

THE GHOST OF LOCHRAN, OR THE UNDERGROUND SYNDICATE

BY MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON, AUTHOR OF "THE PRINCESS PASSES," "THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR," ETC.

CHAPTER XIII—(Continued)

Elspeth did not even say to herself that she was right in her surmises, it was nothing to her. She had come to have the idea—though but dimly and vaguely—that many mysteries were moving shadow-like about the hotel, and that all these dark shades were controlled by one hand, perhaps aided by others; that somehow there was a connection between all the gliding shadows.

Elspeth remained in her room all the evening, as she had remained in the beautiful old one; but she did not go to bed at the usual hour. She sat up, trying to read, and once in a while glancing at the stained and faded sketch of the boy in old-fashioned clothes which she had brought away from the other room between the pages in a book of her own.

The face was so like Captain Oxford's that she half intended to show it to him some day, and though she would not wish to have no right to take it with her out of the house when she left Lochrain Castle she had been disinclined to leave it in its old place. If she did so and the tower room was really occupied she could not get the sketch if she should make up her mind to let Captain Oxford see it.

The dimly lighted corridor was silent as the grave. Even the man who collected the boots had come and gone and would not return till early morning. She tipped downstairs and was not disturbed by a sound. On the ground floor there was a grandfather clock solemnly ticking and its hands pointed to the quarter before 1.

Elspeth told herself that she was safe now she would meet nobody—unless someone wandering for as strange a reason as her own.

To go from this part of the house to the tower where Elspeth had lived it was necessary to pass the doors of Mr. Kenneth and Captain Oxford's rooms. They were in the same corridor, just beyond which was the entrance to the tower; and their corridor could be shut off from a small square hall (in which several private sitting rooms opened) by a heavy sliding door.

This door Elspeth had never seen closed, and so far as her knowledge extended, it never was closed by night or by day, but to her astonishment, it was shut.

"It is sure to squeak and wake somebody up," she thought ruefully, as she tried cautiously to push the door back. But for some time she tried in vain, and it was only when she discovered an old-fashioned latch, which held the door down as she strove to turn the handle, that she was able to open the door.

"Supposing anyone on the other side had wanted to come through," she said to herself, "she could not have got out of the corridor this way." And then she thought sprang into her mind that the closed and locked door was the door to the mystery she was hoping to unravel.

The idea frightened her, as it made the plot—whatever it was—appear so elaborate and so formidable. She was about to stop, when she might prove to be beyond her powers, or that she might be destroyed in the attempt she was about to make.

Still, she remembered that she had pushed back the sliding door which, so far from squeaking, glided so smoothly along its groove that Elspeth wondered if it had not been lately oiled.

doors in. It's a wonder he or some one else hasn't heard me before." She turned to turn toward the door which led into the great hall when she was round the waist from behind and at the same time a hand was pressed over her mouth. She felt that she had been lifted off her feet, and that she was being borne away, away toward the corridor in the direction of the tower.

There could be no doubt that the hand which pressed her lips was the hand of the would-be murderer. She had interfered with the success of his work and she was to be removed perhaps from the world. But, strangely enough, there was no fear for herself in Elspeth's heart at that instant. She thought only of Kenneth and Captain Oxford, but especially of Kenneth, whom she loved.

She could not let them die a terrible death. If she could but save them she would be willing to die in their place. Let the murderer revenge himself upon her as he chose.

With the fierce strength that only desperation gives, she gripped at the hand which covered her mouth, and regaining her liberty for a second's space, uttered such a shriek as she could not have given in a moment of less peril. It rang wildly through the corridor, and was terrible even in the girl's own ears. It seemed to her that it might almost make a dead man turn in his grave to be called thus. But would it wake John Kenneth and Captain Oxford?

She could not pray that it might be so, for the scream was stifled in the midst by the hand which crushed her face again, with an iron grip under her chin, and a pressure so savage over her lips that she seemed the blood must spring through the delicate skin. Her neck was bent so roughly that her muscles were strained, and her breath choked back upon her tongue.

A shower of sparks seemed to rise and fall before her eyes, smarting and raining tears in the thick smoke. She struggled again, but vainly, and the agonizing struggle of body and mind against the unconscionable force, lost breath and consciousness.

When she awoke, it seemed that she was lying on a bed—a bed at the same time comfortable and familiar. "What had happened?" Had she had a horrible dream? She asked herself, but found no answer.

There was the same pleasant, mingling fragrance of dried lavender and old wood which she had noticed in the wonderful bed in the tower room. Often she had told herself that these scents would make her think of that room, no matter how long it might be, and how many years might have passed. Only last night she had thought that, not knowing she was not to sleep in that bed again.

But, she said in her mind perhaps it was part of the dream that she had been changed to another room. Surely she could not be mistaken. No other bed could be like that. And then, if she were not there, why should she be in bed at all? What about the fire burning behind the closed door in the corridor, her frantic knockings, her scream, and the hand that had choked away her breath? Had she really gone through that terrible night? Or did she not doubt it. Perhaps, even at that minute Mr. Kenneth and Captain Oxford were being hurried to death. Somehow she must save them.

She tried to sit up, but something held her back and tied together at the wrists; she could not move, and there had been. And her feet were bound also. She was powerless to move, but at least she could cry out.

Suddenly she remembered how near to the corridor of the burning room it was. If the fire spread it would reach the tower; and if in reality she were lying on her old bed in the tower room, it was only the question of a little time before the fire should reach her, and she would be burned to death.

"Fainted," came a whisper, louder than before. "Can't be sure," murmured a second voice. "She may be shamming." A moment later Elspeth felt the pressure of a hand on her chest. "She doesn't seem to breathe," was the whispered comment.

"Well, then, let us leave her for the present. She can't possibly escape." "If she did, she wouldn't be heard." "Yet we are whispering." "Loud voices might rouse the girl to consciousness. It's more convenient that she should be as she is. We've no time to waste upon her now. Little wretch! If she hadn't spoiled our game, how below we should have had her!"

"Not too late to think that," there must be no suspicion against us. We had better go now. But I would feel safer if I were certain she could make no noise." "Simple enough to close her mouth." "Not what you think I am. We can't afford to risk the smallest tolltale stain upon our show ourselves downstairs among the people who have been roused by the fire, and, besides, I've another plan. The thing must be done before morning, and in such a way that she can be carried off without our being seen. I'll do it, with no one to guess that she met death by violence. A dose of laudanum is the thing; the bottle found by her side. It's a good idea. She'll be dead herself because she'd been discharged."

"You think of everything." "I have had some experience; otherwise I should not be where I am." "Can you get hold of the laudanum?" "Yes, I always keep plenty of stage properties. There, I've made a gag of a sort out of a bottle of laudanum after the work is fit, and she can wake when she likes it, without causing you a qualm." Elspeth heard every word of this conversation, but she could not stir a finger to open her mouth she lay limp and motionless as if made of no real substance. A great lump of cambric was forced between her teeth, and she lay feigned unconsciousness. Her hearing seemed now almost abnormally keen. She heard the soft sound of footsteps on the carpet, and she knew that she was being watched.

After that she was still, and she knew that she had been left alone. "What had happened to the men who were going, and it was reasonable to suppose that they would be gone some time. Still it could not be very long with her to be disposed of 'before morning' after the fashion which had with so much quiet grimness been suggested. They would need darkness to hide the deed, if she were to escape. Like a woman's hair, she felt her pulse was to spring up with a shriek. But she forced the cry back, and instead of drawing away her hand she passed it over her eyes, and once more she slept.

There was no doubt this time. She was touching a woman's hair, hair elaborately dressed in thick waves and curls, and she felt that she was to do a thing against which her flesh and blood rebelled, she touched a face so cold that it might have been carved in stone; then, when she felt the features, wanders to a marble throat and motionless breast, clothed in silk, she yielded at last to her impulse, and she felt the hand of the perpetrator, who was to die tonight.

For her there was but one ray of light in darkness. She had heard one of the men say to the other that she had "got their game." That must mean, she thought, that the alarm she had given had been heard; that John Kenneth and Captain Oxford had been saved. And the idea that she had been able to do this gave her courage to attempt more. She had only herself to lose, but if she could only free herself she could find out and, if afterward, she could escape, she would be able to give at least one villain up to justice.

Once more she searched with eager fingers for some spring on the wide panel of the door, and she found it at last, the movable bed; but finding nothing, she moved on until she came at last upon another wooden panel. There she did find a knob of metal, and pressing it she slipped silently, smoothly away from her bed. Instead, an open space was left, through which her body could pass, and she slipped out, and she felt a relief with a joyous sensation of being saved.

For an instant she stood bewildered, but the faint light from the window, which blackness seemed brighter than it really was, to eyes accustomed to the dark. Dimly she could see shapes she soon made out as chairs and tables. She was in a furnished room, with uncurtained windows that were squares of starry sky; now, and life or death might lie, for her, in the dimly light of the surroundings impressed themselves upon her mind.

"The tower room! And I must have come in by the entrance through which the ghost—or man—appeared—the other night. That is why he vanished so quickly and so silently. He came through a secret door, and went back by the same way." Elspeth waited only long enough to close the door (which shut by a spring, as it had opened), made sure of exploring finger that could find the spring again, if need were, and then she fled to the door which was the known entrance to the room.

She had feared to find it locked, and so it was, but only by a bolt on the inside, which she slipped back. Then she was in the landing which led to the tower stairs, and there the air was still thick and acrid with smoke.

help. But he was in the one room of the house where it seemed that it would be impossible for her to get at him and still carry out the plan she had proposed to herself. Besides, it seemed ominous to her that Mr. Kenneth and Captain Oxford should be in a room offered to them by Trowbridge. She did not believe that such an offer would have been made except for a reason of which she trembled to think.

Her brain worked rapidly. She asked herself what she could do, and realized that, if anything at all were to be done it must be done quickly. She took from her pocket the purse which held all she had in the world—a crown, "and"—holding up her a sovereign—"this will be for you if you can get a message, which I will give you, to Mr. Kenneth, without any one else guessing from whom it comes." I should like to write a note—just a word or two.

"I'll turn up one of the lights, miss," said the night porter, "and you know there's paper and envelopes on all the tables here in the hall." Elspeth sat down at a small table in a corner and wrote hurriedly. "I must see you for a moment on a matter of life and death. Don't contradict anything the bearer says, but come quickly. Do not eat or drink anything that may be given you in the room where you are, either. This is important. Any excuse to refuse."

In a moment the note was finished, and instead of putting it in an envelope Elspeth twisted the half-sheet she had chosen into a tiny wisp. "Go to the door of Mr. Trowbridge's sitting-room," she said, "and hand him the note, and ask him to get it to me. When he has stopped to do so, probably he will go back for a minute to speak to Captain Oxford; but in any case he will be waiting here in the hall. When you come back with Mr. Kenneth I'll give you half the sovereign."

"Thank you, miss, very kindly," said the man, "I will come back as much as I can as easily, every night. You can depend on me. Shall I leave the light turned up?" "No, no, thank you," said Elspeth hastily. "I'd rather sit in the dark."

Her brain had acted quickly, and she had told herself that, in case her plans went wrong, it would be well for her not to be seen in the hall by any other eyes than those of Mr. Kenneth.

Upstairs, Trowbridge was lingering in his own sitting room, chatting with the two men to whom he had lent it. He excused himself for remaining by saying that every one in the house was far too excited to sleep. They talked over various famous faces, and at last Trowbridge said, "Now when you two fellows have had a parting drink with me I'll say good-night and go off to my own bed. By Jove, I never thought these quarters could have been made to look so comfortable. That cot and the big sofa are quite inviting. I only hope Mr. Kenneth that the pain of your burns won't keep you awake."

Elspeth smiled. "If it does, I shan't lose many hours' sleep. It's nearly three." "By Jove, I've kept you up too long," exclaimed Trowbridge. "It's time for whisky and good-night." He went to a small table, where stood a Tantalus, a couple of syphons and some glasses.

"Don't trouble, thank you, as far as I am concerned," said Elspeth. "You two are the first ones who have been to my own bed. For Jove, I never thought these quarters could have been made to look so comfortable. That cot and the big sofa are quite inviting. I only hope Mr. Kenneth that the pain of your burns won't keep you awake."

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"My engagement with Lady Hilary Vane," Trowbridge went on. "It will be announced tomorrow. You two are the first ones who have been to my own bed. For Jove, I never thought these quarters could have been made to look so comfortable. That cot and the big sofa are quite inviting. I only hope Mr. Kenneth that the pain of your burns won't keep you awake."

Elspeth had given anything now for a match, even a single match; but here and there a board creaked, and she came upon a steep, narrow stairway. It also was covered with some thick, soft material as if to deaden the sound of footsteps, but here and there a board creaked, and she came upon a steep, narrow stairway. It also was covered with some thick, soft material as if to deaden the sound of footsteps, but here and there a board creaked, and she came upon a steep, narrow stairway.

The stairway was so exceedingly steep as to resemble a ladder, and the girl counted thirty steps before she reached the top. Above was a floor of oak, and she had to tread and her hand before trusting her feet upon it.

She imagined now that she must be in the room above the other she occupied in the tower, and as she had been told that it was in a ruinous condition, she stepped carefully; but she found no sign of loose boards as she moved, cautiously along literally inch by inch; and it occurred to her that the stairway she had seen bricked up had probably been made a passage for some other reason than the one believed by Mrs. Warden, the housekeeper.

There was no time to speculate upon that now, as Elspeth could not help recalling the night when the blood-drops had rained through the cracks between the oak rafters in the tower, and she could guess as little at the explanation as on that night when she had started at the falling rubies as though unable to believe that they were real.

As she moved slowly along she stretched out her arms, trying to touch the wall, as she had done in the tower, but she had to tread over something which lay at her feet—something soft and heavy, over which she would have fallen if she had not recovered her balance with a quick backward step.

In the excitement of discovery and progress Elspeth had almost forgotten that she was alone in the tower, and she felt a cold, overwhelming wave.

What was this soft, heavy bundle on the floor of the hidden room in the tower? It was a young girl alone at this time and in this place.

Elspeth, who kept early hours, had never before encountered a night porter in the hotel, and she found it a strange thing to see him as he was. He took her for one of the guests there was no reason why she should go out of her way to disturb his mind of the suspicion.

"Did you ring, miss?" the man asked, peering at her through the dimness. "Yes, there has been a great disturbance in the house, hasn't there?" Elspeth asked.

"Dear me, yes, miss. There was the fire. But it's all out and over now, it must be nearly dawn. I'll be glad to see you if necessary, in the dark hours, and very quickly the summons was answered by a man who showed his surprise at sight of a young girl alone at this time and in this place.

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troubles. Had anything that he had actually said or done influenced her to regrettable extravagance? If that were true, it was presupposing that she would have been willing to accept him, she had proposed, and he had never told himself that she would do that.

But she had believed that he intended asking her to be his wife, was he not in a way pledged to her by the half intention one in his mind, and the words and actions to which that half intention of his had prompted him?

He thought of Lady Hilary, her love for her. If his great mother had been his affianced wife, the child need not have sacrificed her inclinations. Was it not his duty to save her, even now, though, day by day, his intention of proposing to Lady Lambert had been slipping further and further away from his mind?

He had never loved the handsome woman, but until very lately he had admired her exceedingly, and she had fascinated him to a certain extent. Doubtless she had been followed his inclination; but he had never loved her, and through a subtle change had crept into their relationship lately, he had not perhaps gone too far to retract.

Elspeth had not asked himself this question in so many words before, until he heard that Hilary Vane was to be sacrificed for her mother. And as he tried to answer it mentally, scarcely knowing what he did, with his burnt and bandaged hand he raised a glass of whiskey from the small silver tray which Trowbridge had placed on the table beside him.

"I beg your pardon, I mixed that for Captain Oxford. It's rather stronger than you're remembering hearing you say once that you didn't like your whisky too strong," said Trowbridge; and thus it was Kenneth himself who held out the glass to Elspeth.

Oxford would rather have thrown Trowbridge's whiskey in his face than drink it, could he have followed his inclination; but he had never loved her, and through a subtle change had crept into their relationship lately, he had not perhaps gone too far to retract.

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CHAPTER XVII. Prince Charlie. It was the night porter who opened the door at Kenneth's "Come in," and he was holding a beautiful collie dog in leash.

"I beg pardon," he said, restraining his animal with difficulty, "but Prince Charlie seems half out of his senses tonight. He's been as good as gold most nights since he was put in my charge to look after him this morning, but whether it's the condition of the fire in the house, or the smell of smoke, anyhow he's more like a wild thing than himself. I made bold to bring him for you, if you think it worth your while to do it," he said to himself, as reluctantly he lifted the glass to his lips.

At this moment there came a knock at the door.

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