



The Earl's Son;
—OR—
TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER VI.

The next morning, after she had answered the letters, Veronica went up to her room and stood looking out of the window musingly, her under lip caught in her teeth, a faint tinge of colour coming and going in her face. But the woman who hesitates is lost. Still resolving that she would not go to the stream, she exchanged her morning frock of muslin for a tailor-made costume of grey homespun, and left the house by the back hall.

Talbot was standing on the terrace, reading the Times and smoking a cigarette, and he looked up quickly as the graceful figure passed him and went down the steps.

"Are you going for a walk? May I come with you?" he said, expecting a ready assent; but Veronica smiled and shook her head.

"No, thanks," she replied with a coolness that surprised him. "I am in the humor for solitude this morning."

Her face crimsoned a moment or two after as she thought of her reply. Solitude! Was she not going to the stream on the chance of meeting Ralph Farrington?

But if she were, she was doomed to disappointment: there was no stalwart figure standing out against the sky; her "mood for solitude" was gratified.

She walked along the bank, trying to persuade herself that she was not in the least disappointed; but, soon satiated with her solitude, she was turning away to return to the house when she heard a step behind her, and Ralph came up with his rod in his hand. The blood did not rush to her face—but only a woman can tell what it cost her to keep it back—and she inclined her head slightly and curtly as he raised his cap.

"Good morning, Miss Gresham," he said in his frank, self-possessed way. "Sorry you didn't come down yesterday; the fish rose well and I got a good basket, though I kept all the best places for you—which was a pity."

"I have come this morning," said Veronica.

"Ah!" he said; "and I've left your rod at home. I found a nice light one, more suitable for a lady than this. I'll go back for it."

"No," she said, in a tone of command. "I cannot wait. I will use this one."

"As you please," he said, cheerfully. He looked at her woman-like dress approvingly, but eyed her boots doubtfully. "They're not water-proof, I suppose? No, ladies' boots never

are; you can't wade. Never mind. Here is the rod. Throw the fly just below that stone, where the ripple is. Oh, very good!"

She made several casts, then, impatiently: "Why doesn't a fish rise?" "There isn't one there," he said, drily. "There was one, but your fly came down like a lump of lead and frightened him. You must throw more lightly."

"Show me, please," she commanded. He took the rod—the butt still held the warmth of her hand, and it seemed to run like an electric thrill up his arm and to his heart—and showed her how to drop the fly like a piece of thistledown.

"See?"

"Oh, I see," she retorted, pettishly; "but I shall never do it."

"Never in a long day," he remarked encouragingly. "Why, that's better already. Fact is—after watching her for a moment—you are rather nervous. I'll leave you alone for a bit."

"I was never nervous in my life," she said, eyeing him with a superb surprise at his audacity.

He fought with a smile, but walked away a few yards and threw himself down on the grass, leaning on his elbow; she went on making casts, but suddenly she stopped and, thinking she had got the line entangled, he rose and went to her.

"Anything the matter?" Her face was flushed with annoyance and she was fumbling at something. "Why, yes! You have got the hook in your wrist!"

"Yes, and I cannot get it out. Take it out, please," she added, and she held out her arm imperiously.

He took the hand, his lips growing tight, his brows coming down in a kind of frown.

"Easier said than done," he said, gravely. "I have got it over the barb, and I am afraid I shall hurt you, Miss Gresham."

She smiled at him half disdainfully. "So small a thing as that hurt me! Please, pull it out!"

His eyes were fixed on the snow-white wrist in which the little fly was embedded, and they were still downcast as he took a small pair of scissors from his pocket.

"I can't pull it out. I must cut the skin—oh, very slightly; but it will hurt, though I will be as gentle as I can."

She laughed again. "It does not look like a very formidable operation," she said.

He raised his eyes for an instant and looked at her, and something in their expression sent the blood rushing to her face. She saw that he was pale, his lips set tightly, as if with the effort of repression, and she felt his hand tremble as it held hers lightly but firmly.

"Look away," he said, almost sternly. "You will not feel it so much."

She fought against the instinct of obedience, and kept her eyes on the hook. He was about to cut the skin and so release the hook, but paused in the act and raised his eyes again.

"Look away, please," he said in a low voice. "I can't do it while—while you watch me!"

She smiled tormentingly, with all the woman's enjoyment in his novel discomfiture.

"Are you so egotized by the sight of blood?" she said, half mockingly. "Are you a gamekeeper?"

He shook his head, his lips set tight, and laughed low and grimly. "Not by oceans of it," he retorted; "but to give you—a woman—pain! That's another matter!"

She was quick to notice the voluntary "you," and a smile shone in her downcast eyes.

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"You'd better let me do it—I don't mind the pain."

"No, no," he said. "You'd make a cut—a gash—of it. I can do it so that it will scarcely leave a mark. It would be a pity—He did not finish the sentence, but she could feel his eyes on her white wrist that was glowing with a soft and strangely new warmth in his light grasp.

"Ah, well!" he breathed, as if it had to be done. She felt the sharp point of the scissors as he made the cut, and the little pang of pain as he drew out the hook; but she would not wince. She was about to withdraw her hand with a cold "Thanks," but, to her surprise, he still held it.

"Wait!" he said. "The fly was an old one I have used several times; they get poisoned sometimes. I'm sorry—but there is no other way!"

Before she could stop him he had bent his head and she felt his warm lips on the tiny wound.

The blood rushed to her face, then left it pale.

"Was that—necessary?" she demanded.

"It was. I have known blood-poisoning from less cause: a pin's prick will do it sometimes; and I could not risk it. It's left a mark—but it will be all right!"

He dropped her hand, almost flung it from him, and, as if he were struggling against some emotion, said, roughly:

"I'll take the rod and see if the fish are rising."

As he strode up stream and, wading in, began to fish, Veronica stood, still as stone, looking from the red spot on her wrist to the man whose lips had touched it.

"Veronica!"

She looked up with a start. Talbot Denby was standing beside her, eyeing her with cold surprise.

"What are you doing here with that fellow?" he asked, pointing to Ralph Farrington.

CHAPTER VII.

"What are you doing here with this fellow?"

Veronica's face flushed and her lips parted with the retort, "What business is it of yours, Mr. Denby?" but she checked it, and, drawing herself to her full height, looked at him with the air of proud disdain and surprise which, when it flashes from so beautiful a woman as Veronica, cuts a man like a whip, and turning away from him went slowly up the bank.

Talbot Denby looked after her for a moment, gnawing his lip, then strode towards Ralph.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Ralph glanced over his shoulder.

"I'm getting some trout—at least, trying to do so," said Ralph, eyeing him as if he wondered where he had come from and what was the matter with him.

Talbot was conscious of a feeling of surprise and doubt: the man in his shapely fishing-suit looked and spoke like a gentleman.

"Who are you?" he said, with al-

most open insolence.

"I'm one of the Lynborough's gamekeepers," replied Ralph, gravely. "Who are you?"

Talbot's face flamed. "You are insolent, my man!" he said. "I am Mr. Talbot Denby, the earl's nephew. You will take a month's notice."

Ralph came to the bank and, taking a fresh fly from the lappel of his coat, put it on with deliberate care.

"That's strange," he said, meditatively. "His lordship appears to have changed his mind pretty quickly. He engaged me only the other day. What's wrong?"

Talbot Denby eyed him with smouldering rage.

"It is not my custom to give explanations to discharged servants," he said. "Nor do I think it necessary to teach a man his place. You seem to forget yours, my man. What were you doing with Miss Gresham, the lady who has just left us?"

"Teaching her to throw a fly," said Ralph, very quietly.

"And you took advantage of—of—her condescension. I was on the hill and saw you"—his lips twitched angrily—"saw you kiss her hand."

"Your imagination is better than your eyesight," said Ralph, just glancing up at the white face. "You saw me taking a hook from Miss Gresham's wrist—"

"You are lying, you impudent scamp!" exclaimed Talbot.

Ralph threw the fly across the stream as if to try it, then he said, as quietly as before:

"The lie's yours—and the impudence."

Talbot's fury mastered him; taking a step forward he raised his stick. Ralph's left hand shot out and gripped Talbot's arm, which seemed suddenly to have lost all power, for the stick fell to the ground, and when Ralph released the limb it dropped to its owner's side as if it were paralyzed.

(To be Continued.)

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