

A SONG IN THE WINGS

BY
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THE assistant stage-manager was already on his rounds giving the "fifteen minutes" call at the dressing-rooms.

"Oh, Lil," called a feminine voice across the next room, "lend me your spoon?"

"What do you want it for?" demanded Lil. "I thought you had become an aristocrat and bought yourself a real, gilt-edged, thirty-five cent stewpan to boil your greasypaint in!"

"So I did yesterday," admitted Vic meekly. "But the little woman borrowed it to heat the baby's milk in last night and I've not had time to get it back."

"What little woman?" grumbled Lil, tying on her wigband as though she were strangling an enemy.

"That little mother-woman thing," answered Vic.

"Her name is Norris," called out another of the girls. "Wife of Jack Norris, who manages the lights. You know—the one with the baby."

Lil gave up the tin spoon, grudgingly. She was having a hard time with her lips; they would smudge.

"Hurry up with it, that's all," she warned. "This beastly cold weather makes it such a job to get any makeup on at all. There goes Gussie's sixth eyelash. Oh, dear! I know that Lemuel will be grouchy as blazes to-night! You'd better look out for him, Regina. You've hardly made up at all."

"You know how much I care what he thinks of my makeup, don't you?" remarked Regina, ominously. Her eyes were particularly leonine. She was one of those rare women who show emotion about six times in their lives, but set the river on fire and stir up everybody when they do it.

"Steer clear of the Empress of China," said Lil. "She's got a grouch."

Regina adjusted a hair-pin with superb indifference to all derision. She not only did not object to being called the Empress of China, but did not notice it.

She was a tall, pale blonde, with smoldering eyes and a tragic gift of reticence. She was married to Sandy Cairns, a good-looking Scotchman, who had rather a large part in the present piece. Regina, however, was merely one of the extras, except for a short song she sang behind the scenes in the first act. She and Sandy were understood to be on speaking terms only.

"Overture, please!" called the assistant stage-manager, just outside. "Is everyone here?"

"Everyone," called Vic.

"No," added Lil, impertinently. "Regina Cairns, the Empress of China, is several miles away, and Miss Lillian Leeds has not been heard from at all. We are afraid she has been kidnapped!"

"A little less poise, Miss Leeds," said the assistant stage-manager, tolerantly, and passed on. Lil was a favorite of his. Twice he had told the stage-manager that she was in the theater when she was really out of town at a house party.

"Awful rot of that little mother-woman thing to keep the baby in the theater," resumed Lil, when the assistant stage-manager had gone down to the next landing. "Bad atmosphere for a kid to be brought up in!"

"She's not old enough to be hurt by the atmosphere," remarked Vic, "considering that she's only six months of age! And she hasn't money enough for a nurse to take care of the kid at home."

"Who isn't old enough to be hurt by the atmosphere—the little mother-woman?" demanded Lil.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" said our tough girl, Bird Laffin. "Anyway, the kid's a sweet kid, bless her heart!"

"I hate children!" said Regina, with venom.

They were all silent for a moment. There are certain locked and removed holies in the souls even of extra ladies. Not another of the five girls in the room would have said such a thing. A sort of chill manifested itself in their attitude toward Regina, by far the best bred and best educated of them all.

"Hurry up, girls!" exclaimed Vic. "The overture's on. Get down on the floor in a hurry!" And she slid out of the room, and went down the little hallway toward the stairs, softly humming to herself the air the orchestra was playing.

"I'm done," announced Lil, with open pride. "Managed it in seven minutes this time. Whoopie!"

She plunged out of the room and was gone. Before the door had had time to swing to a small, breathless figure dashed in.

"How are you, Mrs. Norris?" said Bird Laffin. "Holla! You've brought the kid! How's your health, youngster?"

Mrs. Norris was very little and slight and pink, and looked like a child herself. In her arms she

carried a walling baby, wrapped in a soft embroidered blanket.

"Oh, please," she gasped, looking from Bird to Regina, and then to silent Gus James in the corner. "Baby's sick again to-night, and—and I have to go on in this act, to-night. Mr. Lemuel just told me he wanted me to take Kate Carpenter's part, for the two nights she's away; I'm little, like her, and I don't dare refuse. Are all three of you on in this act? If not, could—one of you be an angel, and take baby, just till the first curtain? I—I don't believe she'll be much trouble; she'll get quiet in a moment; she's crying now, because I haven't been able to hold her while I was making up."

Bird and Gussie looked at each other, and then at their slippers. Neither of them was to go on in that act, but one had a date down on the floor with one of the extra men, and the other was in love with the leading man. Therefore neither was anxious to spend the next twenty minutes in taking care of a crying baby. Mrs. Norris straightened up with a flush that showed through her makeup.

turned toward the door quickly. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Cairns," she added, in a matter-of-fact way.

As she stood for a moment in the doorway, Regina, rocking the baby in her arms, could not help exclaiming, hardly realizing what she said, "How little, how awfully little, you are!"

The Little Mother-Woman's forehead grew slightly pink.

"Isn't it silly?" she said; then she added, with a sort of soft shamefacedness, "Jack calls us his two babies!"

She laughed a little and hurried away.

Regina took the now quiet baby and walked to the head of the stairs, where she could hear what was going on down on the stage below. After a few moments she descended, with a leisurely step, still hushing the baby in the hollow of her left arm. Her right hand, with that soft, accustomed touch of motherhood, caressed the little flannel-shrouded form.

On the stairs she met Miss Braddon. She was leading woman, and a great friend of Eleanore Bridge,

Regina had sung each night during the run with a scornful heart and a frigid intonation. To-night everything seemed different. She felt suddenly that she could not sing that trivial, meretricious air; instead, another, long and determinedly unsung, if not forgotten, drifted insistently across her brain. She had not sung it since the first gold-threaded days of her mother-life, when Sandy was still her lover, and her baby lay on her breast. Now, when her cue came, and her trained brain responded, she found herself singing the old, dear, foolish little song which on one black summer morning she had vowed never to sing again:

"Look where the little stars play
And call to the flying Sun:
'Come back, Sun, from your love, the Day,
For your work is now all done!
Come and dance in the moon-lit sky,
For the night is sweet and true;
Come, old Sun, and we dare you try
To dance like us in the pleasant blue—
In our ball-room cool and blue!"



HER HUSBAND WAS ON THE STAGE, MAKING LOVE

"I'm sorry," she said, with a sharp note of resentment in her voice. "I shouldn't have asked—"

Regina turned in a casual way from the particular cracked mirror which she claimed as her own.

"I'll take her," she said, quietly. The others stared. Regina, the baby-hater, the cold, the ill-tempered! Moreover, she had her song to sing in this very scene!

"Regina!" exclaimed Bird Laffin. "You're crazy! Don't you remember you have your song?"

"It's sung in the wings," returned Regina, imperturbably. "And I never have sung much with my arms."

The two other girls left the dressing-room in silence as she took the Little Mother-Woman's baby into her arms. There was a certain odd hungry element in her manner of grasping the tiny girl that struck the Little Mother-Woman's maternally acute perceptions.

"You—you have a baby of your own?" she ventured shyly.

Regina shook her head fiercely. Then she looked at the other woman with a dumb betrayal.

"It died," she said harshly.

The Mother-Woman put out her hand to touch with an involuntary greedy finger the white dress of her own living baby; then with a rare tact she turned her eyes from Regina's face.

"I'm going to borrow one of Miss Leeds' long, black pins," she said; and her indifferent way of saying it made Regina passionately grateful to her. "She's such a good sort that I'm sure she won't mind!" She

the star. Her rouge was badly put on, and made unbecomingly high lights upon her hard, sharp cheekbones.

"Really!" she exclaimed, "a baby in the theater! This is too absurd! I shall certainly speak to Mr. Lemuel. Is it yours?"

Regina did not even look at her, but walked on down the stairs, looking, with her grave face, tall figure and pale, clear coloring, not unlike a painted and powdered Madonna. The dress she wore, her costume for the third act, was a ridiculously bizarre one, but nothing could cheapen the soft, new feeling of her face and manner. She passed between three or four young, whispering, gossiping members of the company, who were improving the dusky moments of a dark change by flagrant flirtation, and did not even hear their murmured comments of astonishment.

When she reached her usual place in the wings her husband was on the stage. He was making love in his usual outrageous fashion to the soubrette who played opposite him; for once, Regina gazed on the scene unmoved. The nightly torture which she habitually went through was for the nonce lifted and removed. She clasped the baby closer to her and waited, tall and motionless, for her cue.

The situation on the stage required a tender, melting little melody, which was supposed to charm the wayward heart of the flirting cavalier into a musical and sentimental channel. The composer of the incidental music had written a cheap waltz song, which

It was only when it was all over, and the silenced and bewildered orchestra had taken up the bars of an entrance chorus supposed to follow the little song that Regina realized what she had done.

She heard the stage-manager say sharply, "Great Caesar, Mrs. Cairns, what on earth do you mean?"

But she could not wait for another word. Speechless, she fled through the crowded wings, hiding her head against the sleeping baby. She felt that she must go some place where she could be alone; for her newly-awakened self shrank from unsympathetic contact. She turned her hurried steps to the stairway that led down to the big room in the cellar where the good wig-maker and his wife, the wardrobe mistress, reigned supreme.

She met Mrs. Hansel on the steep stairs.

"Act, it Frau Norris's baby ist, nicht?" she said. "The pretty Engelein! I haf not you seen lately, Frau Regina; it iss all yell mit your husband, nicht wahr?"

"May I take the baby down to the room?" asked Regina, breathlessly. "She is asleep, and I am afraid the noise in the dressing-room—"

"Ach, warum nicht? Take her down, surely, yess! There iss a pile of silk sashes sich ve gif out to de girls for next Montag, and dey vill make a gut, hubsch resting-place for the lieber kind—a place for schlaf und ruh, nicht?"

"Is anyone down there?" asked Regina.

"Aber, dere iss Fritz. But you do not him mind, nicht? He the kinder loves! I go to Miss Bratton. Ach, she iss one old maid!"

Regina ran down the stairs, and, slipping past the excellent Fritz, who was sitting curling wigs in the front room, installed herself and the baby in the tiny silk-filled back room where Mrs. Hansel kept all her surplus, as well as her new supplies.

There, by the light of a dingy gas-burner, Regina made the softest of couches for her small charge. Sashes, kerchiefs, scarves, and even laces, she used to make a bed such as a wee fairy princess might have enjoyed. Upon this rainbow couch she laid the baby, and then, secure from interruption, she hung hungrily over the wee little form and poured out to it some of the pent-up mother-love which her own baby was too many long eternities away to hear.

And as the little one dropped asleep the minor tragedies of her restrained life since the baby's death came to the fore with sharp distinctness.

"He never seemed to care!" she murmured, vacillating between tears and hardness. "I could have borne it—oh, I think I could have borne it—if he had only seemed to care!"

Upstairs she could hear the tramp of feet. Soon the Little Mother-Woman would come to rob her, the spurious, make-believe mother-woman, of her treasure. She got on her knees and clasped the sleeping baby to her breast. The child stirred and whimpered softly, opening and shutting an aimless hand; its mouth was half-open, moist, and as pink as a moss-rosebud. Its scant fair hair, as soft as the fur of a very young kitten, was damp. Still sleepily crying, she cuddled closer into the soft nest of Regina's bosom, and, in a moment, had drowsed off again.

"Look, where the little stars play,"

sang Regina, brokenly, controlling her wild longing to press the sleepy baby closer to her heart.

"And call to the flying Sun:

'Come back, Sun, from your love, the Day—'"

There was a firm and extremely hurried step outside, and a man's wife speaking a quick word to Fritz, but Regina did not notice. She laid the baby gently down, singing, beneath her breath:

"For your work is now—all—done—"

Suddenly there was a shadow at her side; she was caught, clasped, and held hard, hard against a very stormily pounding heart.

"Regina!"

She looked up, trembling, into the earnestness in Sandy's face, and, crushing down her agitation at what she saw there, whispered:

"Hush! You'll wake her!"

The little phrase brought back to them both, with a poignancy that was knifelike, the many times in the past that one had used it to the other, tiptoeing with hushed laughter about their tiny flat, when the baby was asleep and they were helping each other get dinner.

"Regina, I saw you with that baby—" he said again, with a very unsteady voice. "I did not know—I did not realize—"

"You forgot!" said Regina, with reproof that was the sharper for its gentleness.

He shook his head, dumbly, yet humbly; for he knew better than she how near he had been to forgetting. Then with manly determination he said, vehemently and contritely.

"I will never forget again, Regina."

"Hush, hush, you'll wake the baby!" whispered Regina, happily; and Sandy acted the rest silently.

"Oh, Mrs. Cairns," gasped the anxious voice of the Little Mother-Woman at the door, "where is—?" Then she caught sight of the heap of silks and what lay upon them, and darted forward, with an ejaculation of relief.

"I—I hunted for you everywhere," she explained, as she gathered her small daughter into her arms, and looked apologetically from Regina to Sandy. Then she seemed to feel some subtle something that was new and electric in the air. "I—I hope that she has not been any trouble," she said a little awkwardly, but with sympathy in her childlike gaze.

The two women looked at each other, a long, understanding look.

"No," said Regina, a little breathlessly, and with strangely shining eyes. "No. She—has—not—been—any—trouble!"

NEXT WEEK,

Move and Counter Move
By Elliott Flower