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The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —
Harry Irving Greene
Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"

Supplied Exclusively in Canada by The British & Colonial Press Service, Limited.

"But nevertheless I am going to do it. Soul and body, I want you to prevail, and your sacrifices to the common cause shall be mine. There will be enough wine left for us when we do not have to think of a to-morrow. Come. Let us go now." I looked around and then glanced at my watch. It was 11 o'clock, and a steady stream of humanity was flowing towards the exit, as we wedged ourselves into it. Once outside, the enclosure I started the motor, and taking my place, assisted her to her seat, standing erect for a moment thereafter as I allowed my eyes to wander over the outpouring stream. Through the midst of it I saw a big man with a coarse face and flowing moustaches plowing his way, his small evil-set eyes riveted upon me with ominous fixity. It was Rich, and Mackay, and the malevolent, jealous, and maliciously filled me with a lousy of his expression. I laughed and pointed blank in his face as I seated myself beside my fiancée and tucked the robe close about her with lingering and ostentatious familiarity before throwing forward the lever. A side-long glance stolen at her told me that she had not noticed him in the press, and with no reference to his having been present, I sent the car humming homeward.

She asked me if I cared to come within for a few moments, and together we were lifted to her floor. In her reception parlor I seated myself close beside her, gathering her hands in mine. The first intoxication of success had passed, and a great, quiet joy had settled upon me, soothing and restful. Never had I been filled with better impulses than in this hour. In my victory the better side of my nature came uppermost in my gratitude to the infinite. Firmly I resolved that my life in the future should be one of which no man might be ashamed, and for what I had done in the past that was unworthy I silently avowed amends. For the sake of the woman by my side I should lead a life that our sons would be proud to emulate. I would command her respect in all things. Speculation I did not consider a moral offense. It was but a battle of money and wits, and to the victors of the earth the spoils legitimately belong.

I told her the general trend of my thoughts, with much earnestness, and she listened without comment, her face slightly averted and her hands resting contentedly in mine. I kissed her eyes and forehead, and she sighed softly as her bosom rose. Just what the sigh meant I did not know, and did not ask, but believed it was the responsive chords of her nature sounding to my touch. She had told me that she cared more for me than for any other man, and that under conditions which I appreciated were not unreasonable, she would rather live within my arms than those of any other person. Neither had she made my financial success an unqualified condition of our marriage, but had merely pointed out the great desirability of it as an added stimulus to my endeavors. That the principal reason she had advanced as to why she wished me to possess wealth was that I might be able to be more often at her side thrilled me with joy whenever it recurred to me. Had she not really loved me her desires in this respect must have been just the reverse.

The buzzing of the door bell aroused us from our close communion with a mutual start. It was an unusual summons, one sharp pressure upon the button closely followed by two more of some seconds duration each. At the first alarm her hands involuntarily tightened in mine, and as the longer notes hummed their insistence I saw the color rush from her cheeks in a scurrying tide. Her form straightened and grew tense, and arising she glided with swift noiselessness across the room and touched the button that summoned her maid. As though she had been waiting in the doorway, Janet slipped into the room. Her mistress addressed her swiftly.

"Janet, say that I am not at home. Under no circumstance permit him to enter. If he says that it is important, tell him that he may call me up in the morning." Beyond all question greatly agitated, she returned to near where I sat, placing herself before the piano in the attitude of one about to play. Her face was unattractively bloodless, and a thin, hair-like line about the corners of her mouth seemed to be constricting her lips. Altogether the change in her appearance was not to my liking, and the quick stealth of her movements caused a most uncomfortable sensation to run through me; a mingled feeling of guilt and doggedness, as though I had been surprised in a forbidden bower by its rightful lord. A totally different type from the soft and perfectly poised creature of the moment before was revealed to me in those fleeting seconds of quick action and swift sentences, and my breath came faster before the contrast. In the few steps that had been required to take her across the room and back, her face had become that of an older, harder woman. The sensitive beauty of her mouth had been lost in its compression; her cheeks were like polished marble; the soft lustre of her eyes had turned into the glinting brilliancy of gems. Whether it was fear or anger or a blending of the two that had wrought this magic transformation I could not determine.

Almost breathlessly I watched the maid as she swung the door slightly and stood blocking the opening with her left arm. From without rumbled the heavy tones of a man unsteady and thick from drink. "Good evening, Janet. I would like to see Mrs. Dace." The girl's answer was softly apologetic.

"My mistress is not at home." The

reply which followed was preceded by a laugh.

"You know better, Janet. Tell her I wish to see her. Tell her, also, that it is a matter of importance." "But I have said that she is not at home. But of course she will be here in the morning and you can then communicate with her. I have no doubt she will be pleased to hear from you."

In the instant of heavy hanging silence which followed I shot a glance forward. She had leaned slightly forward, her hands clenched and her ears strained in the direction of the door. Then the notes of the man arose again, a sullen growl sounding through them.

"Did she order you to tell me this nonsense or are you acting upon your own responsibility?" The voice of the yellow girl, theretofore respectful, took on a cold insolence.

"That is a matter for you to form your own opinion about. At least I am willing to accept any responsibility that I may tell you. You may ask her concerning it when you see her again."

Plainly and distinctly Mackay swore, and I saw the door yield slightly to the pressure of a heavy hand from without. In the twinkling of an eye the maid's slender figure became that of an enraged panther, and her tones rang out with positive viciousness. "If you try to force your way in here against me I will have you thrown head and heels into the street by the employees. Release that door instantly!"

He roared again, the pressure ceased and I heard his heavy step as he retreated down the hall. In a trice the maid had closed the door behind him and stood before us with a hot flush upon her face and her eyes alight. Mrs. Dace drew a long breath, and her form and features softened. Once more she became the low-spoken, perfectly self-controlled woman of the minute before. "You did very well, Janet. I think that is all for the present. You may retire now." Noiselessly the girl slipped past us and disappeared behind a portiere.

"What does this mean, Mackay?" I asked quickly, but with the sickening sensation that I had experienced once before, making my knees weak and my throat dry. She faced me with an almost imperceptible lifting of her eyebrows and shoulders.

"So far as I know it means nothing except that Mr. Mackay has been drinking and wished to see me for some reason of which I am as ignorant as you are."

"But at this hour of the night! It seems strange that even a man like him should have the presumption to call. I think under the circumstances I have a right to inquire. Does he sometimes do such things?"

"He has done so before. He had no right to do so now. If it is a matter of important business he should have notified me of his coming at least a few moments in advance."

"But what business could he possibly wish to confer with you about at such a time of night that could not be transacted over the telephone?" I pursued unhappily. She waved her head.

"I am sure that I am as ignorant and disturbed over the affair as you can possibly be. When I see him again I shall demand an explanation. Then I will be able to tell you."

"And those rings—they sounded almost like a signal—one short and two long ones."

"It is one of his peculiarities. I think he so announces himself everywhere." She came close beside me, dropping her hand upon my shoulder.

"You told me once that you would never mistrust me again. You are doing so now. I cannot wholly control the actions of others, and there are reasons why I do not quarrel with Mr. Mackay unless I am driven to it. Your jealousy may ruin our prospects and make us bad friends after all. I do not feel flattered by it."

I got upon my feet and slipped my arm about her. "You must forgive me once more, dearest. While I admit that my love is a jealous one, yet where my heart is my faith also reposes. I trust you implicitly and will ask you nothing further. I was very much surprised, that is all."

She smiled upon me with a sweetness that was incomparable, and for an instant her palms held my cheeks. "You had better go now, Tom. It is really late and I am just plain, physically tired. You may kiss me good-night if you wish—just once."

She turned her cheek to me, and my lips paid reverential tribute to it. She accompanied me to the door, her hands locked above my elbow, blew me a farewell from finger tips that touched her lips, and disappeared behind the oaken panel. Sobered of spirit by the occurrence of a few minutes before, and despite myself somewhat depressed by thoughts which, notwithstanding the fact that I would not permit them to crowd themselves into my brain, nevertheless hovered upon the horizon of it, I started homeward on a brisk walk after having ordered the car. Now hers, to one of the garages within the building. A vacant lot with a path cutting diagonally across it spread itself before me, and in accordance with my usual custom, I took this short cut as a savor of steps. The remains of a natural grove were scattered throughout it, and upon its centre the nightshades lay heavily. As I passed an oak that leaned over the

path I was conscious of a slight rustling movement at my back, and ducked my head with an involuntary quickness that is the gift of a natural

lover. Then I noticed with

surprise that I was not alone. The least surprised at his attempted robbery, and I now determined to give him the worst beating I was capable of with- out using more than my fists or endangering his life. His reputation was an open book. When sober he used his brains for the destruction of his enemies, but when drunk the beast within him arose raging, and many was the man who, crossing him in his cups, had been felled unconscious by his great fist. Instinctively disliking him to the very core of my being, and raging inwardly at the cowardliness of his attack, I stopped his approach by a straight, left-hand blow that cracked like the report of a pistol and sent his head rocking. He was probably as powerful a man as myself, but much slower, much older and in much poorer condition physically and mentally. His bear-like rushes and swings I evaded without difficulty, sending his head backward with short, quick blows until his wine-filled mind whirled, and he staggered as he tried to reach me. My time had come, and deliberately I took full advantage of it. For the first time I used my right hand, sending it over his guard with the viciousness with which I would have struck at the head of a serpent. He spun in his tracks, threw up his hands and came down like a falling wall.

I stepped back, readjusted my coat, and stood waiting. Perhaps thirty seconds later he stirred and climbed to his feet after several unsuccessful efforts, and stood rocking in his tracks, as he wiped the blood from his face and glared at me. "If I don't get you for this you will be the first one that ever got away from me," he said, wickedly. For the second time that night I laughed in his face.

"At any time and place that suits you, Mackay. There is a beauty doctor a few blocks down the street—open day and night. I believe, I wish you a pleasant evening with the devil for your company." He picked up his hat, coughed once in his peculiar way, and disappeared without reply in the direction of the lighted street. Although I knew that I had made an unforgiving foe, against whom it had been charged and almost proven that he had more than once hired professional thugs to half kill his enemies; knowing also that there was no reason why he might not do the same in my case, I was still more than half glad that the affair had happened. At any rate, if he had any status beyond that of a business agent with the woman who had promised to be my wife, this incident would develop the fact. Even though he was her financial guardian he would be seriously embarrassed should he attempt to uphold himself in what he had done this night; and certainly if she cared for me at all she would express her satisfaction to me over the outcome. Nursing my sole injuries, which were confined to a pair of battered knuckles, I

Continued on page 7.

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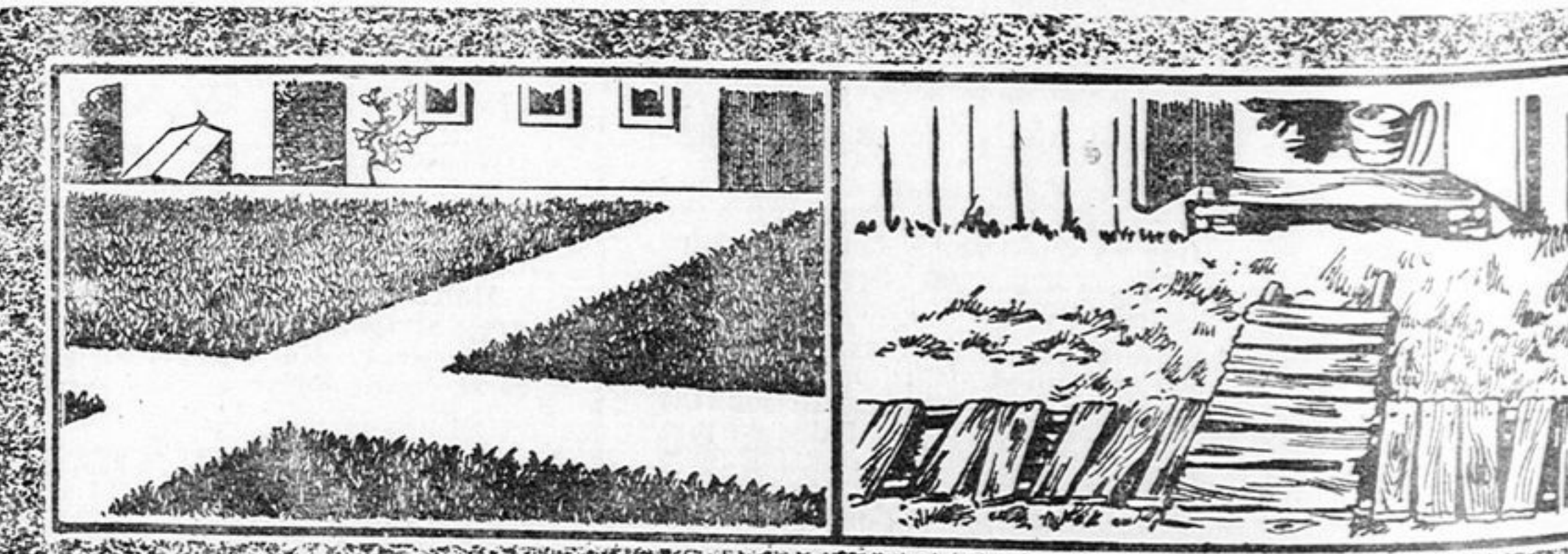
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