

OBLIVION.

The Story of a Painter's Opportunity.

"You want to shut me out. Oh, I have known it for some time. You don't like me to come to the studio! And once—once you weren't happy unless I was sitting by, reading or sewing, while you worked."

"It was some time ago," he murmured to himself, and shrugged his shoulders, half shamed. A kinder glance showed him that her hands were trembling and that her eyes had the hard brightness of pent-up tears. Perhaps he comprehended something of the nervous strain under which she was suffering, though he would have been puzzled to define its cause. He went closer to her and laid his hand on her arm. The color sprang to her averted face.

"When I have done anything good you are the first to see it," he said, more gently. "But no artist likes to exhibit his beginnings or his failures!"

"You admit, then, that it is a failure!" she cried suddenly.

"The statue—a failure? What—what are you talking about?" He moved away from her abruptly.

"I tell you it is, Herman! You have failed. That statue—is it the expression of an idea, a noble conception? No, it is a portrait of your model! There is no imagination in it. That woman there—what does she mean? *Oblivion*? She's a cocotte, dreaming! shaweful!"

The sculptor silently threw the sheet over the clay statue. He walked away to the fireplace, lit a cigarette and stood looking down into the blaze on the hearth, a scowl on his handsome face.

"Can't you see it—can't you feel it yourself, the degeneration in your work? This past year you have done nothing worthy of yourself, nothing fine. People say so, and I can see it. And I can tell you why it is. No one could lead the life you do and do good work. You are using your strength; you are becoming coarse in thought; you are not capable any longer of a pure idea!"

Still he was silent, only looking up at her with steely eyes, cold and repellent.

"Do you think I am blind—that I can't see what goes on under my very eyes? It's not for nothing you have modeled that woman twenty times! And she is not even a professional model!"

"What stuff are you talking?" he interrupted, roughly. "You are behaving like a child—an idiot!"

"Oh, I know! I know her as well as you do. I could point you out a dozen likenesses of her in this room. That is a cast of her arm. I know her, I tell you. She's Corinne, the dancer."

"What of that?" You talk like a fool."

"You shall not—you shall not have her here, within a stone's throw of my house."

"Your house, My good Martha? I don't propose to talk to you in this mood. I'll wait till you have recovered your senses. But I may as well tell you now that I shall employ just what models I find most useful, and if I can get what I want by going outside the profession, I don't know anything that will prevent me from doing so. That hardly need be said."

"Not that woman, Herman!"

"That woman, or any other. What has come over you, Martha? Upon my word, I believe you're insane. You used to be sensible enough. Nowadays you clog me, hold me back, worry me to death with these perpetual disputes. Do you think I can stand this sort of thing? Can I work in an atmosphere like this? Good heavens! and you are the woman that vowed she would die to give me success!"

"I said it, and I would die, even now, to help you! But I will not stand it to be killed by inches—to see you growing worse day by day, and die of shame to see it! I will not bear it!"

The air tingled with the harshness of these discords, suggestions of an irreconcilable strife, of a difference which meant hopeless division. The physical contrast of the two typified this lack of sympathy or comprehension. The man's short, strongly-built frame, ruddy coloring, quick, restless movements, bespoke a full and intense vitality, a sanguine and passionate temperament, impulsive and scarcely restrained by the keen susceptibility of the artist. There was a leonine suggestion in his aspect, a look of lithe and brutal power and insinuating savagery.

The woman's thin figure, whose gracefulness her dress did not seek to dissemble, the lines of her wasted face, her straight narrow lips and sharply-cut nostrils, marked her as an ascetic, whose flesh, if indeed it had ever rebelled, was now completely subdued to her spirit. No lack of spirit was evinced in her intense blue eyes, animated by a flame of disdain—the disdain of icy chastity for sensual errors which it could not comprehend or forgive. While she stood trembling after her last outburst, seeking for words that might lash and sting the man before her, these eyes rested upon him with an expression which changed slowly from jealous fury to unutterable grief.

But he did not perceive this softening. He smoked his cigarette out and flung the tip into the fire, still in sullen silence. And then, without looking at his wife, he changed his velvet coat for a more conventional garment, put on his hat and light overcoat and left the studio.

"Herman," she called to him sharply.

"I shall not come back here for a week," he said, between the opening and the closing of the door. And some half-childish, half-savage impulse moved him to add, "I hate you."

A moment later his shadow passed the window, against which the wind flung a gust of yellow leaves. The woman stood listening, a stunned look on her face. Her eyes traveled slowly round the studio, resting a long time on the shrouded clay model. She took a step toward it and raised a clenched hand as though for a blow. Then she stood still again, and shivered.

The fire burned steadily, a red core of heat with little fitful bluish flames playing over it. She dragged a heavy straight-backed chair closer to the hearth and dropped into it, clasping her arms over her breast, her face contorted with a sudden keen physical pain. Blindly she felt in her pocket and found a small bottle. Without waiting to measure or dilute the dose she put the bottle to her lips and swallowed part of its contents. For some time she lay huddled in the chair, gasping for breath. Then, growing quieter, she reached out and dragged from a chest near by its covering, a dark blanket, and drew it round her head and body, and so sat, staring into the falling fire with eyes dull from exhaustion and pain.

The sculptor fought his way along the street swept bare by a biting east wind, toward the quarter of hotels and cafes. He felt himself in need of something to soothe the pin pricks inflicted by a nagging tongue, and to counteract the depression, mental and physical, which was too often his lot after a long day's work, like the present, of dubious result. Ordinarily the remedy he sought would have presented itself in the shape of a jolly party of his friends, masculine and feminine, and an evening of gayety. But on this occasion he felt a moody aversion for these companions of his own or a kindred craft; he was sick of shop. As for Corinne, his sudden revulsion culminated against her; he invoked anathemas upon her absent head, and would have flung these in her face if she had happened to cross his path. He avoided the places where he might meet her or any of the artist clan; and went into a large cafe, where he took a table in a corner, with his back to the room, and

ordered dinner, preface'd by a stiff absinthe.

As he sat sipping the pale green liquor and absently drawing lines on the tablecloth with a fork, his square ungraceful figure and his hanging head expressed the mood which dominated him. He was tired, sick at heart; the horrible sense of discouragement, of failure, which the artist knows at its keenest, had fastened upon him. His wife's words repeated themselves over and over again in his brain, coiling and stinging like thin venomous reptiles. Was this statue a failure? Was it true that his work was degenerating, that he could no longer command the power that had been his?

He drained the glass of absinthe and pushed it away from him, leaning his forehead on his clasped hands. He admitted to himself that it was true. He knew that in this case, and in other instances of late, the idea that he wanted was there, somewhere within the region of his consciousness, but just beyond his reach, forever escaping him. He had not been able to seize it, and in despair had fallen back on a level frankly imitative. He had wished to materialize the idea of *Oblivion*: what he had produced would perhaps satisfy the man who had ordered the mortuary statue, but it did not satisfy himself. It was a failure, and he had known it long before his wife had pointed the fact out to him. A cold rage seized upon his soul—rage against his wife, against the model who had posed for the unlucky statue, against the world of artists who would see and sneer at his work, bestowing covert smiles where formerly they had been compelled to admire, finally and chiefly against himself, for the weakness he despised. Was he then, after all, to lose the place he had conquered with such tremendous effort? Was he to decline in strength and watch men who had toiled beneath him pass him in the race? He set his teeth in fury at the thought that this might be the forfeit of his carelessness, his late indulgence in unnerving pleasure. For the first time he faced squarely the fact that his youth, his physical strength, his creative power, had limitations, and the shock was no light one. In that hour he seemed to himself to have grown old.

He ate his dinner and drank a bottle of good Burgundy and felt his blood running warmer. The subtle influence of the absinthe insensibly lightened his mood. He straightened up and lifted his head defiantly. He stretched out his arm, opening and closing the powerful fingers of his right hand; it had not lost its cunning yet—he would show them.

Dinner over, he lit a cigar and turned about to face the room. He was rather glad to perceive at one of the tables near him, sipping his coffee and Cognac, a painter whom he knew. He joined this acquaintance and went off with him to a theatre, and later to a studio merry-making, at which Corinne, the dancer, happened to be the guest of honor.

It was in the small hours that the sculptor finally reached his home, sobered considerably by the walk in the chill night air. He had indeed found in it opportunity and some incentive to reflection. He thought over a remark or two which had fallen from one or another of the men during the evening. There was a change in the attitude of his *confreres* toward himself; it was something subtle, slight, intangible, but it was there. They had ceased to look to him. He knew that the change must have been gradual, slow, but now his eyes were opened, and he perceived what he had long been blind to. This to a man who felt himself still in the prime of strength was inexpressibly galling. He swore that the tide should be reversed; that he would make them look again! He would put fully behind him and give himself once more to his

art. He would break in pieces the clay model, dismiss Corinne, and search for a new idea.

The house was dark, except for the night light in the hall. With a sullen memory of the quarrel of the afternoon he went around to the studio, a separate building in the rear, intending to sleep there, as he did often. He unlocked the door, which had a spring lock, and closed with a catch. The room was in perfect darkness, the fire was long out, and a deadly chill numbed the air. The sculptor struck a match and lit two gas jets, shivering at the prospect before him, but resolved not to enter the house. He did not at first perceive a figure, heavily shrouded in some dark drapery, seated with its back toward him before the ashes on the hearth. When he did perceive it his first thought was that his nerves had played him an uncanny trick; his second, that his wife had waited here for the opportunity of baiting him on his return. His impulse was to turn on his heel and leave the studio in her undisputed possession; he hated scenes and nagging, and he was not far at that moment from hating the woman who had become identified with these things in his mind.

He did turn toward the door, and then paused, withheld by the strange stillness of the room, the motionlessness of the dark figure. He thought she must be asleep, and felt no desire to awaken her; but he knew that he could not rest, leaving her as she was. He approached her, therefore, reluctantly, dragging himself slowly over the floor. The moment he looked upon her face he knew she was dead. The cold white face in the shadow of the blanket showed only as a pale glimmer; but the man felt death.

He recoiled and dropped upon the chest at the side of the fire-place, staring. It did not occur to him to call out, nor to see if the woman's heart still beat. She was dead, that was the whole of the matter. After a while he reached up above his head, and shrinking horribly the while, lit another gas jet. But there was nothing horrible to see. The figure, straight and stiff, outlined by the dark blanket which swept in heavy folds from the shoulders; the face, rigid and composed, calm with an ineffable quiet which nothing could touch or ruffle more; the dignity of absolute passionless repose; the look of one who had done with earth and the things of earth forever—these were the impressions to which the startled senses of the man responded. There was no doubt in him of the tremendous fact of death; yet he rose, and, half timidly, as though it were a conscious desecration, touched the cold flesh of the woman's cheek, and held his fingers for a moment before the quiet mouth. The clamor of his nerves subsided; personal emotions sank away, but half roused. At some future time he might be glad or sorry. Now, the genesis of an idea occupied usurped all his mind. Half consciously he stared at the face whose sharply cut features, shadowed and softened by the simple strong line of the drapery, took on a nobility so piercingly impressive. This—this! This was what he sought—this majesty, this austerity. Did one seek oblivion, forgetfulness of things earthly? This woman had found it. This was the secret of her locked lips, her half-closed, inscrutable eyes. Here, then, at last—at last!

A brain excited, spurred to action, and now sprung suddenly into fullest life, possessed the man. He found paper and crayon, and, sitting before the body of his wife, he drew like one driven of a demon. Eye and hand held tense till he had mastered what lay before him. He made three sketches, and the livid dawn filtered in as he finished the last. He locked them in a drawer and put the key in his pocket with a throb of exultation.

The reaction came instantly, and for