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The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —

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CHAPTER V.

The love of a man for a woman is a strange disease. Its methods of attacking its victims are varied; its effects manifold. It may be spasmodic or insidious, acute or chronic, violent as the toothache or unsuspected as a slow fever. Its subjects may be melancholic, exhilarated, tormented, soothed or affected in any one of a dozen other different ways. In my case, to start with, it was both insidious and exhilarating. I was somewhat like a man who has been shot through some soft part by a modern high-power rifle. He perhaps does not feel it at the time, and may run on for a considerable distance before a sharp pang notifies him that he is badly hit, indeed. Then he sits down in considerable astonishment and wonders just when he got it. I had felt no shock as yet, and had no doubt of my ability to run out of danger at any time. I made an engagement to call upon Mrs. Dace, and then dressed myself with particularity as to details. That done, I squared myself before the mirror for a view of the general effect.

I could not help but feel that Bruce had spoken only the truth regarding my personal appearance. I am six feet tall, and when I was in college was a scintillating athletic star of the first magnitude. Nor do I believe that I am any vainer than the average man, but if any woman whom I happened to be with was ever displeased with my physical personage, I never became aware of it. Mrs. Dace had evidently approved of it, for she paid me the round-about compliment of confessing in a general way her admiration of tall, well-set-up men. Assuring myself by a last sweeping glance in the glass that I could do nothing more to improve my toilet, I departed.

The Arcadia was one of the modern palace apartments that are springing up so magically in our greater cities. Its entrance was castle like; its outer court a bower. Its height was great, and its general effect imposing. There were private garages on each floor for the cars of its tenants. I went in at the entrance where I had left her, took the elevator to the fifth floor, and rang the bell of her suite. The door was opened by an inscrutable-faced mulatto maid, who surveyed me up and down with a quick keenness that made me feel that she would never forget me. I inquired for her mistress, and was immediately shown into a handsomely furnished reception parlor. Promptly Mrs. Dace came floating from between the portieres.

I viewed her with refreshed admiration. Her gown, though of angelic simplicity, was yet a triumph of artfulness. The cunning of a master hand was revealed in each smooth curve and the delicate tracery of lacework through which the white flesh gleamed. Her figure was exquisite, and seemed to have been moulded within this creation of a genius. She approached me with hand extended, her smile a witching thing.

"You have come at last. I was growing impatient. I was lonesome to-night and wanted someone to talk to me—preferably you. Do you know, I had been thinking of you just before you called me up. Perhaps it was thought transmission that made you ring me a moment later. Who knows?" She laughed musically as I took her fingers and bent my lips to them.

"Mrs. Dace, thought transmission to remind me of you would be grossly superfluous. I am going to be perfectly plain with you. It is barely possible that I have thought of something else since I saw you last, but if I have I do not now remember what it was. However, you flatter me." She withdrew her hand with a sudden averting of her eyes, smiling again.

"No, it was not flattery. I also am a plain person and do not speak in parables. Besides, what harm to think of one's friends?" She half turned an easy chair for me, and I seated myself in it, my eyes running over the room. The quiet richness of its furnishings was a revelation. Exquisite taste was in the very air. Several of the darkly rich pictures were either original masterpieces or copies so cleverly executed that I could not detect the difference. The oriental vases were magnificent tokens of barbaric art, and were overflowing with great clusters of blood-red roses. The furniture was of the handsomest and the tapestries heavy and rich. As to Mrs. Dace's income I had no knowledge, but at least her apartments were high of rental and equipped with extravagance. For some reason Richard Mackay's name came creeping through my mind like an evil thing, and I squirmed inwardly at the thought. I had never seen the man's face outside of the papers, but that in itself was enough. While it was not unhandsome in a strong animal way, the stamp of vice was indelible upon it. It seemed a sacrilege to even mention his name in connection with that of this exquisite woman, for his reputation was as contaminating as his personality was poisonous. Furthermore, he was married.

It is not my intention to go further into the particulars of my private affairs with Mrs. Dace than is necessary for a complete understanding of the circumstances which surrounded the mysterious crime against my uncle. Briefly, I will say that in the next month we were much together, and most of the time alone. She seemed to prefer it that way; I certainly did, and under those auspicious surroundings our friendship rapidly thickened. It was a delirious time to me, wherein during the days I walked like one in a trance when apart from her; dreamed rapturously of her by night, and was in a chafing fever of discontent when not by her side. Of Bruce's dragon I saw nothing, while as for other would-be suitors, she tactfully kept them at bay. Having occasion to notice this, and of course being secretly delighted by it, I nevertheless one day asked her why she shunned those who wished to pay her attentions. She stifled a yawn behind her handkerchief.

"Most men bore me," she answered, quietly. I leaned closer.

"I wish you to tell me frankly—And do I?"

She swayed away from me slightly, not answering, her cheeks swept by her falling lashes and her bosom swelling to its round fullness. I draw so close that her soft hair brushed my face. "Matie—tell me," I pleaded.

Her eyes, in whose fathomless depths the soul of any man might well have been drowned, looked up at me. She smiled, and one hand fell feather-light upon my own, setting every nerve tingling as a harp vibrates when swept broadcast by a hand. And as an earthwork is annihilated by a cloudburst, so was all my restraint swept away by the flood of passion that arose within me; my blood leaping like a mountain torrent and my heart fighting its way to my throat. Not stopping to think what I said or did, scarcely realizing; only knowing that I loved this creature with a passion that would no longer be controlled, I crushed her to me and held her helpless as I rained kisses upon her eyes and lips and cried out my love for her in broken, half-coherent sentences. She did not resist, and I doubt if I would have known it had she done so, such was the intensity of my fervor. Nor did she respond in the least, and when my first ardor had exhausted itself and my arms relaxed she quietly broke away from me. Her face was flushed and her hair disordered, but her voice was as calm as the first time she ever spoke to me, and she told me that I was forgetting myself and must leave her at once. Uncertain as to whether she had submitted to my outburst with more or less indifference as the best way of extricating herself from an embarrassing situation, or whether she was secretly angry, yet worried greatly over the consequences of my impetuosity, I held out my hand appealingly as I begged her forgiveness that in my great love for her I had taken advantage of my superior strength. My hand she eluded by a step backward, and her perfectly modulated voice once more bade me a noncommittal good-night.

I threw my overcoat over my arm and turned to the door. "But at least you may tell me if I am forgiven," I pleaded, as heavy of heart, I paused upon the threshold. Her expression remained changeless.

"I have not fully decided. You will know later."

"Then I may hope that I have not sinned beyond redemption and that I may see you again?"

"You may call me up in a few days when you have recovered your balance."

"And until then I must wait for my answer?"

"Until then you must wait. Good night."

I bowed, passed into the hallway and left her, hope and fear battling in my bosom.

CHAPTER VI.

When I called her up three days later she seemed to have forgotten that any such incident had ever happened. She passed the usual pleasantries of the day over the wire, laughed as softly and musically as ever, and ended by telling me that I might call that evening. When I did so she received me with neither more nor less than her customary friendliness. I was mystified. As to what was going on in the wonderland that lay behind her eyes I had no conception further than the evident fact that she had not been seriously offended. And that was solace enough for the present. Of course I would renew the assault-at-arms when the opportunity seemed propitious, but for the time being I would resort to steady siege. I renewed my devotions.

As had been the case before, I again haunted her. Necessarily this soon became bruited around the circle of our acquaintances, and occasionally echoes of the gossip reached my ears. Bruce spoke of it once or twice quizzically, but as I ignored his remarks he soon quit bothering me with them. Clare, as usual, had her little say.

"I hear that you and Mrs. Dace are exceedingly good friends these days, and that you are with her nearly everywhere," she began sweetly. "I wish you would tell me about it." Now, as a matter of fact, I was secretly proud to be recognized as the accepted suitor of so beautiful a woman, and Clare was an entirely different proposition from Bruce to confide in. So I admitted nonchalantly that we were on excellent terms. She frowned a little.

"Well, I suppose, of course, that it is all right, and anyway it is none of my business. But she is such a mysterious woman. She lives like a duchess, and everybody says her husband left her scarcely anything. When that little is gone what will she do unless she marries a rich man? And how on earth could you get money enough to support a woman of her tastes, as she would demand to be supported. You just answer me that, Tom Halliday?"

Now I had rather expected something like this from Clare, but nevertheless the question annoyed me somewhat. It was the identical one that had been making my sane moments a bugaboo for many nights and days past; still, I hated to be reminded of it by another person. Even now I was beginning to feel the drain of her upon my resources, although I had done nothing extravagant. I had taken her to the theatre, paid for carriages, and bought her luncheons and flowers, but beyond that had done practically nothing. And in a certain way there was much satisfaction in the thought that I had offered her so little in the way of allurement besides my own society. While there were men by the score who would have been overjoyed to squander money upon her, she had laughingly excused herself to them for the sake of inexpensive little evenings with me. As proof that she really preferred me it seemed conclusive, and was the thing that gave me the most hope. However I did not speak, and Clare went on:

"Some of her gowns cost more than you earn in a month, while as for supporting an establishment at the Arcadia—well, of course, the very idea is preposterous. Now, why don't you be sensible?" I smiled, scenting what was coming.

"And what is your idea of sense, Clare?" I inquired.

"Well, take up with a nice little girl like Mollie Osborn, for instance."

It was just as I had suspected, for Clare and Mollie are chums and devoted in advancing each other's interests. But the idea that any man, once knowing Mrs. Dace as I knew her, could be content with a girl like Mollie, struck me as so delicious, nonsensical, that I could not refrain from laughing.

"It is absurd, Clare. Certainly Mollie is strictly all right, but she would look like a mouse beside Mrs. Dace." She nodded spiritedly.

"Now you are talking sense. Like a nice little white mouse beside a leopardess, exactly." I did not like the comparison.

"Do you mean to say that Mrs. Dace is a leopardess?" I demanded, with some warmth. Clare was as cool as a cumumber.

"Oh, I don't know. Anyway she is as beautiful as one. And viewing her as I have only from a distance, I have somehow gained the impression that there are traits in common between them. She is so wonderfully smooth and soft and quiet moving, you know." She looked up at me sideways, saw the displeasure that rested upon my face, and broke into a laugh as she gave my cheek a pat.

"Of course you must not mind what I say, Tom, dear. I really know almost nothing about your charmer, and I trust to your level head to take care of you. Only please to be careful." So we laughed together and dropped the subject hard then and there.

Up to this time the course of no man's love ever ran smoother than had mine for Mrs. Dace. Yet it was only a few days after this conversation with Clare that there happened a thing so awful to me at the time that hades itself could have offered no torture more exquisite. I had never been jealous of Mrs. Dace, for the simple reason that I had seen no cause to be; yet I knew that the fires of that passion slumbered within me like those of a latent volcano. The mere thought of another making love to her was a torment. She had told me that few men interested her, and the frequency of my attendance upon her seemed to preclude the idea of a rival of consequence lurking in the background. That I was being publicly exhibited to attract attention and thus used as a sheep-skin to cloak a real wolf, had never entered my mind until the thought in all its hideousness was forced upon me purely by accident. I had spent the evening downtown, and was going

Continued on page 7.

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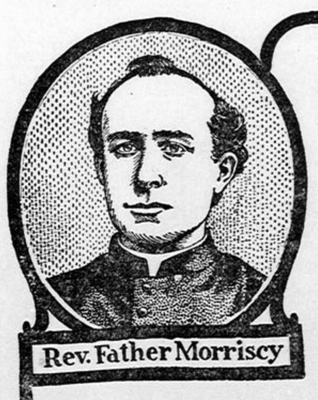

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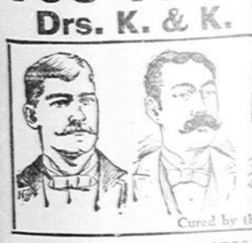

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