

IRENE'S VOW

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME.

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

"Alone, and reading, Irene? Are you lonely, my darling?"

"No, I am never lonely," she replied, "unless I find myself in a crowd with a book I have always a companion."

He then informed her that it was customary, during the fall and winter, to have a number of guests at Saxtonhurst, and that it was his intention to present some of his most intimate friends to her.

"I have written a list of those whom I think we ought to invite," he said, "and I will describe them as I go."

He then named Lord and Lady Wainwright, his next of kin; Lady Elymer, a wealthy widow; Miss Channing, an American heiress, and several others. But it was not until he mentioned, as one of his friends, Lord Gerant, that she manifested any interest.

Then it seemed to her that her heart stood still and refused to beat; that a great light shone before her eyes, and a mist of sorrow and pain enfolded her, out of which she heard the slow tones of the duke's voice uttering these words:

"My most honored guest will be the great statesman, Lord Gerant. I am anxious to show him all honor, and you will help me, I am sure."

The voice that answered him was calm and low, and seemed to come from afar off.

"I will do my best, I suppose, to meet your wishes in every way," he said.

Lower sank the beautiful golden head; the rich draperies of muslin and lace rose and fell as though her heart were breaking; the beautiful face drooped more and more from his sight.

"That brings me," said the duke, "to the next name on my list. My old friend has a daughter who is one of the most beautiful women and the richest heiress in England—Lady Lira Gerant."

Had he noticed this name, he would have seen her face grow deadly pale, and a great gasp come from her parted lips.

Lady Lira married a man who will leave his mark on the age—Sir Hubert Estmere, of the Mere."

It had come at last—this name, which was to her like the knell of doom. For a few minutes she thought she must fall from the chair to the ground. The sound of the name so long and so dearly loved, so long unheeded, struck her with keen, passionate pain; a mist swam before her eyes, a sound of rushing waters filled her ears. With a violent, almost desperate effort, she recovered herself; she stifled the trembling, she forced the color back to her face.

"You interest me greatly, I suppose," she said.

"Do I? I am very glad. I feared from your silence that it was otherwise. I was telling you that my friend's daughter, Lady Lira Gerant, had married a rising statesman, Sir Hubert Estmere. I like him very much; we agree exactly in our notions of politics; I have asked him with his wife, Lady Estmere; and if, in all England, there is one woman with whom it would delight me to see you on friendly terms, it is Lady Estmere. She is young like yourself, beautiful—not as you, but next to you—clever and good. I feel sure that you will love her, and it is the dearest wish of my heart that you should do so. Our families are and always have been so intimate that I shall hope to see you and Lady Estmere like sisters."

"Oh, heaven! would the voice never cease? Would the torture never stop? Would he never rise from that chair and leave her to the anguish of her own thoughts?"

"How long will they remain?" she asked.

"Lord Gerant for two weeks; the others longer, Irene? he cried, catching a glimpse of her pale face. "Irene, you are not looking well! I am tiring you."

And she was only too pleased, after any fashion, to make her escape.

CHAPTER XVII.

On the evening when the party of guests were expected, the first who arrived were Lord and Lady Wainwright and Miss Channing, the famous American heiress. They were formally presented to the young duchess.

Irene stood apart from her guests for a few minutes, looking at the smooth, sweet leaves, and thinking of the glittering islands where the palm trees grow. She heard a slight murmur, the rustle of silk; she heard her husband's voice in accents of warm welcome, and then—

"Oh, heaven, how was she to live? how was she to bear it? how ever turn her face to the light? how speak, how act or move? A low moan came from her lips; she clutched her hands so tightly that the rings made great dents in her white skin."

"Oh, heaven!" she cried, from the depths of her heart, "help me, or I shall die!"

For she heard his voice once again—the voice of the man she had so passionately loved—the voice that she had heard last, telling her, in what she believed to be her home, telling her she could never be ever had been his wife.

Down the long vista of the drawing room she could see a little party coming toward them, led by the duke. Irene came to her aid. He had slighted her, he had not thought her good enough to bear his name, and now he found her sharing the most noble name in England.

So she stood awaiting him, her face, trailing draperies of cream and lace falling in statuesque folds; her face fair and proud as that of a stately queen; the light shining in her diamonds until it seemed to draw all the brightness around her. The jeweled fan, made of the priceless plumage of some rare birds, touched her white breast, and no stir of the spotted feathers told of the beating heart within. The white hands did not tremble; the beautiful arms, bare to the shoulders and clasped by diamond bracelets, were still as though no heart-beat made her whole frame tremble. Calm, with serene, high-bred, perfect grace, with fair proud beauty, she awaited him.

Step by step she heard him advance—every step it seemed to her treading on her heart. For the time she forgot all the world except him; everything else was lost. Step by step. Once he spoke; once he laughed, carelessly. At the sound of his voice she might have brok-

en down; the sound of his laugh emboldened her. It was the same laugh that had driven her almost mad on the morning he had told her that she was not his wife. She could meet him now, for the memory of her wrongs burned her as with hot iron.

Swart her still. Something comes between her and the brilliant light. Shadows seem to fall, and the duke is speaking. She does not raise her eyes, for she thinks to herself that if she looks up and sees him suddenly she will fall down dead. Those who are watching her intently think, despite her great beauty and excited position, how shy she is; for the long lashes lay on the beautifully tinted cheeks. She is horribly conscious that he stands over her and she knows also that a terrible doom has come over her, and that he is going in wonder on her.

Presently she realizes that her husband stands before her. She sees rich folds of white satin, and she knows that Lady Estmere—the woman who bears the name that ought to be hers—also stands there; the woman who unwittingly stole her love.

What was the duke saying? "Ordinary forms of introduction are in this case useless. I want the daughter of the oldest friend I have in the world to love my wife, and I want my wife to love her."

Then the duchess looked up and saw before her a beautiful woman, whose frank eyes and sweet lips smiled almost tenderly at her. They looked at each other fixedly for an instant—these two women who had crossed each other's lives so strangely—and then two white hands met each other. The duchess made some kindly answer, and Lady Estmere said to herself that the difficulty would be not to love one so exquisitely loving and charming.

Another minute and the draperies of white satin had vanished. A gentleman with a star on his breast was bowing before her, and the duke, in a voice that she knew faltered with emotion, told her that this was Lord Gerant, his dearest friend. She must speak—that she knew—if she died for it. And then the earl made way for some one else. She would not raise her eyes, but she saw a dark, handsome head bending low before her; she knew—she knew!

A few words from the duke, and then the voice that had once made her life's music said, in a tone of significance of which she herself perfectly understood: "I cannot tell your grace how more than delighted I am."

Few words; but to her they meant so much. If she had looked at him she must have died. It seemed to her that a hand of ice clutched at her heart; that the blood froze in her veins; that she must fall flat with her face on the ground, that she could not help herself in the least; then the duke said:

"Irene, you look tired; let me give you a chair. Why are you standing?"

She was just conscious when she set down that Lady Estmere was saying something to her. She closed her eyes for an instant, and then strength came back to her. It was a relief to her when the dinner bell rang. The duke offered his arm to Lady Estmere, and Lord Gerant took down the duchess. She recovered herself sufficiently to talk to the great statesman, and she delighted him by telling him how often she herself had longed to see him.

"I am sure," said Lord Gerant, "that we shall be great friends; and I think the duke has done the wisest action in his life in marrying again."

"I hope you will always think so," said the duchess, with one of her most charming smiles.

It was a long and splendid banquet, worthy of the grand ballroom in which it was given, worthy of the host who gave it; and Sir Hubert, watching the duchess intently, wondered where Irene had acquired that calm, serene manner which caused her to be considered one of the best bred women of the day. One thing struck him—look at her as he would, he never found her eyes on him; she treated him as the greatest stranger. When the ladies rose to retire, as she passed him, quite by accident she dropped one of the lovely white violets from her bouquet. In an instant he had stooped to pick it up, and offered it to her with a low bow. She passed him with the most queenly indifference, and did not take the flower.

"My bouquet is falling to pieces," she said; "one flower more or less does not matter."

The next moment she was gone, and all the brightness of the room seemed to go out with her.

When he entered the drawing room he sat down by her side. The diamond cross on her white breast did not stir. He could not flatter himself that her heart beat one degree quicker for his coming.

"You have some fine engravings there, duchess," he said; "do you care about pictures and art?"

"That is a very comprehensive question," she said; "and pardon me, not very clearly put."

"Quite right," said Lord Gerant. "I thought the same thing when I heard it."

Lady Estmere looked up a little anxiously, the strange inflection in the sweet voice of the duchess struck her.

"I am afraid they are not going to like each other," she thought, "and that would be a great pity. I must bring them together."

"I am very unfortunate," said Sir Hubert. "Let me frame my question differently. Do you like pictures, duchess?"

"I do more. I love and appreciate them," she replied.

"Now I must ask, do you love art?"

"Yes, of all kinds—music, painting, sculpture and everything else that comes under the meaning of the word 'art,'" she replied.

Then he was quiet at a loss what to say; he who was ever so eloquent, so fluent in words, so plentiful in ideas; for she had never looked at him and had drawn herself quite away from him.

His wife just then earned his deepest gratitude. She was very anxious that they should become friends; and she thought to herself that if she were to leave them together the charm and polish of Sir Hubert's manner must make

an impression on one so refined as the young duchess. She made the conversation general for a few minutes, then said carelessly:

"Papa, I should like to see the pictures in the white drawing room; the duke tells me there are several new ones since we were here last."

"Most of them were purchased in Rome," said the duchess. "Shall I go with you, Lady Estmere?"

It was the first time she had called the beautiful woman who had supplanted her by name, and her lips trembled over it.

"No," said Lady Estmere, laughing, "the greatest favor you can do me is to talk to Sir Hubert and keep him in good order for me while I am away."

She did not raise her eyes; she made no answer; she heard the rustle of rich draperies, and then there floated to her a whisper of:

"Irene—Irene, have you no word for me?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

Not one line in that firm, proud face moved; not even a curve of the proud lips showed that she had heard him, or that the voice had any echo in her heart.

"Irene," he cried, and this time there was the ring of passion in his voice.

Still she leaned back in her chair with the same calm, serene, queenly indifference, holding the rich feathers of her fan against her white breast, proud that no feather fluttered or moved; proud that her jeweled hands did not tremble; proud that she should see that he had no power to make her tremble or to move her.

"Irene!" he cried, "for heaven's sake, speak to me; you are driving me mad!"

Unutterable scorn and contempt deepened in those beautiful eyes.

"If you are speaking to me," she replied, "Sir Hubert Estmere, I am the Duchess of Bayard."

"Speak to me," he cried, "whoever you may be now. You have been Irene Darcy, and so can never be a stranger to me."

"There is no greater stranger to you than I am," she said.

He thought she was rising to go away, and with eager carelessness laid his hand on her arm as though to detain her. In one moment he saw his mistake; she had flung it from her as though it had been the poison sting of an adder. Her face grew deadly pale with anger; she trembled with indignation that he should dare to lay even one finger on her.

"I beg you to forgive me," he said, "I crave your pardon."

"Be careful that you do not repeat the offense," she said, imperiously.

"Irene," he repeated, "for heaven's sake do not drive me mad. I would not have presumed to touch you but that I was afraid you were going to leave me. Do you think I have no heart, no feeling?"

Nothing could have been more proud, or still, or contemptuous than that beautiful face. She made no answer.

"Do you think," he cried, "that I can forget?"

Then she spoke.

"There can be nothing to remember, nothing to forget," she said calmly. "You are Sir Hubert Estmere of the Mere; I am the Duchess of Bayard. There can be nothing in common between us."

"You cannot forget; you must, you shall remember," he cried.

Then she opened her beautiful eyes quite wide and looked at him with supreme contempt.

"It would be well for you," she said, "if I could forget. I do not; I remember many things, and, above all, I remember my vow."

"Your vow! What vow?" he asked.

"My vow of vengeance," she said. "I made it, and I shall keep it—let it be a long time or a short time before the opportunity comes, I do not care—I shall keep it to the end."

"Your vow against me—of vengeance against me?" he said.

"Yes, my vow of vengeance against you," she repeated.

He drew back a little, as though he did not like the words.

"It is best as it is. I do not see any occasion for melodrama of any kind," he said. "You could not ask for a more brilliant lot in life than you have now, could you, in all fair dealing, Irene? I must speak frankly to you, and I pray you most humbly to listen. You see that our family and the house of Bayard are on the most friendly terms. I heard of the duke's marriage, but I need not tell you that in my wildest dreams I could never guess who the duchess was. I have thought of you a thousand times each day, Irene, but my thoughts were all fears. If I had known that you were the duke's wife I should not have come. You see the position is an awkward one for me, unless you are kind enough to enlighten me."

"I do not see that you have any position to mention," she said, haughtily.

He was in a fever of impatience and suspense.

"Oh, Irene, do not trifle with me; I can ill bear suspense. Tell me in one word, does the duke know your story?"

"I cannot see how that interests you, Sir Hubert," she replied.

"It interests me this much," he said, "that if he knows it I leave the house to-night never to re-enter it, and that there will be bitter war between us."

She looked at him with angry indignation.

"Do you suppose for one moment," she said, "that if that honorable, loyal gentleman whom I call my husband knew your real character he would allow you to cross his threshold?"

"There are worse characters than mine," he said, sullenly.

"I think not, Sir Hubert. A traitor ranks with a spy, and you are the very king of traitors."

He began to have some kind of idea that danger was in store for him.

"I will tell you with pleasure," she answered. "He asked me your name and I declined to tell him. He said that he should be quite sure to find it out, and when that happened he would never rest until he had set his foot on the traitor's face."

"Well," said Sir Hubert, with a faint attempt at a sneer, "it seems to me that I am likely to have a lively time of it. But as I am no coward I do not fear. What do you threaten me with, Irene?"

"It would please me if you would try to remember that my title's Duchess of Bayard," she said, imperiously. "I threaten you with nothing, I owe you my vengeance."

And again a certain expression of anxiety crossed his face. He did not like the frequent repetition of the word "vengeance."

(To be continued.)

Exquisitely Evaded.

"Singularly apropos of Emerson's poetic dictum, I hold it of little matter whether your jewel be of pure water, a rose diamond or a white, but whether it dazzled me with light, is a story of Herman Merivale, an Englishman of letters, and that brilliant and lovable actress, Miss Ellen Terry, which comes from the London periodical known as M. A. P."

When Miss Terry appeared in "Macbeth" Mr. Merivale thought, with many others, that her part was not suited to her personality or ability. He did not care for her Lady Macbeth at all, and decided not to go behind the scenes in case he should be asked to express an opinion. Sir Henry Irving, however, sent him a most pressing invitation, and directly Miss Terry caught sight of him she hurried across the stage, and asked eagerly:

"Well, how do you like me?"

"Nell," returned Mr. Merivale, "the first time we met I saw you as 'Puck,' springing from the earth behind a road-stool. You bewitched me then, and you've been doing it ever since."

Ask the Blacksmith.

When Attorney Tom Cannon went East with the Jefferson Club to Monticello, he chanced to run down to Richmond and Newport News. At the latter place he met a full-fledged Englishman, a Londoner, who was visiting America for the first time. Mr. Cannon and the Britisher went one evening for a ride into the country and chanced upon a typical Virginia village.

Over a blacksmith shop was suspended a jocular sign, which read: "Ten miles to the next town. If you can't read, ask the blacksmith."

"If you can't read ask the blacksmith," I can't understand what that bally sign means, don't ye know," exclaimed the Englishman.

"Oh, that's a joke," explained Mr. Cannon.

The Englishman studied the sign for a full minute and then declared with a laugh:

"How jolly clever, don't ye know! Wouldn't it be a great joke if the bally blacksmith was not at home!"—St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Sayings of Smart Youngsters.

A Boston teacher recently read to her young pupils an account of a man "who had lived for years upon the frontier."

When the story was reproduced by one of the children, to her surprise it read that he had lived for some years "on his front ear!" Another teacher read that a gentleman "had occupied for some time a fine country seat." Upon asking the children what was meant by a "country seat" a dead silence reigned till one little fellow said he thought he knew, and to the inquiry of the teacher replied: "A milking stool!" Still another had been reading to her pupils about the rain. One, being asked to write a little story about the rain, after declaring his inability to do so, produced the following: "What does the rain say to the dust? 'I am on to you and your name is mud!'"

A Tall Chimney.

The tallest smokestack on record is what is known as St. Rollox chimney at the Tennant chemical works, Glasgow. It is 455½ feet. It was originally 400 feet, but the management, learning that another stack was to be built equaling it, added the fifty-five and one-half feet to hold the record. The original height was rendered necessary by the law against chemical works within the city and the necessity for carrying the fumes clear of the district. It is built of brick and supported by heavy iron bands. Once it swayed out of the perpendicular, but by means of a kite and the sawing of the mortar upon one side it was swayed back. Germany has a stack 396 feet high.

Business.

"So you won't let me play 'Hamlet'?" said Mr. Stormington Barnes.

"Emphatically, no," answered the manager.

"You have no respect for the character of the great Dane?"

"Now, my dear Stormie," was the soothing rejoinder, "what does the long care about great Danes? What they want is the bloodhounds in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"—Washington Star.

Unbiased.

"I trust," said one practical politician, "that you will approach the election in an absolutely unbiased spirit."

"I shall," answered the other. "I have received equal amounts of money from both sides."—Washington Star.

Largest of American Ships.

The largest ships ever launched from an American shipyard are the Korea and Siberia, built at Newport News for the transpacific trade.

Widows whose husbands are dead may be cheerful, but their cheerfulness isn't a circumstance that of some grass widows.

OUR BUDGET OF FUN.

HUMOROUS SAYINGS AND DOINGS HERE AND THERE.

Jokes and Jokelets that Are Supposed to Have Been Recently Born—Sayings and Doings that Are Old, Curious and Laughable—The Week's Humor.

The Ice-man—Evidently warm weather is near.

His Assistant—What makes you think so?

The Ice-man—People are beginning to call me "Mr. Smith." Haven't got anything better all winter than "I say, you," or "Hello, there!"—Boston Transcript.

Small Wonder.
Professor—You would be surprised, madam, to know how sensitive is the membrane of the human ear.

Miss Smarter—Considering what some people have to hear, I don't wonder at it.

Poor Tommy.
The Visitor—Does mamma give you anything for being a good boy?

Tommy—No; she gives it to me when I ain't.

Well Protected.

"But big fellow goin' down there just hit me."

"Serves ye right. Ye oughter have a bloodhound like me, an' dey wouldn't dare hit ye."

A Hardened Wretch.
"See that man with the hard face? He's killed his man."

"Indeed! Chauffeur or motorman?"

—Yonkers Statesman.

A Wise Girl.
Alice—How long should a girl know a man before becoming engaged to him?

Grace—Oh, long enough for him to propose.

Usual Thing.
Biggs—I hear you are financially embarrassed; is it true?

Diggs—No; my creditors seem to be a little embarrassed, but I'm not.

Gene.
Aunt Maria—You should love your neighbor as yourself.

Tom—I love her better than I do myself.

He Was Next to the Game.
"Put not your trust in riches," said the clerical-looking man in the rusty coat.

"I don't," replied the prosperous-looking individual. "I put my riches in trusts."

Judging by the Price.
"This is a picture hat," said the fond wife, showing her husband the new piece of millinery.

"Picture hat?" murmured the gentle husband, moodily gazing at the bill which had accompanied it. "It must be by one of the old masters."—Baltimore American.

A Rag-Time Comment.
"The refrain," we said to our neighbor at the vaudeville performance, while the popular ballad was being rendered, "is prettier than the verses."

"Yes," he agreed. "I wish he would refrain altogether."—Baltimore American.

Summer Style for Horses.

My lady's horse.

Why He Lost.
Old Fogey—I am pained to hear that you are addicted to playing whist, and that last night you lost \$25.

Young Fogey—The ideal! Why, I don't even know how to play the game.

Old Fogey—So I am informed by the gentleman who won the money.

His Acquaintance.
Wigg—Have you known Harduppe long?

Wagg—No. He's been short ever since I've known him.—Philadelphia Record.

Very Wet.
Customer—I want to get a nice book, nothing dry.

Clerk—I think this will please you, hen.

Customer—What is it?

Clerk—A treatise on scientific rain-making.

The Inveterate Angler.
Mrs. Malaprop—My husband's getting ready for the opening of the fishing season.

Browne—Fond of the sport, eh?

Mrs. Malaprop—Well, I should say. Why, he's a regular angliomaniac.—Philadelphia Press.

The Worser Half.
"Miss Sarkassum says you always bring a spring-like sensation to those around you."

"Now, that's what I call mighty nice of her."

"Yes? Well, she went on to say something about the tired feeling that comes with the spring."

Why He Knew.
"Didn't you know Jingleby wrote poetry?"

"Yes; he served a copy of his latest book on me last week."

He Had.
"Haven't you any occupation?" asked the woman at the kitchen door, after listening to his tale of woe.

"Yes, ma'am," responded Tufford Knutt. "I'm a hunter."

"A hunter? Of what?"

"Grub, ma'am."—Chicago Tribune.

Indications.
"Do you think they'll marry?"

"Circumstances point in that direction. Her people object, and he's as poor as a church mouse."

An Ideal Church.
Mrs. Newcome—Yes, our new home is delightful and there's such a nice church right near it.

Mrs. Mooven—Indeed? What denomination?

Mrs. Newcome—I declare I don't know, but the pews are so arranged that you can see every one who comes in without the slightest trouble.

The Porter Got It.
Hi Harix—Well, them bunco fellows up town the city didn't get my money this time, b'gosh.

Cy Corntas—How did yew manage