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The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Did you expect me to stand by and leave the child in the house?" he said, simply. "Why, any one of the firemen would have done it, if I had not happened to be first. And I knew her room, you see, so it was easier for me. Where am I? This room is strange to me."

"You are in Sowerby Street, in rooms belonging to a friend of mine," replied Mr. Sainsbury, guardedly.

"I thought it might be a ward in the hospital," said Ralph. "Wouldn't that have been the best place for me—less trouble, and all that?"

Mr. Sainsbury shook his head.

"We could not have borne to give you up," he said; "the least we could do was to take charge of you, nurse you. You are having the best advice—Sir Thomas Lucas, the great surgeon, has been here every day, will be here presently, and there is the local doctor—"

"It's very good of you," said Ralph, gratefully; "but I hope I sha'n't be a nuisance for long. Oh—he started and frowned—"I was to start for Australia—I'm shipped on a vessel—it hasn't sailed yet?"

"About a week ago," said Mr. Sainsbury. "You talked about it when you were delirious. But there is no cause for you to worry. We'll talk about the future when you're strong enough. There's plenty of time."

Ralph looked thoughtful, and stroked his chin.

Ed Ada's hair in silence for a time, then he said:

"You said 'all of us' just now. Did you mean Ada and you, or—or was there anybody else?"

"Why do you ask?" said Mr. Sainsbury, gently and cautiously, for he had been warned against permitting the patient to receive a sudden shock.

Ralph coloured.

"I had an idea that a lady—two ladies had been in the room off and on; and that one of them was here nearly all the time; but I suppose it was only my fancy: I reckon I've been off my head pretty badly?"

"You must mean the lady to whom these rooms belong. She saw you rescue Ada, and she knows you. It is she who has nursed you, assisted by a friend who also lives in the house."

"Knows me?" said Ralph, looking puzzled. "I don't know any lady in London. I thought, I fancied, she was like a lady I knew very well, a lady who— But of course it was only a kind of vision."

He sighed and turned his head away; for he was still very weak and the disappointment was hard to bear.

Mr. Sainsbury took Ada up.

"We'll leave you for a little while," he said; "and you must try to get to sleep—a proper sleep this time. Just take this medicine, and let yourself go. You'll be better when you wake, and strong enough to—talk over matters. But what you have to do now is to sleep."

Ralph kissed Ada.

"Don't take her away for good; let her come in again," he said, as he closed his eyes.

The draught soon sent him off, and he slept a real, refreshing sleep.

When he awoke and looked round he started and held his breath, then lay

motionless as if he feared lest a movement of his should dispel the beautiful vision which had come again; but it remained seated in the chair beside him, and presently it stretched out a hand and laid it gently and lightly, but, ah, how caressingly on his lips!

"Veronica!" he breathed, beginning to tremble.

She slid down on her knees beside him and put her lips where her fingers had been.

"Veronica!" he cried. "Oh, don't move! Stay there, stay there for a little while! I know I am only dreaming, that I have been dreaming all along, but—but stay with me! You seem so real! Just as you looked in the arbour when I told you that I loved you, and you— Ah, so real!"

Her lips moved and the happy tears welled over in her eyes.

"I am real, Ralph! Ralph, dear, dear Ralph! My—love!" she murmured.

He listened to her voice that seemed to fill the room with low and exquisite music; then with difficulty and pain he stretched out his hand and touched her cheek. And then a cry broke from his parched lips, and he would have sprung up in the bed, but she bent over him and lovingly held him down, pressing her face to his, and whispering thrillingly:

"It is I! I am here—here, dearest! In your arms!" She drew his arms round her. "It is Veronica! But you must not move, dearest! No, no, you must not move! See, I'll kiss you if you'll be still; but it must be quite still. Listen while I tell you, Ralph! You must not talk—they'll send me away if you do!"

The shock had tried him; the joy in his eyes shone through a mist very much like tears, and his lips dully besought the kiss she had promised him.

"I was at—the fire. I have been in London some time, Ralph. Dearest, did you think I could remain at the Court leading a life of luxury and sloth and ease while you were fighting the world for me? I left it all behind me for ever the morning after you had gone. I meant to follow you—to Australia, the end of the world—"

"Veronica!" he breathed.

"No, no; not a word!" she forbade him, with an exultantly tender air of command. "I will tell you all, every-

thing. I came to London and found a friend—it is the girl I am living with here—I tried to find you, was eating my heart out with longing, longing for you, when—I found you, brave Ralph, my hero—as you lay almost dead beside the child you had saved! I saw it all, Ralph, and, oh—oh—"she fought with her sobs—"I am so—so proud of you! Ah, keep calm, dearest! See, there is another kiss, and another, and another! Am I not generous? But, oh, my lover, my brave lover, you shall pay me back a thousand-fold when you are stronger!"

She hid her blushing face on his breast for a moment.

"You left the Court—everything for me?" he said in a low voice. "Ah, you should not have done so! You are not fitted—"

"Oh, I am made of sugar and will melt!" she broke in, in a voice that was indeed as sweet as honey. "The sacrifice was to be all on your part! Who taught you to think so lightly of women, Ralph? Not that dear, brave mother of whom you are so proud, and whom I should have loved so dearly if—she had lived. I shall never forgive myself for letting you give me up, for not refusing to let you go that afternoon. That wasn't very womanly, Ralph! But you will forgive me, dearest; you have, I know!"

He looked at her dress—the old serge was beginning to show signs of wear. She understood the look, of course.

"And I wouldn't go back to that life of dependence if I could, Ralph. Ah, if you knew how happy I am—now I have got you back! But I will try and show you, dear! I'll bring my work and sit beside you, and talk to you, and sometimes—" She kissed him instead of finishing.

"Work?" he said, ruefully. "You work? Oh, Veronica!"

"And, oh, Ralph, why not? You forget that I once worked for my living; and it was better, more dignified way of living than dawning about Lynne Court. But, oh, how I have talked! You'll be bad and the doctor will turn me out and say that I am not fit for a nurse."

"You nursed me!"

"I and Martha, Ludlow: she's—she's a brick, if you like! You'll see her when she comes from the factory."

"The factory!"

"And why not, sir? You think the proud Miss Gresham is too high and mighty to have a girl at a factory for a friend? The proud Miss Gresham has learnt common sense, dearest. Besides, Martha is a friend anyone might be proud of. And now, dear, I want to tell you about Mr. Sainsbury."

"Sainsbury? That is the name of the people at the Hall?" he said, wondering.

Veronica nodded.

"Yes; he is one of them. He is Ada's father. He has been abroad a great deal—in Australia—everywhere and they call him the 'black sheep' of the family, because he went out to earn his own living and has not been very successful. I suppose."

"It's a small world," remarked Ralph. "One of the Sainsburys Ada's father!"

"Yes; and Ralph, can you guess—but of course you can't—how grateful he is to you? You saved his only child, that dear little soul—of whom, by the way, I am a little wee bit jealous, sir; for it's plain that you have



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won Miss Ada's heart. Ah, as if any one could help loving my Ralph!"

Another pause, filled in by the mute but more eloquent language of the lips.

"And Mr. Sainsbury has been thinking of your, our future—"

Ralph sighed penitently.

"Mine's of no great consequence, Veronica," he said. "Yours should be at Lynne Court!"

She laughed and shook her head.

"So it would be if you were there; for it will be wherever you are, Ralph. Don't sigh, sir; that is ungrateful. And now you must rest. Why, your hand is hot, any your poor face flushed. You must close your eyes and not open them for a time. If you will promise to be good—very good—I—I will close them for you."

And she did so in a way that the Angel of Sleep herself might have envied.

When the famous doctor came he stared with a mixture of surprise and satisfaction.

"You have the strength and the frame of a Hercules, my young friend," he said. "Not one man in a thousand would have pulled round so quickly; not one in a hundred would have been alive."

(To be continued.)

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