

LIFE'S CHEQUERBOARD

By Helen Wallace



Resume: Lady Marchmont and her grandniece, Lesley, are visiting the former's nephew, Richard Skene, at "Strode," his Scottish home. They withdraw from the dining-room, after Lady Marchmont has pled with her nephew to forgive an erring member of the family. Mr. Skene's lawyer, Dalmahoy, ventures to refer to this injury of many years before. The offender, Adrian Skene, the son of Richard's cousin, had refused years before to marry Lesley and the old lawyer advises his friend to alter his will. Mr. Skene tells of how Adrian had won Mary Erskine, the girl whom he had loved, and the emotion called up by this recital of past wrongs proves too much for his failing strength. He falls to the floor and dies of an attack of heart trouble. Lesley Home, after her uncle's death, dreads the prospect of meeting Adrian again. Adrian arrives and is greeted warmly. At the reading of the will it is found that the property is left to him, on condition that he marries Lesley. Otherwise the latter becomes owner of "Strode." In the excitement following this announcement, Adrian's wife appears. Lesley wishes Adrian to accept position of manager of the Strode estate. The latter accepts and informs his wife, Alys, a shallow and rather disappointing young person, of his new position with which she is naturally delighted since Adrian had not been successful as a London journalist. Sir Neil Wedderburne, one of the trustees, is dissatisfied with Adrian's management and shows plainly that he desires Lesley to become his wife. In the meantime, Alys becomes restless and discontented with the quiet life of "Strode." One day, while looking over some old papers, Alys comes upon an unsigned will which gave "Strode" to Adrian. She forges the signature and places the will among papers which Lesley Home is to examine. The latter finds the will and arranges for a meeting of legal authorities. The forgery is detected and announced. Adrian sees that Alys is guilty but screens her by refusing to explain. He then leaves "Strode" in disgrace.

my friend," turning impulsively round, a wet gleam in those softened brown eyes.

"While I live you shall never want a friend," said Sir Neil, "but, Lesley, I at least want more. Is it to be always a friend and only a friend? It is much but it's not enough. Lesley—my love," his voice suddenly breaking, "can't you give me what I want—I have wanted it so long."

"I don't know," faltered Lesley. "I am afraid I cannot give you what you want—what you want."

"Then give me what you can," cried Sir Neil, with sudden passion; "give me what you can. I ask no more."

Lesley was silent. Unconsciously her fingers had closed upon a marguerite from the gay window box without, and now the narrow white petals fell as fast as though she had been putting the old augury to test.

"Lesley," Sir Neil broke the silence again, and there was a curious change in his voice, "forgive me—don't answer me if you think I have no right to ask it—perhaps I haven't—but—is there anyone between us?"

There was a pause, and then Lesley said steadily, "No."

"Then I shall plead for myself. You don't call a hungry man selfish if he prays for bread." The sudden relief gave a new ring to his voice.

"Oh, stop, I beg you!" broke in Lesley, a sudden breathless hurry in her voice. "I know it seems foolish, unreasonable, unkind, after all that you have done for me. Believe me, I do not know how to value it, and—and you," with a quick, upward glance like the shy confidence of a child, infinitely touching in contrast with her usual calm, gracious control. "But won't you wait—wait till I am at home again? I don't know whether it is this busy London, but I feel as if I couldn't think, couldn't decide here. Wait till I am at Strode again—is it too much to ask?"

Sir Neil's face darkened. He made a swift turn up and down the room, and it was as well that there was not the usual crowd of useless tables and chairs to impede his hasty steps. Then he came back to Lesley's side.

"I think you perhaps don't know how much you ask. It is my fault, perhaps. I have let you think that there is no end to my patience, and a patient wooer has himself to blame, I suppose, if he is thought a slack one. I have waited long, but it is not indifference which has kept me silent, and I think you know it, Lesley." Her eyes faltered from his. She did know it—too well. "But since you ask it, I will wait a little longer—if only I might wait in hope," with a sudden reversion from his almost dogged tone to eagerness.

He caught her hand and gazed earnestly into her face, then he dropped it with an impatient sigh.

"Well, till we are in Glen Falla again, I won't bore you about myself. I want you to have a good time here with Agatha," he said in almost his usual voice as he turned to leave the room. At the door he paused, as if for some farewell word or look, but Lesley was still standing by the window looking absently out.

She started violently when Lady Marchmont's voice, in its briskest tones, broke in upon those apparently absorbing thoughts.

"I met Sir Neil in the hall just now. I gathered that you hadn't sent him away quite despairing."

"It would have been more honest, perhaps, if I had," said Lesley, gravely.

"Nonsense, my dear, he'll be more than satisfied with what you can give him, and as he is ready to give you all he is and all he has, don't you think you might try to be satisfied too? Most people would think you had every reason to be. 'If you cannot have what you would like, it is well to like what you can have,' is the chief wisdom of life, and it has carried me at least through a fairly long one very comfortably. Not many of us get the chance to pick and choose. We are well off if even the second best is allotted to us."

"Poor Sir Neil," said Lesley, trying to smile. "I don't think he would care to be regarded as second best."

"That, my dear, would never occur to him, nor to any other man, so you may set your mind at rest. He'll think that you've come to your senses, or that his devotion has had its due effect, and certainly he has been very patient. Three years, or is it four, is more than patriarchal nowadays. Jacob's seven in his slow-going times is nothing compared with it. Seriously, Lesley, I wish you could bring your mind to it. Of course, I mean to live to a hundred, but I should like to see another generation at Strode before I go. I couldn't rest in my grave if I thought of the Skene-Wellwoods and their skinny brood in the old place."

"There might be other ways of preventing that than by marrying Sir Neil," said Lesley, with an attempt at a laugh.

"Where will you get a better man, upright, honourable?" with perhaps the faintest emphasis on the last word—"but I needn't catalogue his qualities. You should know them far better than I. And let me tell you, though you mayn't believe it now, it is heartless work keeping a place warm for somebody else's children, or trying to find out how you can do the least harm with your money if you leave it to charities. If you didn't mean to be kind to Sir Neil at last, we should hardly be here, and with his sister acting chaperone for you."

"Sir Neil is too generous to take advantage of that," said Lesley hastily.

"H'm, perhaps he is, but the generosity shouldn't be all on one side, my dear," drily.

Lady Marchmont was surprised and disappointed at what seemed to her Lesley's unaccountable decision—no usual feature of the girl's character—but secretly she thought that her grandniece would find ere long that these very hesitations and delays would form themselves in a binding chain which she would find hard to break.

In the pause which fell between them Lady Marchmont hoped that Lesley was digesting her last words, when she suddenly said, in a changed voice and with what seemed to the old lady extreme and provoking irrelevance:

"I have been wondering since we came here if there is nothing more I could do to learn something of poor Alys."

"Poor Alys, indeed!" she ejaculated, with the air of a warhorse snuffing the battle, or as much of it as a dainty, dignified old lady could assume.

"I have always thought, in spite of all our failures," went on Lesley, "that very likely she is still somewhere in London. I often find myself watching the stream of faces, half expecting to see hers among them. To-day, in the crowd at the Corner, as we were coming out of the Park, I saw a girl so like her, the same little pale face and the cloud of coppery hair, that I almost asked Mrs. Kenyon to stop."

"You didn't, I hope."

"No, she was gone again before I could have singled her out."

"Likely it was only some chance resemblance—that colour of hair is the fashion just now, there is plenty of it to be seen. But I cannot see why you should trouble about her any more—you have done enough and more than enough."

"No," said Lesley sadly. "I have not done enough, that is what weighs upon me. Since she left us I have indeed done all I could, but before that—I might, I ought to have done more. I took a charge on myself, and I didn't even try to fulfil it. I was very unhappy myself—simply—"too unhappy to think what she must have been suffering, and when at last I did read it in her face, it was too late. It was the very day she disappeared, leaving only that miserable letter behind. I shall never forget her look and the way she shuddered away from me. If I had been kinder, if I had tried more to make a friend of her—"

"Nonsense, my dear," sharply, "you may perhaps make bricks without straw, but you certainly can't make a friend when there is nothing to make one of. But why have you brought up that wretched time again?" with a protesting glance round the airy, sunny room.

(To be continued)



AND there was excuse enough for him. The past two years, which had seen Lesley mistress of Strode, had done more than bring her fairness to its full and perfect bloom. The responsibility of a great position had added to it dignity and a touch of command, which her stately young grace could well carry. Greatest change of

all, in these two years she had sounded the depths of her own nature, she had been brought face to face with the hidden things of life—a searching experience which leaves its traces not only upon the character but sets its mark upon the face. Lesley's eyes had lost nothing of their frank confidence, their open sincerity, but they had gained a wider outlook, a new softness.

It may have been that softened look which had now been Sir Neil's undoing. When three years ago he had first seen Lesley Home, he had vowed that if man might he would make this woman his wife, but even then, and much more since the brief and tragic interlude of Adrian Skene's appearance at Strode, he had realised that his cause would not be served by haste.

Now had he ruined all the hopes which he had built up with such long patience, such sore self-repression? In the parti-coloured light and shadow from the gaily-stripped blinds without which he could not read the expression on the girl's half-averted face as she stood by the window, widely opened to the faint June breeze. For half a lifetime, as it seemed to him, there was no sound in the room save the roll of swift wheels or the hoot of a motor from the square without; and yet he was no impatient lad, burning in his first fever-fit of love, but a man, sobered, experienced, toughened in the world's ways.

"Lesley, have you not a word for me?" he said at last. "Surely I have been patient long enough—too patient, I sometimes think," rather bitterly.

"You have been everything that a friend could be," said Lesley gently. "I should not like to lose