

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 XXXVII.

Early on the following morning, there was unusual stir about Mapleton. John Burrill was to be buried that day, and the sad funeral preparations were going on. People were moving about, making the bustle the more noticeable by their visible efforts to step softly, and by the low monotonous hum of their voices.

Up stairs, the usual quiet reigned. Sybil was sleeping under the influence of powerful opiates, administered to insure her against the possibility of being overheard in her ravings, or of waking to a realization of the events taking place below stairs.

Evan, too, had been quieted by the use of brandy and morphine, and Mrs. Lamotte kept watch at his bedside, while Constance, in Sybil's chamber, maintained a similar vigil. Neither of the two watchers manifested any interest in the funeral preparations, nor did they feel any.

"I shall not be present at the burial," Mrs. Lamotte had said to her husband. "Sybil's illness and Evan's will furnish sufficient excuse, and—nothing constrains me to do honor to John Burrill now."

Mr. Lamotte opened his lips to remonstrate, but catching a look upon the face of his wife that he had learned to its fullest meaning, he closed them again and went grimly below stairs, and, through all the day previous to the departure of the funeral cortege, Jasper Lamotte was the only member of that aristocratic family who was visible to the curious gaze of the strangers who attended upon the burial preparations.

Early in the forenoon an unexpected delegation arrived at the entrance of Mapleton.

First, came Doctor Benoit, driving alone in his time-honored gig, the only vehicle he had been seen to enter within the memory of W—.

Close behind him, a carriage containing four gentlemen, all manifestly persons of more than ordinary importance, Mr. O'Meara, in fact, his colleague of the New York Bar, and two elderly, self-possessed strangers, evidently city men.

They desired a few words with Mr. Lamotte, and that gentleman, after some hesitation and no little concern as to the nature of their business at such a time, presented himself before them, looking the personification of subdued sorrow and haughty reserve.

Mr. O'Meara acted as spokesman for the party.

"Mr. Lamotte," he began, with profound politeness and marked coldness of manner and speech, "I should apologize for our intrusion at such a time, were it not that our errand is one of gravest importance and can not be put off. Allow me to introduce to you Mr. Wedron, Doctor Gaylor and Professor Harrington."

Mr. Lamotte recognized the strangers with haughty courtesy, and silently awaited disclosures.

"Mr. Wedron and myself, as the representatives and counsel of Doctor Heath, have summoned from the city these two gentlemen, whom you must know by reputation, and we desire that they be allowed to examine the body of Mr. Burrill, in order to ascertain if the wounds upon the body were actually made by the knife found with it."

The countenance of Mr. Lamotte darkened perceptibly.

"It seems to me," he said, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, "that this is an unwarrantable and useless proceeding—doubtless so at this late hour."

"Nevertheless, it is a necessary one," broke in Mr. Wedron, crisply. "It is presumable that you can have no personal enmity against Doctor Heath, sir; therefore you can have no reason for opposing measures instigated by justice. The examination will be a brief one."

The resolute tone of his voice, no less than his words, brought Jasper Lamotte to his senses.

"Certainly, I have no wish to oppose the ends of justice," he said, in a tone which, in spite of himself, was most ungracious. "Such an investigation is naturally distasteful to me. Nevertheless, you may proceed, gentlemen, but I should not like the ladies of my household to discover what is going on. They are sufficiently nervous already. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will go up and request them to remain in their rooms for the present. After that, you are at liberty to proceed."

They all sat themselves gravely, and Mr. Lamotte, taking this as a quiet acquiescence, goes out, and softly but swiftly up the broad stairs; not to the rooms occupied by the ladies, however, but straight on to Frank's room, where that young man has remained in solitude, ever since his unusually early breakfast hour.

"Frank," he says, entering quietly and closing the door with great care. "Frank, we have a delegation of doctors below stairs."

"A delegation of doctors?" Frank repeats, parrot-like.

"Precisely; they want to examine the body."

Frank comes slowly to his feet.

"To examine the body?" he repeats again. "In Heaven's name, why?"

"To ascertain, by examining the wounds on the body, if the knife found with it is the knife that killed."

A sickly hue overspreads Frank Lamotte's face, and he sits weakly down in

the chair, from which he has just risen, saying never a word.

"Frank," says Jasper Lamotte, eyeing his son sharply. "Do you see any reason why this investigation should not take place; supposing that it were yet in our power to hinder it?"

A silence that lasts many seconds, then—

"It is not in our power to hinder it," says Frank, in a hollow voice; "neither would it be policy. Let the play go on, and he turns his face away with a weary gesture."

For a moment, Jasper Lamotte stands gazing at his son; a puzzled look on his face; then he turns and goes out as softly as he came.

"Gentlemen," he says, re-entering the library, with the same subdued manner, "you are at liberty to proceed with your examination, and, if I may suggest, it is as well to lose no time. The funeral takes place at two o'clock."

They arise simultaneously, and without more words, follow Jasper Lamotte to the room of death.

At the door, Mr. Wedron halts.

"I will remain on the balcony," he says to Mr. O'Meara, but sufficiently loud to be heard by all the rest, "I never could endure the sight of a corpse." And he turns abruptly, and goes out through the open doorway; taking up a position on the broad piazza, and turning his gaze toward the river.

Jasper Lamotte is less sensitive, however; he enters with the others, and stands beside O'Meara, while the physicians do their work.

"At least," he thinks, "I'll know what they are about, and what their verdict is."

But in this he is disappointed. They have brought with them a surgeon's knife; the precise counterpart of the one now in possession of the prosecution, and of the same manufacture.

One by one they examine, they compare, they probe, and all in silence. Then they turn toward O'Meara.

"I believe we have finished," says Professor Harrington.

"And the result?" asks Jasper Lamotte, eagerly, in spite of himself.

"That," replies Mr. O'Meara, with elaborate nonchalance, "will be made known at the trial. Mr. Lamotte, we trust that you will pardon this most necessary intrusion, and we wish you a very good morning."

The examination has been a very brief affair; it is just ten o'clock when the four unwelcome guests drive away.

Doctor Benoit does not accompany them; he goes up stairs to visit his patient.

Jasper Lamotte asks him no questions. He knows that Doctor Benoit is a man of honor and that he will keep his professional secrets. So he goes sulkily back to his library.

Two hours later a rough, uncouth looking man appear at the servants' entrance and asks to see Mr. Lamotte.

"I'm one of his workmen," he says, very gravely, "and I want to see him particular."

Jasper Lamotte is in no mood for receiving visitors, but he is, just now, in a position where he cannot, with safety, follow the dictates of his haughty nature.

He is filled with suspicion; surrounded by a mystery he cannot fathom; and, a man who begs for an audience at such an hour must have an extraordinary errand. Reasoning thus, he says, crustily—

"Show the fellow here."

A moment later the man shuffles into the room. Mr. Lamotte glances up, and his brow darkens ominously.

"Brooks!" he exclaims. "What the mischief!" he checks himself, then adds, ungraciously: "What do you want?"

"Mr. Lamotte, I beg your pardon, sir," says the man, a trifle thickly. "I came back to W— last night, and heard of the awful things, as has happened here. Now, I always liked Burrill, in spite of his weakness, for I ain't the man to criticize such failin'. I've been down among the factory people, and I've heard them talk; and, thinks I to myself, there's some things as Mr. Lamotte ought to know you've always paid me my wages, sir; and treated me fair; and I believe you've treated all the hands the same; but—there's some people as must always have their fling at every body, as the Lord has seen fit to set over the heads; and—there's some of them sort in Mill avenue."

During this harangue the countenance of Jasper Lamotte has grown less supercilious, but not less curious.

"Explain yourself, Brook," he says graciously, and with some inward uneasiness. "I do not comprehend your meaning."

"If I had come to your servants and asked to see the body of my old chum," begins Brooks, with a knowing look, drawing near Mr. Lamotte, "they would have ordered me off, and shut the door in my face; so I just asked to see you on particular business. But if you was to ring your bell, by and by, and order one of your servants to take me in to look at the corpse, I could explain to them what an old friend I was, and that would settle the curiosity business."

"Doesn't it strike you, Brooks, that you don't cut much of a figure, to appear as the friend of my son-in-law?" questions Mr. Lamotte, looking with some disfavor at the ensemble before him.

Brooks buries his chin in his bosom, in order to survey his soiled linen; looks down at his dingy boots; runs his fingers through his shock of coarse red hair.

"I ain't much of a feller to look at; but that's because I ain't been as lucky as Burrill was; though I ain't anxious to change places with him now. I'll fix the friendship business to suit you, sir, and be proper respectful about it. Say Burrill was my boss, or something of that sort. I shouldn't like to have certain parties know my real business here, and I should like to take a look at Burrill on my own account."

There is a ring of sarcasm in the first words of this speech, and Mr. Lamotte reflects that he has not yet learned his errand.

"Very good, Brooks, you shall see the body, and manage the rest as delicately as possible, please. You know we want no ill spoken of the dead. Now, then, your real business, for," consulting his watch, "time presses."

"I know it does, sir, and I won't waste any words. You see, sir, beggin' your pardon for mentionin' of it, Burrill has got another wife, a divorced one, I mean, livin' down at the avenue. She works in Story's mill now, but she used to work in yours before—"

"Yes, yes," impatiently. "Get on faster, Brooks."

"Well, you see, sir, since her husband—I mean since Mr. Burrill was killed, she has been sittin' up rough, and lettin' out many things as you wouldn't like to have get all over W—. She ain't afraid of him no more (he did beat her monstrous), and when she gets to takin' on, she lets out things that would sound bad about your son-in-law. If it was a common chap like me, it wouldn't matter, but I think to myself, now, Brooks, this 'ere woman who can't hold her tongue will be hauled up as a witness for Doctor Heath. I ain't got nothing against Doctor Heath, but I says, it will be awful humblin' to Mr. Lamotte's pride, and powerful hard on his pretty daughter; so I just come to say that if Nance Burrill could be got to go away, quiet like, before the other parties could get their hands on her, why, it would be a good thing, Mr. Lamotte."

Considering the tender solicitude he feels for "Mr. Lamotte's pride," he has given it some pretty hard knocks, but he looks quite innocent, and incapable of any sinister intent, and Mr. Lamotte, after gnawing his lip viciously for a moment and favoring his vis-a-vis with a sharp glance of suspicion, says, with sudden condensation—

"Brooks, I've always been inclined to believe you a pretty good sort of fellow, but really this singular disinterestedness almost makes me suspect your motive. Stop," as Brooks elevates his head and suddenly faces toward the door. "Hear me out, Brooks, don't be ashamed to confess it. Did the thought of a reward stimulate you to do me this—favor?"

"If it's a favor, sir, you take it very uppish," retorts Brooks sulkily, and edging slowly toward the door. "I'm a poor man, sir, but I ain't bad enough to come to you with a trumped-up story, and if I happened to think that in case you found things as I tell you, you might reward me by and by with a ten-dollar note, why, I don't think there is much harm in that. I liked you and your ways, and wanted to do you a good turn, and if I wanted to do myself a good turn, too, why, there's nater in that."

"There's nater in that, true enough. Brooks, I wish I had time to hear all the particulars of this affair."

"I don't want to give them, sir," replies the man, hastily. "No more would it be fair for me to do so. I've got some fair friends among the Mill avenue folks. I've come back to W—, because I couldn't get on anywhere else; and I've come back broke. The factory folks will trust me to a night's lodging, when their betters wouldn't. I've told you enough to open your eyes, sir; and you can look into the thing for yourself."

To "look into the thing" for himself, is precisely what Jasper Lamotte is not inclined to do; so he says, with growing convictions, and increasing friendliness of manner—

"At least, Brooks, you can give me an idea of the nature of the stories this woman will tell, if brought into court?"

"The Lord knows what she won't tell, sir; she blows hot, and blows cold. One minute she tells how he was a fairly good husband, until he got into the hand of some city gang, while they lived in New York; and next she raves over all his misdeeds, tells how he was compelled to quit England, or he juggled up; how he forced her into divorcing him; how he bragged over the strong influence he had over you and all your family; how he came to her house time and again, after he was married to your gal; and how he promised her 'pots of old Lamotte's money'; them's her words, sir, 'pots of old Lamotte's money, and heaps of diamonds, for the sake of old times,' when he was drunk enough to be good natured; and how he beat her, and I can testify to that, when he was a little drunker."

"Brooks," says Mr. Lamotte, springing a last trap, "do you suppose you could manage this business of getting away the woman, if I paid you well, and gave you a bribe for her?"

"No, sir, I couldn't do it. I am so well known about Mill avenue; it won't do for a poor broke up devil to turn up flush all at once. I don't want nothing to do with the affair. I've done all I can do."

Mr. Lamotte slowly draws forth his wallet, and slowly opens it.

"Brooks, here is twenty-five dollars. I've not much money by me; I'll look into this matter, and do more for you after we get quiet again. Meantime, you can have the first vacancy at the factory; I'll see to that at once."

"And I'll try and be sober, sir, and ready to fit. Now, then, I've been here a good many minutes; you'd better let me take a look at the corpse, and be off."

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for the horses is mighty tall of me, being little used of late."

"Well, well," broke in Mr. Lamotte. "I suppose you can let a man to fill your place?"

The man's countenance brightened at once.

"Oh, yes, sir; I've the very man right on hand. A friend of mine, and a master one with horses."

"Let him take your place then, and see that every thing is in proper order."

"It's all right," said the coachman, returning to the stables and addressing a man who leaned against the loose box, where two blooded carriage horses were undergoing the currying process. "It's all right; you can drive the horses."

"Cap'n you're a good fellow," said the man, enthusiastically, "and here's your ten dollars. It's a favor I'll never forget, mind, for many's the day I've driven the beauties, before Squire McInnis went up, and we all had to go."

"That was a big failure," replied the coachman, knowingly. "You just see that the horses are done off all right, won't you? I must look after the carriage."

"It was lucky for me that I happened to know the history of these horses," mused Jerry Belknap, for he it was who leaned confidently over to stroke the sleek sides of one of the beautiful bays, and who had bribed Mr. Lamotte's coachman with a ten-dollar bill. "If I drive the Lamottes, I'm sure of a hearing, and no audience; at the worst if they should take in a third party, but they won't; I can find a way to make myself and my wands known." And he sauntered across to the carriage house and critically inspected the splendid landau that was being rolled out upon the gravel.

He had returned to W— on foot, from a near railway station, reaching the town within five hours from the time he left it.

During this time, however, his personal appearance had undergone a marked change. He was rufous, and more youthful of countenance; shabbily smart in dress; excessively "horsey," and somewhat loud in manner.

During his intercourse with the Lamottes he had learned from Frank that their blooded bays had once been the property of a wealthy and prominent citizen of New York, who having failed, after the modern fashion, had given Jasper Lamotte the first bid for the valuable span. Given thus much, the rest was easy. Representing himself as a former coachman of this bankrupt New Yorker, he had told his little story. He was looking about him for a place in which to open a "small, but neat" livery stable, had wandered into W— that morning, and having considerable cash about him, all his savings in fact, he had not cared to tempt robbers, by appearing too "high toned."

(To be Continued.)

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