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Lord Cecil's Dilemma

The Picnic

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XXXV.

The determination to face the worst at any cost had taken so strong a hold on the Earl of Swinford that he could think of nothing else, and the probable outcome.

He knew that it would be a terrible ordeal, and that his ancient name, which had never before been dragged into the filth and mire of the law courts, would be stained forevermore. Under any circumstances, the charge of murder was a horrible thing. Even when a man was guiltless of the crime, the mere odium of suspicion was hard to shake off. In the lower ranks charged me with this crime were avoided—in the middle ranks they were financially ruined—in his own class, it would take centuries to gloss over the stain.

He had no plea of not guilty. He was guilty of killing a man, but by accident. Would the judge and the jury and the world believe that it was an accident? Could they be brought to believe this when he had hidden the body, and kept his horrid crime a secret for more than twenty years? No—no! he did not think that anyone would believe him guiltless. And then, to add to his guilt, he had let another man be tried for the murder of Edgar Emden—a long, weary trial that had killed an innocent man with the disgrace of it! It would be useless for him to urge that he knew nothing about it—that he was thousands of miles away—where no English newspapers were to be seen, even had he been inclined to read them; and, after putting himself upon trial, he decided that he was guilty of severe punishment.

But there was one faint hope. Had Edgar Emden really died? This question was ever in his brain. If so, where was the body? Had it been removed by the steward? He could not forget Gladys' cry—that Lady Marcia was still waiting for her lover—that she believed that he lived—and would some day come back to her.

The day after his discovery that the arched recess was empty, he spoke to Lady Marcia in a manner that startled her. He had lain awake all night, and looked wretched and haggard.

"Do you believe in dreams, Marcia?" he asked.

"Some dreams carry a certain amount of significance, Edward," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I had a strange dream last night—a most vivid affair, I can assure you."

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He laughed in a constrained, nervous manner, and fidgeted about my room in a way that was unusual for him.

"What was your dream like, Edward? Was it pleasant or unpleasant?"

"I will leave that for you to decide, Marcia."

"That is a strange remark."

"Not at all. I dreamed he was not dead, after all. Ha! ha! Wasn't that funny?"

He stared at her with anxious, expectant eyes; and though he affected to laugh, there was no mirth in the sound.

"You dreamed of Edgar—you dreamed that he lived? I have had a similar dream many times," Lady Marcia said.

"And what significance do you attach to your dream?"

"Why do you ask, Edward?"

Lady Marcia looked at him gravely and curiously.

"Because it seems so strange to dream about a man who has been dead for twenty years!"

"Not dead, Edward! I am sure that he is not dead. I have never believed it for one moment. I know that Edgar will come back to me. You may smile, but a woman's faith is all-enduring. I was stung by his foolish jealousy of you—my brother. I would not have explained even if I could have done so, but I was bound to keep your visits secret, and my pride was hurt. We were both young, self-willed, and foolish."

Lady Marcia's lips quivered.

"I thank you for those words," cried the earl. "I thank you for your faith. It is the sweetest thing in life to me."

Lady Marcia could not understand his strange speech—his strange manner. For weeks she had grieved about him; his haggard face was ever before her. He was weighted with some trouble, fancied or real, that he would not share with her. Her efforts to console him had been almost rudely repulsed; her very presence was often an annoyance, and his misery was reflected in Gladys' face. This was the cruellest part of it all. No wonder that Lady Marcia felt hurt—no wonder that a shadow had even risen between aunt and niece—and once they had been all in all to each other!

And now the fear was growing that my lord's mind was affected. His words, his actions, were not those of a sane man. Why should he refer to Edgar Emden? Why should her belief in her lover's existence be the sweetest thing in all the world to him?

"Edward," she said, gravely, "you are not well—you have been ill for many weeks. I shall send for our physician, whether you like it or not."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Marcia," my lord replied, sharply. "If the physician came I would refuse to see him."

"Oh, my brother, why are you so changed toward me? You have even taken from me the confidences of Gladys, you have colored her young life with some miserable secret of your own, and while my heart is bleeding for her, and for you, I am now a stranger to you both!"

"I am ill, Marcia, but my illness is not of the body. I have been weighted by cares that few mortal men could endure and live. I have carried them to every quarter of the globe. I have tried to fly from them, but in the silent watches of the night they have gazed at me—east, west, north, and south. I thought that my cup of misery was overflowing, that not one more drop could be added; but it was a fallacious hope, if hope I may call it. I came home to be undeceived; I came home to find the last measure of gall and wormwood awaiting me, and Gladys alone stood between me and a degradation that I thought worse than a hundred deaths!"

Lady Marcia listened in pained surprise, and doubted not that his reason was dethroned.

"I see that you do not believe me!"

he went on. "You think me mad. Would to God I were! My secret was known to another—Collins, the steward. His silence was conditional, and for reasons which you will soon learn; he desired my child to become the wife of Lord Cecil Stanhope. I was coward enough to agree; I was coward enough to lay my awful position before Gladys—to strike at the very root of her sweet young life; and I hoped that you would never know why she had consented to be the mistress of Stanhope Towers—the wife of a man she despises. But it is not to be, Marcia; they have driven me too far. The sacrifice will never be made. I am forced to tell you this story. I never thought that I should have the courage, but my mind is in a strange whirl of hope, and doubt, and fear. It will come better from my lips than from the lips of others, and I pray to God that you may find it in your gentle heart to pity and forgive me."

"Edward, my brother, how wildly, how foolishly you talk! Am I to be your judge? There is nothing in the world that could influence me against you."

She would have put her arms about him, but he pushed her off, and she sank trembling into her seat again.

"Not to do not touch me! Hear what I have to say!"

His tones were frenzied, and he covered his eyes with his hands.

"Marcia, I am to be charged with the murder of your lover—I am to be charged with the murder of Edgar Emden! The night that he left you with cruel upbraiding, he must have been mad with jealousy. He watched me, he followed me, and struck me from behind. I turned and closed with him. In the struggle he fell into the lake, and I was too exhausted to help him until he floated on the water, as I believed, dead. I hid the body, intending to return and bury it. I was unable to come back, and my subsequent movements are known to you. That is the dread secret of my life—that is the crime that Collins witnessed—this is the power that he revealed to me when I charged him with embezzlement."

Lady Marcia's face was white. She had never dreamed of a revelation such as this, but she sprang to the earl's side with cheering words.

"Edward, I do not see that you have committed any crime. Why did you not tell me all this before?" she said, softly.

"The world is to be my judge now," he said. "It is the disgrace of it that is killing me. I dreaded that you would reproach me, but there is the chance yet that he lives. I told you that I had hidden the body. Until last night I have never had the courage to look at it again. I was nerved to desperation, and opened the stone recess into which I had thrust it, prepared to see naught but bones. It was empty. I was delicious with a mad delight, and then I dreamed that he still lived. Oh, blessed hope!"

He laughed shrilly, and Lady Marcia whispered soothing words in his ears.

It was at this moment that a servant announced the steward, and Collins pushed past him with scant ceremony, and closed the door in his face.

"I gave you until New Year's Day to think over my demands—nay, my commands, my lord," he blurted out. "but I have changed my mind. I must have your reply now. I have seen Lord Cecil, and his manner does not please me. I will not be hoodwinked."

The earl did not look at him, but his form was quivering like an aspen.

(To be continued)

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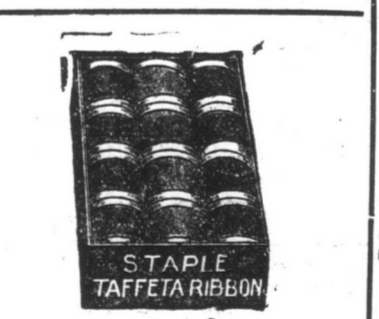
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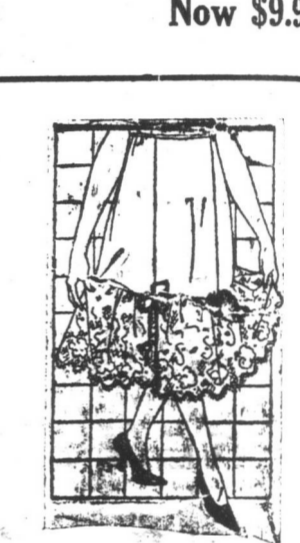
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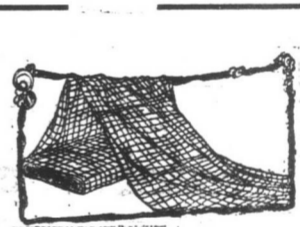
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