but they are a good size."

With a touch of color in her face, and her eyes looking straight above his head, she said, icily: "You may leave two of them, the other you may take to your friend—Fanny—Mrs. Mason. I imagine it will not be the first present of fish you have given them."

Now, if she had left out this last sting, the man half frozen by her voice and manner would have gone in silence; but it turned the ice to fire. "What!" he said, in a low voice, his eyes flashing. "Do you mean that I steal the fish—the game—"

Inwardly Veronica walked before his just wrath, but outwardly she was calm and scornful indifference.

"That is the door!" she said haughtily. Ralph gazed at her indignantly and his lips opened; then he seemed to swallow something, and with one more look he turned on his heel.

CHAPTER VIII.

Ralph left the Court with every nerve in his body tingling. Of course he knew, he thought, the cause of Miss Gresham's treatment of him. She was a great lady, and resented his rough-and-ready way of protecting her against blood poisoning.

"I suppose she'd rather have died," he thought, bitterly. "She looked as if I had contaminated her; she spoke to me as if I were a dog, and I suppose, in her estimation, I am very little better."

Then his mood softened a little. "After all," he said to himself, "she's only a girl, though she is the niece of an earl and as proud as a queen; and girls are shy—and touchy. How beautiful she looked! To feel her eyes blazing at you was like having the light from that great painted window in the hall dazzling you! It's lucky that haughty young gentleman, Mr. Talbot Denby, wasn't looking on: I should have lost my head and blurted out—something I should have been sorry for all the rest of my life. Yes, she's as beautiful as a picture. Strange, she didn't seem so angry just after I'd done it. I suppose she'd had time to realise the enormity of my offence. Perhaps she was wild with me for having quarrelled with her cousin; he is her cousin, I suppose. Oh, dash it, I can't fathom a woman's moods! All I know is that I feel as if I'd been beaten all over."

He went quickly to the hut. Burchett was cleaning a gun, and looked up from under his brows at Ralph with grim interrogation.

"Afraid I shall have to hand in my resignation," said Ralph, with anything but a mirthful glance. "I don't appear to give satisfaction," as the servant-maids say."

Burchett eyed him gravely. "Where have you been?" he said. "To the Court; and I wish I hadn't. The fact is, I'm not used to the ways of gentlefolks, as you call them. Over there"—he jerked his head—"we don't put up with insolence from any man—or woman, for that matter; and I've had a double dose this morning."

In sharp, laconic phrases he told Burchett of the incidents of the morning, but said nothing of his quick and ready operation for the prevention of blood poisoning; somehow or other that seemed sacred to himself. "It's strange," he said, with a short laugh, "you have treated me well enough; it was reserved for these great people to treat me like a dog."

Burchett leant on his gun. (To be Continued.)

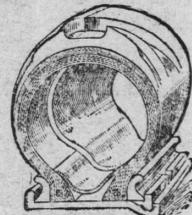
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