

Stephen Otway's Silence.

Finis! The man working away for dear life in the fading twilight that June evening wrote the magic word, laid down his pen and looked about him for the first time in two solid hours. At last his wonderful symphony was written. Yes; not another note would be added, not a single bar revised; it should go before the judges in that big contest he was striving might and main to win just as it lay there—the crown of six weeks' toil, the best that was in him, the fair flower of his achievement that was surely destined to bring fame and fortune, maybe something still more precious, in its train.

His chance; the golden opportunity of a lifetime! The hundred guineas and a gold medal for the best symphony by a British composer. All unexpectedly it had fallen out, bringing with it a golden vista to his glowing thoughts. Let him win that and everything was simplified. There was no pinnacle of fame, no point of soaring ambition so high that to it he might not aspire. Old Farley Ainsworth, most generous of benefactors, would laugh now at the bare idea of calling him son-in-law; such a possibility as the lad he had befriended daring to fall in love with his own daughter had never entered the head of the proud, music-loving old squire, or he would have taken speedy means to nip the romance in the bud. But afterward—

It seemed to Stephen Otway that all the face of nature would be changed at that one stroke. Rising from the table at which he had been working, he went to the piano and began to play. A Chopin nocturne, dreamy and elusive, first; then the joyous rondo of the Waldstein sonata, filling the little room with the music of a hundred rippling, sun-kissed brooks, and from that he drifted softly, all unconscious, into the other—his own. His fingers scarcely seemed to touch the ivory keys, brushed them with the airy lightness of a butterfly; yet the man who had softly opened the door and stepped inside halted involuntarily at sound of this strange, sweet melody.

"Steve, you miracle, what's that?" the tense, hushed whisper thrilled across. "Not—not the symphony? You don't mean it? Why, man, it's wonderful; no one else can ever hope to win!" "You think so?" He had broken off abruptly, swung round with lips just parted, and the blue-gray eyes starting past in that seeming effort to focus some dim nebulous object in the darkness of the passage. "I do not know what to think. Sometimes I am full of confidence, at other times—anyhow, it's finished, I am grateful for that alone. Not another stroke will I write; I am fagged out—what rest, I have even thought of going down home for a day or two to—"

too, would be angry. Come and see me again to-morrow, we will talk it over when you are more composed." "No!" He had drawn himself apart, stood there, handsome and defiant, with a hectic little spot on either cheek. "No, we will not! It's now or never, Otway—I mean it! Choose quickly—yes or no!" The other's half-impatient shrug incensed him beyond measure; he waited for no more. "Very well! That ends it. Remember it's your own doing. Good-night—and good-bye!"

Yes; that was it. "Good-night—and good-bye!" Full five minutes after he had flung out of the room the older man stood there in the gathering darkness trying to realize, to make himself believe, that he had really gone. Clive could surely never mean it—never! He would be back in the morning, nay, to-night, with that winning smile on his face, pouring out apologies for those hasty words. Not possible for a moment that he really meant them.

Laughing awkwardly, he turned away to light the gas and draw down the blind, and then went back to those carefully written sheets of manuscript. Just one more look to make sure that he had copied them correctly; then he would wrap them up and put them away safely till morning, till he could carry them with his own hands to the big college where their fate was to be decided. Too precious to be trusted to the post.

In the morning he would not own to feeling disappointed that there was no letter. Clive was coming round shortly, that was all. But the hours passed with no Clive, no communication of any kind, and he grew fidgety; told himself that he had been harsh and ungenerous. In the afternoon, anxious to purchase reconciliation at any price, he went to the bank, withdrew his little stock of money—earned by playing solos at occasional concerts or city dinners—and sent five five-pound notes, with a few hastily scribbled words, to Clive's address. By night they were back at his own, with no word at all, and for just the moment he was staring at them with eyes that seemed transfixed, his lips quivering like a woman's. Only the moment; then he had snatched up hat and gloves and was rushing round to Clive's lodgings at top speed. The grim misunderstanding must be ended once for all.

Dazed, stunned, unable for a moment to realize the bitter truth, he sat there listening to the smooth, and, the rippling allegretto, that rushing, rhythmic finale with the weird chromatic scale-passages for the violin—his own, every note! The priceless symphony on which he had spent so many hours, built so many hopes.

Dead Sea fruit that storm of cheers that broke from the audience at its close; galled and wormwood those repeated cries of "Encore! Encore!" Next thing he knew he was outside in the cool, fresh air, trying to think it all out—that bitter, blinding sense of treachery dimming all else in his brain. What did it mean—what could it mean—save one thing? Stolen!

Three solid hours he tramped the streets, beating out that grim tragedy of a lifetime. Incredible, unthinkable, that the man who had been his friend could have carried paltry rage so far! And then—He had reached his lodgings, gone up the creaky stairs with the heavy, shuffling tread of one foot-weary and despondent, thrown open the door of his room and— "Clive!"

That moment would surely live forever in his memory. There they stood a full minute, facing one another, neither seeking to break the straining silence. Then—"Stephen, you were there? You heard—"

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dal, Stephen, eh? Couldn't help win it, could he?" The wrinkled hand was quivering feebly in his own. Bending down to listen, Stephen Otway felt a lump rise in his throat as he remembered the debt of gratitude he owed the old man lying there. He glanced across at the girl standing by the window, and made a sudden grim resolve. "Yes, he won it," he said, quietly. Later, walking slowly away from that house with the closed shutters and the drawn blinds, it seemed to him that either the world had grown different or he was very old and weary. Nothing mattered now; all the days would be alike—a miserable, haunting drudgery. He recollected reaching Euston and walking to his lodgings, but nothing more that was clear. His brain reeled stupidly. There was a dull, dead ache, and a sense of heaviness that bore him down—down—till at last there came a final blank.

Ten whole days that grim span of feverish unconsciousness remained; and his life and death were playthings 'twixt which he hovered like a fretful child, uncertain which to choose. When the dark cloud lifted he knew that he was lying in bed; there was a little table holding medicines by his side. The dark-robbed figure seated by the window heard him move, turned round to look. Suddenly it struck him that the figure was familiar. What could Sybil be doing here? He said her name half expecting that the vision would dissolve at sound of word.

"Stephen! Oh, how glad I am!" She came to him with a shining smile on her face. "There, don't try to talk, lie still and get quite well and strong. I know everything—all the miserable story. Clive has told me what a hero you have been. You can never know how he yearns for your forgiveness, and how dear you are to us both."

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