As it Happened

Carpenter, Edward · *from Towards Democracy · Swan Sonnenschein, 1911*

CROSS-LEGGED in a low tailor's den, gasping for breath –
The gas flaring, doors and windows tight shut, the thick sick atmosphere;
The men in their shirt-sleeves, with close heat from the stove, and smell of sweat and of the cloth;
Stitching, stitching, 12 hours a day, no set time for meals –
Stitching, cross-stitching, button-holing, binding,
Silk twist, cotton twist, black thread, white thread,
Stouting, felling, pressing, damping,
Basting, seaming, opening seams, rantering,
With sore eyes, sick sick at heart, and furious,
In the low tailor's den he sits.

All day in his mind – like a hunted criminal – he resolves: How shall I escape?
How change this miserable pittance for Freedom, and yet not starve?
At night after some brief dream of joy he wakes to tears, tears, tears –
Drenching his bed with tears.
No God, no Truth, no Justice – and under it all, no Love.
[This is what is slowly killing him – no Love.]
A little fire burns in his heart, burns night and day;
The slow pain kills – no Love.

O the deep deep hunger!
The mean life all around, the wolfish eyes, the mere struggle for existence, as of men starving on a raft at sea – no room for anything more.
All that he has read in books, all the stories of other times and lands – Mignon, Eloise, Eros the beautiful boy wandering over the world – so wonderful a world, and he in this prison, this filthy den!
O the deep deep hunger of Love!
All the obscene talk of the shop is neither here nor there: it cannot fill the void.
The shallow laughter of his companions and the bought kisses of the street-girls are the mere husks that the swine did eat.

O little heart, beating, beating!
Heart once so strong, full-pulsed; now often at night out of some dream of Splendor –

[Dream of Love – some shining form within a garden and at the gate stands a bearded man, dagger in hand, saying "Thou canst not enter here, except thou pass the Ordeal."

And he in his dream, beholding Love beyond, bares his breast gladly to the knife, and feels the sharp point turn within his heart] –

Waking thus oft to pain and sick sick powerless days,

At last little heart thy strength gives way indeed.

Stumbling, with strange uncertain motion, like one confused – now hurrying on,

Now halting in thy pace as near to stop,

That something's wrong with thee is past a doubt.

And the grave doctor comes and says the valves are weak, and recommends rest and good food and fresh air and other things that are not to be had: but says nothing of that which lies nearest to the patient.

And he, the patient, half misdoubts himself – thinks likely the doctor knows best – feels only strangely dull and indifferent; and after a while rises and goes back to his den and takes his place once more cross-legged amongst the rest, stitching, stitching; and the horns on his heal and ancle grow again, and the air seems closer and more suffocating than ever; but he drags through the days, ever more lethargic growing, caring not much whether he die or live – thinking perhaps to die on the whole were better.

When, as it happened – and this was the strangest of all – quite suddenly, the most unexpected thing in the world,

To a casual little club, which once a week he was in the habit of attending, there came one night a new member,

Of athletic strength and beauty, yet gentle in his manners,

And with a face like a star – so stedfast clear and true that he the sufferer felt renewed by merely looking on it.

But what was even more strange, the newcomer turning spoke friendly to him, and soon seemed to understand,

And from that time forward came and companioned and nursed him, and stayed whole nights and days with him and loved him.

And out of his despair there grew something so glorious that he forgets it not, night nor day;

Great waves of health and strength come to him – as to a man who after the long Arctic night bathes in the warmth and light of the re-arisen Sun;

Even the wretched tailor's den is transformed; but soon leaving that he accepts by preference the poorest work in the open under heaven,

And breathes again, and tastes the sweet air afresh;

And watches a new sun rise in the mornings and a new transparency

among the stars at night;
And the body grows strong and hardy, and the little heart gathers and knits itself together,
And sings, sings, sings:
Sings all day to its friend whether present or absent.

pages 280 to 283 of the 1911 edition published by Swan & Sonnenschein
pages 231 to 234 of the 1985 Gay Men's Press reprint of the 1931 Complete Edition by Swan & Sonnenschein