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CHAPTER XXI.

That night she wrote to Bobby. There was not a word of reproach in the loving letter; she only begged him to come home, if only for a day. Not until five days afterward did she receive a hurried scrawl from Bobby, saying it was impossible for him to leave London just then, but that he would run down as soon as he possibly could. The letter was so unlike him—there was not a touch of Bobby's brightness in it—that it filled Decima with dismay and foreboding. The days passed. It seemed to her as if there were forty-eight hours in each of them instead of twenty-four. She felt so lonely, and as if something had gone out of her life. She grew pale and listless.

When she went for a walk, she avoided the gates of the Leafmore lodge, and if she were compelled to go there, she would not glance up at the avenue.

She tried to forget Lord Gaunt—was one who had loved and lost, for she did not know that she loved him, would have been startled if the idea had entered her head for a moment—but she felt that, yielding to Mr. Bright's entreaties, she had done her insignificant best to keep Lord Gaunt amongst his people—and had failed.

But it was hard to forget a man whose name she was constantly hearing. The village people were always talking of him and deploring his absence. The country families were indignant at his sudden flight, and the local paper shed an inky tear over it.

Lady Ferndale, the Countess of Roberborough, and several of their friends had called upon Decima, and would have welcomed her into their set, but Decima felt as if, like Lord Gaunt, she hated society. She shrunk into her shell, as it were, and the great ladies, after awhile, gave up the attempt to woo her from it.

The only persons she saw were Mr. Mershon and Mrs. Sherborne. He came to The Woodbines nearly every day, and Mrs. Sherborne very often accompanied him and sat with Decima in the drawing-room, while her brother talked to Mr. Deane in the laboratory. Mrs. Sherborne was as constrained as ever, and she watched Decima with a covert scrutiny which sometimes got on the girl's nerves and made her feel as if she must scream or rush from the room. She was beginning to feel as if a net were being drawn round her.

And yet she could not complain of Mr. Mershon. He was too clever to harass her with attentions, and his manner toward her was one of the deepest respect and deference.

Sometimes Mrs. Sherborne brought a magnificent bunch of orchids from The Firs, and only sometimes she

casually mentioned that Theodore had cut the blooms with his own hands. Now and again Decima met Mr. Bright; indeed, he sought her as of old, and asked her advice and assistance in carrying out the benevolent schemes which he always declared she had started. And Decima tried to throw her heart into work which she had begun so eagerly, but she seemed to have no heart to throw. Now and again she asked Mr. Bright if he had heard from or of Lord Gaunt, but he always replied in the negative, with a shake of the head and a sigh.

One afternoon she came back from the village feeling tired and listless. She took off her things, and then went down to a little room at the back of the house where she kept her pets.

It had grown into quite a small menagerie, for, in addition to the guinea pigs and white mice she had brought with her, there were other pets which Lord Gaunt had given her. There were some Belgian hares, a rakish-looking jackdaw, who was quite a linguist in his way, a tame hawk, and a couple of Norwegian rats, to say nothing of a tortoise and a case of green lizards.

Gaunt had given her these from time to time, bringing them up in his pocket, and stealing a secret joy in her girlish delight at receiving them.

As Decima fed and played with the pets, she remembered the happy minutes she had spent with Lord Gaunt in the room, how he had told her the history of each of the animals and had been coaxing her into narrating some of his hunting stories. She could almost see him as he had leaned against the wall, smoking his cigarette, and smiling down at her as she knelt beside one of the cages. He had never been anything else but kind to her ever since the first day she had met him, now he was gone, and she took the jackdaw on her hand, and stroked his black plumes, and the bird croaked as if in sympathy.

Suddenly the door opened, and looking round, she saw Bobby. She sprang to her feet with a glad cry, the jackdaw flying with a shriek to the ceiling, and flung her arms round Bobby's neck. Then, as she looked into his face, she drew back with a little cry of alarm and apprehension.

Was that Bobby, the bright, laughing-eyed boy whose every word was a jest—this pale young man with gaunt cheeks and black marks under his eyes?

"Bobby!" she exclaimed. "What is the matter—are you ill?"

The flush rose to his haggard face for a moment, and he averted the eyes which had hitherto met hers so straightly.

"I am rather seedy, Decie," he said. "It's—it's the London life."

He sat down on one of the cages, and she sat close beside him and got hold of one of his hands and pressed and dragged at it anxiously.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she said. "And, oh, Bobby, you must be ill to look like that!"

"I didn't know until this morning that I was coming," he said, ignoring her comment on his appearance. "You're not looking first-rate yourself, Decie," he added; for the sudden flush of excitement had left her face and its pallor was perceptible.

"I am all right, Bobby," she said. "But tell me, is anything the matter?"

He looked down at the ground and began to roll up a cigarette; and she could see that his hands were shaking.

"There is something the matter, Decie," he said. "You've got to know sooner or later; it can't be kept from you, and you'd better hear it from me than any one else. We're in trouble, Decie."

"Trouble! Her lips formed the word; then her woman's courage came to her aid.

"Tell me all—everything, Bobby," she said. "Whatever it is, we must meet it and bear it."

He lighted his cigarette, but it went out again, and he flung it from him with a nervous gesture.

"It was Mr. Mershon wired for me," he said.

"Mr. Mershon? Why should he telegraph to you?"

"Because he thought I ought to know; that I ought to be here. He was quite right, of course. He met me at the station and told me all about it."

"All about it! About what? Is it—is it anything to do with this business—this company—of father's?"

Bobby nodded gloomily.

"Yes," he said. "That's it. The affair has come to smash."

Decima drew a long breath.

"To utter smash," he said. "I don't

understand it all, even now, though Mershon tried to explain. There was something wrong in the invention—the patent wouldn't hold water. I don't quite know what it was. Mershon tried not to put the blame on the governor, but he let it out reluctantly."

Decima sat pale and silent for a moment; then she murmured:

"Why did he join Mr. Mershon?"

"Honestly, I don't think Mershon's to blame," said Bobby. "He was led away by the governor's enthusiasm. Who wouldn't be? You know the way he talks. I don't think Mershon's such a bad fellow, after all. He—he is behaving very well about it. He has lost a lot of money in the affair."

"I am sorry," said Decima. "Very—very sorry. But Mr. Mershon is a rich man, and it will not matter to him. But it will matter very much to poor father; for we are not rich, are we, Bobby? But never mind"—she forced a smile—"we will meet it as best we can, we shall have to economize. You will only be able to smoke half as many cigarettes, Bobby."

She crept closer to him, and laid her head upon his shoulder. It was the only word of reproach she would utter.

Bobby looked down at her remorsefully, and then went away suddenly, as if he could not bear the sight of her brave smile, which touched him more than tears would have done.

"We shall have to leave The Woodbines, I suppose?" she said. She stifled a sigh. "Well, never mind. We can go into one of the new little cottages, and live very quietly and plainly."

Bobby's face worked, and his lips parted as if he were about to speak; but his courage failed him, and he got up quickly, his face averted from her.

"I'll—I'll go and change," he said. "We—we will talk about it after dinner."

He hurried out of the room.

Decima sat where he had left her, her hands clasped in her lap. Although she had not been altogether unprepared, the blow had fallen heavily. Presently she heard steps coming toward the door, and she thought it was Bobby returning; but the door opened, and Mr. Mershon's voice said:

"I beg your pardon, is your brother here?"

Decima rose and moved away slightly.

"He has just gone," she said.

Mershon came into the room, and stood looking at her.

"I see he has told you, Miss Decima," he said.

"Yes," said Decima, with her back almost turned to him. "He has told me, and I am very sorry. I am sorry that you should lose so much money through my father's fault."

He drew a little nearer.

"There's no occasion to be sorry on my account," he said; "I shan't miss it. I'm sorry, too—for your father."

Decima sighed.

"We must bear it," she said. "I have just been telling Bobby that we must leave The Woodbines and live very plainly, like—like poor people—which I suppose we shall be. There is nothing very hard in that."

He looked at her with a curious expression.

"And—perhaps if we are careful," she went on in a low voice, "we may be able to pay back some of the money you have lost through us. I don't know how much it is."

Mershon suppressed a smile.

"I'm afraid your brother hasn't told you all," he said.

"Yes," said Decima, "he has told me all. He is bearing it bravely. Poor Bobby! It will be a struggle for him, for he will have to manage with a very small allowance, I'm afraid. But it will be all right when he gets into the army—for he is so clever that he is sure to get one."

(To be continued.)

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