

‘The Family Conspiracy’

Nothing could exceed the indignation of the mother of M. Lacarge when she received a letter from him informing her that he had just entered the matrimonial state a second time. The union of Charles Lacarge with Marie Chappelle had taken place at Paris; and it was not until the ceremony had been accomplished that a letter was despatched to Grandier, to break the news to the old lady, and desire her to prepare for the reception of the newly-married couple.

Madame Lacarge, senior, was a woman of imperious temper and haughty disposition. She was fond of power, and frequently regretted that she had not been born a queen. She however resolved not to resign her sway over the mansion of Grandier, and its dependence, without a struggle; and old as she was, she possessed a mind capable of the most artful combinations. She knew that when her son returned with his young bride, the domestics would look upon the latter as their rightful mistress; and that the fate of all dowagers, whether they be potentates in empires or only in domestic circles, is to sit tranquilly by the fire-side in winter, and at the casement in summer, without daring to interfere in the economy of the household. She knew also that novelty is pleasing, especially to the uneducated; and that she herself would be entirely thrown into the shade, while the new mistress would engross all attentions, exercise all power, and command all obedience. The idea of being neglected entered the mind of the jealous Madame Lacarge, senior, as the barbed arrow penetrates the soft flesh; and every endeavour to eradicate that idea from her bosom was as painful as to attempt to pluck out the pointed dart from the entrails where it rankles. It was that the designing old woman detested the unfortunate Marie even before she had seen her; and she resolved to adopt some means both to avenge herself upon her son for having ventured to form such a connexion without consulting her, and to preserve her domination over the establishment of Grandier.

When a carriage stopped at the gate of the old mansion and her son Charles handed his beautiful bride from the vehicle, the old woman could have wept with vexation: but she concealed her spite, the better to accomplish her schemes. She accordingly received the bride with open arms, and congratulated her son upon the choice he had made in the selection of a wife. Lacarge, who had dreaded this interview with his mother, was delighted at the reception that he and his beloved Marie experienced at her hands, and his mind felt relieved of a considerable load.

An opportunity soon occurred for the mother to commence her infernal schemes, one portion of which was to undermine the good opinion her son entertained of his wife. Scarcely had Marie been in the house four hours, when, in a fit of despair – resulting from the rashness of the step she had adopted in marrying Lacarge, the conviction that he had deceived her with regard to his immense possessions, and a reminiscence of the impression that had been made on her mind by a youth named Auguste Dumesnil some time previously, – in a fit of despair she wrote a letter to her husband, summoned a servant to her bed-chamber where she penned it, and sent it to him in the drawing room. In this letter she declared that she had deceived him – that she could never

love him – that it would be impossible for her to exist in so gloomy spot as Grandier – and that she implored him to allow her to depart for some distant land, where she could pass the remnant of her days in obscurity and peace. This epistle was penned under the excitement of feelings and emotions, for which its authoress herself could scarcely account. It was the effusion of a soul tormented by the most gloomy impressions, all more imaginary than real. It was the production of one of those hours that occur in the existence of all, – hours in which we have no more control over the whirlwind of our passions than the Norwegian sailor has over the wind which he imagines he can evoke or still with his whistle. Scarcely had she despatched the letter to her husband, when she would have given worlds to recall it.

Her husband was so bewildered when he received the letter, that he suffered it to fall from his hands. His mother instantly picked it up, perused it, and commenced a long and bitter tirade against the faithlessness – the duplicity – the deceit of her daughter-in-law. For a moment she completely unhinged all confidence in his wife's honour in the mind of Lacarge, and the unhappy man knew not what course to adopt. He however proceeded to his wife's apartment to receive a more explicit avowal of her true sentiments with regard to him; and the moment he entered the room, Marie precipitated herself into his arms, imploring his pardon for the pain she had caused him. He wished for nothing more than this means of reconciliation; and Marie descended with him to the drawing room. The old mother, who had retained possession of the letter, bit her lips to conceal her spite when she saw the affectionate terms upon which they had contrived so suddenly to place themselves.

The designing mother of Lacarge was not however to be beaten at her own game. She determined to seek a co-operator in the arduous labour which she had undertaken; and her eyes fell on Denaise, the confidential clerk of her son. Denaise had viewed this second marriage of his master with as much disgust as the bridegroom's mother herself; and his motives of enmity against the match were precisely similar to those which influenced the conduct of the old lady. He trembled for the power which he exercised over the naturally weak mind of M. Lacarge; and he moreover dreaded to be questioned relative to certain sums for which he had not as yet entered into any explanation. It was therefore with feelings of mingled alarms and hatred that Denaise saw Madame Marie Lacarge enter into the spirit of all her husband's speculation, visit the iron-works which he possessed, examine the financial condition of his affairs, and suggest a variety of improvements, the end of which was economy. Denaise and Madame Lacarge, senior, speedily comprehended each other: the affinity of mesmerism exists between all minds filled with the same demoralized and debased ideas; an interchange of significant glances soon led to verbal hints, – and these at length produced a mutual explanation of sentiments and fears. Denaise saw that the old lady possessed courage sufficient to execute the most desperate plots, and he himself was capable of every villainy that his active imagination could conceive.

Denaise, it has been observed, exercised considerable influence over the mind of M. Lacarge, and was made the keeper of many of that gentleman's important secrets. It appears that Lacarge

had been deceived in the value of the iron-works which he had purchased, and that the profits arising from them would not be so speedy as he could have wished. He had considerably embarrassed himself to collect together the purchase-money for that property; and, immediately after the bargain was concluded, he lacked funds to continue the enterprise with that adequate degree of liberality which was calculated to turn the works to an eventually good account. He was too proud to abandon the speculation at once; and yet money must be had. In this dilemma he had addressed himself to Denaise, his clerk. Denaise suggested that a loan should be raised upon bills at a short date, and measures might be adopted to provide for them just before they became due. The bankers at Tulle and Brives had offered to cash such bills if a responsible name besides that of Lacarge were placed upon them. Lacarge knew not to whom to apply for security; and he was almost reduced to despair when Denaise propounded a scheme.

‘The bankers do not suspect your honesty,’ he said, ‘they merely require additional guarantees in case of your death. They will not ask a question relative to the bills, which I will myself take to them for you. Suppose we write the name of some rich landed proprietor of the Department upon them, and make them payable at a bank in Paris. We can provide the funds to take them up; and the person whose acceptance we shall thus use will never hear of the transaction.’

Lacarge had to decide between imminent disgrace and ruin, or the expedient to which Denaise had alluded. Bankruptcy or forgery: those were the alternatives and he chose the latter. The bills were drawn – the acceptance of a rich farmer of Corrèze was written across them – and Denaise procured the cash without any difficulty. It was thus that funds had been procured to work out the enterprise into which Lacarge had so heedlessly plunged; and Denaise had reaped a considerable profit from the transaction.

Shortly after this affair Lacarge proceeded to Paris upon particular business, and there fell in with Marie Chapelle, to whom he was speedily united. He trembled for the period when the bills would be falling due; and he eagerly embraced the opportunity of acquiring a sum of money towards a provision for them by means of marriage. Denaise did not, however, approve of the match; and, although he dared not express his opinion to his master, he willingly, as before stated, entered into a dark and damnable conspiracy with the mother against the peace of the unfortunate Marie.

Immediately after the union of Lacarge with Mademoiselle Chapelle, instructions were given to a notary in Paris to raise a certain sum of money upon her property; and, after a few weeks of tranquil happiness at Grandier in the society of his bride, who speedily entertained the greatest affection for her husband, Lacarge found himself compelled to repair to Paris once more, both in respect to the sum to be obtained from her dowry, and also with the view of raising a further loan, to make up the necessary amount to provide for the forged bills when due. Harassed by the dread of detection in this affair, Lacarge exerted himself to the utmost to raise the additional loan in Paris, – but without effect. At length he encountered an old friend, from whose generosity he

obtained a promise of that assistance which he could not procure elsewhere. In the hurry and confusion of the moment, he hinted that he had bills to offer as security; whereas he was as denuded of any legitimate means of giving a guarantee as he had been on the occasion when he procured the previous loan by means of the forged bill. He however wrote a full account of his hopes and promises to Denaise, and desired that individual, unknown to his wife and mother, to join him in Paris in about a fortnight's time – that being the period when his friend had promised to supply him with the loan required.

Denaise saw that the sums which had been obtained on the forged bills, and laid out to considerable advantage, had placed the enterprise of the iron-works in a most prosperous condition; and he now conceived nothing less than the atrocious idea of securing to himself at least a part of the property. The murder of his master was the plan that he entertained; and he also resolved to enlist that master's mother in the dread conspiracy. He sounded her upon the subject – he represented to her that the whole weight of suspicion might be readily thrown upon the shoulders of the unfortunate Marie, – and, horrible to relate, the unnatural mother consented to become an accomplice in the assassination of her own son !

The fertile imaginations of these wretches speedily conceived and executed one of the most infernal schemes ever contemplated by human beings. The mother was well aware of the silly but innocent nature of the letters which Marie daily sent to her husband, inasmuch as she herself was accustomed to write with equal regularity to her son in order to keep up a shadow of the influence and authority she had formerly exercised over his mind. The contents of Marie's letters to her husband were always submitted to the inspection of Madame Lacarge, senior, ere they were despatched; and this lady determined to avail herself of circumstance that the affectionate young wife requested her husband to glance at the moon at a certain hour, or to drink wine under a similar condition, in order that their actions, though they were asunder, might be sympathetic. One day the elder Madame Lacarge suggested to Marie a plan of making some cakes, a portion of which might be despatched to Charles in Paris, and the remainder kept at Grandier, so that even their very repasts might take place at the same moment. Marie, with all the childishness of an ardent affection which the breath of this cold world had not yet chilled, eagerly profited by the hint. A number of cakes were made by her delicate hands; some were packed up in a box, and entrusted to Denaise to convey to the diligence-office at Brives to be forwarded to Paris; and a letter was despatched by the delighted wife to give her husband notice of the present she has sent him, as well as to appoint the exact hour at which he was to partake of the delicacy. In the meantime, the mother of the intended victim had manufactured a large cake, which she had impregnated with arsenic; and this cake was substituted by Denaise for the smaller ones. On this occasion, Madame Lacarge, senior, forbore to write a letter to her son, being anxious to avoid any allusion to the remittance of a cake, so that no suspicion might attach itself to her in case of the detection of the scheme.

Shortly after the accomplishment of this terrible plan, Denaise proceeded to Paris, in obedience to the letter which he had received some time previously from his master. He was grieved to find that the poison had not produced the desired effect; but he did not on that account abandon his project. Lacarge informed him that bills of some kind must be procured as securities for the loan his English friend was about to advance him; and the ingenuity of Denaise immediately supplied this deficiency. A number of stamps were procured; and the names of persons who were not in existence were written across the documents. The ink was still wet when the friend of Lacarge entered the room where the transaction took place, at an hotel in Paris. Lacarge, in the confusion of the moment, slipped the bills into his pocket; and produced them again, when the amount he required was paid down to him upon the table. His friend received the worthless securities and took his leave for the instant; and Denaise hastened to lodge the money at the banking establishment where the forged bills given upon the former occasion were payable. As soon as this important matter was accomplished, Denaise took his departure for Grandier, and did not mention on his return to what place he had been during his short absence.

Lacarge hastened back to Grandier, with a mind relieved of considerable burthen. But he was not long destined to pursue the career of duplicity and deceit on which he had lately entered. His arrival at home was a signal for the execution of the damnable plot against his life already planned by Denaise and the elder Madame Lacarge. The secret of a subterranean passage beneath the old mansion was well known to both; and the fact that one end of the avenue communicated with her son's room suggested to the mind of the unnatural mother a means of not only accomplishing her aims, but also of throwing all suspicion upon Marie.

At the dead of night did she seek the subterranean passage, and obtained ingress to her son's chamber, into which she could not have otherwise entered, as his door was invariably fastened with precaution ere he retired to rest. Marie was accustomed to make him some refreshing beverage every night, and place it upon a table at the side of his bed. Into this drink did the mother, in her nocturnal visits to the chamber, infuse a copious supply of arsenic: and the effects were eventually as fatal as she could have wished them to prove. Whenever the name of arsenic had been breathed by any member of the household, she had invariably affected to shudder at the mere idea; and yet did she nerve herself with the courage sufficient to conduct her through the dark avenues of a subterranean passage, her breast filled with a murderous design, to impregnate with poison the beverage by the bedside of her only son !

On one occasion, when a posset was ordered by the medical attendant for the invalid, the crafty mother insisted upon making it herself; and then, with admirable ingenuity she prevailed upon the unsuspecting Marie to declare that she herself had composed it. The old woman executed all her schemes with an address and a precaution worthy of a better cause. She opposed herself to the plan of Marie sitting up with her husband at night, as such a scheme would have prevented the nocturnal visit to the chamber of the invalid; she took care that Marie should visit him the first thing in the morning, to supply his parched lips with a cup of the poisoned beverage from

the pitcher on the table; she consulted with the physician upon the possibility of her son being the victim of slow poison administered by his wife: and she dropped dark hints that such was the fact, to those around her.

Denaise was duly made acquainted with the progress of the scheme; and another circumstance seemed to forward the views of the conspirators, by placing the unfortunate Marie more completely in their power. She had been entrusted with some jewels to return to a certain Countess de Latour, a friend of hers, who resided in Paris, and to whom it was necessary that the property should be conveyed with the utmost secrecy and discretion. Marie immediately determined to entrust Denaise with the commission of taking them in a sealed packet to the diligence-office at Brives, and booking them for their destination in Paris. Denaise promised to comply with her wishes; but he kept the diamonds by him and destroyed the letter that was to accompany them to the Countess.

At length the infernal schemes of an unnatural mother and ungrateful servant were successfully accomplished. Lacarge expired in the most excruciating agonies; and shortly after his burial, his wretched widow was arrested upon the suspicion of murdering him. The artifices of Denaise and the elder Madame Lacarge prepared additional ignominy for the unfortunate victim of their machinations: the diamonds were placed in one of her boxes of clothes immediately after she was dragged to prison; and she has been pronounced guilty of a murder which was achieved by others. She has been the victim of the most extraordinary combination of circumstances upon which a criminal indictment was ever founded; and so connected appeared to be the evidence against her, that the jury were unanimous in the verdict which condemned her. The letter, which she had written to her husband upon the first day of her arrival at Grandier, and which fell into the possession of her mother-in-law, was produced against her; and that simple ebullition of an imagination that was disordered at the moment seemed to form the first link of the chain of testimony brought forward by the prosecutors.