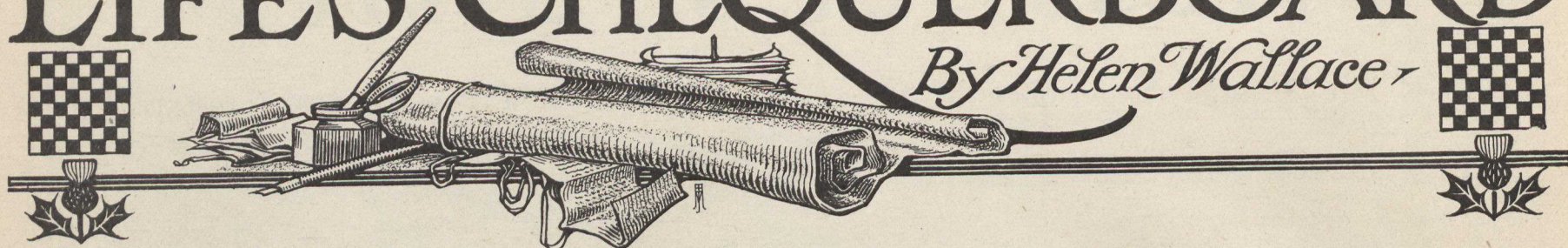


# LIFE'S CHEQUERBOARD

By Helen Wallace



## CHAPTER I.



**B**USINESS! That for your business!" snapping her withered fingers briskly. "I don't believe a word of it. You and Mr. Dalmahoy have been at it all day, Richard. No, no; you only want to get rid of Lesley and me, that you may have a better crack, and fancy yourselves Rick and

Dick together again. I don't altogether hold with the way women are setting themselves forward nowadays—"

"That is because you have had your own way all your life, Aunt Mary," put in the tall girl through whose round, young arm old Lady Marchmont had slipped one heavily-ringed hand, though the erect little figure seemed no more in need of the support of her grandniece than of the stout ebony cane on which she rested her other hand.

As they stood side by side, each was an admirable foil to the other, a study in black and white, in youth and age, though the two men were probably too familiar with the sight to note the piquant contrast. The old lady, with her high features and high-bred face, was worn indeed, but yet unconquered by the years which had passed in storm and sunshine over the white head, still bravely carried under the softening fall of lace which flowed down and mingled with her fluttering scarves and voluminous black draperies. The keen old eyes which had seen so many changes, youth and love and friends passing away, still looked out with zest upon life, well-nigh as ready to encounter and to relish fresh experiences as the girl beside her to whom all things were yet new.

The tall, youthful figure at her side seemed to gain in height from the straight, simple folds of her white gown, sharply accented against Lady Marchmont's floating laces and gauzes, and still more from the fine poise and carriage of her head and shoulders, which with every firm and shapely line of form and limb spoke of an open-air life and abundant exercise. A touch of colour was supplied by the ruddy gleam in the thick brown hair, which had its complement in the quick spark which roused anger or wakened humour could kindle in her eyes, while the white sheen of the single row of fine pearls, her only ornament, encircled a neck as white as they.

Best of all, none could be insensible to the frank sincerity of the brown eyes, or to the charm of her smile, when the young, red mouth relaxed to such bewitching curves. If anything were lacking to give complete harmony to feature and expression, it might be that touch of softness which womanhood brings when fully awakened, though in her twenty-third year Lesley considered that she was a woman indeed, and that she had left the things of youth behind. Was she not her uncle's right hand within doors and without, while she extended a kindly protection towards her old grand-aunt which caused Lady Marchmont an occasional sly, secret smile.

She smiled that smile now, as she said:

"I get as much of my own way now as you care to allow me,

my dear, but if once on a day I ever did get it, it was because I knew very well when and how to take it; but"—with a dry laugh—"I'll believe in the independence of women, and all the rest of it, when we can shut men's mouths with that one word 'business' as effectually as they do ours now. Eh, I know what you are thinking, Richard," with a twinkle in her keen, dark eyes, while her nephew, Mr. Richard Skene, advanced with old-fashioned courtesy to bow the two ladies out. "You're thinking that it hasn't shut one old woman's mouth over well. Maybe not—maybe not—" She paused.

The wide stream of light from the opened door poured into the dusk of the great hall without and fell upon a picture, barely seen by daylight in its obscure corner. It was a portrait of a young man, dark, gallant, winsome, a face which would easily awaken smiles, but which might leave tears behind when it was turned away. The hard brightness of the old woman's eyes suddenly dimmed as they rested upon it.

"Then there's one bit of business I wish you would reconsider, Richard," she exclaimed impetuously. "It's he you can't forgive, rather than his son," with a slight gesture towards the portrait. Then her eyes sought her nephew's face. "How much longer are you to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children? If it is Christian not to let the sun go down on your wrath, is it wise to let another year and another come to an end—?"

"Pardon me, my dear lady, that bit of business is finally settled," broke in Mr. Skene in a tone from which there was no appeal. He seemed in no way ruffled by Lady Marchmont's sudden attack. "Lesley, you are allowing your aunt to stand in the draught," he added.

The heavy door closed behind the two women with a click, which, like Mr. Skene's frigid tones, seemed to convey a sense of finality. The portrait sank back into the shadow again. Lady Marchmont leaned a little more heavily upon Lesley's arm as they crossed the hall, which, beyond the radius of the fire-glow and the lamp-light, lay in an amber dusk.

"Say it out, Lesley," she said bitterly. "Say

that I gave you a fine example just now of how and when to get your own way. Truly there is no fool like an old fool, and I was a fool to speak to Richard as I did, but somehow the sudden sight of the dear lad's face made me speak."

"Fill your glass, Dalmahoy," said Mr. Skene, coming back to the table. He had closed the door, as his friend and lawyer's quick perceptions had noted, with more haste than usually characterised his somewhat precise ways and movements, as if to shut out definitely the thoughts which Lady Marchmont's sudden appeal might have awakened. But when he had followed his guest's example, he let his wine stand untasted and gazed absently before him.

The dining-room at Strode was one of the show places of the county. It was panelled not with oak, but with fine old mahogany, the costly whim of a former laird in the days when Scotland was striving to open a trade with the West Indies. By day most people pronounced it a gloomy room, in spite of its long range of windows opening on the south terrace. But by night it was transformed. The flames racing up the wide chimney were reflected from the glossy, satin-smooth surface of the panelling in ruby gleams, the hue of rare old wine, while the whole room was steeped in a warm, crimson haze, which threw into high relief the white damask, the flowers, and silver upon the table, and the faces of the two men seated at it in luxurious ease to all seeming.

But there was little content in the look of the owner of all this warmth and comfort. His face was a type of one cast of Scottish countenance to which the high forehead and the high cheekbones give a look of unusual length, which is increased by a long upper lip and the firm set of the mouth. Just now Mr. Skene's lips were so tightly drawn that the closed mouth might have seemed little more than the gash of an old wound. From the few excellent portraits which were allowed to break the dusky splendour of the walls, faces not unlike that of their descendant looked down, but they were full of shrewd, kindly humour, of high courage, and abundant capacity. On the face of their successor, in this moment of forgetfulness and unconscious self-revelation, there was stamped only the abiding bitterness of life-long disappointment.

On Richard Skene the fates had lavished every gift, save that crowning one of the power to enjoy them. So Dalmahoy was perhaps thinking, as the silence grew, and the sight of his friend's face took the flavour from the wine which he had been supping with slow appreciation. The man was as white as parchment, the professional simile coming naturally to his mind, but it was not that which chiefly disturbed him. He set down his glass.

"Skene," he said, "I'm your lawyer, and in that capacity you can silence me when you like, but we were boys to gether, Rick and Dick to one another, as Lady Marchmont says, and I want you to let me speak to you as Dick, and not as the senior partner of Messrs. Sinclair, Dalmahoy, and Ferrier, W.S."

Mr. Skene started slightly, the thin, pallid lips parted in a sudden smile, which showed how happiness might have altered his face.

"I've stood a good deal from Dick," he said; "more than I would have taken from any other man. Say what you like, except upon one subject; but don't be sentimental."

(To be continued.)



".....her nephew, Mr. Richard Skene, advanced with old-fashioned courtesy to bow the two ladies out....."