

# Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER II.  
THE COUNT DE MONTAULT  
(Continued.)

Amongst them were the deep tones of the man who had left the place recently. He was laughing and joking and rallying his two companions. The three entered with the laughter on their lips evoked by the jest of the dark man.

He came into the chamber of death with a swagger and an oath.

Then as if catching sight of the figure on the settle, he stopped his laughter and cried:

'Hullo, here's my uncle asleep. I couldn't think where the deuce he'd got to. Uncle, here are Ambrose and Giraud. I've walked from Asson, and am about as hungry as the—'

Why, he stopped and made a big demonstration of excitement, 'what's the matter? Here, Ambrose, Giraud, my dear old uncle ill. Look, look, My God he's dead. Died in his sleep. That's what the doctor always said would happen. Oh, my uncle, my uncle,' and with a burst of emotion, he threw himself on his knees.

At that instant a loud crash of music chords startled the girl, and brought her back from her picture dream of the cowardly crime which she knew had been committed by the man who had now risen, and was coming to her to shake hands, and bid her good night.

The touch of his flesh made her cringe and shudder, and the room seemed lighter and purer the instant he had passed out of it.

Then, moved by an impulse, Dessie put her arms around her friend's waist and holding her as though shielding her from the attack which she knew this villain was planning against her life, she kissed her passionately and almost fiercely, over and over again.

And as she did it she vowed to herself that she would indeed step in between the man and his intended victim, let the cost to herself be what it might.

The next instant she was listening to Mrs. Markham's protest against her strange action, and then to the pleased proud and eager questions whether she did not think the Count was all that a gallant, noble, handsome man should be.

## CHAPTER III.

"You Are Rolande Lespard"

The two friends sat talking together for a long time after the Count had left, and Dessie found it difficult to evade the questions which the infuriated little widow poured upon her.

"I want to know more about him, Dora," said the girl more than once. "Who he is, what he is, what he has done, what sort of life he has lived."

Mrs. Markham shrugged her shoulder.

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ers, and tossed her head with a gesture of impatience. She was of a fair haired, small featured, large, eyed, doll-like type of woman; small and pretty, but too conscious of her good looks, and very disposed to be playful and kittenish. Altogether impatient of contradiction and control, she was apt to do any mad thing in a moment of impulse. She was a little afraid of Dessie's quiet, penetrating, self-strong manner; and while most anxious to have her genuine opinion of the Count, inclined to be irritable and peevish because that opinion was not as enthusiastic as her own.

"I thought you could read people so quickly," she answered, rather testily. "What more can you want to know? Do you suppose I can't trust my own instincts?"

"If it was a matter of giving a five-pound note to some charity on the strength of his recommendation, I should say by all means follow your impulse. But when it comes to giving this—she took her friend's hand and pressed it and smiled—"I won't trust anyone's instincts. I'm like a Tom; I want facts."

Mrs. Markham withdrew her hand and frowned.

"If I can't trust my own heart I can trust nothing," she said. "I can't for the life of me understand how you can have a lingering shade of doubt when once you've looked into God-fro's eyes. Did you look searchingly into them?"

"Men don't carry their characters written on their faces, dear."

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"My dear Dora, I haven't tried to set you against him," cried Dessie. "If he is the man you believe him then there is nothing in the world would please me more than that you should be his wife."

Mrs. Markham was silenced for a moment, but a movement of her shoulders showed vexation.

"If he's the man I believe him," she repeated. "What does that mean? Oh, I suppose you think it's the money that attracts him. I hate the money. I wish I hadn't any. It only makes one suspect everybody about one. Either they are rushing after it for themselves or they want to keep others from sharing it. I wish I was poor," and a tear of anger glistened for a moment in her light blue eyes.

"You are very ridiculous, Dora," said Dessie quietly. "and if I didn't know that in your heart you do not for a moment believe me capable of being in your second category, I'd walk out of the house and never enter it again. In word, you have just accused me implicitly of trying to set you against the Count in order to keep him from sharing your money. If I could do that, I should be just the meanest thing on earth."

"I didn't mean that at all," said the widow, weakly and half tearfully; the girl's quiet resolution and plain speech rather frightened her. "I know you're as true a friend as anyone can be. But—but it's so disappointing when you go and make up your mind not to like someone I like and want you to like."

"I haven't even told you I don't like him, dear."

"No, but I can see it easily enough although you do think my instincts are not quick and true, and that I'm blind and silly and—and everything. I declare it makes me wish I hadn't come home. And I thought you'd be pleased." The tone of her voice was beginning to suggest tears; and Dessie noticing it, said with real feeling:

"Nothing will please me more than your real happiness, Dora. I'll do anything I can to secure it for you,

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But do just think what you're asking me. You want me in cold blood to take the same view as you do of the man you love passionately. Do you think as I do about my Tom?

"Oh, Mr. Cheriton's different," said the widow, as if repudiating the idea of a comparison between the two men.

"Ought not to be mentioned in the same breath, eh?" asked Dessie, laughing. "Well, how can I be more enthusiastic and less critical of you lover than you are of mine?"

Mrs. Markham paused a moment, and then said, a little triumphantly,

"But I've never said a word against Mr. Cheriton, and I like him immensely. Why then do you do so against the Count?"

"But one doesn't always wait to know all the ins and outs of a person's life in order to like them. Why, if it comes to that, I know nothing about you—and there's no doubt about my loving you, is there?"

"You and I are not going to be man and wife; and if we disagreed we could part; but if you were going to put yourself and your happiness, everything, into my charge, you'd want to know everything."

"Not a bit of it, Dessie. I'd trust you to-morrow with every penny piece I have in the world, and give you unlimited power to do with me just what you please. When I trust I trust wholly."

Dessie was silent at this. She kissed her companion without adding a word; and for the moment the subject was dropped. But after they had gone upstairs to bed, Dessie went into her companion's room for a last few words.

"Dora, if I seem in any way unbecomable in this thing, remember it is only my love for you that makes me urge you to open your eyes to other things beside mere looks and love. Sit here a bit, I'll tell you a passage of my own life, to show you why I don't trust every man as I do my Tom."

Mrs. Markham pushed a low stool to her companion's side, and sat with her head resting on Dessie's lap, the girl's fingers playing with her hair as she spoke.

Three or four years ago, I was governed in a very disagreeable family, and the conditions of life were such that the place was almost unendurable. Then I met a man—we'll call him L—, who made much of me, and in his way, led me through in love. I did not love him: I didn't think then I should ever love anyone: And when he asked me to marry him, I refused. He asked me again, and I refused: And then, when he pressed me a third time, I told him the truth—that I didn't love him, but, if he would be contented with that, I would marry him. He vowed he was more than contented, and we were engaged. I am bound to say he did everything in his power to prove how great his love was."

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"Was he young or old?" "Young, dear; and good-looking, and as looks go, such a man as a girl might be proud to be engaged to. He was pretty well off, too, and gave me rich presents. Well, there are certain things in my past life—nothing that is any disgrace to me, thank God—but still things which the man I was to marry ought to know. I told him, therefore, and while he thanked me for telling him, he said they made no difference to him."

"He was a good man, Dessie."

"Yes, so I thought, and I was more nearly in love with him than at any other time. I could have loved him, but just at that time a most unexpected thing happened. In two months no less than four people who stood between him and a baronetcy died; and from being a man with a fairly good income, looked up to in his little chapel set, he became a baronet with a big income. The change was more than his moderate brain could endure without reeling. His engagement to me galled and fretted him; and I saw him tugging at the chain. I offered to release him; and he showed how really weak he was. He was still in love with me—more in love than ever, I think, because he had brought himself to believe there was a barrier of caste between us, but he fell away so fast morally that I began to despair him. I wrote and told him that I would not marry him, and it was when he answered the letter in person—I shall never forget the interview—that I learnt at first hand how utterly base and contemptible a thing a man may be."

She paused a moment, and Dora murmured a word of sympathy.

To be continued.

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