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CHAPTER XL.

Eighteen months after the acquittal of Lord Gaunt, and the death of Ralph Trevor—he died in prison within a week of the trial—there was a garden-party at Lady Roborough's. It must be confessed that the usual garden-party is a deadly dull affair—she has not suffered at it—but Lady Roborough's was an exception to the ordinary rule.

As has been intimated, she was a clever old lady, far too clever and good natured to get together a mob of people and permit them to bore themselves to death through the hottest and most trying part of a summer's day.

At Roborough you were sure to find plenty of shade—the gardens were the pride of the country—and plenty of amusement. There were four capital tennis-courts, for instance; a wonderful bowling green; a lake with boats; tennis with an unlimited supply of tennis balls, and more solid refreshments; a first-rate band—not too loud—in the open air, and music in the drawing-room, if the day should be wet—as it sometimes is in England—and there were shrubberies and shady walks in which one could flirt or smoke the surreptitious cigarette in safety.

People came from far and wide to these garden parties, and, marvelous to state, were always sorry when the time came for them to go, and the butler to collect and check the plate and napkins.

Lady Roborough, looking scarcely a day older, moved about the grounds applauding the tennis players, congratulating the flirter, cautioning the boating-parties to "be careful," and seeing that no one went without the precious cup of tea.

Now and again she persuaded herself to take a rest, and seated just inside the big marquee, from whence, like a general, she could survey her forces, she indulged in a little gossip with some of the elder guests, who liked the shaded tents better than the tennis, the boats, or even the shrubberies.

"A great success, as usual, my dear," remarked Lady Ferndale, who sat next her.

"Everybody seems very happy—at any rate, they appear to be amusing themselves," admitted Lady Roborough. "The next best thing to being young is to be old enough to like to watch young people."

Lady Ferndale smiled. "You must be enjoying yourself, then," she said, "for there are plenty here. How pretty some of the girls are! Do you think any of us were half as good-looking?"

"I can answer for one, my dear," rejoined Lady Roborough, touching her friend's arm affectionately. "But there are some very good-looking young people here this afternoon. If I were inclined to be vulgar—which, by the way, I very often am—I should say it was quite a beauty show."

"How awful!" exclaimed Lady Ferndale; but she laughed. "I wonder where that impressionable man, my husband, is? I have not seen him for

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the last hour. I suppose he is flirting with some of your pretty girls. Really, I am inclined to feel jealous."

She pretended to sigh, and Lady Roborough smiled. "You need not be my dear," she remarked. "Lord Ferndale is delightfully general in his admiration. There is always safety in numbers, you know."

"Yes; that is my only consolation!" said Lady Ferndale, with mock gravity. "Though Edward has concentrated his attentions upon Miss Deane of late. Is that he talking to her now?"

Lady Ferndale was short-sighted. Lady Roborough put up her eye-glasses and surveyed Decima and her male companion.

"No; that is young Illminster," she said.

There was a certain significance in her tone, and Lady Ferndale glanced at her.

"What a sweet girl she is!" she said, musingly. "Now, I really don't think any of us were quite so lovely as she is," she added.

"I suppose she is; oh, yes, of course, she is," assented Lady Ferndale; "but to tell you the truth I never think of her prettiness when I am with her. There is something about her that

"passeth show," as our friend Hamlet says. I know," said Lady Ferndale. "She fascinates me, and I quite sympathize with Edward; indeed, I'm rather more in love with her than he is."

"And yet," said Lady Roborough, still looking toward Decima, "there are girls who are as beautiful, and certainly more clever and accomplished. For instance, you scarcely ever hear her say anything brilliant or witty—"

"I don't know that I particularly care for brilliant or witty girls," interpolated Lady Ferndale.

"—And she has few accomplishments. Her charm is a nameless one, or difficult to describe. It must be, do you think it is her foodiness?" she asked, doubtfully. "Sometimes I think it is. She is awfully good; you know she was Lady Pauline's ward or charge. And yet there isn't a trace of the Pharisee in her."

"Perhaps it's her gentleness," suggested Lady Ferndale. "So few girls have that nowadays. I'm afraid it's rather unfashionable. Girls like to be thought fast and 'smart'—dear me, how I hate the world!—and are ashamed of possessing that inconvenient thing, a heart. Sometimes I'm inclined to think that in the next generation or two it will be only the men who will be capable of the 'emotions.' Now, Decima Deane is like a sensitive leaf."

"Too sensitive, I'm afraid," said Lady Roborough.

"Ah, yes; and yet how admirably self-contained and self-possessed she is! I like to sit and watch her face; it is like a mirror, an dyet so grave and calm, and—what do you call it?—not impassive—but—"

"All serene," suggested Lady Roborough.

Lady Ferndale laughed. "That sounds like slang!" she said.

"But I see you know what I mean. She looks to me like one of those rare lilies which have stood the strain of wind and rain, and, though they still stand erect, show something of the ordeal through which they have passed."

"There is nothing taded about our lily, though," said Lady Roborough. "She is still a girl, and as fresh as a newly opened blossom."

"Yes, is she quite well now?" asked Lady Ferndale. "She was so very ill, and looked so pale and frail for so long, that I began to fear the lily would not hold up its head again."

"She is better; quite well, I think. She is really very strong; indeed, she must be, or she would not have pulled through. She was playing tennis just now; a hard game, and she was on the winning side."

"I wonder she has not married," said Lady Ferndale. "I am glad her engagement with that man, Mr. Merston, was broken off. What has become of him, do you know?"

Lady Roborough shook her head. "No; he left The Firs more than a year ago. It is for sale, as you know. I don't know what has become of him, but I think I heard that he had settled in some place on the Continent."

Yes, she went on, after a pause, "It is strange that Decima does not marry. She has had one or two offers during the last twelve months. I know, though she—you know her—of course, has not told me of them."

"And there will be a third directly," said Lady Ferndale. "That is Lord Illminster with her, is it not?"

"Yes; oh, yes; he will propose to her. It is an open secret; indeed, he

has told me, and has asked me to help him. But I declined. Decima is not like most girls, and one feels that one would be treading on very delicate ground if one ventured to play the part of match-maker with her."

Lady Ferndale nodded sympathetically. "I should not like to venture. I could not. Do you think she will accept him?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think she may, at others I think not."

"That's very non-committal, my dear," responded Lady Ferndale, with a smile.

"It expresses what I feel exactly. But Decima, without meaning it, of course—for she is simplicity itself—is rather deceptive. For instance, sometimes she will be quite—quite friendly to Lord Illminster, and he will go about looking as happy as a sand-boy, and presently he will come to me and make dolorous moan, and complain that Miss Deane has either passed him in the road with a cold bow, or answered him so absently and with such a preoccupied, dreamy manner that he is sure there is no hope for him."

"Poor fellow! How I pity him! Imagine being really in love with Decima Deane! How a man could suffer!"

"Oh, he suffers badly enough," assented Lady Roborough, placidly. "But I don't feel for him so much. I think of Decima. I want her to be happy."

"And she is not now?"

Lady Roborough looked doubtful and rather sad.

"I—don't know. I'm afraid not. That absent, dreamy look which makes poor Lord Illminster so wretched is too often on her face. It comes quite suddenly, just after she has been talking and laughing quite brightly, as if she had suddenly remembered something. The expression passes quickly enough sometimes, but it has been there, and one can not forget it."

"Wasn't wasn't there something between her and Lord Gaunt?" said Lady Ferndale, hesitatingly, and in a low voice.

"I don't know. They were very much together. She helped him in the village; indeed, all the great improvements—But you know all about that as well as I do. But Lord Gaunt was so much older, and was married—though we did not know it. Oh, no; there was nothing. How could there be?"

"There was something said, hinted, at the trial."

"Oh, no. She chanced to call upon her brother when Lord Gaunt went to his rooms that night. There was some suggestion, some hint of a love affair between them, but it must have been groundless. Otherwise, why is he not here?"

"Yes; nothing has been seen of him since the trial," remarked Lady Ferndale.

"No," said Lady Roborough. "He is abroad in Africa; one reads about him every now and then. I don't suppose he will ever come back to England."

"So Edward says. What a pity it is that a place like Leafmore should be shut up. There seems a Fate in it. Now, I pity Lord Gaunt. I like him so much."

"So did we all, and we all pity him," said Lady Roborough, with a sigh. "But what will you? There is one great mistake which a man can commit—an unfortunate marriage; and he never can dodge the consequences. It is the one piece of folly which is always attended by its Nemesis."

"Poor Lord Gaunt! And Decima lives all alone with her father. Lady Pauline has gone, has she not?"

"Oh, yes; some time ago. Yes, she is alone with her father. Her brother is at Sandhurst. He passed last March. He worked terribly hard, and won his way back into all our hearts before he left."

"It must be a great responsibility for her," said Lady Ferndale, "Mr. Deane is more—more absorbed in his fads than ever, isn't he? I saw him for a few minutes once when I called, and I think he was scarcely conscious of my presence."

"Yes, it is a great responsibility, said Lady Roborough. "But Decima is not the girl to shirk it. No daughter could be more loving and devoted."

"What a wife some happy man will have! I hope he will be Lord Illminster; he is a fine young fellow, and it would be a good match."

"Hush, she is coming!" said Lady Roborough, warningly, as Decima came alone across the lawn, with her racket in her hand. "Well, my dear, what have you done with Lord Illminster?" asked the old lady. "Come into the shade." She took Decima's hand and drew her into the chair beside her, and kept the small hand and patted it caressingly; every one felt a strong temptation to pat and caress the girl.

"Lord Illminster has gone to play tennis," said Decima. "I was down for the set, but I felt rather tired, and knew he would lose if I played, so I asked him to get a stronger partner."

"For which he was very grateful, I'm sure," remarked her ladyship, dryly.

"Oh, yes," said Decima, innocently. "He plays so well, and it would have been a pity to make him lose the set."

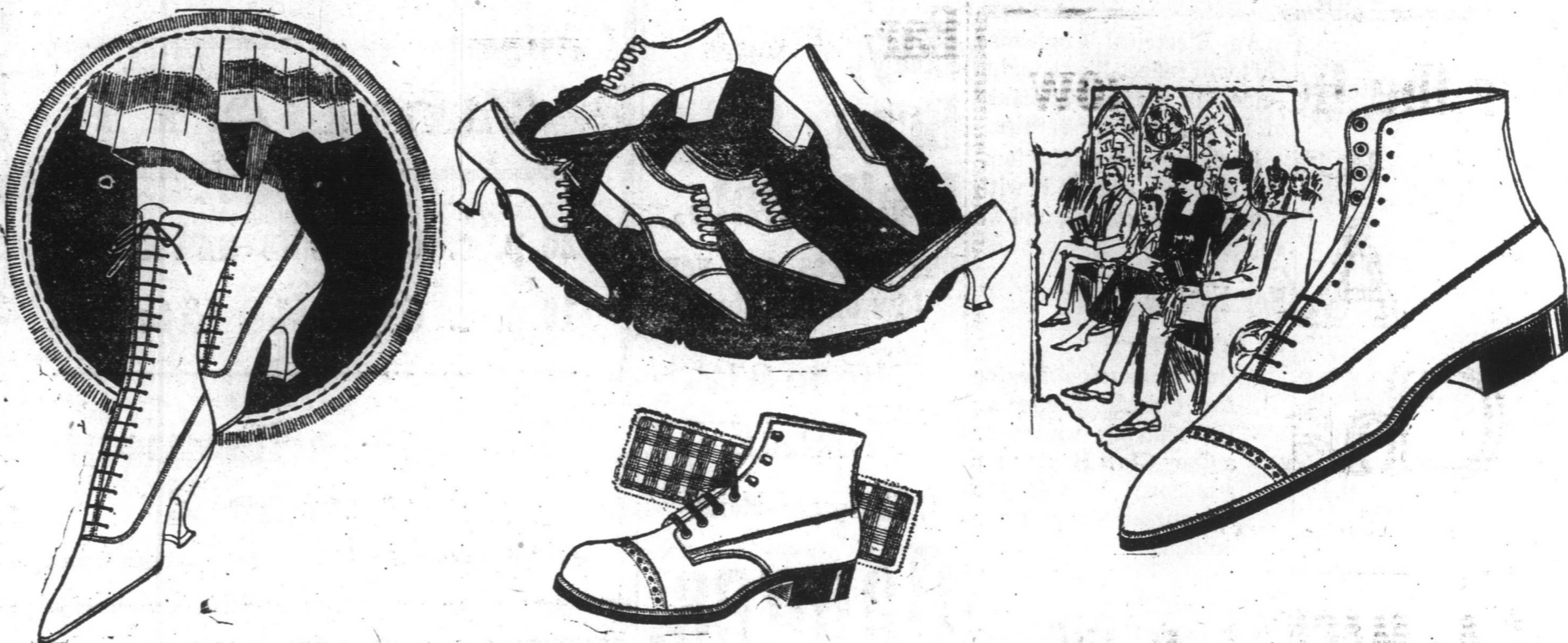
"Yes, a great pity," assented Lady Roborough, as dryly as before. "Will you have some tea, my dear?" She looked round for one of the neat maid-servants who were in attendance, but Decima rose.

(To be continued.)

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