

Tale of Mystery

CHAPTER VIII.
AN OMINOUS MEETING.
(continued)

Never in all her life had Dessie Merriam had greater need of all her pluck and shrewdness than at the moment when she stood facing the Count de Montali, forcing down her fears and anxieties, and thinking eagerly what course she should take and whether she should admit or deny her possession of the jewels.

If she denied it, then her knowledge of his identity had no substantial foundation; it she admitted it, he would have possibly as great a power over her as she had over him. She was altogether ignorant as to what the effect to her might be of having kept the rubies. It was certain that she had not stolen them. She believed the two letters she had received from the woman whose bag she had taken in mistake would clear her of that charge certainly; but how far she was justified in retaining possession of them, and whether she could be punished for having done so, she did not know.

But she had now to choose her course in ignorance of the consequences; and yet having once taken it she might have to stick to it through thick and thin; and the difficulty of choice puzzled, and indeed for the moment baffled and bewildered her.

All these considerations flashed through her thoughts as she stood facing her antagonist and waiting for him to answer; while she was conscious that the keen dark eyes were searching her face to guess her thoughts.

'This promises to be an exceptionally interesting conversation,' he said, after a minute's pause. 'Exceptionally interesting. Shall we walk on? Standing looking at one another in this way is just a little melodramatic, don't you think?'

They moved on at this and after another short pause he added—
'Now you'll understand what I meant last night when I said that you and I had better understand one another. I have a considerable admiration for many of your qualities, Miss Merriam—though of course my knowledge of your connection with this jewel robbery must influence me when I come to think of you as a friend of my future wife. But we can talk of that another time. That is of the future. I want to speak of the present. What are you going to do? Are you going to force me to take the unpleasant step of revealing my knowledge to Mrs. Markham, and leaving you to make such explanation as you please? Or shall we let things go on as they were, before I made this discovery? I am not so harsh and peremptory as you here yesterday, you see. Willing rather to screen you if possible.'

'I am not going to stoop to ask you what you mean when you insult me in this way about some discovery that you pretend to have made about me. I have come to meet you to get the proofs of your identity—something to satisfy me you are no

Rolande Lespard; and in place of these you hatch up this story.'

'Then I shall be, under the painful necessity of informing either Mrs. Markham or the police, or both, that you are a young lady of very questionable antecedents, one of whose exploits undoubtedly was to be concerned in the robbery of very valuable jewels in March, five years ago.'

Dessie smiled at this as she answered.
'I am not much disposed to think that you will go any near the policeman than you are obliged to. But please yourself, I have made up my mind in this matter. I have wired this morning to ask Mr. Cheriton to come up to London at once, and I shall then lay the whole facts before him. Till then I shall do nothing. I have no more to say, and as you have not done what you said should be done at this time, I prefer not to prolong it.' With that she turned away abruptly, and left him, without giving him time to reply.

Her one thought, desire and policy now was to see Tom and tell him everything.
The Count stood and stared after her in anger and astonishment at her sudden decision; and at first he made a step or two as if to follow her. But he checked himself, and turned away, thinking rapidly.
'If the two once get together before I have completed such a case as I can make up against her, I shall be beaten,' he muttered to himself. 'It's all gone splendidly up to now—up to the time this sharp-eyed, keen-witted, plucky little beggar coming in to spoil everything. I'll do as I thought—go to her rooms, and ransack the place—see what I can find.' With that he hailed a hansom, and told the man to drive fast to the address of Dessie Merriam's rooms.

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There, a little impudence, a lie or two, and a tip imposed upon the woman housekeeper, so that he gained admission to the girl's three rooms. He said that she was coming back directly to meet him, and had given him the key of the rooms. He produced a card of hers, on which he had pencilled, in writing (meant to resemble hers, an instruction to let the bearer wait in the room. When he key he produced would not fit the lock, he made an excuse to the woman that Dessie had obviously given him the wrong one; whereupon, she opened the door for him.

'Miss Merriam didn't tell me as you are coming, sir, not when she was here for her letters just now; leastways a hour or so ago. But, I suppose it's all right.'

'My good woman, do I look as if it could be all wrong?' asked De Montali, and his handsome looks, fashionably cut clothes, and pleasant smile quite disarmed her. 'If you'd feel more comfortable to see me sitting on the stairs, and whistling, instead of in this very comfortable armchair, I've no objection. I'll do anything to oblige so manifestly kind and pleasant a lady as yourself. But personally, I prefer the chair; and he smiled again, in a way that convinced the woman there could be no guile behind it. Then, as she was leaving the room, he added, to give the matter an added touch of genuineness. 'By the way, if a gentleman calls before Miss Merriam should get here—it's a rather important business matter that we're to meet about—you'd better let him come up at once.'

'Very ell, sir, said the woman; the smile on the man's face broadening as the door closed behind her.

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traces of his work as possible, and then sat down in the arm chair and waited for the knock to be repeated.
When it came again, he yawned very loudly got up and opened the door with the expression on his face as if he had just awoken, while his hand concealed a smothered yawn.
'Beg your pardon. Hope you haven't been knocking long. But the truth was I got tired waiting and dropped off into a snooze.' As he spoke he was eyeing very keenly the new-comer, a middle-sized, dapper-looking, well-groomed man, who seemed considerably astonished at his reception.
'Wonder who the devil you are,' was de Montali's inward comment. 'Won't you come in?' he asked, seeing the man hesitate.
'Are not these Miss Merriam's rooms?' asked the visitor.
'Not the lover, evidently,' thought the Count much relieved, as he replied aloud, 'Of course they are. She'll be here in a minute or two. Come in. She should be here now, only you know what woman's punctuality is. I expect you're the man she said was coming,' and he held out his hand for the card which he saw in the other's hand. 'Oh! Landale—Sir Edmund Landale—yes, of course. Well, I don't know whether that was the name she said. Oh! yes, Landale, of course,' as some references in the papers he had just been reading flashed across his thoughts.
'I wrote and said I should be here this morning.'

'The devil you did,' thought his hearer; 'then I wonder if she's coming back to meet you.' But aloud he replied—'Yes, I know. Well, I am absolutely in her confidence now, and whatever you have to say may as well be said through me, Sir Edmund.'
The baronet looked infinitely surprised at this, and his feeling found expression in a long stare which the other man met with a bland and courteous expression.
'Do you mean that Miss Merriam told you the purport of my letter, Mr.—Mr.—I didn't catch your name?'

'No, I haven't mentioned it. De Montali, my name is—the Count de Montali. I dare say you know it.'
'No, I never heard it. But may I ask what relation you stand in toward Miss Merriam?'

'Well, I am afraid that that would be a little difficult to explain,' was the very truthful answer, continued untruthfully. 'You can judge pretty well that as I am here in her rooms alone waiting for her we're not strangers. I assure you you can speak with absolute confidence.'
'Do you mean that you know the object of my visit?'

'No, I can't say that, or I could give you an answer without waiting for you to say a word. But of course, I know of your former friendship for her.'

To be continued.

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