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CHAPTER XXIII.

Decima uttered a low cry, and attempted to rise; but Mrs. Sherborne's hand forced her back into her chair. "Do you think that is too strong, that it is unjust?" continued the strained voice. "It is not. I know him; you do not. There is no cruelty he would not be capable of. My poor child, he could make life a hell for you—and he would do it!"

Decima could not speak; she could scarcely breathe.

"I have known him since he was a boy," said Mrs. Sherborne, with a long-drawn sigh. "He has been cruel to me, though I have never thwarted him; he will have no pity for you; for there is nothing that rouses the devil in a man like Theodore than to find that the woman he loves dislikes and fears him."

Her voice died away, and an intense silence reigned in the luxurious room. Mrs. Sherborne drew her hand away, and sat with bent head, staring at the fire.

Decima could not speak. It was as if a hand had torn aside the veil which shrouds the future, and had revealed to her in all its hideousness. "Well, I have told you!" said Mrs. Sherborne. "Do you believe me? It is quite true, quite true! What will you do?"

Suddenly her tone altered, changed to one of feverish imploration.

"Child, there is yet time to draw back! Do so at any cost, at any cost—before it is too late! Better be lying out there in the church-yard, better be wandering in the streets, homeless and shelterless, than marry a man you don't love!"

Decima rose, supporting herself by the back of the chair. Her face was very white; there was horror in her eyes, in the drawn and parted lips.

"It is too late!" she said. "I—I have given my word. I must do it. I can not draw back!"

She went, with uncertain step, to the couch, and got her out-door things and began to put them on with trembling hands.

Mrs. Sherborne watched her. All the fire and earnestness had died out of her face and manner, and she was again the apathetic, constrained, and reserved woman.

"You are going?" she said in her old way.

"Yes, yes," said Decima. "I must go outside. I want air."

"And all I have said is no use?" said Mrs. Sherborne, with a kind of cold resignation. "Well, I have done my duty—I have tried to save you. If you are resolved—"

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Decima threw out her hands with a piteous gesture infinitely girlish, infinitely despairful.

"I can not help it!" she murmured. "I have given my word. Good-bye."

She got out of the room and through the gorgeous hall and into the open air, for which she seemed dying. Mrs. Sherborne's words rang in her ears; the truth of them rang like a knell in her heart. But what could she do? If it were all true, she must go through it for the sake of those she loved.

She went home, and as she went about those duties which make up the routine of a woman's life, and which must be got through though that woman's heart were breaking, she tried to forget the awful words of warning which Mrs. Sherborne had spoken.

But they were not to be forgotten. They haunted her day and night, and gradually there came upon her the feeling that unless she spoke to some one, unburdened herself of the dread weight which was crushing her heart, she must go mad.

She had not written to Lady Pauline. Why should she not go and see her?

There, at least, was one who loved her, who could help her. It was not the first time Decima had thought of her aunt during this crisis; but she knew that Lady Pauline was not rich, certainly not rich enough to lend or give the money that was necessary to save her father and Bobby. And pride, a not unnatural pride, had prevented her confiding their joint trouble to Lady Pauline, who would have suffered all the more because of her incapacity to render assistance.

But now Decima resolved that she would go to the woman who loved her so tenderly.

"Father, I am going up to Aunt Pauline," she said, one morning. "I want to see her. I want to tell her about—about my marriage." Her lips quivered. "I can come back to-morrow or the day after."

Mr. Deane looked up from the piece of iron he was sawing; and regarded her with an absent and preoccupied stare.

"Very well—very well, my dear," he said. "Give my kind regards to Lady Pauline. Most charming woman, but lacking in intelligence. I never could make her understand. Would you mind standing out of the light, Decima?"

Decima sighed and kissed him, and went out.

On her way to the station, she saw, through the window of the closed fly, Mr. Mershon going toward The Woodbines. She had not told him that she was going, for she knew that he would have insisted upon accompanying her. And why not? It was his right. She shrunk back into the corner, and closed her eyes.

She reached London about four o'clock, and took a cab to Lady Pauline's. When she rang the bell, her heart beating fast at the thought of seeing her aunt again, the door was opened, not by a spruce servant, but a shabby-looking charwoman. Decima walked in as she put the question mechanically:

"My aunt—Lady Pauline—is she at home?"

"Oh, Lor', no, miss!" said the woman. "Lady Pauline ain't here! She's at Walfield. She went yesterday."

Decima's heart sunk, and she glared at the woman aghast.

"I did not know," she said. "I have just come from the country, and expected to find my aunt here."

"Ave you now, miss?" said the charwoman. "Ow, disappointin'! You must be Miss Decima, as the maids is always talkin' about?"

"Yes," said Decima, droopingly. "When do you expect Lady Pauline back?"

"Well, I don't rightly know, miss," was the reply.

"It's too late to go to Walfield to-night," said Decima, more to herself than to the woman.

"Yes, it is, miss. And of course you can sleep here; I can get a room ready for you in no time."

Decima's heart rose a little. "Thank you," she said; "I will stay here to-night, and go on to Walfield to-morrow. I ought to have telegraphed."

"Which it would have been safer, miss," said the charwoman, taking up Decima's bag. "I'm afraid I haven't got anything in the 'ouse fit to eat," she added, as Decima followed her. "But I can make you a cup of tea."

Decima stopped short. She had suddenly remembered Bobby.

"Wait!" she said. "My brother is in London. He is living at Prince's Mansions. I will go straight to him; he will bring me back here to-night. Where is Prince's Mansions?"

The woman said she did not know, but that any cabman would find it; and eventually Decima found herself in a hansom rattling toward the rooms Lord Gaunt had lent Bobby.

A page opened the door to her and gazed at her after the manner of his kind when she inquired for Mr. Deane. "I don't know whether he's in, miss," he said; "but I will step up and see."

"I will come, too," said Decima. "I am his sister."

The page opened the outer door of Gaunt's flat, and Decima followed him through the hall into the drawing or sitting-room.

A fire was burning in the grate; there was an odor of cigarettes. The page looked round.

"Mr. Deane ain't here, miss, but I expect he'll be here directly."

"Very well," said Decima; "I will wait."

She sat down in a chair beside the fire and looked round the room. It was beautifully warm, and its luxury and air of taste and refinement struck upon her gratefully. She noticed the exquisite pictures, the rare bronzes, the fur rugs of leopard and bear skins. Then she remembered that the room was Lord Gaunt's, that he had lived there, and a strange feeling stole over her.

Presently there came a soft knock at the door, and a maid, a neatly dressed London maid in black alpaca, with white cap and long strings, entered with some tea things.

"Wouldn't you like to take your things off, miss?" she said, respectfully. "And I have brought you some tea."

Decima assented gratefully, and the maid let her into Bobby's bed-room; that is to say Lord Gaunt's. Decima looked round with a curious feeling as the maid helped her to remove her out-door things and went for some hot water.

There was an odor of cigarettes in this room also; a dress-suit of Bobby's lay folded on a chair; a peculiar perfume arose from it. It struck Decima unpleasantly. A copy of a sporting paper was on a chair beside the bed, as if Bobby had thrown it down just before going to sleep. There were etchings on the wall, delicate, delightful bits of art, which reminded her of Lord Gaunt, as Bobby's clothes and the cigarette fumes and the sporting paper had reminded her of Bobby.

She washed her hands and face and brushed the soft, wavy hair, and went back to the sitting-room, and had placed the tea-service on a gypsy table in front of the fire, and Decima poured herself out a cup, looking round the room musingly and with intense interest.

It seemed to her elopement of Lord Gaunt. Her mind dwelt upon him. He had lived in this room; had sat in this very chair, perhaps; and drunk out of this cup. Where was he now? she wondered. She sighed and leaned back. If only he had been here, she could have told him of her trouble; he could have helped her, advised her. Not for the first time, her heart ached with a yearning for his presence.

(To be continued.)

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