

## “Sub Tegmine Fagi”

By Marie Clothilde Balfour

THE sun strikes full upon a hillside sloping to the east, and backed by long, swelling moorlands ; there are firs on the western edge of the path, that guard a fragrant silence in their brown, cool shadow ; but here one can catch the rustle of their quivering needles aloft, where the breeze from the sea whispers to them and brings gossip from their cousins in far countries. And below there is grass, stretching widely, and falling to a little wood of oaks and beeches, and an up-thrust cliff, along whose face young foxes gambol and scamper ; and again an undulation of young grass, and a swaying corner of green corn, and woods, and further cliffs, till the land ends abruptly in a line of amethyst sea that itself fades into the pearl and primrose of the far horizon, and there is not a house to break the beauty of it—not a house, though out of those further trees there is a faint line of smoke rising, that is dimly white against the green ; and round the corner, behind the edge of the hill, there is a little sleepy town huddled in the hollow ; but here there is not a house anywhere set as a pock-mark upon the summer face of nature. There are birds, busy below us ; amid the trees and round the tufts of gorse, plovers are calling to each other ; and behind, on the moor, one hears sometimes the shrill, sad cry of the curlew ; and from the sky,

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sky, like falling drops of water, comes the song of a lark. Now it is loud, and if one has good eyes, one may see the small black thing poised not far above us ; and then it rises suddenly, and the sound fades suddenly into the thin, blue distance, like an echo far amid the mountains.

Everywhere the bees are loud ; amid the gorse bloom, and occasional clover heads, and the small, exquisite flowers that hide in the short grass, the pimpernel, and the tiniest vetches, the bird's-eye, and a microscopic forget-me-not, mauve, and blue, and yellow, white and scarlet—a world of bloom and colour blent into the green, and trampled, unseen, under foot. And a thousand winged things poise, and hover, and dart in the indolent air ; the sheep come near us, so that we hear them nibbling, and look at us out of wisely foolish eyes.

It is morning and it is June ; and one of those few days when it is well to be alive, when the feeling of one's flesh is a complicated delight, and the wholesomeness of the world is pre-eminent. One wonders when that approaching century arrives, when our passions will be regulated, like our possession, to an equal smoothness, and *all* of us will be mild anarchical dynamiters ; one wonders whether the grey days of winter and the golden mornings of summer will be mingled also into a dull, drab sameness. And whether those who are young then will ever say, when they look out upon the wide loveliness of land and water : “ To-day it is good to be alive ” ? Perhaps, after all, they will be too wise and have too much work to do.

Down in the hollow, in the little town, people do not look out of window and greet the day with acclamation. The time is gone by when Strephon sat below the beeches and piped his pretty loves to Lesbia and Chloe ; and when Dresden china shepherdesses in high-heeled shoes herded sugar-candy sheep on green and lovely uplands.

uplands. Strephon now wears moleskins, odorous and uncleanly, and a sleeveless waistcoat, of a forgotten colour, hanging open over a dirty shirt ; and instead of piping his love upon a flute, he tickles Lesbia, invitingly, and spits out a jest or two, mixed with tobacco juice, and she does not blush ; while Chloe, in a mushroom hat and kerchief about her throat and head, and a tight apron outlining every protuberance of her figure, is weeding in the next field, and cursing the sun and the sea air for burning the white anæmic skin of her, and wondering whether Strephon will meet her behind the hedge to-night, and whether he is just now "making up" to Lesbia—which he is. That is the pastoral life of to-day. It is pretty no longer ; but it is human. There are no piping shepherds to set the pink and white maids a-dancing, or to sing when love goes awry with them : "Oh, blow the winds, heigho !" as in the old Northumbrian ballad. It is only the green trees and the grass, and the waters, and the eternal hills, and the song of birds, and the nibbling sheep, that are the same ; and surely, even the sheep are blacker than they used to be. The dainty china figures have become men and women—not too clean, perhaps, of life or lip ; not lovely in their habits or in their passions ; taking their pleasures rudely, and their sorrows with reviling ; and loose-minded from the promiscuity of existence. Their joys are as those of the beasts that couple in the fields, and their leisure is replete with an unvirtuous indolence.

Yet they are men and women—flesh and blood ; cursed with the passions and the pains of humanity, and tasting thereof but the cheaper pleasures. And humanity is something greater, if less lovely, than a puppet-play : and in the blackest of truth there is always the white line of eternity. Strephon and Chloe, the pretty piping lovers, have fled the stage ; and their place is taken by Bill and Mary Ann ; who are clad in the warm encumbrance

of

of living flesh, and play the old drama—“the tragedy, Man”—wearing their sex with a difference; for “male and female created He them.”

No, Strephon no longer sits and pipes beneath the beeches; nor does Tityrus lie dreaming of the joys of a pastoral life. Strephon is washing sheep, yonder in the foul smelling pond by the stunted hawthorn-trees; and Tityrus is cursing the weather and the irreconcilable desires of his crops, or trotting home titubant from market.

Along the white road that crosses the plantation grounds like an uncoiled ribbon, a lumbering cart proceeds, and a dim echo reaches us of the thud of the horse's slow feet, and the rumble of the heavy wheels; probably the driver is dozing on the shaft, where by long habit, he can perch even when asleep. Old John the carter travelled thus, trusting to his meditative mare, who reflected over every step she took with her ponderous feet: and thus they found him that drenching wet day, when they brought him home in his own cart stiffened into a horribly undignified bent thing beneath a wet cover that clung unkindly to his outlines . . .

It was a hopelessly wet day. In North Street—which is the road leading to the northern moors from the small grey town in the hollow—everyone was within doors; not even the children put out their noses into the grim unceasing downpour. The road was spread with a continuous surface of water, which leapt in a million tiny fountains to meet the lashing of the descending rain, and gathering streams clashed and gurgled about the gutters, and swirled round the overflowing drains. Down the open chimneys and spluttering into the fires beneath; battering upon the roofs and against the small windows, and creeping in at every hole and cranny; entering in an insolent pool beneath the doors; the

the rain was everywhere, and the low sky frowned in a black promise of continuance.

But at the cottage of John the carter the door stood wide, and the water took its way in without hindrance and lay comfortably upon the floor, reflecting the red glow of the spluttering fire, with the kettle singing cheerfully on the hob, and the tea-things set out upon the little table at the side where the armchair stood. It stole into the very founce of the bed that hid itself modestly behind curtains and woodwork, and only opened a wide black mouth behind a hanging full of gaudy cotton. Hannah stood outside—out in the rain—and stared up the road in a blasphemous silence. John was out yonder—in the wettest of the wet weather—he who was so old and so frail and newly from a sick bed; John who had married her—sometimes she wondered why—only a few months ago; that he might have some one to nurse him and cook his dinner, the neighbours said—but Hannah thought differently. There were others who could have done that for him; but she, Hannah, who had trailed herself through the mire of the town and had spent her youth in the bearing of chance-got children and the bestiality of drunkenness; she at whom the not overnice neighbours had looked askance, and whose grey hairs had not brought her dignity, why had John, the carter, who was sober and well to do, ever looked at her? Hannah did not know, but she thought dimly that God had been sorry for her, and she remembered the wild unspoken rage of gratitude and devotion that had filled her, when John asked her to come to his fireside, and to come there by way of the Church door. She would have gone without that; but her simple undeveloped mind had its yearnings for paradise—a paradise where she would know what it was to be “an honest woman” before she died; where she could be as others were, who had once nevertheless

theless been—not quite what she was, but still mothers of nameless children also in forgotten years. And she left behind her, for ever she hoped, the life that had been hers, and the misery and the want, and the shame of it; and like a little child that turns smiling from its tears, she smoothed the wisps of grey hairs upon her brow, and followed John the carter to his home, silent, obedient, and consumed with an exceeding devotion. And John, rough John, who had taken her none knew why, had done well for himself, and was aware of it, too; though he swore at her and grumbled after the manner of man, and his hand was heavy. But Hannah had known worse than that . . . and now John was out in the rain—out yonder; and she stood in the street, her dress clinging to her gaunt haunches and shrunken breast, and the water streaming from her scant grey hairs, to see “how wet he would get”; and to recall the hideous words of the doctor when he bade her “keep your man warm and out of the cold—if you want him to live.” If she wanted him to live! God! And Hannah looked at the black sky and blasphemed and shivered, as she felt the rain beating—beating down upon *him*. And presently the familiar cart turned into the street from the market-place and came slowly towards her. But there were strange men leading the old white mare, and women that gathered upon the doorsteps as they passed. And Hannah looked, and the world stood still and waited and waited with her, as the thud of the mare’s hoofs and the rumble of the wheels and the splash of men’s feet through the water, came up the street . . . it had never—never sounded like that before. Then they reached the door, which was standing open, and they went in carrying the bent distorted thing under the clinging cover, and laid it in the black gulf of the bed; and the water on the floor reflected the red glow of the fire, where the kettle still sang, and touched the legs of the table which was set  
out

out for tea for John the carter. But he did not want it now. And that night Hannah, who had not looked at whisky since she had known what it was to be an "honest woman," rolled on the wet floor drunken, and dabbled her grey head in the cold pool of entering rain. It did not matter, for there was no one to care; John—the thing within the darkness of the bed—could not see her any more; there was nothing left now but whisky. It did not matter. John the carter was buried two days later, but Hannah did not go to the funeral; she was drunk still; and she went drunk to her pauper's coffin, in a little while. There was nobody to care and it did not matter at all.

One thinks of it now, seeing yonder cart cross the stillness; and the lives of a pastoral people are, it seems to one, so strangely sad—even their crimes and their brutalities are such as gods weep over.

There is a gentle dove-voiced woman in one of the cottages, whose eyes are fixed always on the invisible. One morning her little son, one of a crowd of children, for she was the mother of many, ran out and called to her gleefully that he was going for a ride; and she looked after him lovingly, and saw that the sun glinted on his hair and turned it to gold. Presently a whisper ran up the street that there had been an accident, and Mr. Main's little son had been hurt—was insensible—was dead; and Martha ran, cooing, down the sidewalk to comfort the mourning mother. And she met the little procession of men carrying the small figure, and the doctor came to her and spoke—but she did not understand. How could it be her Jacky, that thing covered over, when Jacky had but just gone for a ride? And she followed them home, her lips pouting with unspoken questions and a horrid comprehension dazing her eyes. For three long days the small coffin lay upon the bed, with flowers about it, and yellow hair curling

curling on a white forehead, and eyelids that trembled when you looked at them, but were never lifted; and flowers lay over the mouth and chin that had met the horse's hoof. . . . And the mother moved about the room, and cooked at the fireside, and set meals on the small table for the others of them; and the children ate and lived and some of them slept, within the same four walls as the open coffin on the white bed. And their father sat on the settle, with tears glittering in the tangle of his grey beard, and whispered to them hoarsely, “ Be canny noo ! ” when he saw his wife's dull sad eyes, and the unspeakable sorrows hanging on her lips.

When they took the coffin away, and all the town followed Jacky to the churchyard, Martha wandered aimlessly about the empty room and sought, sought, for something that she missed; and at last, when the groping fingers touched the edge of madness, they closed on a whistle—a sugar whistle that had been Jacky's, and which was half sucked and dirty, as it had been taken from his pocket when they brought him home. And Martha found her tears, and the seal upon her eyes was lifted, and she came back to a whole mind and a broken heart. But often now, in the midst of her stalwart boys and her pretty hard-working daughters, if you ask her which is the best of them, she smiles and says softly, “ The one that does not grow any older and never leaves my side, ” and her eyes look over their shoulders to the yellow head she sees always near her, and the father whispers hoarsely to the others, “ Be canny noo. ”

It was he I remember and big Tom Jamieson who told us of the Macara affair—a small thing which none troubled much about. Big Tom and decent, gentle John Elliott were coming home one night from the slakes, where they had been shooting wild duck together; and as they came up North Street, they heard loud  
noises

noises from the miserable hut where Pete Macara lived, since he came to the town a month or two back to work—when it pleased him—in the quarry. Pete Macara was a perfectly lovely villain, whose face was the colour of ancient ivory, carved into a mask of the vilest sort of wisdom. From the top of his curly black head to the tips of his slender fingers, he was beautiful as a black panther and as vicious, and the eyes of him were limpid pools of iniquity. He had a wife, whom we saw but seldom, till the latter days, and whom we found perplexing ; a small, frail, white thing, with a gentle frightened face, who sometimes forgot to speak vulgarly, and whose soft hands were but newly roughened by work.

Pete swore at her, we knew, and beat her we suspected ; and therefore John and Big Tom stopped uneasily when they heard a cry rising from the hut, and glued their eyes to the narrow slit of bare window-pane beneath the rag that served as curtain. They did not look long before the cry sharpened to a shriek, and there was a dull thud, and a loud curse, which came from gentle John Elliott's mouth, that was wont to whisper hoarsely "Be canny." And big Tom Jamieson hurled his great shoulders at the door, whereat the lock, as was to be expected, gave way obediently. Pete Macara leapt to the threshold, and instantly met with a shaking that made his bones rattle and his skin crack ; while John pushed past them, and bent over the bundle of clothes that was huddled upon the floor, and whence there came a small crawling worm of something red and sticky. . . .

Tom went on shaking Pete at intervals, till he dropped him on the floor, and swore at him comfortably. It took a good deal of plain speech to ease big Tom when once his huge body woke up to anger. The other gathered himself together, and surveyed the scene sulkily, but with a wicked satisfaction twitching at his lips ;  
and

and John stood anxiously by the dirty bed, where he had lifted the woman whom we called Peter Macara's wife.

Tom went over and stood beside him.

“ A'll go fur tha doctor, if ye reckon a'd better,” he said, meditatively ; “ an' bring 'un back wi' me. Till 'un it's a maitter o' life an' death—an' maistly death.”

“ Wull a goo? ”

John shook his head. “ A think she's comin' roun',” he answered hoarsely, “ a think so. It's mebbe more a matter for the polis than the docter——”

“ The polis sure 'nuff. It's 'tempted manslaughter—hear that noo? ” and he glanced over his shoulder at Pete, who smiled, and the stained ivory of his skin carved itself into wrinkles and made of him a malicious Eastern god.

“ Ax her,” was all he deigned to reply.

John and big Tom surveyed her as she sat up and looked about her composedly, and touched the red wound on her forehead with dazed wondering fingers ; and they said to each other some of the things we had all been saying recently, when we looked from her white sorrowful little face to the evil bestial brows of Pete Macara. But she heard what they said, and it roused her. She got off the bed and stood by it dizzily, and spoke—to the point.

“ It's none o' your business,” she said, “ what I am, or who I am, or where I come from. All you need to know is that I belong to Pete Macara—and he can do what he likes with me. And if it pleases him to knock me down—or to kill me—I tell you it's none of your business, and I say he shall do it if he chooses ! And—this is his house—what are you doing here?—go ! ” and she staggered forward and fell dizzily on her knees in the middle of the stain upon the floor. There she groped for Pete's hand, laying her face against it, and he spurned her with his foot.

foot. "You see?" she said, and laughed, a little wildly. "I belong to Pete Macara—and *you*—you can go!"

Big Tom Jamieson and John Elliott went away without further argument, and walked up the street together, thinking hard and saying nothing. It was only when they came to John's door, that they looked at each other uncomfortably. "God!" said big Tom; "she spoke like—like a lady—and he—he kicked her off like a fawning bitch." John looked away and moved his lips uneasily. Then he turned to his own door, and muttered very low. "Pah! she—she *licked his hand*."

People did not meddle much with Pete Macara or his wife after that. But he forced her—so we supposed—to support him by the vilest traffic, and he lived in happy indolence till the Squire got tired of waiting for his rent and kicked him out. Then they left us, unregretted; but not before there were many other tales whispered about the small pale woman who was Pete Macara's possession. . . .

When strangers came to the little grey town in the hollow, they wondered at its uneventfulness, and pitied us for the long monotonous months that slowly filled the years; but beneath the surface, it seems, on looking back, that for those who had eyes to see there was a constant succession of small tragedies, the tragi-comedies that build up the commonplaceness of life. Not the dainty operettas of Strephon and Chloe, as I said before, but little melodramas, where one only did not weep because one was too hopelessly wretched. For the pathos is apt to be so miserably hideous, that the onlooker feels sick and turns away with a sigh; and yet it is but the setting and the mask; the actual passions are, after all, the great simple underplan of life in all of us, and in such as these they lie nearer the surface. And the innermost soul is the same, when you reach it—or perhaps it is a little more

childlike, and unharmed by the mire in which it is plunged. Bobby Stobbs, for instance, I conceive had a soul that was as lovely as in the flesh he was—otherwise. And since Bobby Stobbs, like Hannah, and Martha, and like Pete Macara’s miserable wife, loved much. . . .

Bobby took a house in our street, and we stared in surprise; for it was so ruinous and tumble-down that it did not seem fit for pigs to litter in. We supposed he got it cheap; but a penny would have been a fair rent to pay for it, and we told him so. Bobby smiled at us superiorly. “Ah,” he said, “Tusky will make it that smart an’ comfable.” We were interested, for we did not know he had female belongings; but he went on to explain he was going to fetch home his wife and children, and that Tusky would make the house all that it should be. He went off with a borrowed cart and pony to fetch them. It rained that day so heavily that he was already soaking as he went down the street; and when he returned with his precious load, it was raining still, and Bobby sat on the shaft dripping and shivering, his only coat wrapped round the baby in the cart. If Bobby could have faced us naked, he would have given them the small remainder of his garments too. We watched a small black woman crawl out from beneath a table and help him to haul the soaking bedding and the few broken chairs and a box of cracked pottery in at the door; and then three bundles tumbled into the mud, shook down legs and followed their mother, while Bobby led the lame pony back to its stable in the Watsons’ wash-house, with his white face looking, so they told us afterwards, extremely happy and well content, though his shoulders shook ominously. Dinah Green went in late to see how they were getting on, being of a neighbourly turn of mind.

“The beddin’ was afore the fire,” she told us next day, “an’  
you

you could smell it acrost the street ; and when you came in you could see 'em a jumpin' and a crahlin' from the very doorstep." (Dinah was a clean woman and apt to see things to which other people shut their eyes). Tusky was running about the room, talking to the children, who crawled over the floor, amid a sea of rags, potsherd and other things—which it is not necessary to particularise. She was sticking a few gaudy pictures on the walls, but had not thought of stopping the rain from drifting in at the broken window ; and she was hampered in her work by having with one hand to hold her garments together at the waist. There was already a considerable piece of dirty skin visible. There was also a whisky-bottle on the table, which was propped up against the wall ; and it was half empty. Consequently Tusky was cheerful and talkative.

Dinah listened to her awhile in grim silence.

"Where's yer man ?" she asked suddenly.

Tusky added another smear to her face by passing her free hand over it. "He's—here—I reckon," she said vaguely. "Ha' ye got a pin ?"

Dinah passed her one at arm's-length, and Tusky performed a short toilet.

"Where's yer man ?" repeated the tall, gaunt woman in the sun-bonnet, as the other conveyed the whisky-bottle to her mouth ; but this time Tusky looked silly, and did not trouble to answer. Then a voice came feebly from the depths of the box-bed.

"I'm here—Dinah," it said. "Get ye doon, my woman. Tusky's—that busy—she can't—see t'ye."

The words came in gasps, and Dinah peered into the darkness. Bobby lay in his wet clothes in a pool of water. The bedding was at the fire, so he lay upon the bare boards. He was not comfortable.

fortable. "My word," said Dinah, "what'll I do wi' ye? Ye can't be took anywhere else, ye're that dirty; and here"——. She sniffed.

"I'm—cleaner—than or'nar," he murmured feebly; "come—o' bein'—in—the rain," and his face looked strangely white in the darkness of the bed.

Dinah came and went many times that evening, while Tusky snored in the corner, and the children whimpered on the wet floor. On her last journey the rain had turned to snow, and the air had grown terribly cold. The poultice she carried between hot plates was already tepid. But Bobby was grateful for it, nevertheless, as he lay amid the blankets she had brought him, breathing fast, and talking softly to himself, while Tusky snored, and the candle and the fire were both nearly burned out. Dinah did what she could for him, and turned him upon his side.

"I'll bring the doctor first thing to-mara," she said cheerily, "an' I reckon he'll mak' ye weel. He's a terrible clever chap, our doctor is, an' a real decent man, too. He'll mak' ye weel."

Bobby looked up composedly. "Ay, it'll be a vera sore expense," he murmured, "an' that hard on Tusky—poor Tusky—an' she so handy—an' goin' to make the house that smart an' comf'able—Tusky—ah!—she's a smart 'un—Tusky," and he looked across at the dirty, drunken little figure huddled in the corner, with wisps of hair straggling across her grimy and vixenish face. Dinah looked that way, too, and snorted: "Ye maun keep warm, an' sleep, an' wait for the doctor," she said, restraining herself with energy, and preparing to depart. "Ye're doin' fine, and ye've on'y got to wait for the doctor. I'll gat 'un fine'n yarly."

She let herself out into the snow, and saw that Bobby lay with his loving eyes fixed on his wife.

"Tusky

"Tusky—smart 'un," he murmured, and Dinah shut the door.

Bobby did not wait for the doctor, so his bill was saved, as Tusky remarked, when she was sober enough to understand about it.

"An'," she added, "there'll be an inquest, an' the jurymen'll give me their shillin's—they allus do," and she tried the effect of a black rag that she had found in the gutter, pinned about her throat. Tusky thought that, some day, she would marry again. But Bobby Stobbs had loved much.

Down yonder, under the beeches, upon a knoll, the sheep have clustered prettily, and there are lambs in the lower field that bleat and gambol in the sunshine. I can almost fancy that I see Strephon a-piping where the shadow of the leaves flings a golden tracery on the soft green grass; and surely Lesbia is dancing, and under her feet the smell of the fallen pine needles rises pungently sweet and pervading from the cool brown ground.

But Lesbia is sadly besmirched, and all her playmates are apt to be unbeautiful nowadays, and in the flock she tends there are too many black sheep.

The grass and the beeches below us, the firs behind; the trimmed carpet of flowers and the song of the birds; the silver-spangled sea beyond and the gladness of the eternal hills—only these are the same; and so, after all, is humanity.