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The Earl's Son;

—OR—

TWO HEARTS UNITED;

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Yes," said Veronica, raising her eyes to his falsely smiling ones. "Truth will prevail, and murder will out, Talbot. Trite sayings, but they console and encourage us."

"Yes, yes!" he assented. "The evidence—"

She caught him up quickly.

"There may be, there will be, further evidence. Someone may have been out that night and seen or heard something that may lead to the discovery of the man who did this deed."

He met her eyes unflinchingly.

"Let us hope so!" he said, devoutly. "It is very strange! On that very night I had intended going for a stroll, and in the direction of the woods; indeed I went down the steps of the terrace, but I changed my mind and returned to the house. If I had only gone on!"

Veronica did not start, but her eyes dwelt on his face with the woman's penetrating acuteness. But he did not move a muscle.

"Why are you staying here? Why will you not come to the Court?" he said.

She shook her head as she had shaken it to the earl's invitation.

"When—Ralph is proved innocent," she said. "Until then I shall remain here and near him."

Without another word she went into the hotel and up to her room and, sinking into a chair, covered her face with her hands and thought hard.

Why had Talbot Denby told her a lie? Why had he said that he had not been out that night? She had seen him in the spinney. Was he lying because he did not wish to be a witness, to be connected with the trial?

A vague suspicion, too vague, indeed, to be a suspicion, crept into her mind for a moment, to be dismissed the next. The chief evidence in

Ralph's favor was the absence of motive; and what motive could Talbot Denby have for murdering this vagrant and tramp? Yes; he had lied because he feared that he might have to appear in the case. It was cowardly; but since the day she had seen Ralph break Talbot's stick across his back she had known that Talbot was a coward.

The prison officials received the earl with befitting respect, and the governor himself assisted him to alight, escorted him into the corridor and led him to Ralph's cell. The proud old man looked straight before him, his waxen face set hard, his lips drawn tightly. "My son—here!" was the dominant thought in his mind.

The door was unlocked, and the governor, stepping aside to permit the earl to enter, said:

"A visitor for you, Lord Lynborough."

Ralph was sitting on his pallet, his head resting on his hand, his eyes fixed on the floor. He was thinking, not of the awful charge under which he was lying, but of the miniature, the portrait of his mother, of her dying words and the missing certificates. His mother was Jane Burchett, Burchett's sister. Burchett, Mr. Whetstone, all thought that she had been betrayed, and the certificates were missing and there was a cloud over his birth. In the eyes of the world he must figure, as nameless, dishonored; for how could he prove the marriage, his legal birth? And Veronica—Veronica, who was of noble birth—how could he permit her to unite herself to a—the terrible word made him shudder. Yes, he must give her up!

He was wording his letter to her in his mind when the earl was admitted. He rose and the two men regarded each other in silence. Ralph was surprised but not embarrassed; for he conjectured that Lord Lynborough had come to ask him some questions; but as the earl continued to gaze at him with a sad and earnest scrutiny, he said:

"Will you not sit down, my lord? I am sorry—there is only the pallet." The earl sank onto it, then motioned to Ralph to seat himself beside him, and Ralph did so. Still there was silence, as if the earl could not find his voice; then at last he said in faltering accents and with a quiver of his lips:

"Can—can you not guess why I have come?"

"No, my lord," said Ralph. "Is it to ask me some questions?"

The earl seized upon the words. "Yes, yes!" he said. "Turn your face to the light! Ah!" He drew a long breath, and his face worked.

"I—I want to ask you about your early life, about—your mother."

"My mother?" said Ralph, with a sigh and a contraction of his brows which made his face still more like the aged one beside him. "What is it you wish to know, my lord?" he went on, rather bitterly. "She was a good mother, a good woman"—the old man winced—"she had a hard life, a life of hard work and sorrow. I do not remember ever seeing her smile." He was silent a moment. "We lived together till she died. What more do you wish to know?"

"Your father?" he said.

Ralph's brows darkened.

"I know nothing of him, my lord," he said. "He died when I was a child. The night my mother died she wished to tell me about him, but—it was too late." His voice broke, and he turned his face away. "She said that there was a story to tell me, that she possessed certificates that would prove her marriage and my birth; but when I went to find them, at her request, I discovered that they were gone."

"So—so you know nothing of him, who, or what he was?" asked the earl, almost faintly.

"No," assented Ralph, gravely and still rather bitterly; "but since I have been here I have heard the story of Burchett's sister, and yesterday—"

his voice broke—"I saw my mother's portrait. I had seen it before, in Mr. Whetstone's hand. She was Janet Burchett, I am sure; but my father—"

The earl looked at him with a world of yearning in his sunken eyes.

"Would—would you be glad to hear that he was living?" he asked in a low voice.

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Ralph started, then his lips twitched.

"He deserted my mother."

"No, no!" cried the earl. "He thought her dead."

Ralph turned on him swiftly.

"You know him?" he said, huskily.

The earl bowed his head.

"Yes; listen, and—don't judge him harshly. He met your mother when she was a beautiful, innocent girl—ah, be silent and wait!" for Ralph had moved and his hands had clenched.

"He was above her in rank, and—and an open marriage—was, for many reasons, impossible. They were married clandestinely."

Ralph drew a long breath.

"Thank God!" he murmured. "But why—why did he desert her?"

"He did not—and yet their separation sprang from his fault. He was a proud man, and a weak if not a wicked one. He—he wearied of her. Yes, I will tell you all—reserve nothing; it is your due! He allowed her to see that he thought the marriage a mistake, a mesalliance."

"I understand!" said Ralph, bitterly. "Ah, yes; it is easy for me, who knew her, to understand. You speak of his pride; but my mother was proud, too, my lord. I can understand how little she could endure to remain beside the man who was ashamed of her!"

The earl stifled a groan.

"You put it cruelly, you are—unmerciful!" he said; "but you do not know how bitterly he repented when she had gone, how bitter and unceasing was his remorse when he heard of her death. He was seeking her when the news reached him."

"Then—then—he would have gone to her!" cried Ralph.

"God knows how gladly he would have done so!" murmured the earl, brokenly. "God knows how intense was his remorse; it has embittered his whole life until this day."

"My father? You knew him, know him! Who is he, where is he?" demanded Ralph, with deep agitation, and he sprang up.

The earl raised his eyes and held out his trembling arms.

"He is here; I am your father. My son, my son!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

The earl's trembling hands rested on Ralph's head as he instinctively

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and unconsciously knelt to receive his father's blessing, for it was a blessing, though no words passed the quivering lips. For a time they sat side by side, the old man's hand on the young man's knee, in a pregnant silence. They were both overwhelmed by the stupendous fact that they were father and son, and they both forgot in the joy of the discovery that they were in a prison cell in which one of them was a prisoner charged with wilful murder.

As the old man's eyes wandered over the handsome face and strong, graceful figure his heart swelled with pride; and, if the truth must be told, Ralph on his part was proud that his newly found father was a nobleman, and that he himself was highly born. As was natural his thoughts flew to Veronica; and, as if in sympathy, the earl thought of her.

"I have just parted from Veronica, Ralph," he said, pronouncing the word with a lingering tenderness which was eloquent of the emotion which was warming the heart that had been so long cold and lifeless. "She was wiser than I, as I told her. How fortunate that you and she should have met, and grown to care for each other! If I had had my choice I could not have chosen a wife for you whom I should have been more glad to receive. And it is true love, love of the best kind. What a romance!" he smiled; but the cynicism had gone out of his smile and it lit up the white, wan face pleasantly.

"I hope—there will be no need to delay the wedding. I want to see you happy, to have your children at my knee—I have been alone so long! There are long arrears to make up—Yes! The marriage must take place at once!"

The words, the sanguine, assured tone startled Ralph from his dream, and involuntarily he looked round the gloomy cell. The earl's eyes followed him, and he too started.

"Ralph!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "I—God forgive me!—I had forgotten!—I—I thought we were sitting in the library at the Court! You—you are a prisoner—this terrible charge! But it is absurd—He forced a smile, but it was an uncertain, troubled one. "Of course your innocence will be established. It must be. At the next examination they shall discharge you; I—I will see that they do so! Murder!" he laughed, scornfully; "as if you commit a cold-blooded, vulgar murder!"

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