The Piano

Dorothy Canfield

Table of Contents

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I

IT was characteristic of Frederika's relentlessly keen self−analysis that one of the most intolerable elements of her misery was the banality of the situation. Following every step of the wretchedly familiar mental pilgrimage came the conviction of the total lack of novelty in her sensation. It was as though the aridity of her outward life penetrated to the center of her being, and she could not even suffer but in a worn−out and threadbare fashion.

The very setting of the scene was platitudinously appropriate, she reflected, as she looked about the little room, bare but for the grand piano, and noted that the fire at her husband's feet had smoldered out into white ashes. Her thin, handsome face did not move from its expression of lassitude as this detail claimed her attention, although her unspoken comment was acrid: "Just the thing a second−rate French novelist would put in as a cheap and trivial bit of symbolism."

Her eyes rested long on her husband after this, in a distastefully minute survey of his figure, relaxed in his armchair, his neck bulging out in a red roll in spite of the unloosened collar of his uniform. She noticed how the straight, severe lines of his officer's tunic brought out the ugly lines of a too large waist, and she remembered, still with no outward change in her spiritless face, that ten years ago she had thought a uniform a becoming garment, which gave color and character to military life, alone in a commercial age.

And yet she had not been a young girl, ignorant and inexperienced, when she married. She had thought that she recognized unmistakably the call of love as stronger than the rights of her art, that the humanity in her was more vital than music. She had fancied that she knew life and that she could weigh what she was going to give up, definitely, against what she was getting. The dry, commercial aspect of her phrase suddenly came to her, and her inexorable sense of justice, even to herself, made her retract. It was not only what she was to get from Dick that had influenced her, it was what she could give the rough, silent giant; it was the great and joyous sacrifice of a brilliant musical career to his interests; it was the rare and romantic chance to prove herself worthy of a mighty love and capable of returning it by giving up all that meaner folk hold precious — ease, variety, money, reputation, success, her name golden for all music−loving souls. She had thought all that of little avail beside the inextinguishable fire of affection and devotion she felt within her for Richard Farrington. At this for the first time her mouth twisted into a wry smile, and she looked again at the heap of white and gray between the andirons.

And how equally insignificant was the extinguishing of either fire to the sleeping man! Another, even if he slept, would awake, shivering, and feel the chilly desolation of the room and of her heart, but Dick would rouse himself only to go to bed so that he could be fresh for reveille in the morning, that hateful call to action in the bald light of dawn which had grown so unbearable to her. And then he would be out all day on the drill−ground, blustering paternally over his recruits, and filling in vacant moments with the childishly detailed accounts of every breath drawn on the little remote Western post which the government at Washington exacted and Dick delighted to make out. And in the evening he would come back to the ill−constructed officers' quarters, eat his dinner with a robust disregard for what it was, drop heavily into his armchair in front of the fire, dutifully ask his wife to play to him, and doze off as he had to−night, not noticing that she sat in silence.

For herself, as though in an ingenious contrivance of many−angled mirrors, she saw her drooping figure wherever she looked, sitting as she now sat, before a cold hearth, her long musician's fingers idle in her lap and her self−contemptuous thoughts busy behind her impassive face. She told herself impatiently that she envied unreasonable women who could get a perverse satisfaction out of blaming conditions for what they themselves were responsible for. That would be a variation from the hopelessly clear sight which turned her thoughts inexorably back upon herself.

She could not blame Dick for being exactly what he was. When she married him, he had steadily and honestly told her that he was a rough, inert, half−complete creature, all soldier and but half−man, his heart going out in a foolishly recurrent impulse to one after another of the groups of sodden, fumbling animals who were given him to make soldiers of. She remembered how he had been moved to a blind fear by her passion and the greatness of her sacrifice to marry him, and had striven inarticulately to tell her that she was mistaken in him; that, although his love for her was all of his personality outside his profession, still it was not worthy of her love for him — her love made up of such fine, subtle insight and clear, bright confidence.

II

SHE stirred restlessly in her chair, pricked through her apathetic disgust with herself and the world by a sudden stab of mortification. How foolishly they had talked when they were engaged! She could not tell how it had happened. It seemed like a fantastic dream; and now she was awake and yawning in a deadly and eternal ennui, and Dick — — She looked at him again. His head hung more heavily toward his shoulder than before, and his breathing was louder. With each outward respiration his lips puffed out with a faint, unpleasant whistling sound. In about five minutes he would begin to snore. She would wake him, he would look up, nod, perhaps pat her hand, and settle down in a new position to snore again. Nor could she blame him for it. A day of active exercise out of doors in that eversweeping wind — what could she expect?

That was not the point. What had she expected? What could she have expected? With a qualm of self−suspicion she wondered if she was so paltry as to be disappointed because Dick was too good an officer with recruits and common soldiers ever to be advanced to more spectacular positions.

Had she perhaps dreamed of being a general's wife, of having social rank and prestige in some metropolitan society? Remembering her incongruous school−girl admiration for Dick's uniform, she searched her mind for traces of another vein of cheapness in her discontent. There was even a cessation of the dull ache of dejection as she drove this new inquiry home to the innermost fastnesses of her heart; but in a moment she drew a long breath and again shifted her position.

No, she was not so low as that. There was no such positive element as disappointed ambition in the flat negation of her depression. She had married Dick because she loved him, and because that love meant more to her than her art; and now she did not love him, and her art was lost to her. She held her hand up to shield her eyes from the lamp, and noticed how steadily it stood as she admitted that she no longer loved her husband. The most terrifying cataclysm of a woman's life was upon her, and she acknowledged it to herself so languidly that her hand did not quiver.

There were, in fact, no positive aspects of her condition to make her quiver. She said dryly to herself that in one respect at least she differed from the unpleasant and familiar heroine of the well−worn French novel. She did not crave any other love, having lost her first. She had lost not only her love for her husband but her love for love. She shuddered at the thought of ever again putting herself in that maze of self−illusion, of ever again feeling that feverish insanity of emotion. She was cured once and for all — "a burned child."

She recalled without a tremor, so unmoved did it leave her, the sudden outburst of passion of a young lieutenant at the post where they had been last stationed, and remembered with a half smile how his fervor had been frozen into a sort of terror of her unearthly remoteness. Not even his sudden shame had made him mistake her attitude for conscious virtue. He had called her inhuman — an epithet, she reflected, which was truer than most of those of amorous and disappointed youth, and probably a great deal truer than he at all realized. His ardent, impudent love−making had not moved her. She settled a ring on a long, strong finger with the reflection that nothing could move her.

And yet as the next gust of wind brought a sudden patter of autumn rain upon the tin roof, she sprang to her feet, and ran across the room like a girl, to close the window above the piano, passing an anxious hand across the polished surface to detect dampness. There was something that could move her, and she gave a little gasp of thankfulness to feel her heart beating high. She was still alive, although imprisoned in a tomb. But the thing that kept her alive was an emotion forever unsatisfied. She looked at the great piano, sprawling its ungainly bulk across most of the tiny room, with unreasoning, half−hysterical devotion. It had saved the life of her soul, she thought to herself, and a knot came in her throat at the cool, smooth touch of the keys. The piles of music on the little table by its side were like so many tongues, calling out to her that beauty still lived in the world. But they also cried out that she was lost to it, and it to her.

In the passionate lament over her realization that she was missing all that life meant for her she exonerated herself proudly from much personal vanity and selfish disappointment. She was not thinking of the brilliant future her teachers had promised her, of the international reputation which had been within her grasp. She was not so poor a thing as to regret her name in large letters on posters. What rent her with an intolerable sense of rebellion

against fate was the thought of all the lovely realm of joy which she might have made for herself and a thousand thousand hearers; the inspiriting consciousness of the actuality, the power, the invincible might of beauty she might have given them.

And it was still hers, in blessed moments, thanks to the ugly black monster before her. Even in her rising emotion she gave an honest thought to the man before the hearth — how he had always toiled and contrived and mastered circumstance so that she might have her genie with her; and always with so vacant and good−natured an incapacity to understand one tittle of what it meant to her, that his sacrifice was of no avail — was even hateful to her — a profanation!

She sat down before the piano, shivering with a prescience of emotion to come, and laid her hands fondly upon the keys. As she swung into the first movement of the Beethoven sonata in F minor, she felt her listless weariness break and fade away. The last scudding wisp of it, which for a moment blinded her to the glorious ether whither the music swept her, was the sardonic reflection that the only outward value of her talent now was that she would wake her husband, so that he could shift to an easier position, by the crash of chords instead of a hand on his shoulder.

And then, while the sonata lasted, she was transfigured — translated by a happy magic into a world all joy, where every pain is beautiful. Like a viewless column the music rose up solemnly and shut her into a fairy tower of safety from herself.

The last movement ended, the last chord was struck, the last echo died away, and down from about her melted the fleeting bulwarks of her soul. She sat shivering on the stool, waiting for her husband's never−failing, cheerful, ignorant admiration. She did not look up at him, but she knew precisely the aspect of his face, vacuous with fatigue and faintly colored with an absent and conscientious interest in her art. He did not speak. She turned sharply about to have the incident over with, and saw him sitting as she had last noticed him, but with his head now hanging completely on his shoulder. It made him look like a man who has been hanged.

"Dick!" she called peremptorily.

He did not stir. Something about the look of his hand, fallen from the chair−arm and hanging heavily — — She held her breath, and heard stertorous gasps that turned her faint. She flung herself toward the chair, and dropped back appalled at the blue−lipped mask of horror which hung upon her husband's shoulder.

III

AFTER the last desperate expedient had been tried, it seemed to Frederika that an hour of agonized suspense passed before the doctor lifted his white head from the sick man's breast. In answer to the haggard question in her eyes he nodded and drew a long breath.

"He'll pull through — this time! He'll probably be conscious in a few minutes. Get around to this side. He'll want to see you first."

Still with his eyes bent on the face of the prostrate man, with one hand on the heart and one on the pulse, he went on: "I've been afraid of something of this sort ever since he came to the post. I warned him about his heart only a few months ago, and told him to keep as quiet as he could, but he — — "

The woman interrupted him, a keen edge of apprehension in her voice. "Oh, doctor, it won't mean his having to give up and go back to Washington or New York? It would break his heart to give up his active life! He's all soldier, you know!"

She spoke with an accent of pride which broke into a yearning quiver as she continued: "But, oh, what does it matter now that he's safe! Now that I have him again! Oh, doctor, don't let him die! He's all that I have in the world."

This last she said in a tone of such simple and heartfelt conviction that the doctor found no answer to make, and they sat silent, one on each side of the sick man.

The fire blazing high at his feet threw a strong flickering light into every corner of the disordered room, littered with sick−room appliances assembled in the most frenzied haste. The piano, as almost the only article of furniture besides the chairs, was laden with a strange array. Basins of hot water with cloths hanging over the side, a heap of broken ice, an overturned bottle from whose open mouth a thick black liquid was dripping slowly upon the keys, a pile of wet flannel rags still sending up faint wisps of steam, and a broken flask of ammonia whose contents had left a white trail across the polished wood.

Frederika's hair hung in a disordered maze about her shoulders. Her hands, swollen and red with manipulating hot cloths, were clasped across her breast as though to keep her heart in her bosom, and her deep eyes never for a moment left her husband's face.

The bluish tinge was gradually fading from his lips. As his countenance relaxed into lines of peace she bent over him in a frenzy of attention, but when he opened his eyes and looked at her recognizingly, she began to cry quietly, like a little child.

He put out his hand weakly, his first impulse being to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Freddie, dear," he whispered. "I won't do it if you don't like to have me — — "

He stopped, his voice failing him, suddenly realizing his situation and trying vainly to lift his head. His wife caught up his hand and held it to her lips, as the doctor came briskly to the explanation.

"Don't stir, old man. We've had trouble enough with you as it is. You've had one of those attacks I prophesied to you. It's come, but you're none the worse for it, thanks to about the hardest two hours I ever put in — but mostly thanks to your wife. She's missed her vocation. She should have been a trained nurse."

The sick man smiled, his swollen lips twisting in a grotesque and pathetic grimace.

"There's nothing she can't do, doctor." And then with a sudden accent of horror, "Oh, Freddie, darling, what have you done to your piano? It'll be ruined!"

He tried to raise himself, a distracted anxiety in his voice.

The fire blazed high and in a flickering leap brought the wild confusion of the instrument close to them. The musician surveyed it for a moment with unseeing eyes — blank and inattentive. Then she turned back impatiently to her husband, put her arms about him, and still sobbing a little, laid her head on his shoulder. A moment later she sought blindly for his lips and kissed his feverish, swollen mouth with so profound a fervor that the doctor turned away.

"Come, Mrs. Farrington," he said as he came back to the hearth, "pleasurable emotions won't hurt our patient, but we mustn't let him worry. The piano's all right, captain; and now, my dear lady, if I may have a glass of just plain cold water I guarantee to have him ready for bed in half an hour. These attacks pass as quickly as they

come."

The woman rose alertly from her knees and went to the door. As she passed the piano her skirt caught on a pail of water standing near the stool, and stooping to free herself she brushed one hand against the keys. At the touch she stood suddenly erect, electrified, looking at the piano as though she saw it for the first time.

"Oh!" she said in a low tone, with a sharp, indrawn breath, and she gazed at it with a fierce attention. Her voice went up an octave. "Oh!" she cried with an enigmatic intonation, and turning, she fixed her eyes on her husband with a strange and ambiguous expression of wonder. She looked at the piano again, and then going swiftly to the fire, she knelt by the sick man and taking his large square hand in hers she kissed it.

The doctor followed her out of the room with his eyes. "Captain Farrington, heart failure or not, I envy you. Through all the excitement of the last two hours the thought which has been uppermost in my mind has been that you are a very lucky man. It's positive cruelty to show a loveless old bachelor such depths of affection! It makes me feel as though I were dying of cold in sight of a blazing fire."

The soldier smiled humbly. "What she ever saw in me — — "

"It's not only what she saw in you then, it's what she continues to see in you now. You don't begin to deserve it — and yet somehow you must! I'd never dare to marry a woman like that. I'd be sure I never could keep her affection. Good God! To see her look at you as you were coming to — after ten years of married life!"

Captain Farrington spoke with a grave and boyish solemnity. "You can't know what it is — no man who is not married can! It's not just the passion of a moment of anxiety. It's the never−wavering, never−faltering quality of a true woman's love. A man who is married to a good woman who loves him is in a haven of peace which heaven can't better. The surety of it — the blessed certainty!"

The doctor rose to his feet and began dropping the bottles in his medicine−case back to their sockets.

"Yes, I know," he quoted sententiously in the tone of one who utters a self−evident axiomatic truth. "'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence!'"