

The Diamond Coterie

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(Continued)

CHAPTER XIX.

The sudden and surprising exit of Burrill caused, for a moment, a stay of proceedings, and left the group, so rapidly gathered in Nance Burrill's kitchen, standing on tableaux, for a full minute. Dr. Heath was the first to recover from his surprise, and as he took in the absurdity of the scene, he uttered a low laugh, and turned once more toward the woman, Nance, who seemed to have lost herself in a prolonged stare.

"Your persecutor does not like my looks, apparently," he said, at the same time taking from his pocket a small medicine case. "Or was it some of these good friends that put him to flight?" And he glanced at the group gathered near the door.

A woman with a child in her arms, and her husband with two more in charge, at her heels; a family group to the rescue; two or three old women, of course; and a man with a slouching gait, a shock of unruly red hair, and a face very much freckled across the cheek bones, and very red about the nose; the eyes, too, had an uncanny squint, as if nature had given up her task too soon and left him to survey the world through the narrow slits. This man had always an air of being profoundly interested in the smallest affairs of life, perhaps because the slits through which he gazed magnified the objects gazed upon, and he peered about him now with profoundest solicitude. This was Watt Brooks, a mechanic, and hanger-on about the mills, where he did an occasional bit of odd work, and employed the balance of his time in gossiping among the women, or lounging at the drinking saloons, talking a great deal about the wrongs of the working classes, and winning to himself some friends from a certain turbulent class who listened admiringly to his loud communistic oratory.

Brooks had not been long in W., but he had made rapid headway among that class who, having little or nothing to lose or to fear, are not slow to relieve the monotony of very bare existence by appropriating to themselves the friendship of every hail fellow whom chance throws in their way.

Accordingly Brooks had become a sort of oracle among the dwellers in "Mill avenue," as the street was facetiously called, and he was ready for any dish of gossip, not infrequently making himself conspicuous as a teller of news; he was faithful in gathering up and retelling small items among such ladies of the "avenue" as, being exempted from mill work because of family cares, had time and inclination, and this latter was seldom lacking, to chatter with him about the latest mishap, or the one that was bound to occur soon.

Prominent among the gossips of Mill avenue was that much abused matron Mrs. Burrill, number one, and she had not been slow to discover the advantages of possessing such an acquaintance as Mr. Brooks; accordingly they gravitated toward each other by mutual attraction, and it was quite a common thing for Brooks to drop in and pass an evening hour in the society of Mrs. Burrill, sometimes even taking a cup of tea at the table of the lone woman on a Sunday afternoon.

As Doctor Heath laid his case upon the small pine table, and prepared to deal out a soothing lotion for the bruised Mrs. Burrill, Brooks advanced courageously, supported on either hand by an anxious old lady, and the chorus commenced.

"It warn't us as scared him out, sir," said Brooks, positively. "He's seen all of us, first and last. Maybe as he's had cause for remembering you sir?" and Brooks peered anxiously at the doctor, as if hoping for a prompt confirmation of this shrewd guess.

"Sure, an' it was a guilty conscience, if ever I seen one, as made the brute beast run like that, from the sight of the doctor," chimed in first old lady, who quarreled with her "old man" on principle, and seldom came out second best. "Faith, an' the murderin' wretch had half killed ye, Burrill, dear."

"I was that scart with the screamin'," said the mother of three, "that I nearly let the baby fall a-runnin' here."

And then they all gathered around Mrs. Burrill, and talked vigorously, and all together, while Brooks, hovering near the doctor, pursued his investigation.

"A bad lot, that Burrill, sir. I've seen him, frequent; and so he's had occasion to know you, sir?"

"No, my good fellow; I never had the honor of meeting Mr. John Burrill before," replied Doctor Heath, smiling at the man's pertinacity.

"Now, I want to know," exclaimed Brooks, in accents of real distress, "then what could have set him off like that?"

"I suppose we were getting too many for him," replied the doctor, easily.

"Not a bit of it, sir. Burrill ain't no coward, especially when he's in liquor; and he and me's on good enough terms, too; though, of course," said Brooks, recollecting himself, and glancing anxiously at the reclining figure of the injured one, "of course, I would never stand by and see a lady struck down, sir."

"Manifestly not," replied the doctor, drily. "Then, as he would not fear you, and could not fear me, he must have been in the first stages of 'snake seeing.'"

"It's my opinion, he took you for somebody else, as he has reasons to be afraid

of," said one of the women, with an emphatic nod.

But here the voice of the heroine of the occasion rose high above the rest.

"John Burrill wasn't so drunk as to run away from a man he never saw, or to see crooked," she said, fiercely. "I saw the look on his face, blinded tho' I was, and he's afraid of you, Doctor Heath. I don't know why. There's some secrets in John Burrill's life that I don't know, and there's more that I wish I didn't know; but here, or somewhere else, he has known you, sir. Perhaps only by sight; but he's afraid of you, that's certain."

There was no reply from Doctor Heath; he was busy over his medicine case. He prepared a lotion, to be applied to the bruises, and a sedative, to be applied to the nerves of the patient, who was beginning to recover herself in a measure, and launched out into a torrent of invective against the author of her trouble; after which she rushed into a wild recital of her wrongs, beginning at the time when she left a good place in England, to follow the fortunes of John Burrill, and running with glib tongue over the entire gamut of her trials since.

All of this, although it was far from new to the dwellers of Mill Avenue, was listened to, by them, with absorbed interest, and the proper accompaniment of ejaculations at the proper places. During this discourse, to which Brooks listened with evidence of liveliest interest, Doctor Heath remained seemingly inattentive, waiting for a lull in the storm; when it came at last, he ascertained as briefly as possible, who among the women would remain, and pass the night with Mrs. Burrill; gave her direction, as to the use she was to make of the medicines he had prepared, and buttoned his coat about him, preparatory to departure.

As his hand was upon the latch, the voice of his patient arrested him.

"Doctor," she said, earnestly. "It wouldn't be gratitude in me to let you go away without a word of warning. I don't want to pry into your affairs, but let me tell you this: You are not done with John Burrill; you took him by surprise to-night; but I'll wager he is over his scare by now, and he is plotting how he can get another sight at you, unbeknown to yourself; and, if he has reason to be afraid of you, then look out for him; you have reasons for being afraid too."

Doctor Heath hesitated a moment, and a shade of annoyance crossed his face, then he said in his usual careless tone:—"Give yourself no uneasiness about this matter, madam; I never saw the scoundrel before, and he was simply afraid of my fist. However, if he ever should cross my path, be assured I shall know how to dispose of him;" and Clifford Heath bowed and went out into the night, little reckoning that he had left his life in the hands of five old women.

In a short time, Brooks arose and shuffled out, and then the tongues were once more loosened; the husband attendant had been ordered home with his two charges, and the chief subject of their converse was Doctor Heath, and the strange influence he had exerted upon John Burrill; and a fruitful theme they found it.

Meantime, John Burrill, who had fled straight on down the gloomy length of Mill avenue, found himself, and his senses, together, close under the shadow of one of the huge factories, and at the river's very edge.

Here, breathless and bespattered, he sat down upon a flat stone to recover himself, and review the situation.

"Curse the man," he muttered. "I would not have made such a fool of myself for a gold mine; but I couldn't have helped it for two," he added, after a moment's reflection. "If it's the man I supposed it to be! But it can't be! It is not."

He was by this time comparatively sober, and he arose to his feet, finally, feeling his courage returning, but still deep in thought.

"Hang the luck," he muttered, kicking viciously at a loose stone. "If that's the man I fear, then Jasper Lamotte would be glad to know him. Why!" starting suddenly erect, "I can find out, and I will. I must, for my own safety," and John Burrill faced about and retraced his steps.

Cautiously this time, he went over the ground, heading where he set his foot, lest some misstep should betray his presence in Mill avenue still; more and more cautiously as he neared the house from which he had so lately fled.

Closer and closer he crept, until at last he was under the window the kitchen, and here he crouched, listening. He heard the mingled confusion of voices, then the firm tones of Clifford Heath, clear above the rest. Hearing this, he moved quickly away, for he was in instant danger of detection, should the door open suddenly, as it might at any moment.

He crossed the street and standing under the shadow of a small tenement, waited.

It was not long before the door opened, and the light from within showed him the tall form of Clifford Heath, clearly outlined against the darkness.

Out strode Heath, walking so rapidly, that the not yet quite sober John Burrill found himself compelled to exercise

care, and expend some breath, in keeping him within sight.

On and on, went the pursued and the pursuer, and presently, out of the darkness, came a third form, gliding shadow-like; as if every step of the way were too familiar to render caution necessary; this third form drew nearer and nearer to Burrill, who, all unconscious of its proximity, labored on after Doctor Heath.

Straight to his own cottage went the doubly shadowed young physician; he opened the door with a latch key, and the followers lost him in the darkness of the unlighted vestibule. Presently, however, a light was seen to glimmer through the partially closed blinds, and then John Burrill crept cautiously nearer, and feeling his way carefully, lest some obstacle at his feet should cause him to stumble, he gained the window, pressed his face close to the shutters and peered through.

Clifford Heath was pacing up and down his cosy sitting room, seemingly lost in perplexed thought, and, as again and again his face was turned to the light, the watcher studied it closely; finally he seemed satisfied with his scrutiny, for he turned away and groped back to the street once more.

"It's the other one," he muttered, drawing a long breath of relief. "I might have known it from the first; so he is the young doctor they tell of! Well, it's a rum game that brings him here, and it's certain he don't want to be known. He can't know me, and—Jove, I'd like to pay him for the hits he gave me," and he fell to pondering as he turned his steps, not the way he had come, nor yet toward Mapleton, but in the direction of "Old Forty Rods." But long before he reached his destination, the creeping, stealthy shadow, had ceased to follow, and had vanished down a side street.

A few lights were glimmering, here and there, as he turned down the not very elegant street on which was located the haven of "Forty Rods," and when he was within a block of the place, a man, coming suddenly around the corner, ran square against him.

Burrill uttered an oath, as he with difficulty regained his balance, but the new-comer called out in a voice, a little unsteady from some cause:—"Hello! B—Burrill, that yer, ole feller? Didn't mean ter knock against yer, give-ye my word I didn't. Give us a kiss, ole man, an' come-long to Forty's!"

"Brooks," said Burrill, taking him sociably by the arm, and facing toward the saloon in question. "Brooks, you're drunk; you're beastly drunk; drunk as a sailor by all that's sober." And together they entered "Old Forty Rods."

(To be Continued.)

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