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## Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—

## The Picnic

—in—

## Woodall Forest

CHAPTER XXX.

"I do not think we need trouble ourselves about your bete noir, mother," Sir Charles said, after his memorable interview with Ebenezer Lupus. "My fears have merely been played upon by a rascally lawyer, who is lucky to have escaped me as easily as he has done."

His eyes burned with resentment when he thought of the ugly scandal that had already gone the round of the scurrilous press. It had only been dwarfed into insignificance by a still uglier story concerning personages who laid claim to royal blood.

That Lady Hastings was greatly relieved was apparent in the sign of satisfaction that she gave, and it was with a pang of remorse that the young man noted how thin and pale she looked. In his own wretchedness he had forgotten his mother. It was true that most of their troubles were attributable to her folly, but she was still his mother, and her life had been lonely and miserable for many years.

"Mother," he continued, "I am afraid that I have been very selfish for a long time. I have almost forgotten you. I have quite neglected you, while I have been intent upon mending our fortunes. But see how well God has rewarded us!"

He led her into the soft, September sunshine; for, though it was the end of the month, it seemed that summer was lingering still. He led her over the springy lawn to an eminence which commanded a view of the surrounding country for many miles. Beneath them the village lay sleeping under a purple haze; beyond, the fields looked like oceans of gold.

"Mother," he said, simply, "you see the result of my years of labor. We are prosperous, and our cottagers are happy and contented. I have tumbled the revenues, and do not now owe one shilling of the money borrowed."

"How happy we might be if I could but undo one mad act of my life," Lady Hastings replied, tearfully.

"We must not look back," he said. "My gaze shall be ever to a brighter future. It is not good for man or woman to live alone, as you have been doing for so long, and I want to make the old place merry within as well as without. We will open the rooms that have been closed for so long; we will brighten them with new paint, new carpets, and new furniture, and there are many friends of mine, mother, who

would like to know you and be friends of yours, too."

Just then there was a merry peal from the church bells, and the sweet music seemed to ripple about them in showers of melodious blessings.

"It will make you happier, my boy, I do not care how many people you bring here—now," Lady Hastings sighed deeply.

"It is not society that neglects us," said her son, "but we ignore people who would like to be sociable." Then he added quickly: "Mother, I want you to go to church with me this morning. You will feel better for it, and it will be the first step to a happier future."

To his surprise she made no objection, and from that day Emden Hall underwent a change for the better. There was a busy month with painters, and decorators, and upholsterers; and then the place was made lively with visitors, and half-dozen new servants.

Sir Charles was more than satisfied. The change was not only beneficial to his mother, but to himself. His disappointment was not even present when trying to amuse others; the sting of the canker-worm at his heart could not always be felt now.

Among these visitors were Lady Craythorne and her daughters, and the quick eyes of Lady Hastings soon detected Ada's passion for her son. It was evident at every glance—it was all-consuming, and her heart went out to the girl with a mother's love. By and by they exchanged confidences, and Lady Craythorne's society became indispensable to Lady Hastings.

Lady Craythorne and Flosie went home after one week at Emden Hall, but Ada remained. Lady Hastings could not do without her, and Sir Charles was glad that his mother at length had one woman friend. He was no longer expected to provide amusement; Lady Hastings and Ada were quite capable of entertaining friends, and devising plans for future pleasure. Sir Charles had only to give his consent, and during the Christmas holidays it was their intention to have a large gathering of people, and there were dreams of ice carnivals, sleighing, balls, and conquests!

"My dear," Lady Hastings said to Ada Craythorne, one morning, "I really believe that my son had something more in view than he cared to own, when he insisted that I should invite you and your people here."

They were sitting in Lady Hastings' newly-furnished boudoir, and her ladyship had been idly watching Ada's deft fingers for some little time, as they fidgeted about the smoking-cape which she was tastefully embroidering. This was to be a Christmas present for Sir Charles.

Ada looked up inquiringly from her work.

"Something more in view than he cared to own," she asked.

Lady Hastings nodded, and Ada turned her eyes to the cheerful fire that was glowing in the steel grate before her.

"He is in love with you!" her ladyship smiled. "And but for one thing, he would tell you, dear. I am sure of it. He is never so happy as when near you. When you are absent he wanders about in search of you."

"I am not ashamed to own that I care for him," Ada replied, calmly. A very faint tinge of pink mounted to her cheeks, but her splendid eyes became luminous. "He is a king among men!"

"Oh, if it might only be!" exclaimed Lady Hastings, weakly. "If we could only prove that that woman were dead!"

It was true that Sir Charles found pleasure in Ada Craythorne's society; her advice upon many things was valuable, and she took an interest in all that interested him. She admired the same flowers that he admired. She petted his favorite dog, and fed it when sick. She visited an old couple, who had lived on the estate for nearly a century, because he had heard that they were ailing.

While Sir Charles admired Ada Craythorne, and cared for her in a friendly, brotherly way, no thought of love had ever entered his heart. Such a thing was impossible. Though Lady Gladys Howard were lost to him forever, Ada Craythorne had not the power to stir one emotion. No woman had that power. Besides, he felt safe from her in the knowledge that to love or to be loved would be sinful in the eyes of the world and of the law. He went to her for sympathy, and Ada thought that he craved for love.

They were in the picture gallery

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one day, arranging some choice bits of work in water colors, which Herbert Gardner had sent to Sir Charles. "These are from the brush of an amateur," the baronet was saying to Miss Craythorne, "the truest friend that man ever had. He will be one of my guests at Christmas."

"I have often heard you speak of Mr. Gardner," replied Ada. "I did not know that men cared for each other so much. I am sure that women never do."

"I never had a brother," continued Sir Charles; "but I do not think that the fondest of brothers love as we love. A brother is a mere accident of birth. Our love has been tried by the furnace of affliction and adversity. I have little else that I value in life."

She looked up at him half-reproachfully, but he did not seem to notice her. His thoughts were with Gladys.

"Then you do not think that any woman's friendship can equal that of your friend, Mr. Gardner? I declare I am quite jealous!"

He laughed a little.

"You must not put it in that way," he replied. "Gardner is one of my oldest chums. Nothing can alter my affection for him. A woman's love is so different, and, then, I can never hope for that."

She knew what he meant, and his plaintive tone found an echo in her heart.

"Never!" she whispered. "I do not like that awful word, 'Sir Charles. You must sweep the barrier away.'"

He shook his head mournfully, and she was about to speak again when one of the women servants passed between them with swift, noiseless steps.

Ada Craythorne was startled by the vindictive gleam that flashed from the woman's black eyes, and could not resist a cold shudder running through every nerve. She had seen the servant before often enough, but had never taken much notice of her until now. It would be impossible to forget those wicked eyes.

She waited for an opportunity to point out the woman to Lady Hastings, and ask her name.

"I do not know, my dear. She is one of the new servants, and I leave all those matters to the housekeeper. Why do you ask?"

"Only that her face appears to be familiar," replied Ada, evasively. "It is of no consequence."

Nevertheless, she always regarded the woman curiously, and by adroitly questioning the housekeeper learned that her name was Agnes Maitland, and that she had been well recommended by responsible references.

(To be continued.)



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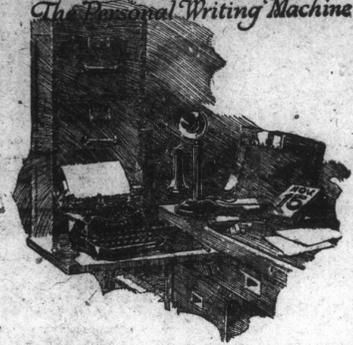
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