

The Victory of Defeat

The things that matter happen in the heart. Lanister was conscious of something akin to the old thrill, the old indefinable sense of completeness, as he looked across the room and saw her, and he rather despised himself for the weakness of it.

It seemed so paltry, so trivial, this revival of dead issues, this quickening of dulled pulses at the mere sight of a woman's face. And of all women's faces—hers! It was as though a warrior, who had fared through the battle's din and havoc, had come, scarred and maimed, from the cannon's mouth into the pleasant places of the world; was, nevertheless, weak enough, fool enough, to be moved by the bursting of a quill and the scent of a spoonful of powder.

And yet—How well she looked! How lightly Time had tried her! Not that three years ought to make any perceptible difference in a woman of five and twenty, but it rather hurt his sense of self love to find that the separation had told as little outwardly upon her as it had upon him. Not a change in her; not a flaw in her! It was as though Time had reversed the rolling of the scroll and brought her back to the springtime and the days of her rose white girlhood. The same sweetly smiling mouth, the same brightly flashing eyes, the same pretty, birdlike trick of the never quiet head. It would have been irritating in any other woman, that constant fluttering disquiet, but in her—Lanister hesitated for a moment, and then swung away from the throng about him and made his way across the room to where she stood. Some time he must meet her, he told himself—that was inevitable—so, why not now as well as any other?

Within a yard of where she stood, and now so near that he could have stretched forth his hand and touched her, his hostess barred the way. She was one of those amiable social idiots who label all their guests at introduction as though the glory of their attainments shed some reflected greatness on themselves.

"Mr. Lanister, permit me to detain you for a moment," she interposed. "I want to have the pleasure of introducing a relative. My nephew, Mr. Fawcley, Mr. Lanister. You must have heard of Mr. Lanister even in the West, Philip—Mr. George Lanister, who wrote 'Don Scarpia' and 'The Sands of Paeolus.' Everybody has read them and talked of them—everybody."

Lanister knew from the sudden cessation of sound that she too had heard, and the consciousness that she had turned her head and was looking at him brought another vague, indefinable thrill. He got through the introduction somehow, then lifted his eyes and let them find their way to hers.

Always, since first he heard of her success, and knew that the laurel of attained desire had come to her at last, he had known that some day, somewhere, somehow, they two must meet again—that was inevitable—and always he had wondered what form the words of greeting would take. Now that the moment had come—

"Er—How do you do?" she replied with one of her joyous laughs. "You know I always did Doady—it's a way of mine."

Doady. The old pet name fell from her lips as naturally as though it was only yesterday she used it last, and although the mention of it brought a faint gust of color to Lanister's face, no change came over the smiling loveliness of hers.

"I half fancied I should meet you— one meets everybody of importance at Mrs. Montessor's sometime, you know," she went on in a slightly lowered voice. "It is the tax that Art has to pay to Commercialism—when Commercialism is in a position to write its check for millions. After all, the call of Mammon penetrates even the Temple of the Muses, Doady, and a millionaires can lure even Melpomene, if she serves strawberries and peaches in midwinter. Yes, I rather thought I should meet you here."

"Did that influence you at all?" "Influence me?" She gave one of her sweet, rippling laughs and twitched her bare shoulder in the way Lanister remembered so well. "My dear Doady, why should it?" "Yes, that's it—why should it?" said Lanister a trifle moodily. "We each choose our own path, each cut adrift, and, as you say, why should a mere meeting again influence us? I read a great deal about you in the papers last winter. That chap who writes the 'Musical Matters' in 'The Era' spoke highly of your success in Milan and Rome; likened your voice to Patti's in her prime, and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, they were very kind to me— public and critics alike. I could have sung all this winter at La Scala if I chose. They offered me the engagement on my own terms; but I preferred to come home."

"Good gracious! you ask a woman 'Why?' And of all women—me! The fancy took me, that's all. I never indulge in self analysis. It is too much like performing a surgical operation on a butterfly. You know, looking at him archly, "I am a butterfly. You used to say so often, when—when the honeymoon began to wane."

"I said so many things then— things that I meant and—things that I didn't."

"Yes, I know. It's the way with men and husbands."

"And women and wives," he added a trifle resentfully.

"And women and wives," she admitted sweetly. "One as well as just. How droll it seems to think that we were ever that!"

"Just, do you mean?"

"No—husband and wife. We were always just, you know. It was that that made us part. Such sillies as we were!"

"To part?" a thin note of eagerness in his voice.

"Oh, mercy, no! To marry. It was the maddest of our many mad mis-

takes. Fancy two such devotees to Art—and Art with a capital A, please—as you and I, being absurd enough to think that we could live a humdrum life together and give up the roses and lilies for a bundle of dried herbs. Do you remember how I used to madden you with my practice when you wanted to write? And do you remember how you used to make me cry—sometimes with remorse and sometimes with—with other feelings—when I spent the whole day with Madam Lafarge and forgot to order anything for dinner?"

"Yes," admitted Lanister gloomily; "I'm afraid I wasn't very pleasant at those times. And they happened along very frequently. That was the worst of it. You see, it—it's impossible for Art to be everything in life."

"Especially when it isn't one's own particular branch of Art. There's so much in the question of viewpoint. Doady. No wonder we bored each other! I know you tried honestly, and I know that I did, too; but it was all a mistake—all a wretched, blundering, uncomfortable mistake, and there was only one way to right it, and that was to do as we did. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," said Lanister gloomily, looking down and toying with his watch chain. "Perhaps, if—if the baby had lived—"

She put up her hand suddenly, and all the light went out from her sparkling eyes. "Don't!" she said in a whisper. "I can't bear to talk of it even yet. One may treat Marriage as an epigram and Life as a jest; but Motherhood—Don't speak of it! There are chords which only dead hands may play upon and that even Memory shrinks from touching."

There was a moment of silence before Lanister could trust himself to look up. When he did so, she had recovered her composure. Her lips were again smiling and her eyes again bright—brighter than ever, for the light that came from them came through a glaze of undropped tears.

"Can't we go somewhere and get away from this beastly crowd?" said Lanister, wrinkling his brows and introducing his fingernails. "It seems so absurd to be talking like this in a ball room."

"Everything we have ever done has been absurd," she answered, with a laugh. "Why shouldn't we continue the practice?"

"Does that mean that you had rather remain where you are?"

"No; that I had rather do what you suggest. It seems so deliciously ridiculous for two sensibly separated persons to sit down and enjoy a quiet tete-a-tete. But—there is so much I want to hear from your own lips—"

"Is there? Do you really care—"

"About your literary success? Oh, yes!" she interjected smilingly. "After all, there is something in reflected greatness, and one can't help feeling a little pride in being the wife of a great literary genius—especially when she remembers that she contributed to that greatness, and, indeed, made it possible, by removing herself from his march to the Temple of Fame. I want to talk to you about 'The Sands of Paeolus.' It was simply superb—the novel of the year. But you must be tired of hearing that."

"I am—a little," admitted Lanister. "I've changed a bit, you see. Once upon a time—But let that pass: I want to talk of other things tonight. Can't we go somewhere and be alone together for a little while, Peggy?"

She laughed and gave her head another bird-like little twitch. "What, here?" she said gaily. "Was ever anything so absurd? Who could be alone even for one poor instant when Mrs. Montessor holds forth for the benefit of her 'dear five hundred'? Every nook and corner overflows with the ingredients of the 'rich jam.'"

"Then somewhere else?"

"Somewhere else is indefinite. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

The momentary lull was broken by the band striking up again. She glanced at her program and then out over the filled room.

"I am down on the card for 'tis with Mr. Halliday," she said, "and here he comes to claim it. Do you mind if I leave you?"

"Have I any right to a choice? But won't you go on with what you were saying? 'Somewhere else is indefinite, unless—'

"Unless you care to find out where 'Madame Peggy Lanister' lives, and to play Lochinvar—and carry her off there—to Arcadia—after this dance is done," she said, with a laugh and a faint rise of color, as she walked by him and went to meet her advancing partner. And if more was said, Lanister lost it in the gush of the music and the swish of her skirt as she went circling down the long light room with a coat sleeve around her waist and her eyes shining out over the curve of a man's shoulder.

It was after twelve o'clock, and she had danced five dances without catching any further glimpse of him, although she had looked searchingly about the crowded rooms, when she came upon him next. He was standing at the foot of the stairs in the big entrance hall with his hat in his hand and a long white opera cloak over his arm. "Doady!" she began with a little surprised laugh. "I had given you up;—"

The cloak was round her shoulders before she could finish the sentence and Lanister was pulling her hand through his arm. "Come!" he said. "I've been waiting for you for ages. I felt like rushing in and throttling that fellow you were dancing with last."

"Why didn't you? It would have expediated matters, and I think that I should have relished it a little."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense! As if I had the right—as if I hadn't forfeited that! For God's sake, Peggy! what have we two being doing with our lives?"

"What we always wanted to do with them, of course, devoting them

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to Art and crowning them with the laurel of Success."

"Success! You call it success? Isn't there something better—better and nobler than just that?"

Her only answer was a laugh. They were out in the frosty, star-pierced darkness by this time, making their way down the steps to where a puffing auto waited. Lanister lifted her lightly and placed her in it and in another moment the great dark hulk swung away from the curb and went clugging off into the quiet of the night.

"You haven't answered my last question," said Lanister, breaking the silence which had fallen between them.

"She laid a deprecating hand upon his sleeve and looked up at him with troubled eyes.

"I can't just yet," she said. "Don't ask me anything for a time; don't ask me anything here. I want to be sure."

"Of what? Of whom?" She looked away without answering, and sat for a long time with hands loosely folded in her lap. And so she was still sitting when the auto slowed down and stopped.

She looked up at the house before her and then round at Lanister, and he could see in the faint light that her face was very pale. "It is my own home—the home of—the opera singer," she said in a voice out of which all the snap and tinkle seemed to have gone. "You took me at my word, then? And after I mentioned Lochinvar! You carry me off and—bring me to my own home?"

"Because I have none of my own," he answered. "I live at a hotel. I couldn't respect you and take you there."

She flung him a laugh, wholly sweet, utterly joyous, and, rising, jumped out of the auto before he could help her. "How like a man—how very like a man!" she said, her face breaking into smiles, and the wet light in her eyes again. "Come! It is our own Arcadia again."

And how much more like Arcadia than she imagined, she realized when she ran with him to her own bower and flung open the door; for all the room was filled with flowers. White roses, white lilies—whole sheaves of them—in vases and urns and lying in drifts of creamy fragrance everywhere. And in the midst of the floral confusion stood her maid, with arms brimful of blossoms.

"Ah, madame, what shall I do with you?" she cried, perplexed and despairful, as her mistress appeared. "Figure to yourself ze extreme difficulty. They shall come, not twenty minutes since, viz ze compliment, ze commissionaire say, of one Monsieur Lanister—and zere is not room for ze half. What shall I do with you?"

"Throw them down—anywhere—and go, Felicie, go!" said her mistress, with a laugh in which the hysteria of happiness was clearly traceable. "Oh, you may listen at the door if you like

—it is all one to me, so that you go. And this is why you did not come for me at the end of that first dance?" she added, turning to Lanister as the insulted maid went out and banged the door behind her. "How nice of you—how tender of you! You remembered what I said all those miserable years ago—'A successful singer's path should be strewn with flowers, and you shall live to see that happen to me.' And you still remembered!"

"It—it was only a little thing, Peggy."

"Only a little thing!" She had thrown aside her cloak and was running her bare arms through the fragrant heap, piling the things up against her face and laughing like a happy child; then with sudden abandonment she dropped them all and, seating herself, put her elbows upon the table, made a bridge of her two hands and rested her chin upon them. "Only a little thing! As if all earth, and heaven—yes, and even hell itself—were not made up of little things! Such little things as this mean victory, mean redemption, George."

"Then, if it is so, may I ask again, Peggy. What have we two been doing with our lives? I know you said that we had made successes of them; but there's a rue leaf in every laurel crown, dear, and a rose in every defeat. Can't we go back, Peggy—back to Arcadia and the days that were?"

He came round the table and took her hand in his. "We both have tasted of the wine of the Victor, but to me the lees are bitter," he said gently. "Can't we two go back and begin our real life all over again?"

She drew her hand from his and stood off, looking at him with bright, searching eyes. "Let me look at you a moment—let me be sure," she said, a thrill of eager longing in her voice. "To go back! To go back! And you once said, 'There is never any going back in the canons of Art.'"

"But isn't there something higher than Art? Isn't there something more to be desired?"

"Yes," she answered in a sort of whisper. "Do you think I should have come back here—to America—if there had not been? No, don't speak, don't stop me—let me go on to the end. And let me look into your eyes while I say it, Art; you know how I worshiped it; you know what a slave I was to it. Well, I served my term of serfdom, and I won its glittering reward. The World came to me with a rose in its mouth and hands that dripped with gold. I climbed, as you climbed, to the very pinnacle of Success, the very apex of Victory. And then—" her voice wavered for a moment and sank into silence. She came a step nearer and laid a shaking touch on Lanister's arm.

"Then a little dead hand reached out and took the scales from my eyes, and—I was!" she went on softly. "All at once the glamour seemed to depart from everything. The scent

went out of the roses, the shine faded from the gold, and I knew at last that there was something better, stronger, nobler, and that we two had flung it from us! George," her fingers slipped softly up his arm to his shoulder and rested there earnestly.

"George, you asked me tonight what all the world was at my feet and all that I had sighed for, worked for, longed for, was mine to have and to hold forever if I wished. It was a little dead hand—a little crumpled dead hand that rested on my bosom for only one short day and yet left its impress there for all eternity."

"Ah, that's right. Hold me fast, hold me tight, and never let me stray again!" she said as she raised her face. "Dear, the cry of the Woman is sweeter than the laughter of Success! for Love is in it, and, after all, Love is immortal."

Lanister made no reply. He simply bent and laid his lips on hers and let the little dead hand pick up the raveled threads and weave them together again.

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