

TRISTESSE.

Today I'm sad, and wherefore sad, Since all in nature seems so glad?

ONE OF MY OLDEST FRIENDS.

All afternoon Marion had been happy. She wandered from room to room of their little apartment, strolling into the nursery to help the nurse-girl feed the children from dripping spoons, and then reading for a while on their new sofa, the most extravagant thing they had bought in their five years of marriage.

When she heard Michael's step in the hall she turned her head and listened; she liked to hear him walk, carefully always as if there were children sleeping close by.

"Michael." He came into the room, a tall, broad, thin man of thirty with a high forehead and kind black eyes.

"I've got some news for you," he said immediately. "Charley Hart's getting married."

"No!"

"Who's he marrying?"

"One of the little Lawrence girls from home." He hesitated. "She's arriving in New York to-morrow and I think we ought to do something for them while she's here. Charley's about my oldest friend."

"Let's have them up for dinner."

"I'd like to do something more than that," he interrupted. "Maybe a theater party. You see—" Again he hesitated. "It'd be a nice courtesy to Charley."

"All right," agreed Marion, "but we mustn't spend much—and I don't think we're under any obligation."

He looked at her in surprise. "I mean," went on Marion, "we've hardly see Charley any more. We hardly see him at all."

"Well, you know how it is in New York," explained Michael apologetically. "He's just as busy as I am. He has made a big name for himself and I suppose he's pretty much in demand all the time."

They always spoke of Charley Hart as their oldest friend. Five years before, when Michael and Marion were first married, the three of them had come to New York from the same Western city. For over a year they had seen Charley nearly every day and no domestic adventure, no uprush of their hopes and dreams, was too insignificant for his ear. His arrival in times of difficulty never failed to give a pleasant, humorous cast to the situation.

Of course Marion's babies had made a difference, and it was several years now since they had called up Charley at midnight to say that the pipes had broken or the ceiling was falling in on their heads; but so gradually had they drifted apart that Michael still spoke of Charley rather proudly as if he saw him every day. For a while Charley dined with them once a month and all three found a great deal to say; but the meetings never broke up any more with, "I'll give you a ring to-morrow." Instead it was, "You'll have to come to dinner more often," or even, after three or four years, "We'll see you soon."

"Oh, I'm perfectly willing to give a little party," said Marion now, looking speculatively about her. "Did you suggest a definite date?"

"Week from Saturday." His dark eyes roamed the floor vaguely. "We can take up the rugs or something."

"No." She shook her head. "We'll have a dinner, eight people, very formal and everything, and afterwards we'll play cards."

She was always speculating on whom to invite. Charley, of course, being an artist, probably saw interesting people every day.

"We could have the Willoughbys," she suggested doubtfully. "She's on the stage or something—and he writes movies."

"No—that's not it," objected Michael. "He probably meets that crowd at lunch and dinner every day until he's sick of them. Besides, except for the Willoughbys, who else like that do we know? I've got a better idea. Let's collect a few people who've drifted down here from home. They've all followed Charley's career and they'd probably enjoy seeing him again. I'd like them to find out how natural and unspoiled he is after all."

After some discussion they agreed on this plan and within an hour Marion had her first guest on the telephone:

"It's to meet Charley Hart's fiancée," she explained. "Charley Hart, the artist. You see, he's one of our oldest friends."

As she began her preparations her enthusiasm grew. She rented a serving-maid to assure an impeccable service and persuaded the neighborhood florist to come in person and arrange the flowers. All the "people from home" had accepted eagerly and the number of guests had swollen to ten. "What'll we talk about, Michael?" she demanded nervously on the eve of the party. "Suppose everything goes

wrong and everybody gets mad and goes home?"

He laughed. "Nothing will. You see, these people all know each other—"

The phone on the table asserted itself and Michael picked up the receiver.

"Hello * * * why, hello, Charley." Marion sat up alertly in her chair. "Is that so? Well, I'm very sorry. I'm very, very sorry. * * * I hope it's nothing serious."

"Can't he come?" broke out Marion. "Sh!" Then into the phone, "Well, it certainly is too bad, Charley. No, it's no trouble for us at all. We're just sorry your ill."

With a dismal gesture Michael replaced the receiver.

"The Lawrence girl had to go home last night and Charley's sick in bed with the grip."

"Do you mean he can't come?" "He can't come."

Marion's face contracted suddenly and her eyes filled with tears.

"He says he's had the doctor all day," explained Michael dejectedly. "He's got fever and they didn't even want him to go to the telephone."

"I don't care," sobbed Marion. "I think it's terrible. After we've invited all these people to meet him."

"People can't help being sick."

"Yes they can," she wailed illogically, "they can help it some way. And if the Lawrence girl was going to leave last night why didn't he let us know then?"

"He said she left unexpectedly. Up to yesterday afternoon they both intended to come."

"I don't think he c-cares a bit. I'll bet he's glad he's sick. If he'd cared he'd have brought her to see us long ago."

She stood up suddenly. "I'll tell you one thing," she assured him vehemently, "I'm just going to telephone everybody and call the whole thing off."

"Why, Marion—" But in spite of his half-hearted protests she picked up the phone book and began looking for the first number.

They bought theatre tickets next day hoping to fill the hollowness which would invest the evening. Marion had wept when the unintercepted florist arrived at five with boxes of flowers and she felt that she must get out of the house to avoid the ghosts who would presently peep it. In silence they ate an elaborate dinner composed of all the things that she had bought for the party.

"It's only eight," said Michael afterwards, "I think it'd be sort of nice if we dropped in on Charley for a minute, don't you?"

"Why, no," Marion answered, started. "I wouldn't think of it."

"Why not? If he's seriously sick I'd like to see how well he's being taken care of."

She saw that he had made up his mind, so she fought down her instinct against the idea and they taxied to a tall pile of studio apartments on Madison Avenue.

"You go in in," urged Marion nervously. "I'd rather wait out here."

"Please come in."

"Why? He'll be in bed and he doesn't want any women around."

"But he'd like to see you—it'd cheer him up. And he'd know that we understood about tonight. He sounded awfully depressed over the phone."

He urged her from the cab. "Let's only stay a minute," she whispered tensely as they went up in the elevator. "The show starts at half past eight."

"Apartment on the right," said the elevator man.

They rang the bell and waited. The door opened and they walked directly into Charley Hart's great studio room.



OLIVER OCTOBER By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

A MYSTERIOUS Gypsy fortune teller foretold the future of Oliver October Baxter on the day he was born.

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crime." Charley was following Michael along the hall. "Can't you understand that this is all an accidental situation?"

"It's all right," Michael muttered, "I understand."

"No, you don't. Charley's voice rose with exasperation. He was working up anger against them so as to justify his own intolerable position. "You're going away mad and I asked you to come in and join the party. Why did you come up here if you won't come in? Why did you?"

Michael walked into the elevator. "Down, please!" cried Marion. "Oh, I want to go down, please!"

The gate clanged shut.

They told the taxi-man to take them directly home—neither of them could have endured the theatre. Driving up-town to their apartment, Michael buried his face in his hands and tried to realize that the friendship which had meant so much to him was over.

He saw now that it had been over for some time; that not once during the past year had Charley sought their company and the shock of the discovery far outweighed the affront he had received.

When they reached home, Marion, who had not said a word in the taxi, led the way into the living-room and motioned for her husband to sit down.

"I'm going to tell you something that you ought to know," she said. "If it hadn't been for what happened tonight I'd probably never have told you—but now I think you ought to hear the whole story." She hesitated.

"In the first place, Charley Hart wasn't a friend of yours at all."

played all day on a tangled half acre of grass and trees. The subject of Charley was never mentioned between them and as the months passed he receded to a shadowy background in their minds. Sometimes, just before dropping off to sleep, Michael found himself thinking of the happy times the three of them had had together five years before—then the reality would intrude upon the illusion and he would be repelled from the subject with almost physical distaste.

One warm evening in July he lay dozing on the porch in the twilight. He had had a hard day at his office and it was welcome to rest here while the summer light faded from the land.

At the sound of an automobile he raised his head lazily. At the end of the path a local taxicab had stopped and a young man was getting out. With an exclamation Michael sat up. Even in the dusk he recognized those shoulders that impatient walk—

"Well, I'm damned," he said softly. As Charley Hart came up the gravel path Michael noticed in a glance that he was unusually disheveled. His handsome face was drawn and tired, his clothes were out of press and he had the unmistakable look of needing a good night's sleep.

He came up on the porch, saw Michael and smiled in a wan, embarrassed way.

"Hello Michael."

Neither of them made any move to shake hands, but after a moment Charley crossed abruptly into a chair.

"I'd like a glass of water," he said huskily, "it's hot as hell."

Without a word Michael went into the house—returned with a glass of water which Charley drank in great noisy gulps.

"Thanks," he said, gasping, "I thought I was going to pass away."

He looked about him with eyes that only pretended to take in his surroundings.

"Nice little place you've got here," he remarked; his eyes returned to Michael. "Do you want me to get out?"

"Why—no. Sit and rest if you want to. You look all in."

"I am. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyhow," said Charley defiantly. "That's what I came out here for. I'm in trouble, Michael, and I haven't got anybody to go to except you."

"Have you tried your friends?" asked Michael coolly.

"I've tried about everybody—everybody I've had time to go to. God! He wiped his forehead with his hand. "I never realized how hard it was to raise a simple two thousand dollars."

"Have you come to me for two thousand dollars?"

"Wait a minute, Michael. Wait till you hear. It just shows you what a mess a man can get into without meaning any harm. You see I'm the treasurer of a society called the Independent Artists' Benefit—a thing to help struggling students. There was a fund, thirty-five hundred dollars, and it's been lying in my bank for over a year. Well, as you know, I live pretty high—make a lot and spend a lot—and about a month ago I began speculating a little through a friend of mine—"

"I don't know why you're telling me all this," interrupted Michael impatiently. "I—"

"Wait a minute, won't you—I'm almost through." He looked at Michael with frightened eyes. "I used that money sometimes without even realizing that it wasn't mine. I've always had plenty of my own, you see. Till this week," he hesitated, "this week there was a meeting of this society and they asked me to turn over the money. Well, I went to a couple of men to try to borrow it and as soon as my back was turned one of them blabbed. There was a terrible blow-up last night. They told me unless I handed over the two thousand this morning they'd send me to jail!" His voice rose and he looked around wildly. "There's a warrant out for me now—and if I can't get the money I'll kill myself, Michael; I swear to God I will; I won't go to prison. I'm an artist—not a business man. I—"

"He made an effort to control his voice."

"Michael," he whispered, "you're my oldest friend. I haven't got any one in the world to turn to but you."

"You're a little late," said Michael uncomforably, "you didn't think of me four years ago when you asked my wife to run away with you."

A look of sincere surprise passed over Charley's face.

"Are you mad at me about that?" he asked in a puzzled way. "I thought you were mad because I didn't come to your party."

Michael did not answer. "I supposed she'd told you about that long ago," went on Charley. "I couldn't help it about Marion. I was lonesome and you two had each other. Every time I went to your house you'd tell me what a wonderful girl Marion was and finally I—I began to agree with you. How could I help falling in love with her, when for a year and a half she was the only decent girl I knew?" He looked defiantly at Michael. "Well, you've got her, haven't you. I didn't take her away. I never so much as kissed her—do you have to rub it in?"

swallowed up in the darkness. Where the path met the road Michael heard his footsteps cease as if he were hesitating. Then they turned down the road toward the station a mile away.

Michael sank into his chair, burying his face in his hands. He heard Marion come out the door.

"I listened," she whispered, "I could not help it. I'm glad you didn't lend him anything."

She came close to him and would have sat down on his lap but an almost physical repulsion came over him and he got up quickly from his chair.

"I was afraid he'd work on your sentiment and make a fool of you," went on Marion. She hesitated. "He hated you, you know. He used to wish you'd die. I told him that if he ever said so to me again I'd never see him any more."

Michael looked up at her darkly. "In fact, you were very noble."

"Why, Michael—"

"You let him say things like that to you—and then when he comes here, down and out, without a friend in the world to turn to, you say you're glad I sent him away."

"It's because I love you, dear—"

"No it isn't!" He interrupted savagely. "It's because hate's cheap in this world. Everybody's got it for sale. My God! What do you suppose I think of myself now?"

"He's not worth feeling that way about."

"Please go away!" cried Michael passionately. "I want to be alone."

Obediently she left him and he sat down again in the darkness of the porch, a sort of terror creeping over him. Several times he made a motion to get up but each time he frowned and remained motionless. Then after another long while he jumped suddenly to his feet, cold sweat starting from his forehead. The last hour, the months just passed, were washed away and he was swept years back in time. Why they were after Charley Hart, his old friend, Charley Hart who had come to see him because he had no other place to go, Michael began to run hastily about the porch in a daze, hunting for his hat and coat.

"Why Charley!" he cried aloud. He found his coat finally and, struggling into it, ran wildly down the steps. It seemed to him that Charley had gone out only a few minutes before.

"Charley!" he called when he reached the road, "Charley, come back here. There's been a mistake!"

He paused listening. There was no answer. Panting a little he began to run doggedly along the road through the hot night.

It was only half past eight o'clock but the country was very quiet and the frogs were loud in the strip of wet marsh that ran along beside the road. The sky was salted thinly with stars and after a while there would be a moon, but the road ran among dark trees and Michael could scarcely see ten feet in front of him. After a while he slowed down to a walk, glancing at the phosphorous dial of his wrist watch—the New York train was not due for an hour. There was plenty of time.

In spite of this he broke into an uneasy run and covered the mile between his house and the station in fifteen minutes. It was a little station, crouched humbly beside the shining rails in the darkness. Beside it Michael saw the lights of a single taxi waiting for the next train.

The platform was deserted and Michael opened the door and peered into the dim waiting-room. It was empty.

"That's funny," he muttered. Rousing a sleepy taxi driver, he asked if there had been anyone waiting for the train. The taxi driver considered—yes, there had been a young man waiting, about twenty minutes ago. He had walked up and down for a while, smoking a cigarette, and then gone away into the darkness.

"That's funny," repeated Michael. He made a megaphone of his hands and facing toward the wood across the track shouted aloud.

"Charley!"

There was no answer. He tried again. Then he turned back to the driver.

"Have you any idea what direction he went?"

"The man pointed vaguely down the New York road which ran along beside the railroad track."

"Down there somewhere."

With increasing uneasiness Michael thanked him and started swiftly along the road which was white now under the risen moon. He knew now as surely as he knew anything that Charley had gone off by himself to die. He remembered the expression on his face as he had turned away and the hand tucked down close in his coat pocket as if it clutched some menacing thing. "Charley!" he called in a terrible voice.

The dark trees gave back no sound. He walked on past a dozen fields bright as silver under the moon, pausing every minute to shout and then waiting tensely for an answer. It occurred to him that it was foolish to continue in this direction—Charley was probably back by the station in the woods somewhere. Perhaps it was all imagination, perhaps even now Charley was pacing the station platform waiting for the train from the city. But some impulse beyond logic made him continue. More than that—several times he had the sense that some one was in front of him, someone who just eluded him at every turning, out of sight and earshot, yet leaving always behind him a dim, tragic aura of having passed that way. Once he thought he heard steps among the leaves on the side of the road but it was only a piece of vagrant newspaper blown by the faint hot wind.

It was a stifling night—the moon seemed to be beating hot rays down upon the sweltering earth. Michael took off his coat and threw it over his arm as he walked. A little way ahead of him now was a stone bridge over the tracks and beyond that an interminable line of telephone poles which stretched in diminishing perspective toward an endless horizon. Well, he would walk to the bridge and then give up. He would have given up before except for the story he had that some—