

Better Than Life

By Charles Garvice

He goes to Cecilia who at once consents, and he leads her to the piano. She plays with the correctness of a machine and sings like a dove, softly, cooingly. He stands beside her for a moment, then comes back to the fire, and looks down at the face upon which the flames are casting weird lights.

"You have not forgiven me yet?" he says in a low voice. She makes an impatient movement.

"I hate talking when anyone is singing," she says.

"So do I, which proves my eagerness for that same forgiveness, Miss Dunbar."

"My sister is Miss Dunbar."

"Miss Ida you are very angry with me. Will you be less so if I admit that I deserve that you should be?"

"Angry—or less so?" she retorts.

He smiles.

"You see, I even forget my grammar. But let me explain."

"I hate explanations," she said petulantly.

"There again I agree with you. Give me credit for moral courage, therefore you are angry, and justly angry, that I did not tell you who I was the other day, when we met at the well."

"Not in the least," she declares, with a smile that is intended to be witheringly contemptuous. "It was no business of mine."

"It wouldn't have been, if I had cleared off, forever, as I intended," he says. "But I changed my mind."

"I want you to believe that I did not keep you in ignorance from sheer malice."

"It is really of no consequence," she breaks in—"not in the very least; only"—she pauses for a moment, and her face grows red—"only I don't care to be a laughing stock, even of my own family, and if—Bobby, for instance—knew that you were the unknown gentleman who was so kind—"on board the boat—"

"I see—I quite see," he says in the low voice; "and so we will say nothing about it. We will let them remain in ignorance. Will that please you? I mean, would you rather I said nothing? I should have spoken out when you came in this evening, but I saw that you were silent."

"She makes an impatient gesture of assent. "And am I to have forgiveness now?" He asks.

She looks stubbornly in the fire, her long lashes hiding her eyes, her lips tightly set. The song comes to an end, and, as in duty bound, he goes to the piano.

"Thanks—very much. May I say that you have a very sweet voice, Miss Dunbar?"

Cecilia smiles her soft, saint-like smile.

"Yes; but it is very thin. Ida's—" "You will sing for us?" he says, turning to Ida.

"No thanks," she said with scant courtesy. "I don't feel like singing

to-night. I've got a sore throat."

The vicar looks alarmed on the spot.

"My dear child—" "Oh, it's nothing, nothing," she says impatiently. "It's only sore enough not to want to sing."

"Do you not play, Lord Levondale?" says Cecilia.

He hesitates for a moment then he shrugs his shoulders.

"I can make a noise," he says, reluctantly—very reluctantly, and does not approach the piano.

But Bobby has heard the admission and instantly pounces upon him.

"Oh, do sir," he says eagerly. "I'm sure you can."

"Gently, Bobby," says the vicar rebukingly; but the earl lets his hands fall on Bobby's shoulder and looks down at him with kindly eyes.

"You'll be disappointed, Master Bob!" he says; and he goes to the piano.

It is quite true that he can not play, and that the accompaniment is just so many convenient and harmonious chords, but before he has sung half a dozen notes a profound silence reigns in the big room, and three out of four of the listeners exchange glances of amazement, and then stare at the back of his head.

It is only a Bavarian drinking song, but it is sung in a magnificent baritone, and so dramatically that the vicar can see the group of peasants round the vines and almost hear the clink of the tin cans.

"Oh, go on, please," he says, as the song finishes.

"h, I say," remarks Bobby, with inexpressible admiration.

"What a magnificent voice!" murmurs Cecilia. Ida alone adds nothing to the chorus of praise, but sits in the same attitude.

"Levondale strikes a chord or two then sings again."

This time it is a song in a language unknown to them. It is Arabic. It tells of a man who is leaving the tribe of his fathers to wander forth into the desert a fugitive and an outcast.

Not one of the listeners understands a word, but the music is eloquent, and presently the vicar begins to cough. Bobby's face assumes the grotesque expression which sits upon that of the human boy when he is much moved, and Cecilia's eyes fill.

It is the weirdest, saddest music imaginable. Ida stares at the fire, and listens, trying to harden her heart, but gradually it softens against her will. The fire is enveloped by a mist, and her hand steals up to her face to hide the tears that fill her eyes and threaten to fall upon the pretty dress.

They are there still when the song ceases, and with a long-drawn sigh Cecilia exclaims:

"Oh, that was beautiful, Lord Levondale! What is it?"

"You sing like an artist," says the vicar, emphatically.

Levondale comes to the fire.

"It is an Arab song," he says; and there is no reflection of their emotion in his calm, impassive face. "A man has committed a sin against his tribe, and is turned out to wander in the wilderness. It is his last farewell and lament. The words are as pathetic as the music, and I am sorry that I cannot translate them into English, Miss Ida."

She looks up there is a diamond drop in her eyes, but she dashes it away.

"I hate sentimental songs," she says at last, and defiantly. "They—they always make me laugh."

"Mr. Dunbar's carriage!" announces the footman; and she springs up immediately, as if glad to escape from the most wearisome evening she had ever spent.

Lord Levondale accompanies them to the hall and puts Cecilia's cloak round her; then he turns to Ida, but she shrinks back.

"Thanks; but Bobby is the only one who can put this thing on without spoiling my hair," she says. "Good-night;" and she gives him a limp hand to shake or drop, as he may please, and turns coldly away.

CHAPTER VII

That extremely sentimentality and wicked Frenchman, Rousseau, declares that the first night a girl is kept awake thinking of a man she passes from girlhood to womanhood.

If he is right, then Ida that night stepped across the mystic brook, for she lay awake for hours thinking of Lord Levondale.

If one has been rude to a person, one is almost sure to suffer remorse for it; and Ida, as she turned from side to side, and gazed vacantly at the moonlight travelling slowly round her dainty little room, suffered enough remorse to more than satisfy the man she had ill-treated.

She tried to assure herself that he had played an unpardonable trick upon her, and that she ought to dislike him very much indeed; but

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somehow she found this same dislike very difficult.

He had been kind to her on board the boat; he had been kind and long-suffering, and patient all the evening, even when she had been at her rudest.

When she was forced to admit to herself that she did not altogether dislike him, and she tried to forget him, and she likewise failed in this.

Most persons found it difficult to forget Lord Levondale after they had spent a few hours in his company and Ida could not banish him from her thoughts, he was so unlike any man she had ever seen.

For one thing—and it is a great thing with a young girl—he was unusually handsome; but, indeed, it was not Lord Levondale's good looks that haunted her. It was the half-sad, half-weary expression of his eyes and his face when in repose, and the charm of the deep, musical voice.

The expression, the voice, seemed to say: "I have lived my life, and all things are as Dead Sea Fruit to my lips; but don't blame you for it, and I have nothing but good wishes for you. May you find life better worth living than I have done, that's all."

Ida was not a romantic girl, in the ordinary acceptance of the word. The girls at Mme. Bonnet's had cured her of that tendency to sentimentality which the very young of both sexes inevitably—and probably very properly possess. The girls at Mme. Bonnet's fell in love with everybody—the young postman, the music-master, whose teeth were false as dice; the oaths, and even the dancing-master, and absurd man, round as a tub, and already in possession of a wife and nine children.

When the school went for a walk, they cast glances—well, under their lashes—at most of the young men that passed, and invented altogether fabulous and impossible sentimental histories for them. In a word they were like the generality of school-girls, neither better nor worse. But Ida had been an exception—a sacred word to her, and she tion. Even then the word "love" only laughed at the make-believe, and scorned the base imitation.

She had never seen a man half so handsome, or so good, in her opinion, as her father—had never seen a man on whom she could bestow a second thought until—until this tall man with the sad, weary eyes had come up to her on the boat and said, as if he were compelled to say it, "Have you had your breakfast? Shall I get you some?"

Since that moment, he had been, though she would not have admitted it, not very far from her mind.

She was not in "love" as yet. Love! What did she know of it—she, a school-girl, still in her teens, with as little knowledge of the world and the sons of men as a convent nun? She was not in love, but—she lay awake and thought of Lord Levondale, recalled his face and words, and went over the story of Zuleika as he had told it. She had said that he had boasted, but she had not spoken her mind. He had told the story quietly, modestly enough! And how cool-

ly he had admitted that he had shot the man!

She turned her pale face to the pillow, and shuddered, but it was a forced shudder and there was no horror or condemnation in it.

"He is a wicked man," she said to herself; "everybody says so, and I do not like him."

But it was very strange, and worthy of note that she, and indeed everyone else who knew him, never remembered Levondale's wickedness until they had got beyond the charm of his presence.

When she had told him to his face!—under the well porch, that he was bad, he had not denied it—had not attempted to defend himself; as if it were not worth while to consider what people said. That too, had been the impression he had given her this evening. It was as if he had said. Let them call me good or

bad. What does it matter?" and yet with all his indifference, he had borne with her and been kind to her and a patient with her airs and temper.

She turned restlessly and sighed. "I wish he had not come. I wish he would go away! However he is not likely to say much to me for the future, that is one comfort."

But she sighed still more heavily and restlessly, as if the comfort contained in the reflection were not of a very solid kind.

She was late for breakfast next morning and the vicar noticed that she was pale and that the wonderful eyes he was never tired of secretly admiring were heavy and dreamy.

"You look pale this morning, my dear," he said. "Are you tired?"

"I've always said that little girls

(continued on page eight)



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