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CHAPTER XVIII.

The night of Gaunt's dinner-party arrived. He had put it off as long as possible, for he hated the thought of it, but the thing had to be done, and at last a date was fixed and the invitations sent out. It was to be a very large party, but there was no danger of the resources of the Hall being strained; for the "state" rooms, as the housekeeper loved to call them, were vast enough to hold more persons than were asked, and the army of servants was well drilled.

There was a Countess of Roborough, a dear old lady, with white hair, and beautiful, old-fashioned manners; she was a great friend of Gaunt's, and she offered to play the part of hostess and sit at the head of his table, "for that night only."

"It is a pity that there is not a duly qualified and legal 'lady of the castle,'" she said to Gaunt when she made the offer. "It is always awkward for a bachelor, and I think you will find me useful. I hope, next time you give a party, I shall not be needed, Lord Gaunt."

She smiled at him with her wise and compassionate old eyes, and Gaunt smiled back at her, and shook his head.

He had winced at the word "bachelor," but he answered, calmly enough: "No one could fill the place so well as you, dear Lady Roborough, and I should always be satisfied to see you in it. I am very grateful."

She looked at him trustfully, and sighed; she knew that there must be some mystery in his life; but she knew also that whatever it was, Gaunt would keep it to himself.

Mrs. Sherborne and her brother received an invitation, and accepted; Decima also received hers. She would have liked to have refused, but Lord Gaunt had made her promise, and she knew she must go. But she did not want to go with Mrs. Sherborne, and she carried the invitation to her father. Mr. Deane positively refused.

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"I hate a crowd," he said. "Why does not Robert take you?"

"Bobby can not leave London," said Decima.

Mr. Deane shuffled up and down the laboratory. "I've had a letter this morning from him," he said, and he felt in his pockets and looked round helplessly. "Where is it? I put it somewhere. He writes asking for more money; he seems to have spent all his allowance already. I suppose I must send him some more, though I can't afford it; that is, just now, presently it will not matter." He straightened himself and looked round with a sanguine smile. "There will be plenty of money, my dear Decima, plenty, very soon. Yes, Bobby and you shall take your proper places in the world."

Decima had grown so accustomed to such remarks as these that they had ceased to make any impression on her. "And you will go, father?" she said. "Yes—yes; I suppose so," he assented, with a sigh.

Decima went and looked at her dresses. She would have liked a new frock for the occasion, but she thought of Bobby's letter, and resolved to make one of the old ones do. She was quite sure that so insignificant a person as herself would not be noticed in that brilliant assemblage.

So, when the night came, she put on her soft, dove-colored silk, only slightly open at the neck, and without a flower or jewel for ornament, and smiled at her reflection in the glass. "I certainly do look rather Quakerish, as Bobby would say," she thought. "But it will not matter. I know scarcely any one but the Mershons, and I shall escape notice all the easier."

The party had created a great deal of excitement, and she realized how important a function it was when she saw the large crowd of villagers which had collected at the gate to see the guests arrive, and the long line of handsome carriages coming and going along the avenue.

The great house was a blaze of light, and Mr. Deane shuffled his feet and groaned, as their modest fly at last drew up to the steps, over which a striped awning had been spread, and he caught a glimpse of the many footmen standing in waiting.

Lady Roborough stood just within the drawing-room to receive the guests, and Lord Gaunt stood at her elbow holding her bouquet. Her keen eyes scanned Decima's face as she and her father were announced, and for a moment a look of surprise and admiration flashed in her ladyship's eyes as she gave Decima her hand.

At Decima's entrance, Gaunt's heart leaped, but his face grew paler if anything.

"It was good of you to come," he said in a low voice, and his hand closed over hers with a firm pressure. Decima murmured something inaudible, and passing on, was swallowed up in the crowd.

Lady Roborough looked after her. "What a sweet-looking girl!" she said in an under-tone to Gaunt. "It is a remarkable face; one sees so few really modest-looking girls nowadays. I did not know Mr. Deane had a daughter. How is it I have not met her?"

Gaunt looked straight before him; the touch of the little gloved hand was still throbbing through him. "They are very quiet people and go nowhere," he said, casually; too casually, for the sharp old lady glanced at him keenly. But Gaunt's face was as impassive as usual and told nothing.

There were several persons who knew Mr. Deane, and Decima found that she was not to pass unnoticed, as she had hoped and expected; for her appearance had impressed others besides Lady Roborough; and the men were asking Mr. Deane to introduce them, and the ladies were glancing at her curiously.

Presently, Mrs. Sherborne and Mr. Mershon arrived. Mrs. Sherborne was very pale and looked nervous, and Mr. Mershon entered with lowered eyes, and kept them under their lids for some minutes; then he raised them, looked round with a kind of covert eagerness saw Decima, and made his way to her. There were several gentlemen near her, and one was talking to

her, and Mr. Mershon had to wait until she was free to greet him. His thin lips lightened, and he stood looking down with a half-nervous, half-aggressive air. Then he shook hands with her, and his small eyes glanced round the magnificent room and the brilliant crowd.

"Quite a brilliant affair, isn't it?" he said, with an attempt at a sneer.

Decima looked about her with a very different expression. The splendor of the women's dresses, the flashing of the diamonds pleased her, and excited her a little. There was not a spark of envy in her bosom, not a tinge of regret for her own plain attire. Mr. Mershon's remark and its tone grated upon her, and she made no response. She saw Lord Gaunt moving about the room, speaking to one and another, and almost as if he were conscious that her eyes were resting upon him, he turned and looked at her, and suddenly came across to her.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he said in a low voice, too low for Mershon to hear; and Mr. Mershon noticed the whispered tone and resented it with sharp resentment as he moved away a little.

"Satisfied?" said Decima, looking up at him with a faint smile.

"Yes," he said; "this is your doing; you wanted me to see people, go into society—and here you are, you see!" He smiled, but there was a gravity and intensity in his gaze which Decima felt.

"Oh!" she said in repudiation. "But if it were true, then I am satisfied. How beautiful it is! I mean the rooms."

"Which you decorated!" he said in a low voice.

"—And the dresses and the jewels," she continued, disregarding his interruption. "It is quite significant, and—like a pageant. You ought to be very proud, Lord Gaunt; for it must be pleasant to have so many nice and beautiful persons in your house."

He looked at the girlish face uplifted to him, and smiled enigmatically. He noticed the plainness of her dress, the absence of any ornament—he had noticed it the moment she entered—and he thought: "Not one of the women, with all their grand dresses and their diamonds, is so beautiful, so distinguished-looking, as this love of mine in her simple frock!"

"I am glad you are pleased," he said, quietly. "It will be my reward for being a good boy, and doing as I was told."

As he spoke, Mr. Mershon came up and offered her his arm. "I am to take you in, Miss Deane," he said.

Gaunt looked at him with an impassive face, in which no sign of his envy was visible, and went to the Countess of Ilminster, who was allotted to him.

The brilliant crowd passed into the dining-room with its softly shaded lights. For this occasion the famous Gaunt plate had been unearthed from the bank vaults, and the long table shone with gold and silver.

There were flowers everywhere, and they softened the glitter of the precious metals and the flashing of the jewels. The dinner was a superb one—it is talked of to this day—and, unlike most functions of its kind, by no means dreary.

Lady Roborough was the perfection of a hostess, and Gaunt exerted all the charm which belonged to his race. No one was better fitted to shine in society, and Decima, who was not very far from him, where he sat at the bottom of the table, thought, as she listened to him and glanced now and again at his face, how much younger he looked then than when she had first met him.

As a matter of fact, he was playing his part extremely well. He hated and loathed the whole affair, but no one had the least suspicion of his sentiment, or guessed that all the while he was talking so brilliantly and smiling so easily, that he was wishing them all away—all but one little girl in dove-colored silk.

Gaunt's admirably assumed manner and mood proved infectious, and instead of the dreary, commonplace small-talk, with its intervals of awkward and embarrassing silence, which characterized most dinner-parties, conversation flowed freely, and laughter ran like an accompaniment.

(To be continued.)

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