

Famous American
Belles of the
Nineteenth Century

By

Virginia Tatnall Peacock

ILLUSTRATED



Philadelphia & London
J. B. Lippincott Company

1901

MARCIA BURNS

(MRS. JOHN PETER VAN NESS)

MARCIA BURNS! What memories the quaint Scotch lassie's name calls up!

The city of Washington disappears and its site spreads before us in flourishing farm lands and orchards. Scattered farm-houses raise their chimneys amid primeval oaks and elms, and from the low doorway of the humblest emerges the winsome form of Marcia Burns. Six hundred acres, representing the thrift of generations of Scotch ancestors, surround her. The Potomac, one of the great water-ways of the South, carrying the produce of the fertile lands above into Alexandria for consumption or reshipment, almost kisses her feet. This is her patrimony, over which she has already heard such spirited debate between her father and General Washington, then President of the United States, and the three gentlemen commissioned by Congress, at that time sitting in Philadelphia, to select and purchase the ground on which is to be built the capital city. As she looks riverward a canoe is beached in the shadow of the vine-hung trees, and the President, accompanied by two of the commissioners, whose forms have of late grown



Marcia Burns
(Mrs. John Peter Van Ness)
From miniature by James Peale, 1797

of her father's home, the President's house was nearing completion. A mile and a half to the east, on the summit of a hill, the white walls of the Capitol were becoming visible to all the surrounding country. At irregular intervals houses, single and in rows, were in course of construction. There was nothing in the so-called city of Washington to which Marcia Burns came home, and of which the government took formal possession in 1800, that ever so remotely suggested the garden spot that it is to-day. Members of Congress and foreign ministers alike reviled it, and the lamentations of Mrs. Adams are too well known to be repeated here.

Of such social life as there was scattered over so vast an area of mud, in which "pedestrians frequently slumped and horses became stalled," Marcia Burns became a central figure. Though she was too gentle and modest ever to assume a leadership, yet all that was best and brightest in the life about her naturally gravitated in her direction.

Notwithstanding the pretentious homes that were going up around her, she still dwelt contentedly in her cottage of four rooms. There, in the summer evenings, gathered on the low, broad stone slab of its south door, overhung with blooming wistaria, her friends and neighbors,—the Tayloes from the afterwards famous Octagon house, the Calverts, and the Daniel Carrolls from Duddington Manor over near the Capitol.

In the winter season, when Congress was in session,

somest houses of that day in the city and one that compares not unfavorably with the most elegant homes built there in recent years. It was designed and built by Latrobe at a cost of nearly sixty thousand dollars, its marble mantel-pieces, which are works of art, being imported from Italy. It had, moreover, a *porte cochère*, which was a rarity in those days,—the President's house having the only other one in Washington. A truly magnificent home it was, and destined to be the scene of many brilliant occasions, as also to witness days as full of heart-rending unhappiness to Marcia Burns as those both in the cottage of her girlhood and the home of her early married life had been of pure joyousness.

With all its treasures of art, the chief ornament of the new home was Ann Van Ness, who completed her studies at a boarding-school in Philadelphia and returned to Washington about the time her parents took possession of it. Two years later she married Arthur Middleton, of South Carolina, the son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and probably that same Arthur Middleton, of whom Mrs. Edward Livingston made mention in a letter to her husband ten years later to the effect that his moustaches, whiskers, and velvet shirt were creating more of a sensation in New York than the quarrel between Jackson and Calhoun. Ann died within a year after her marriage. She was an only child, and to her mother life held nothing that could amend her loss. Thenceforth she withdrew from the sphere to which she

had been since her early girlhood so great an ornament. She frequently sought the seclusion of the little cottage, and there, perhaps, lived over in memory the days that had known no shadow.

She did not need the discipline of sorrow, which some natures require to sweeten them, but under its influence she rose to the loftiest heights of benevolence. Her pictured face reveals to us the beauty of her soul. The truth that speaks in her eyes, the spirituality of her brow, the tenderness of her mouth, combine to make the perfection of human character. The Washington City Orphan Asylum, which she founded and to which she devoted both time and means, is a fitting monument to her memory.

She died on the 9th of September, 1832, and is the only woman who was ever honored with a public funeral in Washington. Through her charities she had become as widely known and as tenderly loved in the later years of her life as she had been in her youth through qualities not less endearing.

The following tribute to her is by Horatio Greenough :

“ ‘Mid rank and wealth and worldly pride,
From every snare she turned aside.
She sought the low, the humble shed,
Where gaunt disease and famine tread ;
And from that time, in youthful pride,
She stood Van Ness's blooming bride,
No day her blameless head o'er past
But saw her dearer than the last.”