The Snake Scotched

—AND—

Justice Done.

CHAPTER XIV.

(Concluded.)

"I can scarcely hope that you return my affection, Veronica," he said, with appropriate humility. "That would be too much! But I hope to win your love in time, and I am willing to wait. But, dear Veronica, perhaps you will let me plead my cause, perhaps I may win your consent now. I am not a stranger; you know me, we are kith and kin—that is not to my advantage, perhaps; but I have some claim on your interest. Veronica, you know my ambition, that I have a career before me that may be no mean one. With you to help and encourage me, better still, with you to work for, I feel that I could attain to the highest position in this kingdom. Yes, Veronica, the hope has been a secret confined to my own bosom, but I venture to tell you—you!—that, given luck and opportunity, I might become leader of our party. It is an exalted position, one which is the legitimate ambition of the best and highest in the land. Will you help me to achieve it? Will you share it with me? Think, Veronica! To be the wife of the foremost man in England—yes, in the world! And you would reign so worthily, would fill the position so admirably, so nobly! Ah, Veronica, don't think I rest my claim to your love on this; you will not think I am trying to bribe you! No, I merely lay the chance, the prospect, before you, as a monarch might lay down his crown, a conqueror his laurel wreath. It is because I love you that I ask you to be my wife."

His voice dropped to an earnest, eager murmur, and he leant forward and looked at her. The blush had fader from her face, which wore its usual hue of ivory, her lips were set and her brows were drawn straight with a troubled, doubtful expression.

She was trying to picture the future he had drawn so cleverly, but though her pride was stirred and flattered, her heart was not touched, and it beat slowly and doubtfully.

"In any case, whether I reach the premiership or miss it, you would be the Countess of Lynborough," he went on in smooth, persuasive accents. "And, Veronica, I do not think a lesser title, position, would satisfy you. I know your heart, I know how proud proud you are. You would not be happy in a lower sphere, one less worthy of you. You were born to reign, to move among the high and noble, you would not be satisfied, content, in a sphere beneath that in which you were born. Am I not right, Veronica?"

She turned her head away from his dark eyes as she tried to tell herself that he spoke truly.

"Together, hand in hand, we can move the world—our world," he murmured, temptingly. "Oh I think I see you the mistress, the leader of our party, with all the world at your feet, its acknowledged queen! But, Veronica, we won't speak of this. After all, I rest my claim on my love for you. The rest may come afterwards, my love shall be first and foremost."

She tries to think, to weigh her words to telll herself that he was in earnest and that she had no right to refuse what he offered her. She called her pride to her aid, tried to see herself the leader of fashion, the wife of the first man in Europe—but her heart would not respond, and still beat heavily. She grew impatient with herself and her lack of enthusiasm, called herself dull and irresponsive, and with a gesture of impatience turned the ponies down a lane which leads to a road beside the river.

"Well, Veronica?" he murmured. "Will you give me some hope, at least? It is not only I who will be made happy if you will say 'Yes,' Veronica. I think—I am sure—the earl wishes to see us united."

She started slightly as she remembered the condition on which she was to inherit Wayneford and the earl's private fortune. Had he contemplated the marriage with Talbot? Yes; it would be only natural that he would do so. The estates and title and the money would go together; the scheme would be complete and rounded off. Her lips parted and she sighed. He saw the effect his artful suggestion had made and bent a little closer to her.

"You will say yes, Veronica?" he whispered. "You will make us both happy—and, dare I venture to add, yourself, also?"

The words jarred upon her, and increased her doubts, but she fought against them and called her pride to her aid again. And Pride might have won, for she was slowly turning her troubled face toward him, when the ponies swung into the river road, a sound of men shouting, of the blows of hammers, broke the stillness, and, looking round swiftly, she saw a gang of men at work on the weir opposite which they had just arrived. On the weir itself stood a tall form, a crowbar in one hand, the other raised in an attitude of command.

It was Ralph. He had taken off his coat and waistcoat, the collar of his shirt was unfastened, and the sleeves turned up over the muscular, sunburnt arms. He did not see, or hear, in the noise of the work, the pony-carriage, but Veronica could see his handsome face all aglow, yet set, with earnestness; and in an instant her heart spoke out and clamoured its protest against the thing she was doing. A kind of deathly sickness assailed her, the sort of vertigo one feels when one is drawing back from the edge of a precipice. It was not only a protest which clamoured for recognition, but a deeper, a more intense feeling; as if the temptation to which she had been on the point of yielding were loathsome and despicable.

Her hands shook, her eyes closed for a moment. When they opened she saw that Ralph had seen her. His hand had fallen to his side; he stood, looking at her as if he had forgotten his men, the work in which, only a moment before, he had been engrossed, as if he could not take his eyes from her.

His hand went slowly up to his cap, and he raised it. The blood surged in Veronica's heart, but would not come to her face, in which the terror of her peril still expressed itself. She did not return his salutation, but drove on, her eyes fixed before her.

As if he were recovering from a kind of spell, Ralph raised his crowbar again and resumed work.

Talbot had seen him, and he looked swiftly, keenly, from the stalwart, heroic figure to the white face.

"Well, Veronica?" he murmured.

She started slightly, almost as if she had forgotten his presence.

"I am sorry," she said in a low voice, but a perfectly clear one. "I was thinking, trying— But I can't. I am sorry!"

His face darkened, and he looked at her with a mixture of surprise and malignant disappointment.

"You mean—surely you cannot mean that you refuse me?" he said, trying to speak gently, but knowing that his voice rang hard and cold.

"Yes," she said, biting her lip. "I am very proud, very grateful. I wish — But it is impossible!"

"Impossible! Do you mean that you do not care for me? I can quite understand that you should not — at present; but—"

"No, no!" it is impossible—impossible! Please do not speak of it, or—or think of it again!"

His lips went as white as its sallowness would permit, and his thin lips came together as they did when he was hard pressed at the House—or losing heavily at the silvery hell in Soho.

"Perhaps I have been forstalled—perhaps there is someone else—" he said, with the suggestion of a sneer in his tone and on his lips.

She swung round on him, with an angry spot on each cheek, and her violet eyes flashing with maiden wrath.

"How dare you—" then she checked herself, and, with throbbing heart, forced herself to outward calmness. "You have no right to ask me the question; but since you have, I will answer you. There—is not!"

"Forgive me!" he said in a low voice. "Make some allowance for my disappointment. I had no right—But I am glad to hear—"

He was silent for a moment or two, his eyes half hidden beneath the white lids, his thin lips writhing; then he said, coldly:

"I hope this will make no difference between us, Veronica? I mean that it is scarcely worth while to tell the earl, to alter our friendly relations."

She shrugged her shoulders. Her heart was beating with a sense of relief, of thanksgiving. Has not one the right to be thankful when one has been saved at the very brink of the precipice?

"I shall not tell the earl—or anyone," she said. "It need not break off our—friendship. I will try to forget it; as you doubtless will do."

"No, I shall not forget," he said, in a low voice and with a forced sigh.

"Oh, I think you will," he retorted, forcing a smile. "How beautiful those dahlias are!"

They had entered the avenue by this time, and presently the ponies drew up to the steps. He helped her out, but Veronica took her hand from his arm and transferred it to Goodwin's.

"Thanks very much for the drive," she said; but her eyes were averted from him.

Talbot went up to the terrace and lit a cigarette; his face was set, his thin lips drawn. No man likes to be refused, even when his heart is not staked on his suit; but Talbot was playing for higher stakes than hearts. It had never occurred to him that Veronica would reject him.

Why, it seemed only the other day she had come, a penniless orphan, to take up the position of a dependant at the Court. It was true that her position was altered, but still—to refuse a coronet!

But wounded pride was not the emotion that predominated in his breast. Mr. Talbot Denby, the "coming man," the man to whom the eyes of the public were turning with a certain expectancy, was in terrible straits, and stood on the brink of ruin.

Of late luck had gone against him, everything he had touched had gone wrong; he had gambled in stocks and shares as secretly as he had gambled in the silver hell at Soho, and his speculations on the Stock Exchange had turned out as badly as his plunging at the roulette table. He had gone to the Jews and raised money on his life interest in the Lynne estates. A large portion of the two thousand pounds the earl had given him on his last visit had been swallowed up in paying the usual exorbitant interest. A speedy marriage with Veronica would have tided him over, renewed his credit with the Jews, saved him. And now—she had refused him.

His hand trembled so that his cigarette fell from the limp fingers. He set his foot upon it—it might have been Veronica, so malignant was the expression on his face, so bitter the oath that escaped him—and, as if he could not remain in one place, he aimlessly walked down the steps and along the path through the shrubbery.

He reached the lodge, as mechanically, passed through the massive iron gates into the road, and was walking on, his head bent, his brows heavy with thought, when he was conscious of footsteps behind him. Instinctively he smoothed the lines from his face, raised his head and assumed a more cheerful air. Suddenly the steps behind him quickened, and he felt a touch on his shoulder.

(To be continued.)

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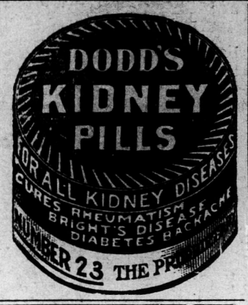

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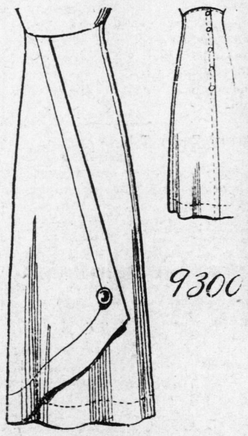

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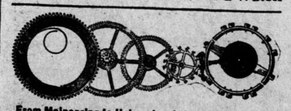

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