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CHAPTER XX.

"He has not deserted you," she said. "He has left you word to go on doing all the good and noble things he began. We—you—have no right to expect him to stay here, if he does not wish to. Why should he not go away?"

Bright sighed and reached for his hat.

"It's like you to speak like that, and you're right. He's his own master. But I feel anxious and worried about it. You see, I'm fond of him. Of course, I can't expect you to share my feelings. I'll go back to the Hall and see about closing it up. This will be a blow to the country and the neighborhood. And after such a splendid success as last night, too! Well, well! Good-morning."

He got his hat, and sighed himself out of the room.

Decima stood by the window, looking straight before her. All the brightness seemed to have gone out of her life. She remembered that he had said "good-bye" last night—remembered the tone of his voice. It was significant enough now. It was evident that he had resolved last night to leave Leafmore. Why had he done so?—what had happened? Had he heard bad news, or was he tired of the place, and of—all his friends?

No answer was forthcoming. She went back to the table, but she could eat no more. She wandered about the house as if she were in a dream, and later on she put on her out-door things and went down to the village. The people were full of Lord Gaunt's departure, and she had to stand and listen to Mrs. Topper's lamentations echoed shrilly by Mrs. Murphy. A cloud seemed to have fallen on the place and darkened all its brightness.

Decima went her charitable rounds with a dull aching at her heart. At the Leafmore gates, she stopped for a moment and looked down the avenue. Some men were taking down the fairy lamps which had been stretched from tree to tree; some grooms were ex-

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ercising the horses; the men were talking among themselves, and she caught a few words. They were talking of Lord Gaunt's departure and the loss it would mean to them.

She returned slowly and heavily to the Woodbines. As she passed through the hall, the door leading to the laboratory was ajar, and she heard her father and Mr. Mershon talking.

She had not forgotten his proposal; it had oppressed her at the first moment of her waking; but Lord Gaunt's flight—for it was little else—had for a time driven all thoughts of Mr. Mershon from her mind; but now the scene with him in the conservatory rose before her, and she drew back with a little catch in her breath. Suddenly she heard her father utter an exclamation of dismay and a groan. She pushed open the door, and entered.

Her father was pacing up and down, his hands tightly gripped behind him, his head bent, his hair in wild disorder. Mr. Mershon was, as usual, seated on the bench; there was a big cigar in his mouth, as usual, and he was regarding Mr. Dean with a half-cynical, half-curious expression.

Decima went straight to her father. "Did you call, father? Did you want me?"

Mr. Deane stopped in his pacing to and fro, and regarded her with a vacant, troubled stare; then he pushed his hands through his hair and stifled a groan.

"No; no; I didn't call!" he said. "I'm engaged on business with Mr. Mershon. Go away, Decima."

Decima turned to Mershon. "What is this business?" she asked, almost demanded. "What is troubling my father so?"

Mershon extinguished his cigar by jabbing it on the bench, and kept his small eyes fixed on the operation.

"I thought you knew," he said. "It's this Electric Storage Company."

"I do not know," said Decima. "What about it? Tell me."

Mershon glanced at her for a moment.

"It's this invention of your father's," he said. "An awfully clever thing. There ought to be a lot of money in it, and I thought there was. You see, I don't understand this kind of thing myself, and I relied upon Mr. Deane. He ought to know."

"If I do not know, who does?" exclaimed Mr. Deane, throwing out his hands with pitiful vanity.

"Just so," said Mershon, slowly, and shooting another glance at Decima. "If he doesn't know, who does? That's what I told them in the city."

"What is the matter?" asked Decima. "Has anything gone wrong?"

"Well, yes; I'm afraid there has," he said. "The thing—the invention doesn't seem quite to work out somehow."

"It does; it must!" broke in Mr. Deane, wildly. "I will explain."

"I'm afraid it isn't much use explaining to me," said Mershon. "As I said, I don't understand anything about the invention, the machine; all I undertook was to float the company; and I should have done, that right enough if it hadn't been for this hitch."

"Is it some mistake?" said Decima. "Can it not be put right?" She turned anxiously from Mr. Mershon to her father.

it; but I'm afraid your father's gone in for it rather heavily." Mr. Deane groaned. "I—I have invested a great deal," he said.

It is very probable that he did not know how much, seeing that he had left the matter entirely to Mr. Mershon.

Decima was too young, too ignorant of the world to understand clearly and fully; but a sense of coming evil oppressed her. She laid her hand upon her father's arm.

"Perhaps it will all come right, father," she said.

"Of course it will!" responded the inventor, with a kind of desperate courage. "I can't be wrong. It is the great idea of my life. It only wants explanation."

He grabbed at some drawings and unfolded them with a trembling hand. Mr. Mershon regarded them sideways with cynical dubiosity.

"Better explain them to the shareholders," he said. "I can't make head or tail of them." He reached for his hat and looked at Decima as he smoothed it. "I should like a word with you, Miss Decima," he said, under his breath, and with a jerk of his head toward the door.

Leaving her father poring over the drawings, Decima followed Mr. Mershon out.

"I'm afraid your father's deeper in this thing than I thought," he said, flicking at a rose-bush with his stick and glancing up at her sideways. "I cautioned him not to go into it too heavily, but he seemed so certain of the success of the thing that I shouldn't be surprised if he'd sunk the greater portion of his fortune in it."

Decima regarded him with troubled eyes.

"And—and you think he will lose it?" she said in a low voice.

"I shouldn't wonder," he answered. "That's the worst of these inventions, there's generally a screw loose somewhere."

"What shall I do?" said Decima to herself.

Mershon picked a leaf off the rose-bush, examined it critically, then glanced up at her in his covert way.

"I'm afraid your father's a bit worried about your brother, Miss Decima, isn't he?" he said.

Decima stared at him.

"My brother!" she said.

"Yes," replied Mershon, picking the leaf to pieces with his long nails. "Seems to have been going the pace. Been writing to your father for more money again."

"Bobby?" exclaimed Decima. "I—I don't understand!"

"Oh, it's a way young fellows have when they go up to London," said Mershon. "I dare say it isn't serious, and he'll pull through. Good-morning."

Decima did not return the adieu, and he came back and glanced at her again.

"So Lord Gaunt's off!" he said. "Thought he'd cut the place all of a sudden like this. Gone to Africa, I hear."

The red flooded Decima's face for an instant, then left it pale again.

Mershon stood with his eyes fixed on the ground.

"You haven't forgotten what I said to you last night, Miss Decima?" he said. "Whatever happens, I stand by what I said—every word of it. Good-morning." He held out his hand, and Decima just touched it with her fingers; then she went back to her father.

"Tell me what all this means, father," she asked.

Mr. Deane launched into a torrent of words to prove that his invention was impregnable; but it is needless to say that they carried no conviction to Decima's mind.

"And what is this about Bobby, father?" she asked, anxiously.

Mr. Deane paced up and down, and tore at his hair.

"I don't know; I don't understand!" he said, impatiently. "Your brother Robert keeps writing for money, and says that he has incurred debts which must be discharged at once. I have sent him all the money I can. Yesterday I had a letter from the banker's saying that I had overdrawn my account. Mr. Mershon has been kind enough to lend me a hundred pounds."

"Mr. Mershon!" said Decima, faintly.

"Yes, yes," responded Mr. Deane; "he is extremely kind. I don't know what I should do without him."

Decima stole out of the laboratory feeling faint and sick.

(To be continued.)

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