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**Happiness
At Last;**
OR
Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER I.
(Continued.)

"It all depends upon what you call it," he said. "I am afraid I should seem to you very aged."

She thought a moment.

"Aunt says that a man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks."

"Reckoning on that basis, I am ninety-three," he said.

She smiled at him with innocent amusement.

"And I?"

He looked at her with a listless kind of scrutiny.

"Seventy-eighteen—"

She put the cake down, and stared at him with girlish indignation.

"How absurd! I am nearly twenty!"

He was surprised, and he looked faintly.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You are like aunt. She is always telling me that I look like a girl, and imploring me to remember that I am a woman—as if it made any difference."

He got out a cigarette-case—got it out mechanically—then glanced at her, and was putting it away again, when she said:

"Are you going to smoke? Do, if you wish. I do not mind."

He lighted his cigarette and leaned his elbow on the table.

"You live with your aunt?" he said, not because he wished to know, but just to make conversation. She nodded over her tea-cup and munched her cake for a moment before replying.

"Yes; I have lived with her for the last ten years—she and I alone together."

"Then—your parents are dead?"

"My mother is," she said, quietly, and with a sudden sweet gravity in the lovely face. "I went to aunt when my mother died. My father is alive, and I have a brother. He is younger than I am. Aunt adopted me, you know. I had no mother nor sister, and father was travelling about, and—I suppose he was glad to get rid of me. Girls are always a nuisance, are they not?"

"I don't know—not always, I should think. Only sometimes."

She seemed struck by the reply, and



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a faint—a very faint—blush stole over her face.

"Perhaps I am a nuisance to you now?" she said. "I have kept you—I didn't think; but you need not wait. I can find my way to the gate, and aunt may come up any minute. Please do not wait."

She spoke quite frankly, without a touch of coquetry or pique, and he answered as frankly:

"You are not keeping me; I assure you I have nothing in the world to do, and it is very pleasant here. Besides, I feel in a way responsible for you, and should like to see you safe in your aunt's keeping."

"Why, what harm could come to me?" she asked, with wide-open eyes and a smile of amusement. "Do you think I should fall into the bear's cage, or get run over by the elephant?"

"No; but all the same, I should like to see you safe in your aunt's care. By the way, you did not tell me her name."

"Lascelles—Lady Lascelles," said the girl.

He raised his eyebrows slightly, as if he recognized the name.

"And you did not tell me yours," he remarked.

"You didn't ask me," she said, simply. "It is Decima Deane. What is yours?"

She leaned forward, her chin resting on her now ungloved hand—by no means small, by the way, but beautifully shaped and with a character of its own—and regarded him with girlish, friendly curiosity.

The waiter came up at the moment, and the gentleman put his left hand in his pocket for his purse. He had kept his arm behind his chair during the tea, and even now he moved it out of sight again quickly and shuffled his purse to the right hand; but Decima's eyes were sharp as well as beautiful, and she saw the rent in the sleeve.

She forgot all about his name, and exclaimed:

"Why, the lion did tear your sleeve! Oh, did it scratch you?"

"No, no," he said, rather shortly. "How much, waiter?"

"Three shillings, sir."

"That is eighteen pence each," said Decima, taking out her silver chain purse, and she extracted a shilling and sixpence, and laid them down on the table.

The man smiled grimly. It was evident he was the first man she had ever taken public tea with.

"Put your money back," he said, much amused.

"Oh, why?" she asked, with wide eyes. "Why should you pay for me?"

"I don't know," he said, "excepting that it is usual, and that it would be exceedingly bad form for you to pay for it yourself."

"Now, I can't understand that!" she said, with girlish insistence; and just as if she were arguing with a school-fellow. "Why should a gentleman always pay for ladies?"

"Because it is one of the few privileges we wretched men possess."

"That's absurd!" she laughed. "Besides, we are strangers. And I don't know what aunt would say. She says that girls should always be independent and—Oh, here she is! Aunt, how did you lose me?" and she sprang up and caught the arm of the tall lady in gray, who approached with stately steps and a grave countenance.

"My dear Decima, where—where have you been? And—as the gentleman rose and removed his hat—"and who is this?" she added in an anxious under-tone.

Decima turned a smiling and grateful face toward her late and temporary guardian.

"Oh, this gentleman has been helping me to find you, and we could not, though we went everywhere—"

Lady Lascelles glanced at the tea-table and then at the tall and erect gentleman in front of it, with a grave and stern eye.

"—And I was so thirsty," Decima went on, answering the look, "and he got some tea; and—well, then you came up. I am so glad! But I should not have been lost, should I? I should have gone to the gate where the carriage was to wait. And oh, aunt, will you please thank this gentleman for taking so much trouble—"

Lady Lascelles touched the girl's arm as an exhortation to silence, and addressed the gentleman.

"I am greatly obliged to you for your care of my niece, sir. I am afraid she has given you some trouble. To whom am I indebted?"

The gentleman frowned slightly, as if the question were an unwelcome one. From his cigarette-case lying on the table he took a card and gave it

"That is my name," he said, quietly. Lady Lascelles started slightly as she crushed the card in her palm, her face flushing.

He bowed as if he understood, his lips set tight, the weary, listless look back in his eyes again.

The stately lady became taller and more stately, and with a cold "Good-day," she drew Decima's hand over her arm—as if the girl suddenly needed protection—and was walking her off. But Decima looked back with a troubled expression in her eyes and about the expressive mouth, and swiftly releasing her arm, she ran back to where Lord Gaunt was still standing, a faint grim smile of amusement in his eyes.

"Oh, I haven't thanked you as I ought to!" she said. "You were so kind and—patient! And you showed me the private lions, you know—and I am so grateful—and—oh, please do not be offended with aunt, but—shake hands!"

She held out her hand, and he took it. He did not press it, but let it fall, and with another lifting of his hat, turned away.

Lady Lascelles waited with her lips tightly set, a frown upon her broad brow.

"Decima, come, please," she said.

Decima returned to her aunt's side, but looked rather wistfully after the tall, retreating form of the man who had been so coldly treated for his kindness.

"Why—why were you so angry with him, aunt?" she asked, just a little piteously. "He was very, very kind, and—and—what has he done to make you so cross?"

"My dear Decima, you must not ask questions which I can not answer. It was very wrong of you to permit a gentleman—a stranger—to walk about the Gardens with you. And how could you possibly sit there and take tea with him?"

"I was thirsty," said Decima, simply.

Lady Lascelles almost groaned.

"Decima, you are nothing more than a child—a mere child. You must never do such a thing again!"

"Why not? What harm have I done?" insisted the girl.

"It is—it is not usual; it is bad etiquette, manners, form, to walk about with a strange man; to take tea with him is worse. Any strange gentleman is bad enough; but that man of all men in the wide world!"

"Why was it worse to walk about and sit down to tea with him than any one else, aunt?" Decima asked.

Lady Lascelles hit her lip.

"Because—my dear girl, you would not understand—"

"But, aunt—why?"

"Because he is a bad, wicked man—one of the most wicked men in the world!"

And Decima was silenced at last.

CHAPTER II.

"One of the most wicked men in the world" meanwhile walked slowly across the Gardens to the Clarence Gate, and calling a cab, told the man to drive him to Cavendish Square. Stopping the cab at the house of Sir James Starke, he inquired if the great physician were in, and was shown in to the consulting room.

Sir James Starke had just come in from his rounds, and had still got his hat on. He tilted it up with an expression of astonishment at sight of his visitor.

"Halloo, Gaunt!" he said. "I didn't know you were in England. How are you? Sit down! Anything the matter?" and as he shook hands, he surveyed the weary, handsome face with the physician's all seeing, penetrating gaze.

Lord Gaunt took off his coat, and rolled the sleeve above his left arm.

"Just cauterize that, will you, Starke?" he said, quietly.

Sir James turned the arm to the light—an arm well made and muscular; hard as iron and smooth as marble.

"Why—what is it?" he said. "A dog-bite? No, a cat's scratch? What is it?"

"A lion scratch," said Lord Gaunt. "Got it at the Zoo, fooling with the cub I brought over. It isn't much; but it felt angry, and well—I've seen a nigger or two go mad with blood-poisoning for less than this."

Sir James nodded gravely, and got the caustic.

"It's not like you to come to harm in this way, Gaunt," he said; "you must have been precious careless."

"Yes, I was," said Lord Gaunt, concisely.

After he had performed the simple operation, Sir James looked at his patient's face, and ran a finger on his pulse. Then he shook his head.

"Same old game, Gaunt!" he said, gravely.

Lord Gaunt smiled grimly.

"Same old game," he said, quietly.

"Pity! pity!" murmured Sir James. "Can't you do something better with your life than waste it?"

"I don't know. I've never asked myself the question. Perhaps I don't waste my life more than you waste yours. It's all a point of view, you know, Starke."

"My dear fellow!" expostulated the great physician; "I work—earn money—"

"—And I lounge, and laze, and spend it. Who shall say which is the wiser? Life is only a chance for making mistakes."

Sir James nodded sympathetically.



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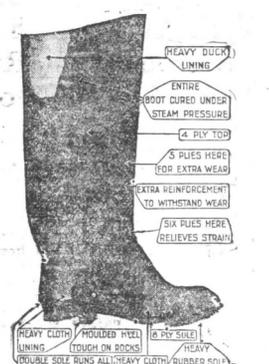
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