The Mystery OF THE Mountain Pass

IN EOUR INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS EVE. My name is John Douglas. I am a plain living, plain-spoken man; and, Heaven knows, I never have, and never shall, set up to be regarded as a literateur Nevertheless, it has been suggested me that certain adventures, through which I passed five Christmases ago, and a year later, were so very startling, that I ought to cast them into the form of a narrative for other folks to read.

I believe my friends are, perhaps, right in this, and hence am beginning to set down these extraordinary adventures; but I warn my readers they must expect nothing mere than a narration of facts altogether unembellished by any graces of

It is unnecessary to detail the circumstances which led me, who am by birth a gentleman, and who, even then, was not without some little money of my own, to take up my residence in a cottage, which was little more than a hut, at the foot of a | not suggest that she should do so.

mountain in Wales. Suffice it that a quarrel with a relative cottage with no companion, save my dog, from endeavoring to penetrate her disand with no occupation beyond fishing, guise.

shooting, and mountain climbing. When Christmas came round, it found me there

Pretty late on the Christmas Eve. I provisions, and tramped back again even an elopement. through the falling snow, with a misan- But, let it be what it thropical enjoyment of the fact that, for the first time in my life, I should eat my Christmas dinner alone.

I threw another log on the fire, made myself a glass of whiskey-toddy, and was sipping it very much at my leisure, when the furioug barking of my dog made me jump up and hurry outside, confident that

something was wrong. My hut was at least three miles from any for weeks together no one passed near it. Thieves were out of the question, for I

had nothing to tempt cupidity. What, then, could be the meaning of Nero's furious barking?

It sounded, for all the world, as though he were rending some enemy limb from

was the work of a moment.

The snow had ceased falling, and the moon was shining brightly; but for a moment I saw nothing of my dog, though his hoarse bark sounded more furiously than my handkerchief, and pressed it deep-

A stone's throw from the cottage, and quite at the back of it, was a little copse | moment. of trees. From that came the barking, and hurrying towards the spot, I was struck | metal on the cool white flesh, caused me dumb with horror to see Nero attacking a | shudder from head to foot; I ground my woman. He had pulled her down to the | teeth almost fiercely in the intensity of my ground, and his teeth had actually met in | feelings, and a copious perspiration started the fleshy part of her arm.

with the utmost reluctance, licking his chops, and growling horribly, as though he would fain return to the attack.

had risen to her feet the moment the brute let go his hold.

Even in the moonlight I could see that blood was trickling down her hand.

Fond as I was of my dog, I telt at that moment tempted to put a bullet through his head, so incensed was I against him. 'Good heavens! I hope you are not seri-

ously hurt?' I cried; and, even as I spoke, I became dimly conscious that this woman was no ordinary woman-that this midnight adventure was one of peculiar mys-

Two things assisted me to this convic-

One was that the woman had never uttered a single cry or groan.

Even when Nero's cruel teeth had torn her flesh, she had suffered in stoical silence, contenting herself, as I had seen, with a desperate attempt to choke him off by the unaided strength of her own hands.

This in itself was marvellous, for it is second nature with a woman to cry out at such a time, especially when a cry may be trusted to bring her help.

Surely her silence must have been due to the fact that she preferred even the pain and peril of those awful tangs to the chance of being seen by any human eye.

The other thing was that when I approached close to her, and she turned and faced me, I saw she wore a black velvet mask, which covered her features sufficiently to defy recognition.

'Are you seriously hurt ?' I questioned, anxiously, and waiving my surprise in my tears for her safety. 'Has the brute bitten you severely ?'

For answer she held out her arm, bare to above the elbow, and showed me a

frightful wound. 'Good Heavens !' I exclaimed, aghast; 'you had better let me cauterize that. Not that I think the dog is mad. I believe him to be perfectly healthy. But still, it would

be safer.' Then the woman spoke for the first time. Her voice was rich and clear, its accents unmistakably those of a lady; it thrilled

me curiously. 'Are you alone ?' she asked. 'Is there

anyone in there with you?' and she pointed to the cottage.

'I am quite alone. No one will see you.

I gave her my arm She took it without a word, and leaned on me heavily. We had to pass by Nero, who had been

sitting on his haunches, still licking his chops, and steadily regarding us. A low and angry growl broke, as though involuntarily, from his throat as my

companion passed near him. 'Lie down, you brute!' I called o t to him, in anger; and, when he aftempted to fawn upon me, I sternly put him back. I had never been so disgusted with him before.

We entered the cottage. I led my companion to a seat, poured out a little brandy, and insisted on her drinking it.

I knew she would need some support in the terrible ordeal that lay before her. She did not remove her mask, and I did

As a man or sense, I knew she did not wear that at midnight among the mounmade me thus seclude myself, and that, tain snows without a purpose; and, as a for more than six months, I lived in that | man of breeding, I, of course, refrained

> Whatever her reason for secrecy, she was welcome to preserve it, so far as I was

In my own mind, I suspected a love-aftramped into the town for my store of | fair-some romantic assignation, perhaps | her.

business of mine.

Thus I thought, little dreaming then what fate was weaving in the meshes of her mystic web.

'Can you bear to let me cauterize that wound ?' I asked. 'Ol course I must tell you, frankly, it will give you great pain.'

'I can bear it.' 'Then, the sooner it is done, the better.' As I spoke, I turned my back to her, other human habitation; it lay out of the | that she might not watch my movements, way of all beaten tracks-so much so that | and poked into the hottest part of the fire a long flat piece of steel.

'I brought it to a white heat; then I turned to the woman. I was as white as a sheet, I am quite

certain, and it was only with a strong effort of will I kept my hands steady. I would a hundred times rather have passed that cruel steel across my own arm

To snatch up my gun and open the door | than across the arm of this tender delicate But it had to be done-for her sake;

and I did not shrink from it. I gripped one end of the steel firmly with

deep-into her flesh! I never shall forget my sensations at that

The horrible 'fizz' made by the burning out upon my brow.

Even when I called him off, he obeyed The tortured victim herself uttered

neither cry or groan. I could see by the movement of her face that she was setting her teeth hard, and I administered an angry kick to him in when the steel burnt jits way into the flesh, passing, then strode up to the woman, who I could feel her shudder; but this was the only token of her agony.

My heart was filled with wondering admiration. This woman had the soul of a heroine, I

told myself. Never had I seen in female form, a higher spirit or a more dauntless mind.

The moment the horrible operation was over, I seized my brandy flask, and at tempted to pour a little of the spirits be ween her lips.

I think she felt herself near swooning, for she feebly put up her hand as mine touched the black velvet mask, and whisp-

'You will not try to see my face?'
'On my honor I will not,' I answered,

promptly. 'You may trust me.'

She was lying back in my low basketchair now, on the verge of tainting.

Her eyes were closed her lips tightly

set; her face was ashen pale.
I administered a little brandy but feared it would not suffice to revive her. Indeed it seemed to me she had already swooned quite away.

I was terribly perplexed.

Fettered as I was by my promise not to look at her face, I could not remove that hateful, tantalizing mask; and yet it seemed monstrous to stand by and make no effort to bring her back to consciousness.

To be sure, the mask did not seriously impede her breathin , for it only reached as far as her upper lip, and I had already noticed that her chin was beautifully moulded, and that her teeth were white as pearls, and her lips like some soft crimson

But, if I was forbidden to remove the mask, the interdict went no further, I reflected, and stooping over the inanimate form, I unfastened the long dark cloak, which was buttoned closely from the throat to the feet.

A further surprise awaited me, for, instead of seeing a dress suited to the weather, I saw an evening-gown of softest, richest ivory satin, cenfined at the waist by a zone of pearl and silver, and cut low enough to display the milky whiteness of a throat and bosom such as, for peerless beauty, I had never seen before.

Around the firm white throat was clasped a circlet of rubies, which flashed like points of fire in the light of my readinglamp,

Half guiltily, I refastened the disguising cloak, and contented myself with applying some strong smelling salts to her nostrils. Happily, these quickly took effect.

I saw the eyes unclose behind the maskbeautiful lustrous eyes I was sure they were, even though I could see but little of

She stirred, shuddered, put out her hand as though to ward away some peril, then drew her cloak more closely round

I should say here, perhaps, that the cloak had a hood to it. which was drawn closely round her face, but that I had caught a glimpse of her hair gleaming in the fire-light.

'I am better,' she said, still in that thrillingly rich, sweet voice, and in a tone of re markable self-possession. Please let me walk to the door. All I want is air.' 'One moment!' I answered.

I had been applying ointment to her poor, wounded arm, and now I wrapped a a bandage round it. 'There, now it will heal quickly. You

have been wonderfully brave.' I gave her my arm and led her to the

Nero, cowed by my displeasure, was slinking outside; at sight of her, however, he could not repress a growl. I did begin to fear he might be going

mad; and, perhaps, that is what had determined me to cauterize the wound. At any rate, I had never known him to act like this before.

A minute or two we stood together at the door in silence.

Far and near there was not a sound. The mountain shrouded from its foot to its loftiest peak with snow, towered solemply above us; the moon hung high in corner of the road. the heavens; the air was intensely cold.

Suddenly the clock in the tower of the little church, on the other side of the mountain, struck out the hour of twelve. The strokes were borne to us quite dis-

tinctly on the still, frosty air. It was Christmas day.

A slight shiver ran through my compan ion as we stood together listening to the sounds which told us that Christmas was

The stroke of the clock might have been falling—each one of them—upon her heart effort, and removed her hand from my

'I must go !' she said. 'I thank you for you kindness but I must go.' 'Go!' I echoed, blankly. 'Go where?'

The question fell from me quite involuntarily. Whatever curiosity I felt, I had not in-

tended to betray it. 'You have promised not to seek to

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know who I am,' she answered. Remember, I trust you. 'And you may trust me. But surely you are in no condition to face this night alone.

Let me at least see you to some place of safety. I promise you I will not pry into your affairs. I will not seek to know so much as your name,

'I am an unhappy woman,' she replied; 'a most unhappy woman !' And there was a mournful cadence in her voice which haunted me for long after-

"But, at least, I can believe that all men are not false," she added, "I will trust

you." I was certain, now, that I was right in suspecting she had come to this lonely place in order to keep some secret assig-

Probably she had kept her part of it in vain-her lover had forsaken her; why else should she be on the mountain side alone? Why also should she say, so mournfully, | hoofs.

that all men were not false? I frankly admit, it angered me to reflect that this woman, who had the form of a goddess, and who, I did not doubt, had beanty of face to match, should have wasted the treasure of her love on one who, probably, cared not for the gift.

A moment or two she stood in silence; then she said-"You shall go with me, if you will, as

far as the corner of the road." "The corner of the road! But, even then, the nearest house is three miles away. It is impossible that you should walk that distance through all this snow-

"Come with me to the corner, and I shall be sate," she answered quietly. "I have someone waiting for me there."

Although I was greatly surprised, I was careful not to show it. "I will do whatever you wish," I said.

"Thank you, You are very good and generous. I know it must seem strange to you that I should mask my face like this. It is not wholly for my own sake that I am anxious to remain unknown. But I cannot explain. I can only thank you. Now, please let us go."

I drew on my fur lined coat, then gave her my arm, which she surely needed, for her strength seemed all but spent, and walked with her until we came to the

There she stopped me. 'Good-night, and good-bye!" she whispered, softly. "Remember, I trust you

never to seek to find out who I am !" "Good-bye!" I answered, wondering vaguely whether this adventure were not simply a part of some curiously vivid

She glided away from me, her dark form silhouetted against the whiteness of the new fallen snow.

I trammped back to my cottage without so much as one backward glance. Honor forbade me to try to see whither She roused herself, as though with an she went or who was her mysterious friend. I felt strangely disturbed and restless,

however, as I sat down by the fire. 'Well this has been the strangest Christmas Eve I've ever spent, or ever shall spend!' I muttered.

I was wrong in this. My next Christmas Eve was fated to be stranger still.

> CHAPTER II. CHRISTMAS DAY.

Christmas morning dawned bright and

I had had but little sleep, for the excitement, consequent on my nocturnal adventure, had keep me awake until two or three and even then I had only fallen asleep to dream of a superlatively beautiful woman, with lustrous eyes and pale golden hair, who led me among mountain snows in vain searches after hidden treasure I could

I dipped my face into a bowl of ice-cold water; then, feeling refreshed and thoroughly wide-awake, drank a cup of cocoa, and sallied out, intending to make a more

substantial breakfast on my return. The moment I opened the door, Nerowho had spent the night in an out-housecame up and fawned upon me, wagging his of rage as well. tail and looking wistfully into my face, as

if doubtful of his welcome. I was angry with him and yet in my heart I could not altogether blame him; for in thinking the whole case over during the night, I had come to the conclusion that the mysterious black mask had been the cause of his attack on a defenceless woman. Doubtless in his eyes, that bit of velvet had had a suspicious and uncanny look.

I was very fond of Nero. He was a magnificent brute, an Irish hound, faithful and affectionate; and moreover, he had on one occasion saved my

It was not likely I should keep my anger against him long-especially on Christmas Day, when we ought surely to show our good will to animals as well as to men. He was transported with delight at being taken back into favor.

'Come on, old fellow!' I called to him, as I bent my steps towards that corner of the road at which I had parted from the

mysterious woman. No snow had fallen in the night, so that our footprints-mine and hers-were still plainly visible.

At that corner I paused, half doubting whether I should go any further.

To track those footprints would be to track the woman to her home. Was I not in honor bound not to do

But, even as I paced backwards and forwards in decision, I made a startling dis-A dozen yards away from the corner the

footprints ended, and, in place of them, I saw the marks of wheels, and of a horse's Doubtless a carriage had stood near the

corner awaiting my mysterious visitor last The wheels had made deep indentations in the snow; the marks of the horse's hoofs

were distinctly seen. After a short struggle with what I conceive to have been a very natural curiosity, my sense of honor triumphed, and I resolutely turned my back upon those tempting tracks, and prepared to take my morn-

ing walk in quite an opposite direction. My cottage stood, as I think I have said. at the foot of a mountain-I might almost say it was at the foot of several mountains, inasmuch as it was in a narrow pass encompassed by craggy heights on every

The pass was a lonely one. In the winter months, no one would

enter it for day or even weeks together. When I turned back from the corner of the road, I walked almost mechanically to the spot where I had rescued the woman from Nero's fangs last night; and, having reached it, I found, to my surprise, that the footsteps did not end there, but that they stretched out, far as my eye could reach, right up the pass.

I walked on a few paces, and soon I made another discovery.

Two people had gone up that pass last night-a man as well as a woman. This did not so much surprise me as the fact that the man had not come back. The female footprints were plainly

enough discernible coming down as well as

going up the pass; but the man's only went one way.

The woman had come back alone. I felt vaguely uncomfortable. It was not that, at that moment, I actually suspected foul play; but still, I was anxious to know where the woman's companion had gone.

The other end of the pass led nowhere. or, rather, it led only to a road across the mountain, which it would have been madness to attempt by night. I resolved to push my discoveries a little further, and I was confirmed in this

determination by the strange conduct of Nero, who was running excitedly backwards, and forwards, smelling at the footprints, and every now and again emitting an angry growl. 'There is some mystery here. I must

the pass in the wake of those mysterious footprints. I half expected to find some poor wretch dying of exhaustion among the mou ain

solve it,' I said, and, making sure my

whiskey flask was well filled, I hurried up

Nero went on before me, growing more and more excited every minute; and I must own, that I was beginning to share in his excitement.

Well, the footprints led us by the pass for about three quarters of a mile; then to my amazement, after mingling curiously, they disappeared altogether, close to a cavity in the mountain side.

Beyond this cavity the snow lay, all white and untrodden, without spot or An eerie feeling came over me-a feel-

ing which was evidently scared by Nero for he was tearing about like a mad thing. seemingly wild with fear, and yet in a fury

I was certain he smelt blood. The cavity in the rock was just big enough for a man to sit in; but, assuredly it would not have screened one from the storm last night, for the storm had apparently drifted in that direction-had drifted so steadily that it lay in a great heap, or

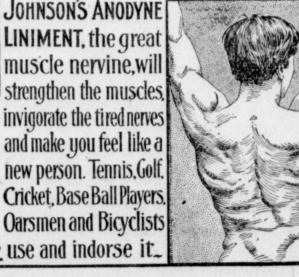




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