



## Happiness At Last

OR  
Loyalty Recompensed.

### CHAPTER XIX.

"I want you to be my wife," he repeated. "I suppose you have seen this coming."

Decima found her voice at last. "No; oh, no, no!" she said, like one speaking mechanically; and it was well for his coolness that he did not see the shiver which followed her denial.

"Well, that's because you're so young and—and innocent," he said. "But I thought you might have guessed. I dare say your father does."

"My father!" The cry was almost one of amazement.

He nodded.

"Yes, he must have seen it; and I don't suppose he'd have any objection. Why should he? Look here, Miss Decima, I'm not going to boast—I know I'm not worthy of you; I don't know any man that is, but—well, as I say, I hate anything like boasting, but I can't help feeling that I've got the means to make you happy."

The horror was beginning to grow upon her, to make itself felt. She tried to rise, but she seemed under a spell, and there was something hideously fascinating in his cool, measured voice and tone.

"I'm a rich man. It wasn't swaggar when I said that I could buy a place like this." He looked round. "I'd buy a couple, half a dozen, if you expressed a wish to have them. I'm rich enough. But that's all I want to say about that. What I meant to say is, that all my money won't bring me happiness unless I can win you. I'm as deeply in love with you as a man could be."

"Oh, stop—stop!" she said. Her voice was broken, and faltered in her eagerness to stop him, but she saved one single word more. "I—I did not know, indeed—indeed, I did not know. I never thought, never guessed, Oh, do—do believe me. You must believe me."

"I do," he said.

"Well, then," she said, drawing a long breath, "you will not say any more, will not even think of it again." He looked at her fixedly.

"Does that mean that you refuse me?" he asked in a low voice.

She turned her lovely eyes with frank amazement at his, not understanding him.

"Oh, yes—yes!" she said, eagerly, as a girl speaks when she does not wish to wound. "I could not—could not!" She laughed a quivering laugh. "Why, I—I have never thought—I am so young; I—Oh, why did you tell me?"

There was pain in the voice, the pain of innocence at the approach of knowledge.

"You're not too young to be married," he said; "and as to your never having thought—well, I can understand that. You didn't know. But you know now, and I'll give you time to answer it."

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"No, don't; please don't!" she implored, with girlish eagerness. "I could not think. I—I am sure. All the thinking in the world would not make me. I could not!"

Every word she spoke, every emotion pictured on the lovely face, only made his desire more intense, his determination more solid.

"Do you hate me?" he asked, shortly.

Decima shrunk. "Hate! Oh, no, no! Why should I?" "Do you dislike me?" She moved uneasily.

"Why should I dislike you? My father—you have been kind—Oh, why do you ask me?"

"If you don't hate or even dislike me, you can grow to like me," he said, doggedly, with the persistence which had helped him to make his money.

"I'm in no hurry. I don't want to hurry you. I'll give you time to think it over."

"No," she said; and suddenly her voice had become full of womanly dignity. "I do not want any time. I am quite sure."

"But you can't be," he said. "I've taken you by surprise—you said so. You don't know your own mind. Take time. Don't answer me now. Tell your father"—he glanced at her, and something in his words and his glance—was it a presentiment?—made Decima shudder—"tell him and—ask him to advise you. It's a serious thing, matrimony. All your life depends upon it. It's like a big coup in mining shares; you rise or fall forever. Take time; only don't forget that I love you, and that I'd do anything to make you happy." He looked toward the ball-room. "None of those swells could say more than that, and they couldn't mean it more. I love you, and I'd spend every penny I've got to make you happy."

Decima was pale to the lips by this time; but there was no longer any tremor on them, nor was there any faltering in her eyes, dark enough now to be called black.

"I am sorry!" she said in a low, clear voice. "I must—I must—say no, a thousand times no! Will you—will you please find my father and tell him I would like to go home Mr. Mershon?"

Something in her voice, the touch of dignity in it, daunted him for a moment. He rose and stood before her, looking not at her face, but at the edge of her dress.

"I'll find him. But—but—I don't accept your answer. It's not my way. When I want a thing, I hold on till—I'll get it; and I want you, Miss Decima, very badly."

She looked up at him with a kind of surprised horror and repulsion. His face was pale, and his thin lips compressed tightly. The man looked—well, like a man who meant what he said. If she had had the least liking for him she would have felt some admiration for his dogged tenacity; but his determination repelled her.

"Oh, go, please!" she said; and he went.

He wandered about the rooms until he found Mr. Deane in the hall. He was talking to Lord Ferndale and one or two other men, talking in a high, strained voice, and emphasizing his words with his thin, lean hands. Mr. Mershon caught one sentence:

"The electric storage. My invention, Lord Ferndale. Mr. Mershon—my friend, Mr. Mershon—is bringing it out. There is a fortune, an enormous fortune—"

Mershon turned away with an oath and a sneer.

"I've got her fast enough!" he muttered; and he did not deliver Decima's message.

Decima sat quite still after he had left her. No attempt shall be made to analyze or describe her state of mind. What pen could do it? The first words of love had been spoken by—Mr. Mershon, let that suffice.

Her brows were drawn straight. She sat like one in a dream. And thus Gaunt found her. She did not hear his step until he was close upon her; then she seemed to awake, and turned to him with an eagerness which made the blood rush to his heart.

"This is our dance," he said, simply. "Your partners—those whom you have deserted—are rending their hair; I am prepared to be rend also."

She rose without a word, and he led her to the ball-room.

They began to dance. For a moment the room, the lights, the flashing diamonds, whirled like the prisms in a kaleidoscope, and her feet were uncertain; then, as his strong arms held her, she felt assured.

Gaunt waited, as he did most things he attempted, perfectly. She felt as if she were treading on air; as if she were supported by something as supple and strong as steel. A delicious sense of rest, peace, stole over her.

She looked, once, up at his face and

met his eyes. They smiled down at her, and the smile sunk into her heart. She laughed softly; why, she knew not! His arms tightened round her, and she could feel his breath upon her hair.

Suddenly the room began to swim, the music grew to a roar in her ears, and the lights seemed to have been extinguished, as if a hand had passed over them.

He felt her sink on to his breast, felt the collapse, and, with all a strong man's self-possession, he carried her, apparently still dancing, toward the palm-house.

When they had reached it he looked down at her. She had fainted.

He lifted her in his arms, and bore her to a corner surrounded by giant ferns. It was almost dark there, and the only sound near to them was the plash of a fountain.

He held her in his arms, and looked down at her, all his soul in his eyes. Her head was lying on his breast, her lips, parted, touched the front of his shirt.

The man's great love overmastered him.

"Decima!" he whispered. "My darling, my darling!" At that moment, so selfish is the best, and the worst, of men, he almost wished her dead. "My darling, my love!"

He bent his head until his lips touched hers. His own lips were hot with the fever of passion, and, as if their fire had warmed her back to life, she shuddered and opened her eyes.

For a moment there was no intelligence in them, then she saw and recognized him. A shiver ran through her, and, all unconsciously, her arms tightened round him.

"I—am—glad!" she murmured, unconsciously.

"So glad—dearest!" he whispered.

"Yes," she said, faintly. "I have been asleep—and dreaming, and—ah! I thought it was some one else. Have I fainted, Lord Gaunt?"

"Yes," he said, hoarsely, as he allowed her—and helped her—to stand upright.

Her arm was still round his neck, and she drew it away without a blush, with perfect innocence.

"I am so sorry!" she said.

He was white to the lips, and his dark eyes glowed like coals.

"Decima!" he panted.

She looked at him with a faintly troubled smile. Then she frowned.

"He called me that!" she murmured, half unconsciously, and she shivered.

"He! Who?" he demanded.

She looked up at him, and swept the soft brown hair from her forehead.

"It—It does not matter! Oh, let me go home!" she said.

He stooped, still holding her, his eyes like spots of flame. So might the king of the forest be had so often hunted have looked when brought to bay.

With a great, a never-to-be-described effort, he controlled himself.

"Stay here!" he said, hoarsely. "I will find your father!"

(To be continued.)

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