Father's Sweetheart

When Miss Morrell came to look at the house next to ours she seemed quite nice. She smiled very pleasantly when she asked for the key; and while she was down the garden she picked some apples and threw them over to Bob and Tommy. They were not her apples really, because she had not taken the house, but I thought it was kind of her. So I called when she moved in. Mother is dead, so I have to call. Father is Frank Marchant, the celebrated author, and I am Molly. I was fifteen in June, and Miss Morrell was thirty-one, she said. She must have meant forty-one, because she and father were boy and girl together, she told me, and he is forty-three.

"He was such a nice boy," she said. "He'd have done well if he hadn't been so clever, poor fellow!"

"If he wasn't clever he couldn't write his stories," I pointed out.

"What's the good of writing stories if you can't sell them? Clever men have no sense!"

I am afraid that is true, but of course I would not say so; and I got up to go. "Father is more than clever," I told her. "He is the best man that ever was, and the kindest. I will not listen to anything against him; and I think perhaps it would be better if you did not call."

I know it was not polite to say that, but even mother was not polite if anyone spoke against father.

Miss Morrell only laughed and took hold of my arm. "Tut-tut, child! I think well enough of your father. I fancy he has a very good little daughter, too. Now sit down and have another tea-cake."

They were very nice tea-cakes, and she made them herself. She gave me the recipe, but mine did not turn out the same.

She was watering her flowers when father walked down the garden after tea. He did not notice her, because he was worried about a plot. He had found a way of getting the hero and heroine off a precipice, but he could not think how to get them on! She came and watched him over the wall. She had the water-pot in one hand, and some weeds in the other, and she wore an old hat like a black basin.

"Still up in the clouds, Frank?" she called at last.

He started and turned round; then he held out his hand and laughed. "Mary! Well, I never! It's good to look at you again."

I did not want to listen, of course, and Dick was whistling at the front gate, so I went out with him. (He is Carson Major, and we are chums. He is not silly, like other boys).

"I don't care for that woman," I told him; but he only laughed and said I needn't be jealous. He is an impudent boy.

We went round Love Lane, and came home across the brook. It was swollen with the rains, and I could not find a place to jump it. So Dick had to wade and carry me, and it was quite dark when we got in. Father was still talking to Miss Morrell over the wall, and hadn't made the boys do their home-lessons; and they were watching out of the window.

"Father's got a sweetheart, Molly," Tommy cried.

I do not often lose my temper with the boys, but I boxed his ears quite hard. I was sorry directly, but I could not say so, for fear I should cry. So I went upstairs to take off my hat. When I came down Dick had Tommy on his knee, doing his last sum. There were white smears on his face where he had cried, and I wiped him with my handkerchief.

"Dick's given me a penny, Molly," he said, and grinned at me. He is a kind little boy, and never bears malice.

Dick didn't look at me, and I thought he was cross. I did not get up to go to the door with him, but he tilted me out of my chair, so I had to go.

"Oh, Dick!" I told him, "I wish I hadn't."

"Nonsense," he said. "It will do him good, the little wretch. You didn't hurt him."

"No—o; but he was mother's baby, and—and——"

I think I should have cried, but Dick was so nice to me, and said I was good to the boys. I gave them four chocolates each, and read a chapter of the "Swiss Family Robinson" to them, when they were in bed; and Tommy said he hardly felt it, and only cried to frighten me. I don't think I did it very hard.

When I came downstairs father was sitting at his desk, but he was not writing. He did not speak till he caught me looking at him. Then he sighed.

"It has brought back the old times," he said. "We were boy and girl together. Some day you will look back to the times when you and Dick were boy and girl together."

I did not say anything, but went into the drawing-room. If it had not been father, I should have told him not to compare that woman with me.

At supper he talked about her again. "She was always bright," he said, "and very pretty when she was a girl."

"People alter a good deal as they grow older," I remarked. "I don't know if you noticed her hat?"

Father laughed. "That hat is not fascinating, certainly," he agreed.

I thought he laid too much emphasis on the "hat."

The next evening they talked over the wall again. The evening after he went in to see her. He took a shows his manuscripts. He never shows his manuscripts except to literary people or people he likes very much.

The next day she sent us a dozen teacakes. Father ate two, and the boys the rest. I offered Jane some, but she would not touch them.

"Not if I was starvin', and' a bite would save me!" she said. "I've got eyes in my 'ead, Miss Molly; she'll never do by 'im as you've done."

Jane forgets, and breaks things, but she is a good girl really.

The next afternoon Miss Morrell asked me to take the boys in to tea. I told her that I was too busy; but the boys wanted to bo, so I let them. They are not old enough to know better. She gave them three sorts of cake for tea, they said, and sixpence each. She helped them with their lessons, too, but I found a mistake in one of Bob's sums.

"Ah!" father said, when I showed it to him, "she never was good at arithmetic; but she had a wonderful head for business."

"I'd rather be good, than good at business," I told him.

Father smoked his pipe for two or three minutes, then he laid it down. "She is good, too, Molly," he said. "I could tell you something—I will tell you, because I want you to like her. She was in love with a man once—they were only boy and girl really—and he was in love with her. There was a misunderstanding, and he went away, and got engaged to someone else. One day he came back and found out what a foolish mistake he had made. He would have broken the engagement off, but she wouldn't let him. So he married—the other woman."

I could have screamed to hear him speak of mother like that; but I bit my lip instead. "If I had been the—the other woman, I wouldn't have wanted him, if he hadn't wanted me."

"She didn't know, dear. She never knew right up to the time that she died."

"You—he pretended he liked her all the time?"

"He did like her. She was a nice woman—a very nice woman, only—you will understand, dear, when you are older."

"I understand now," I said. "My—his wife is dead. So he will marry Miss Morrell."

"I don't know." Father filled his pipe slowly. "I hope so. If he does——"

"It will serve him right," I declared. Then I went down in the shrubbery and cried.

"If ever you like someone else better, Dick," I said when I told him, "you're to tell me. I wouldn't marry you for anything if you didn't want to. Promise me—— No, no! It's no use saying you will always like me best, because you can't be sure. Promise me."

Dick looked very serious, and whistled to himself for a long time. He does that when he is thinking. "I believe you're right, kiddie," he said at last, "I promise."

"On your honor?"

He threw his head back a little. "All my promises are on honor," he said. I do like to hear him speak like that.

I did not say any more to father about Miss Morrell, but I made what we called "mother's cake" for tea, and put all her photos about the rooms to remind him of her. He took up the one where she is holding some music, and looked at it for a long time.

"She used to sing a great deal at the Morrells'," he said. "Mary used to accompany her. We must ask her in. She will like to hear you sing some of the old songs."

"I don't want to sing mother's old songs to anyone but you, daddy," I said. "Come and play for me, and I'll sing 'Afterwards.' You can put it down a note, and think it is mother singing."

People say that my deep notes are like mother's, but of course I do not sing so well as she did.

"You can sing that just like your mother, dear. Thank heaven, you can't feel it quite like she did—Ah!"

"I'll try to feel it as much as I can.—No, in E flat, dear——"

He nodded, and played the symphony softly. It is like a dream, and father plays so beautifully. I thought of mother, and took a deep breath, and began·

Afterwards.

Beyond the bound of land and sea,
Beyond the touch of hand,
Beyond the memory of me—
I shall look down, dear love, and see
Your tears, and understand.

She is supposed to be dying. The first part is what he says to her, and the second part is what she says to him. Mother used to smile when she came to "understand," and father used to look over his shoulder, and smile at her.

Light of my life, if I should miss
The path your faith has shown?
My heart was heartened by your kiss,
But now—Dear love, be sure of this,
You will not walk alone.

He is in the minor, of course, and she answers in the major. It always sounded comforting, the way that mother sang it, and when I am worried about things I try to fancy I hear her. Then she used to draw herself up for the last verse.

I shall look down, my dear—my dear!
Only be true, and have no fear;
Only be true, and Heaven is near!
God judge me as I'm true.

I tried to steady myself and make my voice like mother's; and I seemed to see her standing there, with her hand on father's shoulder, and putting out her other hand to hold mine, when I was little and hung to her skirts. I took the now note in the last line quite full; and then something seemed to clutch at my throat; and the big photo of mother that I had put on the piano slipped right down on to father's hands, and I shrieked and shrieked, and laughed and cried, and father couldn't stop me anyhow. I suppose you would call it hysterics.

I was better next morning, but Jane made me have breakfast in bed. Father was very worried, because he was going to Scotland to do some descriptive articles for The Daily Lyre. He began to write out a telegram to say that he couldn't go; but I told him I was quite well really, and Jane promised to look after me "like a mother." So he went.

When he said good-bye he gave me a note for Miss Morrell. "Ask her to wire 'yes,' or 'no,' then I shall know what to do," he said. "Good-bye, dear old girl. Be sure to telegraph if you want me back."

It seems a dreadful thing to say, but I felt as if I never wanted father back again. If I hadn't loved him so, I believe I should have hated him. You would understand if you had known mother, or even if you knew what I think of her.

I told Jane about the letter, and she said anyone could tell it was a proposal; and if she was we she would burn it. I was a good mind to, but when I asked Dick he said, "it wouldn't be cricket." So I gave it to him to do what he liked with, and he took it in to Miss Morrell. She asked him to take a telegram to send off to father, but he told her that he would rather not have anything to do with it. He saw her write, and it was "yes." He wouldn't look at me when he told me, but he said a lot of nice things about me, and how good I was to father and the boys, and I shouldn't have to live with her very long, because he was growing up. I think anybody would like Dick. He is so kind. Jane was very kind, too, and didn't even grumble at Bob when he knocked over her pail of water.

"I'd have liked to box 'is ears," she said; "but I thought of you, you poor dear. More'n a mother you've been to them, an 'e ought 'o be ashamed of 'isself, the marster ought."

In the afternoon I sat down in the garden darning the boys' socks and Miss Morrell came and stared at me over the garden wall. "You don't look well, child," she said.

"I am quite well, thank you," I told her.

She put up her eyeglasses and looked at me. "You're too young to look after a house," she said abruptly.

"Anyhow," I said, "I have looked after it. I don't suppose I have done very well, but I have done my best. No doubt you could do better, but would find it very different to having only yourself." I thought I would let her see that I understood.

"I daresay I should." She sighed, but she did not seem cross. "Do you know, Molly, sometimes I wish I had others to work for. Don't you think I could help you?"

"I don't want any help," I said; "and if I did, I'd rather not have it. You see. I promised mother. She wouldn't want anybody else to do things for father and the boys—only me." I looked straight at her, and she shook her head.

"We were children together," she said, "she and your father and I. I don't think she would mind me."

I gathered the socks and angola together, and got up. "I think," I said, "she would mind you very much."

Miss Morrell looked surprised and hurt. "You don't like me, Molly?" she asked.

"No," I told her, "I don't. You have sent the telegram to father, I suppose?"

"Yes—your father has told you?"

"He has told me." It was not true, but I could not let her think that father did not trust me. "Good-afternoon."

I went indoors and gave the boys their tea. After tea I gave them two pennies each to spend. I thought I shouldn't have the housekeeping money for long, and she wouldn't do things for them like mother used to, and like I tried to do.

Father came home on Sunday night. He had only just taken his hat off, and sat down in the arm-chair, when she came in. He jumped up, and held out both hands, and she trembled, and half laughed and half cried. She looked quite young, and almost pretty, and I hated her.

"I am so glad, Mary," father said. "So glad, dear old Mary. God bless you."

"God bless you, Frank—kind old Frank!" she said.

Then she began crying softly, and he bent down and kissed her. I was in the dark corner by the screen, and they did not seem to notice me. I felt my heart thump, and my breath come and go, and I looked at them, and looked at the big photo of mother on the mantel-piece. It was just beside them, as if she was watching them; and I rushed between them, and snatched it away.

"Mother!" I cried. "Oh, mother!"

Then I seemed dizzy, and tripped over something; and Miss Morrell caught me, and I didn't remember anything more till I found her bathing my forehead with eau de Cologne and I was too weak to push her away.

"My poor child," she sobbed, "my poor child!"

Her tears fell all over me, she was crying so. "We ought to have understood. It isn't your father, darling. It's my old lover that he has found for me in Scotland, and that was what I telegraphed about. Now, we'll see if you can't like me a little. No, no! You mustn't move yet."

But I sat up somehow, and held out my arms to father, and he picked me up, and nursed me like a baby.

"I've only two sweethearts, darling," he said, and wiped his hand across his eyes. "Your mother—and you!"

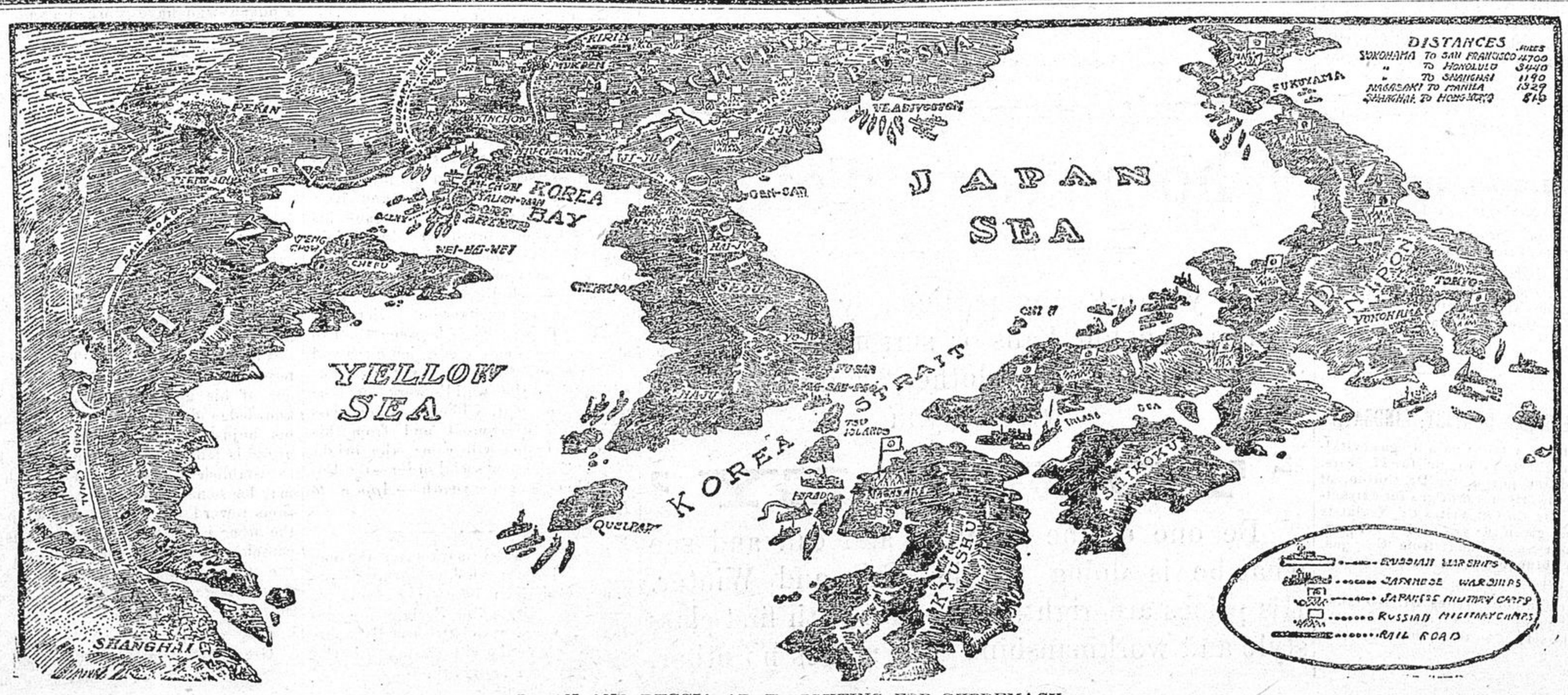
I shall never quite forgive myself for thinking of him like I did; but it was only because I was so fond of mother.—Owen Oliver, in Pall Mall Magazine.

UNEEK.

We spell some words in a manner unique,
But that is no reason why we should spique
Of the eagle who, from the mountain-pique,
Swoops down to the valley, there to sique
Some venturesome youngster beside a crique,
And carries him, kicking, away in his bique.
Would the youngster let out an unearthly shrique,
Or would he just venture a querulous squique,
When carried aloft, with the speed of a strique
Of light, to the crag so dear and blique?
Would he be so calm, demure, and mique
That he'd not even open his eyes to sique
When the eagle says, 'Here enough to ique
Out food for the crowd at least a wique?"
All of which is simply to show the chique
Of him who started a frivolous frique
By spelling the word uneek unique.

"I often wonder just what he thinks of me," said the young married man. "It is easy to find out," said the elderly married man. "Just sit down on her hat, and she will tell you what she thinks of you in less than a minute."

Angela—"When one of us dies I shall go and live somewhere in the country, all among the woods and wild flowers." Percy—"But dearest, supposing that you were to die first?" Angela—"Oh, don't let us think of anything so dreadful."



WHERE JAPAN AND RUSSIA AR E FIGHTING FOR SUPREMACY.