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CHAPTER XX.
Gaunt went in search of Mr. Deane. He found him, not in the hall-room, but wandering about the ball-room, the brioche-brac, as absorbed and preoccupied as if there were not a hundred persons dancing, and a band playing within hearing.

"Decima—Miss Deane wants you," said Gaunt, hoarsely; and he took her arm and led her to the fernery.

Decima looked up with a smile. She was pale, but there was no fear nor shyness in her eyes, and Gaunt saw that she had not heard the passionate words which had escaped him when she was coming to.

"Stay here," he said, "and I will get the carriage for you." He spoke abruptly, almost sternly. He could scarcely trust his voice.

He went through the fernery and to the stable-yard, and ordered a brougham to be brought round to the side-door immediately; then he went and found her wrap and returned to them. She was going to stand up for him to put her wrap round her, but he pressed her lightly on the shoulder.

"Do not rise," he said; "rest until the carriage comes. It will be here directly. Miss Deane should remain in bed to-morrow," he said to her father; "the heat and the excitement have been too much for her, and she is not strong."

Mr. Deane gazed at her absently. "Decima is like her mother," he said; "she had a weak heart—yes, she is very like her mother."

A sharp pang went through Gaunt. Decima laughed a little tremulously. "I am quite strong," she said; "and I don't believe there is anything the matter with my heart. I don't know why I fainted; but, oh, I am so ashamed of giving you so much trouble! Please—please go back to the ball-room; they will be missing you."

"Let them miss me," he said, curtly. He sat down beside her, his hands thrust in his pockets, his head drooping. His face was drawn, and there were deep lines upon it; the effort at self-restraint was almost too much for him. Presently he heard the carriage drive up to the outer door of the conservatory.

"Come!" he said.

Decima rose, and was surprised to find that she felt weak and giddy. He took her hand and drew it within his arm and almost supported her; it may be said that he almost lifted her into the brougham. Then he drew the wrap close round her. She leaned forward and gave him both her hands with a little girlish gesture of gratitude.

"You are always so kind to me," she said.

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He held her hands and looked into her eyes, shining like stars from her pale face. He could not have spoken to save his life, and she did not see his face, or its pallor and rigidity would have startled and frightened her. At last he found his voice.

"Good-night," he said; "and good-bye!"

The tone of his voice did startle her.

"Are you afraid that I am ill?" she said. "I am not—I am not? You will see to-morrow that I am all right."

"To-morrow!" His lips formed the word almost inaudibly with an accent of despair. His hands closed tightly on hers for a moment, then he laid them down gently on her lap, said "Good-bye" again hoarsely, and closed the door.

As the brougham drove away, she bent forward and looked back at him, and he forced a smile to his white face. He stood for a moment or two looking out into the night, as a man looks when hope is slowly leaving him forever; then he went back to the ball-room.

The dance was going brilliantly. He went about from one to the other, apparently quite at his ease and sharing the delight and pleasure of his guests. He did not dance again, but he talked and even laughed, and to the end was a perfect and most charming host.

But to him how long the end was in coming!

At last, the last carriage had driven away and he stood alone in the silent hall. He looked round him with a confused air, as if he were bewildered; then he went to the fernery and sat in the seat in which she had sat, and with his head in his hands, faced the situation. His strength, his resolution, had broken down, and he knew it. He had spoken words of love to her, though he had sworn to himself that he would never do so. It had so happened that she had not heard them, but temptation would assail him again, and he would not be able to resist it. The time would come when, yielding to the passion which consumed him, he would speak as he had spoken to-night, and she would hear. Therefore it was impossible that he should remain near her any longer.

There was only one thing for him to do, to go away, to fly from temptation. He rose with a groan, passed through the ball-room, where the servants were putting out the lights, and went upstairs to his own room. Hobson was waiting for him, and glanced with concern and alarm at his master's haggard face.

Gaunt dropped into a chair. He felt well-nigh exhausted by the terrible strain he had undergone.

"Get me something to drink, Hobson," he said.

Hobson hurried down and brought a brandy and soda. Gaunt drank it straightaway and got a cigar. As Hobson held the match, he saw that his master's hand was shaking.

"You are tired, my lord," he said. "Will you let me undress you?"

"Not just yet," said Gaunt. "Yes, I'm tired. This—this place doesn't suit me. I'm afraid Hobson. I'll clear out to-morrow—the first thing."

"Very good, my lord. Where do we go?" said Hobson.

Gaunt sighed wearily.

"I don't know. I'll decide to-morrow. I'll get you to pack up to-night. I go alone."

Hobson colored.

"Hadin't I better go with you, my lord?" he said in a dry voice.

Gaunt looked up at him with just a glance of gratitude.

"No; I must be alone, Hobson," he said. "You had better stay here and look after things. I'll send for you if I want you."

The man sighed and said nothing; he knew it would be useless; and he went into the next room and began to pack.

Gaunt drew his chair to the writing-table and wrote a note to Bright, saying that he was going away, and telling Bright to let everything go on—the improvements in the village and all the plans which he and Decima had decided for the welfare of the people, as if he, Lord Gaunt, were still at home; and he held the pen in

his hand and asked himself if he should write a word of farewell to Decima. But he could not trust himself. He could not pen a commonplace note. If he wrote, he felt that some word of his love and despair would creep into the lines. He fung the pen away from him and put the paper aside. He had said "good-bye," the last good-bye. He must never see her any more.

He did not go to bed, but sat in his chair for the few remaining hours before the sunrise, then he had a bath, changed his clothes, and long before the village was astir, was on his way to catch the mail that would carry him up north and hundreds of miles away from Decima—and temptation.

They were still at breakfast at The Woodbine when Mr. Bright was shown in. He looked anxious and upset, and held an open letter in his hand.

"I—I beg your pardon for bursting in upon you, Miss Deane," he said, with agitation, as Decima rose and gave him her hand; "but I'm in great trouble."

"Why, what is the matter?" she asked; and her eyes rested on him with ready sympathy. "I hope it is not serious. Sit down and tell me."

Mr. Bright dropped into a chair, but rose again almost instantly, as if he could not keep still, and began to pace the room.

"It's Lord Gaunt," he said. "He has gone!"

The color rose to Decima's face; it had been pale a moment before, and its pallor increased as the flush faded.

"Gone!" she echoed in a low voice.

"What? Where?"

"This morning, quite early; by the mail. Where, I don't know. No one knows; not even Hobson. He brought me this note. I'll read it to you." He read it.

Decima leaned back, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes down-cast.

"He has thought of everything," she said. "Why are you so troubled?"

Mr. Bright heaved a deep sigh.

"Yes; that's all right enough," he said. "He has told me that everything is to go on as usual, and I ought to be satisfied; but I'm thinking of him just at this moment, and I don't seem to care about the improvements and the rest of it. I'm anxious about him, Miss Deane. I'm afraid he's in trouble."

"Trouble!" said Decima in a low voice.

"Yes, Hobson tells me—he would not say much, it's not his way, but he was off his guard for a moment—and he told me that Lord Gaunt was very strange last night. Hobson had only seen his master as bad once or twice before in his life. The man is devoted to Lord Gaunt, and he is greatly distressed and very anxious about him. He thinks he must have heard some bad news, yet he can not understand how Lord Gaunt can have done so. Anyway, he has gone, and we may not see him again for years."

Decima rose and went to the window. A weight seemed suddenly to have fallen upon her heart. The sun was shining on the little garden, but yet it looked dark and cold.

"He may come back soon," she said.

"He may," said Mr. Bright, with a sigh; "but Hobson does not think it likely. Why, the Hall is to be closed and only a few servants retained. I shouldn't be surprised to find that Lord Gaunt had gone to Africa, after all."

Decima drew a long breath.

"I hope he will be happy wherever he has gone," she said. She tried to keep her voice steady and to smile, but the voice shook, and her eyes grew suddenly dim.

Mr. Bright was too absorbed in his own grief to notice the effect upon her of his tidings.

"Well, I thought I'd come and tell you," he said. "Of course you will go on helping me, Miss Deane. You won't desert me as Lord Gaunt has done?"

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