

# MARGOT

By ONOTO WATANNA



*Drawn by Margaret Fernie.*

**A** LITTLE snapping-eyed artist, with a huge pinafore covering her natty shirt waist and short walking skirt, dropped her palette on the ground and turned to the sleepy, lounging camp with an exclamation that startled them.

"For all the world, look! Here comes Maude Muller in the flesh!"

A young girl of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years climbed the fence which divided the farm lands from the forest, and approached the artists' camp with timid confidence. She laid her pail of fresh milk and butter and eggs on the grass, smilingly inviting them to buy.

"Nectar for the gods!" said one young fellow quaffing a tin cup of the rich milk. "Thank thee, thou fair maiden, and what may thy name be?"

"Now quit your fooling, Bud!" said the sharp-eyed little woman, with a reproving glance at her irrepressible brother. Then turning to the girl she said with a gracious smile:

"We should like very much to have you bring us these good things every day, if possible. We spend the summer here. Do you live far away?"

The girl shook her head. "Only five miles!"

"Only! And do you walk it?" glancing apprehensively at the little bare feet.

"Why, that's not far! I like it!"

"Take your sun-bonnet off, won't you? Stay just as you are now. Did you ever see such hair!"

"What are you going to do?" said the girl, growing suddenly abashed

and conscious of the curious eyes turned upon her.

"Sketch you, my dear child."

After that first encounter the little girl came down to the camp regularly every day. They painted her in every conceivable attitude; sometimes with her wistful eyes peering out large and wondering from the depths of her old sun-bonnet; sometimes with her tawny bronze hair blowing in the winds about her. They copied her little faded cotton gown, worn at the elbows and ragged at the edges, and reproduced with loving exactness her little bare feet and tanned legs. But all their labor could not do justice to the child's mobile face, which reflected a thousand inconstant moods that puzzled the artists. Now it was stormy and discontented, now sad and wistful; now vitally awake with feeling and interest; now sombre and hopeless; always rippling into the sunny glow of a child's sunny soul.

There came a day when the artists waited in vain for Margot, and the landscape lost its charm for them. They had become strongly attached to the queer, brooding, reticent little waif who had come each day among them, listening eagerly to their chatter, and smiling happily when they addressed her, though seldom speaking herself. A delegation of eight started out from camp to find her.

She must have seen them approaching the house, for she ran down to meet them.

"Thou fair but false one," began Bud, but the others cut him off ruthlessly.

Margot led them proudly into the old-fashioned and stuffy room which served as a "parlor." Beyond this room they could see the expanse of a large kitchen and living-room, glowing with comfort and cleanliness.

"Why have you not been down to the camp lately, Margot?"

"Mother got a baby!" announced the girl, with shining, dancing eyes.

The artists relieved themselves with exclamations indicative of amused exasperation. This would mean perhaps the prolonged absence

from the camp of Margot, who would doubtless be transformed into a nurse-girl.

"Look here! Where did you get these, Margot?" and one of the artists picked up some sheets of music. The girl flushed proudly.

"They are mine!" she said "I bought them."

"But for heaven's sake—"

"I play!" she said, with a sharp tone to her voice, as though she expected to be disputed.

"You play! Not these? Why look here—Chopin—Von Bulow—"

The girl went to a corner of the room, and drew from under an old stuffed sofa a dingy violin case. With a new pride in her flushed face and parted lips, she threw her head back, and, tucking the violin under her chin, commenced to play.

The guests sat in amazed silence. She was playing one of Chopin's nocturnes without time or music, but with correct note and with the strangest feeling and expression. It was weird and uncanny, but despite the crudity of its execution they recognized with startled wonder the genius of the player. When she laid the violin down there was absolute silence for a time in the little parlor. Then Kemp Evans, a long-legged Englishman, strode over to her, and laid his hand with nervous excitement on her shoulder.

"Who on earth, Margot, taught you to play like that?"

"Nobody. Only daddy and the hired man taught me the notes. Daddy gave me his old fiddle for keeps last Christmas. I saved up till I had enough to send for the best music to the big stores in New York. They sent me those."

"And you learned without instruction to play them all?"

"I knowed the notes already. They were hard at first, but—I loved them. I like Mr. Von Bulow best. I have read all about him too. I have named our baby for him. Only his name was so long, I just call him 'Von' for short!"

A great change now took place in the life of Margot. Upon the discov-

ery of the child's genius Kemp Evans, who was something of a musician himself as well as an artist, undertook to give the little girl lessons on the violin, whilst his wife, the kindly, bright-eyed little woman who first accosted Margot, endeavored to improve her education. The camp, one and all interested in Margot, contributed in various ways to her education and development. In return, the child patiently posed for them, either alone or with the baby, little Von, in her arms, heroically refusing to take the "rests," on which the artists insisted.

The mellow summer began

to lose its light, and the campers with sighs of regret folded their tents and returned once more to the noise and distraction of the city's life.

All through the bleak winter days when the snow clouds descended on the land white and gentle as a benediction, Margot read and studied and practiced with her violin, drawing from its precious strings all the melody



*Smilingly invited them to buy.*

of joy and bewilderment and sudden awakening that had come into her life. Restless as a caged nightingale, with a new ambition beating in her little brain and heart, the child could find solace in nothing but the music which had become her very

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soul. Sometimes with her face pressed against the tiny pane, Margot looked out into the great snowy world that bounded her horizon, and insensibly her face grew luminous with tenderness and hope. And so the heart of the little girl quieted its beating, and her soul found a source of comfort in her music, and the vague but vivid fancies of her imagination. The two successive summers following brought back her friends, and the girl's dreams fluttered into life.

"It is time now," said her benefactors, and a little fund was raised among them. Margot went out from her home of beauty and love to a great peopled city, full of hustling men and women, thrilling with life and hope and feeling, but incomparably lonelier than the silence of her mountain home.

Her artist friends had written to the Conservatory of Music, at which Margot was to study, requesting them to meet her, and if possible to secure a home for her in some house where other pupils of the Conservatory lived. The officers had complied with the request, and Margot, who had never been beyond a few miles of her mountains had now a tiny room on the top floor of a huge New York boarding house, especially recommended as it permitted its boarders to practice on their sundry musical instruments.

As Margot took her seat at the long table down whose length eleven pairs of girlish critical eyes were turned on her the morning after her arrival, she said "Good morning" with a nervous little smile to the tall blonde who graced the seat next to her. She was rewarded by a cold stare from a pair of glassy blue eyes, and an irrepressible titter shivered around the table. There were amused smiles; heads tilted; one of the girls looked coolly at Margot with a prolonged scrutiny, and then deliberately winked across the table at her neighbor.

All her uncertainty and timidity vanished as by a shock, and she sat up stiff and straight, her hands clenched, her face flushed and her great dark eyes stormy and defiant.

After that awful breakfast, Margot flashed into a comprehension of the difference between herself and those about her, and with the same marvelous quickness with which she had studied in the mountains her music and her books, she now studied the art of dressing after a certain law called fashion, and guarding her speech and actions in such manner that to these tittering fashionables, studying to cultivate and manufacture an imaginary talent, she proved both a sphinx and an irritation. She came and went among them with a silence that was absolute and a dignity and coolness of demeanor that disturbed their equanimity.

One particular Sunday morning, as Gene Manning, one of the boarders, came up from breakfast, he ran, accidentally, against Margot, who was coming down the dark stairway. He apologized for the encounter and paused a moment to exchange a few pleasantries with her, marveling and amused at the girl's painful shyness, for the suddenness of the encounter had surprised her out of her customary reserve, and she blushed and stammered under the young man's quizzing eyes. Meanwhile the tall blonde looked over the banisters and stared at the couple on the stairs. She had been waiting for Manning herself and had grown impatient. Among the students, and particularly to herself, he was considered her personal property. She sauntered slowly into the parlor and with amused contempt mentioned that she had just caught Gene flirting with that freak on the stairs. Wasn't it too droll for anything? When the young man joined them he was greeted by a storm of jeers and laughter. That night a plot was hatched.

Margot was in love! At first it was a rose that had boldly knocked at the door of her heart. She found it on her dressing table one night after an unusually depressing dinner. Someone must have laid it there. The rose was but the forerunner of other slight, though sweet, favors that steadily found their way to her lonely heart.

And then one day she discovered his name badly erased from the title page of a volume of love lyrics that had accompanied a little bunch of violets.

After all, the pretty tokens could have come from no one else, for he was the only one in the house with whom she was on terms of even slight intimacy. From the day they had met on the stairs, Manning, with good-natured scorn of the teasing of the girl-students, had made it a point always to stop and speak to Margot. She met his overtures with a gladness that touched the young man.

Margot wore the violets in her hair that night, and she smiled with dreamy happiness as she passed Gene Manning's table. When she took her place in her customary seat at the long table, however, her face grew stiff and cold again, for a cynical smile was reflected on the faces of the students. She ate her dinner in silence, but she lingered in the hall after it was finished. Gene Manning passed her with a cheerful "Good evening," but did not stay to speak to her. She climbed the four flights of stairs wearily, and there was a pitiful and puzzled expression in her face, as she took the flowers from her hair, and began to sob on her violin.

There was a knock at her door and a confused noise outside. Margot laid her violin down quickly and opened the door. There was no one there, but a note had been thrust underneath the door. With trembling hands and beating heart the girl carried it to the light under the gas jet, tore it open and began to read. When she had finished, she sat down on the floor, and with her chin resting on her arms, she stared out at the quiet moon which had stolen over the high buildings and was smiling in on her.

"It is too good to be true," she said dreamily, and then "Oh, dear God, how good you are to me!"

One of the sheets of the letter fell from her fingers. She picked it up quickly, and with a sudden passion covered it with kisses, then with the letter pressed against her face, she walked back and forth in the tiny room.

She paused at her dressing table and smiled at herself in the mirror, she smiled at her violin and she smiled out into the quiet night, and up at the pageantry of the heavens with its diamond bursts of stars and the sweet moon. The whole world had become changed for her. Suddenly she drew out her little desk and began to write.

When Gene Manning read Margot's letter, he sat staring at it in stupefied amazement before he could fully grasp its meaning. Then he threw his head back and laughed. Only for a moment, however, for the sinister aspect of the situation suddenly struck him, and despite his irritation and chagrin, he grew quite alarmed. So he went directly to her. She must have been waiting for him, for she opened the door at once. She was visibly trembling though her eyes were shining. He dashed into his subject with brutal disregard.

"I have just got your letter. I am awfully sorry, but really there is some absurd mistake somewhere. Someone has been playing a joke on us, you see. I never wrote to you at all, and as for sending you flowers and gifts, why—" He stopped there. He found it impossible to proceed.

The girl was standing as if petrified, her great dark eyes staring at him with a dumb expression of horror and anguish. He stuttered and stammered, and endeavored to say something more, but the stony misery which had settled in a gray shadow on the girl's face robbed him of speech.

"Perhaps I had better go—" he finally said. "I assure you I am sorry to have hurt—awfully sorry. If even I can do anything—You see a fellow doesn't—Good-night!"

He went out quickly, taking with him her letter. Once alone in his room, Margot's face came back to his vision, haunting him with its startled expression of anguish.

"If you can but read my love in these few incoherent helpless words!" she had written in her letter.

The day after the clever invention of the students of the Conservatory and its bitter results, Margot came to



Tucking the violin under her chin, commenced to play -



the table with an inscrutable face that baffled them. One of the girls said "Good morning" to her, but Margot stared at her with a haughtiness that her blonde neighbor might have been glad to emulate. That day she asked the landlady to remove her seat to another table.

Margot passed Manning in the hall with a studiously averted head, and when he spoke to her she did not reply. He went up to his room and took a crumpled letter out from his pocket, and read it over very slowly and carefully. He smiled and whistled as he dressed.

A few nights later, he made his second pilgrimage to the top flight of the boarding house. At the end of the long, narrow, dark hall was Margot's little room. He approached it almost

fearfully, and hesitated outside her closed door, his face indecisive and uncertain. Out upon the silence of the dingy hall a long plaintive note stole, so weirdly strange that instinctively he held his breath in an agony of feeling. Margot was speaking to him on her violin. He

stood outside her door, motionless and silent. When the last thrilling note had quivered away, he groped his way down the dark passage into the lighted hall above the banisters and went back into his room. Once more he drew out her passionate letter. "In love I am only a crude little girl, without diplomacy or art." "Poor, crude, little girl!" he said softly.

The great concert hall blazed with light. The audience was opulent and enthusiastic. They sat back in their seats chattering and fanning themselves, discussing the quaint history of the new artist whom they had come to hear and see, this stripling girl from their own mountains. The painful shyness and reserve of the girl which had caused her to ignore blindly the wheedling of those who had elected themselves her patrons and managers and to refuse to be "interviewed" or "reviewed" by anyone and everyone, pleased her audience. They were her admirers before they had even seen or heard her. They expected much.

It was past eight o'clock and the audience was beginning to look speculative. Fifteen minutes passed and they became restive. At eight-thirty

they were whispering impatiently and visibly annoyed. Some youths started clapping by way of encouragement, but no response rewarded their efforts.

It was approaching nine o'clock when a nervous man, in evening dress, came to the front of the curtain. He mopped his perspiring brow with his handkerchief and his voice trembled nervously as he addressed the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a most untoward and lamentable accident prevents us from hearing the young artist expected this evening. When about to enter her carriage she slipped and fell on the pavement, and while it is believed she is not fatally hurt, it is feared that she has injured her right hand. It is with deepest emotion that I am forced to the painful duty of announcing this tragic accident—tragic when it is realized what the loss of the artist's magic fingers may mean to her and to all true lovers of music."

The most profound silence reigned over the great concert hall during the disjointed though dramatic speech of the manager. When he bowed himself off the stage, a subdued murmur, like the roar of the surf on a melancholy shore, rose and fell all over the house.

Up in her little room Margot was lying on the bed, her languid eyes closed, her poor little mangled arm lying outside the coverlet. A nurse tiptoed about the room.

All over the boarding house a hubbub of whispering was going on, for those who had not gone to the concert hall had heard of the accident, and some of them had seen the slight form carried in through the door, limp and helpless in the pretty finery in which they had decked her.

In the wide lengths of his rooms on the first floor Manning was striding up and down. Now and then he would sink into a chair, groaning and shuddering, only to spring to his feet again with impatient pain.

He had waited in the chill coldness of the February night for Margot to pass into the carriage. When she came out of the house with two of her

artist friends, Manning sprang out of the shadow of the porch on to the stoop and with impetuous haste rushed down the steps toward the carriage, throwing the door open for Margot. When he turned aside for her to pass into the carriage, he saw her trembling and swaying with a strange somnambulistic expression in her eyes. She must have fallen immediately, for when he put forth his hand to assist her, he saw nothing save the dim, sinuous outlines of the white figure fallen like a lily whipped by a brutal wind at his feet. The horses, cold and impatient, tossed their heads and stamped their feet. One of the wheels turned. It touched and crushed a little outstretched white arm.

It was Manning who had carried her indoors, and it was Manning whom her friends were reviling and holding responsible for the accident. In her state of excitement and nervousness, the sudden shock of the appearance of the man emerging from the porch had startled her so that she had fainted.

A few days later Margot was taken back to her mountain home.

March was gambling and playing its pranks more boldly than ever in the mountains. The roads were trackless, but a certain traveler who had come as far as possible by stage and then by horseback still plodded on and stubbornly kept going ahead. When he came within sight of Margot's home he gave a slight cheer and urged his horse to a quicker speed.

And it was Margot herself who met him at the door, and stood there in the glistening sunlight reflected from the snow-clad hills.

"Margot!" was all he said, and stood with uncovered head.

"Is it you?"

"Yes, I had to come to you—since you were gone from me."

"Come indoors," she said mechanically, and he followed her into the glowing warmth of the farmhouse kitchen.

He stood by the stove and warmed his hands, watching the girl's dazed face tenderly.

"Come here, Margot," he said suddenly, and he held his two hands out.

She flushed painfully, but she did not obey him. The bewilderment in her eyes was deepening.

"Come, Margot—dear!"

"Why have you come?"

"I love you, Margot!"

"Oh, no, no—"

"And you love me, Margot."

"No, no—"

"Yes, yes," he said, and went to her, and took her in his arms

"You cannot deny it, Margot. You know it is true. I know your letter by heart."

"And I yours," she said pitifully—"the one you never wrote."

"But I will say the words to you. I will live them."

"That is better," said Margot, softly.

He suddenly remembered something.

"Your little hand—" he began, his voice trembling.

She drew her hand from his and held it up before his eyes, tapering and moving the slender fingers.

"See," she said, "they, too, are quite well and happy now."



*Drawn by Margaret Fernie.*

*Coming down the dark stairway.*