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The Imprisoned Heiress —OR— The Spectre of Egremont.

CHAPTER XXIII

"How long he was there I don't know," continued the lady, "but when I went up with Toplist to see her, he was standing in the door of her little study, and there was a light in both their faces that could come only from love."

"Cursed fatality!" muttered Lord Egremont. "But how could they learn to love each other in an interview of but a few minutes?"

"I don't know. It is possible that they have met before. Perhaps he saw her that night when she visited his room. If he did he is not the man to have forgotten her as soon as she had vanished. She is very beautiful—more beautiful than Alexina—and her strange resemblance to the portrait of the Lady Jasmine would inspire interest in any one. Then when he found she was not an apparition, Lord Ashcroft's romantic fancy would be captivated by her strange attire, her seclusion, and the mystery enveloping her. It is easy to see it all!"

"But there must have been a fate in it," declared Lord Egremont, his ruddy face now pale. "What did you say to Lord Ashcroft? Did you betray anything?"

"No. My wits were sharpened by my fright. I carried it off very well. I brought him down to this room, and told him that Alexina was my child, and not mine, and that we concealed her existence as being merciful both to her and to us. I hinted at disgrace, etc., if he betrayed our secret, and he promised to keep it carefully. Lord Egremont was not at first pleased at the explanation that had been given by his wife, but he finally conceded that she could have said

by the score. She must be carefully guarded in future, for Lord Ashcroft may not again see her. I will see him to-day about hastening his marriage with Xina."

This resolution was approved as by the countess, and the earl retired to his dressing-room, from which he soon emerged, newly dressed, and set out to have an interview with his guest.

He found him in the music-room, dreamily touching the keys of the piano, and trying to evoke the same strain he had heard played by the mysterious occupant of the haunted rooms.

He ceased his effort at the entrance of his host, who plunged at once into the business upon which he had sought him.

"Lord Ashcroft," he said, "I am about to make a communication to you which, under other circumstances, would scarcely be proper. But the happiness of my ward is at stake, and I trust you will excuse what you deem my over-zeal in consideration of its cause."

His guest bowed assent, and prepared to listen to the promised communication.

After a moment's pause, Lord Egremont resumed:

"The peculiar circumstances of your engagement with my ward have conspired to awaken her romantic fancy, and to cause her to regard you with tenderness women give only to a favored lover. I may be thus frank with you, since you informed me, some days since, that you admired her beyond all other women, and were ready to fulfill your engagement with her at any moment. Xina was informed of your sentiments toward her, and that may be the reason she loves you. Perhaps I did wrong in telling her, but I made no allowance for the possible changing of your mind. I shall never forgive myself if, by my indiscretion, I have been the means of wrecking her life and happiness."

"I scarcely understand you, Lord Egremont. I have not professed to love your ward, nor have I thought that she really loves me. But I hold myself in readiness to fulfill my engagement to her—"

"From admiration for her beauty?" "From a sense of honor!" and Lord Ashcroft's face grew cold and hangy in its expression, as if all warmth were leaving his system. "I hold myself bound in honor to your ward, but were I sure that she did not love me I should have no hesitation in retiring from the contract made by our parents, and leaving the Lady Alexina free."

"You would rather forfeit a fortune, then, than wed her?" Lord Ashcroft bowed silently.

Lord Egremont looked shocked and troubled.

"Lord Ashcroft," he said, with considerable agitation. "I will not reproach you for your clandestine visit to the 'haunted rooms.' Lady Egremont has told me about her findings you there, and has declared to me her surprise that a noble guest of Egremont should have penetrated into chambers to which free access had been denied him."

He paused, waiting for an apology, or protestation of sorrow.

But Lord Ashcroft offered none. He was strongly tempted to explain why he had looked for Alexina in the closed rooms; that he had feared she was detained a prisoner there against her will; and he even thought of giving expression to the ideas to which the visit of the heiress' nurse had given birth.

But a timely sense of prudence restrained him.

As he did not speak, his host resumed:

"I have said that I will not reproach you for what you have done, Lord Ashcroft; but I must ask you not to seek out Alexina again. She has been set apart from her birth for a life of celibacy. From her earliest childhood we have intended her to become a nun. We have made some mistakes in training and educating her, for we should have sent her to a convent in her infancy. But we could not bear to part with her. Lady Egremont has told you the child's sad history, and I need say nothing in reference to it. It is enough to say that she has been tenderly loved and cherished all her life-long, and you have seen for yourself that we surmised her with every luxury. Even now you free Alexina could not become your wife; and, since you are not free, is it not best to let the mem-

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ory of you die out of the child's you mean by 'immediately,' guard-

Lord Ashcroft assented, adding heart?"

sadly: "Lord Egremont, my conduct may be somewhat excused in your eyes—or it may be aggravated—by a confession that I love the Lady Alexina as I should love my future wife. She is the realization of my wildest, purest dreams, the incarnation of all that I have fancied of loveliness and beauty, and could I, in honor, break off my present engagement, I would offer my hand and heart."

Lost for Three Years in the Arctic

A Danish explorer, Peter Freuchen, of whom nothing had been heard for three years, has been found in Baffin Land, by Captain F. M. Pedersen, of the schooner Sokongen, which has arrived at Aberdeen after an adventurous voyage to the frozen north. Freuchen left Copenhagen in 1920. He was eventually discovered at Ponds Inlet by Captain Pedersen, who sailed from Denmark on the search expedition in March, after a harassing voyage through the ice.

Freuchen was suffering from frost bite and in a bad state of health, when the rescue came. His toes had been frozen off, his food was running short, and he was living on seal, walrus, reindeer and fish, which he shot and caught.

Four of his native helpers—two men and two women—were also lost. They had set out with dogs and sledges to try to secure assistance. Their plans to make their way southwards to Cape York were frustrated, however, by the severity of the winter, and they had to turn back and were stranded on the north of Bylot Island, where they were eventually discovered.

The only boat which touches Ponds Inlet, where the explorer was found, is a Canadian police vessel, which goes there once a year to land two constables and a sergeant of the Canadian North-West Mounted Police, and take those who have been there back to Canada.

The explorer, however, had evidently been taken ill after the boat had gone, and as it would not be back for another year, and as the police had probably moved on, the Eskimos had set out for help.

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