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CHAPTER XXII.

Indeed, and in very truth, she was walking in a dream—the martyr's dream.

One day Mr. Mershon came down to The Woodbines. His face was a little graver than usual, and all through the dinner he was rather absent-minded. When it was over, he went to the drawing-room and leaned over the chair in which Decima was sitting with a book in her hand—which she had not been reading.

"I've got some news for you," he said. "You remember my telling you about that Italian concession?"

He often told her of his enterprises and of their success; but she forgot them; and she knit her brows now.

"The Italian concession?" she said. "Yes, the water-works business. They want me to go over there. There's money in it—a pile of money. And I'm half inclined to go. How would you like to go with me? You would like to see Italy; it's a place most girls hanker after; and we could do it very well; I could spare a couple of months."

She looked up at him doubtfully, questioningly.

"Father hates traveling," she said. Mershon bit his lip.

"I didn't think of your father coming," he said, "but of you. Look here, Decima! Why shouldn't we be married and go on this Italian trip for a honeymoon?"

The blood rushed to her face, and left it pallid.

"Married!" she breathed, almost inaudibly.

"Yes, why not?" he demanded, with a catch in his breath. "Why shouldn't we take this opportunity and be married? What is the use of waiting? This is a fine-rate opportunity of combining pleasure with business."

She could not see the eagerness in his eyes, but she felt it. A shudder convulsed her.

"What do you say?" he went on. "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't do it. I needn't go for a fortnight or three weeks; I leave that to you."

To be married, to be Theodore Mershon's wife in a fortnight or three weeks! The room grew suddenly dark to her.

"You think it over," he said. "You talk it over with my sister; you're going to take with her to-morrow." Decima found her voice at last.

"Is it so soon," she said.

She rose and went to the fireplace, in which a fire was burning, as if she had been stricken by a sudden cold. He followed her.

"What is the use of waiting?" he reiterated. "Let us get the thing over and done with." His breath came fast and his small eyes glowed with a passionate fire.

Decima shrunk away from him. With all her innocence of what marriage meant, a fearful repugnance rose within her and overwhelmed her.

"You'd like to see Italy," he said.

"You'll think it a strange question, and stranger, coming from me; for though we have seen a great deal of each other lately, since—since your engagement, I know that you have not felt toward me like a friend, have not cared for me very much. Don't deny it," she hurried on; "it wouldn't be any use. And I'm not complaining. But I should have been glad if you had got to care for me, shall be very glad if you grow to like me. I am a very lonely woman, Decima, and until I knew you I thought that it was impossible for me to have one tender feeling for any one. But I have grown fond of you, dear, and for weeks past I have wanted to ask you a question which I am going to ask now."

"Ask me," said Decima. "What is it?"

Mrs. Sherborne's lips twitched nervously.

"Do you care for Theodore?" she asked, with the abruptness of a timid and reserved nature.

Decima did not start, but the color came quickly to her face and as quickly fled again.

"Why do you ask me that?" she said.

"Because," because I have watched you. I have seen you grow thin and pale. You were such a happy-looking girl when you first came here; there was a glad light in your eyes and always a smile on your lips; but now—"Well, I've watched you when you've been with Theodore, and I've seen you—have seen the look on your face when he spoke to you or touched you."

Decima's head bent lower. Mrs. Sherborne stretched out her hand and laid it on Decima's clasped ones.

"Oh, my dear, I must speak!" she said in a strained voice. "I have kept silent too long, but I must speak now. I could hold my tongue to the end if I had not grown fond of you; but you have crept into my heart, and it aches and aches for you. Decima, you do not care for Theodore; you do not love him!"

Decima raised her eyes heavily. "No," she said in a low voice. "Mr. Mershon knows that. He does not ask me—does not expect—"He says that I shall—love him after we are married."

Her voice was almost inaudible. Mrs. Sherborne's hand tightened on the girl's arm.

"After you are married!" she repeated, as if she were half terror-stricken. "Oh, you do not know what you are saying! You do not know what it means. You are too innocent—too ignorant. Decima, if you do not love him now, you will hate him after you are married."

Decima started and shrunk slightly, but Mrs. Sherborne retained her grasp of her arm.

"You are indifferent now," she went on; "something has come over you. You are just as if you were in a dream, walking in your sleep—that is because you do not know. But that indifference will turn to loathing after you are married. It always does—always does! I know, for I have been married." There was the bitterness of a past misery in her voice. "Think of it!" she went on in a subdued, constrained tone, as if she were speaking against her will, as if every word were forced from her. "You are not happy when you are with him now; you are not glad when you are by his side; you don't like him to touch you. Oh, I have seen you and him together; I have noticed. How will it be when you have to spend every hour of your life with him—when you can not escape from him—when he will have the right to take you in his arms, to kiss you whenever he pleases?"

Decima recoiled and leaned back, with wide-open eyes fixed upon the elder woman.

"Are you beginning to understand?" said Mrs. Sherborne. "And do you think that I am mistaken, that what I say is not true? My dear, it is—it is! I know, because I have been through it. You will be the slave, and he will be master. And you think he will not soon find out how much you dislike him? Soon, very soon, he will learn the truth, will discover that you hate him, that you will never love him, that the loathing for him will grow more intense day by day for long as you both live."

"Oh, what are you saying? Do not say any more!" came from Decima's white lips. A faint gleam of the knowledge of the truth was breaking in upon her.

"I must—I must!" said Mrs. Sherborne, as if in desperation. "And then when he finds this out for himself, do you know what will happen?" She paused, drew a long breath, and looked round the room as she were afraid of being overheard. "He is all kindness and gentleness now. There is nothing he would not do for you; he is the slave, and you are the mistress; but it will all be changed then, and he will be—"She stopped and looked round again fearfully. "Decima, you don't know him. He is all very well when things are going as he wants them; but when he is thwarted, he is a devil incarnate!"

(to be continued.)

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