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#### A Perilous Adventure.

"Get rooms ready at cottage. Coming down 20th, with visitors."

Such was the telegram, read with a half amused smile by Doris Maitland, on the morning of the 19th December.

"Just like master and mistress!" said she; "here to-day; there to-morrow! I never did see such a harum-scarum couple! Well, I'll have to go out in the snow, I suppose! A houseful of visitors, an overflow, evidently, else they wouldn't want the cottage! If it's weather like this, even the gentlemen's gentlemen won't like turning out at night! And what about my folks! I had thought I might have locked up the house and got a few days with them, but if my mistress wants me, of course I must stay!"

The "mistress" was always settled the question for Doris, who was one of the "faithful to the death" class of servants, unhappily so fast disappearing from the face of the earth in these latter days. Doris was the daughter of an old and attached outdoor servant of Mr. Lee (the owner of Lee Hill and its surrounding property), and the girl had entered the service of her young master some six years before, on his marriage as under housemaid. But an unfortunate accident had, while not depriving the girl of ability to work altogether, left her with little capacity for steady work; standing and kneeling and lifting weights were beyond her, so Mrs. Lee, who was not only fond of Doris—a pretty and attractive creature—but very rightly conceived that an old servant's daughter had a moral claim on her, had kept Doris about the house, and finally, when the mistress and her husband were abroad or away, she was left in sole charge at Lee Hill.

It was a lonely life for a young woman of twenty-five, and town-bred girls would have shrunk in horror from the terrors of burglars, tramps and other dangers, but Doris was country-bred, and was not afraid. There were no jewels or plate kept in the place in the absence of the family, and so there was nothing to steal, said Doris, and if any man tried to insult her, why, there was a shot for him, same as if she was a man. For Doris could use a gun as well as her father, who had been a gamekeeper, and was now retired and in possession of a little cottage and ground down in the village, some two miles or more away.

Just as Doris was starting in the afternoon for the cottage, the postman came and handed her a letter.

"From mistress," said the girl, and bade the man wait a moment, while she drew him a glass of beer to cheer him on his way. Meanwhile she read her letter, which set forth more particularly certain orders about the cottage, and concluded thus—

"I dare say you would like a few days with your father, Doris, but leave it open if you can. If you are not at the house when Evans comes down with the plate and things, I shall conclude you could not stay."

Doris pondered over this a minute. It was rather an unsatisfactory way of leaving the question; but still, the girl thought, if she sent a message by the postman down to her father's cottage, she might prevent him from being disappointed if he did not see her. So she sent to say if she was not with him by a certain day he was to conclude she was obliged to remain up at the house and come up as usual, with the other tenants and superannuated servants—Christmas Eve.

"That's off my mind, anyhow!" Doris said to herself when the postman was gone. "Now I'll run over to the cottage, clean up the rooms and get back before it's very dark. The snow's awful thick, and how cold it is!"

Doris shivered even under her thick winter cloak, as she gathered her brooms together, put matches in her pocket and ran lightly down the snow-covered drive, through the shrubbery, and over a bit of a hill to the cottage.

This cottage was a sort of "back-servant's" in attendance upon the great house. It had been occupied once by a relation of the family, an ancient lady now dead, and since her time the lower rooms had been dismantled of most of their furniture only the bedroom being left intact, as they were sometimes required for the overwinter "visitors" during the shooting season.

The place looked very dreary as Doris stepped up to the back door and inserted her key in the lock, and something like a feeling of nervous fear for an instant took

hold of her as she entered the silent, cheerless looking house. However, Doris was not given to indulgence in such "fancies," and speedily shook off the momentary weakness and went briskly about her work sweeping and dusting upstairs and down, rubbing up furniture and polishing brass with such a will that the short December day was barely more than darkening when she had finished the rougher part of her duties, and there remained only the finishing to do.

Doris descended again to the kitchen and paused for a moment, thinking out her plan of campaign for the morrow. The wind had risen during the afternoon, and was howling dimly round the cottage, and swirling the snow up in eddies out on the road and in the garden, and as Doris paused it caught the back door and swung it open, driving in snow before it.

"Ugh!" said the girl, with a shiver. "I'm not going across the yard to the out house to put my brooms away there. I'll just pop them in this cupboard, and there they'll be to-morrow when I come."

The cupboard referred to was a good wide closet in the kitchen, placed midway between the back door and that leading into the interior of the house, and the girl opened the closet door and stepped in, depositing her cleaning impedimenta in one corner. She was just turning to come out again when, with a swirl, the wind came careering through the kitchen, and—bang went the cupboard door with a sharp snap like the report of a pistol!

Just for a moment Doris was so staggered that she hardly realized the situation; then at once she felt instinctively for the door handle, at first with confidence, as one seeking what must be there; then half wildly, with trembling hands and curdling blood, and a strange fear and agony creeping all through her.

Then, with a rush, she remembered! This door shut with a spring, the handle to which used to be outside, but was broken off, so that, not even from without, could the door be opened even if any one came that way; release could only come through breaking down the door!

Never in all her life could Doris forget the terrible horror that seized her and for moments held her paralyzed, unable to move, scarcely to breathe. There she was securely shut in, in a dark, stifling cupboard, without even a keyhole to admit a little stream of fresh air; not a soul was likely to come that way, and if they did, no cries could be heard from the road. No one was at the Great House, no one knew where she was. On the morrow, when the family came down, and Doris did not appear, they would think she was at her father's cottage, and her father would think she was up at the house; so she would not be missed, perhaps for days. The visitors might not come to-morrow night; indeed, probably were not expected till the 23rd, and meanwhile the poor girl might die of asphyxia, or hunger, or both.

The thought lent her energy to overcome her first feeling of terror. She threw herself frantically against the door, and beat at it with her hands, but she had as well flung her strength against one of the oaks outside. Doors and frames alike of the Cottage were made in days when these necessities came not from Sweden, nor were "made in Germany," and, consequently, were able to resist more even than a girl's not very powerful efforts.

Poor Doris exhausted herself, and made herself hoarse with cries to no purpose; and the close air, the pitchy darkness, and the horror of her position very soon told on a physique not at any time robust.

She bethought her of her matches, and felt in her pocket, but remembered that she had left them on the kitchen mantelpiece when she had lighted the fire. She sank on the floor with a moan, and a sort of faintness began to steal over her. She was conscious only of living, cold and wretched and terrified. She could not tell how long she remained in this state—half sleep, half faint—hours, she thought, must have passed, when first the sound of voices, speaking very low and cautiously, mingled with the sort of disturbed dreams that helped to keep her conscious. At first, half bewildered with the terrible assurance that nothing in her position had changed, the girl lay still and gradually gathered her senses together. Her first impulse had been to cry aloud for help, but the words she heard froze the cry on her lips and made her lift herself, stiff and cold as were her limbs, to a sitting posture, with her ear against the door—crack there was none; she could not even tell whether there was a light in the room or not.

"E's comin' down to-morrow with the plate, an' there's a dinner party the night after!" "We'll crack that one sure, as easy as easy. There won't be no one up there but the man an' that there gal, an' we can manage them easy."

Doris' blood ran cold; an agonizing feeling of impotence took her breath, and held her in icy grip.

"Great heavens!" she half whispered, "what shall I do! Oh, to be imprisoned here, helpless—helpless!"

She lay and listened, with beating heart, to a terrible sentence, to all their plans. There seemed to be three or four men, and the girl distinguished each different tone and felt she should know them again—if she ever got out alive!

Presently there was a stir. She heard a sound of snuffing round her prison door, and some one said—

"Hallo, Jim, what are you after?"

The voice was a better tone than that of

the others and said "after," not "arter."

Doris noted this.

"Some one in there," said another, suspiciously.

There was a pushing back of chairs, then steps approached the cupboard door and shook it. The girl held her breath, a new terror possessing her now. If they broke it open!

"I told you some one had been here," remarked the better toned voice.

"Tell you what, that blamed gal 'as been 'ere, sweepin'. Them at the 'ouse ain't no room, an' they puts gents 'ere! That dawg o' mine 'e scents some one!"

The speaker was a Londoner, thought Doris, every nerve on the quiver. He spoke the vile Cockney dialect, as did they all, more or less.

"Any one there?" cried the better tone but under breath, as it were. "Answer or it'll be the worse for you!"

Silence. Doris scarcely breathed. Still she heard the dog sniffing and scratching. Then he barked, and some one, with an oath, cuffed him on the head, whereat he whimpered.

"I believe that girl's in there, shut in," said the leader—he of the better tone.

"See, the door has a spring lock, no handle."

"We can crack it and fetch 'er out," said another.

"No—too dangerous. That 'tee might be round. What'll we do with a girl besides?"

There was a murmur, to which evidently the leader replied:

"Stow that. Killin's dangerous—if to be helped."

"Dangerous to leave her there," grumbled the other man. "Why, she might git out, some'ow, be missed, an' blow the 'ole gaff!"

"Nonsense! She'll die there," rejoined the leader, gruffly. "If she's there and it ain't a dead rat that dog snells, she must have been there long enough."

Again he called on any one who was there to answer. Again only silence. The girl's heart was beating in her throat—she felt dazed, and sick with suspense.

"Answer and you shan't be hurt," continued the leader. "If you're imprisoned there, like enough you'll die if we don't let you out. Swear to keep dark what ever you've heard, and we'll break down the door and let you go free—when we've got what we want. Be a good girl, and you shall have your share of the swag!"

The hot blood rushed to Doris' brow. Almost, in her passion of wrath that any one should dare try and enlist her against her mistress, she had cried out indignantly; but bit her lip hard to prevent this catastrophe. Yet—to leave her there to die! Die by inches, of cold, of hunger, of asphyxia. Already the air was choking her—the air she had breathed up again into her famished lungs a thousand times!

"Heaven give me strength!" the girl said in her soul. Her lips were shut hard.

They tried threats, persuasion, convinced that some one was there and the some one was "the gal," but without avail. Doris, true to her faith, answered never a word. She knew, if she swore to keep silence with the idea of outwitting them, they would not, of course, trust her out of their hands ere it was too late; and Doris had no faith, either, in the honor of thieves. At last they gave up as hopeless and also, she surmised, they feared to remain too long; certainly they presently went away, and with a new agony and despair the girl heard them shut and lock the back door, and all was deadly still.

And then consciousness left her.

Again the gray twilight descended on snow and icebound earth. The snow, indeed, had ceased to fall, but the sky looked laden with it still, and a tall, good-looking man, wrapped in a dark overcoat, who came at a moderate pace down the road, felt very thankful—for more than one reason—that the snow had ceased. His eyes were on the ground, watchfully, and two or three times he bent and examined the snow with care. He was accompanied by a rough terrier that, nose to ground, careered about very importantly.

"H'm!" said he, and pursued his way through a small wood till he reached the back fence of the garden which surrounded the cottage.

Then he reconnoitred a bit, and calmly effected an entrance to the premises through a window, undoing the latch with a knife and putting back the shutters, which were broken. The terrier sprang through after his master and stood for a moment with his nostrils quivering, then sniffed round, and finally raised himself on his hind legs against the cupboard door, pinning his nose to the crack, wagging his tail, and looking back at his master with intelligence in every movement of his wriggling body.

"Hallo! Dandy, what's the find, eh?" said the master, alert, and came over to the door.

Dandy continued his pantomime, and barked in addition, loud and shrill.

"Silence! Too much noise!" said the master, warningly. "Silence, Dandy! By Jove! What's that?"

A sigh that was almost a groan came from within the closet. The detective listened.

"A woman?" said he to himself. He tried the door, shook it, examined it and found the secret; calmly took from a pocket a little case of instruments such as a housebreaker after, and proceeded to use

(Continued on Page 5.)



Pearl McFarland  
Wallaceburg, Ont.

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