

NO LUM



The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED.

CHAPTER XV.

Talbot raised his head and knitted his brows. Now that the man mentioned it, he remembered that Farrington was one of the family names. He had not heard it for years, but—Ah, yes, it was a mere coincidence, of course.

"Is that all?" he asked, contemptuously. "I have listened very patiently, my man—"

"I ain't done yet," said Oatway stolidly. "The other night as I was sauntering, just for exercise, through the woods, I came upon the head-keeper's hut. There was two of 'em a-talkin', this Ralph Farrington an' the head-keeper; an' just for passin' the time, I crep' up an' listened. Burchett was tellin' about the way his sister Janet was lured away by one o' the swells at the Court, how she disappeared an' left no trace—usual kind o' thing, you know; but it set me thinkin', an' I was goin' away to think it out, when the young 'un—nearly spotted me afore through on o' those cursed dawgs o' his—collared me in the last spinney. He treated me rough, he did! Reg'lar mauled me!"

His hand went to his throat and loosened his collar, as if he were choking.

"He treated me vile, he did!" he went on, with an oath and an ugly scowl. "An' it's well for you he did!" he added, with a sudden snarl; "for if he'd been civil an' gentle with me I should have up an' told him what I'm tellin' you; an' where would you have been then, Mister Talbot Denby?"

Talbot smiled.

"Very much where I am now, my man!" he said; "for, of course I

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needn't tell you that I don't believe a word of your extremely crude—of your cock-and-bull story. Wait, please!" as Oatway struck his leg and prepared to burst in with an oath. "That your wife had already been married, was a widow, before you married her, I have no doubt; but that she married the Earl of Lynborough—that was your assertion, was it not?—is too ridiculous—"

"I went to the chapel—in the grounds," broke in Oatway. "I seen the registry of his birth; the names are the same as them on their certificate of marriage! Eh, what?"

Talbot sneered.

"Very fairly put together for an illiterate person like yourself," he said. "But if I asked you for the certificates—which I have no intention of doing, believe me—I should be told that you had lost them, that they had been accidentally destroyed—"

Oatway leered at him triumphantly. "Not so fast, guv'nor!" he said. "I'm not so green. Not me! I've stuck to them papers, an' I've got them now!"

He took out the greasy pocket-book and, laying it on his knee, struck it with his big, dirty hand.

"There they are, tight an' snug!" he said, gloatingly.

"But you refuse to let me see them!" remarked Talbot, with a shrug.

"Not a bit of it!" retorted Oatway. "There they are!" He opened the pocket-book and, taking out some papers, actually thrust them into Talbot's hand. "Oh, I'm not afraid! I've got the copies in another pocket! You can tear 'em up, if you like—But you just try it!" he added, savagely. "Try it, an' I'll choke you where you sit!"

Talbot took the papers and, slowly unfolding them, examined them closely. His heart seemed to him to cease to beat as he read them. If they were not skillful forgeries—too skillful to be the work of such a man as this—they were genuine certificates of the marriage of the earl to Janet Burchett, and the birth of his child: the son and heir of the Earl of Lynborough. It was too amazing, too incredible! Why, the man who had just passed was, if he were the child whose certificate of birth Talbot held in his hand, Viscount Denby, the next Earl of Lynborough! And he Talbot Denby.

Not a muscle of his face moved, but he could feel the blood in his veins turn cold.

He could have borne the shock better if it had been any other man; but that this fellow who had set him at defiance and had broken his stick almost across his back should be the heir to Lynborough, should oust him out of the title and estates— Oh, it was too monstrous, too improbable and far-fetched!

"Well, guv'nor," demanded Oatway, who had been watching him closely, "what are you goin' to do? F'r instance, what offer are you goin' to make? What are you goin' to give me for those papers, an' to 'old my tongue, eh?"

Talbot awoke from his hideous reverie and tossed the certificates to him.

"Nothing," he said, with an air of indifference.

"Nothin'?" echoed Oatway.

"Certainly not! If this story were true, if these certificates were genuine, which I doubt, the story is probably known to half a dozen, to twenty other persons—"

"No, no; I'll swear it isn't!" Oatway broke in. "It was her secret, an' she kep' it, why, I don't know; I'll admit I don't! There's not a livin' soul as knows she was married, as knows who the boy is but me. I'll swear it! What! d'ye think she wouldn't have told me, the man she was goin' to marry! Why, when we fell out I used to ails Jee about her 'mistfortune,' an' she never let on, never spoke up an' said she was married. And d'ye think if she could keep her tongue quiet under them there circumstances that she'd let on to other people! No, guv'nor, you may take your Bible oath that only me—only you an' me now—knows anything about it."

Talbot was silent for a moment. In a moment much thought can be accomplished. Why had the earl never married, but remained a bachelor? Why had he let the title and estates



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descend to him, Talbot, whom he did not like? Talbot reflected that he, and as it seemed, no other person, knew anything of the earl's past and early life. The earl never alluded to it; no friend of the family ever spoke of it. A mystery, a veil, which Talbot had only vaguely noticed hitherto, hung over it. Great Heaven, had the earl really contracted this marriage, and had a son been born? Could it be possible that the son was the young fellow who had passed them a few minutes before? Here on the estate! What should he, Talbot, do?

"I think you believe in this story of yours," he said at last. "But I must examine into the matter, I must consider—"

"While the grass is growin' this 'ere horse is starvin'!" broke in Oatway. "I'll go to the rightfu' 'air. I hate him, but business is business!" Talbot smiled.

"That would be the very worst way of doing your business," he said. "If you went to him the first word you uttered would give you away and put him on the scent for himself; if you went to the earl he would probably give you in custody for attempting to obtain money under false pretences—and then inquire into the matter for himself."

"You're clever, you are!" growled Oatway.

"I am certainly clever enough to see the weak points in your scheme my man," Talbot said, coolly. "I'm not sure that I ought not to act as the earl would do—"

"But you won't," sneered Oatway.

"No," he admitted, "I've no desire to start a scandal. I will consider the matter. Come here—better go farther into the wood—to-morrow night at ten o'clock, and I will meet you, if it should be convenient for me to do so, and give you my decision."

He rose with a languid and careless air. "Better wait here until I have gone some distance up the road. Good day."

He sauntered off, his hands in his pockets, his head erect, his face as composed as usual; but his brain was in a whirl, his heart was beating thickly. To lose the title, the estates, to have them snatched from him by this gamekeeper fellow! To be in the power of a ruffian of the lowest type!

He reached the Court, and going to his room drank some brandy from the flask in his dressing-case. The spirit encouraged him fictionally, and he thought he would seek the earl and try and sound him by referring, as if by chance, to his early life. A footman said the earl was in the library, and Talbot went there; but his artificial courage fled at the sight of the cold, stern face as the earl raised his head and looked at him.

Talbot saw that a large parchment was stretched out on the table before

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his lordship and that the safe was open.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I'm interrupting you. I came in for a book—"

"Not at all, not at all," said the earl. "Get your book, by all means. I was looking over the will Mr. Bolton has just sent me. Strange that a man cannot express his intentions plainly without the rigmorole of a kind of dog-Latin! May I trouble you to put this in the safe and lock it?"

He folded the will and Talbot took it, placed it in the safe, which he locked, and handed the keys to the earl.

"Thanks!" said the earl. "You had a pleasant drive, I hope?"

Talbot was standing by one of the book-cases fingering the books, and he looked over his shoulder, mechanically watching the old man put the bunch of keys in his trouser pocket.

"Yes, oh, yes—well, not particularly so," he corrected himself. "The fact is, sir, that I asked Veronica to be my wife; and—"

The earl looked up quickly and with a little nod of satisfaction.

"You did? I'm glad. I think you were very wise, Talbot. Veronica is a woman in a thousand. I do not think you could find a more suitable wife, or one who would—he phrase is not a particularly delicate one, but it expresses what I mean—do you more credit?"

"I am glad to have your approval, sir," said Talbot; "but unfortunately I did not succeed in getting a favorable answer from Veronica."

The earl raised his brows and his lips tightened.

"She refused you?" he said, drily. Talbot hesitated.

"Well, scarcely refused," he replied. "I a ma'raid I took her by surprise. I must confess that I had not made up my own mind, did not know until recently that my heart was engaged—"

The earl's smile became still more caustic and cynical. He knew that Talbot's heart had been engaged at the exact moment when he told him of the will in Veronica's favor.

"—And she would not give me a decided answer. But I do not despair, sir. I still hope that I may win her affections. By the way, sir, we agreed that you should not know—"

(To be Continued.)

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