

The Earl's Son; TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER XII.

Burchett's warning rang in his ears. Notwithstanding his almost fierce repudiation of the suggestion that he was unduly interested in Miss Veronica, he had an uneasy sense that Burchett was right. He tried to laugh at the idea, but the laugh was a failure, and so he fell to self-scorn and inwardly called himself a fool.

"Yes, that is what I am," he mused, bitterly. "The worst kind of fool and idiot. What have I got to do with the great lady of the Court? Been kind to me. Of course! Why not? She'd be kind to a dog, if she was in the mood. And she was in the mood to be kind to-day, as it was her whim to be cold and insolent yesterday—as it will be to-morrow. Perhaps she was feeling a little grateful because she was in pain and I'd come up at the right moment to help her. How gentle she was when she told me that she had been poor, how soft her voice grew! One would never believe it could be so soft! And her face was quite altered, with all the pride gone out of it and her eyes like—like—what are the lines?—like violets washed in dew."

He stopped short and drew his hand across his brow with a gesture that was very nearly one of dismay. "There I am again, notwithstanding Burchett's warning, thinking of her, picturing her! It seems as if I could not get her out of my mind! The whole place seems full of her—!" He glanced round him confusedly; then he frowned and swore under his breath. "Why shouldn't I think of her! Thought is free. The lowest of men can think if he likes. And what harm can it do her if I consider her to be the loveliest, the sweetest—Oh, great Heaven, what is the matter with me? Is there something in the air of this place that robs a fellow of his strength and grit? If so, the sooner I clear out the better. Will you move your chair so that I can see you, please?" How sweetly she said that: not proudly, as if she were addressing a servant, but an equal—

He swore again and reddened with shame for his weakness. "There I am again! Oh, I'll have to go, that's evident!"

He laughed with self-contempt and walked on still more quickly, trying to concentrate his attention on his work.

He had nearly traversed the wood when the dogs which, unnoticed by him, had been running hither and thither and whimpering, set up a

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sharp yap of warning and dashed in front of him; and he saw a man running smartly for the fence which divided the wood from the road.

Ralph set off after him, calling to him to stop; but the man gained the fence and half leapt, half tumbled over it as Ralph, clearing the rails almost at the same moment, seized him by the collar. The man struggled, but Ralph's grip was like that of a vice, and after a moment he stood still, swearing under his breath.

Ralph dragged him from under the shadow of the trees and saw that it was the man with the bandaged hand. "What are you doing here?" he asked, rather glad to find someone he could be angry with besides himself. "Do you know that you are trespassing?"

"Am I?" replied the man, with covert insolence. "No, now! I thought as this was the high road, mister!"

"You were in the woods a moment ago when I called to you," said Ralph, sternly.

"Was I? I think you're mistook," said the man, with a laugh. "The light ain't very good and I think it kiped of deceived you. Don't you shake me, mister!"—Ralph had given him a shake—"and 'ave the goodness to take your 'and off me; you're spoiling my collar. D'e 'ear? Let me go, or I'll have the law of you! This is the king's 'ighway, and nobody hasn't the right to interfere with a man when he's done no 'arm on it. Leggo!"

Ralph forced him up against a tree and, holding him, eyed him keenly.

"I believe you were poaching," he said, sternly.

The man grinned.

"Oh, you do, do you! Then you're wrong— Take your hand out o' my collar; I'm 'alf choked. Poachin'! Where's my gun? I ain't so much as a stick!"

"But you may have a snare," said Ralph; "and I'm going to search you."

The man laughed defiantly.

"Now, don't you be so uppish, young man," he said, with a mixture of defiance and cajollery. "I suppose a man can take a walk in your blasted woods without being mauled by every whipper-snapper—"

"Turn out your pockets," said Ralph, who had grown cooler by this time. "If you refuse, I'll keep you here until the policeman comes along—"

"'s about his time—and give you in charge as a suspicious character."

The man's evil face was twisted in a leer that was intended to be ingratiating.

"Look 'ere, Mr. Ralph Farrington," he said, persuasively, "don't you make yourself unpleasant to me; don't you, now. I ask you to treat me

like a friend, for I've a kind o' friendly feelin' to you. Yes, I have!" as Ralph expressed his sense of the value of the assertion by a little shake. "I'd do you a good turn, if it came my way; and who knows as it won't? Who knows, I say—"

"Turn them out!" said Ralph, grimly. "I'm one of the keepers, as you know—"

"You're an insolent and overbearing dog of a puppy!" snarled the man. "There, then!"

He turned out his trouser and coat pockets, muttering to himself and glaring at Ralph. There was some money and odd things—a big knife amongst them—but no snare. Ralph's eyes went to the man's breast pocket, and he pointed to it.

"Turn that out," he said. "If there is nothing there—"

The man's hand flew to the pocket as if involuntarily, and Ralph, jumping to the conclusion that he had bowled him out, tore open the coat and pulled out an old pocket book much bulged by its contents. There was nothing else.

The man uttered a snarl—the snarl of a dog from which a tasty bone has been snatched—and with an awful oath flung out his hands.

"You thief!" he cried, hoarsely. "You thief! Gimme back my property!"

In his fury he shook himself free from Ralph's grasp and flung himself upon him, snarling and swearing savagely. Ralph grappled with him—it was difficult to avoid handling the man roughly—and flung him to the ground.

"Get up," he said, sternly. "Get up and go; but remember the warning I gave you. If I find you on the Court grounds again I'll give you in charge for trespassing or poaching. There's your pocket book."

The man snatched at it and returned it to its place. His face was livid with fury and he shook his fist at Ralph's face.

"You—you—hound! You'll find that this is the worst night's work you've ever done! You've turned your best frined agen you! You've—yah! I'll be even with you if it costs me a fortune," he snarled, tugging at his neck, which still felt the pressure of Ralph's hand.

"Be off!" said Ralph. "Be off, and thank your stars that you've got clear. And remember what I say—"

"Yes! And you remember what I say!" retorted the man, furiously; "for as sure as my name's Jim Oatway, I'll make you repent this night's work."

With another snarl and a muttered imprecation, the man slunk off, and Ralph, after watching him for a moment, vaulted the fence and tramped homewards.

"That's done me good," he said, cheerfully. "I wanted a row with someone and Mr. James Oatway was kind enough to oblige. I wonder what he has in that pocket book?"

If he could have known.

CHAPTER XIII.

As Veronica lay on a couch by the open window of the small drawing room the fourth day after her accident, the earl came in with a telegram in his hand.

"How are you getting on, Veronica?" he asked, leaning on his stick with both hands and looking down at her.

She laughed a trifle impatiently.

"Doctor Thorne persists in saying that I am 'getting on' very well indeed, and is quite heart broken when I venture to disagree with him," she said. "I do trust I shall never sprain my ankle again! It would have been almost more satisfactory if I'd broken my leg—there would have been some excuse for lying like a log from day to day."

The earl smiled with a kind of cynical sympathy.

"You have your books—"

"Yes, I know!" she responded, resentfully, eyeing the latest from Maudie's, where it lay on the floor as it had fallen from her hand. "But I don't seem able to read. And most of the books are so stupid!"

"As how?" he asked, regarding the lovely and rather flushed face as if he were studying it.

The flush deepened and she laughed again, and this time more impatiently.

"Oh, I don't know! They all are about one subject—love! It is love, love, and nothing but love! As if it were not only the most important

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thing in one's life, but as if everything else didn't matter in the least."

"Perhaps it is; perhaps they don't," he said, almost to himself.

She looked at him with faint surprise.

"I should scarcely have thought that you would have agreed with them," she remarked. "In this book I have been reading a girl makes the most tremendous sacrifices, sinks her rank, leaves her place in society, in the world; in fact, gives up everything for the man she loves."

"And finds that she has bartered the substance for the shadow, given gold for copper, sacrificed herself in vain!" he said.

"Oh, dear, no!" she retorted. "This is one of the 'marry-and-live-happy-ever afterwards' novels. That is what makes me so impatient with it. It is so improbable."

"Yes, improbable enough," he said; "because the contract is never an equal one. It is always a case of being loved and loving, and the one who loves is the one who makes the sacrifice—of course. And the time comes when either he or she makes the lamentable discovery that they have sacrificed themselves in vain; that the thing wasn't worth the pence they paid for it. I take it that your heroine—it is always the heroine, by the way, who yields everything—makes what is called an unequal match?"

Veronica nodded and pushed the hair from her forehead.

"Ah!" he said, with his cold smile. "That is always a mistake; and I believe it is generally discovered before the honey-moon is over. And then it is bad for both of them, for the one who stoops from his or her high place, and the one stooped to. Marriages are made in heaven, they say, but—I have long had my doubts."

"Is that telegram for me?" asked Veronica, as if the subject had ceased to interest her.

"No; it is from Talbot. He appears to have suddenly discovered a novel desire for our society. He has succeeded in 'pairing' in the House, and is coming down for a few days."

"I will give the necessary orders," said Veronica, reaching for the bell.

"Don't trouble; I have done so," he said. "I am glad Talbot is coming—I am always glad, of course—he will be company for you. I am afraid these last few days have been dull ones."

"Oh, no, not at all, Lord Lynbriought," she responded, but she checked a sigh; for indeed she had found them dull. The restraint would have been bad enough, but she had not only been chained to the couch or to the bath chair, but had been chained so to speak, to her own thoughts. No book or music could stifle them or dispel them; and much to her annoyance and humiliation they had centred on one subject—Ralph Farrington. And now this book—she glanced at it reproachfully—harped upon the theme of a girl's love for her inferior, and the sacrifice she had made for that love. It had ended, as Veronica had complained, happily enough, but she knew that the conclusion was false, and that in real life the heroine, and the man also, would have been extremely wretched.

(To be Continued.)

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