

The Blue Cornucopia

How Matters Were Changed Because of the Search For It

By KATHARINE TYNAN

CECILIA WADE was very fond of her Aunt Jane, being a sweet-natured creature, and apt to be disproportionately grateful for kindnesses small or great. Seeing that she had had it drummed into her from babyhood that her aunt was her best friend, having done more for her than could be expected in giving her food and shelter from the world, she might well believe it. Her father, Robert Wade, had broken the hearts of all his family, according to Miss Jane Wade, by marrying a little French governess whom he had met accidentally on the Dover and Calais boat.

Other people might have thought that Miss Wade owed something to Cecilia for youth chained to her sofa and tender service most willingly rendered. But that point of view had not occurred to Miss Wade. Nor to Cecilia, for the matter of that. Cecilia acted as an unpaid nurse and maid to her Aunt Jane, read to her, wrote her letters, did her shopping and paid her bills, superintended the gardener, looked after the cats and dogs and the canary—in fact, did a hundred things, and had in return just food and shelter, the clothes she stood up in, and the tiniest allowance of pocket money.

A good many people would have been glad to be kind to Cecilia, who was a charming girl to look at—tall, slender, with brown eyes at once gentle and vivacious, a fine, colourless skin, a delightful smile, and the French politeness. The latter was something Aunt Jane never approved of in her niece. Cecilia had few people to show politeness to beyond the servants and the tradespeople, with whom Miss Wade thought her niece's manners sadly out of place. Miss Wade did not welcome casual acquaintances, she said. She had her own old friends—not one under seventy years of age. Living in London, she was not troubled by callers. When any acquaintance was offered to her she rejected it. What did she want with new people at her time of life? She never thought of Cecilia.

Cecilia was quite well aware, and had not grumbled over it, that Miss Wade's money had been spent in the purchase of an annuity, so that when the old lady was gone there would be no provision for her. To do Miss Wade justice, the money had been so invested before Cecilia had come to her—a little black-clad, white-faced orphan of seven. It had not seemed to trouble her that death would leave the girl unprovided for, beyond what her furniture and jewels and lace and other possessions might bring. She had not thought to cut down any expenses—to do without a carriage, for instance, as she might well have done in a London square. She would have said that she was Admiral Wade's daughter, and that she owed it to her father's memory to live in the way he had accustomed her to live. If Robert had wasted his substance in riotous living instead of providing for his daughter that was not to be laid at his sister's door. In her own estimation she had done more than anyone could have expected of her when she took in the orphan child and gave her a home.

So far Miss Jane Wade in the days of health. She was a very strong old lady, who had seldom suffered ache or pain, and was intolerant of such weaknesses in others. She had such a tradition of health that people who knew her were accustomed to say that she would die, as she had lived, unacquainted or with the barest nodding acquaintance with pain.

But, quite suddenly as it seemed, Miss Wade's age began to find her out. It was a long time before she would call in a doctor, looking on the suggestion when it was first made to her in the light of an affront. But presently pain and weakness made her more amenable. Like most people who have had a long period of health and strength, when she failed she failed rapidly. With illness her nature seemed to alter. She grew amazingly gentle and considerate as she became dependent. For the first time in those days of illness Miss Wade became lovable. Cecilia, whose love fed on very little, like the plants that gain life and health in the interstices of rocks, would have always said and believed that she loved Aunt Jane. Now at last it was possible really to love her; and that was a compensation to Cecilia's kind heart for the sorrow it was to see the strong, self-reliant old woman reduced to the state that she asked humbly for things to be done for her and apologized for the trouble she gave.

Cecilia was so touched by this new aspect of Aunt Jane that she could not do enough for her. She was so chained to the sick woman's room all one winter that Dr. Crispin was moved to protest.

Cecilia would lose her own health if she did not get exercise and open air. He looked compassionately at the charming face which, of late, had begun to show its age. Cecilia was thirty. After a few hours in the open air with the dogs she would have passed for twenty-five. She was such a delightful creature, so gay and gentle and humble and devoted, that Cecilia, looking her thirty years and over, affected Dr. Crispin with an odd sense of vexation and pain.

He had given Miss Wade a very gentle hint about her testamentary dispositions as regarded Cecilia.

"Cecilia will have all I have," Miss Wade had responded; and the doctor was satisfied. He had no idea that all Miss Wade had was her household furniture and personal effects. Cecilia knew and was satisfied. She would have to work for a living after Aunt Jane was taken from her, which she prayed might not be for a long time yet. She was not uneasy. Aunt Jane had said to her one day, surprisingly, unexpectedly: "When I am gone, Cecilia, I should not like you to go to Caroline Wells as companion, for Caroline Wells would be a hard task-mistress, harder than I have been. Mary Moir would be glad to have you. To be sure, she is half blind, and sits in a darkened room nearly all the year. But she would be very fond of you, and very kind to you; and you are so fond of animals that you would not mind being shut up with so many of them."

Cecilia did not protest, had not the faintest temptation to protest.

IT came, indeed, as a relief to her to think that if the sorrowful time came when she must do without Aunt Jane she would have someone to turn to. She was fond of Mrs. Moir, who was a gentle old lady. She found it easy to be good to the old, as she did to children and animals. Not a word of complaint, even in her hidden heart, of her sacrificed youth, of the dreary outlook for her future. She had already in her own mind written herself down old maid, gaily and gently, with no lurking pity for herself.

Confined to her room, her sofa, presently her bed, Aunt Jane's memory went back to the days of her youth. All the intervening years seemed to have dropped out. It was of Ardlewy, the old home of her childhood, she talked incessantly. Cecilia, listening and putting in a word now and then, came to feel that she knew Ardlewy by heart. To be sure, there were pictures and photographs to assist her. There were Aunt Jane's woolly water-colours, mainly concerned with the scenes of her youth; Miss Wade had never been a globe-trotter. There were portfolios of pencil drawings, of faded photographs. The long, white house with its golden thatch, the green-trellised porch, the drawing-room opening on to the garden, the garden with its apple-trees, its summer-house and privet-hedges, and box-borders—she seemed to know them all intimately, by heart.

At another time Miss Wade would have out her Indian shawls, her old lace, her trinkets, and go over them with Cecilia, recalling this and that happy association. "They will be all yours when I am gone, Cecilia," she would say; and Cecilia would smile gratefully through her tears, never thinking that she might have had some of them while she was still young.

Another time it would be the china and silver. Miss Wade had some beautiful possessions of that kind.

"Better send them to Christie's when I am gone. You will need the money," she said; and having said it she turned her face to the wall and was inconsolable till she forgot.

Cecilia heard all about her lovers, her conquests in the olden days—the balls she went to, the bouquets she received.

"The year I came out," she said, "there were thirty girls going out from Pulteney-street. The people said they couldn't sleep for the carriages coming back in the small hours. And it was conceded that I was the prettiest girl of the year."

Cecilia did not smile. The old memories had for her something of the fragrance of pot-pourri. After she had told her old tales several times over, Aunt Jane, in great good humour, had out her fans and presented one to Cecilia—an heirloom, painted on chicken-skin by Carl Vauloo.

"Keep it as long as you can, Ciss," she said. She had positively in these latter days given Cecilia a

pet name. Cecilia had been Cecilia all through her childhood and girlhood.

"I wish now," the old woman went on, "that I had been more careful—for your sake, child. I wish I could have left you this house and enough to keep it going, that my pretty things need not be sold. I'm afraid I've been a selfish old woman, Ciss."

Cecilia kissed her, protesting that her aunt had always been all goodness to her; and the old lady fell asleep smiling.

She awoke talking of the blue cornucopia as though she had remembered it in sleep. Cecilia knew one blue cornucopia, a piece of her aunt's rather fine collection of Nankin. Now it seemed that the blue cornucopia had once had a fellow. Somehow it had disappeared. To the old mind it seemed that the absence of the second cornucopia spoiled the collection.

"A great number of things were scattered and given away when my mother died," she said. "I wonder who could have had the blue cornucopia?"

She fretted over it all the afternoon. She could not sleep for thinking of the possible persons who might have had it. Searching back over fifty years for a vanished piece of china seemed a somewhat hopeless task. It appeared that the cornucopia had certain indentations not common in Nankin. The old lady remembered it over the fifty years as though it had been yesterday. The missing cornucopia had had a chip out of the top of it. It was Miss Wade's brother Cyril, who had died in childhood, who was responsible for that chip.

She had a bad night worrying over the cornucopia. The pair were absolutely unique. Her mother had always said that there was nothing like them in the great collections. What folly it was to have separated them!

For two or three days she fretted over the missing cornucopia, and was worse in consequence. The third night she awakened Cecilia, who slept on an uncomfortable chair-bed in the corner of the room.

"I believe, after all," she said, "that the blue cornucopia must have gone to old lady Stukeley. She was a great friend of my mother. They lived at Knoll House, Eldingham, Hants. Such a dear old house, my dear. I have lost sight of them. Lady Stukeley died abroad."

"Knoll House, Eldingham, Hampshire." Cecilia went to the writing table and put down the address. She was very sleepy. In the morning she might have forgotten all about it.

She tucked in Miss Wade carefully and tenderly. "Go to sleep now," she said. "I'm glad you have remembered the address. Don't think any more about the blue cornucopia. I am going to get it for you."

Miss Wade slept quite late in the morning. The sun was in the room and the sparrows chattering outside. Pratt, Miss Wade's maid, was knocking at the door with Cecilia's morning cup of tea when she awakened. Miss Wade seemed much better, was in a placid mood, and never mentioned the blue cornucopia.

But after breakfast, when the old lady had had her toilette made, and was asleep after the exertion, Cecilia sat down and wrote. She was uncertain at first as to how to address the letter. Finally she made up her mind, and addressed it to the Representatives of the late Lady Stukeley, Knoll House, Eldingham, Hampshire. Then she wrote her letter. She felt the quaintness of it—a request for the restoration of a piece of china given more than fifty years ago. Why, there might be no one to receive it. Lady Stukeley might have left no representatives.

HOWEVER, she made her statement simply. Miss Wade was old, in failing health. She had set her heart on finding the missing cornucopia of the pair. It fretted her, and prevented her sleeping. If Lady Stukeley's representatives were still possessed of the cornucopia, and willing to part with it, Miss Wade would be glad to buy it back.

After she had posted the letter, without saying anything to her aunt about it, she had a set-back. Miss Wade remembered the cornucopia, thought she remembered that it had been broken by a careless maid sixty years ago. So Cecilia's letter had been written in vain.

She said to herself that her letter would, in all probability, be returned to her through the Dead Letter Office. A more experienced person than Cecilia would have discovered ways and means of

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