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CHAPTER XVII.

"Are we late?" Then she looked round. "What a delightful room, Mr. Deane! Why, you are quite a gyrfalcon!" Bobby in his nervousness was about to blurt out, in forgetfulness of Morgan Thorpe's injunction, that the room was not his; but Morgan Thorpe frowned at him warningly, and Bobby stammered:

"Not—not worthy of your presence, Mrs. Dalton."

"How nicely you said that," she murmured. "And, oh, what lovely flowers!" She looked down at the bunch of orchids in her hand, and raised them carefully to her red lips. "And these I found on the dressing-table. Were they meant for me? I appropriated them, you see."

"If you will deign to accept them," said Bobby, glowing with pride and pleasure.

Then they sat down to dinner, and Morgan Thorpe praised the soup and the hock—and the wine deserved all his praise if it was as good as the price was high—and praised the red mullet, and praised the entrée which the well-trained waiter handed round with the gravity and noiselessness of a dual retainer.

Bobby was nervous at starting, and, like all novices at the same, watched the waiter anxiously; but as the dinner, the costly dinner, proceeded and Morgan Thorpe grew more laudatory, he gained confidence, and rattled on with his usual boyish candor and spirit. He allowed the waiter to fill his glass rather frequently, and the good wine set his heart beating and his tongue wagging.

The divine Laura toyed delicately with her dainty fare, smiled sweetly at him, and murmured soft and musical nothings; Morgan Thorpe talked fluently and in his best style; and only Trevor sat glum and silent, eating the costly and never-ending dishes with sullen appreciation.

Every now and then he looked up from his plate and regarded Laura and Bobby with a fierce and gloomy scrutiny; but Laura caught the glances and smiled at him, when Bobby was not looking, and Trevor would return to his plate comforted and reassured.

The dinner was a success. It would have been rather strange if it had not been, considering the pains and money spent upon it; and Morgan Thorpe, when Laura had retired to the adjoining apartment, which was only divided from the dining-room by a curtain, and was furnished as a drawing-room, expressed his satisfaction and appreciation enthusiastically.

"A dinner fit for a prince! My dear Deane, you have proved yourself a perfect Macanass! My dear fellow, you evidently have a genius for this kind of thing. I envy you, for I can not

imitate you. The plate—the third on the menu—did you think of it yourself?"

"No," said Bobby, modestly. "Ah, I see! Gave your cook carte blanche. Well, she has proved herself a cordon bleu. It was beyond praise. What wine is this?" He filled his glass—and Trevor's—with the Chateau claret. "Fit for the gods! My dear Deane, I drink to you! Fill his glass, Trevor. He is neglecting himself. It is the way of hosts."

Trevor shoved the decanter along sullenly, and Bobby filled his glass and drank to Mr. Morgan Thorpe.

The cigars were lighted. "Laura will not object to such cigars as these, my dear Deane," remarked Morgan Thorpe.

A soft and subtle Chopin floated from the piano in the next room. Laura was playing. Bobby's head began to swim with the wine and Morgan Thorpe's praise and the exquisite music. His heart was filled with satisfaction; the beautiful creature was in his (that is, Lord Gaunt's) rooms; his dinner had been a success.

They went into the little drawing-room, and Bobby leaned his elbow on the piano and gazed into the lovely, piquant face, and she gazed back at him with a soft and tender smile.

Then Trevor came up to the piano, and as Bobby moved away to answer a remark of Morgan Thorpe's, she smiled up at him and murmured something in a low voice.

"How's this going to end?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "What's it mean?"

"My dear friend, why be angry with me?" she whispered. "You know that I am not a free agent. I am under orders, and I am—ah, can you not see—but obeying those orders. Don't be angry with me!"

Trevor—his face was flushed and his eyes bloodshot—bent until his lips nearly touched her hair.

"Don't—don't try me too far," he said; hoarsely, "or I shan't be able to stand it!"

And she smiled and sighed up at him, and the next instant she was smiling up at Bobby with a pathetic, pleading expression in her dark eyes.

"Shall we have some cards?" Morgan Thorpe asked, presently, and in quite a casual way.

Bobby stared away from the piano and the angel at it.

"Cards! I'm—I'm afraid I haven't any. I'm very sorry," he said, remorsefully.

"By Jove, how strange!" said Morgan Thorpe, feeling in his pocket. "Quite by chance I happened to put a pack—why, there are here!—in my pocket last night. Now, how did I come to do that?"

"Don't play, dear Mr. Deane!" murmured Laura. But Mr. Morgan Thorpe slid his hand through Bobby's arm and led him to the table which the waiter had opened.

"Nonsense, my dear Laura! Of course he will play!" Bobby sat down. He was all aglow with pleasant satisfaction at the success of his dinner, and—ah!—it is written—with wine!

As they seated themselves, the waiter, preparatory to leaving, opened a couple of bottles of champagne and filled the gentlemen's glasses, and Bobby emptied his speedily.

While they played, the music floated out to them from the next room, and Bobby could scarcely fix his attention on the game, and he hummed an accompaniment; and his attention was yet further diverted when the divine Laura glided in to them, and leaning on his shoulder, bent over him.

"Tiresome cards!" she murmured. "How I hate them! Why are you men so fond of them, I wonder?" and with a petulant impatient gesture, she swept the dark hair from her forehead.

Bobby looked up at her with all his young soul in his eyes.

"I would rather—rather be at the piano with you," he murmured. "Your play, Deane," broke in Trevor's harsh voice, and Bobby played the first card—and lost.

"I mark the game," Mr. Morgan Thorpe would say, pleasantly. "You ought to have won that, my dear Deane."

Once or twice Bobby rose from the table and strayed to the piano, but Morgan Thorpe always called him back.

The music, the play, went on until the chimes sounded small. Very frequently, Laura leaned over Bobby's shoulder and murmured soft nothings. Once her small white hand stroked his hair softly, and at the caress the blood mounted hotly to the boy's face, and he did not know whether he was

playing hearts or diamonds; conscious of nothing but that fascinating presence, the dark eyes and red lips, the soft, murmuring voice that sang sweetly in his ears.

He passed the champagne—the wine whose cost he was presently to learn—and filled his own glass. And he talked and laughed, and made foolish bets, and lost them with cheerful indifference.

At last, warned by a glance from his sister's speaking eyes, Morgan Thorpe said, looking at the priceless bronze clock on the mantel-shelf:

"By Jove! my dear Deane, do you know the time? We must be going; we really must! My dear Laura, how could you let us trespass on Mr. Deane's hospitality?"

"It is those horrid cards!" said the divine Laura, with a pout, and her hand touched Bobby's arm with a lingering caress.

"Let me see," said Morgan Thorpe, as he consulted his memorandum tablet, "you have been unlucky tonight, Deane, very unlucky. I never saw such cards. You owe Trevor fifty-six pounds, and me a hundred and twenty-four."

Bobby's face fell, but Laura's white hand touched his shoulder, and she smiled up at her.

"I'm sorry! I'm—I'm afraid—" he stammered.

Morgan Thorpe laughed carelessly. "My dear fellow, I did not suppose you carried so much money in your waistcoat pocket. No one does. You will do the usual thing, of course. Just give me an I.O.U., or, better still, a little bill. Strange, but I have one about me!"

He produced a sheet of blue paper, partly filled up, and laid it on the table.

"Sign that, my dear Deane. It is only a matter of form. Between friends, you know. You need not pay until it is convenient; in fact, Trevor and I don't care very much whether you pay or not. We have had such a delightful evening. Delightful! You are a perfect Macanass, my dear Deane! By Jove! I have never had a more absolute perfect dinner! Eh, Laura?"

Laura, thus appealed to, murmured something in Bobby's ear; and Bobby, taking the stylographic pen which Mr. Morgan Thorpe offered him, signed his name across the blue paper.

His head was swimming, his whole being thrilling under the touch of her hand, the music of her murmuring voice. He would have done anything, signed anything.

With a fond and vacuous smile, he wrapped her cloak round her.

"Take one of my flowers with you," he said in a thick whisper.

She pressed the bouquet to her lips, and looked across it at him with a sad smile.

"If we had only met—earlier!" she murmured.

Bobby went down to the brougham with them, and, as she entered, she pressed his hand so warmly that he ventured to raise his small white hand to his lips.

The brougham rattled away, and the divine Laura leaned back with a yawn and a sigh.

Trevor bent forward, his bloodshot eyes gleaming upon her.

"How long is this going to last?" he asked, hoarsely.

She shrugged her shoulders and glanced at her brother.

"Ask him," she said.

Mr. Morgan Thorpe laughed.

"My dear Trevor," he said, remonstratingly, "you surely are not jealous! Of a boy like that! And Trevor, with a smothered oath, subsided.

Meanwhile, Bobby sat at the table, with the cards strewn around him, and thought of the divine Laura. He could feel her perfumed breath upon his cheek, could hear her voice still ringing in his ears.

He did not remember how much he had lost; did not reflect that he was the son of a poor man, with a limited allowance. He only thought of that beautiful face and sweet voice, and—Reader, did you ever hear the song of "The Spider and the Fly?"

(To be continued.)

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