

The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER IX.

"Not the least in the world," Ralph assured her, "especially as it is no business of mine, and I've a habit of forgetting anything that doesn't concern or interest me."

"I hope that doesn't apply to your friends," she murmured, shyly, with a sudden flush.

"Why, of course not," responded Ralph, laughing; "one's friends are always interesting, Miss Fanny, and one's gratitude for their kindness keeps them in remembrance."

"Then I mustn't forget you, Mr. Ralph," she said, with a laugh, but with a tender emphasis on the "you."

"The kindness is on your side," he said. "You're the first friend I've made in Lynne, you know."

Her face, all aglow with pleasure, was turned to him.

"Oh, how nicely you said that!" she breathed. "And I know you won't forget us, or—leave us for any new ones."

"Well, I've got to leave you now," said Ralph, lightly. "I have to keep a sharp look out in the western wood, for I suspect it has had some undesirable visitors lately."

She rose and went with him to the door and down the garden path.

"How sweet the stocks smell," said Ralph.

"Don't they! They always smell sweeter at night," she said. "Wait a minute." She ran across to a border and picked a fine blossom, and came back to him. "There is one for you." She raised the flower to her lips—there is only a little distance between the nose and the lips, you see—and held it up to him. "Let me put it in your coat for you—may I?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Thank you," said Ralph, with too calm a gratitude, for she sighed faintly as her hand went up to the lapel of his coat. She was very close to him, so close that he could feel her warm, sweet breath upon his cheek, and as she put the flower in its place and raised her face, with a murmur—"There!" its dainty firmness was so near to his lips that it would almost have been pardonable if they had traversed the few inches and met her half-parted ones upturned so invitingly to him.

But Ralph was not a susceptible man and—*rara avis!*—not one given to flirting, and it did not occur to him to kiss her.

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"Thanks very much!" he said, with exasperating cheerfulness. "Jove! how sweet it smells! Good-night, Miss Fanny!"

She stood and watched him, all her heart in her eyes, as he strode away with his pipe in his mouth and his gun on his shoulder; then biting the lips which he had so coldly ignored she sighed heavily and went indoors.

It was nearly dawn before Ralph returned to the hut and to bed, but tired as he was he was not too tired to dream; and he dreamt that he was standing by the stream, that Mr. Talbot was thrashing him with a broken stick, and that Miss Veronica was looking on and laughing! It was no pleasant dream by any means, and Ralph awoke with a cry of rage and humiliation and in a wringing perspiration.

That night at dinner Veronica wore a heavy gold bracelet which covered the spot on her wrist, and she kept the old-fashioned ornament on until her maid had left her for the night. Then she took it off slowly and looked long and musingly at the little red spot on her slender, white wrist.

"Blood-poisoning is very bad, I imagine," she thought, dreamily. "It is fatal sometimes, very often, I think. I suppose he knew that or he wouldn't have presumed, wouldn't have dared to—to do what he did." Her face flushed with sudden shame. "It is very humiliating. A gamekeeper! He is the first man who has kissed—no, no, no!—whose lips have touched me!" Her eyes glowed angrily then suddenly anger died out. "I wonder whether there was any danger for him? If there was poison in the wound—to call so small a pin prick a wound: it is too ridiculous!—but if there was, and he happened to have a scratch on his lips: gamekeepers often get scratched by the briars and—and—and things—Oh, how idiotic I am! What has come to me! How angry he looked when I as good as ordered him out of the hall. His eyes blazed; he was going to say something. I was afraid, yes, I was actually trembling inside. Did he see it? No, no; I am too clever, too artful. I wonder what he thinks of me? Not difficult to guess. What could he think but that I am so foolishly proud and heartless a woman as to be incapable of gratitude, incapable of feeling anything but offended by a man for attempting to save my life. I suppose he did save me, or did he take advantage of—of the accident! Ah, no, that's unjust! I'm old enough to know an honest man when I see him, and this man is honest and genuine, I'll stake my life, the life he saved—Oh, what nonsense! there was no danger—but there might have been—Oh, Veronica, my dear Veronica, are you out of your senses, that you cannot forget the whole thing, that you must dwell upon your adventure—hateful word!—with a young gamekeeper as if it were of any consequence! Young; that's it. He is young and ridiculously good-looking; that's the reason—" Her face flushed with the shame that ran through her like a fire. "I wish Lord Lynborough had let him go! But even he, so rarely moved one way or the other, seemed impressed by the man, seemed to feel his influence. A gamekeeper with influence!" She laughed impatiently. "It is too absurd! I am growing morbid and—and sentimental. This life of slothful ease and luxury is sapping my usually strong and healthy mind. I'll take Sally for a thirty-mile spin to-morrow."

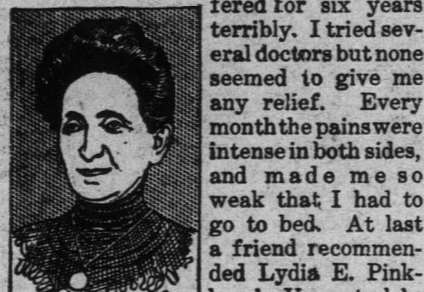
Sally was brought round soon after breakfast the next morning, and set off on a thirty-mile run which was to dispel the "morbid" vapours which possessed her mistress. The mare was young and fresh, and in the exuberance of her spirits, rose two or three times at starting; but Veronica's seat was well-nigh a perfect one, and she only laughed at Sally's preliminary antics, which subsided after her mistress had let her have her head across the park. When she had quite settled down for the time being, Veronica turned her into the wood. She had not gone very far through it before Sally pricked up her ears and started, and a moment afterwards Ralph came from amongst the trees to the edge of the narrow path.

He raised his cap, but Veronica, though—indeed, because—her heart gave a sudden bound at sight of him, kept her eyes fixed on Sally's ears

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and ignored Ralph's salutation. But the moment she had passed him she felt annoyed with herself.

"Now, why couldn't I have just bowed!" she thought, irritably. "The man will think I am attaching importance to his—presumption!"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders as he looked after her, then went his way. Fate chose to amuse herself with them that day as it had done on the previous one; for as, an hour later he crossed the top of a spinney, he heard the thud of hoofs behind him and, looking round, saw the mare tearing along the meadow at a break-neck pace. If she had not actually bolted she had very nearly done so, and Ralph, as he glanced at the wood towards which the mare was making, could not help thinking of the peril that awaited her rider from overhanging boughs, and treacherous undergrowth. He stood, leaning on his gun, and waited.

Veronica had got all her weight on the bit, and succeeded in pulling up the mare on the edge of the wood, and so close to Ralph that he saw she was riding on a snaffle. The significant fact dispelled his reluctance to address her; indeed, he would have done so if she had been his mortal foe. He went up to her and said, respectfully but with the unembarrassed frankness which Veronica had found so trying:

"Forgive me, Miss Gresham, but is it wise to ride your horse on a snaffle? She's young and fresh, I see."

Veronica was hot with the struggle and not in the sweetest of tempers.

"I always ride her on the snaffle," she said, curtly. "It is easier than a curb, and really more effective. If you knew anything about horses—"

"A smile which displayed itself for an instant in his eyes nettled her.

"But I suppose, like most men, you think you do."

"I was a cow-boy once," he said, simply. "And you've only one rein, I see," he added, going up to the mare and patting her. Sally, who had been fidgeting, sniffed at the hand which he slid over her nose—an old cow-boy trick, one Ralph had practised on Burchett's dog—and then, apparently satisfied, stood still and nibbled contentedly at his sleeve. "Now, that's rather risky, and if I were your groom I wouldn't allow it."

He reached the hut, and was removing the cartridges from his gun—a precaution he always took—when he heard something rushing and tearing through the brake and was just in time to spring upon the mare, which was thundering affrightedly through the clearing, and catch her by the—of course, broken—rein.

"Just what I thought!" he said to himself. He tied the mare up to a tree, then, with a sinking heart, he followed her tracks, and presently came upon Veronica. She was seated on a mossy bank, with her head in her hand.

She had lost her hat and her glorious hair had come partly undone, one dark, glossy strand falling over her cheek. She started at the sound of his footsteps and tried to rise, but sank down again and looked up at him with a mixture of helplessness, displeasure, and defiance.

(To be Continued.)

"You wouldn't allow—" repeated Veronica with a fine smile.

"No, I suppose he's responsible," said Ralph. "Two reins to a snaffle; but you'd better have a curb—you needn't use it—for a young and hot-headed mare like this: she's a beauty, oh, yes!—I admired her the other day—but she's a mare, and they're not always reliable. If she had bolted—she looked precious near it—and had carried you into the woods—Well, it would have been awkward."

"But I can pull her up; I did," said Veronica.

"This time, yes," he said, coolly; "but you might not always be able to do so; and your life is too precious—The blood rose to Veronica's face.

"Will you please let go of my rein?" she said, coolly.

"I beg your pardon," said Ralph, he colour coming into his tanned face, his eyes flashing with something like anger. "I meant any life was too precious to take such chances." His hand fell from the rein, and raising his cap he turned and struck into the wood.

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(To be Continued.)

went to the front and stayed there, because the skid-resisting surface forms a permanent part of the tire. T. 106

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