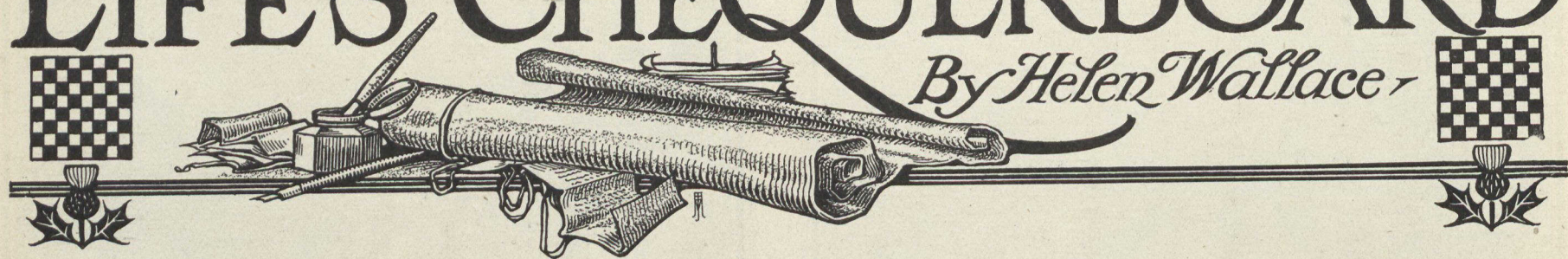


LIFE'S CHEQUERBOARD

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.

was light, but there was no mistaking the hope and the purpose underlying it.

"You must tell me more by and by. As you know, we are not literary people at Strode, so that must be my excuse if what I am going to suggest is quite unsuitable." Lesley paused, and then began again with a slight effort. "Since Captain Grant's death a few months ago my uncle was acting as his own agent, and I think I was not a bad deputy," with a laugh, "but it was too much for poor uncle, and certainly it would be far too much for me. Adrian, will you help me, for I cannot manage alone, and there is a great deal to be done. Uncle Richard was a far more generous landlord than people knew, but there were many things with which he had no sympathy. Do you remember what improvements you used to plan—we could carry them out together," eagerly. "You would have a free hand. I hoped—I thought you might care to come back to Glen Falla and the hills. Mr. Dalmahoy will explain the business side of it, but Strode is a great empty house for two women, and I hoped that you—and Alys would make your home with us unless you preferred to have Tombreck. You will think it over at least, won't you? There is no need to decide at once," she ended beseechingly.

Adrian was silent for a moment. He knew that his cousin had taken this means of offering him a very handsome income, an honourable position, and an occupation which, though responsible, was to one fitted for it by no means arduous. And there was something inexpressibly winning in the way she had done it, in the contrast between her usual calm, easy decision of manner, and the touch of doubt and hesitation in her voice, the scarcely-veiled suggestion that the conferring of the favour lay with him. The proposal had its temptations; it would relieve at once the wearing, daily pressure of anxiety, it would place in his hands that which he had long vainly coveted, the power to help and influence other lives, but—to give up all his hopes, to come back to Strode under such changed circumstances! He thrust the last thought aside, for he knew it was the consciousness of it which had brought the flush to Lesley's face, the tremor to her voice. But all these mattered little compared with the main question—how could he take advantage of her generosity, how could he accept her charity, for it would be no less?

"Lesley, your plan is as generous as yourself," he exclaimed hastily. "It's not your proposal that is unsuitable, but I who am wholly unfit. You and Strode need someone with experience, and five years of Fleet Street haven't added to any small stock I ever possessed. It was always one of the chief counts in your uncle's indictment that I was so impractical, so little adapted to a country life, and I am afraid Mr. Dalmahoy and your trustees would be of the same opinion."

"Oh, they—" exclaimed Lesley, with a disdainful lift of her head and a quick involuntary gesture as if she were sweeping away adverse opinions like so many cobwebs. "If that is your only objection—"

"Isn't it enough, even if there were no others? But I am 'thirted' to a very exacting and capricious mistress, the spell of the inkpot is on me, and if it is hard to serve two masters, what about two mistresses?" with rather a woud-be laugh. Then, with a sudden change of voice, "Lesley, if I could really serve you, God knows I would, but it would be no service to you if I take up a post which some other man could easily fill better. It was more than good of you to think of it, to remember what all this means to me," with another glance round glowing hill and valley. "I thank you with all my heart, but I can never thank you enough—" striving to find warmer words in a vain effort to salve the hurt he knew he was inflicting. "I would not lightly put such an offer aside, but I cannot do what you wish—it would not be right for me—it would not be honourable—"

Lesley's rare vivid flush dyed her face.

"I am sorry you think I should ask you to do anything dishonourable," she said in a suppressed voice. The words were almost wilfully perverse,

but in her sudden disappointment she could not stay them.

"Lesley!" exclaimed Adrian, "you know I don't mean that. You ask me to serve you, but I know that you would fain do me a service too, and in your kindness you think too well of me. I know what I am fit for, that as an estate agent I should not be worth my salt for months, and if I undertake it, what should I be but—" He stopped abruptly. Such words should not be spoken between them, but what cursed folly had led him almost to the brink of uttering them? The breaking off of his own word would have been reason enough.

But Lesley's instinct divined his thought, as if it had been spoken. She sprang hastily to her feet, ejecting Coolin suddenly from his comfortable couch on her skirt.

"I thought you would have been more generous, Cousin Adrian," she said in a low voice, as the collie, leaping up, filled the air with a tempest of joyful barks.

CHAPTER V.

"And this is Strode?" eagerly.

"Yes, this is Strode," absently.

Luncheon over, Alys had instantly claimed the fulfilment of her husband's promise to show her "all his old haunts," so she phrased it, but, away from the house, her interest soon flagged, and Adrian had been a rather silent and abstracted guide. Even the famous garden, falling steeply from the house to the river, terrace below terrace, rose-garlanded or creeper-hung, failed to hold her attention. The contrast between the sombre firwoods, the billowing sweeps of bare moorland, and the wealth of colour and fragrance on this sunny, sheltered slope had seemingly no appeal to her any more than the quaint relics of a bygone taste which had striven to create the surroundings of a Roman villa in a Highland strath—the exotic shrubs formally trimmed, the carved urns and lichened statues which surmounted each pilastered terrace and flanked the descending flights of mossy steps.

"What a lot of money all this must cost. I am sure I have counted half a dozen gardeners already," had been her chief comment as they had climbed up to the level of the house again.

Now, as they leaned on the balustrade of the uppermost terrace, each had a different picture before the eye. Alys Skene was looking back at the great house—the shaggy fragments of the ancient tower still clinging to the high, narrow sixteenth-century house with its crow-stepped gables, its small, irregular windows and shotholes for defence in the lower storey. In quaint contrast with both was the latest addition, the great Georgian building, whose long rows of windows overlooked the terrace. On these Alys's eyes were fixed, but it was with the interior of Strode rather than with its outward aspect that her thoughts were busy, with the great rooms of which, since yesterday, she had caught brief glimpses.

Their size somewhat impressed her. Their whole flat in Mostyn Mansions could have been put into her bedroom, she thought, while the huge bed with its curious hangings, embroidered with a parrot and a poppy—a parrot and a poppy by hands long ago quietly folded—seemed as large as a room. Very old-fashioned, too, she was inclined hastily to pronounce these stately chambers, this being her first experience of a house which has been a centre of family life through long years, and where each generation of men and women, the flower of their day for wit and culture and knowledge of a wider world, have left some tokens of their presence to those who would follow them. Still she was keenly alive to all that Strode represented, and above all to its warmth and comfort. Last night every opening door had revealed a fire sparkling in the autumn dusk. Hot water in abundance seemed always waiting, every want was anticipated without even the need for ringing a bell, a process which, as Alys knew to her cost, had hitherto in her own experience been attended by very doubtful results.

And all this—her eyes roving again over the great, grey pile—and all that it implied, ought to



UT you can serve me!" exclaimed Lesley eagerly. "It is that I want to speak about, Cousin Adrian. Uncle Richard is dead, I am powerless to undo what he has done. I have just been learning my limitations," with a bitter little smile at the recollection of her talk with Mr. Dalmahoy. "Nothing I could say would make you under-

stand how I feel at being forced not only to take all, but to keep all—to be able to offer so little." She spoke vehemently, and then suddenly paused. "Would it be a great sacrifice for you to leave London?" she asked abruptly.

Adrian glanced round the sweep of sky, at the familiar hills, and drew in a long breath of the crystal-clear air, as Lesley added quickly, though in evident afterthought:

"Do you think Alys would care to live in the country?"

At that moment, as he recalled the murky yellow haze which for days had overhung the grimy, sweltering city, and through which a sickly, half-seen sun had sent down a heavy, smiting heat, London focussed itself to Adrian in that swarming human ant-hill, the "Mansions," to one of whose innumerable flats or sets of cupboards, rather, he had a month or two ago brought home his wife. Within their handbox partitions the occupier was made easily free of every sound and smell, not only from the clanging, thronging street without, but from the close-packed life above and below.

"You haven't spent an autumn in town, Lesley, or you wouldn't ask such a question," he said with rather a wry smile. "Would it be a sacrifice to exchange purgatory for paradise—a purgatory without any remedial results, too—worse luck! But it isn't always a stifling September, and I have my work to do. There is nowhere else I could find a market for such wares as I have to offer. As to Alys"—slowly—"really, I hardly know. She is such a little Londoner that as yet, I think, the sea is her only alternative from town."

"I know so little about your work," said Lesley, rather wistfully.

"My work! I fear there is not much to say about it," said Adrian, with his slight involuntary shrug, an inherited habit which had always annoyed Richard Skene, and which he had stigmatised as a "foreign trick." "To supply copy at so much per column has about as much to do with literature as brick-laying with architecture. However, one gets an opportunity at times of laying one's bricks according to one's own fancy, not the stereotyped pattern, and straightway begins to plan 'cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces.' Of course, I count on rearing my palace some day. I am still young enough at the business for that." The tone