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The Lash of Circumstance

- BY -
Harry Irving Greene

Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"

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"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 allurements 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 deliciously 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 cucumber.

"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 hitherto I 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 home at about eleven, when a circumstance occurred to me. A few evenings before, when at Mrs. Dace's, she had requested me to open a bottle of wine, which I had done by means of a folding corkscrew I carried upon my key-ring. When I had reached my own door later in the evening I had discovered that my keys were missing, and remembered at the time that I had laid the ring containing them and the corkscrew upon the

table after opening the bottle. I had forgotten to replace them in my pocket, but knowing they were perfectly safe, I felt no uneasiness; told myself that I would recover them upon my next visit, and ringing the bell, was admitted by Mrs. Tebbetts. I had not seen Mrs. Dace since, and now on my way home decided to stop off for a moment at the Arcadia, and if she or the maid were home I would claim the keys in order to avoid disturbing the housekeeper, who retired early. I therefore stepped from the car at the point where it crossed the boulevard upon which she resided, and hurried towards her building. I chanced to be upon the opposite side of the street from my destination, and as I was about to cross the way my steps were arrested by the warning honk of a motor car. Pausing at the curb I watched its swift approach, its lights glaring like the eyes of some speeding monster. By the street lamps I saw that it was a ponderous affair, and a pang of regret stabbed me that I was not able to possess its like. Almost as huge as a locomotive it looked as it rolled to a point opposite me, and then suddenly swinging in a close circle, stopped in front of the entrance across the way. Instinctively I paused in the shadow to watch it.

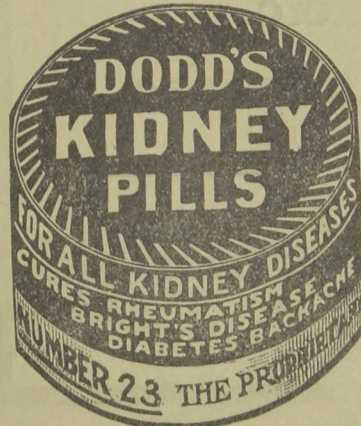
Its door swung open and out on to the pavement there stepped a great man with a massive bull-dog shaped head and neck, and mustaches that flowed from his lips like yellow fountains. By the gaslight I could see the bear-like power of his arm as he thrust out his hand to some one yet within the car, and a cold premonition of something wretched to come swept over me. To my ears there came a short, peculiar cough, and from this mannerism of which I had heard, as well as from pictures which I had seen in the newspapers, I instantly recognized him. The dragon had arrived in his juggernaut. Richard Mackay, the infamous, the mad leper, who, corrupt of soul and body, had long reigned as autocrat of the under world and prince of spoliators, loomed across the way. Fearless and able, powerful, yet subtle, always a dominant force for evil, he was one from whom any man might recoil with secret fear.

And an instant later the wretched thing came to pass. From out of the car and into his grasp there stepped the woman whom I loved with all my soul, and my heart seemed to stop.

With his arm around her waist, brazenly indifferent as to who might witness, he passed across the walk by her side and threw the door wide by a sweep of his free hand. For some reason—I learned later it was because of a weakened spring—the door failed to close promptly, and I distinctly saw them in the subdued light of the interior as they stood close together awaiting the descent of the elevator car. It was but a fleeting glimpse, yet had it lasted longer I believe I should have cried outright in my agony. For, as plainly as I ever saw anything in my life I saw him draw her close to him as impulsively as I had done in my outburst as he lifted her face and half buried it beneath his sweeping moustache. Then the door mercifully closed, shutting out the sight and leaving me with horror filling my breast and the coldness of death creeping over me. For an instant I was incapable of movement, then regaining partial control of myself, I lurched away. Numb of brain, my knees turned to water, and with jealousy tearing at my vitals like a culture, I staggered homeward.

Upon the night of horror that followed I do not care to dwell. Like one in a fever I tossed through the hours sleepless save for the fitful dream moments when I wandered far into the evil haunts of the nightmare. Morning creeping grayly into my room found me with head splitting and set eyes that stared at the ceiling. As one who is crippled with rheumatism in every joint, I arose stiffly, bathed myself and crawled out into the air. It was Sunday morning, and already the chime of distant bells mellowed in my ears. It was all plain to me now, her deceit and treachery; and had I been sentenced over night to the gibbet I could not have been more wretched. In the miserableness of it I stood soul sick before the utter hollowness of all things. There could be but one explanation of it. The hideous innuendoes that had haunted my ears like the whisperings of a sea shell had been less than the truth, and I had been used as the false light to mislead the world; as a dummy the fool. Oh, the treachery and the wickedness and the black shame of it! And that this woman for whom I would have given my heart's blood could be guilty of such cruelty to me! Broken-heartedly, I sobbed beneath the oaks like a child.

(To Be Continued.)



MUNICIPAL LEAGUE MEETS IN TORONTO

Toronto, Ont., Nov. 12—Many delegates gathered in Toronto today for the nineteenth annual convention of the National Municipal League of the United States. It is the first time that the organization has met in Canada and the delegates plan to spend considerable time in learning how Canadian cities are dealing with municipal problems that are common to the cities of both countries. A special Canadian session will be held Friday at which Hon. Adam Beck will tell of the hydro-electric power system and J. F. Beer will explain what the province and city are doing to improve housing conditions. Other speakers will be heard on the details of the municipal system in Ontario.

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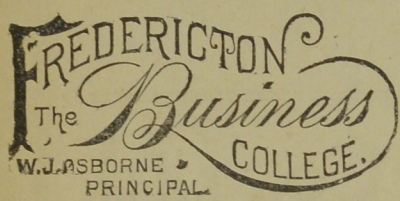
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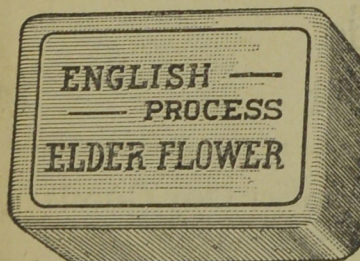
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