

Life's Chequerboard.

(Continued from page 14)

was nothing of any special importance in the bureau, or in my uncle's rooms, but I put all the keys into my jewel-case."

"Then we can only regret that Mr. Skene did not exercise the same care," said the lawyer drily.

For a moment Adrian made no reply. His pride would have taken fire at Mr. Ferrier's tone, but the matter was too serious for such personal considerations, and he was absorbed in the effort to recall what he had done with the keys after Lesley had given them to him. He had been culpably careless, certainly, but who could have dreamed that such a reckoning would be demanded for a little harmless heedlessness. He had found them in his pocket, and had put them into a drawer of his dressing-table, but who was likely to be in his dressing-room save the servants or—good God! no—not that!

"Come, Mr. Skene," broke in Mr. Ferrier with a subtle change of tone, "have you no suggestion to make? I am sure that no one can be more anxious than yourself that this distressing business should be cleared up. It seems impossible to doubt that the contents of the bureau were examined, this hitherto unknown document found, and the forgery executed, which, pardon me saying it, so entirely alters the relative positions of yourself and Miss Home, and all this while the keys were—well, nominally in your possession. I surely need not say another word."

He would never had space to utter so much, but, as Adrian Skene would have sprung to his feet and flung back the barely-veiled accusation and the hideous doubt with it, Alys drew herself out of the depths of her chair and turned to her husband. Every eye was turned on Adrian, expecting that hot and instant repudiation, but a dead and dreadful silence fell and lengthened, for in that decisive moment, big with the fate of his name and honour, he saw nothing but his wife's face.

And that face! The mediæval frescoes of the tortures of the damned now strike the note of the grotesque rather than the awful, and yet amid the rout of writhing forms and busy demons there stands out some face, stamped not only with helpless, shrinking horror, with frantic, despairing appeal, but with such a realising of utter hopeless loss that the careless smile of the onlooker dies away and the blood chills.

And as his wife leaned towards him with that despair, that vain appeal in her little waxen face, her grey eyes wells of anguish, Adrian Skene's heart turned to stone within him. The hot words which had sprung to his lips froze there, as the blood seemed slowly freezing in his veins.

It was Alys, his own wife, who had done this thing, the woman whom he had taken to himself for better, for worse, who now cried to him out of her own voiceless torment. What was he to do?

What but the one thing could a man do! And yet if it had been his life she had claimed instead of this—this—

It was his life she asked—the life of an honourable man amid his fellows—what did the tarnished remainder matter? There and then he took his farewell of it, looked his last upon familiar faces, faces on which he no more than the dead could hope to look upon again—the woman he loved—the upright, honest man who loved her—who was now his judge—

The wonder in Lesley's eyes grew to distress, in Sir Neil's to doubt as blank despair dulled the dark, elo-

quent face. The silence, so portentous to Adrian, grew intolerable.

"Adrian—you are a Skene—remember that!" came thin and strained from Lady Marchmont as the wind might shrill through a dry reed.

Sir Neil sprang to his feet. With all his heart he loved the fair woman beside him. Instinct told him that more than aught else, early memories and, it might be, something softer and tenderer stood between him and his desire. Yet because he truly loved, he forgot himself for that moment, and divined what Lesley was feeling. Things look black enough, but since *she* cared for the man he couldn't have done this thing.

"Skene, for God's sake, speak!" he exclaimed. "We can't but see what Ferrier is driving at, but none of us believe it—it *can't* be—it isn't possible, but speak—deny it!"

The vibrant echoes of the appeal had time to throb out and die into the silence before from stiff lips there came the answer in two words:

"I—can't."

Not another word was uttered. Even to Lord Palmont the shock was too great. A faint gasp from Alys passed unheeded. For the moment she was forgotten.

Adrian did not lift his eyes. Like enough he saw nothing of it at the moment, but that fleur-de-lys on the faded carpet at his feet was branded on his memory for ever. If he had wronged her in thought though never in intent, verily it was a full cup which Alys, his wife, had wrung out and put to his lips. But that cup was not yet drunk to the dregs, no, nor ever would be till life had run out. Before even Mr. Ferrier had recovered himself enough to ask what was to follow, Adrian rose and said heavily:

"There is nothing more to say. I am in your hands—you can do with me as you think, but you will find me in my room when—when you have decided."

Putting out a groping hand, as if the full, cold daylight were darkness, he moved towards the door without looking round. The high dark head was sunk, the shoulders seemed to stoop, already under their load of shame.

Was this her Cousin Adrian who had flung that lying paper into the fire, and would have watched it burn with a smile? It couldn't be—no one man was capable of the two actions. He—or they—must be under some monstrous delusion. Before he could reach the door Lesley had sprung forward to his side, and seized his arm with the clutch as of one drowning.

"Adrian!" she cried in a voice which none there ever forgot, and which told its own story.

Alys, who had fallen back as if in a stupor, sat suddenly erect, the pinched terror of her face crossed by some other emotion, hard to read, but none had eyes for her.

"Adrian, you must not, you shall not go! You have not done this thing—you could not do it—I will never believe it. You said you could not deny it—God knows what you mean, but I challenge you"—the brown eyes were ablaze with passionate, desperate appeal—"look me in the face, and say that you did—then—I shall let you go."

Like the shudder that runs through a tree before its final crashing fall, when the trunk has been all but severed by the axe, a quiver ran through Adrian's tall figure. For one instant he lifted the dark anguish of his gaze in a last look, then the words came, one by one:

"You must—let—me—go."

It was time flesh and blood could endure no more. Lesley fell back as if he had struck her on the face. Alys, who sat breathing hard, a red spot

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like the impress of a bruising finger upon each cheek-bone, dropped with a faint cry back into her chair.

"Poor child—poor child—none of us have been thinking how terrible this is for her!" exclaimed Lord Palmont.

Adrian mechanically stooped over her, as if he would have lifted her from the chair, but Lesley suddenly stepped between.

"Don't touch her, she shall be my care. Go—since you must," she said hoarsely.

And Adrian Skene went, leaving behind him love and honour and all for which a man gives his life-blood and counts it a light thing.

CHAPTER XIII.

Through the lowered sunblinds the June sunlight was filtering into a room which, in its elegant bareness, the last word of the modern revolt from over-ornamentation and over-furnishing, might have served as a background for one of Orchardson's pictures. The resemblance would have been complete had its two occupants, instead of the man's conventional

frock-coat and the girl's gauzy white draperies, worn eighteenth century dress. Under such a title as "*Solitude a deux*," it would have made a very charming *genre* picture, a graceful embodiment of that old story which never fails to touch and to please, to awaken the sigh and the smile of memory or of hope. But the strained anxiety, the hardly-suppressed passion on Sir Neil Wedderburne's face were emotions too keen and visible for such pleasant drawing-room art.

He had succeeded in persuading Lesley to accept his sister's eagerly-urged invitation to spend some weeks of the season with her, and had meant to be content for the moment with seeing Miss Home and Lady Marchmont installed in Mrs. Kenyon's pretty London house—a victory indeed to his persistence. But with more sympathy than prudence, Agatha Kenyon had chosen to efface herself this afternoon, and from the friendly talk which long habit had made so easy and familiar between Lesley and himself, Sir Neil found himself hurried, he hardly knew how, into hot avowal of the love which had grown strong in silence.

(To be continued)