

UNDER THE SYCAMORE.

BY STELLA OF LACKAWANNA.

He will not waken:
The gale has shaken
The leaves from the stalk of the white rose-tree:
And sharp and shrill
Rings the wood bird's trill:
Yet he will not waken and speak to me.

To all my pleading
He lies unheeding.
Who never was deaf to my call before:
I listen and wait
Till the hour grows late!
No: only a sigh in the sycamore.

I call him—call him:
O clouds that wall him
From my warm arms, will ye tell him so?
The grass is wet
With my tears—and yet
He will not answer: he cannot know.

To all my pleading
He lies unheeding.
Who never was deaf to my call before:
He will not awake,
And my heart must break
Under the pitying sycamore.

MY LORD BELVIDERE.

I.

Phœbus Adolphus Bellasis, the sixth Earl of Belvidere, occupied chambers in the Albany, Piccadilly. Considered from the point of view of the peerage, my Lord Belvidere was but a poor man; contemplated from the lower level occupied by the commonalty he was very comfortably, even luxuriously provided for. The house of Bellasis claimed to be of most ancient descent: its titles were not acquired, however, until early in the eighteenth century, when for sundry services rendered to the State, a certain Hyperion Bellasis, goldsmith and jeweller, who was said to have made a fortune by trading largely in Irish diamonds was created Baron Bellasis, Viscount Bellamont, and Earl of Belvidere, all in the peerage of Ireland. The large fortune possessed by the first Earl had suffered much in the hands of his less prudent and thrifty successors, and of late years the family estates in the province of Connaught had not proved specially productive. But during the long minority of the sixth Earl his property had been heedfully nursed for him; he was the owner of valuable lands in Huntingdonshire, and of a town house in Pall-mall, now usually the occupation of his lordship's grandmother, the Dowager Countess of Bellamont. His lordship's mother had been dead some years. For some time before her demise, the delicate state of her health had compelled her ladyship to seek a southern climate; she had remained abroad, visiting England only at long intervals. She died at Rome, and was interred in the Protestant cemetery there, beneath the shadow of the well-known pyramid of Caius Cestius.

Lord Belvidere was of low stature and spare figure; his complexion was colorless, his features insignificant. There was little light in his large short-sighted, pale blue eyes; his hair was of a sandy flaxen hue, and a feeble mustache straggled about his upper lip. Yet a certain air of refinement attended him; he was graceful of bearing and movement; he was always tastefully and carefully dressed, and it was held that he wore invariably the look of one of gentle birth and breeding. He was a young nobleman of dilettante inclinations; he was wont to dabble in literature, in poetry and the fine arts, but not venturing very far or deeply into those troubled waters—not much above his ankle, so to speak. Indeed, it cannot be said that he had in any respect greatly distinguished himself. He had quitted Oxford without taking a degree; he had travelled and could make commonplace observations in various foreign tongues; he had written one or two very tolerable articles in a high-class magazine of small circulation. In politics he had not found that he could take any interest; he was wont to profess himself a liberal, for that seemed the best course a man could pursue whose opinions were inchoate, indistinct, unsettled, incoherent; but he was not a representative peer, and he had never courted an English constituency. Altogether he was accounted as a very worthy young nobleman; he had many friends, and, generally, he was much liked; but he was by no means viewed as one of the shining lights of the peerage; no one ventured to reckon him among the "coming men" of the time. However, there are so many so-called "coming men" who never come to much, if they come to anything or come at all.

II.

Lord Belvidere had returned to his chambers from a calm amble in the low on one of the safest of hacks.

"Any one called?" his lordship asked of his faithful servant Curtis.

"Yes, a party had called," Curtis replied, with some hesitation of manner.

"When you say a party, Curtis, am I to understand you to mean a lady or a gentleman?"

"The party was a female, my lord," explained Curtis.

"She left her name?"

"Name of Nibloe, my lord. Susannah Nibloe, she said your lordship would be sure to remember the name, and your lordship would be sure to see her, and she would call upon your lordship again."

"Name of Nibloe, Susannah Nibloe," Lord Belvidere repeated, musingly. "Now when and where did I ever hear of the name of Nibloe, Susannah Nibloe? Has she ever called here before, Curtis?"

"Never to my knowledge, my lord."

"I seem to know the name. Some old servant, probably."

"She's elderly, my lord, but not so very old; about fifty, perhaps; and stout in proportion," observed Curtis. "Highly respectable looking, if I may so, my lord. Might be a housekeeper, my lord, or even a monthly nurse."

"Thank you, Curtis. I think I understand the sort of person. Well, if she calls again and I happen to be at home, of course I will see her. Nibloe, Nibloe, Susannah Nibloe—now, when and where did I ever hear the name of Nibloe?" The subject haunted and perplexed his lordship for the remainder of the day.

III.

It was evening; a shaded lamp shed a softened mellow light upon the scene.

Lord Belvidere was sitting in his comfortable, well carpeted, warmly curtained study; a cup of coffee stood upon a little table beside him; he was smoking a cigarette, the while with an ivory paper-knife of a large and ornamental sort—it had almost the aspect of a harlequin's wand—he cut the leaves of a new magazine in which an article written by himself was printed. He was looking forward to some few hours of cosiness, warmth, quiet, and literary entertainment, when Curtis announced the return of Mrs. Nibloe.

"I must see her, of course," said his lordship with a sigh, as he closed the magazine; he had been much interested in his contribution to that work. "Show Mrs. Nibloe in."

There entered a lady whose face for the moment seemed to be all smiles as her figure appeared to be all courtesies and obeisances. She was of florid complexion; her hair was auburn, but perhaps by a lawyer would be described as rather her own by purchase than by descent, her coiffure was of the variegated, radiant and flamboyant order. In other respects she justified Curtis's account of her; she was fifty perhaps, and she was stout of form; she might have been a housekeeper, or even a monthly nurse. She owned a bright and rolling eye, much vivacity of expression, and a voice of fruity quality, somewhat husky in certain of its tones.

"Your lordship has quite forgotten me, I fear," she said interrogatively.

"Pray be seated, Mrs. Nibloe," he replied with evasive politeness. "I recollect the name; at least I think I may say that I have some recollection of the name of Nibloe."

"Perhaps the name of Moss may be more familiar to your lordship?"

"Possibly," said Lord Belvidere, with a vague glance at his visitor.

"My first was Moss," explained the lady; "at least it would have been first if things had happened as they ought to have happened. I was always known as Mrs. Moss until I married Nibloe. I call Nibloe my second."

"And Mr. Nibloe survives?" his lordship inquired. Not that he was in the least interested concerning the existence of Mr. Nibloe, but he felt that it behoved him to say something.

"Deary me, no," answered the lady. "I'm a widder again. Nibloe couldn't abide married life. He was in the seafaring way of business. He married me for my money. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. We did not live very happily together. So in a fit of temper—he had always a nasty temper had Nibloe—he ran away from me, went to sea again, and was drowned. That was the last of Nibloe."

"Poor Nibloe!" murmured Lord Belvidere sympathetically. But, upon the whole, he was not disposed to marvel at the running away of his visitor's husband.

"And now may I ask," said his lordship after a pause, "to what I am indebted for the honor of Mrs. Nibloe's visit?"

"I was anxious to see you lordship once again."

"That anxiety is, I am sure most gratifying and flattering to me. And—was that all, Mrs. Nibloe?"

"Ah!" she cried, with some abruptness of manner, "I see that your lordship has clean forgotten me! Why, I was your lordship's first nurse. I've rocked your lordship to sleep in these arms many and many's the time. Why, when your lordship was but a blessed infant, your lordship was never so happy as when in your Mossy's arms. For Mossy was what your lordship always called your faithful nurse in them happy times. Mossy was almost the first word as your lordship ever spoke."

"Did I take the liberty of calling you Mossy?" Lord Belvidere inquired vaguely.

"I fear that your lordship has forgotten all about me."

"Let me say that I only dimly remember you, Mrs. Moss—Mrs. Nibloe I should call you. Many years have, of course, elapsed since the time you have referred to. I hope I am not ungrateful for any kindnesses I have received in the past from you, or indeed from any other person."

"Your lordship has very good reason to be grateful to me if you knew all."

"If I knew all? Is there anything, then, I do not know and should know?"

"A many things," Mrs. Nibloe replied frankly. "But it's dry work talking," she added.

"Pardon me, I should offer you some refreshment. You have been walking far perhaps, and

are fatigued doubtless. You will take some tea or a cup of coffee?" his lordship rang the bell.

"Coffee? It would keep me awake all night. I dare not touch it. No if it's anything it must be just the merest thought in life of gin, hot and sweet. I'm subject to a stitch in the side which takes me at odd times, and that's the only thing I ever found to do me any good."

His lordship in grave tones gave the requisite orders to Curtis, who opened wide his eyes.

"I suppose we have gin in the house," said Lord Belvidere doubtfully, "if not you will get some."

"And let the water be as hot as hot," interposed Mrs. Nibloe, addressing herself to Curtis, "there's a dear good young man."

The refreshment, brought and consumed, had a stirring and unlocking effect upon Mrs. Nibloe. It was as though her words were set loose; they came flocking forth like escaped prisoners or released schoolboys, and a way to her heart seemed opened. Her sentiments and emotions were, so to say, proclaimed public property.

"My own boy!" she exclaimed, gazing fondly at his lordship, who somewhat winced the while; yet he felt that the affection of an old servant must be considerably viewed—was in itself a thoroughly respectable and worthy thing. "For you really are my own boy," Mrs. Nibloe cried, "if the truth was told and every one had their rights."

"I really don't understand you, Mrs. Nibloe."

"Will you kiss me?" she demanded.

"Well, really," his lordship hesitated, "if you insist upon it—it is absolutely necessary."

"You are my own, own child, Harry Moss, that's what you are, God bless you!" and as she spoke she fell, or rather she threw herself, upon his lordship, circled his neck with her arms and burst into tears.

After this manifestation of emotion she became garrulous, and at great length, employing many words and permitting herself various digressions and irrelevancies, she told a very strange story. His lordship listened with amazement, with alarm, almost with horror. He tried hard to believe her, but he found himself gradually driven from the position of incredulity he had taken up in the first instance and had endeavored to occupy and maintain.

Her story was to this effect: He was not the real Lord Belvidere; his name was Harry Moss; he was her own child, whom she, employed as nurse in the Bellasis family, had substituted for the infant heir to the peerage. She had, as she stated, stolen the aristocratic infant from its cradle, and placed there in its stead her plebeian and illegitimate offspring.

Where, then, was the rightful heir, the real Lord Belvidere?

Wholly ignorant of his origin, of the rank he was entitled to, he bore the name of Harry Moss, and he gained a very humble and precarious, indeed rather what may be called a deadly livelihood, by toiling as a "writer" at a law stationer's in Currier street, Chancery lane.

When, after some hours, Mrs. Nibloe withdrew from the Albany, her speech was a little hazy, her gait uncertain, and her wonted brightness of eye was certainly veiled. She had concluded her story and the decanter of Geneva which Curtis had produced was very nearly empty. A strong odor of spirits was over all the room.

She left Lord Belvidere—for it will be convenient still to describe him—a shattered creature. His nerves were all unstrung, his cheeks were blanched, his voice was a mere whisper, his heart throbbed painfully. Altogether he was most miserable. He staggered to a sofa and threw himself full length upon it, covering his face with his hands.

It seemed to him impossible to doubt the truth of Mrs. Nibloe's statement—it was set forth with such convincing circumstantiality. He could not persuade himself for a moment that the woman was capable of inventing so very remarkable a narrative.

His lordship passed a wretched night.

IV.

What was to be done? Lord Belvidere was quite clear upon one point: He must consult his solicitor. The next morning found his lordship closeted with Mr. Foksett, of Furnival's Inn, who had during many years acted as the confidential legal adviser of the Bellasis family. Foksett was a thick-set gentleman, with a rich, deep, strong voice, very white hair standing erect, keen brown eyes, a red face, and rude, gnarled features. His manner was pleasantly frank and hearty, if a little abrupt.

To Mr. Foksett Lord Belvidere repeated fully and at length Mrs. Nibloe's extraordinary story.

"The woman's mad," said Mr. Foksett, simply; "mad, without a doubt. There are so many mad-women in the world. In point of fact, every other woman you meet is more or less mad. And they're fond of going about telling stories of this sort. A woman no sooner becomes a mother than she thinks something strange has happened to her child; that it has been changed; at nurse for somebody else's, or some nonsense of that sort. Your Mrs. Nibloe wanted a good shaking, my lord. There's a wonderful lot of women going about who want a good shaking. She's mad, depend upon it." Mr. Foksett was a bachelor.

Lord Belvidere shook his head. He was not to be persuaded that Mrs. Nibloe was mad.

"Then she was drunk," said Mr. Foksett decisively.

His Lordship was unable to accept this explanation of the case.

Something must be done, he said. Inquiry must be made. Mrs. Nibloe's story must be sifted. That it was true, in part at any rate, he could not doubt. The woman had certainly been in the service of his mother. He had some recollection of her himself, but he was not, he admitted, very clear upon the subject. And then this young man, known as Harry Moss—whom she declared to be the real Lord Belvidere—must be looked for and discovered.

"I don't know that it is our business to look for him," observed Mr. Foksett. "No doubt he'll be forthcoming fast enough. As a rule claimants are not much troubled with modesty or fond of keeping in the background. If there's anything in the case at all—which I very much question—your Lordship may rely upon meeting with this Mr. Harry Moss before long."

"If Mrs. Nibloe's story is true, of course the young man is very much to be pitied—is deserving of every consideration at our hands. He has all these years been kept out of the title and property that are rightfully his. Probably he has suffered much; he has been doomed to a life of indigence and privation, it may be. I have the sincerest compassion for him."

"But, of course, a title and property such as your Lordship enjoys are not abandoned without a struggle. We must meet this claimant, if he is to be reckoned a claimant, as other claimants are to be met—in a court of justice—and he must be dealt with according to law. We shall carry the case from court to court until we obtain a final decision upon it. A surrender without a fight is always a mistake, as I judge, and is not to be thought of for a moment in this matter."

"I would do nothing Quixotic," said Lord Belvidere, "at the same time I will do nothing unjust. Directly I find that I am standing in this young man's shoes I step out of them. Let him show that he is really Lord Belvidere and I change places with him. I will even consent to call myself Henry Moss, though God knows it will be hard."

"Just so," acquiesced Mr. Foksett, with a suspicious glance at his client.

"And then there is Lady Gwendoline to be thought of," said his Lordship.

Mr. Foksett was silent. He knew, as indeed every one knew—for the fact had been announced in the newspapers—that a matrimonial alliance was on the tapis—that was how it was stated—between his Lordship and Lady Gwendoline, the daughter of the Marquis of Mountacute.

"If Mrs. Nibloe's story is true, what am I to say to Lady Gwendoline?"

"I think, my Lord," suggested Mr. Foksett, "that quite the first thing to do is to discover whether this old woman's story is true or not."

With an understanding that diligent inquiry into the matter should be commenced forthwith the solicitor took leave of his noble client.

V.

When Lord Belvidere next met his legal adviser it was observable that Mr. Foksett's brow was somewhat clouded.

"It is curious," he observed; "there are circumstances in this case I find it hard to account for. At the same time, I venture to say that there is very little this claimant could possibly carry into court with him."

"You have seen Mrs. Nibloe?" asked his Lordship.

"I have heard Mrs. Nibloe repeat the story she told your Lordship."

"You have found Harry Moss?"

"I have found the young man known as Harry Moss. Oddly enough, he works for a law stationer whom I often employ. I can lay my hand upon Harry Moss at any moment."

"He is a nice, worthy, respectable sort of young man?" his Lordship asked, in a hesitating way.

"That is hardly how I should describe him," said Mr. Foksett.

"I mean, of course, taking into account the peculiar circumstances of his position."

"I mean that, too," said the lawyer. "No, he's not exactly what I should call a nice young man, but he writes an excellent hand, and he earns five-and-twenty shillings a week—when he is sober."

"He is not always sober?" inquired Lord Belvidere.

"He is often drunk," said Mr. Foksett.

The lawyer then set forth some further particulars of the case, the result of his investigation.

His Lordship was born at Folkestone. The late Countess of Belvidere had been taken suddenly ill there; she had just crossed the Channel and was on her way to London. The nearest medical man was sent for. Her child was born prematurely, and for some time its life was despaired of, while the Countess herself lay in a very precarious state. Mrs. Nibloe, then calling herself Mrs. Moss, but believed to be unmarried, had been engaged as nurse to the child. She had reported at the time that her own child, to whom she had lately given birth, was dead. She now confessed that her statement in that respect was false.

"In fact," commented Mr. Foksett, "the woman's a tremendous liar, there's no doubt about it, and everything she says must be received with extreme caution. She would be shattered all to pieces in the witness box. Her evidence without corroboration would be of no sort of value."