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The Broken Circle!

CHAPTER LIV.

"I will not," he promised. "Accept my best thanks," she said, holding out her hand to him. "I knew there was something radically wrong; I am happier and easier, now that I understand what it is. You have done me a service, farewell!"

He thought of her a hundred times. He wished that he had detained her, that he had forced her to send for her friends. He reproached himself until the end of his life, and yet he had not been to blame.

"You look better to-night, Leah," said the duchess. The deadly pallor had left the fair face, and there was a smile in the dark eyes. "I feel more at ease about you."

Leah smiled to herself. She was better because she was drawing nearer to the golden shore.

There followed two quiet, peaceful, and happy weeks, of which Hettie liked to think afterward. It struck her at times that Leah looked weak and ill, but she made no complaint.

News came from England that Sir Basil had been returned member for the county. The duke and duchess were delighted. Hettie was pleased, and talked more about it than she talked of anything else.

Leah went to her room; the sun shone bright and warm, and the air was full of the perfume of flowers. She was tired, with a peculiar feeling of longing for rest which was new to her, and her senses had been suddenly sharpened. She could see further; she could hear with almost painful distinctness. She had a letter to write, but the feeling of fatigue was so strong upon her that she was hardly inclined to commence her task. "I will do it at once, and then it will not trouble me," she said to herself. She went to one of her jewel-cases which was kept locked, and which opened only with a peculiar key. From it she took the small ring case that Sir Basil had given her, and drew from it the old-fashioned wedding-ring with which she was to have been married. But, as she lifted it from the case, it

snapped and fell in two in her hands. Whether it had been put away in some awkward fashion, or whether some one in looking over the jewel-case, had taken the ring out, accidentally broken it, and replaced it without mentioning the fact, she could not tell. She was not superstitious, she did not think it an omen or augury of evil, but it gave her a terrible shock. She trembled as though some great disaster had occurred. She had intended to write to Sir Basil, and return him the ring, leaving the letter to be handed to him. Now it lay broken in two—the ring that had been worn by so many faithful wives, that had been given by so many loving husbands—the ring that she had received with such loving trust and confidence—the ring that she had hoped to wear until she lay dead and Basil took it from her.

It was broken now, like her love, her heart, her life. What would Basil do? she wondered. Would he have it mended? Would Hettie ever wear it? She had never shed a tear since she had found that Basil did not love her, but her eyes grew dim as she looked at the broken ring. She kissed it as though it had been a living thing and understood her action.

A broken wedding-ring is never a pleasant sight, and is always supposed to be an omen of misfortune, but there was something unutterably sad about this. It signified so much; the heart of the girl to whom it belonged was broken as surely as the wedding-ring which lay before her. She snapped in two. She took the two halves and folded them in a sheet of paper, sealed it, and addressed it to Sir Basil, then she drew towards her a sheet of paper to write the letter which she felt was to be the last she would ever pen.

(To be continued.)

Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—

The Picnic

—in—

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER II.

"I am so glad, Edward."

"One question, Marcia. I am surprised to find Gladys a woman. I have kept no count of time. Of course, she has seen little of society!" The earl looked anxiously at his sister.

"Very little," Lady Marcia admitted. "A few garden parties and balls. We do not have many visitors, Edward; the Stanhopes are among our few friends. You remember Cecil? He is now a fine young fellow."

"No, I don't remember much of the boy. His father's death was very sudden, poor fellow. He was master of the Beagles the year I captained the Light Blues. I wanted to ask you if Gladys is troubled with lovers? You know what young people are!"

Lady Marcia smiled. "I do not think so," she said, quickly. "Lord Cecil appears to be very fond of her, but Gladys is not an ordinary girl."

The earl looked pleased. He wanted his daughter to herself for a little while. He knew no lover could be so devoted as he would be.

"Lord Cecil and some other people

will be here to-morrow, Edward."

Lady Marcia observed. "The arrangements have been made for some time for a flower bazaar to be held in Swinford Meadows, behind the park. The clergyman is very anxious to make a success of it, as the church is in need of funds. You do not object?"

"Why should I? I left my affairs in the hands of my steward—I left the conduct of everything between you and Collins, Marcia. I am not so selfish that I wish to be a spoilsport. I hope that the flower show will be a great success. Let the vicar have the choicest blooms we can afford."

"And," Lady Marcia continued, "Gladys has promised to preside at one of the tables."

"To sell flowers to idiotic young men!" The earl looked annoyed. "I confess that that does not please me, but it is too late to draw back. I understand what these affairs are. A worthless flower from the hands of a high-born beauty commands a ready sale at a fabulous figure. Flower shows and bazaars are legal swindles. Marcia, I will escort Gladys to the flower show. My sudden appearance will cause a little sensation, but society will receive its dues from me later on!"

He seemed pleased at the prospect; there was a smile on his face, a springiness in his step that Lady Marcia had missed for many years.

The next morning he had the servants before him in the hall. They were almost all old faces. Many had grown gray in the service of the Howards, and dreamed of a cottage on the estate and a modest pension.

My lord spoke to them kindly, and asked them to welcome him home again. He had returned to stay. He did not want any noisy demonstration, but he proposed a garden fete for the servants any day they liked. It might be a grand affair, and they were at liberty to invite their friends. My lord would bear the expense, and the grounds were at their service. Let it be in one or two weeks. He would leave the arrangements entirely in their hands.

They were too well trained to give vent to their feelings noisily, but their faces beamed with pleasure, and the butler thanked the earl in a neat little speech.

Lord Howard was surprised to find himself feeling happier and more youthful. He had the painting of the lost lady of the house—his sainted wife—restored to its rightful place in the magnificent gallery.

He looked at it reverently, and he fancied that the smiling eyes were filled with fond approval!

Then he thought of his beautiful daughter Gladys, and murmured, rapturously:

She is the most peerless girl in all England!"

He sat in silence for a little while, then muttered, passionately:

"Why need she ever know! Surely the evil fate that has pursued me will not darken her young and innocent life! How many times have I wished that I had no child! Bah! I defy the croakings of superstition; they shall no longer weigh upon my spirits, and from this day I commence a new life!"

(To be continued.)

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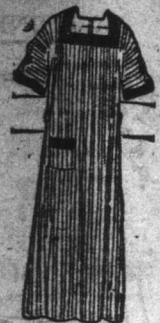
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