

The Misericord

HOW A WOMAN SETTLED THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE RIGHT OF POSSESSION AND THE RIGHT OF LOVE

By William Merriam Rouse

MARGARET CRAGG stepped out upon the balcony that circled the living room, and smiled a greeting down upon Christopher Howland. He rose from the depths of a tapestried chair in front of the fire. In the soft glow of light her black hair was misty dusk and her eyes two stars. It was at this moment that Howland realized that she looked more beautiful to him than another man's wife should.

As she came down the spiral stairway, Lyman Cragg, her husband and Howland's host, entered from the library—tall, handsome, suave Lyman Cragg, antiquarian by avocation, and possessor of great inherited wealth. Mechanically Howland bowed to his hostess, and mechanically he took the hand of his host. The new idea had half stunned him, and he found himself replying to their greeting with sentences which, considering his intimate acquaintance with the Craggs, were banal.

"Why, Christopher!" exclaimed Margaret. "What's happened to you? You're as formal as an ambassador at a strange court!"

For the first time in his life Howland's soul was frightened. He did not dare to look into her eyes. He snapped his shoulders back.

Howland was an artist, but he looked more like an army man than a wielder of little brushes within doors. His exceedingly short hair and his capable jaw invariably brought a look of disappointment when new people learned who he was.

Just now Cragg helped him out of his rigidity with a laugh and a movement toward the fireplace that broke up the stiffness of the group.

"You've been working too hard," he said. "Isn't that it?"

"Quite likely. I worked as long as there was light."

"He's been in the fifteenth century," said Cragg, turning to his wife with a smile, "and he hasn't come out of it yet."

"Come back to New York now and play with us," pleaded Margaret. "Life is pleasanter, I think."

"It's much the same," murmured Howland, "with a different setting. The same loves and hates—the same struggles—"

"The same, certainly," agreed Cragg. "The moving forces are inevitably the same. That's why one is able to live with Tiglath-pileser in Assyria—with Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence—"

"Or with the Chevalier Bayard in France, where Christopher spends his days now!" cried Margaret Cragg.

Her eyes lighted with that swift enthusiasm for painting which had drawn her and Howland together at their first meeting. Cragg had a historical interest in the work of the artist. His wife saw the romance which Howland was trying to make live again upon canvas for a series of illustrations to be used in a *de luxe* edition of Bayard's life.

"What are you doing now?" she asked. "You know I'm following the chronicle with you."

"The duel with Don Alonzo de Sotomayor," replied Howland. "That's why I telephoned to ask if I might come to-night. I need a dagger, and I think Lyman has one of the right sort."

"Ah, yes, a duel!" Cragg became keen at the mention of something that touched his passion. "I think I have exactly what you want; but tell me about it. It's a long time since I read the joyous adventures of the Bayard."

"They fought on foot, with rapiers,"

said Howland. "Bayard delivered a blow that mortally wounded Sotomayor. The chronicle says that 'despite his good gorget, the rapier entered his throat four good fingerbreadths.' Then Sotomayor closed in and seized the Good Knight around the body. Bayard thrust his dagger into his enemy's nostrils and cried: 'Yield thee, Señor Alonzo, or thou diest!' It's a dagger that would be used under such circumstances that I want to see. Of course it must be the right thing."

"The misericord!" exclaimed Cragg. "A weapon with a thin and very sharp blade about fifteen inches long. It was named from its use, which was to end the suffering of a fallen enemy. It was for the thrust of mercy, the *coup de grâce*."

"Wasn't it rather a doubtful mercy?" asked Margaret. "It's hard to believe in death, and harder to believe that one human being can want to bring it to another."

"Death is a fact," said Cragg, with a shrug. "I can understand how a man may find it necessary for his own well-being to eliminate another for his own safety, let us say. But come, Howland! Those daggers—I have two of them, by the way—are in the library."

He walked quickly to the doorway and drew back the hangings for his wife to pass. Christopher Howland looked at him with a new interest. Howland liked this antithetical person, who was alternately club man and antiquarian, although he had never felt the closeness of friendship which might have developed with another man under similar circumstances. Perhaps it was because he had never been able to tell whether the possibility of real emotion lay under the well bred exterior of Lyman Cragg—an exterior so polished that at times it seemed to present a hard and unyielding surface.

In the library Cragg placed a chair for Margaret. She sat with a faint and delicate smile for Howland, her exquisite arms resting upon the dull mahogany of the big table that stood in the center of the room—a room which Christopher had first entered with a cry of delight.

Irregularly placed shelves held first editions, priceless and beautiful bindings, portfolios of etchings, Latin manuscripts illuminated hundreds of years before in the cloisters of the Middle Ages. A shirt of chain mail lay over the back of a chair, and did not seem to be out of place there. Steel of Toledo and Damascus—clay cylin-

ders with the cuneiform writing of Babylon—a great Bokhara rug that met the feet caressingly.

II

HOWLAND had become acquainted with the Craggs six months before, at a time when he needed to make a drawing of a piece of shoulder armor, the great *garde-bras*. Cragg possessed one of the finest pieces in the country, and a mutual friend at the Metropolitan Museum had given Howland a note of introduction. The painter found the antiquarian friendly, and willing even to let Howland take treasures away to his studio for intimate study. This had gone on all through the winter, and it was now spring.

A spring evening, with Lyman Cragg crossing his library to get a couple of fifteenth-century daggers, and Christopher Howland thinking that Margaret Cragg was as beautiful as a lyric read at twilight by a singing river, as fair as silver birches in the wind! He must stay away. He was unhappy and ashamed and confused.

Cragg returned, carrying two daggers. He put them down upon the table with the ring of true steel—blades keen of edge and sharp as to point. The hilts were rather heavy, of dull chased silver.

"The misericords," he said. "The one with the ring in the end of the hilt is attributed to Bayard; but I'm sure it could not have belonged to his period, because of the design."

Margaret Cragg picked up one of the daggers and Howland took the other. He turned it over, feeling the grip and its weight, and carelessly pressed the point against the sleeve of his dinner coat. It seemed to penetrate the fabric with a volition of its own, so keen was the steel.

A cry from Margaret snapped his head up. A little red line ran along her forearm, with red drops stealing from it. Howland sprang to his feet, trembling.

"You're hurt!" he cried. "Margaret—"

He checked himself, remembering; but for the span of a second she looked up into his face with eyes he had never seen before. It was as if he could see down into them, to unfathomable depths.

Cragg had turned from a cabinet at the other side of the room and was gazing at them. Suddenly Margaret went white, and leaned forward heavily against the edge of the table.

"Some brandy, Lyman!" said Howland sharply. "I think Mrs. Cragg's going to faint!"

"No!" She straightened up, and the color returned to her cheeks and lips. "How foolish of me! I'm not afraid of blood, and that little scratch is nothing. Lyman is afraid of germs, and he has everything disinfected."

She smiled, and wrapped her handkerchief around her arm. Cragg had crossed over to the table and was looking down at her thoughtfully.

"It's fortunate that I do take precautions," he said. "As it is, that scratch amounts to nothing; but I'm not sure that you are feeling quite yourself. Have you been in to see Dr. Langhorne lately?"

"Oh, yes!" She laughed. "I'm a thoroughly well person, Lyman; but I don't like your misericords. They're much too—effective!"

"They were intended to be," he replied dryly. He glanced at the clock, and turned to Howland with his invariably polite smile. "I shall have to keep that appointment that I mentioned when you telephoned, Christopher. I'm sorry; but it may mean that I'll get a piece of armor that you'll be interested in. Stay and amuse Margaret. Sketch the daggers, or take them with you, as you like. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

"Surely," exclaimed Howland. "And thanks again. You've saved me incalculable time this winter that I should have lost through red tape at the museum."

"It has been a pleasure, sir!"

III

Cragg bowed to his wife and to Christopher Howland, and left the room. Howland sat down and stared at the daggers. The library clock ticked louder and louder, it seemed. For the moment he did not trust himself to look at Margaret Cragg.

Ought he to have said that he must go when Cragg did? He hadn't thought of it in time; and Margaret would think it strange if he left now, suddenly. He was a little dazed. He must stay away from the house of Lyman Cragg hereafter. He had no right in their lives. The hurt was too new and swift to give its greatest pain now, but he dreaded the long future.

Minutes passed. What would she think of his downcast silence? He must look at her, and speak. He lifted his gaze from the daggers.

Her eyes were upon him. He thought they were brimming with tears. Perhaps she guessed, and pitied him. He gripped the arms of his chair and felt the muscles of his forearms swell. He experienced a certain satisfaction in thinking that he had not allowed himself to take on flesh, as Cragg had. Curious, how the mind worked!

He made an effort of will, and rose to his feet.

"I—must go." He found words difficult. "I must—"

Margaret Cragg was on her feet before him. The handkerchief dropped from her arm. She drew breath quickly, deeply, so that her shoulders rose and fell. The room dimmed and swayed to the eyes of Howland. She did guess, and he might as well tell her. It would help him, and it could not harm her, since she knew.

Yet this woman was another man's wife. He walked around the table until it was between them.

"Margaret!" he whispered. "Forgive me, but I—I love you! I'm going away!"

Her arms reached toward him across the table.

"I love you, too," she said.

With all the strength of a great desire he wanted to go around that table and take her in his arms. That was why he had put the table between them. Nevertheless, his own arms lifted, his hands met hers, and they stood looking into each other's eyes over the barrier.

"I didn't know," he said; "not until to-night."

"Nor I, until to-night!" She smiled, and the tears that had gathered in her eyes moved slowly down her cheeks. "When I hurt myself, it was you I wanted!"

"Margaret!" said Howland, tightening his grip upon her cool fingers. "Does he love you?"

"That's my question, too, Chris—does he love me?"

"You don't know?"

"I've never known. He's so utterly—correct! I don't know whether there's a real feeling underneath the surface or not. I've never known whether I was a wife or a convenience."

"There lies the answer to our riddle, Margaret."

"Yes!"

"If we crushed him to take our happiness, then our happiness would fail us. It wouldn't be there."

"It's because you can think that way that I love you, Chris. You are like one of your own pictures, my dear, my dear—the one of my Cid, the Campeador, receiving knighthood!"

"Margaret!" he cried. "You shame me. I'm only trying to play the game as well as I can—and not doing it."

"Ah, but you are! Now! At this moment you are! For, Christopher, if you were to come around this table and take me in your arms, I'd go with you to the other end of the world. We'd be sorry, but I'd go!"

"No, it's you, Margaret. You could draw me there, around the table, if you wanted to. God knows I'm standing with your strength as well as my own!"

After that there was silence between them for a long time, while they looked at each other, suffering, happy beyond words, torn by the claws of despair.

"What can we do, Chris?" she asked, at length.

"We are going to find out whether he loves you," answered Howland grimly. "If he doesn't, you belong to me, and I shall have you. If he does—"

"If he does," she repeated, "I shall keep my oath. I must keep it. I put my hand in his and promised."

"I'll find out!"

"How, Christopher?"

"I don't know, yet. Somehow the truth must appear—perhaps to you."

Slowly she shook her head.

"This is real life," she said. "If it were only a story—"

"If it were a story, either he or I would be despicable, and would break his neck in the last chapter."

"But there's no villain, Chris, in this tragedy!"

"I'll find out, somehow." He released her hands and began to pace the floor with quick strides. "I can't come here as I have, obviously. I must come only as a painter to an antiquarian. Or should I stay away altogether? Tell me, Margaret, am I mad?"

"You're not mad, Christopher," she said, sinking down into her chair. "Neither of us will help what has happened, and neither of us can help it now. Love can't be wiped out by a gesture; but we can act naturally, and wait, and play the game."

"You," said Howland, stopping and gazing down upon her, "are perfect!"

"Go home, Chris," she said softly. "We both need to be alone—to-night!"

IV

HOWLAND took her hand, pulled himself away, and left the room. He found his hat and stick, and went down into the cool spring night with the feeling that he was a dream man in a world of dreams—a fanciful distortion of himself, which would vanish presently and leave again the solid reality of Christopher Howland, able-bodied and prosperous painter, with short hair and a reasonably sane and well ordered life.

But the dream was the reality, and the past was the sleep from which he had awakened. Before dawn grayed the big windows of his studio, he knew that he had crossed the border into a new land.

Howland had never before been seriously in love. He had never experienced the love which seeks first of all to express itself in giving, which seeks at the expense of everything the well-being of the beloved. He had, of course, thought that some time he would care greatly about a woman, but it had never occurred to him that the woman would be the wife of another man—and of a man whose bread and salt he had eaten, and from whose courtesy he had received repeated favors.

Nothing had warned him that his great and increasing liking for Margaret Cragg was the beginning of love. If he had been more given to light love affairs, he would have known, and perhaps he would not have cared. He realized this bitterly in the long hours of the night.

Yet no depth of rage against fate could make him resolve to take the wife of Lyman Cragg, even if she were willing to be taken, without counting the cost to Cragg. Yes, he had liked Cragg; and whether or not the man was a piece of highly polished wood, without emotions, he certainly was not a villain.

That morning Howland did not work. He sat through the hours looking out into Gramercy Park, freshening to green again. His thoughts went in fruitless circles, like the strangers who walked around the outside of the iron fence that inclosed the park. He lunched alone in a restaurant, instead of going to his club; and when he came in he found that Lyman Cragg had called him by telephone.

There was nothing strange in this, in itself. Not infrequently, since he had been

working on the Bayard illustrations, Cragg had called to tell him of the acquisition of a piece of armor or a weapon of the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Nevertheless, Howland felt a thrill of uneasiness as he called the Cragg apartment.

"Ah, Howland!" came in the even tones of the antiquarian. "I see you didn't take either of the daggers with you last night. Did you make a sketch?"

"Why, no," admitted Howland, after a moment of hesitation. "I decided I could work from memory. Thank you very much, as usual."

"Not at all. I telephoned to-day to tell you that last night I brought home a basinet which I think you'd like to see. I'm making a special study of head armor just now, and this piece is undoubtedly of the type that Bayard and Sotomayor wore in their duel. Often a light headpiece and a gorget were the only defensive arms in those affairs. This must be returned to the owner to-night, but I'd be glad to have you come up now and look at it, if you care to."

Howland waited a moment before replying. More than anything else he wanted to remain away from the Cragg apartment to-day, while he tried to bring order out of the chaos of his mind; and yet Cragg would undoubtedly think it strange if he did not seize the opportunity to sketch this helmet.

"It's very good of you," he said, at length. "I'll come up right away, if I may."

"I'll expect you, then," replied Cragg. "Good-by!"

Christopher Howland shook himself mentally and physically. He told himself that he must get back to his daily life—that it was imagination alone that had found something peculiar in the tone of Lyman Cragg's voice. Certainly Cragg had spoken with his usual courtesy.

Howland took a Fifth Avenue bus, and rode on top, to let the reality of the spring sunshine sink into his mind. He wanted to believe that it was a good world.

When he arrived at the apartment, he was shown directly into the library. Ordinarily Cragg met him in the living room. To-day the antiquarian stood at one end of the long library table. The basinet lay before him, the two daggers were where they had been left the night before.

Howland advanced smiling into the room, and Cragg came forward to meet him, but he did not offer to shake hands, as usual.

Instead, he bowed gravely and pulled together the big doors behind the hangings between the library and living room.

"Sit down, please," he said quietly. "There is something more than the basinet—something which I did not care to mention in telephoning."

Howland sat down by the table, and waited in silence while Cragg drew up another chair opposite. Anything might be coming—trivial or tragic. For the first time the painter noted the color of Cragg's eyes. They were steel blue, like the blades of the misericords.

"Howland," he said, leaning slightly forward, "I don't wish to be at all dramatic, but I've discovered that my wife is in love with you."

For the moment Christopher Howland was paralyzed. When his mind functioned again, its first coherent thought was for the protection of Margaret.

"Will you believe me when I say that you have no cause whatever for complaint against your wife?"

"Last night," said Cragg, "I saw you look at each other when she pricked her wrist, and I knew then that you were in love with each other, or thought you were. I had suspected for some time that you would fall in love with Mrs. Cragg, but I considered it none of my business. That she fancies herself in love with you is my business. However, I did not send for you to discuss my affairs. I sent for you to tell you that you must eliminate yourself."

"'Must' is a strong word, Cragg!"

"I used it advisedly, sir."

Howland was growing angry, but he realized that his wrath was nothing compared to the fury which kindled that blue light in the eyes of the other man. It was like the blue flame of a Bunsen burner—a heat to melt and fuse glass. This was the man whom he had called wooden in his thoughts!

"I am not sure, Cragg, that you have the right to command."

"*Jus possessionis!*" exclaimed the antiquarian, in a low and intense voice. "*Jus retentionis!*" Those two rights are so fundamental that they are as clearly recognized now as they were under the ancient Roman law. They follow from the *justum matrimonium*."

"The right to possess and to retain come from love," said Howland slowly. "If you love Margaret, you will keep her, without

hindrance from me. If you don't, you will lose her. That is the whole truth!"

"Howland," said Cragg, "for the last time I tell you that the right is mine, and I shall enforce it!"

"And I tell you that you are rapidly convincing me that you do not love your wife. I'll be quite frank. This morning I feared you did; this afternoon I begin to hope that you don't."

Lyman Cragg stood up, and rested his knotted fists upon the table. He trembled with the effort by which he held himself to a semblance of self-control.

"Will you drop out?" he growled. "Or won't you?"

Howland rose and faced Cragg. He wanted to end the interview, but he had no intention of ending it by giving the promise that Cragg demanded. He hated the man now.

"Will you assure me that you are suffering from something more than smashed vanity?"

The sentence was like a spark in a powder magazine. Cragg vaulted over the table, and, as he did so, caught up one of the daggers with his free hand. The instant his feet touched the floor he drove the point at Howland's neck.

The attack was so swift, so unexpected, that the blade slit the shoulder of Howland's coat as he dodged. His hand reached for the other weapon instinctively, and he leaped away from the table armed. The face of Lyman Cragg told him that he would have to fight for his life.

V

CRAGG caught himself and steadied. His lips were pressed to a thin line. He shifted his grip upon the misericord, held it as if it were a rapier, and advanced with the light step of a boxer.

Howland retreated and took a fencing position. The weapon was utterly strange to him. He faced a man twenty pounds heavier than himself, taller, and with a longer reach; but he was hard, he had good wind, and he was quite cool now. There was no longer any chance to escape. He must kill, be killed, or tire out his antagonist. It was this last that he wished to do.

Lyman Cragg feinted and thrust. The blow was high, at the throat. Howland parried it, but his antagonist's weight and strength carried the point to within a hand's breadth of his flesh before it turned aside.

The hilts of the daggers locked. Cragg recovered. In the heat of that tense moment Howland swept his arm forward as his weapon was disengaged, and brushed Cragg's side. He came back to position before Cragg could attack again. Then the big man began to move warily around him, breathing a little hard, but trying to save his strength and wind.

Both of them had been near death in that brief engagement, and Christopher Howland had learned that he might find himself the slayer of Lyman Cragg without intent. The thrust at Cragg's side had been instinctive, an automatic reaction to the point that had almost touched his throat. He did not want the battle to end in death; and so he began to dance in and out, thrusting, engaging Cragg's blade, disengaging, and retreating, in a great effort to tire the big man, to reduce him to helplessness.

Howland knew that he himself had plenty of endurance for such a contest. The breathing of Cragg had told him that after the first clash.

Cragg pressed him hard at intervals. He drove forward at unexpected moments in bull-like rushes, which bore Howland back and back until sometimes he fought swiftly and desperately, with his shoulders almost touching a wall, and with a question in his heart as to whether this were not the end. Each time, however, his own good condition told. When Cragg seemed on the point of breaking down his guard by sheer weight, the attacker's wind would fail, and he would be forced to draw off temporarily. Then Howland worried him as a dog worries a bear.

Neither went unscathed. Howland's left sleeve was slashed from wrist to elbow, and red drops trickled down over his hand. Once Cragg had pressed so hard that only a thrust at the face had kept him from bearing Howland back over a chair. The point had drawn a line across his cheek.

The smart of that wound spurred Cragg momentarily to greater effort, and then left him panting. Howland realized that he was preparing to risk everything in an attempt to finish it. He also knew that if Cragg failed in this final attempt, he would collapse.

Howland moved out into the center of the room. Then the attack came—a whirlwind of reckless jabs and thrusts that drove him steadily backward. Suddenly he felt the edge of the table pressing against his

hips. Cragg's point was sweeping toward him. He could not get away, and so he closed. He flung himself inside the blow, dropped his dagger, and caught Cragg's arm. They spun around, locked together, and fell over upon the table as they struggled for the weapon in Cragg's hand.

Howland heard a sound in the room, but the whole volume of his strength and will was concentrated upon bending backward the arm that held that long and gleaming blade. Slowly it yielded. He ground his elbow into Cragg's neck.

Then, before the gaze that Howland had fixed upon the dagger, the hands of Margaret Cragg reached down. They closed upon the fist of Lyman Cragg. Howland twisted with all the power that was in him. A long moment; then the grip relaxed, and Margaret took the silver-hilted dagger in her own hands.

Howland released Cragg, stumbled to one knee, snapped to his feet, and stood facing Margaret. Cragg pulled himself up and leaned upon the table heavily, panting.

VI

It seemed to Howland that Margaret Cragg was beautiful with a new and unearthly kind of beauty. There was a strange radiance in her face as she looked at them. She seemed detached, calm, aloof, glorified, wholly transcendent to the murderous battle she had interrupted. It was as if she were looking down upon them from the gold bar of heaven.

"You need not fight," she said, in a voice as gentle as flowing water. "It is settled for all of us."

"Settled?" Cragg got the word out with difficulty. He pulled at his collar. "What do you mean?"

"That you don't need this!" She tossed

the dagger away and laughed softly. A sob caught in the laugh and broke it. "The—the misericord of the gods—has settled it!"

"Are you mad?" barked Cragg.

"Margaret!" cried Howland. "What has happened?"

"Dr. Langhorne examined me a week ago, and to-day he has told me that I have tuberculosis of the lungs."

The silence lasted until it became unendurable. Through that seeming eternity the face of Margaret Cragg did not change, did not lose its faintly smiling bravery, its triumphant detachment from all things human. It was Cragg who ripped a word into the dead stillness that lay upon them like a pall.

"*Tuberculosis!*" he whispered hoarsely.

Margaret made a movement swift as light, and stood in front of him.

"Kiss me, Lyman!" she said.

She held her lips up to him. He recoiled as from naked steel, caught himself, and leaned forward to kiss her upon the forehead. In that instant she drifted out of his reach and turned to Howland.

"Kiss me, Christopher!" she breathed.

His arms leaped out and clasped her. He pressed his lips upon hers with a stifled cry of thanksgiving. The thirst of his spirit was quenched.

She put his arms away, but her hand remained in his as she turned to Lyman Cragg.

"You will divorce me, Lyman," she said. "I shall fight it out in the mountains. Good-by!"

"*We will fight it out in the mountains!*" corrected Howland, as he led her from the room.

In the doorway he turned and looked back. Cragg was still leaning upon the table, following them with his eyes.

"*Jus amoris!*" murmured Howland.

MOONRISE

THE moon there on the hills—no moon so young
 Hath ever danced before the throne of night.
 Oh, thrilling maid! Oh, crystal innocence!
 Oh, virgin soul of light,
 Making of sight a sanctuary! Whence,
 From what deep wells of wonder, art thou sprung?
 What mystic effluence
 Floods thy frail crescent thus with brimming pearl,
 Thou wild rose of the sky,
 Thou silver-diademed girl!

Oliver C. Moore