The Case of Lady Broadstone

A THRILLING STORY OF LOVE, MONEY AND INTRIGUE.

By

Arthur Marchmont

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

Dorrison, in dire need of money, goes to Broadstone and finds his cousin in the same fix. He conceives the idea of getting rid of Eva's brother, Jack, whose money will go to Eva.

"Cast-iron John" Petherby, a multi-millionaire, forces his daughter, Eva, to marry Lord Broadstone, exiling her lover, Don Stuart. Lord Broadstone had been married in America under an alias, and left his wife for dead, having tried to poison her. His cousin, Gilbert Dorrison, heir to the title, discovers she is living. Meanwhile, she has a son, and has inherited wealth. She goes to England to search for her husband. Dorrison, who is on the steamer, tries to marry her for her money, but she knows his intention and cleverly humiliates him.

Sadie, the first wife, discovers her husband is Lord Broadstone. Under the name of Margaret Hutchinson she gets a position as Eva's maid.

Jack, while visiting Eva, goes sailing with Dorrison; Sadie, through a field-glass, sees the boat capsize.

Jack was brought in dead. Sadie takes from his wrist a silk cord. Eva is ill from the shock. She sees Don at the funeral.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CIRCLE OF PERIL

EVEN Sadie had underestimated the intensity of Broadstone's anger, for she had not known one of the chief causes. He was in truth nearly beside himself with jealousy, fear and chagrin.

On the previous day he had received a letter from Gertrude Hamyl in which she announced her betrothal to Harold Vynoche.

"We must both do our best to forget the past. We can't do as we wished, so you must not blame me for doing what I can. We had better not see one another again. It is just another case of 'it might have been,' if we had met earlier. Good-bye!"

Powers and Sadie's anonymous letter had roused his fears and made him terribly afraid of his cousin. He was quite shrewd enough to draw the inference she suggested. He knew the truth as to Jack Petherby's death; and while he was bitterly disconcerted on Gertrude Hamyl's account, that Eva was getting better instead of worse, he was morbidly convinced that if his life alone should stand between Dorrison and the title and fortune, the same diabolical cunning would be directed against him. And he was an egregious coward.

His one idea was that if Eva died, he would go abroad far out of Dorrison's reach and persuade Gertrude to go with him.

Now, however, everything was falling him. In a week Eva would leave the Towers, and he cursed Sadie bitterly as the cause of this. That it was she who had thwarted the attempt on Eva he had not even the faintest suspicion; neither did he see that it was she who had quietly forced his hand and brought about the collapse of the attempt to woo Eva's regard.

What to do he was at a loss to decide. He must have Dorrison's advice; and to get that he must hide his new fears of him, and he must keep away from the whisky bottle lest the truth should slip out.

Meanwhile, Sadie, on her part, was strengthening her defences of Eva. Under the pretext that her bedroom was draughty she had the bed removed to a room which communicated with Eva's, and placed close to the door which opened from the one room to the other.

She hurried the arrangements and preparations for their tour, so that they could get away two days before the time Eva had fixed; and in order to have a reason for inducing Eva to fall in with this plan at the last moment, Sadie planned to have an urgent message calling her to Paris without a moment's delay.

She resolved, too, that as soon as Eva was safely away in her charge, she would write to both Broadstone and Dorrison, telling them who she really was, and what she must be done.

As a further step to disarm Dorrison's suspicions, she gave it out that it would be nearer a fortnight than a week before Eva would start for the Continent.

In the meantime, every night would find her on the watch. Whatever might be attempted against Eva now would have to be some drastic step, and the night time would thus be more dangerous than the day. Two or three hours' sleep in the day would enable her to keep her night-vigils, and it would be an easy matter to feign indisposition and induce Eva to watch by her side while she slept.

Despite the almost feverish agitation which these thoughts and plans induced, Sadie let no sign of them appear when she was with Eva. Their chief topic now was the forthcoming tour, where they would go and what they would see. Paris, Switzerland, Rome, Venice, the Riviera, were on their lips all the time. They read about the places and discussed them, to Eva's unending delight.

That Dorrison had arrived, they knew, and on the following morning he asked permission to see Eva.

"I have really come as a peace delegate, Eva," he said, after he had expressed delight at finding her so well. "Bertram has told me of the unfortunate affair the day before yesterday, and I assure you he is profoundly repentant and intensely ashamed. I had a long talk with him last night, and he's really miserable at this—this state of war." He used the phrase with a smile and a lifting of the hands.

"There is no war between us, Mr. Dorrison," said Eva.

"But you are leaving Broadstone."

"We are going on the Continent for a month or so: that is all. That is not leaving Broadstone in any such sense as you imply."

"But the household knows of the cause—and servants talk. These things get out and so scandal grows."

"The household knows of many other things."

"I know, of course. There is no use in thinking facts. I told Bertram his treatment of you had been abominable throughout."

"I don't think I can thank you for that. I don't think I want anyone to interfere in matters between my husband and myself."

"I only speak as a member of the family—a man of the world, Eva, who knows how the world feeds on the garbage of scandal such as these."

"It is not I who have added to the garbage heap," replied Eva, pointedly.

"Oh, please don't think I have ever suggested such a thing. I can quite understand how you feel—and am the first to admit you have only too much cause for complaint. My only sugestion is that you should delay this trip—say for a month—so that the cause and effect should not be apparent."

So this was the object, thought Sadie; and when Dorrison said prevently that the weather a month later would be much more agreeable for a tour, she said quietly: "That is perfectly true, Eva."

"What, are you for a postponement, too, Margaret?"

"The Continental hotels are horrible when they are crowded with tourists, dear; and if we waited we could book our rooms well ahead everywhere."

"I did not expect to find you on Mr. Dorrison's side," replied Eva, with some show of disappointment.

"I am not exactly that, Eva. I shouldn't give the least weight to his first reason. No one is likely to make a scandal because you go abroad for a few weeks; but you certainly would find it much more agreeable a month hence."

Dorrison prudently said nothing, but Sadie's prompt intervention both pleased and surprised him.

"We have talked so much about it you have made me eager to get away," cried Eva, with a smile.

"Well, we could split the difference and make it a fortnight later. That would meet Mr. Dorrison's point, and every week counts at this season."

"I suppose I have no option but to yield," and Eva shrugged her shoulders.

"You have been a great traveller, Miss Hutchinson?" said Dorrison. He had been watching her closely and puzzling again over the resemblance which she suggested.

"Oh, yes—that is, I have been to many places."

"You know America pretty well?"

"I am an American citizen. I was raised there—as we say," she answered, with a laugh.

"American women are very charming," he said gallantly as he rose to leave. "Then we may take that as settled, Eva?" he asked, turning to her.

"I am afraid so," was the reply, with a rueful glance at Sadie.

"You won't regret it, dear," said the latter; and Dorrison went away more puzzled than ever as to Sadie. He was getting near to the truth. "If the infernal thing wasn't impossible, I should think she was actually number one. By gad!" he broke off suddenly. "That's the resemblance—the nose in that profile photograph."

With a feeling of unwonted excitement, he hurried to his room before rejoining Broadstone, hunted up the photograph, and scrutinized it eagerly, then shook his head. "No, the mouth makes it impossible. The nose is very much like—but those long, prominent teeth, no. A devilish, ugly mouth, too. Besides Bertram couldn't be such a blind ass as to be in the same house with his own wife and not recognize her. I'm a fool. Wait, wait, am I?" and then he fell into a train of thought which ended in one of those ominous smiles of his.

Sadie's acquiescence in Dorrison's proposal—that their tour should be postponed—had been a mere pretence, intended to lead him to believe that he would have more time for his schemes.

The longer she could persuade him to believe he had, the more time he was sure to take to mature his plans. Every day was of consequence, she felt; every hour almost. She was fighting against a man who was ready to take desperate chances; and he knew, quite as well as she, that if Eva were once away from Broadstone the difficulties he would have to overcome would be immensely increased.

And Eva had shown that she would readily enough fall in with Eva's plan for a hasty departure.

"I wish you hadn't urged me to stay here longer, Margaret," she said, after Dorrison had left them. "I would rather have gone on the day we fixed. I am longing to get away."

"It is always open to us to change our minds again," laughed Sadie. "If one woman may do that, surely two may, who have no one but themselves to consult and please."

"Then why did you say that to Mr. Dorrison?"

"He is so pleasant, you know, and so difficult to refuse."

"You don't really like him, Margaret?"

"Everybody does, Eva. But I'll tell you a little secret of mine—and not a very pleasant one. I am acting quite selfishly in proposing this trip of ours. A great friend of mine is in Paris, and I have heard such news that I may have to go there quite in a hurry."

"Oh, Margaret; but you won't leave me?" cried Eva in dismay.

"No, no, don't think that. But I may have to carry you off with me, hurry-scurry posthaste, as fast as we can travel. So I'll tell you my idea. We'll be ready to start at any minute; but if the need does not arise we can stay as long as you like. But we need not tell everybody all our business—and certainly not Mr. Dorrison, despite all his pleasant ways."

"If it is not bad news, I think I should like a rush journey like that."

"There's another reason, too, for our being ready. If anything more unpleasant happened here, we could just be off."

And so it was settled between them, and Sadie was able to hasten the preparations without causing any suspicions. Indeed, there were very few to be made. They were going to Paris, where everything they needed could be easily bought.

Sadie planned therefore that a telegram should reach her on the morning of the third day after the talk with Dorrison, and on that day she determined to leave the Towers, covering the suddenness of the departure with the plea of her summons to Paris.

That night Sadie kept her first vigil, but without results; and the next morning, pleading nerves and a bad headache, she slept for two or three hours, having got from Eva a promise that she would sit by her side.

In the afternoon they went for a drive and returning through the village stopped at the postoffice. Sadie wished to post the letter to her maid about the telegram with her own hands.

She had bought some stamps and was leaving the shop when Mr Gregory came out from a room behind.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Hutchinson?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you may as well sign the book, if you will."

"Sign what book?" she asked in great surprise.

"It's only a form and I think a regular farce, but we have to comply with the law, you know, or else they come down on us pretty heavily. When we sell poisons, the purchaser has to sign for them. I gave them to your messenger, knowing you so well, and meant to ask you to sign the next time you were in. It wasn't quite regular, but I was willing to strain a point, of course, for anyone at the Towers."

Sadie glanced at the girl behind the post-office desk, who was staring hard at her. "I think I had better speak to you a minute in private," she said.

He led her into a room behind.

"Do you mean someone asked for poisons for me?" she asked.

"He did not ask; he brought me your letter;" said Mr. Gregory and showed her a letter signed "Margaret Hutchinson," and asking that some arsenic, a small quantity of hydrocyanic acid, and a hypodermic syringe should be sent by the bearer, who would pay the charge.

"There is some strange mistake, Mr. Gregory. I did not write this letter, and I certainly do not want any prussic acid."

"I shall get into trouble if the book is not signed," said Mr. Gregory. "Of course, I did not know it was a mistake."

"One of the servants. I don't know him. A thin-faced, sallow, spare man, with close-set eyes, not in livery."

Sadie recognized the description as that of Gardiner.

"I will keep this letter and make inquiries. Possibly one of the stable men wanted the things to kill a cat or a dog."

"I'd rather have the letter, please it's my only authority."

"I tell you it is a forgery, and no authority from me; but you can keep it. I will see to the matter."

So the circle of peril was spreading, and she was to be involved, thought Sadie, as she went back to the carriage.

She said nothing to Eva, but resolved to redouble her vigilance; and that night she kept watch with a loaded revolver under her pillow.

CHAPTER XIX

A LIFE AND DEATH MATCH.

Sadie was fully alive to the fact that the stroke thus aimed at her might have perilous results but for the discovery just made. It might even yet be dangerous. It would be possible to put the blame on her if anything happened to Eva.

Lord Broadstone as a peer of the realm and Gilbert Dorrison, the well-known member of Parliament, were men whose evidence would have weight with any jury; while, on her side, Sadie would be handicapped by the fact that she was living under a wrong name, had obtained her position by a false pretence, and had Eva almost entirely in her care.

The very means she was adopting to guard Eva were enough to convict her, if those against whom she was fighting could break through the defence. It was a scheme of diabolical cunning, worthy of Dorrison.

Jack Petherby had been done to death by an "accident," and now his sister was to be subtly murdered and the crime laid upon Margaret Hutchinson, whose life would be sworn away by those who committed the deed. Sadie could picture the outward grief of Lord Broadstone and the public sympathy for him in his bereavement, while Dorrison's reputation for shrewdness and acumen would be enhanced by his adroit detection of the clues to the murderess.

There had been a blunder somewhere, however, in Dorrison's calculations. Sadie knew him to be far too cunning to have made such a slip as that which had brought the thing to her knowledge. It was a piece of sheer good luck and as she puzzled over it she came close upon the truth.

The fact was that Dorrison had been betrayed by Gardiner's fears. The letter, written in Margaret Hutchinson's name had been given to him, and he had not been told what he was to bring from Gregory's. "You may have to sign a book for the things, Gardiner; but as they are for Miss Hutchinson, you had better sign her name," said Dorrison, in a tone of indifference.

But when the chemist put the poison register before him and told him he must sign his own name as having had the poisons, Gardiner put the pen down and fled. "Miss Hutchinson said I'd get if there was any difficulty she would sign the book the next time she called."

"You signed the book, I suppose, asked Dorrison.

"Yes, sir," was the glib reply; and thus his master had no suspicion whatever that the trick had miscarried.

But Gardiner was intensely ill at ease. He knew his mate too well to think that he wanted prussic acid and arsenic for any but an ugly purpose, and felt that he had been made a tool in a manner that might have ruinous results.

He knew the truth about Jack Petherby's death and had had one serious interview with his master about the price which the latter was to pay for the evidence in his possession. He was cunning enough to see that if anything occurred to take Margaret Hutchinson away from Broadstone or to damage her character, the value of his own evidence would shrink to nothing.

The same afternoon, therefore, he went to Dorrison and told him he was obliged to leave at once, and asked him for a thousand pounds.

"Are you mad, Gardiner?"

"No, sir, I hope not; but the other day when you showed great interest in that curio of mine—that piece of cord, sir—and as I took a great deal of trouble to get it, I think £1,000 is a fair price."

"Nonsense. A thousand pounds! Do you take me for a fool, man?"

"Far from that, sir. But I thought you would like to have the first offer. Just as you please, of course, sir. But I am leaving just the same; and as the value of it rather depends upon my having Miss Hutchinson handy, and as she's going away with my lady in a week or two, I wish to close the matter now."

"You'll get no thousand pounds from me, man; nor a hundred, either. It's like your infernal impudence to ask it."

"Very well, sir. Only Miss Hutchinson asked me very particular about it one day. I think perhaps she could get the money from my lady." His manner was as respectful as ever, but his ferrety eyes were very sly and threatening.

Dorrison grew uneasy. "Don't be a fool, Gardiner. You've got a good situation; don't force me to discharge you without a character."

"I am not going into service again, sir."

"I don't care a straw about your cord. Do what you like with it. You know perfectly well that the sheet of the mainsail caused the mishap."

"Of course, I know that, sir. I told Miss Hutchinson so, and she said it was easy to prove that by having the boat raised to see if the rope had been cut. If it had been, there was an end of the thing, sir."

"Raise it then and see. I haven't the money, and that's all about it." said Dorrison, who now saw clearly the danger that threatened.

"His lordship could perhaps do it, sir; but of course, I don't want to force the thing on you—only I'm obliged to leave, sir."

"You've taken me entirely by surprise. But I'll see what I can do by to-morrow. You have this thing here?"

"I can produce it, sir, whenever you wish. Let it be to-morrow, sir, then."

"If I do anything, mind, it will be on the condition that you leave the country and go to America."

Dorrison had no intention of being blackmailed in this barefaced manner; but he was as quite as firmly resolved to get possession of the incriminating piece of cord.

On the following morning, therefore, he said to Gardiner: "I have arranged that matter. Bring me the thing this evening and I'll give you the money; but you leave Broadstone to-night."

"A thousand pounds, sir! And there'll be my wages."

"Yes, a thousand pounds and your wages;" and Gardiner pluming himself upon his cleverness went off to pack his belongings in readiness to leave the Towers the moment the money was in his pocket.

"The sly scoundrel, to try to rush me in that way! But his eyes will be opened this evening," muttered Dorrison to himself. "A thousand pounds!" and he laughed angrily.

Meanwhile, Sadie had kept a ceaseless watch over Eva; and the time of vigilance was fast drawing to a close. Only for one more night would they remain in the Towers. The next day would see them away on their journey.

"They shall think they have plenty of time for their scheme, whatever it is," said Sadie to herself; and what the nature of the treacherous scheme was, she had guessed.

One thrust of the hypodermic syringe charged with prussic acid, and death would be almost instantaneous, and the cause almost impossible to detect.

But they meant it to be detected. They had planned that the means of death should be found in Sadie's possession. Twice every day, therefore, at night and morning, she made a thorough and exhaustive examination of everything in her room. And not without results.

The first search had been made after her discovery at the chemist's, and placed among the box of chocolates she still had in her room was one which she had not bought. She had put a mark on all hers, that she might know them. And from this the mark was missing.

Examination of the sweets showed the use to which the arsenic she was supposed to have bought had been put. The glass showed her they were poisoned.

She turned spy on her own account, then. Clad all in black, her feet muffled in felt slippers, she flitted about the house at all hours of the day and night.

It was her own safety as well as Eva's she had to guard, and she watched and listened and prayed, in her pressing need to find out the plans of her enemies.

Once she was in hiding when Dorrison and Broadstone went by her, almost touching her as they passed, speaking in low tones.

Dorrison had been pressing for something to be done and blaming Broadstone for delay. "We've another week at least, man," was the reply which Sadie heard as she held her breath and felt the curtain of the recess behind which she crouched, move as one of the men brushed against it.

"I believe you're afraid," sneered Dorrison. "Try whisky."

She heard Broadstone growl out an oath, but the rest of the reply was lost upon her.

This went to show that her plan to deceive everyone about the time of their departure had succeeded; but still she was not satisfied.

When the two men were out of the house, she went down to the room where they generally sat, and then saw a means by which she could overhear them at the moment when they were most likely to speak openly to one another of their plans.

The room was an extension which had been added to the dining-room, and was divided from it by double doors, with a space of six feet between, with cupboards on each side.

Sadie saw at once that she could readily reach the place through the dining-room and overhear whatever passed in the other room, while at need, she could step into one of the cupboards and remain hidden even if her retreat by the other way were stopped.

To make it the more easy for her to reach the recess, she took away the key of the door leading from the dining-room, and carefully plugged the slot so that the door handle just caught. The slightest turn of the handle would be enough to open it. Then having made certain that the door did not creak on the hinges, she went back upstairs.

The dinner was served at eight; it lasted about an hour; another half-hour would suffice for the table to be cleared; and at ten o'clock she was pretty sure to find the way open.

The hours of the interval dragged wearily. Eva and she dined in their room, and she's succeeded in getting Eva to bed by about half-past nine. Then she hurried to her room for a scent bottle for Eva, and as she recrossed the corridor she saw James Gardiner.

He was very agitated and her first thought was that he had been drinking and was bent on some mischief.

"Please let me speak to you, Miss Hutchinson," he said, hurrying toward her eagerly.

"Keep at a distance, please. What can you want to say to me?"

"It's about that cord, and—and other things."

"I don't want to have anything more to do with you. Last time you lied to me—you know that; and now you seem to have got your deserts."

"I did lie to you, miss, I admit that. I stole that piece you cut off Master Petherby's wrist. I don't deny anything. I did it because I wanted to keep the thing in my own hands."

"And now you've been fooled, eh? It serves you right. You are a scoundrel and deserve a scoundrel's treatment."

"I'm not as bad as he is—you know who I mean," he said, in a low tone, glancing over his shoulder as if in fear. "He's bilked me. Promised me a thousand pounds and then cheated me; took it from me tonight by force. He's got it on him now, and the bit that matches it. I swear, he has, on my soul."

"I don't want to hear this. Go away," said Sadie, coldly. "You had a chance to tell the truth and you lied. I'll have no more to do with you."

"There's something more—just as bad. Against you, miss. He sent me to old Gregory's for some poison, and——"

"Rubbish! I suppose Mr. Dorrison has discovered what a rascal you are, and has discharged you, and you come running to me with these tales. I won't hear any more—at any rate now. In the morning, if you persist in the story you shall have an opportunity of telling it to the proper people."

"In the morning it'll be too late. He'll have destroyed it," wailed Gardiner, throwing up his hands.

(To be Continued)

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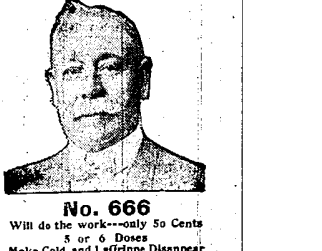

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