THE TRIBUTE SILVER: A STORY: BY ELIZABETH CARR McMAKIN

ROUND about the lonely cottage that stood in an expanse of cultivated farmland, Nature revealed herself in plain and stern aspect: hedging in the clean utility of the fields, the pine trees rose in uncompromising uprightness, and the gray stone boulder that stood in solitary relief against them, on the east, suggested a calm strength impervious to destructive forces. The one tender touch in the picture lay in the distance—beyond the fields and woods and house tops of the adjacent town—in the slender church spire pointing upward against the western sky.

On the piazza of the cottage two women were waiting for the car. Their conversation, as they whiled away the time, had suddenly taken the personal turn which the guest had for the past hour been vainly striving to give it. She realized, still, the precariousness of the situation, and at the more critical junctures, where angularities in her hostess obtruded more acutely, she digressed judiciously, yet not so far as not to be able to steer naturally, if not comfortably, back to the main question. At the present uneasy period she withdrew her veiled scrutiny of the coarse garb of her companion, and looked off over the cotton fields, still patched with white, with a puzzled air. It was not wanton curiosity that was goading her to ascertain the truth concerning her young friend’s estrangement from Herbert Long, nor was it officious interest that was prompting her to make a plea for their reconciliation: so fundamentally, to her thought, did this woman’s character stand for the ethical in life, that,—this single flaw threatening the security of the whole,—she felt unable to go on her way harmoniously, until the just cause of the weakness was known.

“I know,” she presently suggested, “that you have inherited your father’s judicial mind, without the saving impracticality of your mother’s, but the inheritance shouldn’t have enslaved you; and the fact that Herbert does nothing to disabuse the world of its belief that you treated him inconsiderately is not reconcilable with your character. I am hurt; your friends are hurt; and you yourself are injured.”

Instantly the girl drew within herself, then, as by a decisive stroke of will, yielded. She opened her lips to speak, but the older woman interrupted her, impatiently. “I’m not going over all that,” she continued, “those worn causes: your lack of health, his lack of money; your plan of taking advantage of his slavery in order to fit him, through
hardship, for the finer success; I know the whole stoic perpetration, but what I do not know is, when he had met your every exaction, how you could have the heart to destroy him like this.”

The younger woman turned her head and looked into her guest’s face, an expression of concern in her eyes: “Like this? Like what?”

“The only reason I can conceive of,” the guest continued, not heeding the question, “is that you had ceased to love him, which reason, forsooth, is inconceivable.”

The young woman leaned over and gave the cat that was purring at her feet one light, gentle stroke with her roughened hand. “What is love?” she queried.

“I do not know, I’m sure,” the other replied, with a vexed laugh, “but one ventures to suppose it is a compound of which mercy is one of the elements.”

The girl stood up and let her eyes wander dispassionately over the fields. Her poise was irritating. Her friend, watching her, hesitated a moment, then said: “I want the truth.”

The continued silence of the young hostess was evidence of her unwillingness to enter a situation that had been made too intimately personal. But presently, deliberately, as one hard disciplined to meet the day’s work without evasion or slight, she said, simply: “I will tell you.”

But she did not continue at once, and appeared as mentally casting about for the least self-inflicting form of verbal expression, breaking with difficulty through her reserve. “Perhaps you do not know,” she finally began, in halting progress, “that I have seen Herbert Long only twice since father died—three years ago?”

The elder woman uttered some inarticulate murmur of surprise, but did not otherwise comment, and the girl slowly continued: “It was the year father left us that the temptation to marry him was so strong, my loss so emphasized my loneliness and my poverty, but,—well, we talked it over, and, as you know, it ended with his going abroad for three years, primarily in the interest of a friend’s business, and my coming here, to seek for health. My whole thought after that was ordered, I may as well admit, with one end in view,—to hold his love. I was fearful at first, for he was having great opportunity, while my life here was the narrowing existence of any common farmer. However, I seemed to have small difficulty in holding him; he was aesthetic; he is still,” smiling; “an excess of the quality is one of the flaws of his work, and I, in my own weakness, responded to his clamors for the letters ‘that held beauty,—that held joy.’
"The farce of my attitude and treatment presently came home to me when my struggle for a bare living opened my mind to the side of life that smiles at unapplied theories. The keen barter with rude men for a cow, or a mule; the haggling with the rich over the price of a dozen eggs; the setting aright the misplaced generosity of the impulsive; one's stand toward the thoughtless, the indifferent, the dishonest,—from all these dealings it was something to come out with clean hands and a fair mind, and to know one had done nothing to keep one's neighbor from standing in like way beside one. This close, hard intercourse with practical men and women tended to relegate the merely beautiful to its proper relation to other things, and when I saw that Herbert Long was gleaning the refinement of the old world and getting little else, I gave to him the worth of my experience; it furnished a rough stuff needful to the healthy body of his work, and, apparently, my reward came. You can imagine with what interest I watched every step of his advancement during those years, for he wrote freely, and the delight with which I noted what seemed to me to be a development,—which I bent every energy to foster.

"I was very nearly happy, for the secret spring from which I drew the strength that kept me up through all was the belief that his love for me was deepening, gradually losing its whimsical, passionate nature, and settling into the strong and even lines that stand the test of time and change. Out of all this"—she gave a slight, abrupt wave of her hand toward the open,—"together with the knowledge I had reaped from the other sources, I gleaned spiritual truth, and this I used, to hold him. In the generously sweet and lovable way that had always characterized him and rooted him ineradicably in my heart, where he filled my need, he made his quick, glad response: his work was richer in meaning because of me, and I was necessary to it; I was his soul's complement; only together did we form a complete whole; and through me the real life was opening before him. He said much, in fact, that he was doubtless sorry for afterward, and yet, he told the truth: I was his soul's complement, for I possessed the things he lacked, and in that he had the one thing I had not, and needed,—the softness that relieved and redeemed the hardness of my nature."

Far down the track the car rushed into sight; its whirr sounded across the cotton field as it neared and sped by unheeded.

"When the time for the home-coming drew near," the young woman continued, "it was a joyous cry that came across to me,—the gladness
of looking into my eyes, of hearing my voice, of touching my hands, of claiming me! How my body must have grown in rare beauty with my soul!” Half unconsciously she raised one toil-worn hand and scrutinized it, and glanced down at her coarse garments and roughly shod feet. “He harped on that so, and when I sought to open his eyes to the truth, he would not believe me,—and dwelt on my modesty. Then it was that the fear came home to me that it was not my happiness, but my tragedy, that was at my door. My fight for a living in the open had brought hardiness, but in my fervent quest for what I deemed to be better things, I neglected,—even sacrificed,—that which had first won his fancy. All the time he was advancing in exquisite polish, I was paying for my gain in knotted hands and awkwardness. I didn’t think he could stand the shock of seeing me here, in this way—” again she gave a downward glance at herself, “and I didn’t believe I had the strength to give him up. But there was only one way open, and those last few months were the fire from which I came out tempered for action.” She moved a few paces away from her guest, changing her position so that the sun fell less directly on her face. But its soft rays still covered her, accentuating and hallowing the stern lines of her figure.

“He came home presently,—to some fame, to much praise, to old interests; and to new ones. It was his wish, he said his prayer, that I should be the first to welcome him, and I did not gainsay him; he came straight to me.” She was silent for a thoughtful moment. From the rear of the cottage a pony grazed leisurely into view, and, seeing his mistress, lifted his head with a glad whinny and came to the side of the railing to rub his nose against her sleeve. Her hand sought his mane with a clinging, loving touch before she gave the gentle push that sent him away to his grazing again.

“You understand the artistic temperament as well as I do,” she concluded, “its needs, its exactions; and I think,” it was a ghost of a smile that wavered on her lips, “that the story really ends here.”

The older woman looked bewildered: “Do you mean to say,—” she began; the face of the other suddenly hardened. “Yes,” sharply, “I mean to say just that; in fact I rejected him; in truth he rejected me. Oh, it was not all done in a moment,” she cried, the lines of her face obediently relaxing at the command of her will, “and his conduct was irreproachable; the surface of things was preserved in a flawless beauty and harmony; he asked me how soon he might take me away from—this” her glance swept the open, “and try to nurse me back to my old self. I put him off from month to month, hoping
in fasting and prayer—I had fallen so low—that there was some spark of the former feeling left in him, but his old passion seemed as dead as was my old self; we couldn’t go back; we tried. Finally, in apparently outworn patience, he wrote the letter in which he asked me if I would either marry him or free him from the bondage of his hope,—from—the—bondage—of—his—hope; you see, he was graceful to the last. I gave him his freedom.

The story was in truth ended, but the woman who had been listening was irritated beyond endurance.

“But what is the meaning of it all?” she cried, with pain in her voice, “I see only purposelessness, emptiness.”

Her companion was silent. The guest regarded her uncertainly for a moment, then said: “I can’t understand, surely he was not blind—”

“Not to the outside of things,” the other answered, smiling.

“You have no word of blame for him?”

“He was only true to himself,—as he has thus far found himself.”

“Well, tell me this:’’ the unpacificed guest urged, in sheer exasperation, “according to your theory that you furnished the energy for his success, that you are practically the whole thing thus far anyway, will his future work be lacking, now that he is only a fraction of a soul, for you needn’t dream that this woman he is to marry is your moral twin?”

Her companion was silent,—silent for a long while.

“There will be a lull in his work now, for a time,” she said, finally, in a dulled tone, “after that, I cannot tell. If he is to be married, as you say, much will depend for him on her influence.” She raised deliberate eyes to her friend’s face. “You say you know her?”

“Yes,” adding, with malicious sarcasm, “she hath a beautiful body.”

“What kind of wife will she make him? Will his pleasure last?”

“That is what hurts me so,’’ urged the older woman; “To think of your turning him over to a woman like that! No, she’ll make him wretched, in the end!” A sudden, grateful light shone in the other’s face.

“Oh, well then,’’ she cried, in a tone of relief, “his continued success is probably assured.” Her friend stared for a moment in a surprise she made no effort to conceal, then gave a helpless smile.

A faint flush tinged the younger woman’s face, which was gone ere it appeared, but which for the moment so transfigured her as to quicken the light in her friend’s eyes.
THE TRIBUTE SILVER

“I mean,” she quietly sought to explain, “that he must go from energy to energy, getting his inspiration outside of himself, and, always, his most useful means of advancement must be unsatisfied sense; happiness would mean death to his work.”

The guest smiled unbelievingly. “Do you think he is capable of—fixed fancy, we will call it?” she asked.

“According to your standard he is,” was the reply.

“Then, according to the same standard, you have never loved him,” she announced. Her companion looked startled for a moment, then said, quietly, “Probably so.”

“Certainly so,” the older woman continued, calmly, her mind falling at last into its habitual logical action. “You have exaggerated every condition, from his moral to your physical weakness. You’ve starved and abused yourself and him until he is a cripple and you are deformed. You haven’t been unselfish; you’ve been only cruel; you haven’t been strong and heroic; it’s you that have been the weakling,—a slave to fear, afraid to share the common joys and common sorrows that are the healthful, ennobling portion of man and woman. Your influence has reached beyond the seas to be choked back at last to a one-horse farm, where the dogs and the chickens get the wealth of your heart. And now, to cap it all, you say you are giving this man his freedom, when you are only sealing his sentence of life imprisonment. And you call this love? My dear, he has much to forgive you!” Her eyes dwelt searchingly on the dumb face before her, then her tone, as she continued, grew softer:

“Far be it from me to disparage the things of the spirit, but one can’t ignore the rightful use of the senses—and live. The things of this world that you are dependent on, bear their tax—and you admit you are dependent on affection, whether it be of your fellow-kind, or,” bitterly, her tone dropping its gentle note, “of your petted animals. You pay it, forsooth, to the cats and the horses, yet deny it to a hungry soul. ‘In this way,’” she swept the coarse raiment of the woman opposite with a seathing glance, “why should it have been ‘in this way?’ What moral right had you, on your lover’s homecoming, to make God’s gift of beauty to you, that he loved, unsightly? By what theory or course of reasoning do you make homespun more spiritual than broadcloth? No, you leaped the bounds of time and place and tried to force Herbert Long’s soul with you. In all your ascetic extravagance why did it not seem worth while to you to descend to him and lead him through his love of beauty to a discernment of the truth? Couldn’t you afford a few concessions, realizing, as you
say, that his very weakness is needful to the perfection of your united souls? Instead of that strenuous, harrowing fight you made to hold him, your aim could have been so easily and completely carried by a mildest of human methods, at no cost of dignity or self-esteem." She paused a moment, then took a step nearer the still figure and spoke with earnest appeal: "Even now you might reclaim him, for, beneath that hideous mask you wear, you are beautiful still. Relax, I beg of you!" She hesitated, then said, quietly, "I am asking you to save him."

The woman opposite made no response. She absently picked away some burrs clinging to the hem of her frock and gently dropped them to the floor. When she finally raised herself erect, her face looked pinched and sick.

"It is little, after all, that I ask you to concede," the older woman urged, gently.

"Little?" the other echoed, "you ask me to compromise with my soul." Her friend made a gesture of patient intolerance.

"I ask only that you do not permit the stronger laws to crush the weaker ones—just because they are stronger," she said. Then she added, "if you believe, as I do not, that with Herbert Long sense is final, I have no further word to say." The younger woman smiled: "Would you have more to say in any case?" she asked, bitterly. The other nodded: "Perhaps," she replied.

"Well, don't!" the girl said. "You are asking me to act as the greatest minds have acted, and I can't do it. I don't know what's latent in Herbert Long; there may be depths hard to sound, but the line in my hand is fallen useless. I can do nothing now; any advance on my part would only cheapen all to a semblance of caricature. No, I must follow my light, dim or dimmed as that light may be, and at worst I'll be my own punishment."

"That is just it," her friend reminded her, "it is more than your own tragedy that you have to account for. Don't you know that when the brief glamour of the honeymoon is over he will see things in their true light, and his soul will be filled with pessimism, and, malleable as he is, he'll put it into his work and you'll be responsible?"

Even beyond the church spire the listening woman's eyes seemed to pierce, and in them there was a deep glow.

"In their true light," she quoted softly. Then she looked gratefully at her companion. "I hadn't hoped for that," she said.

"And then," the guest cried, mockingly, "he will love you—according to your own standard?" The lips of the other suddenly
IN SEASON

tightened; then her whole being relaxed wearily. The guest dared not trespass further, and a few minutes later in unhappy mood she went across the cotton field and signaled for the car to stop.

As she sank into the seat, she looked out of the window toward the cottage. She saw an old-young figure plodding with uneven step through the crispened stalks of cotton. A few paces behind, a calf followed docilely; a few feet in front a dog bounded joyously. The three were clearly outlined against the sunset sky.

IN SEASON

I like daffodils in April,
And strawberries in June;
When they make them come in winter
It seems to spoil the seasons—
Maybe these aren’t good reasons.
But I like things in tune
And not to change the moon.

I like to wait for flowers
In the old way, as one should,
They need the outdoor showers;
Hothouses are for roses
And such things. One supposes
God knows how to make ripe and sweet
Better than we the fruit we eat.

Half the spring’s charm is first to see
The jonquils waving in the light,
It’s worth the waiting for. If we
Choose to live where winter’s cold,
Do not let us be too bold
To change what God has started right,
But let things sleep while the ground is white!

—Isabella Howe Fiske.