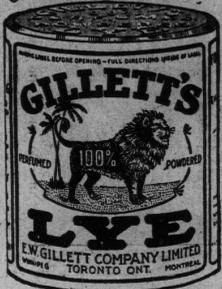


GILLETT'S LYE EATS DIRT



The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XXXI.

"You've been drinking again, you beast!" said Talbot, between his teeth. "You are right; you are not fit to accompany me. Go, get out of my sight! I'll find some means of punishing you!"

Gibbon spat on the ground and looked before him as if he had not heard his dismissal.

"Yes, I'm going to tell them all about it."

"All about what?" demanded Talbot, surprised into the question by the man's audacity.

"The murder," said Gibbon, as coolly as before.

Talbot did not start, was not, indeed, startled.

"What do you know about it?" he said, with a kind of impatient contempt. "What have you got into your head, you besotted fool?"

"I know all about it," said Gibbon, turning his eyes on his master for the first time. "Why, I was there all the time."

Talbot's hands closed on the edge of the coping, and the blue sky seemed to him to turn a blood red.

"You—were—" He could say no more, for his tongue seemed to have thickened and filled his mouth.

Gibbon nodded.

"Yes," he said, with a twist of the lips that was a hideous travesty of a smile. "I followed you that night. I thought you were up to something, Mr. Talbot. I watched you that evening, as I've watched you often and often before. Oh, I know what you keep in the safe in your room in Charlotte Mansions! I've heard you go out when you thought I was asleep, and followed you. I know all the places you go to for your card-playing and roulette. But that's of no consequence now; we've got bigger fish to fry. I knew you were up to something by the way you turned up your collar and slouched your hat over your eyes. I thought you were going to meet some girl, perhaps. I little thought of the game you'd got in hand."

He paused a moment or two and spat again. Talbot uttered no word—his tongue was still absurdly large for his mouth—and Gibbon went on: "I shadowed you to where the man was sitting in the wood, and I heard and saw everything that passed. I was so near to you, lying there in the bracken, that you might have heard me breathing if you hadn't been so busy. And that's what I'm going to tell his lordship, the earl, and the police, if you'd listened to me the other day when I asked for the money—not half enough, Mr. Talbot, sir, not half enough—if you'd treated me like a man instead of a dog, I'd have held my tongue, and you'd have been safe; for they say the evidence was strong enough to hang that young gentleman—I mean Lord Denby; but you was a fool. You've always treated me as if I was the dirt beneath your feet—worse! But I'm thinking it's my turn now, Mr. Talbot!"

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other day when I asked for the money—not half enough, Mr. Talbot, sir, not half enough—if you'd treated me like a man instead of a dog, I'd have held my tongue, and you'd have been safe; for they say the evidence was strong enough to hang that young gentleman—I mean Lord Denby; but you was a fool. You've always treated me as if I was the dirt beneath your feet—worse! But I'm thinking it's my turn now, Mr. Talbot!"

The man's garrulity had given Talbot time to recover from the shock, to collect his scattered senses. He laughed scornfully.

"My good man, you talk like an idiot who has just awakened from a dream—nightmare! And you thought to frighten me! BBah! Who do you think would believe this cock-and-bull story invented by a fall-bird, a convict, who happened to bear his master a grudge?"

Gibbon appeared unmoved.

"That's right enough," he said; "but I've got some evidence. There was the clothes you told me to brush—I've kept them—they're all over mould and moss—"

"I fell into a ditch," said Talbot, quickly, contemptuously. "You might have worn them yourself. Ah, you see!"

Gibbon eyed him with a reflection of the contempt in Talbot's eyes.

"Oh, stow it!" he said, scornfully. "I've got the pocket-book with the certificates!"

Talbot's face grew white and his eyes expanded.

Gibbon nodded.

"Yes. That touches you, Mr. Talbot, doesn't it? I got it out of the man's pocket while you went for the spade. Remember?"

Talbot remembered; was there any detail of that hideous deed that did not haunt him perpetually?

"I've got 'em here, sir," said Gibbon, striking his breast coat-pocket. "They'll help the young gentleman get his rights as well as hang you, Mr. Denby."

Talbot stood as if turned to stone; then suddenly he said:

"My man you have overreached yourself! Do you know—but of course you do not—that if I committed—if I—his tongue bothered him again—"If I was guilty, you, too, are in danger. You concealed the thing; you are, as they call it, an accessory after the fact."

Gibbon moved his lips into a smile.

"Yes; I know," he said, coolly;

"but I'm going to make my bargain with his lordship, the earl, and the police. I'm going to turn King's evidence; ever heard of that, Mr. Talbot? Oh, I may be a dog, and a fall-bird, but I'm not so ignorant as you think!"

As he spoke he seated himself on the edge of the low wall and swung his legs, and eyed his master with an air of gloating triumph.

Talbot looked over the man's head with an absent gaze, with eyes that saw nothing but—but what? Was it a scaffold, a tall figure, hideously like himself, with a white cap drawn over the face? He shuddered and passed his hand over his eyes.

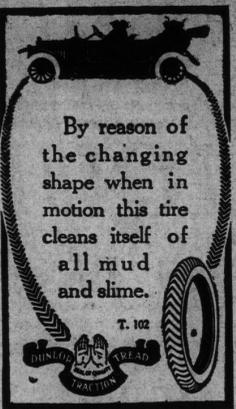
"See here, Gibbon," he said, in a low voice. "You have been a faithful servant to me—"

"You bound, you drunken beast, you fall-bird," murmured Gibbon, his eyes lighting up vindictively.

"A faithful servant, and I do not think you would do me an injury," Gibbon drew his thin lips into a grin.

"The least injury I would do you is to hang you," he said. "And I will."

"I think not!" said Talbot. "You are not such a fool as to tell this story, produce that pocket-book when, by holding your tongue—just holding



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your tongue, as you have done—and giving me the book, you can earn a couple of thousand pounds."

To his amazement, his terror, Gibbon laughed.

"Too late!" he said, coolly; "you weren't in court to the end—they told me how you bolted—and didn't hear Miss Veronica swear that she saw you that night; you don't know that Mr. Selby—ah, he's a sharp 'un, he is!—has got his suspicions."

While he had been speaking, slowly, tauntingly, as if he were enjoying every word as he sent it home, Talbot's quick brain was working.

And this was the line it was taking, with that swiftness, that marvellous precision which is as miraculous as the coming of spring, the growth of a grain of corn, the flowering of the daisy. The man, this manfiend who was torturing him, was in the possession of the pocket-book. If he were found—dead, say—with that book in his pocket, who would doubt that he was the murderer? Still more swiftly, acutely, the trained brain worked.

The man was sitting on the wall: if he fell—Talbot could say that the man had confessed the murder, had tried to make terms, that he, Talbot, struggled with him.

With a low cry, the guttural cry of a tiger springing on his prey, Talbot flung himself on him. But quick as the attack had been, Gibbon had been warned by the murderous flash of the eyes, and he stiffened himself and flinging out his arms threw them round Talbot. But he, Gibbon, had been taken at a disadvantage and he could only manage, with every bit of his strength exerted, to keep his back straight; he could not get his feet to the ground.

Talbot seized the advantage and pressed with all his force until Gibbon's back was nearly broken by the terrible strain. Then, with the suddenness born of despair, Gibbon holstered his assailant on to a level with himself. They swayed for a moment—a terrible moment—on the top of the wall, then, with an awful cry which seemed to rise from both lips at the same time, they fell over, locked in each other's arms, to the peaceful valley beneath.

CHAPTER XXXII.

At the moment Talbot and Gibbon were struggling on the wall of the viaduct, Mr. Selby entered the hotel and asked for Miss Gresham and Mr. Sainsbury.

They saw by his face, which was an eloquent one, excepting when he was in court or wished to conceal his thoughts, that he had something of importance to communicate to them; and Veronica entered the sitting-room in a state of suppressed excitement not unmixed with a vague fear and dread.

"What is it, Mr. Selby?" she asked, apprehensively. "I see that something has happened. Why did you call my cousin, Mr. Talbot Denby, as witness?" she added with a woman's quickness.

"Because I wanted him—Forgive me, Miss Veronica—it was wonderful how soon all her friends got to calling her by her Christian name; they excused themselves by saying that it was so beautiful; they really meant that the owner was so lovable—but I wanted him in many senses of the word. I am going to ask you to be brave; and I know I sha'n't ask in vain, for you have been—well, simply heroic during this hard time."

But prepare yourself for a shock. Miss Veronica, I think, indeed I am nearly sure, that I have found the murderer—criminal!"

Veronica sank into a chair, and Mr. Sainsbury and Burchett, who had entered the room, exclaimed.

Mr. Selby nodded.

"Yes; in my opinion the man who killed James Outway was—Miss Veronica, I have warned you; you will be calm? Is—his voice dropped—"Mr. Talbot Denby!"

Notwithstanding the warning, Veronica started, and a cry of horror and incredulity escaped her.

"Talbot!" she said. "Oh, no, no! It is impossible!"

"Nothing is so possible as the impossible," he said; "nothing is so certain to occur as the unexpected. That is a truism which is brought home to us lawyers every day in the week. Listen. My suspicions were first roused by the fact that Mr. Denby had been out in the woods that night, and that he had—denied it."

"He wanted to avoid being mixed up with the case," murmured Veronica. "Besides, what motive could Talbot Denby have in—killing the man? What connection was there between them?"

"The first question I can't answer definitely, though I can give a tolerable guess; the other I can. Look at this." He took a silver match-box from his pocket. "If you remember, this was found on the body. At the time one thought anything about it. It is true that it has the Denby crest; but the man might have picked it up or stolen it."

"Yes, yes!" she assented, eagerly. "Oh, yes!"

"Yes; but on the other hand, it may have been given him by Mr. Talbot Denby. Anyway, Groser, to whom I showed it just now, says that he noticed it in Outway's hand the day of the murder, and that he had not seen it in his possession before then; and he could not have failed to observe it if Outway had possessed it, used it. Now, there is the connection between the two. It is a small, almost invisible link, but it is a link, and I think I can construct the rest of the drama from it."

(To be Continued.)

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