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The Imprisoned Heiress

—OR—

The Spectre of Egremont.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Pardon me. You look like an Egremont, and most of all like the Lady Jasmine. May I ask your name?"

"I am the Lady Aimee; I have no other name."

"It is very appropriate," declared Lord Ashcroft. "You were well named. Was it not you whom I heard singing at the window of one of the haunted rooms the other evening?"

"Yes," said the maiden, brightly. "Did you like the song?"

"Like it!" cried Lord Ashcroft, enthusiastically. "It was heavenly! But I do not understand—"

"And you must not," interrupted the Lady Aimee. "Don't ever say anything about me. Promise me you will not."

Lord Ashcroft promised, greatly mystified.

"But why all this mystery?" he asked.

"I cannot tell you," she responded sadly.

"Are you unhappy?"

"Every one is kind to me," she answered, evasively. "I don't want to talk of myself, Lord Ashcroft, and I hope you will not allow me to do so. I came here to tell you that I am not a ghost, and to give you my picture. I thought you might like it."

"I shall prize it above all things!" exclaimed his lordship. "It is far more precious in my eyes than anything I own."

"Thank you," she said, with a grateful smile. "You can keep it to remember me by. I cannot come here

again to see you, for I suppose it wouldn't be quite right. The first time I came by accident. Besides its not being right," added Aimee, naively, "I shall not probably get the chance to come. But you won't forget me, will you?"

"Never—never!"

"I want to tell you something, Lord Ashcroft," and the maiden's manner grew more hushed. "I came in here a little while ago, and there was no one here. But soon after I heard some one coming, and I hid behind those curtains—"

"It was I."

"No. It was before you came. A man entered, a large man, with a terrible face, and he peered all around and went into your bedroom, and turned something out of a vase into your water-bottle. I can't see why he should have come only for that."

"I can't understand it," said Lord Ashcroft, a cloud gathering on his brow.

"I am glad, for I cannot. As he was going out he saw you in the hall, and he hid himself behind those other curtains. After you sat down, and covered your face so that you could think, he crept out into the hall and closed the door. He was a terrible-looking man."

And Aimee shuddered.

"Poor little bird. So he frightened you. Tell me how he looked, if you will be so kind."

Aimee complied, giving a full description of the masked intruder.

"That would answer for Gosman

Kepp—all but the face," mused Lord Ashcroft. "A large pink and white face, with a great red mouth that never moved. Ah, that must have been a mask. That must have been poison he put in my water-bottle. How strange that I should have such a bitter and untiring enemy."

He almost forgot his horror at the discovery in his admiration for the lovely and artless narrator. In order to induce her to prolong her stay, he asked her many questions about the mask, watching delightedly the changes of expression and the varying color in her face.

"I must go now," she said, at last. "I have been here a long time."

"Shall I not see you again, Lady Aimee?"

"I don't know," she answered, irresolutely. "Not here, for that would not be proper. You might come to the picture-gallery some evening about this time and find me there."

"I shall go there every night," cried Lord Ashcroft, enraptured at her half promise. "I will not seek to penetrate the mystery in which you choose to enwrap yourself, Lady Aimee. I owe you my life, so there is a providence in our meeting."

"How do you owe me your life?"

"But for you, Lady Aimee, I should doubtless have met my death to-night. That man that came in here so secretly was an enemy, and he meant to poison me. You will gladden the life you have saved by allowing me to see you sometimes."

He had no thought of his betrothed as he spoke.

The star of the heiress paled before the glowing sun of this young beauty, whom already Lord Ashcroft regarded with a tender and enduring love.

She was so like the angel of his dreams—only surpassing her—was so delicate, so gentle, so modest, yet so inexpressibly lovely, that his warm, enthusiastic heart evinced the love that was to be the passion of his life.

When he had met the Lady Alexina he had said to himself that he must learn her disposition, her mental resources, her character, before he could trust his happiness to her.

But with the Lady Aimee he had no such thought. Her truth, gentleness, goodness and intellectuality, were expressed in every feature and every movement, and he read her transparent character as well in that brief interview as he could have done with a year's study.

No wonder that he forgot his betrothed for the moment.

"I will see you sometimes," said Aimee, with a sweet and gentle reserve of manner. "I am very lonely occasionally, but I have something now to look forward to—something to think of."

"Would you accept a little present from me, Lady Aimee, in return for your picture?" asked Lord Ashcroft.

Without waiting for a reply, he drew from his little finger a diamond solitaire, which he placed upon her tiny forefinger.

"Too large, is it not?" he asked.

"A little; but it will do very well. It is very beautiful."

She little knew the hope she gave Lord Ashcroft when he put that ring upon her hand.

He would have pressed the hand to his lips as a fitting conclusion to the ceremony, and as the seal to the resolve he had formed, but he dared not venture to do so, her reserve seeming to deepen, now that her business was concluded.

She lingered but a moment more, and then glided away as silently as a spirit, leaving, as it appeared to Lord Ashcroft, darkness, where before there had been dazzling light.

"She is an Egremont—that is evident," said the young lord, when he found himself alone. "And she is an angel, too. How pure and tender she is! What can be the reason I have not seen her before? Does she live here? What is the mystery that enshrouds her?"

Unable to answer these puzzling questions, he drew her picture from his bosom, and gazed lovingly upon it.

CHAPTER XVII.

The shadow that had fallen upon her lover, also enveloped pretty Jessy Kay. Her coquettish airs were all gone, and with them had vanished her sprightliness and good humor. Her step was slower as she moved about the cottage; her eyes were full of unshed tears, and had a look that testified to nights of sleeplessness; and her face had lost its color, and looked faded and wan. Her temper, too, had become capricious, and had the head-forester been less preoccupied, he must have seen that his daughter no longer accorded to him the unquestionable deference to which he was accustomed.

In truth, poor Jessy ascribed to her father all the trouble that had come upon her lover. She felt convinced that had he not refused her hand in marriage to Gosman Kepp, the incredible charge of attempted assassination would never have been brought against the latter. She could not give even to herself a reason for this strange belief, but she cherished it, nevertheless, and a feeling of bitterness against her parent began to take possession of her heart.

The head-forester was scarcely conscious of the change in his home. His fire burned as brightly as usual upon the broad hearth-stone; his meals were prepared as regularly and as neatly as possible, and none of the material comforts he required were lacking. He did not notice the gloom upon the brow of his daughter as she served him in silence; he did not even notice that her merry laughter had ceased, and that her merry voice no longer ran through the room, as it had been wont to do, to his great annoyance.

For Donald Kay, too, was under a shadow.

The gloom and mystery that always hung about him had seemed to deepen since Kepp's application for Jessy's hand, and most of his time was now spent in wandering through the forest or in fulfilling the duties of his position. He had avoided his home as much as possible since his underforester had accused him of borrowing the gun with which had been committed the first assault upon Lord Ashcroft, and, when they did meet, Jessy noticed that he avoided her gaze, shrinking from her with an expression that seemed made up of fear and guiltiness.

On the morning subsequent to the intrusion of his masked enemy into Lord Ashcroft's chambers, Jessy sat by her kitchen fire. Her eyes were red with weeping, but her tears now were dried up. Her hands were folded idly in her lap, for she had no heart for working, and occasionally she uttered a sobbing sigh, like that of a grieved child.

She was sitting thus when her father came in from the porch, and advanced to the fire, rubbing his hands.

"The morning is cold, lass," he said, uneasily, avoiding the gaze she directed to him. "Get me my great-coat. I've a long walk before me."

Jessy obeyed, bringing the great-coat from its peg on the wall and assisting him to put it on.

(To be continued.)

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