

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XXII.—CONTINUED.

But how to get up that dreadful staircase again, where the cold outstretched hands of statues greet one with a chilly touch as one goes by? Nevertheless she will brave it; she—

Hark! What is that? A step, surely! Stealthy—slow—but unmistakable!

Warily—with a faint sound that would be inaudible to any but a cruelly strained attention—it seems to draw nearer—nearer still!

Is it a friend or foe? What friend would come thus stealing in the dead of night? Is there fresh treachery afoot?

At this supreme instant Lady Clontarf forgets her terrors of a moment since, and with strung nerves and head erect, listens with all her might. What though she be in truth alone in this dark room, with no help near, and a desperate foe within a few feet of her? Still she will wait, and discover, if possible, his plans, and do her utmost to confound them.

Ever nearer comes that creeping footstep to that silvery path of moonlight lying athwart the room. Then a tall dark figure enters it, crosses it, and is gone again, but not before her eager eyes have seen and marked it. The footman's face, pallid and full of wild and evil determination, flashed upon her in that one fateful instant.

And not upon her alone! Clontarf and Dicky Browne, standing concealed in a dark corner, see him too; in fact, the wretched man's coat actually brushes against them as he gropes his way hurriedly but noiselessly toward the window already mentioned as giving easy access to the ground outside.

Already his hand is on the bar that secures the window. He has drawn it back; the evidence of his guilt is complete, when an irrepressible exclamation from Dicky Browne tells him he is discovered. Quick as lightning he springs backward, and, turning, muffled with the eager instinct of the hunted animal, for the unused door, where Doris is still standing, quivering but undaunted. She too had sprung forward just as Dicky's voice fell upon her ear—oh, how welcome was that voice!—and then had stopped short, thankful to find she need be only a simple spectator of whatever events may follow.

As he rushes wildly in her direction the man stumbles over a chair and comes heavily to the ground, but is up again in an instant.

"Stand! or I shall fire," says Clontarf's voice, stern and clear. As he speaks, Dicky flings open the now unbarred shutter, and a flood of moonlight rushing in, illumines the scene.

Hearing the voice, Connor turns as if at bay, and thrusts his hand into his bosom. There is a ferocious gleam in his eyes. He glances hurriedly from Clontarf to Dicky, and then back again. After that he never once removes his eyes from Clontarf.

In him he sees the man who, only a few hours ago, had pointed him out to Brian as an object of suspicion, who had made him a mark for the eyes of all the crowd of idle gazers in the hall. He sees, too, the determination in Clontarf's face, and knows by it how small is his chance of effecting an escape in any way. Involuntarily his fingers tighten upon the murderous weapon in his breast, and, as their eyes meet, he glances defiantly back at Donat.

Doris, watching him with distended gaze from her secret place in the doorway—to which the moonbeams cannot penetrate, and where her presence is unsuspected by the three men—tells herself with a sinking heart that he is bent on having her husband's blood. His face is eager as a maniac's, and without hope.

How long a time it takes to tell all this!—how short is the doing of it! Barely one minute in reality elapses between that warning call from Clontarf and the moment when the traitor, drawing his hand from his breast, levels the revolver he had there concealed at Clontarf.

"Ay, fire away, and be d— to ye!" he shouts he, with a yell of defiance, discharging the revolver straight at his opponent.

But not before a something miraculous—as it seems to Dicky and Clontarf—has happened. Not before a slight figure clad in white has rushed forward and flung herself upon the would-be assassin's arm. There is a slight struggle, and, when the bullet does find its home, it is not in Clontarf's breast,

but in the wall some inches to its right, passing so close by Doris that her husband and Dicky for a moment turn sick and cold; but she, though pale and trembling, now that it is all at an end, is still erect and self-possessed.

It takes but a little time after this to bear the desperate man to the ground and overpower him. Securely made prisoner, he is still raving and cursing when The Desmond and some of the others, having heard the report of the fire-arm, hurry to the spot.

There is very little talk after this, but a good deal of action, as it takes a considerable amount of trouble, and several men, to carry the kicking, furious victim of a few vile demagogues to a room up stairs, where he is locked in, and left to his own devices until morning shall dawn.

Lady Clontarf, having answered a few terrified and admiring questions from Monica and Kit (who had broken all oaths and left their apartments at the sound of the shot fired), had escaped to her room, and the others, having again secured the library, disperse themselves to such "watch-towers" as have been assigned them for the night. "Out with all lights again, except those in the back rooms," says The Desmond—a few candles having been produced during the late disturbance.

"I'll put mine out in one moment," says Clontarf, rushing past him. "I only want—"

He is out of hearing before The Desmond can catch the remainder of his speech, and is hurrying along the corridor upstairs to Brian's dressing-room to fetch some cartridges. The corridor is in darkness, but for the candle he himself is holding, which gives little or no light, so fast he is going. Consequently, not being able to see him, he runs presently very nearly into the arms of Doris.

"Oh! is it you?" he says, holding the candle aloft and peering down into her face. "You seem to be everywhere, like a guardian angel. You slipped away from us so suddenly after that fellow was secured that I had not time to thank you for what you did for me. Let me thank you now"—very seriously—"for having saved my life."

As he says this, he places the candle on a table a little way from them, so that the gloom that all along has surrounded her is now intensified.

"You must not make too much of it," she says, in a low tone.

"How can I make enough of it? Do you know that that brute might have killed you? He"—with a shudder—"was very near it, too."

"I did not think of that, fortunately, at the moment, or perhaps"—with a rather languid smile—"I should have left you to your fate and beat an ignominious retreat."

"There is another thing," he says, hurriedly, a shade crossing his face. "We, Dicky and I, heard you coming, and we made sure you were Connor. When you paused in the doorway, I concluded you were afraid to come on, and—I had raised my revolver to fire at you, when the real step arrested me. Good heavens!" exclaims he, turning deadly white, "what induced you to come down at such a time, and without giving us warning? When I think of what might have happened, I—"

"Well, nothing has happened," says Doris, but her voice sounds more and more languid.

"It was a very near thing, though, in both cases; and as for that villain—why, his bullet must have all but grazed you."

"All but!" it is with difficulty she repeats these words after him. How strange the candle looks over there, so far—far—is it far away? and how many candles are there? who was it came up the corridor a moment since with one? and where is he now? who was it?

"You are ill, faint," says Clontarf, in a terrified tone, catching her as she sways heavily forward. As he does so, he necessarily presses against her left arm, and a cry, low but suggestive of extreme pain, breaks from her lips; consciousness returning to her with the sharp pang his touch has caused her, she instinctively tries to push him from her.

"Not that. Do not touch this arm," she says, faintly.

Overcome by a horrible fear, he throws

back the heavy black lace scarf that is covering her arm in part, and—

What is this that is soiling the purity of her white gown? The sleeve of her dress has been rudely torn away, and on the hanging fragments of cashmere, and trickling down the fair soft flesh is—blood.

"You are hurt!—wounded!" cries he, in a dreadful voice. "He has killed you, and for me—me! Doris, speak to me!"

"It is nothing—nothing!" gasps she, faintly; and then she sways again, and, with a vague confiding gesture full of pathos, puts out her hands to him and falls insensible upon his breast.

Frantic with terror, he raises the slender figure in his arms and rushes with her to Mrs. Desmond's room.

Fortunately, Monica is not devoid of wit and nerve; fortunately, too, Kit (who has just returned from a clandestine meeting with Brabazon on the stairs) is a person equal to any emergency, or Donat's distraught visage would have frightened them into it, or at least utter incompetency.

As it is, in less time than I can write it (though I drove my quill with railroad speed), they restore Doris to consciousness, and convince Donat that the wound, though "nasty," is not dangerous.

Evidently Connor's bullet had struck her, and torn away a little of the skin, but not enough to make a scar or spoil the beauty of that perfect arm forever. "Time will surely heal it and that soon." "He need not be uneasy, indeed," etc., etc. And when presently Doris herself is so far recovered as to sit up and submit to the bathing of it, and has expressed a wish that he will go back to his post and make a point of forgetting all about her, he is gently pushed from the room by Kit, and told not to come back again upon any pretext whatsoever, unless with news of the extinction of the foe.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Lo! who may trust to Fortune any throw
For him that followeth all this world of prey,
Ere he be ware, is often laid full low."

"By such a way as he would least suppose."

"Time is up," says Brian, striking a match to look at his watch.

"More than up," says Mr. Browne, calmly. "I shouldn't wonder if they sold us in the long run. There is no depending on such rascals." He is evidently struggling with a heavy sense of injury.

"Yes, quite half-past two," says Brian, shutting up his watch with an angry snap. "Can they be waiting for some private signal from that fellow Connor?"

"I always told you I believed it to be a cock-and-bull story from start to finish," says The Desmond, irritably, who had never told them anything of the sort.

"Hush! what's that?" says Brabazon, pointing to a bushy laurustinus that stands by itself rather outside the shrubberies at the west end of the gravel sweep.

The four men mentioned have stationed themselves in an upper room overlooking the avenue, the shrubberies, and all the principal approaches to the front of the house; Clontarf and Gerald and Burke in the north wing are watching the entrances to and from the yard, and most of the back premises; from a third window, too, in the room they have chosen for observation, they can get a practical view of the front lawn and shrubberies.

The women, as I have said, have been commanded not to leave their rooms on pain of death, and, with Bridget, who had been publicly declared by Monica before the other servants to be indispensable to their comfort—are sitting in shivering expectation before Monica's fire, having distinctly declined to bear the suspense alone. Doris, in spite of many entreaties, cannot be persuaded even to lie down, but, with her poor arm carefully bandaged, is lounging in a huge chair, drinking tea. Indeed, they are all drinking tea. They have drawn the curtains very closely, and have allowed them selves a night-light that only serves to make them a degree more dismal, being highly suggestive of death-rattles and corpses.

It is a brilliant night; the moon above in the heavens is flinging its broad beams upon the sleeping earth, the slight but unbroken covering of snow that covers all the land rendering its "pale fire" even more "effective." On barren branch and leafy bough lies that "winter robe of purest white," and on the gravel too so warmly does it rest that one can hardly tell where the gravel ceases and the grass beyond begins. Everything on which one's eye may rest is a-glitter with

nature's chilly diamonds, and the moonlight lying over all softens and deepens into tenderest beauty each dark-green leaf, each snow-crowned glistening tower and turret.

But there are corners into which even the prying Diana cannot penetrate. A certain portion of the gravel, almost on a line with the laurustinus already mentioned, is lost in shadow thrown by a high wall, troy shaped at its summit, that comes out from the southern side of the house and is supposed to be the most ancient part of it—a part that had once been a monastery, or a chapel, or something.

"I don't see anything," says Brian, following the direction of Brabazon's intent gaze.

"Wait!" Even as he speaks, a long dark shadow falls across the moonlit snow on the gravel, then moves toward the darkened space near the wall, and is lost.

They are now spell bound, and silent with expectation. Presently a second shadow seems to approach them, and then a man's figure steps stealthily from behind the laurustinus and follows the first into the protective dusk of the old ivied wall. He is followed by another and yet another, until a large number of men are assembled, who, all keeping carefully out of the betraying moonlight, seem to whisper among themselves, and, hesitate, and glance impatiently at the house now and again, as if perplexed by the non appearance of something or some one. Every one of these men is holding in one hand a huge log of blackened wood.

"O Connor, 'where art thou?' 'Why tarry the wheels of thy chariot?' exclaims Mr. Browne, with sympathetic appreciation of their perplexity, betraying at the same time a dangerous desire to execute a waltz-dance.

"I'll speak to them," says Brian, suddenly going forward and throwing up the window.

"What do you want here, you fellows?" he asks, in a loud authoritative voice.

His sudden appearance, being totally unexpected, causes a dead silence to fall upon the body of men. They do not answer immediately, but commence a parley among themselves of a very animated description, judging by the impassioned movements of their hands and arms. Their gesticulations can be indistinctly seen through the gloom that encircles them. Then one of their number, stepping forward, but still keeping carefully out of the moonlight, glances up defiantly at the window.

"You!" he answers, in a tone of open insolence.

"Well, you see me. What can I do for you?" says Brian, calmly.

"Nothing! 'tis we're goin' to do for you to-night," replies the same voice, jeeringly—which coarsely produces a loud laugh of commendation from his fellows.

"As for that, we shall see," says Brian, still quite calmly.

"Stand a little more to this side, Desmond; you will be more out of their range," says Brabazon, quickly, drawing him as he speaks into the desired position.

"Let me speak to them," says The Desmond, who is by this time very nearly beyond control.

"Certainly not," replies his nephew, sternly. Here a fresh voice from the crowd below attracts their attention.

"Stand back, you," says the man, plainly indicating Brian, "an' show us theould man. Where's The Desmond himself? Where's the oppressor? What's he hidin' behind ye for? Tell him to step out an' let us see him, if he isn't afraid of us!"

"Afraid!" roars The Desmond, now hopelessly broken loose, making a dash past Brian, and fearlessly thrusting his body half out of the window. "Who dared to say that?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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The first fault is the child of simplicity, but every other the offspring of guilt.

When any calamity has been suffered the first thing to be remembered is how much has been escaped.