

The Snake Scotched —AND— Justice Done.

CHAPTER XXV.
(Continued)

"A murderous looking thing," he said in a low voice. "To whom does it belong; does anyone know?"

There was a silence for a moment or two, then a voice—it came from a hobbled young labourer—said, pipingly:

"It be like Ralph Farrington's, the gamekeeper."

The earl's stern glance rested on him for a second, then went to Burchett's face and rested there enquiringly:

"What do you say, Burchett? Let him look at it."

Burchett took the knife and examined it.

"It is like—" he said, slowly, hoarsely. "But there are hundreds of such knives—"

"Not like this one, Mr. Burchett," put in the inspector, gravely. "This isn't English, leastways it's different to those we're used to; and, besides these initials and carvings!"

"I've seen him w' the knife hundreds o' times," said the young plough boy, encouraged by the sound of his own voice.

"Aye, aye, that we have!" came like a Greek chorus.

The earl's face went grey and his heavy brows came down.

"Take care what you say!" he said, so sternly that those near him drew back with instinctive awe of the great earl. "Why should Ralph Farrington's knife be here?"

"Buried with the corpse; it was found, so Burchett and Goldie said, on top of the body," murmured the inspector.

The earl scowled at the interruption.

"What connection can there be between this murder and the young fellow? It is possible that they never met, never saw each other!"

Talbot, standing near his elbow, nodded concurringly.

"Just so," he said, in a low voice. "They probably never set eyes on each other. Why should the young man—what is his name—Farrington be suspected?"

"No one hinted at suspicion!" broke in the earl, sharply.

The inspector shook his head.

"I am sorry to say, my lord," he said, respectfully but firmly, "that they did meet. They met more than once, and on two occasions at least had words. Farrington found the man trespassing, and, in accordance with his duty, ordered him out of the preserves. The man wasn't very civil, and I'm told he threatened Farrington or Farrington threatened him—"

The earl's face, grey and set, grew darker.

"This is no place for such a discussion," he said, sternly. "Take the body to the church mortuary and then come up to the Court, inspector. Burchett, you will come with him."

Talbot offered his arm and the earl took it, and was conducted to the carriage. As he got in he signed to Whetstone.

"I have got some more information, my lord," said Grey, the inspector, "and I think I ought to ask you for a warrant for the apprehension of Ralph Farrington on a charge of murder."

The earl's lips tightened.

"There is not enough evidence—"

"The knife—" The inspector swung round on Burchett. "You identify it? I am told by the man who was helping you move the faggots that the moment you picked up the knife you exclaimed, 'Ralph's knife!'"

Burchett's face remained immovable, his deep-set grey eyes were fixed on the opposite wall.

"Yes; it is the knife," he said. Truth is truth, and cannot harm him."

"And I have witnesses who say that Fanny Mason told them she saw Ralph Farrington and the deceased— James Oatway, as he called himself, he had other aliases, my lord—the night Ralph Farrington left the Court, that she heard them quarrelling, and that they were speaking so

angrily that she, being afraid they would come to blows, ran away home instead of waiting for Ralph; she was rather partial to Farrington, my lord, as is well known."

The earl moved his hand impatiently.

"Hearsay evidence! It is worth nothing."

"Certainly!" said Talbot, emphatically. "Where is this—Fanny Mason?"

The colour had crept back to his face, and he spoke quite calmly though gravely; but there was a strained look about his face, as if he were still affected by the tragedy which had broken upon all so suddenly.

"Yes; where is she?" echoed the earl.

"In a situation in London," replied Grey. "I have her address and will telegraph for her, I have written a description of Ralph Farrington to head-quarters at Scotland Yard, my lord, and I do not think there will be any difficulty in finding him."

"Why not?" asked the earl. "He was supposed to have returned to Australia."

"He had not gone some weeks ago, my lord," said Grey. "Your lordship may remember reading an account of his saving a little girl from a fire; it was a plucky thing, and he risked his life, the papers said."

The earl smiled, a grim smile.

"And this man you suspect of murdering?" he said, contemptuously.

"Yes, my lord, the evidence is so strong. If your lordship will please give me the warrant—"

The earl sighed and drew the paper towards him and was filling it in when Whetstone, who had been leaning against the table as if he were exhausted by the strain, started and, stretching out his hand across the desk, actually almost touched the earl's hand, as if to arrest it.

"No, no!" he said, hoarsely. "Don't do it, my lord, don't do it! Let Grey—let him go to Lord Sainsbury—one of the other magistrates! I—I beg, implore your lordship not to make out the warrant!"

The earl lowered the pen and, his face flushed and working, stared at the trembling man.

"What ails you, Whetstone?" he demanded, sternly, and yet with a strange quaver in his voice. "Why should I not? What reason—what is this young man to me that I should not issue a warrant for his apprehension?"



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stone to accompany them. When they reached the library the earl sank into his chair by the fire, and sat staring before him as if he were overwhelmed by the shock of the terrible discovery; then, so suddenly that the others started, he rose, and, moving with stately dignity, went to the chair at the table and took up the writing materials.

Talbot approached him quietly.

"Why trouble yourself with this matter, sir?" he said, in a low, persuasive voice. "Why not let the inspector go to Lord Sainsbury?"

The earl frowned up at the smooth, sallow face.

"Since when have I neglected my duty?" he said, sternly. "Do you think I am so old, so feeble, as to be incapable of performing the duty of a magistrate? This murder—if murder it was—was committed on the estates, the young fellow who is accused—"

"Oh, no, no!" murmured Talbot, as if his sense of justice were shocked; "not accused, even if suspected!"

The earl's frown relaxed.

"You are right, I went too fast, Talbot," he said. "The idea that Ralph Farrington was concerned in it is of course absurd—"

"Of course!" said Talbot, promptly. "He was a hot-tempered young man and nothing was known of his antecedents, but—" warmly and looking round appealingly, "those are certainly not sufficient reasons for suspecting him of so terrible a crime."

Whetstone looked up.

"You are right, Mr. Talbot; you are right! He did not do it," he said with such feverish eagerness that Talbot glanced at him covertly.

"You knew him, Mr. Whetstone?" he said, as if pleased at Whetstone's confidence in Ralph's innocence.

"Yes, Mr. Talbot," replied Whetstone. "I saw him several times, and was much impressed by him—his face and manner—"

"Did he tell you anything of his past life?" asked Talbot, as if still anxious to hear the best of Ralph.

Mr. Whetstone shook his head.

"Very little," he answered. "But I—I judged from his appearance, his voice—"

The inspector came in, and the earl looked up gravely.

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Talbot, who had drawn near, looking from one to the other, wiped his lips covertly and lowered his lids, and as Whetstone, apparently crushed and daunted by the earl's sternness, covered and sank into a chair, Talbot murmured:

"My advice, too, sir! Let the matter go into someone else's hands."

The earl glanced at him angrily, then with a firm hand made out the warrant.

"There it is, Grey," he said. "Do your duty, as I have done mine!"

Grey took the warrant and went out. Talbot followed him into the dining-room.

"This—is this a dreadful business, Grey," he said.

"It is indeed, Mr. Talbot," assented the inspector, gravely. "I can see it has quite upset you, and no wonder!" he added, sympathetically, for Mr. Talbot's face was now ashen and his thin lips were trembling; there, was, too, a strange look—it might have been called one of apprehension and dread—in his dark eyes.

"Yes—yes!" said Talbot. "It—it came so suddenly, I was so unprepared. Er—did you"—his hand went to his lips as if he would try to steady them—"did you find anything on—the body?"

He turned aside as he asked the question as if he could scarcely face the inspector while he answered.

"One or two things, sir. A knife—I wonder he didn't use it!"

To be continued.

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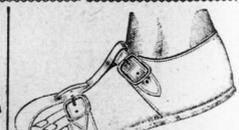
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