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

CHAPTER XXIV.
Lord Chesterleigh, who was sitting on the left of Clive, consulted his programme.

"This is the young girl, Veronica Vernon, whom I told you I heard at Manchester," he said. "She has a wonderful voice, and is a remarkably pretty girl—ah, here she comes!"

The audience clapped furiously as the young, slight figure came slowly up the steps and onto the platform. Clive was looking at the programme and did not raise his eyes until the prelude of the accompaniment had been got through and the first notes of the singer rose in the crowded and heated hall. Then the programme fluttered from his hand, the color faded from his face and he sat, like a thing of stone, staring at the young girl, who stood, with downcast eyes and modest mien, pouring out the liquid voice which he knew so well.

He sat like a man in a trance, his heart seemed to have ceased to beat, he scarcely breathed. It is said that in the moment before death all one's past life passes before one's consciousness; it was so with Clive at that moment. Every incident of the past with which Mina was connected rose before him, and the voice in which she had spoken to him in the street when he had rescued her, at the Tate Gallery, in the grimy hall where she had saved his life, at the bedside when she had nursed him, drowned the exquisite melody with which she was now flooding the hall.

A kind of dull amazement sat upon him. She was lovelier than ever; with all her modesty, she bore herself like a young queen. In all that crowded hall there was no girl, no woman, so lovely, so bewitching.

The song ended and was instantly followed by a burst of enthusiastic applause and shouts of encore, in which even the orchestra joined. Clive glanced at the orchestra and saw the best form of the hunchback, Elisha, which he had not noticed before. No, it was no vision, no hallucination; it was Mina herself, no longer the waif and stray of the streets, but a queen of song, acknowledged and acclaimed as such by an enthusiastic audience. It is not too much to say that Clive lost all sense of his surroundings, that he was overwhelmed by the sudden backward rush of memory; his emotions ebbed like a swift tide; he realized that he had been living during the last two or three months in a kind of dream, that he had been caught up by the wind of circumstance and driven without volition into a course of life in which his heart had no part.

Lady Edith's voice roused him from his reverie, his state of stupor. "Why don't you clap, dearest?" she asked. "How beautifully she sang! No wonder they want an encore. Why, what is the matter, Clive! How pale you look, are you ill?" she inquired anxiously.

Clive shook his head; for a moment he seemed incapable of speaking. There was a sudden hush; Miss Veronica Vernon was going to grant the encore. As usual, she sang "Home, Sweet Home"; and she was in the middle of the second verse, the audience listening as if spellbound, with tears in the eyes of many of them, when suddenly the young singer faltered and then stopped. A kind of thrill ran through the audience, every eye was fixed on her, and it was seen that she had gone deathly white and that her gaze seemed to be riveted on some one or something in the middle of the front seats.

The sudden cessation of the sweet, pathetic voice, the pallor of the beautiful face, gave the audience something like a shock; and they turned and looked curiously, half-fearfully, in the direction in which her eyes were fixed. Instinctively, with a desire to go to her, Clive half rose; fortunately, other persons had also risen and his movement appeared to be unnoticed; but as he sank down again he chanced to look behind him and he met the dark, piercing eyes of Sara fixed on him. There was something sinister in their expression, in the straight line of the lips; and her gleaming eyes flashed from his face to that of the white one of the girl on the platform.

"What is the matter?" asked Lady Edith, while similar inquiries came from different parts of the hall.

It was Lord Chesterleigh who answered. He, too, had risen. "She has been taken ill," he said. "Poor girl!"

From the orchestra a hunchback with a violin in his hand came across the platform toward the girl; but before he could reach her—the pause had been really only one of a few moments—she had signed to the conductor and taken up the song; and she sang it through bravely, and all the more touchingly because of the tremor in her voice. With her last note a roar of applause and cheering rewarded her courage.

The audience insisted upon calling her again and again, and she came on led by the conductor, her face still pale and with a grave expression in her eyes instead of the conventional smile.

The rest of the concert was a kind of anticlimax; every one was thinking of and a great many talking of the girl. The crowded audience got up to go, with "God Save the King," but Clive still sat as if in a dream; then, with a start, he pulled himself together, arranged Lady Edith's gorgeous wrap about her white shoulders, and went out with the rest. Late as it was, he had a committee meeting to attend, and he told Lady Edith

of this as he put her in the carriage. "Oh, what a pity, dearest!" she said. "Can you not shirk it for tonight? You look so pale, so tired, as if you were ill."

"I'm all right," he said, and he knew that his voice sounded strange and hoarse. "Good night."

When the carriage had driven off, he stood, with his hands thrust in his overcoat pockets, his head bent. Was it because she had seen him that she had been startled and smitten to silence? If so, what did it mean? She did not love him, he knew that; she had told him so in the most effectual way. She was near him. A burning, feverish desire to see her took possession of him; a desire that was irresistible.

He made his way through the crowd to the corner of the street, then stopped, but the force he could not withstand drew him on, and he went round to the orchestra door.

CHAPTER XXV.
The people were coming out of the orchestra seats, and Clive stood aside to let them pass. The period of waiting gave him still further time for reflection. He was engaged to Lady Edith; what excuse had he for seeking a meeting with Mina, the girl who had refused him? What right had he to force his presence on her, to cause her embarrassment, perhaps pain? There could be one answer only; but still he lingered.

The crowd began to grow less and presently a fly drove up. Inside it was Tibby! A transformed Tibby, gaily dressed in the extreme of fashion, but with a hat of enormous proportions and adorned by an ostrich-feather of which the bird who originally owned it had every reason to be proud. In size and gorgeousness the hat bore a family likeness to the quaint head-gear with which Clive was familiar, and the sight of Tibby in all her splendor touched a chord in Clive's heart and recalled the past.

She leaned back, surveying the crowd with the air of satisfaction with which a showman surveys the audience pouring out of his hall or theatre; then she caught sight of Clive; an angry flush rose to her face and she sprang out of the fly, said something to the driver, and pushed her way into the hall before Clive, who had raised his hat, could approach her.

Clive waited for some minutes, then went into the passage and asked the hall-keeper for Miss Veronica Vernon.

"I think she's gone, sir," said the man. "I'll inquire for you."

He came back presently. "Yes, sir, she's gone. She went out by the front entrance."

Clive realized with something like a sad relief that Tibby had been one too many for him. He went round to the front, but the keeper had already locked the door, and Clive walked slowly to the committee rooms. Yes; Tibby had saved the situation, and unwittingly prevented him from inflicting pain on Mina.

He tried to throw himself into the business before him, but it was with infinite weariness that he got through it and returned to the Royal Hart. He spent a sleepless night, counting the hours struck by the church clock—which seemed to be under his bed, so near and painfully insistent was it—and when it proclaimed seven he rose with a bad headache, had his breakfast, and went out.

It was a lovely morning, and Clive, leaving the high street, the errand boys sleepily shaking the mats and sweeping out the shops stopping to look after him with curious interest, gained the meadows outside the town. Now that the effect of the sudden sight of Mina had worn off, he realized the hopelessness, the unwisdom of his impulse of the night before; it was better that they should not meet.

As he thus reflected bitterly, he saw her.

She was walking a little ahead of him down the lane. His heart leaped and his pulse quickened as he caught sight of the slight, graceful figure, and all the old love, which had only been sleeping, rose within him like an ardent flame, a flame that tortured as it consumed him. She wore a plain morning frock of blue serge and a tam-o'-shanter, and she carried her gloves in her hand as if she had caught them up as she left the hotel.

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She was walking slowly, her head bent, a certain listlessness evident in her bearing; but as she heard footsteps behind her she drew herself up and walked more quickly, but he overtook her very soon.

"Mina!" he said quietly.

She stopped dead short and paused a moment before she turned her head, her face flushing hotly, then white as death; and she turned and looked at him as if she were incapable of speech. In that moment he saw how much she had changed. He had left her a shy, almost timid girl; now, even in that moment of stress and strain, she was, though a girl in years, a woman in her power of self-command, and her eyes, after the first moment, met his steadily.

"Mina!" he said again. She had not offered her hand, and they stood regarding each other like two beings gazing from opposite sides of a wide gulf. "I tried to see you last night. I went out to the back of the hall."

He knew by the expression of her eyes that Tibby had not told her that she had seen him. "I wanted to see you, to tell you how much—" He paused. How banal the words sounded! "You are well?"

"Quite well," she said very quietly. "And—and there is no need to ask whether you are flourishing. You have brought truth to our prophecies. You are on the road to fame, and famous already." Again he felt how banal, how weak and feeble was the speech, but he struggled on. "Last night's triumph is but one of many. I suppose?"

"They are always very kind to me, yes," she said. Her voice was still low and it did not quaver now, but her eyes were downcast, and he knew that her heart was beating fast.

"I am so glad, so delighted," he said in the same tone, a tone meant to mask his agitation. "I did not know you were going to be here, to sing, did not know that you had become so famous."

"No," she said.

"No. I have not heard anything of you since— And yet I have searched for you."

"Why?" she asked gravely.

Clive looked away across the cornfields ripening to harvest. What could he answer?

"I was interested— Ah, Mina, why did you think it necessary to fly from me, to disappear, hide yourself, as if you were—yes, afraid of me?"

She regarded him with surprise, a pained surprise.

"Why should I not have done so?" she asked. "It—it could not have mattered to you whether I remained at Benson's Rents or went elsewhere."

As she spoke he noticed the change in her voice and tone. They had always been refined, but they were now marked by a savoir faire which quite wrongly, by the way, we consider the monopoly of the higher classes. He looked at her sadly.

"Did you think me so selfish, so heartless as not to care what became of you?" he said.

He saw that his appeal affected her. Her voice quavered slightly as she said:

(To be Continued.)

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