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THROUGH THE DARK SHADOWS

Or The Sunlight of Love

CHAPTER VIII.—(Cont'd.)

Behind him glittered the long French windows of the morning-room, one of which stood open, revealing the luxury of the room beyond; the table with its silver and delicate china service, and the purple hangings of the walls.

Presently he stopped—in his stroll and turned his stern eyes towards the landscape stretching beneath him. Through the confusion of the dark woods there lay a long line of turf, cut here and there by formidable hedges, and divided by a streak of glittering silver, which was in reality a dangerous stream—indeed, higher up it became a torrent—forming the final obstacle of the Barminster lesteep-course. All the Leroy had been fond of horses. The Barminster stables had sent many a satiny-coated colt to carry off the gold cup; and this race-course had been carefully kept and preserved by the family for many generations.

While he stood gazing on it a light footstep sounded behind him, and a slender hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned slowly, and with a kind of

kingly courtesy kissed the long white fingers.

"You are early as usual, Constance," he said approvingly.

Lady Constance Tremaine smiled as she turned with him and walked along the mosaic pavement of the terrace. She was little more than a girl, with a slim, graceful figure, and clad in a simple white morning gown, which served to enhance her youthful beauty. Her face was a pure oval, with clear-cut features and an exquisitely curved, sensitive mouth, while her grey-blue eyes gazed beneath their thick lashes with a calm serenity that bred faith and confidence in those who looked into them. Crowned with a wealth of pale golden hair, together with her delicate complexion, she looked as if she had stepped from one of the old Florentine pictures of the saints.

As the two so typical of youth and age stood side by side in the clear morning light, the resemblance between them was marked. Indeed, they were related, for the Tremaines were a distant branch of the Leroy family, and the same proud blood ran in their veins. Lady Constance had been brought up in the Barminster household, and Adrien had grown to regard her in the light of a loved and trusted sister; but, as yet, nothing more.

"Won't you come in to breakfast?" she said, as they reached the end of the terrace. "Aunt Penelope is not coming down; her nerves are bad this morning."

Miss Penelope Leroy, Lord Barminster's only sister, was not strictly speaking Constance's aunt, merely a distant cousin; but as a child Constance had been accustomed to call her her so, and the habit had grown up with her.

Lord Barminster smiled grimly. "I advised her to let the cucumber alone last night," was his only comment as he turned towards the breakfast-room.

Constance smiled too, for she knew that when Miss Penelope complained of her nerves, it was in reality nothing but a case of indigestion.

"How bright the course looks this morning!" she said, with a charitable wish to change the subject, for Lord Barminster was apt at times to wax caustic over his sister's small weaknesses.

"Yes," he said grimly; "like all the things dangerous, it is pleasant to the eye. I hate that strip of green—it is the grave of many a Leroy's best hope. The turf has always been a fatal snare to our race. But, come," he broke off, "let us go in. Thank goodness, Adrien arrives to-day."

"To-day?" repeated Lady Constance, a delicate flush rising to her sweet face. "I thought he was not going to arrive until the morning of the race."

"The race is to-morrow, but he comes to-day," answered Lord Barminster. "I had a note from him last night saying he would be here by lunch time, and was bringing a few friends down with him."

"And Mr. Vermont, too?" inquired Lady Constance almost timidly. The old man's face darkened and his thin lips set in a hard line.

"Yes," he said fiercely, "I suppose so. Adrien is as much in love with him as a young fellow with his first sweetheart. I know that he's a scoundrel and a rogue—but there, what would you? Times have changed since my day; we have replaced horses by motors, to spoil our roads and ruin our lands, and gentleman friends by base-born, 'cheming adventurers.'"

"Oh, but, uncle," Lady Constance timidly remonstrated, "surely Mr. Vermont is a gentleman?"

"Yes, by Act of Parliament!" snapped the old man, in whose aristocratic eyes a lawyer was but little removed from the criminal whose case he defended.

"Certainly it is strange that Adrien should be so attached to him," the girl said musingly; she, herself, had little liking for the gentleman in question, though her sense of justice had made her speak a good word for him. "But he is a clever steward, at least."

"A rogue's only virtue," said Lord Barminster dryly.

"Amusing, too," she suggested.

"We've no longer need of a court jester," returned her companion, with sarcasm. "But never mind, Adrien will find out his mistake for himself one day. Certainly, I am not going to attempt to strip the mask off his friend's face. Give him rope enough, and he will hang himself. Meanwhile, give me some more coffee, and leave the fellow's name alone; I hate even the thought of him."

Lady Constance refilled his cup and brought it to the end of the table, for she loved to wait on the old man. As she did so, his sharp eyes caught the glitter of a piece of needlework across the back of her chair, and with a curb gesture towards it, he said:

"What is that?"

She blushed, almost deeply, then took it up, and opened it out for them to see. It was a silk riding jacket, in the scarlet and white racing colors of the Leroy's, and their coat of arms, worked in silver, upon the breast.

"For the Grand National," said Lady Constance, as she refolded the jacket.

"You worked it yourself?" questioned the old man abruptly.

"Yes," she replied, blushing again. Then, as he was silent for some minutes, she said almost timidly: "You do not mind, uncle, do you?"

He started. "Mind! Good heavens, child, why should I? You know the wish of my heart only too well. What better favor could he wear than yours? As far as I am concerned, you were plighted in your cradles. Leroy and Tremaine are no unequal match. No—my dear, make his jacket, and win his heart—if you can!"

Some few hours later, panting and throbbing, the Daimler motor drew up in the Castle courtyard—Adrien and his friends had arrived for the great steeplechase.

Attracted by the sound of the barking dogs, who apparently disliked the unaccustomed monster—Lord Barminster himself invariably using horses—Lady Constance stepped from her room on to the balcony which looked down upon the courtyard beneath.

The gentlemen's hats flew off in greeting, and, as Adrien looked up, an unusual thrill ran through him as he noted the simple beauty of the girl above him.

"We thought we'd left the sun behind us, Constance, but evidently 'she' is still overhead," he said smiling.

She looked down with mock reproof, playfully shaking at him a flower which she held in her hand.

"I thought compliments were out of date, Adrien. Have you enjoyed your drive?"

"Not half so much as the welcome," was the courteous reply, as he caught the rose which she had let fall.

She laughed, and blushed a little, then turned to the other members of the party, who had now alighted from the car.

"Ah, Lord Standon! I did not know you were coming." Then, as that young man's face lengthened, she added quickly: "Unexpected pleasures are always welcome. I am glad to see you, Mr. Paxhorn."

After a word of greeting to Mortimer Shelton, she drew back into her room; while the men, laughing and chatting, passed into the great hall, where they found Lord Barminster awaiting them. His stern face softened into a welcome as, with outstretched hand, he came forward to greet his guests.

"Ah, Shelton!" he said, "so you keep my boy company, and you, Paxhorn and Standon, gentlemen, you are welcome—through there's no need to remind you of that, I know. Adrien, turning to his son, 'you have a fine day, did you drive or ride?'"

"We motored down, sir," answered the young man, in his soft, melodious voice.

His father frowned slightly. He heartily detested all modern innovations, and would never hold that motors—or indeed, any increased facilities for travelling—were improvements. "They breed discontent, sir," he would declaim vigorously. "In my young days people were content to stay in the place in which they had been born, and do their duty. Now, forsooth, they must see this country and that, and visit a dozen places in the year, where their grandparents visited one. Anything for an excuse to fritter away their hard-earned savings!"

On this occasion, however, he made no comment, but turned to Mortimer Shelton.

"You'll find the roads here better suited for horses than for oil-cans," he said grimly. "We are primitive, as you know."

Shelton laughed; he knew his host's ideas on this subject, and was apt to respect them.

"So much the better, sir," he said in a cheerful tone; "I am a bit tired of the smell of the patrol myself. Give me Nature without a corset."

"You'll certainly get that here," Lord Barminster replied, favoring his young guest with an approving glance. Shortly afterwards, they made their way to the morning-room. Here, luncheon had been laid, and Lord Barminster, Miss Penelope, and Lady Constance, were awaiting them. The little party sat down to table, each one secretly only too ready for the meal; for the ride through the fresh, country air had been a fairly long one.

"I was really hungry, Constance," Adrien said, with his low, careless laugh. "There must be magic in the air of Barminster."

"Yet still you come here so seldom," returned his cousin gently.

"Business and the cares of State," quoted Adrien, with a smile. "But I might retaliate. Why do we not see you up in town? Society misses one of its brightest stars."

Lady Constance toyed idly with the grapes on her plate; then she looked up.

"Society has many brighter lights than I, Adrien," she said quietly. "But now, tell me about the race—autie is terribly anxious over it; are you not, dear?"

"Yes, my love," returned Miss Penelope, who, reality, hardly knew one horse from another.

"Oh, Adrien always wins," put in Lord Standon. "That's a foregone conclusion. Have you seen the 'King' lately, Lady Constance?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "He is exercised in the paddock every morning, and is in fine form."

Adrien smiled.

"Poor 'King Cole'; he'll be worth his weight in gold if he wins to-morrow! What about the other horses, Stan; are they down?"

"Yes," replied Lord Standon; "my man saw some of them at the station; but no sign of the Yorkshire chestnut."

"So much the better," said Adrien; "perhaps his owner has thought discretion the better part of valour and withdrawn him."

(To be continued.)

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