

The Diamond Coterie

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(Continued)

CHAPTER VII.

Constance Wardour arose early on Sunday morning. In spite of youth, health, and her splendid self-poise, she had slept but little; and such slumber as had visited her eyelids, had been haunted by hideous dreams, in which detectives and burglars mixed their identity in the most remarkable manner; and through all, more vivid than all, shone the face of Sybil Lamotte, always agonized, always appealing, always surrounded by dark shadows, and always seeming menaced, terrified, helpless. Such nights of tormented slumber, and uneasy wakefulness, were new to the mistress of Wardour; and now, while the dew was yet on the grass and flowers, she was promiscuously her pretty rose garden, where the sun shone full, looking a trifle paler than was usual to her, and somewhat dissatisfied.

Mrs. Aliston was still snugly ensconced in her bed, for she never rose early, and always retired late, her motto being, "Mrs. Aliston first, the world afterward." That lady of portly dimensions had her peculiar theory of life. To eat the best food obtainable, and a great deal of it; to wear the heaviest silks, and the softest cashmeres; and to sleep in the downiest of beds; these were to her the necessities of life. That the food was provided from the larder of her niece; that the silks and cashmere were gracious gifts, and that the downy couch cost her nothing, mattered little; her niece needed her, she needed her niece; ergo, her niece sought in every way possible to render her happy and comfortable; and she, in return for her comfort and happiness, was a model duenna; never questioning, never criticizing, humoring all that young lady's whims, yet retaining that free, hearty old-spokenness, that made her seem not in the least a dependent, and which was, as Mrs. Aliston well knew, most pleasing to the heiress.

Altogether, they were a pair of very sensible women. Mrs. Aliston ate when she liked, and slept when she liked; Miss Wardour did what she liked, and both were satisfied.

While Miss Wardour was promenading her garden, and Mrs. Aliston was comfortably sleeping, two men were approaching each other on the sandy road that ran from the town past Wardour Place.

The one coming from townward was our detective tramp, looking all that a tramp should be.

The other, approaching from the opposite direction, was a sleek, respectable looking, middle-aged man, who might have been some small farmer dressed in his Sunday clothes, which fitted him none too well.

Almost opposite the gates of Wardour Place they met and passed each other, the tramp saluting respectfully, the other responding with a stolid stare.

A little further on the tramp turned slowly and looked back. The farmer-looking individual had entered the grounds of Wardour Place, and was hurrying straight on toward the entrance, looking neither to the right nor left.

"So!" muttered the tramp, with the air of a man who would have been astonished then, but for the fact that he never allowed anything to astonish him. "So he is mixing himself up in this affair! I wonder in what capacity? Can it be that by some means he has been selected to work up this case? Oh! oh! Bless my soul! What a coincidence that would be!"

Evidently he had grasped at a new idea, and one that was somewhat startling. He quickened his pace until, unconsciously, it became almost a trot. The mask of studied vacancy dropped from his face, leaving it alert, keen, analytical. His mind had grasped at a problem, and he was studying it with knitted brow and compressed mouth, as he hurried on countryward, not heeding anything save the thought which possessed him.

It was Sunday morning, too early for church goers, and too late for cow boys. So he met no one on his hurried march. And when at last he began to moderate his pace, he was a full mile from Wardour Place. As his walk grew slower his face relaxed, and gradually resumed its mask of careless stupidity.

Finally he paused, looked about him, laughed a short half laugh, and crossing the road, vaulted a high-wired fence, with the ease of a harlequin, and took his way across a meadow toward the river.

"Tra-la, tra-la-la-la," chirped he, softly and contentedly. "What a pretty kettle of fish. How I should love to sit down right beside it and see it boil, stir it occasionally; instead, I must go far away, and meantime, who knows, the kettle may boil over. But I hope not—I trust not. I will try and prevent it; and to do that, I must drop a little shell before I go. I must bind Miss Wardour over to my aid. I must show her that it is wise to trust me. I must have a confidante here, and there are only two to choose from. Doctor Heath, 'from nowhere,' and this clear-eyed lady. I choose her; for, with all due regard for my friend, the doctor, and all due faith in the propriety of his motives, I must know why he throws that bit of circumstantial evidence in my way, before I show him any part of my hand. Why Doctor Heath is here, is none of my business, strange as his presence and present occupation seem to me. Why he is mixing himself up in the affair of Miss War-

dour's diamonds, however, is my business, just now. But, first of all, to know how much or little Jerry Belknap knows of this affair, and of these people, and whether he is at his old crookedness once more. Now, here is the matter; here the footpath. I must see the mistress of Wardour Place, and at once; so, en avant."

And he struck into the river footpath, and strode rapidly along toward Wardour Place, whistling softly as he went. Meantime, Constance Wardour, pacing the walks of her garden, with her brows wrinkled into a frown, was interrupted by her housemaid.

"If you please, miss, there's a man in the front hall, that's wanting to see you, and says I am to tell you it's important that his business is."

Constance made a slight gesture of impatience; she had been thinking of Sybil Lamotte, to the exclusion of all other subjects, and this message brought her suddenly back to her own affairs.

"Important!" she muttered to herself. "Then it must be—the other one. Nelly," raising her voice, "what is this man like?"

"Like, miss?" inquiringly.

"Yes. How does he look?"

"Oh! Well, it's very ugly he looks, to my notion."

"Does he look like a gentleman, Nelly?"

"Oh, murder! no."

"Like a tramp, then?"

"No; his clothes is too new."

"Well, Nelly, I will go and see him," said Constance, beginning to despair of finding out whether this visitor were the tramp of the night previous, or the new actor expected on the scene. "You know I never allow you to turn a tramp away hungry, and if one comes who seems worthy of help, I wish you always to let me know it."

This she said, thinking of the manner in which it was probable the detective tramp would seek access to her presence.

"By the way, Nelly," pausing with one foot on the steps of the dining-room terrace. "You may wake Mrs. Aliston and tell her that if I wish her to join me in the little parlor I will send you to her," then sotto voce, as she entered the house and went carelessly toward the drawing-room: "If this visitor proves a bore I will turn him over to Aunt Honor; I can't have two days of constant boredom."

Coming forward from the lower entrance, Constance encountered the gaze of the strange man, whom, arriving at the front door, Nelly had not ventured to set down as a tramp, and whose clothes made her doubt the propriety of showing him the drawing-room. Being of Hibernian extraction, and not to be nonplussed, Nelly had adapted a happy medium, and seated the visitor in the largest hall chair, where he now awaited the approach of Constance.

"I think you wished to see me," said Constance, in the unaffected, kindly tone usual to her when addressing strangers or inferiors. "I am Miss Wardour."

The stranger arose, making a stiff salute, and saying in a low, guarded tone: "Yes, Miss Wardour, I have a message for you;" at the same moment he presented her a card, and glanced in a suggestive manner toward Nelly, who was traveling up the stairs in very leisurely manner on route for Mrs. Aliston's rooms.

Constance glanced at the card which bore the inscription,

"JERRY BELKNAP,
Private Detective."

"Come this way," she said, throwing open the drawing-room door and proceeding into the next apartment.

Jerry Belknap, private detective, followed close behind her, and himself closed the door carefully. Constance crossed the room, drew back the curtains, and pushed open the shutters of the terrace windows, thus letting in a flood of light. Then turning, she seated herself upon a fauteuil, and motioning the detective to a chair opposite, said: "Now, sir, I am ready to receive your message."

"It's a verbal one," returned the detective, in a voice soft and smooth, not at all in keeping with his disguise, "and from Mr. Lamotte. I am the officer chosen by him to investigate for you, Miss Wardour, and as much time has been lost, I only wait your sanction and acceptance to begin the work."

The soft voice and polished accent were in very marked contrast to his dress and facial appearance. His manner of speech and discomf had been dropped when the door closed upon outside observation.

Mentally contrasting the ease and suavity of this new comer with the catlike movements and brusqueness of his predecessor, Constance, who began to realize the ludicrousness of the situation, in fact seemed to have some special private reason for finding it exceedingly absurd, replied that Mr. Lamotte's chosen officer must of course be acceptable to her, and that she only awaited his commands, if she could be of any service to him.

"Then," said Detective Belknap, "I may as well look over the premises, unless," turning upon her a searching look, "there are particulars concerning the robbery which Mr. Lamotte was not in possession of."

Constance lowered her eyes, in seeming effort to remember if Mr. Lamotte knew absolutely all; she thought of the chloroform, but the bottle had not yet been

returned to her. What should she do? Before telling this part of the story she must have the bottle. Suddenly her woman's wit came to her aid. Looking up with sweetest candor into the detective's face, she said:—

"I am the only one who possesses any information that was known to Mr. Lamotte. It is a mere trifle, but as it will take some time in the telling, I will, if you please, order breakfast. You can scarcely have breakfasted at this hour. I will show you the library now. Will you look over that and the other rooms, and kindly excuse me for a short time. Then join me at breakfast, and I will give you my version of the story."

She arose as if considering the matter decided beyond question, and moved toward the door, and with a bow and murmur of assent, Mr. Jerry Belknap fell into his assumed shamble, and followed her to the library. Leaving him there, Constance went out to order breakfast served in half an hour, and to send Nelly with the key to her dressing room.

"Nelly must be taken into my confidence," mused she, as she went in search of that damsel. "I can trust Nelly in spite of her Irishries, and if Doctor Heath does not appear soon she must help me out in some way."

Nelly was not at her post, having been dispatched kitchenward by Mrs. Aliston, and Constance went up to her own rooms, thinking, as she went, how best to defer a further interview with Mr. Belknap.

"I must take him the key myself," she muttered, as she moved about the dressing room, and then a sudden thought came, and she moved quickly to an open wardrobe, pulled down the dress she had worn on the previous afternoon, and searched hurriedly in the pockets.

All at once a look of dismay overspread her features, again and again she shook out the silken folds, again thrust her hands in the dainty pockets, and fluttered her fingers among the intricacies of the trimming. The thing she searched for was gone, Sybil Lamotte's strange letter, the letter that was a trust not to be violated, was not to be found.

Thoroughly distressed now, Constance renewed her search—about the room—everywhere—in the most impossible places; but no letter.

Down stairs she went; and hopeless as was the chance of finding it there, hunted in the drawing room and on the terrace.

She distinctly remembered placing it in her pocket, after receiving it back from the hands of Doctor Heath; of bestowing it very carefully, too.

Who had been in the drawing room since Doctor Heath? Mrs. Aliston; the two detectives; herself. Who had seen her put the letter in her pocket? Only Doctor Heath. Could it have dropped from her pocket? That seemed impossible. Could he have removed it? That seemed impossible, too, and very absurd. But what could she think, else? Then, she remembered what he had said to the detective the night before, and all the mystery surrounding his past. Hitherto, she had scoffed at the prying ones, and advocated his perfect right to his own past and future, too. Now, she felt her ignorance of aught concerning the life of Doctor Clifford Heath, to be a deep personal injury. Hitherto, she had reasoned that his past was something very simple, a commonplace of study, perhaps, and self-building for her, being an admirer of self-made men, had chosen to believe him one of them. Now, she bounded straight to the conclusion that Doctor Heath had a past—to conceal and then she found herself growing very angry, with him first, and herself afterward.

Why had he not presented his passports before seeking her favor? How had he dared to make himself so much at home in her drawing room, with his impertinent insolences and his Sultan airs? How had he gone about, indifferent, independent, ignoring when he pleased, courting no one's favor, and yet, be—nobody knew who.

And what a fool she had been, trusting him with her personal secrets; putting her private letters into his hands. How he must be laughing at her in his sleeve! Exasperating thought. Worse than all else, to be laughed at. What worse calamity can befall poor, arrogant human nature?

Constance was now thoroughly angry and "by the same token," thoroughly unreasonable. It is highly objectionable in a heroine; but Constance, as we have said before, is a very human heroine. And, dear reader, however sensible you be, if you have ever been in just the state of mind in which Constance Wardour found herself that morning, and most of us have, I promise you, you were not one whit more reasonable; not one whit less capable of being aggressive, unreasonable, and generally disagreeable.

And now, the perverse imp who goes about, concocting horrible practical jokes, and stirring up contretemps, seemed to take possession of the field for, just at the moment when he should have been at least five miles away, Doctor Heath, unannounced, appeared at the drawing room door—miling, too, looking provokingly sure of a welcome, and handsomer than usual.

Miss Wardour's self-possession was as instant as her indignation.

"Good morning, Doctor Heath," frigidly. "I am sorry you found it necessary to admit yourself in this manner. I suppose my servants are neglectful."

"Not at all," replied he, discovering that she was out of humor, but not divining the cause. "Your housemaid admitted me, and thinking you in your own room, was about to usher me in here, and go to announce me, when I saved her the trouble, telling her that my time was limited, and admitting myself; had I known you were here, I should not have intruded without permission;" then perceiving that her face retained its frigidity, his voice took on a shade of haughtiness as he laid a packet upon the table, saying: "I have brought back your 'proofs,' Mr. Bathurst wished me to say, if I chanced to see you first, that is," hesitating.

"I have not seen Mr. Bathurst."

"No!" Doctor Heath seemed to be somewhat affected by the chill of the atmosphere. "Then I am to say that he has something for your private ear, and

that when he comes, he begs that you will contrive in some way to see him, whether your officer like me or no."

A grave frown from Leland. Then, "Officer Bathurst is here, and in the library, I am consulting her watch, "he is waiting for me at this moment."

Doctor Heath had been standing a few feet from her, hat in hand; now, and in spite of this implied dismissal, he coolly deposited his hat upon the table beside Miss Wardour's package, and advanced nearer to that young lady, speaking calmly, gently even, but without the slightest touch of entreaty, penitence, or humility of any sort in his manner or voice.

"Miss Wardour, pardon me for alluding to it, but I would be blind indeed not to see that something has annoyed you exceedingly. Indeed, I could almost fancy that, in some way, I have become the cause of your displeasure; if this is so, tell me how I have been so unfortunate as to offend?"

Now this was a very pacific and proper speech, and uttered in the right spirit. But had its effect been salutary, then Doctor Heath would stand alone, the first, last, and only man who ever yet attempted to argue with, reason with, or pacify an angry woman without blundering egregiously in the beginning, and coming out worsted at the end. There are a few things in this world that mortal man can't compass, and to attempt to pour oil on the waves of a woman's wrath when they are just at the boiling point, and ready to overflow their confines, is like sitting down on a bunch of fire-crackers to prevent their going off. Let the water boil over, and there will still be enough left to brew you a cup of tea. Let the crackers explode, and you may sit down on them with impunity."

Dear brethren, the moral is homely. How had he offended? That he should ask the question, was the acme of his offense. As if she could tell how he had offended. Was there ever so impertinent a question and questioner? "How had he been so unfortunate as to offend?" Any other man would have said "unhappy," whether he meant it or not, but this man, oh! he would not even look a culprit.

She raised her haughty head a trifle higher, as high as it could be; she drew back as many steps as he had advanced; the room had become a refrigerator.

"Doctor Heath flatters himself; in what manner could he offend me?"

Still he retains his composure, not guessing at the truth.

"I have never presumed Miss Wardour, therefore can not have flattered myself. I may have offended by coming one moment too late with this packet. Miss Wardour is accustomed to unconditional obedience. If I fail in that it is not from lack of inclination, but—because I am just learning submission." He uttered the last words in a lower, softer tone, and fell back as he uttered them, laying his hand upon his hat.

Anger, self-shame, and a strange thrilling emotion, she could not, or would not recognize or define, urged her out of herself, beyond herself, and beyond the bounds of propriety or courtesy. Sweeping toward him with one swift movement, she extended one hand with downward turned palm, in a quick, meaning gesture, and said,

"Doctor Heath, I have lost Sybil Lamotte's letter."

"Lost it! How?"

"That I should be glad to know since I showed it to you last night and replaced it in my pocket, I have not seen it, and, Doctor Heath, as I do not wish without your knowledge, to be in possession of any secret of yours, I may as well tell you now that I overheard your warning to the detective last night."

"My warning!" he repeated, parrot-like.

"Your reminder that you must be to him, Doctor Heath from nowhere?"

Doctor Heath from nowhere, gazed at her for a moment as if petrified, his mind seeming reluctant or unable to grasp at once her full meaning; then he came close to her, straight and tall, and paler than her own pale robe; the blood of all the Howards flashing from his eye, and speaking in his bearing. Thus, for a moment, they faced each other, pale, passionate, mute then a voice, soft and suave, broke the spell.

(To be Continued.)

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