

The Mansion of Mysteries
by Amy Randolph

“Really,” said old Major Dedbrook, “I am not one that believes in meddling in his neighbor’s affairs—not as a general rule, at least—”

“Certainly not,” said Dr. Purpledown, solemnly taking snuff, and indulging himself with the mildest of sneezes.

“But,” resumed the major, “there are times when one owes a duty to our common humanity. There are seasons, Purpledown, when all frivolous form and ceremony should be laid aside!”

“Of course,” nodded Dr. Purpledown, secretly wondering whither all these remarks tended.

“And that is the reason I sent for you today,” added Major Dedbrook.

“Exactly,” said the doctor, more inwardly puzzled than ever.

“I want your advice,” said the major.

Dr. Purpledown’s carmine face brightened; he had begun to fear that his old friend wanted to borrow money, and had already, in his inmost mind, composed a form of words which should, as compactly as possible, express his anxiety to oblige Major Dedbrook, the narrowed state of his exchequer, and the general impossibility of raising any stated amount, from ten dollars up to two hundred!

“Oh!” said he. “Yes. *Exactly!*”

Major Dedbrook rose from the easy-chair in which he had been enjoying his after-dinner wine and walnuts, took his friend by the arm with one hand, and with the other drew aside the maroon draperies of the window.

“Do you see yonder house?” said he, lowering his voice to a mysterious under-tone.

“The old red brick house?” said Dr. Purpledown. “Behind the mildewed garden wall? With the dead cedar tree in front of it?”

“Yes,” said Major Dedbrook.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “I see it!”

“And what do you think of it?”

“I think,” Dr. Purpledown responded, after some reflection, “that they’d better cut down the dead cedar.”

“Nonsense!” said the major, a little impatiently. “I don’t mean that. I mean what does it look like?”

“As if it wanted repairs!” Dr. Purpledown promptly answered.

“Yes, I know—but—it isn’t that, either, exactly. Does it look mysterious? Does it look as if it might have a story attached to it?”

“W-w-well I don’t know but what it does,” admitted Dr. Purpledown, after regarding the sombre brick walls and gabled chimneys, with his head first upon one side, and then upon the other.

“I thought so,” shouted Dedbrook, triumphantly, as he let fall the maroon folds once more. “There *is* a mystery brooding, black and silent, within those walls. There *is* a story—Heaven alone knows how dark—attached to that grim structure.”

“Indeed!” said Dr. Purpledown, vaguely reminded of the Arabian Nights he had read, years ago, when he was a schoolboy. “And what is it, if I may venture to ask?”

“That’s just what I don’t know,” said Major Dedbrook, descending with a sudden jerk, as it were, from the vague and ideal to positive facts. “There is a gentleman lives there who bears every aspect of a finished villain, by the name of Alberti. I don’t like foreign names, do you?”

“Not as a matter of taste!” said Purpledown.

“And a lady—his wife—who paints portraits, and writes for the papers. That fact alone—the newspaper fact, I mean—establishes her, in my eyes, as an unfeminine traitor to her sex!”

The doctor peeled a particularly large nut, dipped it in wine, and said nothing.

“And they keep a little maid-servant,” said the major, “who cleans the steps, runs of errands, and takes the letters from the postman. I’ve seen her do it many a time. With red hair and a blonde complexion!”

“Ah!” said the doctor.

“And that constitutes the family,” added Major Dedbrook. “Ostensibly, that is.”

“Oh!” said Dr. Purpledown. “Ostensibly?”

“And here,” said Major Dedbrook, smiting the table with his hand so that the little wine glasses

tinkled softly together, “the mystery comes in. At nine o’clock every night, a light—blue and spectral, like a corpse candle—shines between the iron bars of the cellar window; at nine o’clock, a figure all white with long, black hair streaming down its back, and chains clanking at its wrists, walks up and down the floor—hard cement, you know—and wrings its hands!”

“Bless my soul!” said Dr. Purpledown. “Does it *say* anything?”

“It talks,” said Major Dedbrook. “That is, I can see its lips move; but, of course, with a grated window and a solid sheet of glass between us, I can’t pretend to hear anything.”

“Humph!” grunted Dr. Purpledown. “Probably a lunatic.”

“But down cellar!” remonstrated Major Dedbrook. “And in such despair as that! No, my friend, no. ‘Mind your own business’ is a very good motto, under some circumstances, I allow; but in such a case as this I feel it my religious duty to interfere—and interfere I will.”

“Dedbrook,” solemnly spoke up the doctor, “I approve of your spirit and resolution; and if you feel that your appeal would come more powerfully backed by the presence of a friend, *I* will accompany you to this mansion stained with crime and mystery.”

And the two old gentlemen shook hands across the table.

Five minutes later Major Dedbrook and Dr. Purpledown found themselves in the prettily-furnished, although rather antique-looking, reception-room of the Mysterious Mansion, where two or three waxlights burned in silver sconces, an easel was covered with dull-red drapery, and the floor of time-darkened wood was partially revealed by an immense Turkey rug, in whose mossy depths the foot lost itself, so to speak. A pleasant-looking, middle-aged gentleman laid down the newspaper whose columns he was perusing by the light of a student-lamp, and rose to his feet in some surprise; a lady, who was actually engaged in darning stockings, looked up in wild amazement.

“Is this Mr. Alberti?” questioned Major Dedbrook; and the stranger answered courteously:

“That is my name. May I inquire to what I am indebted for the pleasure of this visit?”

“Sir,” said Major Dedbrook, laying his hand upon his heart, “ask your own conscience.”

The middle-aged gentleman stared harder than ever.

“That fettered form!” burst in Dr. Purpledown.

“Those groans!” said Major Dedbrook.

“That sepulchral light!” echoed the doctor.

“Those subterranean depths!” added the major.

“Once again, gentlemen,” said Mr. Alberti, “may I entreat you to explain yourselves?”

“Sir,” said Major Dedbrook, majestically, “will you be so good as to conduct us—ahem—down cellar?”

Mr. Alberti looked keenly at the two portly personages who stood before him.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “I presume that you are neither gas men, sanitary inspectors, nor police officers?”

“Sir,” said Dr. Purpledown, “we are here entirely in a private capacity.”

“Then what on earth can you want of my cellar?” demanded Mr. Alberti.

“To unravel the dark mystery which lurks there,” Major Dedbrook made haste to answer.

“Matthew,” whispered the lady to the gentleman, “don’t go with them. They are lunatics.”

“My dear,” returned the gentleman, in the same tone, “the best way to get along with lunatics is to humor them. And I really believe them to be as sane as myself. Gentlemen,”—in a loud voice— “your request is strange, but I have no objection to humor it. Be so good as to walk this way; and I hope soon to convince you that my cellar is haunted by no darker mystery than rats.”

And, with a peculiar smile upon his countenance, he took up the shaded lamp and led the way down stairs.

But he himself recoiled in amazement when, upon the cellar door being opened, a stream of light burst out upon his view, and the figure, all in white, with chains clanking on its wrists, was discovered!

“Mary Ann!” he thundered, “what does this mean?”

“Please, sir, don’t be angry!” whimpered the figure in white, hurriedly divesting itself of its chains, its black wig and the unbleached sheeting which had made a first-class spectre of it; “but I ’ad my part to learn, and there wasn’t no other place where I wouldn’t disturb nobody nor nothin’!”

“Your—part!” echoed Mr. Alberti.

“Please, sir, there’s private theatricals at Mrs. Budge’s lady’s-maid’s on Friday week—and I’m to be the prisoner—and Mrs. Budge’s coachman ’e said I’d never be perfect in my part until I practiced it *en costum*. And, please sir, I’ve practiced it three nights down here for fear of disturbing you and madam. And, please, sir, I ’ope you and madam won’t object, for it’s for charitable institutions, sir, and—”

Mr. Alberti shut the cellar door upon the voluble protestations of the stage-struck maid-of-all-work, before he burst into the fit of laughter, in which Major Dedbrook and Dr. Purpledown heartily joined.

“And now, gentlemen,” said he, “are you satisfied?”

“Sir,” said Dr. Purpledown, shamefacedly, “I beg your pardon.”

“And I, too,” chimed in Major Dedbrook.

“Then come up stairs and have a cigar,” said the hospitable host.

And then they finished the evening after a pleasant and social fashion; but when Major Dedbrook was once more within the walls of his own house he turned solemnly to his friend.

“Purpledown,” said he, “this night’s experience has taught me a lesson.”

“Eh?” said Dr. Purpledown.

“Henceforward,” said Dedbrook, “I return to first principles.”

“What do you mean?” asked the doctor.

“I mean—minding my own business!” answered Major Dedbrook.”

The New York Ledger, April 5, 1879