

# MAGIC BAKING POWDER



## Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—  
The Picnic

—IN—  
Woodall Forest

CHAPTER VIII.

"I have little more to say. I only wish you to go. My grief is greater than I can express. It appears that you have been living beyond your means, and have had to stoop to theft—"

"I deny the theft," was the fierce reply. "Now, what are your intentions? I have expected this; I have known all along that you had set a watch upon me—"

"The action of the solicitors; I would never have dreamed of doubting you, Collins," the earl said, regretfully; "but why need we go further into this painful matter? I have no desire or intention to press the charge against you; I only ask you to resign your position, and there is an end of it."

"You are very kind," was the sarcastic reply. "And I must go into the world and starve; I must give up everything—my friends—my social position—all, to suit you."

The earl glanced at Collins in astonishment, and Lady Marcia thought that he had taken leave of his senses.

"I thank you for not being at the root of the espionage that has been set upon me, and owe you an apology for the bitter thoughts I have felt toward you; I have no doubt that I shall get even with the solicitors before long. And now, my lord, if you will have the consideration to persuade Lady Marcia to withdraw, I will tell you why I am not a thief, at least in my own estimation, and why

I shall continue here as your steward, notwithstanding your present wishes to the contrary."

Lady Marcia's eyes sparkled with anger, and she looked at her brother, expecting that he would have the man ejected from the house; but there was no anger in my lord's white face, and his hands had dropped nervously to his sides.

"I don't know that I ought to listen to you, Collins," he said, weakly, tenation of the charges preferred against you is of too painful a nature for Lady Marcia's ears. I am sure she will not desire to stay. My own opinion is that my solicitors should be present."

"Your opinion will soon change," smiled Collins, his lips curling. He fixed upon the earl a significant look—a look that had made him fear the man long ago.

Lady Marcia rose, for she had rightly interpreted her brother's tone and glance, and left the library, her heart filled with mingled curiosity and unhappy forebodings.

When the door had closed behind her, the steward nodded in a satisfied way, and addressed the earl in cool, even tones:

"I have anticipated all this, my lord," he said; "I knew that you would return some day and investigate my conduct. It is now time that we came to some sort of an understanding, and I am sorry that it is not all over—sorry, because we have more opposition or encounter now that we should have had a week since."

"You will come to the point, please," interrupted the earl. "Certainly!" was the quick and almost angry reply. "In the first place, I refuse to resign my position because I know what is hidden behind your panel containing three black fenders!"

"God in heaven!" gasped the earl, dropping his face into his hands. "I

half-expected this, and yet I tried to hope that none knew! Spare me, Collins, for the sake of my child!"

"The secret is safe with me, my lord," was the quick rejoinder. "I saw you drag the body from the lake and hide it here. I knew that, much as you loved the countess, it was not her death alone that made of you an exile and a wanderer."

"Collins, believe me, before Heaven, I am not a murderer. It was accidental; he struck me, and we struggled to the brink of the lake. I did not even know him; I did not know who the dead man was until weeks afterward. I knew not how long he was in the water, for I became half-unconscious, and when I recovered his dead face was turned upward, and looked horrible in the moonlight. I feared the consequence, for I was supposed to be miles away. I had visited Marcia in secret, and dreaded my father's anger. I was married then, Collins, and the old earl never forgave me. I saw the library window open, and, knowing the secret of the black panel, I hid the body of my unknown assailant in the recess beyond."

"I knew all this," said Collins, pityingly; "but do not think that I have used the money which is supposed to be yours because of this knowledge; I am not so despicable as that. I have used this money because I have an equal right to it—because I have desired to educate my children, to give them the advantages to which they are morally and legally entitled."

He paused, and the earl gazed at him in utter bewilderment.

"Because you have an equal right to it!" he repeated. "Let me know your meaning at once."

"My lord," the steward went on, "can it be possible that you have never suspected that I am your half-brother? Do we not resemble each other in every way, only that I am dark and you are fair?"

"Collins, what madness is this?" gasped Lord Howard.

"Only that my mother was the woman the old earl loved, and yours the woman his family approved."

"Then you are his illegitimate child?" the earl whispered, huskily.

"I thought so until two years ago," the steward replied, quietly.

"You thought so!" hissed the earl. "Man, are you aware of what you insinuate?"

"I insinuate nothing, Lord Howard; I state a fact. My mother was legally married to the earl, our father. I have proved it beyond question, and I am the rightful heir. Do not mistake; our father was not a villain; my mother died before he wedded yours. She died believing that her husband was plain Arthur Collins, a comparatively poor man. I do not wish to press these claims; I am still Collins, the steward; but I must have my stipend trebled; I must have the suit of Lord Cecil Stanhope—who aspires to the honor of leading Lady Gladys to the altar—I must have his suit looked upon with favor. Some day you shall know why! I have two daughters; they are clever, handsome girls—they are true Howards. To each of these you must bequeath a suitable allowance; to each you must give a suitable wedding present—a check for ten or twelve thousand. If you agree to this, there will be no scandal, and the fate of Edgar Emden may ever remain a secret! Think well over what I have said to you, my lord, and if you are willing to adopt my suggestions, I must have everything embodied in writing within a week. I have my family to think of; I care nothing for myself. I, the rightful heir of the title and estates of Swinford Abbey, am content to remain Arthur Collins, my lord's humble servant and steward. Good evening, Edward, I use your Christian name for once with brotherly familiarity. Take my hand for once in brotherly love. We are of the same flesh, but I am an unfortunate; I was not born in luck's way. You were!" He laughed sarcastically, and the earl shivered. "I have lived so long in obscurity that I have no ambition to emerge from it. I only want comfort and a competence. I enjoy myself very well in my own way. One thing I must request, Edward—say, insist upon. You must dispense with the future service of the lawyers who have made themselves so busy. Promise me this!"

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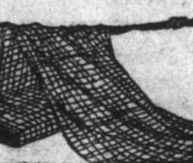
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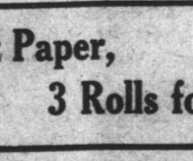
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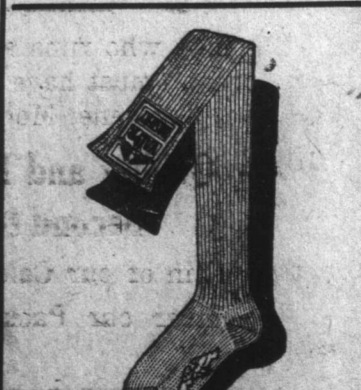
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(To be continued.)