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CHAPTER XXIII.

She rose and went round the room, looking at the various articles upon the tables and cabinets. There was a strange mixture. A carving in ivory, a bronze medallion, an illuminated missal lay cheek and jowl beside a well-used Persian pipe. Upon the walls hung swords and spears; not the ornaments you buy in Wardour Street, but weapons which had been used and still bore the stains of blood. She touched one with her fingers, and shuddered.

Yes; the room was eloquent of him. She got round to the mantel-shelf at last. It was too crowded with bric-a-brac; but one thing among them attracted and chained her attention.

It was the portrait, a cabinet photograph of a woman's face and bust. It was a beautiful face; more than beautiful, fascinating. A dark face, of perfect oval, with dark eyes which smiled wistfully, fascinating, as did the small lips. She wore a low-necked dress—very low—and the white neck and bust shone snow-like against the dark hair and eyes.

Decima looked at it, and as she looked, a strange repulsion took possession of her.

The face was beautiful, fascinating; but to Decima the beauty was repellent, the witchery unholly. The face jarred upon her, and yet she could not take her eyes from it. It was inclosed in a costly silver frame.

She took it in her hand, and studied the face, her brows drawn straight.

Who was it? Some friend of Bobby's—or Lord Gaunt's?

While the photograph was in her hand, she heard the hall door open, and she raised her head, listening expectantly.

Steps came along the hall, a hand turned the handle of the door.

"Bobby," she almost exclaimed aloud; and she put the photograph hurriedly, face downward, upon the mantel-shelf, and went to meet him, with a smile on her face.

The door opened, and a tall figure in a fur coat entered. It was too tall for Bobby, but for a moment she did not recognize him; then, as he turned from closing the door, and presented his face to her, she saw that it was Lord Gaunt.

She shrank back, her outstretched arms falling to her side.

He looked at her, stopped short, then exclaiming, "Good God, Decima!" came toward her.

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his eyes as they dwelt on her face. He had been in Scotland, far up in Sutherlandshire, quite alone, wandering in the wilds, going through the pretense of fishing, shooting; fighting against the mad love which consumed him as men fight vainly against the flames which spring up afresh against the beating hands. And at last he had acknowledged himself beaten, had resolved to leave England forever. He would go without a word of farewell—as he had often gone before—and leave no trace behind him.

He had booked his passage, the vessel sailed on the morrow, and he had come to his rooms to get his gun and other weapons necessary for the killing of the big game which he hoped and prayed would divert his mind and help him to kill the memory of his girl-love.

He should never see her again—and now here she stood before him, within reach of his hand—unless she were indeed only a wraith of herself, a vision, a ghost.

His breath—it had seemed to cease—came again quickly; but he could not speak, though his lips formed her name again. The blood had rushed to the back of his head, a swift, sudden joy leaped in her heart.

"Lord Gaunt! Is it really you?" she said at last, and her voice rang like soft music in his ears. It was the sound he had been thirsting for all these weary, weary weeks. How often, in fancy, had he heard it in the great solitudes amongst the mountains!

"Yes, it is I," he responded, as if to assure himself that he was awake and not dreaming. "What—why are you here?"

He did not offer to shake hands, did not move toward her, but still stood gazing at her. And she, for her part, stood still also, her hand resting on the back of the chair.

"I came to see Bobby," she said. He looked round.

"He is not here?"

"No," she said; "he is out. He is coming back presently, they say. Where have you come from? Does he expect you?"

"No," he said. "I have come from Scotland—from Sutherlandshire." Mechanically, slowly, like a man in a dream, he took off the huge fur coat and dropped it on the couch and came toward the fire.

Decima looked at him and saw more plainly, as the fire-light played on his face, how worn and haggard he looked.

"Have—have you been ill?" she asked, timidly.

"Ill? No," he replied. He raised his head and glanced at her. He scarcely dared to look long at her, lest the desire to take her in his arms should get the better of him. "And—and you? You look—you are thinner, paler. Have you been ill?"

"No," she said, simply. "I am quite well. What have you been doing all— all this time?"

"Fishing, shooting," he said. "All this time—does it seem so long?"

"Yes; very long!" she replied, with the ghost of a sigh, as she looked at the fire. "How long is it? I—I scarcely remember. Why—why did you go so suddenly, Lord Gaunt?"

He caught his breath to keep back the words:

"Because I loved you, because I should have gone mad if I stayed."

Then he said aloud, with a low, strained laugh.

"I wanted a change."

Decima nodded.

"And you have enjoyed it?"

"Very much," he said, with bitter irony.

"There was silence for a moment. The antique clock, with its figure of reluctant Time moving down the minutes with its scythe, ticked mockingly.

"And—and what is the news from Leafmore? Is your father well?"

"Yes," she said.

"And—and Bright and the rest?"

"You must be tired! Will you let me give you some tea?" She laughed softly, timidly. "That sounds strange—asking you in your own house! Shall I—may I ring for some more water?"

"No, no," he said, quickly. He did not want the maid—any one—to come in, did not want any other voice than hers in the room. "That will do."

"It is quite hot still," he said.

She poured out a cup for him, and carried it to him. He had not moved or offered to go to the table.

He took it from her with a slight inclination of the head, and his hand, in transferring the cup, just touched hers. He stood holding the cup as if he had forgotten it.

"Won't you sit down?" she said. "I have got your chair. Will you not come inus it? You see I am forgetting that this is your room and your chair."

He shook his head and drew a chair forward, quite close to the fire, and signed to her to take the big one.

She sat down, her hands resting in her lap, her eyes fixed on the blaze as it rose and fell fitfully, one moment lighting up their faces, the next casting them into shadow.

Gradually the wan look was leaving his face, a light began to dawn in his eyes. Her presence, her nearness was having its effect upon him. He could hear her even breathing, could feel, though he did not look at her, the eyes he loved so passionately glancing at him now and again. She was here—here by his side, his dear, sweet girl-love. He forgot all else.

The silence did not seem irksome or embarrassing; it was as if his thoughts spoke, and no lip language were necessary. But at last he said.

"And so all is going on well at Leafmore?"

"Yes," she said, with a slight start. Upon her, too, a kind of peace—a lull in the storm—had fallen. "Yes; Mr. Bright has been working very hard—"

"Which means that you have also," he said in a low voice.

"—And a very great deal has been done. You will be surprised at the change, at the improvement. Mr. Bright says that it will be the model village, the example for the rest of England. He is very proud of it. And the people—ah, you should hear what they say! It would make you very happy, Lord Gaunt."

"Would it?" he said, slowly. "And you—are you happy, content?"

She winced slightly, as one winces when a hand touches, though gently, a wound forgotten for the moment.

"I am quite content," she said, ignoring the "happy." "Why, have you not done all I—Mr. Bright and the people wanted? Yes; quite content and satisfied."

"Then I am also," he said, gravely.

"Will you have some more tea?" she asked. "And will you not eat something—some bread and butter?"

"Only some tea, please," he said. She filled his cup again, and he took it, looking at her as he did so. Was it fancy on his part, or had the lovely face grown less pale, the eyes less sad?

She leaned back and glanced up at the clock.

"Bobby has not come yet," she said, reflectively. "I wonder how long—"

Then, as if it had suddenly occurred to her: "Oh, Lord Gaunt, had I not better go? I—I must be in your way."

She said it quite frankly, and her eyes sought his face innocently, as one man's might seek another's, and she rose.

He put out his hand and almost touched her.

"No, no," he said; "do not go; stay. Bobby will be here directly, no doubt. How long have you been in London?"

He went on, as if by talking he could keep her.

"Only this afternoon," she said. "I have only just come up. I came up suddenly, unexpectedly." Her voice faltered and her face grew grave. She remembered—it came upon her like a flash—the reason for the journey, and the remembrance clouded over her unconscious joy in his presence. "I found that Aunt Pauline was not in London—"

She is at her country house—and I came on here to spend the evening with Bobby. I am going to Aunt Pauline's to sleep."

"I see," he said. "Why did you come up so suddenly?"

She was silent a moment. Why could she not tell him? And yet she could not.

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