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The Imprisoned Heiress —OR— The Spectre of Edremont.

CHAPTER III.

She was standing in the full blaze of the chandelier, dressed in garnet silk that fell in heavy folds behind her, trailing upon the carpet, her eyes glowing under her arched brows and her dark hair wreathed with red geraniums, seeming to the bewildered Lord Ashcroft like the embodiment of the light and fragrance that filled the apartment.

There was nothing timid or retiring in her manner as she stood there, playing with a jeweled fan. No queen ever appeared before her subjects with more royal self-possession than the heiress of Edremont did before the guests.

Lord Ashcroft bowed low before her, and with queenly graciousness the Lady Alexina extended one of her white hands, allowing him to clasp it for a second with something of a lover's warmth.

An introduction between the Lady Lorean and Alexina followed, and as they exchanged a few sentences Lord Ashcroft found opportunity to regard the maiden more closely.

She did not come up to his ideal. There was nothing tender or amiable about her, nothing sweet and clinging, and the idol of his dreams had possessed all these qualities, with an ineffable grace that might only be compared to the fragrance of the flowers.

But he did not feel much disappointed.

This beautiful, imperious girl aroused his intense admiration, and he even felt a thrill of pride in believing that her haughty will might bend to his, and that to him she might become the tender, clinging being he had loved to picture.

His thoughts were put to flight by the keen and quiet glance he suddenly encountered from the eyes of the heiress, and he knew that she had been scrutinizing him as narrowly and as thoroughly. He wondered what her opinion of him could be.

It could not be otherwise than

favorable, although he was too modest to confess so much to himself. In full dinner dress, as he was, his elegant form was set off to the best advantage, and his spirited face wearied the faintest trace of anxiety, never looked nobler or more commanding.

A conversation upon the commonest topics of the day soon became general, and Alexina's condescending air, and Lord Ashcroft's deferential manner, delighted Lord Egremont, for he read in them the favorable impression each had made upon the other.

But a few minutes passed when a young gentleman sauntered into the room, and was introduced to her guests by Lady Egremont as her nephew, Lyle Indor.

Directly after the introduction dinner was announced and Lord Egremont gave his arm to Lady Lorean, Lord Ashcroft offered the same courtesy to his betrothed, and Lady Egremont laid her fingers lightly upon the arm of her nephew.

Then they passed to the dining-room, where a sumptuous meal was provided. It was enjoyed by all. At its close the ladies retired to the drawing room, the gentlemen lingering in the dining-room but a short time.

Lord Ashcroft would have liked to withdraw with his betrothed to one of the deep window-seats, a little retired from the general company, and converse with her upon subjects agreeable to themselves, but he felt doubtful.

He was, however, about to address some light remark to the heiress, who was in the centre of the group, when Lyle Indor addressed him, thus claiming his attention.

Mr. Indor was older than his lordship, being in his six-and-twentieth year. His appearance was very prepossessing, his countenance having a frank and boyish expression, and his manner being easy and careless.

He had a brown mustache, which he played with frequently with long and tapering fingers that might have

belonged to a woman. There was an air of effeminacy about him, which was increased by the quantity and delicacy of his perfumes, his hair and handkerchiefs sending forth the sweetest of odors, and by the handsome diamond ring he wore.

Lord Ashcroft liked him from the moment he saw him, while the Lady Lorean, a strong-minded woman, despised him, calling him in her own mind "a scented popinjay," and "a ladies' darling."

She retracted this opinion before the evening was over, for Indor devoted himself to her, paying her so many delicate and unobtrusive compliments that she took a great fancy to him.

Lord Ashcroft had scarcely replied to the remark of Indor when Lady Egremont exclaimed:

"Lady Lorean has been telling me, Lord Ashcroft, that you had a serious adventure on your way here."

Lord Ashcroft bowed.

"What was it?" asked the earl, with some appearance of interest. "Did your horses get beyond the control of their driver?"

"It was more serious than that," answered Lord Ashcroft, quietly. "I had the honor to be made a target of by some wanderer in the woods."

There was a general stir at this announcement, and the Lady Alexina drew a little nearer her betrothed. He noticed the act, and drew favorable inferences from it.

"How unfortunate that such a thing should have occurred!" exclaimed the earl. "I suppose it was an accident, or the work of some awkward sportsman."

"I think your conjectures are wide of the truth," said Lord Ashcroft, reflectively. "There was something about the occurrence that shows it to have been premeditated. I do not know positively that I was the victim intended, but the hand of an assassin directed the bullet that I narrowly escaped."

"But," said the earl, "what possible motive could there have been?"

"I know of none. My sister suggested that the act was that of a madman."

The earl shook his head, showing that the theory met with no assent from him, and then requested full particulars of the outrage.

Lord Ashcroft replied by giving a lucid account of the affair, describing the obstructions along the road, the assault, and the pursuit of the assailant.

"Did you see the man's face?" inquired Mr. Indor.

"Unfortunately, I did not. He seemed rather stout and disproportionately small. His clothes were dark, and he wore a small black cap. Beyond these few particulars, which attracted my notice as I pursued him, I cannot describe him."

"As you say," exclaimed the earl, after a period of thought, "the act was premeditated! I know of no lunatic in the vicinity of Edremont, and had there been one lurking about, the foresters must have discovered him. The obstructions must have been placed on the road this afternoon, but who could have done it? I shall probe the matter thoroughly. Such an outrage, such a murderous assault, shall not go unpunished."

"I passed over the road this morning," said Mr. Indor, and there were no branches lying across it then. The earl's conjecture that they were placed there this afternoon is therefore true.

"What a pity you did not overtake the assassin," said the earl regretfully. "I would give much to have him locked up. But he shall reach that destination yet, and a worse imprisonment will follow. But I think," he added, "you said you brought away the gun."

Ashcroft bowed, answering that it was at that moment in the corridor.

The earl immediately rang, ordering the weapon to be brought into the drawing-room. The order was obeyed by the footman.

The weapon was deposited upon a table, and the party began to examine it.

It was plain, but well made, and seemed calculated to do excellent service for a long period. There was nothing particular about it, except a small plate riveted upon it. Upon this plate, which was silver, were scratched some initials, which were at length deciphered as being G. K.

"G. K.," said the earl, musingly. "Here is an excellent clue to the assassin; but I know no one whose initials are G. K."

(To be continued.)

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