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CHAPTER XV.

"Glad! Why?" he asked, moodily.

"Oh, because it must be so pleasant for you," she said.

"Pleasant!" he said, grimly.

"Isn't it?" she said. "I should think it must be to meet new and nice people. And it was so dull for you at the Hall—all alone, and seeing no one."

"It was not dull," he said, trying to speak more cheerfully; "and if you think that a course of dinner-parties is provocative of pleasure—Ah, well!"

He looked round. "Is everything going on alright?" he asked, as he walked beside her.

Decima nodded brightly. She had been pale and sad a moment or two ago—he was sure of it. Was she pleased to see him?

"Oh, yes; we have gone on just as if you were here. Mr. Bright wanted to ask you about things; but I begged him not to worry you, but to let you go on enjoying yourself."

"Thanks!" he said, through his closed teeth. "That was very kind of you."

Enjoying himself!

"Yes, Mr. Bright agreed with me. He is so delighted at your going out so much."

"Oh, he is?"

"And did you hear from Bobby?"

"Yes," he said.

"He wrote me such a long letter. And he told me about your rooms. They are beautiful, he says, only much too handsome and rich for him. And he is so proud of being a member of that fashionable club, and I was to try and thank you, because he never could. He says that he is working hard, but having 'such a good time.'"

"I am pleased to hear it," he said. There was a silence.

His heart was beating with the joy of being near her, the delight of hearing her voice again. They reached the bridge which spanned the narrow, rippling river, and they stopped and leaned on the rail, looking at the stream.

"I am going to give a big dinner," he said. "I have to feed those who have fed me, not wisely but too well. I want you to come."

Decima shook her head and smiled.

"Oh, I don't think so," she said. "Bobby's not here, you know, and father—and father would be lost in a big party. He never goes anywhere."

"I must go!" she said. "It is late, and—Good-bye!" and she left him suddenly, her whole being quivering. He had not seen her face—he had been engaged with the lilies—and he suspected nothing of the emotions which had swept over her young heart.

That afternoon Bobby walked into the Orient—walked in with that sense of proud possession which the young man feels in his first club. He made his way through the imposing hall, with its solemn porter and stately footmen, into the handsome smoking-room, and lighting a cigarette, took up a paper; not to read, but as a screen from which he could look at the other members who were present; for Bobby was a stranger, and every one who belonged to the Orient was of interest to him. He knew some by sight, or from their photographs displayed in the shop windows—for there are some famous men in the club—and he was wondering whether he should get to know any of them personally, when two men entered through the great glass doors.

Bobby looked at them curiously. One was a tall, fair, very fair man with a clean-shaven face, handsome, frank-looking blue eyes, and lips wearing a peculiarly pleasant and winning smile. The other was a younger man—of Bobby's age—with red hair and a pale face. He was plain, but there was something of suppressed force in the rather sullen-looking face which was noticeable. His eyes were somewhat bloodshot, and, as he looked from side to side, they had a suggestion of ferocity, of savageness held in check by their owner which made them still more remarkable.

Bobby took a second glance at him; then, with an exclamation, rose to his feet. For he had suddenly recognized the young man as a fellow school-fellow.

"Halloo, Trevor!" he said, holding out his hand.

The young fellow eyed him with a frown for a moment, then he said, without any great display of joy:

"Halloo, Deane! Didn't know you were in town."

"No," said Bobby in his bright way. "It is a long time since we met."

"Not since we left that beastly Rugby," said Trevor, gloomily.

"Are you staying up for any time?"

"For a month or two," said Bobby.

The fair man stood looking at them with a pleasant smile in his blue eyes and on his well-cut lips.

"A meeting of old friends, Trevor?" he said in a soft and musical voice.

"Will you introduce me, my dear fellow?"

Trevor glowered for a moment at the thick Turkey carpet as if he had a grudge against it; then he said, sullenly:

"It's an old school-fellow of mine, Mr. Deane. This is a friend, Deane—Mr. Thorpe, Morgan Thorpe."

Mr. Morgan Thorpe held out his hand with a winning smile.

"Delighted to know any friend of Trevor's," he said. "And very glad to find you are a member of the old club, Mr. Deane."

There was something flattering in the speech and its manner which made Bobby flush with pleasure.

"And what are you doing—just on a pleasant visit to the little village?" asked Mr. Thorpe. "Shall we sit down, Trevor? Mr. Deane, you will join us in a drink?"

Bobby said he would have coffee, and it was brought in in company with the soda and whiskies of the other men.

"I'm grinding for Sandhurst," said Bobby.

"Ah, I envy you!" said Mr. Thorpe in the same flattering way. "Nothing like the service. I was in it for some years."

"What regiment?" asked Bobby, who of course knew his Army List by heart.

"Not an English one, alas!" said Mr. Thorpe, blandly. "I was in foreign service. A free lance, Mr. Deane, a free lance! I have my brevet colonelcy—but of course I don't use it here. I am a civilian in England; but over there—"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Bobby would have asked where "over there" was, but didn't like to.

"Deane—Deane! Let me see, are you one of the Deanes of Learnington?" continued Mr. Thorpe.

"No," said Bobby; "I live at a place called Leafmore."

"Ah, I know the Deanes of Learnington very well. Leafmore?" He shot a swift glance from his blue eyes at Bobby. "Leafmore in Downshire? I've heard of it. Now, what shall we do? What do you say to a game of pool?"

Bobby had to confess that he didn't know billiards.

"Never too late to learn, my dear fellow!" said Mr. Thorpe. "I'm a dandy had player myself or I'd offer to teach you; but Trevor is a first-class performer with the stick and the spheres. Come on, Trevor, and give us both a lesson."

Trevor got up with a kind of reluctance, and they went into the billiard-room. Trevor and Thorpe played, and Bobby took his first lesson; in marking, Thorpe played, as he had said, indifferently; and appeared to take more interest in chatting with Bobby than in the game. He talked—well, Bobby thought he had never met a more charming man, or one more frank and candid, and—really, almost child-like—in his genial simplicity. In the course of an hour Bobby left as if he had known Mr. Morgan Thorpe for years. Trevor said little, but played with a kind of moody absorption, and made some splendid breaks.

Presently Mr. Morgan Thorpe glanced at his watch.

(To be continued.)

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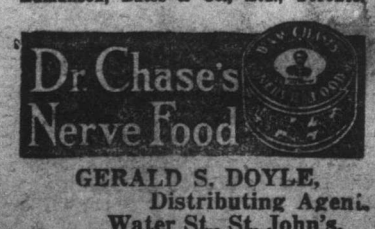
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