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CHAPTER XVI.

She took the flowers and thanked him with a smile, and he sat down beside her and talked in an under-tone. The French maid announced dinner. "Deane, will you take in my sister?" said Mr. Morgan Thorpe.

Trevor had already offered his arm, and he let it fall to his side and cowered at Bobby as he bore Laura off.

The dining-room was small, but it looked very cozy. The table was an oval, and lighted by a hanging lamp, carefully shaded, which threw a soft, rose-colored light upon Laura's exquisite face. The plate was electro-plate, but Bobby did not know this—the glass was good; there was a plateau of beautifully arranged flowers in the center of the table. Champagne stood in ice on the sideboard. The dinner was a good one, and the French woman waited with the noiseless dexterity of her nation. The champagne flowed freely, and Trevor allowed the maid to fill his glass pretty frequently.

He sat opposite Bobby and took little or no part in the conversation, but sat the well-arranged and dainty meal with a kind of sullen appreciation. Morgan Thorpe kept the talk going, and managed to get a good deal of information about his personal affairs from Bobby. Laura spoke now and again, and once or twice addressed herself directly to Bobby. She told him of her life on the Continent; of her loneliness here in London; and she looked so pensive and sad and breathless such a soft little sigh, that Bobby's heart thrilled with pity—for what he didn't know. When she was speaking to Bobby, Trevor watched them from under his lowered lids; and every now and then he glowered at Laura as if he resented her addressing any one but himself.

Mr. Thorpe grew still more cheerful and amusing as the dinner progressed and the champagne circulated, and Bobby thought the meal the most delightful he had ever eaten.

Presently Mrs. Dalton rose and gathered her fan and flowers together and smiled sweetly on the men, her smile resting longest on Bobby.

"Do not leave me in my loneliness too long," she said; and Bobby would have liked to have gone with her there and then.

Mr. Morgan Thorpe got some port and some cigarettes. Bobby felt somehow that he'd had enough wine and declined the port, but Morgan Thorpe insisted, and filled his glass.

"Good wine, though I say it, my dear Deane. It came from the cellar of my dear old grandfather, the earl." He didn't say which earl. "It is the only thing I am likely to have from him, alas!"

Something like a sneer passed over Trevor's thick lips as he filled his burgundy glass with "the earl's" port. As he drank, and he filled his glass several times, a faint flush rose to the pallor of his cheeks, and his eyes began to glow with a sudden fire; but he did not talk and sat twisting his glass about, his eyes shifting from one man's face to the other.

With the port and the cigarettes, Morgan Thorpe became a still more delightful companion. He seemed, to Bobby, to have been everywhere, and to know everything and everybody. He was full of reminiscences and anecdotes. It was, "I'll tell you a thing

that happened to me when I was travelling in Hungary with the Duke of Seltberg," or, "a remarkable thing occurred to me when I was staying with the prince at the Marquis of Goodwin's shooting-box in Ayrshire." And he told all these fabulous stories so modestly and with such an air of truth, that Bobby could not but believe him.

The sound of a piano floated out to them from the drawing-room, and, as if it were a signal—which it was—Morgan Thorpe said, with a wistful glance at the decanter:

"We ought to join my sister. Will you take some more wine, my dear fellows?"

Bobby shook his head, but Thorpe filled Trevor's glass again, and Trevor tossed the wine off as if it were water.

They went into the drawing-room. Laura looked over her shoulder at Bobby with a smile, and Bobby, as if drawn to it, made straight for the piano. She had a wonderful touch, and played like an artist. Bobby had never heard such music. She played Chopin; a soft and sensuous nocturne which filled the small, perfumed room with an exquisite melody.

"Would you like some cards?" asked Morgan Thorpe in a casual way, when the nocturne was over. "Trevor, Deane, what do you say?"

"I don't care," said Trevor. "Yes; if you like."

"Those horrid cards!" said Laura, turning with raised brows and a little moue of disgust to Bobby. "I hope you're not fond of cards, Mr. Deane! I think they are so tiresome."

"I don't care a bit about them," said Bobby. Then, with a boyish desire to seem a man of the world, he added: "Of course I play sometimes—whist and loo."

"Don't play to-night," she said in a low voice. "If you will not, I will sing to you; and we can talk while the others are playing. Mr. Trevor is devoted to cards."

Bobby flushed, and was speechless. "Ah, well," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe, "if Deane doesn't care about it, you and I will have a hand at cards, Trevor."

He opened the card-table and got the cards, and the two men sat down and commenced to play.

"You said you would sing for me," said Bobby.

"And I will keep my promise," she said.

She sang as perfectly as she played. Her voice was not strong—a loud voice would have been too much for the small room—but it was exquisitely sweet, and managed—well, as artistically as were her eyes, her smile, her complexion.

She sang an Arab hunting song, and Bobby could hear the thud of the hoofs upon the sand, could feel the breath of the stirocco upon his cheek.

"Sing something else," he said.

She nodded at him, smiled, and sang a Tuscan love song. It was so exquisite, so moving, that Bobby's young and unsophisticated heart beat nine-tenths to the dozen.

The champagne and the port, the air heavily laden with perfume, the fascination of this beautiful little creature, were mounting to his brain. He breathed hard.

"That was beautiful," he said. "What a lovely voice you have! I could listen to you all night."

"But I should be so tired!" she murmured, with a little plaintive smile. "Ah! but, no! I love to sing for those who like to hear me, who love music; and I know you love it, Mr. Deane."

Under the spell of her voice, Bobby's head whirled. He could not speak. She rose from the piano.

"Let us see how they are going on," she said.

Light as a thistle-down she seemed to Bobby to float across the room. She went behind Trevor, and leaning her hand upon his shoulder, in a way that seemed to Bobby very friendly and girlish, said, gaily:

"Are you winning?"

Trevor looked up at her with an ardent look in his small eyes.

"Yes, at present," he said, nodding at a pile of money beside him.

"I am so glad!" she said. "It is not very satisfactory, but I like Morgan to lose."

"It doesn't lose often," remarked Trevor, glumly.

She looked at his cards, and raised her hand to the left side of her head, and stroked the soft black hair. Morgan Thorpe glanced at her hesitatingly. She repeated the action.

"I'll go you double this hand, if you like," he said, carelessly.

She bent over Trevor so that the soft tendrils of her hair touched his red head. He looked up at her with a sudden flush, and answered at random:

"Eh! Oh, yes; if you like. There, I've lost!" he said; and he laughed disconcertedly as he pushed the stakes across the table.

A fresh hand was dealt, and Laura remained behind Trevor. Something must have been the matter with her hair that night, for her white hand went up to it and smoothed it very often, now on the right side, now on the left, as she bent over him. He played wildly; the flush on his face grew redder, his eyes glanced up at her beautiful face with a kind of suppressed and sullen passion. He lost the small heap of money beside him, and the pile at Morgan's elbow grew larger. Morgan Thorpe stroked his mustache. As if it were a signal—which it was—she went back to Bobby, who had been turning over a photograph album in which her portrait appeared frequently.

"And so you are going into the army?" she said. "How I envy you being a man!"

Thereupon, Bobby was led to talk of his prospects. She listened to him with her soft black eyes fixed on his face with an expression of sympathy and liking. She went to the piano again and sang to him several times; but between the songs she fitted across the room and leaned over Trevor, her hand upon his shoulder as before. And as before, her hand wandered to her hair.

Strange to say, whenever she stood behind him, Trevor lost.

At last he rose with a discordant laugh and something like a muffled oath.

"I've lost all the coin I've got, Thorpe," he said. "Here's an I.O.U. for the rest."

He flicked the I.O.U. across the table.

"You've had bad luck, my dear boy," said Morgan Thorpe, pleasantly. "Ah, well; the beauty of cards is, that what you lose one day you win the next."

"Oh, is it?" said Trevor. "I don't find it so. I'm going."

He went up to Laura, and drawing her aside, talked to her in a low voice. She listened with a pensive smile—the non-committal smile which a woman knows how to manage so well—then she glided away from him to Bobby.

"I hope you will come to see us often," she said in a low voice.

Bobby tried to murmur his thanks.

The French maid appeared with a spirit-stand. Bobby had some whiskey, though he didn't want it; he also accepted a big cigar, though he didn't want that. His brain was in a whirl; his bright eyes were flashing; his heart was beating fast. Laura was standing beside him, smiling up at him with a friendly, almost a loving, smile.

"I wonder whether you would come and dine with me?" he said, looking round with boyish eagerness, his eyes resting, however, on the beautiful face beside him. "I've got rooms at Prince's Mansions. They're not mine, really; they belong to a friend of mine, an awfully good fellow, Lord Gaunt—"

Mr. Morgan Thorpe, who alone heard this, was mixing himself a second glass of whiskey. He was just pouring in a small quantity of water, and with an awkwardness scarcely to be expected of so cool a hand, he let the carafe slip from his grasp. The water poured over the table, and in the confusion Bobby's speech was almost unnoticed.

"How clumsy of me!" exclaimed Morgan Thorpe. "Forgive me, my dear Laura. We shall be delighted, my dear Deane—delighted. Must you really be going? Ah, well, the happiest hours come to a finish."

Laura went out into the small hall as the two men put on their light overcoats. Bobby found difficulty with his, and she helped him with her small white hands.

"You will come again?" she said.

"Yes—yes, indeed!" said Bobby, "if you will be so good as to ask me."

He got outside, and the cool evening air struck upon his heated brow.

He felt as if he had come from some enchanted palace in which a beautiful creature with soft black eyes had resigned like a queen of the fairies.

"Nice people," he said to Trevor, with boyish enthusiasm.

Trevor grunted.

"You know them very well?" said Bobby.

"What a lovely creature Mrs. Dalton is!" said Bobby, looking up at the sky.

Trevor eyed him with a kind of suppressed ferocity.

"Oh, you think so, do you?" he said. "Look here, Deane—"

There was so much suppressed savagery in his tone that Bobby stopped and stared at him.

Trevor bit his lip, and looked from side to side.

"We part here," he said. "Good-night."

(To be continued.)

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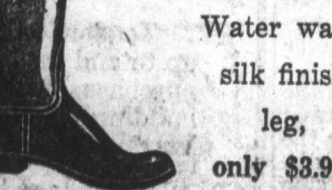
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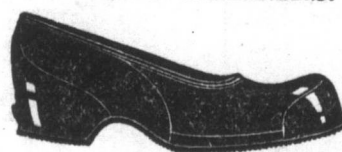


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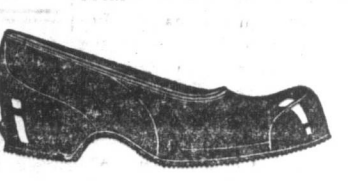
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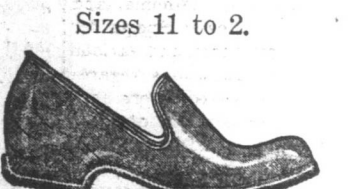
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