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CHAPTER XXI.

(To be continued.)

"It is evident that he hasn't told you all," said Mershon. "I'm afraid, Miss Decima, that the case is worse than you guess. I don't know how bad it was myself until I had a talk with your father and brother together."

Decima looked at him with slowly growing apprehension.

"What do you mean?" she said faintly. "How can it be worse?"

"Well," he said, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "you talk about paying me back, and your brother going into the army, but I'm afraid there's little chance of either event coming off--no, that I want to be paid back or should take the money. The fact is, Miss Decima, your father has been going in for this thing neck or nothing--what we call in the city, lose all or win all. It appears--mind, I didn't know it or I should strongly have advised him against such foolhardiness--that he has put every penny he possessed into this 'confounded' thing. And of course he has lost it. In fact, I'm afraid he has made himself liable for more than he has got. He says he is utterly ruined."

Decima stared at him with wide eyes; her lips quivered, but no sound came.

Mershon went and closed the door with his foot, then he came near to her, as near as he dared.

"Look here, Miss Decima," he said, "it's best to face these things straight out, and so I've told you the absolute truth. Your father's ruined, and your brother will have to give up all idea of the army and take his chance in the colonies, and a deuced poor chance it is, I'm afraid. That is, unless--he paused and looked at her and then down at the ground, for the terror in her eyes and white face daunted even him for a moment--"unless--" he went on. "Well--it all rests with you."

"With me?" Her lips formed the words; they were scarcely audible.

"Yes, with you," he said. "Miss Decima, I'm a straight man--we have to speak out straight in the city--and I won't treat you as a child, but as a girl, a woman, upon whom her father's and brother's happiness and welfare depend. This trouble's about as big as it can be. They must go under with it--unless you care to save them."

"I--I save them!" said Decima. He jerked his head.

"Yes, you remember what I said to you the other night at the Leafmore Hall, I told you I loved you, and I asked you to be my wife. You said 'no' then, but I said I wouldn't take your answer; I haven't taken it. I ask you again--now! If you will say 'yes,' I will take this trouble off your hands. I will find the money your father's lost. I will double your brother's allowance, and pay his debts."

"His debts!" breathed Decima. Mershon laughed shortly.

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"Oh, yes, there are debts. He has been going the pace. I'll do more than this; I'll keep an eye on your father for the future and look after him. And I'll make a settlement on you as large as you like."

In his eagerness he had taken a step or two nearer. Decima drew back until she leaned against the window. Her brain was whirling; she felt as if she were suffocating, and her eyes were fixed on his shrewd, sharp face as if she were under a spell.

"Come," he said, "I've made the offer bluntly because it's business; but I could put it in another way. I love you, Decima, love you with all my heart and soul. I want you more than I've wanted anything before in my life. If you'd said 'yes' to me the other night, you'd never have heard anything of this trouble; I'd have paid up every penny and said not a syllable about it. That's my way. But you said 'no,' and I'm obliged to tell you and make a bargain with you. You close with my offer, and I'll never refer to it again. No one need know anything about it; not even your brother; for I can tell him that things have turned out better than we expected. It will be easy to bamboozle him, for he knows as little of business as the rest of you. Do you mind me smoking, for I'm a little upset. I see your brother had a cigarette."

He lighted his cigar, and his hand shook as Bobby's had done, but with a different emotion. Decima put up a shaking hand and brushed the soft hair from her forehead. No bird in the fowler's net was more helpless than she was at that moment. As Mershon had said to his sister, he had got her tightly. Her father ruined, Bobby's future absolutely blasted! And by a word, a word of three letters, she could save them.

At that moment all Lady Pauline's lessons inculcating the duty of self-sacrifice flashed across her mind. To live for others, to suffer for others, it was the woman's ideal, the woman's duty, should be the woman's pleasure. No thought of herself rose to deter her. By saying "yes" she could save those she loved.

She thought of her father, broken-hearted by his failure, cooped up in a laborer's cottage, deprived of his work-shop, of all his dreams; she thought of Bobby, the bright boy, with his shattered hopes, starving in the colonies, and a shudder swept over her.

She could save them by the one word--yes.

At that moment--why, she knew not--she thought of Lord Gaunt. If he were only here to help her, advise her. But he was not there; he might be thousands of miles away. She was alone and helpless.

Mershon eyed her covertly. He knew that she was struggling, but he knew that there was no loophole in the net that he had drawn round her.

"What do you say?" he said at last. Decima seemed to wake as if from a dream, and turned her eyes upon him with a half-dazed, half-appealing gaze.

"Why should you hesitate?" he said. "You said the other night that you didn't dislike me. I don't expect you to love me, but I dare say you like me well enough to be my wife. All the rest will come after we are married; it generally does. Anyhow, I'll chance it. Give me your answer. Say 'yes,' Decima, and I'll go straight in and tell your father and brother that more needn't worry themselves any more about this miserable business. Your father can go on playing at making his fortune by inventions, and your brother can go into the army and be a general in time. Only say the word, and leave the rest to me."

There was silence in the room, broken only by the faint creak of the jackdaw as he preened his feathers. The slim, girlish figure, with its white face and dark-rimmed eyes, leaned by the window. Her heart, as if it were imprisoned by a hand of ice.

"To save them, the dear ones!"

"Well," he said, "what is your answer?"

Her hands clinched at her side, the martyr's look came into her eyes.

"I must--I must!" she breathed.

"Yes."

CHAPTER XXII.

"Yes," Decima said, and almost inaudible as the word was, it sent the blood rushing to Mershon's face.

He took a step toward her, with outstretched hands, as if to take her in his arms; but something in her face, as she shrunk back, arrested him.

There was almost a terror in her

eyes, and she went pale to the lips, which formed the monosyllable "No."

The color died from Mershon's cheeks, and his arms fell to his sides, as he stood looking at her irresolutely. But he was very much in love, and he was wise enough to know that a half loaf is better than none. Besides, she had not told him that she loved him, but had simply promised to be his wife; and he must be content with that--for a time.

"You have made me very happy, Decima," he said. "I've always got what I've wanted all through my life, and my luck hasn't deserted me; it's not a bad thing to marry a lucky man, my dear."

Decima winced at the "my dear," and shrunk back a little further. She was confused and bewildered, and the predominant feeling at that moment was the desire that he would go--if he would only go and leave her alone to get her breath, as it were.

"You'd better leave me to tell your father and brother," he said. "I dare say they won't be very much astonished; any one could have seen that I'd fallen in love with you. Yes; I'll tell them."

"Thank you," she said, almost gratefully; for she shrunk from the thought of having to tell them.

He still stood looking at her irresolutely; then took her hand half fearfully and touched it with his lips, which burned against the coldness of her hand.

When he had gone, Decima looked at the hand vacantly, as if it did not belong to her, then she sunk on to one of the cages, and sat staring before her, trying to realize that she was to be Theodore Mershon's wife.

Her very innocence prevented her realizing fully what it meant. Lady Pauline's system of perfect ignorance was bearing its fruit. If Decima had been impossible; and the knowledge would have saved her from a sacrifice all too common, but none the less wicked and unholly.

But all she shrunk from was the thought of leaving The Woodbines and her father, and going to live in the society of Mr. Mershon and his sister at The Pirs. She would have to be with him always, to go with him wherever he went; to live in the great new house, the splendor of which oppressed her; to spend long hours listening to Mrs. Sherborne's praise of her brother.

This was all which presented itself to her imagination; but it was enough. Only one thought consoled her--that she would still be near her father, and that she would be able to see him often; that she had saved him and Bobby from ruin, and that Bobby's future was assured.

After a time she went up to her own room. She caught sight of her face in the glass, and its expression startled her.

A knock at the door sent her hand to her heart; and she turned round with a look in her eyes, almost of terror, as if she dreaded to see Mr. Mershon.

But it was Bobby.

"Decima!" he exclaimed, half anxiously, and yet with something like relief in his voice; "is this true--that Mershon has been telling us?"

She stood with her back to the light, and he could not see her face distinctly, or it would have told its tale.

"Yes, it is true, Bobby," she said; and she managed--Heaven only knows how--to force a smile and speak cheerfully.

"Well," he exclaimed, "it's taken my breath away. I hadn't the least idea! But I suppose it's been going on while I've been away?"

(To be continued.)

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