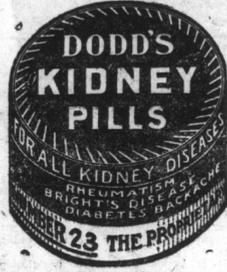


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Happiness At Last; Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER VII.
Decima stopped short and uttered an exclamation of delight.
It was one of those places which Meadows and Marcus Stone love to paint. An old, far-stretching, house of red brick almost black with age, and draped with ivy and clematis. Its redness was relieved and accentuated by the white stone sills and copings, and still further by the white marble lions which, at intervals, reared themselves on the massive pedestals of the broad terrace which was approached by a wide flight of marble steps, and shone like newly fallen snow in the moonlight.
"How's that?" asked Bobby.
Decima could scarcely respond for a moment, then she said:
"Oh, it is lovely, lovely! It is like a picture. It is like the house in Tennyson's poem. You know, Bobby?"
"Sorry, Tennyson's poems don't come in the examination papers. But it is pretty."
"Pretty!" exclaimed Decima, reproachfully. "It isn't pretty, Bobby, dear; it is magnificent! But how still it is! And there are no lights in the windows; see, they are all dark. And there is no smoke from the chimneys. What chimneys they are, too! Who lives there?"
"No one," replied Bobby. "Let's sit down. Here's a seat."
Decima sat down on a rustic bench under a fir, and leaning her chin in her hand, gazed at the house.
"No one? How is that? What is the place called, Bobby?"
"Leafmore," he said.
"What a pretty name!" She repeated it. "And whom does it belong to? Not a city man, like Mr.—of The First—what is his name?"
"Not much!" said Bobby, tilting his hat so that he could lean against the red trunk of the giant fir. "This belongs to a man named Gaunt—Lord Gaunt."
"What a singular name," said Decima, dreamily, her eyes fixed on the house.
"Yes; and he is a singular character."
"Do you know him, Bobby?"
"No; I've never seen him. He hasn't been here for years."
"Oh, how strange!" said Decima. "Think of having such a lovely place as this, and not living in it!"
"Yes; it sounds odd and strange, doesn't it? But I think he has several other places as beautiful or more beautiful than this. He is enormously rich and very eccentric."



"How eccentric?" she asked. "What does he do?"
"Well, I don't know quite. He's a great traveler, for one thing. He's the man who discovered Lake Ogwyn. Tremendous find that was! He's a kind of Wandering Jew. Here, there, and everywhere. And—and he doesn't bear the best of reputations."
Decima looked at him innocently.
"He is a bad man, do you mean?" Bobby stared at the end of his cigarette.
"Yes; I fancy so. He gambles. He is the man who lost—or won—I forget which, fifty thousand pounds to one of Prince Walden, the czar's brother, you know?"
"That is a large sum," said Decima.
"But—but—of course it is wicked to gamble; but they both stood the same chance, Bobby?"
Bobby laughed.
"Bravo! Not bad for a retort, my little Quaker!" he said. "But he's a dusky lot in other ways."
"What ways?" she asked, with her pure, innocent eyes upon him.
Bobby fidgeted.
"Oh, all sorts of ways. No, not all sorts of ways—We'll give him his due; he doesn't drink."
"That would be horrible!" said Decima.
Bobby nodded.
"It is only quite recently, during the last three or four years, less, perhaps, that he has been so bad," he said. "They say that he was all right at starting. He came into the title and the estates when he was quite young, and did his duty by them in the most exemplary fashion. Kept the straight line like a pilot-engine for a time, then suddenly he swerved off, and has been rushing down line ever since."
Decima looked puzzled.
"I don't understand how a man with so beautiful a house as this to come to be so wicked," she said, dreamily. "But, Bobby, that reminds me, aren't we trespassing?"
"No," he said. "I know Mr. Bright, the steward. He's an awfully decent chap. He's as fond of the place, and Lord Gaunt himself, as if it and he belonged to him."
"He likes Lord Gaunt, then?"
"Rather! He thinks there is no one like him, and he's awfully fond of

talking about him. According to him, Lord Gaunt is a kind of demi-god—the best rider, the best shot, the coolest, bravest man in all the world. He's known him ever since he was a child. Bright was steward here in Lord Gaunt's father's time, and he says there never was such a boy, or such a young man, as this Lord Gaunt was. Bright will talk about him for hours. Sometimes when I'm fishing—there's a splendid stream runs through this place; it's just below that hill—he comes and walks beside me and jabs about 'the young lord', as he calls him, though Gaunt must be quite thirty-one or two, I think."
"There must be some good in a man for another man—and not a relation—to be so fond of him," said Decima, thoughtfully.
Bobby nodded.
"Oh, yes. Bright says that Lord Gaunt was as good as good until something happened to change him. What it was, he doesn't know. Something with a woman in it, I expect."
"A woman?" said Decima, turning her eyes upon him. "Why do you say that?"
Bobby lowered his eyes under the direct, innocent gaze.
"Oh, it's usual to say that. I don't know anything about it. Bright himself doesn't know. All he knows is that Lord Gaunt is letting this estate—and the others, I suppose—go to rack and ruin from neglect. He won't come down to see it, he doesn't answer any letters, and, in short, behaves as if he didn't care a brass farthing for the place. Bright does what he can to keep things straight, but of course there are heaps of things he can't do, and that's why the place looks 'so desolate.'"
"The house is like that poem of Hood's," said Decima, dreamily.
"It's a lovely place inside," said Bobby. "I'll take you in some day. Bright has given me the run of it. So far as I am concerned, I don't care how long Lord Gaunt keeps away. I come here to fish, and I often come here to work, and sometimes I take a turn in the picture gallery—there is a perfectly lovely collection, a priceless collection of the old masters, especially the Flemish—and now and again I almost fancy I'm the proprietor of the whole show. I wish I were."
"Perhaps you would be as unhappy," said Decima.
Bobby laughed—the young man's laugh.
"Oh, I don't know about being unhappy. I should think Lord Gaunt has a high old time of it. He is tremendously rich, awfully handsome, according to Bright, and a devil-may-care sort of fellow, evidently, or he wouldn't let things here slide as he does. Bright says the tenants' places—the homesteads and all that—are going to rack and ruin; and he—that's Bright—can't do anything without Lord Gaunt's authority, and Gaunt won't write or take any notice. Un-

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happy! I should say he was as happy as a sand boy."
"Aunt Pauline says that no one is happy who does not do his duty."
"Aunt Pauline is as good as a copy-book heading," said Bobby, irreverently. "No wonder you are such a saint. But come on; we'd better be going back, or the governor will blow up the house—he has invented a new dynamic force; it's to put an end to the modern system of warfare. You fire it out of an eighty-tonner, and it annihilates the enemy at one shot. Come on!"
Decima rose, with her eyes still on the picturesque house, lying so still and deserted in the moonlight, and they went back through the wooden gate and along the road.
As they approached the new and imposing entrance to The Firs, Bobby sniffed the evening air.
"Some one smoking a cigar; and a strong one," he remarked.
A moment afterward, Decima saw a man standing just inside The Firs' gate. He was a shortish man, young, with a clean-shaven face. He was in evening-dress, with the dinner-jacket which bachelors nowadays affect, and looked particularly spruce and alert.
"Mr. Theodore Mershon," said Bobby, under his breath.
As they came up to the gate, Mr. Mershon turned his head and looked at them, recognized Bobby, and raised his hat in a rather cool and supercilious way; but as Decima moved from the shadow of a tree and came into the moonlight, Mr. Mershon saw her distinctly, and his sharp eyes scanned her with a critical stare. As he looked, his manner changed, and he took a step or two forward and held out his hand to Bobby.
"How do you do, Deane?" he said; but though he addressed Bobby, his sharp eyes were fixed on the girl's lovely face.
Bobby replied coolly enough, and would have passed on, but Mr. Mershon detained him with a question.
"Been for a stroll?" he said; and Decima noticed that his voice was thin, quick and sharp, in harmony with his face.
"Yes," said Bobby. "My sister and I—this is my sister, Mr. Mershon."
Nothing would have induced him to omit the "Mr."
Mr. Mershon raised his hat again and bowed.
"I didn't know Miss Deane was down here," he said. "In fact, I didn't know you had a sister."
"She has only just come down," said Bobby, rather coldly. "It's a fine night, isn't it?"
"Very. And you have only just come to Stretton, Miss Deane?" said Mr. Mershon, his eyes scanning her face for a moment, and then turned aside, so that they were hidden from her, as she replied:
"Only to-night."
"Well, it's too early to ask you if you like it," he said. "But I hope you will. Have you been abroad?"
"I have been living with an aunt," said Decima; and she, too, spoke rather coldly, for something in the man's face or his voice or his manner was repellent to her.
He shot a glance at her, and averted his eyes again.
"Ah, you come at a nice time of the year. The place looks at its best now. By the way, Deane"—he glanced at Bobby—"I was going to ask if you and your father would dine with me some night—"

"My father never dines out," said Bobby, somewhat stiffly.
Mr. Mershon looked from him to Decima.
"Oh! Perhaps you and Miss Deane would honor me? I will have the pleasure of calling on you, if you will allow me, and we can arrange a night. I should like to show Miss Deane—your father—the new palm-house. Will you come?"
He looked for an instant at Decima—an instant in which his sharp eyes seemed to take in the whole of her face and form.
Decima's frank eyes rested on him placidly.
"Perhaps," she said in her direct way, "if my father or brother—"
"Better say 'Yes,' and name a day, Deane," he said. "Say next Tuesday. I'll come over and try and persuade your father."
Bobby was old enough to know that this was not the proper mode of invitation, and he colored with boyish embarrassment.
Mershon glanced at him, bit his lip and colored, as if he saw his mistake.
"I'll write," he said. "Good-night."
He did not turn into the drive, but stood and watched them as they passed on.
"By Heaven! what a lovely creature!" he said to himself. "Fancy that old maniac having a daughter like that! Look like—like—I don't know what she looks like."
"What a strange man!" said Decima, when they had got out of hearing.
"Yes, he's a rum fish," said Bobby.
"Awfully bad form, pressing us to dine with him, wasn't it?"
"I suppose it was," said Decima.
"Shall you go?"
"No," said Bobby. Then he added: "Would you like to?"
"Oh, no. Why should I?"
"It might be fun," said Bobby.
"Well, see. Did you see the diamond stud in the shirt-front? That sort of man always wears a diamond stud. It is the mark of the beast. And did you notice that his eyes never met yours? Sort of man I distrust. But I'm rather curious to see what kind of a dinner he would put on. We'll see. Here you are, 'the lights of home!' I'll go into the laboratory and see if the governor is still there."
He opened the door and looked in.
"Gone to roost, the saints be praised! And you'd better go to your little bed, sister mine. Oh, you don't want to kiss me, do you? Well, it's the first night—"
He submitted to the embrace, and Decima ran up to her room.
She slept like a top—if ever the gods are envious, it is of the blessed top of youth—and in the morning came down "fresh as the rose that's gemmed with dew."
(To be continued.)

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