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CHAPTER IX.

Decima looked from side to side, then raised her eyes to his face. "It sounds nonsense," she said. "But—but, yes! I will help you. But you will not need me."

He was silent a moment, then he said, very quietly: "I think—I am sure—I shall need you; and I will come and ask your father to permit you to render me your help."

The clock in the turret struck the hour hoarsely, and Bobby, who had been studying a fishing group with keen interest, started.

"I say, Decie, we shall have to make a rush for it, if we are to be home in time for dinner."

"I will order a carriage," said Gaunt; then he laughed grimly. "I forgot. There is no carriage. But there shall be the next time you come, Miss Deane."

They went down-stairs to the door, and Decima held out her hand. "Am I forgiven?" he said, as he took it in his; and his eyes sought hers gravely.

"Yes, quite!" she said, frankly. "Good-bye, and thank you for showing us the house."

He did not utter the conventional response of "Thank you for coming," but as he shook hands with Bobby, said:

"I hope we shall see a great deal of each other, Deane."

As the two went quickly down the steps, he stood at the open door and looked after them. Then, when they had disappeared in the avenue, he turned back into the hall and stood gazing round him absently, a strange look on his face. All the brightness which had now and again flashed over it disappeared, and his eyes and brows were gloomy.

Mr. Bright stood a little apart and watched him with the intendment of devoted affection.

"This is a happy day for Leafmore, Lord Gaunt," he began presently. Gaunt started slightly, raised his head, and looked at him as if he had forgotten his presence.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Bright!" he said. "Come into the library."



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Decima and Bobby hurried on. "We shall be late," he said; "and that will give cook an excuse for treating our internal economy with cold glances. I'll get my rod; and you hurry on and dig the governor out of his den. I say, what an afternoon of surprises! Fancy that being Lord Gaunt himself! What a splendid fellow he is! Not a bit like what I pictured him. I don't wonder at Bright's enthusiasm. What did you think of him?"

"I—I don't know," said Decima. She could not bring herself, at that moment, to tell Bobby of her previous meeting with Lord Gaunt.

Bobby sniffed contemptuously. "That's so like a girl. You don't know. I suppose you'd think any amount of him if he were a pretty young man with curly hair and the rest of it. Now, I call him a splendid specimen; a man! Do you understand? And awfully kind, too. Made us free of the house, by George! It's a rare piece of luck for us, his deciding to settle down here. It won't be my fault if we don't see a good deal of him. Here's my rod; now, you cut off as fast as you can pelt, while I pack up; you know your way."

Decima hurried on. The meeting with Lord Gaunt and its dramatic incidents confused and bewildered her. She could scarcely ask herself if she had acted rightly in being so—so friendly with him. Why had she gone so far as to consent to help him? What would Aunt Pauline say if she knew of it? But she had tried to cut him, had actually cut him; and then he had pleaded his case so well—was it so artfully?—and—She put her hand to her brow, and pushed the soft brown hair from it with a gesture of perplexity and helplessness, and resolved to think no more of him until she could do so quietly in her own room at bedtime.

She reached The Woodbines, and pushed open the door of the laboratory. As she did so, she was surprised to hear her father's voice. He was talking rapidly, and in the excited tones which she had already learned to know.

She shaded her eyes—for the sunlight poured in after her and dazzled her—and the first thing she saw was Mr. Theodore Mershon. He was seated on the carpenter's bench, his small, dapper form bent rather grotesquely, his feet resting on a stool, one hand nursing his chin, the other holding a big cigar, the fumes of which filled the room and made her choke.

His attitude, and not only his attitude, but the expression of his small eyes as they rested on her father, reminded her, in the flash of a moment, of one of the monkeys at the Zoo.

Her father was pacing up and down the room, a model in his hand, his hair all ruffled over his head, and he was talking in the excited, rhapsodical fashion in which he had talked to her on the previous night.

"There is a large, an enormous fortune in this idea, for it is a great—and, above all, an original idea. My dear sir, I assure you—and I know what I am saying—that there is wealth beyond the dreams of avarice in this invention of mine. What is this?"

"Father," said Decima, as he stared at her vacantly, "it is I—Decima!"

Mr. Mershon got off the bench and removed his hat, which he had worn tilted at the back of his head.

"How do you do, Miss Deane?" he said, and a faint flush stained his face. "I have taken the pleasure of calling on Mr. Deane, and he has been explaining—"

"Yes—yes!" broke in Mr. Deane. "Very kind of Mr.—Mr.—" he hesitated for a moment—"Mr. Curzon."

"Mershon," suggested the owner of the name.

"Pardon, Mershon. A gentleman of great intelligence, my dear Decima, I have been telling him of my new invention—concentrated electricity."

"A great invention, Miss Deane," said Mershon. "I think very highly of it. In my humble opinion, there's money in it—a lot of money."

Mr. Deane wagged his head with proud satisfaction.

"A gentleman of great experience and intelligence, my dear Decima."

"I am glad," said Decima, looking from one to the other with slightly drawn brows.

Mr. Theodore Mershon's eyes dwelt on her face. "Of course I haven't heard the whole of it," he said. "But your father is going to explain and bring the drawings when you come to dine with me on Tuesday, Miss Deane."

The troubled look grew more distinct on Decima's face. "Are we—are we going, father?" she said.

"Yes, yes! Why not?" said Mr. Deane testily. "Mr. Mershon is much interested in the idea—are you not, Mr. Curzon?"

"Very much," said that gentleman; and his small eyes devoured the girl's face. "Awfully; I'll cut off now, sir. I shall expect you on Tuesday, Miss Deane."

He held out his hand, and it closed over Decima's with a pressure which made something within her rise with resentment.

She said nothing, not even "good-bye;" but, after he had gone, stood with downcast eyes as her father, pushing his hand through his tangled hair, and pacing to and fro, muttered: "A very sensible, intelligent young man! He understood me. And he is rich. He can help me—can help all of us! With his money and my brains—Eh? What did you say, Decima? Dinner! Already?"

And, with a reluctant sigh, he suffered Decima to lead him out of the room.

CHAPTER X.

Decima slept soundly that night. Why should she not? for as yet love had not come to trouble her. But she dreamed, and in her dreams Lord Gaunt and Theodore Mershon were inextricably mixed; their voices, the one deep and musical, the other sharp and metallic, clashed together; and once she started uneasily, as if she felt Mr. Mershon's thin, claw-like fingers imprisoning hers.

At breakfast Bobby was full of Lord Gaunt's sudden decision to live amongst them, and Decima listened almost in silence. Mr. Deane displayed little or no interest, as he absently ate what was put before him, and shuffled off to his laboratory.

"I'm going down to the village, Bobby," said Decima, "to make my first essay in housekeeping. What shop do I go to?"

Bobby grinned. "What shop, you simple infant? There is only one shop—Mrs. Topper's. It sells everything—excepting what you want; but Mrs. Topper will offer to get it for you, say, in a month. There is nothing she will not promise to get you, from a needle to—a to a needle-gun. Go and make her acquaintance. She'll be glad to see you, for you'll be something fresh to talk to."

"Conversation Topper," we call her, for she's got a jaw that would fit a medium-sized crocodile. She never leaves off when once she begins, and you'll find you'll have to make a bolt for it. I always edge toward the door and shoot off in the middle of one of her sentences, and she follows me and shouts it down the street. You'll like Mrs. Topper. But, say, what's this about dining with that fellow Mershon? The governor tells me he has accepted for Tuesday."

"Yes," said Decima, reluctantly, "she put on her hat. 'We shall have to go, Bobby, I am afraid.'"

Bobby shrugged his shoulders. "Any one can get over the governor. He'd dine with the de—"

"Bobby!"

"Just you wait till I've finished. The deacon of the Wesleyan chapel, if he promised to listen to his account of a new invention. Well, I'm off. Give my love to Lord Gaunt, if you see him, and tell him that, notwithstanding his being such a bad lot, I rather like him, and will consent to fish his river as usual."

He went off with a cigarette in his lips, and Decima, having interviewed the cook, went down to the village.

It was a pretty, rambling cluster of houses, with the one shop Bobby had so graphically described standing a little way back from the green. Decima looked about her with interest, and noticed that the cottages, though picturesque, were in anything but good repair. Most of the roofs were of thatch and wanted renewing. The windows were small and, she fancied, were not made to open. The doors, some of them, were below the surface of the street or lane, and she knew that the houses must be damp, for the walls were streaked with green. The sign of the inn—the Gaunt Arms—swung by one hinge and the inn itself clamored loudly for new shutters and a coat of paint.

In a word, she felt that the place had been neglected, just as the Hall had been.

(To be continued.)

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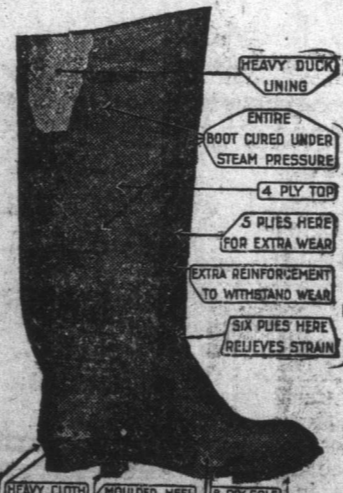
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