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THE Lady of the Night —OR— Amelia Makes a Success

CHAPTER XIV.

A MEETING WITH MR. STRIPLEY.

"Now, really!" exclaimed Mr. Stripley, "how fortunate that I should have run across you! I was just going home to my modest little house in Wandsworth. If you are not too proud, Mr. Graham, I should be delighted to offer you hospitality. Don't refuse, I beg, my dear sir; I have the keenest recollection of that mutton"—he snatched his lips and cast up his eyes—"let me beg of you to come with me and make my little place your abiding place while in this great city. I live out Wandsworth way. Quite country-like there, I assure you; green fields and the rest of it. Now, I beg of you, don't refuse!"

"You are very kind," said Elliot; "I shall be very glad."

"Here's a bust!" exclaimed Stripley. He made a dash for it and caught it without stopping it; Elliot followed, and they climbed to the top.

After awhile they alighted, and Mr. Stripley conducted Elliot to a rather desolate spot on which stood, at intervals, the most curious collection of houses which Elliot had ever seen.

"Eccentric is a mild word by which to describe them. There were rows of newly-built, semi-detached villas which, so to speak, had stopped half-way; that is to say, at the end of the

road was a newly-begun, but, for some mysterious reason, unfinished house. Here and there were tiny dwellings in the most grotesque styles of architecture. A building of the dimensions of a cottage traversed the characteristics of a castle, while others were abject mockeries of a Swiss cottage, or an old English mansion. To one of the former Mr. Stripley led the amazed Elliot. It was more like a doll's house than the habitation of human beings of a normal size; but Stripley regarded it with evident pride as he knocked at the door, and cast an eye round the front garden, measuring quite twelve feet by ten.

The door was opened by an ancient lady who so closely resembled his host that Elliot was not surprised when Stripley introduced her as his grandmother. She greeted Elliot in a manner so like that of her grandson that Elliot was struck by the conviction that if she had worn a tall hat she would have plucked it off with just the same gesture as the latter had done.

"This gentleman I told you about—from Devonshire, grandmother," explained Mr. Stripley, his face contorted with a grin of satisfaction. "Come in, Mr. Graham, honour our unpretentious abode. It's small, but comfortable—for instance, we—saw a bathroom; few of the other houses have. What can you give us for tea, grandmother?"

"I'm afraid we can't manage Devonshire cream; but perhaps there will be shrimps. Situated as we are in this rural district, far from the busy mart, so to speak, we can't compete with lordly Devonshire. Dear me, what a piece of mutton that was!" His huge mouth evidently watered at the recollection, as he conducted his guest to

the vaulted bathroom, which was so small that Elliot was lost in wonder how anyone, having got into the bath, could ever get out again.

It was clear that while Elliot was having his bath, Mr. Stripley had been on a foraging expedition; for a high tea of the most orthodox kind awaited him in a room so tiny that Elliot had some difficulty in reaching his allotted seat without straining the by no means thick walls.

Mr. Stripley talked all through the meal, his grandmother confining herself to a series of nods, conveying assent to his various statements. When the tea was finished, Mr. Stripley suggested a walk while the grandmother removed the remains of the meal. With evident pride he conducted Elliot through the mazes of finished and incomplete houses; and, while extolling the advantages of the position, the salubrity of the air, and the social importance of the inhabitants, continually turned his eyes with ill-concealed satisfaction to his own monstrously eccentric domicile.

His geniality, however, reached its zenith when they were once more settled in the tiny apartment which his owner fondly called his dining-room; and, having placed Elliot in an easy chair, he produced a spirit tumbler, and piled his guest with a strange compound which he honestly believed to be old Highland whisky.

"Pray make yourself quite at home," he implored Elliot, "it's Liberty Hall here." Strangely enough, this was the favourite formula of Sir Joseph in welcoming his guests. "I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you. It's quite an honour to have you under my 'umble roof. 'Umbly, but nice and convenient, don't you think? My own design, Mr. Graham, and built under my own eye—on the instalment system. I hope you left Sir Joseph well and hearty."

Elliot assured him that Sir Joseph appeared to be in excellent health. "Wonderful man, Sir Joseph," remarked Mr. Stripley, taking a gulp of the "old Highland whisky," and turning up his eyes to the ceiling. "A most extraordinary mind, Mr. Graham—extraordinary. I have been in Sir Joseph's employ—began as errand boy, and rose from that lowly position to what I am now—for many years. But, if you'll believe me, I have not yet fathomed that mind. It's stupendous. Incredible! There's nothing too great for it to grasp, and nothing—nothing too small. One of the leading men in the city, is Sir Joseph, and an honour to it. But there! you don't want me to tell you what he is; you know him, you live in daily intercourse with him, as you may say. Speaking of Australia—"

Elliot, who had not been listening very intently, roused from his reverie and looked up. Mr. Stripley caught the steady regard of the grave eyes, and coughed over his pipe. The door opened, and the grandmother's head appeared round it with an inquiry regarding a fresh supply of water. Stripley dismissed her a trifle impatiently, and the head having disappeared as suddenly as it had presented itself, he resumed.

"We were speaking of Australia, weren't we?" he said.

"Were we?" said Elliot apologetically. "I'm afraid I was not listening as attentively—"

"We were," said Stripley, with humble emphasis. "I take a great interest in Australia—wonderful country, as I remarked to you when I had the honour and pleasure of putting my legs under your mahogany in that charming cottage of yours down in Devonshire. Dear me, how one thing suggests another, and how one's mind travels back! We had some business at the office with Australia; and I fancy I can recall your name. Am I wrong, or were you ever connected with a place called Wally Hollow?"

Elliot coloured, and looked up all alert; then he sank back with a sigh.

"Yes," he said, "it was my father's place. We had a sheep run there." He was silent for a moment or two, then he went on gravely. "It was there my father lost his fortune. We had a long drought, the sheep died by thousands, my father got into difficulties—"

Mr. Stripley held his pipe suspended on its way to his lips, and leant forward with suppressed eagerness.

"Dear, dear!" he said sympathetically, "and what was the outcome of it?"

Elliot smoked moodily, his brows bent.

"My father was ruined; we should have been bankrupt, dishonoured, but Sir Joseph came to our assistance. He could not save us from ruin, but he did save our good name."

Stripley leaned forward, until he was in danger of falling from his chair.

"Just like him, just like him!" he said fervently; "he's got a good heart, has Sir Joseph; always ready to help a friend. Now—er—what did he do? You'll excuse my curiosity, Mr. Graham, but I do like to hear of Sir Joseph's good deeds."

"He took over my father's liabilities," said Elliot quietly, "and paid the debts. My father was ill at the time, and he died soon after, of the worry, and the dread of shame and dishonour."

Mr. Stripley emitted several clicks of acute sympathy.

"And—er—the estate?" he queried.

Elliot shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what became of it," he

said. "I suppose Sir Joseph took it over with the debts and liabilities."

"Yes, of course he would!" murmured Stripley, with a furtive gleam in his watery eyes. "I mean—that, of course, was only business. Do you—er—happen to know what kind of agreement your father signed? I merely ask out of curiosity, Mr. Graham; your story is so—so interesting, and is so characteristic of Sir Joseph—he's got a good heart, a good heart, Mr. Graham—that I—er—"

Elliot considered for a moment. "Yes, I do remember," he said. "My father signed an agreement that Sir Joseph should hold the Wally Hollow estate until the liabilities were paid."

"Quite so, quite so!" commented Mr. Stripley. "Just like Sir Joseph! The most self-sacrificing of men! I quite see the whole thing. You are greatly indebted to Sir Joseph, if I may say so, Mr. Graham. A noble man! So unselfish! So disinterested! My father was an old friend of Sir Joseph's," said Elliot.

"Ex-actly!" exclaimed Stripley. "Nothing would delight Sir Joseph so much as doing—I mean," he corrected himself hastily, "helping an old friend. Now, I daresay you'd like to retire to your virtuous couch. Let me show you the way, sir."

He lit a candle, and led the way to Elliot's room, then, returning to the dining-room, went to a Tottenham Court Road bureau, and feverishly hunted amongst some papers. He found what he wanted, and, seating himself at the table, with his claw-like hands thrust into his lank hair, studied the documents he had selected. Presently, with a ghoul-like laugh, he exclaimed—

"Clever man, Sir Joseph! Clever! Clever! Wonderful man! He's got this Wally Hollow estate in his grip. It must be worth £50,000 at least, even after the liabilities are paid. And it belongs to this young man upstairs, but he doesn't know it. And he never will, if Sir Joseph can help it. Oh, what a won-der-ful man you are, Sir Joseph!"

The following morning Mr. Stripley treated Elliot with so strong a compound of deference and humility, and with such anxious expressions of his desire to be of service to him, that Elliot was quite overwhelmed by such superabundant good-will, declining to make "The Mountain Retreat"—as Mr. Stripley's chalet was called—his temporary home while in London. Though Elliot was quite unconscious of the fact, Stripley watched him with the covert and glowing gaze of a butcher regarding a particularly promising lamb in course of fattening for the slaughter-house. He frequently implored Elliot to take great care how he crossed the crowded London thoroughfares, mounted or descended "buses," reclined in hansom cabs, or walked over cellar flaps.

"Yours is a valuable life, my dear young sir," he remarked fervently, and you really cannot be too careful. Pray, pray, take care of yourself! And you will let me know where you are staying? We must have a snack together. I can take you to a place—it will be a great honour for me—where a steak really is a steak: tender, juicy, and full of flavour. It will remind us of your beautiful mutton down in Devonshire. And you will drop in here whenever you feel so inclined, my dear young sir, won't you? Really, I don't like to let you go out of my sight. Such a valuable life!"

"I have not found it particularly so," said Elliot rather grimly, as he thanked Mr. Stripley for his kindness; and, as later in the day, he dodged the traffic at Charing Cross, he wondered whether he should very much care if the brewer's dray, the motor-bus, the hansom cab, and His Majesty's Mail-cart, which were converging on him from different directions, knocked him down, and put an end to the life upon which Mr. Stripley seemed to set such a strange and flattering value.

(To be continued)

If you wish to use hard-boiled eggs for garnishing, cook them in this way and they will be perfectly hard but not tough. Place eggs in hot water, in top of double boiler, having about a pint of water to four eggs. Put this over hot water in the bottom and let water in bottom boil for ¾ of an hour.



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Household Notes.

When putting down eggs in water-glass, use a clean utensil with a cover, and arrange eggs large end up if possible.

Rice custard is delicious. Cook 4 tablespoonfuls of rice in water and proceed as you would to make a tapioca custard.

Boil asparagus in as little water as possible so that it does not have to be poured out, otherwise the asparagus will be poor.

Use a wire whisk to beat up sponge cake. When baked, tear it apart with two forks instead of cutting with a knife.

If sponge-cake batter is beaten until stiff and then the sugar added, you will have a dry cake. Sift sugar in very slowly while beating.

If a screw breaks off in a chair and it is impossible to remove the point, put wet salt on the hole, insert the broken screw, and it will rust fast.

To 4 beaten yolks add 1 cupful of sugar and the grated rind and juice of 1 lemon. Fold in the beaten whites of the eggs and bake in a buttered pudding dish.

To have custards "like velvet" do not let the water boil in the bottom of double boiler, and when baking them, do not let the water which surrounds cup boil.

If you put your loaf bread, cold biscuits or baked sweet potatoes in your grates cooler just after you have taken out the dinner, they will be as warm and soft as if freshly baked for supper.

Heat ¼ cupful sugar over a low flame, stirring until melted, and is a light brown in color. Stir in ¼ cupful boiling water slowly, and let boil until it is thick enough.

Shrimps are good served in white sauce to which 2 tablespoonfuls of chopped mushrooms, 1 tablespoonful of lemon juice, 1 teaspoonful of onion juice and 1 teaspoonful of chopped parsley have been added.

To make caramel custard put tablespoonful of caramel (made with sugar and water) in the bottom of each cup. Pour custard in over a teaspoonful so that it will fall gently and not mix with caramel. Bake.

Halibut turbans are attractive. Cut pieces of halibut the size of a napkin ring. Dip into seasoned melted butter, dredge with flour and bake in a well greased pan. Fasten rings with wooden skewers and garnish with parsley.

To remove iron rust from a delicate fabric, spread it with cream of tartar. Twist cloth to keep cream of tartar in place; put in a pan of cold water, and heat gradually to boiling point. It may be necessary to repeat treatment.

To change the feathers from one case to another use the vacuum cleaner. Remove dust bag and attach clean case, fasten the suction part, and after making an opening in the tick, transfer feathers quickly, using the hose attachment.

Ice cream can be frozen in your fireless cooker. Fill the can belonging to the small compartment, with the cream, place in the large compartment, on a bed of cracked, salted ice. Pack ice around it, cover and let stand four hours.

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