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## A Dark Shadow;

Or, A Coming Vengeance

### CHAPTER XIV.

Mina held the glass to his lips, and her eyes dwelt on his face tenderly until he raised his, then hers fell. He lay in a kind of daze for a little while. It was the quietest part of the day in the Rente, and the house was very still. Outside, the impudent, self-assertive sparrows twittered incessantly, the strains of an organ, playing in a distant street, were almost harmonious; and stillness like that of the house brooded, like the dove of peace, over Mina's spirit, as she listened to his breathing and watched his flushed face. Presently he looked up, and touched her arm.

"I wonder whether you would sing to me, Mina?" he said. "My brain is in a whirl; I can't think, and I want to try not to. Sing to me, sing to me, if you will. Sing the song you sang the night we met—do you remember what it was?"

"Yes, I remember," she said in a very low voice; and after a moment or two she began to sing softly, so softly that the notes were like a lullaby.

Olivia lay with his eyes half-closed; the lines on his forehead and at the corners of his lips relaxed, and he drew a long breath of relief of peace.

"That voice of yours would drive seven devils out of a man, Mina," he said. "It's so sweet, so pure. How often have I heard it when you have not been near! Sing me something else: the 'Ave Maria'."

She sang it, with all her heart in it, so that he covered his eyes with his hands. "Oh, beautiful," he said almost inaudibly. "To be able to hear that voice always!"

"You would get tired of it," she said with a smile.

"I think not," he returned. "There are some voices and faces which one grows to love more dearly the oftener one hears or sees them."

Her face brightened and then went pale, and she rose quickly.

"I will get some more ice," she said tremulously.

His eyes followed her slender, graceful figure wistfully, and he sighed. Was it because he was so weak, so upset, that he felt her absence, even for a few moments, a heavy loss? It was some little time before she returned, and he nodded and smiled at her.

"I thought you were never coming back," he said half-shamefacedly. "See how you are spoiling me! I am growing as exacting as a confirmed invalid. What shall I do when I have gone, when I lose you altogether, Mina?"

He smiled as he put the question, but there was a grave note in his accents, and, as she bent over him to straighten his pillow, he saw her winces and her eyes fill with tears. He raised himself on his elbow, and looked up at the beautiful face with an intent, an eager gaze.

"Mina," he whispered huskily. "You would be sorry! Oh, my child—don't! For she had sunk on her knees, and buried her face in her hands, and he could see that her heart was breaking with her efforts to repress her sobs. Do you mean that you care whether I stay or go? Do you mean—Oh, Mina, my dear little one, do you think that I shall not be sorry? Don't you think I shall be glad, glad to be here, though I'm lying here helpless; that I am happier than I have ever been in all my life? And don't you know why? Ah, I ought not to tell you, Mina, ought not to speak now—it's taking advantage of all your sweet goodness to me—but I can't keep silent. Mina, I love you, dear!"

He saw the shiver that ran through her, and his heart leapt as he put out his hand, and laid it gently on her downcast head.

"Are you angry—frightened, Mina?" he said, in so low a voice that the words were almost inaudible. "Ah, don't be, my child! I love you, Mina! Do you care just a little for me? Speak, dear one; lift up your head and look at me—and I shall know by your eyes."

She raised her head slowly, and looked at him with all a girl's first love glowing in her eyes, trembling on her lips; and Olivia, awed by the sight, held his breath, and could not speak. And so they gazed at each other, heart to heart, soul to soul.

"Is it true?" he whispered at last. "Do you love me, Mina?"

Her eyes did not waver and her lips parted, but for a moment no sound came from them; then, in a responsive whisper, she said, slowly, dreamily:

"I—I don't know. Yes, I think so."

"You think so?" he echoed, with the sense of awe still mastering him. "You are not sure, Mina?"

Her head drooped till her face rested, and was hidden, on his arm; he could feel the tears as they welled from her eyes.

"I don't know," she whispered in a troubled voice. "I have not asked myself. But I am always thinking of you, always! And I am so—happy when I see you: that other day at the picture gallery—it was like heaven. And now—when you said that you would soon be gone—and you will—I feel as if something had gone out of me, as if the light had grown dark—and it was all misery, misery—Oh, yes; I must love you, don't you think so?" She raised her head, and looked at him with an agony of doubt, of wistfulness, of entreaty.

He took her hand and laid it in his burning one, and drew her towards him. She resisted at first, but gradually she yielded, and her head sank on his breast. He put the hair from her forehead, and kissed her—not even yet did he dare kiss her quivering lips.

"Mina!" he said hoarsely. "Be sure, do what I want! For I mean so much to you both of us! You have seen so very little of me. It may be just pity, because you saved my life, have nursed me, and I am sick and helpless. Think, Mina! Do you love me well enough to live with me always, to be my wife?"

He felt her shake as if his question had stirred her to the heart's core, and felt, rather than heard, the whispered "Yes." Then he raised her head and kissed her on the face passionately.

"My beautiful angel—ah, better!—my dear little woman! Kiss me, so that I may be sure that you really love me!"

Pale yet blushing, she lifted her lips to his, and kissed him. Then suddenly she started, and in accents of affright and remorse she cried in a low voice:

"Oh, what have I done! I ought not to have tried to smile away her distress, to soothe her with another kiss, but she put up her hand to ward it off. I—I did not think, did not remember. I forgot everything. Ah, you know I must not love you, that I can't be your wife. Her face burnt for a moment at the word, then went white, as she firmly freed herself from his arm, and stood at the side of the bed, her hand pressed to her bosom, her breath coming painfully.

"What is the matter, Mina?" he asked. "Why do you say that? Why do you shrink from me? Come back to me, dear one!"

She shook her head. "No—I must not, she whispered sadly. "It is wrong—ah, you know it! You cannot marry me, you ought not to, and I ought not to have said what I did. But, pitiously, you slipped from me. I could not keep it back."

"Why should you, dearest?" he said, and his voice was feeble, for the passion had exhausted him. "I love you; and you—you love me, Mina! I know it—and why should we not be married, my dear child?"

She shook her head again. "Because you are a gentleman, ever so much, ah, ever so much above me. You—you forget that I was—what I am, a girl who has got her living by singing in the streets, and who has been a beggar!"

Her face went hot again, and she hung her head. It was the old story, the old story that dates back to Adam and Eve: knowledge may bring power, but it often brings unhappiness. Mina had learnt to be ashamed of her lowly past. Olivia was too wise, comprehended her state of mind too clearly, to attempt to laugh away her scruples.

"Is that what is troubling you, Mina?" he said. "Dearest, don't let it do so. I had not forgotten; but, remembering it, I honored you for striving to repay the kindness of a man who had sheltered and fathered you. And as for me, well, he laughed, "I'm a gentleman, I hope; but if I haven't sung in the streets, I've spoken in them."

"That is different," she murmured. "Is there any difference? I doubt it," he rejoined quite gravely, for he knew how difficult it would be to overcome the obstacle she had raised. "You sang—for money, and I did not, and I love you, and love of it. I wanted to gain something, place, power, and yes, money, for I've not too much of it. So that, if there is anything derogatory in the two businesses, there is not much to choose between them."

She sighed and looked at him appealingly.

"I am not fit to be your wife," she said. "There is so great a difference."

"I can't argue with you, sweet," he said; "but put it this way: if you were what you call a 'lady'—mind! I say you are, at my eyes, a lady, a lady of the purest type: Heaven's own!—and I got my living—yes, by singing in the streets, would you, if you loved me, turn away from me?"

"You said you would not argue," she whispered imploringly.

"Answer, dearest! But you would not. I know your heart too well to want an answer. So, there you are, Mina! And now come to me again, dearest, and say, 'Olivia, you are right and I am wrong, and I will be your wife.'"

But she still kept beyond his reach, her head turned away, as if she dared not trust herself to meet his ardent eyes.

"No," she said at last; "not now."

"Why not now?" he asked.

"Because"—she hesitated—"because you are ill—you don't realize it, would be cruel, unfair to let you pledge yourself. Passionately as he loved her, much as he admired her fine discernment and instinctive delicacy, he was conscious of surprise.

"Dearest, there is a reproach in that," he said gravely. "It is I who should not have spoken—I am in your care, have traded on your pity, your goodness to me."

"No," she breathed swiftly. "You have not done anything wrong—you could not. Ah, don't speak! I feel so—so weak, as if I must listen, as if I must do what you want! And all the while I know it is wrong; that you may come to be sorry that you have asked me."

"I feel!" he said feverishly. "Well, we'll appeal from Philip sick to Philip sound! Dearest, don't laugh at me, you the purest type! Heaven's own!—and I got my living—yes, by singing in the streets, would you, if you loved me, turn away from me?"

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and approached the bed on tip-toe. "I'm awake and kicking," said Olivia cheerily.

Elisha nodded congratulatingly. "That's first rate, sir," he said. "Do you think you're well enough to see a visitor?"

Olivia stared, and Mina looked towards the door apprehensively, jealously.

"I got your address from the lady at one of the houses where I teach, and I went there. There was a gentleman coming down the stairs, and I asked him if he knew whether Mr. Olivia lived there. He looked doubtful for a moment, then he said, 'Yes,' and I told him."

"But I asked you not to tell any one," said Olivia gently.

"That's right, sir," assented Elisha meekly; "and I didn't give him no particular name, sir; and I'm sorry to say it's gone: something like counterpane, as near as I can remember."

"Quilton!" said Olivia, with a sigh of relief, for he could rely on Quilton's discretion. "Let him come in."

As Quilton entered, Mina went towards the door. He made way for her, and looked at her in his impressive way, then he stopped short, his colorless eyes fixed on her downcast face. His lips opened as if he were about to speak, then he checked himself; but as he held the door for her, he opened his lips again, again hesitated, but at last said:

"I hope he is well enough to see me?" As he put the question, his eyes rested blankly on her face, he held his head on one side as if waiting, listening intently, very much as a particularly deaf man waits to catch some sound.

She scarcely raised her eyes, and answered in a low voice:

"Yes, I think so; but he must be kept quiet."

Quilton's eyes closed, his thick eyelids dropped over his eyes, and he emitted a kind of sigh, as if some question in his mind were answered.

"Thank you," he said in his expressionless voice. "I will be careful."

He waited until Elisha had followed Mina out, then he went to the bedside, and looked down at Olivia with a countenance so impressive that it seemed to indicate an absolute lack of interest.

"What is it—football? No; they don't play football in the summer. Been run over?"

Olivia laughed shortly. "No; a row at a meeting."

"Badly hurt?"

"Not at all; nothing to speak of. Got a rash on the head—as you see. I shall be all right tomorrow—in a day or two. I'm sorry my friend here told you."

Quilton nodded. "Didn't want publicity? Strange how you shrink from that which most men want—attention."

"You must have been pretty badly: are bad, in fact, now. Brain concussion, fever?"

"You might be a doctor," said Olivia rather pettishly; "the fever was still on him. 'No—I don't want this accident of mine cackled about.'"

"Sure? It would make a splendid article in the Beacon. Don't alarm your friend here, but I shall be all right tomorrow—in a day or two. I'm sorry my friend here told you."

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"I may be mistook," she said, addressing the opposite wall slowly and meaningly; "but I've a kind of idea that the doctor said as he wasn't to be hexcited."

"I'm sorry if my visit has done so," said Quilton. "Perhaps he ought not to see too many people."

"Shouldn't wonder if you're right: one of 'em's goin', anyhow," said Tibby; and with a significant nod of the ridiculous bonnet she sailed out.

Quilton stood looking at the opposite wall at which she had been staring.

"One of your friends appears to be somewhat eccentric," he remarked, not by any means resentfully; but as if he were stating an undeniable fact.

Olivia laughed. "She is rather. But there isn't a better-hearted girl."

"It's her sister who is nursing you?" said Quilton.

Olivia moved his head on the pillow restlessly.

"Yes. She isn't her sister."

The words had slipped out, been forced from him by his instinctive desire to differentiate Mina from the other two. He regretted the words the minute he had spoken them; but words, alas! are of the few things one cannot recall. Quilton, however, did not appear to display any interest in the information.

"Well," he said, "I'll take Miss Tabitha's gentle hint, and relieve you of my presence. It isn't likely that you will want to see me again; but if you should, send a messenger or a wire."

"Thanks very much; I will," said Olivia. "And I'm very grateful to you for calling."

Quilton nodded to cut short the thanks, and held out his hand. As he took Olivia's now fiercely burning one he said, staring at the pillow absently:

"Shouldn't hurry to get up if I were you. Your friends won't mind keeping you—they're very old friends, I see: call you 'Olivia.'"

"Oh, do they?" said Olivia indifferently. Quilton's eye wandered from the pillow to the flushed face.

"Yes. Good-bye."

As he went out of the room the door of the opposite opened, and Mina came out. She drew back into the room again, but before she could close the door, he said:

"I'm afraid my visit has tended to excite Mr.—my friend—," he began. "He is very hot and feverish."

Her lips parted, and her eyes grew swiftly anxious.

"Oh! I will go to him," she said; and she went softly and quickly past the visitor, as if she had forgotten his existence.

Quilton went slowly down the stairs with his wooden face and colorless expression less eyes; but at the opening into the

street he paused and stared up at the sky, and muttered:

"If there is anything in the evidence of face and voice—it's the girl, the girl herself. Phew! The plot thickens!"

(To be continued.)



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