

A Dark Shadow;

Or, A Coming Vengeance

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

The dinner was necessarily short, for the concert began at 7.30, and hurrying through their meal, the party set out in the best of spirits.

"You look tired, dearest," said Lady Edith, leaning forward in the carriage, her hand resting on Clive's.

"Little wonder," said Lord Chesterleigh. "For the first time in my life I realize one of the advantages of being a peer: one hasn't to contest an election. But it will soon be over; we shall have a big majority, and all will be beer and skittles."

"It is you who should be tired, Edith," said Clive; "and I shall be glad when it is over, for your sake. How much you have done for me!"

As he entered, Clive saw his opponents, Mr. Gordon and Mr. Broddy, in the front seats. Mr. Gordon bowed and smiled; Broddy, who had Koecki beside him, scowled. As Clive seated himself, he caught sight of Sara, who had, of course, come down with her mistress to Brimfield—in the seat behind him. The organ, of which Brimfield was justly proud, played an overture, and the concert proper began.

Each performer was received with unstinted applause, every song and instrumental piece was encored; and the Directors, at the back of the platform, beamed with complacent satisfaction. Presently there was a little lull, followed by the stir of anticipation which marks the appearance of a bright and particular star. Lord Chesterleigh, who was sitting on the left of Clive, consulted his programme.

"This is the young girl, Veronika Vernon, whom I told you I heard at Manchester," he said. "She has a wonderful voice, and is a remarkably pretty girl."

The audience clapped furiously as the young, slight figure came slowly up the steps and on to the platform. Clive was looking at the programme, and did not raise his eyes until the sounds of the accompaniment had been going through and the first notes of the singer rose in the crowded 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 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 was not until 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, which Clive had never 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 nursed him, and where she had 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, for him, 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!" which even the orchestra joined. Clive glanced at the programme, and saw the bent 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. He is not aware 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? You are quite pale; are you ill?" she inquired anxiously.

Clive shook his head; for a moment he seemed incapable of speaking. There was a sudden hush; Miss Vernon was going to sing "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 singer faltered, and her voice 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 something in the middle of the front seats.

The sudden cessation of the sweet, pathetic voice, the palor 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 glanced to look behind him, and 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 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.

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He, too, had risen. "She must have been taken ill," he said. "Poor girl!"

From the orchestra a hunchback with a violin in his hand came across the platform towards the girl; but before he could reach her the pause had been raised by 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 anti-climax; every one was thinking and a great many talking, of the girl, the crowded audience got up to go with "God Save the King"; but Clive sat as if in a dream, then, with a start, he pulled himself together, arranged Lady Edith's costly 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 stick it for to-night? 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 on his hips, 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.

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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 relief that Tibby had the same reason for 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 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 plainly 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 market square outside the town. Now 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.

And as he thus reflected bitterly he saw her.

She was walking a little ahead of him down the lane. His heart leapt and his pulse quickened at the sight of her 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 hat of black shantung, and she carried her gloves in her hand as if she had caught them up as she left the hotel. 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 quickly.

She stopped dead short, and paused a moment before she turned her head, her face flushing hotly, then going as 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 still 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 arising from opposite sides of a gulf. "I tried to see you last night. I went 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 want to see you, to tell you how much I want. 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 prophesies. You are on the road to fame, are famous already." Again he felt how banal, how weak and feeble was the speech; but he struggled on. "Last night, 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."

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"Why?" she asked gravely. Clive looked away across the cornfields not wanting to see if you had regretted what you had said.

"But you understand now?" he pleaded almost fiercely. "You know now that I was not the cur you thought me? My wife, my letter explained my absence. Oh, Mina, could you not have trusted me a little longer, have waited?"

"It was not that I did not trust you," she said; "but when you were silent, my message came from you, and I learned that you were—what you are, so far above me."

She shook her head. "As if that counted!" he said hoarsely. "And it was Tibby who intercepted the telegram, who wrote the letter. God forgive her! She has wrecked my life! And you—ah, Mina, tell me that you have not forgotten me."

He stopped, struck silent by the expression of her eyes, by her sudden shrinking from him.

"Oh, no, no!" she breathed. "It is you who have forgotten. Lady Edith!"

Her face burnt, and her eyes met his with a solemn reproach in them. Clive stood and gazed at her, as the repented wretch might gaze when he hears that it is requisite only, not full and free pardon, and that the sentence still stands.

"I am glad," he said simply. "And—and you are happy, Mina?"

"I am not happy," she said, how cruel the question was. But she did not wince; she even forced a smile.

"I am content," she said in a low voice. "I love my work—I must go back. What a lovely morning! It tempted me to go out before breakfast." He turned with her, his heart aching. "And you? You must be very happy," she said after a pause. "I read about you in the newspapers, Mr. Clive—Harvey."

"No, no!" he said winningly, as she had not done. "Call me 'Mr. Clive,' Mina. It—it will sound like old times—Oh, Mina, why did you not answer my telegram, my letter? Why did you send it back unopened? You know I wrote to you, you not have written me one line, if only to say 'Good-bye'?"

She stopped dead short, and her hand went to her bosom as if something had struck her there.

"Your telegram—letter?" she breathed, her face suddenly pale.

He looked at her amazed, spellbound. "Yes; I wired to you—I was called away to my father—he died—I wrote to you, but I never received it. I could not come, I could not come to you, or I would have done so." He stopped, smitten dumb by bewilderment, the agony in her face.

"You wrote—to me?" she said in a dull voice, and yet with a note of relief, of joy in it.

"Yes, yes; of course!" he said. "Did you think I should have gone away without writing? You sent the letter back without a word!"

"I never got it," she said slowly, as if she were speaking to herself rather than to him.

He stared at her, the color coming and going in his face. "You never got it?" he cried. "Mina! Then—then—you sent it back—who intercepted it? Ah! Tibby!" he answered for her, his teeth clenched, his face a dusky red.

She was silent for a moment, then she looked at him.

"I am glad—you wrote," she said almost inaudibly. "I thought that—that you had changed your mind. Ah, yes; you were free to do so. It—it was a bargain between us; do you remember? You—you were quite free—quite. And I thought—"

"You wronged me cruelly!" he cried, but with all his heart in the cry. "Oh, Mina, didn't you know that I loved you? That I should not change? That I would not do that to you? You had changed her face, then it went white, and she looked from side to side as if in trouble and pain—for them both.

"I—I did not know. You did not come, she said. "I see now why you could not. But then—it went as if—as if you did not want to."

"For God's sake!" he pleaded hoarsely. "Is this the last word, is this our farewell, our real parting, Mina?" he said almost inaudibly. "Ah! What can I say? What could he say? Certainly he could not tell her that he was marrying Lady Edith because he was forced to do so by a chapter of accidents! She was silent for a moment or two, then she said gravely: "Yes, I—I hope we shall not meet again. Last night!" He caught her up with what he knew to be a mean eagerness. She blushed. "Last night I—I was startled by the sight of you, and—and—it all came back to me so suddenly, like a flood that—that—But it will not happen again. No; it will not affect me so again. I think now I have seen you that I shall be—more at peace."

"This was too much for him. "Mina!" he cried desperately. "We must not part—we must not! I cannot! God help me, I am tied and bound, a slave, but it is not too late."

He had caught at her hand, and grasping it tightly, drew her nearer to him. Her eyes half-closed, and he saw her quiver, and bend towards him as a flame is swayed by the wind, then, with a faint cry she tore her hand free, and drew back.

"No, no! Please, let me go! There are some people."

Clive turned his head angrily, and saw some persons coming down the lane. One of them was a woman wrapped in voluminous drapery, with a veil half-down across her face. It was Sara. In his surprise at her appearance, and his indignation—for it flashed upon him that she must have been spying on them—he released Mina's hand, and she passed him, and walked on quickly. As she went towards the Hindoo woman, Sara stopped, and looked at her with a fierce threatening stare; then she walked on until she came to Clive, where she stopped and salaamed. (To be continued.)

Fact and Fancy.

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