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LORD WHARTON'S NIECE - AND - THE HEIR TO REGNA COURT.

CHAPTER VI.

He reddened, and his small eyes were cast down, and then raised to her face, with a slinking kind of inquiry...

At the turn of the road from which another leads down to Regna, she paused for a moment or two to look at the exquisite view.

"If I were an artist like Mr. Wayne, I should like to paint that," said Claire to herself.

As she was about to ride on, the slim figure of a girl came out from a meadow gateway, and stood with her hands shading her eyes looking up the road down which Claire had ridden.

Claire rode up beside her. "Good-morning, Lucy," she said. "How startled you look! Did I frighten you?"

"Oh, no, miss," said Lucy, dropping her courtesy. "That is—yes; you did startle me a little. I thought it was somebody else."

Claire smiled and looked at her with friendly admiration.

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real. It is like a beautiful picture. I haven't seen half of it yet. "We will make a tour of inspection after lunch," said Claire.

Mrs. Lexton looked at her admiringly. "And I have not quite persuaded myself that you are real, Claire," she said.

"Yes," said Claire, rather absently. She was asking herself whether she should tell Mrs. Lexton about her meeting with Gerald Wayne; then, ashamed of her hesitation, she said, "No."

"I have had quite an adventure this morning. I went up to the chapel on the hill and met Mr. Wayne, the gentleman who found my spray last night. He is an architect, she smiled, and ever so many other things, and he is sketching the chapel."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lexton, with placid interest. "Is he a clever young man?" "Yes, I think so," said Claire, with an indifference which she felt was assumed. "I only saw a part of a sketch which he had made. Shall we go for a drive this afternoon, or would you like to wander about the grounds, Mary?"

Mrs. Lexton said that she would rather see something more of the house.

"I feel that I want to know it as soon as possible," she said.

Claire laughed. "Your enthusiasm is quite catching, Mary," she said, "although I have been here so many years, there are some parts of the house that I have not been into."

A portion was always kept closed during Lord Wharton's life, and since his death, her voice dropped, "I have felt no desire to penetrate into it. The inhabited part is quite huge enough for one person, and I am glad you have come, Mary, to share it with me."

Wait till I have changed my habit and we will start while your enthusiasm is still hot."

She exchanged her habit for a dress of plain, white merino, whose black sash made it a significant mourning, and they went into the grounds and toward the wing which Gerald Wayne had spoken of on the preceding night.

Here the walls were closely covered by ivy, which had partly overgrown

some of the windows. With its arched doorway and diamond panes, the wing looked very ancient, and somewhat weird.

"How exquisite!" exclaimed Mrs. Lexton. "And this part is unoccupied."

"Yes and has been for years. I think the rooms have been left undisturbed since the time of Lord Wharton's grandfather. The village folk say that it is haunted, and that figures of the usual raggedness and whiteness are seen to pass the windows. I believe that a murder was once committed in one of the rooms."

"How delightful!" said Mrs. Lexton, with a shudder. "We can get in, I suppose?"

"I have brought some old keys with me," said Claire, "and I am hoping that one will fit. Yes, this is the one. How stiff the lock is!"

The key turned after some pressure, and the door creaked back on its hinges. They entered a small passage, with an old worm-eaten stair at the further end. Dust lay thick everywhere, and to Mrs. Lexton's consternation, a mouse, as much startled as she was, scampered across the oak floor.

They opened the doors leading to the ground-floor rooms, and found themselves in spacious apartments, furnished in old world style, and with the dust as thick as in the hall. Claire looked round her curiously, and Mrs. Lexton held her breath.

"I can quite understand the village people's belief," she said, "the place feels haunted. What magnificent furniture! Claire, it is a sin to leave it here, neglected and going to ruin."

"Let us go upstairs," said Claire. They went to the upper floor. It was as fully furnished as the rooms below. One was a bedroom, with the hangings to the bed in rents, torn by the hand of time. A satin coverlet lay across a chair, as if it had been thrown there the night previous.

"The murder may have been committed in that bed!" said Mrs. Lexton, in an awe-stricken voice. "Let us come away!"

They went into the opposite room, and Mrs. Lexton uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, this has been used lately!" she said.

(To be continued.)

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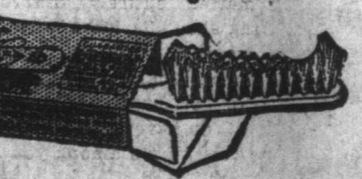


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