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CHAPTER XI.

Already it was announced that he would be asked to re-establish the pack of hounds which had been put down at his father's death; and the mothers of eligible daughters looked at their girls thoughtfully and speculatively, as they reflected that Lord Gaunt would be the best part of the country had held for some years past; and Leafmore was a very desirable residence, and would need a mistress.

Mr. Bright got Decima down to the Hall nearly every day, and asked her advice upon nearly every change that was being so swiftly wrought there; and Decima was so engrossed that she had quite forgotten the dinner-party at The Firs until, on the Tuesday morning, Bobby remarked:

"I wonder whether the governor means going with us to-night? If so, I shall have to order a fly; otherwise we could walk."

"Oh, I had forgotten it," said Decima. "I'll ask him," and she ran into the laboratory.

Mr. Deane gazed at her with an absent air.

"Dinner—Firs—Mr. Mershon? Ah, yes—yes. Yes, I remember. Of course, of course! I am to show him those drawings of the electric storage. Where are they—where? I put them somewhere for safety—where?"

"Bobby 'dug him out' at seven, and by a quarter to eight brought him into the hall dressed in his grotesque evening-suit. His neck-tie notwithstanding Bobby's care, had already worked under the left ear and he had ruined his shirt-front irretrievably by clutching the roll of drawings against it. Bobby glanced up at Decima despairingly as she came down the stairs.

"Look sharp," he said in a tone scarcely lowered, for Mr. Deane never heard any remark unless it was addressed directly to him, and not always then, "or he'll reduce himself to the likeness of a rag-bag before we get him there. I say, what a swell you are!" he added, taking her by the shoulders and regarding her with reluctant fraternal admiration.

And, indeed, she looked like a dainty flower in the dimly lighted hall. She wore one of the dinner-dresses Lady Pauline had made for the visit to



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London; a soft gray, as usual, but fitting the slim, graceful figure exquisitely. It was open a very little at the neck, and it had an air of soft splendor which struck ever Bobby.

"Kindly mention to the admiring crowds, as we go along, that you are my sister, will you?" he remarked. "I feel rather proud of you."

She put her arm round his neck; but he dodged her with:

"Ah, would you! Never, never attempt to cuddle a man when he has got a three-inch collar and a white tie on! You'd ruin them. Come on! His father! where are you going?" for Mr. Deane was shuffling toward the belated den. "This way; going to dine with Mr. Mershon, you know. Get in and hold him tight, Decie!"

When they reached The Firs, a footman in brilliant—too brilliant—livery opened the door of the fly; another stood in the hall—a handsome fellow enough, with palms and statury; but how different to the hall at Leafmore!—and flinging open the drawing-room door, announced them with a pompous air.

Decima was almost dazzled by the overlighted, overglit room. Its newness was everywhere—in the decorations, the furniture, the pictures. It "seared one's eyes," as poor William Morris used to say.

Decima was aware presently that a lady was standing in front of her. She was past middle age, with hair streaked with gray, with a thin figure and a pale face, in which timidity, almost fear, was plainly expressed as she glanced from Mr. Mershon to Decima and back again. Mr. Mershon, in too well-fitting an evening-dress with the too large diamond stud, came up.

"My half-sister, Mrs. Sherborne," he said. "She has come to run the house for me." As he spoke, he shot a sharp, half-savage glance at her, and with a nervous quaver in her voice, Mrs. Sherborne said:

"I—I am very glad to see you. Will you come upstairs and take your cloak off? I—I will go with you."

Decima followed her up the stairs, daddoed with gold and lined with new and garish pictures, and Mrs. Sherborne helped her off with her cloak, though a maid stood ready to do so.

"You—you did not expect to see a lady here?" said Mrs. Sherborne. "I—I only came a few days ago." She scanned the lovely, girlish face covertly, then turned her eyes away, and so reminded Decima of Mr. Mershon. "You know my brother very well, Miss Deane?" she added in a quieter voice, but a restrained one, as if she were trying to master her nervousness. The effort made her tone curiously impassive and expressionless. It was like the voice from behind a mask.

"Oh, no," said Decima. "I have only met Mr. Mershon once or twice."

Mrs. Sherborne smothered a sigh.

"You are very young," she said, as if to herself. Decima looked at her with some surprise, and Mrs. Sherborne colored and bit her lip. "Are you ready? We will go down," she said, confusedly.

Mr. Mershon gave his arm to Decima and they went into the dining-room. Decima's first impression of the room was that it was like a jeweler's shop. There was the usual oak—modern oak—furniture, from which the huge buffet stood out conspicuously, as it was simply loaded with silver. There was beautiful flowers on the table, but the profusion of plate overweighed and seemed to crush them—it and the thr footmen; and as they moved to and fro, their gaudy liveries oppressed Decima.

There seemed no single spot in the room on which the eye could rest; it was all color, and glitter or silver and gold.

The dinner was a superb one—not one of Mr. Mershon's guests really knew how perfect it was—but to Decima it seemed endless and wearisome.

And yet Mr. Mershon did his best to entertain her. She was, of course, seated next to him, and he talked to her through all the courses. His topic was the one which has the most interest for most men—himself. He told her how he had started the Great Wheel Mining Company, and made a quarter of a million out of it—before it went smash; how he had bought up town lots in Arizona at a pound a lot and realized at fifty; how he had gained the concession from Turkey for the supply of cocconut fiber, and netted five hundred thousand for his company in six months, and of similar achievements.

And he did not talk badly, for, while a man talks of what he understands and the thing that is nearest

to his heart, he will generally talk well.

Every now and then he glanced at Mrs. Sherborne, and as if in obedience to his glance, she addressed some remark to Decima in the strange, expressionless voice.

When he was not talking to Decima, and her face was turned away from him, Mr. Mershon's restless, shiftless eyes were fixed on her with a curiously intent gaze of which Decima was quite unconscious. He pressed the champagne—it was Wachter, 1880, a rare vintage—on Bobby, and permitted the butler to fill his own glass pretty frequently.

Bobby addressed himself to the dinner, and Mr. Deane eat and drank what was put before him with his usual mechanical acquiescence. And the silent, constrained Mrs. Sherborne sat with down-cast eyes, excepting when she raised them quickly with a half-frightened expression of some remark of her half-brother's. At last, to Decima's relief, Mrs. Sherborne looked at her and rose, and they went into the drawing-room. Mr. Mershon got a box of cigars and cigarettes from the side-board and handed them to Bobby.

"You'll find these Rothschilds pretty fair, Deane," he said.

Bobby chose a cigar and lighted up, and Mr. Mershon drew his chair nearer to Mr. Deane.

"Did you bring those drawings?" he asked.

Mr. Deane, who had been in a brown study during the dinner, woke up instantly.

"Yes, yes," he said, eagerly; "I brought them. I don't know what I did with them. Robert, there is a roll of paper in the hall."

Bobby fetched them, and strolled into the electrically lighted conservatory adjoining the dining-room; he was not eager to hear his father rhapsodize.

Mr. Deane opened out the papers.

"You see—" he began, Mr. Mershon looked at the drawings and then at his guest's face with a peculiar, cynical smile, and listened with his eyes averted.

"Yes; there is a lot of money in it," he said, after a time.

"You think?" exclaimed Mr. Deane, eagerly.

Mr. Mershon nodded.

"Yes; I'm ready to make a company of it. But you must put something into it. They'll expect that."

Mr. Deane's face fell.

"Let me tell you how I am placed," he said, with a suppressed excitement. "I have a small independence which produces an income—a narrow income—on which we live."

Mr. Mershon nodded.

"I understand. But that's enough. I'll show you the way to realize a sufficient sum to back this thing. Leave it to me. I'll work it for you. As you say, there's a fortune in this idea of yours."

"My dear sir, there is incalculable wealth!" interjected Mr. Deane.

"Quite so," said Mr. Mershon, with a scarcely concealed sneer. "You leave it to me. You may have heard me telling your daughter about the large sums I have made out of limited companies? It's my forte, my line. You leave it to me. I'll take care of those drawings."

"You understand—you are quite sure you understand?" said Mr. Deane, feverishly.

"Oh, I quite understand. Shall we join the ladies, Mr. Robert?" said Mr. Mershon.

They went into the drawing-room, and Mr. Mershon, with a sharp glance at Mrs. Sherborne, who was bending over some embroidery, went up to Decima.

"Will you play or sing for us, Miss Deane?" he said.

(To be continued.)

Some men are so credulous that they actually believe that a woman carries a pink parasol in order to keep off the sun, wears a one-piece bathing-suit to swim in, and smiles because she is happy.

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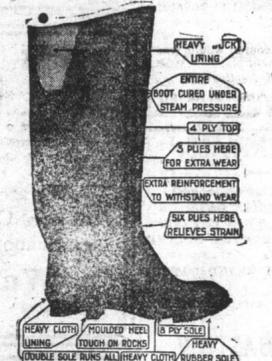
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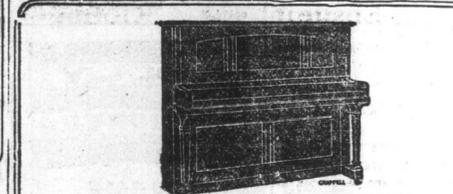
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