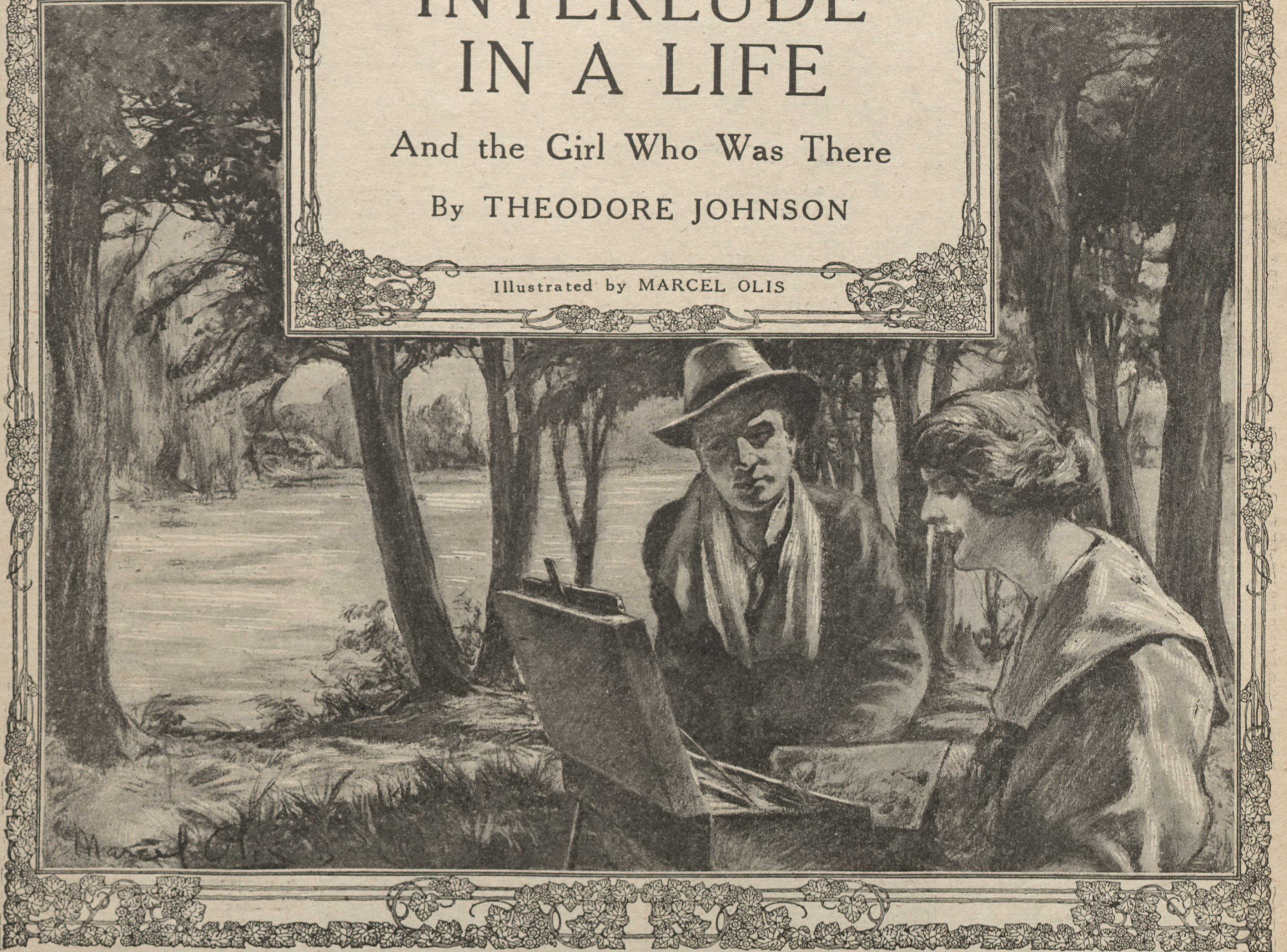


AN INTERLUDE IN A LIFE

And the Girl Who Was There

By THEODORE JOHNSON

Illustrated by MARCEL OLIS



THE summer breeze whispered lazily among the tree tops; overhead was the deep blue of a July sky, fading to the pale colour of forget-me-nots toward the horizon. A few clouds, snowy white, billowed and unfurled their folds of down, as though the gods, new-waked from slumber, had called a drowsy wind to scatter and renew the Olympian couches.

The river wound its quiet way among the pastures, whispering so low the while, that the willows must bend to catch the message. From the distance, now faintly heard, now half imagined, came the hum and click of machinery, for hay making had begun.

Seated near the river in the shade of a tree, Myra was sketching; her back toward the upper reaches of the stream. It was because of that, and also because she was so engrossed with her work, that the advent of the stranger came unnoticed. He was tall and slim, with slightly stooping shoulders; he wore an ill-fitting grey flannel suit, while a towel round his shoulders proclaimed what his occupation had lately been.

"Too much detail!" Myra started.

"Oh! how you startled me!" she exclaimed.

"I must apologise," said the stranger, bowing, but without lifting his panama hat. "The fact is I was talking to myself."

Myra was silent; she was not desirous of conversation with a total stranger. The man in grey did not move.

"It's true, all the same," he said, "there is too much detail."

"Are you an artist?" enquired the girl.

"Am I? I'm not quite sure. Years ago, I forget how many—centuries surely—I exhibited pictures at the Royal Academy."

"Why not now?"

"Oh, my health broke down. Come now, there's a freemasonry among artists. Your style is good, your soul is artistic. Let me give you a few hints," and without waiting to hear any protests, the stranger proceeded to give advice with regard to the sketch, which Myra could not but own was excellent.

Under his directions the picture grew into life; the girl's artistic nature responded readily to the guidance of a master hand, till the very drowsiness of the air, and even

the indescribable sounds of a warm day by the river seemed to mingle in the colours of the sketch.

Myra thanked him, and as she did so, noticed for the first time the look of refinement, the clear eye, the broad, intellectual forehead, the sensitive mouth. But what struck her most forcibly about the man was the sadness of his dark brown eyes; even though the lips were smiling, always there seemed to be gazing from those eyes the hopeless misery of a soul in prison. He was smiling now.

"Look!" he said, "isn't that a delightful corner? You see where I mean! The back-water runs up toward the farm, and the light just catches the red tiles of a roof, while all the rest takes the shadow of the trees. There's the splash of red in the water again, and the leaning willows are reflected, too."

Myra arranged her easel afresh, and prepared to pencil in the outlines.

"You must see how much you can remember of my teaching," said the man, with a far-away look in his eyes. "I'm going to tell you a story. Stop me when you're bored, and ask me anything you want to know."

HE lay, full length, on the grass, and, feeling in his pockets, produced a cigarette case and a box of matches, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"The story I'm going to tell you," he began, "is true. It all happened ten years ago. I am thirty-five now, though I must look over forty. . . . A friend of mine, an artist like myself, was guardian to a little cousin of his, a girl fresh from school. They had grown up together, and were just like brother and sister, for Rosalind was an orphan. We will call my friend 'Thomas,' because that wasn't his name.

"Thomas' father and mother both died before he was of age, and he was left in rather an awkward predicament. He would have found a home for Rosalind somewhere, for his own quarters were rather Bohemian and uncivilised, but she wouldn't go. They were devoted to each other, those two. Not in a sentimental way, you understand. Thomas had a very strong prejudice about cousins marrying, and he never thought of Rosalind in that way at all. He just loved her!—loved her with the best kind of love there is; and you may take it from me, that between him and his old housekeeper there was good order kept at his place when the men came buzzing 'round to smoke

and talk and sing, and get a glimpse of Rosalind. She was pretty, too! Of course she soon grew up, more quickly than most girls. There's something about keeping a host of admirers at bay that quickens a girl's wits and teaches her self-possession. Not that she was spoilt; a more unaffected, simple-hearted girl it would be difficult to find. She was just a good comrade to all the men, and if she had favourites, none knew it.

"It was her desire to be independent, of what she considered charity from Thomas, that led to the trouble of which I am going to tell you. He was then very poor, and she had just a small annuity, enough to buy her own clothes by exercising strict economy. The idea that possessed her was that she could earn money on the stage. Thomas at first protested, but finally gave in. He saw the force of Rosalind's argument, that if she could earn her own living, there would be no anxiety about the future.

"I don't want to have to marry for money," she said, "and I don't want to marry any one at all unless Mr. Right comes along. Just think, dear old boy, if you were ill and couldn't work, we should be up a very tall tree!"

"So it was settled. There were several men whom they knew who had a little influence in stage-land, and between them they found a place for Rosalind in a very small part. With the money so obtained she was enabled to attend a School of Dramatic Art, where she made many girl friends, and it was through one of these that she met Brunton. Brunton was an idler, cursed with a comfortable competence. He did nothing useful, and the old adage about idle hands and the Devil, came true in his case. Thomas did not know him. In fact, he hardly knew of his existence till the engagement was announced. There was no doubt that Rosalind had altered her lover's life; it was this sense of power that made her love him. Her maternal instinct yearned over this young scapegrace, and for three years the man kept straight. He gave up drink altogether. Thomas was not pleased, and the more he learned about his antecedents, the less pleased he was.

"Still, the girl had made up her mind, and nothing could shake her. A year after the engagement was announced, they were married. As I said, Brunton kept straight for three years under Rosalind's influence. It was thus two years after they were married that the trouble began. One night Stephen Brunton came home horribly drunk. Rosalind was (Continued on page 38)