

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## AT TWILIGHT

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A breeze from the May world without blew through the class-room, and as it lifted his papers he had a curious sense of freshness and mustiness meeting. He looked at the group of students before him, half smiling at the way the breath of spring was teasing the hair of the girls sitting by the window. Anna Lawrence was trying to pin hers back again, but May would have none of such decorum, and only waited long enough for her to finish her work before joyously undoing it. She caught the laughing, admiring eyes of a boy sitting across from her and sought to conceal her pleasure in her unmanageable wealth of hair by a wry little face, and then the eyes of both strayed out to the trees that had scented that breeze for them, looking with frank longing at the campus which stretched before them in all its May glory that sunny afternoon. He remembered having met this boy and girl strolling in the twilight the evening before, and as a buoyant breeze that instant swept his own face he had a sudden, irrelevant consciousness of being seventy-three years old.

Other eyes were straying to the trees and birds and lilacs of that world from which the class-room was for the hour shutting them out. He was used to it--that straying of young eyes in the spring. For more than forty years he had sat at that desk and talked to young men and women about philosophy, and in those forty years there had always been straying eyes in May. The children of some of those boys and girls had in time come to him, and now there were other children who, before many years went by, might be sitting upon those benches, listening to lectures upon what men had thought about life, while their eyes strayed out where life called. So it went on--May, perhaps, the philosopher triumphant.

As, with a considerable effort--for the languor of spring, or some other languor, was upon him too--he brought himself back to the papers they had handed in, he found himself thinking of those first boys and girls, now men and women, and parents of other boys and girls. He hoped that philosophy had, after all, done

something more than shut them out from May. He had always tried, not so much to instruct them in what men had thought, as to teach them to think, and perhaps now, when May had become a time for them to watch the straying of other eyes, they were the less desolate because of the habits he had helped them to form. He wanted to think that he had done something more than hold them prisoners.

There was a sadness to-day in his sympathy. He was tired. It was hard to go back to what he had been saying about the different things the world's philosophers had believed about the immortality of the soul. So, as often when his feeling for his thought dragged, he turned to Gretta Loring. She seldom failed to bring a revival of interest--a freshening. She was his favourite student. He did not believe that in all the years there had been any student who had not only pleased, but helped him as she did.

He had taught her father and mother. And now there was Gretta, clear-eyed and steady of gaze, asking more of life than either of them had asked; asking, not only May, but what May meant. For Gretta there need be no duality. She was one of those rare ones for whom the meaning of life opened new springs to the joy of life, for whom life intensified with the understanding of it. He never said a thing that gratified him as reaching toward the things not easy to say but that he would find Gretta's face illumined--and always that eager little leaning ahead for more.

She had that look of waiting now, but to-day it seemed less an expectant than a troubled look. She wanted him to go on with what he had been saying about the immortality of the soul. But it was not so much a demand upon him--he had come to rely upon those demands, as it was--he had an odd, altogether absurd sense of its being a fear for him. She looked uncomfortable, fretted; and suddenly he was startled to see her searching eyes blurred by something that must be tears.

She turned away, and for just a minute it seemed to leave him alone and helpless. He rubbed his forehead with his hand. It felt hot. It got that way sometimes lately when he was tired. And the close of that hour often found him tired.

He believed he knew what she wanted. She would have him declare his own belief. In the youthful flush of her modernism she was impatient with that fumbling around with what other men had thought. Despising the muddled thinking of some of her classmates, she would have him put it right to them with "As for yourself--"

He tried to formulate what he would care to say. But, perhaps just because he was too tired to say it right, the life the robin in the nearest tree was that moment

celebrating in song seemed more important than anything he had to say about his own feeling toward the things men had thought about the human soul.

It was ten minutes before closing time, but suddenly he turned to his class with: "Go out-of-doors and think about it. This is no day to sit within and talk of philosophy. What men have thought about life in the past is less important than what you feel about it to-day." He paused, then added, he could not have said why, "And don't let the shadow of either belief or unbelief fall across the days that are here for you now." Again he stopped, then surprised himself by ending, "Philosophy should quicken life, not deaden it."

They were not slow in going, their astonishment in his wanting them to go quickly engulfed in their pleasure in doing so. It was only Gretta who lingered a moment, seeming too held by his manner in sending her out into the sunshine to care about going there. He thought she was going to come to the desk and speak to him. He was sure she wanted to. But at the last she went hastily, and he thought, just before she turned her face away, that it was a tear he saw on her lashes.

Strange! Was she unhappy, she through whom life surged so richly? And yet was it not true, that where it gave much it exacted much? Feeling much, and understanding what she felt, and feeling for what she understood--must she also suffer much? Must one always pay?

He sighed, and began gathering together his papers. Thoughts about life tired him to-day.

On the steps he paused, unreasonably enough a little saddened as he watched some of them beginning a tennis game. Certainly they were losing no time--eager to let go thoughts about life for its pleasures, very few of them awake to that rich life he had tried to make them ready for. He drooped still more wearily at the thought that perhaps the most real gift he had for them was that unexpected ten minutes.

Remembering a book he must have from the library, he turned back. He went to the alcove where the works on philosophy were to be found, and was reaching up for the volume he wanted, when a sentence from a lowly murmured conversation in the next aisle came to him across the stack of books.

"That's all very well; we know, of course, that he doesn't believe, but what will he do when it comes to *himself*?"

It arrested him, coming as it did from one of the girls who had just left his classroom. He stood there motionless, his hand still reaching up for the book.

"Do? Why, face it, of course. Face it as squarely as he's faced every other fact of life."

That was Gretta, and though, mindful of the library mandate for silence, her tone was low, it was vibrant with a fine scorn.

"Well," said the first speaker, "I guess he'll have to face it before very long."

That was not answered; there was a movement on the other side of the barricade of books--it might have been that Gretta had turned away. His hand dropped down from the high shelf. He was leaning against the books.

"Haven't you noticed, Gretta, how he's losing his grip?"

At that his head went up sharply; he stood altogether tense as he waited for Gretta to set the other girl right--Gretta, so sure-seeing, so much wiser and truer than the rest of them. Gretta would *laugh!*

But she did not laugh. And what his strained ear caught at last was--not her scornful denial, but a little gasp of breath suggesting a sob.

"*Noticed* it? Why it breaks my heart!"

He stared at the books through which her low, passionate voice had carried. Then he sank to the chair that fortunately was beside him. Power for standing had gone from him.

"Father says--father's on the board, you know" (it was the first girl who spoke)--"that they don't know what to do about it. It's not justice to the school to let him begin another year. These things are arranged with less embarrassment in the big schools, where a man begins emeritus at a certain time. Though of course they'll pension him--he's done a lot for the school."

He thanked Gretta for her little laugh of disdain. The memory of it was more comforting--more satisfying--than any attempt to put it into words could have been.

He heard them move away, their skirts brushing the book-stacks in passing. A little later he saw them out in the sunshine on the campus. Gretta joined one of the boys for a game of tennis. Motionless, he sat looking out at her. She looked so very young as she played.

For an hour he remained at the table in the alcove where he had overheard what his students had to say of him. And when the hour had gone by he took up the pen which was there upon the study table and wrote his resignation to the secretary of the board of trustees. It was very brief--simply that he felt the time had come when a younger man could do more for the school than he, and that he should like his resignation to take effect at the close of the present school year. He had an envelope, and sealed and stamped the letter--ready to drop in the box in front of the building as he left. He had always served the school as best he could; he lost no time now, once convinced, in rendering to it the last service he could offer it--that of making way for the younger man.

Looking things squarely in the face, and it was the habit of a lifetime to look things squarely in the face, he had not been long in seeing that they were right. Things tired him now as they had not once tired him. He had less zest at the beginning of the hour, more relief at the close of it. He seemed stupid in not having seen it for himself, but possibly many people were a little stupid in seeing that their own time was over. Of course he had thought, in a vague way, that his working time couldn't be much longer, but it seemed part of the way human beings managed with themselves that things in even the very near future kept the remoteness of future things.

Now he understood Gretta's troubled look and her tears. He knew how those fine nerves of hers must have suffered, how her own mind had wanted to leap to the aid of his, how her own strength must have tormented her in not being able to reach his flagging powers. It seemed part of the whole hardness of life that she who would care the most would be the one to see it most understandingly.

What he was trying to do was to see it all very simply, in matter-of-fact fashion, that there might be no bitterness and the least of tragedy. It was nothing unique in human history he was facing. One did one's work; then, when through, one stopped. He tried to feel that it was as simple as it sounded, but he wondered if back of many of those brief letters of resignation that came at quitting-time there was the hurt, the desolation, that there was no use denying to himself was back of his.

He hoped that most men had more to turn to. Most men of seventy-three had grandchildren. That would help, surrounding one with a feeling of the naturalness of it all. But that school had been his only child. And he had loved it with the tenderness one gives a child. That in him which would have gone to the child had gone to the school.

The woman whom he loved had not loved him; he had never married. His life had been called lonely; but lonely though it undeniably had been, the life he won from books and work and thinking had kept the chill from his heart. He had the gift of drawing life from all contact with life. Working with youth, he kept that feeling for youth that does for the life within what sunshine and fresh air do for the room in which one dwells.

It was now that the loneliness that blights seemed waiting for him.... Life *used* one--and that in the ugly, not the noble sense of being used. Stripped of the fine fancies men wove around it, what was it beyond just a matter of being sucked dry and then thrown aside? Why not admit that, and then face it? And the abundance with which one might have given--the joy in the giving--had no bearing upon the fact that it came at last to that question of getting one out of the way. It was no one's unkindness; it was just that life was like that. Indeed, the bitterness festered around the thought that it *was* life itself--the way of life--not the brutality of any particular people. "They'll pension him--he's done a lot for the school." Even the grateful memory of Greta's tremulous, scoffing little laugh for the way it fell short could not follow to the deep place that had been hurt.

Getting himself in hand again, and trying to face this as simply and honestly as he had sought to face the other, he knew that it was true he had done a great deal for the school. He did not believe it too much to say he had done more for it than any other man. Certainly more than any other man he had given it what place it had with men who thought. He had come to it in his early manhood, and at a time when the school was in its infancy--just a crude, struggling little Western college. Greta Loring's grandfather had been one of its founders--founding it in revolt against the cramping sectarianism of another college. He had gloried in the spirit which gave it birth, and it was he who, through the encroachings of problems of administration and the ensnarements and entanglements of practicality, had fought to keep unattached and unfettered that spirit of freedom in the service of truth.

His own voice had been heard and recognised, and a number of times during the years calls had come from more important institutions, but he had not cared to go. For year by year there deepened that personal love for the little college to which he

had given the youthful ardour of his own intellectual passion. All his life's habits were one with it. His days seemed beaten into the path that cut across the campus. The vines that season after season went a little higher on the wall out there indicated his strivings by their own, and the generation that had worn down even the stones of those front steps had furrowed his forehead and stooped his shoulders. He had grown old along with it! His days were twined around it. It was the place of his efforts and satisfactions (joys perhaps he should not call them), of his falterings and his hopes. He loved it because he had given himself to it; loved it because he had helped to bring it up. On the shelves all around him were books which it had been his pleasure--because during some of those hard years they were to be had in no other way--to order himself and pay for from his own almost ludicrously meagre salary. He remembered the excitement there always was in getting them fresh from the publisher and bringing them over there in his arms; the satisfaction in coming in next day and finding them on the shelves. Such had been his dissipations, his indulgences of self. Many things came back to him as he sat there going back over busy years, the works on philosophy looking down upon him, the shadows of that spring afternoon gathering around him. He looked like a very old man indeed as he at last reached out for the letter he had written to the trustees, relieving them of their embarrassment.

Twilight had come on. On the front steps he paused and looked around the campus. It was growing dark in that lingering way it has in the spring--daylight creeping away under protest, night coming gently, as if it knew that the world having been so pleasant, day would be loath to go. The boys and girls were going back and forth upon the campus and the streets. They could not bear to go within. For more than forty years it had been like that. It would be like that for many times forty years--indeed, until the end of the world, for it would be the end of the world when it was not like that. He was glad that they were out in the twilight, not indoors trying to gain from books something of the meaning of life. That course had its satisfactions along the way, but it was surely no port of peace to which it bore one at the last.

He shrunk from going home. There were so many readjustments he must make, once home. So, lingering, he saw that off among the trees a girl was sitting alone. She threw back her head in a certain way just then, and he knew by the gesture that it was Gretta Loring. He wondered what she was thinking about. What did one who thought think about--over there on the other side of life? Youth and age looked at life from opposite sides. Then they could not see it alike, for what one saw in life seemed to depend so entirely upon how the light was falling from where one stood.

He could not have said just what it was made him cross the campus toward her. Part of it was the desire for human sympathy--one thing, at least, which age did not deaden. But that was not the whole of it, nor the deepest thing in it. It was an urge of the spirit to find and keep for itself a place where the light was falling backward upon life.

She was quiet in her greeting, and gentle. Her cheeks were still flushed, her hair tumbled from her game, but her eyes were thoughtful and, he thought, sad. He felt that the sadness was because of him; of him and the things of which he made her think. He knew of her affection for him, the warmth there was in her admiration of the things for which he had fought. He had discovered that it hurt her now that others should be seeing and not he, pained her to watch so sorry a thing as his falling below himself, wounded both pride and heart that men whom she would doubtless say had never appreciated him were whispering among themselves about how to get rid of him. Why, the poor child might even be tormenting herself with the idea she ought to tell him!

That was why he told her. He pointed to the address on the envelope, saying: "That carries my resignation, Gretta."

Her start and the tears which rushed to her eyes told him he was right about her feeling. She did not seem able to say anything. Her chin was trembling.

"I see that the time has come," he said, "when a younger man can do more for the school than I can hope to do for it."

Still she said nothing at all, but her eyes were deepening and she had that very steadfast, almost inspired look that had so many times quickened him in the classroom.

She was not going to deny it! She was not going to pretend!

After the first feeling of not having got something needed he rose to her high ground--ground she had taken it for granted he would take.

"And will you believe it, Gretta," he said, rising to that ground and there asking, not for the sympathy that bends down, but for a hand in passing, "there comes a hard hour when first one feels the time has come to step aside and be replaced by that younger man?"

She nodded. "It must be," she said, simply; "it must be very much harder than any of us can know till we come to it."

She brought him a sense of his advantage in experience--his riches. To be sure, there was that.

And he was oddly comforted by the honesty in her which could not stoop to dishonest comforting. In what superficially might seem her failure there was a very real victory for them both. And there was nothing of coldness in her reserve! There was the fulness of understanding, and of valuing the moments too highly for anything there was to be said about it. There was a great spiritual dignity, a nobility, in the way she was looking at him. It called upon the whole of his own spiritual dignity. It was her old demand upon him, but this time the tears through which her eyes shone were tears of pride in fulfilment, not of sorrowing for failure.

Suddenly he felt that his life had not been spent in vain, that the lives of all those men of his day who had fought the good fight for intellectual honesty--spiritual dignity--had not been spent in vain if they were leaving upon the earth even a few who were like the girl beside them.

It turned him from himself to her. She was what counted--for she was what remained. And he remained in just the measure that he remained through her; counted in so far as he counted for her. It was as if he had been facing in the wrong direction and now a kindly hand had turned him around. It was not in looking back there he would find himself. He was not back there to be found. Only so much of him lived as had been able to wing itself ahead--on in the direction she was moving.

It did not particularly surprise him that when she at last spoke it was to voice a shade of that same feeling. "I was thinking," she began, "of that younger man. Of what he must mean to the man who gives way to him."

She was feeling her way as she went--groping among the many dim things that were there. He had always liked to watch her face when she was thinking her way step by step.

"I think you used a word wrongly a minute ago," she said, with a smile. "You spoke of being replaced. But that isn't it. A man like you isn't replaced; he's"--she got it after a minute and came forth with it triumphantly--"fulfilled!"

Her face was shining as she turned to him after that. "Don't you see? He's there waiting to take your place because you got him ready. Why, you made that younger man! Your whole life has been a getting ready for him. He can do his work because you first did yours. Of course he can go farther than you can! Wouldn't it be a sorry commentary on you if he couldn't?"

Her voice throbbed warmly upon that last, and during the pause the light it had brought still played upon her face. "We were talking in class about immortality," she went on, more slowly. "There's one form of immortality I like to think about. It's that all those who from the very first have given anything to the world are living in the world to-day." There was a rush of tears to her eyes and of affection to her voice as she finished, very low: "You'll never die. You've deepened the consciousness of life too much for that."

They sat there as twilight drew near to night, the old man and the young girl, silent. The laughter of boys and girls and the good-night calls of the birds were all around them. The fragrance of life was around them. It was one of those silences to which come impressions, faiths, longings, not yet born as thoughts.

Something in the quality of that silence brought the rescuing sense of its having been good to have lived and done one's part--that sense which, from places of desolation and over ways rough and steep and dark, can find its way to the meadows of serenity.