THE WORK OF LIVING: A STORY: BY MARIE LOUISE GOETCHIUS

He put down the book. She had been staring at it vacantly, with only the conscious desire that in some way she might become one of the meaningless black curly lines on its page. Then once securely fastened between its snug white margins, she would wish that the covers be closed protectingly upon her. It had seemed to her strained imagination as if there were no other escape from the recurrent pounding of familiar sound.

Gradually she became aware of the volume of noise about her, for like a heavily wielded hammer, it had forced her enveloped senses back to their surroundings. The children were playing. There was the large healthy bump and clatter of their feet, spreading apparently over all the small apartment. It appeared to her nervous hearing as if children were galloping from the four quarters of the globe to this central spot. It was impossible, she told herself irritably, that three children could be responsible for so much uproar. Furthermore, from the accessible kitchen she could distinguish each scrape and jangle of the cooking utensils agitated by the awkward Swedish girl in preparation for supper. She could, indeed, almost catch the crackle of her husband’s manuscript, as he bent patiently over his worn desk in the sitting room. She knew that, as usual, he was working on one of his beautiful tales for children—those tales which sold so slowly.

As she sat there, passive to suggestion, her mind slipped picturingly backward. She had never been able to understand the absolute purity of her husband’s creativeness. Although his days were dipped in the same gross realities over which she shuddered, yet he seemed to have a fine disregard for the sordid. She had once compared his soul to slanting glass, because everything which was not beautiful slipped from it, and left it as a prism for delicate colors. His fat red-cheeked children were to him ethereal little creatures of dreams. As for her—his wife—she was the beginning and end of the scale of virtue in woman. She rested secure, serene, on the pinnacle of his faith. With the obstinacy of a gentle idealist he would allow nothing to displace his standard of living for himself and others. She had seen him wince and shiver at the touch of sacrilegious hands, and then instinctively protect himself by avoiding any further insistency of discord. In this manner his creative power flowed like some tranquil stream clear and untroubled by alien mud. She had always taken great pride in that quality of his nature which demanded absolute purity of contact, and from the beginning of their life together she had made it her duty to guard him from unloveliness.
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The current of these reflections passed swiftly from the insinuated starting point of the household sounds which had intruded themselves through her door. They were, indeed, thoughts which she did not wish to combat. She sat motionless, absorbing them, as she had done so often before, until in the soft brush of their passing they seemed to rub through the surface to the deep nerves which lay at the roots of consciousness. Then with a sudden twitch of her thin shoulders she rose and went over to her small mirror. She stared at herself in it, sensitively aware that she stood at the edge of a revealing moment. The mirror represented more to her than a reflection of features and coloring; it was as if she looked deep through a transparency of the external to those secrets which make a soul once gazing nakedly upon them wither for shame or blossom gloriously.

She looked at herself until the lines of her face grew blurred and vague. A mist of feature and pallor floated strangely before the fixed darkness of her eyes. Then out of it all—out of the unreality of mirrored concentration, came the expression she had imagined must be there. Yet when she recognized it she recoiled from it afraid, for it seemed less familiar than her habitual mask—it seemed indeed to be an accumulation of ages of starved femininity. For it was hunger that she saw—hunger of self, of the primitive woman, cheated in impulse and instinct. She had lived for so long the contour of a lie! The meekly parted hair drawn low, the Madonna oval of her face, the sweet mother curve on her lips, all had spoken for her before she had found the strength to contradict them. She had been niched in the high place of wife and mother without question as to a possible other existence. Her husband had unconsciously narrowed and pinched the ledge upon which he had reverently put her, until now no space was left in which to move.

All this she read before the outlines settled back to their usual shape. Then, as if she had returned from a dangerous question, she met herself anxiously, to see if there remained any traces of the things she had encountered upon the way. The almost fanatical unselfishness so admired by her husband and friends had sunk again in its apparent lines across her forehead; a steadiness of heart beat in her large eyes; tiny tired wrinkles had crept finely around her mouth; the pallor of convalescence from a recent illness lay smooth in her faintly hollowed cheeks. No one would divine the loud shriek of reaction behind the calm screen of her expression. She smiled curiously as she cased herself with the requisite control for the little world outside her room. She had not forgotten that her hour of rest was over, and that now her husband and children could claim her for the remainder of the evening.
As she opened her door the children trooped rapturously around her. They knew that it was only their mother who could put the necessary finishing touches to the supper prepared by the servant. But where usually their absolute dependence upon her brought great warmth with it, tonight it irritated her. She hurried by their clinging little hands. She felt a nervous impatience to tend quickly to their wants, and so complete the actual work of the evening.

She had never before complained of the manifold services she was called upon to give. Indeed, she had created responsibilities which now were expected of her. It was only when her sensitiveness had detected in her family a slight degree of matter-of-course acceptance for these details of their living that, in spite of herself, she had rebelled. She began to think that she was sinking her slender strength into a bottomless well of domesticity. Her mind struggled fiercely for articulateness, but the sharp points of thought which pricked more and more her peace of habit bore such unfamiliar shapes to all her previous training and ideas that she dared not acknowledge them openly. Yet refusing to be denied, they pushed and cut their way to light, as if insisting on a climax of expression. It was with a nervous desire to race ahead of such a climax that she continued striving more conscientiously that evening than ever before, to justify her husband’s ideal of her.

Not until she was sitting at supper with her husband opposite and her children around her, did she realize that the force of her mood had not subsided. Usually with the resuming of routine she regained absolute control of emotion. Vainly now she tried to find restraint under the influence of her husband’s calm. But tonight, his personality affected her more as a whip than the accustomed curb. His placid attitude of adoration became an unconscious reproach. She felt that she was beautiful to him simply because of reflection, and because he must see in those he loved what to him was right. If he should know her, as she had found herself to be, he would no doubt shrink from her. She tried to imagine the absolute harmony of his face contracting painfully beneath the brutal lash of disillusionment. It fascinated her to realize the wounding power which lay quiet and poisonous in her mind. Then she could not help wondering if even that were possible—if she could make his child eyes see the truth.

But as the supper neared its homely end, her heart softened wistfully toward him. After all, how few women could boast of such a good husband! She tried to shame herself by a swift mental comparison to those other women, who, content with their place in the order of things, accepted quiescently their married state as a life
mission. But this evening her imagination refused to admit tamely such herding with her sex.

Her unsatisfied attention refastened itself restlessly upon her husband. She knew that it was unusual, indeed amazing, to find any man with such consistent ideals, such strictness of example. His work was like his life—uplifting. All the women and children in his little tales sprang from the heart of his family; all the men were unconsciously as knightly and gentle as he. There were never any rapid emotions, never any intricate issues.

She felt herself glowing momentarily with the inspiration of his great sweetness. Perhaps behind his very love of beauty, lay a vast understanding for humanity, as it struggled on through the mysteries of its destiny. Perhaps he who had conquered, never having battled, could afford to help her at this crisis of reaction.

The temptation in the past of being absolutely sincere with him had seemed almost immodest, for, without meaning to do so, he had forbidden sincerity by his assumption of it. Now, suddenly, the door of her intimate heart swung open to him, and in a flash she resolved to conduct him to the threshold.

A turbulence of expression leaping from within caught at her tongue and suggested immediate translation. But she choked back the strangely ready recruits of speech. She felt the power of their numbers, the strength of their taste, and she decided to wait the later time to part with them.

As the children chattered on unmindingly she became aware that their boisterous young presence was treading heavily on the prepared sensitiveness of her resolution. It seemed incongruous that she should entertain unusual ideas and unsatisfied longings in the proximity of such happy healthy fragments of herself—her own children, who were unconsciously being as she had once been. With a fear that she might yield to their innocent pressure she sent them to bed as soon as she could do so fairly, without giving cause for familiar wails and protests. But even that natural means of sliding them out of her vision took more time than her patience could spare.

When they had noisily left the room, and their steps had beat down the hall, she turned to her husband—

"Don't hear the children say their prayers tonight," she began, impulsively.

He peered at her in mild surprise, through his glasses. "Why, my dear, I always hear them say their prayers. What makes you suggest any change?"

The courage failed her to meet his disapproval, and she returned weakly, "Oh, nothing—do go right away though."
Then she sat waiting for him to come back to her. She knew that he looked forward eagerly to his evenings. It was his greatest pleasure to sit and read aloud to her some time-worn classic from his limited library. Until lately, the drone of his voice had soothed her, but now she had grown to dread its even texture and to tire of his conservative taste in books.

She could hear the low murmur of the children’s voices pitched in the key of prayer. It struck her as singularly like life itself that tangling in with the prayer there should be an indifferent accompaniment of rattling pots and pans in the kitchen. The clash of the two extreme suggestions fascinated her. It was so unavoidable that the noise of the pots and pans should be louder than that of the prayer. The idea of life’s vast maze of interthreaded contrasts, caught at her seeking mind and sent it far afield; until realizing sudden distance from her original mood, she tried jealously to force back concentration to herself. Then strangely enough, she found that the distance was not so great as she had imagined. Everything upon which her thoughts had touched seemed to have some remote connection with her newly formed attitude. The room itself offered direct bearing on her state of mind—playing its part in the cause and effect. The home-made curtains, bright gaslight, carefully chosen books and ornaments, her husband’s desk piled with scribbled notes and manuscript, her workbox beside her, the children’s coats flung carelessly over the chair by the door—all these things had contributed inanimately to her condition.

Through the placid, well-intentioned shine of her surroundings the now full-grown expression of rebellion against them burned fiercely. She started pacing the small room as if she were in a cage. Then suddenly her husband appeared in the doorway. His coming seemed in itself an anticlimax, so quietly did he enter her irritated consciousness.

He apparently did not notice that she was pacing the floor, and sitting down in his big easy chair he leaned back luxuriously. His thin hands stroked a nearby book; his eyes were still bending in imagination over his children’s beds.

She continued her restless walking, but there came into it an added impatience which had not been there before. She had half expected her husband to remark her mood. She would have adored him had he flung a question to her quivering nerves. But as after a strained succession of minutes his innocent indifference evinced no sign of change she became more and more annoyed at his composure. Finally, in what she acknowledged to be a childish show of temper, she pulled a chair from the corner of the room to the table,
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allowing it to grate and scrape against the floor. Only then did her husband arouse himself.

“Natalie, dear, don’t you think you may disturb our neighbors?” he observed.

She walked quickly over to him. “I don’t care whether I do or not. I’m very nervous tonight, David,” she said.

He looked up at her with immediate concern. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear,” he murmured. “Perhaps if I read to you——”

She knelt beside him. “I don’t want to be read to,” she said.

It was the time now to speak. She tried to fetch forward the eloquent words, the passionate expression which had been waiting for this moment. To her dismay they had strayed from her tongue. Still she felt them dimly beckoning in the distance of her mind, only a little beyond the incoherent jumble of chaotic nerves. To gain time, she started preparing for their way.

“Do you love me?” she asked, with impulsive warmth.

Her husband stared at her wonderingly—his hand touched her hair. “Of course, Natalie, you know I do,” he said, but his voice was the voice with which he spoke to his children.

“Why don’t you tell me so, then?” she cried in rising emotion. “But I do,” he replied, bewildered.

“Will you play a game with me tonight, then?” she asked suddenly, rising to her feet and sweeping a step away from him. “Will you take me out now to a restaurant, and will you make violent love to me all evening? And will you talk to me for once as if you were my lover, not my husband”—her voice broke hysterically. She realized that she was not approaching him as she had started out to do, and a driving anger at the failure of the moment urged on her tongue recklessly. She was not now pleading for her soul. That would be later. The nervous restlessness of her body crashed through all caution. “Come,” she cried, “won’t you? We’ll pretend we’ve never been married and have no children.” She avoided the look of shocked amazement which she felt lighting in his eyes. “And at the café,” she went on, “you’ll press my hand under the table, just the way lovers do, and kiss me in the carriage coming home. Oh, let us live, let us, just for tonight. Let us get away from the eternal commonplace of ourselves. Don’t you want to?” She stopped as if choked by the tumbling eagerness of her words.

Then she became aware of a pucker of silence in the atmosphere. She looked at her husband challengingly. He was staring at her with a strained expression of bewildered listening. At last he came toward her, but his nearness was like infinite space. She wanted to run from him. A damp cold paralyzed her tongue. She felt desperately
ashamed of a sudden, and as if she had done some brazen thing before him she blushed and shrank away. He would no doubt be terrible in his disapproval of her unwomanliness.

He touched her cheek with his hand. "You're feverish, my dear," he said, anxiously. "I—I think you must be ill. Hadn't I better put you to bed?"

So that was to be it! She was not even to have anger or reprimand from him, only this complete blankness of understanding. In a swift revulsion of feeling she could have laughed aloud at the very absurdity of ever having expected him to understand. Then a pitiless desire not to spare him tore through the pale veil of her preceding remorse. She wanted savagely to break at any cost his ideal of her—to throw it from her like a bit of delicate glass, and joy in its splintering.

"You can't conceive of any woman in her right mind meaning what I've just said?" she asked.

"No," he answered, slowly, "not a good woman."

"And if she should?" she persisted.

"You don't know what you're talking about, my dear," he said, and his voice was vague. "Women like that are quite unnatural, quite." His words trailed off. "Now come, dear, don't bother your head about such things. You look really tired tonight." He hurried away from the subject as if relieved to have ended it.

She stared at him dumbly. He had not recognized the very nerves of her soul! Then everything dropped from her. The hysteria of her climax flattened dully. She felt as if nothing had happened, as if, in fact, she had not moved since he had come into the room.

Yet as he stood anxiously beside her, his face relaxed into its usual gentleness, a consciousness pressed upon her that more was to come, that in fact she had not attained the height of the situation.

She searched despairingly in her crypt of self trying to feel the shape of the crouching things she knew still to be there. She had grasped the meaning of her husband's attitude. She knew what insistence on her part would mean. But she was not sure that she could live on now as she had done, without sincerity. She might never hope to reach again the courage of another such moment, and she dared not let it pass until she had drained it dry. So she kept him standing there beside her while she waited with one hand over her eyes for the inspiration of expression which had been with her early in the evening.

It seemed to her monstrously incredible that a moment which could be to her full of pregnancy was at the same time being empty of meaning to the man who stood close to her.

Then suddenly from her world of aloneness there came back all
the strength and power of speech she had so desired. She felt words
at her command which were as detached shreds of her soul, words
which could fly like the spray from a torch in the wind illuminatingly
through darkness. She knew that if she chose to speak now she
could show her husband by mere force of word all the muffled in-
stincts of years back, all the longings for years to come.

But with this revelation of power came also a pitiless clearness of
vision. She looked beneath the moment and saw the stamp it would
press on her husband’s spirit. He had failed her unknowingly and
beyond recall—she could now fail him deliberately in return. She
stared about her. The room with its home-made curtains, bright
gaslight, carefully chosen books and ornaments, her husband’s
desk piled with scribbled notes and manuscript, her workbox, the
children’s coats—all these things seemed to appeal mutely to her.
She turned from them to her husband. He appeared suddenly very
small and gentle and eager to serve her as he knew service.

Then as she looked at him, her eyes grew dim and tender, and like
a thick soft cloak, something of no name descended, enveloping, upon
her. She felt her nakedness blend mysteriously with its quiet cover-
ing, and it was as if she had said aloud—“I shall know myself, but
no one else shall know me.”

Slowly she sank into her own chair near the table.
“No, David,” she said, “I won’t go to bed yet, but you shall read
to me.”

“AN ANGEL DARKENETH THE POOL—”

THAT there may be no picturing to read,
No glimpse of coming grief,
Nor dazzle of a joy for us to heed
Before its meted hour—
For this, the angel darkens now
The waters of the pool
And none may question when nor how
The Vision-depths will clear.

AILEEN CLEVELAND HIGGINS.