



***ELLA WHEELER
WILCOX***

***MAURINE
AND OTHER
POEMS***

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Maurine and Other Poems

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MAURINE

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PART I.

I sat and sewed, and sang some tender tune,
Oh, beauteous was that morn in early June!
Mellow with sunlight, and with blossoms fair:
The climbing rose-tree grew about me there,
And checked with shade the sunny portico
Where, morns like this, I came to read, or sew.

I heard the gate click, and a firm quick tread
Upon the walk. No need to turn my head;
I would mistake, and doubt my own voice sounding,
Before his step upon the gravel bounding.
In an unstudied attitude of grace,
He stretched his comely form; and from his face
He tossed the dark, damp curls; and at my knees,
With his broad hat he fanned the lazy breeze,
And turned his head, and lifted his large eyes,
Of that strange hue we see in ocean dyes,
And call it blue sometimes, and sometimes green
And save in poet eyes, not elsewhere seen.

"Lest I should meet with my fair lady's scorning,
For calling quite so early in the morning,
I've brought a passport that can never fail,"
He said, and, laughing, laid the morning mail
Upon my lap. "I'm welcome? so I thought!
I'll figure by the letters that I brought
How glad you are to see me. Only one?
And that one from a lady? I'm undone!
That, lightly skimmed, you'll think me *such* a bore,

And wonder why I did not bring you four.
It's ever thus: a woman cannot get
So many letters that she will not fret
O'er one that did not come."
"I'll prove you wrong,"
I answered gayly, "here upon the spot!
This little letter, precious if not long,
Is just the one, of all you might have brought,
To please me. You have heard me speak, I'm sure,
Of Helen Trevor: she writes here to say
She's coming out to see me; and will stay
Till Autumn, maybe. She is, like her note,
Petite and dainty, tender, loving, pure.
You'd know her by a letter that she wrote,
For a sweet tinted thing. 'Tis always so:—
Letters all blots, though finely written, show
A slovenly person. Letters stiff and white
Bespeak a nature honest, plain, upright.
And tissuey, tinted, perfumed notes, like this,
Tell of a creature formed to pet and kiss."

My listener heard me with a slow, odd smile;
Stretched in abandon at my feet, the while,
He fanned me idly with his broad-brimmed hat.
"Then all young ladies must be formed for that!"
He laughed, and said.
"Their letters read, and look,
As like as twenty copies of one book.
They're written in a dainty, spider scrawl,
To 'darling, precious Kate,' or 'Fan,' or 'Moll.'
The 'dearest, sweetest' friend they ever had.
They say they 'want to see you, oh, so bad!'
Vow they'll 'forget you, never, _never_, oh!'
And then they tell about a splendid beau—
A lovely hat—a charming dress, and send
A little scrap of this to every friend.

And then to close, for lack of something better,
They beg you'll 'read and burn this horrid letter.'"

He watched me, smiling. He was prone to vex
And hector me with flings upon my sex.
He liked, he said, to have me flash and frown,
So he could tease me, and then laugh me down.
My storms of wrath amused him very much:
He liked to see me go off at a touch;
Anger became me—made my color rise,
And gave an added luster to my eyes.
So he would talk—and so he watched me now,
To see the hot flush mantle cheek and brow.

Instead, I answered coolly, with a smile,
Felling a seam with utmost care, meanwhile.
"The caustic tongue of Vivian Dangerfield
Is barbed as ever, for my sex, this morn.
Still unconvinced, no smallest point I yield.
Woman I love, and trust, despite your scorn.
There is some truth in what you say? Well, yes!
Your statements usually hold more or less.
Some women write weak letters—(some men do;)
Some make professions, knowing them untrue.
And woman's friendship, in the time of need,
I own, too often proves a broken reed.
But I believe, and ever will contend,
Woman can be a sister woman's friend,
Giving from out her large heart's bounteous store
A living love—claiming to do no more
Than, through and by that love, she knows she can;
And living by her professions, _like a man_.
And such a tie, true friendship's silken tether,
Binds Helen Trevor's heart and mine together.
I love her for her beauty, meekness, grace;
For her white lily soul and angel face.

She loves me, for my greater strength, may be;
Loves—and would give her heart's best blood for me
And I, to save her from a pain, or cross,
Would suffer any sacrifice or loss.
Such can be woman's friendship for another.
Could man give more, or ask more from a brother?"

I paused: and Vivian leaned his massive head
Against the pillar of the portico,
Smiled his slow, skeptic smile, then laughed, and
said:

"Nay, surely not—if what you say be so.
You've made a statement, but no proof's at hand.
Wait—do not flash your eyes so! Understand
I think you quite sincere in what you say:
You love your friend, and she loves you, to-day;
But friendship is not friendship at the best
Till circumstances put it to the test.
Man's, less demonstrative, stands strain and tear,
While woman's, half profession, fails to wear.
Two women love each other passing well—
Say Helen Trevor and Maurine La Pelle,
Just for example.
Let them daily meet
At ball and concert, in the church and street,
They kiss and coo, they visit, chat, caress;
Their love increases, rather than grows less;
And all goes well, till 'Helen dear' discovers
That 'Maurine darling' wins too many lovers.

And then her 'precious friend,' her 'pet,' her 'sweet,'
Becomes a 'minx,' a 'creature all deceit.'
Let Helen smile too oft on Maurine's beaux,
Or wear more stylish or becoming clothes,
Or sport a hat that has a longer feather—
And lo! the strain has broken 'friendship's tether.'

Maurine's sweet smile becomes a frown or pout;
'She's just begun to find that Helen out'
The breach grows wider—anger fills each heart;
They drift asunder, whom 'but death could part.'
You shake your head? Oh, well, we'll never know!
It is not likely Fate will test you so.
You'll live, and love; and, meeting twice a year,
While life shall last, you'll hold each other dear.
I pray it may be so; it were not best
To shake your faith in woman by the test.
Keep your belief, and nurse it while you can.
I've faith in woman's friendship too—for man!
They're true as steel, as mothers, friends, and
wives:
And that's enough to bless us all our lives.
That man's a selfish fellow, and a bore,
Who is unsatisfied, and asks for more."

"But there is need of more!" I here broke in.
"I hold that woman guilty of a sin,
Who would not cling to, and defend another,
As nobly as she would stand by a brother.
Who would not suffer for a sister's sake,
And, were there need to prove her friendship, make
'Most any sacrifice, nor count the cost.
Who would not do this for a friend is lost
To every nobler principle."
"Shame, shame!"
Cried Vivian, laughing, "for you now defame
The whole sweet sex; since there's not one would do
The thing you name, nor would I want her to.
I love the sex. My mother was a woman—
I hope my wife will be, and wholly human.
And if she wants to make some sacrifice,
I'll think her far more sensible and wise
To let her husband reap the benefit,

Instead of some old maid or senseless chit.
Selfish? Of course! I hold all love is so:
And I shall love my wife right well, I know.
Now there's a point regarding selfish love,
You thirst to argue with me, and disprove.
But since these cosy hours will soon be gone
And all our meetings broken in upon,
No more of these rare moments must be spent
In vain discussions, or in argument.
I wish Miss Trevor was in—Jericho!
(You see the selfishness begins to show.)
She wants to see you?—So do I: but she
Will gain her wish, by taking you from me.
'Come all the same?' that means I'll be allowed
To realize that 'three can make a crowd.'
I do not like to feel myself *_de trop_*.
With two girl cronies would I not be so?
My ring would interrupt some private chat.
You'd ask me in and take my cane and hat,
And speak about the lovely summer day,
And think—'The lout! I wish he'd kept away.'
Miss Trevor'd smile, but just to hide a pout
And count the moments till I was shown out.
And, while I twirled my thumbs, I would sit wishing
That I had gone off hunting birds, or fishing.
No, thanks, Maurine! The iron hand of Fate,
(Or otherwise Miss Trevor's dainty fingers,)
Will bar my entrance into Eden's gate;
And I shall be like some poor soul that lingers
At heaven's portal, paying the price of sin,
Yet hoping to be pardoned and let in."

He looked so melancholy sitting there,
I laughed outright. "How well you act a part;
You look the very picture of despair!
You've missed your calling, sir! suppose you start

Upon a starr'g tour, and carve your name
With Booth's and Barrett's on the heights of Fame.
But now, taboo'g nonsense, I shall send
For you to help me entertain my friend,
Unless you come without it. 'Cronies?' True,
Wanting our 'private chats' as cronies do
And we'll take those, while you are reading Greek,
Or writing 'Lines to Dora's brow' or 'cheek.'
But when you have an hour or two of leisure,
Call as you now do, and afford like pleasure.
For never yet did heaven's sun shine on,
Or stars discover, that phenomenon,
In any country, or in any clime:
Two maids so bound, by ties of mind and heart.
They did not feel the heavy weight of time
In weeks of scenes wherein no man took part.
God made the sexes to associate:
Nor law of man, nor stern decree of Fate,
Can ever undo what His hand has done,
And, quite alone, make happy either one.
My Helen is an only child:—a pet
Of loving parents: and she never yet
Has been denied one boon for which she pleaded.
A fragile thing, her lightest wish was heeded.
Would she pluck roses? they must first be shorn,
By careful hands, of every hateful thorn.
And loving eyes must scan the pathway where
Her feet may tread, to see no stones are there.
She'll grow dull here, in this secluded nook,
Unless you aid me in the pleasant task
Of entertaining. Drop in with your book—
Read, talk, sing for her sometimes. What I ask,
Do once, to please me: then there'll be no need
For me to state the case again, or plead.
There's nothing like a woman's grace and beauty
To waken mankind to a sense of duty."

"I bow before the mandate of my queen:
Your slightest wish is law, Ma Belle Maurine,"
He answered smiling, "I'm at your command;
Point but one lily finger, or your wand,
And you will find a willing slave obeying.
There goes my dinner bell! I hear it saying
I've spent two hours here, lying at your feet,
Not profitable, maybe—surely sweet.
All time is money; now were I to measure
The time I spend here by its solid pleasure,
And that were coined in dollars, then I've laid
Each day a fortune at your feet, fair maid.
There goes that bell again! I'll say good-bye,
Or clouds will shadow my domestic sky.
I'll come again, as you would have me do,
And see your friend, while she is seeing you.
That's like by proxy being at a feast;
Unsatisfactory, to say the least."

He drew his fine shape up, and trod the land
With kingly grace. Passing the gate, his hand
He lightly placed the garden wall upon,
Leaped over like a leopard, and was gone.

And, going, took the brightness from the place,
Yet left the June day with a sweeter grace,
And my young soul so steeped in happy dreams,
Heaven itself seemed shown to me in gleams.
There is a time with lovers, when the heart
First slowly rouses from its dreamless sleep,
To all the tumult of a passion life,
Ere yet have wakened jealousy and strife.
Just as a young, untutored child will start
Out of a long hour's slumber, sound and deep,
And lie and smile with rosy lips, and cheeks,

In a sweet, restful trance, before it speaks.
A time when yet no word the spell has broken,
Save what the heart unto the soul has spoken,
In quickened throbs, and sighs but half suppressed.
A time when that sweet truth, all unconfessed,
Gives added fragrance to the summer flowers,
A golden glory to the passing hours,
A hopeful beauty to the plainest face,
And lends to life a new and tender grace.

When the full heart has climbed the heights of bliss,
And, smiling, looks back o'er the golden past,
I think it finds no sweeter hour than this
In all love-life. For, later, when the last
Translucent drop o'erflows the cup of joy,
And love, more mighty than the heart's control,
Surges in words of passion from the soul,
And vows are asked and given, shadows rise
Like mists before the sun in noonday skies,
Vague fears, that prove the brimming cup's alloy;
A dread of change—the crowning moment's curse,
Since what is perfect, change but renders worse:
A vain desire to cripple Time, who goes
Bearing our joys away, and bringing woes.
And later, doubts and jealousies awaken.
And plighted hearts are tempest-tossed, and
shaken.

Doubt sends a test, that goes a step too far,
A wound is made, that, healing, leaves a scar,
Or one heart, full with love's sweet satisfaction,
Thinks truth once spoken always understood,
While one is pining for the tender action
And whispered word by which, of old, 'twas wooed.

But this blest hour, in love's glad, golden day,
Is like the dawning, ere the radiant ray

Of glowing Sol has burst upon the eye,
But yet is heralded in earth and sky,
Warm with its fervor, mellow with its light,
While Care still slumbers in the arms of night.
But Hope, awake, hears happy birdlings sing,
And thinks of all a summer day may bring.

In this sweet calm, my young heart lay at rest,
Filled with a blissful sense of peace; nor guessed
That sullen clouds were gathering in the skies
To hide the glorious sun, ere it should rise.

PART II.

To little birds that never tire of humming
About the garden, in the summer weather,
Aunt Ruth compared us, after Helen's coming,
As we two roamed, or sat and talked together.
Twelve months apart, we had so much to say
Of school days gone—and time since passed away;
Of that old friend, and this; of what we'd done;
Of how our separate paths in life had run;
Of what we would do, in the coming years;
Of plans and castles, hopes and dreams and fears.
All these, and more, as soon as we found speech,
We touched upon, and skimmed from this to that
But at the first, each only gazed on each,
And, dumb with joy, that did not need a voice
Like lesser joys, to say, "Lo! I rejoice,"
With smiling eyes and clasping hands we sat
Wrapped in that peace, felt but with those dear,
Contented just to know each other near.
But when this silent eloquence gave place
To words, 'twas like the rising of a flood
Above a dam. We sat there, face to face,
And let our talk glide on where'er it would,

Speech never halting in its speed or zest,
Save when our rippling laughter let it rest;
Just as a stream will sometimes pause and play
About a bubbling spring, then dash away.
No wonder, then, the third day's sun was nigh
Up to the zenith when my friend and I
Opened our eyes from slumber long and deep:
Nature demanding recompense for hours
Spent in the portico, among the flowers,
Halves of two nights we should have spent in sleep.

So this third day, we breakfasted at one:
Then walked about the garden in the sun,
Hearing the thrushes and the robins sing,
And looking to see what buds were opening.

The clock chimed three, and we yet strayed at will
About the yard in morning dishabille,
When Aunt Ruth came, with apron o'er her head,
Holding a letter in her hand, and said,
"Here is a note, from Vivian I opine;
At least his servant brought it. And now, girls,
You may think this is no concern of mine,
But in my day young ladies did not go,
Till almost bed-time roaming to and fro
In morning wrappers, and with tangled curls,
The very pictures of forlorn distress.
'Tis three o'clock, and time for you to dress.
Come! read your note and hurry in, Maurine,
And make yourself fit object to be seen."

Helen was bending o'er an almond bush,
And ere she looked up I had read the note,
And calmed my heart, that, bounding, sent a flush
To brow and cheek, at sight of aught *he* wrote.
"Ma Belle Maurine:" (so Vivian's billet ran,)

"Is it not time I saw your cherished guest?
'Pity the sorrows of a poor young man,'
Banished from all that makes existence blest.
I'm dying to see—your friend; and I will come
And pay respects, hoping you'll be at home
To-night at eight. Expectantly, V. D."

Inside my belt I slipped the billet, saying,
"Helen, go make yourself most fair to see:
Quick! hurry now! no time for more delaying!
In just five hours a caller will be here,
And you must look your prettiest, my dear!
Begin your toilet right away. I know
How long it takes you to arrange each bow—
To twist each curl, and loop your skirts aright.
And you must prove you are *au fait* to-night,
And make a perfect toilet: for our caller
Is man, and critic, poet, artist, scholar,
And views with eyes of all."

"Oh, oh! Maurine,"
Cried Helen with a well-feigned look of fear,
"You've frightened me so I shall not appear:
I'll hide away, refusing to be seen
By such an ogre. Woe is me! bereft
Of all my friends, my peaceful home I've left,
And strayed away into the dreadful wood
To meet the fate of poor Red Riding Hood.
No, Maurine, no! you've given me such a fright,
I'll not go near your ugly wolf to-night."

Meantime we'd left the garden; and I stood
In Helen's room, where she had thrown herself
Upon a couch, and lay, a winsome elf,
Pouting and smiling, cheek upon her arm,
Not in the least a portrait of alarm.
"Now sweet!" I coaxed, and knelt by her, "be good!

Go curl your hair; and please your own Maurine,
By putting on that lovely grenadine.
Not wolf, nor ogre, neither Caliban,
Nor Mephistopheles, you'll meet to-night,
But what the ladies call 'a nice young man'!
Yet one worth knowing—strong with health and
might
Of perfect manhood; gifted, noble, wise;
Moving among his kind with loving eyes,
And helpful hand; progressive, brave, refined,
After the image of his Maker's mind."

"Now, now, Maurine!" cried Helen, "I believe
It is your lover coming here this eve.
Why have you never written of him, pray?
Is the day set?—and when? Say, Maurine, say!"

Had I betrayed by some too fervent word
The secret love that all my being stirred?
My lover? Ay! My heart proclaimed him so;
But first *his* lips must win the sweet confession,
Ere even Helen be allowed to know.
I must straightway erase the slight impression
Made by the words just uttered.
"Foolish child!"
I gayly cried, "your fancy's straying wild.
Just let a girl of eighteen hear the name
Of maid and youth uttered about one time,
And off her fancy goes, at break-neck pace,
Defying circumstances, reason, space—
And straightway builds romances so sublime
They put all Shakespeare's dramas to the shame.
This Vivian Dangerfield is neighbor, friend
And kind companion; bringing books and flowers.
And, by his thoughtful actions without end,
Helping me pass some otherwise long hours;

But he has never breathed a word of love.
If you still doubt me, listen while I prove
My statement by the letter that he wrote.
'Dying to meet—my friend!' (she could not see
The dash between that meant so much to me.)
'Will come this eve, at eight, and hopes we may
Be in to greet him.' Now I think you'll say
'Tis not much like a lover's tender note."

We laugh, we jest, not meaning what we say;
We hide our thoughts, by light words lightly spoken,
And pass on heedless, till we find one day
They've bruised our hearts, or left some other
broken.

I sought my room, and trilling some blithe air,
Opened my wardrobe, wondering what to wear.
Momentous question! femininely human!
More than all others, vexing mind of woman,
Since that sad day, when in her discontent,
To search for leaves, our fair first mother went.
All undecided what I should put on,
At length I made selection of a lawn—
White, with a tiny pink vine overrun:—
My simplest robe, but Vivian's favorite one.
And placing a single flowret in my hair,
I crossed the hall to Helen's chamber, where
I found her with her fair locks all let down,
Brushing the kinks out, with a pretty frown.
'T was like a picture, or a pleasing play,
To watch her make her toilet. She would stand,
And turn her head first this and then that way,
Trying effect of ribbon, bow or band.
Then she would pick up something else, and curve
Her lovely neck, with cunning, bird-like grace,
And watch the mirror while she put it on,

With such a sweetly grave and thoughtful face;
And then to view it all would sway, and swerve
Her lithe young body, like a graceful swan.

Helen was over medium height, and slender
Even to frailty. Her great, wistful eyes
Were like the deep blue of autumnal skies;
And through them looked her soul, large, loving,
tender.

Her long, light hair was lusterless, except
Upon the ends, where burnished sunbeams slept,
And on the earlocks; and she looped the curls
Back with a shell comb, studded thick with pearls,
Costly yet simple. Her pale loveliness,
That night, was heightened by her rich, black dress,
That trailed behind her, leaving half in sight
Her taper arms, and shoulders marble white.

I was not tall as Helen, and my face
Was shaped and colored like my grandsire's race;
For through his veins my own received the warm,
Red blood of southern France, which curved my
form,
And glowed upon my cheek in crimson dyes,
And bronzed my hair, and darkled in my eyes.
And as the morning trails the skirts of night,
And dusky night puts on the garb of morn,
And walk together when the day is born,
So we two glided down the hall and stair,
Arm clasping arm, into the parlor, where
Sat Vivian, bathed in sunset's gorgeous light.
He rose to greet us. Oh! his form was grand;
And he possessed that power, strange, occult,
Called magnetism, lacking better word,
Which moves the world, achieving great result
Where genius fails completely. Touch his hand,