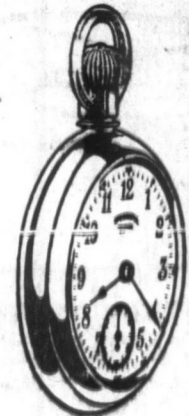


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The Imprisoned Heiress

—OR—

The Spectre of Edremont.

CHAPTER II.

At the same hour in which the Lady marked Lady Lorean, reassuringly, Alexina had learned of her betrothal to a man whom she had never beheld, a carriage and four, with outriders, was steadily advancing upon the road leading to Edremont.

The vehicle was occupied by only two persons.

They were the Lady Lorean Ashcroft and her brother Lionel, Lord Ashcroft.

The former was plain in features, and plain in dress, as if fearful of making to apparent Dame Nature's rigidity to her in the matter of personal attractions. She had a rugged but kindly face, a determined mouth, and keen gray eyes that seemed capable of reading the very souls of those with whom she came in contact.

Her character will be revealed by the events that followed.

His lordship, who had so recently succeeded to the title, was, as has been stated, ten years younger than his sister.

Nature, while a niggard to his masculine-looking sister, had showered all her choicest gifts upon him.

Tall, and sufficiently slender to be graceful and easy in his movements, with a spirited face, in which an expression of the most intense gravity and thoughtfulness yielded to irresistible gaiety, he was as brave as noble, as glib as in heart as in mind.

"Look out of the window, Lionel," said the Lady Lorean, as their glances rested on the forest to their left.

"We are now upon your future estate, that forest is Edremont Wood."

His lordship obeyed his sister's request, looking out with natural curiosity.

"It is a lovely spot, Lorean," he said, admiringly. "Edremont must certainly be an earthy Eden. I wonder if its mistress be equally beautiful in her way?"

"I can almost vouch for her beauty without ever having seen her," re-

plied you would credit it. Lionel, I fancied you would feel the loss of the amount you would forfeit in destitute an alliance with the Egremonts. But that was not the only reason for my remaining single. The captain was poor—he's a younger son, you know—and he's obliged to live upon his pay, and he is afraid of being thought a fortune-hunter."

"That can easily be arranged," returned Lord Ashcroft, as his sister paused. "Challoner has no taste for the army, and I have influence enough to obtain for him a government office, where the duties will be merely nominal, and the salary sufficient to make him feel independent."

The Lady Lorean pressed her brother's hand in silence and a tear came into her keen eyes, giving them a look of unwonted softness.

"Since you are so sure, Lionel, that you will love the Lary Alexina," she said, recovering her usual manner, "you should take a good view of your future domain."

Even as she spoke, Lord Ashcroft was looking out of the carriage window, viewing the various attractions of the estate. Presently the carriage entered Edremont Wood, and here the road leading to the mansion was somewhat gloomy in consequence of the overhanging trees. Their progress was necessarily slower.

Now and then a branch lay across the road, as if placed there purposely to obstruct the passage of the carriage, since they must have been brought from the wood; and the outriders were sent on in advance to clear the way should there be more obstructions.

The carriage horses, therefore, proceeded at a quiet walk.

The travellers had arrived at the spot where the overhanging branches of evergreen dropped lowest, shutting out the sky completely, and compelling the driver to crouch upon his box, and to remove his gold laced hat for fear of injury.

"What a lovely and romantic spot!" exclaimed His Lordship, chafed with the unexpected beauty of the scene.

To obtain a better view of the road he obtruded his head from the window beside him, and he made the Lady Lorean look out from her side of the carriage and note the extreme beauty of the trees.

She had scarcely obeyed him when a loud report sounded upon the wintry air, and a bullet dashed past Lord Ashcroft, narrowly missing his head, and passed out of the opposite window, in dangerous proximity to his sister.

The Lady Lorean uttered a shriek of terror, forgetful in her tears for her brother of her own narrow escape, and flung her arms around him as if to shield him from further danger.

"Hush, Lorean!" said his lordship, with gentle firmness, seemingly unmoved by his late peril, as he unwound her arms and placed her in her seat. "Do not impede our movements."

The carriage halted at this moment, and his lordship dashed open the door, sprang out, and hastened in the direction from which the bullet had proceeded.

The outriders, hearing the report of the rifle, looked back, and seeing that the carriage had stopped, turned and rode toward it at full speed.

The driver, who had all he could do to hold his frightened horses, hurriedly informed his fellow-servants of their master's course, and they leaped off their horses and hastened after his lordship, alarmed for his safety.

On entering the plantation Ashcroft had beheld a man in full retreat, dodging in and out among the trees, and he had called upon him to stop, but the fellow had only quickened his steps at his command.

He had then assured him that if the affair was an accident he should be held blameless, but the stranger made no reply, and renewed his efforts to escape.

Active, lithe, and sinewy as was his lordship, it was not to be wondered at that he gained upon the fugitive, in-cumbered as was the latter with his rifle, and he had nearly overtaken him, when the fellow dropped his gun and sped, like an arrow from the bow, into the intricacies of the plantation.

By the time Lord Ashcroft reached the rifle the quarry was beyond his pursuit.

He picked up the weapon, examined it carefully, and then set out with it to return to the carriage.

(To be continued.)

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