

Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER XXVI.
DAPHNE'S STORY.
(Continued.)

No one was so deeply moved by the entrance of Daphne Marlow as the Count de Montalt. But he did not allow himself to be surprised, since he had foreseen that the sisters would be sure to attempt some communication with Mrs. Markham to stop the marriage; and it was likely enough that as Desse had not returned, the first place her sister would look for her would be at Mrs. Markham's. But her arrival was none the less unwelcome because it was probable. He had to choose his course rapidly, and as he had all the facts which were necessary to enable him to judge what must now almost inevitably happen, he had formed his resolve almost as soon as Daphne had entered the room.

"I have come in search of Desse's Merrion," she said, in her firm, melodious voice. "I must ask you to pardon my coming in unannounced, madam, but the matter is so urgent and so unusual that I must not wait."

"Miss Merrion is not here. What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Markham, who took the interruption in very good part. She had released her hold of the Count's hand and came forward to speak to the new comer.

"I learn that she has not been here, either," said Daphne; "and it is because of that and because this gentleman was here that I came in as I did." She hesitated over the term, and after glancing quickly and shrewdly at the other three people who were in the room, she added: "I have much to say that concerns him, and perhaps we had better be in private."

Tom Cheriton took in the situation instantly. "You can speak before us freely. My name is Cheriton; Miss Merrion is my affianced wife; Mrs. Davenant and Mr. Vezev are here on much the same errand as yours. We have just told Mrs. Markham that that man is not what he says, the Count de Montalt, but Roland Lespard, a convicted felon. If you can give additional proof, do so at once."

Daphne looked across at de Montalt fixedly during a long pause; and he returned her look with equal steadiness.

"He will not deny himself to me," she said quietly. "He knows that it will be useless. He knows that it is not more than a few hours since we met in Desse's rooms, and he knew that I had resolved to run the risk of exposing him."

"God-fro!" The cry came like an appeal in pain, and Mrs. Markham looked from one to the other in the deepest agitation. The statement that he had been in Desse's rooms moved her more than all the charges.

"You vowed you would trust me," he answered. "I swear to you there is some horrible mistake. All these people are mistaking me for some other man. Don't you believe me?" He went to her side and took her hand, pressing it feverishly.

"Yes, I believe you," answered the woman, yielding at his touch.

"Then let us clear the house of these slanderers, whose sole object is to malign me for their advantage, and so to try and part us."

He made as if to lead Mrs. Markham out of the room, but Daphne quietly stepped in front of the door.

"No," she cried in a voice that rang with decision. "You know me better than that. I have not come here to be balked in this manner. If you attempt to play false with me now I will put you straight into the hands of the police—you know for what crime."

"Stand out of the way," he cried angrily, "or I'll force you."

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"No, no," said Cheriton, going quickly across to Daphne's side, there can be no talk of force here. Mrs. Markham, you must see that there is much more here than either you or I can understand as yet."

"If I cannot leave a room in my own house when I please, Mr. Cheriton, what am I to think?" said the widow, now very angry.

"You cannot," said Daphne; and another instant she had locked the door and handed the key to Cheriton. "Keep it, Mr. Cheriton, while what has to be said is said in this room. If this lady insists upon the door being broken open, send for the police—and the first constable that comes will take out that man as his prisoner."

The Frenchman threw up his hands with his familiar gesture of indifference, while he mentally cursed himself for not as having secured the key of the room.

"My dear Dora, you really ought to take better measures to keep the house free from lunatics," he said lightly and with a sneer. "But if this particular lunatic wishes to tell us a story and locks us all in to make sure of an audience I've no special objection. It's always best to humour this sort of madness, I've heard. Come, child, sit by me and let us be amused together. Now, what is it you wish to say? Please say it and take the collection quickly, and then go home again."

The ineffable impudence of his manner was indescribably galling but it had no effect upon Daphne. "I am prepared to tell the whole story, if you are prepared to listen," she said quietly.

"I cannot understand you at all," cried Mrs. Markham, in dismay and perplexity.

"That man and I are old associates Mrs. Markham. In years gone by I lived a life of all wildness and wrong and he was my companion and backer."

"I care nothing about what happened years ago," said the widow, holding fast by her love and faith.

"It climaxed in a deed of blood. I was held guilty of it, and he committed it. Knowing that I should have the greatest difficulty in proving my innocence I fled, and from that moment changed my life. I became a nurse, Nurse Morland. He hid as well, and took with him some of the ill-gotten proceeds of that crime; he forced them from me by threats. The chief of them were three rubies of priceless value—the Rubies of Rohikund. For these a large reward was offered, and I know that he carried them about with him for some time afraid or unwilling to get rid of them. During the time he was thus hiding he went to the home of an uncle, Paul Duvalier, in the South-west of France, and from motives of greed murdered the old man in his sleep. He was suspected, but for the time escaped and returned to England."

"All this is nothing to me. I don't believe it," said Mrs. Markham, impatiently. "I believe you are all actuated by wrong motives against him. I won't believe it."

"It is all capable of proof in ten minutes' time," was the deliberate answer. "In England, though under what circumstances I do not know, he was mixed up with some one in the Midlands; and he was one day at Birmingham station in the company of some woman, when he was arrested on an extradition warrant for the murder of his uncle, tried, convicted, and sentenced."

"I don't believe it. What is it to me?" persisted the widow, determined not to credit a word of the tale. "I have heard of it already once to-day."

"If you will see the moment even you will see the truth. When that arrest took place, Desse Merrion—"Who?" ejaculated the Count with a sneer.

"For the present, Desse Merrion. You will understand the meaning of that sneer in a moment. By itself it is a proof that he knows full well the worth of every word I utter. Desse was on the platform, saw the arrest, warned the man's companion of what had taken place, and induced her to fly. In the excitement the two women exchanged handbags, and when Desse looked in hers, she found the Rohikund rubies cunningly hidden. She did not know what to do with them, and eventually locked them up in a safe with the Deposit Company here in London. They have been a burden to her ever since."

"Why did she not give them over to the police?" asked Cheriton, who had listened to this part of the story with breathless interest.

"For two reasons. Her own bag was returned to her and with it a letter saying she was to destroy everything in the one which she had taken

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In mistake, except such things as she would see the writer would wish to have again if ever she dared to claim them. But the second was the main reason. She was flying from an old life of evil associations and surroundings and trying to make a new start in a new name; and she felt that if she had to stand the fire of any inquiries, the whole opportunity of the new chance would be shut. She preferred silence—and, I say, preferred it wisely.

"How do you mean—a life of evil surroundings? I have never heard a word of this," said Tom Cheriton.

"Prudence again, I suppose," ejaculated the Count, with a sneer.

"Probably she put off the telling

for the same reason we all put off the doing of unpleasant things—and she put it off until too late. But let me go on. She put these jewels away, expecting never to hear any more of the matter, and certainly never to see the man again. But she was wrong. You know what her life has been for the last four or five years. Mrs. Markham, for you were her chief friend. You can judge then of her horror when, in the man whom you were to marry, she recognised the Roland Lespard who had been convicted of the cruel murder of his uncle."

"She said nothing to me," said Mrs. Markham.

"For years the mere thought of the man had been a terror to her, and for the moment she was at a loss what to do. Then she resolved to tell Mr. Cheriton the next morning. But before she left here, you will remember, she had a long interview with the man himself. She told him pluck-

"Poor Desse! What she must have suffered!" exclaimed Cheriton. "Where is she now? Why not here?" "She left her rooms to come here some hours ago, soon after this man had been there and she was to come back the moment she had seen Mrs. Markham. She did not return, so I came after her; and now I learn she has not been here at all. I know well enough where to put the blame for the devilry of this kind; and when I heard that man was here, I resolved to come and ask him where she is."

ly that she recognised him, and warned him not to come here again. After that she went to find you, Mr. Cheriton; but you had been called away, and she was thus left alone to fight this man single-handed; and it is no surprise that he beat her."

"Beat her? How could he do that if this extraordinary tale be true?" exclaimed Mrs. Markham, with indignant disbelief.

"For reason's that do credit to that villain's skill," cried Daphne, for the first time showing signs of her indignation. "He first attempted to poison her in this very house. Do you remember a cup of tea being spilt and broken? That was poisoned, and we have proof in the analysis. Then he searched her room here that night, to try and regain possession of the poisoned tea. He failed—Mr. Vezev here can tell you something of that—but he found a clue to the fact that she was in reality the possessor of the jewels, the woman he had been searching for, and then, jumping to the conclusion that there was some secret in her life, he got into her rooms, ransacked her papers, and found there enough to show him her identity. His own knowledge and some other help from a congenial scoundrel, Sir Edmund Landale, led him to know the secret sorrow and fear of her life, so that he could hold his knowledge over her and not only threaten her with exposure if she exposed him, but also put me in the dock on the charge of murder."

"And you? Who are you?" asked Mrs. Markham, sharply.

"I am her sister. This was to protect me from the fate which this man threatened that she consented to give up you and bear all the weight of this secret. A noble or pure girl does not breathe that my sister—Dorothy. Her name is Dorothy, and, like mine, Marlow. We are the daughters of a father who was convicted of forgery, and the sisters of a brother who was tempted by his own father into crime. That was the life she was flying from. She would tell you nothing, Mr. Cheriton, when you questioned her the other day, because in her opinion, it was too late. When she was engaged to you, and, indeed, until she came to me, three days ago in the North, she knew nothing of the deed the exposure of which this man was able to hold over her as a threat should she expose him. She would never have told you, but she came bearing the load in silence, had I not come up and said I would tell the truth at any cost."

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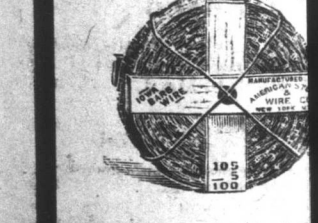
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