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Happiness At Last, Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER XVII.

Bobby woke with a headache the next morning—Champagne and port do not mix very well. As he woke, he was conscious of a faint odor of perfume in the room. It proceeded from his dress clothes, and it was the scent which breathed in Mrs. Dalton's hair, the subtle perfume which emanated from her dress. Bobby must have been standing very near to her before it could have got into his dress-coat.

It recalled the previous evening, and Bobby, as he got into his bath, thought of Mr. Morgan Thorpe and his fascinating sister, and of Trevor.

Now, Bobby was not altogether a simpleton, and there were some things about the small house in Cardigan Terrace which rather jarred upon him; a headache makes you rather critical. Mr. Morgan Thorpe was a little too suave and smiling; the rooms certainly were rather soiled and vulgar; and Mrs. Dalton—But Bobby could find no fault with her. She was altogether beautiful, and charming, and sweet, and he glowed when he thought how gracious she had been to him.

He thought of her all the morning while he was grinding French and German with his crammer; and in the afternoon who should call at Prince's Mansions but Mr. Morgan Thorpe himself.

"I was just passing on my way to the club, my dear Deane," he said, with his winning smile, "and I thought I would look in and ask you to go down with me."

Bobby said he should be delighted, and gave his visitor a chair.

Mr. Morgan Thorpe looked round the handsome room with interest and admiration, as if he had never seen it before.

"You have tremendously swaggy chambers, my dear Deane," he said. "Your friend must be a man of nice taste as well as wealth. What did you say his name was? I didn't catch it last night."

"Gaunt," said Bobby. "Lord Gaunt. He's a splendid fellow, and awfully generous. I'm half ashamed of accepting his offer and living in this splendor. His place, Leafmore, is near where we live, and we see a great deal of him. He is doing wonders for the place, rebuilding the cottages and setting up schools, and all that sort of thing."

"Ah, playing the model landlord!" said Morgan Thorpe. "Is he—or a married man?"

"Oh, no!" said Bobby.

Morgan Thorpe nodded, and looked round the room; and Bobby following his eye, said, with a little blush:

"I—I hope Mrs. Dalton, if she will be so kind as to dine here, will like the room."

"Oh, Laura will be sure to admire it," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe. "These etchings, and bronzes, and fur rugs, are all in her way, for as I dare say you noticed, my dear fellow, she is artistic to her finger-tips. But I'm not sure that she will come. She is quite a home bird, and rarely goes anywhere; but of this I am very certain, that if she were to make an exception,

it would be in your favor; for, between you and me, my dear Deane I must tell you that you made quite a favorable impression last night upon my dear girl."

Bobby colored to the roots of his hair.

"By the way," continued Mr. Morgan Thorpe, "I think it would be as well, perhaps, not to tell her that these rooms are not your own; she is so very particular, and she might object to come. In fact, if I were you, I shouldn't mention it to any one."

Bobby scarcely saw any reason for this concealment, but he nodded in assent, and was full of admiration of Mrs. Dalton's delicacy.

They went down to the club, and there met Trevor, and the three men went into the billiard-room; and Bobby took his first lesson with all the eagerness of a novice.

They dined together at a restaurant, and Mr. Morgan Thorpe insisted upon paying for the banquet, much, apparently, to Trevor's surprise; for he eyed him with a sullen curiosity and suspicion.

From the theatre, which followed, they went to a little club where Mr. Morgan Thorpe said they could get some decent grilled bones.

It was a very different club to the Orient, and neither so large nor so quiet. A piano was going in one of the rooms, and a gentleman was singing a popular ditty, and there was a good deal of laughter, excepting in one corner, where some men were gathered round a green table playing baccarat.

As he called for champagne, Mr. Morgan Thorpe explained somewhat apologetically that he rarely visited the club, but that it was a capital place to look in at late in the evening, and for a few minutes. On this occasion the few minutes extended to some hours; and with champagne and cigarettes Bobby had a remarkably good time of it. As he went home in one of the small hours, with a flushed cheek and a hot head, he felt that he was "seeing life;" and there is nothing more flattering to youth than this conviction.

He met Mr. Morgan Thorpe nearly every day at the Orient; and in a day or two received another invitation to dine at Cardigan Terrace. As on the previous occasion, he and Trevor were the only guests. Mrs. Dalton received him with a softly murmured welcome. "I thought you were never coming again!" she said in her low, clear voice.

She wore a dress of old rose silk, and she looked, if that were possible, more lovely and bewitching than she had done the first night he had seen her. As before, the dinner was excellent, and Mr. Morgan Thorpe a charming host. The dinner was excellent, and Mr. Morgan Thorpe a charming host. The dinner was excellent, and Mr. Morgan Thorpe a charming host.

Presently, in the middle of a song, Morgan Thorpe exclaimed: "Oh! This is really too slow! Can't we have a little nap? Deane, you play nap, surely? Come and join us; for Trevor and I are boring each other to death."

Bobby hesitated. He had not promised any one that he would not play cards or bet on races; but he was conscious that he was not rich enough for either amusement.

"Don't play unless you like," murmured Laura. "Something in her tone nettled Bobby."

"Oh, I'll take a hand, as they want me," he said.

"Then you must not play high," she said, letting her hand fall upon his arm lightly, with an almost tender little pressure. "Morgan, you must not play high."

"We'll play 'for love,' if Mr. Deane likes," said Morgan Thorpe. Trevor growled contemptuously, and Bobby, as he seated himself at the table, said, with a flush:

"I'll play for anything you like."

The little nap commenced, and was played for some time to the accompaniment of soft music. At intervals Laura moved about the room, arranging some flowers or looking over a ladies' fashion paper, and now and again she would come to the table and look on at the play with a little yawn and gesture of petulant impatience.

As is not unusual with the novice, Bobby held good cards. Fortune smiled upon him, as the Goddess of Luck has a trick of doing when she wants to lure the young devotee still closer to her shrine, and he won steadily.

"Really, my dear Deane," said Morgan Thorpe, "you play remarkably well; for, let me tell you, there is more play in nap than in generalisimo."

"He held all the cards," growled Trevor, who was the larger loser. "The cards are not everything," said Morgan Thorpe. "Deane plays with discretion; he has a cool head and a quick eye."

Now, this is the kind of praise which is as sweet as honey to the inexperienced youth, and Bobby, as he gathered together the little heap of sovereigns, was delighted with himself and his new friends; and as he went home with his winnings jingling in his pocket and the divine Laura's musical voice humming in his head, he felt that he was indeed "seeing life" under peculiarly pleasant auspices.

It was true that on his next visit he lost; but not so much as he had won; and on this occasion Morgan Thorpe assured him that he had only lost because he had held such vile cards.

Excepting when he was working with his crammer, Bobby spent nearly all his time with the Thorpes and Trevor; and he was rapidly becoming quite a man about town. He learned to play billiards, and other card games less innocent than nap; he could drink a fairly large quantity of wine without growing hot and dizzy about the head; and he did not blush so frequently; not even when the divine Laura's smile grew more tender and her voice more soft and thrilling when she looked and spoke to him.

After a week or two he grew bold enough to give a formal invitation to dinner. It was his first dinner-party; and for days beforehand he was in a fever of anxiety and excitement lest everything should not be right, and the entertainment not be worthy of—of the beautiful woman who had been so sweet and gracious to him.

He spent hours thinking over the menu, and filled his cook with amazement by ordering a meal which would not have discredited a Rothschild.

"I shall have to have some help, sir," she said; "or perhaps I'd better get some of the things from Fortnum & Mason. It won't cost much more, and they'll sure to be first-rate."

"All right," said Bobby, cheerfully and innocently. "And you'd better get a man to wait."

On the morning of the dinner he rearranged the rooms, shifting and re-shifting the furniture that it should all appear at the best advantage. He had ordered a huge basket of flowers and orchids from the man in Bond Street—it was the bill for the flowers that, more than any other, afterward made Bobby's hair stand on end—and he set a great bunch on his dressing-table beside the silver-backed brushes and combs he had purchased for Laura's use; also he placed another, but smaller posy, beside her plate.

When at home he drank beer; but for this occasion he ordered some of the most expensive wines on the wine merchant's list, and procured cigars of the choicest brand. He was very particular about the coffee, which Fortnum & Mason were to sendiced at the precise moment it would be required.

Concerning the cost of the affair he did not trouble himself, seeing that everybody was willing and more than willing to give him credit; and having dressed himself with extraordinary care, he surveyed the table glittering with Gaunt's plate and silver and the costly orchids, with a feeling not quite of satisfaction, but, at any rate, cheerful anxiety.

How his heart beat and the color rose to his handsome face when he heard the bell ring and Mr. Morgan Thorpe's soft voice! Stiffing his nervousness he went forward to meet his guests and stammered his welcome. He could scarcely believe that she was really here in his (this is, Lord Gaunt's) room, until he felt the soft pressure of her gloved hand, and heard her musical voice murmuring: (To be continued.)

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