

The Storyteller

THE ROKEBY GHOST.

'Simply perfect, Bess,' said Miss Lawrence, sinking down in the depths of a great easy chair after a tour of her friend's country house. 'I don't wonder you and Dick seized upon it at once—rats, bats, ghost, and all.'

'We've driven off the rats and bats,' laughed the little hostess, as she poured a welcome cup of tea, 'and as for the ghost, we don't talk or think about him.'

'Why not?' asked Miss Lawrence lightly. 'An old-fashioned ghost is a delightful addition to an establishment in these prosaic days. I should make every effort to retain the ghost, Bess. It is so patrician.'

'Of course some of us believe in such things,' said little Mrs. Winters, dropping another lump of sugar in her friend's cup. 'Still there are always so many stories about an old house like this. The Rokebys came over with Lord Baltimore, you know, and the family have owned the place ever since. And it was entailed in the old English fashion, so they couldn't sell. And Jack Rokeby—you know him, Nell.'

'Yes,' answered Miss Lawrence briefly, a delicate flush rising to her cheek.

'Well, he has nothing left to speak of, except that old place—with an invalid mother and two sisters on his hands, and he was glad to let us have it at a rent I am almost ashamed to tell. The doctor said Dick ought to live an out-door life for a year or two after his spell of typhoid. So when we came back from our honeymoon in Florida, Dick brought me down to see the place, and I lost my heart at once.'

'I don't wonder,' said Miss Lawrence, looking up at the old colonial mantel, upheld by carved pillars bearing the Rokeby crest. 'It is just the place for lovers to live and dream.'

'I suppose it is,' was the response, 'only Dick and I are not the dreaming sort. To us it seemed just the place for house parties and hunting parties, and all sorts of jollifications. Twenty rooms at least, my dear, with no one knows how many more walled up.'

'Walled up!' exclaimed Miss Lawrence, opening her violet eyes in wide amaze.

'Yes, Jack told us there were one or two rooms sealed up. One is the old Romish chapel. It seems that the Rokebys were an old Catholic family in England. Dated back to the Crusades. All sorts of dreadful things happened to them in the times of persecution; they lost their home and their fortune and several of them their heads for their faith, and finally they came over here with the Calverts, who gave them a grant of this manor. And they had their own chapel—and—Mass—don't you call it?—and a priest here—even when they had to hide him to save his neck. And so when, about seventy years ago, the son and heir of the house gave up his faith while abroad at a German university, and married a Protestant wife, it created excitement, as you may guess.'

'Naturally,' said Miss Lawrence warmly; 'I am a Catholic myself, you know, Bess, and can understand what apostasy means to such a race of martyrs and saints.'

'They say it broke his mother's heart. She is the lady in the Empire gown, whose portrait you saw downstairs. But the old father was of sterner stuff—he tried to disinherit his son, but the entail still held in those days, and he could not prevent Rokeby Manor from falling into his heir's hands. So he had the chapel, which had been a holy place for so long, walled up that it might not be profaned or dishonored. And where he left his money no one knew. His son concluded it must have been given away in secret charity, for the old gentleman got strange and moody at the last, and lived and died here alone with the exception of a few trusty slaves. It is his ghost that is supposed to walk—and really I don't wonder. The Rokeby fortunes are going down in a way to rouse any right-minded ancestor. As Jack told Dick, things have touched bottom rock with him. He is too poor to marry for love, and too proud to marry for money, so he is likely to prove the last of the Rokeby name and line. 'But goodness-gracious! here I am chattering away, forgetting my Nesselrode pudding that Chloe can never manage alone. We dine at seven, Nell. Look your prettiest; Dick has half a dozen fine fellows down for the duck-shooting all ready to fall victims to your charms.'

And the pretty little housewife of a year flitted away, leaving her guest to think over the light, careless words with a pain stirring in her heart that those who knew Helen Lawrence best would never have guessed.

But Miss Lawrence was a woman of the world, and women of the world often walk its glittering ways with hearts as veiled and silent as those of the cloister, hearts that break and die and make no sign.

When she floated into the dining-room that night, a radiant vision in filmy white, the violets that followed this reigning belle everywhere blooming on her breast, her snowy throat banded with pearls, the six bold hunters succumbed without a struggle.

All the evening she held gay court in the great Manor Hall, where huge hickory logs blazing and crackling in the big chimney-place showed the old Crusader's shield of the Rokebys, with its cross and sword and proud motto, 'Dieu et mon droit.'

All the evening, as she laughed and jested, the grave, tender eyes of the pictured Rokebys on the wainscotted walls seemed to rest upon her. Despite the love locks and doublets, the eyes seemed to pierce her heart with unforgotten pain.

Not six months ago eyes just like these had looked into hers with a hopeless love the lips had been too proud to speak. For Miss Lawrence was heiress as well as beauty, and Jack Rokeby was bound by strong fetters of duty, the last of his ruined race.

It was with a sigh of relief that she entered her own room that night, glad to drop her glittering mask and be at rest.

'You can go, Margaret,' she said to the maid who was awaiting her; 'I will not need you to-night.'

'Let me stay with you, miss,' said the girl. 'It's such a strange, lonely place, and the housemaid has been telling me how the rooms over here are haunted. I don't like leaving you alone.'

'Nonsense,' said the young lady. 'I thought you had more sense than to listen to such foolishness, Margaret. There are no such things as ghosts, as you have been taught and ought to know.'

'They were saying this was the worst room of all,' continued the girl uneasily.

'Mrs. Rokeby, the old lady, was fairly driven out of it with the moanings and the rappings. And the candles are flaring, as you can see, miss, without a breath blowing on them. The maids were telling me they always flare and flicker in here, and there's a cold draught, like that from an open vault, even on a summer night. It is the room where the old squire died, him that put the ban on the place. They say you can hear his cane tap, tapping, just as when he walked in life, miss.'

'How perfectly silly!' laughed the young lady. 'I am not in the least afraid of the old squire or his cane, and I prefer to be alone. Put another log on the fire, Margaret, and go to bed.'

And as the girl reluctantly obeyed Miss Lawrence locked and bolted her chamber door and flung herself in the great easy chair before the hearth to dream hopeless dreams.

This old house had put a spell upon her she had never felt before. Though scores of princely mansions had been open to her queenhood, none had charmed her like this. It seemed to call her, to hold her, to claim her for its own—the old ivy-veiled walls closing around her seemed to take her to the heart of things.

And how she could lift its shadow, how she could brighten and bless it, how sweet it would be to unseal its closed sanctuary, and let the light of faith shine out once more from its hallowed walls!

But this could never be, she felt, with a hopeless pang. Stronger even than the love she had read in its master's earnest eyes was his pride.

'You will come to see me in town next winter?' she had asked when they had parted last spring at the friend's where they had met at an Easter house-party.

'No,' he had answered, and she had almost winced at the despairing clasp that had wrung her little hand. 'I—I dare not—it would be madness. This is good-bye.'

'Good-bye!' The wind had sounded like a knell in her ear—the death knell of a sweet, womanly hope. It seemed echoing through his old home to-night in tender, sorrowful plaint. The old home in which she could only poise like a brilliant winged bird, and where she must not rest. 'Good-bye!' She leaned back in the soft, cushioned chair and let the tears that had gathered in her violet eyes fall freely, tears that she had held back all the evening, and that even her faithful Margaret must not see. And as she sat there, abandoned to her grief, a cold breath swept over her that made her start. It was like the touch of an icy hand. The lace ruffles on the toilet table stirred, the candle flickered, flared, and went out. And tap, tap, in the sudden darkness, came the sound of a ghostly cane.

The dreamer sprang to her feet, her blood for the moment chilled. But it was heroic blood. Helen Lawrence had been trained to wisdom and courage beyond her years.