STRONGER THAN LIFE.

CHAPTER IV.—(CONTINUED)

It is the evening of Madame Cronhelm's concert, which is indeed more of a *conversazione* than a concert, the performers mixing among the audience when not actually required on the raised platform at the upper end of the room, where the grand piano and violins and violincello are located, and a hum of talk filling up the intervals between the songs and concerted pieces. We all enjoy it, having so many friends among both performers and audience, and though most of Madame Cronhelm's pupils take part in the choruses only, they are pleased to appear in public in any capacity—if so exclusive a reunion can be called public at all.

My "Jewel" song is among the first on the programme; and, when I have sung it, and when Herr von Konig has complimented me on what he is pleased to call the delicate grace of my vocalism, and called my voice "truly celestial," I make my way down to the Rollestons, whom I see grouped at a little distance from the blaze of light which makes a dazzling centre of the stage. But, before I can reach them, moving away slowly through the dense crowd, with my long black satin skirt in one hand and my fan in the other, Gerard Baxter appears, I know not from what coign of vantage, and offers me his arm.

"Allow me to make way for you," he says, smiling, "and allow me to congratulate you on having 'brought down the house.'"

"Oh don't you flatter me!" I laugh, shrugging my shoulders.

"Why do you emphasise the 'you'?"

"Because it seems unnatural for you to pay compliments."

"I paid you a compliment once, and you misunderstood it," he says more gravely. "Perhaps I may find some safer road to your favor than that. Have you forgiven me yet for my stupidity?"

"Long ago," I answer frankly. "Let us forget all about a piece of folly for which I am sorry, and of which I am heartily ashamed."

"I am ready to forget all you do not wish me to remember," he rejoins at once.

And then, instead of finding myself nearer to the Rollestons, I find myself sitting on a chair near a cool bank of ferns and exotics with Mr. Baxter standing behind me, listening to a girl with a magnificent contralto voice singing the "Clang of the Wooden Shoon."

I listen like one in a dream. I know that he is there, standing near me in his sombre evening raiment, and that I am happy, with a strange unaccountable sense of happiness, which I could not analyse even if I would.

"Do you like her singing?" he asks, when the song is ended.

"She has a very pure contralto. Her voice is better than her method of singing. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. I have heard people say that she is studying for the stage, that she is going to Italy to finish her musical education."

"So I have heard. I think she is quite right. Such a voice as hers was never meant to 'rust unburnished, not to shine in use.'"

"Or yours?" he questions a little wistfully. "They tell me you are studying for public exhibition too."

Who could have told him so? The idea amuses me so much that I do not immediately advise him to the contrary.

"And if I am," I say, laughing, "do you think that I am right in putting the talent which has been given me to some practical use?"

"If you have no other means of livelihood—yes."

"You do not approve of singing on the stage?"

"I do no care to think of your doing it."

"But one can do it, and yet ——"

"I hope you will never do it," he interrupts, with more passion than the occasion seems to warrant. "I hope to Heaven you will never do it!"

"But if I must do it?" I say wilfully encouraging the idea which he somehow or other seems to have taken into his head. "If my daily bread depends upon it, what am I to do?"

"Can't you teach, or something?" he says boyishly. "You could teach other girls, couldn't you?"

"But fancy teaching—fancy wearing oneself out with a troop of idle girls, as Madame Cronhelm does, when one might be bowing to a delightful audience behind the foot-lights, with one's arms full of bouquets!"

"That's just what I hate," he retorts savagely. "That is just what no girl—no cousin or sister of mine—should ever degrade herself by doing! How do you think a man—who loved you for instance—would like to see other men level their opera glasses at you, and perhaps—indeed certainly—make comments on your personal appearance?"

"If they were complimentary, I don't suppose she would mind very much."

"But he would mind. If he were her brother or her husband, he would rather see her in her coffin than subject her to such degradation."

"How delightfully selfish!" I laugh, shrugging my shoulders.

"Oh, we are all very selfish!" Mr. Baxter allows; and then, the overture to Tannhauser commencing, we find it impossible to talk any more for the present.

I amuse myself by looking for my own particular friends in the crowd. Olive is in a corner flirting with Jack Rolleston, Poppy is sitting calmly beside her *fiance*, looking as lazily handsome as ever, Katie Rolleston is looking at me. I wonder if she would like very much to change places with me, and if half at least of Olive's suspicion about her and Gerard Baxter is true? Perhaps Katie has lost her heart to this artist-friend of her brother's, though, according to Mrs Wauchope, Mr. Baxter does not care for young ladies. I am puzzling over Katie's steadfast look, and wondering how it has happened that, among all our common friends, nobody has told Gerard Baxter who I am, when *Tannhauser* comes to an end, and I rise from my seat, Blumenthal's "Bend of the River" being next on the programme.

"You practise a great deal?" Mr. Baxter observes, as he offers me his arm again.

"Yes" I answer, smiling, as I meet his splendid dark eyes. "I hope it does not annoy you."

"No; Mrs. Wauchope will tell you that I have never been so industrious as since you came to Carleton Street."

"I am glad to hear it," I venture, somewhat soberly. "If I had your talent, I should certainly not let it lie idle."

"I mean to work very hard, now," he says quickly. "Before, I did not care very much whether I made a name for myself or not. But now—I do!"

CHAPTER V.

"So he thinks I spend my time drumming on this unfortunate instrument with the ultimate object of earning my livelihood?" I laugh, sitting before the piano in Mrs Wauchope's drawing room on the morning after Madame Cronhelm's *soiree musicale*. "He thinks I am a penniless art-student like himself, bound to earn my bread by whatever talent I possess, unless I prefer to sit and starve. What a joke it is, and how Olive will enjoy it! And how aunt Rosa's stiff gray curls would bristle with horror if she knew that her niece Allie Somers Scott of Woodhay was taken for a poor young woman from the country who had come up to these cheap furnished lodgings for the purpose of studying vocal music for the stage!"

The idea is too delicious! I laugh to myself with such frantic enjoyment that, if Mary Anne had chanced to come into the room, she would have set me down either as an idiot or as some harmless kind of lunatic. I shall not tell Mr. Baxter the mistake he has made—since no one has thought of telling him before, I hope they will not tell him now. They must take it for granted that he knows who I am, and he must have thought no questions necessary, seeing for himself my mode of life. As for Mrs. Wauchope, she still labors under the delusion that the Count and the "drawing rooms" have never yet encountered each other here or any where else.

Mr. Baxter must think the Deanes and Rollestons have been very kind in taking me up; but then he knows them to be fond of art and artistic people, especially the Rollestons, and likely enough to make much of me for the sake of my voice. What fun it is to think of myself as working for my living! What fun it will be to keep up the delusion with the help of my scampish friend Olive, who loves nothing so much as a practical joke!

But my fun is put a stop to in a very summary manner. While I am sitting here at the piano, a note from Olive is put into my hand to say that Ellinor has scarlet fever, and that I am not to come near the house. All the others have had it, and are not afraid; but Mrs. Deane will not allow them to come near me—I must not expect even to see Olive at Madame Cronhelm's to-day, as her mother does not think it would be right to allow her to go there out of an infected house.

I am very sorry, not only for my own sake, but for Ellinor and all of them. I write a note to Olive, and have just made up my mind not to go out at all this morning, when Ada Rolleston comes running in with an urgent request that I would come over and spend the day in Berkley Street, which I am rather unwilling to do, but which Ada persuades me into doing in the end.

During the next five or six days I spend most of my time with the Rollestons. Ada pets me and spoils me very much, in the fashion of Olive Deane who has "fagged" for me since we were children together. The house in Berkley Street is a very pleasant one—there are always visitors coming and going—clever people, poets, painters, artists, and literary men and women. We are never at a loss for amusement, between the preparations for the fancy-ball, Jack's amateur studio, and the great music-room where their musical friends would willingly play symphonies and fantasies all day long, if they could find any one to listen to them.

I meet Mr. Baxter there very often—in fact, I may say every day. I do not think he can be working very hard—unless he paints by lamplight—he is always with Jack Rolleston, smoking in his studio or chatting to us in the drawing-room. He even stays to dinner sometimes—I know it because they insisted upon my dining there once or twice, and, when I dine there, he dines there too. They laugh at me about him—of course, girls laugh at each other for very little—and call him my handsome sweetheart. But I do not flirt with him, though he manages somehow to be always in my neighborhood, and I cannot help knowing that he is almost always looking at me.

I am going home on the second of April, to come up to town again for Poppy's wedding, unless it is postponed on account of Ellinor's illness. Olive who writes to me almost every day, says they are thinking of going to Brighton as soon as Ellinor is strong enough to travel, and I should not be surprised if Poppy's wedding took place from there.

The prospect of seeing Woodhay so soon does not fill me with unmixed delight. Something has thrown a glamour over Mrs. Wauchope's shabby furnished lodgings, which my own beautiful Manor has never known—"a light that never was on land or sea" illumines these dusty rooms, a "glory and a freshness and a dream," in which I walk like one who "on a mountain takes the dawn." I am so happy, and yet I cannot say what has made me happy.

One day the Rollestons take me to see the studio of an artist of whose pictures I have heard—a man who very often comes to Berkley Street, and who, gaunt and gray and dishevelled as he is, is one of the "lions" of the day. As we go up the stairs leading to the studio, we meet a girl coming down—a young girl, poorly dressed, but with a face of such extraordinary beauty that it absolutely dazzles me. I had never dreamed that a human face could be so lovely, and Mrs. Rolleston, who has also been struck by it, makes the same remark to the great painter himself.

"Oh that," he says, laying down his palette and brushes, "is a poor child who sits to me as a model—her name is White! Her mother is a wretched woman, always begging—sometimes drunk. Here is her picture—yes it is a lovely face."

He has turned a canvas which has been standing with its face to the wall, and we are looking again at the girl we met on the stairs. There are the pure Greek outlines which Phidias might have worshipped—the tangled red-gold hair tossed back from the white forehead, glittering like a halo round the angelic head, the dark blue velvety eyes, the exquisite smiling lips. The great artist had painted her in rags, selling violets—she is holding out a bunch in one small slender hand, as she leans against the pillar of some great portico, looking out of the canvas with those innocent wistful eyes. I stand before the picture for a long time; studying that girl's face. I envy her, though she is in rags and I am wearing a dress of steel-gray velvet with a bonnet of the same, whose cost I scarcely care to remember. How happy she ought to be with a face like that? What matter about cold and hunger and rags, if one could smile on the beholder with those ethereal eyes, with those exquisite childish lips! So I think, looking down at the lifeless canvas. And as I look a shiver runs through my veins, as though a door had opened somewhere, letting in a breath of some cold outer air. It is a curious sensation—I have heard of people feeling the like when some one walked over their grave that was to be. Yet why should this girl's face make me shiver? It is as beautiful as the face of an angel, and as innocent—it is not very likely that it should ever do me any harm!

. . . . . .

This evening the Rollestons insist upon sending their carriage to take me back to Berkley Street to dinner. I should have spent a lonely evening if I had not gone, and yet I go rather unwillingly, having had a pile of letters from Woodhay and Yattenden in the morning, which I have not yet had time to read. But the temptation to spend the evening in that pleasant house is too strong to resist—against my better judgment I allow myself to be persuaded, and seven o'clock finds me in the drawing-room at Berkley Street; and, as usual, I find Mr. Baxter there before me.

"I don't think you are working very hard," I say to him in the course of the evening.

"I think we have both been rather idle lately," he retorts, with his boyish smile.

"I have been here every day—I have no time to practise."

"And I have been here every day—I have no time to paint."

"But how are you to make this great name for yourself if you do not work?"

"And you?" he suggests, laughing.

"Oh, I am not in any great hurry to make a name for myself!"

"I am glad to hear it. I hope you will never make a name for yourself at all."

"Thank you!"

"I mean that I hope you will never make that voice of yours public property."

"What then is to become of me?" I ask, with laudable gravity.

"Let some man work for you," he says hurriedly, his boyish face flushing like a girl's. "Give some man the chance of making a name for himself—for your sake!"

I shake my head gravely, looking out into the twilight. We are standing at an open window at the upper end of a long music-room. All the rest of the party are clustered round the piano at the lower end, where some music mad friend of Crauford's is playing Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. These are all in a warm glow of candle-light from the lights on the piano, but we, standing at this distant window, are illumined only by the low glimmer from a faint clear apple-green sky against which the houses stand up picturesquely dark and indistinct, and in which, just above the shadowy chimney-tops, burns one great red lovely star.

"Miss Scott, do you think the man you marry will ever allow you to sing on the stage?"

His voice startles me, low and quiet as the words are spoken. I look up at the tall dark figure, indistinct in the twilight; and suddenly this boy, with his beautiful eyes, his desperate poverty, his passionate pride, seems to take me by the hand and lead me into some "fairy-land forlorn" of which I have never dreamed in all my life before.

"I do not think about it," I answer with truth.

"Miss Scott will you marry me?"

The question takes me so entirely by surprise that it conveys no meaning to my mind.

"Allie, will you marry me, and give me the right to work for you?"

I look up into the eager dark eyes of the lad who is so eager to work for me, the lad who cannot or will not work for himself.

"You with a wife!" I exclaim, with a cruel smile. "It seems to me to be as much as you can compass——"

"To live myself. You are very bitter; I think you take a pleasure in hurting me—I think you always did!"

"Forgive me," I say, holding out my hand; it looks very white and slim in the half light, as I am sure I look myself in my faint white clinging gown. "It was kind of you to wish to help me in the only way you could ——"

"Kind!" he interrupts passionately, taking the hand I have offered to him and daring to press his warm young lips against it. "I am kind to you, Allie, if you call it kind to love you with all the strength of my heart and soul!"

"But you have only known me for so short a time," I say, drawing my hand away coldly. "You can know nothing about me."

"I know that I love you—I know that I have loved you since the very first evening I met you here. I believe I fell in love with your voice before I ever saw you, though Mrs. Wauchope thought she nipped any danger of that kind so cleverly in the bud;" and he laughs a little—the old boyish laugh.

I think of the violets and am silent, looking at that great solitary star, at the houses standing up black against the gold-green sky. The quaint fantastic music of the Symphonie fills the room, the group about the piano listen to it eagerly, with the light full on their preoccupied faces; only we two are alone together in the twilight window, two tall shadows against the faint clear sadness of the sky.

"We should be poor, Allie; but, if we cared for each other, that would not matter. And I would work so hard for you—I would work day and night to become famous for your sake—nothing would be too hard for me with such a hope as that."

He looks as if he could "pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved," as he stands there, so young and strong and full of life and hope.

"But what fools people would think us!" I say, smiling, and wondering what he will say when he hears the truth about me.

"Should we care for that?" he exclaims, with scornful dark eyes. "If we were happy, we should care very little what other people said. We are both poor, and, if we choose to be poor together, it is nobody's business but our own."

Perhaps my silence says "what I would never swear," for he comes nearer to me, bending his dark head to look into my eyes as he did once before in this very room, when we quarrelled about a bunch of withered violets.

"Allie, couldn't you care for me enough to 'lay your sweet hands in mine and trust to me'?"

Could I? Can I? He takes me in his arms, kisses me passionately, and I, Allie Somers Scott of Woodhay, submit to it, with an amazed docility which I could not have believed possible a fortnight ago. And so we stand for "one vast moment" of intolerable happiness; and then, with a laugh which ends in a sigh, I push him away from me.

"Oh, this is folly!" I exclaim, with rather tardy wisdom, it must be confessed. "We are mad to think of such a thing for a minute. You have nothing, and yet you want to burden yourself with a wife whose only mode of earning her living you condemn!"

"My wife shall never sing for her bread!" the boy says, throwing up his head.

"Then how do you propose to live?"

"I shall live by my art."

"But you must practise your art before you can live by it."

"And I intend to practise it."

"And if you fail?"

"I shall not fail with such an incentive to work."

"You are very confident," I say, gazing into the eyes which look dark as night under their black lashes. "But suppose you should not succeed?"

"I shall succeed."

"But you seem to me to be more anxious to bewilder my audacious originality than to conquer by sober work," I say deliberately.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

"From Khoja Saleh to Sarakhs."

There are some things that should be remembered while watching the negotiations that may lead to a vast war or patch up a temporary peace between the rival conquerors of Asia. When England acquiesced in the move by which Russia possessed herself of Merv, it was on the agreement that a joint commission should be appointed to "delimit the Afghan frontier from Khoja Saleh on the Oxus to Sarakhs" on the Hari Rud or Tajand river—a distance of about three hundred miles. The Russians make the peculiar claim that this line crosses the river about one hundred and fifty miles nearer Herat than Sarakhs, the point from which it starts and at which it would naturally cross the river. The English claim that the line should cross the Tajand at Sarakhs and starts from thence in the direction of Khoja Saleh. The disputed territory almost forms a regular parallelogram, with Khoja Saleh, Sarakhs, and Kafar Kalek at three angles, while the fourth angle of nearly three hundred miles due east is the last named point, at no place in particular but anywhere that Russian diplomacy may consider best suited for some military advantage. The English maintain that the way to "delimit the Afghan frontier from Khoja Saleh on the Oxus to Sarakhs" is to run it on the one side of this parallelogram which lies almost in a strait line between the two points. The Russians insist that the proper way to do so is to follow the other three sides of the parallelogram. This is the same as saying that the proper way to pass between two points on the same street is to go around the block. If Russia does not come out ahead in this controversy it will not be because of her modesty in claiming.

A grave responsibility—The sexton's.

The Russian Soldier.

The Russian soldier in the field is a man of many virtues. At home in peace, indeed, he has but one vice to speak of. He will get drunk when he can, and keep drunk as long as he can.

Drink does not make him dangerous, but simply adds to his child-like amiability. He tumbles about badly, but quietly picks himself up, and staggers on till the next tumble sets in. He is eager to hug every one he meets, and his enthusiasm for kissing and calling all the world brother when he is in his cups, would be grotesque were it not degrading.

The Russian soldier needs no iron-handed discipline to keep him in order. He is docile by nature; and he obeys his officer, whom, indeed, he addresses as "little father" as if he were a child. He is contented in hardship; heat takes no effect on him, and he has become well inured to cold. His weakest point in campaigning is his susceptibility to homesickness.

When the Russian armies were lying in front of Constantinople, in that long, weary inaction between the treaty of San Stephano and the treaty of Berlin, thousands of soldiers actually died of nostalgia, or homesickness. Despondency of mind lowered the bodily tone, and they seemed simply to fade away.

The Russian soldier, when the homesickness is not upon him, is a right merry-hearted fellow. All day long the camp re-echoes to the voice of song. Russian vocal music is real singing, not the horrible croak, alternated by ear-splitting falsetto, which the Servians and Bulgarians insanely regard as vocal harmony.

The Russian comic songs are full of "snap" and *verve*; and they always have a rattling chorus, in which every one within hearing joins; while the singer accompanies the strains of his chorus with a ludicrously fantastic breakdown, in which he seems to dislocate every joint in his body. The plaintive melodies vibrate with a strange pathos, that swells the heart of the listener, even though he may understand nothing of the words. And the grand chant with which the massive columns move forward into the battle glows with the true fervor of fighting ardor. There is a legend of a battle-song so heart-stirring, that it inspired Mennonites to violate their tenets, and fight like men possessed.

The Russian soldiers are almost wholly without book-learning. Not above twenty-five per cent. can read, and a still smaller percentage have any knowledge of writing. Their religion, which is fervent, is mixed with superstition. But their external devoutness is unremitting.

They live chiefly on soup, thickened with a little meat, much meal, and anything that fortune may offer on the march in the way of vegetables. This soup is made in large camp-kettles, one of which cooks for each company; and when the soup is ready, each company marches up to its own particular kettle, every man with his pannikin in hand, into which the cook bales a ladleful.

When all are supplied, the company reforms, and there is sung a long grace before meat, which I never knew omitted or curtailed, even when, as on the Shipka Pass, the enemy's bullets would be whistling over the cooking-place, and occasionally rattling against the kettles.

Throughout every regiment is a sprinkling of foreigners, whose loyalty is not to be relied on, but with this exception, the Russian soldier is a whole-souled, devoted adorer of the Czar. The expression constantly in his mouth as regards the future, just as clergymen are wont to say, "God willing," is, "If God and the Czar will!" They are to him the arbiters of his destiny. "If God and the Czar will," I have heard a Russian soldier say, "that I return home, oh, how happy I should be; but if they decree that I must die here in a foreign land, their will be done!"

The bravery of the Russian soldier admits of no question. He is stupid, poor fellow, and requires to be shown what it is wished that he should do; he has no idea of initiative or of acting for himself on a pinch; but he may be relied on to go forward while an officer stands up to lead him, and he will hold his ground till he falls.

He may be relied on against falling a victim to panic; he is too stolid and unimpressible for that. If one-half of a Russian army were slaughtered in the morning, the other half would sullenly rally and be ready to confront the prospect of being slaughtered that same afternoon. In the bloodiest battles of the old world: Borodino, Eylau, Friedland, and the Plevna combats of July and September, 1877, Russian troops had been combatants.

But the spectator of a battle in which Russian soldiers are participants always feels half sorry for them, half angry with them.

They have no fighting versatility or individual ingenuity; if their flank is turned, well, "God and the Czar" has willed the misfortune, and they endure it passively till the manœuvre sweeps away all who have not fallen.

Unless there are officers to order him, the Russian soldier has no more idea of helping to form a new front in such an emergency than he has of usurping the crown of the Great White Czar. He has not even that appreciation of the situation that would move him to run away.

ARCHIBALD FORBES.

A girl with three arms is one of the attractions of a Louisiana side show. This young lady ought to be sought for by every marriageable young man in the neighborhood. She could put two arms around a man's neck, while she turned pancakes with the other.

An Irishman caught a bee after it had stung him, and examining it carefully, he said: "Ye dirty little blaggart! Yez bin sittin' round till yez worn the sate out of yer breeches, an' bedad ol've found yer knoife shticken through the hole in yer hip-pocket, yer little haythen!"