



The Earl's Son;
TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XVI.

He sighed heavily and made a despairing gesture with his hand. "But it's too late for regrets. I've blurted out the truth, and—and I'll take my punishment like a man. Why don't you laugh?" he broke out desperately.

But there was no laughter in her heart, only a delirious joy which shamed while it dowered her. "I'm sorry!" at last broke tremulously from her lips.

"Sorry!" he echoed, penitently, his mood changing to bitter self-reproach. "Why should you be sorry? Why should the star be sorry because it shines on a puddle? You can't help being what you are! God made you so. You are a queen of women, while I—am just worthy to kneel at your feet and adore you, and that's all."

There was a moment of silence; then he raised his head which had sunk on his chest.

"I'll—I'll say good-bye. I don't expect you to forgive me—" The note in his broken voice went straight to Veronica's heart and said, "Here is your master."

The woman's longing, craving to yield possessed her. "Forgive!" she murmured, scarcely conscious that she had spoken.

He drew a step nearer, all his being tense and strained.

"You—you forgive me! You do not laugh!" he breathed. "Then—then I can go away happy—with pleasant memories—" He was silent a moment, then he went on in a low voice: "I shall not be able to believe this. Will you give me some sign? That handkerchief: I've worn it next my heart—give it back to me—"

She took the handkerchief from him.

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her bosom and held it out to him, her eyes on his. He came nearer and stretched out his hand for it. His hand touched hers and an electric thrill ran like lightning through both of them. Unconsciously he fell on his knees, his hand and hers still touching.

"Oh, it's hard to go!" broke from him.

Her face drooped lower, like a beautiful flower, until it was close to his.

"Then—don't go!" she whispered. For a moment doubt, incredulity held him, then his soul leapt to the heights her whisper had opened to him, and springing to his feet he clasped her in his arms.

She did not repulse him. Her head drooped, as it had drooped the day he had carried her, and, when his lips sought hers she did not refuse them. "I'm—I'm dreaming!" he said, hoarsely. "You can't—you can't!"

Her face lightened with a divine smile. "It is so pleasant a dream?" she murmured. "Let me share it for—I love you!"

He cried out inarticulately and pressed her to him; and she still yielded herself. Then she suddenly grew rigid, her eyes became fixed and fearful, and turning he saw the earl standing at the entrance to the arbour and regarding them with a face like that of that one of the stone statues on the terrace.

CHAPTER XVII.

There was something appalling in the old man's stone-like face, in the rigid, colourless lips, the face in which the only living thing seemed the eyes, that gleamed like mica under the bent brows.

Veronica shrank back for a moment and caught her breath, but Ralph, after an instant of stupefaction, drew himself up and met the terrible eyes steadily.

The earl's glance passed over him and rested like a blight on Veronica.

"I beg you to pardon me for this intrusion," he said in a voice that struck like ice and cut like a whip in its infinite scorn. "I do not usually play the eavesdropper; but I may, perhaps be excused on this occasion, seeing that the lady who has disgraced herself bears my name and is—or was—under my care and in my charge."

Ralph's face grew dark and his eyes flashed.

"Disgraced, my lord—" broke from him.

"Silence!" interrupted the earl, as icily impassive as before. "I want to speak to—this lady. Leave us."

Ralph shook his head.

"No," he said. "My place is by her side, my lord—until she tells me to go."

Lord Lynborough bent his gaze on Veronica.

"Do you accept that?" he asked, sternly, but with a kind of contemptuous indifference.

Veronica held out her hand to Ralph, and he took it.

"I do, my lord," she said in a low, but perfectly clear voice. "The fault is mine. I accept all the responsibility."

For the first time the earl smiled: a bitter smile.

"I agree," he said. "It is always the woman's fault, and she bears the consequences. That you encouraged this man I have no doubt. I had intended to address you alone; but, as you chose that he should remain—" He shrugged his shoulders, paused a moment, then went on: "I gather from the words I heard to-day and yesterday—yes, I was here—that you have condescended to plight your troth to—my gamekeeper?"

Veronica raised her head and regarded him steadily.

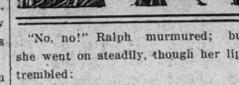
"Yes," she said, quietly, but as proudly as if Ralph had been her equal, her superior.

The earl inclined his head.

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"No, no!" Ralph murmured; but she went on steadily, though her lips trembled:

"That of all the men I have met, he is the bravest, the most kindly—" "I will ask you to spare me your rhapsodies," broke in the earl, with a wave of his hand. "We will accept your infatuation as an established fact. I merely asked from curiosity, and, yes, a desire to ascertain if it were possible for me to stretch out a hand and save you from the degradation to which you are sinking."

Veronica's eyes flashed and the color dyed her cheek.

"Degradation, my lord?"

"Do you wish to argue the point?" he said, deliberately. "You had best be seated, for it will take some few minutes."

She sank on to the seat, but motioned Ralph to stand near her. As he did so he turned to the earl.

"The fault is mine—I am answerable—" he began, hoarsely, but the earl would not hear him.

"Be silent," he said, sternly. "I will address myself to you presently. Now, Veronica, we will take your infatuation for granted. I will do this man the justice to admit that the blame rests with you. I have heard every word. I know that he has struggled to resist you—that he failed. It is a tribute to your charms—"

She made to rise, stung by the cold, impassive voice, but sank down again with a gesture of forced patience.

"That you have exerted those charms to fascinate him, I can well believe; no man forgets his place so soon unless he has had great encouragement, provocation. The de-

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il made woman to tempt, the man to yield—" Ralph's face flamed and he opened his lips, but the earl motioned him to silence.

"You have tempted this man to the utmost—that he has yielded is no marvel. But have you considered the consequences? I think not. Woman rarely do. Have you considered that, if you carry this thing to its mad conclusion, you leave the Court and my protection, you lose Waynford, all I have willed to you, that you relinquish your place in society, that you become an outcast and a pariah—"

Ralph uttered an exclamation, but Veronica took his hand and pressed it, and a heavenly smile shone in her eyes.

"They are terrible words, my lord," she said; "but they do not frighten me. I shall not become an outcast by marrying an honest man." Her voice trembled with suppressed passion, then grew steady. "My lord, I am not ungrateful—"

He made a gesture of contemptuous repudiation.

"I do not forget all your kindness to me. I do not forget that you lifted me from a life of poverty to one of ease and luxury. You have been very good to me and—the tears rose to her eyes—"it hurts me that I should seem indifferent, ungrateful. But, oh, my lord, I—I cannot help it! I—I love him with all my heart and soul. Let the consequences be what they may, I can not give him up. All the luxury in the world would be of no use to me without him. The consequences? Yes, I accept them. I am ready to share his life, to return to the old poverty, the old hard life—ah, but it will be no longer hard if he will share it with me!"

Ralph's heart throbbed, and he marvelled how any man could look upon that lovely face, listen to that sweet voice unmoved; the earl was still like a stone as he bent his head with icy courtesy.

"And I thought you proud!" he said, as if with self-contempt.

"Proud!" she echoed, as if she were looking back on her past life, a self that had slipped from her for ever.

"Yes, I suppose I was," a smile shone in her eyes. "Love casts out Pride, my lord," she added, softly.

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"A noble sentiment," he said. "I have no more to say to you. Now, sir, for the few words I shall condescend to address to you."

Ralph drew his eyes slowly from the face of the woman he loved and fixed them on the earl's, and the two men regarded each other as duellists look into each other's faces when the sword play begins; then the earl's eyes grew contemplative and his frown deepened.

"There must be something in you out of the common to have won this lady's heart," he said; "and I will try and forget that you are my servant and appeal to you—yes! appeal to you as if we were for the moment on equal terms. At any rate, I will speak as man to man."

Ralph flushed and waited. The earl was silent while one could count twenty, then he said slowly, calmly:

"My niece scorns the consequences of this mad act. But you? I take it that you—love her." It was a hard word to utter and it fell with a metallic note from his bloodless lips.

"Have you, too, considered what this infatuation of hers will cost her—not you, but her! Oh, be silent, until I have finished. Can you, who—love her, bear to see her degraded from the position in which she was born; can you accept the sacrifice she is prepared to make? Are you prepared to take advantage of her—weakness for you? Think! The sacrifice will not be momentary, temporary; it will endure for all her life; until the hour of her death she will be a mark for the scorn of the world, will be pointed at as the woman who married her uncle's servant. Can you realize what that means? I think not; but probably you can form some idea, however slight. It is bad enough when a man makes an unequal marriage and chains himself to an inferior; but for the woman who does so!" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled with a scornful pty.

(To be Continued.)

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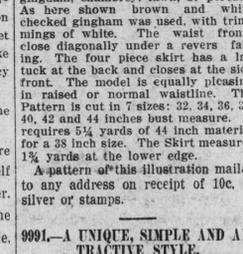
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