

ELSIE.

"By Jove!" said Lord Arthur, between his set teeth. "By George!"

He was in a state of mind. This Miss Brackley had a certain and strong influence over him; it was like mesmerism. He had not an atom of anything like real love for her, and yet she led him along almost without his knowing it. She had managed it so well—this seat for Elsie in the rear of the park phaeton, her own establishment in Elsie's stead by the side of Lord Hammond in the wagonette; and what made the clever woman's victory more complete was that everyone—at least every one of the women—was on her side.

Elsie arose, feeling a little pained, but still the drive in the open park phaeton had its charms for her. Quickly she descended into the road, and found her way to where lovely Lady Marjorie held the reins of a pair of snow-white ponies. She seated herself amid crimson cushions and rich fur rugs, and looked at the great seal skin jacket, a plumed hat of scarlet satin on her pretty head. She was the earl's favorite, and she was in the prime of life.

"Good morning!" he said, courteously, to Elsie. "You see, Lady Marjorie has taken compassion on a good parent who is going to drive me to the Ghost's Castle. Can you get in? Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Yes—no," said Elsie, reversing her answers in the confusion of the moment. She was not a believer in ghosts, but her back seat was quite luxurious. She was wrapped in a great fur rug.

By the side of the park phaeton was a dark gentleman, mounted on a tall black horse. Basil Byrne looked to advantage on horseback. The dashing cavalier and the soldier in his aspect; his riding clothes became him admirably; his velvet cap was pulled over his dark brows, and there was an exultant light in his eyes. For the moment the Irish baronet was happy. He had established himself as the bodyguard of Lady Marjorie.

Away sped the little cavalcade along the frosty lanes. The frost sparkled on every twig, for the sun shone with a bright, exhilarating glow, with a keen north wind sweeping over the downs, and drifting the snow here and there, the cottages nestled in the hollows, and the lordly seats of the landowners gleamed in the striped park of the elms and oaks in the deep parks.

Elsie loved the country even on a windy day; and as the ponies sped merrily along, her young heart threw off the momentary anxiety caused by Miss Brackley, and she told herself that life was a very pleasant thing.

Basil or better, as the case might be, rode the gallant horseman, and Lady Marjorie chattered, in her sweet, clear, somewhat husky voice, of pleasure, present and to come. The earl said that the air was doing him good.

Elsie ventured to wonder what had become of Mr. Paul Latone, the unhappy-looking affiance of Pauline Brackley, and she afterwards learned that the energetic young lady had positively persuaded the countess to employ him that morning in writing some letters to her respecting a home for destitute Italian children in which she was interested.

"At the foot of this lane," said Lady Marjorie, turning her sparkling face round to Elsie, "the avenue of the haunted house. Numbers of people, even educated people, believe that the Gower is haunted—don't they, papa?"

"My dear Marjorie, don't appeal to me," said the peer. "You know that I am a practical individual, without an atom of imaginative faculty. Your mother, now, I have no doubt, would enter into a speculative conversation, and discuss the question of ghosts or no ghosts with the utmost pleasure; but I don't admit that there is a question."

"Papa is horribly practical," said Lady Marjorie, "and so full of common sense; but I fancy the notion of something really pleasant in a good ghost story, if one has a nice cheerful company assembled round a well-lighted fire. Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Carey?"

"No, I don't think I do, Lady Marjorie. 'Well, you see,' pursued Lady Marjorie, 'there was a fearfully wicked Miss Hardcastle, one hundred years ago, and she haunts the house. Shall I tell you the story as we go up the avenue?'"

"Oh, how delighted I should be if you kindly would," said Elsie, who cried, eagerly.

By this time the carriage had reached the entrance gates of Gower House. Certainly if ever the approach to a country mansion looked weird and ominous, it was this one. Enormously high moss-grown walls, overtopped by tall, gloomy pines, great ivy-covered towers, a massive drive, an avenue of yew trees. There was no lodge, and Basil Byrne leaped from his horse, threw the reins over a yew-erect branch of a tree, and began to unlock the padlock which fastened the gate, for Col. Hardcastle had left the key with Lady Carey. The gate once open, Lady Marjorie drove her ponies up the avenue, and Elsie, after a moment's hesitation, reined her horse and dismounted.

While Lady Marjorie told the tale he rode slowly by the side of the phaeton, and hung entranced on every word the young lady spoke.

"Emeline Hardcastle was proud and wicked; she was not so beautiful as her sister Louise; she was dark, and her eyes were fearful, black, fierce, flashing, so that you dreamt of them afterwards if you saw her in a passion; and Louise and Emeline both fell in love with the same man, a young officer called Capt. Marjory, who was going to the wars. When Emeline found that Capt. Marjory was in love with her sister, she set her father, Squire Hardcastle, against

him, and found out some silly things he had done when he was very young. The squire forgave him the house; but Louise ran away and met him in London, and they were married.

"After that he was obliged to go away, and then the squire forgave his daughter, and she came back here to live, and her sweet little baby son, and the old gentleman took such a fancy to the child! The captain, meanwhile, wrote word that he was coming home from the wars. The day before he came the little boy, three years old, was missed. They thought the squire's little boy had been stolen; but his little body was found in the deep sea-pond, with a stone round his neck and a handkerchief over his mouth.

"It was his Aunt Emeline's handkerchief. The poor mother went mad, and Emeline managed to escape. She was never seen—never heard of again alive; but they say she haunts this old house, awfully; there are certain rooms in which she walks at dusk carrying a handkerchief and a great stone in her hand, as if she were searching for her little nephew, and that the reason the Hardcastles are so much away is just because of this fearful ghost, which won't give them any peace."

The Earl of Chase broke into a loud fit of laughter. Just at that moment Lady Marjorie drew rein in front of a grand gray house. All the blinds were half drawn, and the windows seemed to look at Elsie like many eyes. The strangest event that had ever happened to Elsie Carey was about to befall her within the next hour. A silver ran over her—was it the cold? Was it Lady Marjorie's weird story? Was it something more appalling, even than that terrible romance of unalloyed love and deadly vengeance to which she had listened?

CHAPTER IX.

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