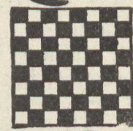
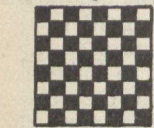


LIFE'S CHEQUERBOARD

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.



SLIGHT commotion behind her made her turn swiftly round. In her absorption the light roll of the wheels, the trot of the horse, had passed unheard. The big double doors were already flung open. Out of the square of misty, midnight blackness which they disclosed a tall figure was advancing—a stranger surely—no, it must be—"Adrian!"

The cry was forced from her by his sudden, unlooked for appearance, and by that strange, rising excitement which she could neither repress nor understand, and which from her quick-beating heart thrilled in her voice and shone in her eyes.

For a moment she stood still, holding the lamp aloft. Adrian Skene had had his own thoughts during the long, dark journey of what it would mean to him to stand in the old hall at Strode once more, but in that instant sheer wonder blotted all else from his mind. Who was this—this tall, splendid young creature, wearing her sweeping folds of black like a royal robe, and holding her head high as if its burnished, ruddy coils were a crown royal? In the strong shower of light from the uplifted lamp the young, round neck and the fair face showed privet-white against their swart setting. With the next breath their eyes met—that delicate, virginal whiteness was drowned in the sudden uprush of the quick, bright blood, spreading its vivid glow over throat and cheek and brow.

Who could this be? Not surely little Lesley Home, though in truth "little" was a word which could never literally be applied to her, his little comrade and good friend of long ago, till he had suddenly been bidden to regard her as—

The wonder had lasted but an instant. Already Lesley had handed the lamp to a servant, and was coming towards him with extended hand. He glanced at its strong, shapely whiteness with a grotesque, darting recollection of the traces which "little Lesley's" hands used frequently to bear of her varied outdoor pursuits, before he could respond to the conventional:

"You are very late; I am afraid your train must have been dreadfully delayed," which seemed all she could find to say.

"It was late, but one is prepared for that on our good old dawdling line. But I was not prepared to find anyone awaiting me. It was very good of you, if it was really for me you were waiting, that is," he answered with equal originality; but then he was somewhat thrown off his balance, and was in doubt whether to tone his reply to her formal words or to her look and that sudden flush which had curiously stirred him.

"If one sets out to wait for anyone, one feels bound somehow to see it out," said Lesley, rather coldly. She could have beaten herself for that sudden tingling blush, which still seemed to scorch her, and for the "missishness" which prevented her from uttering the few words of warm, simple welcome which should have been so easy to say. And yet was she so much to blame? How welcome a man to what might be his own house—how refer

to the past or to his long absence, when each knew what had caused it—how even say a kindly word of the dead, knowing all that lay between him and the living? Lesley at least felt herself incapable of it, and all the more with Adrian's eyes fixed upon her. Like her, he was perhaps trying to piece the present to the past.

This was neither the Adrian of the portrait nor of her vague dreams and memories. He had his father's features, modified somewhat by the stronger mould of the Skene strain, his father's dark colouring, but the gay, easy triumph on the pictured face was lacking. Instead the living one had a look of weariness, which seemed to go deeper than the fatigue of a long hurried journey warranted; and the eyes, which Lesley remembered as dreamy yet fiery—a spark through a cloud—had lost that quick, vivifying gleam. But it was idle to judge anyone after twelve hours, or more it might be, of constant travelling. She would likely have to recast all her ideas to-morrow, meantime the greatest kindness she could do was to leave him in peace. But before she could speak Adrian exclaimed:

"And you are really Lesley—little Lesley!" with a sudden, illuminating smile which proved him to be his father's son. The weariness vanished from her eyes, though it might still linger in the lines about the sensitive mouth.

"I am certainly not little Lesley any longer, if ever I was. Do you remember how angry I used to be when you called me so, and treated me like a child, as I thought?" Then the quick smile which the words had called up vanished. "We shall have to make each other's acquaintance to-morrow," the touch of ceremony returning to her voice. "But you must be dead-tired, I am sure. Soames has everything ready for you. I thought you would like to have your old room again. I am glad you were able to reach here in time," she added after a moment, in a vain attempt to atone for a reception, which she confusedly felt had been at once too warm and too cold.

"Thank you; it was kind of you to remember the old room," said Adrian. He had averted his eyes to the heaped logs under the cavernous canopy of the fireplace. "It has certainly been a long day. Dalmahoy's letters and telegrams seem to have been wandering about a good deal before they reached me, but I am glad to be here, as you say, in time. After all, it is much only to be here again." And his eyes kindled in the old way as they flashed a quick look round the vast, dim space, with here a half-seen face looking down from the shadows, there a sudden gleam of steel as polished helmet or morion caught the flicker of the flames.

Something in his look and tone touched Lesley to the quick and shook her out of the dumb constraint which held her.

"I hope you will always be here, Cousin Adrian. I hope that you have come home," she exclaimed warmly, heartily, cordially, and stretching out an impulsive hand. Afterwards she was glad, very glad, that she had said it.

CHAPTER III.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The old cathedral bell, which had called so many generations to pray, had tolled through the dense white smother of autumn mist which lay thick and heavy over hill and valley like the ure-cloth upon a dead man's face, moulding and yet muffling every feature—that dead man's it might be whose passing breath had given speech to the iron tongue of the bell, booming its message far and wide over the broad lands which so short a time ago men had still called his.

At last it was all over. Richard Skene had been laid with his fathers, the vault had been closed again and the great concourse of tenants and onlookers, the long train of neighbours and acquaintances—save Dick Dalmahoy it may be doubted if Richard Skene had ever had a friend—had slowly dispersed. By some Adrian had been greeted with warm cor-

diality; others had availed themselves of "the melancholy occasion" to limit their salutes to what civility demanded. They, like most of the tenantry, felt conscious of a dilemma. The young man had filled the place of chief mourner—that could hardly be denied to him—but who could tell whether Richard Skene had relented at the last, whether they saw before them the new Laird of Strode, the arbiter of fate to so many of them, or whether they must carry their homage elsewhere. Those who were near enough eagerly scanned the grave, dark features, like and yet so unlike "his forbears," in search of some clue, but they could read nothing there.

At that moment Adrian Skene was not thinking of himself, cause enough though he had to do so. Standing by the open vault in the hoary, roofless aisle, while the spectral mist crept in around slender shaft and broken arch, and the slow, heavy drip, drip of the moisture from every lichened ledge and lintel could be heard in every pause of the service—the only tears likely to be shed at this burial—he was honestly trying to keep past and future out of his mind. So much honour he would strive to pay to the dead. Between Richard Skene and himself there had been no love lost, nor even liking, but with that open grave at his feet, a factor which so strangely alters the values of human things, he may have wished that he had been more forbearing, that he had dealt more gently with the dead. At least he could feel profound pity for the man who, though a crowd had come to bury him, had lived so lonely a life, and however he might have marred the hopes of others, had had but bleak disappointment for his own portion.

But when Strode was reached again, Mr. Dalmahoy's keen, trained scrutiny could read no more in the young man's face than the eager eyes which had peered through the baffling mists in the cathedral aisle.

"H'm, there's where breed tells. Cool as he looks, there's no man alive but would be on thorns to know what was in those papers," ruffling the edges of the leaves before him with an uneasy hand. "Oh, my poor old friend Rich, I wish you had left this task to any man but me, or rather that you had left it to no one. I wonder how it looks from the other side, if you know anything of it, that is," the lawyer was thinking as he studied the face and figure once so familiar.

There was little fault to find with either. Adrian had the stately height of all the Skenes, but he carried it with an easy grace, which, like his dark colouring, he owed to the dash of Southern blood in his veins.

"A fine fellow, though he has none of his father's ways with him. All the better without it, maybe, though he looks over-old for his years. The wide world and freedom isn't a well-lined nest like Strode, as no doubt he's found out. They'd make a braw pair"—his thoughts ran with seeming irrelevance—"but neither of them is likely to see that any the clearer for having a pistol put to their heads."

Out of the great gathering in the kirkyard it was but a small company which was assembled in the library, where Richard Skene had spent the greater part of his days, and where his chill presence still seemed to linger. The big writing-table was cumbered yet with his books and papers, arranged in the precise order which he loved. The lofty walls were lined with books, chiefly bound in old-fashioned pale leather, and carpet and hangings had faded to the same neutral drab hue. In the cold light filtering through the white mist lying close and thick beyond the tall windows, the room had a dreary, chilly effect, which not even a generous fire could brighten.

Beside the lawyer and Adrian, there were present only a kindly, fidgety, elderly man, whom the latter knew well as Lord Polmont, and a tall, vigorous-looking man, the tan of whose bronzed face seemed the deeper for a pair of very keen light-blue eyes and his reddish fair hair. Mr. Dalmahoy intro-

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