

# A SONG IN THE WINGS

BY  
ANNA ALICE CHAPIN

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

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

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

"So I did yesterday," admitted Vic merrily. "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 Lili, 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."

Lili 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 Lili. "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 Lili, 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 noise, Miss Leeds," said the assistant stage-manager, tolerantly, and passed on. Lili 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 Lili, 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 Lili.

"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 holes 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 Lili, 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. "Hello! 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 wailing 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—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!"

"Aber, dere iss Fritz. But you do not him mind, nicht? He the kinder loves! I go to Miss Braddon. 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 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, ut Regina did not notice. She laid the baby gently in, singing, beneath her breath:

"For your work is now—all—none—"

Suddenly there was a shadow at her side; she was caught, clasped, and held hard, hard against a very stormy 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!"



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.

"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 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 night 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

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

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

"Is anyone down there?" asked Regina.

NEXT WEEK,

Move and Counter Move  
By Elliott Flower