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C. McArthur

THE GHOST OF LOCHRAIN CASTLE

BY MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON

Author of "The Princess Passes," "The Lightning Conductor," Etc., Etc.

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Elsbeth shivered a little. Suspicious people, who knew of Captain Oxford's love for Lady Hilary and their common poverty, might suspect a plot if they should hear this story, especially should they find out the sequel to it, which she knew. But she did not intend that any one should find out that sequel through her.

"Shall you send for a detective?" she asked.

"I suppose so," he answered. "But now you tell me you saw no one near; and as Lady Hilary did not lose consciousness at first, she must have known if anybody had approached me. I must confess that to me the mystery seems beyond the skill of any detective less clever than we read of in impossible novels."

"I think," said Elspeth quietly, "that the detective would turn his attention to me."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Kenneth.

"I mean that he would consider it very likely that I had taken the jewels."

"That is nonsense," Kenneth said, almost angrily. "A man who saw you, and yet made such a suggestion as that, would be discharged as soon as he made it."

"Thank you," Elspeth answered, laughing faintly. "After all, perhaps a very clever detective would know that most women would be too cowardly to attempt such a crime as that in open day, even if they had the will to do it. But, indeed, I should have no right to be offended if a suspicion of that sort did come into a detective's head."

"If you say such things I shall not send for one, but will let the jewels go."

"No, no!" exclaimed the girl. "I shall feel terribly if you don't do everything you can to get them back. I wish I could help you. I shall think and think with all my might. Who knows but I may have an inspiration."

"You are clever enough to have one," said Kenneth, "if you put your mind to it, so do try. Of course, all that I've told you is between ourselves. I don't want my loss known and discussed in the hotel. But I'm sure I don't really need to say that."

"No, I would not think of speaking to any one," replied Elspeth. "And I shall try very hard for that inspiration though I'm afraid it's too much to hope for that a really helpful one will come. Now, if you have no other questions to ask me, I must go, for Lady Ardcliffe wants me to come to her room, and I'm keeping her waiting."

"I hope I haven't worried you," Kenneth said. "I'd much rather lose the jewels than do that. Naturally, I should like to solve the mystery of their disappearance, and still more to get them back, if I can; but if I can't, it is not going to disturb me seriously, and it certainly must not distress you. Remember, I took you out this afternoon by way of trying to bring back the color to your cheeks. Instead of doing you good I threw you out on the road, came near killing you, shook you up terribly and braided you a good deal. I'm greatly afraid, though you are too brave to complain. So you see, I've enough responsibility already. If you are going to worry about a comparatively small misfortune that's happened to me it will make it a lot worse."

"I won't worry then," smiled Elspeth. "I'll save myself up for the inspiration. But now may I ask you one question; what about your chauffeur? Do you trust him entirely?"

Kenneth looked surprised. "I've always found him a good driver and a particularly fine mechanic," he replied. "I've had him in my employ ever since I took to motoring, nearly two years ago. I've never had any serious accident until to-day."

"But what about that wheel? Oughtn't he to have known there was something wrong with it?"

"He's been ailing for a day or two some trouble with his eyes. He told me, when I sent word at what time I wanted the car to-day, that he would hardly trust himself to drive, if I were willing to do so instead. Of course I was willing—indeed, I generally do drive, and put him in the tonneau. But I must say that the wheels and everything else appeared to be all right before we started. I looked the car over myself, but I see now it must have been superficially. As Dubois wasn't well, I ought to have made a more thorough examination, so I fear I have myself to blame, rather than the chauffeur."

"He's a Frenchman?" asked Elspeth.

"A Belgian," said the girl, scarcely daring to suggest that the chauffeur might have pretended illness by way of an excuse to absent himself when he knew that an accident was sure to happen. If the man were innocent, it would be cruel to plant an unjust suspicion against him in his master's breast. If he were guilty of connivance in some horrible plot, then let the detective Mr. Kenneth was going to send for find it out; for in the meantime there was no further danger from him than that he could do, as the car was badly broken and could not be used for many days to come.

The girl supposed that Lady Ardcliffe wanted her to talk over some new poem about to be begun, therefore she was surprised to find a number of people in the sitting room.

"We want you to tell us all about the accident," Lady Ardcliffe said. "Begin at the beginning, from the time you went out."

There was no reason why Elspeth should not obey, still she was reluctant to speak, and would have made some excuse to refuse could she have thought of one; but she was very weary, and not as fertile in expedients as if her vitality had not been at a low ebb. In a dull, tired way, she told how the automobile had started, how Mr. Trowbridge had tried to stop it, and all that had happened afterward. Lady Ardcliffe began by asking questions, but presently she relapsed into silence, looking so pale and angry that Elspeth wondered if inadvertently she had said anything to give offense.

The change in Lady Ardcliffe's manner was felt by every one in the room, and when Elspeth had told her story, they rose, one by one, and went away. Elspeth would gladly have gone also, but Lady Ardcliffe laid a hand upon her arm. "Wait," she said. "I wanted to speak with you alone. That is why I pretended to be tired; I meant to get rid of them all. Now, tell me, how did Mr. Trowbridge act when he came on the spot where the motor had broken down? Didn't he seem particularly anxious about one person in the party? I was sure from something you inadvertently let drop just now that he did. You needn't look so obstinate, as if you had made up your mind to say nothing, Miss Dean. He did show that he was desperately anxious about Hilary Vane, I'm sure."

"A week ago, Lady Ardcliffe, you asked me whether I thought Mr. Trowbridge cared a great deal about Countess Radepolsko?"

"Ah, but that was before he met Hilary."

"You must think him very changeable."

"I only fancied that he cared about the Countess. I feel that he is in love with Lady Hilary. You know it, don't you?"

"It is not my affair," said Elspeth, prudently.

"That is just the same as if you said 'yes.' But of course, it is not my affair either, except that I am a friend of Mr. Trowbridge's, and I should be very sorry to see him sacrificed by a designing woman."

"Oh, Lady Ardcliffe, you can't call Lady Hilary a designing woman!" cried Elspeth.

"I call her mother a designing woman, and Hilary Vane must do as Ida Lambert bids her. They are well-born, of course, but the mother has been hideously extravagant and now she is reaping the reward of her folly. I believe that Mr. Kenneth is beginning to see her as she really is. She is losing hope where he's concerned, and everything depends upon Hilary's marriage. If something isn't done, Mr. Trowbridge will fall into the trap they've laid for him."

"He may be a millionaire, but all the same Lady Hilary Vane is a thousand times too good for him," Elspeth retorted loyally. "I do hope she won't marry Mr. Trowbridge."

Lady Ardcliffe's eyes blazed. "She shall not marry him," she cried viciously. "That must be prevented somehow. I don't quite see how, yet, but it must be done. It would be too great a sacrifice."

Elspeth was growing more and more angry with this foolish woman who wore her double-aged heart on her sleeve. No doubt Trowbridge had amused himself by flirting with her, for some reason that the girl could not fathom; still, she ought to have sense enough to see that a man of his age could not possibly be really in love with a woman of hers. Elspeth longed to speak on her scorn, and warn Lady Ardcliffe that Hilary must not be injured in any way, or even annoyed. But she told herself that anything she could say on such a subject would only make matters worse; indeed, she had spoken too much already. So she held her tongue, and merely said, when she could put in a word, that she must go and see whether Mr. McGowan had come.

"After all," Elspeth thought a few minutes later, as she was on the way downstairs, "I don't see how she can possibly have loved Lady Hilary. Malicious as she may be in her stupid jealousy, what can she do—or the Countess, either?"

Yet the girl was vaguely uneasy, for she knew that Hilary had two enemies in the house—two women who, though as different one from the other as Summer from Winter, hated their young and beautiful rival for the same reason; because, all against her will, she had found favor in the eyes of a man they both loved.

Elspeth went straight from Lady Ardcliffe's room to Mr. McGowan's office, where she wished to explain—if he had come—why her duties for the afternoon had been neglected. Perhaps he would blame her for having gone out with Mr. Kenneth in the motor car, she thought; yet he could hardly do that, as she had gone in her free hour, and could not possibly know that an accident would happen to delay and incapacitate her for her duties.

Still, she rather dreaded seeing the manager, and her heart began to beat fast when she heard his voice on the other side of the door. So he had come.

To be continued.

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