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## Happiness At Last;

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CHAPTER VIII.

But Gaunt was in a queer mood that afternoon. Perhaps the sight of the old place in which he had been born, and which he had neglected so long, had told upon him. Perhaps the girl's innocent frankness and candor had had their effect. Anyway, he yielded to the impulse, and began.

"I suppose it was your Aunt, Lady Pauline, who told you that I was so wicked?" he said.

"Yes," said Decima.

"Ah!" He smoked for a minute or two. "Did she tell you of what crime or crimes I had been guilty? But, no; I suppose not."

Decima shook her head.

"Lady Pauline is a very religious woman, is she not?" he asked.

"Yes—oh, yes; she is very good—goodness itself," said Decima.

"Yes; I have heard so," he remarked.

"Now, I think you will admit that so good a woman as Lady Pauline Lascelles would be disposed to regard other persons who were not so good as—well, let us say, very great sinners!"

"No," said Decima. "Aunt Pauline—"

"Then she stopped."

"You would like to say 'No,' but are forced to admit that I am right, Lady Pauline, for instance, would consider a man whose life was entirely given up to amusement as a member of the earth, a useless member of society, scarcely worthy of living in a workaday world?"

"Yes," said Decima, reluctantly.

"Quite so," said Gaunt, with a grim smile. "And for some of his amusements Lady Pauline would find no word of condemnation too hard. For instance, if he played cards—"

he had to choose his words carefully, for he felt that the girl beside him was as innocent of the world as a child—"she would call him a gambler—an habitual gambler."

"Yes," said Decima.

"Thanks. I am coming to my point, though I seem to skate round it. And if he went to the opera, and the theatre, and to balls, she would call him a worldling—I think that's the word—and a slave to dissipation."

"Yes," said Decima again.

"Very well," he said. "Then, I am

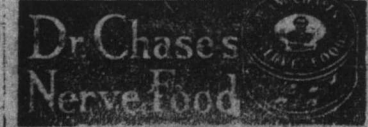


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afraid, I am, according to Lady Pauline's code, a very wicked man. But, Miss Deane—"

He paused. Was it, after all, worth while to defend himself before this sweet girl-judge?

"Yes!" said Decima. "Why do you not go on?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, with a slight start, as if he had lost the thread of the subject. "Yes, I am rather absent-minded. Please forgive me. I was going to say that it is very difficult for a man to work who has never learned to do any. And that's my case. Unfortunately, my parents and guardians neglected to teach me to use either my hands or my brains. I can neither sow nor spin. I can do nothing that would earn me a glass of the cheapest ale. It is sad, but there it is. I can only amuse myself, and"—he sighed—"I can't always do that—very seldom, indeed."

Decima looked at him. There was a smile in his eyes and on his lips, but it was rather a sad and self-mocking one.

"But that's all the point I wanted to make," he went on, knocking the ash off his cigar and looking at her as if—

or Decima felt—she were a long way off. "I wanted to show how unreasonable, how inconsistent you were in cutting me just now."

"Yes?" said Decima, flushing slightly. "Inconsistent?"

"I am, I will admit, very wicked; and you, of course, are very good."

"No one is really good," said Decima, rebukingly.

He regarded her with a half smile.

"Ah, well; fairly good. Now, Miss Deane, do you think there is no hope for the wicked? Do you think that it is impossible for a bad man to become good?"

Decima looked shocked.

"Oh, no, no! There is always hope! It is never too late—"

"To mend," he said. "And don't you think it is the duty of the good folk to help the wicked on to the right road? Poor wicked! Perhaps they have strayed through no fault of their own—have only lost their way. And think! A helping, directing hand may put them on the right path again. Do you think it is the duty of all the good people to stand a long way off and watch the bad ones drifting down the broad, the Primrose Path, that steep descent down the hill of Avernus, without making an effort to stop them?"

Decima glanced with a troubled little frown at the handsome face with its half-grave, half-bantering smile.

"I never thought of that," she said in a low voice.

"Just so; so I suspected. But you are not singular. It's a way most good people have. They look upon the poor black sheep as lost forever—"

"Oh, no, no!" said Decima, breaking in with a piteous little eagerness.

"You do not?" he said, still smiling at her. "Thank you. And, after all," he said in a moment or two, "perhaps the sheep is not so black as he is painted. Some persons, especially when they are so good as Lady Pauline, have a knack of exaggerating. Give a dog a bad name, and you may as well hang him right away. Now I, apparently, have a bad name; but don't hang me, please—I mean, don't cut me as if I were quite too black and criminal. Who knows? If you knew the story of my life—"

He paused, and bit his lip as if he were trying to catch his words; but Decima looked at him waiting.

"I was going to say that even for such a one as myself it might be possible to find some excuse; and it is, again, just possible that you would let me off 'with the option of a fine.' But the poor prisoner at the bar has spoken, and his prayer is that the sentence will be less severe than the cut direct.—Is the judge inclined to mercy?"

Decima looked straight before her. Notwithstanding the smile, there was a certain sadness and gravity in his eyes which revealed the seriousness under the tone of banter.

"I will not avoid you again," she said in a low voice.

He inclined his head.

"Thank you," he said, gravely. "I shall not abuse your indulgence, for it is not very likely that we shall meet often, or for a very long time."

"Are you going away? Do you not live near here?" asked Decima.

He ignored the latter question.

"I am going abroad very shortly, and shall be away for some time," he said.

"That will be nice," said Decima.

But, even as she spoke, she was conscious of a vague sensation of re-

gret. He had been so kind to her at the Zoo, and—well, a young girl could scarcely help being flattered by such a plea as he had addressed to her.

"Nice? Ah, yes, yes! I dare say you would enjoy it," he said.

"And will not you?" asked Decima, regarding him inquiringly.

"Not very much, I am afraid. "Do you know the story of the boy who startled everybody by refusing a raspberry tart, until he informed them that he was employed at a pastry-cook's? He had got tired of jam tarts. I have got tired of travelling, and most other things. But—I don't know how it is—I have dropped into a fine display of egotism. Will you tell me how it is I find you down here so unexpectedly?"

Decima rose and took the path through the fir toward the river, as she answered:

"My father sent for me quite suddenly. Our house, The Woodbine, is near here—down the road to the village. Perhaps you passed it. It is a very pretty cottage overgrown with ivy, and with an old-fashioned garden in front."

"Yes; I noticed it," he said.

"But all the place is pretty," said Decima. "And isn't this lovely?"

She paused and looked round her and at the great house, a glimpse of which they could still see between the straight fir trunks.

"Yes," he said. "May I go down as far as the river with you? I should like to know what sport your brother is having."

"If you like," she said, walking on again. "Isn't it a pity that the place is so neglected?"

"Is it neglected?" he said, after a moment.

"Oh, yes; so my brother says. He was telling me all about it last night. We strolled down after dinner, and you can not imagine how lovely it looked in the moonlight; and yet so weird and—and melancholy; for there were no lights in the windows, and no signs nor sounds of life."

"Yes, it would look rather eerie," he said, very quietly.

"It is a pity that the law does not take it away from its owner, and give it to some one who would appreciate it and love it," said Decima.

Gaunt put up his hand to his mustache to hide the grim smile. It was evident that Lady Pauline had not told the girl his name.

"That sounds like a kind of socialism, Miss Deane," he said. "But do you know he doesn't appreciate it?"

Decima stopped short and looked over her shoulder at him with faint surprise.

"How can he, seeing that he never comes near it?" she said. "I think he must be very heartless."

"Heartless?"

"Yes. My brother was telling me how the steward had written to him, asking him for instructions to manage the estate. And he will send no answer. Is it not—well, yes, it is wicked. For, think! surely it is wicked to neglect one's duty. And it is his duty to take care of people—the tenants and laborers who live on the estate—and naturally look up to him as their friend and protector as well as landlord."

"Is he a hard landlord, did you hear?" said Gaunt, quietly.

"Oh, I think not. It is that he neglects them. Why does he not come and live in that beautiful house and in this lovely place instead of deserting it?"

"Perhaps he can not help himself," said Gaunt. "I ventured to plead for mercy for myself just now, Miss Deane; let me now plead for him. We don't know his story. It's likely enough that if we heard him in his own defense, he might not seem so heartless as what you called him, was it not?"

Decima nodded.

(To be continued.)

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