



"ECHOES of the Past; OR, The Recompense of Love!"

CHAPTER XX.

He had come in some time after the programme had commenced, but he was not too late for Mina's first song. Immediately she appeared, Lord Chesterleigh was struck by the grace and modesty of her bearing; and he put up his eye-glasses and looked at her with attention. As he did so he was smitten by a vague sense of having seen her before; yet he could not recollect where or under what circumstances; he consulted the programme, but her name, obviously a stage one, conveyed nothing to him. The feeling, a troublesome one, stirred dim depths of his past life, and made him strangely uneasy, even melancholy, and her singing of "Home, Sweet Home," though he admired it, and applauded it as enthusiastically as the rest of the audience, made him still sadder. Where had he seen her before, of whom did she remind him? He harried his memory with the question, but it refused to answer.

He remained until the end of the concert, and was making his way out, still thinking of the girl and pondering over the problem which her personality had set him, when, at a temporary block near the entrance, he recognized a man who was standing close in front of him.

"How do you do, Mr. Qulton?" he said, touching the man on the shoulder.

Qulton turned round and gazed at Lord Chesterleigh with his colorless eyes and without the slightest sign of responsive recognition on his impassive face.

"I'm afraid you don't remember me?" said Chesterleigh, as they passed on together into the street. "My name is Chesterleigh. We met in India, if you recollect? At any rate, I do not forget that you rendered the government a great service."

"Ah, yes! How do you do, Lord Chesterleigh?" said Qulton, as if he had just recollect his companion, but his own tone and face were as impassive as usual.

"Yes; that was very valuable assistance you rendered us," said Lord Chesterleigh, "and I fear that it was not fully recognized. But that was not altogether our fault, was it? You left—I was going to say, disappeared from—Simla so suddenly, not to say mysteriously"—he smiled—"that all our efforts to find you were unavailing."

"That's some years ago, Lord Ches-

terleigh," said Qulton, "and I'm afraid I've forgotten what it was that took me away. Any small service I may have been able to render the government it was quite welcome to."

"Strange to meet you here again at Manchester after so many years. Will you have a cigar?" said Lord Chesterleigh. Qulton accepted one and lit it in his leisurely fashion.

"May one inquire what brings you here?"

"Business," replied Qulton. "I am on the staff of The Beacon, and I came down to report your lordship's meeting."

"I wish you could have found a pleasanter occupation," said Lord Chesterleigh, shrugging his shoulders, "but, indeed, you have this evening. What a capital concert! By the way," he hesitated a moment, "there was a young lady, quite a young girl, who sang most charmingly; an extremely pretty girl—Miss Veronica Vernon. Do you—you gentlemen of the press are generally omniscient—do you know anything of her? I don't remember seeing her name before."

Qulton knocked the ash off his cigar and studied it as if he had suddenly discovered something exceedingly interesting in it, then he said: "She has only appeared recently. I should say—I don't know much about such matters—that she promises to be a success."

"A very great success," said Lord Chesterleigh warmly. "But what I meant to ask was, do you know anything about her personally? I put the question because I fancied that I had seen her before, or that she reminded me of some one."

Qulton stared before him with expressionless eyes.

"I should scarcely think that was likely, Lord Chesterleigh. I do happen to know something about her. She is the daughter of quite humble people. Her father played in the orchestra to-night, and he and her sister look after her."

Lord Chesterleigh sighed—it almost seemed with relief. "I am glad she is so well looked after, guarded. A girl, so young, so beautiful and so finely gifted, is exposed to many temptations. You did not tell me her name?"

Qulton seemed to ponder for a moment. "Jones, Brown, Thompson—I forget," he said casually.

Lord Chesterleigh sighed again. "Ah, well," he said, as if dismissing the subject. "Will you come to the hotel with me and have a nightcap and a chat over the old times in India, Mr. Qulton?"

"Thank you, Lord Chesterleigh, I am afraid I cannot," said Qulton. "I am going to take my report up with me by the night train. And that reminds me that I have only just time to catch it. Good night, Lord Chesterleigh; glad to have met you."

He went off, not hurriedly, but in such a way as to prevent any further conversation, and Lord Chesterleigh went to his hotel, his head bent, his brows drawn, as if his meeting with Qulton had awakened echoes of the past.

The months glided by, the season commenced, the Conservatives were still clinging to office with a tenacity which, of course, the Liberals declared to be as wicked as it was desperate. The Liberals were still working hard to overthrow the government and few worked harder than Clive; not, if the truth must be told that he was particularly and personally desirous of ousting the Conservatives,

but because he found that when he was not at work he invariably fell to brooding. Therefore he was nearly always in his place in the House, did a great deal of stumping in the country and, what was unusual with him, went a great deal into society, where, it should be added, he was very welcome.

And, of course, he saw a great deal of Lady Edith. He met her nearly everywhere he went, and they danced and talked together. And they talked not only when they met at balls and receptions, but at Grosvenor Square. Habit is a second nature, a man is very much like a tabby-cat, in his unconscious readiness to move in a certain groove or haunt a certain spot. Clive got into the habit of dropping in at the Chesterleighs, especially when he felt tired and hipped, and it is just when a man is in this condition that the presence and the sympathy of a woman who is not only beautiful but cultured and tactful are most welcome.

And Lady Edith's sympathy was of the most comprehensive kind; she understood all Clive's aims and aspirations; she had forced herself to take an interest in the cause of the poor which he was always championing, and her tact was really remarkable for so young a woman; she seemed to divine his mood the moment he entered the room, seemed to know whether it would be better to be silent or to talk to him. Sometimes she went to the piano and played softly, but, if she could only have known it, these were the only occasions on which she erred, for when she played or sang Clive was reminded of Mina, and sometimes he could scarcely bear the music.

Lord Chesterleigh and he were greater friends than ever, and Clive was made free of the house; indeed, Lord Chesterleigh treated him almost as if he were a son, and Clive very naturally grew much attached to the older man. They had become so friendly, and Lord Chesterleigh so often talked about family and personal matters so unreservedly and confidentially, that Clive was several times on the point of telling him of the strange, foreign-looking woman, but in these modern days most of us shrink from even the appearance of intrusion on other persons' private affairs, and Clive held his tongue.

As a matter of fact, he had attached little or no importance to the woman or her behaviour, which he ascribed to monomania.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Clive and Lady Edith's evident friendship for each other and his frequent visits to the house attracted attention. Society regarded a marriage between them as certain, and thoroughly approved of it. But Clive had no intention of proposing to Lady Edith; he did not want to marry any one—excepting Mina. His heart felt dead; he was incapable of love for any other woman, and he had, almost unconsciously, the feeling which every man and woman has in his condition—that every one must know, be aware of his state of mind.

But accident and circumstance often drive us whither we had no intention of going.

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Clive went home one morning with

Lord Chesterleigh to lunch. It was a lovely cobs, and that he has never Edith who had received Clive as if his presence were all that was needed to make the day perfect, remarked:

"What a shame to waste such lovely weather. Father, could you not drive me out into the country in that new mail-phaeton of yours? Do you know," she turned to Clive with a laugh, "that he has bought a most splendid phaeton and a pair of lovely day in early spring, and Lady once asked me to go out with him? And yet I dare say he goes about, priding himself that he is an affectionate and an attentive parent."

Lord Chesterleigh laughed. "I haven't been out with them yet myself," he said.

"Then take me somewhere this afternoon," she retorted quickly. "And perhaps Mr. Harvey would come with us; that is, if he can tear himself away from the House."

"I should be delighted," said Clive. "Wild horses wouldn't drag me to the House this afternoon."

"Then tame horses shall drag us down to—where, father?" she said, her eyes sparkling, her face radiant. "I don't care where it is. Could we find some rustic, out-of-the-way spot where we could have a dinner of tough chops or ham and eggs or something different to the usual endless and tiresome meal we get at home? Do you know of such a place, Mr. Harvey?"

Clive considered for a moment or two. "There's a little place called Palmer's Green, out Surrey way," he said; "it is scarcely a place, for there is nothing there but a small inn, but, though I doubt the chops, I feel pretty sure about the ham and eggs. I came upon the place when I was out riding one day. By the way, it is rather a long drive."

"I'll back my horses for any distance," said Lord Chesterleigh, with an owner's proud confidence.

"Your description sounds delightful," remarked Lady Edith. "Let us go at once!"

Clive rose. "I think I should like to change my hat and frock coat for something more suitable for the occasion," he said. "I promise to be back long before you're ready."

"Then you will have to be very quick," she said brightly, "for I shall be exactly three minutes and a half."

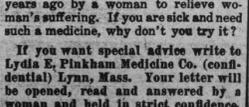
"That means three-quarters of an hour," remarked Lord Chesterleigh. "Yes; I can have the phaeton round by that time."

Clive found some letters and a telegram, which required immediate attention, awaiting him, and when he returned to Grosvenor Square the phaeton was at the door; but he found Lady Edith in the drawing-room looking downcast and disappointed.

(To be Continued.)

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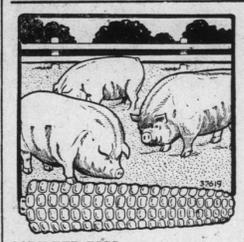
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