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THE DANVERS JEWELS

AN ANONYMOUS NOVEL

In Which is Told a Thrilling Story of Baffled Crime.

CHAPTER VII.

"Look at Carr! waltzing with Aurelia!"

It was nearly 8 o'clock when I came down. The play was to begin at 8. The hall, which was brilliantly lighted, was one moving mass of black coats, with here and there a red one, and evening dresses many colored, the people in them chatting, bowing, laughing, being ushered to their places. Lady Mary and Sir George Danvers, side by side, received their guests at the foot of the grand staircase, Lady Mary resplendent in diamond tiara and riviere, smiling as if she could never finish; Sir George upright, courteous, a little stiff, as most English country gentlemen feel it incumbent on themselves to be on such occasions.

Presently the continual roll of the carriages outside ceased, the lamps were toned down, the orchestra struck up, and Sir George and Lady Mary took their seats, looking around with anxious satisfaction at the hall crowded with people. People lined the walls; chairs were being lifted over the heads of the sitting for those who were still standing; cushions were being arranged on the billiard table at the back for a covey of white waistcoats who arrived late; the staircase was now only crowded with servants; the whole place was crammed.

I wondered how they were getting on behind the scenes and slipping out of the hall I traversed the great gold and white drawing room, which with the adjoining library had been given up to the actors. They were all assembled in the morning room, however, waiting for one of the elder ladies who had not come down. The prompter was getting fidgety and walking about. The two scene shifters, pale, weary looking men, who had come down with the scenery, were sitting in the wings, perfectly apathetic amid the general excitement.

Charles and several other actors were standing round a footman who was opening champagne bottles at a surprising rate. I saw Charles take a glass to Evelyn, who was shivering in an armchair with a sharp attack of stage fever, holding everything past. She smiled gratefully, but we saw that her eyes wandered to the other side of the room, where Ralph, on all fours before Aurelia, was fastening a diamond star in her dress. Diamonds, rubies and emeralds flashed in her hair and on her white neck and arms. Ralph was fastening the last ornament in her hair with wire off a champagne bottle, there being no clasp to hold it in its place. I saw Evelyn turn away again, and Charles, who was within [illegible] to Evelyn's side, and [illegible] the door, and [illegible] nervous.

"[illegible] Charles," she called [illegible] was giving a final flourish, was hooped in a hoarse whisper to keep going a few minutes longer, as we to applied to the hole in the curtain, and then, every one being assembled, it was felt by all that the awful moment had come at last. A more miserable looking set of people I never saw. I always imagined that the actors behind the scenes were as gay off the stage as on it, but I found to my astonishment that they were all suffering more or less from severe mental depression.

Ralph and Aurelia were now sitting morally together on an ottoman beside the painting table, littered with its various rouges and creams and stage appliances. Even Charles, who had established Evelyn on a chair in the wings at the side she had to come on from, and was now drinking champagne with due regard to his paint—even Charles owned to being nervous.

"I wish to goodness Mrs. Wright would begin," he said. "Ah! there she goes!" as the curtain rose on the stage steps. "There goes the bell. We are in for it now. She starts, and I come on next. Up goes the curtain. Where the devil has my book got to?"

In another moment he was in the wings in his part; then I saw him [illegible] his book and go jaunty forward. A moment more and there was a thunder of applause. All the actors looked at each other and smiled a feeble smile.

"He will do," said Gen. Marston, the Indian officer, who, now in the dress of an old fashioned livery servant, proceeded to assume the stage. It dawned upon me that I was missing the play, and I hurried back to find Charles convulsing the audience with the humor of his lines, and evidently enjoying himself exceedingly. Then Evelyn came on—— But who cares to read a description of a play? It is sufficient to say that Aurelia looked charming, and many were the whispered comments on her magnificent jewels, her, on the stage, Evelyn surpassed her as much as Aurelia surpassed Evelyn off it.

Ralph and Carr did well, but Charles was the favorite with every one, from the Duchess of Cruskington in the front seat to the scullery maid on the staircase. He was so bold, so wicked, so insinuating, in his plushed cap and shag cloak, so elegantly refined when he wiped his sword upon his scarlet lined handkerchief. He took every one's heart by storm. Ralph, who represented all the virtues, with rather thick ankles and a false moustache, was nowhere. When the curtain fell for the last time, amid great and continued applause, the "heavy mother," Ralph, Aurelia—all were well received as they passed by, or in, but Charles, who appeared last, was the hero of the evening.

"He is engaged to his cousin, Miss Dubrick, isn't he?" said a lady near me in a loud whisper to a friend.

"Hush! No. Charles can't marry. Head over ears in debt. They say she is attached to one of her cousins, but I forget which. I am not sure it was not the other one."

"Then it is the second son who is going to be married, is it? I know I heard something about one of them being engaged."

"Yes, the second son is engaged to that good looking girl in diamonds who acted Florence Marlaunt. A lot of money, I believe, but not much in the way of family. Grandfather sold some traps in Birmingham, or Sheffield, they say."

"She looks like it," replied the other, who had daughters out, and could not afford to let any gender of other girls pass. "No breeding on the mother side, and she will be stout later, you will see."

The play being over a general movement now set in toward the drawing room, where the tea urn was already installed and making the passages known by an inspiring white haze. In a few moments twenty, thirty, forty people were swaying to the music. Aurelia in her acting costume was dancing away with Ralph in his red shoulders, Carr with the "heavy mother," and Charles in his pale sea green dress was flirting past with Evelyn, who, now that she had effaced her beautiful clear complexion, looked pale and grave as ever.

I suppose it was a capital ball. Every one seemed to enjoy it. I did not dance myself, but I liked watching the others, and after a time Charles, who had been dancing half furiously with two school room girls with pinafores came and flung himself down on the other half of the ottoman on which I was sitting.

"Three times with each," he said, in a voice of extreme exhaustion. "No favoritism. I have done for tonight now."

"What! Are you not going to dance any more?"

"No, not unless Evelyn will give me another turn. Look here, will you go [illegible] room? There [illegible] all being [illegible] water ices. [illegible] Aurelia and Carr waltzing with Aurelia. [illegible] to be leaning on her [illegible] and she looks as if she were telling him secrets not [illegible]. There, they have subsided into the bay window. I thought she would not stand it long. He does not dance well, as he acts. Hospitable? Come in to supper with me, Middleton. The supper room will be emptier now, and I am dying of hunger. You must be the same, for you had no regular dinner, and we had ours. Come along. We will get a certain little table for two that I know of in the bay window, where I took the hair pigtail just now, to the accident anxiety of the personal chaperon who was at the large table. We will have a good feed in peace and quietness."

In a few minutes we were established in a quiet nook in the supper room, which was now half empty, and were making short work of everything before us.

"How well Carr acted!" said Charles at last, leaning back and leisurely sipping his champagne. "I can think of something better to eat now. Did not you think he acted well?"

"Yes," I said, "but you cut him out."

"Did I?" said Charles smoothly, beckoning to some lobster salad which was passing. "Have some? Do, Middleton. We can but die once. You work. Well, I will. Have you often seen Carr act before?"

"Never," I said. "I never saw him till I came on board the Bagshot—"

"Indeed! Oh, I fancied you were quite old friends."

"We made great friends on the steamer."

"Did you see much of him in London?" he asked, filling up his glass and mine.

"Not much, naturally," I said, laughing. "I was only in London two nights."

"Ah, I forgot. Very good of you, I am sure, to come down here so soon after your arrival. You would hardly have seen him at all since you landed, then?"

"Carr? Yes," I replied, thinking that Charles' talk was becoming very candid, though when I rallied him about it next day he assured me it had been very much to the point indeed. "We dined and went to the play together, and had a rather nasty accident in the bargain on our way home."

"What kind of accident?"

I told him the particulars, which seemed to interest him very much.

"And you had all those jewels of poor Sir John's with you no doubt," continued Charles. "You said you had them on you day and night. I wonder you were not relieved of them."

"That is just what Carr said," I went on, for he had something of his, poor fellow. However, I had left them with Jane in a—in a safe place."

I did not think it necessary to mention the place to Sir.

"Oh! so Carr knew you had charge of them, did he?" said Charles. "Have some of these grapes, Middleton; the white ones are the best."

"Yes," I said, "he was the only person who had any idea of such a thing. I am very careful, I can tell you, and I did not mean to have half the ship's company know that I had valuables to such an amount upon me. When I told Jane about them——"

"Oh, then, Jane—I beg her pardon, Miss Middleton—was aware you had them with you?"

"Of course," I recalled, "and she was quite astonished at them when I showed them to her."

"I hope," continued Charles, with his charming smile—all the more charming because it was so rare—"that Miss Middleton will add me to the number of her friends some day. I live in London, you know, but I wonder at ladies caring to live there. My poetry or yard is, to which the feminine and moral climate."

"Jane seems to like it," I said.

"Yes," replied Charles, meditatively. "I dare say she is very nice. A woman who lives almost as much safer in town than in the country, in case of burglars, or"——

"Well, I don't know that," I said. "I don't see that they are so very safe. Why, only the night before I came down here——" I began. I had looked up to catch a sudden glimpse of Charles' face, pale and musing, reclining in a mirror opposite. In a moment I saw his face turn smiling to another—Evelyn's. I think—and both were gone.

Charles' light blue eyes were fixed full upon me.

"Only the night before you came down here? Do go on!" he remarked, leaning back and half shutting them as usual.

"Yes, only the night before I came down here the house was broken into. And I gave him a short account of what had happened, and only the night before last, I added, the house was broken into again. I am [illegible] all hours. I [illegible] I [illegible] I went to the [illegible] morning, [illegible] the best thing, [illegible] the fire. I don't see that living in town is [illegible] safer for life and property after dark."

"Dear me! Very nice, quite perfectly right," said Charles, drowsily. "Yours is [illegible] experience, I guess. And that other [illegible] before—and in Miss Middleton's former house, too. Well, Middleton," with a start, "I suppose we ought to be going back now. I [illegible] have, I would rather [illegible] tired."

We re-entered the ball room to find the last waltz being played, and a crowd of people bidding adieu of Lady Mary.

"Where is Aurelia?" asked Charles, as Ralph came up. "She ought to be home to keep good hours."

"She's gone to bed," said Ralph. "Aunt Mary sent her. He was quite done up. He has been on his legs all day. I expect he will be laid up to-morrow."

In a quarter of an hour the ball room was empty, and Lady Mary, who had drawn the hood of a cloak around her as the last carriage rolled away, felt that the night's safety rested on the labor of her mind. [illegible] from the gracious and benevolent to the acid and severe.

"To bed! to bed!" she kept repeating. "Where is Evelyn? I want her. Gen. Marston, Col. Middleton, will you have the goodness to go and clear up these young people? Mrs. Marston and Lady Delmour, you must soon be turned to death. Let us go on, and they can follow."

Gen. Marston and I found a whole flock of the said young people in the library, candle in hand, laughing and talking, thinking they were going in a moment, but not doing it, and after a fine, listening to Charles, who was expounding a theory of his own respecting ball dresses, which seemed to meet with the greatest feminine approbation.

"First take yours off, Ralph," he was saying as we came in. "There is nothing unbecoming in mentioning it, is there, Evelyn? I don't see it. Here I heard Lady Delmour telling Mrs. Wright that all well brought up young ladies had silk slips. There!"

"He expects his appearance more entirely very unusual," said Evelyn. "Let us all go to bed and leave him to hold forth to men who know as little as himself."

"Oh, Ralph!" said Aurelia, pointing to the jewels on her neck and arms; "before we go I want you to take back these. I don't like keeping them myself; I am afraid of them." And she began to take them off and lay them on the table.

"Nonsense, my pet. Keep them yourself and lock them up in your dressing case." And Ralph held them toward her.

"I haven't got a dressing case," said Aurelia, pouting, "and my hat box won't lock. I don't like having them. I wish you would keep them yourself."

"Bother!" said Ralph, "and father has gone to bed. He can't put them back into his safe, and he keeps the key himself. Where is the bag they go in?"

Aurelia said that she had seen him put it behind a certain jar on the chimneypiece in the morning room, and Carr went for it, she following him with a candle, as all the lamps had been put out. They presently returned with it, and Ralph, who had been collecting all the jewels spread over the table, shoveled them in with little ceremony.

"Either," he said, again looking round and swinging the bag, "what on earth am I to do with them? Ah, well, here goes!" and he opened a side drawer in a massive writing table and shoved the bag in.

"There," he said, locking it and putting the key in his pocket—"they will do very well there till to-morrow. Are you coming now, Aurelia?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "I am if you are." And she bade us good night and followed in the wake of the others, who were really under way at last.

As we all tramped wearily up stairs to the smoking room I saw Charles draw Ralph aside and whisper something to him.

"Nonsense!" I heard Ralph say. "Safe enough. Besides, who would suspect their being there? Just as safe as in the strong box. Brahma lock. Won't be bothered any more about them."

Charles shrugged his shoulders and marched off to bed. Ralph and Carr lit cigars and went off shortly afterward to their rooms in the lodge. Carr looked tired to death. I went down with them, at Ralph's request, to lock the door behind them, as all the servants had gone to bed.

It was a fine night, still and cold, with a bright moon. It had evidently been snowing afresh, for there was not a trace of wheels upon the ground, but it had ceased now.

"Good-night!" called Ralph and Carr as they went down the steps together. I watched the two figures, for a moment in the moonlight, their footsteps making a double track in the untrodden snow. The cold was intense. I drew back shivering and locked and bolted the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

I saw Charles pale and haggard.

It is very seldom I cannot sleep, but I lay awake that night. There was something in the unusual quiet and repose of the great house, after all the excitement of the last few hours, that oppressed me. Everything seemed, as I lay awake, so unnaturally silent. There was not a sound in the wide grate where the last embers of the logs were silently giving up the ghost, not a rustle of wind in the old ivy which had seemed so much to see the night before. I listened and tossed and vainly sought for sleep, now on this side, now on that.

At last I gave up trying, half on the impression that I should open my eyes—[illegible] of the play and the house on fire, [illegible] the degree of anything and everything, but it was a quiet night, [illegible] of disturbance. I lay and [illegible] myself [illegible] to the silence—listening as if it had been broken by a sound which I had not heard. My watch ticked loud and louder on the dressing table, and presently I gave quite a start as the silent room clock rolled out the hour—one—two—three—[illegible]. I had gone to bed [illegible]. It [illegible] only been [illegible] hour? It seemed incredible. I sat up on the instantaneously afraid of breaking the silence, I noiselessly parted the heavy curtains and looked out.

[illegible] but by the frosty moonlight the outlines of the great snow laden trees and the wide sweep of white drive were still plainly visible. All was silent without as within. Not a branch moved on the full breast of snow. There was not a breath of wind stirring. I was on the point of getting back into bed when I thought in the distance I heard a sound. I listened intently. No! I must have been mistaken. Ah! again, and nearer! I held my breath. I could distinctly hear a stealthy step coming up the stairs. My room was the nearest to the flight, and out of the corridor, and any one coming up the stairs must pass my door. With a presence of mind which I am glad to say rarely deserts me I blew out my candle, slipped to the door and noiselessly opened it a chink.

Some one was coming down the corridor with the lightness of a cat, candle in hand, as a faint light showed me. Another moment and I saw Charles, pale and haggard, still in evening dress, coming toward me. He was without his shoes. He passed my door and went noiselessly into his own room, a little further down the passage. There was the faintest suspicion of a sound, as of a key being gently turned in the lock, and then all was still again, stiller than ever.

What could Charles have been after, I wondered. He could not have been returning from seeing Denis, who was not only much better, but was in the room beyond his own. And why had he still got on his evening clothes at 4 o'clock in the morning? I determined to ask him about it next day as I got back into bed again, and then, while wondering about it and trying to get warm, I fell fast asleep. I was only roused, after being twice called, to find that it was broad daylight, and to hear the boxes being carried down of many of the guests who were leaving by an early train.

I was late, but not so late as some. Breakfast was still going on. Evelyn and Ralph had been up to see their friends off, but Gen. and Mrs. Marston and Carr, who was staying on, came in after I did. Lady Mary and Aurelia were having breakfast in their own rooms. I think nothing is more dreary than a long breakfast table laid for large numbers with half a dozen picknicking at it among the debris left by earlier ravages. Evelyn, behind the great silver urn, looked pale and preoccupied and had very little to say for herself when I journeyed up to her end of the table and sat down by her. She asked me twice if I took sugar, and was not bright and alert and ready in conversation, as I think girls should be. Carr, too, was eating his breakfast in silence beside Mrs. Marston.

It was not cheerful. And then Charles came in, listless and tired, and without an appetite. He sat down wearily on the other side of Evelyn and watched her pour out his coffee without a word.

"The Carews and Edmonds and Lady Delmour and her daughter have just gone," said Evelyn, "and Mr. Denis."

"Yes," replied Charles, seeming to pull himself together; "Denis came to my room before he went. He looked a wreck, poor fellow; but not worse than some of us. These late hours, these friskings with energetic young creatures in the schoolroom, these midnight revels are too much for me. I feel a perfect wreck this morning, too."

He certainly looked it.

"Have you had bad letters?" said Evelyn, in a low voice.

He laughed a little—a grim laugh—and shook his head. "But I had yesterday," he added, presently, in a low tone. "I shall have to try change of air again soon, I am afraid."

I was just going to ask Charles what he had been doing walking about in his socks the night before, when the door opened, and Ralph, whose absence I had not noticed, came in. He looked much perturbed. It seemed his father had been taken suddenly and alarmingly ill while dressing.

In a moment all was confusion. Evelyn promptly left the room to go to him, while Charles rushed round to the stables to send a groom on horseback for the nearest doctor. Ralph followed him, and the remainder of the party gathered in a little knot round the fire, Mrs. Marston expressing the sentiment of each of us when she said that she thought visitors were very much in the way when there was illness in the house, and that she regretted that she and her husband had arranged to stay over Sunday, today being Friday.

"So have I," said Carr; "but I am sure I had better have refused. A stranger in a sick house is a positive nuisance. I think I shall go to town by an afternoon train if there is one."

"Upon my word I think we had better do the same," said Mrs. Marston. "What do you say, Arthur?" And she turned to her husband.

"I must go to-day, anyhow—on business," said Gen. Marston.

"I hope no one is talking of leaving," said Charles, who had returned suddenly, rather out of breath.

As he spoke his eyes were fixed on Carr.

"Yes, that is exactly what we were [illegible]," said Mrs. Marston. "Nothing [illegible] having visitors on such [illegible] when there is illness in the house. Mr. Carr was thinking of going up to London by the afternoon train, and I have a very good mind to go away with Arthur instead of staying on and letting him come back here for me to-morrow, as we had intended."

"I pray do not think of such a thing!" said Charles, really with unusual earnestness. "Mrs. Marston, pray do not alter your plans. Carr! in a much stronger tone, "I must hope that you will not think of leaving us today. Your friend, old Middleton, is staying on, and we cannot allow you to desert us so suddenly."

It was more like a command than an invitation; but Carr, usually so quick to take a slight, did not seem to notice it, and merely said that he should be happy to go or stay, whichever was most in accordance with the wishes of others, and took up the newspaper. He and Charles did not seem to get on well. I could see that Charles had not seemed to take to him from the very first, and Carr certainly did not appear at ease in the house.

Perhaps Charles felt that he had rather failed in courtesy to him, for during the remainder of the morning he hardly let him out of his sight. He took him to see the stables, though Carr openly declared that he did not understand horses; he showed him his collection of Zulu weapons in the vestibule; he even started a game of billiards with him till the arrival of the doctor. I do not think Carr took his attentions in very good part, though he was too well mannered to show it; but he looked relieved when Charles went upstairs with the doctor, and pitched his cue into the rack at once, and came to the hall fire, where I was sitting, and where Aurelia presently joined us, fresh and smiling, in the prettiest of morning gowns. Everyone was in the hall. It was in the center of the house, and everyone coming up stairs had to pass through it. Just now it was not so tempting an object as usual, for the flowers and part of the stage had already been removed, and the bare boards with their wooden supports gave much of disconfort to the whole place.

Aurelia up and [illegible] horror at hearing Sir George was ill. She got out a tiny lace pocket handkerchief, but before she had time to weep much into it and spoil her pretty eyes the doctor reappeared, accompanied by Charles and Ralph, and we all learned to our great relief that Sir George, though undoubtedly ill, was not dangerous at present, though the greatest care would be necessary. Lady Mary had undertaken the nursing of her brother-in-law, and in her the doctor expressed the same confidence which parents are wont to feel in a stern schoolmaster. In the meantime the patient was to be kept very quiet and on no account to be disturbed.

When the doctor had left Ralph and Aurelia, who had actually seen nothing of each other that morning, retired away together toward the library. Charles challenged Carr to finish his game of billiards and Marston and I retired upstairs to the smoking room, where we could talk over our late experiences, and perhaps doze undisturbed. We might have been occupied for half an hour or more when a flying step came up the stairs, the door was thrown open and Ralph rushed into the room.

"Gen. Marston! Col. Middleton!" he gasped out, breathing hard, "will you both of you come to my father's room at once? He has sent for you."

"Good gracious! Is he worse?" I exclaimed.

"No. Hush! Don't ask anything, but just come," and he turned and led the way to Sir George Danvers' room.

We followed in wonderin[illegible], and after passing along [illegible] were ushered into a large [illegible] room with a great curtained bed in it, in the middle of which, half upright, sat Sir George Danvers, pale as ivory, his light steel eyes [illegible] to be the only living [illegible].

As we came in he looked at each of us in turn.

"Where is Charles?" he said, [illegible] in a hoarse whisper.

"Dare not! Sir George!" [illegible] gently, "[illegible] voice?"

He looked at me for a moment, and then turned to Ralph [illegible]

"[illegible] Charles [illegible] time [illegible]

"Here," said [illegible] Charles came [illegible]

CHAPTER IX.

My hand [illegible]

The two [illegible] looked steadily at each other.

A tap came to the door.

Sir George [illegible] Ralph, were [illegible]

"I am coming, [illegible] Lady Mary's [illegible]

"Send her away," came a whisper from the bed.

[illegible] But it was done [illegible] Lady and Laura [illegible] impossible [illegible] was asleep, [illegible] with his [illegible] who [illegible] get a little sleep.

"Now," whispered [illegible] to Ralph.

"The fact is," said Ralph, "the jewels are gone. They have been stolen in the night."

He looked out with the [illegible] and then was silent. Marston and I stared at him aghast.

"Is there no mistake?" said Marston at last.

"None," replied Ralph. "I put them in a drawer in the green inlaid writing table in the library last night, before everybody. I went for them this morning, half an hour ago, at father's request. The lock was broken, and they were gone."

There was another long silence.

"I was a fool, of course, to put them there," resumed Ralph. "Charles told me so, but I thought they were as safe