

MARCH.

(From "The Harp and Plow," by the Peasant Bard.)

Since Bryant touched his harp for thee,
And sang thee in his tuneful strains,
How feeble the attempt in me
To sing thy winds and chequered plains!

But still, thy airs so freely blown
Awake an answering chord: to me
Thy music is thy piping tone,
Thy march is full of melody.

Thou call'st the rabbit from her lair,
And wonder beams in pussy's eyes,
O'er the flecked hill-side, wearing bare,
With thy mad winds a race she tries.

Yonder the smoky column gray
Is wreathing from the leafless wood:
There the swart rustic boils away
The sugar-maple's limpid blood.

There in his lonely camp he stays
And keeps his hermit fire aglow:
And feels relieved when o'er him strays
The halloo, reconnoitering crow.

I mark you early bird, and lone,
That plumes herself with idle bill,
Or tries a would-be merry tone
To soothe thy wild and wayward will.

The squirrel peeps from out his cell
When haply Phoebus warms the sky,
And hastes his moody mate to tell
Glad days are coming by and by.

And they will come; e'en at thy heels
The lengthened hours of April tread;
The earth her bubbling spring unseals,
And verdure vivifies the dead.

Wild month! thy storm-encircled ways
Mind me how good men's lives are pass'd;
Clouds may begirt them all their days,
But sunshine glorifies at last.

The Professor's Darling.

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL.

CHAPTER IV.

SWEET SEVENTEEN.

Although she had never crossed the threshold of a school, few children were so well grounded in the first principles of a high class education as Stannie was.

Following out a self-invented plan, the Professor was leading her young mind gently to the gates of the classic land in which he himself revelled. While the young Mactavishes and Macphersons learned English, Stannie learnt Latin, and her lesson books were the Professor's own well-worn college volumes.

He did not force her education on; it was a gradual thing—a letter one day, a word the next—perhaps only a story culled and simplified from the olden mythology the day following.

Never was instruction so pleasant to a child before as it was now made to poor Charlie Ross's little daughter.

And so the years rolled on in their natural order till she was seventeen.

Nothing unusual had ever happened to break their somewhat monotonous tenour.

The Professor was ageing prematurely, as most hard students do. The hair above his temples was thinning, and turning silver white.

St. Breeda had accepted it as a fact that he would never marry, and decided that it was positively wicked in a well-to-do man like him never to give a woman the chance of loving him.

Though stationary in St. Breeda so long, Alan Neil had not been idle. The world had learnt his name, and he had made the old college more famous than ever. Strangers came from afar—not students only, to sit humbly at his feet and there learn their later lessons—but white-haired men of letters, who deemed it a privilege to shake his hand.

Other universities had tried repeatedly to lure him away by baits of higher salary and tangible honours, but he had turned a deaf ear to their wiles.

His life and very being had taken such deep root in the little northern town that nothing would ever have power to tempt him from it.

One part of Stannie's education he had given into Mr. Graem's hands at an early period.

Strange to chronicle, but all the same true, Mr. Graem was one of the finest musicians who ever walked in the never-to-be-obliterated tracks of the grand old masters, and thereby hung a short and pathetic tale which no one in St. Breeda ever heard till on a certain evening in the twilight he told it softly to Alan Neil.

His father had been a music master in Edinburgh. "Professor of music" he would have called himself to-day, and so was to have been the son. But his vocal talents were of so high an order that he aspired to shine as an operatic star.

Certainly he was plain-featured to a degree which might with truth be called ugliness; but he could sing, and who cares when the nightingale pours out her flood of silvery notes that her foliage is dull and lustreless!

So he went away in his early youth to Italy to perfect the training begun in Edinburgh, and would have been a success in time—no doubt of that—but he fell in love with a beautiful Tuscan girl, who, like himself, was studying for the stage. She fell ill, and, in her delirium, turned away from him. He was cut to the heart.

She died, however, with a clear brain, and her little brown hand clasped in his.

In her lonely grave, among the oleanders, he buried his heart and his ambition, too.

He left Italy at once, and returning to Edinburgh, commenced the study of theology.

His new life was a startling contrast to the brilliant career which he had planned for himself.

Sitting in his quiet rooms month after month, poring over great tomes collected by defunct doctors of divinity, and mastering their dry orthodoxies, visions of the footlights and the gaudy trappings of the stage, and himself, the hero of the night, standing among trophies of flowers and laurels, would rise up before him, till he felt that he must return to it all, or else go mad.

But the strong, resolute will, inborn in so many Scotchmen, crushed out "the flowers which might have bloomed," and "quenched the lights which might have blazed" one day for him, and a happiness, subdued but real, gradually filled the void which death and buried aspirations had created.

He plodded on through college and the divinity hall, and in course of time was licensed, and, later, ordained minister of St. Breeda.

No one there dreamt what a page of romance was folded away in his bygone life. To his parishioners he was cold and reserved, except in time of trouble or sickness, when he was tender and sympathetic as a woman; and his old associates would never have recognized in the hard-working parish minister the brilliant young tenor whose voice had moved them all to tears long ago when they stood around the Tuscan girl's grave and raised a simple little funeral hymn. Emotion soon checked their voices; but his rang out clear and strong to the close. He never sang again.

"Mr. Graem going to teach Stannie Ross music!" cries Mrs. Mactavish, in amazement, when she heard the intelligence. "He might as well teach her to knit a stocking or make a haggis. Is it the bagpipes or the Jew's harp he plays! I don't believe he knows a piano from a sideboard!"

"I think he does," answered Mrs. Macpherson, sighing softly, as usual. "At any rate, he has got a very grand one. I forget if it's a Broadwood or some other kind of wood from London. There's no room in Alan Neil's house for it, so it stands in the manse drawing-room; but it's a birthday present for Stannie, all the same."

"And he teaches her the scales and five-finger exercises! Are you sure!"

"Quite. I happened to go in one afternoon last week to speak about the Mother Dorcas meeting—it's falling off dreadfully this winter—and he was giving her a lesson. I was quite taken aback, and said that I had no idea that he was a player."

"And what did he say?"

He laughed, and said that he had learnt a little music when he was young, and remembered enough to begin Stannie.

"Well, Alan Neil grows queerer every day. As if Miss Duncan, who teaches my girls, couldn't have taught Stannie! These clever men are all very fine; but for common, practical sense give me a man with just an average amount of brains."

CHAPTER V.

I NEVER CAN FORGIVE YOU

Nothing in this world can go on long the very same.

Even to the Professor changes had to come. That Stannie was a child no longer was a visible fact. She had donned the badge of womanhood, a trailing skirt, and her long hair was gathered up in a shining mass upon her crown.

She still nestled like a bird in his arms, and sought or cared for no society but his and Mr. Graem's; but he began to see a change in his darling.

Something troubled her; something had come to dull her winsome smile, but what it could be was beyond his power of divination.

She would go by herself, and wander for hours in the woods, or sit in the deserted college chapel with the marble effigies of by-gone knights and dames.

Her cheeks were often tear-stained, and her bright eyes dull with frequent weeping.

He questioned her softly, even tenderly, as to the cause, but she never answered him, and would say that he was growing fanciful, and would change the subject with a laugh.

She took to going more frequently than ever to the house, oftener even than the fact of her piano being there warranted.

And after these visits she appeared more dejected than ever.

The Professor was at his wit's end what to make of this new phase of matters. So one evening, putting on his broad felt hat, he walked across the meadow-field which separated his house from the Manse glebe, and asked Mr. Graem if he could see him quite alone for an hour.

The minister was always delighted when the Professor stepped over to have a quiet chat with him, but now there was something in his manner which scarcely betokened enjoyment when he noted the marked emphasis laid on the words "quite alone." Without, however, betraying any surprise, he led the way to his study, and carefully closed the door behind them.

The Professor walked to the window, and

gazed from it in silence. The sun had just gone down in flames of purple and crimson, and the after-glow illuminated the mountains with a transient bright glory.

"Those hills are often a comfort to me, Graem," Alan said, still continuing to gaze on them. "I think they keep me here more than anything else. Go where I might, there would never be hills like these. I love them in all their aspects, bright and sun-bathed, or with the mists clinging to their sides in fleecy clouds, or mantled in snow. There's nothing like the hills for lifting your thoughts from the littleness of the finite to the vastness of the infinite."

"I think that feeling is natural to one who has lived under their shadow so long as you have; I begin to realize it a little now myself. I did not at first."

"Graem," said the Professor, suddenly wheeling round, and facing him, "do you know what is the matter with Stannie?"

"I do," answered the minister, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

"I thought as much! She has confided in you rather than me, who has been as a father to her since she was three years old. Where have I failed in my duty, that the child turns from me in her first trouble, whatever it may be, and comes to you?"

"You have not failed, Neil—you have been everything to her. She would be the first herself to say so."

"Then why did she come to you when she was in distress? Can you tell me what is wrong without violating the confidence reposed in you?"

"I can. Only this afternoon she asked me to tell you."

The Professor sighed, and looked out once more towards the hills; the purple reflections had vanished, and the evening shadows were settling darkly on them.

"Sit down, Neil, you can listen better sitting—at least, it will be more comfortable."

"Thanks. I prefer standing. Well, I am waiting. What has come to the child?"

"She wishes to leave St. Breeda."

Mr. Graem paused to note the effect of his announcement, but none was visible.

Alan Neil still stood with folded arms, looking across the moorland to the darkling hills.

"She is unhappy here."

He paused again for a word or sign from the Professor, but none came, only he saw that he turned very pale.

Mr. Graem had undertaken a harder task than he knew how to perform.

He could proceed no further; the words died upon his lips.

A long silence ensued—at least, it seemed so to the two men standing there; in reality, it was only about three minutes. Then Graem commenced again.

"She is a splendid singer; far beyond the average. You must have often remarked it, have you not?"

"Yes. So was her mother before her. Thanks to you, she has been well trained, but what has that to do with the matter on hand?"

"Everything," replied Mr. Graem, speaking rapidly. The ice was fairly broken at last, and the sooner he made a clean breast of it all, the better. "Everything. She wishes to go away and make a name for herself, to shine one day in the great world." And he pointed southward as he spoke.

"I do not understand you. Speak plainly!"

"I cannot put it plainer. She wishes to become a great singer—a professional singer—but fears that you will never consent."

The Professor staggered forward like a drunken man, and for the first time in all his life an oath came hissing out from between his set teeth.

He glared at the minister like a wild animal about to spring on his prey, and that worthy shrank cowering from his gaze.

"This is your doing, Graem," he said, fiercely. "Why have you done this! Why have you used her to resuscitate your own old dreams? I never will forgive you—never, never! I could sell you down like an ox as you stand there. You have spoiled her life, and mine, too!"

"I did not do it intentionally, I will swear to that! I have used no undue influence!"

"You must—you have, or it had never come to this. How dare you deny it?"

"She has a rare voice, and it was a great pleasure for me to train it. About a year ago I happened one day to mention casually that she might be famous if she cared to be so. She asked how, and I told her that a voice like hers would ring all over Europe, if it only had the chance to be heard. Forgive me, Neil; I had no idea what I was doing when I said it! My heart is weak and soft when I think on the old days in Italy. I told her how brilliant and honourable a gifted singer's life might be. I told her how intoxicating is success; that no one knew what happiness really was, or meant, until they stood, the recognized idol of an adoring public. I wish now that I had been struck dumb before I let my tongue run on as it did, but I thought that she would forget it in an hour, or a day at longest. Instead of that—oh, Neil, don't look at me in that way, I love the child almost as you do yourself—she pondered over it, and returned to the subject time after time; and as I have said, she came to-day and pleaded that I should speak to you—that I should ask you to let her go. She could not do it herself; she knows what she is to you, and how hard it would be to part with her. I shall wish that I had never seen her, or you either,

if you are going to blame me. Will you not forgive me, Neil?"

"I cannot! You have done the child a wrong which I may never be able to repair. You have shown her the gilded side of things, the stage in all its garish pomp. You never told her of the temptations which would beset her at every corner: of the possible failures and bitter disappointments; of the rough road over which her feet must travel to reach the reward if she ever did attain it, and how empty and frothy fame is, after all. I know what it is. To me it came early, and after it's first young flush it palled on me, then and for ever. She was happy before you put such wild chimeras into her head. Forgive you! No, never! How dare you expect it?"

"You misjudge me cruelly. I showed her both sides; I even drew upon my imagination, but it was too late. I told her how short and uncertain is a public idol's career, and how humbling it must be to be set aside for the first new face and fresh voice. She said then that she would not care; if she only had her day, how brief it was, but that she must have it!"

"She cannot," said the Professor, sternly. "I shall never let her touch a piano again—shall forbid her to sing another note; this craze or fancy must be nipped in the bud."

"You cannot compel the lark to be mute," said Mr. Graem, sadly. "And why should you attempt it! Our talents are given to us to be used for noble ends. A splendid career must be in store for her. Why not let her have her heart's desire?"

"Are you dolted, Graem! Let Stannie sing before a gaping, vulgar crowd! Though all the crowned heads in Europe were to hear her, Charlie Ross's daughter should never, with my consent, be a public gazing-stock!" said the Professor, moving towards the door.

"Are you going home! Supper must be nearly ready; you had better stay and have something."

But the Professor was already in the passage, and opening the outer door, and Mr. Graem did not dare to follow him.

Alan Neil lingered an instant in the porch, and once more looked towards the hills which had so often brought peace and soothing to him in times of perplexity; but the curtains of night had fallen on them and him.

He walked back across the meadow, feeling an altered and a disappointed man.

He had striven hard to do his best for Charlie and Katey's child, and this was the result—she was pining to leave him for a life which he considered utterly abhorrent. Mrs. Mactavish had been right, after all.

He paused at the door of the little drawing-room where he knew that Stannie would be sitting, and put out his hand to turn the handle, then drew it quickly back again.

"Not to-night," he murmured—"not to-night! I could not bear to see her!"

And turning away, he went to his study, and wrote a letter.

It was as follows:—

"DEAR MR. HUNTER,—

"Fourteen years ago you promised to come to St. Breeda if ever Stansmore was in trouble, and required other help and counsel than mine. Can you come at once?"

"Yours faithfully,

"ALAN NEIL."

The town house-clock had clanged out the twelve metallic strokes which indicated midnight, and the lights in St. Breeda had gone out one by one; but in College Bounds two lamps burned steadily on till morning.

Pacing his sparsely-furnished little chamber, Alan Neil passed the long, silent hours. He felt that he had committed grave mistakes, which a little thought, and a little listening to the advice he had so persistently rejected, might have averted.

Far better had he insisted on Stannie's mixing with other children in their sports and pastimes; far better if he had sent her to school, instead of teaching her himself, and had had faith in Miss Duncan's musical abilities.

A public singer! He had said the words over and over to himself, and his whole nature recoiled from their very sound. A public life of any kind for a woman was incompatible with all his ideas of propriety.

But if he refused her, she might pine, and silently break her heart.

What course should he adopt? What do! How act? Alas! he knew not!

CHAPTER VI.

HER HEART'S DESIRE.

Stannie watched the professor cross the fields to the Manse, and knew that when he returned Mr. Graem would have told him all. With the telling the worst would be over.

It would be hard to win his consent, but it must come in time. He had never refused her anything, and would not now, where such a brilliant future was awaiting her.

The possibility of failure never occurred to her—never for a brief second held a place in her planning. She was not selfish, this isolated young creature, who had grown up with only the companionship of two quiet, retiring men. She would have endured poverty and privation without complaining, would have sacrificed much if her uncle Alan could have benefited by it in any way, for he reigned paramount in her affections. She thought that there was no one like him in the world for wisdom, goodness and kindness. She had obeyed him implicitly all her life until now. True, his had been a gentle