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Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRUTH.

The two sisters sat for a long time in silence, each impressed by the critical gravity of the position. The younger tried to put the strongest reserve upon herself, and the elder was manifestly overcome by the rush of thoughts which her sister's words had loosened. Her face became very stern and hard, the frown on the forehead giving to the features an expression that was almost repelling.

"I do not know how to answer you, Dorothy," she said, at length. "I cannot tell you the whole story—I will not, in fact; and yet without telling you I cannot make you understand. I am not a murderer in fact. That is, I did not kill that wretched maid. Make your mind easy on that score—that is to say, if your mind is one of those British ones which holds a man or woman innocent of murder so long as their hands have not actually dealt the death blow. But he owed his death to me; and to-morrow with the crime and the facts were even fairly told, there are not a dozen men in England who would not think me guilty. There you have my secret then," she cried, with angry emphasis. "I have

lived the last seven years with the full knowledge that if ever the police found out who I was, I should be condemned for the murder of that man. That is a sword which no woman can carry about in her heart, and yet remain young. At least, so I thought. But now—"

She paused and her sister made no attempt to speak. What had been said let her see clearly enough now that the hold which the man Count de Montalt had, was even much greater than she had feared.

"Do you think he knows where I am?" asked Daphne, sharply, after a long and painful pause.

"I can't say yet. But I am afraid of him that he seems to me likely to know anything."

"Had you it written anywhere among your papers?"

"Only in one place. There is an entry in a diary of mine simply the name 'Nurse Morland,' and the address. But the diary is in a safe in my own room. He cannot have got to that."

"Cannot!" exclaimed the other with a gesture of impatience. "You don't know him if you think that. When he once held the clue he got when searching your box, he would ransack every nook and cranny where you would probably or improbably keep such a thing. He must have found the name Marlow somewhere; and that accounts for his knowing everything else. He is no wizard; only a man of infinite cunning, and as daring as a man can be. Our one chance is that he does not know where I am. He has sought me for years."

At the moment they were interrupted by a knock at the door, and the elder sister, removing rapidly the signs of her emotion, opened at once. "Nurse Morland, the matron says that No. 37 is not so well, and can you go to her?"

"I must go on duty now, Dessie," she said turning to her sister, while the maid waited. "I am glad to have had a chat over old times. I will call and see you to-morrow morning. You are probably staying at the Queen's Hotel?"

"Yes, you will find me there in the morning. Come as early as you can, as I am going on before the afternoon."

"If you give my name at the Queen's you will find Mrs. Smith very pleasant. I nursed her through an illness, and she thinks I saved her life."

hurried away to make arrangements at the hotel to stay the night. The mention of Nurse Morland's name proved a good introduction, and saved her from having to give any reason for the somewhat equivocal fact that she was travelling alone and without luggage.

She passed a desolate night. Ever at the darkest point of her life she had had hope in the future; but now she could not perceive a single ray anywhere. She was absolutely in this man's power, to do with as he pleased, and out of this a new dread grew during the night's thoughts.

It was that she would not be able to tell Tom Cheriton; and no one knew better than she that that must mean their parting. Looming in the distance she saw the terrible alternative of having to maintain an impenetrable silence in regard to everything or of having to see her sister stand in the dock on a charge of murder, with almost certain conviction to follow.

Before the prospect of such a choice she shrank and trembled like a child. It was as she had said. At that she held dear in life hung on the issue.

In the morning she was up early and had breakfast in her own room. She resolved to go out for a short walk, as her head was aching violently, and then return and wait for her sister. As she was going down the stairs to pass through the hall she had an additional shock.

Sir Edmund Landale was standing there, speaking to a waiter and asking the way to the Middle Riding Infirmary.

What could that mean? She was

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quick now to scent danger in any new incident, and after a moment's pause of indecision, she determined that there was less risk in speaking to him and endeavouring to find out his business than in remaining ignorant of it.

He showed little or no surprise at seeing her; and Dessie noticed it. "How did you know I was here?" she asked; and the question confused him so that he hesitated and stammered.

"I had to come here—" he began. "The day before yesterday morning you wrote that you were going to call at my rooms to see me. Not a word knew of my coming here. Why then—" She stopped and paused. Her own question had given her a clue that startled her; but she acted upon it with instant readiness and very shrewdly. She steadied herself for the effort, and in a matter-of-fact tone, she added: "When you saw the Count de Montalt at my rooms, he gave you no reason to think I should be here. He told me nothing about your coming north either. You dropped no hint of it to him, did you?"

He stared at her, as if trying to get at her meaning; his weak features so expressive of doubt and perplexity, that for the moment Dessie feared she had made a mistake. But she went on with it.

"If you told him anything, then I can only conclude that he has played me false. He knew perfectly well that I should not have come here, had I thought to meet you. The reasons which made me keep away, even from my own rooms, when you were going to call there, would have had ten times their strength in such a case as this."

The Baronet saw the discrepancy in her words and gave away the important secret in the eagerness to score the little point against her.

"You have just now said that he could have told me nothing, because at that time you had not even formed the plan in your own thoughts. I could not therefore have come down on any but my own initiative."

"Do you mean that this meeting is the result of pure chance, Sir Edmund?"

"Don't say 'Sir' Edmund, Dessie," he said. "Try and be a little less hard with me. What I said in my letter is all absolutely true. Come out; you've got your things on, I see. I'll tell you the whole cause of my being down here. You don't know the influence you have with me. I'll do anything you like, anything you tell me, if only you'll listen to me."

It was all plain enough to the girl now, and it was with a feeling of dismay that she followed her companion out of the hotel.

"Well," she said, when for some time he made no attempt to speak "what have you to tell me?"

"I'm going to make a confession to you. I've been within an ace of having a brittle to you again. You can believe me or not, as you please, but I swear to you it's true what I wrote. I've been looking for you for months—for years, indeed—ever since we parted. I didn't know then how much you were to me; now I—"

To be continued.

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