

The Mystery OF THE Mountain Pass

IN FOUR INSTALLMENTS.

CHAPTER III.—CONTINUED.

MY FRIEND GWYNNE.

I was in my own sphere once more, and the memory of those months spent in the mountain hut would have seemed little more than a dream, had it not been for my adventure with the mysterious masked woman on Christmas Eve and the discovery of the murdered man in the pass.

The recollection of these things was terribly vivid in my mind.

The man had been buried without a name, I knew, and people had talked much of the strangeness of his being among the mountains in such attire; but all such things are only nine days' wonders, at the best, and before a week was over, some other mystery arose to chase that one from its place in the public mind.

When I got out of the train at Deepdene station I found as I had expected, Gwynne upon the platform awaiting me.

"This is very good of you, old fellow," he said, in his quiet, earnest manner, which always meant so much, as he grasped my hand.

"I like that," I answered, laughing. "It's your sister who's good for inviting me, I should think."

"You know we're always glad to have you," he said as he led the way to the dog-cart. He was driving himself, and had no servant with him.

I saw in a minute he wanted a bit of private conversation with me.

"Is it a love-affair?" I thought. "Has somebody touched his heart at last? And hardly had we taken our seats, before he turned around to me and said in the simplest quietest manner—

"Jack, old boy, I'm going to get married."

I was surprised and keenly interested. Somehow I had taken it for granted that Gwynne would never marry.

He was over forty—seven years older than I—and although chivalrous and deferential to all women, had never shown the very faintest trace of being in love with one.

He was a fine handsome fellow too, just the sort that women are most fond of. Very tall, with a grand carriage, deep grey eyes, and a massive brow.

He was immensely rich, and his family was one of the oldest in England.

Of course I said I was very pleased to hear his news, though in my heart I'm not sure I was pleased at all.

I was a confirmed old bachelor myself, and didn't relish the idea of my best friend quitting the state in which I was, at that time, resolutely determined to remain.

"Who is the lady?" I asked, more anxiously than I quite cared to show. "Do I know her, Hal?"

"I am quite sure you do not. She has never been in England until lately. I must tell you first, Jack, she is a widow."

"A widow?" I repeated, Gwynne, too, too, sank to zero. I have always detested widows as a class. The idea of my friend falling a prey to one was positively awful to me.

"Yes, a widow," repeated Gwynne, quietly. "You're surprised, I can see; but try to suspend your judgment until you have seen her. I will ask you for your congratulations then."

"Oh, I have no doubt the lady is everything that is charming!" I answered, lamely. "If she hadn't been, you wouldn't have chosen her, I'm quite sure of that. Can you describe her at all—give me any idea what she's like?"

"No," he answered, gravely; "no description could do that. If I were to tell you she is the most beautiful woman in the world, you would think I was rhapsodizing, and yet I verily believe that, in saying so, I should be well within the truth. But I can't expect you to believe it now; you must see her, then you will understand."

His voice was dreamily soft as he spoke, his deep grey eyes held a look of infinite tenderness. I could see for myself it was a mighty passion which possessed his soul.

"You haven't told me her name," I ventured.

"Her name! It is that of Dante's love—Beatrice," and his voice dwelt softly on the sound.

"But her other name, her late husband's?"

"Gramont. She is the Countess de Gramont."

"A Frenchwoman?" I exclaimed, in amazement.

"No, no! She is English, the orphan daughter of a high born, but poor, English gentleman, who was forced by circumstances to spend most of his time abroad."

"And where did you first meet her?" I asked a little mistrustfully, I fear.

I could not help dreading that he had fallen into the toils of an adventuress.

"I met her in Switzerland. She was staying there with her daughter."

"Her daughter! Good Heavens, Gwynne! And now I could not help showing how surprised and shocked I was.

"Surely, you don't mean she has a grown up child?"

"Not exactly grown-up, Jack," he answered, with a quiet gentleness which went to my heart. "She is barely sixteen."

"Of course, then, it would be discountenanced to ask the age of the mother."

"I will tell you without your asking. She is thirty-two."

"Then she must have married at fifteen."

"Yes, she did."

There was silence between us for a minute or two after this; then my friend turned round to me, looked full into my eyes, and laid his hand on mine.

"Jack, old fellow," he said, in a voice of deep emotion, "if there's a man on earth I can be said to love it's you, and I think you know it. I'm not a man to give my heart to many; but, where I do give it, I give it beyond recall. I have one sister, one friend, one love; and, Jack, it would hurt me more than I can say if there were to be anything but peace and true good will amongst us four."

"Lottie has already learned to love my Beatrice, and I want you to love her, too. Nay, don't speak—as I was about to answer him—'don't speak now. Wait till you have seen Beatrice; then you shall tell me all your thoughts of her, whatever they are, and I will listen. I know quite well all you are thinking me, but, believe me, when once you have seen my love, you will tell me I am not deceiving you. You will lay your hand in mine, and congratulate me as the most fortunate man who ever trod this earth."

His earnestness moved me deeply. I resolved at that moment to like the goddess of his idolatry for his dear sake. I gripped his hand in mine, and muttered an indistinct word or two.

I don't know whether I ought to be ashamed to confess it, but I do confess that both our eyes were wet.

CHAPTER IV.

LADY GRAMONT.

In another minute we were at the house. Lady Mallory came out into the well-lighted hall to welcome me, and led me straight away to her own pretty boudoir.

Her brother went around to the stable meanwhile to look after the horse.

"I suppose Harold has told you the news?" she said, holding me by both hands and laughing gaily.

I had known her ever since she wore short frocks and pinafores, and we had always been famous friends.

"Yes, I was surprised. Is she really so very charming?"

"She is indeed. I am almost as much in love with her as Harold is; and so will you be when you see her. She has been staying here quite a long time now, and I like her more and more every day. She is the most exquisitely gifted creature, as well as perfectly beautiful. But now you must go away and dress, or you will be late for dinner; and then, you know, Sir Thomas will be sure to scold."

I dressed very expeditiously—so expeditiously that, when I entered the drawing room, I found no one there; I was the first to come downstairs.

I knew the house well enough to find my way to any part of it, so I walked on to the library, half hoping that I might find Gwynne there.

The door was slightly ajar; I pushed it open very quietly, and at once saw there was something there, and that somebody was Gwynne.

A young girl—little more than a child I took her to be as she stood with her back towards me—was at one of the bookshelves reaching upon a tip-toe in a vain attempt to touch the book she wanted.

She was dressed all in white, a soft muslin which reached only to her ankles, and her hair fell over her cheeks and about her shoulders.

I stepped up behind her, and reached down the book.

"Allow me," I said, and handed it to her, with a smile.

She turned and looked at me, a little startled, and then I saw that, in spite of the childish simplicity of her dress, she was, in truth, almost a woman.

She was very, very lovely.

Her face was a pure oval in shape, and was exquisitely tinted—skin remarkably fair, with a color in the cheeks like that in the heart of a blush rose.

Her eyes were large and lustrous; I could not at the moment determine their color, but I have since discovered they were of a greyish hazel, fringed by long silken lashes.

She had a sweet sensitive mouth, a perfectly moulded nose and chin, and the hair which waved about her face, slightly curling and very silky, was of the richest shade of light chestnut brown.

In a moment it struck me that this was probably the daughter of the Countess de Gramont.

Gwynne had said she was barely sixteen, and this girl's dress testified to her being about that age.

There was a look of thoughtful gravity on her face which might have made me fancy she was nearer eighteen than sixteen if it had not been for the testimony of the dress.

"Perhaps," I said to myself, "the marriageable widow had discreetly put back her daughter's age a year or two."

"I don't know whether I may be permitted to introduce myself," I observed, when she had thanked me for my assistance. "I am a very old friend of Lady Mallory and of her brother. My name is Douglas."

Her face instantly lightened up with recognition, and I flattered myself, with pleasure also.

"Mr. John Douglas?" she cried. "Oh, I am so glad to know you! Sir Harold is always talking about you to us—I mean to mamma and me."

"And may I not know who mamma and you are?" I questioned, laughing, though, of course, I now scarcely needed to be told.

"My name is Vera—Vera Gramont. Mamma is Madame la Comtesse de Gramont," she added, archly.

"I thought so. Well, Miss Vera, I hope our acquaintance will quickly ripen into friendship."

"Oh! and so do I. It will be so nice to know you already with hearing so much of you from Sir Harold."

There was a gentle girlish frankness in her manner, and in her look as well, which was altogether winning.

In my heart I said that, if the mother were only half as charming, Sir Harold had chosen well.

"Perhaps," Lady Mallory will allow me to take you into dinner," I said, smiling down upon the girl; "then, I fancy, our acquaintance would ripen fast."

"Oh! but I don't go in to dinner. I dined long since—at the regular luncheon. I am not out yet, you know."

I looked and felt disappointed.

I would have seen more of this lovely creature.

She must have read the disappointment in my face, for she went on brightly—

"But I come into the drawing-room after dinner. Mamma bids me just sit quietly in a corner, and not try and attract notice. But I may speak if I am spoken to," she added, with a glance of the sweetest archness.

"I shall look in all the corners till I find you out," I assured her laughing.

Even while I spoke, the dinner-gong sounded, and Vera flew away like a lapwing.

I returned to the drawing-room with an increased curiosity to know what her mother was like.

Gwynne was there.

"Oh! here you are, Jack," he said as I made my appearance. "Then in a lower voice: 'And here is Beatrice; I hear her voice on the stairs.'"

The door opened.

Gwynne went towards it; and I turning round from a picture which I was pretending to study, saw him leading forward a woman whose beauty was so dazzling, so entirely perfect, that for a moment I could only stand and look at her with something that almost bordered on a stare.

She was above the middle height, and yet one would scarcely have described her as tall, so exquisitely were her proportions. A figure of more perfect grace I should think it would be impossible to see.

Her face rang like some queenly flower on the stem of her white, firm throat, was such as I know not how to describe.

A face of wonderful fairness, the features clear-cut, as though chiselled out of marble the eyes a deep violet blue, fringed by long dark lashes; and the hair of a deep nut-brown, very glossy and abundant, and to-night bejewelled with lustrous pearls.

Her lips were full, yet not too full, a delicious crimson, and sweet as any rose in June.

I want you two to know each other," said Gwynne, in a voice of deep feeling. "I shall not introduce you formally. Jack you know this is my future wife. Beatrice, you know this is my dearest friend."

Lady Gramont put out her hand with a frank, sweet grace of manner which reminded me of her daughter.

"I need not say I am glad to meet you," I said, I fear a little awkwardly.

Men generally are awkward just when they desire to be most easy.

"I will not say it either; but I will try to prove my gladness," said Lady Gramont with gentle earnestness.

"I have already seen your daughter," I said, after a pause.

Her face lighted up into new beauty.

"Ah, Vera!" she exclaimed. "What do you think of her, Mr. Douglas?"

"What must everyone think of her? She is altogether charming—and very beautiful."

"It is kind of you to say so. I, as her

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mother, am prejudiced of course; but I do think Vera is very sweet."

Sir Thomas and Lady Mallory, and some of their other guests, came into the room at this moment.

I feared I should be separated from Lady Gramont; but it was not so.

Lady Mallory had assigned to me the agreeable duty of taking her down to dinner.

I doubted not that this was at Gwynne's suggestion.

He wanted me to become acquainted with his betrothed wife.

I, upon my part, was well pleased to find myself beside her.

A man is never insensible to the proximity of a beautiful woman, and I quickly found that Lady Gramont was rarely gifted as well as daintily beautiful.

Politics, arts, sciences, or literature, she was at ease on all these topics, and expressed herself with a grace and brilliancy which left me lost in admiration.

Harold sat opposite me.

I caught his eye, and knew quite well it was saying—

"I challenge your congratulations now. Have I not indeed chosen the fairest and noblest woman in the world?"

After dinner, when we repaired to the drawing-room, I remembered my promise to Vera.

Sure enough, I found her in the most secluded corner, almost quite hidden by a great pot of pink azaleas.

She wore her white muslin frock still, but had added a blue sash, and an exquisite pearl comb put back her lovely hair.

"Well, you see I have come," I said, dropping into the seat beside her.

She nodded brightly.

"Yes; but I knew you would."

"And how, pray?"

A delicate pink flush mantled her cheek, but she raised her eyes quite frankly to mine.

"I can read people's characters in their faces," she said, laughing, and I was quite sure you would keep your word."

The frank childish flattery—if it was flattery—charmed me more than I should have cared to admit.

I told myself I had never seen such a charming child in all my life as this young daughter of Lady Gramont's.

We were allowed to keep undisturbed possession of our corner for nearly an hour.

Lady Gramont, who sat at some distance, with Harold leaning over the back of her chair, could see us distinctly, and I had an odd, vague fancy, that she kept Lady Mallory from disturbing us.

More than once I saw my hostess glance towards our corner, and on each such occasion Vera's mother seemed to murmur a word, which prevented her from calling me away.

Presently, however, Lady Gramont herself rose and came towards us.

Her grand, fair beauty showed to perfection as she walked down the long, brilliantly-lighted room.

She wore a dress of thick ivory satin, edged with dark fur.

It fitted her queenly figure to perfection, and the dark, soft fur threw up into new loveliness the dazzling fairness of her skin.

Vera sprang up to meet her as she approached.

"Oh, mamma, I am enjoying myself so much!" she cried. "Mr. Douglas is telling me such a lot of adventures. He has travelled in nearly every country, mamma, and has met with adventures in them all."

Was it my fancy, or did a shade of something which I felt it was not fair, was closely akin to it, darken for a moment Lady Gramont's face?

"Mr. Douglas is very good," she said, in her rich, soft voice, and with the sweetest smile. "But you must not let him find you troublesome. He has far more important things to do than entertain my little girl."

As she said this she wound her arm round her daughter's waist, looking down into her face the while with a look of tenderest love.

Standing together thus, they made a lovely picture.

The grandly refined womanhood of the mother was a foil for the girlish grace of the daughter; and the daughter performed equal service for the mother.

One thing I decided, as I stood and watched them; I had been altogether wrong in my uncharitable suspicion that Lady Gramont had, perhaps, represented Vera as younger than she really was, in order to conceal her own true age.

She could easily have passed for seventeen; and if it had not been for this tall young daughter; and assuredly no one—not even the most malignant enemy—could suspect she was any older than she frankly confessed herself to be—thirty-two.

She and Vera seemed more like sisters than mother and child.

Deepdene.

Everyone who has spent a Christmas in a pleasant country house, knows what a succession of fun and gaiety there is for those who are inclined to take part in it.

There were to be private theatricals on New Year's Day, and the rehearsals kept us all busy, as well as provided us with endless merriment.

Vera and I had become fast friends.

Her grace and loveliness had charmed me from the first; and when I found, as I quickly did that she had intellectual gifts of a high order, and a sweet frankness of disposition, I attached myself to her whenever I could, with hearty goodwill.

She, upon her side, seemed equally pleased with me.

I'm sure I don't know why, for I was twice her age, a great strapping fellow more than six feet high, a mighty hunter rather than a drawing room gallant; and I fear she must have found me a little unpolished, if not absolutely rough.

I had spent much of my life in traveling, and had had few opportunities of acquiring that particular species of refinement which ladies' society is supposed to confer.

However, Vera took it into her pretty head to like me, and we were never so happy in those cold December days as when we were together, I telling her some wild tale of adventure, or she taking up the part of entertainer by singing songs or reading poetry to me.

Let it be clearly understood that there was no question of love-making between us.

If such a thought ever crossed my mind, I always told myself I was a great deal too old, and plain, and rough for that lovely girl; and, besides, she was so thoroughly a child, in her simple white frocks, and with her unbound hair, that the very notion seemed preposterous.

I won't deny that I used to get an odd little pain at my heart when I thought what a lovely woman she would make in a few years' time, and how much she would be sought after.

Nevertheless, I treated her exactly as I would have treated a dear young sister, and we simply remained fast friends.

I was not so interested in the daughter as to have no thought for the mother.

Indeed, the more I knew of Vera, the more keenly interested I felt in Lady Gramont.

Harold monopolized her very much, of course; but she found time to spend a few minutes by my side very frequently, and I am sure I ought to have been flattered by the winning sweetness of her look whenever she addressed me.

She seemed bent on ingratiating herself with the man who was her future husband's dearest friend.

But, strange though it may sound, I could not cordially like Lady Gramont.

On the first evening, I had been dazzled by her beauty—dazzled, also, by her intellectual charm; but, as day succeeded day, and I saw her again and again, I was conscious that there was a latent something in my nature which stubbornly refused to harmonize with hers.

I took myself severely to task for this unreasonable caprice, as I called it; but I could not overcome it—I could not divest myself of a suspicion that Lady Gramont was not altogether what she seemed.

When I had been at Deepdene but a few days this suspicion took a still odder shape.

I was passing the library, when I heard her reading aloud to Sir Harold.

It was poetry she was reading—something intensely melancholy.

I think it was that mournful thing of Keats', called "Isabella"; at any rate, I heard her repeat these words—

"And still they say, 'Oh, cruelly! To take my heart from me!'"

Her voice, of course, took on a melancholy cadence, and, as I heard it, I could scarcely keep back an exclamation of horror and amazement; for it sounded to me exactly like the voice of the woman who had been attacked by Nero last Christmas Eve—the woman whom, in my secret heart, I firmly believe to be a murderer.

It is impossible to describe my sensations at that moment.

The library door was slightly ajar, and I stood outside it, like one turned to stone—fascinated by those rich, full mournful tones.

The masked woman had scarcely addressed more than half a dozen sentences to me, and her voice for the most part had been heard with fear; but once it had sounded clear enough.

It was when we had stood at the cottage (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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CHAPTER V.
A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.
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