A Dark Shadow;

Or, A Coming Vengeance

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued).

Clive walked slowly down Parliament Street, the old man's words haunting him; for Lord Standon had spoken the truth: the man who married Lord Chesterleigh's daughter, with her vast wealth and the great family interest, would find his political road smoothed for him, would find the path of his ambition strewn with roses instead of the flints which lie so thickly on the cruelly rough road to fame and power.

Perhaps the thought was still with him when he went up the stairs of the great house in Grosvenor Square, for he was grave and preoccupied. But Lady Edith greeted him brightly, and appeared to be in the happiest of moods.

"How tired you look!" she remarked. "I thought you looked as if you didn't want to be bothered with the talk and chatter, and I have told them that I am not at home to any one else, so that you can rest, and drink your tea in silence, if you like."

"That was very kind of you," he said gratefully. "But I want to talk."

"When you have had another cup of tea," she said. "And now, if you must talk, tell me about—oh, anything that you are doing."

She leant forward, her eyes fixed on his face with so evident an interest that Clive responded at once.

"I'm still pursuing the uneven tenor of my way," he said. "I think we shall be able to do something with the Housing question."

He told her in a few words—there was no need for a lengthy explanation, for she had the whole matter at her finger ends—of the proposal of the Government; and she listened intently, putting in a word, asking a question, now and again, and leading him on as a clever woman can lead a man by talking of the subject nearest his heart.

"Yes; it is better than nothing," she said. "But you will get all you want in time; you are one of the men who always succeed sooner or later."

He laughed. "That's a rather too flattering estimate of my poor powers," he said. "But, tell me, You were kind enough to say you could get some more pupils for my friend?"

"Yes; I have another one, I think," she said brightly. "And he deserves all we can do; for he is really very clever, and is a capital teacher."

Clive thanked her again. "I can't tell you how grateful I am to you," he said warmly, so warmly that the color rose to her face, and her eyes became downcast; then she raised them, and glanced at him swiftly.

"It is I who should be grateful to you," she said in a low voice. "Until I—I knew you, I cared for nothing—I mean"—quickly, her color deepening—"that nothing interested me, that I was quite indifferent about things, everything. Life seemed such a wearisome business, so many dinners, so many balls, so many receptions; and I was terribly tired of them all. But I know now why you and men like you—keep on trying to do good, despite all sorts of disappointments and discouragements."

She paused for a moment; then went on again

"This little thing I have done for you—you can't tell how much pleasure it has given me. I suppose it is because I have been of some use in the world; perhaps because I have been of some little use to 'the Friend of the People.' Will you let me be of more use to you? Isn't there something else I can do? Something bigger, that will give me real trouble: this was none. There now! I am selfish. I am forgetting that you are tired, and want to rest; and I am plaguing you. No; you shall not humor my whims and fancies, shall not talk. Lean back and rest, won't you?"

She took a cushion from the long divan, and put it at the back of his chair with a half-apologetic laugh, but with an appeal in her eyes.

Clive put out his hand to refuse the cushion, and their hands met. The blood rushed to her face at the contact, and her eyes grew soft and melting. Embarrassed, with a strange sense of foreboding, Clive let his hand fall, and looked at her now downcast face with a troubled regard. It was an awkward moment; but before either of them could speak the door opened, and Sara entered. Lady Edith started, and looked up with a frown.

"What is it, Sara?" she demanded, with ill-concealed impatience.

Sara had stopped just within the room, and had shot a swift glance, malign, almost threatening, at Clive, but with a gesture of apology she bent her head low, and put out her joined hands in an Oriental salaam.

"Pardon, my lady!" she murmured. "I did not know—I thought the room was empty. Pardon, sahib!"

She had gone, had glided out in a moment; but her entrance had broken the spell, and Clive rose with a feeling of relief, of—was it escape?

"I take you at your word. I'll accept your kind offer, Lady Edith," he said, gravely. "If I need any help I think you can give me for some of my poor people, I will come to you. I am very grateful."

She gave him her hand in silence, her eyes downcast, her face low pale; and for some minutes after he had gone she sat breathing painfully, and gazing at the chair in which he had sat.

As Clive went down the stairs and into the street, he too breathed painfully, and again Lord Standon's words came back to him. He lived in a world in which so many marriages without love are made, in which the marriage of convenience is as frequent as any other act of exchange and barter, that he was not startled by the idea suggested by the old gossip. But he recoiled from it with a sense of distaste, of resentment, which arose from something within him that lay deeper than the mere surface objection to a loveless union.

She was very beautiful; the advantages of such a match were as great, as undeniable, as Lord Standon had pointed out; but—No; he could not do it; though by doing it she should gain all that he was striving for. And yet a few weeks ago would he have shrunk from the idea of marrying Lady Edith as he shrank now? Why had he become so scrupulous? What had happened to make him so unworldly?

As if in answer to his question, Mina's face rose before him, but he thrust it aside; he would not accept the mute answer.

When he entered the Tate Gallery the next afternoon and looked round eagerly, he was conscious of a pang of disappointment; for she was not there. He walked quickly through the rooms, devoured by suspense; and presently, with a sense of relief and gladness, he saw her coming toward him.

Her face was pale, and there was a troubled expression in the grey eyes as she gave him her hand.

"I am late," she said in a low voice, her eyes avoiding his. "I—I did not mean to come."

"Not mean to come? Why?" he asked, though he foresaw, with a sinking of the heart, her reply.

"No," she said, meeting his eyes with an effort, but steadily. "I—I thought it over after I left you. I knew Tibby would be angry, and—and I did not tell her. I have not told her that I was at the meeting the other night. And—and—no: I did not mean to come. But I—I could not keep away. It seemed so ungrateful not to come and tell you why."

"I understand," he said in a voice as low as hers. "You think it is wrong, Mina?"

She inclined her head: there were no tears in her eyes, but he knew that she was afraid lest there should be.

"Yes; I—I suppose it is. Tibby would know. I did not think of it until I discovered that I did not want to tell her. She would know. And yet—is it wrong?" she asked almost piteously.

Clive stood, battling with his conscience. Her presence was as sweet as myrrh to him. There was an irresistible fascination in her innocence, her half-unconscious desire to avoid evil. What should he say?

"Perhaps Tibby is right," he said at last; but even as he spoke he rebelled against the scruples which were dividing them. "But all the same, I am glad you have come, Mina. Will you stay five ten minutes now you are here?"

She looked round wistfully, then up at him doubtfully.

"Five minutes, then," she faltered with a sigh. "There—there is one of the pictures I want to see again."

"Tell me which it is, and we will go and look at it together," he said.

She went straight to one of the rooms, and they stood before Waterhouse's magnificent and pathetic "Lady of Shalott."

"This is it," she said in a low voice, her eyes fixed on the picture. "It is so beautiful—so real, that I could not get it out of my mind, though I don't know what it means."

"It is one of Tennyson's poems," he said. "I will send it to you."

"No, no!" she said. "I can borrow it from the school library. How lovely she looks, and how unhappy! I—I wish I could forget it."

"Come and look at some of the others," he said in a voice that came painfully.

They walked round slowly, and she gazed at the pictures, but with lessened interest, and when they reached the door she started slightly and stopped.

"I will go now," she said. "I—I am glad I came, that I have seen the picture once more."

"You can come again," he said, still with labored voice. "You can come alone, Mina."

She shook her head, her face averted.

"No; I shall not come again," she said almost inaudibly. "Don't—don't come with me, please. I would rather you did not." Her voice broke and her lips quivered. "Oh, how ungrateful you must think me! But I'm not, I'm not!" She raised her eyes to his face, and he saw the tears in them now. "But I—I could not tell Tibby." The tears threatened to fall, and she turned aside and put her hand to her eyes with a swift movement that wrung Clive's heart. "Good-bye."

He held her hand a moment, his own closing over hers lightly, then she withdrew it from his grasp, and before he could realize that she had gone, she had passed out.

He stood looking at the door like a man in a dream; then with a quick sigh, a catch of the breath, he turned after her; but when he had reached the entrance he stopped short, biting his lips, his face pale and strained, his heart beating heavily; for with the passing of that slight, girlish figure something seemed to have passed out of his life.

But she was right—the instinct born of her purity, her innate goodness, her child-like shrinking from an unknown evil was right; he must see her no more.

Yes; something had gone out of his life, a gleam of brightness, a vague happiness; and he felt the loss so acutely that his voice and manner proclaimed it plainly. He went about his Parliamentary duties as usual, but in a listless, perfunctory way. He was to have spoken on the third night after their parting; but he made an excuse to the Whip, and sat dumb and inert in his place. It was with something like a shock that, turning over his engagement book a week later, he saw that he was engaged to speak at the Workmen's Hall again. The Bill for the Housing of the Poor had been brought in by the Government; it was absolutely necessary that he should go down to the Hall and explain it to the Band of Brotherhood.

He made some notes forcing himself into a semblance of interest in the subject—and on the night appointed went down to the hall. It was crowded; but he noticed that his appearance was not greeted with the usual applause; the greeting lacked the warmth and spontaneity which were generally accorded him. But he was almost indifferent, and, as he passed on to the platform, he felt as if it were the semblance, the mere outward shell, of himself which stood there.

He noticed that a large proportion of the audience appeared to be foreigners, aliens, and that these were occupying places near the platform; and that in the first rows were sitting Koshki and his Anarchist friends. The slight cheering soon ceased, and Clive began his address.

He knew that his manner and his tone were lifeless, and that his audience must think him lukewarm; but he could not rise to the occasion. No cheers punctuated his silences, and, when he had finished, the applause was so faint that Clive knew that he had lost his power over them. He sat down with a sense of failure and weariness. Koshki rose, and the cheers which had been denied to Clive, or rendered grudgingly, greeted the Pole with a kind of suppressed significance.

"I vant to ask Mr. Harvey a question, von question only," said Koshki in his guttural voice. "And I—ve all—vant a straight answer. This is it: Does he or does not mean to oppose the Bill he has been telling ush of"

He sat down, his small eyes fixed on Clive, his tongue moistening his coarse lips.

Clive rose. "My answer needs a foregoing word of explanation——" he began; but Koshki rose, extending a dirty hand, and almost shaking it at him.

"Ve vant a 'yes' or 'no,'" he shouted.

"No," said Clive quietly.

Koshki turned to the rest of the audience with a laugh and a sneer; and a murmur which rapidly grew to a groan rose and filled the room.

"You see!" he said. "You see, my bruzzers! vhat ve vere told is true. Zis man, zis fine shentleman, zer 'Frent of the People'"—he laughed scornfully—"is a traitor!"

Clive had sat down, but he sprang up, his blood roused, his eyes flashing; but his words could not be heard above the din, the snarls, the yells which rose from nearly all sides, especially from the aliens in the front seats.

"A traitor!" repeated Koshki, his face purple, his eyes gleaming. "Zat is vhat I call him, vhat ve all call him. He has betrayed us, my bruzzers! He is a sham and a fraud. He has sold us; sold us who vere fools enough to trust him. Fools, yes; ve vere fools to put our trust in an accursed aristocrat."

The yells of the angry men drowned his voice for a moment, but he held up his grubby hand and got a hearing again.

"I said zat I vould ask him von question: but you shall ask him anozer. Ask him vhat he is going to be paid for selling us; ask him."

Clive went slowly down to the edge of the platform and looked down at the angry crowd calmly, though his eyes were flashing and his hands clenched behind him; he opened his lips, but the uproar was too great to permit of his being heard, and with a shrug of the shoulders he laughed.

This was Koshki's cue. Shaking both fists at Clive, he roared:

"He laughs at us; laughs! He treats us like dirt, like dogs! It is how he treated me ze ozer night vhen I implored, viz tears, my bruzzers, implored like a bruzzer zat he vould not vote for zis Bill!"

Clive's face grew red, but he kept himself well in hand.

"That is a lie, Herr Koshki," he said.

"He gives us ze lie!" snarled Koshki, his eyes glancing at his friends and compatriots near him. "I tell him, zis traitor, zis aristocrat, zis vraud, zat it is he zat lies, and we ar enot to be deceived, zold like sheep."

A roar went up; a large part of the audience were on their feet, there was a rush for the platform. Some of the men had sticks in their hands, as if they had come provided with weapons, others caught up chairs; and the sticks and chairs were waved threateningly as the crowd pressed forward. Passion—whether it be the passion of fear, of affection, or of hate—moves quickly, burns fiercely in a mob, large or small, especially in a mob composed of such elements as this one was composed of. It does not mean to do murder; but it is too apt to do it unintentionally. All it is conscious of is the desire to break, to crush; and here was something this one could satisfy its desire on.

It was not the first time Clive had faced an angry audience; but hitherto it had been in the open air, where there was room for the evil spirit to spend itself. Here, in this hot, stifling room, the fury of the audience acted and reacted; and there grew that hideous, hysterical desire to maim and destroy which is always lying dormant in such men as those who threatened Clive.

"Is there a back way?" he shouted to the chairman, a weak-minded man who, white and trembling, had shrunk back against the wall. "If so, get out of it; quickly. I'll keep them till you're clear."

As he spoke, one of Koshki's friends closed the front door and bolted it, and ran towards the one at the back. Clive turned to bid the chairman hurry up, but the raging crowd, thinking that Clive meditated flight, yelled furiously, as if they were about to be baulked of their prey; two or three of them leapt on the platform, and one man raised a chair to strike him.

Clive caught the chair, and, putting out his leg, tripped the man up; but in doing so he laid himself open to other attacks, and several blows were dealt him by sticks. He was still calm, even smiling, and he struck out right and left, flooring two of his assailants; but another blow, on the side of the head this time, made him stagger, and he was afraid that he should fall. To fall would, he knew, be a serious matter, for the rush was thickening, and he would be trampled under foot by the men, who were, indeed, at that moment more like wild beasts than human beings.

As he pulled himself together and caught the blows which showered on him, he was aware of a cry, a piercing heart-rending scream that rose above the din; and, looking in the direction of the cry, he saw Mina. The sight of her white face, her eyes fixed on him with terror, stupefied him for a moment; and he called to her of course, inaudibly—"Mina!" She saw his lips move, and, with a choking sob, she pressed forward. Then, as she moved, Clive caught sight of Tibby beside her.

For the first time he thought of the police: would they arrive in time to save her? His eyes were chained to hers, he tried to shout to her loud enough to be heard—to keep back; but he could not make his voice pierce the awful din; and he could only wave his hands, signing to her to keep away from the platform. But, with agony, he saw that she was disregarding his signalled injunctions, and that she was pressing nearer and nearer.

He was so engrossed by his apprehension for her safety that he was absolutely forgetful of his own; and presently a blow from a piece of wood which had been torn from one of the benches fell on the side of his head, the lights leapt in his eyes, the noise of storm-beaten waves crashed in his ears, and he went down.

A yell, a mad yell of savage triumph, rose from his assailants, and the man who had felled him raised the piece of wood to strike him again; but the blow fell short; for he was thrust aside, and to the amazement of the men who surged round the prostrate man, a slight, girlish figure stood over him, with hands outstretched to ward off the blows, with eyes that glowed like those of a tigress protecting her cub; with face white as death, but with lips firm and untrembling.

Her hair, torn loose in her efforts to reach Clive's side, fell over her shoulders and across her face; she swept it from her eyes with a swift hand, then raised the hand above her head with a gesture of command, of defiance rather than imploration.

"Cowards! Cowards!" she panted, and her voice could be heard in the momentary lull caused by the surprise at her presence, her attitude, the spectacle of her heroism. "You shall not strike him again—shall not touch him! Keep back! You shall not touch him: you shall kill me first!"

(To be continued.)

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