THE PRISONERS: A STORY: BY MARION WINTHROP

HANS, the canary, lived in his cage—light-hearted, you would have said, from his song,—yet with a swift wistful glance for the visitor who might bring reprieve. Hans, the child, lived in a cage also,—a cage with walls not of golden wire but of stone and plaster. Once in a long while Hans, the canary, found the door of his cage open, and learned to know that at such times he might fly about the room or pause upon the red geranium in the window to rest his easily tired wings. Once in a while—not quite so long a while—Hans, the child, could go out to play in the street or in the tiny high-walled backyard. The canary never breathed the outer air except during the brief moment of morning ventilation, and then only from under the corners of a careful handkerchief thrown over the cage to save his little yellow life from danger of cold. The child, for the same reason, was not permitted the outer air too often. His aunt, the arbiter of both their destinies, was a woman with a conscience, an American of the class and generation that regards fresh air with suspicion. And so the child spent many weary days pressing a pale little face that should not have been pale against the window pane; and the bird hopped ceaselessly from perch to perch within his narrow home, questioning fate with his pathetically cheerful chirp. Neither knew words for his desire.

The child dreamed in these long moments of the green grass and trees in the park where his father, returning from time to time from a vague somewhere, would take him. The canary dreamed, perchance, also of trees and grass and blue sky and of golden sunshine among green boughs. And when he caught sight of the solitary red geranium upon the window sill, or the sunlight sent a wandering ray into his cage, he would sing as if his little heart would break with the joy of it.

After his father, the child loved the canary better than anything on earth. “He has my name,” Hans would explain, joyfully. “He is Hans; I, also, am Hans; we are both Hans.” And then he would laugh. This was Hans’ joke. He was a quiet child who asked his questions in shy glances. He liked to become acquainted with a new object by touching it softly with his hands. He almost never broke his toys for all his eager little spirit. His voice was low, and his pale cheeks flushed easily.

Hans’ father and mother were German, but Hans had been born in America. When his mother died there had been no one to
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take him but his father’s brother’s widow, an American living in prosperity and comfort, according to her ideas, in Greenwich village. There, in a little crooked street, in a little, but not crooked, red brick house with a white door and brass knob,—which had also three modern bells in a horizontal row signifying its adaptation to the flat class—Hans lived all alone with his aunt. There were no children in the families living on the floors above and beneath them. Even William Johnson, the colored janitor who lived in the basement, had none. Next to his father and the canary Hans loved William Johnson, who always met him with a smile and polished jest. The janitor’s duties not being heavy, and being shared by his ample wife, William Johnson found time to interest himself also in a tobacco and news store around the corner. From this base of supplies he sometimes brought Hans bright-colored pictures of rather consciously beautiful ladies and angelic children. These offerings Hans’ aunt smiled upon. Upon this question of taste the three were at one. From other standpoints, Hans’ aunt regarded the child’s fondness for William Johnson as indicative of a low taste and explainable by the fact that Hans was “Dutch.”

It had not yet occurred to the child to ask himself whether or not he loved his aunt, so he did not know that he did not love her. He only knew that he did not like to watch her as he liked to watch the yellow-haired girl across the way who was always coming down or going up her steps. Hans loved bright things like sunshine and yellow hair and the canary’s downy breast. He loved music, too, even the organ man’s music, and perhaps that was another reason why he loved the canary, for the bird had a wonderful soft song that sounded somehow like two canaries, and bore no resemblance to the shrill, meaningless trills of most caged birds. Perhaps Hans had not been born a captive or perhaps he had caught fragments of the songs of other birds who had lived in the sunlight. The canary had belonged to the child’s mother and had come with him when she died. Hans’ aunt did not like the canary, but she tolerated it and cared for it, being, as has been said, a woman with a conscience.

Hans’ father was engaged in some nondescript traveling business of apparently not too lucrative a nature. From these trips he made infrequent visits to his child, during which time Hans was very happy, for then he took many trips outdoors and was secretly fed much bright-colored candy. He seemed a cheerful soul, Hans’ father, although given to superficial sighing fits when reflecting upon his inability to stay at home “bei mein Kind.” Hans never knew pre-
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cisely when his father was coming, but he knew—and his heart would
give a great bound of joy when he heard the heavy step in the hall—
that when the door was open he would be lifted high by big strong
hands with the loving—"So, mein Kind! Jetzt Papa kommt wieder!"

It was in the time of the spring cleaning when it seemed as if
Hans’ little spirit could hardly contain itself indoors that there came
a sudden warm "spell," as his aunt called it, and she decided it to be
more than ever essential that Hans should stay indoors. Hans, the
canary, came under the ban also.

"Cannot the cage of Hans hang outside the window today?" asked Hans one perfect spring morning. "So hangs the bird across
the way."

"Want your bird to catch cold and die?" was the answer.

Later in the day when the sun was almost hot the child ventured
to plead again. "Surely, good aunt, Hans cannot now catch cold
if he is by the window—"

But his aunt only replied, "In that hot sun, you silly child! Don’t
tease. I’m just clean used up with all the work I have to do."

The next day being warmer the bird was banished even from the
daylight. The cage was placed on top of a wardrobe in a dark cor-
ner of the inner room. Hans pleaded in vain. "He loves so much
the sunshine. . . He sings ever in the sunshine. He is so sad in
the dark."

"You don’t know what you are talking about," his aunt reproved
him. "That hot sun will make him sick and then you won’t have
no more canary. Besides, I get tired hearing him screech all day.
It makes my head ache."

Hans’ eyes filled, but he knew better than to protest. Moreover,
it was not his way. He was a submissive child. So the canary lived
in darkness through the wonderful spring days and scarcely ever sang
any more, although he never failed to answer with a cheerful "cheep"
when Hans stood at the foot of the wardrobe and called up to him.
And the child spent long hours kneeling in a chair by the window,
watching the swift white April clouds roll past. Then, one day, unex-
pectedly, came the sound of the beloved step on the stairs, the familiar
stumble at the turn near the top and the hand feeling for the knob,
and Hans was at the door, crying, "Vater, mein lieber Vater," and his
aunt was telling him to stop making such a racket and Hans was not
hearing, for by that time his pale cheek was against a ruddy, prickly
cheek and the big bass voice was saying cheerily, "So, mein Kind!"

Soon it was discovered that the child was to go to the park,—
not at some distant promised time, but right away that very minute, and in the joy of that realization the silent canary in his darkened cage was forgotten.

And so it was through the blissful week that followed. The child, because he was a child, forgot the bird’s dark little life in the new lightness and freedom of his own. But at length came the morning—the gray miserable morning—of the last day, yet not so unhappy as some last days, for lieber Vater was to come back soon again, and there was even the rosy hope of a time when there would be no more separations, when they could be together all the days.

“But now for many days I shall have no one but Hans,” said the child, sadly. Then recollections came to him and he exclaimed, “Poor little Hans! He sings no more. He is ever in darkness.”

“Why, then,” asked his father, suddenly realizing that he had not seen the bird. “Why, then, is the Vögelein in darkness? It is not kind.”

“The bird bracket was taken down at house cleaning,” the aunt returned, shortly, “and I haven’t had time, with the extra work and all, to put it up.” She did not care for Hans’ father, who seemed to her foolishly expressive and unreasonably cheerful for one who had achieved so little in worldly success. Nevertheless, she had the deference of her class toward his sex and did not dare to put him aside as she had Hans. So when he demanded firmly, “Where, then, is that bracket? I, myself, shall nail it, und the Canarienvogel shall sing once more—” she did not refuse.

So the bracket was brought out and Hans’ father put it up again in the window and hung the canary’s cage upon it then and there.

When the bird found himself once more in the sunlight he flew up to the top perch with swift turns of the head and an inquiring “tweet;” then, when he found it all quite true, such a song of joy rushed from his yellow throat as no one had ever heard before. And Hans danced for the very happiness and wonder of it, and his father smiled and ejaculated, “Wunderschön!” several times with a beaming face. Then he told Hans to run and get his coat, for they were going to the park for their last walk. As they left the room the bird was still singing—singing his wild little song of joy. But after the door had closed the song twittered and faded away, and the bird fluttered to the bottom of his cage, suddenly still.

When the child came home it was late and the heavy night cloth was thrown over the bird’s cage. It was the last evening with lieber Vater, and so again the canary was temporarily forgotten.
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Hans' father left early in the morning before he was awake, and directly after the child's breakfast his aunt went out for her morning marketing. Left, alone, Hans, who seldom dared take the initiative in the presence of his aunt, ran up to the bird's cage and threw back the cloth. But there was no cheerful chirp and upward flash of yellow wings in answer. Instead, a strange sight,—Hans lying on his back in the bottom of the cage with helpless little claws upturned.

Hans had never seen death in any form, yet something about the bird's stillness sent a pang through him. He chirped and called the canary by name; he coaxed it, he whistled to it; then, with a curious sinking about his heart, he carefully opened the cage door and slowly put in his hand. But the bird did not start up as he had half expected. He touched the downy feathers softly. The wings were curiously stiff, but the little body was limp. Very gently his hand closed over it and drew it out of the cage.

He was still standing there, looking down at it, when his aunt came in. He looked up at her with frightened eyes when she spoke to him, but it was not his aunt that he feared this time.

"Hans is very still. He sleeps, perhaps," he whispered. "Yet I fear—I fear he is ill, good aunt."

His aunt glanced at the bird. "He is dead," she said. "I told you that hot sun in the window would kill him."

"Dead," repeated Hans, troubled, wondering. "What is it to be dead, good aunt? Is it to be very ill?"

"To be dead is to be dead," was his aunt's explanation. "Your bird won't sing any more, Hans. You'd better go out in the yard and dig a little grave for him. It's a pleasant day. I guess it won't hurt you if you wrap up good. You can have the trowel if you're careful not to lose it."

Confused and trembling, Hans stumbled out of the door, down the stairs, and out into the dingy little backyard. Out there he sat down on an empty box, still holding the bird in his hands. From time to time he spoke to it and lifted it to his cheek, saying its name softly. So William Johnson, coming out with a fluent song and a can of ashes, found him.

"That you, honey? What you doin' over there so still? What you got dead?"

Hans held out the dead bird with mute questioning. He tried to speak, but could not.

The darkey's smiling face became clouded with sympathy and consternation.

The child’s lip quivered. “So he sang when I went away with lieber Vater then—this morning——” his voice sank to a whisper, “in his cage, I found him so.”

There was a painful silence which William Johnson broke twice to say, “It’s a shame, honey, it cert’nly is.”

“Oh, William Johnson,” cried Hans, suddenly sobbing, “Won’t he ever, ever sing again?”

“I se feared not, honey,” William replied, reluctantly. “Dis yere little bird won’t sing no more. But I reckon yore papa’ll buy you another bird——”

But Hans interrupted him, passionately. “I don’t want another bird, never—never—only Hans.”

Then kind William Johnson had nothing more to say except, “Doan’ you cry, honey, doan’ cry.”

“Oh, William Johnson,” sobbed Hans, “do you think the good God will let him in the Himmel?”

William Johnson looked doubtful a moment, then, the child’s sobs being very distressing to him, said, soothingly, “I reckon so, honey. I jus’ reckon He will, for we cert’nly hear tell about the birds of Paradise, so there surely mus’ be birds a-dwellin’ there.”

“William, I wish also to go there.”

“So you will, honey, ef you’s a good child, as you mos’ usually is. But you doan’ want to go right now jes cause yore little bird’s done died.”

Hans cried more softly. “He was so happy to be once more in the sunshine . . . he sang so beautiful a song . . . and now . . . he will not sing any more.”

“I reckon the sunshine here ain’t a patch on de light ob de glory ob de Lord,” said William Johnson, solemnly, “so doan’ you cry any more ’bout yore pore little yellow bird. He may be singin’ in Paradise dis blessed minit.”

“Oh, William Johnson, do you really think so,” Hans whispered, ecstatically. Then seeing the change in the child’s face, William Johnson reiterated, positively, “I se jes plum sure of it, honey.”

“Hans, Hans!” his aunt’s voice called from an upper window. Come in. The sun is getting hot, and here is a letter from your father.”

And one Hans went back to his prison from which he was soon to be free. And the other Hans, freed from his prison forever, had flown—where?