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Happiness At Last; Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Yes—that is it; I am tired," said Decima, dully.

She went into the bedroom. A fire was burning brightly.

The woman lighted some candles, and looked round tentatively.

"Is there anything I can get you, miss? I'm sorry that one of my maids ain't here. Perhaps you'd let me take your boots off for you?"

Decima sunk into a chair, and thanked her; and the woman took off the wet boots.

"Why, miss, you're shivering with cold!" she said. "Shall I get you a little something? Lor, I forgot as everything is locked up! But I could run round the corner and get you some brandy or some port wine."

Decima forced a mechanical smile to her white, wan face.

"Oh, no, no; thank you!" she said. "I shall be warm directly. It was kind of you to make so nice a fire—and, good-night!"

When the door had closed, she sunk back and shut her eyes.

What was that that had happened to her? Let her try and think! She had been so happy—so happy—only an hour ago; less than an hour ago! What had happened since then?

But only the cause of her happiness came back to her at first. She remembered that Lord Gaunt had come in, that they had sat talking, that his presence had filled her with a kind of gladness and pleasure. And then—he had told her that he loved her, and then, in a strange, mysterious way, a veil seemed to have been torn aside from her inner life, and she had realized that she loved him, that she had loved him for—oh, ever so long, ever so long!

The color stole to her white face, her eyes became suffused with tears, tears of joy and infinite delight and peace.

As she sat there, she could hear his voice, "I love you—I love you!" it had said to her. Oh, wonderful, life-giving words! She could see his face—it stole between her closed lids and her eyes—the handsome face she loved so dearly. She could feel his kisses upon her lips, upon her hair, and a thrill ran through her, and the

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touch of color grew to a burning blush.

He loved her! He had said so; his kisses, his eyes, had been even more eloquent, more convincing than his words.

Oh, how happy she was! To be loved by him! "Every thought is of you! I love you with all my heart and soul! You hold my heart in the hollow of your hand!" What words they were! And they were true, true; he could not speak falsely.

How happy she was! Was there ever a girl in the world so blessed, so fortunate as she? To be loved by him! To know that his love was so great that he kept her ribbon—the poor little faded ribbon!—next his heart, day and night, just because she had worn it in her hair. But what had happened? Why did this terrible weight, this dragging fear and shame, crush out all her happiness?

Then she forced herself to remember, and so she recalled the discovery of the portrait, his words "My wife!" and all that had passed afterward, she opened her eyes and covered them with her hand, and a low cry of misery broke from her white and trembling lips.

He was married. Another woman was his wife; it was not she, Decima, whom he ought to love, whom he could marry. He belonged to some one else—the beautiful woman whose picture he had held in his hand. Oh, what should she do—what should she do? She leaned forward, and rocked herself to and fro. The anguish in her heart was like a physical pain racking and tearing at her.

She knew what she ought to do. She ought to cease loving him from that moment. It was her duty, her solemn duty, to tear his image from her heart; to love him no longer, to forget him.

But, alas, for poor human nature! she found she could not do this.

It is only the impossible heroines in impossible, goody-goody novels who, when they have discovered that the man they love is unworthy of them, or married to another woman, rise and nobly crush down their love, and cast it from their hearts.

She ought to do it; but—well, she could not.

Her face burned with shame, her heart grew hot amid its pain as she realized that, notwithstanding what she had learned that evening, notwithstanding that another woman was Lord Gaunt's wife, she loved him still.

Ah, where was all Lady Pauline's teaching? In spite of it all, she was bad and wicked, for she could not cast him off. She loved him still. It was horrible, horrible! and her gutts weighed upon her and crushed her, so that her head bent still lower in her shaking hands.

Yet, how was she to help loving him while his last words of entreaty were ringing in her ears? He had knelt to her as one kneels and prays for life itself. He had said that he could not live without her. And, alas! at that moment her heart echoed his passionate, despairing avowal. She felt that she could not live without him.

She slipped from the chair and to her knees, trying to pray for strength to bear this awful sorrow which was breaking her heart; but Gaunt's face rose before her; his voice rang in her ears. Over and over again she went through the scene, until it seemed to be repeating itself in the very room, as if he were still present. She rose at last and began to undress, but still mechanically. Every now and then she paused and looked at her hand. He had held it; she could feel his hand gripping it still. As she parted her hair from her forehead she could feel his hand upon her head, the caressing fingers, the lingering kiss.

"Oh, God help me; what shall I do?" she wailed. "I love him. Why did he make me love him so?"

Then she remembered his misery and anguish, and a hot wave of pity swept over her, and swept away, for a time, her own sorrow and bitterness. How he, too, must be suffering! He had said that he loved her a thousand times better than she loved him. It was not possible, of course; but how he must be suffering! She remembered the expression of his face, the agony ringing in his voice.

And she should never see him again! The thought struck her heart like ice. Never to see him again! All her life! And she was so young! Why, she might live to be an old woman! All those terrible years stretching before her, in which she should go on loving and longing for him, and with no hope of seeing him again!

Oh, why could she not die? It would be so good to die now, this moment, with his dear voice ringing in her ears, his kisses still warm upon his lips! She had not been so very wicked; she had tried to lead the good life Aunt Pauline had held up for her. Would not Heaven be merciful and let her die? If they could only both die together, he and she, hand in hand, looking into each other's eyes, and passing away from this cruel world into that other of peace and rest!

She laughed pitiously.

"No, I shall not die!" she said, aloud. "I am young and strong, and I shall go on living for years!" she shuddered—"for years, loving, loving, and longing for him!"

She threw herself on the bed at last, but she could not sleep. The scene she had gone through passed through her brain, before her eyes, again and again. It was like the scene in a play. Now and again it seemed to her that



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he was bending over her, and she put out her hand as if to thrust him away, sobbing:

"No, no! She is your wife. It is she whom you love, not me! You must not touch me, kiss me!"

Toward morning she fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion; but the sleep was one long dream, in which Gaunt knelt before her, clutching at her arm, his voice rising and falling in the anguish of his entreaty.

A little after eight o'clock the charwoman knocked at the door, and Decima awoke. She tried to rise, but could not. It seemed as if her limbs were weighed with lead, as if there was one spot in her brain burning like a hot coal.

The woman knocked again, and Decima called to her to come in. Her voice sounded weak and strained, and the woman hurried to the bed with a vague alarm which grew into definite dismay as she looked at the white face with the two spots of crimson glowing under the glittering eyes.

"Lor, miss! ain't you well?" she said, aghast. "You look—you look as if you was in a fever, that you do! You must 'ave got a chill las' night."

Decima eyed her, with profound indifference.

"Yes; I think I am ill," she said, as if she were speaking of some one else, some one who did not matter in the least, was of no possible importance. "I feel as if I could not move, and—and—my head is on fire."

The woman was alarmed. "I'll—I'll go for a doctor," she said, half speaking to herself. "I don't like the looks of you at all, miss."

Decima smiled indifferently; it was a piteous smile.

"Do you think I am going to die?" she asked, calmly, almost hopefully.

The woman forced a laugh. "Not you, miss!" she said. "Lor, it's only a feverish cold as 'ave took 'old of you!"

Decima sighed and turned her head away, and the woman, after looking round helplessly for a moment, stole from the room and did the most sensible thing she could have done. There was a telegraph office within a few yards, and she wired to Lady Pauline, and then hurried on to the nearest doctor.

When she came back, Decima was staring at the ceiling with eyes which shone and glittered with fever, and her hands were clinched on the satin coverlet as if she were holding on to consciousness by a supreme effort of will.

When Lady Pauline arrived, she found the doctor bending over Decima, applying foot bandages to the burning head. He greeted Lady Pauline with a silent nod, and, in silence, for a moment she knelt beside the bed. Then she said in a tremulous whisper: "She is very ill! What is it?"

"Brain fever," he said, gravely and aloud. There was no need to whisper, for Decima could not hear.

"How did she come here? I know nothing!" she said, as she took off her bonnet and cloak. He was her own doctor, and he spoke with the candor which he knew she desired and would approve.

"She came last night, about four o'clock, so the charwoman tells me. Then she went out—to her brother's—and returned about ten. She was quite well on her first arrival, so the woman says, but looked pale and tired when she came in later."

(To be continued.)



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