

The Diamond Coterie

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(Continued.)

"It's the only way," she repeated. "They have left me but one weapon, and it's for my life!" and the lips set themselves in hard lines, and the dark eyes looked steeley and resolute. What wild purpose was taking shape in the tortured brain of Sybil Burrill? planted there by the impulsive revelation of Constance Wardour.

While the lurid light yet shone from her eyes, there came a tap upon the door, and then Mrs. Lamotte's voice called:—"Sybil, are you there?"

"Yes, mamma."

Sybil gathered up the jewels once more, hastily and putting them under lock and key, admitted her mother. Mrs. Lamotte was never a demonstrative parent. She glanced anxiously at her daughter, and the look upon the pale face did not escape her eye; but she made no comment, only saying:—"I heard Constance drive away, and thought I should find you alone. Do you feel equal to a drive, Sybil?"

Sybil hesitated, and then answered:—"I think so, mamma, if you wish to go out."

"I have some shopping to do, and—it's best for us to go out a little. Don't you think so?"

"It's best that we keep up appearances, certainly mamma; for what else do we exist? Shall we take the honorable Mr. Burrill?"

Mrs. Lamotte shrugged her shoulders. "By no means," she replied. "Mr. Burrill, if his feelings are too much hurt, shall drive with me to-morrow. It's an honor he has been thirsting for."

"He has indeed, mamma; the creature is insatiable."

Mrs. Lamotte arose with one of her cold smiles.

"For the present let us ignore him, Sybil," she said. "Make an elaborate driving toilet, we want the admiration of W—, not his pity." And having thus uttered one article of her creed, Mrs. Lamotte swept away to prepare for the ordeal, for such that drive would be to those two proud women.

No one could have guessed it, however, when an hour later, the elegant barouche, drawn by two superb grays, rolled through the streets of W—. Two richly dressed, handsome, high-bred, smiling women; that is what W— saw, and all he saw; and light-hearted poverty looked, and envied; little knowing the sorrow hidden underneath the silk and lace, and the misery that was masked in smiles.

Meantime, John Burrill, left to his own devices, found time drag heavily. Frank had abandoned him, as soon as it became known that Constance was gone; and had abandoned himself to a fit of rage, when he became aware that his black mare was also gone. Mr. Lamotte had driven to town with his own light buggy; Sybil was gone, Evan was gone; even his stately mother-in-law was beyond the reach of his obnoxious pleasantries.

He ordered up a bottle of wine, and drank it in the spirit of an ill used man. Always, in his perfectly sober moments, John Burrill felt oppressed with a sense of the difference existing between himself and the people among whom he had chosen to cast his lot.

Not that he recognized, or admitted, his inferiority; had he not demonstrated to the world, that he, John Burrill, sometime mill worker, and overseer, was a man of parts, a self-made man.

When he had quaffed a bottle of wine, he began to feel oppressed in a different way. He was overburdened with a sense of his own genius, and in a very amiable frame of mind, altogether. In this mood, he joined the family at dinner; after which meal, a few glasses of brandy added fire to the smouldering element within him, and straightway he blazed forth: a gallant, a coxcomb. In this frame of mind, he always admired himself excessively, took stock of his burly legs and brawny shoulders, and smiled sentimentally before the mirror, at his reflected face.

There were people who called John Burrill a handsome man; and if one had a fancy for a round head, with depressions where bumps are desirable, and vice versa, and an animal sort of attractiveness of feature, consisting of a low, flat forehead, straight nose, large, full, flared mouth, fair florid complexion set off by a pair of dark blue eyes, that were devoid of any kindly expression, and hair, full beard, and moustache, of a reddish brown hue, coarse in quality, but plentiful in quantity, and curling closely; then we will admit that John Burrill was handsome. Why not? We can

see handsome bovines at any fat cattle show.

After this elation, came the fourth stage: a mixture of liquors as the evening advanced, and then John Burrill became jealous of his rights, careful of his dignity, crafty, quarrelsome, and difficult to manage. Next he became uproarious, then maudlin; then blind, beastly drunk, and utterly regardless where he laid him down, to finish the night, for his last stage usually dragged itself far into the small hours.

Gluttonous and meditative in the morning; beginning to swell with a growing sense of importance about mid-day; amorous, obtrusive, and consequential later; hilarious after dinner; quarrelsome before tea; and down in the ditch before dawn. This was Burrill's notion of enjoying life in leisurely, gentlemanly fashion. And this was his daily

routine, with variations to suit the occasion.

But sober or drunk, morning, noon, or night, he never ceased to remind the Lamottes that he was one of them, their equal; never forgot his purpose, or allowed them to forget it, or him. He was their old man of the sea, their blight, their curse, and, they could never hope to shake him off.

CHAPTER XVI.

Sybil sat alone in her boudoir. It was yet early in the evening, but, feeling little inclined to remain in the society of her family, who assembled, with all due formality, in the drawing room on "at home" evenings, and most of their evenings were spent at home now, she had withdrawn, pleading fatigue after their drive.

The night outside was balmy enough, but Sybil had ordered a light fire in the grate, and she sat before it with all the rays from a fully illuminated chandelier falling directly over her.

She still wore the rich dress she had put on for her drive; and excitement, exercise, something, had lent an unusual glow to her cheeks, and caused her dusky eyes to shine clear and steady, almost too clear, too steadfast, was their gaze as it was fixed upon the glowing coals; she had not looked so thoughtful, so self-forgetful, yet self-absorbed, since she came to Mapleton, John Burrill's wife.

Sitting thus, she heard a shuffling step in the hall, and the heavy voice of her husband, treading out a snatch of song, caught up most likely in some bar-room.

He was approaching her door, and quick as thought she sprang from her chair, and noiselessly examined the fastenings, to assure herself against him.

Then, while her hand still rested on the door, his hand struck a huge blow upon the outside, and he called out gruffly:—"Sybil."

No answer; she dared not move, lest the rustle of her silks should betray her. "Sybil, I say, lemme in." Still no reply, and John Burrill shook the door violently, and ground out an oath.

Just then came the sound of another door further up the hall, her mother's door. It opened easily, and closed softly, and then quick, cat-like steps approached, and the voice of Jasper Lamotte, low and serene as usual, arrested the noise of the baffled applicant for admittance.

"Less noise, Burrill." Sybil had not heard her father address him in that tone of familiar command. "Sybil's not there."

"Jes zif I didn't know better."

"Nonsense, man; your wife is below with her mother at this moment. Now stop that fuss, and shake yourself out. I've some private words for your ear."

"Oh," the man's voice dropped a tone lower; "quite a time since we've had many private words. 'Bout Sybil?"

"No, sir." The tone was lower than before, and so stern that it caused the listener to start. "It's about your business and mine."

"Oh! maybe you want to settle up and discharge me. Maybe you don't need me any more."

"Curse you for a fool! You know your own value too well. Bully as you please, where the rest are concerned, but drop your airs with me. Settle with Sybil later, if you must; I want you now."

Could it be Jasper Lamotte that uttered these words; rather, hissed them? Sybil almost betrayed herself in her surprise; but the gasp that she could not quite stifle, was drowned by the voice of Burrill, saying:—"All right, I'll settle with Sybil later."

And then she heard them enter her mother's room, and close the door softly.

For a full moment Sybil Burrill stood transfixed; then the silken folds that she had instinctively gathered about her at the first, slowly slipped from her hand; gradually the color that had fled from her cheeks came back, and burned brighter than before. She seemed to control herself by a strong effort, and stood thinking—thinking.

Only a few moments; then she lifted her head with a gesture of defiance. Swiftly and noiselessly she moved under the chandelier, drew it down, and extinguished every light. Then softly, cautiously, she opened her door and looked out, listened thus a moment, and then stepped boldly out, and, gliding to the head of the stairs, leaned down and listened.

From the drawing room there came to her ear the sound of the piano, lightly touched, and Frank's tenor humming over the bars of a Neapolitan boat song.

Then she understood her father's mistake. Some unwonted impulse had caused her mother to seat herself at the piano, and accompany Frank, who did not reckon piano playing among his accomplishments; and the thing was so unusual, that Sybil was not surprised at her parent's mistake.

Evan being absent, Jasper Lamotte naturally supposed that floor deserted, and therefore had not observed too much caution.

Only a moment did Sybil listen, and then, gathering up the silken train, and crushing it into a soft mass under her hand, she crept noiselessly as a cat to the door of her mother's room, bent down her head and listened there.

Five minutes, ten, and still they talked, and still Sybil stood, motionless and intent. Then, drawing back suddenly, she ran hurriedly down the hall and

had gained the foot of the stairs before the sound of the opening door admonished her that she had escaped none too soon. In a moment she had entered the drawing room, and, with more of her olden gaiety than they had seen in her manner for many long days, approached the loiterers at the piano.

"Mother! mother! your hand is out of time!" and, in a moment, she had drawn her astonished mother from the stool, and seated herself in the vacant place.

"Sing, Frank," she commanded, striking the keys with a crash that died away in discord. "We have been dull too long."

When Jasper Lamotte and his model son-in-law entered the drawing room, they found Frank singing, Sybil accompanying him with dexterous fingers, and Mrs. Lamotte half resting near them, with veiled eyes, and her serene cast of countenance.

Caught one keen glance toward Burrill, which, being interpreted, meant, "I told you so, you fool!" Mr. Lamotte seated himself beside his wife.

John Burrill, during his interview with his father-in-law, had become a shade more reasonable, and less inclined to think that, in order to vindicate his wounded sensibilities, he must "have it out with Sybil." But his face still wore a surly look, and Frank, who was not over delicate in such matters, looked askance at him, and then whispered to Sybil, under cover of a softly played interlude that he "scented battle afar off."

Sybil's only answer was a low, meaning laugh, and when she had finished his song, she played on and on and on. Sonata, bravura, fantasia, rondo; a crash and whirl—rapid, swift, sweet, brilliant, cold; no feeling, no pathos. A fanciful person might have traced something of exultation and defiance, in those dashing, rippling waves of music.

Presently she stopped and turned to Frank.

"What shall you do in the morning?" she asked, abruptly.

Frank ran his fingers through his hair, after a fashion he much affected, and replied, slowly:—"Well, really! Nothing important. Going to ride to the office—meaning Heath's office, not the mills. Can I do any thing for you, sis?"

"I was thinking," began Sybil, as unconcernedly as if she did not know that she was about to astonish, more than she had already done, every one of her listeners, "that it would be a fine morning for a canter; that is, if to-morrow should be a counterpart of to-day, and I am hungry to be in the saddle."

Frank roused himself from his lazy position, and looked interested. He took a secret delight in annoying Burrill, when he could do it without too much openness or display of malice preposse; and here was one of his opportunities.

"Well, Sybil, you shan't be hungering in vain," he replied, gallantly. "Name your hour, and your steed, and I will even sacrifice my last best morning nap, if need be."

Sybil laughed lightly.

"We will have a moderately reasonable breakfast, Frank, not to make your sacrifice too great; and I will ride Gretchen. Poor thing! she will have almost forgotten me now."

"Then that is settled," replied Frank, tranquilly, and glancing furtively toward Burrill, who was beginning to wriggle uneasily in his chair. "Do you want to go anywhere in particular, sis?"

"No, unless you leave me for a while at Wardour Place; I want to see some of Con's new dresses. You can ride into town and call for me later."

"Ah! very nice arrangement; then I can't call with you?"

"Decidedly not, sir. Who wants a man always about? They are conveniences, not blessings."

"Oh, well, I'm extinguished. I promise to vanish from your gaze as soon as you are within the gates of the Princess of Wardour, and now I think, after so much vocal effort, and so much self-humiliation, I will go and smoke. Adieu, sister mine; adieu mamma. Will you smoke, Burrill?"

"No, sir, thank you," replied Burrill, with brief courtesy, and Frank, who knew beforehand what his answer would be, went toward his own room, smiling contentedly.

"I wonder what's up with Sybil?" he said to himself. "She has waked up decidedly; but she has let herself in for a rumpus with Burrill!"

When he had gone Sybil arose, and seating herself near her mother, said:—"Mamma, you were saying something about going to the city yesterday; have you decided about it?"

Mrs. Lamotte who had had no thought of going to the city, and who was fully conscious that she had made no remark on the subject, looked up without a ruffle upon her placid countenance and replied, like a wise and good mother.

"No, my child, I have not decided."

"Then, when you decide to go, inform me beforehand, mamma. I think I should like to accompany you and do some shopping for myself."

(To be Continued.)

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