

## The Mystery OF THE Mountain Pass

IN FOUR INSTALLMENTS.

### CHAPTER I. CHRISTMAS EVE.

My name is John Douglas. I am a plain living, plain-spoken man; and, Heaven knows, I never have, and never shall, set up to be regarded as a literature. Nevertheless, it has been suggested me that certain adventures, through which I passed five Christmases ago, and a year later, were so very startling, that I ought to cast them into the form of a narrative for other folks to read.

I believe my friends are, perhaps, right in this, and hence am beginning to set down these extraordinary adventures; but I warn my readers they must expect nothing more than a narration of facts altogether unembellished by any graces of literary style.

It is unnecessary to detail the circumstances which led me, who am by birth a gentleman, and who, even then, was not without some little money of my own, to take up my residence in a cottage, which was little more than a hut, at the foot of a mountain in Wales.

Since it that a quarrel with a relative made me thus seclude myself, and that, for more than six months, I lived in that cottage with no companion, save my dog, and with no occupation beyond fishing, shooting, and mountain climbing.

When Christmas came round, it found me there. Pretty late on the Christmas Eve, I tramped into the town for my store of provisions, and tramped back again through the falling snow, with a misanthropical enjoyment of the fact that, for the first time in my life, I should eat my Christmas dinner alone.

I threw another log on the fire, made myself a glass of whiskey-toddy, and was sipping it very much at my leisure, when the furious barking of my dog made me jump up and hurry outside, confident that something was wrong.

My hut was at least three miles from any other human habitation; it lay out of the way of all beaten tracks—so much so that for weeks together no one passed near it. Thieves were out of the question, for I had nothing to tempt cupidity.

What, then, could be the meaning of Nero's furious barking? It sounded, for all the world, as though he were rending some enemy limb from limb.

To snatch up my gun and open the door was the work of a moment. The snow had ceased falling, and the moon was shining brightly; but for a moment I saw nothing of my dog, though his hoarse bark sounded more furiously than ever.

A stone's throw from the cottage, and quite at the back of it, was a little copse of trees. From that came the barking, and hurrying towards the spot, I was struck dumb with horror to see Nero attacking a woman. He had pulled her down to the ground, and his teeth had actually met in the fleshy part of her arm.

Even when I called him off, he obeyed with the utmost reluctance, licking his chops, and growling horribly, as though he would fain return to the attack.

I administered an angry kick to him in passing, then strode up to the woman, who had risen to her feet the moment the brute let go his hold.

Even in the moonlight I could see that blood was trickling down her hand. Fond as I was of my dog, I felt at that moment tempted to put a bullet through his head, so incensed was I against him.

'Good heavens! I hope you are not seriously hurt?' I cried; and even as I spoke, I became dimly conscious that this woman was no ordinary woman—that this midnight adventure was one of peculiar mystery.

Two things assisted me to this conviction. One was that the woman had never uttered a single cry or groan.

Even when Nero's cruel teeth had torn her flesh, she had suffered in stoical silence, contenting herself, as I had seen, with a desperate attempt to choke him off by the unaided strength of her own hands.

This in itself was marvellous, for it is second nature with a woman to cry out at such a time, especially when a cry may be trusted to bring her help.

Surely her silence must have been due to the fact that she preferred even the pain and peril of those awful fangs to the chance of being seen by any human eye.

The other thing was that when I approached close to her, and she turned and faced me, I saw she wore a black velvet mask, which covered her features sufficiently to defy recognition.

'Are you seriously hurt?' I questioned, anxiously, and waving my surprise in my tears for her safety. 'Has the brute bitten you severely?' For answer she held out her arm, bare to above the elbow, and showed me a frightful wound.

'Good heavens!' I exclaimed, aghast; 'you had better let me cauterize that. Not that I think the dog is mad. I believe him to be perfectly healthy. But still, it would be safer.'

Then the woman spoke for the first time. Her voice was rich and clear, its accents unmistakably those of a lady; it thrilled me curiously.

'Are you alone?' she asked. 'Is there

anyone in there with you?' and she pointed to the cottage.

'I am quite alone. No one will see you. Come!'

I gave her my arm. She took it without a word, and leaned on me heavily. We had to pass by Nero, who had been sitting on his haunches, still licking his chops, and steadily regarding us.

A low and angry growl broke, as though involuntarily, from his throat as my companion passed near him.

'Lie down, you brute!' I called out to him, in anger; and, when he attempted to fawn upon me, I sternly put him back.

I had never been so disgusted with him before. We entered the cottage. I led my companion to a seat, poured out a little brandy, and insisted on her drinking it.

I knew she would need some support in the terrible ordeal that lay before her. She did not remove her mask, and I did not suggest that she should do so.

As a man of sense, I knew she did not wear that at midnight among the mountain snows without a purpose; and, as a man of breeding, I, of course, refrained from endeavoring to penetrate her disguise.

Whatever her reason for secrecy, she was welcome to preserve it, so far as I was concerned. In my own mind, I suspected a love-affair—some romantic assignation, perhaps even an elopement.

But let it be what it might, it was no business of mine. Thus I thought, little dreaming then what fate was weaving in the meshes of her mystic web.

'Can you bear to let me cauterize that wound?' I asked. 'Of course I must tell you, frankly, it will give you great pain. I can bear it.'

'Then, the sooner it is done, the better.' As I spoke, I turned my back to her, that she might not watch my movements, and poked into the hottest part of the fire a long flat piece of steel.

I brought it to a white heat; then I turned to the woman.

I was as white as a sheet, I am quite certain, and it was only with a strong effort of will I kept my hands steady.

I would a hundred times rather have passed that cruel steel across my own arm than across the arm of this tender delicate woman!

But it had to be done—for her sake; and I did not shrink from it. I gripped one end of the steel firmly with my handkerchief, and pressed it deep—deep—into her flesh!

I never shall forget my sensations at that moment. The horrible 'fix' made by the burning metal on the cool white flesh, caused me shudder from head to foot; I ground my teeth almost fiercely in the intensity of my feelings, and a copious perspiration started out upon my brow.

The tortured victim herself uttered neither cry or groan.

I could see by the movement of her face that she was setting her teeth hard, and when the steel burnt its way into the flesh, I could feel her shudder; but this was the only token of her agony.

My heart was filled with wondering admiration. This woman had the soul of a heroine, I told myself.

Never had I seen in female form, a higher spirit or a more dauntless mind. The moment the horrible operation was over, I seized my brandy flask, and attempted to pour a little of the spirits between her lips.

I think she felt herself near swooning, for she feebly put up her hand as mine touched the black velvet mask, and whis-

pered—'You will not try to see my face?' 'On my honor I will not,' I answered, promptly. 'You may trust me.'

She was lying back in my low basket-chair now, on the verge of fainting. Her eyes were closed her lips tightly set; her face was ashen pale.

I administered a little brandy but feared it would not suffice to revive her. Indeed it seemed to me she had already swooned quite away.

I was terribly perplexed. Fettered as I was by my promise not to look at her face, I could not remove that hateful, tantalizing mask; and yet it seemed monstrous to stand by and make no effort to bring her back to consciousness.

To be sure, the mask did not seriously impede her breathing, for it only reached as far as her upper lip, and I had already noticed that her chin was beautifully moulded, and that her teeth were white as pearls, and her lips like some soft crimson flower.

But, if I was forbidden to remove the mask, the interdiction went no further, I reflected, and stooping over the insinuating form, I unfastened the long dark cloak, which was buttoned closely from the throat to the feet.

A further surprise awaited me, for, instead of seeing a dress suited to the weather, I saw an evening-gown of softest, richest ivory satin, confined at the waist by a zone of pearl and silver, and cut low enough to display the milky whiteness of a throat and bosom such as, for peerless beauty, I had never seen before.

Around the firm white throat was clasped a circle of rubies, which flashed like points of fire in the light of my reading-lamp.

Half guiltily, I refastened the disguising cloak, and contented myself with applying some strong smelling salts to her nostrils. Happily, these quickly took effect.

I saw the eyes unclosed behind the mask—beautiful lustrous eyes I was sure they were, even though I could see but little of them.

She stirred, shuddered, put out her hand as though to ward away some peril, then drew her cloak more closely round her.

I should say here, perhaps, that the cloak had a hood to it, which was drawn closely round her face, but that I had caught a glimpse of her hair gleaming in the fire-light.

'I am better,' she said, still in that thrillingly rich, sweet voice, and in a tone of remarkable self-possession. 'Please let me walk to the door. All I want is air.'

'One moment!' I answered. I had been applying ointment to her poor, wounded arm, and now I wrapped a bandage round it.

'There, now it will heal quickly. You have been wonderfully brave.'

I gave her my arm and led her to the door. Nero, cowed by my displeasure, was slinking outside; at sight of her, however, he could not repress a growl.

I did begin to fear he might be going mad; and, perhaps, that is what had determined me to cauterize the wound.

At any rate, I had never known him to act like this before. A minute or two we stood together at the door in silence.

Far and near there was not a sound. The mountain shrouded from its foot to its loftiest peak with snow, towered solemnly above us; the moon hung high in the heavens; the air was intensely cold.

Suddenly the clock in the tower of the little church, on the other side of the mountain, struck out the hour of twelve.

The strokes were borne to us quite distinctly on the still, frosty air. It was Christmas day.

A slight shiver ran through my companion as we stood together listening to the sounds which told us that Christmas was born.

The stroke of the clock might have been falling—each one of them—upon her heart. She roused herself, as though with an effort, and removed her hand from my arm.

'I must go,' she said. 'I thank you for your kindness but I must go.' 'Go!' I echoed, blankly. 'Go where?' The question fell from me quite involuntarily.

Whatever curiosity I felt, I had not intended to betray it. 'You have promised not to seek to

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