POOR DOCUMENT

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THE GHOST OF LOCHRAIN
OR
THE UNDERGROUND SYNDICATE

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson, author of "The Princess Passes," "The Lightning Conductor," Etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

Elspeth's Plan.

"I must see you for a moment on a matter of life and death." Elspeth had written to Kenrith, and had forgotten in her great haste and anxiety to name a place of meeting; but Kenrith knew, as he read, that he would be able to find the girl through the porter, who had furtively handed him the note.

In the new light thrown by Elspeth's words, the scene just past took a new significance. They could have but one meaning; she had tried to warn him against an attempt upon Oxford's life, and perhaps his own, by poison.

Kenrith did not particularly like Trowbridge, and he had liked him less than ever after his brusque announcement of an engagement with Lady Hilary Vane; but he had not entertained the slightest suspicion against the man's character. Now, had the warning come from any other woman of his acquaintance, he would have regarded it as absurd; but there was something about the young stenographer which compelled his trust, even when reason argued against her.

He recalled the fleeting look of fury on Trowbridge's face when the dog had broken the glass of whisky and soda which Oxford was in the act of raising to his lips. If Elspeth Dean were right, Prince Charlie had saved his master's life.

"Let us try once more to have a farewell drink before we part," Trowbridge now suggested, laughing. "I always keep plenty of tumblers here," and he went to an old-fashioned wall cupboard, with a prettily curtained glass door.

"No, thank you," Kenrith answered pleasantly, but decidedly, before Captain Oxford had time to speak. "My friend is looking rather done up, and as he's still more or less on the invalid list, spirits are not the best thing for him. Rest will do him more good than anything else to night."

This hint was so broad that Trowbridge was obliged to take it. He apologized good-naturedly for his lack of consideration in keeping them up so long after the trying experience they had gone through, and, wishing them both pleasant dreams, left the room.

"What shall I do about Prince Charlie, sir?" asked the porter, who stood outside the door now, awaiting instructions. "Shall I try downstairs again, or"—

"We'll keep him here for the present, thank you," said Kenrith, anticipating his friend's answer. Oxford had been about to give up the dog to the night porter; but finding that Kenrith was willing to keep him in the room he let it go at that. Millar bade the two gentlemen a respectful good-night, closed the door gently, and they were left alone.

Kenrith decided to say nothing to Oxford about the note from Elspeth Dean until he himself had seen the girl and learned upon what grounds she based her suspicions. Nevertheless, he did not neglect the precautions he would have taken if he fully believed in the warning.

While Oxford busied himself in caressing the excited collie, he selected from the waste-paper basket, where the glass had been thrown, a few of the larger fragments and put them in his pocket. He also rolled a big easy chair over the spot where the whiskey had fallen on the carpet.

"Now I am going to leave you for a few moments," said Kenrith. "I have a little business downstairs with our friend the night porter, but I expect to be back soon, and if you don't mind I should be glad if you could stay awake till you see me again."

If Oxford's curiosity were aroused he did not say so. Indeed, his attention was engrossed by Prince Charlie. The dog's behavior seemed odd to his master, for though the wild excitement he had shown in Trowbridge's presence was abating, he was still unlike himself. His beautiful eyes were extraordinarily bright and prominent. He kept up a continual whimpering, quivering all over, and appearing to suffer in some inexplicable way.

"There's something very queer the matter with the Prince," said Oxford. "I don't understand him tonight at all."

"Watch him," replied Kenrith, remembering that some of the spilled whiskey had fallen on the dog's nose. Still, he kept his own counsel, as he went out to search for the sender of the warning.

No one was to be seen in the dimly lighted corridor. Guilty or not guilty, Trowbridge had no idea that he was suspected.

Kenrith went softly but hastily downstairs, meaning to inquire Elspeth's whereabouts of the night porter; but it was she, not the man, who came quickly to meet him.

"Thank heavens," she whispered. "I was afraid something would keep you—or that you would think I was mad."

"I should have thought any one else mad, who wrote such a letter," he said, "but not you. Now tell me everything."

How Elspeth got through her story she did not know; but somehow she made clear the strange history of events, of suspicions and of actual knowledge.

There was no time to tell all, for she had a plan to propose; but she began with the fire, and what had happened to her in the corridor when she had tried to give the alarm. She told what she had heard in the secret room, and of the dead face her groping fingers had touched.

"It was Mr. Trowbridge's voice I heard, of that I am sure. Who was with him, I can't tell; but whoever it was, those two are in the plot together. They mean to kill Captain Oxford; it must have been they who tried to murder him before. When I heard that you and he were to sleep in Mr. Trowbridge's sitting room, I was afraid there might be still another attempt, since the fire had failed. But that was only part of my reason for sending you the note. Those two men must be taken together in the secret room if at all. You see, they mean to go back there for me—and they will be going soon if they haven't gone already; for they have no time to waste. If they find me gone they'll know the game is up, and even if they don't try to escape from the house they'll make it dreadfully difficult to prove anything against them. There'll only be my word, you know."

"They shall be taken in the secret room, never fear," said Kenrith, quietly.

"You mean you will go?"

"Yes, I will go."

"Not alone. They might kill you."

"I have a revolver which I've carried—since yesterday. But I shan't be alone. The man who brought your letter will go with me."

"The night porter."

"Night porter pro tem. He is a detective, and a smart one. No one knows but Oxford, myself, McGowan—and, now, you. Oxford must be with us, too. It's his right, as the plot was against him. He'd never forgive me if I left him out."

As he spoke he stepped to the door of the night porter's tiny room and gave a peculiar knock.

Instantly the man to whom Elspeth had given her letter appeared.

"She knows," said Kenrith. "We can trust her. Thanks to her alone, we are going to unravel the whole plot and kill two birds, or perhaps more, with one stone. While I get some more particulars from this lady, fetch Captain Oxford, if you please—and—look here, you'll both want revolvers. Don't let them delay a moment. This may be a matter of life and death."

The man scarcely waited for the last word but was off, his figure almost instantly swallowed up in the dark.

"Now, you must tell me the way into that secret room," said Kenrith.

"Tell you the way!" exclaimed Elspeth. "Why, I'm going to guide you there. Oh, please don't object! You couldn't get in without me."

Kenrith's eyes lit up with admiration of her courage as he looked down at her in the dim light.

"You're not afraid?" he asked.

"Not with you," the girl impulsively answered, then blushed deeply because she could not take the words back.

Dark as it was, he saw the blush and the look on her face which told him more than the words spoken inadvertently.

"Darling child," he said, "do you know I love you and want you for my wife?"

He had forgotten Lady Lambart and all his fancied obligations to her, even as Elspeth had forgotten all the world but him.

It seemed impossible that she had heard aright. Such happiness could not be, she thought, for her. But before he could speak again Captain Oxford and the porter came hurriedly into the hall.

CHAPTER XX.

What the Light Showed.

There were two ways of reaching the secret room in the tower. Elspeth Dean had the best reasons for being certain of this, but the only one to which she had a clue was the hidden entrance by the fireplace in her own old quarters.

Fortunately, this was the better way to take, as the men who were to be trapped would almost surely have chosen the other. Had they not intended to do so, they would not have left the door of the tower room locked, and this Elspeth knew they had done, as she had unfastened it when she made her escape.

The three men kept close at her heels, ready to protect her if need be, as she led them up the winding stairs, then to the door of the tower room which had been hers. It was still unlocked, as she had left it, and they filed in, noiselessly as shadows

The room was in darkness, save for the pale starlight that flittered in at the uncovered windows. But Elspeth knew well where to find the place she sought, and no light was needed yet from the police lanterns which the detectives carried.

There was a moment of wild suspense when she feared that, after all, she had lost the secret of the spring which opened the sliding panel. But she touched it at last, with a thrill of triumph, and with a faint click as the sole alarm, the way was open.

Now Kenrith put the girl away, when she would have passed through. "You have done enough," he said in a whisper. "The rest is for us."

But she rebelled gently. "I can't leave you," she answered. "I daren't. I should be more afraid here, or going back, than with you near. Oh, I must stay and see it through."

It was true, as she said. He could not leave her behind. Who could tell whether Trowbridge and the other were already in the secret room, or whether they might not see the girl outside, and in an instant revenge themselves for the ruin she had brought upon them?

"Follow us then," Kenrith said. "But—you are to be careful, for my sake."

Never had the girl been so happy. If death should come to her in the next moment, she would not have missed that which makes life worth living.

On the other side of the secret door they paused listening. There was no sound, and the detective opened his lantern.

When Elspeth had previously been on the other side of the secret door she had groped in darkness, seeing nothing. Now, by the lantern light, she saw a curious, narrow passage between rough walls of stone. The passage followed the form of the tower, and Elspeth told herself that it probably ran all the distance round between the embrasures of the windows in the tower room. The floor was covered with a strip of thick carpet, evidently new, and probably meant to deaden the sound of footfalls in case the passage had to be used while the tower room was occupied. Just at the turn the queer, ladder-like staircase was visible—that steep staircase down which she had hurried in fear and nameless horror but a short time ago. It was covered with the same new carpeting as that which protected the floor; a patternless green fabric, stained with dust and mud as if with a trace of every footstep which had passed up or down.

Elspeth pointed to the stairs. "It's up above where the dead woman lies," she whispered. "But they left me lying here. See, there are the bands of stuff that bound me, knotted still. They'll look here when they come"—

"Hush," murmured the detective.

Elspeth pointed to the stairs. "It's up above where the dead woman lies," she whispered. "But they left me lying here. See, there are the bands of stuff that bound me, knotted still. They'll look here when they come"—

"Hush," murmured the detective with a finger on his lips, and turned off the light. They were in black darkness, darkness which in this cold and gloomy place seemed thick, as if it might be felt.

Kenrith laid his hand on the girl's shoulder. She had been trembling a little, but at his touch her nerves grew steady.

There was a slight sound in the distance. A sliding door had been softly pushed back, somewhere out of sight. Then came muffled sound of footsteps on the carpet and voices talking in low tones together. An instant later a yellow light quivered along the dark wall. They were coming round with a lantern; and Elspeth heard the same clinking noise which had frightened her on that first night in the lower room.

In a moment more they would know that they had been tricked; but the light had not found the intruders yet, and the four who lay hid waited, scarcely breathing.

Now they came round the turn of the passage, two tall, black figures, walking one behind the other: but the old-fashioned lantern which, with its clinking chain, hung from the hand of the foremost man, did not send its rays up to their faces. Their features were hidden still, as, if masked by darkness.

"We're late," Trowbridge's voice said, in a hushed tone, yet audible to those intently listening ears. "You oughtn't to have gone so far off when this thing had to be done still, before dawn."

"We've time still," answered another voice, strange to Elspeth, save that she had heard it here before; but she felt the hand on her shoulder start.

"Where was it we left her?" asked Trowbridge. "Here, I think. Why"—— and the light touched the woollen bands which Elspeth had thrown off. But his sentence was never finished. The detective leaped out of his hiding place and flashed the lantern in his eyes.

With a cry of rage and amazement Trowbridge staggered away from the light, but the full blaze of the detective's lantern was upon them both now, sparing only the face of the unknown. The girl distinctly saw him pull a revolver from his breast and aim it at some one among their number. She had the impression that the shot was not fired at random, merely to injure a dangerous enemy and terrify the others, but that it was meant to find and kill one among them. So strong was this impression that, with a quick thought for the man she loved, she tried to throw herself in front of Kenrith. But the light thrown up by Trowbridge's swaying lantern was not upon his face. It was upon Captain Oxford's, and quickly she realized that the coming shot was meant for him.

With a shriek she would have warned him of his deadly danger, but he was saved in another way.

Trowbridge, struggling to regain his balance, had caught his foot in the folds of a loose-lying carpet, and falling against the man behind him, not only destroyed his aim, but received the bullet in his own body.

Then, for the fraction of a second, Elspeth caught a glimpse of that other face. Disfigured though they were by fear and some other emotion more terrible still, she recognized the features. They were those of the mysterious man she had seen twice before—once revealed by white floods of moonlight in the tower room; again, in a corridor downstairs as he had passed her. But even as the revelation came, it was gone. The face was withdrawn from the light, and turning the man fled.

"I must have him!" cried the detective, darting along the passage, his lantern held high, and Captain Oxford sprang forward to snatch up the other lantern, which had crashed to the floor. Disregarding the danger of treachery, he bent over Trowbridge who, shot in the back, had fallen heavily forward on his face.

"Good heavens, I believe he's killed!" cried the young man. "It's Trowbridge!"

"The man who would have killed you," said Kenrith. "Strange that his last act should have been to save your life."

The fallen man stirred and groaned. "I'm—done for," he gasped, trying to turn upon his side, and a thin stream of blood oozing from his lips as he spoke. "I—don't want to die—without seeing—her."

Oxford would have moved him, gently laying him upon his back, but Trowbridge groaned in anger, as well as pain. "No—not you, I hate you," he said, "Let Kenrith."

There was no need for him to finish. The man was dying, and no matter how vilely he had sinned, he must be forgiven now. Kenrith went down on one knee, and brushing up the loose carpet, made a kind of rough pillow for Trowbridge's head.

"Is it Countess Radepolskoi you wish to see?" he said.

"No—she's dead; I killed her," panted the dying man. "Up there above—she's lying. I—did it to—save Hilary. It's Hilary I must see. Bring her someone, quickly."

Kenrith looked up at Elspeth. "What is to be done?" he asked.

"I will fetch Lady Hilary here; I promise," answered the girl.

"And the doctor," said Kenrith.

Trowbridge heard, and lifted his hand with a commanding gesture. "Not now," he said, "Hilary first—the doctor afterward. But what use? I know I'll die. And I don't want to live. I've—lost everything I've played for. For Heaven's sake, girl, bring Hilary to me. If you will—I—I'll tell her things you would all give much to know."

"I'll go," repeated Elspeth. "There's nothing to be afraid of now."

"The other man—whoever he was," suggested Oxford.

"He will have enough to do to escape from the detective," said Kenrith. "And even if he does escape"——

"What then?"

"It will do him no good. I saw his face," Kenrith finished

"And so did I," said Elspeth.

They were the last words she spoke in the secret passage, for Trowbridge's eyes, brilliant with fever in the dull glow of the lantern which was to have lighted him to another crime, implored her not to delay. She went out as she had come, into the tower room and so downstairs, reaching the great hall in time to hear the tall clock strike the half hour after four, and to see the dawn turning to jewels the colored panes in the big stained-glass window.

"The Countess dead!" she kept saying over and over to herself, as mechanically she went on toward the stairs which would lead her to Hilary Vane's room. "It was her face I touched—that cold, cold face lying there in the secret room; her hair that was so wavy and soft. And—and if I hadn't begged him to save Lady Hilary from her at any cost, she would be alive now. How terrible—how wicked he is; and yet—how he loves Hilary! It was for her—he said it was for her."

So Elspeth came to a closed door which she knew, and tapped once, softly. Before she had time to knock again, the door was opened, and Hilary stood silhouetted against the half light in the room within, her long, beautiful hair hanging loose over a white dressing gown.

"You!" she exclaimed, at sight of her friend's pale face.

"Yes, I," said Elspeth. "You haven't been asleep."

"No. I am too unhappy to sleep. Oh, Elspeth, I'm glad to see you. Did you come because you felt I wanted you? You were a dear to send my letter to him—back; but after all it was no use. I shall have to marry him."

"Dearest, he is dying," said Elspeth. "Death, and his own wickedness, have freed you. But—he wants to see you now; and you can't refuse."

"Dying!" echoed the girl.

"Yes. I'll explain on the way, if you'll come. Oh, do come, not only for his sake, but for the sake of the man you love. I think—he knows who Captain Oxford really is, and would tell you that, and everything if you asked him, because he loves you so, though he would tell no one else."

Without another word, Hilary stepped out to join Elspeth in the corridor.

Such explanations as could be given in haste, Elspeth did give; but when the two girls reached the tower, Hilary understood very little of what had passed. She knew that Trowbridge had been shot in a secret place near Elspeth's old room; that Captain Oxford and Mr. Kenrith were both there; that Trowbridge was dying, and had begged to see her; that she must try to get him to tell her all his story before it should be too late.

"How is he?" asked Elspeth, at the door of the secret passage, for Kenrith, hearing her voice, hastened to meet her there. "Oh, don't say he is dead, without speaking?"

"No, he is not dead," said Kenrith, "but he can't hold out long. I think he's been shot through the lungs, and that the case is hopeless. Every word he speaks gives him agony—but he wants to speak, Lady Hilary. He's been saving himself for you. Go in; and send Oxford, who is watching him, here."

A moment later the young man came. The dawnlight was finding its way through the windows of the tower room now, and putting out the stars. The three stood close together, talking in whispers, their faces pale and weary in the gray dusk.

"You'll have to go and find the doctor, Oxford," said Kenrith. "It wont do for us to let him die without one, though I know well enough that no doctor can do any good, or could, if he run after him at the first moment. There's the dead woman up above, too—murdered by him, on his own confession. That secret must be told. McGowan ought to know. Will you wake him, and tell him he had better come? Say that the mysteries which have been puzzling us for twenty-four hours can be explained behind these walls, thanks to Miss Dean, his secretary."

"I'll do my best," said Oxford. "But look here, Kenrith, do you really think that poor wretch in there was the fellow who tried to do for me the other night?"

"I think that he was acting for some one else."

"Who? Your voice sounds strangely when you say that."

"The man our detective has gone to find."

"Yes—but who is that man?"

"I'll keep my secret till Lady Hilary comes out to us again. Then we shall see if she does not say the same name which is in my mind. But go—go and find the doctor. It is time."

CHAPTER XXI.

"The Bravest Girl in the World."

Elspeth Dean and Kenrith were alone together for the first moment since he had told the girl that he loved her.

Only a few yards away, on the other side of the secret door, which was now wide open, they could hear the murmur of the dying man's voice, as he talked brokenly, painfully, to Lady Hilary Vane. But they could hear no words; and strange as was the situation, for a few minutes they forgot all its strangeness, except as it concerned themselves.

"You are the bravest girl in the world," said Kenrith. "No other girl could or would have done what you have done tonight. You saved Captain Oxford's life by the risk of your own"—

"But it was you I thought of, more than of him," confessed Elspeth. "Perhaps I shouldn't have had so much courage if I had known that, whatever happened, you were safe and out of reach of the fire."

"I think you would have just the same courage," said Kenrith, "because it is in you. I had not known you long before I recognized your strength of character, your brave self-reliance and noble loyalty, which alone would be enough to place you on a pedestal far above any other women I have ever known. And then your sweetness"—

"Ah, you are too good to me!" broke in the girl. "I am nothing, really; I'm not worthy of you. I never dreamed that you could even think of me, except in kindness and as if from far off."

"I have thought of very little else for a long time now," said Kenrith. "But I was afraid that I was too old for you—that you couldn't care for me as a woman should be able to care for a man if she"—

"Why, there's no other man in the world," Elspeth cried.

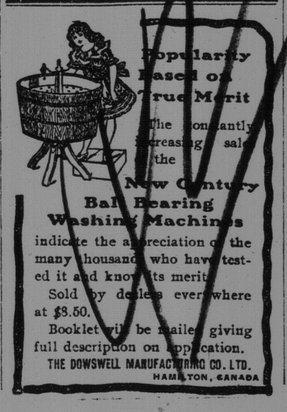
He took her in his arms; and as she stood with her head on his breast, hearing the beating of his heart, she was more than paid for all her suffering of the past few days would have paid for years of suffering far more cruel than she had known in those dark days.

"I thought you were in love with"— she began at last; then stopped, feeling she had no right to say to him what had been on her lips to say. But he answered frankly.

"With Lady Lambart? No, dearest, I was never in love with her. I've never been truly in love with any woman until you came into my life to show me what I had unconsciously been waiting to find through all these years. I didn't love Lady Lambart, but I admired her, was even somewhat attracted by her, especially when we first met; and I admit it's not impossible, if I had not seen you, that while we were thrown together here I might have asked her to marry me. Even tonight I was wondering if it were my duty to do so, though she no longer interested me as she had once. But when you and I looked into each other's eyes tonight I saw something in yours akin to what was in my heart for you. Then I knew that after all I was not too old; that you and I were meant for each other; and that it would be a sin to offer my name to another woman while you and I belonged to one another in love. Probably if I had asked Lady Lambart she wouldn't have accepted me."

Elspeth made no answer, but she hid an incredulous smile on his breast. Many girls in her position would at such a moment have satisfied their innate desire for revenge by telling all the wrongs they had suffered from a jealous rival; but Elspeth held her peace. Even if she had not loved Lady Lambart's daughter she would not have robbed the woman of such kindly friendship as John Kenrith could still give. She said to herself, putting away a mean little temptation, that she would be glad to have him help Lady Lambart in her difficulties.

As if her thoughts had spoken to him, he went on: "I want Lady Hilary to marry Captain Oxford. They love each other and he's a fine fellow. She could never have been Trowbridge's wife; and now you and I must see what we can do for those two."



"You and I!" How delicious it was to hear him speak like that, linking her future with his.

"I believe," she said, "that when the whole truth about this plot is found out we shall discover that Captain Oxford is a man of importance, a man Lady Lambart would think twice of before refusing as a husband for her daughter."

"You think that?" Kenrith echoed. "So do I, somehow; but we have no very solid foundation to go upon, I'm afraid. There's the fact that it was worth some one's while to have him put out of the way, but"——

"Oh!" cried Lady Hilary, coming quickly into the room. "I think he's dying. Is the doctor here yet?"

"Not yet," answered Kenrith. But at this instant the door opened and Oxford came back, with the doctor and Mr. McGowan.

"Bring more light," said Hilary. "It's so dark there. The lantern is burning dimly. And—he has promised to try and sign a statement, if I will write it out."

CHAPTER XXII.

Deathbed Confessions.

It was a strange confession which Trowbridge had made to the girl he had loved and hoped to marry, that night when he knew that death was near.

He had begun brokenly, by telling her how he had loved her, and how, for her sake, he had meant to give up a successful career of crime.

"I want you to be happy," he had said, "so that when you think of me it wont be in hatred. I should like your happiness to come through me, as perhaps it might have come if I had lived and could have taught you to care for me after you were my wife. If it weren't for that wish I'd let every secret I have, of mine, and of others, die with me, for I've been half mad with jealousy of Oxford ever since the first moment I saw and fell in love with you. I came here to kill him, for another; and afterward, to keep you two apart I would have been glad to do it for myself. But I failed, and I've got the shot in my lungs that was meant for his heart. Because I want you to forgive me, and because the one thing to ease the pain I'm suffering, is the thought that it's in my power to give you a happy future. I'm going to tell you a thing you would never know if it weren't for me."

Then the whole story had come out, brokenly, for each word he uttered was like a dagger thrust in Trowbridge's breast.

He was not an American, he said, but an Austrian, who had lived in many places and done many things. Neither was he the millionaire he pretended to be. "That was a pose," he said, "and the Syndicate is responsible for my expenses—the Underground Syndicate, as outsiders call it. No, I'm not going to give it away. The others are just as safe as ever, and it doesn't matter any more for my assistant here—Countess Radepolskoi, as she called herself for this occasion, and for a special purpose. She's dead. She had to die, or she would have spoiled your life."

The Countess who was no Countess, and who had become a Radepolskoi merely because John Kenrith had bought the Radepolskoi diamond, had been sent by the Syndicate to get that diamond; also the pearl which Kenrith was supposed to carry with him; and the jewelry of Lady Ardcliffe, which were famous. Her own jewels, so magnificent in appearance, were almost all false, and her fortune equally a pretence; money supplied by the Syndicate that she might seem a rich woman, above suspicion. Her maid was a humbler member of the same organization, a person of little initiative, but skilled as an assistant. Trowbridge did not know how the Countess had intended to prove Lady Hilary a thief, but if any jewels—one or two of the few real ones, perhaps, possessed by the Countess—were to be hidden in Lady Hilary's room, or attached to her dress, he had no doubt that the maid had been the person to dispose of them.

He had known for some years the woman who called herself the Countess of Radepolskoi. She was half Polish, half French. Her real name was Annette Dritz. He, Trowbridge, had given her reason to think that he cared for her, and would marry her some day; and they had often "worked cases" together, though at the Lochrain Castle Hydro they pretended to be newly acquainted.

As for himself, he had come to Lochrain to play a much higher game than Annette's; nothing less than to get rid of a certain person for an important client of the Syndicate. That person was Captain Oxford. Trowbridge had learned all he could about the young man before attempting to fulfil this engagement. Among other things he had discovered that he was in love with Lady Hilary Vane, and intended to follow her and her mother to the Hydro where they were going. Trowbridge had borne him no personal grudge until he himself had seen and fallen in love with Lady Hilary. Then he had determined to throw over Annette, whose game he had been intending to help on all he could; marry Lady Hilary, and retire from the Syndicate on the considerable private fortune he had been able to amass in his profession.

It was he who had shot Captain Oxford after writing him an anonymous letter appointing a place of meeting, and saying that he had valuable information to give concerning the young man's true parentage. The dog, Prince Charlie, had destroyed his aim by springing on him and biting his wrist, so mangling it that he had been obliged to call for aid from Annette.

He had an appointment to keep in the secret room the same night with the man who had ordered Captain Oxford's death—that important client to whose advantage it was that Oxford should cease to exist.

Thy were to meet there because it was a convenient place for the client, who could come and go by means of an underground passage which led away to the ruin of a still older castle built by the Lochrains, and destroyed by fire before the newer one was begun.

Annette was summoned there to dress and bind the wound, and in the process much blood had flowed before it could be staunched. Trowbridge had not learned then that the room below was newly occupied by a little typewriter who had just arrived; but afterward, when he found out that the room was in use, he had arranged for all necessary meetings to be held elsewhere.

When the first attempt on Captain Oxford's life had failed, another plan was concocted. As Oxford went out every day in Mr. Kenrith's motor car, the chauffeur was bribed to feign illness, and one of the wheels of the motor car was tampered with. That affair also had ended abortively, the only good thing accomplished being the annexation of Kenrith's jewels while he lay unconscious.

Meanwhile James Grant, Mr. McGowan's secretary, had been suborned. As he was known to be in love with Elspeth Dean, and Elspeth Dean was deep in the confidence of Lady Ardcliffe and John Kenrith, it had been hoped that through Grant she could be used as a tool. But Grant knew nothing of the Syndicate. He thought that Trowbridge—the man who offered him a bribe tremendously tempting—was alone interested in bringing off the desired coup.

Thus, always, the Underground Syndicate was faithfully guarded as well as served.

The only good turn, Trowbridge said, which Elspeth Dean had ever done for him, was to enable him to protect Lady Hilary from the malice of the woman who would have had her arrested as a thief. If Elspeth had not come running to tell him what was about to happen he would not have known in time to save the girl he loved. As it was, he had simply ordered Annette Dritz to meet him in the secret room without delay. She had not dared to disregard the command, and had hastened to the rendezvous, leaving her revenge to be accomplished later.

Trowbridge had soon followed, and knowing that persuasion or threats would be useless where Hilary was concerned, had come softly upon the woman and stabbed her in the back. She had staggered forward dead without a cry, and he had laid the body gently on the floor, lest some one should be in Elspeth Dean's room underneath.

Trowbridge had been certain that the dead woman might safely be left to lie throughout the whole day, in the secret room, as nobody save himself and that client of the Syndicate for whom he acted, knew that the hidden room had not been destroyed by a fall of the tower's roof.

As a fire was planned for that same night—a fire in which it seemed certain that Captain Oxford must perish—it would be easy to arrange that the flames should spread a little farther and destroy the tower also, with all the secrets hidden there.

If he had not desired to spare Elspeth Dean, she would have been allowed to sleep as usual in the tower room. Then, she would have heard and suspected nothing; no alarm would have been given, and the scheme would have succeeded.

All these things were told by Trowbridge in a few words, and it was not until the last that he dwelt upon that part of his story which was of most importance for Hilary Vane's future.

"Our Syndicate ferrets out the secrets of rich people," he said, "or people who would be rich or titled if some one else were out of the way. Then, it offers its help in bringing about a desired object; and as it never solicits a client who has not something already to conceal, the Syndicate does not risk exposure. It has never been betrayed by a client, and has never betrayed a client. I am not betraying one now, because the man for whom I've acted, under orders from the Syndicate, is already betrayed. Kenrith saw his face. I know, and must have recognized it, as only a few hours ago the man had sent for him—sent for him to keep out of the way while the fire was started by me. Not that this man or I cared much whether Kenrith lived or died; but he's known to sit up late reading in his room, and it was thought safer for our plans he shouldn't be there.

"Kenrith saw him, as he tried to shoot Oxford, and shot me instead; and besides, he was pursued by a man younger than he. The one I speak of is Lord Lochrain.

"We—the Syndicate—had found out that there was a secret in Lord Lochrain's family. The son of the old Lord, this one's predecessor, had disappeared, and was supposed to be dead. If he had not died, the present Lord Lochrain would not have inherited. But that was not the secret. The secret was this:

"Old Lord Lochrain's son used to have the tower room, where Miss Dean has been sleeping. He was in love with a girl beneath him in station; his father discovered the affair and forbade the boy to see the girl. Not long after a quarrel the father and son had in consequence, there was an attempt on the old man's life. Someone stole into his room at night, and tried to murder him, but the old man shrieked for help, and help came. The murderer had escaped, leaving only a knife, known to belong to Lord Lochrain's only son. After that night the young man was never seen again, and his father lived on, believing him guilty. The boy had escaped, apparently, by the secret way from his own room in the tower, and next morning the mark of blood-stained fingers was found on his pillow.

"After this the present Lord Lochrain who—mark this—was visiting in the castle at the time of the attempted murder, was practically adopted by his uncle. Later, when proofs of the son's death in Canada were obtained, he became heir to the title and the estates, which would not have amounted to much had not coal lately been discovered on the land.

"We of the Syndicate got on the track of this secret. We discovered that the young man had married the girl he loved, but that she had been made to believe her marriage illegal, and had left her husband. Afterward a boy was born to her while she was in extreme poverty, and soon after his birth she had died.

"There are no better detectives than we have in the Syndicate. We followed up every trace and learned after many difficulties that the child had been taken from a provincial asylum for foundlings and adopted by a charitable old lady, who knew nothing of his antecedents. That child is now a man, and is known as Captain Oxford.

"If we had no such proofs that the present Lord Lochrain himself was guilty of attempting to kill his uncle, and persuading his cousin to go off and join his sweetheart the same night, without knowing what was planned to happen, we were able to frighten him by making him believe that we had them. Also we were sure it was he who had secretly persuaded the girl that her marriage was illegal and induced her to run away from her young husband. Such hints were dropped by one of our agents that Lord Lochrain left himself completely in our power, and offered the sum of a hundred thousand pounds to the Syndicate to rid him of Captain Oxford, the real heir, who could claim everything if he but knew.

"Lord Lochrain had never seen Oxford and wished to do so. He was staying with a friend at some miles distance from the Castle, in order to meet me and talk over the progress of affairs from time to time. But with the idea of seeing his cousin he decided to come to the Hydro as an ordinary guest.

"His first sight of Oxford gave him a fright, however, for the family likeness between them is marked. He did not think it would be wise, after all, to appear in public and have the resemblance commented on by strangers just at the time that Oxford was to be put out of the way. Therefore he kept to his room, and intended to leave tomorrow. So far as I know, no one stopping in the hotel had a glimpse of him, except Kenrith and perhaps Elspeth Dean, one night when he came through the secret door into her tower room, not knowing that any one slept there.

"It was he who had the secret of that strange old bed in that room. He met me just as I had made the girl prisoner, after she gave the alarm of fire, and helped me carry her to the room where she had slept. She was unconscious, and it was easiest to leave her there then, as we had other work to do quickly. But he said the head of the bedstead was one with the wall which divided the room from the secret passage, and without moving her the whole bed could be slid along, the mattress tipped up and the girl thrown on the floor of the passage. Then the bed could be slid back again and everything in the tower room would look as it had looked before.

"One big mistake was in letting her live till we should be able to come back and carry out a plan I had for putting it out of her power to injure us.

"Once again I tried to serve myself and the Syndicate by taking Oxford's life; but then, as always, fate has seemed to be against me. Time after time he has been saved in one way or another—twice by his dog; at last by me, since I am dying in his place."

Lord Lochrain was never brought to trial for crimes committed and crimes planned, for in attempting to escape from the pursuing detective he slipped on the stairs which led from the secret way to an underground passage, and, falling to the bottom, broke his neck. But a short confession signed just before death by Trowbridge and Kenrith's recognition of the face in the tower would have been enough to doom him, had he lived.

Clews followed by the mysterious Underground Syndicate in search of prey were traced again by men employed by Oxford, and his case was proved, one valuable bit of evidence being the sketch of his father—a speakness likeness of himself—preserved by Elspeth Dean.

Not far from the dead body of Annette Dritz, in the secret room, were found all the stolen jewels, this of Lady Ardcliff's, as well as Kenrith's famous diamond and pearl. But there were no papers compromising the Underground Syndicate, and that organization still works with all its old secrecy and astounding success.

Lady Hilary has now no need to prove her innocence to any one, and Lady Ardcliffe was forced to apologize for all she said. As for Elspeth, she had never faltered in her loyal belief in her beloved friend, and it was not through any curious questioning, but purely by accident, that she learned from Hilary's own lips the explanation of certain small mysteries which had puzzled her.

Hilary had not wanted her mother to know where Kenrith kept his jewels, lest, in her foolish pride of seeming to know all his affairs, she might be tempted to speak of that which had better be kept secret.

When the girl had bent over Kenrith as he lay unconscious after the motor accident she had thought nothing of the jewels, nothing of all her wild talk, to Elspeth, but only of the man himself. She had laid her hand upon his heart to see if it were still beating, and it was then that Trowbridge and the "Countess" had appeared.

As for the shining jewel that had been tied up in Hilary's handkerchief, it was a ring given her by Captain Oxford. She had not dared to wear it openly because of her mother, and had kept it hidden inside her dress, meaning to give it back if she should be compelled to engage herself to another man.

Captain Oxford did not wish to hurry on his marriage now. Because he loved Hilary so much, and because he had suffered so much pain, and humiliation at the hands of the girl's mother, he wished to be in the possession of his title and estates before she came to him as his wife.

It was different, however, with Kenrith. The sooner Elspeth Dean could belong to him the better he would be pleased; and there was no reason for waiting.

After that strange and terrible night the little stenographer was the heroine of Lochrain Castle Hydro. But she was no longer a stenographer.

The girl considered herself still bound to work for Mr. McGowan until her fortnight was up; but Kenrith would not hear of this arrangement, now that she was engaged to him. He insisted that Mr. McGowan should at once telegraph to London for some one to fill Elspeth's place; and that he should state to the manager of the agency at the same time his reason for superseding her. Therefore, instead of learning that her protegee had been unsatisfactory, Elspeth's old friend, Miss Smith, was informed that Miss Dean was to marry John Kenrith, the millionaire from the North, whose book on social questions she had been typing when they first made acquaintance.

The girl had been liked by all the guests at the hotel who had come in contact with her, and the news of her engagement pleased everybody—everybody, with one exception.

That exception was Lady Lambart, to whom Elspeth Dean's happiness meant the most complete humiliation in her forty years of life. She had had many hard blows, but the loss of John Kenrith, and his love for the girl she had hated and tried to ruin was the hardest of all. Many days passed before she was able to console herself in the smallest degree by the reflection that at least her daughter would be marrying a rich man when she married the new Lord Lochrain, and that probably the mother of Lady Lochrain would have her debts paid and be decently provided for.

She had done all she could to separate the lovers, but they had come together in spite of her, and she knew Hilary well enough to be sure that she would want for nothing.

She even tried to atone for the past by being gracious to her future son-in-law; but, though scrupulously courteous he was icily cold, and Lady Lambart guessed that her life would, in future, better be lived abroad.

Of all places on earth, Lochrain Castle Hydro was the last one where she wished to remain, since it also sheltered Elspeth Dean; but a certain stubborn pride compelled her to consent to Hilary's wish that they should remain. Outwardly, she was on friendly terms with Kenrith guessing that Elspeth had not told him of her cruelty, and, as Hilary was asked to be bridesmaid, she actually found herself compelled, unless she would betray her feelings, to be present at the wedding.

The happiest day of Elspeth's life was the most miserable one in Lady Lambart's; but she wore a brave enough smile on her handsome face as she bore her punishment.

Six weeks later came Hilary's marriage to the new Lord Lochrain, about whose great romance every one was talking. This might have been a triumph for the bride's mother had she been as other mothers, but she realized when it was too late that she had played her cards badly for her own hand, after all.

She was not disappointed in the allowance she hoped to receive, but even gentle-hearted Hilary did not speak of any future life together. And now, in the Summer, Lady Lambart, painted and still pretty, is seen at Aix-les-Bains or Hamburg. In the Winter she is at Cairo or Monte Carlo, and, though she takes in several society papers, she invariably crumples them up, or throws them aside angrily, if she comes upon a paragraph concerning the social success of young Mrs. John Kenrith, wife of the millionaire.

END.

Better Than Spanking

Spanking does not cure children of bed-wetting. There is a constitutional cause for this trouble. Mrs. M. Summers, Box W. 70, Windsor, Ont., will send free to any mother her successful home treatment, with full instructions. Send no money but write her today if your child is troubled in this way. Don't blame the child, the kidneys are it can't help it. This treatment also cures adults and aged people troubled with urine difficulties by day or night.