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CHAPTER IX.

"Yes," he said, "I am coming to stay at Leafmore."

"Lord Gaunt!" exclaimed the devoted steward, almost breathlessly. "You—you are coming to live here, to stay?"

"Yes," said Gaunt, glancing at Decima. "I am going to live here. The place has been neglected too long; it is time I settled down and looked after things; the tenants and the people on the estate, and all that. We'll see if we can't carry out some of these improvements you have been worrying me to see about."

Bright looked as if he were inclined to cry with joy and satisfaction, and there was surprise in his face also.

"I heard from Belford & Lang, the lawyers, that your lordship had booked a passage for Africa," he said. "So I had; the vessel sails the day after to-morrow. But I've changed my mind, and she'll sail without me."

"That is good news, my lord," said Bright. "There'll be rejoicing in the village when they hear you are going to settle down."

"Really?" said Gaunt, with a grim smile. "That sounds strange."

He drew nearer to Decima. "Have I proved the sincerity of my remorse, of my desire for reformation, Miss Deane?" he said in a low voice.

Decima turned her eyes to his. She was still a little pale, but there was the light of pleasure shining in her eyes, and her lips were rather tremulous.

"Are you really going to stay—to live here?" she said, with all a young girl's readiness to forget and forgive, and a woman's delight at having her own way. "Really and truly, on your honor? You won't run away again and disappoint Mr. Bright and all the poor people who will be so glad, as he says, to hear that you have come back?"

"Really and truly, on my honor," he said, with a faint smile.

She laughed up at him slyly. Then a puzzled look came into her eyes.

"Why did you—what made you change your mind so suddenly?" she asked, with a child's frank and innocent curiosity.

He shook his head, and smiled at her grimly.

"Upon my word, I don't know," he said. "Let us say that a whisper from my good angel reached my ear. There

ture was shrouded gave the place a ghostly appearance.

Decima stood in the center of the room and gazed about her, and Gaunt stood near her, and looked not at the room, but at her. Suddenly she shivered slightly. He went to one of the windows, and with a hasty, almost angry, gesture tore aside the long heavy curtains which screened it. Instantly a flood of sunlight poured into the room, lighting up the gold of the decorations and picture-frames, and falling in a golden torrent over Decima.

Gaunt turned and saw—not the suddenly brightened room, but the girl's face and form glorified by the sunlight. He started slightly, and something—he knew not what—sent the blood rushing to his face. It resumed its ordinary pallor almost instantly, and he was grave and self-possessed, as usual, as Decima turned to him with a smile.

"That is what it wants—the sunlight!" she said, nodding brightly. "Only the sunlight."

"There are always a good and a bad one," she said.

"We'll wish you good-afternoon, Lord Gaunt," said Bobby.

Gaunt held out his hand, then drew it back.

"I wonder whether you and Miss Deane would be so kind as to come up to the house with me?" he said. "To tell you the truth, I rather shrink from its loneliness; there will be an accusation, a reproach in it, which will be hard to bear; and Mr. Bright won't bully me—he can bully terribly when he likes, Miss Deane—if you are by. He'd be too polite."

Mr. Bright beamed on them, and laughed.

"Oh, pray come!" he said.

"All right," said Bobby, laying down his rod. "Come on, Decie."

Decima hesitated a moment, while Gaunt watched her gravely, then she inclined her head.

They went up the hill and along the avenue, Gaunt and Decima in front, and Bobby and Bright behind. Gaunt looked about him silently for a moment or two, then he said:

"These trees want thinning; and the road needs a dozen men at work on it."

As they reached the broad steps leading to the terrace, he ran his eye contemplatively along the front of the house.

"It looks deserted enough," he said, more to himself than to Decima. "Poor Bright, what he must have suffered!"

"But you will not let him suffer any longer?" said Decima. "You—you will have it put right?"

"Yes," he replied; "we will have the old place swept and garnished."

He turned on the top step and moved his hand toward the view.

It was a magnificent one of far-stretching meadow and fir-clad hills, on the sides of which, in little clearings, nestled the homesteads of the farms.

"Oh, it is beautiful!" exclaimed Decima under her breath.

Gaunt nodded, and they entered the hall, the great door of which a woman had opened, and at which she stood courtesying nervously.

Decima looked round the vast place with a kind of awe. The hall at Leafmore is one of the finest in England, and a more experienced person than Decima might have found some excuse for emotion at sight of its grandeur. To Decima it seemed as if it had been cut from the frame of some old picture, or were a realization of a description she had read in one of the country histories. The walls, running to the vaulted roof, were covered with oak black with age, with portraits of dead and gone Gaunts smiling or frowning from the panels. A group of tattered and smoke-grimed flags drooped from a spot near the ceiling; men in armor stood out at intervals, and trophies of weapons gleamed dully in the vari-colored light that poured through the great stained window.

A high fire-place yawned on one side, with a bear, so beautifully set up that it looked alive, rearing on its haunches beside it. It was so very alert and fierce-looking that Decima almost started as she caught sight of it. Leopard and lion skins were spread upon the polished parquet floor, and an eagle stretched its broad wings and reared its head from the top of an antique case, through the glass doors of which a collection of Sevres glittered and shone brightly. The place seemed crammed with curios and bric-a-brac, and indicative of luxury and wealth and rank; but over it all hung a kind of gloom, the air of melancholy which every place, however rich, inevitably wears when it has been long deserted.

"It is very grand!" said Decima, and she spoke in quite a hushed voice.

Gaunt opened a door on the left and stood aside to let her pass in. It was the big drawing-room, large and magnificent enough for a state apartment. The decorations were tarnished with age, and offered no relief to the ancient tapestry with which a greater portion of the room was hung. Beyond, and beyond it again, were other rooms, rooms, all equally large, and all very fine in form and coloring. At the end a pair of tall glass doors opened to the palm-house, in which palms reared their heads thirty feet high, and were surrounded by smaller tropical plants and ferns. A marble nymph rose, like Aphrodite, from a fountain in the center; but the fountain was still, and no water flowed from the up-turned shell she held in her white hand.

The gloom and sadness of desertion were here also, and the white callio coverings with which the superb furni-

ture was shrouded gave the place a ghostly appearance.

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"And human voices and faces," said Mr. Bright, nodding also. "I'm sorry you should find the place shut, my lord, but—"

Gaunt made a gesture of repudiation.

"All my fault, Bright," he said. "But it shall have the sunlight and the rest. Will you come up to the picture-gallery, Miss Deane?"

He led the way up the broad stairs, and they reached the long corridor which ran round the hall. It was lined, crammed, with pictures, forming a collection which Bobby had rightly described as priceless. One of the Gaunts had taken the "picture mania," and the Leafmore gallery was the result. It is not by any means the worst form of madness.

"We've taken care of the pictures, at any rate," said Mr. Bright. "I have to thank Mr. Deane for some hints in regard to their preservation. It was at his suggestion that these—he nodded at several—"were glassed in."

"I am very grateful," said Gaunt, quietly. "I hope your kindly interest won't cease, Deane."

Bobby flushed with pleasure at the words, the tone, and, most of all, at the friendly "Deane."

"Oh, it was like my cheek," he said; "and I expect you know more about them than I do."

"No," said Gaunt. "I like them, but I'm afraid I've been indifferent." His eyes followed Decima as she moved along the long line. "Are you fond of art, Miss Deane?" he asked, going up to her.

"Oh, yes; who is not?" said Decima. "I love pictures. But I don't know very much about them, though Aunt Pauline had me taught to draw and paint, and I have read Cunningham and Rukin. Aunt Pauline has a small collection at Walfield—that is her house in the country—and I went to the National Gallery. I know some of these pictures, because I have read of them. How proud you must be of them!"

"Yes; I suppose I ought to be," he said. "I wonder whether you will come with your brother and see them—often, whenever you care to do so, I mean?" he added.

"I shall be very glad," said Decima, frankly, "and I am sure Bobby will."

"There ought to be a catalogue," he said. "I don't know where it is. We will find it. I shall have my hands full, I can see," he went on, with a smile, half listless, half amused. "There are a good deal to do. These are the tenants and the people on the estate; they will want looking after. Mr. Bright has—I can see it in his eyes—all sorts of schemes and plans for new schools and cottages and village hospitals." He paused a moment. "If wonder—"

He stopped again. "Miss Deane, does it occur to you that you ought to bear some of the responsibility?"

"I?" said Decima, with open-eyed surprise.

"Yes," he said, gravely, but with a touch of banter in his eyes. "It was your censure of the absent and heartless owner which led me to decide on staying here. You ought to bear some of the burden which will fall upon me in consequence. That's only fair."

The color rose to Decima's face.

"How can I? I could not help you," she said.

"Indeed, but you can," he said. "I shall want no end of advice upon all the benevolent schemes Mr. Bright is hatching. I know nothing of the people's wants."

"And I?"

"Being a woman, will know all—by a woman's instinct," he said. "I count upon you, Miss Deane. In fact, I shall consider that I am entitled to come to you for advice and assistance—and protection—the moment Mr. Bright begins his assault. Shall I count in vain?"

(To be continued.)

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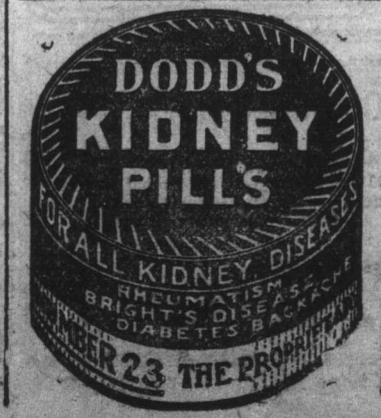
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