

# Her Great Love;

Or, A Struggle For a Heart

CHAPTER XVIII.—(Continued).

It was the one thing needed. The men smiled, and leaned back in their chairs, and the women tapped their feet on the soft Turkey carpet in time with the subdued silvery strains.

Decima glanced at Gaunt, and he met her eyes.

"Are you pleased-satisfied?" he seemed to say, and she smiled approvingly at him.

At last Lady Roborough looked round at the ladies, and rose, and they fled out to the drawing-room.

Gaunt was near the door, and he opened it for them. As Decima passed, he stretched out his hand and touched her arm. She felt the touch and looked at him. There was an infinite yearning in his eyes, a wistful sadness which smote her, and it haunted her for some minutes afterward.

As Gaunt went back to the men, he passed his hand over his brow with the gesture of a man who has to get through an allotted task.

"Close up!" he said. "Ferndale, the port with you. Mr. Mershon, do you prefer cherry or white at your elbow?" In an instant or so he was the perfect host again, and with a smile on his lips, was encouraging the men to drink. But all the time his thoughts were with the little girl in the dove-colored dress, and he hated the necessity that kept him away from her; but he played his part with consummate art, and talked and laughed as if he were delighted with his company and his position as host.

Meanwhile, Decima had found a quiet corner of the drawing-room, and had almost hidden herself. In Lady Pauline's drawing-room she was somebody of importance; but here, amidst these county dames, in their gorgeous dresses and diamonds, she felt herself a kind of nobody, and desired to remain unnoticed. There was a small cabinet of books near her, and she took out a volume. It chanced to be an edition de luxe of a recent history of France, and as she turned over the pages, she came upon a reference to Lord Gaunt. It seemed that the writer regarded Lord Gaunt with strong admiration, and he spoke of his courage and spirit with enthusiasm. Decima's eyes flowed, and the color rose to her face; it was the first time she should have happened upon that book of others; it seemed as if, at no moment of her life, Lord Gaunt could be absent from her thoughts. As she was reading, Lady Roborough came up.

"I have been looking for you, my dear," she said, with that kindly familiarity which an elderly woman of the world can use toward a young girl. "I have been hearing your praises sung. The vicar—what a dear old man he is!—has been telling me of your goodness to the village folk. And he says, too, that it is you who have transformed Leafmore from a dingy old house into a palace."

Decima flushed slightly, but her clear eyes met Lady Roborough's frankly.

"Oh, no, no!" she said; "I only helped." Lady Roborough smiled at her approvingly, for Decima's modesty pleased her. "Rather more than helped, my dear, if all they say is true, and I think it is. But why are you sitting here like a little puss in the corner? Won't you come and sing or play for us?"

Decima looked round reluctantly. She was not nervous, but she felt that the simple songs would be scarcely suited to so large and grand a party.

"Presently, perhaps," said Lady Roborough, as if she understood. And with a nod she left her. A daughter of Lord Ferndale went to the piano. She was a beautiful girl, the belle of the county, and possessed a magnificent and perfectly trained voice, and its marvellous notes filled the big room with a volume of sound. Decima listened with delight, and her eyes shone. There was a murmur of applause when the song finished, and "How beautiful!" escaped Decima's lips. Lady Ferndale was standing near her. She was passionately fond and proud of her daughter, and her exclamatory, girlish burst of admiration touched her.

"Thank you, Miss Deane," she said, smiling down at her. "That was a genuine tribute, and I am grateful. I am her mother, you see!"

Decima smiled up at her as if she understood what she meant, and drawn toward her by her sympathy, Lady Ferndale sat down and talked to her. Some one played a brilliant sonata, and then Lady Roborough came up and drew Decima's hand through her arm.

"Now you will sing to us, my dear," she said.

She led Decima to the piano, and Decima looked up at her appealingly.

"I have so little voice," she said; "and after that grand one!"

But, simply and unaffectedly, she sang one of the ballads which Bobby was so fond of listening to after dinner; and her sweet, low, and something in the voice which touched the audience and what an audience! for the talking ceased. While she was still singing, the gentlemen came in; and at the door they too stopped talking and stood listening.

CHAPTER XIX.

Gaunt had entered almost last, and he drew back so that he was quite behind the others. His eyes went toward the girlish figure at the piano, and he held his breath for a moment as his lips twitched. When she had finished, he went up to the piano and stood beside her. It was the proper thing to do, as host; but he did not praise the song.

"Thank you," was all he said; and the words sounded almost grim and stern. As she looked up at him, she saw a deep line across his brow, and that his lips were tightly drawn. She looked down again in an instant, a faint trouble at her heart. Was he ill, unhappy? she wondered. A moment or two afterward some of the other men came round her and began to talk, and Gaunt moved away and went over the room.

Tea was served with due state and ceremony; there was more singing and playing; the room was filled with the buzz of conversation. Gaunt moved about with a kind of restlessness, and suddenly he went into the hall. Decima heard the door open, and she turned to look at it; then the band began to play, and Gaunt came back and went up to Lady Roborough and said something.

She smiled and nodded, and addressing the company generally, said:

"Lord Gaunt says that as the band is here, why not dance the furniture about it; then the band began to play, and Gaunt came back and went up to Lady Roborough and said something.

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"I am glad," he said in a low voice. "It was worth doing."

"It is such a great success," she said, after a moment. "All are so evidently enjoying themselves. Lady Roborough says that your party will never be forgotten."

"It will not—by me," he commented. "And you, too, must be happy!" she said, glancing at him.

"I am—very," he said; but there was something in his tone, in the look of his eyes, that troubled her.

"You deserve to be," she murmured softly and a little shyly. "You are so unselfish; you have taken all this trouble to give pleasure to others."

He folded his arms and gripped them above the elbows tightly. Her frank, innocent praise of him, the soft sweet voice, the deep eyes, "were getting on his nerves." He felt that if he stayed near her much longer he should lose the power of self-restraint. He forced a smile, and got up from the lounge.

"I save my modesty for fight," he said. "You would make a saint of me, and all the while I know that I am—"

He left the sentence unfinished and walked away.

Mr. Mershon's dance came, and with it that gentleman. He offered her his arm without a word, with just one sharp glance from his guarded eyes, and they started.

He was not a bad waltzer by any means, but either he had not got Decima's step, or the emotion which was pressing on him made him unsteady and confused him, for before they had gone the round of the room he had lost the time and presently came to a full stop.

"It is—is hot, isn't it?" he said, looking just below her eyes, "and the room is crowded." It was not "Wouldn't you like to sit down for a little while?"

Mr. Mershon said Decima, promptly. She would not have very much enjoyed a waltz with Mr. Mershon even if their step had matched perfectly; and she was glad to be released. He led her, through the great glass door at the end of the room, into the palm-house, and they sat under a marble nymph. The light from the lamp in the hand of the statue fell upon Decima's face, and Mr. Mershon glanced at her in silence for a minute or two. He had paid several visits to the buffet, but he was not in the least intoxicated; and the wine had only served to give him a kind of spurious, desperate courage.

She was scarcely conscious of his presence, but was listening to the waltz and thinking of—Lord Gaunt. The tone of his voice haunted her; and she was wondering what made him so sad and grim in the midst of the general gaiety.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Mershon broke in upon her thoughts.

"Rather a fine place, Leafmore," he said. His voice, sharp and thin, yet not so sharp and metallic as usual, jarred upon her.

"Yes," she said, simply. He stroked his clean-shaven lips and looked critically about him through half-closed eyes, and then glanced covertly at her.

"I shouldn't mind having a place like this," he said, meditatively.

"You have a very—grand house already, Mr. Mershon."

He shook his head.

"Yes; but it's rather commonplace. It's new, you see. I should like an old house, something after this style. I think I shall buy one; there are always plenty in the market. Why do you smile?" he added, quickly.

"Because you said that as others say it when they are referring to quite a trivial, inexpensive thing," she replied, candidly.

"Well; it wouldn't break me," he said, coolly. "I might just as well spend my money that way as not. The only thing is, it would be rather large for—for a bachelor."

"Lord Gaunt is a bachelor," she remarked.

His face darkened for an instant; then he smiled and nodded toward the ball-room. She looked and saw Lord Gaunt with Lady Blanche Ferndale upon his arm. He was looking down at her as he talked, with a smile on his face, and the girl's eyes were upturned to his with a pleased expression in them.

"He won't remain a bachelor very long," said Mr. Mershon. "They say that the Ferndale's daughter will be the mistress of Leafmore."

Decima looked at Lord Gaunt with a sudden contraction of the brows.

"She is very beautiful—very!" she said, under her breath.

Mr. Mershon nodded.

"Yes; but I didn't ask you to come here to talk about them," he said, with a kind of desperate abruptness. "I don't take any interest in them—or any one else but myself—and another person."

Decima turned her eyes upon him with faint surprise.

"What a strange speech!" she said, with

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a smile. "I don't in the least know what you mean."

"You don't?" he said, incredulously, and with a side glance at her. "Don't you know that the only person I take any interest in is—you?"

Decima neither blushed nor started, and the smile was still on her lips, as she said:

"In me! That is very kind of you, Mr. Mershon. I suppose it is because you are so great a friend—you see so much—of my father."

He looked at her and lowered his eyes quickly. Gaunt would not have doubted her innocence and sincerity for a moment, but this man was of different metal.

"Not altogether," he said. "Yes, I am a friend of your father's, a true friend; but—but, if I am, it's because of you."

puzzled air, and he went on, not hurriedly but slowly, as if he had rehearsed his words.

"I've known you some—some weeks now, Miss Decima"—she frowned unconsciously at the Decima—"and it's only natural that I should have grown to care for you—to love you, in fact."

Now, let it be remembered that no man had ever spoken of love to her; that she had, unlike most girls, never thought or dwelt upon the great mystery. She scarcely knew what it meant; but she knew enough to shrink at the sound of the word in Mr. Mershon's voice. The color left her face and her lips grew very gray.

"That's how it is with me," he went on, after a pause. "I've fallen in love with you, and I want you to be my wife."

The very suddenness of this may sound like a shock, strange as the thing seemed. If she had been in all prepared, had suspected what was in his mind, there would have been time for the repulsion—almost horror—to have stirred within her. As it was, she sat half-stunned and bewildered. Her silence did not daunt him. Mr. Mershon was accustomed to getting what he wanted, sometimes by guile, sometimes by force, some-

times by sheer dogged persistence. He meant getting this lovely girl—anyway. (To be continued.)

So Much For History.

Horace sat and gnawed his pen, concentrating a look of hatred on the blank sheet of paper before him. From his seat he could see every member of the class writing, as if for dear life, an essay on Henry VIII.—their allotted task.

His pen alone was idle.

"Two minutes more!" came from the teacher. Then Horace, in desperation, seized his pen and made a bid for fame—as follows:

"Henry VIII. was a King of England, and the greatest widower as never was. He was born at a place called Anno Domino, and he had sixty wives. The first he ordered to be executed, but she was beheaded. He revoked the second, and the third died; and then he married Annie Bowling, the daughter of Tom Bowling. When he died he was succeeded on the throne by his Aunt Mary. Her full name was Mary Queen of Scots, or the Lay of the Last Min-strel."

English owls feed mainly on insects and small mammals, such as mice.

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