

The Diamond Coterie

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Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "Dangerous Ground," "Against Odds," Etc., Etc.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XIV.

Mapleton stands high on an eminence, which may have arisen expressly to hold, and to exhibit, the splendid edifice erected thereon by Mr. Jasper Lamotte. It is the only hill within sight on that side of the river, and renders Mapleton a most conspicuous as well as most beautiful abiding place.

In front of the dwelling and its ground flows the river, broad and glittering in the sunshine, on this day of which I write. In the rear stretches a grove, large enough to be termed "the grove" by the people of W—; and dense enough for Robin Hood and his merry men to find comfort in, for Jasper Lamotte has chosen to let it remain en nature, since it first came into his possession.

To reach Mapleton from Wardour Place one must drive directly to the center of W—, turn eastward, then cross a handsome new iron bridge, and go southward a short distance, coming finally to the broad curve which sweeps up to the mansion, and away from the river, along which the road winds.

In the old days, when Sybil Lamotte and Constance Wardour found excellent reasons for meeting and chatting together, at least once in every twenty-four hours, this fair river was a source of alternate pleasure and annoyance to them. Of pleasure, when the days were fair, and Sybil and Frank could pull their boat up stream, and land at the grassy slope in the rear of Wardour Place, where, often, they found Constance and a gay party awaiting them. Or, when Constance could drift down stream with scarcely the stroke of an oar necessary, until she came opposite "the hill," as Mapleton was often called. Of annoyance, when winds blew cold and rough, and the waters of the river turned black and angry, and surged high between its banks. Then the two young ladies voted the iron bridge "the coldest place possible," and wished that no dark, wintry river flowed between them.

The river is very calm to-day, however; it is flowing gently, murmuring softly, and gleaming silver and blue, beneath a soft September sun. Away down, where the factories stand, and the great wheels turn, it loses its blue and silver, flowing under that ever moving, never lifting curtain of smoke, that darkens and dims the skies themselves, and gives to the sun's face the look of a disreputable celestial tramp.

It's always gray, "down at the factories," and why not? What need have the toilers there for sunlight? They have work and sleep.

There is nothing gray or dreary about Mapleton, as we enter there and survey the inmates who, just now, are loitering about the lunch table. Nothing gray, if we except a few silver threads in the hair of Mrs. Lamotte; nothing dreary, unless it may be a look which, now and then, and only for an instant, creeps into the eyes of Mrs. John Burrill.

They sit about the lunch table—all but Sybil. She has arisen, and re-seated herself in a great easy chair, which seems to swallow up her light form, and renders her quite invisible to all at the table, save Evan, who, from time to time, glances furtively across at her.

There may be discussion in this family, but they look the embodiment of high-bred ease and serene contentment.

Jasper Lamotte turns his paper, sips his light wine, speaks suavely, and looks as placid as the sky overhead.

Mrs. Lamotte speaks slow and seldom; smiles when she does speak; and looks as if nothing ever ruffled the placidity of her mind, or the even tenor of her pleasant existence. She looks all this, sitting directly opposite John Burrill, her reluctantly accepted son-in-law, for what Mrs. Lamotte cannot overcome, she ignores, and her proud calm is the result of a long and bitter schooling.

Sybil looks paler than is usual for her, but no other expression than one of calmness and ennui can be detected on that lovely, inscrutable face; and the dusky eyes keep well veiled, and tell no secrets.

Evan Lamotte is sober, and good humored, for his sister's sake; and Frank is simply lazy.

But John Burrill! there is no contentment equal to his; seated in the easiest of chairs, before a table laden with viands upon which he has just gorged himself, he contemplates his legs and his surroundings with extreme satisfaction; his legs first, because, being stretched directly before him, they come first under his eye; and he is delighted with their size, and shape; they are a fine pair, such as would do credit to a bull fighter, or a "champion pedestrian," and with the quality and cut of the pantaloons that adorn them. It has not always been his good fortune to sit at a rich man's table, and to wear fashionable clothing; and John Burrill appreciates his "marbles." He has feasted his stomach, and John Burrill's stomach comes in for a large share of his consideration; and now he is feasting his senses; this richly appointed room is his room; this splendid stately lady, how he delights to call her "mother," varied occasionally by "mother-in-law;" how he glories in the possession of a pair of aristocratic brothers-in-law; and how he swells with pride, when he steps into the carriage, and, beside "the rich Mr. Lamotte," is driven through W— and to the factories; and last, and best of all, there is his wife, a beauty, a belle, a heiress, possessing a secret of lovers, yet won by him.

Only one thing troubles John Burrill, he does not quite understand Sybil. He has "got the hang," so he thinks, of the other members of the family, but sometimes Sybil's wordless glance operates upon him like a cold shower bath, and Mr. Burrill, like all the "gutter born," rather fears a shower bath.

Course in sense and sentiment, plebian in body and soul; whatever else Sybil Lamotte's husband may be, let our story develop.

Quitting his place now, he crosses the room, and, taking up a position where his eyes can glaze upon Sybil's face, he rests one elbow upon a mantel, and so, in a comfortable after-dinner attitude, continues his pleasant meditation. Sybil stirs uneasily, but notices his proximity in no other way. Presently her eyes shoot straight past him, and she says to Evan who has also risen, and stands stretching himself, lazily with his face to the window, and his back toward the assembly:—

"Evan, just hand me that book on the mantel. No, not that one," as he lays his ready hand on the book nearest him, "the other."

"Oh! ejaculates Evan, at the same moment laying his hand upon a volume directly underneath John Burrill's elbow. 'Hoist up your arm, Burrill. 'My lady's up, and wants her willum.'"

John Burrill's face reddens slowly. He is an Englishman, and sometimes his H's and A's play him sorry tricks, although he has labored hard to Americanize himself, and likes to think that he has succeeded.

"D—n it!" broke out the man, suddenly losing his after dinner calm. "You might have asked me for the book, Sybil; it was near enough."

Sybil received the book from Evan's hand, opened it, turned a page or two, and then lifting her eyes to his face, replied in a voice, low, clear, and cutting as the north wind:—

"Evan is my slave, Mr. Burrill, you are my lord and master." Indescribable contempt shone upon him for a moment from her splendid eyes; then she lowered them, and became, apparently, wholly absorbed in her book.

John Burrill muttered something very low, and probably very ugly, and dropped back into his former attitude; and the others, never by word or glance, noticed this little passage at arms. Only Evan returned to the window, and standing there with hands in pockets, glowered down upon the frost-touched rose trees and clustered geraniums, savagely, and long.

Presently, Evan turns from the window, which commands a view of the drive.

"Constance is coming," he says, addressing Sybil.

She starts up, looking anxious and disturbed; Constance has visited her, and she has driven over once to see Constance; but it has so happened that John Burrill has always been absent; and Sybil has a shuddering horror of this meeting that must be.

The announcement seems to galvanize them all into life. Mr. Lamotte looks up with a gleam of latent anticipation in his eyes; Frank smiles his pleasure; and John Burrill steals a deprecatory glance at a mirror, smooths a wrinkle out of his waistcoat, and outsmites Frank. Here is another triumph; he is about to be introduced to the richest girl in the country; to meet her on an equal footing, in the character of husband to her dearest friend.

Sybil rises and goes to the window; her pale face flushing. There is a rolling of wheels, a sound of swift, firm footsteps without, and then the door opens, and Constance is announced.

She follows her name in her usual free, at home fashion, and in a moment is kissing Sybil, shaking hands with Mrs. Lamotte, exchanging smiling salutations with Mr. Lamotte, and gay badinage with Francis. And then, while Sybil still hesitates, Evan comes to the rescue.

With a face of preternatural gravity, he advances, seizes the arm of John Burrill, drags him toward Constance, and says, with elaborate politeness:—

"Constance, allow me to present my new brother-in-law, Mr. Burrill. Brother-in-law," this is Miss Wardour, of Wardour Place.

In spite of themselves, they smile; all except Sybil. John Burrill feels that somehow, he is made ridiculous; that another man in his place would not have been thus introduced. But the eyes of the heiress are upon his face, her daintily gloved hand is proffered him, and she lies in her softest contralto, and unblushingly:—

"I am happy to know you, Mr. Burrill."

Somehow, they all breathe freer after that pretty falsehood. John Burrill regains his composure, and relaxes into his former state of comfortable gloating. Another face is added to the circle of high-bred people around him. He does not talk much, for he is not yet quite at ease when in conversation with them. As they talk, he thinks what a fine nest this is which he has gained for himself;

what a lovely woman is his wife; and how splendidly handsome is Miss Wardour. He thinks how, by and by, he will boast to some of his choice spirits, of his friendship for Miss Wardour, and of the value in which she holds his esteem. He thinks how good is the Lamotte cook, and how, presently, he will sample the Lamotte wines, and smoke a splendid

segar; and then life pricks up his ears and listens, for the conversation has drifted away from the commonplace, and Miss Wardour is saying:—

"It really is a forlorn hope, I fear, Mr. Lamotte. I don't know what to reply to Mr. Belknap, but I think he is wasting his time, and I my money; and, if you will communicate with him, as he failed to name his address in his note to me, we will close up the case."

"And say farewell to your diamonds?" "I have performed that ceremony some time since. I really am worn out with the subject. At some other time I may resume the search."

"You are getting discouraged."

"Call it that, if you like."

"Excuse me, if I pursue so wearisome a subject, Constance; but—does not Mr. Belknap hint at a new clue in this note of his? You must know he has written me also."

"He hints, and very vaguely."

"Well, I am anxious to look into the matter a little further. As a special favor to me will you retain the services of Mr. Belknap a little longer?"

"As you make such a point of it, yes, Mr. Lamotte; but—do you really hope to find anything new, at this late day?"

"I really do, my child, but can not put my ideas in shape, as yet. I think we shall have Mr. Belknap among us soon."

"Well, don't let him persecute me, that's all," stipulated Constance. "I have lost my faith in detectives."

"All this talk reminds me, Constance," interrupted Sybil, "mamma has had her diamonds reset for me, and they are really beautiful; besides which, papa and Mr. Burrill have added to the collection, so that in the absence of yours, I may set myself up as diamond queen. Come to my room and be dazzled."

"And leave us under a cloud," chimed in Frank. "Burrill, come, let's adjourn to the billiard room, and have a segar; and intent upon keeping his brother-in-law in order during the time Constance should be under the roof, he slapped him cordially on his brawny shoulder, and they went out in most amiable and brotherly fashion, and entered the billiard room, where Frank permitted Burrill to cheat at the game, and eventually win it, much to the delight of that personage.

When they had left the morning room, Evan Lamotte, too, sauntered out and down the hall, and hearing their voices in amiable dialogue, interspersed by the click of the billiard balls, he muttered:—

"Ah, Constance, you are a witch indeed! you have made my magnificent brother adopt my role for once; so long as you are here we may depend upon Frank to keep our bull out of the china shop. So, as one good turn deserves another, I will just give your mare a turn and look in at 'Old Forty Rods'; I'm safe to go off duty for the day."

And ten minutes later the reckless youth was galloping Frank's blooded mare along the highway en route for the saloon known as to the initiated as "Old Forty Rods."

Left alone together, Mr. Jasper Lamotte and his wife gazed at each other in silence for a moment, and then he said:—

"Do you think it safe to leave them alone together too long?"

"Who, Frank and —?"

"Pshaw, no; the girls."

"It is safe; nevertheless I will go up to them," and Mrs. Lamotte arose and went slowly up the stairs, and softly past the door where Sybil and Constance sat together, straight to her own room, which she entered, closed and locked the door carefully, and allowing the look of haughty calm to die out of her face, she threw herself into a dressing chair, and pressed two feverish hands against a face that was sad and bitter and full of fear.

Left to his own devices, Jasper Lamotte seated himself at a desk and dashed off a few hurried lines, which he directed to

"Mr. Jerry Belknap,

"No. —, Room 7, Blank St.,

"N. Y."

(To be Continued.)

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