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CHAPTER XXII.
"Yes," she faltered, "while you've been away."

He looked at her still a little doubtfully, and began to pace up and down. "It seems sudden to me, all the same," he said. "I didn't think—" He bit his lip. "But, after all, Mershon's not a bad fellow. He's improved—I—beg your pardon, Decie; I do, indeed! But it's the truth; he has improved. He has behaved like a brick over this affair of the company. He must be a good fellow at heart, or he would have cut up rough. And then you see how fond his sister is of him! And—and—Decie, I've come to congratulate you."

"Thank you, Bobby," she said, very slowly.

"Of course, he isn't worthy of you," he said, hurriedly. "I don't know a man in the world who is, except—" He stopped and colored, and Decima knew—how, she could not have told—that the unspoken name was Gaunt. The blood rushed to her face, then left it pale again. "You'll be very rich, Decie," he said, "and he simply worships the ground you tread on. I could see that while he was telling us. He has gone off like a man half beside himself with joy."

"And father?" said Decima in a low voice.

Bobby laughed shortly. "Oh, father's very glad; it's cheered him up wonderfully. Besides, Mershon told him that he thinks he can see a way to save a greater portion of the money—something about foreign patents; I didn't quite understand."

But Decima did, and she turned her head away.

He looked at her still a little uneasily, then he went to her and took her hand.

"Look here, Decie!" he said. "You're glad, aren't you? You're doing this of your own free will? It's what you want?"

Her lips quivered, but she forced a smile upon them, and met his anxious gaze steadily.

"I am doing it of my own free will—yes, Bobby."

He dropped her hand and drew a breath of relief.

"That's all right, then!" he said. "I only asked because—because it's so sudden."

He stood with his hands thrust in his pockets and looked out of the window, and she went up behind him and put her hands upon his shoulders, and laid her cheek against his short wavy hair.

"You will work hard for your examination, Bobby, won't you?" she said in a low, pleading voice.

"Yes, yes," he said, a little hoarsely. "I must go back to-morrow morning, and I'm going to grind away like anything."

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"And—and, Bobby, you won't be extravagant?"

She felt him wince, and he still kept his face turned from her.

"No, no; that's all over!" He bit his lip. "I mean that I will be very careful. London's a deuce of a place, and—and the money melts away before you know where you are." He laughed uneasily. "I'm going in for retrenchment and reform, as the political chaps say. I'm going to be a model young man, Decie."

The color came and went in his face.

"Thank you, Bobby!" she murmured, gratefully. He turned suddenly and caught her in his arms and kissed her; then he put her away from him as suddenly, and hurried from the room.

Mr. Mershon walked back from The Firs, treading on air. No success he had ever made had acted him as this did. He went straight to his sister's boudoir, and flinging his cap on to a chair, smiled down at her where she sat with some fancy needle-work. She half rose nervously, then sunk back and gazed up at him inquiringly. He laughed stridently and pushed the hair from his forehead.

"I've got her!" he said. "I've come to tell you the news. Decima has promised to be my wife!"

Her lips parted, but she said nothing.

"Don't you understand?" he demanded. "Why do you gape at me as if I'd said the world was coming to an end? I tell you, Decima Deane is going to be my wife. She has just accepted me. Well, can't you speak?"

"I—I'm very glad," she stammered. "I congratulate you, Theodore, and I hope—you will be happy."

"Hope!" He laughed and sneered at her. "Of course I shall be happy. I always am when I get what I want, and God knows I want her badly enough. Happy! What man wouldn't be happy with the loveliest, sweetest girl in all the world for his wife? For Heaven's sake," he broke off, angrily, "don't sit and stare at me as if I were some kind of monster at a fair."

"I—I am only surprised, Theodore," she said, nervously. "I didn't think that she—I mean—"

"I don't care what you mean!" he said, savagely. "But what do you mean? Is it so very wonderful that she should accept me, like me, care for me—yes, love me? Am I hunchbacked, deformed, old? What is there so surprising in it that you turn as white as a sheet and gape at me?"

"I—I didn't mean to, Theodore," she said. "It's—it's a great match for her."

He was leaving the room, but he turned upon her savagely.

"What the devil do you mean by that? I suppose that you mean to insinuate that she's marrying me for my money? Is that it?"

She was frightened by his violence, and visibly covered in her chair.

"No, no; why should I, Theodore?" she said.

"I'm d—d if I know," he retorted, his eyes shifting from side to side; for he knew that he had spoken the truth.

"All I know is that you take the news in a ghoulish fashion that is simply disgusting. I suppose you are thinking that you'll be turned out!" He sneered. "You needn't be afraid. I shall want you still. I won't have her, Decima, my wife—he spoke the word with an exultant pride—"I won't have my wife worried with housekeeping. You can stay on here—if she'll let you. Perhaps you can console yourself with that and find something more cheerful to say."

She bent her head.

"I'm sure I hope she will be happy, Theodore," she said.

"Happy!" he snarled. "Of course she will be! Why shouldn't she? She will have everything she wants, everything money can buy. By Heaven! I'd pull the moon out of the sky if she wanted it! You can tell her so, if you like, when you go and see her to-morrow."

With this command he flung himself out of the room.

They were very quiet that night at The Woodbines. Decima seemed to be under the influence of a spell from which even Bobby's presence could not free her. She had listened to Mr. Deane as he paced up and down the drawing-room, and talked in his rhapsodical way; now of her engagement, now of some new invention; for, alas! the Electric Storage Company had lost its hold upon him, and he was off in another direction.

Every now and then Bobby would glance at Decima with the expression of faint doubt and anxiety which his face had worn in her room; but she always met his glance with a smile.

And all through the evening this thought buoyed her up:

"I have saved these two, and against their happiness mine does not count." She felt very tired, but she sat up long after her father had gone to his laboratory, while Bobby smoked endless cigarettes—sat close beside him, her hands sometimes on his knee, her head on his shoulder.

At last she went to her own room, and even then, in its solitude, she did not realize what she had done. How could she, encircled by the innocence with which Lady Pauline's system had surrounded and guarded her?

Once or twice that night, all innocently, she thought of Lord Gaunt. Where was he? Would he be glad or sorry to hear that she was going to marry Mr. Mershon? She dreamed of him that night. She dreamed that he was far away in Africa; that she was trying to tell him what had happened, but that, though she cried at the top of her voice, it could not reach him, and in her sleep she sobbed at the thought.

Bobby went off by the early train in the morning.

"I sha'n't be in town many weeks longer, Decie," were his last words. "I shall grind away at this French and German, and come back and finish up with old Brown. I mean to pass this exam., you may bet your life on that. Give my love to Mershon."

He had got a check of Mershon's in his pocket. But don't think the worse of Bobby for this. Youth is youth, and Decima had played her part so well that he was firmly convinced she had accepted Mershon of her own free will.

The days passed. Mershon came over to The Woodbines every afternoon. Sometimes he remained to dinner. Nothing succeeds like success, and just at this time Mr. Mershon was at his best. For one thing, he was very careful. He did not claim any of the privileges which belong to the engaged man. Something told him that if he would have revolted and he would have lost her; so, although he was as attentive as the most exacting mistress could have desired, he held himself in check and refrained from any caress. He intended to accustom Decima to his presence and her position as his affianced wife. What his restraint cost him he alone could tell.

Mrs. Sherborna came constantly, and sometimes Decima went to The Firs. Its splendor still oppressed her, but she tried to get used to it; she told herself that she would have to live in its midst presently.

No pen can describe her state of mind. She seemed to have no friend in the world; no one to whom she could go and tell the truth—the truth. It is said that the martyrs, when they heard the dread sentence that they were to be cast to the lions, passed from a state of anxiety and suspense to one of stupor, of calm indifference. This pretty exactly describes Decima's condition—she was in a state of stupor and indifference.

Mershon had made no secret of the engagement, and congratulations and good wishes poured in upon Decima. Lady Roborough, Lady Ferndale, and others in the county set, called upon her and said pleasant and friendly things; and Decima received them with the set face and forced smile which had of late become so easy to her.

"I suppose," said Lady Roborough to Lady Ferndale, "that it is a very good match for her. The man is very rich, I'm given to understand, and the Deanes are poor?"

"Yes," said Lady Ferndale, doubtfully. "I have no doubt it is a very good match, but"—she sighed; she had married for love—"I've an idea that she doesn't look quite happy."

Lady Roborough laughed cynically. "Who is, my dear?" she said. "We can't all marry for love, as you did; but she will be all right. The man is devotedly attached to her, and such marriages generally end well."

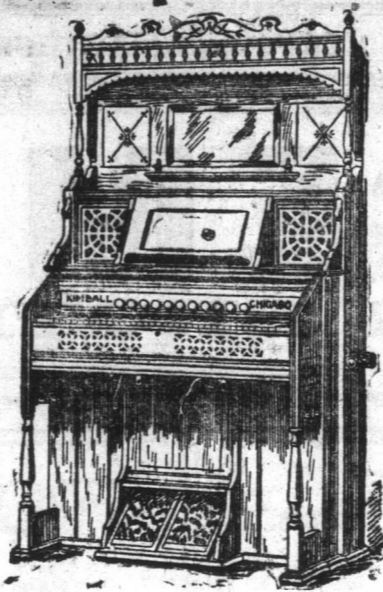
"Ah, but do they?" said Lady Ferndale, with a shake of the head. "Poor girl!" And she sighed.

Decima's life went on as usual. She ran the house and devoted herself to her father. She went her rounds of charity and mercy as before; but she did it all as if she were moving in a dream. The poor people noticed the difference in her, remarked the paleness of her face, the sad look in her eyes. Often, while she was listening to them, her attention would stray, and she would get up and leave the cottage, with one of their sentences unfinished.

(To be continued.)

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