



The Mystery of the Tower

By Andrew Loring

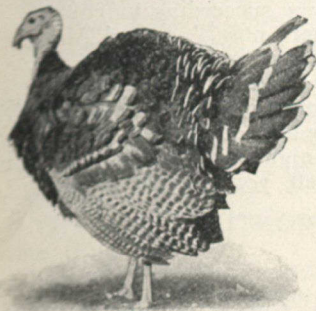
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A NEW SERIAL STORY

SYNOPSIS.

Motherless Margaret Lee flees from Paris and her keeper, Mrs. Gascoigne, to see her father in London. During the first evening at home, she looks through the father's pet telescope and sees a sight which is the basis of all the events to be narrated. In the first excitement, her father drops dead, and her only friend is Mr. Percy Marshall a chance acquaintance. Mrs. Gascoigne comes to London and a mysterious Mrs. Carlingford, a friend of her father, appears also. The former is easily driven out, but the latter is mistress of the situation. In the meantime Marshall sets out to solve the church tower mystery. He finds the church, gets in and discovers that the telescope tells the truth. His entrance is noted, his escape cut off, and he climbs down the lightning rod only to be struck senseless.

CHAPTER VI.



THAT afternoon the maid had opened the door of the drawing room in Maidenlane and announced "A lady to see you, miss."

The visitor hesitated, peering through the soft shadows of the darkened room.

Then the sound of long-drawn, regular breathing came to her, and she moved silently forward. She bent over the couch on which Margaret lay asleep, and scanned the unconscious face, feature by feature. She touched the soft, gleaming curls which clustered round the low white forehead. She studied the long sweeping lashes, the cheeks faintly tinged with the flush of sleep, the red lips which drooped like those of a troubled child, the slender hands, whose pink-tipped relaxed fingers curved like a cup round the soft palms.

For a long time the woman bent listening to the slow, gentle breathing, watching the beautiful unconscious face all the while. At last, either cramped from her awkward position or sure that the girl was deeply buried in slumber, she drew herself erect and glanced around her uncertainly. Her eyes fell on a little bunch of keys which lay on the table near the couch. She sidled towards the table, watching Margaret's face all the while, and her fingers closed over the keys without a sound.

She stole to the door with yet another backward glance, softly turned the handle, and slipped out. A murmur of voices told her that the servants were safely in the kitchen. Three doors were before her, but only one was closed, and this must be open to what she wanted. She tiptoed across the hall, stood for one instant with bent head listening, then stepped within, and noiselessly shot the bolt. She was alone with the dead.

She stared with fascinated eyes at the white sheet which hung straightly, defining the outlines of the rigid body which lay beneath, then moved slowly across the room. The rustle of her silken skirts sounded loud to her in the stillness, and she gathered them with one hand away from her feet, fearful lest the noise should drown approaching footsteps.

She hesitated by the bedside, and twice her hands were sharply withdrawn; but at last she lifted the covering from the calm, quiet face, and she bent over and fixed tearless eyes in intent scrutiny. Precisely as she had studied the face of the girl sleeping so quietly across the hall, she studied the marble face of the dead man. Five minutes passed, and still she stood, not moving.

Through the curtained, open window came faintly the distant roar of the London streets; the bells of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and of St. Paul's,

Covent Garden, struck the quarter, but she did not stir. A sound from the flat itself, that of a closing door, made her start, and she straightened up and listened, her clenched hands pressed to her breast.

She replaced the cloth on the dead face and swept the room with restless, searching eyes; then crossed to a large desk, which came open to the third key she tried. She went hurriedly through the contents of the drawers, which she found arranged in the most perfect order. She flung aside bundle after bundle—these astronomical calculations did not interest her. She pounced eagerly on a yellow packet of old letters, but threw it aside after one glance. There was nothing which she wanted, and she replaced the papers with scrupulous care and relocked the desk.

She crossed with eyes averted from the shrouded figure, and knelt and peered beneath the bed; but could not see in the gloom of the curtained room. She flew to the window and pulled back the blind. A ray of sunshine rested on the silent white form, and that seemed to give her pause; but only for an instant. With shaking fingers she drew from beneath the bed a flat tin box. She unlocked it. The rasping sound made her start; but after listening for an instant she drew out thick bundles of banknotes, then a box which proved to be heavy with golden sovereigns. At last—a long, folded document tied around with lawyer's tape. She snatched it up, and read it with devouring eyes. Then, with one quick glance at the bed, she tore it across and thrust the pieces into the bosom of her dress.

Putting back all the money she relocked and replaced the box, drew the curtain, and stole back to the drawing room, where Margaret still slumbered, as a weary child slumbers. The keys jingled as they were laid down. The strange visitor started and looked at the couch, but the girl did not stir. She laid a gentle hand on Margaret's arm.

MARGARET'S long-lashed lids lifted slowly. She stared for a moment in puzzled perplexity at the beautiful woman who bent to her.

"What's the matter? Where am I?" Then memory came back to her sleep-benumbed brain. "Oh, yes—" she breathed with a shiver. Then she sat upright, brushing back the loosened hair from her forehead. "I'm sorry," she continued, slipping off the couch to her feet, "but I was very tired. I did not hear you come in. Are you Mrs. Carlingford?"

"Yes—Mrs. Carlingford." The visitor's voice was low and sweet, and vibrated as though strongly repressed. Her hand clasped that of Margaret, who thrilled to the firm, kindly grasp.

"You are kind to come so promptly," she said, gratefully. "He died last night, very suddenly. His heart. I—"

"A great shock for you. Were you with him?"

"Yes. I—"

"And you were very fond of your father?"

"I hardly knew him."

"What?"

"I hadn't seen him for years."

"How extraordinary—not for years? And where have you been brought up?"

"In France; people have been paid to look after me." There was a tinge of bitterness in the manner.

"So he left you to strangers? He was very peculiar about everything. I had not seen him for years. How did you come to know the name of Carlingford?"

"My father spoke of you yesterday. You see, I took him by surprise. I ran away from Paris. I had reason; and he said I should go to you later. So that's how I came to telegraph to you. You are good to come."

"Tell me about his death. Do you mind?"

They were sitting together now on the couch, Mrs. Carlingford still keeping a close hold on Margaret's hand.

"You poor child!" cried Mrs. Carlingford, when Margaret had finished, her voice trembling, as she pressed the girl's hand closely between hers. "What a trial for you; and how lonely. You must let me help you now. Would you like me to stay with you until after the funeral?"

"Oh, but—" stammered Margaret, overjoyed at the prospect of a woman's companionship.

"That's settled, then. I came prepared to stay the night. And now, when did you have anything to eat last?"

Margaret admitted that she had only had a cup of tea all that day. She could not eat, she said.

"You must have tea at once," cried Mrs. Carlingford, "and an early dinner. I'll ring—no, don't you move—and you give those orders."

MARGARET felt relief at the kindly way in which her new friend assumed command, and gladly obeyed instructions. She had not known how tired she was, and she rested, under orders, on the couch. Mrs. Carlingford arranged and re-arranged cushions, poured out tea, made her drink, talked with kindly wisdom, and was so entirely sympathetic and tactful that Margaret's lonely heart went out to her. It was novel, delightful to Margaret to receive attentions which were not the result of a handsome salary paid every quarter.

"You look better," said Mrs. Carlingford, an hour later. Her eyes expressed admiration as she looked into Margaret's face. "You are rested, so we can be practical." She drew her chair to the side of the couch. "Death brings many sad duties. Have you written to your father's solicitors?"

"How could I? I don't know who they are."

"Haven't you looked?"

"No, I haven't touched his papers."

Mrs. Carlingford bent her head to hide the involuntary look of relief. "They used to be Morse and Castle," she said; "at least, I think so. Shall I write to them for you, dear?"

"Oh, thank you, would you mind?" murmured Margaret, to whom the thought of going through her father's papers seemed a heavy and mournful task.

"I want to do everything for you I can," answered Mrs. Carlingford, her grey eyes shining with tenderness. "And now about other engagements."

"Mr. Marshall has seen to everything."

"Mr. Marshall?" The elder woman lifted her eyebrows.

"The gentleman who was so kind—last night. I told you, you know. He went for the doctor. He is calling again this evening."

"Then I can see him and thank him for you. We shall not need to trespass on his kindness any further."

"He has been very kind," returned Margaret, a little stiffly. The next moment she was sorry for her slight abruptness. Mrs. Carlingford was so charming, so sympathetic, so anxious to be of help, that she felt she had been ungracious. She laid her hand on her companion's arm, and smiled almost apologetically.

"You see," she said, the colour deepening a little in her cheeks under the other's intent scrutiny, "Mr. Marshall and I were thrown together under very peculiar circumstances. He was so prompt, so ready, and always so courteous, that I should not wish him to think me ungrateful."

"Of course not, dear," answered Mrs. Carlingford; "only, as you say, the circumstances are rather peculiar, and you know"—she put her hand under the girl's chin and gently lifted it—"you are very pretty, and young men—well—" She shrugged her shoulders lightly.

The flush was deeper now. "But for Mr. Marshall," Margaret said, "I should have been placed in a very uncomfortable position this morning. I told you I ran away from Paris—from Mrs. Gascoigne, because—well, she took an unfair advantage of her position. She turned up here this morning—"

"What—from Paris?"

"Yes, she thought, I suppose, to persuade my father to send me back to her; and when she found what had happened she said she was my guardian."

"Oh, that couldn't be. He could never have been so—"