THE SILVERSMITH

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I

The child was born unto a silversmith, born son and grandson both of silversmiths in the small room behind the dusty shop.

The old man stopped his pounding on his bench, his son turned down the fiercely blasting fire when the child was born. But when he breathed, cried and howled, they worked again, as they had done all morning — and as they had done for years before, the old man and his son: silver sculptors, bracelet makers, fashioners of all small articles from gleaming blocks. Now they were glad; not for two hundred years had the house lacked a son, and once again it was not disappointed.

“He is strong and stout, and hale,” they said. “He’ll do good work.” the old man said. “Not for a little while,” the father laughed — a goodly man himself, who looked as though he should have been the other sort of smith, to work the sturdier stuff. A man of brown was he, with waved brown hair in restless locks, smiling with brown eyes from a brown face. His hands knew well the touch of steel tools, both of the clanging hammer and the subtle file. His hands were long and broad—to grasp a virgin block of gleaming silver, hold the wedge, and trace designs, or cut the pattern out. He was a workman when he raised his sledge to shape the shining sheet, or drive a rivet fast. But artistry enough was his when, bent to see more clearly, he would mould a tiny rose or set in motion miniature ladies dancing daintily a silver dance.

And now he straightened, first a father, then a smith, and cleft in two a shining sheet of purest silver, and precisely made a tiny ribbon, round of edge, and with a sheen that sparkled with reflection from his fire.
"A bracelet!" he exclaimed, and laughed aloud,  
"The lad's first introduction to his trade!"
and laid the tiny circlet on the bench.

And then his father, grandsire of the child  
just born, an old man silver as his art,  
took pains to fashion out a tiny cross  
and to the bracelet welded it secure,  
and polished once again the tiny ring,  
in order that the introduction of  
the future workman to his noble trade  
should be its very finest sort of product.

II

The boy held fast the silver to the bench  
and, hands white-knuckled, traced a simple figure,  
working while the years filled out his youth,  
steadied his hand, and sharpened his brown eyes.  
He sank at work, while nearby stood his father,  
watching the light brown curly head bent low,  
watching a fine hand, finer than his own,  
work carefully; he saw a little box  
take silver form, and saw a little joking  
pattern on the top take form — take startling  
form, if once you viewed it carefully.

But when the singing stopped, the childish voice,  
and irritated muttering replaced it,  
tw-as then alone the father interfered.  
He walked at times like these across the shop,  
to where the boy was working at his bench—  
a new-made bench, already bearing scars  
from fire and tool, and holding several bracelets,  
and not a few good boxes. He would see  
his son dejected, staring at a ruined piece.  
"Ruined?" he would echo, "Why, my boy,  
you've barely scratched it. Cut the groove  
a bit more deeply now, and file it so."
"But that's not how I wanted it at all."
"No difference: who buys it will not know."
"But I know!" cried the lad, and bit his lip.  
"Still you must finish it," his father said,  
and sometimes there would come into his voice  
a silver ring of coldness, and an edge  
of hardened steel to cut and chill the boy,
who slowly, silently returned to work.  
But then there came the day — a ruined piece,  
a tool thrown to the floor with young impatience,  
"I cannot finish this one, father. Cut it down  
for trim." The father brushed aside some tools  
and sat upon the bench. "My boy," he said,  
I understand; you want to do good work;  
I've always tried, as my own father has.  
But silver costs us more and more each day —  
we must not waste, but work with what we have."

"It's cheating when you do a thing you didn't  
start and didn't mean to do. This notch,  
see how it crowds and cut the band? I can't  
file down the band that way — it won't look right.  
It was my own design!" and shook his head.  
The father, sighing, took the piece and strode  
across the shop toward the oldest bench.  
The silver grand sire worked no longer standing,  
but sat upon a stool, and watched the boy,  
and smiled with pride, took the rejected piece,  
and, shear in hand, cut out some bands for trim.  
"The boy is conscientious," he observed.  

III  
"But, father, I just can't! It's hideous!"  
He frowned and squirmed and wrinkled up his nose.  
"But that's the way he wants it, son. I know  
he'll wear it at the court and show it off.  
And he himself conceived the whole design.  
I know he'll like your work, so do it well.  
Of course if you can't make the little flowers,  
or carve the inlay for the circle" — now the father  
taunted sharply, and the boy was hurt.  
"But I can make them, father, just the way  
he wants them. Why, you know I can.  
But why don't you do this one, just this once?  
or let grandfather do it? I — I've a box  
to do, and necklaces, and other things, and —  
I just won't make anything that ugly!"  
"Do you know how much he will pay for this?"  
He told the boy, and brown eyes opened wide.  
"But—that's more than we ever had before  
for just one piece, or two, or even three!"  
"A wealthy man, my son, will pay good prices.  
You must do this one for him, for you make  
the flowers better, and the inlay smoother  
than can I . . . Grandfather's eyes no longer . . ."

"Father!" came out in a little gasp,  
"I, make better flowers? You are teasing—"

— 16 —
And then he saw the look of tired years
and pride and envy in his father's eyes;
remembered days of lessons, grinding, filing,
polishing until his hands grew stiff—
each day, implanted in the deep brown eyes—
and knowing he had seen that look before
he was engulfed with pride and love and shame,
and mutely worked and made the hideous thing.

It sat ornate and gaudy on his bench;
the rich man came and raved and highly praised,
and paid. So when the boy returned, there sat
a little bag of gold. It really was
a very little bag, but it was gold.
The boy looked at his father silently,
and at his silver grandsire, who pretended
not to watch him carefully. He then
took one bright yellow piece from all the rest —
"To buy again the silver I have used—"
and set the gold upon his father's bench.
"Three pieces for your labor, son," his father
offered his brown hand. The curly head
shook slowly, and the young voice was manly
when he answered, "No, not my work, father."

IV
He wore it on a thong around his neck—
a tiny bracelet for a baby arm.
He knew his father made it, that his grandsire
made the cross, and so he loved it more.
And when there came the day that son and father
lifted the oldest bench, and carried it away,
and moved the little cabinet in its place,
and hid from one another manly tears,
the boy alone worked late into the night,
and fell asleep at dawn before his bench.
So when the dead man in his coffin lay,
there lay a silver band on silver locks,
a sort of crown, with thread-like tracery
that mingled in itself like wisps of smoke,
and formed a graceful outline in the front
around the ornament upon the brow.
The decoration was a simple silver cross.
The grieving father, going late that day
to the small room behind the dusty shop
in which his father lay, beheld amazed
the bright reflection from the setting sun,
a brilliant splendor from the fire of heaven,
the peaceful face surmounted by the crown—and
since he was a simple, pious man,
he wept, and kneeling prayed beside the coffin.
And it was with regret he realized
the crown was justly not his own reward,
but both reward and product of his son;
and he believed the old man understood, and would
prefer that it be so, for it had been
the boy's grandsire, with patience born of years,
who taught the learning lad the special art
of making perfect crosses out of silver.

V

The young man's light brown locks were darker, and
the dark ones of the father now were silver,
when the king asked for a pair of silver cups.
The father never fashioned for the king,
nor had his father ever wrought for royalty;
but shining fame attended his son's work
and had been spread abroad considerably.

(Some years ago, a petty earl in court
had worn a brooch, whose poor design he boasted,
fashioned by an unknown beardless lad;
the king had long ago worn dull his fancy
over brooches and such regal trinkets,
but had observed with care the tiny flowers,
and noted with amaze the inlaid circle,
and swore it was the best of workmanship.
He vowed that when the boy was older, when
he knew his trade a little more completely,
that he, the king, would render him the honor
of working out a pair of cups in silver).

The fearful father gave instructions to his son,
and said the cups were for a nobleman
who would remain unknown, but must be pleased.
He did no work himself for many months,
but loitered, restless, idling round the shop,
trying vainly to divert his eyes
from the artist working slowly at his bench,
and the ever-growing cups, assuming form,
a wondrous form, if once you viewed them closely. 
A sort of beauty struck him like a fist 
and rendered him a little bit afraid, 
and yet the cups had hardly been begun.

The son had some intentions of his own 
concerning line, and form, and such affairs, 
and worked extremely slowly for perfection. 
There soon were two plain cups, bare of design, 
which stood together on the bench by night, 
and grew together on the bench by day, 
and filled the father's soul with calm delight. 
His own work seemed to him to be 
the tragic triflings of a palsied hand 
or meddlings of an amateur or novice 
beside the ever-growing pair of goblets, 
and yet the cups were not half-way completed.

The son had some intentions of his own 
concerning tracery, and slightly raised design, 
and gracefulness of trim, and so worked slowly. 
The cups began to live, and breathe, as though 
the artist granted to them silver souls 
and had imbued them with a spark of life. 
The night before the final firing process 
the father for the first time let himself 
examine closely both the cups, and saw 
the beauty of finality to come, 
and yet the cups were not completely finished.

VI

Two silver cups sat on the bench—summation 
of all the art and skill of generations. 
The design they bore was somewhat similar 
to that one which the family always used, 
except for one detail the son had added: 
the side of each cup bore a silver cross, 
a silver gleam of bright simplicity.

And then there came the most unwelcome task 
of telling to the son who made the cups 
by whom they had been ordered months before. 
Before the father did so, he remembered 
many years before, a curly head 
which shook defiantly, a single piece
of gold upon a little new-scarred bench —
a notch filed down too deep — a band too narrow—
and wondered at the nature of his son.
He walked to where his son was standing silent,
gazing at the cups, and started speaking.
"Now I must tell you who the cups are for:"
His eyes still on the cups, the son replied,
"It makes no difference who the buyer is;
I don't intend to sell them. They're the best
I've ever done, and I must keep them here.
I'll make some others for your noble person;
it won't take long, and he shan't mind the wait."
"The time is over, though, and these must go."
"But I must keep them—would I sell my soul?"
"For your own good, your father must command."
"And I for my own pride cannot obey."
"You have no choice: they're for the king, my son."

The silence followed deathly and unbroken,
until the son spoke soft, "If I refuse?"
"The king nor me may you refuse, my boy."
His son spoke coldly: "These will go to him—?"
"Tonight," the father said, and turned away.

The bearer of the cups returned in haste
and brought a letter with a heavy seal:
the king's approval, and requests for several
pieces—and a pension for the father.
The old man sat upon the bench and sighed;
and turned toward his son, who stood before
the door, and glared forbiddingly at space.
And it was only then he saw the streaks
of silver in the other's curly hair:
a family sign of true accomplishment
which rested prematurety on the son;
but newly as the fame his work had brought
now rested in his name, so in his eye
there glowed a dull resentful gleam of steel.