The Romance of a Million Dollars

By Elizabeth Dejeans

THE STORY THUS FAR

MARIE ANGOULEME, friendless and almost penniless, starts for New York to recoup her fortunes after a harrowing experience in France as a war ambulance driver. On the train she misses her watch, but finds it, and on her return, by mistake, enters the wrong berth—the berth occupied by a mysterious woman in sables. Instantly steel-like hands grasp her throat and she escapes with difficulty. Arrived in New York, she is directed by an unidentified woman to the Long Island estate of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, a woman of great social prominence and with an income from millions. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent after some hesitation gives Marie a position as chauffeuse. Marie quickly notices there is a sinister atmosphere about the household, which consists, in addition to Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, of her two nephews, West and Breckenridge, and her niece Bella. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent is holding in trust for these three the great fortune of her husband. Marie is attracted to the somber Breck. Going about her work, she finds the tools and accessories of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's motor mysteriously missing. She takes her employer driving and is questioned closely about Breck, at first sight of whom she had started, fancying his eyes resembled those of the woman in sables. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent tells her of a "spite house" near the wall of the Kent estate, and of its occupant, a mysterious Mrs. Smith.

INSTALLMENT III.

Unhappy Days for Marie.

HER dinner that evening and her breakfast the next morning in the servants' dining room proved a puzzling experience to Marie. Gibbs seemed to have ordained that she should eat alone, for which Marie was thankful until it became evident that she was treated strangely. To her pleasant "Good-evening, Mr. Gibbs," she had received a bow and an intensely reserved "Good-evening, miss." He had deposited his tray of viands and had hastened away as if to escape conversation. Then, at breakfast time, Marie had encountered the cook in the passageway, and to her smiling "Good-morning," she received a flurried murmur, followed by a hurried retreat into the kitchen. The cook then looked back at her in a peculiar way, then quickly averted her gaze.

"There is a strangeness in the kitchen as well as in the rest of the house," Marie said to herself, puzzled.

It troubled her, and her experience with the man whom Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent sent her to the station to meet after breakfast increased her bewilderment. It was all well enough on the way to the house from the station—the man chatted pleasantly with her about the weather and complimented her on her skillful management of the car—but afterwards, when Marie was ordered by Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent to wait and take him to the farm and afterwards to the country club and bring him back to Kent house, it was quite different.

Marie had decided that the man was a smoothly spoken person who wished to make himself pleasant to her. He was a young man, well groomed, and he evidently considered himself charming, he was so keen eyed, smiling, and facile tongued. He was not quite a gentleman, Marie decided, not a friend of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's, but perhaps of considerable business importance to her, so he must be treated with extreme politeness and a definite reserve.

After half an hour in Kent house the man came out to Marie as smilingly pleasant as before, and his first remark was a compliment.

"You look like a pretty Canadian snowbird, perched on the seat there. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was telling me you came from Canada. It's a splendid thing for a girl to do, fill a man's position, and do it so well, too."

Marie said, "Thank you, monsieur," and swept him down the driveway.

He talked about Canada then, a country of which he knew nothing, Marie decided, and interspersed his remarks with questions: by what route had she traveled from Canada? What train had she taken out of Buffalo? On what day had she arrived in New York? He talked then about New York, mentioning various restaurants and streets as if she must be acquainted with them. He seemed to think that she must have met some gallant man in New York who had shown her the city.

"A pretty girl like you in New York and no beau?" he said teasingly. "I can't believe that!"

"I was in New York but a few days," Marie answered calmly, though she was angry. What right had he to question in this way? It was natural that Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent should wish to know all about her, she was her employer. But for a strange man to question and be so familiar! Evidently he thought that all girls were silly and easily impressed by smiling looks. She did not like him.

Then, looking full in her eyes, he asked abruptly, "But what of the little adventure you had on the train?"

Marie's heart gave a leap; she was terribly startled. Was it possible he was in search of that fearful creature on the train?

He scrutinized her confusion. "He told you Kent house was a good place to come, didn't he, little girl?"

Marie was swept by relief, and anger as well. The conceited, impertinent imbecile! Did he think she was some ignorant servant girl? The density of some men was remarkable! They may be keen and sensible in conversation with men, but with girls they had no judgment whatever, if the girls looked little and pretty, they considered them as brainless!

Marie flamed at him. "I do not make friends with strange men, monsieur, nor do I speak with persons on trains! I have no use whatever for the kind of man who thinks by smiles and talk to make an impression on me! I am in the employ of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and will drive you where she has ordered me, but you will kindly restrain yourself from questions which would make me seem a silly fool!"

The man looked as if he had suddenly encountered a hornet's nest, vastly taken aback, then driven into a lively retreat.

"I beg your pardon. It never occurred to me to be impertinent," he apologized hastily. "You see, you have no idea how charming and unusual you look. I was interested in you the moment I saw you, and what Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent told me about you interested me still more, so I seemed to be impertinent when I hadn't the least intention of being so."

"Perhaps that is so," Marie returned severely, "but I think rather that you formed a wrong impression of me. It is necessary only for you to correct your manner, then I have nothing further to say."

She paused abruptly, for they had emerged from the park and had come suddenly upon Breck, who was standing beside the road. Evidently he was on his way to Kent house, and had stepped out of the road to let them pass. He looked at them fixedly, and he lifted his cap, but his face was like granite and his eyes like steel. Marie saw how he looked at the man beside her, a cutting stare that traveled over him.

Marie smiled hurriedly at Breck, fearing he might wonder at her flushed and angry appearance. Perhaps he had heard what she had said. It was most unfortunate that she lost her temper so easily he might think that she had been rude to a guest of Kent house. She felt anxious and miserable.

The young man beside her studied her drooping lips and her wistful expression. Then he said without a trace of his previous facetiousness, "That's Breck Dunbarton-Kent, poor fellow. He had a dreadful experience during the war. It's made a lonely sort of him. What he needs is sympathy—some one to talk to. He's standoffish, even with his family, but there are few men who won't melt if a woman's really kind to them. It's a pity about him."

Marie was so interested by this information that she forgot to be severe. "Do you wish to stop at the farm?" she asked.

"No, thanks—just drive slowly by. I'm thinking of buying property out here, and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent offered to have me driven about. I want to take a look at the country club, too."

They passed the farm in silence, apparently the man engrossed in looking about him and Marie thinking of what he had told her. She wished he would tell her more, but not for anything would she have asked a single question.

Until they reached the highroad her companion was silent, but when they could see the roof of Colfax hall he spoke again. "That's Allen Colfax's place," he remarked. "He's let it run down, still it's a valuable piece of property. His land runs from this road clear through to the sound, and he owns half the field that's between Kent house and the sound, too. There's been trouble between Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and Colfax over that field—Colfax could build on his part of it or sell it so some one who'd build and shut off all the view Kent house has. Still, Allen's not such a bad sort, though the Dunbarton-Kents and society in general are down on him. What he needs is a sensible wife to keep him straight. A nice girl, if she took him in hand, could do wonders with him and with Colfax hall. The Colfax family is one of the oldest on the north shore."

The man continued to talk, his observant eyes on Marie. "It's too bad Allen sold off that strip next to Kent house park to Mrs. Smith. She's a queer woman. They say not a single woman out here has called on her, but she seems to be satisfied with only her piano for company. She's gay enough when she's away from here, though."

This information also Marie treated with silence. "This person is a gossip," she said to herself with firm disapproval.

As they went on he commented on the places that they passed, wealthy owners who were absent for the winter, or families who lived the year round in their north shore houses. He talked for some time of a Mrs. Brant-Olwin whose imposing house was near the country club. She had grown up in a mining camp, he told Marie, but, because she had immense wealth, she had worked her way into society; she was noted for her wonderful jewels and her lavish entertainments. When they left the country club he told of the parties given there in the summer. "It's a millionaire's playground!" he declared.

Though she looked as expressionless as possible, Marie was interested. It was entertaining to hear about these people. But why should he care to tell her about them? He looked at her too much, and paused too often as if expecting answers. She maintained a determined silence.

But he puzzled her most by what he said when she brought the car to a stop at Kent house. "I've enjoyed my ride immensely," he declared, "and now I'm going to tell you something, Miss Angouleme: I liked best of all the way you sat down on my joshing. You have plenty of good sense, and if I can ever be of any assistance to you just let me know. This is my card. My name is Walter J. Greene, and I can always be reached at that address. There's trouble waiting around the corner for almost everybody and, in case you run up against it, please remember you have a friend in me and make use of me."

Marie looked at the card. "It is most kind," she said reservedly.

"And shake hands?" he asked.

"With pleasure, monsieur," she returned politely.

Her unsmiling aspect did not seem to lessen his cordiality; he gave her hand a close clasp and lifted his hat a second time when she drove off to the garage. As she circled to the back of the house she saw him still standing in the porte cochère, looking after her.

Marie's cheeks grew hot. "If I did not think him a two face, talking and acting for a purpose, I should call him an imbecile!" she said to herself with decision. Then she sighed. "Each person I meet here is more strange than the last—I do not understand it."

In the days that followed Marie sighed often to herself. She did her best, but things were not at all as they should be. She was certain that Mr. Walter J. Greene had complained of her, for the next time she saw Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent she behaved so strangely. Marie drove her about every day, but Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent would not talk to her and she gave her orders curtly.

When the garage supplies arrived Marie asked her what disposition she should make of them, and she answered impatiently: "I don't want to be bothered about the garage, Angouleme. Breck will look after the garage. He'll give you my orders and you can report to him, so don't come to me about anything—I have too many other things to attend to." Then she relapsed into a grim silence.

So Breck appeared in the garage and inspected the cars. Marie explained the shortage of tires and tools and showed him the supplies she had unpacked. Hoping for a word of praise, she told him: "The condition within these cars was abominable, but now every inch is clean—as you see."

Breck looked, but said nothing. Without a word he carried the useless tires into the storeroom and helped Marie put the new tires into their cases. Then he jacked up the roadster and took off the worn tire which had worried Marie on her first drive with Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. He declined her help: "No—it's not work for a girl."

He did not look at her; he seemed to be looking at her hands, and Marie flushed. Why did he not speak more kindly? It pained her, his looking at her hands; it was impossible to keep them looking well.

But for her half yard of hair she might have been taken for a boy soldier doing a stage turn.

"It is the black oil that has stained the nails," she said involuntarily. "Now that the cars are clean my hands will be different."

Breck had glanced up at her then, a swift, keen look into her troubled eyes, and she had flushed still more deeply. She wished that she had not spoken, and she felt terribly hurt when he finished his work deftly and departed with the brief order: "When there is a heavy piece of work like this, I'll do it. You can tidy up now."

She was shivering with cold, too, for he seemed determined to work with the garage doors wide open.

And so it had continued. He was a strange man, Marie thought. She puzzled over him. Every morning, and sometimes at noon, he came to the garage door and delivered Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's orders for the day, apparently determined not to enter the garage unless it was absolutely necessary. Evidently he hated having anything to do with the cars; Marie felt that he thought it beneath him. Then he would tramp off to the farm. Usually he would stop at the garage on his way back in the evening, after dark, and ask in an even voice, "Are the cars all right," receive her answer, and stride on to the back entrance of the house, then up to his room.

Marie knew which was his room, for often he did not draw down his blinds. To change his clothes he went into another room which Marie thought must be his bathroom. He would reappear in evening dress, then go down to dinner and return in about an hour, wrap himself in a dressing gown, sit at the desk near his window, and read and write late into the night. Often Gibbs brought his dinner up to him on a tray; that was when there was company for dinner, either people from the neighborhood or guests whom Marie was sent to the station to meet.

Marie could see all this from her bedroom window, for she was given her dinner early, before the family or the servants were served. If she brought guests from the station she must wait for Gibbs to telephone whether she was to take them back that night or not. When people came in their cars either they themselves or their chauffeurs, if the night was at all inclement, ran their cars into the garage. The chauffeurs were most troublesome, Marie thought, for they tried to talk to her and even presumed to make love. She found that, having seen the cars properly placed, the best thing was for her to go up to her room and lock herself in. They soon tired of the garage then, and went off to the house, where they were cared for by Gibbs. There were sleeping apartments there for such servants as Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's guests happened to bring with them.

But it was not pleasant to discover that she was regarded as a joke by every chauffeur in the neighborhood and of course by their masters and mistresses. Marie was aware of the covert smiles of the people who passed them when she drove Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. Often they passed Allen Colfax riding a big gray horse and followed by his mastiff, and always he grinned widely. The guests whom she brought from the station to Kent House asked her all sorts of amused questions.

When she parked her car among others while waiting for Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent or Bella to emerge from some entertainment, she understood perfectly the smiles and nods of the other chauffeurs. Sometimes they persisted in surrounding her car and talking to her facetiously. Occasionally a chauffeur tried to be really friendly, for "Mrs. D. K.'s French Baby," as they called her, with fire in her eyes and her black curls escaping from her service cap, was a tempting vision. But Marie proved adamant; she reared the huge collar of her fur coat against friend and foe and turned a contemptuous back upon them.

During nine days' time Marie was literally a nine days' wonder and discussed in every household within miles. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent had defied custom; she was trying to establish a precedent. And she had put that little feminine tot of hers into trousers! Of course their daughters rode astride and wore breeches, they had done that for some time; but think of turning over one's garage to a girl, and such a baby at that! And this at Kent House, which was a by-word for conservatism!

Then what Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said on the subject was passed about. "Whose business is it whether it's masculine or feminine, big or small!" she had roared at an afternoon tea. "It doesn't drink and go joyriding, which is more than most of you can say of your six foot nuisances. Advertise for a respectable girl ambulance driver, and consider yourselves fortunate if you get her. I'm tired of all this fool talk!"

Bella Dunbarton-Kent, though she made no comments herself, was open to either amused or derogatory remarks concerning her aunt's remarkable choice of a chauffeur, but, after the above incident, no one ventured any comments in Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's hearing. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was a much respected and, sometimes, a much feared person; when she struck it was usually a well directed and a forcible blow.

And whatever were their private councils, the Kent House servants also maintained a complete silence regarding the new chauffeur. But there was one occasion when Gibbs administered to a lively young chauffeur a mysterious reproof which traveled. The young man has asked Gibbs for court plaster for his scratched face.

"Where did you get that?" Gibbs had demanded in a startled way.

"The little tiger cat in the garage," the chauffeur confessed disgustedly. "I picked her up in fun, mind you, and she clawed me up like this! The little she devil!"

Ordinarily Buckingham Gibbs was a most lenient father confessor to any man servant, but on this occasion he looked horrified. "You mend your own face, you chump!" he said aghast. Then solemnly, "Remember that angels is sometimes entertained unawares."

But when questioned by the next visiting chauffeur, Gibbs denied any knowledge of the occurrence, and the other servants were equally reticent. There was one subject upon which they were dumb, and that was Marie Angora Lamb.

Marie knew nothing about Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's championship of her or of Gibbs' mysterious reproof. She knew only that she seemed to be ostracised, that Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent would not talk to her, that Bella never even nodded to her and looked at her as if she hated her; that she was regarded with curiosity and amusement by every one in the neighborhood, and that the Kent House servants shunned her.

Those servants! What was the matter with them? One day Marie, driven by loneliness, had approached in friendly fashion Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's personal maid, a bright faced, intelligent looking girl, who had ventured upon the grass plot between the house and the garage. The girl had started convulsively and had almost run back to the house; she had looked frightened out of her wits. Marie had been cut to the quick; she had retreated to the garage with the tears burning her eyes. It was so utterly unaccountable! The attempts at rough lovemaking on the part of the chauffeurs troubled Marie far less than the conduct of the Kent House servants, for she had met with that sort of thing before and felt quite able to defend herself. But to be feared and avoided when she had done nothing to deserve it!

She was utterly lonely and miserable. What did it all mean? It had never been so in any other place where she had been; always her smile had been answered by smiles. "Were it not for the good pay I would leave tomorrow!" Marie confided to herself passionately. "It is as if I had committed a crime!"

But she was compelled by necessity. She had been horrified by the high cost of living in New York. Her hundred dollars would last her only a short time in that place. And her experience with the Kent House servants gave her a terror of working in any household capacity; the other servants might make life unbearable. No, she must cling to her present position until she had saved enough to feel independent. Then, when not utterly miserable, she was stubbornly determined to behave as if she was indifferent to the slights shown her.

Fortunately, during the day Marie had little time for repining; there was so much to do. But when night came it was hard. Then she sat in her room and thought. In the darkness she could sit close to the window and could see Breck sitting in his window and studying. Marie felt certain he was studying. Even when his window shades were down she could see his silhouette cast upon the shade. In a way it was comforting to feel that some one beside herself was lonely; he seemed quite apart from his family.

She wondered endlessly about him. What was the dreadful experience during the war which had made a lonely sort of him? Such a war experience should have made his family sympathetic. It was strange with this family; they were highly respected, that was evident, and their servants were devoted to them, yet no member of the family seemed to have any love for any other member. Bella spent days at a time in the city, Marie knew, because she was constantly driving her to and from the station, a duty which she dreaded, for, though muffled to the eyes in a fur coat which concealed all but her unusual height, Bella's eyes looked cold contempt at her, and her icy commands were little better than an insult, Marie thought. Why Bella hated her she could not imagine, unless it was Bella's nature to hate most people, yet Bella must have friends, for she spent so much time in the city.

Certainly it was a strange family; between Bella and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent there was almost no conversation, and certainly Breck was entirely apart from his family. West Dunbarton-Kent was the only one who seemed to have a smile in his eyes, but she had not seen him since the first day, and Marie thought he must live in the city, for his roadster had disappeared from the garage at the same time that he had disappeared from Kent House. Perhaps the reason he was able to smile was because he did not have to live in Kent House.

Marie decided that there was some bitter family quarrel over property; it was so often the case in families where there was much money to quarrel over. Certainly there was a quarrel with Allen Colfax over property, and quite likely Breck had taken some part in it which displeased his family so much that he was in deep disgrace with them; perhaps at some time he had been a spendthrift.

The result of Marie's puzzled and indignant meditations was a desperate eagerness to prove her worth to these people. She scrubbed and cleaned, oiled and polished. She was proud of all her cars, but she loved best the splendid new seven passenger car, which was not used much now the weather was bad. As one must love something, Marie fixed her affections upon the big car; its running board was her favorite seat; she patted it sometimes and talked to it. When the rain spattered on the garage windows or the March wind whistled under the big doors her favorite car was a comfort. Being a young twenty-three and aching for amusement, she tried to regard her cars as people. She gave them names; West Dunbarton-Kent's roadster, which he had taken away with him, she called "The Unknown"; Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's roadster she called "Bella"—it was such a cold gray. The limousine was "My Lady"; it was a fashionable equipage and did not interest her particularly. Her big car she called "Breck"; it interested her greatly, in spite of its immobile and severely dignified appearance.

One evening, when darkness had settled without, Marie amused herself by lying on her back and chalking on the under side of the running board of each car its name. When she had returned from the station that evening she had found West's roadster in the garage, so all the cars were there. She was unconscious of being observed, though a man was watching her intently through one of the narrow windows up near the ceiling of the garage. These windows were used as ventilators in the summer; now they were closed, but through any one of them the entire floor of the garage could be seen. They were just above the sloping roof of the store room, and by climbing to the roof and crawling up to the windows one could lie flat and look down into the garage. By sliding the windows back a little one could hear as well as see.

It was Breck who was watching her. He had taken a roundabout way through the park which had brought him to the back of the garage.

He had used caution in coming; he had even crawled on his hands and knees across the shrub dotted space behind the garage and had crept beneath the cedar tree which grew against the corner of the store room. Here the roof sloped to about twelve feet from the ground, and after listening intently for a few minutes he had removed his boots and had climbed up the corner as nimbly as a cat. When his hands gripped the eaves he had lifted himself clear of the wall and had swung himself up on the roof with the skill of an acrobat; he was a tall and broad shouldered man, but he did it with an ease that suggested practice. Then he had crawled up the roof to the row of windows and lain prone; he had opened one of the windows slightly so he could both hear and see.

He saw Marie, chalk in hand, crawl under each car, then saw her get to her feet and bow deeply to each car in turn, calling it by name. With each bow, her loosened curls fell over her face, then were flung back for another effort. But for her half yard of hair, she might have been taken for a boy soldier doing a stage turn. A Cossack dance taught Marie by a Russian soldier, a great clicking of heels and leaps into the air, and rapid whirls, completed the ceremony. She looked a live, lithe little thing, brim full of fun, grace, and energy.

Flushed and smiling, she sat down then on the running board of the big car. Then, gradually, flush and smile faded, her lips began to quiver, and her eyes filled and, suddenly, she flung herself down on the running board and began to sob, a perfect passion of weeping. Of what good were cars as companions?

Breck had watched her throughout, but also with his attention given to the garage doors. When they parted he drew back, but still watching and listening; some one was coming into the garage.

It was West Dunbarton-Kent. Evidently from the door he had seen Marie doubled up on the running board of the car, for he tiptoed over and stood looking down at her. She was a woebegone figure, given over to grief. For three weeks she had been holding back her tears, now they were a deluge.

West waited for some time, until she quieted, then he said with concern, "What's the matter, Little Chauffeuress?"

Marie came upright with a start and thrust back her hair. When she saw who it was, she was utterly confused. "Monsieur——" she gasped.

"What is it? What has happened?"

"It is not a—happening," Marie returned with an attempt at dignity. "It—it is—continuous, and I do not understand." She set her teeth on a quivering lip and gathered up her hair. Her hairpins being scattered over the garage, she twisted it up in a knot. Then, finding her handkerchief, she rubbed the tears from her face, terribly ashamed at having been caught weeping.

"Everything all wrong, of course. I was afraid it would be so. It's a shame!" he declared.

They were the first kindly words Marie had heard since she came to Kent House and her heart overflowed. "I do not understand the strangeness of your people, that is my trouble, Monsieur!" she said passionately. "Am I a criminal that your people speak to me with eyes turned away and even the servants run from me? Monsieur, you have been away, so you have not seen, but indeed I have done my work well—I have tried in every way to please—yet I am treated as if I were in deep disgrace. If only I knew the reason? If only I could understand what it is about myself that displeases, I would try to be different, but it is to me a mystery and no one will talk to me to explain. You are the first person here to speak kindly. On the first day you were the only one to smile at me. Be kind still, Monsieur, and tell me what it can possibly be?" Marie had begun hotly and had ended in pleading.

(Continued Next Sunday.)