

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Her breast was whole without for to seem,
But in her heart aye was the arrow keen."

"For shame of him, my cheeks waxed red."

As Brian had just given orders for all lights to be extinguished in the house, and for every servant to keep his or her room unless called upon to appear, Clontarf has but a few minutes to run upstairs before the hall lamps are extinguished. The corridor, as he reaches it, is indeed still lit, but dimly—only one light being left at the lower end—so that as he comes to the desired number three he opens it quickly, and enters it in a rather precipitate fashion, fearing lest some officious hand should put out the last lamp and leave him suddenly in utter darkness outside, unable to find the room indicated, without excessive trouble and many awkward adventures.

When he has closed the door with a proprietary bang, and looked around him, he finds himself in a very pretty bedroom, and face to face with his wife!

She is sitting in a low chair before a brilliant fire, with the lights behind her somewhat lowered. She has evidently exchanged her evening gown for one more comfortable, and is now clad in a soft white clinging garment heavily trimmed with lace, the sleeves of which are so loose that falling backward they let half her pretty arms be seen. Her eyes, as she looks up at Clontarf, are full of wonder. That she is fair he has always acknowledged, even though she "be not fair" to him; but how beautiful she can be, with that soft startled expression upon her face, up to this has been unknown to him:

"Her body, face, and hand
Be sharply slender, so that from the head
Unto the foot, all is but womanhood."

Conquering her surprise, she recovers her self-possession gracefully, and rises to her feet. He, being the man, is much slower to recover his.

"I beg your pardon," he says, pausing on the threshold, and looking miserable. "It is quite a mistake. Desmond"—floundering hopelessly—"told me to come here; he of course"—erring still more cruelly—"couldn't know you know."

"No," says Lady Clontarf. She seems to have grown a little taller and a good deal straighter during his remarkable speech.

"There's one comfort," says Donat, still standing like a culprit in the door way: "I haven't disturbed you—I mean"—mildly—"you weren't asleep, or that."

"Oh, no," says Doris, relaxing a little. "I am not thinking of going to sleep. Isn't—ain't it cold over there? Do come to the fire." Gentle concern is making a hard fight with ice, as she makes these two last remarks.

"Thank you, no," says Clontarf, not budging an inch. "The fact is, I am rather tired after my ride, and Desmond persuaded me to get an hour's sleep before I should be wanted. I dare say I shall be able to get it somewhere. I hope"—preparing to depart—"you understand how extremely sorry I am to have disturbed you."

"Do not make yourself unhappy about this absurd mistake," says Doris, quickly, but still coldly. "Rest here for your hour, if you will."

"It is good of you; but I will not take advantage of your offer, he says, with his hand upon the door. "Why should I trouble you?"

For a moment she hesitates; then she flashes crimson and takes a step toward him.

"Do not go," she says, unconsciously clasping her hands. She turns very pale, and her eyes seek the ground. "Why need any one know that—that?" Here she breaks down altogether and stands before him motionless, with down bent head.

He is so sorry for her that he pretends not to understand her.

"May I really stay?" he asks, gayly. "You cannot think what you have saved me from! If I may avail myself of your hospitality, I shall escape an hour's wandering through unknown corridors and sundry indignant ejectments from sacred chambers. You are sure I shall not be in your way?" Thus he delicately ignores both her confusion and her nervous breakdown.

Reassured by his manner, she looks up at him.

"Indeed, no," she says, smiling and shak-

ing her head. "How tired you look! Do lie down there at once, and I will promise to call you when your time is up."

"You speak as if it were the night before my execution," he says laughing. "Well, my gentle jailer, I will trust to you to let me have ample time to prepare for it. Is this"—pointing to a distant lounge—"the one I may call my own?"

"When am I to rouse you?" asks she, anxiously.

"Desmond has given me two hours, but one will be sufficient, so, 'If you're waking, call me early,' but I expect you will be asleep yourself by that time."

He flings himself wearily upon the sofa as he speaks, and then looks up at her.

"It is very good of you to make me welcome in this way," he says. "Somehow I feel that I am your guest to-night, not Desmond's."

"Shall I put this over you?" asks she, softly. She stoops as she speaks, and lays a heavy fur cloak over his shoulders.

"That's delicious," murmurs he, drowsily. "If you would just tuck it round me—"

She does as she is desired, with a lingering care.

"A 'I so'!" he says, contentedly; "you have placed me in Paradise;" and presently he is sound asleep.

Doris, creeping back noiselessly to her former seat by the fire, sits there motionless, least any smallest movement may wake him from his slumbers. She fears almost to breathe, and keeps her slender fingers clasped upon her knees in durance vile; she hardly even dares to blink her soft eyes, that are growing tired and sad from the firelight, because she is afraid that if she lets their lids descend upon them, sleep might descend too, and keep her from waking him at the appointed hour.

Then a heavy sound from the lounge behind her suggests the hope that he is too fast asleep to be drawn back to active life for some time yet to come, except by sundry shakes and calls.

A great desire to see him as he sleeps overcomes her. Rising tremulously, each rustle of her gown causing her a separate pang of fear, she slowly and with cautious footsteps approaches him, and looks down thoughtfully upon his closed lids and tranquil face.

Yes, he is indeed asleep, sunk in that heavy oblivion that comes after all body fatigue, be it honest or otherwise. One arm is flung above his head, the other is hanging a little over the edge of the couch. "Sleep, death's beautiful brother, that fairest phenomenon," has him in his keeping.

How helpless he looks! How simple a thing it would be now to either kill him, or cause him, without danger of discovery! His face, lying in its placid repose, shows ignorant of friend and foe alike, is undisturbed by dreams, kind or hateful; upon his cheeks his long, dark lashes lie without a quiver. There is a helplessness about his whole appearance and attitude that appeals to the heart of her who now stands looking silently down upon him.

He is her own,—nothing can alter that,—her very own, and she is now guarding him. The sense of motherhood that belongs to all good women grows warm within her breast as she listens to the regular coming and going of his breath, and watches the grand but awful unconsciousness that renders him—the strong man—weak now than she.

Of what now is he thinking? Whither is the brain—that is forbidden for a moment to be idle—wandering now?

"Sleep bath its own world;
A boundary between the things misnamed
Death and existence."

Has he reached it? Has she a place in it, however small?

She falls upon her knees beside him, and looks at him long and earnestly, and as she looks a veil is torn away from her that until now has lain between her heart and her. A sudden fire creeps into her veins; all at once it comes to her that she has found the very elixir of life,—its charm, its strength, its sweetness, and, alas! alas! its sorrow.

"It is love indeed that makes 'the world go round;' but, oh, how heavily it goes for some!"

Her heart beats passionately, but more with fear than gladness, as the great truth

becomes known to her. The fact that after so many months of married life she has discovered herself now for the first time to be in love with her own husband strikes her as being more tragical than comic. The vividness of the emotion fills her whole being to the overflowing even of her very soul, and renders her cold and mute.

To escape from his presence, to get away from him, somewhere, is now her great desire. She has turned as though in search of some means of carrying out her design, when he stirs in his sleep.

Lazily, with a little transient smile upon his lips, he flings up one arm, and as it descends again his hand accidentally falls upon hers, and rests there as though well contented. This contact breaks the spell that has been troubling her: she leans toward him. A little rush of rapturous tenderness obliterates all other thoughts, and, almost before she is aware of what she is doing, she has pressed upon his cheek a kiss, full of innocent passion.

An instant later, with ashamed and crimsoned cheeks, she springs to her feet, and, standing back from him, waits, in a very agony of fear and doubt, to see if he will wake, and, in waking, know her guilty of this unsought caress. Oh, the cruelty of this last thought!

But he never stirs. He sleeps on as blissfully as though neither fear, nor grief, nor love, nor any other emotion has come nigh him. After all, what is she to him, that her kiss should awaken him? Seating herself once more in her low chair, she bursts into silent tears.

"I am afraid I must rouse you now. It is quite one o'clock," she says calmly. It is an hour later.

"Is it? Eh? Oh, by Jove, yes, of course it must be," he says, springing to his feet. "And no hangman, after all! and no ropes or anything! You haven't half kept your promise." He laughs in a rather sleepy fashion, and gives himself a little stretch and a little shake. "What a shame that you should have been kept awake all night!" he says. "I firmly believed you would have gone to sleep too, and now I suppose you are fagged to death and thoroughly worn out. Let me see."

He turns her toward the lamp, which is even more lowered than when first he came in, and regards her keenly.

"You are as white as a sheet," he says, anxiously; "and one might almost think you had been—crying."

"One would think wrong, then," interrupts she; with a coldness that is very nearly repellent. "Now go. Mr. Desmond will call you a recreant knight if you are not up to him."

Something in her tone forbids his further lingering, so he leaves the room, and runs swiftly but noiselessly down to the morning-room, where he knows he will probably find Brian awaiting him.

As for Doris, for an hour after he leaves she never stirs, but sits motionless before her fire, thinking of many things that have been, of many things that yet may be; whilst through all her imaginings runs a certainty of coming evil that makes each smallest sound in the darkened household a very thunderbolt of terror. Once or twice Monica and Kit have wandered in to her, but, as they have been put almost on their oaths by Brian not to leave their own rooms, they soon flit back again to those safe quarters, lest their absence from them should be discovered.

And now the silence, the loneliness, is growing almost too great to be borne. Up and down, up and down her room she paces, finding it impossible to sit still for any length of time. For the last half-hour, even the noises that had terrified her off and on have ceased, and nothing disturbs the unnatural stillness but the hoarse bark of some watch-dog that sounds as though it were coming from some place a hundred miles away.

It is terrible being here, all alone, waiting, waiting—for what? What are they doing down stairs? What can they be doing to necessitate this awful stillness? Oh, if anything should have happened to some one below, and the others should be keeping it quiet, fearing to alarm those above, until it is absolutely necessary!

This last thought renders suspense no longer bearable; catching up a black lace scarf, and twisting it round her head and throat to protect her from the chilly night air, noiselessly and candleless she leaves her room, and commences her creeping journey

down the broad oak staircase. Just where the moonbeams can enter the Gothic window a pale flood of light is thrown, but here, and beyond it, all is lost in blackest gloom. A silence as of death seems to have wrapped the house in its embrace; so unearthly is this silence that the faint frou-frou of her soft dressing-gown, as it trails behind her, seems in the supernatural calm a loud and distressing sound. Gathering up the train in her hand, she descends cautiously until the hall beneath is reached.

She has never once asked herself whither she is going. Yet she knows. Instinctively she turns toward that room where they had told her inadvertently was the bow-window so well formed for purposes of exit or entrance. It is the one window in the house, through which a sure escape might be made, even on the most brilliant of moonlight nights, a projecting buttress causing it to lie in perpetual shadow. Once round this buttress (which cannot be overlooked by any window) one could pause to take breath for a moment before a final start, and then there would be only a swift rush along the ivied western wall, and a dart into the cool impenetrable shadows of the myrtles beyond, and then a low wall to jump, and after that the wide country and freedom.

She hardly knows how she has thought it all out—or if she ever thought of it till now—but it certainly seems an old story to her as she gropes her way, like a slim pale ghost, through the hall—a story with a tall even-faced phantom for its hero. The phantom puzzles her. He will not fall into an earthly shape, but slips from her spirit-like almost as she catches him. And yet she knows he is in the story, and she knows too that in the room with the bow window, through which the spirit is vainly trying to escape, she will find her husband.

The bow-window is in the library, and the library may be reached by two doors. One is but little used; yet still, guided by her instinct, she decides—in a dreamy, unexpressed fashion—upon entering it by the least frequented way. No thought that this unused door may probably creak in the opening disturbs her, yet when she comes to it she is surprised to find it already open, and so far wide, that she can enter without touching either door or side post.

Lightly, stealthily, she moves forward, but when she comes to the threshold she pauses, and, shrinking back a little, lays her hand upon the wood-work of the door and tries vainly to pierce the obscurity beyond.

It is not all obscurity. A chink in one of the shutters lets in a stream of moonlight that shoots like a tiny pathway of pale-yellow radiance straight across the room from wall to wall. But into this pathway comes no living form. He—if indeed any one is present—must be standing motionless, hidden within the dense gloom that enshrouds the rest of the apartment.

Oh for a sight, a breath the vaguest movement? The silence is so intense, so deadly that she quails before it. What if there should be nobody here but she herself? There is a ghastliness in the thought that she is, may be watching here alone, with only imaginary forms within the silent room beyond, and far from all the occupied parts of the house, that frightens her. Involuntarily she tightens her grasp upon the wood-work of the door, as though to assure herself that it, at least, is real and not part of a hideous dream; and then she purposes to herself a swift, if ignominious, retreat to the subdued but wholesome light she has left behind her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

"Welcome Home, Brave Volunteers."

The new song by Mr. John Imrie, "Welcome Home, Brave Volunteers," is, we think, one of the best this gifted song-writer has yet produced. The words are soul-stirring and appropriate, and appeal, as all true songs do, to the emotions and sympathies. In all Mr. Imrie's productions there is displayed decided poetical genius and high literary taste, and his lines are always the vehicle by which lofty intellectual emotions are conveyed to the minds and hearts of others. In this latest effort, however, he seems to have surpassed even himself. There is a pathos and fervency in the words which touch the sympathetic chords of every nature. The music is by Mr. Torrington, and is written in his own inimitable style, with an accompaniment which is at once simple and majestic.