

The Mystery OF THE Mountain Pass

IN FOUR INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER VIII.—CONTINUED BROUGHT TO BAY.

The very sight of this took me back to last Christmas Eve. I laid my hand on her arm, and I said, slowly and distinctly—

"If you are not what I suspect you to be, the proof lies ready to your hand. You can convince me in a single moment, if you choose."

She did not appear to understand me, but I concluded this way only another piece of her matchless acting.

Her lips moved faintly and formed the one word—

"How?"

"Show me your arm," I went on mercilessly. "The woman whom I suspect of being a murderer has a wound upon her arm, caused by cauterization following the bite of a dog. Show me your arm, and if there is no such mark upon it I will let you pass unquestioned. I will not even seek to know what you are doing here."

She looked up into my face with those beautiful eyes of hers.

"There were tears in them—tears in her voice, too, as she panted forth—

"Oh, no, no! At least not now! How could I? Oh! for pity's sake—"

I stopped her with a curt, sharp gesture.

"Pray do not think those protestations will avail with me," I said. "It is a very simple thing I am requesting you to do—nothing that need shame the delicacy of the purest woman. I only ask you, in proof of your own innocence, to allow me to look at your arm. You need only roll up your sleeve to just a little above the elbow. Surely there is nothing in that to call for such agitation, or for such piteous entreaties."

"Spare me! Oh, spare me!" she cried; and she folded her arms, as though involuntarily, across her breast.

I was angered by her obduracy—moved, too, by a fear that, if I did not take advantage of this opportunity, she would escape me after all.

How did I know but that she might find some means either of removing the scar from her arm, or of plausibly accounting for it, if once I let her go?

Never before, in my life, had I offered violence to a woman; but I resolved to use it now.

"Lady Gramont," I said, sternly, "it is useless to seek to evade me. I am firmly resolved to know the truth of this matter; and, if you will not consent to show it me, why, much as I shall regret to use even the shadow of a force, I shall simply have to examine your arm for myself without your consent. I can only say that, if I find no scar there, I shall be willing to submit to any punishment you please. Once more, I ask you, will you show me your arm?"

Once more she answered—

"Oh, no, no! Have pity! Spare me! spare me!"

But I was resolute.

I took her arm firmly in both my hands, and rolled back the satin sleeve which fell quite loosely two or three inches below her elbow.

She uttered a faint shriek, but made no other resistance.

I think she realized it was useless to contend with me.

In another moment I had the proof I needed—the proof I had been so certain I should find.

The moonlight shone full upon a long livid, scar on that white and exquisitely rounded arm.

It was the scar of the burn I myself had made there a year ago.

Even after this she would make no confession of her guilt; on the contrary, she asserted her innocence, though she must have known it was little likely I should believe in her assertions.

"I am innocent!" she cried. "Circumstances are against me, I admit; but I am innocent. Oh, Mr. Douglas, I swear to you that I am innocent!"

"Pray do not appeal to me," I answered coldly. "Personally I have nothing more to do with you. I shall leave you in the hands of Sir Harold Gwynne."

At that she broke into a piercing cry of anguish, and fell upon her knees at my feet in the snow.

It was the first sign of acute emotion, I had seen her show, and it moved me not a little though I was still resolved to do my duty, and to keep nothing back from Gwynne.

"You will not tell him?" she moaned. "You will you not tell him? Oh, I would rather that you killed me! Have mercy! Have mercy! Ah, Mr. Douglas, be a little merciful to me!"

"I must be just. I should be the basest of men if I were to keep such a thing as this from my friend."

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"Give me a little time," she moaned. "At least, give a little time."

I stood in silence for a moment or two, considering; she saw my hesitation, and went on passionately pleading.

"Ah! do not tell him yet!" she panted. "Give me a little time! Give me until tomorrow! Promise me he shall not know tonight!"

Although, in my heart of hearts, I believed this woman to be the guiltiest of her sex, she looked so thrillingly beautiful as she knelt at my feet in the moonlight, that she inspired me with some touch of compassion.

I hope I was not weaker than most men would have been under similar circumstances—say, and not half so weak as some, nevertheless, as I listened to her passionate entreaties, I felt disposed to grant them.

After all, I might as well give her a few hours' grace.

If Gwynne were told upon the morrow, it would be soon enough.

"As you so earnestly wish it. 'Nay, I will do more. If you prefer to tell the story to Sir Harold with your own lips, you shall do so. Make your confession to him yourself tomorrow, and I will hold my peace. But, remember, he must know all.'"

"He shall!"

She rose from her knees as she said this, and looked me in the face, fully and straightly, for a single moment.

"As you esteem me such a guilty woman, you will not even care to receive my thanks; but, Mr. Douglas, I do thank you," she paused, then added: "And I thank you, most of all, for Vera's sake."

"I just bowed my head without speaking, and, for a moment or two, there was a painful and embarrassing silence between us."

I broke it.

"Had you not better return to the house?" I said.

And, with a murmured, "Thank you, I will," she turned, and walked up the avenue towards the house.

I followed her at a respectful distance, and in a state of mind impossible to describe.

CHAPTER IX. IN THE RUINED MILL.

It may be supposed that it was no surprise to me to hear when, half an hour later, I walked into the dining room, that Lady Gramont had a headache, and would rather not come down stairs again that evening.

It would have surprised me very much if she had appeared.

What her state of mind might be I could not guess; but, at any rate, I was quite certain she could be in no condition to mingle with Lady Mallory's guests that night.

When we went into the drawing room, I found Vera there, looking so sweet and fair, in her white frock, with faint roses tinting her cheeks, and a dreamy light in her soft, hazel eyes, that my heart melted, and I felt I would gladly have given every penny I possessed in the world to have been spared the knowledge of her mother's crimes.

I did not go and sit beside her, as usual. I felt I could not.

Her sweet eyes rested on me with something of reproachfulness, and, after sitting in silence over a book for nearly an hour, she stole out of the room and, I doubt not, went upstairs to bed.

Often, when she went away, she would come up to me—that is, if I had not been sitting with her—and would put her little soft hand in mine, and whisper, "Good-night, Sir Douglas," with the sweetest look.

But she did nothing of this kind that night.

I felt unutterably guilty as the door closed upon her, and, I must confess, unutterably wretched, too.

I went to bed very early myself; and in spite of the agitation of my thoughts, managed to fall asleep.

It must be remembered I had not had my usual amount of sleep on either of the two preceding nights.

The moment I awoke in the morning, my causes for disquietude rushed back upon my mind.

I remembered it was Christmas eve. I remembered last Christmas eve, and the dreadful story that must needs be told to poor Gwynne by Lady Mallory.

When I went down to breakfast, I was told by Lady Mallory that "dear Beatrice" was still suffering so severely with a headache that she could not come downstairs.

"Harold is so concerned about it," she added. "He is afraid she may not be well enough to come down for the dance to-night, and that would be such a pity."

I made some evasive answer feeling more horribly guilty than ever.

It really seemed to me as though I myself had begotten all the misery that was so soon to fall upon Sir Harold's head.

The day dragged slowly on.

At luncheon-time, Lady Gramont made her appearance.

She looked intensely pale, and there were dark semi-circles underneath her eyes.

Her headache was, of course, thought to be the cause of this, and everybody pressed round to commiserate her, and to hope she would feel well enough to join in the dance that evening.

Gwynne took possession of her as soon as he could.

"Dearest, will you go for a walk after luncheon?" I heard him say. "The fresh air would do you a world of good."

What her answer was I could not catch, but, as soon as luncheon was over, she went up stairs, and presently re-appeared in a walking-out costume of dark blue velvet, trimmed with chinchilla fur.

She was still very pale, but I thought I had rarely seen her look more beautiful.

There was a passion of love in Gwynne's eyes as he drew her fur a little closer round her throat, and, whispering a word of endearment in her ear, gave her his arm.

"Is she going to tell him now?" I asked myself, as I watched them walk slowly down the great avenue, arm in arm, his with his eyes dwelling fondly on her face.

"How will he bear it? Will he leave her or will he, in spite of all, insist on giving her the shelter of his home?"

Of one thing I was quite certain.

When he heard her story, his heart would break.

Feeling restless and unsettled, I went for a walk myself; and when, nearly two hours later, I returned, the woman at the lodge gave me a note which she said had been left there for me—had been sent down from the house, she thought, half an hour ago.

I recognized Gwynne's handwriting, and you may be sure I tore it open, eagerly and hastily enough.

The enclosure was very brief, and had evidently been written in great agitation.

"JACK—I must speak to you. Will you come to the old mill the moment you get this? I have heard such things that I scarcely know whether I am sane or mad. Only you can tell me whether they are true. For God's sake come to me at once."

"H. G."

I put the note into my pocket, and set off for the old mill without a moment's delay.

I was quite sure now that Gwynne had been told, and it was with something like a sense of relief I realized that, at any rate, it was not left for me to wake him from his dream.

Even though he could scarcely as yet believe the truth, he had heard it.

The first shock was over, and with it, surely his worst agony.

The mill in which he desired to see me was rather more than half-a-mile away from Deepdene.

It belonged to Sir Thomas, and was in fairly good preservation; but, for some reason or other, had not been worked for years.

Gwynne and I were rather fond of going up to the platform that ran round it, and leaning over the rails while we smoked a cigar.

It occurred to me now that he had chosen a very prudent place for meeting, considering what manner of conversation ours was likely to be.

Upon that platform we could talk with out the least danger of being overheard.

When I came in sight of the mill, I looked round for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

I judged he was inside and I entered, and groped my way up the steep narrow stairs with a fast beating heart.

How would he look? What would he say?

What could I do to comfort him in this most awful sorrow?

It was of this I was thinking as I groped, my way upstairs in the darkness; but, when I got as far as the platform, and actually walked all round it, and yet could neither see nor hear him, a horrible sense of fear—of fear lest he in his misery, should have laid desperate hands upon himself oppressed me.

"Hal!" I called out, loudly, and as cheerily as I could.

But there was no answer.

"Hal!" I called again, and re-entered the mill by the low, narrow door, and ascended still higher in search of him.

I had reached the very topmost room and had entered it, and was groping my way around, when suddenly I was startled by a loud noise quite close to me, and, turning swiftly, I saw that the door through which I had just entered, had slammed to with quite extraordinary violence.

I suppose it was the wind that had done this, and I determined to search the mill thoroughly for Gwynne, and then, if I did not find him, to walk about outside, and wait until he came."

I had no fancy for staying by myself in that draughty old structure.

A LITTLE COLD LET RUN.

A little tickling in the throat—now and then a dry, hacking cough—"not bad enough to bother about you say."

But every hack makes a breach in the system, strains the lungs and prepares the way for more serious trouble.

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To describe my sensations during the



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But, when I went to the door, I got an unpleasant shock.

I could not open it.

It was fastened on the other side.

In a moment, suspicions of foul play darted in upon my mind.

That note!

Had it really been written by Gwynne, or was it a forgery, concocted by Beatrice Gramont?

It was now quite dark, but I pulled out my match box, and, striking match after match, examined the scrap of paper eagerly by their light.

Now that I looked at it again, I felt almost certain it was a forgery.

It was like Sir Harold's writing, but I did not believe it was his in reality.

I rushed to the door, and banged and hammered at it desperately.

I put all the strength I possessed into my attacks upon it.

But it was all of no use.

It was only a small door; but it was of solid oak, and firmly fitted.

I could make no more impression on it than it had been made of iron.

From the door I turned my attention to the window, but it was very small, and, though I certainly might, with an effort, have got my body through it, still there would have been no means of escape, so far was it, not only from the ground, but from the platform also.

A leap from it would have meant certain death; and I had no means of descending in any other way.

The mill had been dismantled of its sails. There was literally no foothold on its plain, bare walls.

Half maddened by the thought of how simple the trap was, and how blindly I had stepped into it, I stood, with folded arms, clenched teeth, and knitted brow, awaiting an attack of some kind, and resolved to sell my life as dearly as possible.

That Lady Gramont had found means of communicating with her confederates, and that some of them would presently come to the old mill—it indeed they were not at ready inside it—and despatch me, I felt quite certain.

If once I were out of her way, she had no one else to fear; and a woman who had committed one murder with her own hand, would be little likely to pause at another, which only needed her incitement and instigation.

I ground my teeth in fury as I told myself what a blind, mad doll I had been not to think of this before.

I was as helpless now as a rat in a trap.

There was nothing for it but for me to face death as well as I might, but it maddened me to reflect I had walked into the trap with my own free will, and with my eyes wide open.

The night grew darker and darker.

I wondered my murderers did not come in and despatch me.

Unarmed, and they, doubtless were well supplied with weapons.

Would they plunge a knife into my heart or would they shoot me? I wondered, recklessly.

Anyway, I wished they would come, so that I might at least, strike a blow at them, and, perhaps, even take one of their cowardly lives in exchange for my own.

No hope of escape was in my mind.

The mill was in a peculiarly lonely spot, and it was the most unlikely thing in the world that anyone should pass it after nightfall.

Deepdene was the nearest house, and that more than half a mile away.

I had already exhausted myself with hallooing out of the window, and no returning sound had met my ear.

I simply gave myself up for lost.

"They will certainly come before very long," I thought grimly. "I shall be dead before Christmas Day!"

Wearied out with excitement, I leaned against the wall, and closed my eyes in a fierce effort to obtain composure of mind.

My heart was throbbing madly, my blood was tingling in my veins, my every sense was strained to its fullest tension.

When my eyes were opened, I kept fancying I saw shadowy forms stealing towards me in the darkness.

These illusions maddened me, and so, with a strong effort of will, I closed my eyes again, and kept them fast shut for what seemed to me at least five minutes.

I opened them with a start.

I was certain I had heard a sound—a curious, faint, crackling sound, seemingly just outside the door.

The moment I opened my eyes I realized what that noise was, and my heart grew sick and cold with horror.

The mill was on fire; the fire was stealing on me swiftly and surely.

My enemies had exercised a fiendish ingenuity in compassing their vengeance—I was to be roasted alive!

To describe my sensations during the

next few minutes is a task beyond my pen.

I shall, therefore, wisely not attempt it, but content myself with describing the actual facts as they occurred.

Soon after I had realized the horrible truth that the mill was on fire, the flames spread so rapidly that I could see their reflection cast upon the darkness outside.

I could hear, too, with appalling distinctness the cracking beyond the door.

Again I strode to the window, and gave a last wild shout for help, though, in my heart, I felt certain it was useless.

Unless someone chanced to be passing, my voice could reach no human being, and there were at least a hundred chances to one against anyone passing by that lonely spot at such an hour.

The flames might be seen presently, and help come in that way; but it would come too late.

Deepdene was, as I have said, the nearest house, and even though the flames should immediately attract attention there, it would be some minutes before anyone could arrive upon the spot.

In less than that time I should have perished.

The interior of the mill was like so much match wood.

Already I was almost choking with smoke.

A very few more moments, and life and death would be the same to me.

But even as I thus reflected, I heard a step, a light, quick step, coming up the stairs.

At first I thought it was only the fancy of delirium; but the next moment the door opened, admitting a volume of smoke, and bright tongues of flame; and, in the midst of all this horror, I saw a slender form and a pale sweet face—Vera.

I don't know what she said to me, or I to her, or whether we spoke at all. All I remember is catching her up in my arms, straining her to my bosom, carrying her down the narrow staircase, stifling smoke and scorching flame. That we both escaped is a miracle, but we did escape, and practically unscathed.

My hands were burned, it is true, and my face was slightly scorched, but, as for my darling, I held her so closely to me, that the fire did not so much as singe a hair of her head.

Once outside and safe, her high brave spirit gave way a little, and she lay back in my arms, white as a lily, on the verge of fainting.

I fanned her with my hat, and chafed her hands until the color crept back into her lips; then I bent over her, and pressed upon them a long, tender kiss.

"My darling! I whispered. "My precious—precious Vera, Oh, my love! My love!"

The sweetest blush tinged her dear face, she raised her eyes softly, shyly, and yet so lovingly to mine!

"Then you love me?" she whispered. "I thought you didn't."

And then she hid her blushing face upon my shoulder, and broke into a flood of tears.

This is not intended as a love story; therefore I shall not attempt to describe what I said to Vera after this, nor what she said to me.

Suffice it that I discovered I loved her too well to lose her—that I determined within myself that nothing on earth should part us—not even her mother's crimes.

But I wanted to know how it happened that she, of all people in the world, had come to my rescue.

I asked her this, and I gave you her answer in her own words.

You may believe it or not, as you choose. It is by no means the least extraordinary thing in this extraordinary story; and, to this day, I myself hardly know what to think of it, for I am not a superstitious man and hitherto had placed no faith in dreams.

When I asked my dear love how it was she had come to the mill, alone, at that hour, she blushed and hesitated, then said in a very low and earnest voice—

"Heaven sent me—to save you. I am quite sure of that, and you must never try to make me think anything else, dear. I will tell you just how it was. I had lain down on the sofa with a book