

GILLETTS LYE EATS DIRT



The Earl's Son;

TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XVIII.

Burchett gripped his hand—it was burning hot and quivering—and looked grimly into Ralph's face.

"I'm sorry to lose you, lad," he said, gruffly. "I've grown—used to you. But if you must go you must; I've no right to keep you. Life's made up of partings—" he sighed, dropped Ralph's hand and turned to the fire.

As Ralph went out he turned and looked back at the cosy room, the grim, bent figure, then he strode away with a heavy and weary step. The dogs followed him, whining, and he paused a moment to pat them and send them back.

The moon had not yet risen, but the night was clear and light, and he took the narrow path across the woods towards the high road. At a spot in the road from which he could catch a glimpse of the Court he stopped, and leaning against a tree looked long and yearningly at the great house, the casket that held his treasure, Treasure indeed! gem fit for a king's crown, and not to be worn in the fustian jacket of a gamekeeper. As he stood there a slim, girlish figure was passing at the turn in the road. It was Fanny Mason.

She happened to glance in his direction and saw him. She stopped and looked—as longingly as he was looking at the Court—then took a step towards him; but her feet were arrested by the sound of others. A man was lurching along the road, coming from the opposite direction. It was the tramp. She saw him stop at sight of the tall figure by the tree and heard him address Ralph with a tipsy insolence.

"What—what are you a-star-gazing at, my young 'spark'?" he said, with a leer.

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Ralph, thus roughly awakened, looked at him and was passing on; but Oatway stretched out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"Whatah your hurry?" he demanded, wagging his head at him with exaggerated gravity of semi-intoxication. "Looks as if you was a-goin' on a journey, s'ely me!"

"Mind your own business, my man, and take your hand off my arm," said Ralph, quietly enough; and he shook the hand off.

"Oh, we're hotty-totty, are we?" jeered Oatway. "We think we're somebody, don't we? Goin' a journey, eh? Got your bundle on yer back jes' like a common tramp! Why"—with a sudden laugh of insolent triumph—"curse me, if I don't think you've got the sack!" He peered into Ralph's face with eager, wolfish curiosity.

"That's it right enough! I can see it in your face! You've got the sack, been kicked out—" his voice rose gloatingly and he snapped his fingers in Ralph's face. "It's ups and downs with us, mister; you was up the other day and I was down; but its wiccy wersey now, and I'm on top; higher on top than you've a notion of, my young cockerel."

Ralph had walked on, the man following him; but suddenly Ralph turned and Fanny saw the white, haggard face plainly. She was frightened and waited for no more, but ran on, stopping at the end of the road which she expected Ralph to pass presently.

Ralph looked at the man steadily but not angrily; his heart was too sore for him to be angered with the fellow.

"Go your way, my man, and let me go mine," he said; but, as Oatway still seemed inclined to bother him, he left the road and entered the wood. Oatway, with a laugh of drunken audacity, followed him; but Ralph walked quickly, and Oatway presently gave up the aimless pursuit, and seating himself on a tree to get his breath drew out his pipe and, after several ineffectual attempts, lit it.

"He's goin'," he muttered, with portentous gravity and a would-be cunning leer. "Now, what does that mean? Hash the other fellow been up to any tricks, hash he been a-gettin' at him? If I thought so, if I thought as there'd been any underhand work, s'elp me, I'd step in an' interfere."

What did he say to-morrow night for? Why not to-night? This 'ere game's er payin' one, an' I'm goin' to play it for all its worth, an' I ain't goin' to be interfered with. I don't know as I want that young chap out o' my sight, though I hate him, hate him! Seems to me that I'd better see about it. I will, too!"

He rose unsteadily, but sank down again, began to yawn, and very soon fell asleep.

Ralph went on his way. Presently the bundle struck against a tree. His stick was too long for its purpose, and he took out his knife to shorten it. As he was doing so the knife fell from his hand, struck his boot, and bounced to some distance. Ralph searched for it, but the undergrowth was thick and, though he groped in the darkness, he could not find the knife. He knew that he might grope till morning, and at last, with a sigh, he gave up the search.

"Burchett might as well have had it," he said to himself, as he left the spot. "It was the oldest friend I had." Fanny waited at the corner for some time, but she concluded that Ralph had gone through the wood, and, being afraid to linger longer lest Oatway should see her, she went reluctantly homewards.

CHAPTER XIX.

While the tragic act in the drama of two lives was being enacted in the arbour, Talbot Denby was shut up in his own room trying to face the knowledge which had come to him from Jim Oatway.

Even yet he could scarcely bring himself to believe in the man's statement, in the fact that this gamekeeper fellow was the earl's son and heir. But he knew that the thing would have to be faced, that he must either set at defiance this man who possessed the secret, or make terms with him. Make terms with a man who would probably blackmail him for the rest of his life! He thought of a dozen plans for circumventing the man, of rendering the identification of Ralph Farringdon impossible; but one and all had to be discarded as impracticable. There seemed only

one way, and that was to submit to the blackmailing. Confused and bewildered by the terrible problem, he paced up and down the room until it was time to dress for dinner. He had left his man in town, for the silent Gibbon was not a favorite with the Court servants, who were a sociable crew and eyed the taciturn Gibbon with a kind of uneasy suspicion; and Talbot, on his visits to the Court, either availed himself of the services of the earl's man or was valeted by an intelligent young footman.

He was, therefore surprised and, in his overwrought condition, startled, when, in answer to his ring, Gibbon himself appeared in the doorway, with his expressionless face and downcast eyes.

"You here! Well?" said Talbot, with the cold insolence which is harder to bear than overt brutality.

Gibbon raised his eyes and held out a letter.

"It came this morning, sir; and as it was marked 'important and immediate,' I thought I'd better come down with it."

Talbot took the letter and opened it. It was from a famous money-lender, and its peremptory contents made Talbot's face grow even darker than it had been.

"I wish to Heaven you would obey my orders and remain where you are until you are sent for. The thing's of no consequence," he said, not angrily, but with the same cold insolence.

Gibbon dropped his eyes; he had been scanning his master's face while the latter had been reading.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, in his toneless voice. Then he put down the dress clothes he had on his arm, and proceeded to change his master's clothes as if the rebuke had passed over him unnoticed; but every now and then, as he performed his duty with noiseless assiduity, he glanced at the reflection of the dark face in the glass, and his white lids drooped still lower over his dull-looking eyes.

"You'll have to remain till the morning," said Talbot, coldly, as Gibbon stepped back, his task accomplished. "You don't appear to be very welcome to the other servants, I hear, and I am not surprised. That hang-dog face of yours would convict you any day. I wonder, sometimes, why I endure it. Take yourself off by the first train, and don't come here again unless I send for you."

"Yes, sir," responded Gibbon, in exactly the same toneless, unmoved voice, and he stood with meekly bowed head until his master had left the room; then his manner changed swiftly, a spot of red came into his pale cheeks, his colorless eyes shone with an unwholesome light and his teeth came together as if he were keeping back an oath. He went quickly to the letter which Talbot had crushed in his hand and flung from him, and spreading it out he was reading it eagerly when he heard Talbot's returning step. He squeezed up to the letter and dropped it on the spot in which it had lain, and busied himself with the tweed suit.

(To be Continued.)

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"The letter," said Talbot. Gibbon looked about him with dutiful alacrity, and Talbot picked up the letter and left the room.

"It wasn't that," muttered Gibbon, musingly. "It wasn't that, serious as it is. He was looking bad before, when I came in. What is it? What is it, I wonder? He's in a lighter place than usual. I've never seen him show the white feather before. What is it?"

He went all over the pockets in the tweed suit, searched the room in his stealthy, noiseless fashion, but though nothing rewarded him he was still unsatisfied.

"There was a desperate look in that face of his," he muttered. "I've watched him all these months like a cat does a mouse, but I've never seen him look so bad. He's too sharp as a rule; but to-night he looked as if—as if he was hard, drove. Curse him! For all his sharpness, I'll find it out. 'Hang-dog face!' 'Hang-dog face!' You little think, Mr. Talbot Denby, when you're speaking to me and treating me like a dog how often I feel like hanging you!"

Talbot found the drawing room empty.

"His lordship dines in his own room to-night, sir," said the butler; "and Miss Gresham has a headache and begs to be excused."

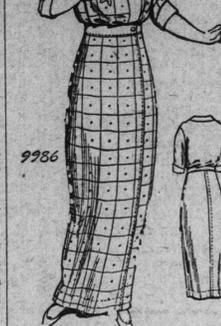
Talbot inclined his head and checked a sigh of relief. He was in no mood for company that evening, for he knew that, admirable actor as he was, it would be difficult to assume a light and casual manner under the keen eyes of the old lord, and the cold violet ones of Veronica.

He made a pretence of eating some of the innumerable dishes, but his throat felt dry, and every morsel was a burden to him. But the wine was welcome, and he not only let the servants fill his glass repeatedly, but drank draught after draught of the claret when they had gone. There was a small carafe of liquor brandy on the table and he finished up with that.

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