

THE IRISH HARPER.

A Tale of Love and Revenge.

[DUBLIN NATION.]

The feast was high in the ancient hall of Lawers; the chief of the Campbells had that day entered his fiftieth year, and his kinsmen and retainers from every part of the country were gathered together to celebrate Breadalbane's birthday. Around the hall were hung the trophies of the chase and the triumphs of war. The noble antlers of the stag were crossed with the broadsword and the targe; while the casque and spear, and burnished breast-plate, showed that, though in profound peace, the chieftain was ever ready for the fight. In the middle hung the broad banner of the Breadalbanes; and beneath, the escutcheon of their arms, with the proud and chivalric motto, "Follow me!" The table in the centre of the hall groaned beneath the burden of the feast; at the upper end, on a seat of dais, sat the noble chieftain, with high features and commanding look; but ever and anon, a dark scowl from his shaggy eyebrows seemed to tell that Breadalbane never forgave an offence. However, generous in peace, and fortunate in war, his vassals followed willingly whithersoever he led. About him sat the ladies of his house, with fair hair and glancing eyes, bedecked with rich robes and precious stones, that glittered and shone in the flickering light of the blazing pine torches with which the hall was illuminated. But one there was of surpassing beauty; her long sunny ringlets clustered on her graceful neck, which rivalled in whiteness the plumage of the plover; when the ground is covered with snow. Her blue eyes, as she gazed vacantly on the scene before her, poured forth a kind of dreamy light; but if caught said or done touched the latent feelings of her heart, the orbs suddenly expanded, and were lighted up with all the glow of enthusiasm, or of passionate indignation. This was Lady Alice, a cousin of the house of Breadalbane, and one who cared not to mingle too much in the gayeties and follies of the rest. For, most of all, did she delight to wander alone on the heathery mountains when the summer suns were setting in the west, and to linger and watch each departing ray, as it silently disappeared, like the vanishing hopes of glory. Sometimes, would she go forth when the spirit of the storm brooded on the hills; and wrapping her mantle around her, listen to the groaning of the tempest and the rushing of the winds, till she returned with her hair and her dress all dripping with the outpourings of its fury. Often would the Lord of Breadalbane chide her for these her wanderings, unbecoming, as he would say, in a noble lady. With that, would her eye glisten, her lips part as if to give utterance to the workings within; but anon, remembering the respect due to the head of her house, she would smother her rising feelings, and lower her head in token of feigned obedience. In the evening, she again won back the chieftain's smile by pouring forth her mellow voice in the songs of her native country, some spirit-stirring ballad of love and war; or almost melt even his iron nature to tears by lingering with melancholy strains over some touching lament of the dead.

Such was the Lady Alice; but at the present moment she gazed upon the rude and boisterous scene with a vacant air, as if her thoughts were wandering far away from the festal board. Albeit, now did the feast become more joyous; rude and riotous grew the revelry at the lower end; to toast upon toast was proposed and drunk, nor were the healths of the female part of the audience, and especially of the Lady Alice, forgotten. Many hearts throbbed at the mention of that name; for many were assembled in the hall that day who had been suitor for her hand. Nobles of high degree, barons, and chieftains, had wooed, but wooed in vain; to all did she return a firm but dignified refusal, till her kinsfolk began to surmise that she had made some vow of eternal chastity. But they knew not her heart; her spirit was made for loving deeply, passionately, madly; yet, she could not devote her affections to beings who had no feelings beyond the best way of killing a stag or a man; and such were the only suitors that had as yet addressed her.

In one of the pauses which occurred preparatory to the announcement of a new toast, a knock was heard at the door. The guests looked surprised, for none could come at such an hour who intended to do honour either to the feast or the giver. Moreover, it was not the knock of one secure of admission, or the haughty chieftain or impatient noble, but that of some humble person, who hesitated as to the reception that might be awarded him. Breadalbane, however, motioned that they should see who was at the gate; the seneschal obeyed, and soon returning, announced that there was without a young Irish harper, who craved admittance that he might tell, in other lands, of Scottish halls and Scottish hospitality. His arrival could not have been more opportune; the feast was at its height, and all were ready to listen to the songs of the bard.

Breadalbane ordered him instantly to be admitted; the doors were thrown open, and all eyes were bent upon the

stranger as he advanced slowly up the hall. He was partly wrapped in a large mantle, which disclosed a vest of green beneath; and a green cap, with a single feather, was placed upon his head. He appeared tall and handsome, and, casting around him a look of conscious mental superiority, he displayed more of the bearing of a noble knight than the humble harper. Such is, indeed, always the feeling of the true and loyal bard; he is proudly sensible of the dignity of his profession, and feels that, in the mental commonwealth, genius is the only legitimate sovereign.

The stranger strode to the upper end of the hall, where, doffing his cap and making a humble salute to the ladies and to the chieftain, he seemed to await their pleasure. Many were the fair eyes that were cast on him, and none with dislike or displeasure; his form and his face, his garb and his mien, were variously noted; and many were the guests that envied him when they saw the Lady Alice bend her blue eyes upon him.

After a short pause he addressed himself to Breadalbane, and said that he was on his return to his native country; that he had visited many castles in his wanderings through Scotland, where he had been nobly entertained, but wherever he went the beauty of the Lady Alice was a universal theme; he had therefore bent his steps to the Castle of Lawers, in the hope that he might be able to carry back to his countrymen a true account of the fame of her beauty, and the hospitality of Breadalbane.

A slight blush was seen by some to steal over the countenance of the Lady Alice during the harper's address. "You are welcome, worthy harper," said the chieftain, "you are right welcome; you shall have the best entertainment my poor castle can afford, so shall we stand well in the eyes of other countries. As for my cousin Alice, Heaven has indeed been kind to her as to outward appearance, but whether her beauty shall prove a blessing or a curse must be seen hereafter. However, you shall pledge me in this goblet, and anon we will have a trial of skill in minstrelsy."

The harper quaffed off the goblet of wine, bowed to the ladies, and struck a few wild notes upon his harp. "So please you, noble chieftain, shall it be a song of battle, or a lay of love?" "In sooth," replied Breadalbane, "if I was to consult my own feelings and that of my knights, I should call for a song of battle, but as we have ladies present, we must allow them the choice; and if I interpret their looks aright, they incline to a lay of love."

The objects of his appeal all gave token of assent; the Lady Alice adding, "We are ourselves skilled in most of the minstrelies of our land. Perchance the noble harper has something from a far country."

"In sooth," replied the harper, "I have a ballad that tells of distant lands; but, methinks, that bard would be unworthy of his art, whose tongue would flow with unstudied lays beneath the bright eyes that I see around me."

The Lady Alice was again observed to blush at these words, while the harper busied himself in arranging his chords; and recalling, as it were, by a few touches, the air and the words of the ballad. At last, the full tide of song broke upon him, and a deep silence, being made, he commenced his theme.

When it was concluded, general murmur of applause was heard throughout the hall. The Lady Alice was not slow in expressing her approbation, and it was generally agreed that the harper fully deserved to be rewarded with the poet's crown; the Lady Alice herself being appointed to place it on his brow.

A wreath of evergreens was accordingly brought, and the harper was ordered to draw near, that he might receive the intended honor. As he came forward and knelt at the foot of the dais, with bended head and downcast eyes, while the Lady Alice advanced, and the other damsels clustered around to witness the ceremony, the whole group would have made a subject worthy of the pencil of the unrivalled Wilkie. But, alas! Scotland had then no such artists to illustrate her history or immortalize the beauty of her children. None present observed that the hand of the Lady Alice trembled as she placed the wreath upon the harper's head; he alone felt it, and suddenly raising his eyes, he encountered those of the Lady Alice, which immediately fell, while a deep blush overspread her lovely face. Strange thoughts passed through the brain of the young harper; strange feelings rose in his breast; his blood beat rapidly in his veins, and hopes he did not care to cherish came and went, like misty stars through the stormy sky.

He was awakened from his trance by the voice of Breadalbane calling him to rise to pledge him in another goblet, and to drink a parting toast. "Good-night to the ladies!" This was the signal for their retirement; and when he had caught the last glimpse of the Lady Alice as she vanished through the lofty doorway, the harper craved permission to withdraw. This was granted, and Breadalbane directed the seneschal to marshal him to his chamber, and to offer him the best entertainment the castle could afford. The rest of the company remained at the board. The revelry waxed louder and more fierce, and many a dirk was drawn over the foaming goblet, which returned slowly and unwillingly to its sheath without its accustomed satisfaction of blood. The iron bell of the castle had tolled many a chime beyond midnight ere the wassail broke up, and the guests wandered to their respective apartments.

Strange and unaccustomed dreams haunted the pillow of the Lady Alice that night; slumber only sank upon her eyelids at intervals, ever and anon the image of the youthful harper flitted across her imagination, and new and indistinct feelings laboured in her bosom.

After this fashion passed the night; but with the early dawn she arose, feverish and unrefreshed, and having hastily donned her garments, she hurried into the garden to enjoy the cooling freshness of the morning air. She wandered along the broad walks, between the antique edges of clipped yew, with her eyes fixed upon the ground, bewildered with the various thoughts which crowded upon her brain, and with the new sensations which had suddenly arisen in her bosom. All at once she was awakened from her

trance by hearing a few wild notes struck carelessly on a harp; she stopped, for she had not deemed that any one would be abroad at this early hour except herself. In a few minutes she recognised the voice of the harper, as he slowly chanted the following verses:—

SONG.

Oh! I would wend with thee, love,
Though all were night and sorrow,
And I would die for thee, love,
Though fate should say to-morrow.

My cloak shall be thy couch, love,
My arm shall be thy pillow,
My sword shall be thy guard, love,
O'er desert, mount, and billow.

Then trust my heart and sword, love,
My sword was ever true,
And can you think my heart, love,
Would e'er be false to you?

As soon as the song was finished, she turned round to retrace her footsteps to the castle; she took, however, a path which led more directly to the house than the one in which she had hitherto wandered. But in hastily turning the corner of one of the yew-tree hedges she suddenly found herself in the presence of the minstrel. His harp hung negligently on his arm, and his eyes were fixed upon the ground; hearing footsteps he raised them, but on becoming aware of the presence of the Lady Alice the colour mounted to his very temples. He soon, however, recovered his self-possession, and advancing towards her he craved pardon for having thus intruded on the privacy of her matin walks.

"I did not conceive," he continued, "that anyone, much less the Lady Alice, would be abroad at such an hour; for myself I must confess that I love to greet the rising sun; there is something so delightful in the feeling and belief that you are looking on a day that is, perhaps, not as yet polluted by earthly sin, that I never feel myself so near to nature and to nature's God as at that early and untainted hour."

"That is indeed a sentiment," answered the Lady Alice, "worthy the art and its master. But was the burden of your early song, in sooth, a morning hymn?" "A hymn, lady, to her I can never cease to worship, though I can never hope to approach her."

It was now the turn of the Lady Alice to look down and blush, as she encountered the earnest, though humble gaze of the youthful harper.

"Such was not the fate of the hero of yesterday's ballad."

"No, lady, no; but oh! how different are these things in fiction from actual life; but gladly, gladly would I undergo a thousand perils to kneel but one hour at the feet of the angel I worship."

As he concluded these words he struck passionately the chords of his harp, and then burst into the following strain:—

I do not ask thee for thy love,
A passing sigh is all
That I can hope for, just to drop
Within my cup of gall.

And even that is more than I
Can ask for as my due,
I only ask in charity
And not for justice sue.

I am not worthy of thy love,
Nor canst thou hope to find,
Within the troubled mirror here
An image of thy mind.

For how can innocence and guilt
Together dwell below,
Or how the nightshade and the rose
Together bloom and blow?

Farewell, farewell—I still must love,
But will not cross thee eye,
Forbear to curse me while I live,
Forget me when I die.

As he concluded these words he rushed hurriedly from her presence, and Lady Alice, surprised, gratified, and yet, perhaps, slightly offended, returned slowly and ruminatingly to the gate of the castle. It is needless to say, that the resolution of the harper, as indicated by his song, was kept; he still lingered about the castle, for Breadalbane still pressed him to stay, and offered all the hospitality of the Scottish chieftain. It is, perhaps, as needless to relate that interviews again occurred between the harper and the Lady Alice. She had at last found, what she had long sought in vain among the uncultured barons of the neighborhood, a mind that corresponded with her own in thought, word, and sentiment. She felt that their inward virtues harmonized, though the outward forms and fashions of life had instituted an almost impassable barrier. Then began the struggle of conflicting passions; the self-regarding fervor of love, and the self-regarding principle of pride. It was after one of these struggles with her contending emotions, struggles which had totally altered her nature, and changed the high and haughty, and apparently cold Lady Alice, into a being full of passionate ardor; it was, as I have stated, after one of these struggles, when the memory of her kinsman's proud castles, her ancient name and noble descent, had gradually yielded to the soft visions of mutual love, in some distant land where

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the pride and the prejudice, the sin and the sorrow of the world should be alike forgotten; that she went forth one calm and beautiful evening to the accustomed tryst. The harper had prayed for one last interview, to bid an eternal farewell; for whether Breadalbane had observed anything which had excited his suspicions or whether some envious spy had profaned the sanctity of their solitary meetings, however that might be, the Irish harper was no longer a welcome guest at the Castle of Lawers.

The minstrel was true to his appointment. His face was pale, and his eye had a wild look of frenzy, as, taking the hand of the Lady Alice, and suddenly casting himself at her feet he poured forth with all the madness of despair the utter hopelessness of his passion.

"Never," said he, "should the secret of my love have escaped from my lips, as long as I lingered here; but now, what is life to me—the star of my hope has fallen from the heavens, and the darkness of the idiot or the maniac will settle on my soul. Oh, that you were in my native land, amid the green hills and sequestered valleys of my own lovely country!—oh, that I could lead you to the hall of my fathers, and point out to you the tombs of all the noble barons of our race, barons who have won the crown of gold, and have received the worship of centuries!—would that my harp could rival their magic numbers, and win but one heart, where ye did win a thousand! But how can I hope to persuade you, lady, here within sight of Breadalbane's towers, and surrounded by all the power and grandeur of a Highland chieftain; how can I hope to persuade you, that I, apparently an humble harper, am revered in mine own land! Yet so it is, lady, and I would not change the sympathising hearts that throng around the bard for all the glory and the grandeur of the proudest earl in the land."

As he uttered these words his eyes he uttered these words his eyes flashed fire, and his whole face beamed with the light of enthusiasm; but soon again was his brow overcast, and again returned the look of despairing despondency.

"But what are the sympathising hearts to me? what the glory of my race, what the crown of gold? Why should I strive for honor or fame, when you, lady, cannot, or will not, share it with me!—No, better that I seek some desolate and lonely spot, where my grief shall be unheard and my tears unseen; or it perchance some wandering shepherd shall catch the echo of my lamentations, he shall deem it but the murmur of the winds, or the wailing of some distant spirit."

He paused, for the sighs of the Lady Alice had now become quite audible; the tears coursed down her cheeks, and her whole frame trembled with emotion, as if some mighty struggle going on within. But no word escaped from her lips; a faint murmur now and then struggled forth, but her tongue refused to give utterance to the feelings of her breast. Suddenly, a death-like paleness overspread her countenance, her limbs tottered, and she would have fallen had not the harper caught her in his arms and gently placed her on a grassy bank. How long she remained in this state she knew not; when she recovered her senses, the shades of night had closed around; lights glimmered in the distant windows of the castle, but all around the lovers was solitude and peace. Let us not disturb their last moments—let us not withdraw the plying veil that night threw around them—let us not violate the sanctity of their parting interview.

The bell of the castle tolled at the usual hour the next morning, to summon the inmates to their early but substantial meal in the ancient hall. In a short time all had taken their seats in accustomed order at the well-filled board; but no sooner had Breadalbane entered, than he at once perceived that the Lady Alice was not in her usual place.

"Where is the Lady Alice?" he exclaimed, "let someone seek her in her chamber; perchance she still lingereth at her toilette, though it becometh not young maidens to be too much addicted to their mirror. Eh, my fair ladies? methinks, if they were all as faithful to their liege lords as they are to their looking-glasses, we should hear of fewer broken vows."

The attendant returned and brought word that the Lady Alice was not in her chamber; at the same time entered a groom, with the news that the palfrey of the Lady Alice was missing from its stall, although the night before it was fastened in the accustomed manner, and the stable door closed. The grim smile upon Breadalbane's face rapidly darkened into an ominous frown; he knit his shaggy eyebrows, and bit his nether lip till the blood started through the skin. "Where is the harper?" he at last exclaimed, as he darted his fiery eyes round the room. No one replied, and each person looked upon his neighbor, as if he came evident that the harper had vanished also.

"Now, by the Holy Cross!" exclaimed Breadalbane, "tis as I suspected; and the cousin of our house has fled with this accursed harper! Truly, truly hath her beauty proved a curse instead of a blessing; but, by the light of heaven! this insult shall not go unpunished! This accursed harper shall pay dearly for his presumption, and the vengeance I will take shall rebound even unto his own land, and shall become a token and warning to after ages. To horse, to horse, gentlemen, spare not the spur, rest not by day, sleep not by night, till ye have discovered the track of this accursed knave; and I will give my best charger, and broad lands upon the Tay, to him who first brings tidings of the traitor dead or alive."

The castle was instantly all in commotion. Zeal inspired some, envy others, and vengeance for slighted vows quickened the ardour of not a few. The knights belted on their swords, the squires buckled on their spurs, and the grooms saddled their steeds. It was a gallant sight to behold, as they all mustered in the castle-yard, their spears glancing, their plumes waving, and their chargers neighing. In the midst of all appeared Breadalbane on a coal-black steed, with a crimson feather dancing on his crest; giving his steed the spur, and crying out, "Forward, gentlemen!" with

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