

The Diamond Coterie

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(Continued)

CHAPTER XVIII.

It is night, late and lowering; especially gloomy in that quarter of W— where from the great ugly rows of tenements that are inhabited by the factory toilers; for the gloom and smoke of the great engines brood over the roofs night and day, and the dust and cinders could only be made noticeable by their absence.

In a small cottage, at the end of a row of larger houses, a woman is busy clearing away the fragments of a none too beautiful supper. A small woman, with a sour visage, and not one ounce of flesh on her person that is not absolutely needed to screen from mortal gaze a bone.

A woman with a long, sharp nose, two bright, ferret-like brown eyes, and rasping voice, that seems to have worn itself thin asking hard questions of Providence, from sunrise till dark.

The table has been spread for two, but the second party at the banquet, a gamine so aged seven, has swallowed his own and all he could get of his mother's share, and betaken himself to the streets, night though it be.

The woman moves about, now and then muttering to herself as she works. The room is shabbily furnished, and not over neat, for its mistress spends her days in the great mill hard by, and house-keeping has become a secondary matter.

Only the needs of life find their demands honored in this part of W—. Too often needs get choked and die of the smoke and the cinders.

It is late, for the woman has been doing extra work; it is stormy, too, blustering and spattering rain. Yet she pauses occasionally and listens to a passing footfall, as though she expected a visitor.

At last, when the final touch has made the room as tidy as it ever is, or as she thinks it need be, there comes a shuffling of feet outside, and a tremendous thump on the rickety door. After which, as if he was sufficiently heralded, in comes a man, a big man, muffled to the eyes in a huge coat, which he slowly draws down and draws off, disclosing to the half curious, half contemptuous gaze of the woman the auburn locks and highly tinted countenance of Mr. John Burrill.

"So," she says, in her shrillest voice, "it's you, is it? It seems one is never to be rid of you at any price."

"Yes, it's me—all of me," the man replies, as if confirming a doubtful statement. "Why, now; you act as if you didn't expect me."

"And no more I did," says the woman sullenly and most untruthfully. "It's a wonder to me that you can't stay away from here, after all that's come and gone."

"Well, I can't," he retorts, amiably rubbing his hands together. "Anyhow, I won't, which means about the same thing. Where's the little duffer?"

"He's where you were at his age, I expect," she replies grimly.

"Well, and if he only keeps on as I have, until he gets up to my present age, he won't be in a bad boat, eh, Mrs. Burrill the first?"

"He's got too much of his mother's grit to be where you are, John Burrill, livin' a lackey among people that despise you because you have got a hand on 'em somewhere. I want to know if you don't think they will choke you off some day when they are done using you?"

John Burrill seated himself astride a low wooden chair, and propelling it and himself forward by a movement of the feet and a "hitch" of the shoulders, he leaned across the chair back in his most facetious manner, and addressed her with severe eloquence.

"Look here, Mrs. Burrill number one, don't you take advantage of your position, and ride the high horse too free. It's something to 'ave been Mrs. J. Burrill once, I'll admit; but don't let it elevate you too much. You ain't quite so handsome as the present Mrs. Burrill, neither are you so young, consequently you don't show off so well in a tantrum. Now the present Mrs. Burrill—"

"Oh, then she does have tantrums, the present Mrs. Burrill," sneered the woman, fairly quivering with suppressed rage. "One would think she would be so proud of you that she could excuse all your little faults. Brooks says that they all talk French up there, so that you can't wring into their confabs, John."

"Does he?" remarked Burrill, quietly, but with an ominous gleam in his ugly eyes. "Brooks must be careful of that tongue of his. You may reckon that they all stop their French when I begin to talk. Now don't be disagreeable, Nance; it ain't every man that can take a rise in the world like me, and I don't put on airs, and hold myself above my old friends. Do you think that every man could step into such a family as I belong to, Mrs. Burrill? No one can say that John Burrill's a common fellow after that feat."

"No, but a great many can say that. John Burrill's a mean fellow, too mean to walk over. Do you think the men as you worked along side of, and drank and sipped with, don't know what you are, John Burrill? Do you think that they don't all know that your outrageous vanity has made a fool of you? Chance threw into your hands a secret of the Lamottes; you need not stare, we ain't fools down here at the factories. Maybe I know what that secret is, and maybe I don't. It's no matter. I know more of your doings than you give me credit for, John Burrill. Now, what must you do? Blackmail would have satisfied a sensible man; but

straightway you are seized with the idea that you were born to be a gentleman. You! Then you form your plan; and you force, by means of the power in your hands, that beautiful young lady to marry you."

"Seems to me," interrupts the man who has been listening quite contentedly, "that you are getting along too fast with your story."

"Yes, I am too fast. When you first hatched out this plan you came to me and put a pistol to my head, and swore that if I didn't apply for a divorce from you at once, you would blow my brains out. I had sworn more than once to have a divorce; and Lord knows I had cause enough; what, with the drunkenness and the beatings, and the idleness, and the night prowlin', and all the rest; but I never expected that."

The woman paused for a moment, and then resumed her tirade of mixed eloquence and bad grammar.

"I didn't expect to be drove into the divorce court at the point of a pistol, but that's how it ended, and you was free to torment Miss Lamotte, poor young thing! Don't you let yourself think that I envied her! Lord knows I had had enough of you, and your meanness, but I pitied her; and if I had knocked out your brains, as I've been tempted to do a dozen times, when you have rolled in here drunk, I'd have done her a good turn, and myself too. The time was when Nance Ferguson was your equal, and more too; but you left England with the notion that here you would be the equal of anybody, and you've never got clear of the idea. I've tried to make you understand that there's a coarse breed of folks, same's there is of dogs, and that you are a mighty coarse breed. I've lived out with gentle folks over the water, and they were none of your sort. But, go on John Burrill, the low women you are so fond of, and the girls at the factory, have called you good lookin', until your head is turned with vanity. You have got yourself in among the upper class, no matter how, and I suppose you expect your good looks to do the rest for you. I mind once when I was at service in Herefordshire, the Squire had a fine young beast in his cattle yard, black an' sleek, an' handsome to look at, and the young ladies came down from the big house and looked at it through the fence, and called it a 'beautiful creature,' but all the same they led it away to the slaughter house with a ring in its nose, and the young ladies dined off it with a relish."

John Burrill stroked his nasal organ fondly, as if discerning some connection between that protuberance and the aforementioned ring; but he made no attempt to interrupt her.

"You was had enough in England, John Burrill; what with your poaching and your other misdeeds, and sorry was the day when I left a good place to come away from the country with you, because it was gettin' too hot for you to stay there. You couldn't get along without me then; and you can't get along now it seems, for all your fine feathers, without you come here sometime to brag of your exploits, and pretend you are lookin' after the boy."

"Nance," said Burrill, "you're a fine old bird! 'Ow I'd like to set you at my old father-in-law, blast him, when he rides it too rough sometimes, and what a sociable little discourse you could lay down for the ladies too, Nance; but, are you about done? You've been clean over the old ground, seems to me, tho' I may have dozed a little here and there. Have you been over the old business, and brought me over the water, by the nape of the neck; because, if you haven't—no, I see you have not, so here's to you, Nance, spin on;" and he took from his pocket a black bottle, and drank a mighty draught therefrom.

"No, I'm not done," screamed the woman. "You've come here to-night, as you have before, for a purpose; one would think that such a fine gentleman could find better society, but it seems you can't. You never come here for nothing; you never come for any good; you want something! What is it?"

He laughed a low, hard laugh.

"Yes," he said, taking another pull at the black bottle; "I want something."

"Umph! I thought so."

"I want to tell you," here he arose, and dropping his careless manner, laid a threatening hand upon her arm. "I want to tell you, Nance Burrill, that you have got to bridle that tongue of yours; d'ye understand me?"

She shook off his hand, and retired a few paces eyeing him closely as she said:—

"Oh! I thought so. Something has scared ye already."

"No, I'm not scared; that thing can't be done by you, Nance; but you have been blowing too much among the factory people, and I won't have it."

"Won't have what?"

"Won't have any more of this talk about going to my wife with stories about me."

"Who said I threatened?"

"No matter, you don't do much that I don't hear of, so mind your eye, Nance. As for the women at the bend, you let them alone, and keep your tongue between your teeth."

"Oh! I will; one can't blame you for seeking the society of your equals, after the snubbing you must get from your letters up there. But that don't satisfy you; you must drag that poor fellow, Evan Lamotte, into their den; as if he

were not wild enough, before you came where you could reach him."

John Burrill took another pull at the black bottle.

"Evan's a good fellow," he said somewhat thickly. "He knows enough to appreciate a man like me, and we loth have larks, now let me tell you."

"Well, have your larks; but don't sit and drink yourself blind before my very eyes. Why don't you go?"

"Cause I don't wan'er—," growing more and more mellow, as the liquor went fuming to his head, already pretty heavily loaded with brandy and wine.

"Where's the little rooster, I tell yer."

"In the streets, and he's too much like his father to ever come home, 'till he's gone after, and dragged in."

"Well, go and drag him in then, I'm goin' ter see 'im."

"I won't!" shrieked the woman, now fairly beside herself with rage; "go home to your lady wife, and take her my compliments; tell her that I turned you out."

John Burrill staggered to his feet, uttering a brutal oath.

"You'll turn me out, will you? You say won't to me; you are forgetting my training, Mrs. Nance; I'll teach you that John Burrill's yer master yet; go for the boy."

But the woman did not stir.

"You won't eh!" clutching her fiercely, and shaking her violently, "now will you?"

"No, you brute."

"Then, take that, and that, and that!" A rain of swift blows; a shriek ringing out on the stillness of the night; then a swift step, the door dashed in, and John Burrill is measuring his length upon the bare floor.

The woman reels, as the clutch of the miscreant loosens from her arm, but recovers herself and turns a bruised face toward the timely intruder. It is Clifford Heath.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asks, anxiously.

She lifts a hand to her poor bruised face, and aching head, and then sinking into a chair says, wearily:—

"It's nothing—for me. Look out, sir!"

This last was an exclamation of warning. John Burrill had staggered to his feet, and was aiming an unsteady blow at the averted head of Doctor Heath.

The latter turned swiftly, comprehending the situation at a glance, and once more felled the brute to the floor.

By this time others had appeared upon the scene—neighbors, roused by the cry of the woman.

Doctor Heath bent again to examine her face. He had scarcely observed the features of the man he had just knocked down; and he now asked:—

"Is—this man your husband, madam?"

"The woman reddened under her bruises. "He was my husband," she said, bitterly. "He is—John Burrill."

Clifford Heath started back, thinking, first of all, of Sybil, and realizing that there must be no scandal, that could be avoided, for her sake. He had never seen Burrill, save at a distance, but had heard, as had every one in W—, of his divorced wife.

Turning to one of the neighbors, he said: "I was passing on my way home from Mrs. Brown's, when I heard this alarm. I think, good people, that we had better let this fellow go away quietly, and attend to this woman. Her face will be badly swollen by and by." Then he turned once more toward Burrill.

Once more the miscreant was struggling to his feet, and at a command from Doctor Heath, he hastened his efforts. Hitherto, he had had only a vision of a pair of flashing dark eyes, and an arm that shot out swiftly, and straight home.

Now, however, as he gained an erect posture, and turned a threatening look upon his assailant, the onlookers, who all knew him, and all hated and feared him, saw a sudden and surprising transformation. The red all died out of his face, the eyes seemed starting from their sockets, the lower jaw dropped abjectly and suddenly, and with a yell of terror, John Burrill lowered his head and dashed from the house, as if pursued by a legion of spectres.

(To be Continued.)

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