

# The Snake Scotched Justice Done.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, in his toneless voice. Then he put down the dress clothes he had on his arm, and proceeded to change his master's clothes as if the rebuke had passed over him unnoticed; but every now and then, as he performed his duty with noiseless assiduity, he glanced at the reflection of the dark face in the glass, and his white lips drooped still lower over his dull-looking eyes.

"You'll have to remain till the morning," said Talbot, coldly, as Gibbon stepped back, his task accomplished. "You don't appear to be very welcome to the other servants, I hear, and I am not surprised. That hang-dog face of yours would convict you any day. I wonder, sometimes, why I endure it. Take yourself off by the first train, and don't come here again unless I send for you."

"Yes, sir," responded Gibbon, in exactly the same toneless, unmoved voice, as he stood with meekly bowed head until his master had left the room; then his manner changed swiftly a spot of red came into his pale cheeks, his colourless eyes shone with an unwholesome light and his teeth came together as if he were keeping back an oath. He went quickly to the letter which Talbot had crushed in his hand and flung from him, and spreading it out he was reading it eagerly when he heard Talbot's returning step. He squeezed up the letter and dropped it on the spot in which it had lain, and busied himself with the tweed suit.

"The letter?" said Talbot. Gibbon looked about him with dutiful alacrity, and Talbot picked it up and left the room.

"It wasn't that," muttered Gibbon, musingly. "It wasn't that, serious as it is. He was looking bad before, when I came in. What is it? What is it, I wonder? He's in a tighter place than usual. I've never seen him show the white feather before. What is it? He went all over the pockets in his tweed suit, searched the room in his stealthy, noiseless fashion, but though nothing rewarded him he was still unsatisfied."

"There was a desperate look in that face of his," he muttered. "I've watched him all these months like a cat a mouse, but I've never seen him look so bad. He's too sharp as a rule; but to-night he looked as if—as if he was hard done. Curse him! For all his sharpness, I'll find him out. 'Hang-dog face!' 'Hang-dog face!' You little think, Mr. Talbot Denby, when you're speaking to me and threatening, how often I feel like hanging for you!"

Talbot found the drawing room empty. "His lordship dines in his own room to-night, sir," said the butler; "and Miss Gresham has a headache and begs you will excuse her."

Talbot inclined his head and checked a sigh of relief. He was in no mood for company that evening, for he knew that, admirable actor as he was, it would be difficult to assume a

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light and careful manner under the keen eyes of the old lord, and the cold violet ones of Veronica.

He made a pretence of eating some of the innumerable dishes, but his throat felt dry, and every morsel was a burden to him. But the wine was welcome, and he not only let the servants fill his glass repeatedly, but drank glass after glass of claret when they had gone. There was a small carafe of liquor brandy on the table and he finished up with that.

The liquor set his blood moving—he had felt cold ever since he had heard Oatway's story—and he rose with a flushed face and a kind of fever in his veins. He felt a desire to meet the man again, at once, to grapple with him, set his keen wit against the fellow's dull ones. Why had he made the appointment for to-morrow instead of to-night? Why had he let the ruffian time to babble in his drink? Would it not be possible to see him to-night?

He went upstairs to his room after awhile, his mind still full of his desire to end his suspense, to meet Oatway and come to terms with him at once. Gibbon was in the adjoining room and heard his master pacing up and down; then suddenly the sound of the restless footsteps ceased, and Gibbon, peeping through the key-hole, saw Talbot put on an overcoat, turn up the collar, and, with a cap drawn well over his face, go to the door and look out.

It was a time when all the servant were usually in their own part of the huge house, and Talbot seeing the way clear went down quietly and let himself out by the door of the back hall.

Gibbon waited for a few minutes then slipping downstairs, caught up his own coat and hat, and like his master, turning up the collar and drawing down the cap, followed stealthily.

Talbot went through the shrubbery, pausing a moment or two to listen Gibbon pausing also; then, skirting the lawn, walked quickly along the fence that divided the park from the road, presently passed into the road through the small gate, and, after stopping to light a cigar, sauntered along it, as if he were taking an after-dinner stroll.

The night had grown rather cloudy and the moon was obscured at times. Suddenly Gibbon caught the smell of rank tobacco coming from the wood on the left. His master had evidently also noticed it, for he stopped, and with a cautious glance round him he vaulted the fence and entered the wood.

Gibbon, stealthily slipped from tree to tree, followed; his light-grey eyes blinking like a ferret's, his lips hanging loosely like a blood-hound's.

CHAPTER XX.

Talbot stealthily approached the direction of the rank, smouldering tobacco, but in a roundabout way, so that he described something like a semicircle, keeping well behind the trees and slipping cautiously through the undergrowth.

As he did so, his foot struck against some object which gave out a metallic sound, and, thinking he had dropped his match-box, he stopped and felt amongst the bracken. To his surprise his hand came in contact with a knife. He picked it up and felt it over. It was open and the blade was sharp and pointed at the end. He had read of a bowie-knife, and it occurred to him that this was one. He closed the blade slowly and noiselessly and slipped the knife into the outer pocket of his dress-overcoat, then he crept on. Presently a rift in the clouds revealed the figure of the man Oatway.

He had slipped from the felled tree, and was lying with his head and arm

on the trunk. He was in a heavy and drunken sleep, and was breathing stertorously; close beside him lay the pipe with the tobacco that had fallen from it still smouldering in the bracken. Instinctively Talbot set his foot upon it and extinguished the vile-smelling embers.

Then he stood with his hands in his pockets and looked down at the sleeping man. What an irony of fate that he, Talbot Denby, the next Earl of Lynborough, should be in the hands of this wretch, this ruffianly sot; that a word from those brutal lips should be sufficient to ruin a life of usefulness and honor! For that was the way Mr. Talbot Denby put it to himself.

The man was in so deep, so drunk-en a sleep that Talbot was almost tempted to stir him with his foot, as one is tempted to stir a sleeping reptile, and, indeed, he did draw nearer and raise his foot. Then suddenly an idea flashed across his mind. The man was sleeping so heavily—might it not be possible to take the papers from him without disturbing him.

But the thought of touching the man with his hand was so repugnant to Talbot that he put the idea from him; but it came back to him after a moment. With out the papers the fellow would be, if not harmless at least at a disadvantage in making terms. No doubt he would attach the usual undue importance to them. It looked so easy to abstract them that the temptation grew, as Talbot looked down at him, and became irresistible. Noiselessly he moved slowly, inch by inch nearer, and kneeling down, stretched out his hand towards the rough fustian pocket; but as he touched it Oatway snored and moved his head. Talbot's hand flew back, but he held it ready, and, as the man did not awake, he approached the coat again and gently drew it back, discovering the pocket.

He could see the edge of the pocket-book, and the sight of it increased his eagerness. With strained nerves and trembling fingers he delicately opened the mouth of the pocket, took hold of the edge of the book and was drawing it out slowly and cautiously when Oatway stirred, yawned heavily, and opened his blood-shot eyes.

For a moment he did not clearly see the figure kneeling in front of him, but he light happened to become better and Oatway saw who it was, saw the white hand at his pocket, and knowing instinctively what it meant, sprang to his feet with an oath and threw himself upon Talbot, who, not having had time to rise went down.

"You thief!" cried Oatway, hoarsely, with a torrent of oaths. "You'd steal the papers, would you? You'd creep in a man when he's a-takin' his rest, his honest sleep, and rob him! I'll teach you!"

He dealt Talbot two or three heavy blows and attempted to hold him down with his knee. The blows maddened Talbot, and swearing almost as vilely as the man, he wriggled from under his knee and managed to get to his feet. For a second or so the two men stood glaring at each other; then Oatway went for Talbot again. But Talbot was prepared for the attack.

He had never distinguished himself very greatly at the 'varsity sports, but there are some things which one learns at public schools and colleges which lie dormant, so to speak, until they are called for. One may forget one's Latin and Greek, but the boxing and wrestling remain. Talbot struck out with his left and caught his opponent on the jaw, and Oatway staggered and seemed about to go down; but the trunk of a tree saved him, and, pulling himself together, he made for Talbot with the rush of a bull. Talbot's arm shot out again, but Oatway dodged the blow, and, throwing his arms round Talbot, tried to bring him to the ground; but Talbot had got his feet well apart and was able not only to hold his ground, but to get a good grip.

They swayed this way and that, firmly looked, their faces so close that Talbot, with a sickening sense of loathing, could feel on his cheek the man's horrible breath, see his blood-shot eyes glaring into his own.

It was a terrible struggle, one that looked as if it were for life or death; and Gibbon, from his place behind a tree, watched it with a sinister enjoyment. He expected every moment to see his master go under; but, strangely enough, Talbot seemed able to hold his own; and Gibbon's enjoyment was arranged under the Porte to which they sail, and indicating the approximate sailings:

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beginning to be marred by disappointment when Oatway managed to thrust his leg between Talbot's, and Gibbon drew a long breath as Talbot went down and Oatway, losing his balance, fell on top of him. Gibbon seated himself at the foot of the tree, and, peering round, watched and waited for the demerol with a satisfaction no longer alloyed.

Talbot, half stunned by the fall and the weight of his assailant's body, lay quite still for a time, and Oatway, presumably with the idea of making his victory doubly sure, struck the prostrate man a cruel blow on the head. The blow seemed to have an effect contrary to that which Oatway had intended, for it roused Talbot's blood. He wriggled one side of himself free, his hand slid in a stealthy fashion to his pocket and fumbled there, and a moment afterwards, Oatway sprang upwards with a sharp guttural cry, clapped one hand to his side, and, beating the air with the other, fell forward on his face as if he had been—stabbed!

In his amazement at this sudden change in the performance which he had been enjoying so hugely, Gibbon rose and took a step forward; then he changed his mind, and, sinking down at full length, lay quite still, his head raised just sufficiently above the braken to permit him to see the conclusion of the drama.

(To be continued.)

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