

THE POET

BY
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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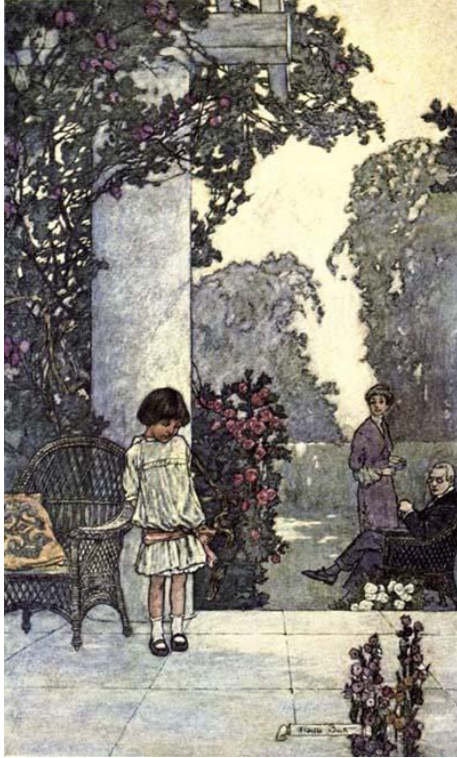
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POOR MARJORIE

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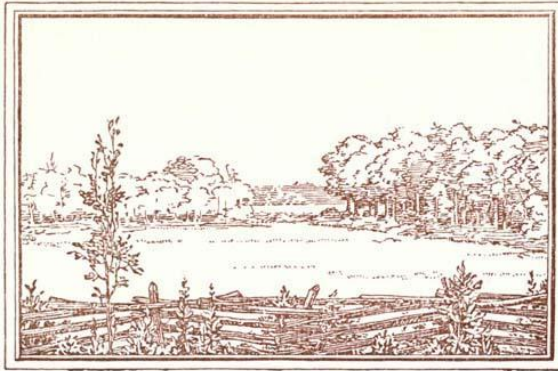
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PART ONE



PART ONE

I

“THE lonesomeness of that little girl over there is becoming painful,” said the Poet from his chair by the hedge. “I can’t make out whether she’s too dressed up to play or whether it’s only shyness.”

“Poor Marjorie!” murmured Mrs. Waring. “We’ve all coaxed her to play, but she won’t budge. By the way, that’s one of the saddest cases we’ve had; it’s heartbreaking, discouraging. Little waifs like Marjorie, whose fathers and mothers can’t hit it off, don’t have a fair chance,—they are handicapped from the start.—Oh, I thought you knew; that’s the Redfields’ little girl.”

The Poet gazed with a new intentness at the dark-haired child of five who stood rigidly at the end of the pergola

with her hands clasped behind her back. The Poet All the People Loved was a philosopher also, but his philosophy was not quite equal to forecasting the destiny of little Marjorie.

“Children,” he observed, “should not be left on the temple steps when the pillars of society crack and rock; the good fairies ought to carry them out of harm’s way. Little Marjorie looks as though she had never smiled.” And then he murmured with characteristic self-mockery,—

“Oh, little child that never smiled—

Somebody might build a poem around that line, but I hope nobody ever will! If that child doesn’t stop looking that way, I shall have to cry or crawl over there on my knees and ride her pickaback.”

Mrs. Waring’s two daughters had been leading the children in a march and dance that now broke up in a romp; and the garden echoed with gleeful laughter. The spell of restraint was broken, and the children began initiating games of their own choosing; but Marjorie stood stolidly gazing at them as though they were of another species. Her nurse, having failed to interest her sad-eyed charge in the games that were delighting the other children, had withdrawn, leaving Marjorie to her own devices.

“She’s always like that,” the girl explained with resignation, “and you can’t do anything with her.”

A tall, fair girl appeared suddenly at the garden entrance. The abrupt manner of her coming, the alert poise of her

figure, as though she had been arrested in flight and had paused only for breath before winging farther, interested the Poet at once.

She stood there as unconscious as though she were the first woman, and against the white gate of the garden was imaginably of kin to the bright goddesses of legend. She was hatless, and the Poet was grateful for this, for a hat, he reflected, should never weigh upon a head so charming, so lifted as though with courage and hope, and faith in the promise of life. A tennis racket held in the hollow of her arm explained her glowing color. Essentially American, he reflected, this young woman, and worthy to stand as a type in his thronging gallery. She so satisfied the eye in that hesitating moment that the Poet shrugged his shoulders impatiently when she threw aside the racket and bounded across the lawn, darting in and out among the children, laughingly eluding small hands thrust out to catch her, and then dropped on her knees before Marjorie. She caught the child's hands, laughed into the sad little face, holding herself away so that the homesick, bewildered heart might have time to adjust itself, and then Marjorie's arms clasped her neck tightly, and the dark head lay close to the golden one.

There was a moment's parley, begun in tears and ending in laughter; and then Marian tripped away with Marjorie, and joined with her in the mazes of a dance that enmeshed the whole company of children in bright ribbons and then freed them again. The Poet, beating time to the music with his hat, wished that Herrick might have been there; it was his habit to think, when something pleased him particularly,

that “Keats would have liked that!”—“Shelley would have made a golden line of this!” He felt songs beating with eager wings at the door of his own heart as his glance followed the fair girl who had so easily turned a child’s tears to laughter. For Marjorie was laughing with the rest now; in ten minutes she was one of them—had found friends and seemed not to mind at all when her good angel dropped out to become a spectator of her happiness.

“I have saved my trousers,” remarked the Poet to Mrs. Waring, who had watched the transformation in silence; “but that girl has spoiled her frock kneeling to Marjorie. I suppose I couldn’t with delicacy offer to reimburse her for the damage. If there were any sort of gallantry in me I would have sacrificed myself, and probably have scared Marjorie to death. If a child should put its arms around me that way and cry on my shoulder and then run off and play, I should be glad to endow laundries to the limit of my bank account. If the Diana who rescued Marjorie has another name—”

“I thought you knew! That’s Marian Agnew, Marjorie’s aunt.”

“I’ve read of her in many books,” said the Poet musingly, “but she’s an elusive person. I might have known that if I would sit in a pleasant garden like this in June and watch children at play, something beautiful would pass this way.”

Mrs. Waring glanced at him quickly, as people usually did to make sure he was not trifling with them.

“You really seem interested in the way she hypnotized Marjorie! Well, to be quite honest, I sent for her to come! She was playing tennis a little farther up the street, but she came running when I sent word that Marjorie was here and that we had all given her up in despair.”

“My first impression was that she had dropped down from heaven or had run away from Olympus. Please don’t ask me to say which I think likelier!”

“I’m sorry to spoil an illusion, but after all Marian is one of the daughters of men; though I remember that when she was ten she told me in solemn confidence that she believed in fairies, because she had seen them—an excellent reason! She graduated from Vassar last year, and I have an idea that college may have shaken her faith in fairies. She’s going to begin teaching school next fall,—she has to do something, you know. She’s an eminently practical person, blessed with a sound appetite, and she can climb a rope, and swim and play tennis all day.”

“The Olympians ate three meals a day, I imagine; and we shouldn’t begrudge this fair-haired Marian her daily bread and butter. Let me see; she’s Marjorie’s aunt; and Marjorie’s father is Miles Redfield. I know Redfield well; his wife was Elizabeth Agnew. I saw a good deal of them in their early married days. They’ve agreed to quit—is that the way of it?”

“How fortunate you are that people don’t tell you gossip! I suppose it’s one of the rewards of being a poet! The whole town has been upset by the Redfields’ troubles;—they have

separated. I've sent Elizabeth up to Waupegan to open my house—made an excuse to get her away. Marjorie's with her grandmother, waiting for the courts to do something about it;—as though courts could do anything about such cases!" she ended with feeling.

The Poet, searching for Marjorie in the throng of children, made no reply.

"You are a poet," Mrs. Waring resumed tauntingly, with the privilege of old friendship, "and have a reputation for knowing the human heart. Why can't you do something about the Redfields' troubles?—there's a fine chance for you! It begins to look as though sentiment, romance, love—all those things you poets have been writing about for thousands of years—have gone out with the old-fashioned roses. I confess that it's because I'm afraid that's true that I'm clinging to all the flowers my grandmother used to love—and I'm nearly seventy and a grandmother myself."

She was still a handsome woman, and the Poet's eyes followed her admiringly as she crossed the lawn, leaving him to find an answer to her question. In the days of his beginnings she had been his steadfast friend, and he was fond of telling her that he had learned the kindness and cheer he put into his poems from her.

She and her assistants were marshaling the children for refreshments under a canopy at the farther corner of the garden, and the animated scene delighted and charmed him. He liked thus to sit apart and observe phases of life,—and

best of all he loved scenes like this that were brightened by the presence of children. He was a bachelor, but the world's children were his; and he studied them, loved them, wrote for them and of them. He was quite alone, as he liked to be often, pondering the misfortunes of the Redfields as lightly limned by Mrs. Waring. Little Marjorie, as she had stood forlornly against the pergola, haunted him still in spite of her capitulation to the charms of her Aunt Marian. He knew perfectly well that Mrs. Waring hadn't meant what she said in her fling about the passing of poetry and romance; she was the last woman in the world to utter such sentiments seriously; but he was aware that many people believed them to be true.

Every day the postman brought him letters in dismaying numbers from people of all sorts and conditions who testified to the validity of his message. The most modest of men, he found it difficult to understand how he reached so many hearts; he refused to believe himself, what some essayist had called him, "a lone piper in the twilight of the poets." With maturity his attitude toward his own genius had changed; and under his joy in the song for the song's sake was a deep, serious feeling of responsibility. It was a high privilege to comfort and uplift so many; and if he were, indeed, one of the apostolic line of poets, he must have a care to keep his altar clean and bright for those who should come after him.

He was so deep in thought that he failed to observe Marian advancing toward him.

“If you please, I have brought you an ice, and there will be cake and bonbons,” said the girl. “And Mrs. Waring said if you didn’t mind I might sit and talk to you.”

“You should be careful,” said the Poet, taking the plate, “about frightening timid men to death. I was thinking about you so hard that my watch and my heart both stopped when you spoke to me.”

“And this,” exclaimed the girl, “from the poet of gracious words! I’ve been told that I’m rather unexpected and generally annoying, but I didn’t know I was so bad as that!”

“Then let us begin all over again,” said the Poet. “Mrs. Waring told me your name and gave you a high reputation as an athlete, and spoke feelingly of your appetite. It’s only fair to give you a chance to speak for yourself. So kindly begin by telling me about Marjorie and why she’s so forlorn, and just what you said to her a while ago!”

The color deepened in the girl’s face. It was disconcerting to be sitting beside the Poet All the People Loved and to be talking to him for the first time in her life; but to have him ask a question of so many obscure connotations, touching upon so many matters that were best left to whispering gossips, quite took her breath away.

“Not a word that I can remember,” she answered; “but Marjorie said, ‘Take me home!’—and after she had cried a little she felt better and was glad to play.”

“Of course that’s only the most superficial and modest account of the incident,” the Poet replied; “but I can’t

blame you for not telling. If I knew how to do what you did, I should very likely keep the secret. Another case of the flower in the crannied wall,—

Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is!”

“You give me far too much credit,” the girl responded gravely. “It was merely a matter of my knowing Marjorie better than any one else at the party; I hadn’t known she was coming or I should have brought her myself.”

“I thought you would say something like that,” the Poet observed, “and that is why I liked you before you said it.”

She looked at him with the frank curiosity aroused by her nearness to a celebrity. Now that the first little heartache over the mention of Marjorie had passed, she found herself quite at ease with him.

“My feelings have been hurt,” he was saying. “Oh, nobody has told me—at least not to-day—that I am growing old, or that it’s silly to carry an umbrella on bright days! It’s much worse than that.”

Sympathy spoke in her face and from the tranquil depths of her violet eyes.

“I shall hate whoever said it, forever and forever!” she averred.

“Oh, no! That would be a very serious mistake! The person who hurt my feelings is the nicest possible person and one

of my best friends. So many people are saying the same thing that we needn't ascribe it to any individual. Let us assume that I've been hurt by many people, who say that romance and old-fashioned roses are not what they were; that such poetry as we have nowadays isn't of any use, and that we are all left floundering here

As on a darkling plain,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

I want you to tell me, honestly and truly, whether you really believe that.”

He was more eager for her reply than she knew; and when it was not immediately forthcoming a troubled look stole into his face. The readiness of the poetic temperament to idealize had betrayed him for once, at least, and he felt his disappointments deeply. The laughter of the children floated fitfully from the corner of the garden where they were arraying themselves in the tissue caps that had been hidden in their bonbons. A robin, wondering at all the merriment, piped cheerily from a tall maple, and a jay, braving the perils of urban life, winged over the garden with a flash of blue. The gleeful echoes from the bright canopy, the bird calls, the tender green of the foliage, the scents and sounds of early summer all spoke for happiness; and yet Marian Agnew withheld the reply on which he had counted. She still delayed as though waiting for the robin to cease; and when a flutter of wings announced his departure, she began irresolutely:—

“I wish I could say no, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am to disappoint you—you, of all men! I know you wouldn’t want me to be dishonest—to make the answer you expected merely to please you. Please forgive me! but I’m not sure I think as you do about life. If I had never known trouble—if I didn’t know that faith and love can die, then I shouldn’t hesitate. But I’m one of the doubting ones.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Poet; “but we may as well assume that we are old friends and be frank. Please believe that I’m not bothering you in this way without a purpose. I think I know what has obscured the light for you. You are thinking of your sister’s troubles; and when I asked you what sorcery you had exercised upon little Marjorie, you knew her mother had been in my mind. That isn’t, of course, any of my affair, in one sense; but in another sense it is. For one thing, I knew your sister when she was a girl—which wasn’t very long ago. And I know the man she married; and there was never any marriage that promised so well as that! And for another thing, I don’t like to think that we’ve cut all the old moorings; that the anchorages of life, that were safe enough in old times, snap nowadays in any passing gust. The very thought of it makes me uncomfortable! You are not fair to yourself when you allow other people’s troubles to darken your own outlook. When you stood over there at the gate, I called the roll of all the divinities of light and sweetness and charm to find a name for you; when you ran to Marjorie and won her back to happiness so quickly, I was glad that these are not the old times of fauns and dryads, but that you are very real, and a

healthy-minded American girl, seeing life quite steadily and whole.”

“Oh, but I don’t; I can’t!” she faltered; “and doesn’t— doesn’t the mistake you made about me prove that what poets see and feel isn’t reality, isn’t life as it really is?”

“I object,” said the Poet with a humorous twinkle, “to any such sacrifice of yourself to support the wail of the pessimists. I positively refuse to sanction anything so sacrilegious!”

“I’m not terribly old,” she went on, ignoring his effort to give a lighter tone to the talk; “and I don’t pretend to be wise; but life can’t be just dreams and flowers: I see that! I wish it were that way, for everything would be so simple and easy and every one would live happy ever after.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t quite true,” said the Poet. “I can’t think of anything more disagreeable than half an hour spent in a big hothouse full of roses. I’ve made the experiment occasionally; and if all creation lived in such an atmosphere, we should be a pale, stifled, anæmic race. And think of the stone-throwing there would be if we all lived in glass houses!”

She smiled at this; and their eyes met in a look that marked the beginnings of a friendship.

“There’s Marjorie, and I must go!” she cried suddenly. “Isn’t she quite the prettiest of them all in her paper cap! We haven’t really decided anything, have we?” she asked, lingering a moment. “And I haven’t even fed you very well,

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