

The Romance of a Million Dollars

By Elizabeth Dejeans

THE STORY THUS FAR

PRETTY Marie Angouleme, daughter of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, once upon a time discovered there is an air of elusiveness about the household which includes two nephews, Breck and West, and a niece, Bella. Even Marie is not held above suspicion of being a spy or detective. Finally, the discovery of money she hid under the floorboards about the estate, she traces music to a "spite house" built by a mysterious "Mrs. Smith," and recognizes the player as a "terrible" woman in white who had tried to strangle her. She is about to strangle Breck with his hand over her mouth and is killed by Allen Colfax, a third nephew, who is distrusted by Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. When Marie awoke, Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent is attending her injuries. A detective reveals Breck has shot Mrs. Smith and she has fled. West, rejected by Marie, accuses Breck of his rival. Breck presents her with a spangled pup, but will not tell her why he is so disliked at Kent House. He warns her to leave and forget them all. The spangled pup escapes into Colfax's grounds and Marie, peering into his house, discovers him embracing Bella. He pursues Marie. She demands to know the truth about Breck. Colfax tells her Breck was born and reared a thief, the son of the Dunbarton-Kent family, and that the millions held in trust by Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent are to go to West, Breck and Bella after her death, provided none of the three commits a crime meantime.

INSTALLMENT VII. HEARTACHE FOR MARIE.

"MR. DUNBARTON-KENT believed in the reform of criminals," continued Colfax. "He used to go to see Breck while he was in prison and when Breck was released he sent him to school and then to college. He had so much faith in Breck that he made him his heir equally with West and Bella."

"Mind you, Marie, no one but Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and Haslett knew Breck's history. All he knew was that Mr. Dunbarton-Kent had hunted up his brother's son and was doing by him as he was by West and Bella. We none of us saw Breck until his first year in college—then he came to Kent House. I used to be at Kent House all the time those days, and Breck seemed to me just a silent sort of boy, an awfully handsome fellow, though."

"Mr. Dunbarton-Kent and my father died in the same year. West and I and Breck were off at different colleges. West and I came in for our money then. Colfax struggled usefully. 'West has a lot of sense—he kept straight—but I got tangled up, got worried and drank-gambled, too, Lord! Then Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent shut down on me, wouldn't let me come to the house any more. As long as Mr. Dunbarton-Kent lived, so far as we know, Breck kept straight, but in his third year in college he got into trouble: at a college party a girl had a valuable diamond pendant stolen. Breck had been with her all evening. Some way or other, the college authorities had gotten hold of Breck's history, and his belongings were searched and they found the pendant. Breck said that some one must have put it among his things. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was notified, and she and West and Haslett quieted the thing, but Breck had to leave college. It was then Breck's history leaked to other members of the family—it was the first I knew of."

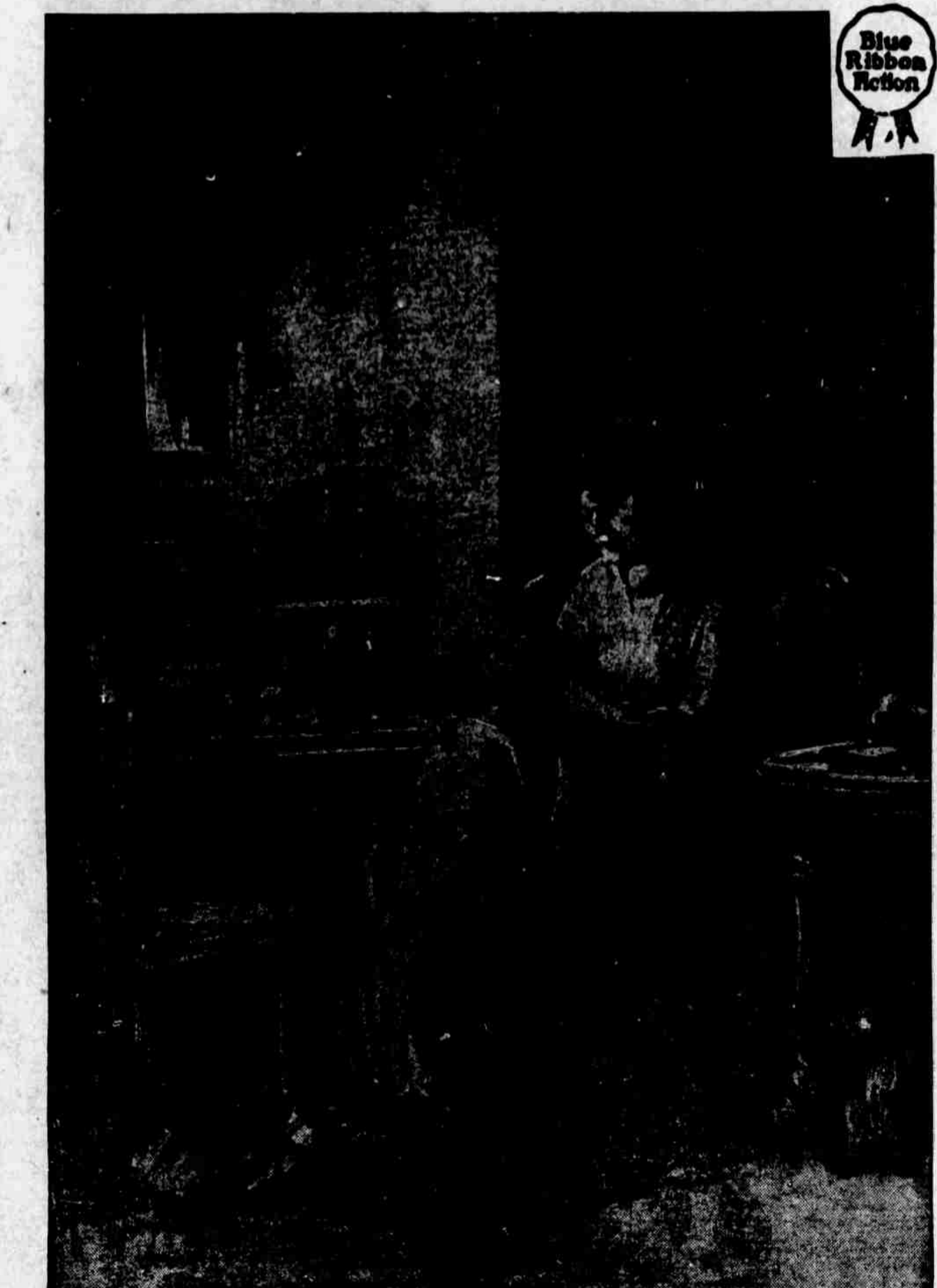
"That was the first year of the war, and Breck went to France and enlisted with the French. The Germans took him prisoner and kept him till the end of the war—he served some pretty hard time, though. If only he'd stayed in Europe then, but he came back to Kent House. He was heir to several millions, for, strictly speaking, he hadn't forfeited his right. It hadn't proved that he took that pendant. He asked Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent to give him a check—that he'd run Kent House farm for her. Haslett advised against taking him in, but Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said she was going to do what she thought her husband would have done under the same circumstances, so Breck stayed. Nobody about here knew his history, except the family."

"It was all right enough for eight months—Breck was understood to be too much broken up by his war experience to see anything of society, and he seemed to want to keep away from people. Then there was the devil to pay. I had a hand in it. I was broke and, too, I wanted to get even with Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, so first I sold that strip to an agent who sold it to Mrs. Smith and she stuck it up on a terrace against Kent House cottage. I didn't know the agent was buying it for Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent raged over it, so I told her next that I was going to sell the Colfax share of the Sound view to any one who'd buy it, and, if she didn't want Kent House ruined, she'd have to buy my share, and my price was just one hundred thousand dollars. She had to come through, but she said such things to me that, to spite her, I told her I wouldn't trust her check—she'd have to hand me the cash when I handed her the deed."

"Colfax had warned to a certain useful extent of his reverses, but he looked grave enough when he continued."

"Now I'm telling you what's the trouble in Kent House. Nobody but the family knew that Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent got the money from her bank in the afternoon. That night she put it under her pillow—I was to give her the deed in the morning. It was stolen from under her head while she was asleep. And worse, a box of jewels, thousands of dollars' worth, was taken that same night from the safe at the head of Mrs. Brant-Olwin's bed, and she asleep within an arm's length of the safe. At the Brant-Olwin house there were signs of some daring porch climbing, but not at Kent House. Every window and door in Kent House is burglar alarmed. The family were all in that night, and when Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent went to bed, the alarm was set and it was in working order the next morning. Not a window or door had been disturbed. There was not a footprint or a finger print, not a clew of any kind."

"But it would have been easy enough for some one to the house to do what was done. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent never locks her bedroom door—any one in the house, if he were skilful, could have stolen that package of bills from under her pillow and have gone to the Brant-Olwin house and have done that stunt, too, for every one in Kent House knows how to turn the burglar alarm on and off. Whoever robbed Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent could have turned off the alarm and have gone to the Brant-Olwin house and have come back and let himself into Kent House, then have turned on the alarm again, or any one in Kent House could have let a



"You shall have a home with me," said Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent.

thief in who did the job. It might have been a one man job, but it could have been done more easily by two or three, the money and the jewels passed on to confederates who would take care of the money and dispose of the jewels."

"The Brant-Olwin theft made a great stir, but, except for the questioning to which Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and Haslett subjected every one in Kent House, the Kent House theft has been kept dead quiet. The family couldn't afford to advertise the thing, and the servants were frightened stiff for fear they might get mixed up in it."

"It's been an abominable situation, the family knowing who had committed the theft, and at the same time detectives hired to protect Breck, to protect the family name, and the servants with no idea of who did it, but in deadly terror that they might be accused."

"Mrs. Brant-Olwin has detectives searching for her jewels, and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent is doing her best to keep suspicion from being directed to Breck. She's afraid to send him away from Kent House for fear he may bring suspicion upon himself, and at the same time she loathes the sight of him—she's not the kind who enjoys shielding a criminal. Only a clever thief would plan for just such a situation, to rob his family and at the same time be protected by them. Only a patient man could wait quietly until the thing blows over, and he can leave Kent House with nothing proved against him and a sum of money laid by to tide him over until he can lay claim to several millions. Breck's both clever and patient. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent accused Breck of having stolen her hundred thousand, and he denied it as coolly as could be. She and Haslett talked to him again when the Brant-Olwin theft was known, and he took it calmly, denied it in the same way. Nobody else in Kent House has said a word to him about it; even West left the matter to Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and Haslett."

"But the whole family feel as if they were on the edge of a precipice, expecting any minute that Breck will do something which will bring suspicion on himself; that he will be arrested for the Brant-Olwin theft; that the theft of the hundred thousand will leak; that their shielding a criminal will come out. Your coming to Kent House seems them a scare. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent is afraid not to keep you, for they were certain that Mrs. Brant-Olwin or some detective of hers had sent you."

"Haslett had two theories first, that you might be an innocent looking detective in Mrs. Brant-Olwin's employ or that you might be connected in some way with Breck, certainly that you were mixed up in the thing in some way. Haslett had you looked up, and meantime there wasn't a minute when you weren't watched by the detectives who has about the place. They gave Breck opportunities to talk to you, and he wouldn't take them. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent stuck to it that you were just what you said you were, and so did West. West insisted that some one who looks like Mrs. Brant-Olwin, some friend of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's, was tickled at the idea of your proposing to drive a huge thing like Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent and sent you to her as a joke. But Haslett looked you up thoroughly, and since the Smith incident, he grants that he was overly suspicious. West believed in you

from the first. He's fallen in love with you as well, and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, whether she likes West's wanting to marry you or not, likes you, so it's come out well for you. But you've been a detective unaware. They are certain you've found Breck's confederate for them. They're finding out all they can about Mrs. Smith. They think Breck knew her from back in the days when stealing was his profession. The whole thing, her building that house just before Breck came back to Kent House, her sudden comings and goings, and the fact that nobody knows just who she is or where she gets the money to gamble with—she's been gambling like a fury for the last two months—'s suspicious."

"They think that Breck was watching you that night you were looking into Mrs. Smith's windows, and they know for certain that Breck went to her house the minute he got Willetts out of the way. They think Breck warned Mrs. Smith to clear out, for that's what she did, instantly. Clever thieves will go to any amount of trouble to secure such a haul as the Brant-Olwin jewels; building a house, as she did, would be a small item, and, as it happened, there was the lucky chance of Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's hundred thousand, too."

"There's one suspicious thing and pretty convincing; that woman calls herself Mrs. Kendall Smith, and that was the name by which Breck was known to the police, 'Ken' Smith. Breck was around New York for a time, both before he went to France and after he came back, and most likely he's married to the woman. Haslett is trying to find out all he can about the woman and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent is praying that the Brant-Olwin detectives won't get on her trail. What Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent wants is by some means to get back the Brant-Olwin jewels and return them secretly, then force Breck to leave America."

"That's the whole history, and that's the way things stand at Kent House, Marie Angouleme. You would have the story, and it's better to tell you everything than to give you a fragment. It isn't just you promise that makes me think you'll keep quiet. I can't abide Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, but I've kept quiet about all this because there are one or two people at Kent House I'd hate to hurt—West is one of them. I know it's the same with you—you have your favorites. Besides, it's dangerous to talk, and you have the sense to realize it." Colfax looked at her curiously.

"I'd like to know, though, whether you're so set on staying at Kent House now? It's been a shock to you, all right."

Marie had listened to him without word or movement, eyes wide and blank and face white. She had listened so absently that when he had finished she looked as if still listening, as if what he had said was being repeated by a voice in her brain. She was gazing at Colfax still, yet she did not appear to see him; she did not seem to be conscious that he had stopped talking.

He studied her blank silence. "I didn't know you cared so much for Breck," he remarked finally.

Marie turned away, as if trying vaguely to escape him, and stumbled over the spangled pup. The sun had gone and it was cold; the little dog had posted herself against Marie's feet. Mechanically Marie bent and lifted her, then started down the road.

Colfax followed her. "I'll go as far as the farmhouse with you," he offered. "You look ill."

"It is not necessary, monsieur," she returned dully. "Thank you that you have explained so fully to me," she added with an effort.

"What are you going to do? Not stay at Kent House?" he asked urgently. "You'll go, won't you?"

"What I shall do—I do not know at all," Marie answered listlessly. "I say good-by now, monsieur," and she moved off.

Colfax watched her go slowly along and saw her turn into the Kent House road. She went on past the farmhouse, walking slowly and with head bent, holding the dog in her arms. Presently the trees of Kent House blotted out her small figure.

Her return to Kent House after her talk with Colfax was to Marie a complete blank; she had been unconscious of objects about her, of the way by which she had returned, unconscious even of the little spaniel in her arms. She was back again in her room, it was growing dark, she was lying on her bed, and on the floor the spaniel was whining; those were the first outward things of which Marie was conscious. Her first thought unconnected with the history Colfax had given her was the realization that the little dog must be fed; it is usually some immediate necessity which steadies an excited brain.

Marie lifted the spaniel. "Poor little dog," she said, and began to wonder what she would do with her. Then it occurred to her that she must not tell any one that she was a present from Breck. She began to think of the future; she could not stay at Kent House. How could she endure the misery of it? But where could she go? She would be homeless.

Marie felt that Colfax had told her the truth. When he told her of the Kent House theft she had said to herself, "No, no, some one else must have done it. It is possible for a thief to reform." But when he told her about Mrs. Smith her belief died in agony. That evil woman! She was secret and dangerous and wise; Marie was convinced of it. And beautiful, the kind of woman to tempt a man into evil. She lived in that house so that she might see Breck often. Such a woman would urge a man to steal that she might deck herself in shining garments and valuable robes.

Marie felt a scorching hate of the woman. There was a steady pain tearing at her; she had never owned it to herself until now, but Breck had been the man of her dreams. And he had been a thief from the time he was a little child. What one learns in childhood persists. It was only natural that when a great temptation offered that child grown into a man should steal again, and for the woman he loved, who was almost certainly either his mistress or secretly his wife.

It was the telephone ringing sharply in the garage that disturbed her—it must be Gibbs telling her to come to dinner. She went down and the spaniel came whining after her. The little creature rolled down several steps of the stairway and Marie took her into her arms again.

It was Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent. "Angouleme, I want to see you," she said. "I've told Gibbs to bring you up to my room."

"You—madame—Marie managed to answer. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent rang off, and Marie was gripped by fright; Colfax had said that there were detectives watching her, perhaps they had seen her talking with Breck and afterwards with Colfax, and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent meant to question her? But she would tell her nothing—not a word. She had promised, besides it would kill her to have to talk about Breck. It would be best not to explain at all, simply say that she wished to leave Kent House."

Then Marie remembered the spaniel, carried her up to her room, and shut her in. After seeing Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent she would bring the dog something to eat. She thought desolately that she would like to take the little animal with her when she left Kent House.

She went down into the garage, and the spaniel began to yelp and whine with all the misery of a lonely puppy. Then Willetts started her; he came out from behind one of the cars and, instantly, Marie was certain that he was one of the detectives, not merely a night watchman. Quite likely he knew that she had talked with Breck that afternoon. "It is my little dog," she said confusedly. "She is hungry, yet Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent has sent for me and I must go."

"I am looking at that car," Willetts explained in his turn. He smiled at Marie. "So some one wished the dog on you, did he? I thought you were going to lie down this afternoon!"

He did know, then. Marie was frightened, yet determined not to tell what either Breck or Colfax had said to her. "I lay down until I was tired, monsieur, then I walked. The dog is hungry, so she cries."

She looked like an ill and distressed child, wide eyes and white, her black curls loose and tumbled about her face.

"Don't you be scared about Colfax," Willetts said soothingly. "I was looking about for you, afraid you might have gotten into some trouble. I saw Colfax talking to you on the high road, and I saw you bring the dog away with you. Colfax is mischief-maker—he'd like to have you get into trouble with Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent over the dog. I guess he wished some of his troubles on you as well, didn't he? Told you he was broke and ill treated by Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent?"

It was evident to Marie that Willetts did not know about her meeting with Breck, and that was a relief. And she could answer his question without breaking her promise to Colfax. "Yes," she confessed.

"I thought so. There's not a Dunbarton-Kent will speak to Colfax. They have no use for him. He doesn't know anything about their affairs, but he's curious. I suppose he worried you sick trying to quiz you about the family?"

Marie was not too frightened to use her wits; evidently Willetts knew nothing about Colfax's affair with Bella; evidently he did not know that Colfax knew all about the theft of the hundred thousand dollars and just what Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was doing and what she wanted to do.

"I would not answer such questions, monsieur," Marie declared. "Besides, I myself like Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent too well to be affected by anything Monsieur Colfax might say against her. He seems to me a reckless man. I did not wish to talk with him, but it happened so that I could not help it."

"I don't doubt that," Willetts said kindly. "He's always nosing around Kent House and he's a good person to avoid. He'll be business frightening you with his talk. You look pretty sick—does your head hurt you?" Willetts had come completely to Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's view of Marie, plus a natural appreciation of velvety eyes and a soft voice.

"Does my head hurt? Both Marie's head and her heart ached. And she wanted desperately to escape. "I am troubled about the little dog—I wish she did not cry. And also my head hurts so I feel almost that I must cry, too. But I must go immediately to Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent, for she waits for me in Kent House. It was quite evident that Willetts admired her."

"I'll look after the dog—you go on to the house. Tell Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent your head hurts and get her to do something for it," he advised concernedly. "I haven't told her about Colfax's having worried you, so you needn't be afraid she'll scold you. Don't worry about it, and, if anything else comes up to bother you, tell me about it and I'll help you the best I can."

"Thank you, monsieur—I will remember," Marie promised. She felt additionally wretched at having misled Willetts, but it could not be helped. The important thing was to keep her secret and get away from Kent House as soon as she could.

Gibbs with his downcast eyes and bow was waiting for her at the entrance to the back hall. Marie remembered how hopefully she had followed Breck through the hall that first day. She had never been farther than the servants' dining room since, but she remembered well the wide front hall into which Gibbs now preceded her. They passed the library, and Marie felt poignantly ashamed when she saw West sitting before the fire and reading. She had not thought of him once since Colfax had talked to her. She had thought of Breck, only Breck. She wanted to hurry away from Kent House because she could not bear to see Breck again, and she had not thought once of the man who in an open and manly way had told her that he loved her and that he meant to make her love him.

"I have been thinking and acting wildly," Marie said to herself. She was ashamed. She walked past the library door. West had been so honest with her and perversely she had wanted to win the man who had never shown her a particle of kindness; even the little dog he had given her he had called "The Little Detective," coolly making fun of her ignorance. Marie's white cheeks grew hot.

Then, when they reached the upper hall, Marie felt a clutch at her heart, for, in the room which they passed, sitting at the writing desk and with her back to the open door, was Bella, gowned in something clinging and shimmering, her splendid shoulders, slim waist, and long lines so exact a reminder of Mrs. Brant-Olwin. She sat at her piano that Marie experienced much the same shock which had caused her to stand and stare through Colfax's window that afternoon. And, with much the same feeling of gazing at an unreality, Marie noticed Bella's halo of tawny yellow hair.

Bella turned her head and looked at her, but instantly Marie forgot her, for a door at the end of the hall had opened and Breck, dressed for dinner, came out and towards her. Gibbs had paused to knock on Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's door, so Marie had to stand still with Breck's eyes fixed steadily on her. She shrank, she could not help it, but, though her hands and her forehead grew moist, she

could not look away from his intent gaze. She felt that he saw in her eyes the feeling of sickness she could not control.

He passed her without speaking and she was incapable of speech. Then, in a dazed way, she heard Gibbs say, "She is here, madame. She was holding Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's door open and was waiting for Marie to go in."

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent had been walking about; now she stood in the center of the room, an energetic bulk. "I'll be down in twenty minutes," she said to Gibbs, and to Marie. "Come in. You weren't at the garage when I called up first?"

Marie courted. "I was walking, madame," she answered huskily.

Then Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent noticed her white face. "What's the matter?" she demanded.

"I am tired, madame—and anxious because I must tell you—"

"You spent the afternoon walking and worrying, of course," Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent interrupted. "Have a headache and all the rest of it and all because of a man. A man who's in love and thinks he's got going to have things all his own way is harder to handle than a porcupine. You must make or make even a hippopotamus nervous," and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent seated herself as heavily as might the animal she mentioned.

"You've been picking out the porcupine quills all afternoon, of course, and, as you're not a hippo, you've made yourself sick over it. Put the porcupine quills on the couch there—I want to talk to you."

Marie obeyed her. Evidently Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent was going to talk about West. She was annoyed with him, but she did not seem to be angry with her. Better to hear what Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent had to say, she felt, than that she could not love West and that she must leave Kent House. Leaving Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent would be like parting from a dear friend, and leaving Kent House like leaving one's home never to return. Marie's throat ached from the tears she was trying to restrain.

What Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said was utterly unexpected.

"Marie Angouleme, what sort of a life do you think I have here at Kent House with three people who don't love me or each other?"

Marie was so surprised that she did not answer.

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent answered her own question, and forcibly. "A lonely, anxious existence! There's something in the nature of these three Dunbarton-Kents that mixes with my nature about as successfully as oil does with water. I had a wonderful husband, child—I loved every inch of him and every word he uttered, but I haven't him any more. I've had an empty heart ever since he left me," her small, usually snapping eyes filled, "and evidently I didn't deserve a child—I prayed every day of my married life for a child—but I haven't any." She paused and steeled her voice to its usual abruptness.

"You're a lonely child—like you. I'm not often mistaken in such things—I could tell you like me. I'm a lonely old woman—I want you to come into Kent House and be my companion. Not a servant, mind you! Just a bit of sunshine to offset the gloom."

For one moment Marie stared into a desolate, homeless space, a vista unobscured by kindness or interest, then her face began to quiver. "O—madame—" Then she burst into tears.

"Come over here to me, child," Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said in an astonishingly soft voice, and Marie went promptly to her and Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent drew her down until Marie knelt beside her. She put her huge arm about Marie's neck and Marie buried her face in Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's ample lap. She stroked Marie's hair. "You be my little friend," she said in the same soft way. "You shall have a home with me."

"It is such a kindness," Marie sobbed, "and I was about to tell you that I must leave Kent House."

"Why, child?"

"Because—because I was so unhappy. My heart felt broken."

"You didn't want to leave Kent House, but you thought it was going to be pretty hard for you here, eh?"

"Yes, madame."

"Every girl should have her chance to do least guess at the nature of the man who wants her—give him his chance, too, I say. More often than not marriage is two guesses gone wrong—but let them have their chance. There may be a good deal of the worst about it—this is not a joyous household—but you'll dwell in Kent House—for better or for worse—will you, Marie Angouleme?"

Marie turned her face and kissed Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's hand. "To have a home and you for a dear friend—I could not have thought of anything more wonderful. I shall try hard to be deserving, madame."

"I believe you," Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said decidedly. Then with grim amusement "It'll be a surprise to some people, but why not get a little fun out of life? Do you know why I wanted that dress of yours, Marie?"

"It seemed to Marie that a year had passed since the forgotten incident. "No, madame."

"I took it to a woman who makes pretty things in two days' time. You're going to have an evening gown."

"Madame!" Through the tears hung on Marie's lashes, her lips trembled into a smile. Then she said with quick independence. "But for that I must pay—I will care for the cars and drive you."

"Care for the cars?" Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent returned positively. "Didn't I tell you you were to turn into a girl? You can drive me and make lace the rest of the time if you want to, but you're going to have the room next to mine and go down with me to breakfast, lunch and dinner. I'll see that you have pin money and plenty over, and you'll earn it—you'll have your troubles."

Marie had not grasped at all what Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent's offer of a home really meant; sitting at the same table with Breck, with Bella, and with West, to become one of the family. Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent meant that she and West were to judge of each other. It would be terribly difficult; seeing Breck every day, knowing the family secret and hiding the knowledge; West would be a difficulty. Then Marie gathered resolution. "Only by will can I do it," she said to herself.

Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent had watched Marie's expression. "Will?" she asked.

"I was thinking that I had not understood fully all your kindness. I was afraid that I might not prove worthy to be taken into your family. But, madame, I can try."

"Let us hope the family will prove worthy of you," Mrs. Dunbarton-Kent said inventively. "I will see to it." She heaved herself up. "You go over to the garage and go to bed—Gibbs! bring you your dinner. Get your things together tomorrow and we'll move them over in the afternoon. And, mind you, not a word of this to anyone, Marie."

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