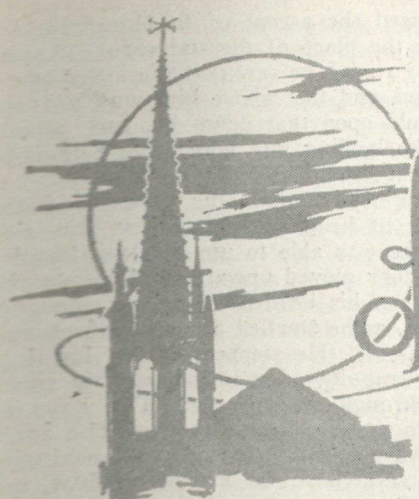




The Mystery of the Tower

By Andrew Loring

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A NEW SERIAL STORY

SYNOPSIS.

Motherless Margaret Lee flees from Paris and her keeper, Mrs. Gascoigne, to see her father in London. During the first evening at home, she looks through the father's pet telescope and sees a sight which is the basis of all the events to be narrated. In the first excitement her father drops dead, and her only friend is Mr. Percy Marshall a chance acquaintance. Mrs. Gascoigne comes to London and a mysterious Mrs. Carlingford, a friend of her father, appears also.

"DEATH is a more efficient chaperon than even you have proved yourself to be," answered Margaret, bitterly.

Mrs. Gascoigne gave a little exclamation of horror as she raised protesting hands; but the girl rushed on unheeding.

"Do you think," she cried, "that I would come to you again?" Infinite scorn rang through the girl's voice. "You bargained—you were willing to sell me. You didn't care that the man was old. You forgot that you had warned me about him once. You said he was notorious. I ask you to go, please."

With a tremendous effort Mrs. Gascoigne kept her temper in leash. "As your guardian," she cried, "for your own sake, Margaret, I must insist on staying. It is my right—it is my duty."

Margaret paused, irresolute. What could she do if this terrible woman carried out her threat? She could not have a scene. Then she turned and beckoned to Percy Marshall. He strode across.

"Mr. Marshall," she said, quickly, "this lady with whom I have been living for the past few months, and whose house I left under somewhat painful circumstances, now claims to be my guardian. There are many reasons why I do not wish this."

"I understand precisely," answered Percy, in his most serious manner. "Madam," he added, bowing courteously to Mrs. Gascoigne, "as the representative of the late Mr. Lee's solicitors, I must beg you to respect Miss Lee's wishes. At the present time my firm has the honour to be Miss Lee's legal guardian, and, until the late Mr. Lee's wishes are known, will continue to act in that capacity. Allow me—" He bent forward and pressed the electric button, which was cunningly concealed in the open mouth of a grotesque head carved in the arm of the chair in which she sat. "If you have any document setting forth your claims, I shall be pleased to consider it at your earliest convenience."

Then, as the maid appeared, he stood aside, bowing low, with the best imitation of a lawyer's manner he could assume. Mrs. Gascoigne, white with rage, picked up her parasol, and swept out before the maid.

THEY stood and watched her go, the sun glittering on the gold rosettes in her hat; then they turned and looked at one another.

Percy's eyes were twinkling, and a laugh rose to his lips. He checked it just in time. He had nearly forgotten that grim Presence in the flat beyond.

"I fear her," cried Margaret; "she is so utterly unscrupulous—and I am so utterly alone."

Percy's heart smote him. What he had been treating as a farce was tragedy to this lonely girl.

"Who are the solicitors, really, do you know?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head; then, in the midst of her distress, a gleam of amusement shone in her grey eyes.

"You played the part very well," she said, smiling.

"I out-foxed the fox, didn't I? Never fear, Miss Lee, she has no legal claim over you."

"I wish I were sure," answered Margaret.

Percy Marshall studied the map once more, then picked it up, folded it, and placed it carefully in his pocket; he was loth to go. Margaret watched him in silence. She noted his powerful, though well-shaped hands, his quick, agile movements, the reddish-brown hair, which would have curled had it not been cropped so closely.

"May I come this evening and report progress?" he asked.

"Oh, please do," she cried. "You have taken such a burden off my shoulders, Mr. Marshall. I can never thank you enough."

"If you would only let me bring one of my woman friends?"

But she shook her head. "You will be careful?" She laid her hand on his sleeve in her anxiety. "Remember, it was murder. Is there any danger, the slightest risk?"

He thrilled to her fear for him, and laughed at it. "I shall hurry back and tell you all about it," he cried, with a confident smile. "Don't worry—promise?"

And she said she would not.

CHAPTER IV.

THREE o'clock! Percy Marshall was astonished at the time he had consumed in making a list of South London churches and chapels. Dressed in flannels, field-glasses over his shoulders, Margaret Lee's map in his hand, he flung himself into a taxi-cab, shouting "Crystal Palace."

He lounged back, and seemed to be studying the toe of his brown boot which rested on the opposite seat. In reality, he was dreaming of Margaret Lee. She appeared to his quickened vision as a figure almost tragic, so strange was her isolation, so sudden the bereavement which had fallen on her. He wondered at her self-command of the morning, at the strength which had repelled the intruder in black and gold. He chuckled as he thought of himself as a solicitor's representative, and wondered what was to be done if Margaret—yes, he thought of her as Margaret already—were legally under the control of this adventuress. He rather hoped she was, he thought with a smile, for then he would have to run off with her.

Suddenly he straightened up and frowned. No more dreaming now—he was very wide awake. Whither was he drifting? Where had these gold-flecked eyes lured him? What had led him to follow her home, had brought him back yet again to pace the street in front of the home that contained her? What whirled him off now on her errand, at her command? Why did he not tell the whole story to the police, and wash his hands of this mysterious murder?

He knew the answer ere he had asked the questions. He realised now—he loved her. And the world seemed different. He had laughed at love all through his adventurous life; and now it had come suddenly and caught him unawares. He did not attempt to struggle—accepted it, welcomed it, as he thought of Margaret. She charmed him utterly.

Gone were thought of towers and church spires, brushed away by this flash of intimate self-knowledge. He forgot that this was an hour of grief for her, an hour of work for him. He remembered only that he loved her tenderly, devotedly. He laughed as he recalled that he hardly knew more than her name. What cared he for this? He loved her, and love meant an infinite trust. The splendid romance of it all appealed to him. His

heart was thumping madly in his breast. He loved her—and he should see her to-night! Then came thought of his promise.

"It is to be all faith and service, and so am I for Margaret," he quoted, half-laughing, as he leant forward, his keen eyes glancing from side to side as he sped along.

"Stop!" he cried, suddenly.

He leaped out, hurried back, and ran down a side-street; then turned quickly on his heel, and resumed his place.

The spire of which he had caught a glimpse as they whirled past had no open arches.

No more dreaming now. As they hurried along up Denmark Hill he was on the alert, in the hope that chance might lead him directly to the spot. He was all eagerness now to find out something that afternoon, that he might go back with some kind of a report; yet in his heart he knew that probably days of careful search would be necessary.

At the Crystal Palace he dismissed his cab, ran to the tower, and studied with feverish haste through his powerful glasses the forest of chimneys and spires to the east and west of him. He saw nothing that looked like the photograph that was engraved on his mind; an arch in a spire, it appeared, was a most unusual feature. He was unable to identify any of these places with any name on his list, and the conviction grew upon him that his quest must be a methodical visit to every church within the limits of the triangle on the map.

HE hurried away from the Palace, turning towards the west. He knew how easily tall spires, even on high ground, may be obscured by intervening buildings, by trees; had already learnt that a turn of a corner may reveal the existence of an unexpected church which one is always surprised one has not seen before.

He jumped into an open cab, fearing to go too rapidly. The place that he sought could not be more than a mile or two in either direction, and was probably somewhere along this range of hills.

It was after five o'clock when he came at last to the western limit marked on his map, near Streatham Common. He had failed in that direction.

"Back again," he cried to the driver, "as fast as you can."

At the Palace he found a taxi, and changed. His was no mood for the slow quartering of the district, for the laborious search for each church, for the crossing of it off as it was found not to be the one. One last, swift effort; if chance favoured him he might find out enough to have something to report that night.

At last—he was sure. He called to the driver to stop, and put his glasses to his eyes. Yes, there it was, a quarter of a mile away, perhaps, towering above the green trees that lay between, and pointing with its exquisite, graceful lines to the skies. Could a spire so beautiful, so peacefully rising there in the waning August afternoon, have been the scene, within a few hours, of a ghastly deed of horror?

The young man's eyes were fastened on that arched opening, high up in the air. It looked like a thread from where he stood, as he saw it sideways.

"Drive me to the nearest station ahead!" he cried. "Quick—quick!"

The chauffeur, greatly wondering at the conduct of this singular man, drew up at the station—what it was, Percy Marshall neither knew nor cared.

He dismissed the cab, assumed an air of indifference, and casually asked a railway porter the name of the church.

"St. Luke's sir, was the laconic answer, made quite naturally, without comment.

Marshall rushed away, knowing now that if any crime had been perpetrated there it had not become public.

He found himself walking past open fields, under beautiful trees, with here and there a pretty villa residence set down amid delightful gardens. At last he turned a corner, and there, across a field, stood the church. It seemed to have been built more with a view to the future, rather than to the present needs of the neighbourhood. The ground was quite open about the churchyard for some distance, except on one side. On that side was a high wall, evidently enclosing the garden of the old house whose gables could be seen here and there through the trees.

What should he do now, obtain the aid of the police? No; the time to do that was when there was something to tell.

So thinking, becoming more and more convinced that the incredible thing was, after all, true, he walked slowly across towards the church, keenly studying each detail of its architecture as he walked.