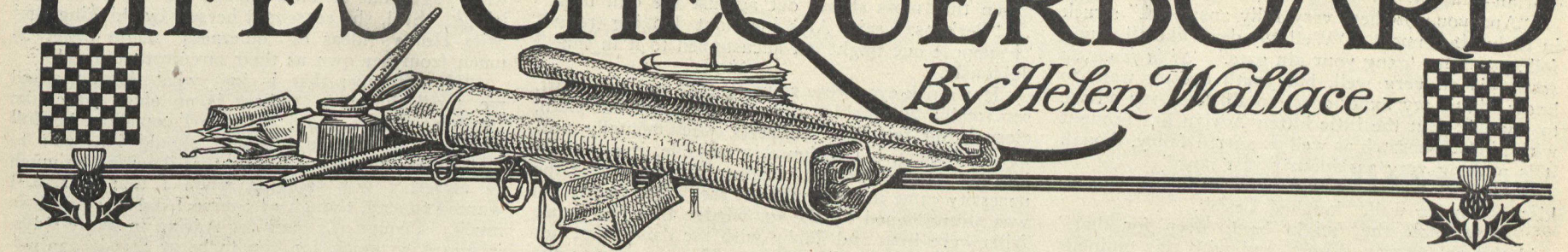


LIFE'S CHEQUERBOARD

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. The latter accepts and informs his wife, Alys, a shallow and rather disappointing young person, of his new position with which she is naturally delighted since Adrian had not been successful as a London journalist.



At length, by such efforts as only those who have been through the mill can know, he had gained a footing which, though precarious enough, allowed him at times to write for something beyond the day's wages. His delicate, subtle prose and verse, though little known to the world, which likes the colour laid on thick and

strong, had gained him some reputation in more critical circles, while, as men do, he had made many and diverse acquaintances up and down amid the free lances of literature and art.

At one of their easy friendly gatherings he had encountered Alys D'Alleyne, and somehow had drifted into a certain intimacy with her and her family, how he never exactly knew, since their ways were emphatically not his ways and jarred ceaselessly with his fastidious nature and habits of thought. A parcel of racketty, headstrong, half-educated lads and girls, all eager to fight their way to the stage or the platform, to publicity and notoriety at any cost, they had scrambled through life under the nominal care of a somewhat nondescript father, a dabbler in all the backwaters of the theatrical world. Amid the noisy, heedless rout of brothers and sisters, Alys, timid, fragile, and shrinking, showed to Adrian's fancy "like a lily among thorns." She seemed also the Cinderella of a household where there was never any money, nor apparently any regular meals, and yet food and drink of a sort could be had at all hours.

Now a sudden, vivid picture of Halcyon Villa arose before him, and of that shaping hour which had all unexpectedly decided his destiny. How well he remembered it—the dreary, pretentious house, with its cracked stucco and peeled paint, and the drift of straws and flying papers which some circling eddy of wind seemed always to deposit in the plot of sickly grass within its florid, broken railings. The electric bell, in brazen defiance of its invitation, refused to "push," and he had had to wait a long time till a slipshod damsel, who would doubtless have alleged that she had been "cleaning herself"—though, judging by results, the process had been a somewhat partial one—at last admitted him.

There was no one in the drawing-room, where the ashes of yesterday's fire still encumbered the grate. The chairs stood about anyhow. One was heaped with some sewing, a mass of flimsy, brightly-coloured stuff, snips and cuttings of which bestrewed the carpet; under another a pair of battered little slippers with preposterous heels had been pushed. The blinds, hanging all awry, were pulled up, probably because they had refused to come down. The

clear, spring sunlight was staring in over some wilted plants, which Alys sometimes remembered to water, and mercilessly revealing the threadbare shabbiness of carpet and cushions, and the undisturbed film of dust which overspread every flat surface.

Though the sight was not unfamiliar, Adrian looked round with a shrug of distaste, which changed to a whimsical smile as, amid the crowd of objects—ornaments, their owners doubtless considered them—which jostled each other on the mantelpiece, his eyes fell on a bit of Devonshire pottery in which some fading flowers were stuck. Cracked and spoutless, it bravely bore the legend, "Adventures are to the adventurous." Had the poor clay pot taken its chances amid the brazen ones, Adrian wondered, with a twitch of the lip, when the door opened, and, like a white, frightened mouse, Alys stole in. Clearly she had been crying, and had dabbed her face more plentifully than skilfully with powder to hide her swelled eyelids and the bluish rings which circled her eyes.

Without greeting her visitor, she paused and looked round her tragically.

"It's too bad! Gwen promised me that she would see things tidied up, but nobody ever does anything in this house," she exclaimed.

"Except you," said Adrian, with a smile, and then, at sight of her face, he exclaimed, "What is the matter, my poor child?" Unconsciously his tone was warmer than he knew.

Next instant the choking sobs broke out anew, and he was trying to comfort her, as if she had been indeed the child she seemed.

"Tell me what is the matter, and perhaps I could help," he was repeating, when from under the heavy eyelids the grey eyes met his, and Adrian Skene would have been blind indeed if he had not understood.

To the girl, accustomed to the "hail-fellow" familiarity of her own set, Adrian Skene, with his innate chivalry and his touch of the "grand manner," inherited, perhaps, with his French blood, had seemed a prince-errant, a being from another world. She had taken no pains to hide her feelings, and to-day Adrian could not but see what was made so plain. He hardly heard her sobbed-out tale of an invitation meant for her, but which Rosalind, as the eldest, had appropriated.

"It was to one of Mrs. Delville's 'at homes,' and Mr. Mountford, of the 'Imperial,' was to be there, and I know I would have been asked to recite, and who knows what might have come of it, for I can recite," falling unconsciously into a pose at once. "I never get a chance, but I am fit for something better than to darn and to dust, and coax the tradespeople, and do all the things in the house that no other one will do. But that's always the way; they won't do it, and somebody must, and it's always me, and now Rosalind says she must have her chance first, so she's going to-night, and it's not fair—nobody thinks of me—nobody cares—" The broken words were swept away in a storm of tears.

It was all so young, so artless, so pitiful—the little oval face all blurred with tears and powder, the eyes telling their innocent story with every glance, the girl's lithe young warmth pressing so trustingly against his arm—it was little wonder that pity and kindness should for the moment swamp reason and memory. What he said, Adrian could never clearly remember, but next instant Alys was drying her tears against his shoulder.

"Do you mean it—oh, do you really mean it—it can't be true—it's too good to be true—and to think I was so miserable a little while ago, and—and now I am—so happy," came in broken snatches between the lessening gusts of sobs. With the last words the little, tear-stained face was raised for a moment, the wet, grey eyes glorified by exultant love.

What could Adrian, impulsive and generous as he was—what could any man do, but whisper the assurance that he did mean it, however far it might have been from his thoughts even a few minutes ago. From that casual visit to Halcyon Villa he came away an engaged man, but it required all the

recollection of Alys's tearful raptures to blot out the memory of Captain D'Alleyne's paternal blessings. Though perfectly willing that anyone should relieve him of his very lightly-carried responsibilities he had shown himself astonishingly well aware of his prospective son-in-law's connections and possible prospects, and had been most happily indifferent to Adrian's blunt statement that nothing was to be hoped for from that quarter.

No doubt, as Alys had said, it was he who had planned that little *coup* yesterday, which made the young man's face burn again as he recalled it.

"Never let yourself be left behind in a corner, my girl. Better let these fine folks know at once there is a Mrs. Adrian Skene, and then you can look after your interests; and that superfine husband of yours among them all," Adrian could hear the big, rolling, husky voice saying.

But all that was for the time forgotten in the cleaving decision which was now forced upon him. Strong as was the call of the hills, of the old life, of the old memories, it had not sufficed that morning to silence the voice of pride, or to slacken the grip which, through years of disappointment, his life-work had laid upon heart and mind. But since then he had made a surprising discovery—he had failed to make Alys happy! Her sudden, sharp outburst of weariness and dissatisfaction, her last words—words which surely she would never have used save under the utmost pressure of desire—had awakened a searching question. Was it not his duty to yield to this passionate desire of hers, since he had done and could do so pitifully little to ease and brighten life for her?

Once more he was passing through one of Life's shaping hours, and, little though he realised it, it was Alys's little slim hands which were moulding his destiny, her eager desires which would form and colour his future.

He gazed at the far-off hills, where the pearly shadows were deepening to the violet of evening, as if to read his answer there. He, too, realised how many and how various were the "buts" arrayed against Lesley's project, but, as the shrewd lawyer had conjectured, there was one which no more occurred to him than it had done to his cousin. He never dreamed of asking himself whether he could live side by side with the new Lesley whom the years had developed and not be visited by the old dreams in which "little Lesley" had once long ago played a part.

CHAPTER VI.

"So you've got your own way," said Lady Marchmont a few days later. "I wonder what Richard, poor man, would think if he knew what a coach-and-four you had driven through that misguided will, and that Adrian was settled at Strode again?" with a dry laugh. "He should have appointed other trustees if he wanted his wishes carried out."

"On the contrary, Sir Neil stood out for some one more experienced—as if Adrian didn't know every inch of Strode," said Lesley rather stiffly. "And if he doesn't, I do," she added. "But, of course, both he and Lord Palmont feel that their trusteeship is rather a matter of form. In little more than a year I shall be my own mistress."

"I wonder when you were anything else," drily. "But I should like to get at Adrian's view of it. I can't think he'll altogether like being man where he ought to have been master."

Lesley winced, her colour rose.

"I know—I know, but what else could I do?" she said hurriedly. "It was all I had to offer. At least, it was better than nothing, as, from what Alys said, I gathered that things were—were not going too well."

"Alys?" queried Lady Marchmont, with a disdainful sniff, as if at some disagreeable odour.

"I don't suppose she can help her name. She is not to blame for that at least," said Lesley, trying to laugh. "What else am I to call her?"

"That's as you please, but why did she come whining to you?" sharply.

"She didn't whine," said Lesley, half-laughing, half indignant. "I only asked her a few questions,