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Loyalty Recompensed

CHAPTER V.

The following afternoon Decima, with eyes still rather red and swollen—for the parting with Aunt Pauline had been bad, very bad, all the worse for the restraint which the elder woman had imposed on herself, and Decima had cried softly at intervals all through the journey—looked out of the carriage window as the train slowed up at Stretton Wold.

She saw a pretty little station with borders of flowers and clematis climbing up the pillars; with a rustic porter and a ruddy-cheeked station-master; but there did not seem to be any one else on the platform excepting a young man in a Norfolk suit; and Decima's heart sunk rather; for her father had said in his letter that her brother would meet her.

The porter opened the door, touched his hat, and inquired if she had any luggage, and she got out and stood looking up and down the platform and at the country beyond the station pailings. It was very beautiful, the road winding through a pine wood which shone redly in the sunlight and scented the air with "terebene." She felt a little lonely and a little disappointed. Where was her brother? A young man passed her as the porter came up with her luggage on a truck, and he glanced at her curiously.

"Where be you goin', miss?" asked the porter.

"To Woodbine," said Decima.

Evidently the young man heard her, for he turned and came up to her quickly, and with a boyish flush, said: "Are you? Why, great aunt, it is Decima!"

Decima blushed in harmony and stared for a moment, then she exclaimed, with a rush of joy:

"Why, it is Bobby!" and put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

Bobby Deane stared a brick-dust red and glanced round half shame-facely, half furiously at the grinning porter.

"And you didn't know me?" cried

Decima.

"I would get up and courtesy, if I wasn't afraid of falling out of the fly," said Decima, her eyes sparkling, her mouth one big and beautiful smile.

"And, Bobby, how you have altered! Oh, dear! I can scarcely believe that this great fellow is the dear little baby brother I used to carry about. And you were so pretty then," she said, with mock regret—for her heart was full of admiration for her handsome, well-built brother.

"It would trouble you to carry me now, Decie," he said. "Mind me smoking a cigarette?"

"And it smokes!" exclaimed Decima, with simulated dismay and amazement. "You are sure it won't make you ill, Bobby? But tell me all the news."

"What news? There isn't any."

"Father—"

"Is the same as usual, yesterday, to-day and forever; he is always the same."

"And is he—he expecting me? Will he be glad to see me? Tell me, Bobby, dear!"

"I'll tell you anything I can, if you'll promise not to call me 'dear,'" said Bobby. "Of course, he'll be glad; anyhow, I am precious glad! It's time some one came to look after us—some woman, I mean. You haven't the least notion of the way things go on, or, rather, don't go on. I haven't been home from school long—about two months—but those eight weeks have whitened these locks, as you see. There's nothing in the wide world the gov'nor doesn't understand excepting domestic economy, and consequently the house is run on a 'go-as-you-please' kind of line, which no doubt makes life a charm for the slaves, but is eminently unsatisfactory for yours truly."

"Father said the servants were a trouble, and that is one reason why he wanted me," said Decima.

"Yes; that puts it mildly. We change about every other week. We have cooks who would not recognize a potato if they met it in the street; waiting-maids who kindly permit us to do all the waiting while they talk with their young men at the back-kitchen door. We have just got rid of one young lady who looked upon the wine-cup too often, and was found, by the unfortunate individual who addresses you, lying under the kitchen-dresser one quarter of an hour before dinner-time. We have at present what, I believe, is called a 'demon-breaker,' she has a pleasant but slightly inconvenient habit of collecting all the glasses and china on a tray and slipping up on it. We have no tumblers left, and only a coffee-cup and a mug. She is under notice, and I left her in tears, waiting that she had no mother; if she had, she'd tumble over and break her."

Decima looked half aghast through her laughter.

"My dear Bobby! My poor Bobby! And poor father!"

"I'll take all the sympathy, if you please," said Bobby. "It would be only wasting it on the gov'nor, for he doesn't mind—doesn't care."

"Doesn't mind?"

"No; he is up in the clouds all the time." The boy waved his hand.

Decima, holding him by the hand and devouring him with her gray-blue eyes. "You didn't know me, Bobby?"

The boy, for he was only seventeen, notwithstanding his mannish air, laughed composedly as he put straight the hat which her sudden embrace had knocked on one side.

"No, I didn't," he admitted; "the fact is, I—well, I was looking for a little girl about half your size."

Decima's low, sweet laugh rang out musically.

"And I was looking for a little boy, Bobby, what idiots we are: we had forgotten that we had grown, and we expected to see each other the same size as when we parted!"

Bobby grimaced.

"It's lucky you spoke and mentioned the house, or I should have gone home and told the gov'nor you had not arrived. But come on; we've provided quite enough circus for the porter. There's a fly outside."

He led her out and put her in the crazy vehicle, then sat opposite her and stared at her with a brother's reluctant admiration, and she smiled back at him.

"Well, you have grown," he said at last. "Who'd have thought you'd have turned out so; why, I remember you were rather a plain kid—"

"I would get up and courtesy, if I wasn't afraid of falling out of the fly," said Decima, her eyes sparkling, her mouth one big and beautiful smile.

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"Doesn't mind?"

"No; he is up in the clouds all the time." The boy waved his hand.

"Dreaming, inventing things to make his fortune. He doesn't eat—he only stokes. I'm not sure that he sleeps. At any rate, he's perfectly indifferent to anything and everything, and the house can go in smithereens so that one room—his laboratory and study—is left standing. See?"

Decima's face grew a little grave and a little remorseful.

"Poor Bobby! And all the time I have been living a life of luxury and ease!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Bobby, quickly and generously. "You can't help having a father utterly unlike any other male parent in the world; no more can I. And I'm jolly glad you've been out of it all this time. In fact, I was dead against the gov'nor sending for you; but—well, he makes up his mind now and again, and when he does, he makes it up into such a jolly stiff parcel that there's no undoing it."

"I'm glad—glad he sent for me," said Decima. "But, Bobby, I—I am afraid, I don't know much about house-keeping."

"You couldn't possibly know less or make more of a muddle of the show than we are doing," said Bobby, encouragingly. "But, upon my word, I'm sorry for you, Decie! I'm afraid you won't like the change from—how did you put it?—a life of luxury and ease with Lady Pauline to slave-driving at Woodbine."

"I shall not mind—I feel glad to come already. I suppose it's seeing you."

"Thank you—thank you," said Bobby, raising his cap. "Excuse these tears—I am not used to this kind of thing, and I am easily moved."

"You wicked, mocking boy!" exclaimed Decima, leaning forward and kissing him impulsively.

Bobby put up both fists, and wiped his mouth with one.

"My good young woman," he said, severely. "I am sorry to check the affectionate instincts of your ardent young nature, but I feel bound to inform you that, in this country, a young lady does not embrace a gentleman in public, even though she be his sister; and I would like to add, at the risk of hurting your feelings, that I have an inveterate dislike to being kissed—excepting by some other fellow's sister; and therefore I shall feel obliged if for the future you will put the brake on your emotions and refrain from—"

"Oh, what a pretty place, Bobby!" exclaimed Decima, as the fly pulled up at a tall iron gate opening on to an old-fashioned garden in front of a red-bricked, ivy-covered house.

"Glad you like it. Behold The Woodbines, the residence of Peter Deane, Esq., and your home, my dear sister!"

Decima jumped out of the fly and went up the path. The door of the house was open, and even as she entered the square, old-fashioned hall, the sound of a falling plate and the crash of the breaking thereof were heard.

"Sarah Jane's welcome to her young mistress!" said Bobby gravely.

Decima smiled, and looked round a little nervously.

"Where is my father?" she asked; and moved toward the door of the drawing-room.

"Oh, I'll take you to him. There's only one place in which he can possibly be. Follow me, and mind the step, and the pall which is almost sure to be on it, and over which I break my shin with painful frequency."

(to be continued.)

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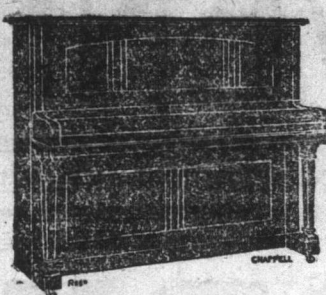
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