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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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"I do beg that you will help me to avoid a scandal," the manager was saying. "If you publicly accuse Lady Hilary!"

He lowered his voice, and Elspeth heard no more; but it was enough. A glance at the Countess's hard, handsome face showed her that it would take persuasions more powerful than Mr. McGowan's to induce her to relinquish so choice a revenge. Both women hated Lady Hilary Vane, and though it was impossible—Elspeth told herself—that she could be guilty, circumstantial evidence must somehow point to her as the thief, or they would not dare threaten to accuse her.

Elspeth grew cold with fear at the sight of the pitfall prepared for her friend by these two jealous women. Even if Lady Hilary could prove her innocence, she would be made to suffer, and Elspeth could not bear that it should be so. How could she save the poor child? She asked herself.

Then, suddenly, she thought of Trowbridge and his passion for Lady Hilary Vane. From it had sprung the malice of these who would ruin the girl; but through it she might yet be rescued.

There was not a second to spare, if Mr. Trowbridge were to be summoned to this task; and without an instant's hesitation Elspeth sped through corridor after corridor on her way to his sitting room. She had not had time to knock at the door, when it opened and he came out. "Miss Dean!" he exclaimed in surprise at the sight of her flushed face.

"I've come to ask you to save Lady Hilary," she burst out abruptly.

"Save Lady Hilary?" No one who saw him then could have doubted the sincerity of his love.

"From Lady Arcliffe and the Countess," Elspeth went on, breathlessly. "All their jewels have been stolen in the night. For some reason or other they suspect Lady Hilary and are going to accuse her as a thief. They hate her, you know. They are downstairs in the great hall now, talking to Mr. McGowan, who is trying to dissuade them; but I know he cannot. You, perhaps, may. I think it's the only hope. Oh, do make haste. If Lady Hilary should come down, as she generally does about this time, there will be a horrible scene, unless you prevent it!"

The look on his face frightened Elspeth. "I will prevent it," he said. "Go to her. Keep her in her room if you can. Make any excuse. Give me a little time, that's all I ask."

Then he was gone, and Elspeth did not stop to look after him. She flew off in the opposite direction, which was that of Lady Hilary's room, but she had not gone far when she saw the girl approaching with her mother.

Elspeth paused, bewildered. What could she do now? After the miserable scene yesterday, when Lady Lambert had done what she could to ruin her, how would it be possible to accost the ladies and prevent them from going downstairs? Yet somehow the object must be accomplished.

Lady Lambert saw her from afar off. Elspeth could see the handsome face freeze into haughtiness. Though she could not hear the words, she knew that Lady Lambert was forbidding her daughter to speak in passing, and it did flash through Elspeth's head that, if she were revengeful, she could satisfy all cravings by letting the two go on to their fate. But at this moment she would not only have sacrificed a thousand revenges, but her hopes for her own future happiness, to save Hilary Vane, and carelessness of consequences to herself, she stepped forward, saying, "Don't go downstairs just yet, I beg, Lady Hilary. I can't tell you why, but—but if you'll wait—if you'll breakfast in your room, I hope you may save yourself and Lady Lambert—a very disagreeable experience."

Elspeth expected an insulting answer from Lady Lambert, but to her surprise, none came. Mother and daughter stopped abruptly, the girl turning pale, the woman flushing scarlet under her rouge and powder. "Oh, mother," exclaimed Hilary. "It has come."

Instantly Elspeth guessed the thought in their minds. She remembered the words she had overheard yesterday, when Lady Lambert had said to her daughter that "to-morrow a summons would be served." They thought now that this dreaded thing had happened, and that, if they obeyed the warning she had given, they might somehow hide from disaster. Elspeth decided that, for Lady Hilary's sake, the best thing she could do would be to let the impression remain undisturbed for the present.

"I told you what would happen, but I didn't know it would come quite so soon," half whispered Lady Lambert. "Now, will you be sensible and save us both in the only way you can? It isn't too late yet."

"I must—I see now that I must," said Lady Hilary. "If I could see him, I would say." "You can't see him now. You must write a note, and quickly," replied Lady Lambert, in the same low tone she had used before.

Hilary turned to Elspeth. "Miss Dean, will you come to my door for one moment, while I write a line, and then—as a great favor to me—take it immediately to the person it is intended for?"

As her daughter made this request without waiting for an answer in the affirmative, Lady Lambert turned and walked rapidly ahead of the others, in the direction of her own room.

Elspeth read her thought accurately and scornfully. In spite of her cruelty the day before, she was willing that its victim should be made use of, though she would not seem to notice the girl she had so deeply injured.

Hilary and Elspeth walked together along the corridor, but the one was too miserable, the other too anxious, to speak.

"Come in and wait," the former said when they had reached her room. "Sit down a minute, and the note will be ready."

Elspeth knew without asking what the note would be, and she was sick at heart. The door was open between this room and the adjoining one, where Lady Lambert could be heard moving restlessly about, therefore she dared not cry out as she longed to do. "Don't write to Mr. Trowbridge that you'll marry him. Perhaps it won't be necessary. Perhaps you may be saved in some other way."

Lady Hilary seated herself at a small writing desk in the window and began to write. As she did so Elspeth watched her wistfully, when suddenly with a start, her gaze focussed on something bright which sparkled in a lace frill of Hilary's dress. Quickly she took a step forward and bent down to see what it was which had caught her attention. Then she had caught her breath a cry of astonishment, for tangled in the lace was a ruby and diamond hoop earring, which she had often seen the Countess Radepolskoi wearing.

For a second or two an odd giddiness came over Elspeth, but it was gone as soon almost as it had come, and she felt cold and calm, as if in the face of a great danger requiring all her reserve force and presence of mind.

"Look, Lady Hilary," she said, drawing no nearer, lest Lady Lambert should enter, "Look at that thing caught in your frill. How very odd that it should be there."

Surprised, the girl stopped in the midst of her note, and following with her eyes the direction of Elspeth's pointing finger. "Why, that's an earring of Countess Radepolskoi's," she exclaimed. "How could it have got caught in my dress?"

"The Countess was wearing those earrings yesterday afternoon," said Elspeth.

"Yes, I remember. But I didn't have on this dress."

"Where was it?" Elspeth asked.

"Hanging up in the wardrobe. It was taken out only this morning. How queer it is. I must give the Countess her earring when I—when I see her. If she has missed it, she must be anxious, and I—"

"I'll see that it's properly disposed of, if you like," replied Elspeth, with a diplomatic meaning which seemed to convey nothing mysterious to the other's mind.

"Thank you," said Hilary. "That will be better, as—as I mayn't be going down for some time. Please explain to her how we found the earring, and perhaps in some way she may be able to clear up the mystery."

Elspeth did not answer; but Hilary, taking it for granted that she acquiesced, went on with her writing, instead of making the request again.

A moment later, she had finished her note, which consisted of but a few lines, and had given it to Elspeth. At the same time she put the Countess's ruby earring into her hand.

"You know what to do with both of these," Hilary said wearily.

"Quite," replied Elspeth. "You may depend on me." Then, at the door she turned, and said, "Lady Hilary, do you lock yourself in at night?"

"No, not always. Why do you ask?" returned the other girl.

Elspeth was slightly confused. "The—the key looks bent," she said. "I thought you ought perhaps to speak to Mr. McGowan about it. In a huge place like this, with so many strangers about, it isn't safe not to lock one's door at night."

Lady Hilary smiled bitterly. "I have nothing of value for anybody to steal," she said. "It's true the key is a little bent. I don't know how it happened, but it must have had a knock. I dare say the maid could tell how, if she would—but no servant will ever confess an awkwardness, if she can help it. I only know it's been like that for a day or two, and that the key won't turn properly. But it really doesn't matter for such a poor person as myself. With Countess Radepolskoi or with Lady Arcliffe it would be different."

Elspeth felt herself blushing. Had Lady Hilary heard the story of the robbery yet, or had she not? The girl dared not ask, but went away, with much food for thought in her mind, and the note, and the ruby earring in her hand.

As soon as she was out of the room, and shut the door, however, she slipped the earring into her pocket.

She believed that there was a plot against Lady Hilary, and that Providence had sent her at the right moment to frustrate it.

"If they have other proofs against her, they've made them, as they tried to make this," she said to herself. "But is this only a part of some great scheme, or is it the whole? It's time I set myself to find out, and I will. There may be some work for me to do here before I go, for which I was never engaged, and will never be paid—except by success. If they have detectives to help them—those people who wish Lady Hilary harm—they will have one against them, too. And, oh, how hard that detective will try to beat the others."

Strange thoughts floated in Elspeth's brain. She began to weave them together, and her pulses beat with the weaving.

"What shall I do with this note?" she asked herself. "If I'd dared to tell Lady Hilary she was wrong—that no man had come with a summons—would she have wished to take

extreme steps? Shall I wait before handing the note to Mr. Trowbridge, and give fate a chance? I could explain to her that I had delayed a little. I can't see how it can do harm, as he is trying to work in her interest at this very minute, without knowing that he's to have a reward—a reward a thousand times greater than he has deserved. Oh, I will wait, whatever happens."

By the time she had decided upon her course she was back again in the great hall. A quick glance showed her that neither the Countess nor Lady Arcliffe was there, but Mr. Trowbridge, who had evidently been expecting her return, came forward to meet her.

"I think that Lady Hilary will be safe from annoyance now," he said; and Elspeth saw that he was very pale.

"You persuaded them both to do nothing?" she asked.

"I have persuaded the Countess; and so far as I can make out, Lady Arcliffe relied for proofs upon the Countess. Without her, she's harmless, except for spiteful gossip, perhaps."

"You're sure the Countess won't help her in some secret way?"

"I am sure," said Trowbridge grimly.

Elspeth was assured; but not comfortable. "They had told Mr. McGowan their suspicions, you know," she reminded him.

"Yes, but I have spoken with Mr. McGowan. I told him that the Countess Radepolskoi didn't intend, after all, to drag Lady Hilary's name into the affair; that she had come to see, on second thought, that she must have been mistaken in her suspicions. I said that there were no proofs at all against Lady Hilary, and that, if Lady Arcliffe persisted in her accusations, he would bitterly regret afterward having paid any attention to them."

"I'm sure it must have been a relief to him to hear that."

"I think it was."

"But I suppose there's already a detective in the house, or soon will be. Suppose that Lady Arcliffe should direct his attention to Lady Hilary?"

"She won't do that at present. Lady Hilary is safe enough from her for a few days. By and by it may be different, but then, I hope, the real thief may have been discovered; or at worst, nothing can be proved against Lady Hilary unless these women have plotted against her more cleverly than I think."

Elspeth reflected for a moment and then felt that she understood his veiled meaning. He hoped that Lady Hilary would promise to marry him; but in any case the engagement would not be announced for some days, and meanwhile, perhaps, he intended to be particularly attentive to Lady Arcliffe, as a "bribe" to her for sparing Lady Hilary.

This was clear enough, but it seemed to the girl that he must have found much greater difficulty in dealing with the Countess, a far more dangerous enemy than flighty and foolish Lady Arcliffe. It was the Countess whom Elspeth had feared, yet Mr. Trowbridge seemed to have disposed of her without a struggle.

She would have liked to ask more questions, but Trowbridge glanced at his watch and said that he must go. "You haven't had breakfast yet," remarked Elspeth.

He smiled vaguely. "Haven't I? I forgot." And without another word he was gone.

There was great excitement in the hotel during the morning, when the news of the double jewel robbery had spread among the guests, and every one wondered much what was being done; but to the annoyance of their friends, Countess Radepolskoi and Lady Arcliffe not only did not appear in public, but refused through their maids to receive visitors.

Had Elspeth been on her old terms with James Grant she would probably have heard from him what was being done; whether the police suspected any one; whether there was a disguised detective at work in the house. But as it was, he kept such secrets as he might possess, though he looked at her wistfully from time to time, as if he hoped that she might yet change her mind.

It occurred to the girl that, if she wished to penetrate the mystery she had now set herself to solve she could not do better than tell James Grant that, after all, she would be engaged to him, and would help him in any way he wished. He would then open his heart to her, and it might well be that, through his communications, she would be put in possession of the very clues she wanted.

But Elspeth could not bring herself to such a course. She was but an amateur detective at best, and could not do the things which a professional would have done without scruple, in pursuit of an end. She must work alone; for, though she did not like or trust James Grant, she would not deceive him.

Late in the afternoon Grant spoke to her for the first time that day, except upon the business of correspondence.

"Mr. McGowan has asked me to tell you," he said, "that he has a very good offer for your room, and that consequently you will have to change into another. The servants will help you, but perhaps you would like to oversee them."

"When am I to change?" inquired Elspeth.

"At once, please. You are to have No. 33, on the third floor, in the west wing. You had better go up to your room now and superintend the maids putting your things together. This is your free hour."

"Very well," said the girl, hiding all emotion; but in reality she was as much excited as surprised. She was convinced that something was to happen in that room from which she had been banished—something connected with the mysterious sights and sounds that had kept her waking through so many nights of fear.

"Who is to have my room?" she asked, with an air of indifference.

"Lord Lochrain, I believe," answered Grant, in the same tone.

(To be Continued)

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