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# Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER XXVII.  
WITH INTENT TO MURDER.  
(Continued.)

"Those who are out can stop out," he muttered; and then as soon as he had made a rapid survey of the room on that floor he mounted the stairs quickly to the room where Dessie was shut in. Before attempting to enter that, however, he went into every room in the upper portion of the house to make sure the place was quite empty.

Everything was as still as he himself could have wished it, and it was with an assurance of success that he turned towards the door of Dessie's room.

But at that point he met with a check. The key was not in the door and in the rapid search he made, he could see no trace of it. Time was valuable, and he cursed this piece of ill luck as likely to cause some delay. He first tried suasion, and knocked at the door. No answer came until he had repeated the knock more than once, his impatience showing in the increasing force with which he rapped.

"Who is it—and what do you want?"

"It is I, the Count de Montalt. I have come to set you at liberty."

"Thank you, I'd rather stay where I am, with the door between us, than come out to you."

"I have come expressly to set you free."

"I don't want freedom at your hands."

"Open the door."

"Not on any consideration."

"You had better."

"Your threats are all one with your wishes. And be careful, I have arms; and if you dare to try force, I shall use them."

De Montalt made no reply. It was no use wasting time in talk. There was nothing for him to do but to break the door in, and this was no

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easy matter. He was a man of great strength, but though he pressed against it with all his force, it withstood him, however much he strained. In those efforts several valuable minutes were lost.

He ran downstairs then, to rummage for some tool to force the door or some wire to pick the lock; and his excitement now began to increase, as he thought of the time lost.

The hunt in the lower part of the house cost him several more minutes, until at last he found an old tool chest. A long iron chisel was among the contents, and with an exclamation of satisfaction, he seized it, and ran upstairs again.

Very little work sufficed then to force the door, and as he saw it yield to his efforts, he breathed hard with pleasure.

But the room was empty. "Miss Merrion, Miss Merrion," he called. There was no response, and the place was in complete darkness. He called again, and then listened intently.

No one answered; but he heard the sound of someone moving in the next room, and then he remembered what for the instant had slipped out of his thoughts, that there was an inner room. The girl was no doubt there.

He struck a light for a moment to see the position of the door, and then went and rapped smartly on it.

"What do you want?" came Dessie's voice through the door.

"I want to speak to you."

"Then speak," she answered.

"There is no one else here."

"Come out; I have news for you. I tell you I have come to set you at liberty."

"I repeat, I prefer to stay where I am. Why are you alone?"

"Sir Edmund Landale has had to go away."

"You are not speaking the truth; and I know now that you are here for some black purpose of your own. He told me before he left, not half an hour ago, that he was going out. But you evidently know nothing of what has passed since you left the house. The door you broke in was locked on the inside. He himself gave me the key, as a proof that he will not harm me. He has given me also a revolver to shoot him if he tries to molest me. So I know you are lying, and if you dare to come near me you must take the consequences. I'll open the door as soon as I hear Sir Edmund Landale's voice, and not before."

De Montalt's reply was an oath breathed into his moustache, and a vigorous attack upon the second door.

It was soon half open, and then he began to show caution.

It was no part of his plan to give the girl a chance of shooting him, though he was not much afraid of her skill.

"I can open the door at any moment, now," he said, and he put all the menace into his voice that he could. "And I'm not in no mood to be trifled with. But I'm in a hurry. Hand out those rubies and I'll let you off."

"I haven't them," said Dessie. "I don't believe you. They were on you when you came here. I know that. Will you give them up?"

"I have given them to Sir Edmund Landale; and if you can get them from him, you may have them and welcome. I told him how I got them, because I meant him to understand your reasons for trapping me here and deceiving him."

At that moment the bell of the front door was rung very furiously, and the clanging of it travelled up from below.

De Montalt started at the sound and rolled out an oath. It was probably the owner of the house who had returned, to find the door barred against him.

Obviously what had to be done must be done at once. One violent wrench with his weapon completed the work on the door, and it was open; but Dessie had piled every article of furniture that she could drag or lift, to strengthen the defences, and when the Frenchman perceived this, his rage passed all bounds. He broke out into a loud volley of threats and oaths, jerking them out as he strained and struggled to force his way into the room.

"You can do no good if you get in," cried the girl, excitedly. "I tell you I gave the stones to Sir Edmund Landale, and he has them now."

"I can deal with you, at any rate," muttered the infuriated man in reply as with a most vigorous effort he forced the door open, and sent the heap of things piled against it rattling and clattering to the ground with a great noise.

Then he sprang into the room, but the next moment he was again checked, for Dessie put out the light and ran swiftly and silently to a spot in the room which she had previously selected for a hiding-place.

This manoeuvre baffled him absolutely for a moment. The room was as dark as a tomb. He did not know a foot of space about him; and if he attempted to strike a light to look for the girl or the jewels he would immediately be a plain mark for her revolver.

He was now so enraged at this trick, and by the way in which Dessie continued to keep out of his grasp that his usual calmness deserted him, and the mad desire to vent his anger upon her made it difficult for him to think connectively.

He stood a minute quite still, gnawing the ends of his moustache and biting his lips in perplexity. Then loosening his knife, in its sheath, he dropped upon his hands and knees, and began a systematic search of the room, moving with the care and caution of an Indian scout, and making as little noise as possible.

He had explored half the room in this grim search when a noise at the other end of the room by the door made him jump to his feet and rush in that direction, in the belief that the girl was trying to escape and had knocked over something in her flight.

But he could not find her, and when he stood to listen with every nerve strained, the room was as still as a death chamber.

Then he guessed he had been tricked, and that Dessie had purposely made the noise, probably throwing

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something across the room, to distract his attention. With another curse at her cleverness he began his search again, yowling under his breath that if he found her—and find her he would—she should pay with her life for all this.

Inch by inch he crept across the floor, the deadly intent growing stronger in his thoughts with every moment that passed, and at every step he took he stopped to listen, and to stretch out his hands on all sides of him.

When they touched anything he felt it carefully, and did not let go until he had thoroughly satisfied himself that it was no part of the girl's clothing and no place where she could possibly hide. Now and again he would stop and listen with the utmost acuteness to catch a sound of her breathing.

It was a scheme sure to succeed in the end, and presently the hands, glided out slowly on all sides of him, touched something which moved.

It was Dessie's foot; and instantly his grasp tightened on it, while he uttered an exclamation of devilish pleasure at his success.

But as suddenly he let go, for the flash of a revolver almost blinded him, and a succession of the girl's piercing screams for help rang through the still house.

(To be continued.)

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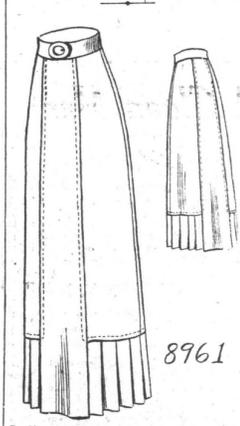


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