The Door of the Trap

Sherwood Anderson

Table of Contents

The Door of the Trap.....**1**
Sherwood Anderson.....1

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WINIFRED WALKER understood some things clearly enough. She understood that when a man is put behind iron bars he is in prison. Marriage was marriage to her.

It was that to her husband Hugh Walker, too, as he found out. Still he didn't understand. It might have been better had he understood. Then he might at least have found himself. He didn't. After his marriage five or six years passed like shadows of wind−blown trees playing on a wall. He was in a drugged, silent state. In the morning and evening every day he saw his wife. Occasionally something happened within him and he kissed her. Three children were born. He taught mathematics in the little college at Union Valley, Illinois, and waited.

For what? He began to ask himself that question. It came to him at first faintly like an echo. Then it became an insistent question. "I want answering," the question seemed to say. "Stop fooling along. Give your attention to me."

Hugh walked through the streets of the Illinois town. "Well, I'm married. I have children," he muttered.

He went home to his own house. He did not have to live within his income from the little college and so the house was rather large and comfortably furnished. There was a negro woman who took care of his children and another who cooked and did housework. One of the women was in the habit of crooning low soft negro songs. Sometimes Hugh stopped at the house door and listened. He could see through the glass in the door into the room where his family was gathered. Two children played with blocks on the floor. His wife sat sewing. The old negress sat in a rocking chair with his youngest child, a baby, in her arms. The whole room seemed under the spell of the crooning voice. Hugh fell under the spell. He waited in silence. The voice carried him far away somewhere, into forests, along the edges of swamps. There was nothing very definite about his thinking. He would have given a good deal to be able to be definite.

He went inside the house. "Well, here I am," his mind seemed to say, "here I am. This is my house, these are my children."

He looked at his wife Winifred. She had grown a little plump since their marriage. "Perhaps it is the mother in her coming out, she has had three children," he thought.

The crooning old negro woman went away, taking the youngest child with her. He and Winifred held a fragmentary conversation. "Have you been well to−day, dear?" she asked. "Yes," he answered.

If the two older children were intent on their play his chain of thought was not broken. His wife never broke it as the children did when they came running to pull and tear at him. Throughout the early evening, after the children went to bed, the surface of the shell of him was not broken at all. A brother college professor and his wife came in or he and Winifred went to a neighbour's house. There was talk. Even when he and Winifred were alone together in the house there was talk. "The shutters are becoming loose," she said. The house was an old one and was furnished with green shutters. They were continually coming loose and at night blew back and forth on their hinges making a loud banging noise.

Hugh made some remark. He said he would see a carpenter about the shutters. Then his mind began playing away out of his wife's presence, out of the house, in another sphere. "I am a house and my shutters are loose," his mind said. He thought of himself as a living thing inside a shell, trying to break out. To avoid distracting conversation he gback and forth on their hinges making a loud banging noise.

Hugh made some remark. He said he would see a carpenter about the shutters. Then his mind began playing away out of his wife's presence, out of the house, in another sphere. "I am a house and my shutters are loose," his mind said. He thought of himself as a living thing inside a shell, trying to break out. To avoid distracting conversation he got a book and pretended to read. When his wife had also begun to read he watched her closely, intently. Her nose was so and so and her eyes so and so. She had a little habit with her hands. When she became lost in the pages of a book the hand crept up to her cheek, touched it and then was put down again. Her hair was not in very good order. Since her marriage and the coming of the children she had not taken good care of her body. When she read her body slumped down in the chair. It became bag−like. She was one whose race has been run.

Hugh's mind played all about the figure of his wife but did not really approach the woman who sat before him. It was so with his children. Sometimes, just for a moment, they were living things to him, things as alive as his own body. Then for long periods they seemed to go far away like the crooning voice of the negress.

It was odd that the negress was always real enough. He felt an understanding existed between himself and the negress. She was outside his life. He could look at her as at a tree. Sometimes in the evening when she had been putting the children to bed in the upper part of the house and when he sat with a book in his hand pretending to read, the old black woman came softly through the room, going toward the kitchen. She did not look at Winifred, but at Hugh. He thought there was a strange, soft light in her old eyes. "I understand you, my son," her eyes seemed to say.

Hugh was determined to get his life cleaned up if he could manage it. "All right, then," he said, as though speaking to a third person in the room. He was quite sure there was a third person there and that the third person was within himself, inside his body. He addressed the third person.

"Well, there is this woman, this person I married, she has the air of something accomplished," he said, as though speaking aloud. Sometimes it almost seemed to him he had spoken aloud and he looked quickly and sharply at his wife. She continued reading, lost in her book. "That may be it," he went on. "She has had these children. They are accomplished facts to her. They came out of her body, not out of mine. Her body has done something. Now it rests. If she is becoming a little bag−like, that's all right."

He got up and making some trivial excuse got out of the room and out of the house. In his youth and young manhood the long periods of walking straight ahead through the country, that had come upon him like visitations of some recurring disease, had helped. Walking solved nothing. It only tired his body, but when his body was tired he could sleep. After many days of walking and sleeping something occurred. The reality of life was in some queer way re−established in his mind. Some little thing happened. A man walking in the road before him threw a stone at a dog that ran barking out of a farm−house. It was evening perhaps, and he walked in a country of low hills. Suddenly he came out upon the top of one of the hills. Before him the road dipped down into darkness but to the west, across fields, there was a farm−house. The sun had gone down, but a faint glow lit the western horizon. A woman came out of the farm−house and went toward a barn. He could not see her figure distinctly. She seemed to be carrying something, no doubt a milk pail; she was going to a barn to milk a cow.

The man in the road who had thrown the stone at the farm dog had turned and seen Hugh in the road behind him. He was a little ashamed of having been afraid of the dog. For a moment he seemed about to wait and speak to Hugh and then was overcome with confusion and hurried away. He was a middle−aged man, but quite suddenly and unexpectedly he looked like a boy.

As for the farm woman, dimly seen going toward a distant barn, she also stopped and looked toward him. It was impossible she should have seen him. She was dressed in white and he could see her but dimly against the blackish green of the trees of an orchard behind her. Still she stood looking and seemed to look directly into his eyes. He had a queer sensation of her having been lifted by an unseen hand and brought to him. It seemed to him he knew all about her life, all about the life of the man who had thrown the stone at the dog.

In his youth when life had stepped out of his grasp Hugh had walked and walked until several such things had occurred and then suddenly he was all right again and could again work and live among men.

After his marriage and after such an evening as the one here described he started walking rapidly as soon as he left the house. As quickly as possible he got out of town and struck out along a road that led over the rolling prairie. "Well, I can't walk for days and days as I did once," he thought. "There are certain facts in life and I must face facts. Winifred, my wife, is a fact, and my children are facts. I must get my fingers on facts. I must live by them and with them. It is the way lives are lived."

Hugh got out of town and on to a road that ran between cornfields. He was an athletic−looking man and wore loose−fitting clothes. He went along distraught and puzzled. In a way he felt like a man capable of taking a man's place in life and in another way he didn't at all.

The country spread out, wide, in all directions. It was always night when he walked thus and he could not see, but the realization of distances was always with him. "Everything goes on and on but I stand still," he thought. He had been a professor in the little college for six years. Young men and women had come into a room and he had taught them. It was nothing. Words and figures had been played with. An effort had been made to arouse minds.

−571−

For what?

There was the old question, always coming back, always wanting answering as a little animal wants food. Hugh gave up trying to answer. He walked rapidly, trying to grow physically tired. He made his mind attend to little things in the effort to forget distances. One night he got out of the road and walked completely around a cornfield. He counted the stalks in each hill of corn and computed the number of stalks in a whole field. "It should yield twelve hundred bushels of corn, that field," he said to himself dumbly, as though it mattered to him. He pulled a little handful of cornsilk out of the top of an ear of corn and played with it. He tried to fashion himself a yellow moustache. "I'd be quite a fellow with a trim yellow moustache," he thought.

One day in his class−room Hugh suddenly began to look with new interest at his pupils. A young girl attracted his attention. She sat beside the son of a Union Valley merchant and the young man was writing something on the back of a book. She looked at it and then turned her head away. The young man waited.

It was winter and the merchant's son had asked the girl to go with him to a skating party. Hugh, however, did not know that. He felt suddenly old. When he asked the girl a question she was confused. Her voice trembled.

When the class was dismissed an amazing thing happened. He asked the merchant's son to stay for a moment and when the two were alone together in the room he grew suddenly and furiously angry. His voice was, however, cold and steady. "Young man," he said, "you do not come into this room to write on the back of a book and waste your time. If I see anything of the kind again I'll do something you don't expect. I'll throw you out through a window, that's what I'll do."

Hugh made a gesture and the young man went away, white and silent. Hugh felt miserable. For several days he thought about the girl who had quite accidentally attracted his attention. "I'll get acquainted with her. I'll find out about her," he thought.

It was not an unusual thing for professors in the college at Union Valley to take students home to their houses. Hugh decided he would take the girl to his home. He thought about it several days and late one afternoon saw her going down the college hill ahead of him.

−572−

The girl's name was Mary Cochran and she had come to the school but a few months before from a place called Huntersburg, Illinois, no doubt just such another place as Union Valley. He knew nothing of her except that her father was dead, her mother too, perhaps. He walked rapidly down the hill to overtake her. "Miss Cochran," he called, and was surprised to find that his voice trembled a little. "What am I so eager about," he asked himself.

A new life began in Hugh Walker's house. It was good for the man to have some one there who did not belong to him and Winifred Walker, and the children accepted the presence of the girl. Winifred urged her to come again. She did come several times a week.

To Mary Cochran it was comforting to be in the presence of a family of children. On winter afternoons she took Hugh's two sons and a sled and went to a small hill near the house. Shouts arose. Mary Cochran pulled the sled up the hill and the children followed. Then they all came tearing down together.

The girl, developing rapidly into womanhood, looked upon Hugh Walker as something that stood completely outside her own life. She and the man who had become suddenly and intensely interested in her had little to say to each other and Winifred Walker seemed to have accepted her without question as an addition to the household.

Often in the afternoon when the two negro women were busy she went away leaving the two older children in Mary's charge.

That was in the late afternoon and perhaps Hugh had walked home with Mary from the college. In the spring he worked in the neglected garden. It had been plowed and planted, but he took a hoe and rake and puttered about. The children played about the house with the college girl. Hugh did not look at them but at her. "She is one of the world of people with whom I live and with whom I am supposed to work here," he thought. "Unlike Winifred and these children she does not belong to me. I could go to her now, touch her fingers, look at her and then go away and never see her again."

That thought was a comfort to the distraught man. In the evening when he went out to walk the sense of distance that lay all about him did not tempt him to walk and walk, going half insanely forward for hours, trying to break through an intangible wall.

He thought about Mary Cochran. She was a girl from a country

−573−

town. She must be like millions of American girls. He wondered what went on in her mind as she sat in his class−room, as she walked beside him along the streets of Union Valley, as she played with the children in the yard beside his house.

In the winter, when in the growing darkness of a late afternoon Mary and the children built a snow man in the yard, he went upstairs and stood in the darkness to look out a window. The tall straight figure of the girl, dimly seen, moved quickly about. "Well, nothing has happened to her. She may be anything or nothing. Her figure is like a young tree that has not borne fruit," he thought. He went away to his own room and sat for a long time in the darkness. That night when he left the house for his evening's walk he did not stay long but hurried home and went to his own room. He locked the door. Unconsciously he did not want Winifred to come to the door and disturb his thoughts. Sometimes she did that.

All the time she read novels. She read the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson. When she had read them all she began again.

Sometimes she came upstairs and stood talking by his door. She told some tale, repeated some wise saying that had fallen unexpectedly from the lips of the children. Occasionally she came into the room and turned out the light. There was a couch by a window. She went to sit on the edge of the couch. Something happened. It was as it had been before their marriage. New life came into her figure. He also went to sit on the couch and she put up her hand and touched his face.

Hugh did not want that to happen now. He stood within the room for a moment and then unlocked the door and went to the head of the stairs. "Be quiet when you come up, Winifred. I have a headache and am going to try to sleep," he lied.

When he had got back in his own room and locked the door again he felt safe. He did not undress but threw himself on the couch and turned out the light.

He thought about Mary Cochran, the school girl, but was sure he thought about her in a quite impersonal way. She was like the woman going to milk cows he had seen across hills when he was a young fellow and walked far and wide over the country to cure the restlessness in himself. In his life she was like the man who threw the stone at the dog.

"Well, she is unformed; she is like a young tree," he told himself

−574−

again. "People are like that. They just grow up suddenly out of childhood. It will happen to my own children. My little Winifred that cannot yet say any words will suddenly be like this girl. I have not selected her to think about for any particular reason. For some reason I have drawn away from life and she has brought me back. It might have happened when I saw a child playing in the street or an old man going up a stairway into a house. She does not belong to me. She will go away out of my sight. Winifred and the children will stay on and on here and I will stay on and on. We are imprisoned by the fact that we belong to each other. She is free, or at least she is free as far as this prison is concerned. No doubt she will after a while make a prison of her own and live in it, but I will have nothing to do with the matter."

By the time Mary Cochran was in her third year in the college at Union Valley she had become a kind of fixture in the Walker household. Still she did not know Hugh. She knew the children better than he did, perhaps

better than their mother. In the fall she and the two boys went to the woods to gather nuts. In the winter they went skating on a little pond near the house.

Winifred accepted her as she accepted everything, the service of the two negroes, the coming of the children, the habitual silence of her husband.

And then quite suddenly and unexpectedly Hugh's silence, that had lasted all through his married life, was broken up. He walked homeward with a German who had the chair of modern languages in the school and got into a violent quarrel. He stopped to speak to men on the street. When he went to putter about in the garden he whistled and sang.

One afternoon in the fall he came home and found the whole family assembled in the living room of the house. The children were playing on the floor and the negress sat in the chair by the window with his youngest child in her arms crooning one of the negro songs.

Mary Cochran was there. She sat reading a book.

Hugh walked directly toward her and looked over her shoulder. At that moment Winifred came into the room. He reached forward and snatched the book out of the girl's hands. She looked up startled. With an oath he threw it into the fire that burned in an open grate at the side of the room. A flood of words ran from him. He cursed books and people and schools. "Damn it all," he said.

"What makes you want to read about life? What makes people want to think about life? Why don't they live? Why don't they leave books and thoughts and schools alone?"

He turned to look at his wife who had grown pale and stared at him with a queer fixed uncertain stare. The old negro woman got up and went quickly away. The two older children began to cry. Hugh was miserable. He looked at the startled girl in the chair who also had tears in her eyes, and at his wife. His fingers pulled nervously at his own coat. To the two women he looked like a boy who had been caught stealing food in a pantry. "I am having one of my silly irritable spells," he said looking at his wife but in reality addressing the girl. "You see I am more serious than I pretend to be. I was not irritated by your book but by something else. I see so much that can be done in life and I do so little."

He went upstairs to his own room wondering why he had lied to the two women, why he continually lied to himself.

Did he lie to himself? He tried to answer the question but couldn't. He was like one who walks in the darkness of the hallway of a house and comes to a blank wall. The old desire to run away from life, to wear himself out physically, came back upon him like a madness.

For a long time he stood in the darkness inside his own room. The children stopped crying and the house became quiet again. He could hear his wife's voice speaking softly and presently the back door of the house banged and he knew the schoolgirl had gone away.

Life in the house began again. Nothing happened. Hugh ate his dinner in silence and went for a long walk. For two weeks Mary Cochran did not come to his house and then one day he saw her on the college grounds. She was no longer one of his pupils. "Please do not desert us because of my rudeness," he said. The girl blushed and said nothing. When he got home that evening she was in the yard beside the house playing with the children. He went at once to his own room. A hard smile came and went on his face. "She isn't like a young tree any more. She is almost like Winifred. She is almost like a person who belongs here, who belongs to me and my life," he thought.

Mary Cochran's visits to the Walker household came to an end very abruptly. One evening when Hugh was in his room she came up the stairway with the two boys. She had dined with the family and was putting the two boys into their beds. It was a privilege she claimed when she dined with the Walkers.

Hugh had hurried upstairs immediately after dining. He knew where his wife was. She was downstairs, sitting under a lamp, reading one of the books of Robert Louis Stevenson.

For a long time Hugh could hear the voices of his children on the floor above. Then the thing happened.

Mary Cochran came down the stairway that led past the door of his room. She stopped, turned back and climbed the stairs again to the room above. Hugh arose and stepped into the hallway. The schoolgirl had returned to the children's room because she had been suddenly overtaken with a hunger to kiss Hugh's oldest boy, now a lad of nine. She crept into the room and stood for a long time looking at the two boys, who unaware of her presence had gone to sleep. Then she stole forward and kissed the boy lightly. When she went out of the room Hugh stood in the darkness waiting for her. He took hold of her hand and led her down the stairs to his own room.

She was terribly afraid and her fright in an odd way pleased him. "Well," he whispered, "you can't understand now what is going to happen here but some day you will. I'm going to kiss you and then I am going to ask you to go out of this house and never come back."

He held the girl against his body and kissed her upon the cheeks and lips. When he led her to the door she was so weak with fright and with new, strange, trembling desires that she could with difficulty make her way down the stairs and into his wife's presence. "She will lie now," he thought, and heard her voice coming up the stairs like an echo to his thoughts. "I have a terrible headache. I must hurry home," he heard her voice saying. The voice was dull and heavy. It was not the voice of a young girl.

"She is no longer like a young tree," he thought. He was glad and proud of what he had done. When he heard the door at the back of the house close softly his heart jumped. A strange quivering light came into his eyes. "She will be imprisoned but I will have nothing to do with it. She will never belong to me. My hands will never build a prison for her," he thought with grim pleasure.