

THE MACHINATIONS OF MARCIA

By May Isabel Fisk

THAT Marcia Egerton was an uncommonly clever girl no one could deny—indeed, no one cared to, save, of course, those rare women who are always prone to undervalue, and, whenever feasible, entirely discountenance the charm of another. That Marcia herself was quite as well aware of her own powers as those who admired and looked up to her, cannot be denied, either. She was self-sufficient, she was self-reliant, and the constant recognition of her acumen had imparted to her bearing a certain—well, scarcely arrogance, but something akin, which lent a rather added attraction to her natural stateliness.

That "Marcia's wonderful firmness of character" held an element of dogged obstinacy, or that her calm, blond beauty ever had an appearance of—say, stodginess, I would be the last to suggest.

But that is neither here nor there; those who knew were those over whom she held dominion, and to them she was a species of religion.

In the family, Marcia was paramount; her sway had never been questioned, her behests always obeyed, since, a toddling infant, she had pointed a pudgy finger at anything her fancy dictated, and lisped, "I want." She reigned by right of will alone, and no queen exacted more humble obedience.

The visiting list was under her rigid supervision, and those whom she black-listed were forever wiped from the social horizon of the Egerton family, whether any of the other members desired it or not. From the purchase of a rug to the scanning of a trite but

ever recurrent tragedy of the plumber's bill, Marcia was consulted, and her dictum permitted of no appeal.

Of course there was Harold, lately returned from a college career, and he had many ideas of independence, but there was something about the resourceful calm of Marcia that struck him as almost uncanny, and in the end he, too, yielded to the yoke.

It was the time of year when the question of the Summer flitting had to be discussed. At least, the other members of the family discussed it, and when the time was ripe, Marcia stepped in with her "superior judgment," and settled the matter in the manner she chose. I am speaking of years past. Now, Marcia observed:

"You need not engage a room for me, papa. I shall remain at home with you."

"Wha—what!" exclaimed the family in chorus.

"No," continued Marcia, calmly, "I shall remain at home with papa. Some one ought to look after him. It seems very selfish of us all to go off and leave him alone. I cannot but feel that I am best fitted to make the sacrifice. I do it gladly."

The head of the house for whom she expressed such solicitude regarded her with a baleful glare. It is possible he saw disappearing—well, the usual things with which the town-bound man is wont to spend his otherwise lonely evenings while mourning the absence of his family. The younger brothers and sisters looked on in silent awe at this exemplification of daughterly devotion; the mother wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, quite overcome.

But the college fledgling, Harold, whistled loud and long his incredulity.

"Don't do that again, Harold; it rasps my nerves and I must reserve all my strength to withstand the heat in town this Summer," observed the exponent of self-abnegation.

"But—but," spluttered Papa Eger-ton, "you'll do nothing of the kind. I won't have you round—I mean it will be much too warm for you—I can't permit——"

Marcia transfixed him with her large blue eyes.

"I shall remain, papa," she said, gently. And all knew it was useless to agitate the question further.

Now, Marcia had decided that she was "getting on;" indeed, she felt the time was not far removed when she should have attained the "thankful age"—a point wherein almost everything in the masculine line proves acceptable. True, she had many admirers—there, that expresses it, perfectly—"admirers"—who looked up to her and worshiped her from afar, but none dreamed of asking such a superior being to share his ordinary lot. Preposterous!

The last time she had moved, graceful and self-possessed, up the aisle to the accompaniment of "tum, de-de-de, tum, tum, de-de-de," she knew she would never again attend another to the threshold of matrimony. She had been maid of honor twice, and bridesmaid four times. On this occasion she had been the subject of many little quips and jokes, anent the possibility of her being the next, etc. To all of these witticisms Marcia responded with a faint smile, but inwardly she raged. Something must be done, and done without delay.

She had read somewhere of a young woman who had remained in the city, one Summer, while the rest of her friends had mourned at manless resorts. This brilliant girl had arranged the back-yard as a veritable garden, stocked the refrigerator with cold refreshments and then proceeded to dispense hospitality to the most eligible men in town. It did not take many

evenings of hammock swinging in the back-yard under the pale light of the stars, or trips to the ice-box in the still dimmer illumination of the butler's pantry, for this enterprising young person to nail the most desirable *parti* in town. Why should not she, Marcia——?

As the last flutter of a vanishing handkerchief was lost in the distance, Marcia gave a sigh of relief and prepared for business.

She worked desperately hard all day, but by nightfall everything was arranged to her satisfaction. She had entirely closed the front of the house. Beneath the chestnut-tree in the back-yard she had placed a rustic table and settee. To a pendulous limb she roped one end of a hammock; the other was fastened securely to a fence. Four palms in their brass standards were filched from the drawing-room and placed advantageously. A nearby florist was hurriedly pressed into service, and transformed the stiff square of sod into riotous masses of color. The whole effect was extremely attractive.

Paterfamilias viewed the transformation with a disapproving frown.

"Humph!" was all he remarked.

"Why, papa, I thought you would be so pleased. Don't you truly like it?"

"Do you expect me to sit out here nights with you?"

Marcia bent over, and plucking a velvet-petaled pansy, regarded it thoughtfully before transferring it to her father's coat.

"Papa, dear," she said, softly, "I don't expect nor want you to make any sacrifice for me; I am staying in town to make you happy. Go ahead, just as though I wasn't here, and I—well, I'll manage. We may as well understand each other at the start."

Pater pursed his lips as though to whistle, apparently thought better of it, and slowly winked one eye and then the other.

"Don't, papa; how inexpressibly vulgar!"

"My girl," said the father, "you ain't so stupid as you look."

Marcia winced under the doubtful compliment, but said nothing.

"Well, I'm off," said *pater*. He paused at the kitchen door and regarded his offspring with a newly acquired admiration. "Marcia, you're all right—you're a chip of the old block. Don't sit up for me." Again he winked slowly and solemnly, and disappeared in the house.

In the growing dusk, Marcia swung in the hammock and commenced to map out her plan of campaign. First, she would—

Clear and high above the muffled din of the streets rang the notes of a violin. Silhouetted against the light in the second-story window of the next house, stood a man, playing. Presently he paused, and laying aside his instrument, looked out. His falling glance rested upon Marcia. Marcia returned the regard, though she grew very red. After a moment the man bent his head toward her and began to play something weird and romantic, in a minor key, that thrilled her through and through, and Marcia knew he was playing to her. It was very interesting and delightfully improper; at last, affrighted, she fled into the kitchen.

The next morning, at an early hour, Marcia was in the yard watering the flowers. She was very attractive in her immaculate white shirt-waist and piqué skirt, to which a tiny apron added a touch of coquetry. Marcia had decided that the simplest of gowning would be most appropriate for the rôle of a stay-at-home.

A soft thud, and at her feet a rose fell, its stem piercing a white sheet of paper. Marcia looked up. At the window of the next house stood, smiling, her serenader of the night before. In the light of day she observed that he was well built and good-looking in a swarthy, foreign fashion. But what most attracted her was the gay red-and-blue uniform with its shining array of brass buttons. If Marcia could have owned to a weakness of any sort it was her predilection for gold lace and brass buttons.

She hesitated, and then, flushing, picked up the note.

FAIR UNKNOWN:

Will you give me the pleasure of your acquaintance? May I call this evening at eight?

Respectfully,

ROMAGNO.

Marcia threw a nod and a smile, and then, overcome by her boldness, hastened into the house.

Now, Marcia was not unlike others of phlegmatic temperament and limited imagination—once turn on the faucet of fancy and the stream becomes a devastating flood, impossible to shut off.

By nightfall Marcia had made up her mind they would live in Rome during the Winter. All the girls would be green with envy when they received her letters dated "Rome, So-and-so;" "Palazzo, So-and-so." That her unknown adorer was a man of title was attested by his note—on it was emblazoned a crown just above the initials, R. H. G. B. She remembered that foreigners of title were always well supplied with names.

Shortly after dark she answered a knock at the back gate and there he stood, uniform and all.

Of course, it was a bit awkward at first, but Romagno—he taught her to say it before the evening was over—was so very easy and offhand in his manner—so delightfully foreign—that her embarrassment soon wore off. It was all fascinating beyond anything she had experienced before.

Although communicative on all other subjects, her guest grew reserved when the conversation took a personal turn. Marcia surmised something mysteriously romantic—he was traveling incognito; but the brass buttons with his initials, R. H. G. B.—it was an odd conceit; she liked it—so delightfully foreign—betrayed him. She would learn all later.

About ten o'clock Marcia remembered the ice-box. It proved all and more than the girl Marcia had read about, claimed for it.

When they again came out into the

yard, Marcia said he must not do it again even though he were delightfully foreign. However, she was delighted to see with what gusto he made away with the dainty edibles and cold drinks she had so carefully prepared. He ate rather hastily and in somewhat different fashion from men she had been associated with, but that, too, was delightfully foreign. He seemed thoroughly familiar with her own language, and spoke with scarcely a trace of accent.

At the end of a week, Romagno avowed his love for her and Marcia had confessed hers in return for him. Would she fly with him? Now, *wasn't* that delightfully foreign? Any American would have asked, stupidly, "Will you marry me?" Would she fly with him?—well, rather!

Said Romagno: "We had better clear out some evening when the family is away, or better still, on your night off."

"Night off!" repeated Marcia, puzzled.

"Yes," said Romagno, "or on your Sunday afternoon, if you would rather."

Marcia had started up, her eyes ablaze with fury.

"Who do you think I am?"

"Come, come," said Romagno, "don't get huffy. You were so perky and had so much style about you, I thought all along you were the waitress or up-stairs girl, but I soon found out myself you were the cook by all these good salads and things you make. But it doesn't make a bit of difference

to me—cook or no cook—I am just as fond of you any way you put it, and——"

"Stop, stop!" shrieked Marcia; "go this minute!"

"What a little cat you are! I didn't mean anything——"

But Marcia had dashed into the house and up-stairs to her room.

Next morning Marcia lay on the shrouded sofa in the dim drawing-room. Her head was splitting and her eyes were swollen with weeping—she still sobbed intermittently. She heard steps descending the stoop of the next house. She crept to the window and raising the shade cautiously, peeped out. Had the shock of the night before affected her brain? Surely—no, she saw a number of men all in uniforms precisely like Romagno's, even to the buttons, and—yes, even to the initials, R. H. G. B. They all carried odd-shaped bundles wrapped in dark material. As one man turned, he displayed on the object he was carrying, the inscription, "Romagno's Hungarian Gipsy Band."

That same afternoon as Mrs. Egerton emerged from the dining-room of the Pine-Top Hotel, she was handed the following telegram:

City hot. Father unbearable. Expect me on evening train.

MARCIA.

"Well," remarked Mrs. Egerton, complacently, "I knew Marcia and her father would never get along alone together without me!"



HEARTS

THEY played at hearts on the ocean strand,
 When the moon was shining bright;
 He thought that the queen was in his hand,
 She thought she played aright.
 But Summer has gone, and they both have strayed
 Away from the fickle wave.
 He says 'twas only the deuce she played,
 She says he played the knave!

C. S. FRIEDMAN.