

# THE GREAT LINTON MYSTERY.

## CHAPTER XX. II.

(CONTINUED.)

On the following day Miss Drummond came down to luncheon, still suffering from headache, but otherwise showing no sign of her recent attack. She explained briefly—her head preventing her from talking for long—that she had been with a notary of Fontainebleau to look at a chalet at Samois, and returned feeling "fearfully out of form;" that she had to wait at the hotel until that horrid groom could be found, and that, to her horror, after starting from Fontainebleau, she discovered that the wretch was intoxicated, and finally that the fright of the journey had acted so violently upon her imagination that she was more dead than alive on reaching home.

When ordinary forms of politeness permitted, she referred to this statement, and timidly asked Miss Drummond if she intended taking a house.

"Yes, Baby. One can't stay here for ever, you know, and I like the neighbourhood too well to leave it. I shall take a little place—if I can find it."

Miss Drummond stayed in the room the whole day, except at dinner-time. She had a couch drawn into a position where the light was not too offensive, and where she could get a full view of herself in a glass; and there she lay scarcely moving, save to change one graceful pose for another, or to dispose her dress more advantageously to the contour of her magnificent limbs. She did not read—she rarely did, unless the newspaper contained some carefully-reported social scandal—and she scarcely spoke, her tongue being now under the restraint of good manners. It suited her indolent sensual nature to lie, comfortably supported by pillows, regarding the slight events that passed and brooding over her own secrets, and it required a piquant emotion or the craving of animal appetite to rouse her from her state of torpor. She watched Gertie working for an hour at a time without moving her half-closed eyes; but, when Gilbert came into the room or passed in the distance, her eyes opened a little wider, the pupils expanded, and they moved from him to Gertie and back again.

Gilbert strolling in towards dinner-time, addressed a few cold conventional inquiries to her about the state of her health, and then, sitting down by Gertie, leaned forward and chatted with her in a genial undertone. Gertie replied in a few gay words, and continued her stitching. He changed his position to catch her profile, and sat admiring the delicate sweet outline until she detected it, and turned her chair about, smiling with a bright flush of happiness in her cheeks.

Miss Drummond watching the two through the parted fingers with which she shielded her eyes—she had replied to Gilbert with her eyes closed and her hand in that favourite pose, the thumb and finger on the two brows, so excellently arranged for displaying her arm, the turn of her wrist, and ring—did not fail to see these signs of love; and, had she been ten times a better woman than she was, envy, hatred, and malice would have rankled in her heart. A bad woman with these sentiments in her heart would not be satisfied to rest inactive long.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

(CONTINUED.)

From Mrs. Pierce, Fontainebleau, to Mrs. Gower, *pauze volante*, Avenue de l'Opera, Paris—

"Valvins, July 30, 188—

"Madam,—(Obedient to your request, I write to furnish you with full particulars of the visit of Mr. Gower and his daughters. Yesterday morning, while preparing the table for luncheon, I perceived a fly approaching the house by the road from Fontainebleau, and, being apprised by your letter of the probable arrival of Mr. Gower, I went at once to—

close the drive gate, which I had purposely left open. The fly had drawn up. "Ask the woman if this is the house, Edith," said Mr. Gower.

"Miss Edith Gower put the question to me in French, and, on my replying in English, Mr. Gower asked if Sir Gilbert was at home. I said he was. Mr. Gower paid the driver, and the young ladies, informing me that they wished to 'take Lady Linton by surprise, asked where they should find her. I replied that she was in the *salon* with Sir Gilbert, and that they could enter the room by the *lawn* in front. After a little consultation amongst themselves, they proceeded, with suppressed merriment, to approach the house by the *lawn*, taking the path beside the house, while I entered the house by the door and took a shawl which Sophia Kirby had been unable to find into the *salon*, in order to see what happened upon the appearance of Mr. Gower.

"Sophia Kirby was lying on a couch; Sir Gilbert was under the verandah trying some loose sprays of clematis to the trellis. Suddenly Lady Linton dropped the things she was holding into her lap, with an exclamation of pleasure, which was answered by the voices of her visitors. Sir Gilbert on perceiving the cause of these cries, instead of going to meet Mr. Gower and his family strode into the *salon* and was about to speak, when he caught sight of me. He went to Sophia Kirby's side and spoke in a hurried whisper. In a moment she whisked from the couch, and slipped out of the room at the very instant Mr. Gower appeared at the window. Thus, madam, the recognition we had hoped for was evaded; nevertheless the conclusion to be drawn from the incident which did occur is valuable.

"Sophia Kirby had luncheon served in her apartment, pleading indisposition as excuse for her absence from the dining-room—an excuse which was partly justified by the previous state of her health. After luncheon the visitors went over the grounds, and the young ladies explored every room except that in which Sophia Kirby had locked herself loudly expressing their astonishment and delight at all they saw. The young ladies were very gay and loquacious and I have never seen Lady Linton in brighter spirits. After dinner the whole party went upon the water. Sophia Kirby, of course, remained in her room. She wrote several letters, which I have not been able to examine. When the party returned from boating, Sir Gilbert and Mr. Gower spent a couple of hours in the billiard-room, while Lady Linton and her young friends chatted in the *salon*—about Mrs. Simpson of Kennington, and facts with which your copy of the diary has acquainted you. It is unnecessary to pain you by repeating the slighting allusions made to you by the Misses Gower and Mr. Gower. Mr. Gower smoked a great many cigars, was particularly merry, and took the spirit case to bed with him.

"This morning, after very early breakfast, the party left in the break, taking with them a cold luncheon and a hamper of wine selected by Mr. Gower personally. I am told they visited Moret, went on to Grez, and took luncheon in the forest. They returned to dinner, and left the house, accompanied by Sir Gilbert and Lady Linton, to catch the last train to Paris just before I sat down to commence this letter. Sophia Kirby watched their departure through the bars of the window-shutter.

"I have nothing further at this moment to report—nothing of moment has occurred since I wrote a fortnight ago. My partner in London is however actively engaged in a new line of inquiry, which we confidently expect will result in a most important discovery.

"I am compelled to close my letter

hurriedly in view of the speedy return of Sir Gilbert and Lady Linton.

"Your respectful and obedient servant, "E. PIERCE."

From the same, to Mr. Pierce, London—"Valvins, Monday.

"Dear Pierce,—Your demand for a written order empowering you to draw money out of the Post-office, and accompanying letter, to hand. You are aware that every penny in the P. O. belongs to me, and that in the past I don't know how many years you have done nothing but spend the money gained by my industry. I do not wish to rake up old grievances, and I am quite willing to accept your excuse and 'make it up,' as you propose. But, though we may be 'the same flesh and blood,' I have no intention to let you participate in the profits of my exertions unless you help me to the best of your ability. As for your threat to 'drop a line to Sir Gilbert, and so blow up the whole conspiracy,' that is a matter of perfect indifference to me, for a reason that will appear hereafter.

"I do not wish to widen the breach between us, Jo; on the contrary, as you will see by the enclosed notes for two hundred francs—the Jew man in Fenchurch Street will give you eight pounds less eighteen pence for them, if you stick out for the proper exchange—I wish to let you see that I am most kindly disposed towards you; and I tell you this—that if you only give me good proof of your wish to serve me, I will listen favourably to your notion of starting the United Angler's Punt Company or of taking the candle-factory.

"I want you, Jo, to find John Barton at once. This will not be very difficult, as I have discovered that he is guiltless of complicity in the murder of Lady L., has been thrown over by Sophia Kirby, and is in all probability dependent on his wife for a living. I am almost certain he is on the turf. S. K. is trying to find him. We must get at him first. She sent a letter to him at the Warden Hotel Dover: but its contents show that she is doubtful of his getting it there. You will do well to go to the Warden and claim the letter. Not that it is of any value to us—I know the contents—but because it would be valuable to him. You had better advertise in the *Sporting Times* and other turf-papers—if I know the addresses of these people, I would not trouble you. Word it like this—'If John Barton wants to hear of a good thing, write to "Double L., Post-office, Dover." If there are any English sporting-papers published in Boulogne or Paris—I think there must be—have the same advertisement inserted in them. You can take a room somewhere in Dover, when you go there to claim the letter at the Warden and wait for answers to the advertisements. It is not unlikely that John Barton will go to Dover himself. Be careful how you manage him. If you find him, promise him whatever you like, and, if possible, get him to come to Fontainebleau with you. Don't frighten him or let him know more than that you are acting for a lady. If he answers by letter, send it to me at once. In either case communicate with me—by telegraph, if pressing.

"And now, Jo, that you may not go about this in a half-hearted reluctant fashion, I will let you into a secret—or part of it. I have discovered within the last week a fact which entirely alters the complexion of this affair. I give you my solemn word that I am working now for Lady L., and that, if I succeed, she will bless the day that Mrs. Gower set us to destroy her happiness. You see now how little I need care for your threat, and how if you really sympathize with Lady L.—as you have professed—you are bound to help me to the utmost in your power. Write to me, enclosing copies of the advertisement, and I will send you more money, and continue the supply while you try to aid me. "Yours affectionately, "E. PIERCE."

"P. S.—I need not enforce upon you the necessity of absolute secrecy with regard to our proceedings at the present

time. Let no one know what we are doing, nor even suspect it by a careless word. It is not probable that you will meet Mrs. Gower; but, should such an accident occur, do not suffer her to draw a single fact from you relative to this affair. You know nothing—the whole matter rests in the hands of your partner at Fontainebleau, you can say. Should she by any means get a clue to the recent turn of events, my plans will be upset, and all hopes of rescuing Lady Linton from misery must be abandoned."

"I am Mr. Pierce, Dover, to Mrs. Pierce, Fontainebleau—

"Sea View Cottage, Thursday.

"Dear Eliza,—You've taken me out of my depth, and where on earth you're going to land me I don't know. However, I recognize the wisdom of hanging on to you, and I thank you for the welcome notes. I am sorry to see the money goes faster than I wish, and must beg you to send more before long. I have carried out your instructions to the letter, and enclosed advertisements published in *Sporting Times*, *Field*, etc. I fetched the letter addressed to John Barton at the Warden and read it. It is all heathen Greek to me. But I have unbounded confidence in you, and am heartily glad to hear we are doing dirty work for clean people. I am certain a cheap bathing-company would do here—but of that more anon. Fish is scarcely to be obtained, the best being sent to London; the remainder is sold in the town at a frightful price. I have been fairly lucky with a line fishing from a boat. A few boats started to supply the town with good fish ought to pay excellently. I am going to try a little bottom-fishing off Folkestone, and so adieu. Any information I may pick up relative to John Barton I will forward without delay.

"Yours most affectionately, "JOE PIERCE."

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

GERTIE'S DISCOVERY.

It was but a short period of happiness that came to little Lady Linton at this time—a gleam of sunlight like that which sometimes succeeds a day of rain irradiating for a moment the tear-washed face of Nature before the darkness of night veils it in deeper gloom.

Miss Drummond was not to be broken in like a horse. If she submitted to Sir Gilbert's guidance, it was simply because she saw the folly of running counter to him while he held the rein and the whip. Meanwhile she pondered the ways and means of getting the rein and whip into her own hands, and bringing Gilbert to submission in his turn.

Gertie saw nothing particular in the absence of Miss Drummond during the visit of Mr. Gower and his daughters. Possibly she was really unwell, possibly she was merely indisposed to meet those whose exuberant greeting indicated a character so entirely opposed to her own lethargic nature. Gertie was heartily glad that she kept her room, for her presence would only have imposed constraint upon the girls, and spoilt her pleasure in their society. How different it would have been, thought she, if Gilbert had not come to an understanding with Miss Drummond! Without that, she might have been openly insulted before her own friends. She would certainly have felt anxious and ill at ease, and they would have gone away with the impression that she was unhappy. Happily they had seen her at her best, and found Gilbert, as he was always to her, the handsomest, bravest, most courteous in the world.

With some such reflections as these Gertie fell asleep that night, after the departure of her friends. When she opened her eyes, it was with a confused notion that she had been listening for some time to muffled voices and strange sounds, such as she had heard in the vestibule on the night of Miss Drummond's late return from Fontainebleau. She might have been dreaming something of the kind. She found that Gilbert was not by her