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CHAPTER XL

"I'll get a cup. And may I bring some for you and Lady Ferndale?"

"Isn't that like her?" said the old lady, when Decima was out of hearing. "You can never by any chance tempt her to think of herself only. Thank you, my dear," as Decima came back, with the maid bearing the tray. "And have you been enjoying your self?"

"Yes, very much," said Decima, with her soft, bright smile. "It is so lovely here, and every one is so happy that it makes one happy just to be with them. And I have been on the lake."

"Yes? Who rowed you, dear?"

"Lord Illminster," said Decima, as innocently and unconsciously as before. "And I played two sets, and Lord Illminster tried to teach me bowls; but I was very stupid and awkward."

"Yes? I hope he wasn't angry?"

"Angry? Lord Illminster?" Decima laughed. "Oh, no; I don't think he could be; he is always so patient and kind."

The two elder women exchanged glances; but Lady Roberough shook her head slightly. She was too much of a woman of the world not to know that when a young girl is in love with a man she is not given to open—raise of him.

"And when did you hear from your brother, Decima?" asked Lady Roberough, changing the subject with suspicious abruptness.

"Decima's face lighted up.

"Oh, yesterday. Such a delightful letter! It was almost as if Bobby were talking. I don't think any one in the world can be funnier than he is, when he chooses. Yes, it was just like hearing him talk. And he is so popular, one can see! Let me try and remember some of the things he says—but you want to hear him say them?"

"She started suddenly, and rather harshly when Bobby was on the subject of her husband's friends."

"Three ladies."

"Lady Ferndale and Lady Roberough had heard of him?"

"I don't think you would like to hear him talk."

"Bobby looked up at him with the expression which she wears when she wishes the speaker; but the young man was rather short-sighted, and did not notice her look. Alas! he was young, and with most of us it is not until we have reached 'forty year' that we learn the full significance of a lady's glance."

"I've just heard of him," he went on, fully convinced that he was making himself agreeable and imparting keenly desired intelligence. "One of the men of his exploring party—you know Lord Gaunt is exploring the source of the Owanmy."

"Yes; oh, yes, we know," said Lady Roberough, rather eagerly, very curiously for her; but he hurried on.

"He was not a native of the place, but only a visitor at one of the neighboring houses, and had probably not

heard the name of the young lady who sat so quietly beside the two old ladies, and had certainly never heard it in connection with Lord Gaunt.

"This man dined at the Travelers'—the club, you know."

"We've all heard of the Travelers', Mr. Jones," said Lady Ferndale, coldly.

"Yes?" Mr. Jones fixed his eyes on Decima. "In fact, we were giving him a little dinner in honor of his return. He came home on six leaves, you know. He told us a lot about the expedition, but nearly all his talk was of Lord Gaunt. It seems that the party had a particularly rough time of it; no end of pests and privations, you know. I forgot how many days they were without food and water; and once or twice they had to fight their way through unfriendly tribes—natives, you know—and they can fight. And he says that Lord Gaunt is a regular brick. That was his word, you know; and according to him, it is just the right one."

Lady Roberough glanced at Decima. She was leaning back in her chair, and her face was pale; but her eyes were not downcast, but fixed before her, and the dreamy expression Lady Roberough had spoken of was in them. She seemed as if she was far away, as if she were scarcely listening.

"He says," continued Mr. Jones, who was enjoying himself exceedingly, "that Lord Gaunt is simply worshipped by them all; certainly he—the man who has come back—is mad enough about him—and that whenever there was anything in the way of hard times or fighting, Lord Gaunt always took the lion's share. He says that, in his opinion, Lord Gaunt doesn't know what fear is. Always in the front when they were attacked, and never down on his luck for a moment. He says that Lord Gaunt marched at the head of his party for three days with a wound in his thigh that would have sent any other man to hospital for three months."

Lady Roberough broke in at this point with a kind of desperation.

"Oh, thank you very much, Mr. Jones!" she said, sweetly, to sweetly. "It's very good of you to tell us this; but—would you be so kind as to go over to the hand and ask them to play again?"

Mr. Jones looked rather bewildered at her description of his little story, but he bled blandly.

"Certainly, certainly! Delighted, Lady Roberough!" and took himself off.

Decima sat a full minute without moving; then her lips parted and a soft sigh escaped them softly, as if she were about to speak, but she did not. She glanced at the watch at her wrist—a present from Bobby.

"It is time for me to go, Lady Roberough," she said, and she spoke quite naturally, and even with a smile. "My father always likes me to be home a little before dinner; and, indeed," smiling, "if I were not, he would not get dressed."

Lady Roberough nodded. She carefully avoided looking at the lovely face for a moment or two.

"And what is the last wonderful invention, Decima?"

Decima smiled again, but only for an instant, as she replied, gently:

"It is something for extinguishing fires—I think I don't know quite; but I think it is a kind of shell which you throw into the flames—and it explodes."

"Sounds as if it were more likely to cause fire than to quench it," remarked Lady Roberough. "Tell them to bring a carriage round for Miss Deane, please," she said to one of the servants.

"Oh, no; I can walk," said Decima. "I've no doubt you can; but you won't, my dear," said Lady Roberough, dryly. "My dear Decima, you are too accustomed to having your own way. And so you grow selfish and self-opinionated."

A look of alarm and penitence began to steal over the sweet face; and Lady Roberough exclaimed:

"You little goose!" and drawing the face down to her, kissed it tenderly.

As she leaned back in the carriage, Decima closed her eyes and pictured Gaunt fighting his way, at the head of the weary and fever-stricken expedition, thought of him suffering "in silence and in strength," and her lips murmured his name and a prayer for him, as the tears stole down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XLV

One evening, a fortnight later, Decima dined at the Ferndales'. It had been a dinner-party, or she would not have gone without her father. The Ferndales were very fond of her—who was not?—and she had spent a very enjoyable evening. Lady Ferndale had made much of her, and Lord Ferndale had exerted himself to amuse her. They had been married, and the Ferndales were quite ready and anxious

to take her into their girl's absent place. They had pressed her to stay the night, but she had come home, because she knew that even if her father did not miss her, that he could not be left.

She saw the light burning in his work-room as she went up the path, and she went straight to him.

He had not dressed for dinner that night, and he looked more untidy and dusty even than usual. Two gas jets were flaring away, and he was standing at his bench, filling some glass tubes with a liquid which he poured from an iron retort.

"Have you not finished, father?" she said. "It is very late, dear."

"Is it?" he said, pushing his unkempt hair aside. "I didn't know. I've been busy, very busy. This is a wonderful idea of mine, Decima! Wonderful! It surpasses anything I have hitherto done. It will simply revolutionize the present unsatisfactory system of dealing with fire."

"I am very glad, dear," said Decima. "But will you not come to bed now? Let me turn out the lights."

"Presently, presently," he said. "This invention of mine is simplicity itself. Of course, there are plenty of hand-grenades and—glass bombs in the market, but this is something quite new, and its action is totally different to that upon which the others depend. You see this tube? It contains a fluid, which, of course, is my secret—it's marvelous that I should hit upon it—which possesses extraordinary qualities."

"It smells very strange and—rather nasty," said Decima. "I hope it isn't dangerous, dear?"

"Dangerous!" he said, impatiently. "Oh, no—that is, it could only be dangerous in the hands of ignorant persons. But I intend to have directions for its use pasted on each tube. All you have to do, in the event of fire, is to throw one of the tubes, not at the flames—there might be some small danger then, I admit—not at the flames, but at the point which they would reach if they remained unchecked. A slight explosion then takes place, the flames are dispersed, choked, so to speak, and your fire, however fierce, is extinguished. I have been making some experiments to-night. I will show you."

He was about to light a roll of paper at the gas-jet, but Decima held his hand.

"Not to-night and in this crowded room, father!" she pleaded. "Show me to-morrow in some safer place, in the open air. Come to bed now, dear; you look tired."

"I am not at all tired," he said, "and there is not the least need for apprehension or alarm, as I could prove to you in a moment. But I will show you to-morrow. Wait one moment," he added, as Decima turned out one of the gas-jets. He began to put the evil-smelling things aside, but paused and pushed his hand through his hair.

"There was something I wanted to tell you," he said. "I can't think what it was. It was important, too. Dear me! I can't remember for the moment." He stared at her vacantly, then went on, as if he had suddenly remembered: "Ah, yes! Lord Illminster called this afternoon."

"Lord Illminster?" said Decima, with some surprise. "Why did he call? He has never been here before. What did he want?"

His eyes and hands wandered toward the precious tubes, and Decima had to repeat her question.

"Oh!" he said. "Ah, yes! He came to see you as well as me."

"To see me?" said Decima. "Oh, about the archery meeting, I suppose. Lord Illminster asked me to help."

"No, it wasn't about archery," said Mr. Deane. "At last, I don't think he mentioned the word archery—he may have done, it's quite possible. He talked of a great deal, and seemed remarkably pleasant and well-informed young man. When I say well informed, I mean on general subjects. I could not get him to understand any of my inventions. But he admitted, very modestly, that his scientific education had been neglected. No; the purport of his visit was to ask me to give my consent to his proposing to you."

"Father!" exclaimed Decima, her face growing red for a moment.

(To be continued.)

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