

THE LAST MARCHBANKS.

By VIOLA ROSEBOBO.

Copyright, 1899, by The Century Company. If you will just step over there to Miss Addington's desk, she will talk with you, madam.

I looked up from my half finished sentence and saw coming toward me, as if propelled by the wave of the editorial hand, a little, shabby, dainty, delicate old lady.

Resentment swelled within me. The managing editor always put it off on me to deal with the pitious feminine noncompetents continually trickling in and out of the office.

"I'm afraid I'm taking up your time when you are very busy," said the lady, with a gracious little "society"



I looked up from my half finished sentence, in which, nevertheless, a tremor of timidity and anxiety was all too evident.

Lo, she was a southerner! There was so mistaking that gentle drawl on the vowels and suppression of the consonants. I shall not try to reproduce the peculiarity of her speech.

She had a manuscript with her that she hoped might be adapted to the columns of The Evening Appeal; she always enjoyed The Appeal so very much.

Her manuscript was devoted to picturing details of life on a southern plantation in the autumn. She had tried to make it timely; she had heard that that was desirable for daily papers. It was not about the far south, but told of things as they might be in Tennessee or Kentucky—the sorghum pressing and sweet potato digging and hog killing.

"Oh, I know it all so well," I broke forth.

"You? Do you? Why, my dear child, are you from the south?"

When she found I was from Tennessee and that my name was Addington, we were straightway launched on a tide of interchange and reminiscence.

I was not surprised to find we knew all about each other's family. I had dimly supposed we did when I heard her speak. All southerners do know or know of all the rest, and I had been given of late years rather to escaping than seeking those kindly intimacies they establish as a matter of course when they meet away from home.

But only a brute could have withheld a cordial response from this little gentlewoman, and, moreover, her name stood for a good deal to my imagination. It was, she told me, Fanny Marchbanks Overman.

I suppose she had been Mrs. Overman nearly 40 years; but, being a southerner, she was still to herself and her friends Fanny Marchbanks as well.

The Marchbanks part was what interested me. My grandfather's most intimate friend and his partner for many years had been Judge Marchbanks, and even in my half foreign bringing up I had learned the traditions of that stout old Whig's loyalty and shrewdness and eccentricity. I had heard, too, of his daughter—had heard of her as the brilliant young belle who had been my mother's childhood ideal of beauty—and now, after all these years and generations and upheavals, here were Fanny Marchbanks and I meeting in the office of the New York Evening Appeal, and she was a poor old woman wanting to sell an unmarketable manuscript.

That manuscript! The thought of it fell upon me like a pall. The worst was her confidence in me, in my acceptance of it. I had been stealing glances at it while she told me what a "polished gentleman" my grandfather was and how smooth my mother wore her hair when she was a little girl.

I saw it would be as much as my position was worth to hand it to the managing editor.

I asked her if she had been doing much writing in New York.

Yes, she had been writing here for a year and a half. She had written some stories for one of the dying, old fashioned magazines; she had had a southern sketch in a good weekly; she had sent some letters to her church paper in the south; she had even had some negro anecdotes published in one of the "comic" journals.

I could guess what that dear, simple, little old thing had gone through—the struggle and the poverty and the heart straining anxiety it had cost to achieve this much. Now she wanted to do more. She wanted to get into other lines of writing, and she thought

there must be a great field in the daily papers. And she looked up at me with the light of hope and the waver of fear in her faded, pretty old eyes.

A bright thought came to save me from despair—if only she could be made to share it. A Tennessee senator had just made some kind of sensation in congress. I said: "You know Senator Lawton, don't you? Then why can't you take this paper and fix it all up as happening on Senator Lawton's place? You've been there. You can easily make it accurate, then. You see, if you can make it fit in with some of the full of just now it will go. It is hardly enough to make it simply about the present season, though that is well, but if you show what the Lawtons' home is like I am sure you can sell it to The Earth, and they will pay you better than this paper will."

She looked pitifully dubious. "You don't think it would be infringing on the laws of hospitality?" she said.

"You don't need to be personal and Jenkins," I hastened to assure her, "and you might write to Colonel Lawton for permission to tell about his sorghum presses."

"I know what you mean," she said, "about the new, curt, quick way of writing. I have noticed it in the papers, only I thought perhaps it was because they couldn't write any other way. But I can try to do it, too, if that is what they like up here in the north. And I'll tell anything about the Lawton place that seems unobjectionable. I'm glad you think he won't dislike it. And now, my dear, I'll take myself away. I am sure you are giving me far too much time, but you can just tell them, my child, that you don't see one every day up here who knows all about you for three generations. Dear, dear, it does seem too bad to leave you here all by yourself so, and you so young! What would your grandfather be very proud of your talents, Adeline, and he was a man who knew that we have to adapt ourselves to circumstances, and I'm sure these gentlemen all seem very—very inoffensive." And she overlooked the hardworking, scribbling crowd bent over their desks.

Softly fluttering over me in this fashion to the very elevator door, she finally took her leave.

I soon learned what seemed all the main facts of her little story—her great, tragic, human story—filled, as everybody's story is, with experiences at once terrible and commonplace.

She had been left a widow with two little children while still a young woman. The children, boys, had both died only a few years later, and she had spent most of her life as a childless widow in her widowed father's house. She was his only child. He had died near the beginning of the war. Most of their property had been lost. Mrs. Overman had since then made what shift she could, and now in her old age, with a courage rooted in inborn gallantry of soul and also in ignorance of this rough world, she had come to this strange land, "the north," to try to make her living by writing.

How foreign and far away this part of our common country seemed to her probably only a southerner can realize. Fundamental ideas affect many ramifications of feeling as well as thought, and the weakness of the idea of nationality at the south sharpens many a homesick pang in many a traveler and exile still in his own country.

That Mrs. Overman succeeded as well as she did was a continual marvel to me. There was a faintness about the frail, delicate, lady bred old woman that made me proud of the civilization—if you will permit the word—that had produced her.

I sympathize with the point of view that finds southern aristocratic pretensions humorous. They certainly had far less basis of material splendor than the simple minded aristocrats themselves imagined, and I doubt not that there is and will be in the future something better in this world than any kind of aristocracy, but for the blessings of a commercial democracy we pay a good deal, and my provincial little old woman exemplified the high hearted virtues of the old regime in her union of fine pride, courage, cheerfulness and gentleness as nobly as if her claims to blue blood were based on something more imposing than an ancestry of two or three generations of backwoods dignitaries. The obligations of an aristocracy were strong upon her.

I a little dreaded visiting her in her boarding house. I thought I knew what it would be like, and I felt it would be rather wretched to see her in the midst of his cheap frivolities and poor pretensions, but I found she had discovered for herself a place very different from my imagination—not vulgar, though offering hardships enough to such a one as Miss Fanny, as we must now in common friendliness begin to call her.

"It is a woman's boarding house, dear, a business woman's house," she explained to me as we sat side by side on an immense haircloth sofa in the clean, mournful, self respecting parlor.

"Miss Mary Barnwell told me about it before I came on here. You never saw Miss Mary, did you? Your mother knew her. She is a lovely woman. She was Timothy Barnwell's daughter, that endowed the college in Wexville, and Miss Mary teaches there. She comes on to New York in the summer sometimes, and she stays here. It made me feel so much more at home to come to a place I'd heard Mary tell about, and I think it is very sheltered and protected to be in a house without gentlemen when one is quite alone so."

It was a big, old fashioned house, and the rooms were divided up into long and narrow ones by wooden partitions, and each contained two little iron bedssteads. The inhabitants of the business woman's boarding house were united as roommates without reference to anything but a rigidly inspected respectability all around (surely none but the most respectable of women ever wanted to live there), but each was given a bed to herself.

Miss Fanny found it a little painful to explain these things to me, and a faint red spot came in each withered, delicate old cheek as she said: "It seems a little like what they call an institution up here, doesn't it? But it isn't. The landlady is a New England woman; her name is Martin, and, you see, she has planned to have the cheapest place that—that a nice person can live in, and, you see, it isn't so bad, for it is clean, and it is quite comfortable, I assure you, and you know you are sure that your roommate is respectable, and everything is arranged for it, so you have a great deal more privacy than you would think. I must take you to my room," she went on, "to show you my father's portrait. Oh, yes, I always have that with me, and you must be able to say you know how Judge Marchbanks looked."

"Of course," she said on the stairs, "these northerners are very strange. The lady I am with is named Miss Boggs. You'd think she was well, rather a common sort of person, from very plain people, you know, on first meeting her, but she is very highly educated; she is studying medicine. She hasn't the polish one finds in our people, but I am sure she has a very fine character, and she is religious and—settled in her views; not in the least like we used to be apt to imagine at the south."

She was interrupted by arriving at her door. Miss Boggs was not in. Looking very large upon the walls of the cell-like little place hung the portrait in its dingy gilt frame—yep, you know the kind—the clothing looking like solidified smoke, the linen as if molded out of vapor and the flesh suggesting painted wood. Yet the creature who painted it had not succeeded in evading his subject altogether, ample as were his incapacities, and something of the man—the large minded, able, romantic man that I had heard of—was in it. I even thought I could see in it qualities I already knew in Miss Fanny, especially the receptivity, the openness to new ideas that made her seem so young and made it possible for her to wage such battle as she had entered upon.

I could imagine as I looked at the picture that the judge, if put down alive in the queer room, would make some sort of intelligent effort to comprehend the conditions around him.

Miss Fanny checked at the frame with her pocket handkerchief, she carried me to one side and the other to see the picture, and she impressively told me the name of the poor soul who painted it. Then she sat herself down in front of it and told me about the Polk and Clay campaign in which Judge Marchbanks and my grandfather had "stumped" the state together, trying politely but fruitlessly to remember as many instances of triumph and adulation for my ancestors as for hers. "That both gentlemen were on the losing side in that contest had never occurred to her as dimming their honors.

I always remember her as she looked that day, like some quaint little priestess before a shrine. She sat in a chair close against the wall that in the narrow room she might be able to see the picture opposite. Her white hair was crimped a little and drawn softly back in a very good compromise between old styles and new—Miss Fanny was not the person to cling to the old for its own sake—and at her wrists and neck were, of all things, bits of "thread" lace. Her figure was girlish rather than otherwise and pretty, too, with its nice flat back. But the old black gown made me sorry, because I knew the little woman was not and never would be indifferent to her dress. As she talked away so proudly, so feelingly, of "my father," I wondered what place in memory had all the rest of her long past—the wifehood and widowhood and motherhood, the common, blessed warm joys and common, crushing griefs that fate had bestowed upon her, and which, good and ill alike, she, so little and tender still, had survived. All seemed to have sunk out of sight, to be buried, and only the first ties to be still active and operative despite time and death.

I reflected that after all she had spent most of her life with her father, that it was as his daughter she had chiefly found her title to existence, but I did not know at that time the thing that really explained her special devotion to him—the fact that she was then spending herself in his service, for his good name. The filial tie was re-enforced now by one yet stronger, by perhaps the firmest of human bonds, that which binds the server to the served, and at last something like a mother's love mingled with the daughter's loyal adoration of the long dead man.

I staid to dinner with her—supper she called it, and in fact the bald little meal might as well be termed the one as the other, but she was unapologetically hospitable and graceful over it.

It was not till I came to go home that Miss Fanny's adaptability failed her. "Oh, my child, I cannot let you go out into the street alone. It is bad enough for me, but you—I can't think of it at all."

"Very well, then, Miss Fanny, I'll ring for a messenger boy."

"What for, dear?"

"To go home with me."

"A messenger boy?"

"Why, yes; that is what we do when we are too proper to go alone."

"Mercy on me! My lamb, it is to save you from messenger boys and their like that I'm going with you myself."

"It is perfectly safe anywhere in this part of the town," volunteered Miss Boggs, a big boned, dust colored young woman reading a calf bound volume at a drop light.

"Yes, Miss Boggs, I know; I suppose it is, and I think it is lovely to see you northern girls so strong minded and independent. You could go anywhere; but, you see, Adeline was not brought up to take care of herself as you were, and I feel a sense of responsibility for her. I ought to be a fairly godmother to her, but I can at least take care of her when she is my guest." And she went on getting out her shawl and settling her bonnet with the cheery decision of a dear, damaged old canary bird.

Miss Boggs looked at me with curiosity. She had not recognized me as a fragile young southern blossom before.

Let me give myself the pleasure of saying that I sent my protectress home in a cab, a form of luxury which in the course of our acquaintance I found she particularly appreciated. She never became accustomed to the city streets. She went about always in a flutter of fear and nervousness, yet she must have done a deal of "going" to get together her little articles and sell them, I saw her down town sometimes, picking her way about among the rushing crowds and cars and trucks, going through the great buildings, with their incoming and outgoing streams of humanity eddying around the rows of elevator doors, and in the grimy newspaper offices, where the air was tense with silent activities, and as I looked at the quaint figure, the gentle, half frightened, high bred old face, I wondered why she was there. She must have lived some way since the war. Why did she not go on now as she had before and satisfy her ambitions, if she had them, by such ladylike efforts with genteel journals as she had made in the past, which had brought her much neighborhood consideration and a little money and which did not tear her away from the dingy, dignified, green old home where she was born and the simple, fixed, old time life in which she was surrounded by friendliness, albeit most of the friends were gone?

It was gallant—yes, surely there was something to stir the blood in seeing so frail, so unarmored a creature take up the gage of battle against such odds—but it was painful too. I all but resisted the pangs she gave me. One day I said to myself, "This is worse than living one's own struggle over again," and that was a bitter saying. I was standing in one room of a newspaper office when I saw her enter an adjoining one. She went up to the managing editor's desk with her little, soft, unbusinesslike manner and seemed to be asking something. The man did not look up. If he had, he surely would have spoken differently. But he was desperately busy, and he simply put his hand in a pigeonhole and drew out a package of manuscript, saying irritably as he gave it a shove along the desk, "Not a thing there that's worth a cent to us."

Oh, just the most ordinary business incident in the world, but poor little Fanny Marchbanks Overman! She took up her papers—I noticed again how old her hands looked—and moved away as if she did not quite see where she was going. I drew back out of sight. There are some pains that sympathy can only double.

I often had Miss Fanny at the little flat I kept with a friend, a girl who painted and taught. She never came to regard our establishment as a normal one, and she always hovered about me with a futile overflow of maternal care that was not in the least checked because it reversed the facts of our relationship.

"My baby child," she exclaimed beneath her breath as she first sat down in our microscopic reception room and looked about her, "to think of your trying to live in all those Yankee ways. I hope you take good care of her," she said to Amy, patting me softly. Amy looked blank for an instant.

She had an air of relief as well as pleasure when she found me the night dressing for a reception. All her innate love of the decorative and romantic came bubbling forth. "Ah, how becoming that is to you!" she exclaimed. "My father used to say that it was a test of blood and raising for people to dress up—that if there was anything common in them it would come out when they were in their best clothes. And shall you see any of the gentlemen of your office?" she asked in an elaborately incidental way, and disappointment was in her face when I said I hardly thought I should.

"And they don't any of them come to see you?" she went on. "I suppose you don't let them."

"Dear Miss Fanny, it has never come up. I don't think any of them ever thought of coming to see me."

"Dear me! Well, these northern men are beyond me. I never knew of any gentlemen before who did not think of paying some attention to a charming girl whom they had the privilege of knowing."

Any, who was standing behind Miss Fanny's chair, turned her eyes and hands to heaven and then for one instant placed her palms in an attitude of benediction above Miss Fanny's infantine old head.

"I suppose you have to have your meals according to these New York ways, with your dinner in the evening, on Miss Amy's account," she said.

"Yes," I replied, "Amy prefers it so. It was a safe assertion, though I had never heard her express herself on the subject. Like the true southerner she was, Miss Fanny never ceased to regard New York as the outside phenomenon and the standards of Wexville as the normal and accepted ones, although in her writing she flexibly enough assumed the other tone. That was mental; the maintenance of ancient standards personally was inarticulately felt to be a matter of loyalty and character.

Miss Fanny and I each experienced some good luck about the same time. The Evening Appeal found occasion to send me abroad, and Miss Fanny obtained a little regular work, the superintendence of the correspondents' column on a weekly paper. This brought her in only the most trivial sum, \$4 or \$5 a week, but it did not take much

time, and I knew from experience how happy was the change from total uncertainty to even this sum assured.

I hoped to see her make herself a little more comfortable and treat herself to a new gown. But when I sailed she came to see me off in the same over-brushed little outfit of rusty black that she had worn the day I first saw her.

A number of people visited me at the dock that day, and it has been a bitterness intruding thought since that I did not give Miss Fanny all the attention that God knows was in my heart for her, and it does not soften that reflection, but brings the keener pang, to remember that she was too much absorbed and delighted by my momentary social importance to have any thought of herself.

She went about giving my acquaintances disjointed bits of my history, personal and ancestral, and telling them, with tears in her eyes, how brave I was living here in New York, away from everything I'd been used to and starting off now all alone on this voyage, though I was naturally of the most shrinking and feminine disposition. Dear Miss Fanny!

I did very little letter writing during the eight months I was gone. I heard from Miss Fanny only once, but she was one of those who had urged that I spend none of my precious time reading or writing letters, so I was not surprised at her silence.

When I came back, I went to the "business woman's boarding house" the day after landing to look her up. Amy had just returned from a four months' absence herself—this was in September—and could give me no news of her.

The square was dusty and deserted. The house as I went in seemed peculiarly desolate in its orderly gloom. The servant was a new one. She had never heard of Mrs. Overman, and an indefinite dread began to gather around me. I sent for Mrs. Martin.

She came in colorless, sad dignity and stood silently before me.

"Tell me," I said.

"She died in this house three months ago."

She sat down.

"I am sorry you were not here. It was a beautiful, easy death. She was not sick. We just found her lying on her bed one day with a letter in her hand, dead."

In the midst of all the formless thoughts and feelings crowding upon me I was pierced by a foolish grief that my little woman should die on one of those prisonlike cots, so strange and unhomey to her.

"The letter," Mrs. Martin went steadily on after a moment's silence, "I had buried with her, but I kept a copy of it. This is it."

I half hesitated.

"I don't think you need mind reading it," she said.

It was very brief. In half a dozen lines Anthony Stottman acknowledged the receipt of a final payment of \$50 as wiping out the principal and interest of a debt of \$3,000 left unpaid in the settling up of Judge Marchbanks' estate.

Ah, it was brief, but to what years of pinching and struggle and high and tender purpose that awkward paper testified! I saw all those years in a heart bursting moment's glance. It was love as much as honor that had sustained little Fanny Marchbanks through that long task, so little in itself, so titanic for her. No stain must rest on the great name her father left behind him. Through more years than I had lived every hour must have been colored to her by this heroic resolution. It had become her reason for living. When she had accomplished this end,

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the shock of revolution in her outlook, the withdrawal of the great motive, had been too much; the light that had been sustained so long ceased. Mrs. Martin told me that Mrs. Overman had been restless, had almost ceased to write, for two weeks before her death, although she seemed well.

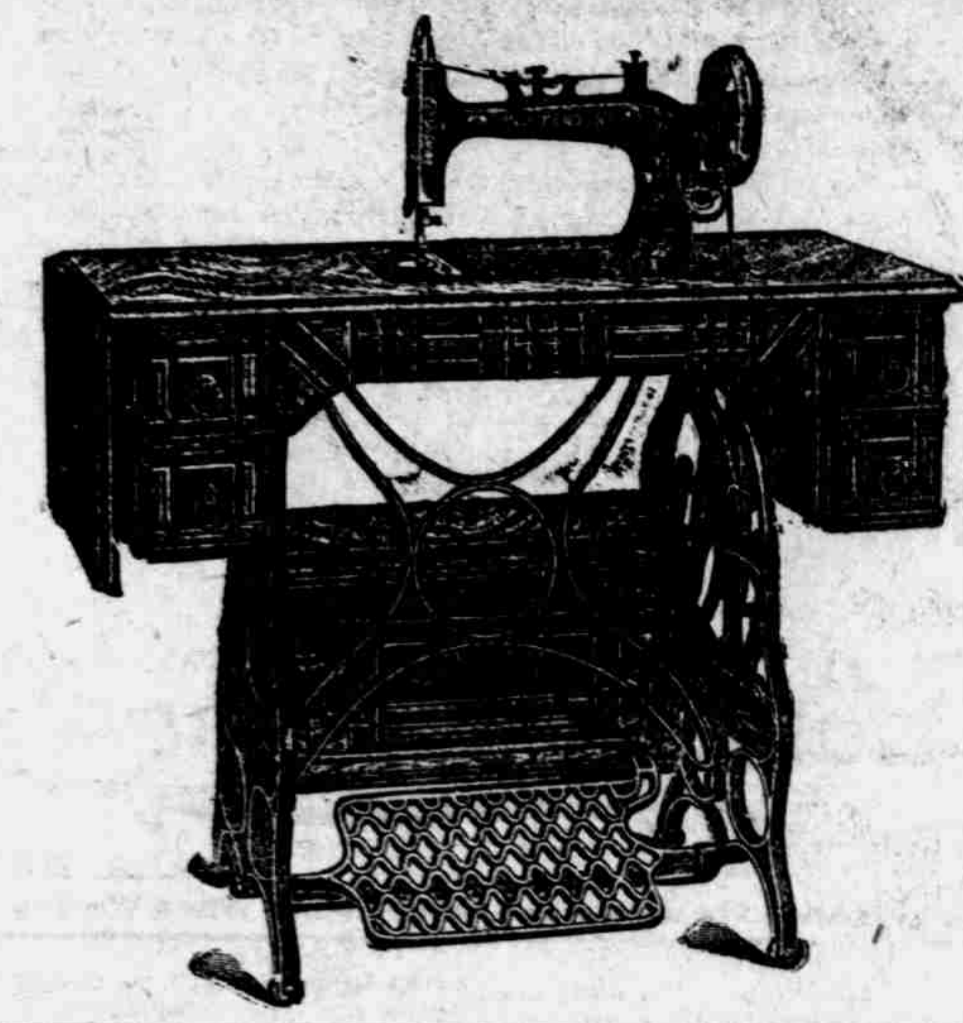
Yes, I knew, I knew how, as with a child, the thought of her great achievement had absorbed her and how she could not be at ease till the sensible testimony of it was in her hand. That brought her case indeed. Truly it was a beautiful way to die.

"Where—where did you bury her?" I forced myself to ask.

"I was at my wife's end, Miss Addington. Those I might have learned something from about her relatives were out of town, and I didn't know which way to turn, but at last I put her in my own plot, where I shall lie some day myself. I thought you would come after awhile and tell me what to do. She left nothing but a few dollars, seven or eight, but I had things done decently. I know Mrs. Overman was a lady, and that letter showed she was something more, Miss Addington. I was glad to pay her respect," Mrs. Martin concluded with firm, downright reflections—God bless her!

Miss Fanny had won for herself in her last strange need hospitality instead of charity, and with her letter on her bosom she might well be an honored guest.

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