

Beautiful Miss Derwent

BROOKLAND is a popular Summer resort, and each year can boast many distinguished visitors; but of them, no other ever attracted so much attention as did Stella Derwent. Describing her, a prominent society journal said: "Her face is of the pure Spanish type, though more regular and delicate in its features than is usual among Spanish women. Her hair is jet; her eyes are large, lustrous and fringed with heavy lashes; her complexion is rich and clear; her expression is bright, sparkling, amiable. More remarkable than the perfection of her head is her faultlessness of figure, which combines stateliness and grace both in carriage and in pose.

The description in no wise exaggerated her beauty. If it be true that "every woman is fond of conquests," Miss Derwent had cause for rejoicing. Before she had been in the place a week most of the gentlemen there resident—whether permanently or temporarily—had succumbed to her charms, vied with one another in paying her their *devoirs*, which she received in a dignified, courteous manner, but with an *insouciance* that stimulated their endeavors to render themselves agreeable to her.

There was one gentleman whom she seemed to regard with greater favor than the others—the Hon. John Maxham. He was the wealthiest, most prominent citizen of Brookland, and had secured his title from having several times represented his town in the State Legislature. Somewhat rising fifty, he looked much younger, and was prepossessing in his personal appearance. He had been bereaved by death of two wives, but was quite ready to marry a third time, provided a woman could be found to comfort his declining years who would creditably fill the position which, as his consort, would be hers.

With him she took long rambles through green pastures and beside still waters; rode behind his handsome bay trotters; not unfrequently dined. So favorable an impression did she make upon the honorable gentleman's daughter and sole heir that she frankly declared to her intimate friend: "I think Miss Derwent would make pa an excellent wife;" no trifling concession, if the effect of her father's marriage upon her patrimony is considered.

The prospective union of Mr. Maxham and Miss Derwent was the general theme of conversation in Brookland, when the community was suddenly startled by an announcement which caused all other matters to fade into insignificance—that the local bank had been burglarized to the extent of nearly one hundred thousand dollars, in currency and negotiable bonds—an announcement that proved only too true.

Of this bank Mr. Maxham was the president and cashier; for its funds he was personally responsible. To make good the deficit it would require the bulk of his worldly possessions. He at once called a meeting of the directors, at which it was decided to offer a reward of two thousand dollars for the apprehension of the guilty party or parties; of five thousand dollars for the recovery of the stolen property; also to employ a skilled detective, who was summoned from New York city by telegraph.

Having arrived in Brookland, the detective—one of the most expert in his profession—made a thorough examination of the building wherein the bank was located and its surroundings;

listened to Mr. Maxham's statement of the facts of the case without remark. Then:

“*You* usually open the bank?” he asked.

“Always, when I am in town,” replied Mr. Maxham.

“On the morning when you discovered that a burglary had been committed, you found the door locked?”

“I did.”

“The windows fastened on the inside as now?”

“They were.”

“You had no suspicion of anything wrong till you went to your safe?”

“I had not.”

“The door of the safe was also locked?”

“It was.”

“Who knows the combination that you use on the lock to your safe?”

“No one but myself.”

“You are liable to be away. In your absence, what does your teller do for money with which to transact the business of the bank?”

“We pay out about the same amount each day. This sum I take from the safe and place in his hands, of course making allowance for a slightly larger demand than the average. If I am to be absent over night, at the close of business he deposits the money in his hands with one of our merchants who has a safe, fireproof and burglar-proof like our own, receiving from him a receipt for the amount.”

“Supposing any casualty—paralysis, sudden death or the like—were to befall you, how would the interior of your safe be reached?”

“The combination is on a slip of paper, which is in a drawer of the safe in the town clerk's office, which has three locks. The keys to these locks are respectively holden by the three directors of the bank, and all of them would have to be used in obtaining the slip of paper.”

“You seem to have made ample provision for the security of your treasures,” smiling. “To guess accurately at your combination would be practically impossible, therefore it must have been learned by some person who watched while you, unsuspecting, opened the safe.”

“I do not remember opening the safe when any one was near me.”

“Then—” And the detective hesitated.

“I know what you would say,” said Mr. Maxham, quietly; “that I must be the guilty person. Fortunately, I can account for every moment during the night when the deed was committed; easily prove an *alibi*.”

The days passed on, and not the faintest “clew” was discovered. No stranger had been seen in the place, directly prior to the burglary, nor since it had any one gone from Brookland to whom the slightest suspicion attached. The detective gave up the case and returned to New York.

Meanwhile, Mr. Maxham had walked, rode, dined with Miss Derwent, as usual. She manifested the warmest sympathy for him in his misfortune; in the sweetest voice, declared that trouble was necessary to show one who his real friends are. From another, the assertion would have afforded him no comfort; from her, it did. It convinced him that her regard for him was not inspired by his wealth, which he would probably have to sacrifice; emboldened him to declare his love, in impassioned language, and ask her to become his wife.

“Oh, you naughty man!” she exclaimed, archly looking into his face; her tone far from discouraging.

“I am positive that, as my wife, I can make you happy.”

“I have no doubt of it. But your proposal is so unexpected. You must give me time to consider it, before definitely answering it.”

“Certainly; you will not allow it to disturb our present friendly relations?”

“By no means!” earnestly.

One evening, some two weeks subsequent to the burglary, a young man named William Avery, a clerk in the Brookland Post-office, called at Mr. Maxham's residence and requested a private interview with him on important business.

“I have company this evening,” said Mr. Maxham, when the two were by themselves in the library, “and trust you will be as expeditious as possible.”

“I will detain you but a few minutes,” Avery replied. “To come directly to the point: Do you know anything of Miss Derwent's antecedents?”

“*What?*” and Mr. Maxham's face flushed angrily.

“Please answer my question. Do you know anything of the lady's past life, even her birthplace?”

“I do not!” with ill-suppressed indignation.

“That foreign gentleman, Count Duprer, has been confined to his room at the Eagle ever since the burglary, has he not?”

“I believe so,” sharply.

“Your teller informs me that you once allowed Miss Derwent to see you lock and unlock the bank-safe, and that you did not acquaint the detective with this circumstance?”

“If you have nothing to talk about except her and the count, I must beg leave to end this interview.”

“Since Miss Derwent has been in this place,” Avery continued, calmly, “she has called at the post-office for her mail, instead of having it sent to the Eagle as other boarders there do; a singular freak, it seemed to me. She has received four letters, each and all of them bearing the same post-mark and addressed in the same coarse, scraggly chirography. Meantime, as many letters have gone from this to the office whence hers have come, and all were for the same person. Hence, I concluded that she was their sender. I firmly believe that one's character is disclosed by his handwriting, in no small degree, and at once made up my mind that he whom I supposed Miss Derwent's correspondent is an extremely rough specimen of humanity. Influenced by an irrepressible curiosity to know what two persons so dissimilar as Miss Derwent and her supposed correspondent could have in common, I wrote to the postmaster of the village where that individual resides for particulars respecting him. Two hours ago, I received the following reply,” drawing a letter from his pocket and reading:

“F—, OHIO, *September 5th*, 18—.

“DEAR SIR: Yours of the 1st, by which I confess myself surprised, is received. In reply would say: Horace Parsons, concerning whom you inquire, once an estimable, though always an illiterate, man, is a miserable, drunken brute. His daughter, of rare physical beauty, some three years since met a young man who had a handsome face and pleasing manners, with whom she became infatuated, by whom her ruin was effected.

“Her parents idolized her, and her disgrace caused her mother's death; her father's downfall. The one for whom she sacrificed her honor is a gambler by profession, and capable of doing almost anything to obtain a living without work. He treats her shamefully, yet she worships him. His real name is Louis Carter but both have *aliases*. I imagine one of hers is Stella Derwent, as Parsons frequently sends letters to that address—lately to your post-office—and I do not know that he writes to anybody else. She furnishes the money for her father's support, doubtless given her by Carter. Very likely Carter is with her in Brookland, though they do not always travel together. If so, look out for him.

“Truly yours, — —, P. M.”

During the reading of this communication, Mr. Maxham sat motionless as a statue, his face

bloodless. When it was finished, he said, in a husky tone:

“You think Carter and Duprer identical? That, aided by Miss Derwent, who betrayed the confidence I reposed in her when I indiscreetly allowed her to see me unlock the safe, he was able to and did rifle its contents without leaving any trace?”

“Yes; and that his illness was feigned in order not to be seen by the detective who might have recognized in him an old offender. He would not wish to leave the place immediately after committing the crime, from fear of being suspected; for, in these days of telegraphs, a malefactor gains nothing by an attempt to run away from the scene of his operations.”

“True.”

“Knowing the relations which have subsisted between you and Miss Derwent—so we will call her for the present—I deemed it best to acquaint you with my views before stating them to any one else.”

“Thank you for your thoughtfulness”—tremulously.

“I may be wholly wrong in my inferences. Therefore, I suggest that we go to the room where Miss Derwent awaits your return, anxiously, no doubt”—smiling as he spoke—“and I think I can at once prove her innocence or guilt.”

“Very well;” and the two descended to the parlor, where Avery was formally introduced to Miss Derwent.

Presently, without any apparent abruptness, turning to Mr. Maxham, he inquired:

“Did you know that Count Duprer is no count at all? That he has been recognized as a notorious character named Carter?”

The effect of this double question upon Miss Derwent was instantaneous. She trembled like a leaf; the color receded from her cheeks; her eyelids drooped.

“One of his exploits was the ruin of a young girl,” Avery continued, not waiting for Mr. Maxham to reply; “and that caused the death of the girl’s mother—made a wreck of her father. It is said that she whom he ruined is so completely in his toils that she dares not refuse to act as his accomplice, whatever deed he may plan to commit”

This was too much for her, and she convulsively exclaimed:

“I confess all, and ask your mercy for—him.”

We will not prolong our narrative. No arrests were made, but the stolen property was all recovered. The sudden departure of “Miss Derwent” and “Count Duprer” from Brookland was a matter of surprise to all save Mr. Maxham and Avery, who, alone, ever knew their guilt.

To Avery was paid the reward of five thousand dollars, a sum which he considered sufficient to warrant a “new departure” on his part—his marriage to the blue-eyed lassie who had long been the principal figure in his dreams by night and by day; heretofore prevented by his pecuniary circumstances.

Mr. Maxham has not, as yet, found his third wife; nor is he likely to find her so long as he avoids women as he recently has avoided them—and particularly handsome brunettes.

Frank Leslie's Sunday Magazine, April 1887