

# The Snake Scotched AND Justice Done.

CHAPTER XIV.  
(Concluded.)

He swung round with difficulty repressing an exclamation, for his nerves were strained to the highest tension, and saw himself confronted by an evil-looking man, who regarded him with a leer, half defiant, half ingratiating.

The man had the appearance of a tramp, and Talbot Denby's hand went instinctively to his pocket, and he was surprised when the man said: "Mr. Talbot Denby, I believe?"

Talbot looked at the man with amazement. "I am Mr. Talbot Denby," he said haughtily. "What do you want with me?"

"Ah! it's evident you don't remember me, gov'nor," said the man, with a short laugh, that was not far removed from a snarl. "I've got better cause to remember you!"

He held up a bandaged hand as he spoke and almost shook it in Talbot's face. There had been something about the man which had struck Talbot, when he had turned on him, as familiar, but only vaguely so; for in the excitement of his voice your gambler has little room for any impression beyond that caused by the game. But now he remembered. It was the man whom he had detected in the attempt to rob him, the man with whom he had struggled in Isaac's den.

Talbot's face grew a shade paler, but his eyes met the man's leering ones steadily enough.

"You are making a mistake, my man," he said, coolly. "I have never seen you before. Let me pass, please. I never give money to tramps and beggars."

Mr. James Oatway's face went an ugly red and his swollen lips rose from his yellow fangs.

"Oh, that's your game, is it?" he said, threateningly. "I'm making a mistake, my man, am I? It's likely ain't it, seeing the good reason I have not to forget you?" He waved the bandaged hand again. "Oh, you're mighty clever, you are; and you play it very well! You forget that your hat fell off, that I saw you face to face, as you may say, that night as you dealt me that cruel blow as maimed me!"

Talbot smiledardonally. "Oh, you are the man, are you?" he said, with a sneer. "Yes, you have cause to remember me, I admit. But the fact that you possess a good memory does not interest me. Stand aside and allow me to pass."

"One—moment!" said Oatway, in a kind of mockery of Talbot's contemptuous drawl. "I want a few words with you, Mr. Talbot Denby."

"I am afraid your wish will not be gratified," said Talbot. "I have nothing whatever to say to you."

"Oh, but I have to you!" retorted the man, with an air of confidence that surprised Talbot.

"Thanks; but I don't care to hear you. Now, my good fellow, cease annoying me, or I shall be compelled to call the policeman I see approaching us, and give you in charge for begging."

Oatway snarled and thrust his face close to Talbot, who shrank back. "Do it—do it!" he said. "Call him. Give me in charge. And I'll charge you before the magistrates with an assault on Isaac's place in 'Soho. See this hand!"

Talbot kept the sneer on his face though his soul was burning with the impatience which is born of, impotence: for if the man carried out his threat—"Charge against Mr. Talbot Denby, the well-known member of Parliament. Great scandal!" In imagination he saw the score-lines in the newspapers.

"See here, my good fellow," he said, slowly, impassively. "Your ridiculous threat would do you no good, and would only cause me a few hours' annoyance. No one would take your word against mine, and—I have never seen you before to-day. You understand? Quick! Make up your mind: the policeman is nearly here!"

Oatway regarded him with suppressed fury, and swore a hideous oath. "Why, you're as bad as the other!" he said, almost to himself. "One maims me and the other nearly chokes the life out of me. I've half a mind to go back to him."

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Talbot scarcely heard the muttered words, and paid little heed to them. "Quick! My word against yours, you know. You are a—sort of tramp. I am Mr. Talbot Denby, Lord Lynborough's heir—"

The sentence was broken in upon by a guttural laugh of scorn and brutal amusement from Oatway.

"You the heir to Lord Lynborough!" he half snarled, half jeered. "Oh, that's what you think you are, I daresay! But I can knock you off that perch, my lardy-dardy swell; and, by the Lord, I will if you don't sing a little smaller! Here's the peeler now; give me in charge and I'll tell 'em in open court what I meant for to tell you on the quiet!"

Talbot's face was like a mask. For the space of a second or two he hesitated. The man was sober enough; there was a certain self-reliance in his voice and manner. A vague curiosity rose in Talbot, a desire to hear him out.

The policeman came up to them, touched his cap to Talbot and eyed the tramp, who stood with his eyes fixed on Talbot's face. Talbot was silent, the policeman passed, and Oatway laughed with coarse satisfaction.

"That's all right!" he said, triumphantly. "Now you an' I are goin' to have a little chat, Mr. Talbot Denby. S'pose we go in at the gate and 'ave a sit down for a few minutes. Oh, don't you look so proud and 'aughty! You'll come fast enough. You're jess a-ying to hear what I've got to say."

Talbot shrugged his shoulders. "I was rather hard upon you the other night," he said, coolly; "and I daresay I owe you some amends some compensation. I'll give you five minutes," he added, as he walked through the gate and seated himself on the trunk of a felled tree out of sight of the road.

Oatway sank down beside him with a grunt of satisfaction. Talbot edged a little further away.

"Got a cigarette?" asked Oatway, insolently.

Talbot took one from his silver case and tossed it to him and the man caught it.

"And a light. Ah!" looking at the match-box. "Pretty box; cress and all complete. The family cress, I s'pose. I'll keep it as a kind o' souvenir."

He slipped the box in his pocket and puffed at the cigarette, blowing the smoke across Talbot's face.

"I was a bit premature just now," he said, watching with his small, evil eyes the resentment in Mr. Talbot Denby's. "I blurted out the truth too quick-like; but what's said is said; and I repeat it, you ain't Lord Lynborough's heir no more than I am."

Talbot smiled and glanced at his watch. "You are amusing, my man," he said; "but you're only four minutes left."

Oatway glared at him. "Oh, ain't I? Then I've got to be quick, 'ave'n't I? You're Lord Lynborough's nevy, ain't you?"

Talbot nodded, his eyes still on the watch. "Quite right; I am."

"Then you're mistook!" snarled Oatway, leaning forward, his hands on his knees, his cigarette in the corner of his thick lips. "The noble earl was married, and he has got a son!"

Talbot rose with a cold sneer. "I suppose you have been on the stage, my man," he said contemptuously. "If so, I can understand your failure. Here is a sovereign for you for your hand." He glanced at the bandage. Better leave the neighborhood as quickly as possible—

Oatway caught the coin and thrust it in his pocket. "The first o' many!" he said, confidently. "You think I'm lying, pitch n' a tale? Right ho! But I can prove it, prove it to you and everybody else's satisfaction. I knew the earl's wife—I know his son, his lawful son and heir—"

"Then I advise you to produce him," retorted Talbot with a sneer. "I've listened long enough to your tipsy ravings—"

"Produce him, you says," he whispered hoarsely in his ear. "It's easy enough to do that! Look there!"

Some workmen were coming along the road, and in their midst were

Ralph, his coat on his arm, his handsome, tanned face cheerful and smiling.

"Look there!" hissed Oatway. "By God, that's him!"

CHAPTER XV.

Talbot Denby did not start, but his dark eyes glittered with an ugly expression as they watched Ralph. Not for one instant did he suspect that there was an atom of truth in the man's assertion; but it was a strange coincidence that he should have pitched upon this young man, this game-keeper with whom Talbot had already been in conflict and whom he disliked, if not actually hated.

The story of the earl's marriage, of a son having been born to him, was of course a concoction, a vague and exceedingly stupid concoction made for the purpose of a blackmail. It was too much like an incident in a sensational novel, the scene of a Surry melodrama, to be treated seriously; and yet—

When Ralph had passed, Talbot glanced at the course face of the man beside him. It was working with agitation, a mixture of excitement and hatred which appeared to be genuine enough, and Talbot saw that the hand which the man drew over his ugly mouth was shaking.

Talbot laughed contemptuously. "I don't know which of the men you mean—"

"The young chap, the good-looking one," broke in Oatway, sullenly. "The one without his coat; that's the man I meant. You could have told easily enough by his difference to the rest."

The one that looked like a gentleman! "Ah; yes, I daresay. I didn't notice," said Talbot, carelessly. "But it's of no consequence. Of course I need not say that I do not believe a word of your ridiculous story. "And now—I think I must wish you good-day. Don't spend that sovereign in frink, my man; it is the last you will get from me."

He was rising, but Oatway laid a hand on his arm to detain him. "Sit down," he said in a much quieter tone than he had hitherto used. "I didn't expect you to believe me right offhand. It 'ude be too much. But I'm goin' to tell you the whole truth, and I'll wager my life you'll believe it when you've heard it."

Talbot sank down again with a shrug of his shoulders. "Cut the story as short as you can," he said; "I am rather tired of you."

"You'll be more tired of me when I've finished," retorted Oatway, gravely. His excitement at sight of Ralph had passed off and left him quiet and sober.

"Some years ago, when I was in Australia—"

"Convict, eh?" murmured Talbot; "or was it after the transportation days?"

Oatway glared at him and showed his fangs, but otherwise ignored the interruption.

(To be continued.)

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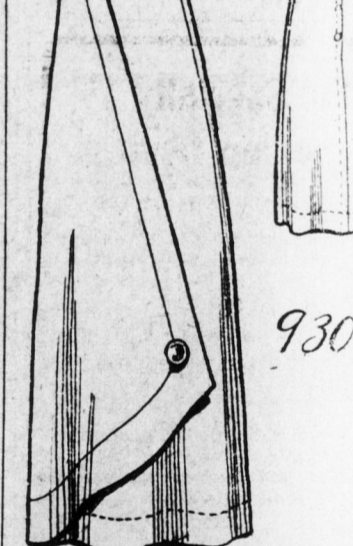
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