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CHAPTER XXIX.

"Brain fever!" said Lady Pauline, calm and on the alert by this time. "I don't understand."

He shook his head gravely.

"Severe brain fever," he said. Absolute candor was always required, demanded, by Lady Pauline, and he knew it. "There is no other trouble. Something was on her mind; something must have occurred between the interval of her first arrival and her return to this house."

Lady Pauline stared at him.

"What could have happened?" she said.

"That we have to discover," he said, quietly. "She must be kept quiet; but you know the treatment as well as I do, Lady Pauline." Lady Pauline had for a time been a hospital nurse in her younger days. "I'll come back in an hour or two. Keep the ice bandages going; and if she should recover consciousness before I return, keep her as tranquil as possible."

Lady Pauline stood beside the bed with tightly compressed lips and aching heart. What had she done to this girl whom she loved with a mother's love?

The charwoman stole in presently, and Lady Pauline questioned her. She could not tell more than the doctor had already told. Lady Pauline sent her with a wire for the servants to return, and returned her place beside the unconscious girl. The doctor came in again within this time.

"Something has happened to her—some shock," he said. "I can do nothing for her that you can not do, Lady Pauline. Absolute quiet, tranquillity, that is all."

"The hours dragged through. Later Lady Pauline saw the white eyelids quiver, and presently Decima looked up at her.

"Aunt Pauline!" she said in the thin, strained voice of fever.

"Yes; it is I, Decima, dear!"

The burning lips smiled wofully.

"I am glad you have come. Very glad, Aunt Pauline!"

"Yes, dear."

"Will you please tell Mr. Mershon that I can not marry him?"

Lady Pauline repressed a start. Was the poor child delirious? But Decima smiled again, as if she read the question, the doubt.

"No; I am quite sensible, dear," she said. "I promised Mr. Mershon. But, you see, I didn't know that, that I loved him."

"Him? Who?" asked Lady Pauline.

Decima stared at her as if surprised that the question should be necessary.

"Lord Gaunt," she said, quietly.

Lady Pauline could not repress the start now.

"Lord Gaunt?" she echoed.

Decima's hands clutched at the coverlet, with feverish violence, but her voice, thin and hollow though it was, was calm and free from delirium.

"Yes," she said. "Didn't you know? I love him, and—An exquisite smile lighted up her face, making its pale loveliness angelic by its intensity. "He loves me."

Lady Pauline permitted a groan to escape her.

"He loves me," continued Decima. "We shall never see each other again. Never! But I can not marry Mr. Mershon; not even to save father and Bobby. Poor Bobby! I am sorry; but I can not do it! I could have done it if—if I had not seen

him—when was it? I forget. Was it long ago, years ago? But I know that he loves me, and I love him. I shall never see him again; but I can't marry Mr. Mershon or any one else. It is a pity, isn't it? But I can not! Will you write to him and tell him? He lives at The Firs, Leafmore." Her mind wandered for a moment. "Leafmore! How beautiful it is! If he would only stay! The schools—the cottages—the church! How good he is! He does all we ask him! How good he is! And I love him—love him—love him! His wife! No, I can't be his wife! There is another woman—Oh, why did he make me love him so!"

She moved her head from side to side with feverish restlessness, then, as if with an effort, she came back to full consciousness.

"Write to—Mr. Mershon at once, Aunt Pauline. Tell him that I can not—can not. Ask him not to be angry. I know I am very wicked. Well, that is all, isn't it? I love him—love him! Promise, Aunt Pauline. I am slipping away—the light—the fire, all is growing dim; I can't see your face, though I know you are there. Promise!"

Lady Pauline bent over her.

"I promise. Be satisfied, dear!" she said; and Decima closed her eyes and drew a long sigh of relief.

CHAPTER XXX.

Gaunt found himself in the street outside the Mansions, very much in the condition in which Decima had been.

His brain was in a whirl. For him life had, so to speak, ended. He had lost Decima, the girl-love who had filled his heart, who had been the one star shining in his darkened life. He had lost her; and it was well. He shuddered as he thought of the risk she had run through his overwhelming temptation. If Laura, his wife—his wife!—had not appeared, what would have happened? Decima would have gone with him, and he would have wrecked the life of the sweetest, the purest of God's creatures!

He shuddered again, and an icy blast seemed to sweep over him. He felt cold, and remembered his fur coat at that moment, so absolutely physical was the sensation which assailed him. He could not go back for the coat. He buttoned the shooting jacket, and went on.

For a time he walked without any thought of the direction he was taking, but suddenly he looked round himself before Lady Pauline's house in the square. He gazed up at the windows; there was a light only in one. It must be her room; she was there. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he stretched his arms out toward the light and groaned. He paced up and down for a moment or two, until, indeed, a policeman eyed him suspiciously and crossed over the road to inspect him more closely. Then Gaunt turned and strode on.

He had put up for the night at a quiet hotel in St. James's, one of those old-fashioned places which men of Gaunt's tastes prefer. It was small and not by any means gorgeous, but it was exclusive and more expensive than any of the modern palatial caravansaries. The butler—the head waiter was always called the butler—met him in the small hall, prepared to help him off with his coat, into which the man had assisted him, and was rather surprised at seeing Gaunt without it.

"I have left my coat at the—club, Wilkins," said Gaunt.

"Yes, my lord; I will send for it," said Wilkins, promptly.

But Gaunt shook his head.

"Never mind," he said, "I will pick it up as I drive to the station tomorrow."

As he spoke he handed his hat to the man, and Wilkins, taking it, saw the streak of blood on Gaunt's wrist.

"Have you cut your hand, my lord?" he asked. He had known Gaunt ever since he was a boy.

Gaunt glanced at the stained wrist-band.

"Oh! Oh, ah, yes, I think I have. No, no; it is nothing. No, I won't have anything, thanks, Wilkins. I will go straight up; I am tired. You will have me called at half past six, please."

He went up to his room, not a large but an extremely comfortable one—for Morlet's Hotel was the perfection of comfort in all respects—and locking the door, flung himself into a chair beside the fire.

Yes, his life was ended. Remorse and love tore his heart like a couple of vultures. That he who loved her so dearly, so truly, should have tempted her to her ruin! His sweet, innocent girl-love, his pure white angel! And he should never see her again! The thought affected him as at that moment its parallel was affecting Decima. He could have borne the parting—the eternal parting—better if he had not known that she returned his love; but to know that she loved him—actually loved him—and to have to leave her forever, was a torture that nearly drove him mad.

Incredible as it may seem, he had not yet thought of his wife. There was only room for Decima in his mind and heart. As to what Laura would do, he was perfectly indifferent, when he did force himself to think of her, he would carry out her threat, claim her right as his wife, and drag his name in the mire, was quite possible, and more probable. But what did it matter? Nothing she could do could affect him. In a few hours he would have left England. It was very certain that he would never return. She might do just what she pleased. He would give her, surrender to her all she claimed—excepting himself. His rank, his wealth, the position due to her as his wife, she might have—but not himself.

Then his thought returned to Decima.

She must not marry Mershon. That, he felt, she would not do; but he would destroy Mershon's power; he would release the Deanes from the man's clutches. That, at any rate, he could do.

Her went to the writing-table, and wrote a letter to Belford & Lang, the lawyers. It was short and to the point.

"Ascertain," he said, "the amount in which Mr. Peter Deane is indebted to Mr. Mershon, and, any persons connected with the company started by him and Mr. Mershon, and discharge all his liabilities. I give you absolute carte blanche in the matter, and request that you will carry it through without a day's delay. It will have to be done with tact and discretion; and I leave the mode of doing it entirely to you, insisting only that it shall be done at once."

He drew a breath of relief as he addressed the envelope. At least, he could snatch his dearest from Mr. Mershon's clutches. But alas! alas! that was all he could do! He could not heal the heart which he had broken—for that he had broken it, the memory of her face, of her eyes as they rested on him at the moment of their parting, convinced him.

Yes, that was what his love for her had wrought! He had broken her heart. Perhaps, after all, it would have been better if that other woman had not come in, and he and Decima had gone away together—together! But he put the thought away from him. It was a desecration, a sacrilege. He had been mad with passion, with intoxication of her presence, her sweet voice, and more than all, her confession of love.

He paced up and down the room until dawn, then he packed the single bag he had with him—the rest of his luggage was already on board—and flung himself on the bed, tried to sleep. But, like Macbeth, he had murdered sleep, and he was still awake when the maid knocked at the door.

The sight of his face in the glass startled him; he was shaking like a man suffering from the effects of a drinking bout. But the cold bath pulled him together somewhat, and he made a pretence of eating the admirably cooked breakfast.

Then he got into a cag and was driven to Charing Cross. Waterloo was his station for Southampton; but he had not intended taking Decima to Africa. He was known at Cape Town, was known to the officers of the vessel—the "Pevensey Castle"—in which he had booked his passage; so he had fixed on Egypt as their place of refuge.

The clock struck eight as he drove into the station-yard.

He told the cabman to wait, and then looked for her—though he knew that she would not come.

She had not come. With a sigh and a twitch of the set lips, he got into the cab again, and was driven to Waterloo. He was just in time to catch the train.

At Southampton one of the "Castle's" officials met him and conducted him to the vessel.

"Your baggage and cases are on board, my lord," he said. "Is this all you have? We start in less than an hour, or thereabouts."

(to be continued.)

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