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## Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—

### The Picnic

—in—

## Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XXIII.

He pressed his hands over his burning eyes. He had heard no word of his love since he had told her that his wife was living. That was weeks since, and there had been no sign. He did not know why he ought to expect anything. All this while Gladys had not been out of his waking thoughts for one hour. He had found a little pleasure in the belief that she would be always true to him—in life and death.

But now! He read the news again, and declared that it was all a cruel lie.

"It cannot be!" he repeated, again and again. "My darling's heart is mine forever. It was no light love, to change in a day or a year. Her sweet eyes expressed steadfastness and truth. No—no—she can never change! I will not believe it; I will not believe that she is untrue to me." Thus did he argue, and he felt that Lady Gladys could never bind herself to another. She belonged to him by right of his love for her, by right of her love for him. He would not believe her capable of such fickleness. She had promised to wait for him, even though their next meeting were in another world. He remembered her tears, her kisses, her faithful, resolute eyes, her fervent tones. No! no! this story was a cruel libel, and he cried, aloud:

"Oh, my darling! my darling! What is life without you? What will all the long years of the future be without you? We are wedded in heart, in spirit, and yet we dare not meet again! God help me! God help me! This

anguish is greater than I can bear!" And yet the anguish to come was greater still.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Sir Charles walked out into the soft September sunshine to nurse his bitter grief. At times like these he did not dare to meet his mother; he would not add to her misery by showing the anguish that he endured—by showing that his life was blighted. For her he had an infinite pity and tenderness. She was not wicked; she had never been wicked; but she was weak; she had no moral courage. She had been attracted by his father's title, by his political fame, when a mere child. She had mistaken silly sentiment for love, and had married a man double her own age, because he admired her pretty face, because his suit was advocated by an ambitious father.

She soon found that the baronet, who dreamed of regenerating the world, of founding a plan of universal citizenship, had very little time to devote to a peevish young wife, whose chief pleasure was a ball or a garden party. She pined for congenial society, and as there was no sympathy between husband and wife, they drifted very much apart. Lady Gladys had but one brother, Edgar Emsden, and he was accounted a scapegrace. He was disinherited, in favor of his sister and sister's husband. Then followed his disappearance, and the baronet's disgrace, disappointment and death.

It was a bitter ending to a vain woman's dreams, and she hid herself from the world because the world rejected her. Father, husband, brother, all were gone, and she had nothing left but her little child, whose life was to be tinged with the misery of others. A malicious fate seemed to follow Lady Gladys, culminating in the terrible act whereby she placed herself within reach of the criminal law.

And now her sorrow had reached its cruellest stage. She had ceased to repine openly, conscious of the penalty her folly had cost her son. To guard against a surprise, Sir Charles had gravely informed her that the woman he had married might appear at any time. She could not help seeing how altered he was of late, not dreaming of its cause. To her the one nightmare was "that woman!" The creature appeared to her in her sleeping and waking moments. Every sound on the bell started her into an agony of fear and expectation.

The young baronet pitied his mother from the bottom of his heart. She was scarcely responsible for her actions. He did not hold her so, now that he had taken the trouble to measure her character. Her life had been one long disappointment, and she blamed everybody but herself for it.

That very morning he had seen her tremble at sight of the post bag, and had assured her that there was nothing fresh concerning the trouble that had impeded them some weeks since. "I dreamed of that woman last night, Charles," replied Lady Gladys, "and you know that there is always something in my dreams. I thought that she agreed never to molest us—never."

"There was such an agreement," said Sir Charles, wearily. "Then why not put it into force?"

"I would do so," he said, vehemently. "I would get rid of the incubus forever—but for one thing. To do so, would mean raking up the past."

Lady Gladys shuddered. "There, dear mother, don't let us refer to it. Perhaps she will never trouble me. It may have been a mere threat on the part of Ebenezer Lupin. He is a man that I cannot trust."

His mother was crying weakly. "It is a living death to me—it is worse," she said. "When the Horleys come, with those people you met at Swinford, the Craythornes, I was too ill to see them. My first thoughts were of that woman, and I became hysterical. It was unfortunate that you were away. Oh, how the Horleys will gossip! I am sure that everybody is talking about us in the village."

Then it was that Sir Charles left home to write his reply to Herbert Gardner, and to post it with his own hands in the village post office. He did not notice that everybody stared at him curiously; but there was the usual courtesying from the villagers, the usual cheerful greetings, for the young man was beloved everywhere. He had a splendid character for honesty, for manliness, and for kindness of heart. In a few years he had turned his estate from a wilderness of poverty and discontent into a garden of prosperity and brightness.

He returned home and read the awful news of Gladys' engagement—the other he accounted as nothing in comparison; he read it, and told himself that it was untrue, and went out into the fields, where none could see his misery.

He would see his love again—he could not rest until he knew the truth. But what right had he to complain? Had he not sinned against her beyond all pardon in the eyes of man and woman? He had won the first fond love of her gentle heart, knowing that he was already bound to another. And yet, in the selfishness of his great love, he claimed her as his own forever. He would not admit that Lady Gladys had a single right to think of any other lover. Such inconsistency appalled him! If this wicked report had emanated from Lord Cecil, he would find means to punish him.

For two days he watched the papers, hoping to see a denial of the announcement; and then, unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, he went to Swinford, determined to see Lady Gladys. He would know the truth, at any cost!

He walked from the railway station through the ways that had grown familiar in so short a time, a dull pain at his heart. He passed through the field wherein he had first seen his love—wherein the bazaar had been held—and he remembered her as she burst upon him, like a vision of beauty and delight, under the warm rays of the July sun. The laughter—the chatter—the rustle of skirts, and the odor of a thousand flowers seemed to be about him again, and he cried: "Oh, Gladys, my own love!" The sound of his own voice startled him, and he continued on his way, hoping to see the graceful form that was so dear to him before he reached the house.

When the abbey came within view he was struck with its air of desolation. Many of the windows were shuttered, and the footman he encountered on the lawn informed him that the family had gone away only the day before.

"Gone away!" he echoed, blankly. (To be continued.)



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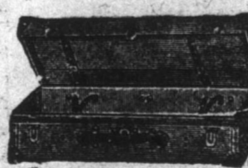
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