

Her Great Love;

Or, A Struggle For a Heart

CHAPTER XI.—(Cont'd.)

There seemed no single spot in the room on which the eye could rest; it was all color, and glitter of silver and gold. The dinner was a superb one—not one of Mr. Mershon's guests really knew how perfect it was—but to Decima it seemed endless and wearisome.

And yet Mr. Mershon did his best to entertain her. She was, of course, seated next to him, and he talked to her through all the courses. His topic was the one which has the most interest for most men—himself. He told her how he had started the Great Wheel Mining Company, and made a quarter of a million out of it—before it went smash; how he had bought up town lots in Arizona at a pound a lot and realized at fifty; how he had gained the concession for Turkey for the supply of cocoon fiber, and netted five hundred thousand for his company in six months, and of similar achievements.

And he did not talk badly, for, while a man talks of what he understands and the things that are nearest to his heart, he will generally talk well.

Every now and then he glanced at Mrs. Sherborne, and as if in obedience to his glance, she addressed some remark to Decima in the strange, expressionless voice.

When he was not talking to Decima, and her face was turned away from him, Mr. Mershon's restless, shiftless eyes were fixed on her with a curiously intent gaze of which Decima was quite unconscious. He pressed the champagne—it was Wachtel, 1880, a rare vintage on Bobby, and permitted the butler to fill his own glass frequently.

Bobby addressed himself to the dinner, and Mr. Deane eat and drank what was put before him with his usual mechanical acquiescence. And the silent, constrained Mrs. Sherborne sat with downcast eyes, excepting when she raised them quickly with a half-frightened expression at some remark of her half-brother's. At last, to Decima's relief, Mrs. Sherborne looked at her and rose, and they went into the drawing-room. Mr. Mershon got a box of cigars and cigarettes from the side-board and handed them to Bobby.

"You'll find these Rothschilds pretty fair," Deane said.

Bobby chose a cigar and lighted up, and Mr. Mershon drew his chair nearer to Mr. Deane.

"Did you bring those drawings?" he asked.

Mr. Deane, who had been in a brown study during the dinner, woke up instantly.

"Yes, yes," he said, eagerly; "I brought them. I don't know what I did with them. Robert, there is a roll of paper in the hall."

Bobby fetched them, and strolled into the electrically lighted conservatory adjoining the dining-room; he was not eager to hear his father's rhapsodies.

Mr. Deane opened out the papers.

"You see—" he began. Mr. Mershon looked at the drawings, and then at his guest's face with a peculiar, cynical smile, and listened with his eyes averted.

"Yes, there is a lot of money in it," he said, after a time.

"You think?" exclaimed Mr. Deane, eagerly.

Mr. Mershon nodded.

"Yes, I'm ready to make a company of it. But you must put something into it. They'll expect that."

Mr. Deane's face fell.

"Let me tell you how I am placed," he said, with a suppressed excitement. "I have a small independence which produces an income—a narrow income—on which we live."

Mr. Mershon nodded.

"I understand. But that's enough. I'll show you the way to realize a sufficient sum to back this thing. Leave it to me. I'll work it for you. As you say, there's a fortune in this idea of yours."

"My dear sir, there is incalculable wealth!" interjected Mr. Deane.

"Quite so," said Mr. Mershon, with a scarcely concealed sneer. "You leave it to me. You may have heard me telling your daughter about the large sums I have made out of limited companies? It's my forte, my line. You leave it to me. I'll take care of those drawings."

"You understand—you are quite sure you understand?" said Mr. Deane, feverishly.

"Oh, I quite understand. Shall we join the ladies, Mr. Robert?" said Mr. Mershon.

They went into the drawing-room, and Mr. Mershon, with a sharp glance at Mrs. Sherborne, who was bending over some embroidery, went up to Decima.

"Will you play or sing for us, Miss Deane?" he said.

Decima, who had been taught by Lady Pauline to accede to any request, unless it were unreasonable or wrong, went at once to the piano, and Mr. Mershon followed her. She knew all her songs by heart, and she sang "The Message." Sung it not with the professional air which so many women aim at, but girlishly and sweetly. Mr. Mershon stood beside her, leaning on the piano, his small, sharp eyes fixed on her face with the expression which a man wears when his heart is in the look. All unconsciously, she glanced up at him as the song finished, and caught the look in his eyes. It was as if a cold, an icy cold, hand had been laid upon her heart, and she rose and stood a little apart from him.

"Will you not sing again?" he said.

"Do!" And for an instant his eyes sought hers.

Decima unconsciously moved away from him and nearer to Bobby.

"No—I will not sing again," she said, almost coldly. "It must be getting late, Bobby!"

Bobby came up to her, there was a little more talk, and then she managed to convey to him that she really wanted to go. Mr. Mershon himself saw them into the hall.

"I hope this won't be your last visit to the Firs, Miss Deane," he said, and his thin fingers closed round hers.

Decima made no response, and the fly drove off. Mr. Mershon returned to the

drawing-room and leaning his arm on the carved mantelshelf, looked at the silent woman who was bending over her embroidery again.

"Well?" he said at last, sharply. She glanced up at him nervously.

"Well, Theodore?" she said, timidly.

"What do you think of her?" he demanded. "Isn't she beautiful, lovely? Is there any girl, woman, like her in all the world?"

"She—she is very beautiful, very sweet," she assented, under her breath.

Mr. Mershon laughed.

"I'm glad you think so," he said; "for I mean to make her my wife."

Mrs. Sherborne raised her head and opened her lips, but no sound came.

"Well, what have you to say? Why the deuce don't you speak?" he said, with the sudden fury of a weak nature, and he glowered down at her with his small eyes glowing excitedly. "You hear? And you've got to help me. You've got to make a friend of her; get the right side of her. You've got to sing my praises to her. You understand?"

Mrs. Sherborne moistened her lips and cast a deprecatory glance at him.

"She—she is very young, Theodore," she said.

"Young! I like her all the better for that. Hang it, you don't suppose I should be such an ass as to fall in love with an old woman? And I've fallen in love with her, I tell you."

"She—she may not consent. I—I mean, she seems to have some will of her own, Theodore. I have been talking to her."

"Consent! Will of her own!" he said, with a sneer. "You are an idiot! Do you suppose I'm depending upon her sweet will only? Not me. I know a better game than that. She'll consent fast enough. You wait and see. I've got her tight enough; or, if I haven't got her already, I shall have her in my grip presently!"

CHAPTER XII.

A week passed, ten days; but no Lord Gaunt appeared. Decima had ceased to go to the Hall, but she met Mr. Bright every day in the village, and that gentleman's face grew longer and less cheerful each time.

"I can't make it out, Miss Deane," he said on the eleventh day. "He said he would come at the end of the week—he may have meant month; it's just possible that I may have misunderstood him. But I've got everything ready. You'd be surprised at what I've managed to get done in the last few days, you would indeed! And he hasn't come after all."

"He may come in a day or two," said Decima.

She, too, felt a little, just a little disappointed.

"Do you think so?" he said, catching at the hope eagerly. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. It's just as likely that he won't come at all. Though he promised, and a promise is a promise with him. I know that. And he doesn't write; and I don't know where to write to. I've sent word to the lawyers that the place is ready—that is, as far ready as I could get it in the time, and they have written that they don't know Lord Gaunt's address—that he's away from London. I'm almost in despair; for, you see, he may have gone to Africa after all."

"I hope not, for your sake," said Decima, gently.

"Say for all our sakes, and his own most," said Mr. Bright. "Well, I am not going to give up hope, and I'm keeping on at the slave-driving. You should see me hounding on the workmen! They think me no end of a brute and bully. Going your rounds? Ah, you've flattered down on the place like a ministering angel. Miss Deane! I hear your praises sung wherever I go. I've just left the Robins cottage, and that poor sick girl of hers had her tears in her eyes when she told me of your goodness to her. Well, I won't say any more if you don't like it, and I beg your pardon. I'm off to the Hall. There's a new grand piano just arrived; that looks as if he meant coming."

He bustled off rather more cheerily, and Decima went her way. Perhaps Lord Gaunt would not come after all. Yes; she would be sorry if he did not, she told herself.

But though Lord Gaunt were still absent, the Deanes ought not to have been dull, for they saw a good deal of Mr. Mershon and his sister. Scarcely a day passed but that gentleman strolled down to The Woodbines.

He generally went straight to the laboratory, and Decima could hear her father talking—Mr. Mershon always appeared to play the listener's part—in his rapid, nervous way.

Once or twice she went in—not knowing Mr. Mershon was there—and found him sitting on the bench as she had seen him on his first visit, his chin in his hands, his attitude like that of a monkey, and his big cigar in his lips.

Sometimes she met him in the garden, and he would stop and talk to her in short, disjointed sentences, his small, sharp eyes scanning her face when she was not looking at him, to be quickly averted when she turned her frank, guileless eyes upon his face.

Several times The Firs carriage, in all its magnificence—and newness—dashed up to the gate, and Mrs. Sherborne would come in and sit in the drawing-room and talk to Decima in her nervous, constrained fashion; and on all the visits she begged Decima to go for a drive with her.

Decima did not very much care for Mrs. Sherborne, though she pitied her—why, she could scarcely have told—and several times refused the drive; but one afternoon Mrs. Sherborne begged so hard, that Decima accompanied her.

But she was sorry that she had done so, for all Mrs. Sherborne's talk was of her brother.

"Theodore is so—so clever," she said, glancing at Decima nervously and yet curiously. "He was always clever as a boy. We all used to say that he would make his mark and do great things. I don't suppose there is any one in the city more—more successful and respected—than he is."

Decima did not know what to say, and so remained silent; and after another glance Mrs. Sherborne went on still more nervously.

"He has made a great deal of money. Theodore is immensely rich—but I dare say you can see that."

"Oh, yes," said Decima. "It must be very nice to be rich—for those who care for money," she added.

"You don't care for it, my dear?" said Mrs. Sherborne, with some surprise.

Decima smiled.

"No; why should I? Does money bring happiness?"

As she spoke, she thought of Lord Gaunt. He was immensely rich, and well he might be, and she thought of her father, and she sighed.

"I don't think it does. Of course, I do not know very much about it."

"No; you are very young and inexperienced," said Mrs. Sherborne. "But you know that everybody wants to be rich; everybody struggles and strives for money—more money."

"Yes, I know," said Decima; "and it seems so foolish. If it does not bring happiness, what is the use of it? Why see how happy some, most, of the poor people here are! They are always cheerful. I hear the women, even the poorest, singing as I go into the village, and the men whistle as they go to their work."

"Then you wouldn't care to marry a rich man, my dear?" asked Mrs. Sherborne.

The speech jarred upon the girl. She had not thought of marriage, and her innocent heart shrank from the woman's questioning.

"I don't know—I have not thought. Not if it were only because he was rich. Oh, I do not know! See how lovely that tree looks with the red sunset upon it!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sherborne; and she was silent a moment, then she said, as if she felt constrained to continue the subject: "We have often wondered why Theodore has not married. Of course he is quite a young man still, but—well, men, especially very rich men, marry at an earlier age than his. And he must have met so many nice—so many beautiful women, who—would have been glad to marry him. Don't you think it is very strange?"

"Is it?" said Decima, growing very weary of the topic. "Perhaps he has not seen any one he cares for."

Mrs. Sherborne glanced at the lovely face with its unclouded eyes.

"Perhaps that is it," she said. "But he will some day. I hope she will be a nice girl."

"I hope so for your sake," said Decima.

"She—she will be able to have everything she wants—everything she can desire," said Mrs. Sherborne, in a dry, mechanical tone, as if she were repeating something she had carefully rehearsed. "Theodore is liberal enough when—when he cares for any one. He will spend money like water—to—gain his object. Yes, his wife will be able to buy anything she may fancy."

"That will be very nice for her," said Decima, unexpectingly. "And now may we turn and go back, please, Mrs. Sherborne? I like to be in some little time before dinner."

Mrs. Sherborne looked at her sideways, sighed, and ordered the coachman to drive back to The Woodbines. She had done her best, but against the girl's absolute innocence and unconsciousness Mrs. Sherborne's hints and suggestions glanced off like arrows from a coat of mail.

"Halloo! been out in the Mershons' chariot?" said Bobby, as Decima came into the house. "What's it feel like, sitting in such a gorgeous vehicle, and staring at the backs of two richly dressed fannies? Did you fancy yourself a duchess, Decie?"

Decima laughed and shook her head.

"I felt like the lord mayor I once read of, who, being a simple-minded man, confessed that he longed to get out of his state coach and take a cab," she said, running up to her room.

"No news of Lord Gaunt yet?" Bobby remarked at dinner. "Bright wears a face of despair, and I'm inclined to suspect that Gaunt has been playing a game of spoof."

"What do you mean?" said Decima.

"My poor child, how terribly your education has been neglected, for all you can speak French and Italian, and play the piano! You don't know your own language yet! Learn, you young dunce, that 'to spoof' is synonymous with 'to deceive,' only it's a better, because a more expressive word. Depend upon it, Lord Gaunt has been having a lark with the simple Bright—and a young lady who shall be nameless; and having had his fun, is off to other climes. Shouldn't wonder if he is on his way to Africa by this time."

(To be continued.)

The teacher was hearing the youthful class in mathematics.

"No," she said, "in order to subtract, things have to be in the same denomination. For instance, we couldn't take eight horses from ten cast. Do you understand?" There was assent from the majority of pupils. One little boy in the rear raised a timid hand. "Well, Bobby, what is it?" asked the teacher.

"Please, teacher," said Bobby, "couldn't you take three quarts of milk from three cows?"

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FORESTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

Progressive Policy Inaugurated by The Federal Government.

The report recently issued by the Chief Conservator of Forests in South Africa for the year ending on December 31st, 1911, is one of considerable interest by way of comparison with what is being done along forestry lines in this country. For such a young Union the progress made is remarkable, and considerable credit is due to the Forest Department for the efficiency already attained in administration and fire-protection.

The area of the Forest Reserves in the Union of South Africa in December, 1911, was 1,799,550 acres. Besides this, there were also 42,587 acres reserved for growing railway ties, on which railway funds alone were expended, making a total reserved area of 1,842,137 acres. This area is divided into seven conservancies, — roughly speaking, a conservancy to each province in the Union. Each conservancy, consisting usually of several reserves, is administered by a District Forest Officer and a technically trained Assistant Forester. Under them are chiefs of reserves, forest guards, rangers, etc. The more important positions are all filled by technical foresters, usually highly trained men who have completed their course in the Oxford School of Forestry and in Germany. This organization very closely resembles that of the Canadian Government forest reserves.

Under their supervision, forest surveys are being made for the demarcation of new reserves, and existing reserves are being protected from fire by burning or cutting fire-belts around the reserves and by planting up their perimeters with trees of the less inflammable species. As a result of these precautions, there were burned during the season of 1911 only seven hundred acres, or 0.04 per cent. of the total area.

On the reserves themselves improvement cuttings are being carried on under the direction of forest officials, for the removal of defective timber and weed trees, and these operations not only have much improved the species composition of the forests, but have proved financially justifiable as well.

Replanting is also being extensively carried on in the various reserves, the total area replanted at the end of 1911 being 48,136 acres. Several species of exotics are being introduced with considerable success. Nurseries are maintained, and the seed and transplants of forest trees are sold to the public at

cost. About six thousand dollars worth of seed was sold by the Department during the year, together with 2,806,402 seedlings, valued at over \$42,500.00.

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Horses' necks differ in shape and it is wrong to make them wear a collar that was fitted to another horse. You would have galled feet if you wore other than your own shoes. Much worse for the horse that pulls a load with a misfit collar.

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