

Literature, &c.

The American Magazines
FOR MAY.

From Graham's Magazine.

MARGARET'S WELL:

A TALE OF THE GREAT CIVIL WAR.

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Traitor,' etc.

It was towards the close of a lovely summer's day, in the eventful year of 1643, that a young cavalier might have been seen riding at a slow pace, and in a somewhat sad and thoughtful mood, through a green and winding lane in the pleasant county of Warwick, not far distant from the pastoral banks of famous Avon.

But though the young man's brow was now overcast and clouded, though his fine gray eye was fixed abstractedly on the mane of his charger, and though a heavy shadow, such as is believed by the superstitious to arise from the presence of coming fate, gloomed over all his features, it was evident that such an expression was alien to the face, such a mood unusual to the character of the man.

He was as handsome a youth as you might see in a twelvemonth, even in that land, so justly famed for the manly beauty of her sons; tall and well made, and giving promise of uncommon strength and vigor, when mature manhood should have swelled and hardened his slender form and yet unfurnished muscles. His face was frank and open, with a fair broad forehead, a well opened, laughing, deep gray eye, and a mouth, the dimpled angles of which could not be divested of their natural tendency to smile, even by the heavy despondency which seemed now to weigh upon his spirit, and alter his whole countenance, even as a sunny landscape is altered by the intervention of a storm cloud, blotting out all the laughing rays, which gave it mirth and radiance.

He was well mounted on a horse that seemed adapted, by its mingled blood and bone, to bide the shock of armies, and compared with demipique and holsters, as became the war steed of an officer. Nor did the rider's dress though not what we would call military, contradict the inferences that would be drawn from the charger's make and accoutrements; for in his steeple-crowned slouched beaver he wore a single long black feather, and across the left breast of his velvet jerkin a baldrick of blue silk, sustaining a sword of heavier and more warlike fabric than the court rapiers of the day—the baldrick and the feather indicating a partisan of the king, as clearly as the sword and war horse showed that he was bound on some longer and more perilous adventure than a ride through rich green meadows and among flowery hedges.

He rode quite alone, however, which was at that day something unusual; for the custom of going forth accompanied by several armed servants or retainers, even in times of profound peace, was still prevalent among men of any pretensions to gentle birth, and such, unless every indication of natural appearance, gentle bearing, and free demeanor failed, was evidently this young cavalier.

The sun was perhaps still an hour high, and the skies were filled with rich yellow lustre, while all the face of the green country was checkered with bright gleams and massive shadows, according as the level rays streamed gaily over the open fields, or were intercepted by the undulation of the ground, the frequent clumps of trees and patches of dark woodland, or the thick hawthorn hedges which diversified that pleasant landscape, when the lane which the young man followed began to rise rapidly over the eastern slope of a deep hill or down, the summit of which, a bare wild sheep pasture, cut clear and solid against the rich gleam of the sun-set heavens.

Here, for the first time, the youth raised his eyes, and after casting a rapid glance over the evening skies, as if to read the hour in the fading hues of day, checked his horse with the curb, and touching him at the same time slightly with the spur, centred up the ascent with more animation in his air than he had hitherto displayed, and with a slight gesture of impatience as if at the unexpected lateness of the hour.

A few minutes rapid riding brought him to the edge of the bare down, which was in fact a mere ridge, with but a few level yards at the summit, beyond these, sinking down almost precipitately into a singular lap or basin of land, nearly circular in form, and about two miles in diameter, walled in as it were from the external world, on every side by tall, bare, grassy downs, treeless and bleak, without a sign of human habitation or of human culture, and limiting the range of the eye to that narrow and cheerless horizon.

Looking downward into the hollow, the scene was, however, entirely different; for all the bottom of the basin, and all the lower slopes of the hills were covered with dark shadowy woods, the gigantic trees and massive foliage of which bore witness alike to their great antiquity, and to the mild and favourable situation, sheltered from every wind of heaven, which had induced their natural growth. The hills at this hour intercepted all the light of the setting sun, and the whole space within the valley was filled with a misty purple shadow; through which, from out the glades and skirts of the black woods, the silvery gleam of many clear, still ponds met

the eye; and beyond these, nearly in the centre of the landscape, the tall gables and twisted chimneys of an old dark-red Hall, with a solitary column of blue smoke soaring up straight into the cloudless sky, arose the only indication in that wild scene of the vicinity of any human being.

But although we have paused a moment on the bare brow of Clavering Edge, to point the reader's eye to this sequestered spot, the youth in whose company we have journeyed hither, made no such pause; but, too impatient to reach the end of his ride, turned his horse's head short to the left, and trotted, as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, along a faintly marked foot path which traversed the hill side in a diagonal line, the steepness of the declivity forbidding any more direct progress to the bottom, leading to a narrow gorge which ran half way up the ascent, feathered with rich dark timber.

As soon as he reached the covert of the woodland he dismounted, and leading his horse a little way aside from the path, fastened him by the chain of his cavalry head-stall to a tall ash tree in the centre of a thick coppice. Then with a rapid step, he hurried down the path, which became every moment more clearly defined, as it followed a clear rapid brook of slender volume along the gorge, which gradually widened into a beautiful wooded valley. Within ten minutes he came to a tall park paling of solid oaken plank, at least ten feet in height, all overrun with the giant ivy which flourishes so verdantly in moist situations, affording access to the park within only by a low wooden portal, closed by an antique iron lock of large dimensions.

This formidable barrier was, however, easily passed by the cavalier; the lock giving way easily, and notwithstanding its rusty guise smoothly enough, to a key which he drew from the bosom of his jerkin. Before opening it altogether he paused, however for a moment, and gazed anxiously through the chink, to see, as it would seem, if there were any one observing him. Then satisfied that all was safe he passed in quickly, closing the door with a noiseless hand after him, but taking especial care not to lock it against his own egress.

Within, the scenery was very beautiful, though still impressed with the same character of loneliness, and almost weighing on the spirits by its unnatural and almost awful silence and repose. The glen expanded rapidly, sloping from the park paling downwards towards the mansion, but so thick were the woods on either slope and in the bottom, that nothing could be distinguished in the foreground but the huge trunks of the giant oaks and beeches with the tall lady fern growing in rank luxuriance under them, nor anything in the distance but the twilight foliage of their heads, as they descended rank below rank in the great amphitheatre. Even at this early hour indeed, that deeply wooded dell would have already been as dark as midnight, save that down its centre there ran a chain of long, narrow shallow fish ponds, each raised by a dam above that next below it, until they reached the level bottom ground; all overarched, it is true, with shadowy branches, but all reflecting the last western gleam which stole in through the arch of leaves, dark as the portal of some Gothic aisle, through which the eye caught a glimpse of a smooth grassy lawn, glimmering in the dewy twilight.

Between the young man and the head of this chain of ponds there lay a belt of thick alders, with here and there a stunted willow, fringing the margin of the brook which fed them, and separating it from the path which gave access to them from above, and to the lawn below, and thence to the garden and the hall.

Along this path he now bounded with a light and impatient step, as if anxious to discover something which might be hidden from his eyes by its leafy barrier; a few paces brought him to the termination of the brake, and to a large clear tank, immediately beyond it, fed by the brook, and itself the feeder of the calm pools below. It was perhaps three yards in length by two in breadth, walled on all sides with solid masonry, and partly covered at the head over the inlet of the stream by a groined arch of stone-work; on every side the ground sloped down to it, covered with deep rank grass, and above it six or seven enormous elm trees shadowed it with a constant gloom. The water within was as transparent as glass, showing the sandy bottom in all parts though of extraordinary depth, with the pure cold springs boiling up from half a dozen little whirlpools, and sending their trains of sparkling bubbles, like the tails of so many comets, through the limped darkness of the pool.

And here once more, the young man paused and gazed anxiously about him, and down the walk towards the quiet lawn. Then seeing that he was alone, and that there was no person in sight, even at a distance, he cast himself down on the turf at the foot of one of the great elms, where the shadows would conceal him from any casual observer's glance; crossed his arm on his breast with a sort of impatient resignation, and muttered to himself half angrily—

'Tis past the hour, and yet she is not here. Oh! if she knew, if she but knew what a hell it kindles in my heart to be kept waiting, to be set doubting, to be tormented thus. But no! he added in a moment, as if reproving his own vehemence. 'No, no! something has fallen wrong—something has hindered or delayed her. And yet what could it be? can we have been betrayed, discovered? God! he exclaimed, springing again to his feet, 'great God forgive me! as I cannot endure this any

longer. Away with my word when hers is broken thus! away, I will go and seek her even in—'

But as he made the first motion to take the path leading towards the house, his impetuosity was arrested, and his harsh speech cut off, by the apparition of a figure entering the verdant arch from the lawn, and advancing with a slow and hesitating step, as if timid or reluctant, towards the tank and the upper glen.

The young man's heart beat rapidly and high, as that form, distinguishable only in the increasing duskiness of the evening by its relief against the twilight sky; entered the green arcade, and it was a minute or two before he could discern with any certainty the sex, much less the identity of the person approaching him.

There is however, in the senses of a lover something intuitive, that can for the most part discern unerringly the presence of the beloved object, by sounds, by signs, perhaps even by perfumes, so slight as to be imperceptible to any one, whose every nerve were not supernaturally sharpened by the influences of passion. Something it must have been of this amorous prescience, which rendered the cavalier almost certain, long ere the eye could inform him, that the figure approaching was no other than the person to meet whom he had ridden hither, and whose delay had caused him so much anxiety.

Nor was he deceived; for ere long the fluttering of female habiliments, might be distinguished clearly, and in another moment the well known sounds of the light gentle foot-step, and the silvery tones of the soft low voice assured him.

He bounded from his covert to meet her, and she too quickened her pace, as she saw and recognised her lover.

She was as beautiful a girl of some eighteen or nineteen years, as ever gladdened the heart of man. Considerably higher than the ordinary height of woman, her figure, though very delicate and slender, with feet and ankles of the smallest and most fairy model, was yet so exquisitely rounded, so perfect in the rise and fall of every graceful and voluptuous outline, that it was not until you stood beside her, and compared her stature with your own that you perceived how far she overtopped her fellow fair ones in height as in beauty. Her face was of perfect Grecian outline, with large soft gentle eyes, like violets surcharged with dew, and a mouth the most beautiful that ever adorned female face, both for shape, colour and expression; an expression so soft and so wooing that it would almost have been thought sensual, but for the candid, artless innocence, not all unblended with a touch of pensive melancholy, which breathed from every other feature of that most lovely and love-inspiring countenance.

Her hair, profuse even to rejoindance, of the richest and sunniest brown, with a golden tinge running through it where it met the light, fell down in soft and silky masses on either side of the pale oval face, and the swan-like neck, and waved in floods of heavy ringlets over the splendid arch of her falling shoulders, and the dazzling fairness of her bust, so far as it was shown by the square cut bodice of her dark velvet dress.

'Margaret,' said the young man as he sprang forward joyously to meet her, 'my own sweet Margaret, is it at length thou? Oh! I have so long tarried, and so—'

'Sorely tormented thyself, Lionel,' interrupted the fair girl, 'is it not so? tormented thyself with fears of I know not what, and doubts of poor Margaret, that thou wert even half mad, between jealousy and apprehension! Now out upon thee for a self tormentor, and most discourtous knight, to misdoubt thus thy true lady's word. For I did not promise thee, Lionel?' she added, laying aside the playful air in which she had at first addressed him, and speaking now in the gentle but earnest tones of pure calm affection, 'did I not promise that I would meet you here this evening, and when did I ever fail in my promise? Oh Lionel,' she continued laying her hand fondly on his arm, and looking full into his eyes, with those large dark orbs of hers swimming in mournful languor, 'how, when I see you thus fiercely moved, thus rendered doubtful and suspicious and unhappy by things of so slight moment, how can I hope that you will bear the real crosses and afflictions, the genuine woes and trials, of which so great a portion of life is composed, with that serene and manly dignity, that resolute and noble patience, which alone at the end can make yourself or those who love you happy? Oh cast this temper Lionel, nay but subdue it altogether; and do not, do not my beloved, make me too doubt and tremble for my future.'

'Beautiful counsellor,' he answered, 'I listen to your eloquent words, your womanly and graceful counsels, and while I listen I would swear to guard them as my soul's best guides; would swear to abide by them forever; but when once your lovely face has banished from before my eyes, when once your sweet voice sounds in my ears no longer, when I am once again alone, and all around me is left void and cheerless, then my heart burns apace and my imagination darkens, and of my very craving and insatiate desire for your dear presence grows fear of everything on earth, and almost doubt of every thing in heaven. But be once mine, let the dark dread of losing you forever be effaced from my mind, and you shall see me calm and patient as—as thyself dear Margaret.'

'Ah you are selfish, dear Lionel,' she answered. 'Your very love makes you selfish,

and in the warmth of your own passions, in the anxiety of your own impatience, you forget that I too have my trials to endure, that I too wax at times impatient under the cold restraint the small punctualities that fetter me, that I too—' and she paused in beatific hesitation for a moment until she marked the pleading glance, which he cast to her eyes—'that I too love and dare not disclose that love, Lionel.'

'Ay, that is it,' he replied moodily. 'All my requests are ever met with 'I dare not,' all my affections cast back coldly on my heart with 'my duty.' I know not how these things should be; I am a poor casuist, Margaret, but I can feel; and I do feel that to genuine, honest, deep-souled true love, there is nothing that may not be dared—that to the plighted there can be no higher duty—'

'Peace, Lionel,' returned the fair girl, gravely, almost severely; 'for if you will speak thus to me, I must not and I will not hear you. You know that, from the first, when I owned that my heart was yours, and promised that my hand should be so likewise, I told you plainly that although nor force, nor flattery, nor fraud, should ever make me the wife of another, yet never would I swerve from a daughter's obedience, though my heart-strings should burst asunder in the strife between my love and my duty. You know all this of old, dear Lionel; then wherefore torture yourself thus, and afflict me, by these wild and unprofitable outbreaks. You are assured that I love you, with all the truth and strength of a young maid's first affection; you have my promise to be yours, or die a heart-widowed maiden, you know, that the obstacles between us are no wise insurmountable; that my good father, although somewhat over tenacious, and self-willed on points which he deems essential, is kind and gracious; that he loved you well.'

'Loved me!' exclaimed the young man, impetuously, 'loved me! ay! fondled me when I was a curled stripling, as one would fondle an ape or a popin-jay! loved me, forsooth! until he found that I aspired to his fair daughter's hand, and then—spurned me—spurned me from his door like a nameless cur! Loved me! Great God! I marvel at you, Margaret!'

'And I both marvel at you, and grieve for you, Lionel,' cried the fair girl, indignantly. 'You are unkind, unreasonable, and ungenerous. I thought you had come hither to say farewell, before riding forth to win honor in the field of loyalty; I thought you had come hither to speak kindly with the woman you pretended to love, the woman whom you may not see again for months, for years, perhaps forever. I thought you had come hither as a man, to console a fond girl's sorrows, to point a sad girl's hopes, to strengthen a frail girl's weakness. I thought you had come hither, nobly and manfully, and generously, as it should besem the king's cavalier, to give and to derive strength for the endurance of long separation, the struggling against hard trial—and how do I find you, captious, unreasonable, jealous-spirited, unkind—seeking to afflict, not to console; to take away, not to give hope; to unnerve, not to strengthen. Now, out upon you, Lionel, I say—out upon you, and for shame! Is this the frame of mind wherein a gentleman should part from the lady of his love? Is this the high prophetic spirit which pointed you erewhile to fields of honor, and to deeds of glory, which should perforce win the consent—the reluctant consent, if you will—of my father, and compel him to be proud of his daughter's chosen husband, even as he was fond of his daughter's youthful playmate? Out upon you, I say, Lionel. It almost shames me to confess that I have loved, to confess that I still love one so high and spirited to aim at great things afar off, so faint-souled when it comes to the touch to win them.'

She spoke fervently, indignantly, and as she spoke her tall form seemed to dilate to a grandeur and more majestic height, and her soft blue eyes flashed, and her pale cheek kindled with the glow of proud and generous emotion.

Lionel gazed at her half in admiration, half in wonder, for though he had seen her in many moods, and admired her loveliness in many guises, never had he seen so much of animation, so much of high-born, haughty fire in her air as at this moment; yet though his mind was moved by her eloquent words; and his heart touched by the justice of her tender, although spirited remonstrance, he answered again ungenerously, resisting the promptings of his better nature, which would have led him to cast himself down at her feet, and confess his injustice and ill-temper; but no; man to the last, unjust to woman, he kicked against the pricks of conscience, and said harshly,

'Proud! proud!—you are proud, too, Margaret. There spoke the temper of Sir Hugh! There spoke the haughty heart of the proud Claverings.'

'And God forbid,' she replied; meeting his gaze with a firm yet melancholy eye, 'that in my tongue should not speak the temper of my noble father—for it is a temper all of loyalty, and nobleness, and honor. God forbid that my breast there should not beat the haughty heart of the Claverings, for in their haughtiness to the high they ever have bore themselves humbly to the low; and in their pride toward the proud and great, they ever have protected the poor and the forlorn. God forbid, I say, Lionel Thornhill, God forbid that I should not be proud—for I am proud only of gentle blood, and gentle deeds, and honorable bearing. And you too sir, should rejoice in that pride of mine; for had I not been proud—too proud to value wealth, or rank; or title, apart from that nobility of soul which alone gives them value, proud enough to esteem the