

The Romance of a Million Dollars

by ELIZABETH DEJEANS



FINAL INSTALLMENT.

The Clouds Roll Away.

Marie was right: West had gambled on his last chance and had lost. Her scorn of Breck had rung true, her revenge triumphant was ringing clear, amusedly certain. West had shrunk; a high-chalant gamster, a conscienceless, clever man of the world, an artist and actor of talent perverted. West Dunbarton-Kent changed, while they looked on, into the hunted criminal. His body seemed to shrink and his statue lessen; his shoulders lifted and rounded, his neck shortened, his jaw protruded and sharp lines narrowed his forehead; his eyes grown furtive and gleaming peered from a face that belonged rightfully to the rogues' gallery. The metamorphosis was more astounding and far more painful than the superficial change wrought by a disguise removed; that which had been a superb woman changed into an erect, arrogant, well-featured man; this was a revelation of mental deformity, revolting, sickening.

He was looking from this side to that, swiftly considering. He moved sidewise toward the black opening in the paneling, glancing into the darkness, glancing over his shoulder at the cottage door, listening the while. He looked at none of them, yet observed them with furtive glances. Then he decided; with a crawling leap he cleared the far end of the table and ran across the room, catching up some of the scattered bills as he went. He climbed the book shelves as one would a ladder. He opened a casement window and crawled through it. They all turned and watched him, his body disappeared; for a brief moment they saw his hands clinging to the sill—then they disappeared.

Marie said softly and sweetly, but in a voice they all heard. "It was necessary. He had but one fear—the law." Then suddenly, she drooped against the table and, before Breck could reach her, she slid to the floor, a huddled heap.

Willets had sprung towards her, but Breck had leaped the table and had reached her first. He lifted her up. "She has fainted," he said. "I ought not to have let her do it, but it was the only way."

He held her carefully, guarding her oddly twisted, hanging arm; stood upright and, over her head, which drooped against his breast, he looked at the three who had crowded close; at Haslett and Willets, who did not know what to do next, at Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, who was saying in quivering agitation: "Give her to me, Breck—my poor child! And you—"

She looked old and broken, her head shook spasmodically.

"No one is coming," Breck said briefly. "She was acting—she beat him at his own game and without anyone's help. You're indebted to her for your release from that man. I've suspected Mrs. Smith for some time."

I've searched her house several times. I've watched it night after night, under difficulties. I searched it again tonight. She was not there, and there was no clew to the jewels. I went a second time to her bedroom and found it locked. There were movements and I know she must have come by some secret way. When there was silence again, I knew she had gone and then it came to me. I got into the room and searched every inch of it and I found it, a concealed stairway down into the cellar.

Then I heard voices—there was a gap in the cellar wall and only the paneling between me and the cottage—the paneling was a door which was closed. I opened it in time, thank God! He had spoken rapidly he gave his orders tersely. "Gather up that stuff on the floor, Willets, and I'll tell you what to do with it. And you, Mr. Haslett, look after my aunt—she's ill. The trouble here is a dislocated shoulder, I think. I didn't notice till she used her left hand. The sooner we get to the house the better."

One afternoon, three weeks later, Burton Haslett walked briskly along the lower road until he neared the entrance to Colfax Hall. Then he walked more slowly, his eyes keenly observant. The old brick pile was being repaired, there was scaffolding across its front and piles of lumber on its unkempt lawn.

He went on then to Kent house entrance, stopped there, and stood gazing. Mrs. Smith's house had disappeared where it had stood was a heap of blackened debris.

Gibbs, looking utterly immune to either tragedy or comedy, intent on his Roman nose, as usual, received the Dunbarton-Kent lawyer and relieved him of his hat

and cane. "Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent will receive you in the library, sir."

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was seated, from winter habit, before the fireplace whose only warmth now was its shining brass. She looked older, her huge cheeks sagged more, and, at times, the jerking of her head, a relic of shock and prolonged nerve strain, was noticeable. "So you chose to walk from the station—I suppose you wanted to see the ruins again," she said with her usual abruptness. She eyed him keenly. "You've had some word from him, of course. I knew it as soon as you telephoned that you were coming out."

"It's good news," Haslett said quickly. "He's out of the country—he writes from Paris."

"He wants money, I suppose?" she said grimly.

"Yes—an allowance. He has seen our New York papers and he realizes Miss Angouleme tricked him."

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's red brown eyes flashed. "Not one cent! Notify him that we've turned him over to the police."

"That was Breck's advice, but we wanted your sanction," Haslett took a paper from his pocket. "Breck advises that I send him this letter: 'Your communication received. I am instructed to notify you that the Dunbarton-Kent family has given your present address to the police. Mrs. Smith is charged with theft and arson, and you are implicated with her. Wherever you are, she is supposed to be. Furthermore, competent witnesses have made statements which have been appended to Richard Dunbarton-Kent's will. So far as your family is concerned, you have ceased to exist.' I agreed with Breck that it is the only way to deal with him."

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent nodded. "Take all hope away from him. He'll gamble away what money he has with him, then he'll drift out. It's the end he deserves. I mean to put him out of my mind."

"That's right, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. Willets, Greene and Jones all are pleased over what you have done for them. Willets is the only one who knows the whole truth; Greene and Jones think as the public does, that West was entangled with Mrs. Smith and that he ran away to escape the scandal. Willets will never speak unless the Dunbarton-Kent interests demand it. He's trustworthy."

"Breck says he is, Haslett." She spoke Breck's name with respect and contrition.

There was the same note in Haslett's confession: "I am a poor judge of character, your husband often said so, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. I should have judged Breck more correctly. I apologized to him, but he cut me off: 'Forget it,' he said. 'My uncle taught me the wicked folly of being dishonest. I have never had any desire to steal from that day to this. We will not refer to the matter again.'"

"The same thing he said to me, Haslett, when I begged him to forgive me. 'Don't think about it, Aunt Bulah—we'll never speak of it again. Just remember my uncle was a good judge of character.' He's been wonderful, Haslett, the way he has taken charge of things here, advising me what to do about Bella and Colfax, and other things. I feel like weeping from shame and pity when I look at that carved face of his." Her lips quivered too much for her to go on.

Haslett looked grave. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's future depended so much upon relief from anxiety and strain. And she was not happy, far from it. "He is a strangely quiet and self-contained man, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. And capable. I have been endlessly grateful to him for insisting that Mrs. Brant-Olwin's pearls must be put back at once in the hole in the cellar where West had had them, and that her detectives should be allowed to make the discovery. As it turned out, West's setting fire to his house before he made off was a most fortunate thing, for it disclosed the entrance to the cellar and brought Mrs. Brant-Olwin's detectives to the scene. Breck saved the day for us."

"And Marie," Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said jealously.

"Yes, indeed—Miss Angouleme, too," Haslett agreed promptly. Her love for Marie was Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's greatest joy, and Haslett grasped at the safe subject. "How is she?"

"Her shoulder is well again," she said more brightly.

Haslett rarely asked Mrs. Dun-

barton-Kent an abrupt question, but it was a thing he had pondered. If Breck should marry Marie Angouleme and settle down happily with Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent at Kent house, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's way would be smooth; she would have companionship and Breck would be an efficient manager of the estate. "Does she love Breck?" he asked.

Her face clouded. "I'm not certain. I know she never cared for that—for West. I've told her his history, as we regard it now, an experience that has made a noble man of Breck. But all she said was, 'It is a most sad history, madam—his face shows how he has suffered.' That was all. She is just the same devoted child to me, sweet, but so grave. She never speaks of Breck, and nothing would induce me to ask her



Marie did not know how long she sat alone in the big room; Gibbs knew.

a question or meddle—I've had one severe lesson in match making. She and Breck talk, at meals and so on, but it's plain that they avoid each other. I'd like to believe that she's happy—I know Breck is not—he's wretched, for, Haslett, I'm certain he loves a woman, but it's not my little Marie—it's Mrs. Brant-Olwin."

"Mrs. Brant-Olwin!" Haslett exclaimed.

"Yes. They are devoted to each other—He goes to see her every day. They've been devoted to each other ever since they met—at my dinner. What troubles Breck is that history of his he will have to tell her and he may lose her."

Haslett had been surprisedly pondering. He said with decision: "She grew up in a rough country; his early history won't matter to her. If she loves him, she will marry him."

"Yes, like Bella. She threw everything to the winds and married Colfax. Willing to risk life with him in a Brooklyn flat—do her own work and all that! Bella! I must say the letter she pinned to my pillow before she eloped changed my opinion of Bella somewhat—she's a woman, after all. I suppose we're all alike, given the chance." She was thinking of Marie. She did not know, but she was certain her child loved Breck as dearly as she had loved Richard Dunbarton-Kent. Her heart ached over Marie.

loved Bella ever since she was a little girl and that he went to pieces because of a quarrel they had. Evidently she loved him for she has married him, finally. It shows that there is something fine in Bella. When I told them what Miss Angouleme had done for the family and of the wrong we'd done Breck, they were terribly upset. Colfax said, 'I told you, Bell, I knew she was a good honest little thing. That child an adventuress! You write to her and beg her pardon.' Bella said she would—did she?"

"Yes, not a bad sort of a letter, stiff, but evidently ashamed of herself. I doubt if Marie and Bella will ever enjoy each other, but if Bella will make a man of Allen Colfax, it's all I'll ever ask of her."

"Well, on the whole, things have turned out better than I expected, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent."

"Yes," she agreed half-heartedly. "I don't mean that I am ungrateful—I'd like to see Breck looking happier, and my little Marie. You had better stay to dinner, Haslett."

"Thank you—no, I must get back to town. And, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, remember Marie Angouleme

into ranches. It's work I can do. I have been considering it for the last two weeks—today I decided. Mrs. Brant-Olwin says she will come to see you and explain."

There was perfect silence for a moment. In the days past, had West made such an announcement, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent would have said: "And when are you and Mrs. Brant-Olwin to be married?"

But of Breck she asked no questions: there were few people whom Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent respected as profoundly as she did Breck, or of whom she stood in greater awe, or over whom her heart ached more. And there was her child to be considered—Marie first of all. Breck and Mrs. Brant-Olwin had decided wisely; Mrs. Brant-Olwin belonged in the west. They would go west and be married and live there; Breck would be happy. And, for her little Marie, it would be far better.

"It is for you to decide, Breck," she said in the affectionate way Marie knew so well. "I have hoped that you would stay at Kent house,"—there was a slight quiver in her voice—"find your happiness here and, in a way, take the place of my dear husband. I am not in the least afraid of your past—it's made the finer man of you. All that will ever worry me is that I misjudged you. But you know best in which direction your happiness lies. And, Breck, I have already made arrangements: I want you and Bella to live in comfort: there are 2,000,000 of your uncle's money that I have saved for your children. I have settled 1,000,000 on Bella with a proviso, Colfax—the other 1,000,000 is yours, without any proviso. West doesn't exist."

Breck had flushed to crimson. He held out his hand to his aunt. "Thank you, Aunt Bulah. I don't know how—to thank you enough. It's what you've said—not the money—" he said jerkily. Mrs. Brant-Olwin has been—kind—too. I'll explain before I go away—I can't—now," and he turned on his heel and left the room.

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was looking at her child. The light fell full on Marie's face; she was looking at Breck through the window. There are times when misery invites sympathy; there are other times when sympathy would be an added hurt. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent rose and left the room as noiselessly as possible.

Marie did not know how long she sat alone in the big room, but Gibbs knew. He appeared with his tray. Contrary to all custom, he bore on the tray the evening paper. He took Marie's coffee cup, but that did not stir her from her frozen attitude. The tinkle of the spoon which Gibbs, also contrary to custom, dropped on the floor, did not startle her. She looked at him with wide, vague eyes.

"I beg pardon, Miss," Gibbs said, but have you seen the evening paper, Miss?"

For the first time since she had come to Kent house Gibbs had asked her a question. If Marie had been in a condition to notice, she would have been astonished. "No," she returned, vaguely. She looked, without seeing, at the folded paper Gibbs had placed on her knee.

"There is a little notice of yourself there, Miss—of your adoption—just under the paragraph on Mrs. Brant-Olwin," and Gibbs indicated exactly the "paragraph on Mrs. Brant-Olwin," by pointing to it. "I have been in the service of the family for 15 years, Miss, and I make free to offer—"

Just what Gibbs was making free to offer Marie did not hear, for she had read the first lines of the paragraph on Mrs. Brant-Olwin and had risen as if lifted by wings. She passed through the outer door like a winged Mercury. From the window, Gibbs watched her flight into the park and smiled.

"Monsieur—Breck?" Marie said. Breck turned with a convulsive start. He had been looking at the ruins of the cottage. But only for a few moments, for he had come down slowly through the park and Marie had flown. He was so astounded he said nothing.

Marie came nearer, into the clear moonlight. Her black curls were loose on her white shoulders, her cheeks vivid, brows knitted, intent upon a purpose. "I ran—to ask you—a question—"

"Yes?" Breck said vaguely.

Marie came close. He looked white, expressionless. "Why is it that you leave—Kent house, monsieur?"

He looked less blank; the color began to darken his face. "Because—I can't endure it here!"

"Because you love Mrs. Brant-Olwin and she is to marry Monsieur Wakefield," tensely.

"I love Mrs. Brant-Olwin! No!"

Marie's whole being relaxed into utter relief. She breathed words that sounded like a prayer. She bent her head, her little hands lifted to her breast, palms together, the attitude of prayer.

Breck looked at her and she

Marie's hands came together, gripping. Then she stiffened, for Breck was speaking. He had said abruptly: "I am going away, Aunt Bulah. Mrs. Brant-Olwin has an immense tract in Arizona. She wants me to make salable property of it, irrigate it, and divide it up