TONY'S AWAKENING—OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DID IT

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"Dio Mio, che vita, che vita," groaned Tony, as, slumped in his one chair, he buried his sleek head in his arms on the edge of the small bedside table. A book tumbled to the floor. A glass fell with a crash and was shattered to bits. Tony looked up to gaze at the debris, but, unconcerned with such trivialities, he buried his head again.

People came and went all day long; boys all around him, and yet he was lonely, desperately lonely. His days were spent in solitude and silence, and he had been known to smile but once. His large black eyes were heavy with despair, and something more—fear. It was fear that made him turn his head slowly and look behind him furtively as if ashamed of doing so, or again, quickly as if the dread was too great to be controlled. At last, his courage completely gone, he would jump up and thump on his crutches up and down the ward, or up and down the long hospital corridors, in a frantic, terrified haste to escape—something—no one knew what. "No one's chasing you, Tony," laughed the boys. "Oh, can that gloom!" said one. "Smile for the lady, smile!" mocked another, but Tony looked at them all unsmilingly and pushed on his way.

He answered the doctors and nurses in monosyllables, with always a question in his eyes; a helpless pleading questioning that all who saw him felt. When? When was he to be operated on, and the same answer, "In a little while now, Tony." Always waiting, waiting for the clearing up of the wound in his thigh so that the operation that was to restore the use of his leg, or leave him a cripple for life, could take place. Eight months ago he had fallen on the battlefield and been left for dead. When he was found, gangrene had set in, and since then he had been moved.
from hospital to hospital, from France to America; sometimes better, sometimes worse. Always waiting—empty, endless, anxious days. Thinking—thinking—

Liza, his betrothed, had at last listened to the pleading of his letters and had taken the 350-mile trip to see him. She had smiled bravely into his despairing eyes, and for a fleeting second he had smiled back (his one recorded smile to date), but he had felt then, and now he knew, things were not the same between them. She, too, had known. There had been no answer in her youthful joyousness to the sombre man before her—and his leg, he might lose it! She, his Liza, with the sun of Italy still shining in her eyes and dancing in her feet, tied to a cripple! Her heart had been torn with pity; but—she did not love him. The gaunt form in the gray hospital suit was not her Tony. What did it matter now what happened to him? He did not want pity, he wanted love, Liza's love! Perhaps she would love him again if his leg was saved. Perhaps he could get his old place back at the factory and work near her again. But if he should lose his leg! He would have to find another job then. A cripple! Sapristi! that man would drive him mad, always singing! But Liza—she had gone, and she would not wait for him. Perhaps already she had forgotten him and—oh, God! if they would only stop laughing, laughing—laughing.

"Did you see what Ferry has just finished?" A gentle voice fell soothingly on his tingling nerves, and he looked up to see a charming little basket of blue raffia held up for his inspection. He knew! She was one of those aides, and she was trying to get him to work. He did not want to work. He was tired; he had to think, to think and work things out. Now, if Liza would only wait—!

"Do you know Ferry?" continued the voice. "He has only one leg and one arm, you know. Don't you think he has done wonderfully with only one hand?"

Only one hand. At least he had two hands. Perhaps—!

Each day "She" stopped for a moment and had something to show him. Her voice was soft, her smile friendly, not too cheerful so as to jar, and she apparently was not going to make him work, so he did not mind just looking.
“You must walk over to the shop with me sometime, Tony, and see all the lovely things the boys are making,” she said; and one day he went. Everyone was busy doing something, all so contented and planning for tomorrow’s work.

The next day he went again, alone, and to all inquiries he said he was “just looking.” Still another day “She” asked him to help her sort some materials and he came across some sweetgrass. He smelled it and stroked it and told how he had made baskets and belts of it as a small boy. She really was very stupid! She could not seem to understand how he had braided and used it. He must show her! He did. Tony’s long days of idleness were over.

Slowly, with infinite pains, he braided yard upon yard of sweetgrass, and then he discovered an old wooden ink-well. Around and around this he wound the braid and studded it with the most precious of the supply of brass-headed tacks! It was a laborious task for the stiff fingers and tired brain, but it was done at last, and, with a smile, he held it up for “Her” to see. So surprised was “She” to see the smile that she almost forgot his work, and such a work of art!

"Why, Tony, you have finished it. How lovely!” (She often sent up little prayers for forgiveness for the many “white lies” she uttered.) But it was not finished yet. There must be a stand for it; then another layer, add another, until, finally, it was a three-storied pagoda, with it’s columns twined with braided grass, and the ink-well resting on top! It was a long journey from the writing pad to the ink! Every brass tack in the shop was shining in one’s eyes and any attempt at literary efforts would undoubtedly be dotted with murmurs of “rich-man, poor-man, beggar-man, thief, etc.” but Tony smiled every day now and time was all too short. Tomorrow he would paint it.

Tomorrow Tony had his operation, so surprisingly quickly had his wound cleared up. He must be in bed for several weeks, so without hurting his feelings, the “monstrosity” could be removed from the “Exhibition Table,” where Tony had placed it. He asked for it daily and was assured it was safe, but he longed to see his creation, so thereafter it monopolized his bedside table.
He gazed and gazed on it with pride, planned for his next piece of work and forgot his pain. Everyone stopped with a suppressed gasp to look, and ended by admiring, in answer to the pleading pleasure in his eyes.

“She” was a reconstruction aide, and a friend now. He called her “Miss.” He would do anything for her. Why, life was a different thing nowadays. What a fool he had been to waste all that time at first. All the boys were cheerful, and busy with weaving, leather work, basketry, studying, or something. But none had made an ink-well like his!

“Miss” had let him work out his own ideas; give expression to his creative faculties; find an outlet for his tumultuous thoughts. Thus hope was born anew; courage had replaced despair; incentive to effort was awakened, and each new day was anticipated and greeted with a smile. A miracle; worked by the constructing of a fantastic, ludicrous ink-well. A failure if viewed as craftmanship, but a triumph for occupational therapy.

“Miss” shuddered at the craft, but gave joyful thanks for the triumph. She decided that Tony must be educated in his artistic tastes.

“Well, Tony, how would like to do some of that nice tooled leather work when you can sit up?” she asked.

“No, Miss,” said Tony, smiling happily, “I’m going to make another ink-well just like mine—for you!”