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Lord Cecil's Dilemma

The Picnic

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XXVII

Captain Frederick was ever at her side, his dark eyes eloquent with something more than mere admiration, but the earl's daughter did not notice this; she felt so safe in the knowledge that she was an engaged woman, and all the world must know it. Long walks, long rides, by road and by water, visits to the theatre, and delightful tete-a-tetes. All these were very pleasant to Captain Frederick, and Gladys accepted his attentions because she liked him, he was so gentle, so kind; she liked him because he had been a friend of Sir Charles Eastings, and said many nice things of the man who was to her a king among his fellows.

So the days lengthened into weeks, and it was arranged that the Elwoods should return to the abbey with the earl's party, to spend Christmas and the holidays.

As yet no one cared to mention Lady Gladys' engagement to Lord Cecil Stanhope, and Lady Elwood was building some pretty castles in the air. Her son had acknowledged to her that he was over head and ears in love with Lady Gladys Howard, and her fondest dream in life was to see her idol happily married.

Where so sweet a wife as the Earl of Swinford's lovely daughter, whose purity of mind had never been tainted by the insidious teachings of the fashionable world. Her dearest wish was for her son to resign his commission in the army. She had a dread of war, for her own loved husband had been stricken in the flower of his manhood.

"I will speak to Lady Gladys," Captain Frederick told her, "before we

get to England. I may not find an opportunity there. If she can care for me, then I will see the earl. If she cannot—Well, I shall be off to Egypt again to find something to do!"

He spoke almost fiercely, and a wild light came into his eyes.

"I love her so much, mother, that I can scarcely bear a refusal! I am almost afraid to put it to the touch," he went on. "Yet she is always kind to me; she always seems glad to welcome me; but there is something lacking—something that makes one think that she does not look upon me in the light of a lover."

"Faint heart never won fair lady," his mother smiled, hopefully. She could not think that Lady Gladys could help loving her handsome son, so brave, so debonair!

"My heart is not faint," he laughed, "but I think that it will be broken if she does not learn to love me!"

It was now nearly mid-December, and the earl had been growing thinner and more careworn daily. His hair was nearly white, and there was a drawn look about the mouth that was painful to see. Further complaints of his steward's harshness had reached him, until the rector of the parish had drawn his attention to Collins' glaring injustice and cruelty.

Within a day or so of this, the steward requested his lord to return to the abbey forthwith. If his desire was not obeyed, the result might be unpleasant!

This threat both angered and frightened my lord, and again he vowed that he would face the worst rather than be under the thumb of this unattractive scoundrel.

And while the earl was suffering in silence, and Lady Marcia was planning future dissipation, both at the abbey and in London, poor Gladys was dreading the return home, for to her it meant the unwelcome, the hateful attentions of Lord Stanhope.

She often found herself thinking of Sir Charles Hastings, wondering if the woman he had married had yet claimed him; and then she would murmur the fondest terms of endearment, and kiss the dear letters that he had written.

ten to her, for they were ever nearest her heart.

Captain Elwood came upon her unexpectedly a day or two before they were to leave Florence; he saw Gladys press fond kisses upon something attached to a ribbon about her neck, and his heart sank, he knew not why.

"I hope that I am not intruding," he said, gently. His face was flushed a little, and there was a tender light in his eyes.

Gladys smiled back at him, saying: "No, Captain Elwood. I am enjoying the Apennines by moonlight. Is not the scene entrancing!"

He took a seat near her, and for a few minutes they talked upon ordinary subjects, until Captain Frederick could repress himself no longer.

"Lady Gladys," he said, suddenly, "our pleasant talks and walks together will soon be dreams of the past."

There was something in his tones that startled her, and she glanced swiftly up at him. She saw that he was trembling with suppressed emotion—trembling with anxiety—and his handsome face had a look upon it that she had never seen there before.

"Yes, but the remembrance will always be pleasant to me," replied the girl.

"It makes me happy to hear you say this," he whispered; "it makes me very happy. It has been the happiest period of my life. I never know before what happiness meant."

Gladys did not reply; she was too confused; she was pained, too, for it had dawned upon her that the young soldier loved her!

She attempted to rise, murmuring some excuse, but Captain Frederick suddenly seized one of her hands. He gazed at her with passionate, burning eyes, and cried:

"Oh, Lady Gladys, do not leave me yet. I have something to say to you. Surely you must see that I love you—love you dearer than life—dearer than all the world, besides—I—"

"Oh, Captain Elwood, I am so sorry," faltered Gladys, in real distress. "You must not say these things to me, indeed you must not."

He paused in utter bewilderment for a moment; then he dropped upon one knee before her and sobbed:

"Oh, Gladys, I love you! I love you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

So that she might better enjoy the beauties of nature and of man's art, Gladys had not rung for lights, but had pushed back the curtains of the deep window, and the room was flooded with the soft beams of a full moon.

"The moon rose over the city—Over the quiet squares, And shone with a glow of pity— On crowded thoroughfares. It smiled on the silent river— With twin-divided streams, That seemed to fade and quiver— Into the land of dreams!"

The domes, the towers, the minarets of beautiful Florence were pale in its silvery light, and away, towering like misty giants, the mountains basked in the mysterious sheen of the moon and stars of the purple sky.

Neither Lady Gladys nor Captain Frederick ever forgot that evening in Florence. As he looked up at her, anguish in his eyes, frenzy in his tones, and cried, "Oh, Gladys, I love you; I love you!" her wondrous beauty was enhanced by the soft moon's beams, until she seemed almost ethereal.

She tried to speak, but her emotion was too great for words, and he continued:

"Do not say that there is no hope; do not look at me in that way! I have loved you, Lady Gladys, from the first moment I beheld you. I offer you no boyish love, but the fond, enduring affection of a man—a love that can never die—a love that encompasses me. Give me but a little hope, and I will wait. To plunge me into despair will be worse than death!"

"Captain Elwood!" gasped Gladys, at length, her eyes luminous with pity. "You must not say these things. You do not know—you do not know!"

"I will say them!" he went on, with fierce vehemence. "I love you, I worship you, and I am not ashamed of it. I am ready to wait for you for years, if need be—unless—unless you prefer some one else to me."

The anguish had returned to his appealing eyes, and Gladys could not resist a sob.

"Only whisper that I am not quite indifferent to you, Gladys," he said, hungrily. "Give me but one little spark of hope. I know that you are young, and it may be that I am taking unfair advantage of you."

(To be continued)

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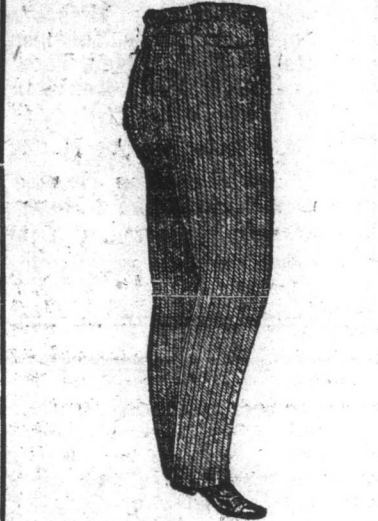
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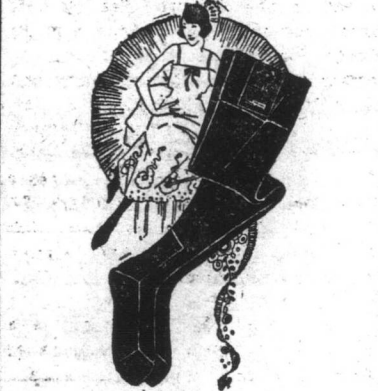
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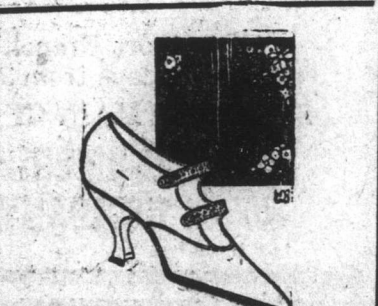


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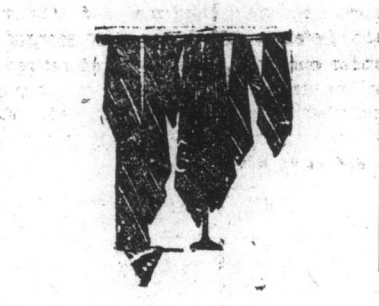
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