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Always have BOVRIL in the House

"Bovril prevents that Sinking Feeling."

Lord Cecil's Dilemma

The Picnic

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XIV.

"Yes—yes!" groaned the earl. "Leave me now, Collins—Arthur—I agree to everything for the sake of my child!"

The steward passed out with a happy smile upon his face, and Lord Howard sat with his head resting on the table before him, incapable of motion, thought, or speech. He was, physically and mentally, in a state of chaos.

Lady Gladys Howard received a love letter from Sir Charles Hastings the next morning. She had been expecting it since the moment he had left her, and had counted the hours until the post bag would arrive on this glad Saturday morning. He had told her that he would write immediately he reached home, both to herself and to the earl, and now she sat in her own bright, little morning-room, the love letter in her hands—the first love letter she had ever received from any man—a happy light in her eyes, and an impatient ring in her tones, when she told her maid, Mademoiselle Lamartine, for the third time, that she wished to be alone for half-an-hour. She could not bear even to open the precious missive in the presence of another, and she had



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suffered the tortures of Tantalus since the earl had handed the letter to her at the breakfast-table—nearly half-an-hour earlier!

At last Mademoiselle Lamartine's seemingly interminable task of arranging a skein of silk came to an end, and she went away. When the door closed, Gladys sprang up and turned the key. Then she drew her lover's first letter from the bosom of her dress, a happy thrill fluttering through her whole being, and after pressing one fond but silent kiss on the dear handwriting, she dropped into an armchair, and took the precious missive from its covering.

With burning cheeks and parted lips, she read her first love letter:

My Darling Gladys—I am at home again, and seem to have left the sunshine behind me. An hour after my arrival I wanted to come back to you. I never before realized what a dull place this world is without you. I think that is usual for people who are in love to drop into poetry. I have heard so, and have smiled at the folly. If folly it be, I am now guilty of it. I do not mean that I am attempting the indiscretion of writing poetry myself, but I find all the love songs that I ever thought worthy of remembering, coming back to my mind like happy echoes. This must be a sign that I am very deeply in love indeed.

"Though the bard to purer fame may soar,"

When wild youth's past, Though he win the wise who frowned before, To smile at last; He'll never meet a joy so sweet In all his noon of fame, As when first he sung to woman's ear His soul-felt flame. And, at every close, she blushed to hear

"The one loved name!" I shall never more meet a joy so sweet, Gladys, and it seems too beautiful to be true. Heaven and myself only know how much I love you, darling. I shall write a few lines to Lord Howard, and then for a busy week. I am going direct to Birmingham, to consult with my lawyers upon a matter of vital importance to us. Then I shall come back to you, dear, and then—the fullness of a perfect joy—or misery!

Yours till death, CHARLES HASTINGS.

Lady Gladys did not feel altogether satisfied with this letter. There was too much—or too little. What did her lover mean by the "fullness of a perfect joy—or misery?" Why should there be misery? Why should there be a single doubt? If he was doubtful of the earl's decision, it was a needless, a foolish doubt. The earl would never interfere in her choice of a lover, he had told her so, and she knew that he meant it. She locked her first love letter safely away, after folding inside it the faded

pages that Sir Charles had given her at the flower bazaar. Then she went out into the morning sunshine to tread the ways that she and her lover had walked together; to recall every word that he had uttered, and to think of the happiness of being loved. One little week, and he would be with her again. One week and the whole world might know that he was her lover. No stolen meetings—no doubts. One unbroken world of delights before them.

She had not been out long when her father passed within a few yards of her. He did not speak to her—he did not see her. His head was bent—his hands were folded behind him, and his whole attitude was suggestive of despair.

Gladys stared at him in wonderment. Could Sir Charles Hastings' letter have caused him this grief? This was her first thought, and a hand of iron, cold as ice, heavy and merciless, seemed to clutch at her heart.

The earl was walking along the banks of the lake, his eyes bent to the ground, seeing nothing of the beauty around him. The great white lilies, with their hearts of gold, nodding drowsily amid the green grass, were passed unheeded. The soft summer wind sounded like a moan of pain in his ears. His thoughts were on the past twenty long years ago, and as he passed from Gladys's sight, he uttered a groan that caused her face to blanch with a nameless dread.

She went indoors in search of Lady Marcia. She would learn from her aunt what Sir Charles had written.

Lady Marcia was in the library, busy with her accounts. She had absolute charge of the household exchequer for many years, and prided herself upon keeping the accounts in order. She greeted Gladys with a mischievous smile, but was at once concerned upon observing her white face and anxious eyes.

"Did your first love letter contain good news?" she asked. "Ah, you cannot deceive the eyes of one who loved once as you love now, darling!" "How did you know that Charles had written, auntie?" the girl said, blushing.

"How do I know? I saw you take three letters, and one of them was hurriedly hidden away. I have done the same thing myself." Lady Marcia laughed, then her eyes grew misty, and she sighed. "But you have not told me your trouble, darling."

"It is about papa; he has gone toward the park, looking simply wretched. He passed within a few yards of me, and did not look up once. I know that Sir Charles has written to him, auntie, and I feared that the letter has troubled him, perhaps. Was I silly? But he has not looked happy since his hurried visit to the city. I don't know why I should connect myself with his changed manner, but I do."

"Then you are worrying yourself needlessly, darling," Lady Marcia replied, soothingly. "The earl has only spoken a few words to me this morning, but I know that his trouble is with Collins, the steward. Our confidence in Collins has been dispensed. He has been systematically robbing us for years, and the earl is dreadfully shocked."

Gladys looked a little bewildered. She had always considered the steward to be above reproach—a strangely preoccupied man, but an honorable gentleman in all things. He had never failed to treat her with the greatest of consideration and respect, and she could not remember that his manner had ever been marked by the usual servility that is affected by servants.

"I am surprised and sorry," she confessed. "I have regarded Collins as quite a superior steward."

"He will have to go, of course," Lady Marcia observed; "but the earl will not punish him further." She was silent for a few moments, then she added: "I wonder why he did not speak about Sir Charles' letter this morning. He can have no possible objection to him. I have known the family for twenty years or more, and the only fault that the young man has is brooding over a charge made against his father."

Gladys was instantly interested, and her face brightened with eagerness.

(To be continued.)

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