

Run Down

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Happiness At Last;

Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER XIII.

"No; the thanks should come from me."

Bobby sung his praises all the way home. According to him, there never had been a man like Lord Gaunt.

She saw him every day. Sometimes he came up to The Woodbines. He would sit in the ivy-grown porch or walk about the old-fashioned garden with Decima beside him. Sometimes they would meet in the village, and he would go round and look on at the demolition of the picturesque and unhealthy cottages, with Decima beside him, and they would talk over the architect's plans. He left everything to her and Bright—which meant her alone, for Bright was simply guided and directed by her.

Sometimes she and Bobby went to the Hall; and then Gaunt was at his best. No more delightful host could be imagined. There was a charm about the man which, alas! many women had felt and yielded to; and all that charm was exerted for Decima, for the innocent girl who never suspected for a moment the feelings that were growing up within the man's heart. When she woke in the morning her first thought was of him—of the plans for the cottages, of the new schools, of the proposed restoration of the dear old church. When she met him—and every day it seemed that she was fated to meet him—something, a sudden well of pleasure, gushed up in her heart. She thought of everything he said, remembered every story of his solitary hunting days; she led him on, with childish cunning, to talk of himself—to recount some of his wonderful adventures. This man, against whom she had been warned, had entered into her life. To her he gradually became the noblest, the most unselfish of men. Why there was nothing she could ask him that he would not do. He spent money on the village like water. It had been a Heaven-forsaken place before he came; it was now growing prosperous and flourishing, with new cottages, new schools in hand, and a church being rapidly restored.

And it seemed that he cared for her society—and Bobby's—only. The country people had come down, its cohorts all glittering with gold, to meet with a



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declined rebuff. The Cattermole, and the Pettergills, the Sir William this, and Sir George that, had called, but failed to see Lord Gaunt. He had returned their cards—but that was all. The country was complacent and dissatisfied; but Lord Gaunt did not seem to care. He lived a solitary life at the Hall, and saw no one but Bright and the Deanes.

One day he rode up to The Woodbines on Nero, leading a handsome half-thoroughbred. There was a lady's saddle on her, and when Decima came down to the gate and stared at him with wide-open eyes, Gaunt said, quietly:

"Just bought her. Do you like her? Get your habit on."

"But—" said Decima, eying the horse wistfully.

"But me no buts," he said, with a smile. "I've been looking out for a horse for you for weeks past. This one is all right, as I think you will say. Don't be longer than you can help."

She had learned to obey him, and she hesitated only a moment; then she ran without a word. It had come to this. In a very few minutes she reappeared in her habit, and he lifted her into the saddle. The color bloomed in her cheeks; her pure eyes grew dark and brilliant; joy welled up in her heart.

"Yes," she said, after they had gone half a mile or so and he had kept close watch over her, "you can ride."

"Oh, yes," said Decima. "Aunt Pauline had me taught. She said that every lady should know how to ride, just as she should know how to play the piano and dance. What a beautiful creature it is? Why did you take the trouble to get it for me? Why are you always so kind to me?"

He looked at her, then turned his eyes away from her. Her very unconsciousness hurt him.

"You merit some amusement," he said. "What with architect's plans, and builder's estimates, you were in danger of being over-worked. Are you happy?" he asked, suddenly.

She looked at him, and her eyes—violet now—met his innocently.

"Quite—quite happy," she said.

They rode through the village and over the moor beyond, and Gaunt still kept a watchful eye upon the mare.

He glanced at her lovely face, with the color of a blush-rose on her cheeks, the light of joy and happiness in her eyes, and his lips grew tight and compressed.

On their way homeward they came to a field with a thorn-hedge, and Decima looked at the latter wistfully.

"Can she jump?" she asked. "Aunt Pauline would never let me jump; but I have always longed to do it. May I try?"

"She can jump," he said. "Try her, but be careful."

He led the way over a bit of timber in the hedge, and Decima followed. It is very likely that she pulled the young mare; anyway, she made a false step, and Decima would have fallen; but Gaunt was close beside her and caught her.

He held her in his arms for a second; it was scarcely longer that her head rested against his heart.

It was but a moment of time; but her heart had beaten against his, his lips had almost touched her cheek.

He went very white, and his face grew stern and set while the moment lasted; but Decima recovered her seat with a laugh, with the unconscious laugh of a child. She had not seen his face, and not known how near his lips had been.

"Nearly off!" she exclaimed. "But it was my fault. Let me try her again!"

"No, no!" he said, almost fiercely. "I will ride her for a day or two first—I will show you." He could scarcely speak, and he turned his head away.

He was almost silent on the way home. A groom was waiting at The Woodbines and took the mare from her, and Gaunt rode home slowly. He went straight to his study and lighted a cigar. He could feel the little graceful figure still in his arms, still feel her breath on his cheek.

Suddenly he flung the cigar in the fire-place, and threw his hand above his head with a wild, despairing gesture.

"Oh, my God!" he cried. "Not that—not that!" But the prayers came too late, and he knew it. "I love her!" he cried, as the sweat of his anguish broke upon his brow. "I love her—I love her!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"I love her! I love her!"

The words rang low through the room with a note of infinite pain and despair; and Gaunt sunk into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

Now, there has been no attempt in this history to whitewash Lord Gaunt, or even to make excuses for him. He was not a good man; he had been guilty of excesses which no good man ever commits; but he was not bad at heart. Until the great mistakes of his life, he had steered the straight course of Virtue on life's rough way; and he had been driven to the wide road which leadeth to destruction by misery and despair.

But since he had come to Leathmore a change had taken place in the man. The old life of dissipation had suddenly grown hideous to him; at no time, even when in the very midst of it, had it been particularly enjoyable. He had played high, and cared little whether he won or lost; he had moved in a fast set whose motto is "Love and Laughter;" but love had not enticed him, and laughter—well, few men had seen Lord Gaunt laugh of late years. Then he came to Leathmore, weary of everything, of the foolish talk, the hollow laughter of the fast set, of life itself. And he had met a young girl—a girl as innocent as a child—and everything had become changed to him.

Life had regained its savor; something like peace—and yet a peace full of wistfulness—had fallen upon him, and he had begun to forget—actually to forget—the past made so bitter by the great mistake.

He had been changing unconsciously; had not known, realized, what it was that was working the transformation.

But he knew now. And he sat with his head bent and his eyes covered, and faced the thing. For Gaunt, though not a good man, was no fool and no coward. He had got to face it.

He placed the whole case before him, so to speak, and tried to regard it calmly and judicially.

He was in love with Decima Deane. He, years older than she—and a married man!

He wiped the sweat from his face with an unsteady hand. It seemed ridiculous and absurd; but there it was, and all the ridicule he could pour on it would not quench or drown the truth. He tried to laugh as he thought of the difference in age, of the bond that held and galled him; but the laugh rang hollow and unsatisfactory.

He loved her. And he knew that it was the first real love of his life. The fancy for the woman who bore his name had been a fancy only, and had died; changed, rather, to contempt and loathing. He had never really loved until he had met Decima. And the girl was everything in the world to him. Life, hope, joy.

Her face rose before him as he sat and thought. The sweet, girlish face with its blue and ever-changing eyes, its mobile mouth and its bright and innocent smile, the soft brown hair clustering in tendrils on her white brow. Her voice with its innocent tone

Innocent! Yes, she was innocent; so child-like, that she did not guess how it was with him. He was not a good man; but he thanked God that she did not know that—she must never know.

He must go away, go away at once. He rose, stung to movement by the resolve, and almost groaned. A shudder ran through him as he thought of returning to the world, of going away from the sight of her face, the sound of her voice. They were life to him, and his days without them would be shadowed by the darkness of a death in life.

Need he go? She did not know, guess, of his love for her. He would keep a close watch and guard over every look and word. Why should he not have the consolation of being near her? She had been like a guardian angel to him; she had, all innocently and unconsciously, led him out of the dark forest of despair and gloom to higher and brighter lands. She had been his saving angel. If he left her he would slip back into the old life—the old life he hated and loathed.

As he paced up and down with bent head and hands tightly clinched, he tried to persuade himself that he should be content to be near her, to see her occasionally; that he would hope for, think of, nothing more.

(to be continued.)

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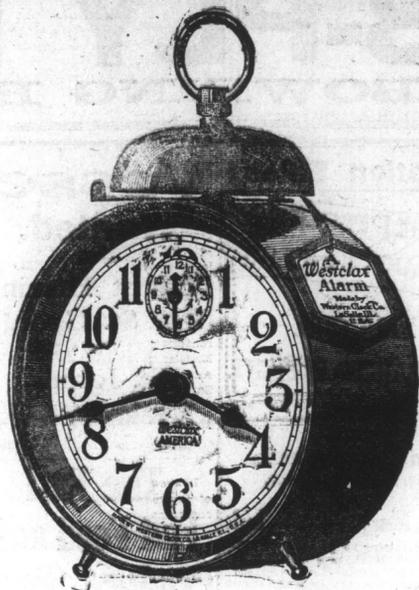
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