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**Lord Cecil's Dilemma**  
—OR—  
**The Picnic**

**Woodall Forest**

CHAPTER XX.

"It was at the Craythornes' place on Tuesday," he continued, "and they talked of paying Hastings a surprise visit."

Gladys felt her face redden with annoyance. Why would these people pry into affairs that did not concern them?

"Indeed!" she said, indifferently, and Lord Cecil was delighted to think that she did not care. He wondered what had made him so blind as to imagine that Lady Gladys loved the young baronet. After all, it might have been but a harmless flirtation. She had declared this, and he knew that she would never stoop to an untruth.

"Yes; I think it is one of Miss Ada's moves. Anybody can see that she is madly in love with Sir Charles."

"That is an unkind speech, Lord Cecil!" Gladys even smiled. There was no trace of jealousy, and the young peer decided that he would not trouble the earl that day. There was really no need to press matters unduly. He would come again, in a day or two, feeling sure that Gladys would be forced to listen to his suit, after the earl had urged the young man's claim. He felt annoyed with Lord Howard for wasting time, for he had been assured by Collins, the earl's steward, that his way would be immediately made clear.

"It is the truth," he went on. "The Craythornes are not particular about throwing themselves directly at a fellow's head. I have been bothered myself with Flossie, and I think that this may have had something to do with your coolness toward me of late."

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Lady Gladys felt her face burning, but she replied, steadily: "I am not interested in Lord Stanhope, Lamartine. I detest the man. He presumes upon an old acquaintance. I shall certainly refuse to see him again."

"He is not a gentleman, my lady, even if he does bear a title. He offered me money to tell him about you, my lady, and Sir Charles Hastings. When I refused, he told me to keep my tongue between my teeth or it would be the worse for me. I laughed at him, but I did not mention it to you; I did not wish to make trouble."

"I am surprised to hear this, Lamartine," said Lady Gladys. "And that is not all, my lady. I repeat that he is not a gentleman," continued the maid. "His own servants dislike him. They say that he swears at his mother, Lady Stanhope—that her life is a misery. She is very much afraid of him."

"It is not wise to listen to idle gossip, Lamartine," reproved Lady Gladys. "But he makes bets with his coachman, my lady. His coachman is a sporting expert, and introduces all kinds of turfdogs to his master. He was in the Swinford Arms, the other night, my lady, and the butler heard that he had a bet with Lord Cecil Stanhope about you! Is it not terrible!"

"About me!" ejaculated the earl's daughter.

"Yes, my lady. Lord Stanhope and his coachman—a man who drinks beer and chews tobacco—have made a bet about you, and the coachman wanted to bet with the butler that you would be Lady Stanhope before Christmas."

The French maid paused, adding: "I knew that our butler would not make a mistake, my lady. He was dreadfully angry, and would have told my lord, your father, only I advised him not to do it, at present. I should not have told you now, only I saw that Lord Cecil was causing you annoyance."

"I am much obliged to you, Lamartine," Lady Gladys whispered. "Pray pay no attention in future to such foolish gossip." She sat in silent thought for some time, her heart filled with bitterness. Then she rose, and resolved to see her father without further delay, and repeat to him the threats of Lord Stanhope. The earl would have to sever the acquaintance. She could never speak to the boorish young peer again. She felt that she could never forgive him; that their friendship was a thing of the past. Had Lady Marcia been well, she would have first confided in her, but it was her father's duty, now that he had returned home, to protect her from cowards.

She sent Lamartine downstairs, to inquire if he had gone out or not. The maid returned with the news that the earl was in his private sitting-room, and had been asking for Lady Gladys.

"I will go to him," she said. "And, Lamartine, say nothing of what you have told me to any one."

"No, my lady. You can trust me," Gladys walked slowly down to her father's sitting-room. He seemed to have a dislike for the library. He had never entered it since his interview with Collins.

He looked up as she entered, and she was startled by the gray line of his face. He had complained that he was unwell—the sudden change in his mode of life had temporarily unsettled him. That was all.

He smiled, faintly, at his daughter, and motioned to her to close the door.

"Good-morning, Gladys," he said. "You are looking somewhat pale, dear."

She strove to reply, but instead, burst into a passion of tears.

(To be continued.)

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