

# THE ANCIENT EAGLE

By Alice Whitson Norton

**IN** the big, old-fashioned kitchen that had been the pride of the late Rosa Aimhurst, Loretta mechanically washed, dried and arranged the pieces of blue willow ware on the topmost shelf of the three-cornered cupboard, just as she had been doing every day for the past seven years. But the song that usually accompanied this joyous task was missing' on this particular morning, and Loretta's heart was weighted down with grief.

"Hurry up, Loretta," interrupted the voice of Jessica Aimhurst, another relative of the dead woman, "the lawyer has arrived, and it won't be long now until we know exactly how high we stood in the estimation of our beloved relative."

"Aunt Rosa never did anything half way or slipshod," Loretta answered quickly.

"I hope she left me the old willow ware," Jessica murmured greedily, eyeing the gleaming china on the top shelf of the old cupboard.

"I shall miss washing, drying and arranging it," returned Loretta, thoughtfully.

"Unless," interrupted Jessica, "you inherit it."

"I don't expect to receive that," replied Loretta. "Your mother has too often expressed a desire for the old willow ware in the presence of Aunt Rosa."

**NOBODY** would be surprised," Jessica murmured, "if the old lady left you everything she possessed, since you've been a slave to her all these years."

"A slave to Aunt Rosa?" repeated Loretta in amazement. "The idea - I've lived like an honored daughter in this house."

"As long as you don't know the difference between slavery and daughter, why should I take the trouble to put you wise," laughed Jessica.

"I don't understand," Loretta returned in a troubled tone.

"My telling you that everybody but yourself has realized for years that Aunt Rosa was making a slave out of you wouldn't open your eyes now."

"Aunt Rosa never called on me for anything," declared Loretta, "that I wasn't happy to do for her - and what she gave in return more than repaid me for all the trouble I took to make her comfortable. You must remember I was a helpless orphan when she took me in."

"I hope she didn't give you a lot of money that rightfully belongs to the heirs," muttered Jessica.

"Her wisdom and knowledge she shared with me," answered Loretta, "and our mutual interest in things counted far more than money in my eyes."

"Of course, you're coming around to the subject of art," laughed Jessica, "and everybody knows of Aunt Rosa's interest in art."

"I'm worse than Aunt Rosa ever dared be," Loretta admitted softly. "She only dealt in fine pictures, while I - well, you might as well know the truth," continued Loretta, "I'm crazy about creating them myself."

"You want to paint?" repeated Jessica in surprise. "Well, that is some ambition, I must confess. But an artist must first possess talent. Surely, you realize that."

"I've already copied 'The Ancient Eagle,' and creditably at that."

" 'The Ancient Eagle,' " repeated Jessica, "of all things to copy. Why make another copy of that, when one is intolerable to me?"

"But, Jessica," reminded Loretta, "Aunt Rosa said she found the picture of the eagle in our great-great-grandfather's attic."

"I know all about that," laughed Jessica, "but it still remains a worthless wreck to me, and I wouldn't give it room on my wall."

"I love it," Loretta declared stoutly, "and never do I gaze upon it that I don't have an inclination that I might also lift my wings and fly."

"I've always known something was wrong with you," Jessica returned, teasingly, "but I never dreamed anybody, except Aunt Rosa, had a weakness for 'The Ancient Eagle.' "

"I have talent, Jessica," Loretta defended solemnly, "and 'The Ancient Eagle' is a masterpiece. Aunt Rosa was planning to let me cultivate my talent this winter in Jonesport, under the direction of the famous artist, Nuburgie. You know," continued Loretta, "Nuburgie was crippled while abroad, and has but recently returned to this country and settled down in his old boyhood town to spend the rest of his life in peace, among friends."

"I don't know anything about art," laughed Jessica, "and I am surprised that you even think you have talent. But I can tell you now, since Aunt Rosa's death, you'll probably never get very far with the project."

"You mean, of course," returned Loretta, "I won't have funds sufficient to carry me through."

"Exactly," answered Jessica, coolly, "for even a comfortable fortune divided among the Aimhurst heirs wouldn't leave any one person enough to brag about. But

one thing certain, we can't remain in the kitchen and hear what's going on in the front part of the house. Come on."

Silently Loretta followed her cousin into the spacious living-room, where the lawyer was already opening his large, black brief-case.

**LORETTA'S** heart sank into the bottom of her small shoes when she saw the eager look upon the faces of the relatives who had gathered in the old home, with high hopes of having been remembered in a financial way by their late kinswoman.

It didn't take long for the lawyer to read the will of the late Miss Aimhurst, for as orderly as she had lived, so had she made preparations against death. Therefore, the lawyer who wound up the estate had little difficulty in disposing of her possessions.

One' by one each relative that had gathered in the room was taken care of, and as item after item of value was passed on to the rightful owner, strange glances were frequently turned upon the girl who had lived closest of any relative to Miss Aimhurst, and yet whose name had not been mentioned.

If Loretta felt any uneasiness about the matter, she showed no such signs, but as piece by piece she heard the objects, with which she had so long been associated, given into other hands, she was forced to wipe away a mist from her eyes.

"And now," said the lawyer, giving Loretta a peculiar glance, "we come to the last named relative, Loretta Aimhurst. To this beloved niece," the gentleman read from the document in his hand, "I bequeath 'The Ancient Eagle' and my cottage, overlooking the sea at Jonesport, just as it stands with its simple, unpretentious furniture. Since 'The Ancient Eagle' has been the inspiration that served to inspire her talent, I would suggest she may roam as a reminder that I am expecting great things of her in the art world."

Loretta thrust her hands over her eyes and made for the door, and presently Jessica found her in the bedroom that she, had so long shared with her Aunt Rosa.

"The reading of a will," Loretta whispered, "is too tragic for me."

"I'd feel the same way," returned Jessica, "had the old girl left me the cottage by the sea and 'The Ancient Eagle' to decorate it with, and, for my part, Loretta, I think she treated you miserly – I –"

"Aunt Rosa has often heard me express a wish that I might always have her most prized picture for my very own," Loretta ventured firmly.

"And believe me," laughed Jessica, "I'm glad she gave it to you. I'm sure nobody else wanted it. Even if it did hang in the home of the first Aimhurst in America, it looks like a piece of faded riff-raff to the present generation, with the exception of you," she added apologetically.

"Aunt Rosa gave it to me," said Loretta, "because she knew if anything could make me happy again it would be the possession of something she also treasured."

The cottage and the picture of 'The Ancient Eagle' going to Loretta was accepted most amiably by the relatives who were sharing in the estate left by the spinster, but many arguments concerning just how a girl, without proper funds, could carry on even a cottage, took place among the heirs while the packing of their inheritance went on.

"It's simple enough to me," Loretta said, when she was questioned about the matter. "Jonesport, you know, is a year-around health resort, and rooms are always, at a premium there."

Mary Duncan gave her cousin, Oliver Aimhurst, a wise wink, and turned back to the one grieving relative. "Aunt Rosa," she said sharply, "may not have been so heedless of your welfare after all – if she knew about this."

"She did know," returned Loretta, "and often we have planned how roomers in the cottage would seem to drive the wolf away, were we suddenly stranded."

**I CAN'T** be bothered about roomers," retorted Mary; "either way, I feel that you are going to have to work to make both ends meet, and I'm quite satisfied that my wealthy relative saw fit to leave me real money instead of a cottage and a dilapidated painting that I could not dispose of."

Two weeks later, Loretta, with her prize possession, arrived at the cottage, where, to her amazement, she found Miss Mollie Williams, an old friend of her Aunt Rosa's, waiting for her.

"Why – why – Miss Mollie," cried Loretta, eagerly, "I didn't expect to find you here."

"Your Aunt Rosa," answered Miss Mollie, "would never forget that a girl of your age would need a companion, so months before her death she placed in my hands a sufficient fund to sustain me through life and enough to share with you until you could think and act sanely again. I made arrangements for you to have your first art lesson next Monday," finished Miss Mollie, proudly.

With a little cry of gladness Loretta twined her arms about Aunt Rosa's lifelong friend, and gave her a loving caress on either cheek.

"My heart glows with a strange joy, Miss Mollie," Loretta said, softly, when they sat together on the little veranda that evening, "over this loving thoughtfulness from Aunt Rosa. I—I—almost found myself thinking she hadn't shared as generously with me as the others. But I didn't voice that thought, for, somehow, deep in my heart I felt that through my own effort I would find a way – and that was what she expected of me."

"Just one thing more," said Miss Williams, "your Aunt Rosa requested me to see that you washed the glass and polished the frame before you re-hung 'The Ancient Eagle' in the cottage."

"It does need both," agreed Loretta. "I noticed when I took it down that dust had crept under the glass and was really marring the beauty of the picture, and the frame does need polishing. But the old eagle, with his wings outspread," Loretta added, eagerly, "never fails, dusty or otherwise - to lift my spirit skyward, and I believe I'll go in and clean it up tonight, Miss Mollie, that I may start a new day with a new inspiration."

"That's a lovely idea," agreed her companion. "I'll wait here, I guess."

Through the door presently came the sound of a sweet singing voice, and Miss Williams knew, even though she could not see the slender figure bending over the wash basin, that the task was under way. Then suddenly the song ceased, and a moment later the sound of footsteps racing in the living-room fell on her ear.

"Oh, Miss Mollie," exclaimed Loretta, excitedly, "'The Ancient Eagle' is a heritage indeed - I understand now why Aunt Rosa left instructions for me to clean it. Look at this!" And then, before the astonished listener could make reply, Loretta dropped a sheet of paper in her lap.

Slowly Miss Williams read the note, and a smile spread over her face.

"Isn't that just like your Aunt Rosa," she murmured presently, "to leave sufficient funds in the Jonesport bank for you to cultivate your artistic talent?"

"And isn't it just like her," cried Loretta, "to leave a message in the back of a picture that she knew no one would want but me?"

"I'm so grateful, Miss Mollie," Loretta murmured faintly, "that Aunt Rosa did this wonderful thing for me in secret. But really I appreciate the knowledge that 'The Ancient Eagle' is the work of an ancestor that reaches back further than the 'Mayflower,' more than the funds that accompanied it."

"I don't understand what you're driving at, now, Loretta," answered Miss Mollie.

"Here," returned the girl, dropping a thin piece of wood into the woman's hands, "read that - that is from the creator of 'The Ancient Eagle,' herself."

Eagerly Miss Mollie lifted her lorgnette and stared unbelievably at a finely inscribed paragraph securely fastened to the wood that had formed the back of the frame.

"This is the work of one Loretta Aimhurst, which won a prize in the Paris Arts Fair, Jan. 1, 1601."

"Isn't that an inspiration, Miss Mollie?" Loretta questioned eagerly.

"It is," admitted Miss Mollie. "Not only all inspiration, but a challenge, in my mind."

"It is a, challenge," agreed Loretta, "and here and now I give you my word of honor I shall leave a similar message on the back of my masterpiece for some one who shall follow in my tracks."

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