Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—

The Picnic

—in—

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XXVII.

"The child is looking better already," remarked Lady Marcia to the earl, on the second day after their arrival in Florence. "How distasteful Lord Stanhope must be to her—what a terrible fate for our darling to be linked to a man that she can never love!"

"The Elwoods are here,' interrupted the earl, "and will be sure to search us out. Lady Elwood is an old friend of yours Marcia. She and her son, Captain Frederick, arrived yesterday. I have not seen the boy since he wore knickerbockers. We really ought to call upon them. They are staying at the Hotel Angelo."

"We will do so," declared Lady Marcia. "How fortunate that the autumn weather continues so warm and lovely! I will order a carriage for three o'clock, Edward."

The earl folded up his newspaper hastily, and escaped from the room. He dreaded to be alone with his sister, her questioning had been so pertinacious of late, and he felt that he would rather die than she should know the truth.

Relieved of the presence of Lord Cecil, Lady Gladys had become brighter, and more cheerful. There was so much to see and to admire in Florence, with its blue mountains, its colossal statues, its undulating avenues, its waterfalls and grottos. What grand reflections of the old and the new world! what tragic memories are revived by its towers, its domes, its con ents and lovely Arno gliding through its ancient bridges.

Of these things was Gladys thinking when Lady Marc.a walked onto the plazza, where the girl was seated, gazing with dreaming eyes into the past.

"My dear," she said, abruptly, "I am not going to let you go a-dreaming again. It is not good for you."

"I am happier to-day than I have been for weeks, auntie," Gladys replied, with a faint smile.

"Yes, and it is all owing to the departure of the man to whom you are engaged to be married. I can see it clearly enough, and am determined to know why the earl is infatuated with Lord Cecil Stanhope."

"Please do not bother papa, auntie," Gladys pleaded, her eyes full of pain. "I am pleasing myself—indeed I am."

"I cannot believe it, and I have a right to be told everything. But for that abominable neuralgia that prostrated me for two weeks, this trouble might never have been! I cannot believe that you are sacrificing yourself simply because you cannot marry the man you love. It is absurd!"

Lady Marcia would have said more, but for the look of pleading in Gladys' troubled eyes, but for the quivering of her lips; then her tender heart reproached her, and she kissed her niece almost hysterically.

"Forgive me, dear," she whispered, presently. "But I cannot help seeing that there is something very wrong—something very mysterious about this marriage. My brother, the earl, will not tell me one word, although his face betrays some inward agony. Until now, he has confided everything to me, from the hour that he first got into scrapes at college; and when I might help him—might help you, darling—I am treated like a child—I am kept in the dark. Am I to stand by passively, and see you made eternally unhappy—you whom I love better than any human being? There! I will let the matter lie at present, but I must know what bond there is between the earl and Lord Cecil before my return to the abbey!"

Gladys shuddered. If she had replied, "I will tell you what it is, auntie. My father killed your lover, the man for whom you have mourned and waited, more than twenty years! My father killed him, and you will never see him again! This is the bond that binds him to Lord Cecil; that binds me Lord Cecil; to save my father from a convict's cell!"

If she had replied in this manner to Lady Marcia, what would have been the result? She tried to picture Lady Marcia's horror, and shivered. No, it would never do for her aunt to know one word of this awful truth, not one word.

"Lady Elwood and her son arrived in Florence yesterday," continued Lady Marcia. "We must call upon them after lunch. I have ordered a carriage for three o'clock."

"I think I remember Lady Elwood," observed Gladys. "She visited the abbey when I was a child. I remember that she was a sweet-faced lady with silvery white hair."

"Yes. Her husband was a soldier. She went to India with him, where he died. I do not think that she has been back very long, and she will be glad to see old friends. I have never seen her son, Captain Frederick. I know that he is her only child, and that she is very proud of him."

Gladys did not feel any interest in Captain Frederick, but she asked, languidly:

"Is the son a soldier, too?"

"Yes, and has already distinguished himself in Egypt, the papers say. He is invalided home, having been severely wounded."

In the afternoon Lady Marcia and her pale, but lovely niece were driven to the Hotel Angelo. At the last moment the earl had decided not to go, having some correspondence to attend to. He had received several letters from Colline lately, which caused him great uneasiness. The steward was practically master of him, and all that belonged to him. There were other letters, too—letters of complaint from old tenants, who were receiving notice to leave their farms, whereon they had been born. Collins would not renew their leases, and was carrying matters with a high hand. The tenants appealed to the earl to see them righted. Some of them, with their ancestors, had cultivated the land for two centuries. They had as much moral right to it as the earl himself. It was a part of their very existence. It was worse than tearing the souls from their bodies to turn them out of the homes that they had loved so well.

"I cannot endure it," Lord Howard groaned. "Better make the one bold plunge, and face the worst!"

But he thought of his child, and wrote back to Collins, begging of him to be kind to the old farmers and their children. Collins only replied that he could get better tenants, and that it was his duty to improve the estate. My lord was powerless, but he found comfort in the knowledge that none of the notices would expire for six months, and something might happen in the meantime. Perhaps Collins would relent. It was a dreadful position for the Earl of Swinford.

Both Lady Elwood and her son were in when Lady Marcia called at their hotel, and Gladys found herself being introduced to a tall, indolent-looking young fellow whose dark eyes at once expressed the admiration he felt for the earl's daughter.

Captain Frederick Elwood was a handsome fellow, but no one would have thought him capable of daring, heroic deeds, he seemed so slow and lazy. He drawled in his speech, and yawned behind his hand in a way that was almost amusing.

"I am so glad that you have come, dear," Lady Elwood said to her friend. "I had no idea that you were in Florence, and we came here because our physician advised it. We only arrived from India last week, and Frederick is recovering from a wound that nearly gave him his death."

A tear shone in Lady Elwood's cheek, and Frederick yawned.

"Oh, don't trouble about that now, mother mine," he smiled, good-humoredly. "Hundreds of fellows get wounded, you know, and have to get well the best way they can."

"You see," Lady Elwood continued, with all a fond mother's pride, "he treats it so lightly, and his life was despaired of for weeks."

Captain Frederick yawned, and smiled in a resigned sort of way at Lady Gladys.

"I observe that he has distinguished himself for bravery and coolness in action," said Lady Marcia. "I saw it in this morning's paper."

"By Jove! I wonder if I could sue these Italian publishers for libel!" muttered Captain Frederick. "I detest these newspaper men, Lady Gladys. Their lies are never to be depended upon."

Gladys could not resist a laugh at his comical expression.

"His last wound," continued Lady Elwood, "was a most complicated affair. He rescued his colonel's daughter from a marauding tiger, and was bitten several times in the shoulder, while a cowardly native servant so lost control of himself that he added to Frederick's trouble by shooting him in mistake."

"Beastly nuisance!" supplemented Captain Frederick. "No romance to follow, you know, Lady Gladys! The colonel's daughter is only three years of age, and I can't expect her to fall in love with me!"

Again Gladys laughed, the young soldier looked so rueful.

The elder ladies were soon busy making plans for the future, and Lady Elwood became very fond of Gladys before many days had passed.

(To be continued.)

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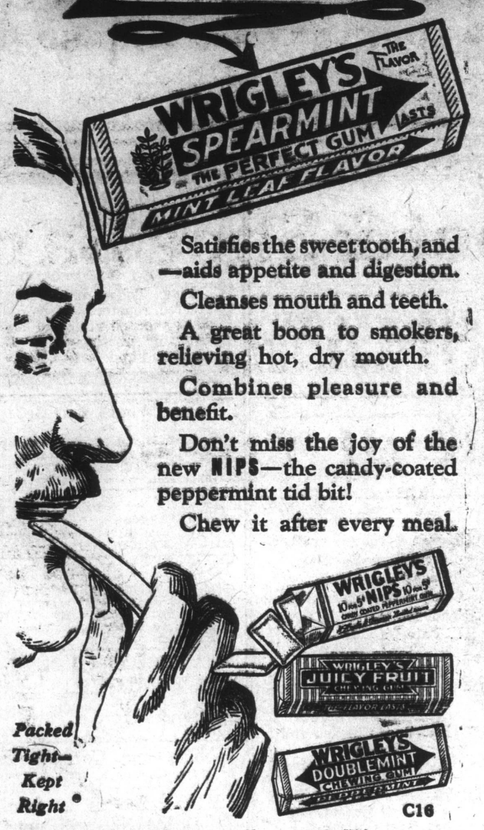

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They can still be seen in the moon, if you look carefully for them, carrying the bucket on a pole between them.

Judging from the illustrations in the earlier printed editions of the rhyme, it refers sometimes to a boy and a girl, sometimes to two boys. One of the earliest versions, published in 1783, reads as follows:—

Jack and Gill went up the hill
To fetch a bottle of water;
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Gill came tumbling after.

Later collections have "Jill" and "Pall."

Jack and Gill were commonly used to mean any boy and girl in early times. There was, too, some suggestion of mental service attaching to both names, for we find a daughter, who wanted her own way, declaring in an old play:—

I won't be my father's Jack,
I won't be my mother's Gill,
I will be the fiddler's wife
And have music when I will.

The fact that the two children went up the hill—not down—in their quest for water, shows that the rhyme is very old. Wells in olden times were always sunk within the entrenched camps on the bare hilltops where our ancestors lived. The valleys and plains were covered with forests, and inhabited only by wild beasts.

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