

THE GHOST OF LOCHRAIN, OR THE UNDERGROUND SYNDICATE

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

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

Elspeth had fancied that she would not like the dark, handsome woman, who was too foreign in appearance, in the somewhat narrow opinion of a young girl, to be freely trusted. But she found her prejudice melting in the unexpected charm of the Countess's manner; and, besides, she would scarcely have been human not to be a little flattered by the evident wish of so magnificent a person to win her regard.

She had never met any one at all resembling the Countess Radepolski; she had never seen a room so littered with beautiful things as the Countess's small sitting room, nor had she ever imagined a tea gown so wonderful as that in which the dark beauty received her.

Elspeth wrote a letter or two from the Countess's dictation, and then the lady made a pause to ask questions about the typewriting machine. She showed such an intelligent interest that Elspeth was pleased, and then would not be satisfied unless the girl explained something about the system of shorthand. "But you are so young and pretty to be earning your living all alone in the world," said the Countess, with her fascinating roll of the "r."

"You must tell me about yourself. I would rather hear you talk than write more letters."

Elspeth demurred at first on the plea of wanting time, but the Countess laughed, and said she found it more amusing to waste time than to do more other things; that was what time was for, to be wasted by nice people, such as they both were. So the girl was drawn into talk about herself, as she had been by John Kenrich, though in a very different way, and at last was led on, before she quite knew what she was doing, to discuss the people she had met in the hotel.

The Countess was enthusiastic in praise of Lady Hilary Lambart, but did not like the mother, and Elspeth was only just prudent enough not to exclaim, "Neither do I!" However, her face must have been expressive, for the Countess said: "Ah, I see you agree with my opinion, though you are too wise to say so in words. You are only a young girl, quite a child, yet I see you have a remarkable insight into human nature. It is a great gift. What a pity men have not got it, where women are concerned! And the nice man's mind, the less he seems to know of women, the more he is likely to be deceived. There's good Mr. Kenrich, for instance. I have not even met him yet, but I have eyes, and already I see that Lady Lambart intends to marry him."

"I hope she won't," exclaimed Elspeth, lured out of her prudence. "So do I, for his sake, though I do not know him. They say she is horribly poor and in debt. It is his money she thinks of, for he is not her sort of man, at all. Cannot you—as it seems you are helping him with some important work—find a way of warning him against such a schemer?"

"I don't see how I possibly could," said Elspeth. "It is a pity. But perhaps you are too young to undertake such a diplomatic mission. By and by I shall know him, perhaps, and then I will try to do it so cleverly that he will not even know it has been done. Only, unfortunately, I fear he has been in some manner prejudiced against me. He looks at me with cold eyes, which do not seem to see me at all, and—I am not quite used to that."

"I should think not," Elspeth replied. "Do, if you care, speak kindly of me to the gentleman. I fancy your opinion—you are so young and frank—would have weight with a man like Mr. Kenrich. Perhaps he thinks I grieve him the blue diamond which was once in my

dead husband's family, but I don't. I am glad for him to have it, for I believe it is a good man. But I should dearly love to know if the diamond is as beautiful as those say who have seen it. It is such a strange mischance that I never have seen it myself, but I should like to describe it to me afterwards, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I will," answered Elspeth. "What a dear child you are!" cried the Countess, patting her head, and giving her a charming smile, with dark eyes alight. Still, Elspeth asked herself afterward if she had said anything which might give the impression that she knew Mr. Kenrich had brought the diamond to Lochrain with him. She remembered how Lady Lambart had exclaimed against his impudence in mentioning it before a stranger, therefore she supposed the presence of the jewel in the house would not be spoken about. However, on reflection, she decided that she had committed no imprudence; and as Countess Radepolski was a rich woman, with many remarkable jewels of her own, her interest in Mr. Kenrich's blue diamond could not possibly be a dangerous one.

The following day, as it happened, the subject of the diamond was brought up, and the girl had an opportunity of keeping her promise to the Countess, if she would.

Lady Lambart, with Lady Hilary, came to the sitting room door just as Elspeth was finishing her work for Mr. Kenrich, but at sight of the young stenographer, made as if she would retire.

"Oh, I thought you would be alone by this time," she said. You told me she hour, but"—(she glanced at her bracelet watch) "I see we're a few minutes before time."

"It doesn't matter; we have finished," said Kenrich. "You shall see my treasures such as they are."

"Pray, let us wait," began Lady Lambart, significantly, but Kenrich only laughed. "Miss Dean, you may perhaps remember our talking of a certain diamond in the train the other day. Now I am going to show it to Lady Lambart and Lady Hilary, also a black pearl which I have lately picked up. You shall stop and see them too."

"I think perhaps I had better not, thank you," stammered Elspeth, rising. "Why, don't you like jewels?" asked Kenrich.

"Yes, but"— "Then you must stay," said he, in his masterful voice.

The girl resisted no longer; but the idea flashed into her head that she would rather not know where the millionaire kept his valuables. There was no definite reason for this feeling, but she had it strongly. Instead of following Kenrich with her eyes as he walked to the other end of the room, she turned them toward Lady Hilary, with rather an appealing smile, as much as to say, "I do hope you don't mind me having stopped."

But the other girl did not even see the smile. Her whole soul seemed concentrated in a gaze which was fixed upon John Kenrich, or Lady Lambart, who had walked away with her host.

Elspeth was almost startled by the look in the girl's face, which hardened it, and for a moment made it old beyond her years. The eyes were eager and feverish, the white throat visibly throbbing under its wisps of tulle. What is the matter with her? Why does she look like that? Elspeth asked herself. And then Lady Lambart exclaimed, "How extraordinary of you! Who on earth would have dreamed of your keeping them there?"

The blood suddenly streamed up to her forehead, and she felt a hot flush on her cheeks. "I don't know what you mean," she said, in a low voice, looking thoughtfully at the girl, evidently undecided what to do. Elspeth felt that she was debating within herself whether or not to tell her something that was in his mind. His lips went down at the corners and suddenly an angry light sparkled in his eyes. "If there were no such conditions—if you hadn't to pledge yourself to me—you would be eager enough to make the money," he said.

"That depends upon the 'scheme' you spoke of," she retorted.

"Again I pause," Elspeth could tell you nothing unless you were bound to me in such a way that my interests were yours," he answered at last.

"Then I am afraid you will have to work alone, or at least without me," said Elspeth, "for I can only be bound to you as a friend."

She spoke decidedly, and a dark flush mounted to the roots of the young man's hair. He was not only deeply disappointed, but embittered by his disappointment, and Elspeth was half alarmed by the angry, thwarted look in his eyes. She could not doubt that he had really been attracted by her, that he fancied himself in love with her, if nothing more; yet she felt dimly that love denied would not be enough to bring that look to his face. Evidently he considered her help very necessary in some undertaking important to his interests, and was almost inclined to ask for it, though she had just refused to be engaged to him.

"I believe you will change your mind yet," he exclaimed. "I must have you."

"You know, if you are going to persist in talking to me like this," said Elspeth, "I shall be driven away from Lochrain, though I very much wish to stay here. Do be kind and leave me to myself now. You have excited me a good deal and made my headache worse. I must get to my work."

"I told you I wasn't going to let you work this morning," returned Grant, almost fiercely. "Go to your room—or take a walk—do anything you choose except work. I will do everything myself."

Lady Hilary's face, then receded, leaving it very pale. In spite of herself, Elspeth was curious to know what there was so extraordinary about the hiding place Mr. Kenrich had chosen for his jewels. She had deprived herself of the knowledge which she might have had; but whatever Lady Lambart had seen, that had Lady Hilary seen too.

CHAPTER VIII. A Puzzle.

For two nights Elspeth had a respite. Nothing happened. But as she lay awake in fearful expectation, or started out of her first sleep, with her heart pounding and her forehead damp, it was not surprising that she began to lose her color and have blue circles under her eyes.

The girl knew that her host showed something of the strain she was silently enduring, but she hoped that no one would notice the change. Luckily, she said to herself, nobody cared enough for her to observe the closely, not even Lady Hilary, who, though grateful to Elspeth, was naturally much absorbed in her own anxieties. But on the first week at Lochrain Castle Hydro, James Grant was waiting for her in Mr. McGowan's room; and he was there alone.

As Elspeth came in, he sprang up from his chair at the desk. "At last," he exclaimed, "I have a chance to see you alone. I began to think it would never come again. Not once since the second day after you arrived, when you promised me your friendship, have I had five minutes to speak to you, and I'm not at all in love with you. I never could be."

"Elspeth was rather taken aback at his manner, which gave a very different impression of the man from what she had received on their first meeting. He had been exceedingly quiet and self-restrained then, talking to her of his employer with marked respect and reticence. Now he called the manager "McGowan," and referred to him almost truculently, as if with resentment.

Somehow Elspeth had been glad not to see Mr. Grant alone morning after morning, but he had suddenly asked for her friendship, with repressed emotion, and an odd air of mystery; and now she shrank away a little, laughing uncomfortably.

"As it's Mr. McGowan's own room," she said, "isn't it rather funny to speak of his 'bursting in'?"

"Grant with an answering smile, as he closed the door which Elspeth had intentionally left open. "Anyhow, there's no danger of his intruding upon us this morning."

"Is he away?" asked Elspeth. "Yes, till afternoon. He has gone to see Mr. Grant alone morning after morning, but he had suddenly asked for her friendship, with repressed emotion, and an odd air of mystery; and now she shrank away a little, laughing uncomfortably.

"You mustn't neglect our work, if he is away. I suppose the letters are waiting for you to write. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"You need suppose nothing about the letters, cut in the young man, his black eyes brightening. "You are to rest this morning. I will do your work and mine, too."

"It's very kind of you to suggest such a thing," replied Elspeth hurriedly, "but—"

"Kind!" echoed Grant. "As if there could be a question of kindness from me to you. Why, I have thought of nothing but your face, growing paler and thinner this last week, from overwork."

"Well, then, that is something. Listen to what I have to propose. Be engaged to me—if you like; no other man need know till you wish it, and help me to carry out a scheme, which will make us both rich. Meanwhile I shall be doing all the work for you, and if I succeed, so much the better for me; if not, no harm will have been done, only a great deal of good for you will have been done. Now, isn't that a fair offer?"

"It is fair, but I can't accept it," replied Elspeth.

"Are you so well satisfied with your condition in life that you are ready to refuse several hundreds of pounds, without even hearing me out, if they be as I say?"

"Too well satisfied to be willing to better my condition by being engaged to a man I don't love," she said.

"Grant smiled, looking thoughtfully at the girl, evidently undecided what to do. Elspeth felt that she was debating within herself whether or not to tell her something that was in his mind. His lips went down at the corners and suddenly an angry light sparkled in his eyes. "If there were no such conditions—if you hadn't to pledge yourself to me—you would be eager enough to make the money," he said.

"That depends upon the 'scheme' you spoke of," she retorted.

"Again I pause," Elspeth could tell you nothing unless you were bound to me in such a way that my interests were yours," he answered at last.

"Oh, it isn't that," answered the girl, then checked herself quickly. She did not wish to confide in James Grant. "You have been enough to wear you out, anyhow," he said. "It's a shame. But I hope it won't be for long. You promised that other day to let me be your friend; but you know I want more than that, really. I never cared about any woman before I saw you. The sort of girls I came in contact with were commonplace creatures, without any attraction for me. I used to think it would be my fate, if I ever fell in love with a woman, that she should be some one so far above me that I would be hopeless for me to try to reach her. But you—you are as dainty and refined and as pretty as if you were the daughter of a countess, like Lady Hilary Vane, yet you are of my own class in life, and I can dare to tell you now that I have been in love with you ever since the afternoon when I drove you up from the railway station."

"That's only a week ago," stammered Elspeth, distressed and embarrassed. "You can't know your own mind in such a short time. Please don't say anything about this to your friend, of course, but—"

"Don't answer me yet," broke in the young man. "I've often heard that girls always said 'no' at first, especially if they were taken by surprise; and I didn't expect that you could have learned to love me so soon. But wait; hear what I've got to say before you answer."

"I thought you were going to let me 'rest' this morning," pleaded Elspeth. "This conversation is much more wearying after a bad night, than attending to Mr. McGowan's correspondence. I've a headache, and—and I'm worried about lots of things."

"You need never worry about anything after this, if you'll trust yourself to me, and do as I am going to ask you to do, presently. First of all I want you to promise that you will be my wife, by and by."

"Oh, I couldn't!" cried Elspeth. "I am not at all in love with you. I never could be."

"How do you know that?" asked Grant. "Unless there is some other man. Is there—is there? You must tell me that."

"You can't ask me such a question, but—there's no one," the girl answered. She spoke the truth. There was no man in her life, and there never had been, except her father and her lover. Nevertheless, the color she had lost slowly streamed back to her face, and the image of a man rose before her eyes. She scarcely knew him, and he was as far removed from her as the stars above the earth. Yet she realized that he was her ideal, the man she could have loved if she had been more fortunately placed in the world, and that, compared to him, no man that she had ever met or was likely to meet would seem in her eyes worth the loving.

The thought flashed into her mind that she was almost frightened the girl, for she had not been aware what a hold he had obtained upon her imagination. She tried to shut her eyes, but she could not. "You mustn't neglect our work, if he is away. I suppose the letters are waiting for you to write. You know what I mean, don't you?"

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She had opened the coat of the unconscious man

did not wish to be ungenerous. "Oh, very well," she answered. "I will leave most of it to you, since you are so kind, if you will promise after this to act as if nothing had happened between us."

"Thank you. Then I'll just get things in shape here." She drew toward the desk again, but still the young man kept her.

"If you must interest yourself in these things, take a few letters up to your room," said he. "I can work faster if I'm alone."

Elspeth made no objection to this proposal, which, indeed, was a relief to her, for she was far from anxious to remain in Mr. Grant's society, especially after what had passed. But she was somewhat surprised at the evident satisfaction he felt at being taken to his word. He did not express this, except by his face, yet it set Elspeth wondering. Had his offer to help her and let her rest not been made entirely for disinterested reasons then? Did he wish to get her out of the way and have the room to himself?

In any case the girl thought it was not her affair, and she was glad to go without further argument. She gathered up a few letters, took her own typewriter, which she had brought down as usual, and went away.

It was true she had been very tired, and the excitement of the little scene she had just passed through had stimulated her mind. He was a run in my motor. I have been lending it to Captain Oxford since he has been able to get out, but he has a friend coming to see him this afternoon, it seems, and has just sent word to me that he won't be able to use the car. You shall go instead."

"Do you like motoring?" "I've never tried," said the girl. "I am sure I should love it, but I'm not very likely ever to find out by experience."

"You shall find out by experience this very day, if you will, in my motor. Instead of taking your usual walk—I know you do walk at a regular hour, for I've often seen you going out as I sat near my window—I shall have a run in my motor. I have been lending it to Captain Oxford since he has been able to get out, but he has a friend coming to see him this afternoon, it seems, and has just sent word to me that he won't be able to use the car. You shall go instead."

"Oh, thank you," exclaimed Elspeth. "But—all alone. I'm sure Lady Hilary Vane will be delighted to go with you," said Kenrich, "and in that case I should be able to be of the party."

Elspeth realized quickly that for her sake he could not have gone with her alone, but with the two girls, his presence in his own car as host, could not arouse gossip in the most censorious clique. "It would be too glorious," she said. "But I don't think Lady Lambart would allow Lady Hilary to go."

"We shall see," replied Kenrich, with a determined look in his eyes, which told Elspeth that the chances were in favor of the expedition.

"There!" exclaimed Trowbridge. "Speaking of angels! Now the cat's out of the bag. I've been waiting for you to show me that I've been trying to give you good advice how to win her. I do hope you don't mind Miss Dean. You've no idea what an interest I take in love affairs, and yours!"

"I have none," said the girl coldly. "Well, Mr. Grant here has, and he's an excellent chap. He has done me no end of little favors since I arrived in this hotel, and, by Jove, I'm going to make his acquaintance. You've no idea what a run in my motor. I have been lending it to Captain Oxford since he has been able to get out, but he has a friend coming to see him this afternoon, it seems, and has just sent word to me that he won't be able to use the car. You shall go instead."

"I am going out with you. Mr. Kenrich suggested that I should look up something warm and comfortable for you, in case you might not have come prepared for motoring and chilly emergencies of that sort. I hope the things I send may do. What a talk we shall have!"

Elspeth's heart was very warm towards Lady Hilary as she read the friendly note and put on the pretty coat, so much handsomer than any she had ever worn. She found the long chiffon veil over her hat and the big, fluffy bow under the chin very becoming. "I wonder if he will see me?" she was asking herself as she went downstairs; and was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she had almost collided with the Countess Radepolski before she saw her coming up.

"Ah, how pretty you look, my dear!" exclaimed the handsome woman. "You have the air of one who is to go motoring."

"I am going," Elspeth answered. "I can go too," said the Countess. "You are driving down to the station in one of the hotel motors."

"No, answered the girl, smiling. "I have had a much pleasanter invitation than that and have accepted it."

Suddenly the woman's dark face changed, and her eyes dilated with a look of horror. "It is not you—are not going with Captain Oxford in Mr. Kenrich's car?" she asked, in an odd, low voice.

"Mr. Kenrich has invited me," Elspeth replied; then, remembering the conventionalities she added, "Lady Hilary Vane is going, too."

The Countess Radepolski's clear features seemed to freeze, and a curious glitter, like steel, lighted her eyes, bleakly. "Lady Hilary is going?" she repeated. "Has—Mr. Trowbridge heard that she is to be one of the party?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Elspeth, surprised. "I don't suppose he has. Why should he have been told?"

"It is a matter of no importance. It was only a foolish little joke of mine, as he seemed to be—rather interested in Lady Hilary Vane's movements of late. Let me go. I hope—she will have a pleasant drive. But you—I wish you would give it up, and

spend an hour with me instead. I am tired of my bad moods. I am lonely. I should like your society. Make some excuse. Stop with me and I will see if I can't find something pretty for you—some little trinket!"

"You are too kind, Countess," said Elspeth, really grateful, though she would not have given up Kenrich's invitation for anything which could have been offered. "I'm so sorry you are lonely; but you see I've promised, and if I didn't go, Lady Hilary would have to stop behind."

"Oh!" almost whispered the Countess. "Oh—if you didn't go, Lady Hilary would have to stop behind. Of course, in that case—I say no more. Good-bye, child. I wish you luck. It will be a pleasant party; you, and Lady Hilary and Captain Oxford."

"Well, Captain Oxford isn't going today," the girl explained hastily, for Hilary's sake, lest some trouble should be made with Lady Lambart.

"Not going?" the Countess cried sharply. Then she burst out laughing. It was just as she had wondered at the expression of the woman's face.

"My chauffeur has had a slight accident, it seems," said Kenrich, as the two girls in motor veils and coats appeared at the door. "He has hurt his hand, and can't drive, so I am going to take you myself. You needn't be frightened. On the whole I think I may say, without conceit, I'm the better driver of the two."

He put the two girls together in the tonneau of the car, which was a fine one of the latest type, 6-horsepower. Having started the motor he took up the chauffeur's seat, and in another instant they were spinning away down the long winding avenue which led away from the Castle and through the park. They had not gone far when they came in sight of Mr. Trowbridge walking leisurely toward the hotel. He looked up, saw the car, with Kenrich driving, and quickly his eyes flashed over the other occupants.

Neither of the girls wore veils heavy enough to disguise their features; they both bowed. Lady Hilary rather coldly and mechanically. Trowbridge snatched off his Panama. But seeing Lady Hilary in the car, instead of smiling in greeting, he grew glacially pale, and, turning, shouted after the motor as it flew by him.

Elspeth caught the look of horror on his face, which reminded her of the expression she had seen Countess Radepolski wear after the motor as it flew by him.

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She tied the long chiffon veil over her hat

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