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Vallisneria Madness

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

A strange and curious little story, about the moonlight mating of flowers.

SEATED comfortably on the broad terrace of Professor Gordon's palatial mansion, Tom Spencer stared abstractedly at the red disk of the setting sun, reflected in the turgid waters of the pool in the garden beyond the edge of the terrace as he listened to his host recount the fascinating story of the love-life of the vallisneria.

The cameo-face of the white-haired botany professor bore a whimsical expression as he declaimed, "Beneath the black surface of that muddy pool out there, the flowers of a score or so of this rare plant which I brought from tropical Asia, pass their entire humdrum life, except for one brief night of moonlit love—not unlike our human existence."

Tom Spencer shifted his keen gray eyes to stare at the matted, ribbon-like leaves, floating on top of the water, which gave little indication of floral life below.

The old professor continued, "As you know from my lectures at Columbia, the vallisneria is a diceous plant. On one night of each year, the night of the vernal full moon, the stem of each female flower begins to stretch, until its ghostly green and white bloom rises to the surface. Each male flower too feels that same impelling urge, 'an instinct within it that reaches and towers,' as James Russell Lowell says. Listen to how Maeterlinck, that great poet and scientist, describes their fatal wooing."

He opened a book which lay on his lap, tilted it so that its pages were il-

lumined by the fading sunlight, and read aloud:

"The green-coated male flowers rise in turn, full of hope, toward the flowers which already sway above them in the moonlight, awaiting them and summoning them to the magic world which lies beyond their native obscurity. But, when half their upward journey is done, they reach the limit that their too short stems can stretch, and are checked abruptly, before they can win their way to their indifferent sweethearts, who pridefully refuse to bend to caress them.

"Filled with yearning, the little heart of each male flower swells and swells until it breaks. In a magnificent effort to achieve his bliss, he tears himself from his stem, and in one incomparable flight rises to perish in love on the surface of the pool. Dying, but free and radiant, he floats for one brief ecstatic moment beside his beloved, then shrivels and floats away; while his mate closes the petals in which she has imprisoned his last breath of life, and shrinks back into the depths, there to ripen the fruit of that fatal union."

The sun set, as Professor Gordon closed his copy of Maeterlinck. A twilight mist began to form above the surface of the garden pool. "How much more noble are the flowers than we," he mused. "As Shakespeare says, 'Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.' "

His athletic young guest narrowed his gray eyes and stared inwardly at the vision conjured up by the older man's reading. "I wonder," he breathed.

Professor Gordon broke the spell by saying in a matter-of-fact tone, "Well, my boy, you are to see tonight the mating of vallisneria, a sight which my colleagues would give their eye-teeth to witness."

"I feel flattered——" Spencer began diffidently, shifting his broad shoulders in an embarrassed manner.

But the fine-featured old man silenced

him with a deprecatory, "Don't, then! You are more outstanding as a football player than as a student of botany. I invited you for other reasons than any outstanding ability you may have shown in your four years of studies under me."

(Spencer thought, "Most likely to rub in on his colleagues his non-invitation of them, by asking instead a mere athlete, who is taking botany merely because it's a cinch course.")

Meanwhile the professor was continuing, "I am sorry that I can't stay out here with you. The mists affect my throat. And I'm sorry my daughter Natalie isn't here either. She helps me take care of the plants, and you'd find her quite intelligent about them. But she had to go over to her aunt's."

"I shouldn't think she'd care to miss—"

"Oh, it's an old story with Natalie. She's seen the phenomenon before. And now I must caution you about one thing. Don't go any nearer the pool than the edge of the terrace. The flowers, when in bloom, exude a strong narcotic fragrance, which is rather dangerous. Anyhow, you can see quite clearly from here."

He rose, and held out one slender blue-veined hand.

"Good night, sir," said Spencer, taking the frail hand in his big strong one. "And thank you for inviting me."

TOM SPENCER eased his athletic frame down into one of the terrace chairs, and gazed abstractedly at the purpling pink of the western sky.

"Just as well that that brat of his isn't here tonight," he mused. "What on earth could I do to amuse her?" He remembered having seen Natalie Gordon several times during his Freshman year, hanging around the door of the Botany Building

at Morningside Heights, waiting for her father. A gawky, pug-nosed, freckle-faced, little thing, with two tightly braided pigtales—about fourteen or fifteen years old, so he judged. Just as well the brat wasn't here.

Spencer turned his attention back to the garden pool. But pitch-darkness had now fallen, and he could see nothing except the outline of the shrubs against the deep purple of the western sky. Then trees in the distance became dimly lit by the full moon, which was rising behind the house; but the long shadow of the house still obscured the garden and its pool. A vagrant zephyr wafted a damp, muddy scent of mist up from the hidden pool.

"I wonder if those water-plants have any consciousness, any volition, about their tragic mating," mused Spencer, "or is it all merely automatic, mechanistic?"

He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and visualized the passage from Maeterlinck, which the old botany professor had read to him.

HE OPENED his eyes again with a start, and sat erect. The shadow of the house had receded to the edge of the terrace, and the entire garden, with the pool in its midst, was now bathed in the chalky light of the moon almost overhead.

Above the surface of the water hung a cottony swirling mist, which seemed to portend some sort of boiling activity in the depths of the muddy pool. The mist thickened and spilled out onto the surrounding garden.

"Humph!" sniffed Spencer, getting up out of his chair. "Can't see a thing from here." And, forgetful of Professor Gordon's express injunction, he ambled down off the terrace, and along the garden walk to the edge of the pool.

Through gaps in the swirling mist, he could see the matted ribbon-like vegetation floating inertly in the water. Not a sign of a flower. So he swung back to the terrace, and slumped down again in his chair.

The mist continued to thicken.

"I guess there'll be no show tonight," Spencer grumbled disgustedly. Then suddenly he sat erect, thrust his broad shoulders forward, and peered intently through the gathering fog, where dark shapes—human-like shapes—seemed to be moving.

Brushing the mist away, shedding it, rising above it, and yet still seeming to be a part of it, they stood out at last, clear in the moonlight; majestic women, Valkyries, with proudly-held blond heads, and flashing eyes. Filmy, floating, luna-green robes set off the chalky whiteness of their perfect features.

A heady perfume wafted across from the hidden pool.

The mist receded until it concealed merely the feet of the beautiful creatures. Where they stood, whether on the surface of the pool or on its banks, Spencer could not tell. Swaying slightly, as though rooted, they undulated their green-swathed arms like seaweed in the tide. Their heads thrown back with an almost defiant gesture, they bathed their perfect features in the glaring white light of the zenith moon.

Never had Tom Spencer seen such sheer feminine beauty. He had no recollection of leaving his seat, but now he found himself standing at the edge of the terrace, irresistibly drawn by a strange yearning toward that galaxy of pulchritude. There were some twenty or so of the young women, their faces all different, each a face of character and personality, each more beautiful than the last.

Irresolute, Spencer held out his arms toward the entire group. Which—which one drew him? To which one should he drift? The uncertainty held him back—that, and the subconscious memory of some warning, some prohibition—and some third as yet undefined prompting.

And, while he hesitated, there appeared, poking up through the mist at the feet of the strange regal women, the points of a score of green-peaked hats. Up they came, and faces appeared beneath them, dark, cleanly-cut, handsome faces of men; tense, yearning faces, with flashing, fanatic eyes, each pair of eyes fixed on one of the beautiful women who towered above.

Gradually they rose, until each man, clad in dark Lincoln green, stood beside one of the pale, diaphanous women.

And then a strange, inexplicable paradox! The beautiful women were slender, completely feminine, utterly adorable. The men were well-built, athletic, thoroughly masculine, seemingly tall rather than short. And yet the women towered above them.

Tom Spencer's mind flashed incongruously back to the scrapbooks of his childhood days, in which he had frequently pasted figures from pictures taken in different scales, with the result that each figure, properly proportioned by itself, failed to match the others in size.

Each of the men now clasped his arms around the waist of his beloved, and stretched and stretched, every sinew of his athletic body taut with the effort. Although Spencer could not see their feet for the mist which covered them, he knew that they were standing on tiptoe. An inarticulate sigh went up from all of them. "Kiss me! Kiss me!" it pleaded. "Kiss me, though I die!"

But the stately women stiffened, and

held themselves more aloof, and towered even more inaccessible, with a beauty so flaming that it hurt. Then their sea-swaying arms floated down until their slim white hands rested on the shoulders of the men. The pearly faces of the women inclined slightly—not enough to meet the upward-straining lips of their mates, but just enough so that they could gaze coldly but enticingly down. A silvery ripple of sound floated through the moonlight. The women were speaking, but what they were saying Spencer could not tell.

A strangled flush spread over the faces of the men, as, lifted by the hands of the women, they rose slowly, until white now with a livid whiteness, their lips met in one passionate, soul-searing embrace.

Tom Spencer drew in a deep breath, and his fingers clenched, then sprang open with a sudden gesture of horror, as he realized that those male heads, so tightly clinging lip to lip with the beautiful mist-women, were bodiless! The green-clad bodies, which had strained so tautly to thrust their heads up to that kiss of death, were now slowly slumping, settling downward, shriveling, turning brown, drifting away in the swirling mists which bathed the feet of the majestic women.

The heads themselves had lost their realness. The skin had become wrinkled, leathery, deflated, flabby. The features were scarcely distinguishable.

Then one by one, with a contemptuous gesture of satiation, the women flung away the sucked-dry rinds. And Tom Spencer, his gaze intent upon the expressions on the women's faces, took no heed what became of the cast-off rinds.

For a subtle change was taking place in those beautiful but cruel creatures. A certain matronly smugness coarsened their features, and they seemed less tall. Yes, they were visibly shrinking, shrinking

and becoming squat and ugly, shrinking back into the mists which masked the muddy pool. All, all returning to the slime which had spawned them.

All but one! Alone she stood, unmated, still towering slim and beautiful in the moonlight. And then Tom Spencer knew why he had waited, why he had not gone to any of the others. For, transcendently beautiful though they had all been, yet this sole survivor of that glorious company outshone them all.

Erect she stood, her golden head thrown back, her arms stretched to each side and raised a little, so that the filmy pale green gauze of her gown hung from them like the wings of a luna moth.

SPENCER gasped and rose from his chair. Forgotten were the warnings of Professor Gordon, as the young man moved steadily out off the terrace into the misty moonlight.

Her lips parted, a smile of welcome overspread her cameo face, and then she spoke—a tinkly, silver, moonlit, rippling voice. "Have you been waiting long for me?"

"All my life!" breathed Spencer.

She laughed, a friendly, silvery laugh.

Like a sleep-walker, Spencer continued to plod toward her.

Six-feet one he was, a gridiron star, and yet this frail, slim wisp of a feminine creature towered inaccessible above him in the mists of the pool.

Spencer reached her. He clasped his arms around her waist, and stretched and stretched, every sinew of his athletic body taut with the effort. He raised his heels from the ground, and strained on tiptoe. A sigh breathed upward from his lips.

"Kiss me! Kiss me!" he pleaded. "Kiss me, though I die."

But she stiffened, and held herself more aloof, and towered even more inaccessibly, while her beauty flamed out so intensely that it gripped Spencer's heart with a stabbing pain.

Then her wide-spread arms floated down, until her slim, cool, white hands rested on Spencer's shoulders. Her cameo-cut face inclined slightly, not enough to meet the upward-straining lips of the young man, but merely enough so that she could gaze coldly but enticingly down into his eyes.

Like a drowning man, there swept through his mind the vision of heads wrenched from male shoulders, sucked dry, and cast aside; male bodies shriveling and drifting away. Well, it was worth it, for that one moment of transcendent ecstasy. But, at the memory-picture of the transformation wrought in the beautiful mist-woman by that long, passionate embrace, he shuddered momentarily. However, he would be gone then—he would not be there to see it. Once more he strained to reach his beloved.

But the expected strangling wrench on his neck did not come. Instead the stiff aloofness of the beautiful girl softened. An expression of yielding consecration suffused her lovely face. She leaned, she bent over him, and floated down into his arms.

Their lips met and clung.

A BREEZE whipped her moon-green gown about him. Opening his eyes, he saw the mists blown away from the

stone bench on which she had been standing, by the edge of the garden pool.

Now, nestled in his arms, she no longer seemed terrifyingly dominating and aloof, but instead small and sweet and soft. And she did not coarsen and sink back into the slime of the pool.

Side by side they sat down together on the stone bench, his arm about her slender waist, her golden head against his shoulder.

For a long time they sat thus in silence. Then, "Tom," she breathed.

"You know my name?" he asked in surprize.

"Why not?" she laughed a silvery moonlit laugh.

Again they sat in silence.

At last she pushed softly away from him. "Well, dear," she said, "it is very late, and we really ought to be going in."

"In? Into the pool?"

"No, silly! Into the house."

He turned, and seized her by the shoulders, and stared fixedly down at her in the moonlight. Then, with a sigh of gladness, he clasped her to him.

"You're Natalie Gordon!" he breathed. "You're real! And I like you much better that way."

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about," said she, "but it's all right with me."

She held up her face, and once more his lips closed on hers, this time in a wholly human embrace.

