

MRS. GAINSBOROUGH'S DIAMONDS. JULIAN HAWTHORNE. Copyrighted by D. APPLETON & Co. Published by Special Arrangement. 1892

Having arrived at this sapient determination, I set to work writing my letters, and scribbled away diligently for an hour or two. At length, as I was looking vacantly up from my paper, at a loss for something interesting to set down upon it, my eyes happened to rest upon the pane of my open window.

Like nearly all German windows, it opened inward on hinges, instead of running up and down in grooves. The pane on my left, therefore, having the dark room as a background, acted as a mirror of the sunlit landscape outside on the right, showing me a portion thereof which was directly invisible to me from where I sat, and to any person standing in which I must myself be invisible.

Now, my window was on the southern side of the house, which fronted west-

ward on the road. On the opposite side of the road was a narrow strip of land planted with vegetables, and above this rose the abrupt side of a hill, ascended by a winding path partly hidden by the trees. I could not see this hill and path without leaning out of the window and looking toward the right; but a considerable part of it was reflected in my window pane mirror and could thus be readily observed without rising from my chair. Happening then, as I said, to cast my eyes upon this mirror, I saw two persons standing together on the path upon the hillside and conversing in a very animated manner.

I had no difficulty in recognizing them; they were Mr. Birchmore and my valet. So far there was nothing surprising in the spectacle. That which did surprise and even astonish me, however, was the mutual bearing of the two men toward each other.

I have already mentioned the peremptory tone in which Mr. Birchmore uniformly addressed the man Slurk and the generally overbearing attitude he assumed toward him; but in the conversation now going forward all this was changed. To judge by appearances, I should have said that Slurk was the master and Mr. Birchmore the valet.

The former was gesticulating forcibly and evidently laying down the law in a very decided and autocratic way. His square, ungainly figure seemed to dilate and take on a masterful and almost hectoring air; while Mr. Birchmore stood with his hands in his coat pockets, undemonstrative and submissive, apparently accepting with meekness all that the other advanced, and only occasionally interpolating a remark or a suggestion to which Slurk would pay but slight or impatient attention. Both were evidently talking in a low tone; for, though they were not more than fifty or sixty yards from where I sat, I could not catch a single word, or even so much as an inarticulate murmur, unless by deliberately straining my ears. But I did not need nor care to hear anything; what I saw was quite enough to startle and mystify me.

After a few minutes the two interlocutors moved slowly on up the path and were soon beyond the field of my mirror. But the unexpected scene which I had witnessed did not so soon pass out of my mind.

I got up from my table and began walking about the room with the restlessness of one who cannot make his new facts tally with his preconceived ideas. Who and what was Slurk, and how had he obtained ascendancy over a man like Birchmore? Certainly it could not be a natural ascendancy. Birchmore must have put himself in the other's power. In other words, Slurk must be black-mailing him. And this was the trouble was it?—this was the mystery? It was an ugly and awkward business, certainly; but the main question remained after all unanswered. What was it that Birchmore had done to give Slurk a hold upon him? and had that act, whatever it was, compromised his daughter along with him?

For now that I gathered up in my memory all the hints and signs which had come under my notice in relation to this affair, I could not help thinking that Kate's attitude had in it something suggestive of more than mere filial sympathy with her father's misfortune. In that misfortune or disgrace she had a personal and separate, in addition to a

sympathetic, share. And yet in what conceivable way could a low villain like Slurk fasten his grip upon a pure and spotless young girl? And what a notorious thought—that such a girl should be in any way at his mercy! The more I turned the matter over in my mind the more ugly did it appear. No wonder that father and daughter had warned me away.

Some men in my position, having seen thus far, might have shrunk back and given up the enterprise. But I was not in that category. I was more than ever determined to see the adventure to its end—nay, to gain my own end in it too. The conditions of the contest were at all events narrowing themselves down to recognizable form. It was to be a trial of strength mainly between myself and Slurk—between an educated, plucky Englishman and a base German ruffian.—between one, moreover, who had right, moral and legal, on his side and love as his goal—and one armed only with underhand cunning and terrorism and aiming at nothing higher than the extortion of money. This was the way I read the situation, and I flattered myself that I was equal to the emergency.

Upon consideration, however, I decided to alter my intention of asking Mr. Birchmore about his valet. It was tolerably clear that he was not in a position to give me any information, and besides, I had already learned everything except the particulars. Those particulars, if I did not succeed in discovering them unaided, must be extracted from Kate. She would not withhold them from me if I questioned her resolutely and directly, enforcing my inquiries with disclosure of the knowledge I had already obtained. This, then, should be my next step. I sealed up my letters locked them in my desk and, it being now nearly seven o'clock, I went down to supper.

CHAPTER VII.

But at supper there was no Kate. Mr. Birchmore and I were served by Christina, while the voices of Slurk and our landlord could be heard in the kitchen. My conversation was naturally somewhat constrained. Mr. Birchmore had a good deal to say about some excursion which he had in view for the morrow but I failed to pay very close attention to his remarks. Once, however, I caught Christina's eyes fixed upon me and smiled as I remembered her warnings respecting the supposed danger of solitary rambles.

After supper I felt more restless than ever. Mr. Birchmore brought out his invariable cigars, expecting me to join him in a smoke; but I was not in the mood for it, neither did I feel at ease in his company until things should have begun to look a little more comprehensible. I left him, therefore, and wandered aimlessly about outside the house, exploring the farmyard and buildings and then coming around to the road, and pacing up and down on a beat about a quarter of a mile in length. It was a clear, moonlight night, and so warm as to be almost oppressive. At length I returned to the house, it being then after nine o'clock. Mr. Birchmore had apparently retired; Christina was nowhere to be seen; so I got a lamp from my surly landlord and found my way without much difficulty to my own chamber.

The warmth within doors was still more oppressive than outside. I opened both the windows, drew up my bed between them, and placed the table with the lamp on it near the bed's head. I had previously thrown off my coat and waistcoat and laid them across one end of the table. The diamonds were still in the pocket of the coat; I intended taking them out before going to sleep and putting them under my pillow or in some equally secure place. My revolver I also placed beside the lamp. Then having provided myself with a book out of my trunk and drawn the bolt of the door, I reclined on the outside of the bed and began to read.

I could not, however, fix my mind upon the page. First my attention and then my eyes would wander; I took a futile and absurd interest in scrutinizing all the details of the room. I recollect them distinctly now. The walls were not papered, but the plaster was washed

over with a dark gray tint, which rubbed off on the fingers, and the uniformity of which was relieved by vertical bands of dull red, painted at intervals of about five feet from floor to ceiling. The ceiling was low—about eight feet from the floor—and whitewashed. In one corner stood the china stove, a glistening, pallid structure of plain tiles, built up four square nearly to the top of the room.



I rose from my bed and laid my hand gently on her wrist.

On the side of the room opposite the two windows and the bed was fastened a tall looking glass, formed of three plates set one above the other, edge to edge, in such a manner as painfully to cut up and distort whatever was reflected in them. In front of the looking glass was a hipbath tub and beside it a straight legged chair without rungs—in a word, a room more utterly devoid of every kind of picturesque or ornamental attraction could not be imagined; yet I could not keep my eyes from vacantly traversing and retraversing its vacancy. The door was behind me, as I lay turned toward the little table on which the lamp stood, but I could see the free edge of it brokenly reflected in the mirror, with the cracked black porcelain latch handle and the iron bolt which I had shot into its place.

I was anything but sleepy; the heat and the pest of midges and beetles which the light attracted in through the windows would have sufficed to keep me awake even had my mind been at ease. In order to disperse the insects I finally extinguished the lamp; the moonlight in the room was so bright that I could almost have seen to read by it. I closed the book, however, and clasping my hands under my head I gave myself up to meditation. Not a sound of any kind was audible except the muffled ticking of the watch in my waistcoat pocket and the faint rustle of the pillow as I breathed. The white moonlight seemed to augment the stillness; the whole great night and the house with it seemed silently and intently listening, and at length I found myself listening intently too! For what? I could not tell, but I listened nevertheless.

By and by I fancied a sound came—a sound from somewhere within the house. It was a very faint sound and did not come again, but it was such as might have been caused by the light pressure of a foot in one of the passages outside. Instinctively I reached forth my hand and had hold of my revolver, but I did not rise from the bed nor otherwise alter my position. I still lay as if asleep, with the revolver in one hand, the other beneath my head and my eyes fixed upon the edge of the door, which was obscurely visible in the mirror.

Several minutes passed thus, and there was no return of the noise. Then I saw the handle of the door move and turn. The latch clicked slightly; the door, bolted though it was, opened as if on oiled hinges, admitting an indistinct figure in a long robe of soft gray. So much I saw in the mirror. Then the door was closed again and the figure, advancing toward the bed, ceased to be reflected in the glass. It advanced close to the bed, and paused there a moment; I could hear its deep, regular breathing. All this time I had not moved, but lay with my back turned, feigning slumber.

Presently the figure passed around the foot of the bed, and came up the other side. The full white light of the moon fell upon it. It was Kate, as I had known it was from the first moment she entered the room. She was clad in a dressing gown of soft flowing material, which was fastened at the throat and trailed on the ground. It had wide sleeves, one of which fell back from the bare, smooth arm and hand that carried a lamp. The lamp was not lighted. Her black hair hung down on her shoulders, and on each side of her pale face. Her eyes were wide open, but fixed and vacant. Her breathing was long and measured, as of one sound asleep.

She put the lamp down on the table beside mine, and then stood quite still in

the moonlight, her face wholly expressionless and without motion. It was an appalling thing to see her thus. I, too, remained motionless, but it was because I knew not what to do. To awaken her might bring on the worst consequences. If she were not disturbed, she might possibly retire as quietly and unconsciously as she had come. But the mystery of her being there at all appeared utterly inexplicable. What had led her, in her trance, to visit my room? How had she ever known where it was? What had she dreamed of doing here, and above all how had she contrived to enter through a bolted door with as much ease as though she had been a spirit? Perhaps this was but a spirit—or a phantom of my own brain! Was I awake?

She stretched out her hand, not following its motion with her eyes, but mechanically, and, as it were, involuntarily. She laid it on my coat—on the pocket which contained the diamonds. Then slowly and deliberately, and still with averted face and eyes and that long drawn, slumberous breathing, she unbuttoned the fastenings one after one, and her soft, tapering fingers closed upon the case.

Meanwhile my mind had been rapidly canvassing all the pros and cons of action; and I had come to the conclusion that it would be better for her that I should interfere. Of my personal interest in the matter I believe that I did not think; indeed, knowing that the diamonds would not be lost, there was no reason why I should. But it would not do to risk compromising Kate. It was dangerous enough that she should be here at all, but that she should carry away the diamonds with her was inadmissible. I rose from my bed and laid my hand gently on her wrist.

She was no spirit, but warm flesh and blood. For a few moments the restraint in which I held her seemed to baffle and distress her; I fancied I could feel her pulse beat under my fingers; a kind of spasm crossed her face, her eyelids quivered and the eyes moved in their sockets. Then her breathing became irregular and caught in her throat in a kind of sob. The moment of awakening was evidently at hand, and I dreaded its coming, lest she should scream out and rouse the house. But fortunately she uttered no sound. Slowly speculation grew within her eyes; she fixed them on me, first with an expression of strange pleasure, soon changing to bewilderment and fear. Then with a cry that was none the less thrilling because it was a whisper she drooped forward into my arms. It was a delicious moment for all its peril.

"You are perfectly safe," I whispered in her ear; "only make no noise."

"Tom," she said, suddenly freeing herself from my arms and putting a hand on either shoulder, while her wild, black eyes searched my face, "you understand—you don't think?"

"Of course I understand, my poor darling!"

"What shall I do—what shall I do? Let me kill myself!"

With a motion swift as the glide of a serpent she reached toward the revolver, which I had left on the bed. I was barely in time to catch her arm. The look in the girl's face at that moment was terrible.

"Let me—I will!"

"Hush, Kate! You never shall."

"Oh, what shall I do?" she murmured again, slipping down on her knees and running both hands through her thick, black hair. "Tom, if you love me you will kill me!"

"Kate, every one in the house is asleep. You can go back to your room, and no one know. Only be calm."

"And no one know? You think that?"

"I am sure of it."

"I know better. Some one knows it now—he made it happen!"

"Don't kneel there, dear. You're not yourself yet. You don't know what you're saying."

I said this reassuringly, but her words had inspired me with a vague alarm that I ventured not to define. I brought a chair and made her sit upon it, and sat down beside her.

"Not here!" she whispered, drawing back out of the moonlight into the shadow. "Come here, Tom. He may be looking."

"Why, Kate, who can see us here? The door is shut."

"Oh—why was not the door bolted?"

"It was. I can't conceive how you opened it."

"Oh, the villain! how I hate him!"

"Kate, I love you, and whoever you hate must have to do with me."

"You can do nothing—no one can do anything—unless you'll help me to kill him!"

"Whom? Do you mean Slurk? Tell me that!"

"Yes!" she answered, with a shiver, not looking me in the face, but with her hands clasped tight between her knees.

"I do mean—him!"

"Now tell me all that he has done, dear," said I quietly. "I must know everything, and then I promise you that you shall be freed from him."

"He is my master!" she said in a frightened whisper. "He has been ever so long! He makes me do what he wills; he sent me here tonight. He shames me and destroys me—he loves me to do it! He makes me sleep and then I cannot help myself. I wake and find it done, and he has no mercy."

"Why does he do this?"

"It was when I was only a little girl that he first got that power over me. He knew my father was rich and he wanted me to be promised to him for his—your know what, Tom. Then my father came in the convent, and I stand there seven years, till we thought he had the power, or was dead, perhaps. But he found me in America and made me come back, and now it's worse than ever."

"Why doesn't your father have him arrested and imprisoned? It can be done."

"Oh, my poor father! He cannot. Tom; do not ask me that!"

"I must ask it, Kate. Remember, I love you! Why is it?"

"My father is afraid of him too," she said, chafing one hand with the other with a piteous expression of pain. "If he did anything against him he would be ruined. My father cannot help me, Tom."

"But I do not understand. What has your father done that he should be afraid of such a scoundrel as Slurk?" I demanded sternly.

She hesitated long before answering, moving her hands and head restlessly and fetching many troubled sighs. At last she laid her hand shrankingly on mine and I grasped it firmly.

"I will tell you, Tom," she said in a faltering voice; "but you know I would tell no one in the world but you. My dear papa did not do wrong himself, but there were people connected with him, who did, and made the blame seem to be his. And there were some papers of my papa's which—which—oh—"

"Yes, yes, I understand, darling; and Slurk stole the papers?"

"Yes—that is—no; it was worse than that, for he didn't know where the papers were kept—no one knew that but I. Tom, he made me sleep, and in my sleep he made me go to the place where they were and take them out and give them to him. He made me rob my own father—put my own dear papa in his hateful power. I would rather have died! And papa forgave me—think of that!"

"Then Slurk has the papers in his possession, and he uses them for blackmail. But have you never thought of trying to—it sounds badly, but it would be perfectly justifiable to steal them back again?"

"I can do nothing. He can make me helpless by a look, and he always carries them with him. But, Tom, if it could be done without being found out I would tell papa to kill him. But I cannot let my dear papa be hanged for that wretch, and you see we have no evidence."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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