Hollow Ash... Hall

BY MARGARET BLOUNT

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"Hats, Mr. Magnum! Do you pretend to be wiser than the whole country side?"

"By no means, my love."

"Well, every one says the place is full of ghosts!"

Yes, my dear."

"What every one says must be true."

Mr. Magnum did not dare to say no.

"And so the place is haunted, replied his better half, triumphantly.

"Eh?" I would not live in that old mansion for the whole world," said Kitty, shrinking at her shoulders.

Does Mr. Cowley like it?" asked Mrs. Magnum.

"No. I think not."

Then why does she stay?"

Mr. Magnum coughed and mopped his forehead.

"Is she afraid of the dead?"

Well, if some of the stories be true, my dear, I don't wonder at it. But I really wish I was Mrs. Cowley. Do you feel tired, Miss Marjorie? You don't look quite well."

I am rather tired," replied the princess, with quiet dignity.

Mr. Magnum, who was the least bit in the world afraid of his wife, looked anxiously at Marjorie. Then he looked at Kitty, and finally at his wife.

"Shall we go?" he inquired, in a low tone, with emphasis. But the wife only looked the next moment as one who had made up her mind to remain where she was.

CHAPTER VIII.

Miss Marjorie did not however, go to her own room. She took a seat from its perch in the hall, threw it over her head, opened the front door softly, and went out. Mr. Magnum would have been shocked out of all her propriety if she had seen her, pacing up and down the garden walks alone, but just at that moment Miss Marjorie cared little for Mrs. Magnum or anything she could say.

The night was dark and starless, the air chill and raw. But after that hot, evil room it was a positive luxury to feel the fresh, damp wind coming from the hills. After those sharp, unnerving voices it was soothing to listen to the low, drowsy breathing and whispering of the coming of the rain. Storm and cold and darkness there were all preferable to that smug parlor and its disagreeable inmates, and so Miss Marjorie paced up and down and thought.

Thought of another time when she had been far happier than this. A time when she was also in company, but not Miss Magnum's companion. A time when there was one voice that always softened when it spoke her name; when there were eyes that brightened at her coming. One that welcomed her as only privileged lips might. She thought of long, pleasant days and evenings, spent with books and work and music around a cottage fire, of quiet walks and talks by summer moonlight. Alas! where had those blissful moments fled? Why but the dearest, the sweetest of these failed her? Why, from that wealth of love and tenderness had she been cast out into the cold world alone?

She had been foully slandered; she had been cruelly distrusted; she had been heartlessly deserted. Over and over again she said this to herself. Yet in that night, as she walked up and down the gravel path, the sense of luxury and of wrong seemed to die away and in their place came a wild yearning for the olden time—but for one moment of the happiness of yore!

"Oh, that it were possible

In this dull life of pain,

To find the arm of my true love

Around me once again!"

he murmured, as she clasped her hands above her aching heart. Where was he? What was he doing now? Beautiful and bright, he had risen like a star above her lonely path, had won her heart, and worth it for a time had bound her to him by the most sacred ties; then left her for years, perhaps forever! Where was he—where was he? And she stretched out her arms to the sullen night sky in her pain and passionate appeal to him who would come no more.

The sky grew darker. A drop of rain touched her cheek. She turned to go in, yet, with a strange, uneasy feeling she lingered a moment beside the gate, looking out upon the dark road that led into the village. Then her eyes wandered away beyond Banley, and at towards the hill where the haunted house stood. How strange the unseen and unacknowledged link that bound her to the people there! What could they say when she went to seem and told her tale? Would they think her mad or would they take compassion upon her for the sorrow he had undergone, and admit her to their family circle as a welcome and honored guest? Was it likely? Had they ever heard her name? Yet how well she knew theirs, and how much he could tell of their daily life and habits, from the stern banker down to his favorite daughter, Rose! "Cousin Rose! Cousin Rose!" She said it aloud twice, and then started and blushed guiltily, lest any one should have heard her.

Some one had heard! Not Mr. Magnum—not even Kitty, but a tall, handsome young man, who had been walking along the public road, with his hands in his pockets and his head bent down. He had passed the garden gate without even looking that way, but the low voice made him start and turn round. In an instant he had leaped the iron fence, and stood by Miss Marjorie's side.

"Have I found you at last?" he exclaimed. "I have looked for you all over England and in vain. Now, Marjorie——"

But Miss Marjorie looked in his face, gave a low cry, and fainted.

He caught her to his arms and kissed her passionately.

Marjorie, my own, my darling look up and speak to me!"

Slowly, she revived. Slowly she came to the knowledge that life was no longer a blank that for had returned and that kissed her softly.

Oh, she sighed, "is this a dream?"

No dream, my own, my darling. Are you sure?" I have dreamed so many times.

But you are awake now. Again to hear me say that I am true, that I was a helpless suspicions fool to listen to a word against you, awake to the knowledge that I am not worthy of your purity, Marjorie! I will give all you can to make amends for my unworthiness."

Marjorie answered Miss Magnum, hurting her lips tremulously.

Hadn't afraid she does," she said. Well, if some of the ghosts be the dead, I don't wonder at it. But I really wish I was Mrs. Cowley."

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mother go into a tantrum when she hears of it! I shan't have to learn any more Latin lessons! You'll have to pack, Miss Marjorie, as sure as eggs is eggs! Heigho, jiminy, and a rigdum!"

His exulting dance was speedily brought to an end. Mr. Cowley, who had kept silent so far from sheer astonishment, now grasped him firmly by the collar.

"You young scoundrel!" he exclaimed, "how dare you speak in that manner to Miss Marjorie?"

She's my governess; I'll say what I like to her!" was the impertinent reply.

And she is my wife! And if you dare to say a word about her—to look at her insolently—to insult her in the smallest way I'll give you such a flogging that you will never want to utter a lady's name as long as you live! Do you hear, sir?" and he shook him in the air as a terrier shakes a rat.

Oh, my! let me go! I'll call my father!" said the frightened boy.

Hold your tongue, you whelp! Where is the key to the garden gate?"

In the hall, sir——"

Go and get it, and don't let anyone see you! Be quick!"

Jimmy thoroughly subdued, ran up the steps and in a moment reappeared with the key.

Where do you going to do? Charles?" inquired Miss Marjorie, wonderingly, as he opened the gate and held out his hand to her.

I am going to take you away with me, Marjorie——"

Where?"

Anywhere—anywhere—that you will go with me, my own, my darling!"

But I have not said——"

Marjorie, you cannot refuse me! You cannot stay in this house, and with such companions! You cannot, you shall not! Come, my own, my darling, come!"

Miss Marjorie looked up at him with his face, and then, with a low cry, she laid her head upon his breast, and clasped her hands around his neck.

Charles, I will go with you anywhere—everywhere! I will follow you through the world! I will be your slave, your servant, your——"

Wife, my own, my darling wife!" he exclaimed, and he covered her face with kisses.

Oh, Charles, let him in with me! I don't know I was happy——"

But I did not. This is the strangest, maddest, most delightful thing that ever happened to me! I came home to Eldon Hall to-day, after an absence of three years in Australia. I have been trying to find you out through agents and advertisements in vain. When I have only been——"

I thought in a school at Brighton two years after I lost you, and that one of the young pupil dunglings was the daughter of Mr. Magnum——"

Magnum! Then I have found you at last! Marjorie, my own, my darling wife, you shall not stay another hour in this house! You shall not breathe the same air as those people! You shall——"

But, Charles, I——"

Not another word! Come, my own, my darling, come!"

Marjorie, with a low cry, clung to him, and, with her head upon his breast, and his arm around her, she left the garden, and walked with him down the road that led to the village.

Mr. Magnum, who had been sitting in the parlor, with his wife and daughter, and Mr. Cowley, who had come in to tea, heard the gate open and shut, and the sound of voices in the garden, but he was too much engrossed in the conversation to pay any attention to it.

Mr. Cowley was telling his host and hostess of the strange and unaccountable behavior of their governess, and Mrs. Magnum was saying that she had always thought there was something queer about her, and that she was sure she was a very unsuitable young woman to have charge of young women.

Mr. Magnum was saying that he had always found her a very pleasant companion.

And Kitty was saying that she was very much afraid of ghosts, and that she should not like to live in a haunted house.

Then Mr. Cowley was telling them that he had come to ask Miss Marjorie to be his wife, and that he was very much surprised and annoyed that she had left the house without saying anything to anyone.

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