



The Earl's Son

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XV.

The earl nodded, and seemed lost in thought for a moment or two, then he said: "Quite so. I appreciate her delicacy. Few women can resist a persistent devotion. You had better stay here as long as you can, and come down more frequently. I am not averse to the match. I don't think you're worthy of her, of course—" "No man is!" murmured Talbot, with well-simulated modesty. "Quite so," assented the earl. "I agree with you; and that being so, you are as deserving as another. You have this in your favor: that her affections are not engaged. Of course she has had many suitors—young Sainsbury, for instance—but I do not think she is inclined to any of them." "I am glad to hear it, sir," said Talbot. "I shall certainly persevere." The earl nodded approvingly and, leaning back, shut his eyes as if the subject were concluded; and Talbot, taking a book at random, went out of the room in his slow and languid fashion. It was not until he had reached the hall that he realized that his courage had failed him, and that he had not ventured to sound the earl on his "early life."

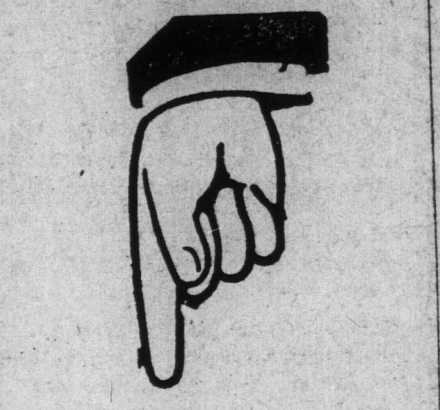
CHAPTER XVI.

That afternoon Veronica suffered from the peculiar affliction that ladies call a "restless fit." Talbot Denby's proposal, the fact that her decision had been affected by the sight of Ralph Farrington, worried her, made the imprisonment to her room intolerable, and the reclining attitude on a couch impossible. She was pining for the open air, for the solitude of the woods, for some place away from the enervating influence of the stately rooms of the Court; and at last she summoned Goodwin from a delightful gossip in the servants' hall.

"I want to go out, Goodwin," she said. "The carriage, miss?" responded Goodwin, promptly; but Veronica shook her head emphatically. "No! I do not want to call anywhere. I want to go for a drive by myself. Ask Matthews to let me have the jingle and the old pony. I don't want anyone with me. You understand?" Goodwin gave the order and came back in a few minutes to dress her mistress. "Matthews says that you'll only be able to go a short distance, and that the pony's very slow, miss?" she said. "Oh, I only want to moon about!" said Veronica. "I want the open air; the house seems stifling. Has the earl gone for his drive?" "His lordship felt strong enough for a little walk, miss," replied Goodwin, "and he's gone into the grounds. Pray mind how you go, miss! Lean on me!" "Oh, I can nearly walk quite well!" said Veronica as she went down the stairs. Matthews and Goodwin, assisted by the butler and a footman, put her into the jingle, and Veronica, with a sigh of relief and satisfaction, took the reins and shook the aged pony into the semblance of a trot. The weight on her mind lifted as she drove away from the great house and into the leafy woods, and her spirits asserted themselves and threw off the cloud of Talbot Denby's proposal in the clear, fine air permeated by the pines through which the jingle threaded its solitary way. The intense stillness, the solitude, was like balm to her harassed mind, and the dark brows relaxed, and the lips grew less strained and hard. The pony jogged along, perfectly contented with himself and his driver, and Veronica let him go on his own pace until she reached one of the rustic arbours which the earl had caused to be built amongst the fragrant pines. Then she pulled him up and leant back in the comfortable little cart, and looked about her with a wistful sigh. It was all very silent and lonely, and it was loneliness she had wanted, but still—but still she was not quite satisfied. Suddenly she heard a step, a firm step, crushing through the bracken and, without turning her head, she saw Ralph Farrington beside her. He had his gun on his shoulder, and the two dogs were at his heels. The blood mounted to her face, but she drove it back again, and turned to him with an admirably assumed calmness. Ralph raised his cap and silenced the yapping of the dogs. "Good-afternoon, Miss Gresham," he said. "I hope you are better!" "Thanks, I am quite well," she replied, coldly. "That is, my foot is nearly all right, and I shall be able to walk again presently." "I am glad," he said. "I heard from the Masons that you were going on all right." "Oh," she said, curtly. "That is why you have not been up to the

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Court to enquire, I suppose?" She spoke with an affectation of indifference, which, of course, Ralph's dull, masculine mind did not detect. "That's why," he said, simply. "That's a very old pony, but a good one." She shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, I am tired of sitting here. Will you help me into the arbour, please?" He put his gun against one of the posts of the summer-house and helped her out of the jingle. She leant rather heavily on his arm, and the touch of her hand brought the blood to his face, but his voice was quite steady as he said: "Wait till I dust the seat—it hasn't been used for months. That's all right." She sank back into the rustic seat and looked straight before her. "You must lead a most joyous life," she said, "just walking through these beautiful woods, with nothing to do—" "But look after poachers who are as cunning and persistent as Old Nick!" he retorted, grimly. "But, oh, yes; it's enjoyable enough, and I'm sorry to have to leave it." She raised her eyes for an instant, then looked away from him. "To leave it? I thought you were quite contented with your—place. I saw you this morning at the weir, and you seemed happy enough." He glanced at her, then his eyes fixed themselves upon the glade that opened before them. "Yes, I was. I am happy enough when there is hard work to be done, such as there was this morning; but— Ah, well, you wouldn't understand, Miss Gresham!" "Why should I not?" she retorted. "Do you think I am lacking in intelligence? What you mean is that you have grown restless, as you said the other day—" "Yes," he responded, gravely. "I have grown restless. I sigh for fresh woods and pastures new—" She looked surprised at the quotation from Milton: a strange one, coming from a gamekeeper. "—And it's time I moved on, as the police say." "And where will you go?" she asked in a low tone. He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Fate will decide. Fate decides most things for us." "And when?" she asked, with well-simulated indifference. "At once," he replied. "As soon as Burchett can find someone to fill my place, and he will find no difficulty in doing that." "I am sorry you have not been happy here—at Lynne Court," she said. He paused. "That's it," he said. "I have been too happy." "Too happy!" she repeated, incredulously. "When did you make up your mind to go?" "Just now," he replied, absently. She was silent a moment, pondering over his reply, her eyes downcast. She was no longer restless and dissatisfied; a sense of peace and happiness, like the warmth of the

summer sun, had stolen over her heart; but it fled, and left a chill behind as she remembered that he was going. The silence grew irksome, intolerable. She knew that he was looking at her, and she grew embarrassed under his gaze, which she felt was full of sadness and melancholy. "I must be going," she said. "Oh!"—suddenly but casually—"did you find my handkerchief?" "Yes," he replied. He was standing behind her, ready to assist her to rise, but she saw his hand go to his breast, and she said, quickly: "Oh, thanks! Bring it to me tomorrow here. I shall come at the same time. I like pottering along with this old pony," she said, hurriedly, as if an excuse were needed. "Very good," he responded. He helped her to the carriage. She could have walked alone very well, but she leant on his arm; and when she started she asked him the name of one of the wild flowers, and, of course he had to pace beside the jingle. She kept him, without his being aware that she was detaining him near her by intention until they had got to the edge of the wood; then she said: "At the same time, please—unless you will be gone before then?" she added, and raised her violet eyes to his face. "No, no!" he replied, swiftly and unsteadily. "I will be here, Miss Gresham." She drove off down the road to the Court, and Ralph, after waiting a moment or two leaning on his gun, and staring, with a frown, at the ground, went his way. Five minutes after they had left the arbour the earl rose from a rustic seat, which was fixed to the back of it, and with bent head and stern face paced slowly towards the Court. When Veronica returned to the house she found him seated before the hall fire. (To be Continued.)

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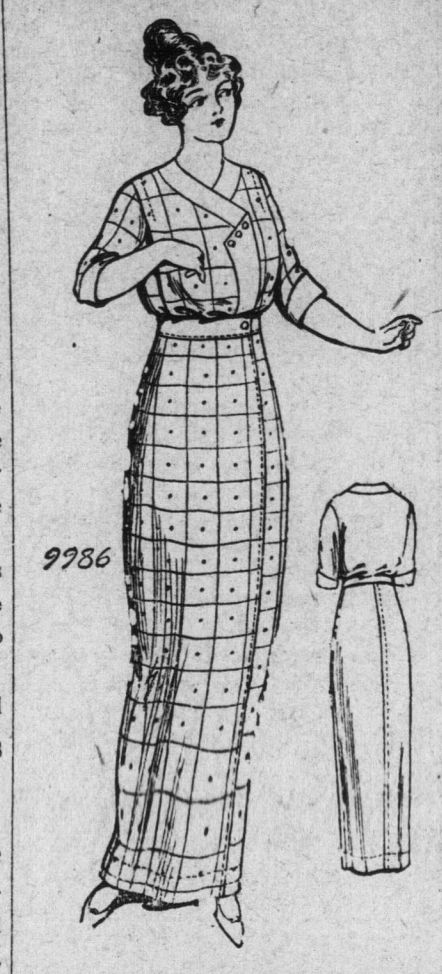
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