

The Rescue

Dorothy Canfield

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THE old man controlled himself with a violent effort, and stopped his storming commands, daunted by the face of fierce opposition which the girl turned to him. He wheeled about and relieved his mind by a few clamorous, angry chords on the great piano against which he was leaning. There was a moment's silence before he faced her again — a silence full of faint reminiscent murmurs and echoes from the music-soaked walls of the bare little room. The tense rigidity of the girl's slenderness relaxed a little; and when the master again looked at her, the stormy light of revolt was gone from her eyes, leaving their usual curious, half-absent brooding.

The old man shook back his long white hair, and began afresh in a new manner.

"I am not so unreasonable as you think," he said in an argumentative tone. "I know well enough I have no legal right to order your life in any way; but" — his voice broke in a grieved quaver — "some rights I have — your old master?"

The girl's eyes softened.

Every right a human parent can have over his child you have, a thousand times stronger, over me — you, who are the parent of my soul, who have made me what I am. But no parent has the right to forbid his child life!"

"I don't forbid you life! I am human as well as you, and I have been young! There have been women in my life, and from them I have drawn my best inspiration. I did not marry because I felt my art would suffer — love and marriage are two different things; but I don't forbid you even marriage — least of all, love! Love all you can, marry if you must; but, in the name of heaven, do not select the one man who is separated from you by an impassable chasm. You admit yourself that he has no musical feeling!"

"He does not know one note from another," said the girl firmly, "and I love him for it."

"You are insane! You are simply unfit to govern your life!" cried the other, in an irresistible burst of choking fury. "What mad idea have you in your head to say that?" He calmed himself again, one shaking hand at his wrinkled old throat. "And an American who is not rich! And a college professor! You, with your training and knowledge of the world of live men and women, to bury yourself in the gossiping, deadening existence of any company of schoolmasters — but in America! And Western America! You can have no faintest remnant of reason left, to think of such a thing!"

The disciple smiled.

"It has been long since you have been in love, maestro mio!" she said.

"In love! Do you know what that means in America? It means a lure to get you — you, Federiga Potowska — to do his housework, to make and maintain a tiresome social position for him, to bear his children, and to sink every spark of your individual life and health and strength in bringing them up!"

Federiga hesitated and then said with a sudden half bold, half terrified rush:

"What better can I do with my vigor and health?"

The old man screamed aloud in a sort of frenzy.

"You blaspheme! You blaspheme! You are beside yourself!"

And then he sank on the seat before the piano, and, laying his head on the keys, he wept aloud, like a child or a heart-broken old man. The girl's face was drawn in nervous lines of agitation, and she spoke pleadingly.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that. Henry will never require me to give up my music. Dear master, you love me; why deny me the right to take this one golden opportunity of my life?"

"The one golden opportunity! Have you no memory? How many men have you refused — men who were mad for love of you, who could appreciate your music, which is your soul, as well as your body and mind. But this half man, this barbarian who owns himself tone deaf!"

"That is just it — can't you see? He is the only man who has ever loved me — me! My music is not myself, it is only a manifestation."

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"It is not that I am going over the old ground that a woman of genius should not marry at all, but it is as if the most beautiful woman in the world should insist on marrying a blind man."

"Master, tell me truly; I am speaking to you from my heart. If I had married Alexis Nicolaievitch, as you wished — Alexis Nicolaievitch, who would have given me passionate love, position, freedom from care, and an almost insane admiration for my music — and if, on my wedding-day, my right hand had become paralyzed, what would have happened?"

The old man defended himself from this thrust almost indignantly as from an unfair weapon.

"Why, of course! What do you expect? Your music is a part of you. What have you a right to ask of human men?"

Federiga's eyes suddenly blazed with a wild joy.

"That's it! That's it! That's all one has a right to expect! But by some unheard-of good fortune I escape the common fate. I alone can be sure that I am really loved. It is as if a beautiful woman should marry a blind man! Do you suppose, after a woman has lived long enough to see the barrier that beauty puts between her and men, after she has seen the sort of love it calls forth — do you suppose, if she could find a blind man who would love her, herself, truly and passionately, that she would not leave all the world to follow him?"

The old man stared at her in blank bewilderment.

"You are simply mad! You have refined on insane subtleties until you cannot see the simplest truths of nature. What is beauty for, but to draw the hearts of men? What are you but your music?"

"So I have always feared! I had come to feel it as inevitable, as part of the sadness of human life. I have thought that the most beautiful woman never could find a blind man who would love her; that, in truth, she was nothing but her beauty."

The musician beat frantically upon the keys, evoking a clangorous discord of maddened exasperation.

"God in heaven grant me patience! That such a fool should have such a genius! How can a man love a woman but for her qualities? You would not be you without your music!"

"So I feared, so I feared, although I cherished the wild hope that all women have, until it is crushed out of them, that somewhere there would be a man who would, by loving it, prove that I had something beyond the outward show that all the world may see. Music has been like a prison to me, which has shut me away from all humanity. Henry Livingstone has delivered me from my bondage, and I am so happy that it seems at times I must die of joy."

"But me — do you never think of me? I have given these last ten years of my life to you; and without a quiver of remorse, without a sign of self-reproach for your desertion, you leave me."

Tears stood, large and glittering, in the girl's eyes.

"Oh, master, that is the hard part! There is where you make it bitter for me! Do you think I have no remorse?"

The old man seized with pathetic eagerness upon this sign of weakening.

"Child, child, tell me it is all a bad dream — a fancy that has passed!" The tears rolled down the girl's cheeks, paled by the stress of the struggle. She was so evidently laboring under some overpowering emotion that the other started up, eager hope in his eyes. "You have seen reason, Federiga! You are rescued!"

He pushed her with an affectionate roughness into a chair, and bent his stiff old frame to kneel beside her, his face all alight with hypnotic fervor, and so impassioned an earnestness breathing from him that Federiga sank back, her hand over her eyes. She did not move from this position during a long time, while the master painted with a flaming wealth of words the golden and glorious future which lay before her. Wrought up by the intensity of his feeling, he had an inspired certainty that he was succeeding, that he was hitting the weak places in her arguments, that the curious, intangible barriers in the girl's mind were giving way before the irresistible rush of his eloquence. He held up her hand, her long white artist hand, and felt that he made her realize to the point of breaking nerves the entrancing possibilities that lay in its firm grasp. He appealed to her ambition, the highest form of it he could imagine; he appealed to her love for him, and to the debt she owed him; he argued, with cruelly sharp divination of her character, that the life she had planned would be a desolate one, a continual horror of abnegation of the best in her. He felt himself in one of those crises of emotion when speech is no longer a barrier to expression, when the flame of feeling burns itself palpably to view.

And yet, as his agitation grew, and as he felt hers respond to it, even this heaven-sent gift of speech was not enough. He struggled in the grasp of a passion higher and keener than he could put into words, and, with a

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musician's instinct, he turned to the piano. Federiga saw his purpose, and, breaking the quivering stillness in which she had listened to him, she cried in an agony of fear:

"Oh, no! Not that! Don't play to me! Don't play to me!"

She sprang from her chair and rushed across the room toward the door, as if to escape. The old man, quicker and stronger than she, put her on one side roughly, locked the door, and darted back to the piano, his eyes alight with an imperious certainty of victory. Federiga sank down by the door, in the farthest corner of the room, and put her hands over her ears with a frenzied gesture; but after the first puissant chords resounded, her hands dropped despairingly, and she turned to gaze helplessly at the magician of sound who was weaving relentlessly the most mighty of his spells.

Even as he played, the old master knew that he was touching the highest achievement of his life. All the forces of his nature were fused into one overwhelming and indomitable resolve to protect the sanctuary of all he held most sacred. It was as if his life had been one long preparation for this moment, so consciously did he pour into his music all the potent vitality gained from battles won in a life of combat for an ideal.

After an interval, the defenseless girl on the other side of the room rose to her feet as though under a spell, and made her way blindly across the floor to the piano. The player did not look up, but into the already maddeningly poignant splendor of his harmonies he infused a yet more piercing quality of intimate beauty. For a long time the three — the invincible master, the conquered woman, and the gloriously resounding instrument — throbbed and glowed and lived as one. And then the old man suddenly stopped and looked full at Federiga.

The room hummed and whispered about them with the haunting murmurs of a huge sea-shell. The girl's slender body shook almost visibly, and across the unearthly pallor of her face there still vibrated inaudible echoes, like the unheard voice of a stringless and dumb violin that answers with all its fibers the long-drawn call of another instrument.

"Ah, Federiga, am I not right? Is there anything else to live for? See, I put it on the highest ground. Do not live for your music because of the joy of it — even because of the heavenly joy of it — but for the sake of the divine thing itself. You are a priestess chosen by fate to minister at the altar. You are necessary to the sacred art. Consecrate yourself to it — to the thing which makes us both what we are."

He rose and led her to the piano gently, as if not to break the spell which lay upon her. At the touch of the instrument the blood came to her face in a rush. She sank upon the seat before it, and spread out her arms upon it with a fierce, hungry gesture of devotion which went to the old man's heart. She bowed her bright head above the keys, she laid her warm cheek upon their cold surface. She kissed their deathlike whiteness with her red lips in a fervor which the master took to be the passion of consecration.

"Heaven be praised!" she cried in a loud voice of joy. "You are too late!"

"Too late?" he asked.

"Too late! Too late! Too late! Thank God, I was married to Henry Livingstone this morning!"