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Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER XVIII.
CLOSING IN.
(Concluded.)

'I suppose if I were to tell you that I am really sorry to have had to put this trouble on you you would not believe me. Yet it's true, and—'

'I have no intention of permitting you to address a single word more than this business renders absolutely necessary,' interposed Dessie, with angry curtness.

'Yet it is true,' he continued, not noticing her interruption, 'and nothing would please me better than to hit on some way of avoiding the trouble altogether.'

'You can do that easily by giving up this mean and infamous plan of marrying my friend for her money.'

'Should I break his heart and my own merely because she chances to be rich?' he asked, in reply, showing his white teeth in a smile, and throwing up his hands in mock dismay. 'I mean some practical way, of course—something in reason.'

'This interview is exceedingly distasteful to me,' said Dessie. 'If you have any further object to gain, be good enough to state it at once.'

'There is the pleasure of being in your society, Miss Merrion,' was the answer, with a slight pause before the name.

'If that is all, my pleasure will be secured by your leaving me. A wild beast may play too long with its victim, remember, and the latter may escape. It is not by any means too late for me to recall the word I gave.'

'You pride yourself on keeping your word,' he put in, quickly, with a sneer.

'You are reducing me to a condition in which I have no pride for anything,' was her retort. 'But do not mistake me. I am taking my course as the result of calculation, and it is no part of that calculation to be pestered with your presence. You will perhaps be tempted to keep away from me for the future, when I tell you that every time I see you I am shaken with doubt whether I dare comply with your terms, and sacrifice my friend even to save my sister. Your presence revives every instinct of dread of you, till I am wild with a desire to rush and tell Dora the truth. Don't come here again, or the temptation to dare all for the truth's sake will be more than I can resist,' she cried, angrily, as she rose from her chair.

'The Count rose also.

'You hold your life cheap,' he said, with a glance of anger. 'If you want to be rid of it, do what you say. And now, what about the jewels? When will you give them up, and how?'

'I will have them here on Monday, in the afternoon, if I have not changed my mind in the meantime and taken courage to tell the truth.'

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He went without a reply, and Dessie, shaken in her resolve by her own words, sat down again in great agitation.

The thought of Dora in the power of this remorseless and utterly reckless scoundrel was indescribably distressing, and the sense of absolute powerlessness which her present isolation intensified, made her misery almost unendurable.

The Count de Montal's visit and the whirlpool of thoughts which followed it rendered work impossible for the rest of that day, and in the night she was troubled and restless. It increased her perplexity, too, that no thing followed the hint which Tom Cheriton had dropped in his letter. Moreover, on the following morning, there was no letter from him; and Dessie felt really ill owing to the suspense, and lack of sleep and despondency.

Early in the forenoon she had a visitor—Sir E. Landale, and as she connected him now with de Montal, the visit angered her.

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'You are looking very ill,' he said, as soon as he saw her.

'Your visit will not make me well,' she retorted, sharply. 'Had I known you were coming here, I would not have had you admitted. If you wish to save your self the indignity of being shown out by the housekeeper, you will not stay here.'

'I mean well by you; I declare I do. I will do anything to help you in this trouble. I know the cause of it.'

'What do you mean?' cried the girl, who was so anxious that she was interested in spite of herself.

'What more do you know than I told you when you—well, you know what I mean?' she finished, with a curl of the lip that showed her contempt.

'Whatever I know I can keep to myself,' answered the baronet cautiously, noticing her fresh anxiety. 'I have come to tell you again that I love you. You are alone, absolutely alone in all this. For the second time in your life you have had to make a big break up of your life.'

'Ah, you have seen de Montal again,' said Dessie, seeing the evidence of this in his words. He winced a little.

'If I have, what then? I have no thought but your good—if you will do what I want. Marry me, Dessie, and make an end of the whole trouble. You can never marry Cher-

ton. You know that you can't go on living here—doing more than a man's work for a girl's pay that barely keeps you alive. You map think you can do it for a time; but how are you going to keep it up? You're looking now as ill as a dog. Give it up. You've made a plucky fight of it, and it isn't your fault you're beaten. But you are beaten. You can't help it. Give yourself to me. I know I acted like a brute years ago; but on my soul I want nothing better than a chance of showing you I'm sorry.

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He paused a moment in the hope that her silence, which was unbroken by any sign of protest on her part, might promise him well.

Dessie had waited while he spoke, not looking at him, but with her head bent down. She raised it now to look at him.

'Go on,' she said calmly. 'You've not finished. Let me hear all you have to say.'

'It's all summed up in one sentence,' he said. 'I want you to marry me. If you will but say yes, you can step in a moment from the lonely life of this place, with all its hard, grinding, hopeless work, into a life that I swear shall have enough of brightness and prosperity and wealth in it to distract even your thoughts from the fact that I was once so miserably unworthy of you. Will you marry me?'

'Have you anything else to say?' she asked in a hard, curt tone.

'Only the one plea—I love you now as I thought I never could love.'

'Then here is my answer. I would not marry you, if the choice lay between your wealth and the work-house. I have no more to say; and she opened the door and held it for the abronet to go out.

'I will try to make you, yet—and I have the power now.'

'Yes, that is your love; I knew it,' she said, with a mocking laugh; and she met his eyes steadily as he went out of the room like a whipped dog.

But no sooner had the door closed on him than the fear rose to her thoughts that, if de Montal and this man were really in league, a marriage with him might be made part of the terms. And the thought sickened and frightened her, adding even to her previous misery.

'I cannot do it. I would rather die, ten thousand times rather,' she said to herself; and in this mood she

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strengthening herself in this resolve, and infinitely sad, as she seemed to find every avenue of hope closing against her, while one after another the courses she would have chosen were becoming impossible.

She could not confide in her lover; she was driven to sacrifice her friend; a marriage with a man she despised likely to be forced upon her; and on every hand she saw the objects she desired kept from her, and those she loathed forced upon her.

Yet, which ever way she turned the knowledge that a word from de Montal could send her sister to the dock was more than enough to completely unnerve and frighten her.

She was in this mood of deepest dejection when she was disturbed by someone knocking at the door.

She went and opened it, and then stood for a moment staring in blank surprise at her visitor.

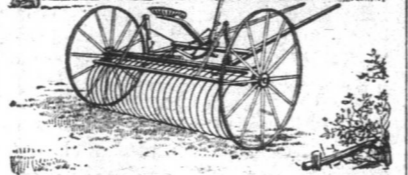
She knew her in a moment, though they had met only once before, and then for only a few minutes.

It was the woman who had been with Rolande Lespard when the latter was arrested. Dessie was so surprised that her lips could not frame the question that rose to them, as to the possible reason for the visit. But her visitor seemed to guess the question and taking the girl's hands in hers, she pressed them, and then kissed her pale face and whispered:

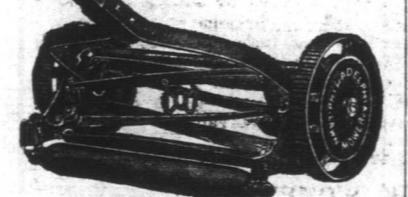
'You are surprised, of course. But I come from Mr. Cheriton—your Tom.'

To be continued.

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