

Life

Time has four seasons richly wrought
With earth, life's joy and sorrow;
And many a heart with hope is fraught
That may be sad to-morrow—
Its spring-time, with its buds and flowers,
Its gloomy hours and glad ones,
Its genial suns and April showers,
Its pleasant dreams and sad ones.

The summer-time of life its bloom
Around the heart is wreathing,
Yet dark-eyed passion-rose illumines
The soul where Hope was breathing
Her earnest prayers, and o'er its chords
A strange, wild music stealing,
Reveals, in plainer terms than words,
Its truthfulness of feeling.

Life's autumn comes, and o'er the heart,
Its fond ties rudely crushing,
Bidding its brightest dreams depart,
Reality is rushing:
And memory, through the dim lit past,
Looks back to youth's sweet dreamings,
And dwells mid joys too bright to last
In summer's passion gleamings.

The winter days of life draw near,
The heart of earth grows weary,
And seeks in vain for ought to cheer,
Its loveliness lives so dreary.
The chilling blasts around our way
With whispering voices creeping,
Too late we've learned life's but a day
Of mingled joy and weeping.

SELECT STORY.

MARCIA;
—OR—
THE LADY OF FERN
NOOK.

There was an instant and simultaneous suspension of employment. The scene was a fashionable club, the hour verging towards ten at night—a starlit night, with a pale crescent moon in the sky, throwing faint light on one side of each street, dense shadows on the other. Men sitting by distant tables, reading, cast aside their papers, and hasten to the open windows, conversation ceased, and a profound silence took the place of the subdued murmur a moment before filling the lofty room. Every head was bent forward in an attitude of attention; and the heavy window-draperies were pushed back by eager hands, to give an uninterrupted view of the street below.

What was the cause of this sudden change? Simply the sound of a woman's voice, issuing from the shadows on the opposite side of the street, in the first notes of a sweet old ballad. Yet such a voice! It rose until it trembled in the air with the wild sweetness of a lark; it sank into low waves of richest melody; its clear, crystalline upper notes might have been those of a seraph singing in the clouds; its lower tones the melodious spell of some Circe. Every rare inflection of feeling was conveyed in its rounded notes, which displayed every added charm that art could bestow, as, after a momentary pause, the singer proceeded to execute one of the most difficult Italian arias from one of the popular operas of the day.

In the meantime, nothing could be seen of the owner of this magnificent voice, save the outline of a black-cloaked figure, standing in the dense shadows of the opposite houses; and perhaps the liquid notes, pouring from those unseen lips, received a subtler charm from the shade from which they poured in so full and perfect a cascade of song.

A mystery has a thousand charms for the most plegmatic temperament, and that one was here could not be doubted.

I would give a thousand dollars to find out who our melodeous incognito is! said one of the group of gentlemen, in a low, excited tone, as, after the concluding note of the aria had quivered into silence, the black-robed form advanced across the street, and paused under the club-house windows in evident expectation of a reward from her auditors.

The street was a retired and aristocratic one, and though one or two pedestrians had paused, fascinated by the strains, yet the group at the window constituted her principal auditory.

Done! said another young man in answer to the speaker. I take you at your word, Desborough. A thousand dollars, if I find out the identity of the mysterious songstress.

Money was of little consequence with the wealthy Basil Desborough, and he repeated—

Yes, I say again, I'd give a thousand dollars to find out about her. At the same time, I do not think you are at all likely to further my whim. See! and he pointed to the black-robed form moving rapidly down the street, having secured the silver and gold pieces which were showered at her feet from the window.

A faint smile crossed the lips of the second speaker. He looked after the retreating figure, then at his watch.

Fifteen minutes after ten; at fifteen minutes past eleven, expect me here with

the desired information. And, with a graceful bow to the gentlemen surrounding him, he quietly left the apartment, followed by the amused glances of some, the dubious ones of others.

Your thousand is sure to go, Desborough, said an elderly gentleman good-humoredly. Fenton mistook his sphere of action in not becoming a detective.

Basil laughed with frank good-humor. I'm sure I hope he'll earn it, he said lightly, dismissing the subject. Who'll come for a stroll *POUR PASSER LE TEMPS*?

A couple of young men joined him, and the three strolled down the quiet street into the brilliantly lighted city, their gay laughter coming back to the ears of those who remained behind, and with whom Basil's offer furnished a new and interesting subject of conversation; though, in his circle, the whims of the young millionaire had come to be regarded with more of amusement than surprise.

In the meantime, Fenton, without the least appearance of uncertainty, struck into a by-street, leading to one of the humbler suburbs of the city. And, although the shadowy form of the singer had faded from view, he pursued his way with the assured air of one who sees his destination in his mind's eye. He walked slowly, and the gas lamps, under which he passed, revealed the fact that his pale features wore a certain expression in which might be traced the faintest shadow of nervousness, not in any way approaching fear, yet akin to it. He had the appearance of a man who was calculating the cost of a venture, and was uncertain whether the possible profit would counterbalance the certain danger. But at that moment he stood in dire need of a certain sum, and Mucious Fenton was not one to withdraw his hand from the golden prize because it was guarded by the ghosts of murdered love and honor; and, indeed, his dislike to his present task was more from an innate honor of what is termed a scene, than from any keen perception of the presence of those spirits.

Young Fenton certainly possessed an intellectual being, in so far as such can be dissociated from the presence of the soul; but where the two harmonize and blend in tone, there remained, in this man, a blank, or what passed as such to merely human insight.

After a walk of some ten minutes, he came to a street where the houses stood somewhat apart from each other, and, though old and tumble-down, had a certain air of faded respectability. A few immense elm trees grew here and there, at wide intervals, down its melancholy length, and the rustling of their leaves, and the subdued hum of the city, were the only sounds which broke the stillness.

A solitary bar of light, from a distant, uncurtained window, fell across the street, and made the sombre shadows of the rest more apparent; and it seemed as though one had wandered into a weird world quite distinct from that brilliant one separated from it but by the length of a couple of streets. No one was astir, and the footstep of Fenton, light, though it was, re-echoed from the broken plank sidewalk, green and slippery from age. No gas lamps shed their cheerful glow over the scene, and whether considering himself in danger from the insecure state of the plank, or wishing to proceed more silently, he left the sidewalk and pursued his course along the middle of the street until he stood opposite the house from whence the solitary light issued. It came from the apartment on the ground floor, and a tall form passing hastily across its glare, threw a gigantic and fantastic shadow on the street.

The house, itself, was exactly similar in outward appearance to those forming the remainder of the street—lonesome, gloomy, and touched by the devouring taint of poverty.

Fenton was not a man much swayed by external surroundings, yet a slight chill ran through him as he glanced up and down the murky street, to make certain that he was alone before he approached the house. The shudder was followed by a low laugh, and slowly, but without hesitation, he ascended the two or three wooden steps, leading to the hall door, and with his ungloved hand rapped lightly and in a peculiar manner on the worm-eaten panel. Twice he repeated the summons. Then a quick step, firm, yet agitated, sounded in the empty hall; there was a chain and bolt being removed, and the next instant the door was hung open to its widest extent, and the form of a woman, sharply defined against the light streaming into the narrow hall from a side room, appeared.

Mucious!

Marcia!

The voice of the woman expressed surprise, joy, a thousand emotions; while Fenton's was slightly deprecatory, suavely polite, nothing more. She half extended her hand towards him, but the lack of warmth in his tone seemed to strike her; for she allowed it to drop to her side, and drew back to allow him

to enter. When he had done so, she closed the door and preceded him in silence into the room whence issued the light.

A small, bare room, containing little but a cooking-stove, a couple of deal chairs, and a table. A heavy black mantle was thrown carelessly over the back of one of the chairs, and a guitar lay on the top of a pile of music which stood in a corner. Everything was spotlessly clean, and the blazing fire in the stove put a certain air of comfort to the apartment.

The woman, addressed as Marcia by Fenton, drew down the blind over the solitary window, and then slowly advanced to the table, at the opposite side of which he had seated himself. She leaned her hand on the table, and bent her eyes on his face, on which the lamp cast its full, unshadowed glare. He was too perfect a master of the situation for that. His face never changed a muscle, and with the caution of his character he waited for her to speak first. She waited too, but her impulsive nature urged her into impatience.

Well? she said, breaking the silence, at length, with the single monosyllable. Yet in the simple word three emotions found expressions—love, anxiety, and the thrill of hope. There was a pathetic questioning too, in it, and in her eyes, which might have won a response from a stone. It did not from him.

I am here, you see, he said, in his easy, assured way, unexpectedly, I have no doubt, to you.

To me? she answered, still looking intently at him. Yes, I had given up all hopes of ever seeing you again.

Taking her tone, with her woman's quick intuition, from his, she had controlled her voice to its steadiest, and she now withdrew her eyes from his, and with a slight pallor creeping over the dusky roses of her face, but otherwise sustaining a forced calmness of demeanor, she seated herself, still keeping the table between them. Her fingers clenched themselves on her lap with nervous agony, of which nothing appeared in her face.

Fenton did not appear inclined to speak again, and once more it fell to her to break the silence.

Is your wife dead? And have you come to legalize our marriage?

Fenton raised his delicate brown eyebrows in a smile at once amused and deprecatory.

To the first part of your question—which is put my dear Marcia, with your usual openness—yes. To the second part, my candor shall equal yours when I answer—no!

To say that his answer was unexpected, would be untrue: to say that she looked stunned, or broken by it, would be equally so. A peculiar expression passed over her face. She looked again steadily at the impassive countenance and then quietly accepted the situation.

We will not refer to that subject again, she said, dismissing it with a slight wave of the hand. I have no doubt that you have taken the proper view of the case. But in the meantime, to what do I owe the honor of this visit to-night?

His vanity, which was the ruling passion of his mind, was wounded by the indifference of her manner; while, at the same time, his prudence foresaw his designs made easier than they would have been had she shown a fierce indignation at the cool announcement of his intentions. Balancing both sentiments, satisfaction predominated, and his manner became more agreeable than it was before.

With all his astuteness could he not perceive that the calm before him was so deceitful as that which preceded the wild and furious cyclone? It is a curious fatality, which, at times seems to throw a glamor over eyes, and, at others, to possess the keen, piercing gaze of the eagle.

For some time Fenton and Marcia sat engaged in earnest conversation, and it was only by making the utmost haste that the former arrived at the club in time to keep the appointment with Basil Desborough.

As Marcia closed the door after him, a glow of triumph seemed to irradiate her whole beautiful face and form, she raised her shapely head as though to register a vow, and her lips moved though no words were audible.

Not only have I found out where our fair songstress resides, said Fenton to Basil Desborough, but I have obtained permission to introduce you to her; she is truly a magnificent creature.

Thanks, said Desborough rather dryly; but a man so near the eve of his marriage as I am, owes something to his future wife. Curiosity concerning the owner of an uncommon voice, and an introduction to a street ballad singer are two different things.

Despite his good-humor and frankness, people found it very difficult to move Basil from a once formed resolution, and Fenton immediately perceived his difficulty. But a meeting between Marcia and Basil he had resolved should take place, and before his iron will and

gigantic selfishness every obstacle must eventually succumb.

Basil Desborough was engaged to the richest heiress in the city of New York, a young girl, an orphan from her earliest years, and who had not yet appeared in society. She was a beautiful creature, with just the faults and virtues, in a degree, one would expect from a training such as hers had been, entirely conducted by strangers. But the natural nobility of her character, unformed as it yet was, had, to a great extent, counteracted its baneful effects, and a more charming, lovable girl did not exist than Maria, or, as she was generally called May Carlyon.

She was spending her summer at a quiet little retreat among the hills, with her former governess, and there Basil expected to join her in the course of a couple of weeks. They were to be married during the autumn.

Basil was detained in New York during this period, by some of those duties entailed on large land-owners; but the instant this business was concluded, he left for Fern Nook, and arrived there on the evening of the second day after leaving New York. He had a true love of the country, and, as he checked his horse in view of the cottage, having ridden in preference to driving from the station five miles away, he sat quietly for a few minutes in intense enjoyment of the beauty of the scene, the balmy, golden quiet of the hour.

The road wound down the side of a hill through groves of towering elms and leafy, murmuring maples, through which the level sunbeams glanced and quivered like liquid gold. A mountain stream leaped along beside the road, and, in the tiny valley below, expanded into a miniature lake, on the further bank of which stood the cottage, its high, fantastic, peaked roof and quaint gables peeping out from a perfect grove of flowering trees, while a couple of gigantic shade trees stood like huge sentinels on either side of this charming little nest.

On the bosom of the lake, a light shallop was idly floating. It contained two figures, one of whom, with the keen sight of a lover, Basil recognized as that of May; and the second he supposed to be Mrs. Orme, her quondam governess and present chaperone.

To attract their attention, he called aloud, and waved his handkerchief; and when he saw that his presence was perceived, he galloped round the lake, and arrived at the little landing just as the shallop darted to within a few feet of the shore, in time to assist the ladies to land, and to see that May's companion was not Mrs. Orme.

The most beautiful woman I have ever seen, was his first thought, as his gaze fell on her; then his loyal heart and eyes returned to May.

Had Milo's Venus descended from her pedestal in the Douver, aglow with the rosy tints of life, he would have admired her heartily, and turned with undiminished affection to the slight young creature at his side, with her innocent, girlish graces and sweet gray eyes.

They were a thoroughly well-bred pair, and her slender white hand released itself from his earnest grasp, to indicate her companion, with a pretty little gesture.

My friend, Mrs. Marchmont, Mr. Basil Desborough.

Basil bowed, wondering much where May had discovered Mrs. Marchmont, this beautiful woman, whose name he had never heard before. Mrs. Marchmont extended her hand to him with a soft, dreamy smile, and a pensive sweetness in her dusky eyes and low voice, as she said—

May's friend must be mine, Mr. Desborough. I am glad to see you.

There was such an ineffable atmosphere of graceful elegance surrounding her, that her slightest action was replete with it, and her simply worded welcome, from the expressive tones of her harmoniously modulated voice, seemed to contain a volume of meaning.

She was dressed in a kind of reminiscence of grief, to wit, some cloudy, much puffed robe of silvery gray, with ruffles of violet ribbon; and the dusky brown waves of her chignon were partially concealed by a thick black tulle hat, with a wreath of white violets, and a subtle and intoxicating odor of the same seemed to diffuse itself in the air surrounding her. Though several years older than slight, little May, she had not yet lost the bloom of youth; and the delicate pink in her cheeks was like the glowing of a rose through a shade of creamy hue. She was just middle height, with an assured, yet undulating grace of figure and movement quite different to the elastic buoyancy of May's.

There is no more dangerous or seductive companion in the world than a young widow, and such Basil was not long in finding out Mrs. Marchmont to be. That she had loved the late Mr. Marchmont, there could be little doubt, for an air of sadness never left her features, and, if possible, rendered her more attractive and fascinating than by nature she was; and any mention of him seemed to pain her so that all took care

not to grieve her by any reference to him.

On reaching the cottage porch, she went in, leaving Basil and May alone together in the shadow of the clustering jessamine. In answer to Desborough's rather anxious inquiries, May gave him a detailed and eager account of how this lovely Mrs. Marchmont had arrived, about ten days before, at the country inn, half a mile away from Fern Nook; and how, meeting in all their walks, they had formed such an affection for her that she had, on the previous day, invited her to make a prolonged stay at the cottage.

She had so much delicacy and taste, continued May, clasping her delicate hands round Basil's arm, and looking up into his face, where she saw a cloud which she naturally laid to the account of the anticipated interruption her presence would be to the lover's *tete-a-tetes*, that I know, darling, she won't make you one bit jealous.

Basil sighed a little impatiently. My impulsive little treasure, he said, you don't understand these things. But tell me, what does Mrs. Orme think of this beautiful unknown widow?

Everything that is nice and kind, replied May, joyfully.

She must be a kind of enchantress, then, said Basil, smiling, as he thought of sour, precise Mrs. Orme's saying everything that was nice and kind of anybody.

Just the very epithet for her, she said; what a dear, clever old boy you are.

Here the subject of Mrs. Marchmont was dismissed, and they glided into that delightful sea of tender nonsense in which lovers, especially young ones delight. Basil was two-and-twenty, while May, sweet May, was seventeen.

Mrs. Marchmont was an established fact at Fern Nook, and, to tell its inmates, a very charming and pleasant one indeed. To generous, impulsive May, her beauty and sweetness seemed like those of an angel; and the sour but good-hearted Mrs. Orme never tired of finding out new, good qualities in her disposition and character. Basil even felt ashamed of his misgivings concerning her, and never offended May now by a clouded brow when she sung her friend's praise. She seemed to blend at once into their quiet home life, and with rare tact devoted herself chiefly to Mrs. Orme, in order to leave the young lovers free to follow their own inclinations, and to enjoy each other's society *AD LIBITUM*.

One evening, when they had walked out among the hills, and Mrs. Orme was confined to her apartment with a severe headache, Mrs. Marchmont found herself the sole occupant of the pretty little drawing-room. Taking a seat in one of those graceful sloping chairs in the low window, with a volume of Tennyson open on her knee, she resigned herself to a state that was neither reverent nor complete mental rest.

The window was of stained glass, and the evening sun threw gorgeous patches of ruby and gold in a kind of shower round her, staining her white dress with Tyrian dyes, and throwing a quaint and fantastic coloring over her dusky beauty; a kind of amber glory fell around her head and throat, and formed a faint reflection in her dreamy eyes and misty waves of hair. Her slender hands were clasped lightly over the open page, and the position of her head, thrown back against the narrow velvet back of the chair, displayed the exquisite lines of throat, chin and bust to perfection.

There was nothing instantly dazzling about her beauty, but a sense of it grew on you until it completely filled your soul, and left nothing to be desired or added. The perfumed quiet of the room, and the golden warmth of the hour, all were alike conducive to repose, and a light sleep closed her eyes as she sat thus.

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