

CLASSICAL PORTRAIT

By RALPH GUSTAFSON

OVER the door, the clock apathetically jerked the minutes into oblivion. The hand had circled unnoticed by the woman on her knees. Her back pained from the sweep of her shoulders with the brush; despite the soggy rag moved under them as she progressed, her knees were numb with their ache. Each time she rose to change the water in the pail short gasps of distress escaped her. She knew it was late by the hurt in her body, by the slowness with which she now covered the area of floor. The room was divided by the long rays from the window into light and shadow, and for an hour her objective had been the edge of the slant of sun.

A few minutes, she kept thinking, and she would reach the sun. It was not far from the wall's base which meant the end of labor.

Imperceptibly the lengthening rays withdrew from her approach; the edge of light, from the dark curves of wet which the woman's scrubbing-brush made before her knees. She knew her calculation was false. She knew by the sun's advance past the smudges of the wooden floor. But it beggared distance. Suddenly, the wall's base would be there.

She paused for a moment; raised herself upright. With the back of her hand she lifted the strand of hair from her face, loosened the coarse apron from under each knee, then sat back on the calves of her legs. Noon when she had left Depot Street seemed far away—the hours a confusion of physical effort and hurt and memory and desolation. True, the gentleman had returned for his glasses but she had paused only long enough to look up, hesitating to interrupt work before him, and he had not spoken to her.

She wrung out the cloth in the pail at her side, laying it along the rim; wiped her hands on her apron. Though their red flesh had swollen into wrinkles, the fingers and joints remained hard.

She gazed round. Under the wall fitted with shelves for the bolts of cloth, were the cutting-tables which she was just able to shift. The dirtiest part of the floor was always beside them. Dully, she wondered why—why she moved the tables. The marks under the legs weren't seen. At the end of the room were the windows overlooking the street. Muffled, the noise of the traffic reached her ears. The faint surprise that it was there, came to her. She looked at the clock. The minute-

hand jerked abruptly audible. She watched until it jerked again. The silence between, weighed with the weight of a whole day . . .

The impulse to rise, gaze at the people in the street, touched her. But she held back. A minute was worth three cents. Fifteen minutes saved, made it three and a half. Eddie had worked out on paper for her what happened, when she hurried. But it was her body, with rising, she really thought of. Adjusting her knees on the cloth beneath, she leaned forward. Dipping the brush in the pail of water she rubbed it with the oblong of yellow soap. The lather came thinly with the lukewarm water. But it would do, for the space that remained.

Nothing was heard in the large room but the stiff swish of the brush, the grinding of the pail along the floor as the woman moved to a new position. The silence settled back into its dilapidation. Here the cutters to the tailor below stairs worked—the room's vanished habitants like figures lost from some misty legend of Yggdrasil, cutting, unendingly round their paper patterns, the geometries of men; the thread in the hands of the women who sewed, unceasingly subtracted. Sound never came—the metallic shears hushed by the stuff in their blades, with the remnants the mouths of the waste-baskets gagged, the framework mannequins in the corner mute on their rubber wheels.

Five-thirty and the woman had washed through the edge on sunlight on the floor. She cautiously straightened her back. Looked from one side of the floor to the other as if it would take pity and relent. She sat back staring blankly where the boards and sun sucked away the edge of wet. The advance she had made became supper to get. Supper for three. What she herself ate, the days she spent out, counted little. Three men—though Myron was really still a boy. Sometimes he still saw that the used dishes on the table didn't end a meal . . .

She bent over to her scrubbing, half realizing that only at the ends of days, of the afternoons when she was alone, did her memory come to time into which they were born. Hurriedly she would make her mind think of Myron, of the good things only that would be his when he was grown. Myron was young yet. But her thoughts swung away, going to Eddie, her mind drawn as though the directions of all their lives must rest there, with her elder son, her eyes filling with bewilderment at the hope and worry and release that came confused, aroused by him whom she had cared for so long and loved. It was Eddie,

always, in the end, her heart drove to, troubled, trembling for the hatred in him, for the terror of the stillness that even as a child he had kept in him, keeping by himself until he was fallen back from, not uttering a sound when his father thrashed him. He was a handsome boy—as his father had been, before the children came. It was shame that was inside Eddie. Not a badness. But Myron was a gentle boy, impressionable, needing love. It was bad for Myron. He minded Eddie almost more than her now. Floorwasher, Eddie named her, in front of his brother, and she would turn away, her love an agony knowing that the hurt in Myron's eyes turning to her must mend itself. And then, remembering, watching Myron's eyes on his brother, her heart would leap with the stab of gladness in her breast at his admiration and that he would know the lie about meekness and know that she washed floors, floors that others walked on.

The brush went dead—her weight on her arm to the floor—the shock of the consciousness of her wish like a blasphemy in her. Terrified, her heart reached out, taking her son to her, Myron, holding him as if from the evil of the wish that had been her thought, keeping him in the image of her love unchanged. It was only when she was afraid—that she thought evil. When she was tired. Even Eddie had never wanted the hatred that was in him . . . She mustn't let herself be tired . . . Her hand released the brush, the back of the palm going across above her eyes, as though to clear their vision; lifting back the strand of hair. Then her arm returned to the floor, the brush continuing its sweep.

If George would only help. He didn't think when he got home and talked in front of his sons. Always rooting into some hole in the house dragging out dirt and taking it to God Almighty on Sunday or doing the damned dishes . . . Eddie sitting watching his father, his curled lip the only sign that he heard. It hurt George with Eddie. And Myron frightened. It did harm to Myron and Eddie to hear their father. They didn't understand . . . how George's words against her were his only way to blame himself. They didn't understand love, the terror of love . . .

The woman paused, sitting back on her haunches, the brush left on the floor, her mind carrying back from the hurt . . . beyond Myron, beyond Eddie . . . to what had been happiness, to the time when she and George had married—knowing, as she'd known each day that passed, how ugliness and bitterness

were cheated. The dresses she'd worn had been fresh and gay. She had worn them for him. And tiredness had been fooled and became a proudness, and she was eager and could love George as he wanted. And nothing of it all had anything to do with years—even though they *were* young then and wonder a thing that could never cease—only being in love and left free to love. And George had laughed, and seeing her tears, did not despise himself. She could hear George's laugh now. And they had been jealous and the colour of it was incredible green . . .

The fingers went to her face, capturing the reality of the dream, forgetful of the darkness beneath her eyes, the tiny marks that enclosed her lips—the eyes lighting with a happiness that filled the moments and the silence and the room where she knelt alone. She raised her hands to her hair, rearranging its contour, her head turned reviewing the colors of the bolts of cloth on the shelves. Then she remembered the newly-tailored coat on the model in the corner. Her arms still raised, she looked toward the hallway door—then rose heavily to her feet. She halted as the pain drove through her, then moved toward the far corner, drying her hands on the lifted apron.

She stopped before the coat on the model. It was of blue serge, cut at the sides without breaks, single-breasted, the lapels cut high—as yet, only basted into shape. She felt the material, then turned the model about on its iron leg. Lovely! It was really handsome. She considered a moment more. She might add lace, the neck-line was severe, needing relief—but not too plain perhaps. The blouse she had kept—in the tissue in the second bureau drawer—that she had got for Jennifer's wedding—would go perfectly. A mirror stood behind the model. She opened first one of the leaves, then the other. A flush came on her cheeks as she stepped back, and she felt her hands tremble. She laughed, stared at the model, then laughed again, lost in the recollection. She'd looked for all the world in the picture just like it—though she *had* had too legs—and couldn't then stand still until the photographer really got mad and told them to take it themselves . . .

She moved back to the model, examining the basting. But the coat really couldn't be removed from place without risk of harm, to try on. It would be a shame. She turned the front to the mirror.

Placing herself behind the coat on the model, she peered over its shoulder at the reflection in the glass. For a minute unseeing the woman gazed at the figures framed in the tall

leaves—then quickly turned away.

The sun had disappeared and a grey dusk filtered through the room when the woman rose. She stood looking at the cleanness around her as though powerless to move. Traffic thrusted in the street below. Then she bent for the cloth rolled round the brush and soap; lifted the pail spread with the rag . . .

The things placed in the closet, she reached down her suit-coat from the hook, replacing it with her apron. She put on the coat, fastening the pin closely under her chin; affixed her hat and gathered up her parcels.

Outside, the weather struck raw with the wet of the days that had been milder—the sky dim with a spreading of cloud that would be snow in the night. She threaded her way through the crowd of pedestrians to the corner, then halted at the curb until she might cross. The damp pressed through the layer of the leather of her boots and each second it seemed she must let the parcels drop—the tiredness seizing her as if to take her whole being—tiredness of memories, of the years, of faces.

Suddenly, tomorrow did not belong to her life. She stared at the street frightened. Quietly, with the despair, the words, Eddie's words, *the bastards*, drove through her, the moment a flame of terror in her, then gone, leaving her, as she waited, with the knowledge of that terror of belief.

The traffic-lights changed. Blindly, as though without life, she moved forward in the stream of people.