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CHAPTER XVIII.

On Lady Roborough's right sat the well-known Lord Ferndale. He was an old friend of hers, and accustomed to speak to her with the freedom and candor which are the privileges of true friendship.

"Lord Gaunt is distinguishing himself to-night," he said in a voice intended for her ear only. "What a fine fellow he is!"

"Have you only just discovered that?" she said, with a smile.

"By George! he has not given me much opportunity of doing so before this!" he retorted. "The man has been a dark horse, and has kept us at arm's length until now."

"What a smile! I did not know that a horse had arms!" he laughed.

"Seriously, I am delighted with him. He is doing this to perfection. Why doesn't he marry and settle down among us, like—like a Christian and a county gentleman?"

Lady Roborough glanced at Gaunt's face, as he bent toward the lady on his left with a pleasant, courtly smile.

"Why don't you ask him himself?" she said, dryly.

Lord Ferndale made a grimace.

"Why don't I beard the lion in his den? Because I am afraid of his claws, my dear Lady Roborough. Gaunt's a queer man to tackle, I should think; and I'd rather ask any man that question than him. By the way, who is that lovely girl—child, I had almost said, sitting beside the dark little man—fourth from the end of the table?"

"A Miss Deane," said Lady Roborough.

"What, old Peter Deane's daughter? Really, how lovely she is! I never saw a more taking face."

"Excepting Lady Ferndale's," said Lady Roborough, with a smile.

For there had been a romance in Lord and Lady Ferndale's lives, and every one knew how devoted they were to each other. He glanced at his still young-looking wife and smiled.

"She is a beautiful girl," he said, meaning Decima. "She has that kind of face which—"

"Which plays havoc with your hearts," said Lady Roborough, finishing the sentence for him. "Yes, she has. I was struck by it the moment I saw it; for we—old—women can admire a girl as ardently as you men can. We have passed the envious and jealous stage, you see. I will introduce her to you after dinner, and you can make love to her. You always do to every pretty girl, don't you?"

"I do," he said, with mock gravity. "It's the duty of every self-respecting man to make love to every pretty girl."

There were others besides Lord Ferndale who were attracted to Decima, and though Mr. Mershon sat silent and rather sullen, she found plenty to talk to her.

Every now and then Gaunt turned

his eyes in her direction, and when he did so, the smile died from his lips, and a preoccupied and absent expression fell on his face. All the fire left his eyes, and they grew sad and wistful. Once, Decima, looking at him, caught this expression, and something stirred in her heart—what, she could not have told; but it made her sad and wistful also.

To her the dinner seemed interminable. Course followed course in an endless chain. But presently a strain of music was heard. Gaunt glanced toward the door leading to the hall.

"I thought you would like some music," he said, half apologetically. "That's the Hungarian Band."

It was the one thing needed. The men smiled, and leaned back in their chairs, and the women tapped their feet on the soft Turkey carpets in time with the subdued silvery strains.

Decima glanced at Gaunt, and he met her eyes.

"Are you pleased—satisfied?" he seemed to say, and she smiled approvingly at him.

At last Lady Roborough looked round at the ladies, and rose, and they filed out to the drawing-room.

Gaunt was near the door, and he opened it for them. As Decima passed, he stretched out his hand and touched her arm. She felt the touch, and looked at him. There was an infinite yearning in his eyes, a wistful sadness which smote her, and it haunted her for some minutes afterward.

As Gaunt went back to the men, he passed his hand over his brow with the gesture of a man who has to get through an allotted task.

"Close up!" he said. "Ferndale, the port is with you. Mr. Mershon, do you prefer claret? It is there at your elbow."

In an instant or so he was the perfect host again, and with a smile on his lips, was encouraging the men to drink. But all the time his thoughts were with the little girl in the dove-colored dress, and he hated the necessity that kept him away from her; but he played his part with consummate art, and talked and laughed as if he were delighted with his company and his position as host.

Meanwhile, Decima had found a quiet corner of the drawing-room, and had almost hidden herself. In Lady Pauline's drawing-room she was somebody of importance; but here, amidst these county dames, in their gorgeous dresses and diamonds, she felt herself a kind of nobody, and desired to remain unnoticed. There was a small cabinet of books near her, and she took out a volume. It chanced to be an edition de luxe of a recent history of travel, and as she turned over the pages, she came upon a reference to Lord Gaunt. It seemed that the writer regarded Lord Gaunt with strong admiration, and he spoke of his courage and spirit with enthusiasm. Decima's eyes glowed, and the color rose to her face. It was strange that she should have happened upon that book of all others; it seemed as if, at no moment of her life, Lord Gaunt could be absent from her thoughts. As she was reading, Lady Roborough came up.

"I have been looking for you, my dear," she said, with that kindly familiarity which an elderly woman of the world can use toward a young girl. "I have been hearing your praises sung. The vicar—what a dear old man he is!—has been telling me of your goodness to the village people. And he says, too, that it is you who have transformed Leafmore from a dingy old house to what it is."

Decima flushed slightly, but her clear eyes met Lady Roborough's frankly.

"Oh, no, no!" she said; "I only helped."

Lady Roborough smiled at her approvingly, for Decima's modesty pleased her.

"Rather more than helped, my dear. If all they say is true; and I think it is. But why are you sitting here like a little puss in the corner? Won't you come and sing or play for us?"

Decima looked round reluctantly. She was not nervous, but she felt that the simple songs would be scarcely suited to so large and grand a party.

"Presently, perhaps," said Lady Roborough, as if she understood. "And with a nod she left her. A daughter of Lord Ferndale's went to the piano. She was a beautiful girl, the belle of the country, and possessed a magnificent and perfectly trained voice, and its marvellous notes filled the big room with a volume of sound. Decima listened with delight, and her eyes shone. There was a murmur of applause when the song finished, and "How beautiful!" escaped Decima's lips. Lady Ferndale was standing near her. She was passionately fond and proud

of her daughter, and the involuntary, girlish burst of admiration touched her.

"Thank you, Miss Deane," she said, smiling down at her. "That was a genuine tribute, and I am grateful. I am her mother, you see!"

Decima smiled up at her as if she understood what she felt; and drawn toward her by her sympathy, Lady Ferndale sat down and talked to her. Some one played a brilliant sonata, and then Lady Roborough came up and drew Decima's hand through her arm.

"Now you will sing to us, my dear!" she said.

She led Decima to the piano, and Decima looked up at her appealingly. "I have so little voice," she said; "and after that grand one!"

But, simply and unaffectedly, she sang one of the ballads which Bobby was so fond of listening to after dinner; and there must have been something in the voice which touched the audience—and what an audience!—for the talking ceased. While she was still singing, the gentlemen came in; and at the door they too stopped talking and stood listening.

CHAPTER XIX.

Gaunt had entered almost last, and he drew back so that he was quite behind the others. His eyes went toward the girlish figure at the piano, and he held his breath for a moment as his lips twitched. When she had finished, he went up to the piano and stood beside her. It was the proper thing for him to do, as host; but he did not praise the song. "Thank you," as all he said; and the words sounded almost grim and stern. As she looked up at him, she saw a deep line across his brow, and that his lips were tightly drawn. She looked down again in an instant, a faint trouble at her heart. Was he ill, unhappy? She wondered. A moment or two afterward some of the other men came round her and began to talk, and Gaunt moved away and went about the room.

Tea was served with due state and ceremony; there was more singing and playing; the room was filled with the buzz of conversation. Gaunt moved about with a kind of restlessness, and suddenly he went into the hall. Decima heard the servants wheeling the furniture about in it; then the band began to play, and Gaunt came back and went up to Lady Roborough and said something.

She smiled and nodded, and addressing the company generally, said: "Lord Gaunt says that as the band is here, why not dance?"

The ladies brightened up and murmured a delighted assent, and in a moment or two the dancing commenced.

Decima drew back, for there were more ladies than gentlemen, and she did not expect to have many partners; but to her astonishment, several men came to her with eager requests for a dance.

Now, Gaunt had proposed the dance that he might get a waltz with her; and having seen the first waltz started, he was making his way to her. Then he saw that she was surrounded—and by some of the younger men, and he stopped short. The line deepened on his brow, and with a sigh he turned aside and went and sat by Lady Ferndale, as if he had no intention of dancing.

Without watching him, Decima saw him, and noticed the approach and retreat, and a little wave of disappointment passed over her.

"I've been talking to that sweet girl," said Lady Ferndale.

He looked straight before him.

"Which?" he said, almost curiously. "There are so many sweet girls, Lady Ferndale."

She laughed.

"How gallant! I mean Miss Deane. She has quite won my heart, and I intend to see more of her, if she will let me."

(To be continued.)

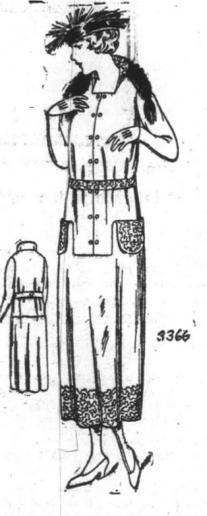
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