

# The Snake Scotched Justice Done.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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

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 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 mistake."

"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 crudely, 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 gone to her!" 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 and unconsciously knelt to receive his father's blessing, for it was a blessing, though no words passed between them. 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 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 also thought of her.

"I have just parted from Veronica, Ralph," he said, pronouncing the word with lingering tenderness which was eloquent of the emotion which was warming his heart which 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. "—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 smile. "Of course your innocence will be established. It must be at the next examination they shall discharge you; I—I will see they do so! Murder!" he laughed, scornfully, "as if you could commit a cold-blooded, vulgar murder!"

Ralph remained silent. His father's belief in him touched him to the heart, but he knew that his innocence might not be so easily proved, that, on the contrary, he was in imminent peril. His silence drove the smile from the earl's face and a covert anxiety began to show itself.

"Can you not throw any light on this mysterious affair, Ralph?" he asked.

"I—I want you home at the Court—home!—there is so much to tell you, so much for you to do. I am old, very old, and feeble; you must take my place. The tenants must come up to the Court to meet you; there shall be public-rejoicing, a dinner—I want to talk it over with you, to arrange. And Veronica—Ralph!" his voice rose and quavered with a pitiful impatience and resentment against Fate. "I have found you, and yet I cannot have you. You are imprisoned here, and I—God help me!—am helpless! Can you throw no light whatever on this tragedy, do nothing to clear up this hideous mystery?"

"I'll come presently, Ada," he said. "I'm obliged to stay here for a time, on—business."

"It must be a very unpleasant business," she said, shrewdly; then she glanced at the earl.

"Oo is that old gentleman?"

"He is my father," said Ralph. "Will you go and say 'How do you do' to him, Ada?"

She got off his knee and advanced to the earl, who had been watching the two with interest.

"Ow do 'oo do?" she said, holding out her hand. "I'm werry glad to see 'oo, if 'oo are Big Man's father."

The earl signed to Veronica to lift the child on his knee—he was too feeble to lift her himself.

"I s'pose you know who I am?" she said, looking up into the parchment-like face with a fearlessness which charmed the earl. "I'm the ickie girl Big Man saved from the fire."

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Ralph shook his head.

"No, sir, I'm afraid not," he said in a low voice, and pressing the old man's hand. "We can only be patient and trust to those who are helping us. They will do all that can be done."

"Why do they not discover the guilty person?" demanded the earl, testily.

"Surely in those days, with all the modern aids to detection, they should be able to prove your innocence and—liberate you. Do you suspect no one, Ralph?"

Ralph shook his head again.

"No," he said. "It is a mystery to me. I have spent hours in thought—I have had plenty of time here—turning the thing this way and that, but I cannot find any solution; nor can Mr. Selby, who has made every possible enquiry. The man was a stranger in the place; Groser, of the Dog and Owl, you know, sir, where the man lodged, knows nothing about him. Burchett—ah, well, you know that Burchett would leave no stone unturned—he can discover nothing. Mr. Whetstone—father—"

He spoke the sacred word in a low voice, and the earl started, and laid his hand upon Ralph's and looked at him with a deep tenderness.

"Yes, Ralph?"

"You will tell Burchett—and him—what you have told me? You will explain—"

"I will tell them everything, Ralph," said the earl, gravely. "All the world shall know that I would have sought your mother—my poor, loving, noble Janet!—and brought her to the Court, if I had not believed she was dead."

Ralph pressed the thin hand gratefully.

"Whetstone also has been trying to solve the mystery, but he has failed like the rest—Has Fanny Mason been found?" he broke off.

"I do not know," said the earl. "But she shall be—nothing shall be neglected. Oh, Ralph, this is part of my punishment! That you should be here, here"—he looked round the cell and shuddered—"instead of at home!"

The governor came to the door.

"Miss Gresham, my lord!" he said.

Veronica entered. She had Ada by the hand, and the child tore herself free and, disregarding the earl, sprang to Ralph.

"Oh, Big Man, I am so glad!" she cried. "They wouldn't let me come to you—they said you'd gone away, and I cried and cried, until 'Ronica brought me!"

Ralph took her on his knee and kissed her and stroked her head.

"But how pale 'oo look!" said Ada, scanning his face with grave intentness. "And what a 'orrid room 'oo live in! What are 'oo stayin' 'ere for? Why don't 'oo come to the 'otel where papa and 'Ronica and me lives? It's ever so much prettier an' nicer than this!"

"I'll come presently, Ada," he said. "I'm obliged to stay here for a time, on—business."

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"I was asleep in my cot, like I am allus at night, you know, and it came on dreful hot, and the room was all full of smoke, and I was afraid I was going to be burned, and that's a dreful death, you know; and I was all stuffing and losin' my seven senses, and I saw Big Man rush into the room, and he talked out to me, 'Ada, here I am, don't be afraid!' and dreckly I 'eard his voice I wasn't no longer afraid; an' he took me in his arms, an' then my seven senses went quite away, and when they came back I was in bed. Big Man had saved me from bein' burned alive! But he got very burned himself, you know, and he was werry ill, oh, werry ill for twite a long while! He's better now, and more like he was when he oosed to take me out for walks and nurse me asleep in the even-ings. But what does he shut himself up in this 'orrid place for?"

The artless prattle of the child went straight to the old man's heart and brought the tears to his eyes.

"Take her away, sir," said Ralph, rather huskily. "This is no place for—a child, for anyone," he added, glancing at Veronica.

"Would you like to come for a ride in a carriage with me, Ada?" said the earl, wiping his eyes covertly.

"Perhaps we shall see some shops where there are some dolls!"

"Just as we oosed to do when I went out with Big Man!" said Ada, joyously.

She ran to Ralph and flinging her arms round his neck, whispered:

"Shall I go, Big Man? He seems a werry nice old gentleman. But of course he must be nice if he's your father!"

(To be continued.)

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