

THE PERFECT GIFT

*A BYRON ON WELLS STORY, AS RELATED BY FAUN CHIOS**

A lone fox braved the bitter December wind. The leaden sky threatened snow, and most folk kept warm indoors, but not Thornton Foxworth. He was chasing the one bright hope that pierced his inner darkness. I had sent him to see my Uncle Erastos.

Thorny never had time to study the gentle arts for he had worked from a very early age. He needed help, quickly, badly, a help I knew only my Uncle could provide.

Thorny found the dancing lawn snowy, silent and empty except for one very old faun who used a staff to help him get about. Was that him? How could that old relic teach dancing, and in the sharp teeth of inclement weather? Thorny's expectations were low to begin with, and the sight of my uncle leaning on his staff, plunged them even deeper.

He timidly approached the faun. "Please sir, your nephew Chios sent me here. Can you...I mean will you...teach me to dance?"

Erastos glared at him. "Why do you want to know?"

"There is this vixen, Clara, that I've invited to the Christmas Ball..."

Erastos heaved a sigh. "You want to impress her, right? Sweep her off her feet? Son, that is not dance to me. Find yourself another teacher!"

"No," Thorny said urgently, "it's not like that! Not at all! I am poor and uneducated. It doesn't take much learning to see that. My love words are awkward, and all I know about is waiting tables and lawn bowling. Clara is a fine lady, so wise and graceful, and when I see her dance I feel like I'm in a waking dream. I ache to hold her in my arms."

Erastos' face softened. "I see. Love her, do you?"

"Oh sir, I would gladly spend my life with her, but I'm sure I'll only get to hold her once. She has so many wealthy and educated suitors, but when I asked her to be my date for the Christmas Ball and she accepted, *I was stunned*. It's the greatest thing that ever happened to me and I want it to be perfect in every way. I want it to be something I can remember when I'm old and alone and feel like I've really lived. I had no childhood, sir. I've worked hard since I was a lad, and Christmas has always

been just another day for me. Is it wrong for me to want *one* happy Christmas?"

"No, son."

Thorny looked down. "I may be ignorant about many things, but I know what loneliness is. And since I saw her, I know what happiness is. *Please help me!*"

Erastos laid a hand on Thorny's shoulder and gave him a little pat. "There, there son. I see a poet lurking inside you. I'm always a patron of lost causes and poets. My nephew was right to send you here, but please understand; I had to make sure you were worthy."

This puzzled the fox. "Is it such a secret that you guard it so jealously?"

"You will understand. Dance for me, son."

The faun lifted his mahogany flute and began to play. At first Thornton moved stiffly and awkwardly. Then as the melody took hold in him and began to grow and flourish, all the conflicting voices in his head, the clamor of confusion and self doubt gave way to one clear melody of incredible beauty.

He blinked his eyes, unable to believe what was happening. Spring had heard the tender yearnings of the sleeping blossoms, the cries of the threadbare meadows, the mournful whispers of the barren trees. Spring had

come to wipe away the tears of winter and cajole the weeping birds to song. As the wind made the trees nod and sway he became one with it, nodding and swaying in time. He floated with the white clouds, realizing that nature had a rhythm and he could dance to it. He embraced it in his soul as he danced, not clumsy as before but in perfect oneness with all creation.

Clara peeked shyly from the willows, a coy smile lighting her lovely countenance. Then with a rush she came to him like springtime, like the first blush of red on the roses. He bowed to her, took her in his arms and pressed her close. With triumphant joy he lofted her as if she were an autumn leaf. How alive and warm she was in his arms!

Drunk with happiness, he danced about in the tender shelter of her embrace. All at once the whole of nature was suffused with saffron hued warmth, and her languid eyes sparkled with innocent mirth.

The clover soft beneath their feet perfumed the meadow with its precious honey. Swallows from the heavens swung and soared about them in giddy rapture. Panting with revelry, Clara clung to him as vines to the arbor. Her smile was a wine that warmed his heart. He gazed into her hazel eyes and trembled with love.

At that one perfect moment, Thorny's heart could have stilled, his breath quenched, and yet his whole dreary life would have been worthwhile.

Then the music stopped. Clara had disappeared and the brief April fled before the harsh jealousy of December.

Thorny trembled, and not from the cold. “Oh, that was wonderful! But did it have to end so soon?”

“That is all I had.”

“You mean the magic won’t work twice?”

“It’s no longer my magic. Can’t you tell?”

Thorny *did* feel different. He felt graceful and more passionate about life than he did before. He could also sense that the old faun was somehow more frail, more empty of vitality than he was before. “You gave all that up...for me?”

Erastos leaned on his staff as if to underscore his words. “In this old body all my memories could do is gather dust and fade away. In you they will prosper and inspire the glories of young love.”

“I cannot take them from you! They’re yours! It wouldn’t be right!”

“You didn’t take them; I gave them to you. Besides, I still have my music. Now go and have your happy Christmas, son.”

“I already have,” the fox said, embracing him tightly. Thorny’s heart was so full of love and joy that

he scarcely noticed the bitter wind. The kiss of Springtime lived on in him and the lonely Winter would never blot it out.

And that is the story of the perfect gift, the gift of one's own self. All went well, and I had the honor of joining Thorny and Clara in marriage. But that, my friends, is another story.

THE END