

The Imprisoned Heiress

—OR—

The Spectre of Egremont.

CHAPTER XII.

"You will hear me through patient-ly, then? A thousand thanks, Xina," and a thrill of joy ran through Lyle Indor's soft tones. I have never said a word to you of love because I had always known of your betrothal to Lord Ashcroft. I would not be dishonorable. But now that he has come to Egremont, and you have shown warmth of manner in your treatment of him, I am emboldened to plead in my own behalf."

Receiving a gracious smile, Indor continued:

"I will not plead in the usual lover phrase for your smiles and your love, Alexina. I do justice to your good impulses, but I am not ignorant of your faults. You are selfish and tyrannical, but if I become a part of yourself tyranny will not be hard to bear. Can you smile upon a lover who reminds you of your faults, Xina?"

The novelty of the manner of his wooing pleased the heiress, and she asked:

"Am I to understand, Lyle, that you love me?"

"You are! Can you love me in return?"

"I can—I do, Lyle. I have loved you ever since you came to Egremont. Your coldness has at times offended me, but I have never ceased to love you."

Lyle Indor's eyes sparkled, and he made a movement toward her, but instantly checked it, sinking back in his chair.

"This assurance gives me unbounded pleasure, Xina," he said. "I prize your love that I might speak to you of marriage, but, alas, you are primed to Lord Ashcroft, who will marry you from a sense of duty, and I must walk on through life alone. I cannot ask you to dismiss him and give yourself to me, for by so doing you will lose all the wealth you now adorn. I fear, too, that should you see some other lady enjoy the fortune of which you would be dispossessed, you would regret your rejection of Lord Ashcroft and acceptance of me."

"Oh, no, I cannot give up Egremont!" declared the heiress. "Tired as I am of being here, I would not exchange the place for any in the realm. I want to see society but not at the expense of Egremont, the home of my ancestors; Egremont, with its farms, its land, its rent-rolls—oh, no, I could not! I have been taught to think of all these things with pride, and I cannot give them up. To-day, when we walked through the picture-gallery, you can scarcely imagine what a thrill of pride I experienced in thinking that that long row of portraits represented the faces of my ancestors. Is it not a grand thing to be the owner of all these possessions, to be admired and honored as the Lady of Egremont?"

"I can understand your feeling, Xina."

"I love you, as I said, Lyle, and I would sacrifice almost anything except Egremont, to become your wife. But I cannot resign what so gratifies my pride—no, not even for your love. Oh, why did my father make such a cruel will! Why did not my mother protest against it! Was there no one to plead in behalf of the little child whose future they were so lightly bartering away?"

The heiress spoke passionately, and a fiery glow burned on either cheek, and a stormy look brooded in her dark eyes.

Lyle Indor saw the struggle she was undergoing—the struggle between love and pride—and he chose to end it.

"Dear Xina," he said, in those soft, feminine tones she loved so well, "I could never accept such a sacrifice at your hands. No, we must part. You will wed Lord Ashcroft, and I will look on and see you given to another, and then return to my lonely life. If I may not have you to love, no one can prevent me from cherishing your memory. I shall never marry!"

"Oh, why did not that assassin succeed in his design?" cried the heiress, passionately. "If he had but killed Lord Ashcroft—don't look so shocked, Lyle; I think it, and must say it—I would then have married you, and we would then have been happy. I cannot think of it without anger. I feel as though I could almost kill Lord Ashcroft myself!"

"Alexina!" and Lyle Indor shrank from her in horror. "It is terrible enough to think of assassination even at the hands of a man, but to hear a woman's lips— But you were not in earnest!" and his tones became calmer. "Poor, troubled child! In your momentary bitterness you would have welcomed anything that would have set you free from your galling band."

"I would, Lyle, and the feeling is more than momentary. Last night, as I arose from the chair in Lord Ashcroft's sitting-room and looked up into his face, I could not help feeling sorry that I did not look upon it in death."

"I think he read your feelings, Xina, as I did," answered Indor.

"Then perhaps he will resign my hand and go home."

"No, for he feels bound in honor to meet his engagement with you. He will not give you up, and it is best not. It would be well if you could gain an interest in him, Xina. You would be the happier for it."

"There is no need to 'affect' an interest in him, Lyle. I feel one now, but not one of the sort that would be most agreeable to his lordship," replied the heiress. "I am glad Kepp is still permitted to go free."

"How is he permitted to go free?" asked Indor, abstractedly.

"Why, don't you know, Lyle? Lord Ashcroft went to see Kepp and his mother to-day, and his tender heart was so touched by their distress that he has begged my guardian to wait a little longer, and see what will happen next. Lord Egremont protested against this request, but finally yielded, for new complications have arisen. I only hope that he will take advantage of his respite."

"Hush, Xina. You do not hope so. It is a terrible thing to be cut off in one's youth, when one's prospects are all bright, and a happy marriage is all arranged. An assassination is awful at any time! As much as I regret that Lord Ashcroft is bound to you, and that you are bound to him, I do not wish that any evil should happen to him. On the contrary, I wish him all possible happiness."

Indor's tone was profoundly melancholy, and caused the tears to spring to the eyes of the heiress.

Noticing her emotion, he arose and approached her, took her hand, and respectfully raised it to his lips, and said:

"Perhaps I have done wrong, Xina, in talking as I have done to the betrothed bride of another, but I fancied that you loved me, and that the confession of my passion for you might prove a consolation in some dark hour."

"It will! It will!" sobbed Alexina, arising and leaning upon the arm he offered her. "I shall think of it often, Lyle. Perhaps something may happen yet to free me, and if there should, remember then that I am bound to you. I would rather marry you than any one else in the world."

"I will remember it," he answered, despondently. "Yet what good will the remembrance do me? And, Xina, I would not for worlds that harm should come to Lord Ashcroft, not even to bring about my joy!"

He held out his arms, received her in them, pressed a long, tender kiss upon her forehead, received a caress in return, and then put her from him, saying:

"Henceforth, Xina, you must be to me as the bride of another!"

"Unless something happens, Lyle," she said, eagerly.

"Unless something happens," he returned, with sad emphasis. "And now, Xina, I will extinguish the light, and conduct you to the house. I fear you may get cold if we remain here longer."

He opened the door, and the heiress went out upon the step while he extinguished the light, put away the lantern, and then rejoined her.

She took his arm silently, and they passed slowly into the walk that led to the residence.

The conduct of Lyle Indor had touched her to the heart. She had long loved him, not knowing that her affection was returned, but receiving his attentions only as the respectful treatment he would have accorded a dear sister. The knowledge that he loved her now filled her heart with a delicious joy, and she longed with all the strength of her passionate heart to cast off the fetters binding her to Lord Ashcroft, and become the wife of Lady Egremont's nephew.

For one wild moment, when the awful yet trembled upon Indor's lips, she had been tempted to declare that she would forfeit everything if she might but be always with him, but the caution and love of luxury that were a part of her nature gave her power to resist temptation.

No, she could not give up everything even for Lyle Indor. As they proceeded up the gloomy walk they talked freely of the love of which the expression must henceforth be forbidden them, and when they reached the porch the heiress whispered:

"Remember what I told you, Lyle. If anything should happen to Lord Ashcroft I am bound to you. If Kepp should kill him, I will surely become your wife."

Without waiting for the reproach which this remark would call from Indor's lips, she ran into the house, and silently sped along the halls to her own apartments.

He secured the door, removed his shoes, and followed more leisurely, fearful of being overheard by some sleepless inmate of the dwelling.

As he passed along the wide upper hall, at the end of which opened the rooms of Lord Ashcroft, the Lady Loren, and others, besides passages leading to other parts of the residence he saw fitting at a little distance before him the spectre of the Lady Jasmine.

He recognized it in a moment, and its innocent eyes rested upon him, thrilling him with an uncomfortable feeling that was almost fear.

She glided on, her feet not making the faintest noise upon the polished floor, and suddenly seemed to fade from his sight, vanishing at the entrance of a passage as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up.

Looking into the passage, almost at the same moment, he saw nothing of her, and he hastened on to his room, breathing more freely when he had placed his door with its secure bolts, between himself and the spectral visitant of Egremont.

(To be continued.)

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