

Lord Cecil's Dilemma

—OR—

The Picnic

—in—

Woodall Forest

CHAPTER VIII

The Earl of Swinford's Steward. The Earl of Swinford did not get through with his business until the day after the picnic, and when he reached home he was looking worn and troubled.

Almost the first thing he did was to send for his sister, Lady Marcia, and when they were alone he unbundled himself.

"Marcia, what is your opinion of Collins, my trusted steward?" he demanded.

"My opinion of Collins? What an extraordinary question, Edward!" cried Lady Marcia. "Collins had had the management of the estate since we were children. No one has ever questioned him!"

"Marcia, I am greatly troubled; I have a most painful duty to perform. I have to question the steward's honesty. My lawyers have had charge of the accounts, as you are aware, and they have suspected Collins for some years. He has drawn large sums of money for the erection of new cottages—for repairs—for modern machinery on the farm; he has robbed the tenants; he has falsified his accounts in every conceivable way. This has been going on for years, and I am the cause of it. The man has felt safe; he has had no master. The lawyers have employed a detective, and I am in possession of every proof of Collins' guilt. He has enriched himself at my expense, and the blow falls heavily upon me."

"I can scarcely believe it," Lady Marcia said.

"It is only too true; I could not believe it myself, until everything was laid before me in black and white. The lawyers wanted me to institute criminal proceedings forthwith, but I cannot do that. These men are like butchers; they have no heart or feeling. They think that he can be made to disgorge the money he has obtained by fraud; but it is my fault, and I will suffer the loss."

He paced the room in great agitation for a few moments; then he went on:

"Marcia, I cannot rest until this affair has been dealt with. I must see Collins here at seven o'clock, and I want you to be present. You have represented me for so many years that I want your support now. Let one of the servants find Collins, with instructions to be here at seven. Until then I will rest; I am completely unnerved."

"I will see that he is here, Edward," said Lady Marcia. "I hope that he will be able to clear himself, but—"

"It is absolutely impossible!" the earl interrupted, sadly, and Lady Marcia left him.

My lord could not tell why he was so nervous and upset. He tried to argue with himself, but came to no satisfactory conclusion.

"It is the shock," he thought, "the shock of finding that one's most trusted servant is a scoundrel. Collins is an old man, comparatively; he is fifty years of age, and has held a position of trust for thirty years. He must have been a young man when my father placed so much power in his hands; he must have had exceptional references."

He passed his hand through his hair, and remembered that Collins

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had always been a mysterious individual, a man of strong personality, who had always avoided the present earl. It seemed to him that the golden brightness of the future that had opened to him a few days since was fading away like a baseless vision.

"Why did I return?" he muttered, his eyes filled with anguish. "With that memory haunting me like a ghoul that feeds upon the living! Why could I not have died abroad? My child would have known little sorrow then; but I believe that she cares for me now. Have I only come back surrounded by an atmosphere of misery? And is this trouble with Collins merely the precursor of man's griefs for those who are dear to me?" Then he straightened himself, with an angry gesture of self-contempt, adding: "I'm a coward. My duty is here—my place at the head of my household, and I will tell Marcia all, even if she hate me for it. Perhaps, then, the past will not haunt me so remorselessly."

He rested for several hours; then dressed for dinner. He ate little, and Gladys did not trouble him with her chatter; for Lady Marcia had told her of some trouble with the steward, which had caused them both surprise and grief.

At seven o'clock the earl and Lady Marcia left the dining-room for the central library, where the business books of the estate were kept, and where business consultations had been held concerning all that appertained to the Swinford estates for nearly three centuries. This was one of the few original rooms of the first abbey buildings. It was lofty and spacious, and filled with cunning nooks, cupboards and sliding panels. The Swinford archives contained many interesting and curious notes, in which the central library was frequently mentioned. When the defenders of the abbey were overpowered by the crop-sared knives of Noll Cromwell, they had found refuge in the central library, and disappeared unaccountably. It was surmised that the solid masonry had been moved by secret springs, and that beyond it were subterranean passages that led to liberty. But the rough walls were now paneled with boards of stout oak, the floors covered with the richest and the softest of Turkey carpets, and the lofty ceiling had been responsible for these innovations, though he considered it an act of vandalism to cut down an old tree or chip off a bit of stone from the ancient walls of the

abbey.

The steward did not keep my lord waiting; within a few minutes of seven he was announced, and entered the library with a quick firm step. He bowed to Lady Marcia, and, while welcoming the earl, glanced keenly at him.

"I have not been able to see you before, my lord," he observed. "Your return home was quite unexpected, and I was in Cornwall until this morning, arranging about the purchase of half-a-dozen draught horses of exceptional breed."

The earl did not believe one word of this, and he motioned the steward to be seated.

As Collins crossed the room, the earl could not help noticing his air of hauteur and defiance. Collins was nothing like one's preconceived idea of a gentleman's steward. He was a portly, handsome man of distinguished appearance. He was a gentleman both in manner and speech, and might have been taken for the earl's elder brother. No one would have guessed that he was the lord's inferior in birth and education, much less his servant.

"I suppose that it is your wish, my lord, to go through my accounts? The attorneys have been regularly supplied with copies, and the books are at your disposal any time after to-morrow."

"I desire to speak with you concerning the accounts, Collins," began the earl, stiffly, "and request you to deliver up your books at once."

"It appears that this may be a painful interview," answered the steward, "and I suggest, my lord, that Lady Marcia's presence is not necessary."

Lord Howard was astonished by the audacity of Mr. Collins, and again that nervous dread crept over him.

"Collins," continued the earl, coldly, "I have no desire to prolong this interview; I have sent for you to let you know that your career of theft is at an end."

"Be careful, my lord!"

"Absolute and indisputable proof has been placed before me, and your defalcations amount to more than twenty thousand pounds. You have robbed me, and you have robbed my tenants, upon an elaborate plan of fraud."

The steward laughed bitterly.

"Go on," he said.

(To be continued.)

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