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Lord Cecil's Dilemma
—OR—
The Picnic
—IN—
Woodall Forest

CHAPTER V.

"Your condition, Lord Cecil? I must have back my flowers!"

He looked ahead. Lord Howard and Lady Marcia were out of sight. He could only hear the cracking of dried sticks among the trees.

"I do not like your way of treating me," he replied, savagely. "I have long regarded you as my future wife—the future Lady Stanhope." Then he bowed his head humbly, saying: "Forgive me. It is my love for you that makes me act like a bore. I only ask you to say why you want back the gift I prize so much. Only tell me the truth, and I will return the flowers to you."

To Gladys this request appeared to be adding insult to injury. What right had this man to question her? How dared he make demands and stipulations?

"I refuse to answer you, sir! Give me back my flowers!" Her eyes flashed, her bosom heaved, and she stamped her foot with passion.

This seemed to amuse Lord Stanhope. His pleasure in mere animal beauty came to the surface. He had never seen Gladys Howard angry before, and her new beauty only added to her worth in his eyes.

"What a spiteful you are, Gladys!" he laughed. "I shall not give you the flowers! Now, let's see another exhibition!"

With a quick bound, she snatched the knot of heart's-ease from his coat, the heads of the flowers snapping off in her hands; then, casting upon the astonished and discomfited young lord a glance of the bitterest hatred and scorn, she fled after her father and aunt.

They were now beyond hearing, and she reached the abbey unobserved. She went directly to her own apartments, and was glad that her maid was away.

She unlocked the door, and, having placed the unfortunate flowers, hid them away in the bottom of a tiny tortoise-shell desk.

"The miserable, wretched coward!" she muttered. "Oh, if I were only a man, that I would be a pleasure to whip him!"

CHAPTER VI.

Gladys was uncomfortably embarrassed, her rapid walk and the movement under which she had been laboring, so she bathed her hands and face, and then took a seat near an open window that commanded a magnificent view of the terraces and parks that surrounded Swinford Abbey.

Gladys was thinking, with feelings of wonderment and awe, of the change that had come into her life in a few short hours. Yesterday she was a child, with the thoughts of a child. To-day she is a woman. She has seen

her knight of old in nineteenth century costume, and she tries to imagine that great figure, that noble face, arrayed in the brave trappings of the knights of the time of the bold King Arthur—the knights that inspired the troubadours. She compared him with Lord Cecil, and she felt that she hated Lord Cecil. He was loud, vulgar, presumptuous. His good-looking face reflected no nobleness of soul, and his actions stamped him a man without delicacy, even toward the girl he thought he loved.

She shuddered. How could Sir Charles Hastings make a friend of Lord Cecil Stanhope? How could two men so totally dissimilar have one common sympathy? She shrank from the window, for the object of her thoughts was strolling toward the house, a cigar in his mouth.

A few minutes more and there was a tap at her door. She knew who it was, and admitted Lady Marcia, who uttered a sigh of relief.

"I did not know that you had come in, Gladys. Lord Cecil says that you left him quite half an hour since."

"I was tired, auntie, and have been resting."

Lady Marcia looked at her sharply, saying:

"Has that young man annoyed you, Gladys? The earl has mentioned to me something about Lord Stanhope's wish to make you his wife. I have assured him that it would be wrong for you to form any opinion upon the question until you have seen more of this world."

"My opinion is already formed, auntie," Lady Gladys replied, firmly. "Lord Cecil has annoyed me. I do not like him. I could never marry him, even if—"

"She paused, and Lady Marcia flashed the sentence for her, smilingly:

"The girl blushed painfully.

"Oh, how can you be so unkind! We are strangers! Auntie, you must never say this again!"

"My darling, I am not so blind that I cannot read what is thrust under my very eyes," said Lady Marcia. "You admire Sir Charles. You think him the most perfect type of man that you have ever beheld. You think that it would be easy for you to worship him."

"Hush, hush, auntie!" cried Gladys. "I will not have you say those dreadful things!"

"Gladys," continued Lady Marcia, "the admiration is mutual. Remember, that I have had my own romance; I loved once, and my lover was Sir Charles Hastings' uncle! I will tell you the story to-morrow. You betrayed yourself by feeling angry with Sir Charles for leaving you to go to Miss Craythorne by giving his flowers to Lord Cecil."

"Am I so silly?" murmured Gladys. "I shall be so glad to hear your story, auntie. How strange that your lover was the uncle of Sir Charles. It seems quite romantic!" Her eyes sparkled.

"Was he—were they anything alike?"

"So alike, darling, that it is not hard to fancy that I am young again, and that Sir Charles is my lover instead of yours!" She laughed mischievously, and continued: "Well, we must begin to think of dressing for

dinner. The earl will be wondering what has become of us."

She looked at her niece tenderly and lovingly for a moment, then kissed her with quivering lips, and said:

"I pray God that your love may never be misplaced or the object of your love prove unworthy, Gladys. We Howards can love but once. We are a proud, haughty race, and no member of it has ever been guilty of a dishonorable action! But our loves have been singularly unfortunate. If you enjoy the rare sweets of the opening of a perfect life, we are robbed of our happiness by death."

"Oh, don't, auntie," shuddered Gladys. "I do not like to hear you talk like this. How can there be so much suffering in so bright and beautiful a world, unless through our own foolish actions? I cannot believe that a remorseless fate pursues us unless we prepare the way by pride or folly. And death comes to all in its own season."

Lady Marcia did not reply, and Gladys felt singularly happy now. The fact of her aunt's never having been Sir Charles Hastings' uncle seemed to bring the young baronet into the warm circle of their friendship.

An hour ago he was a recent acquaintance, handsome as a demigod, courtly as a knight of old; a man who had stirred the sweet mysteries of her heart, whose glances had flushed her cheeks, whose touch had thrilled her through and through. Now he was a friend of the family. His family's history was known to her aunt. They could welcome him to the sacred warmth of their friendship without fear or scruple. The claim he had upon them was sympathetic. People like Lord Cecil Stanhope were neighbors—nothing more.

She had forgotten her brief jealousy, and she began to weave romance out of the fate she sometimes tried to ignore.

CHAPTER VII.

Sir Charles Hastings did not meet his host until luncheon next day. When Lord Cecil arrived at the Towers, he heard that his guest had returned home earlier and had gone to his room. Then, as he was not an early riser, he missed Sir Charles at breakfast. Sir Charles had gone for a stroll.

"To pay a morning call, I suspect," muttered Lord Stanhope to his mother. "He is quite smitten with Ada Craythorne."

"Then it is our duty to let Lady Craythorne know that Sir Charles is a comparative stranger to us. It would be a dreadful thing if one of the dear girls were deceived in a man who trades upon our name."

"Oh, I think Mother Craythorne—"

"Cecil!"

"Well, Lady Craythorne," he laughed. "I think she knows how to look after her chickens. We know that Hastings was in my set at college, and that he has a place in Worcester-shire, but what his income is, or what he has been up to during the past six or seven years I have no knowledge. He is a fine judge of horseflesh, though. Don't you interfere, mother, unless things get too warm. He'll be off home in a day or two, and may never come here again. I notice that he has not invited me to his place."

"Nevertheless, Cecil, I shall warn Lady Craythorne. She thinks so much of us!"

"Yes," grinned the young peer. "Wants to hook me to Flossie's skirts. Flossie is a jolly girl, you know, but she doesn't hold a candle to Lady Gladys Howard. Wouldn't represent a fellow's dignity, half so well."

Lady Stanhope looked pleased. She was anxious for her son to marry, hoping that a wife's influence would be beneficial to him. She was fully aware of his shortcomings, and scandalized by the class of people with whom he fraternized.

"Lady Gladys is a charming girl," she remarked, "but I do not think she cares for you so much as Flossie. I have watched her carefully."

"Then your perceptions are duller than I imagined," sneered Lord Cecil, angrily. He knew that she had spoken the truth. "I proposed to her yesterday, mother mine, and she accepted me!" He told this falsehood in a spirit of bravado, not dreaming that another would hear the words. "I also spoke to the earl, and he urged me to go in and win!"

(To be continued.)

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