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A Dark Shadow;

Or, A Coming Vengeance

CHAPTER XV.

Full of apprehension, on hearing from Quilton that her charge was excited, Mina had glided past him towards the sick room; but she paused at the door to still the throbbing of her heart. She seemed to be moving in a dream, a dream so sweet, so exquisite, that she could scarcely think, scarcely strive to realize that she was awake, and that the man whom she had regarded with a worship as profound as that of a heathen devotee for his god, had told her that he loved her, and wanted her to be his wife.

To nurse and watch over him had been happiness enough, and she would have been content to wait on him hand and foot all her life, or to lay down her life for him, and would have considered herself amply repaid with a nod of thanks, a smile of approval. But to be wooed by him, to be told that he wanted her, not for a servant, a slave—but for a wife! She could not grasp the great fact, could not realize it. To live with him, to see him every day, to share his life!

She swept her hair from her brow, and looked before her murmuring, "I love you! I love you, Mina!" to convince herself that he had really spoken the words, and that she had not dreamed them.

Still murmuring the words that thrilled her to the heart's core, she went in. Clive had fallen into one of his short snatches of sleep—the proposal and Quilton's visit had exhausted him—and almost relieved, she sat beside the bed and looked down at him, longingly, wistfully. He moved restlessly, and she took his hand and held it, and smiled—the woman's maternal smile—as he became quiet.

As her eyes rested on him there was a new expression in their depths, the expression of the proprietorship which is so precious to her sex. If she chose, if when he rose, he should tell her again that he loved her and ask her to be his wife, he would belong to her, he would be her own; this hero, who, only a few hours ago was it months ago, was so far above her, separated from her by the great gulf of position and station! If she chose, should she?

Mina was ignorant of the ways of the world—how should she be otherwise?—but she knew that Clive would be "marrying beneath him" in marrying her. She wished that they had not met until she had raised herself a little higher. She would never, oh, never, be worthy of him; but perhaps if she had succeeded as a singer—a real concert singer—the difference between them would not have been so great. But, if they had not met until that hour, for which she was working, and towards which she was looking so eagerly and earnestly, she would have missed so much: the memory of that night he had saved her from the bootleggers, the precious times they had spent together at the picture gallery, the solemn experience of having stood between him and that howling crowd at the meeting, and those solemn sweet moments by his bedside, when, helpless as a babe, he had had to rely on her tender care.

Yes; let the future be ever so black, nothing could rob her of these happy experiences, of the subtle joy of his presence.

Clive woke to find her eyes on him, her hand in his; and her name sprang to his lips at the first instant of his awakening.

"Mina! I've been asleep, and dreaming: a bad dream. I thought I'd lost you; that you had wandered away into a dark wood, and that I was hunting for you, and could not find you. I was half-mad with fright and grief; and I fought my way through the bush—you know how things obstruct you in a dream, clinging about your arms and legs, and holding you back?—and all the time I could hear your voice crying to me, 'Clive! Clive!'—Phew! It's nice to wake from such a nightmare and find you here, close to me, dearest."

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She shook her head, though she blushed a rosy red.

"You—you must not call me that!" she said in a low voice. "Remember your promise."

He frowned, and laughed up at her, his eyes ardent and reproachful.

"My promise, ah, yes! Forgive me, dear Mina! I am to wait; yes; yes! How grave you look, child; as if I were out of my mind still! But I'll be good, Mina, I won't distress or worry you. But though you can prevent me telling in so many words that I love you, you can't prevent me looking."

No; she could not prevent that; and she tried to turn her eyes away lest the love in them should tempt him to break his word; and she made a resolution, though it cost her a grievous pang, that she would not be alone with him more than she could help.

So Clive, much to his disappointment and regret, found that either Tibby or Elisha was now almost in constant attendance on him, and that only on very rare occasions did Mina permit herself to be alone with him.

This self-denial of hers, of course, hastened his recovery; and in a day or two he was up and able to go out. If he had had doubts of his capacity to leave the house, Tibby would have dispelled them; for though she had been kind enough while he was ill, something of her characteristic mood had returned when he was convalescent.

"I suppose you're fretting to get back to your business, Mr. Clive?" she said, as she tied on her bonnet and rolled up her work apron. "Well, that's natural enough; I felt like that when I 'ad the measles."

"Do you think he's quite strong enough to go out, Tibby?" Elisha put in meekly. "Oh, lor, yes," she retorted emphatically. "A man who can put away a couple of higgs in the fastest style as 'e did just now is strong enough to go road-mending. Not, understand me, Mr. Clive, that we begrudge you the higgs; not by no means. We're well aware that but for you there wouldn't be any higgs at all."

"Tibby!" murmured Mina, fushing. Tibby looked over her shoulder at her. "Well, don't I say so!" she exclaimed. "An', come to that, it seems to me that you've wasted quite enough time. There's as much as you can do for me now. I say wasted, I mean lost, o' course. 'Pears to me that I'm the only one in this family as ever speaks her mind; an' when I do, the fat's in the fire. That's all the thanks I get."

"You're right, Tibby," said Clive reassuringly. "I have lost you time, and caused you too much trouble not to feel that the sooner I take myself off the better. I wish I could tell you how grateful I am. But you must let me come and tell you in a way or two."

"Why not write?" she said as she opened the door. "You can send four ounces o' gratitude for a penny, now, you know."

"But there is something else I want to tell you, you and Elisha," he went on; but Mina gave him a reproachful glance; and Tibby eyed him ungraciously, and jerked her head.

"Put it in the same envelope," she said significantly. "It must be by my 'celastic' o' course; but I can't stop now, or I shall be late. Good-bye, Mr. Clive."

"You won't mind her, sir," pleaded Elisha. "It's only her way. She don't mean 'arf of what she says, don't Tibby—you won't get because of her barking at you, Mr. Clive."

"But Tibby's right," said Clive, as he got his hat. "But you must let me come back, as I said—Mina, I wonder whether you would go with me as far as the end of the street?"

Mina hesitated, and turned her face away, but Elisha exclaimed "O' course, she will, sir!" and she put on her hat and jacket, her hands trembling, her face pale.

Clive said his good-bye to Elisha—refraining from wounding him by a single word of thanks—and Mina and he went down the stairs and into the street in silence, and walked for some little distance before either spoke; for they were too full at heart for words. At last, when they had reached a quiet street, he stopped and took her hand and said:

"It was a hard promise, a hard task you set me, Mina. But I understand, dearest, and I honor you for insisting on it. Set, now, I'll come back to-morrow."

The day after, she murmured, imploringly.

He looked at her reproachfully, but yielded a reluctant assent.

"Well—the day after," he said; "but that is the very longest I can wait. Don't you understand—ah, yes; you do, Mina!—how much I want to feel that you belong to me? To know that you are mine, my very own; that you are pledged to me for my wife. The day after to-morrow! After that I may come and see you, take you out—Mina, one of the first places we will go to shall be the Tate Gallery! And you will not be harrowed by scruples, will not want to run away, as if we were doing something wicked! And soon—it must be very soon, Mina!—we will be married! Don't cry, dearest!"

"I am not, I am not!" she murmured brokenly, as she swept the tears from her eyes, and looked up at him. "But—but it seems so unreal, so—so impossible."

"Impossible!" He laughed and pressed her hand tightly. "Why should it be impossible? And yet you're right, Mina! It does seem unreal that you should care for me, that you should be going to give yourself to me for all your life, all your life!"

Her eyes were dim, her lips moved, repeating his words, and, though she tried not to do so, her hand returned the pressure of his.

fully. "I shall have so much to occupy me, so many arrears to pick up, to help me pass away the time. And you?"

She smiled through her tears. "I shall practise very hard; and I have my lessons."

He nodded. "Lessons! What a child-wife you will be, Mina!" he said with a tender smile. "My little girl-wife! Ah, my child, may I strive to be worthy of your love, to make you happy?"

They were the last words. As if he could not trust himself to say more, he raised her hand to his lips, and walked back before he had gone very far: for she was still standing there looking after him through a mist; but she moved away quickly as he turned. She did not go back to the Rents for some little time, but walked on to the Embankment and stood, leaning on the stone wall, and gazing at the river.

She awoke at last from her happy—yet fearful—reverie and, aghast at the time she had lost, turned home. Elisha had come to his lessons; the rooms were empty and silent; as empty as her heart.

She sat down to the piano, and made an effort to concentrate her attention on the exercises; but there were many pauses, her hands lying motionless on the keys, her eyes half-closed as she recalled his face, his voice, his words. "I love you!"

She was so absorbed in the joy of recollection, of dreaming, that she started guiltily as a knock at the door broke the silence. She rose and opened the door, and stood gazing with surprise at the figure of a Hindoo woman with bronzed face, big gold rings in her ears, and her head enveloped in a white shawl, which, with her white hair, showed in marked contrast to her swarthy, olive complexion. The woman had dark and piercing eyes, and she settled them on Mina with a fierce scrutiny that stultified the fixed smile which twisted the small, full lips.

"You are the girl called Mina? Yes? I wanted to see you," she said in her broken English.

Mina inclined her head. She was at first almost too astonished to speak.

"Will you come in?" she said at last. Sara glided in and stood, smiling still, but still scrutinizing her with those piercing eyes.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mina. "Is it me you want to see, not my sister—Tibby, or Elisha?"

"It is you I want," said Sara, as she seated herself, still gazing at the girl. "You have a gentleman here, a sick gentleman. Is it not so?"

The color rose to Mina's face, but she fought it down.

"You mean Mr. Clive?" she replied. "He has been here, but he has gone."

Sara nodded. "That is well," she said slowly. "He is better?"

"Yes," said Mina, too engrossed in wondering what this strange woman could have with her to feel confused any longer. "Yes, he left this morning. He has been very ill, but he is better."

Sara looked round the room with a swift, all-embracing glance, then her dark eyes returned to Mina's face.

"The sahib's—the gentleman's friends have been anxious about him," she said slowly, as if she were choosing her words, feeling her way. "They have missed him—it was natural."

Mina colored. He did not wish them to be told, she said.

Sara shrugged her shoulders. "So! He wished to be hidden. Ah, yes. That is like these sahibs, when there is a pretty face—you nursed him, Meece Mina?"

"The sahib has you come, what is it you want?" demanded Mina, panting a little, but speaking calmly.

"In a little while I tell you," said Sara. She looked round again. "That is a fine piano. It cost a great deal of money. You buy?"

"No," said Mina; then she added. "Mr. Clive gave it to us."

"So? He gave it to you. He is very kind is the sahib. And he got you jewels—was he not?"

Mina rose and stared at the woman.

"Got me—jewels? No!" she said. "Why do you—?"

"Wait! in a moment," said Sara. "Why you so angry? How long you know the sahib?"

"I will tell you, denarie," said Sara with a smile, a gesture of friendly confidence. "I am the servant, the old nurse of the lady the sahib is going to marry."

Mina's hand closed, and pressed on the table, but she neither started nor called out.

"Mr. Clive—Mr. Harvey is going to marry your mistress," she said slowly, in a dry voice. "Who is she? What is her name?"

"She is Lady Edith, the daughter of the great sahib, Lord Chesterleigh," said



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Sara as slowly, her eyes watching the girl's face intently. Mina remembered the "Edith" which Clive had murmured in his delirium. She had thought of it, of course, very often; it might have been just the name of a friend or an acquaintance. But now she repeated it mechanically, with a sinking of the heart and a swift pang of jealousy—her first. But her eyes met steadily the dark ones fixed on her, she showed no sign of it was wicked of him.

CHAPTER XVII.

There was a silence, during which Sara's expression changed in a subtle way, as if she had made a mistake in her estimate of the girl, as if she found it necessary to change her mode of attack; for she knew now, the knowledge had been growing upon her convincingly every moment, that whatever Mr. Clive Harvey's intentions were towards this girl, hers were good and true. The dullest comprehension—and Sara was as quick as even a Hindoo can be—could not fail to be impressed by Mina's innocence and purity. Sara's tone changed to one of persuasion and even sympathy.

"You are surprised," she said. "He did not tell you? Ah, yes; that is their way. These sahibs, they are all alike. It was wrong of it was wicked of him."

"You say—you say that Mr. Clive is going to marry this lady," said Mina at last, her voice very low, but as steady as her eyes. "Is it true?"

"It is quite true," said Sara. "Why should I say it if it were not? And why should it not be? My mistress is a very beautiful lady—oh, the most beautiful lady in the world." Her face softened, her tone grew lower, she clasped her hands in a kind of rapture. "She is fair as a lily, with eyes like the sky, with hair like the sun for gold"—Mina remembered Clive's incoherent words, "Golden hair, golden heart," and another pang shot through her heart—"she is as graceful as a fawn, as a Nautch girl; her voice is like music. She is peerless, lovely beyond words, is my mistress, the Lady Edith. All men are in love with her; all men want to marry her—why not Mr. Clive Harvey?"

Mina moistened her lips; they were dry and burning. "And she—she—?" she asked. "She loves him, yes," she replied with an air of resignation, condescension. "There are others more worthy, more wealthy, more noble of rank, and as handsome and as straight of form; but my mistress has cast a favorable eye on him. She is a woman like the rest of us, and will make her choice. It is a good marriage for him. He is poor and—what you call it?—ambitious. He wishes to be one of the rulers, one of your great men in public; and it will help him to get all he desires, if he marries Lady Edith; for her father is a lofty nobleman, great and rich and powerful. He has been a ruler, and will be again when the tide turns, and his friends come to power again. I do not understand these things, and cannot explain; but so it is. With such a great man for his father-in-law, Mr. Clive Harvey will climb to a great height, and will be as rich and powerful. You understand?"

"No," said Mina; then she added. "Mr. Clive gave it to us."

"So? He gave it to you. He is very kind is the sahib. And he got you jewels—was he not?"

Mina rose and stared at the woman.

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