

A Good Woman—A One-Act Problem Play

by George Middleton

(Copyright by the Author.)

PERSONS IN THE PLAY.

Hal Merritt A Writer.
Cora Warren The Woman.
Time The Present.

SCENE: At Cora Warren's flat. A large city in New York State. Late one Winter evening.
A small room in what is a modest but comfortable flat, up several flights of stairs. A snow-lined window may be seen at the right through the pretty lace curtains. The furnishings are simple but adequate; wicker chairs, a couch, a small table, carefully selected pictures, some book shelves, and a large warm rug upon the hardwood floor are conspicuous. A house telephone is on the left wall near the door. There is something seclusive, personal and intimate about the little room, softly lighted by several shaded wicker-lamps which blend in color with the one-toned patternless wall-paper.

Outside the wind is heard howling as it drives the snow and sleet against the window. After some moments a bell is heard. Cora Warren enters quickly and opens the outer door, admitting Hal Merritt. She closes the door and kisses him.

Cora Warren is a woman of thirty, full of rich feeling, sensitive, impulsive, yet with clear-visioned and courageous. There is every mark of refinement, culture and distinction in speech, with nothing exotic or abnormal in her manner. She is in a pretty negligee.

Hal Merritt is older, beginning to settle, in fact, but full of mental and physical vigor, in spite of features which, when relaxed, betray a certain careworn expression. He, too, is evidently well-born and has had, no doubt, many advantages. His heavy overcoat, rubbers and soft felt hat are wet with the snow.

CORA—I'm so glad you've come. Why, you're all wet.
HAL (taking off his overcoat)—I walked uptown.
CORA (playfully admonishing him throughout)—In this storm? And you knew I was waiting?

HAL—You are always waiting.

CORA—You'll get your death, dear. Give me the coat. I'll hang it over a chair before the gas stove. And your feet—my—my! Soaked?

HAL—No, rubbers.

CORA—So you did mind me and wear them.

HAL—Yes.

CORA—You must take more care of yourself. What would I do if you were ill? You should have ridden.

HAL—It clears your thoughts to walk with the snow beating in your face.

CORA (detecting a hidden meaning)—Hal?

HAL—It's good to be here with you again, Cora.

CORA (cheerfully again)—Yes; it's been so long since yesterday. (They laugh.) Now sit down and rest. I've a hot toddy all ready for you.

HAL—Just what I wanted.

CORA—Here's your pipe—old and strong as ever. Did you forget the tobacco?

HAL—No. (Taking the pipe.) You always make it seem like home, dearest.

CORA (hurt)—"Seem?"

HAL (holding her hand during a slight pause)—You know what I mean.

CORA (as she strikes a match and lights the pipe which he has filled)—How worn and tired you are, dear. I'll be glad when the lawsuit is over. Just relax. Let go. (She kisses him.) Dearest. (Cora takes up the coat and rubbers, going out quickly in back. Hal stops smoking, the smile disappears and his head lowers, as he seems overcome with the mood he has been trying to fight back. Cora comes in unobserved with the toddy. She looks at him, shakes her head and then comes, placing her hand on his arm. He starts up from his reverie.) What is it, Hal?

HAL—Nothing.

CORA (not believing him)—Take this, dear.

HAL—Thanks. (He sips it.) Um! It's hot.

CORA—Just the right amount of sugar, too. (Cora watches him questioningly as he sips it slowly. She picks up a couple of sofa cushions and comes over to him, placing them by him on the floor. She sits on them, waiting for him to speak.)

CORA—Something's worrying you.

HAL—Something did; but it's all settled now.

CORA—I'm glad it's settled; only I should like to have helped settle it.

HAL—Cora?

CORA (she turns and looks up into his face)—Yes?

HAL—I wonder how great a test your love for me would stand?

CORA—Could I have given more?

HAL—There is something more I must ask.

CORA (puzzled)—Something more? Tell me, Hal.

HAL (holding her head between his hands)—Is your love strong enough to accept a silence?

CORA—Aren't there silent places in every love?

HAL (with some slight hesitation)—I mean it—if I should do something which I thought best not to explain.

CORA (simply)—I should accept everything so long as you were honest with me. Only—

HAL—Only what, dear?

CORA (thoughtfully)—Silence itself is not always honest.

HAL—In this particular matter will you let me be the judge of that?

CORA—A woman in my position must accept.

HAL—Cora!

CORA (quickly)—Oh, I didn't mean that, Hal; that was unworthy of me.

HAL—You know how I love you.

CORA—Yes, yes, dear. Of course I know. I am ashamed of nothing. I'm proud of all we have here in the quiet. But the snow beating against the windows has been reminding me all day of the world outside.

HAL—The snow is so free!

CORA—Yes; and you and I are bound by secrecy. That's what hurts; the secrecy.

HAL (stroking her hair)—If you could only be my wife.

CORA (smiling)—Just for the freedom it would give me to share everything in the open with you. That's all. Just for the freedom we can't have now.

HAL—But, Cora, even in marriage itself only the happy are free.

CORA (imitating a hidden thought)—I suppose the most difficult thing for some people is to give freedom. (He nods in understanding.) Poor Hal! How you have suffered, too, with this tangle we are in. (The phone rings. They are surprised.) Who could that be?

HAL (nervously)—No one knows your number?

CORA—No.

HAL (dismissing it)—Central's made a mistake. Don't answer it.

CORA—Tell me about the case. Is "Boss" McQuinn still going to take his libel suit into court?

HAL—It's called for to-morrow at ten.

CORA (pleased)—To-morrow! It's come at last, then, after all your months of work. To-morrow.

(With a sigh.) And I can't be there in court to hear you when you testify, or to follow in the open each step we've talked over here. That's where my position hurts.

HAL (with apparent difficulty through out)—Perhaps I shan't take the stand against McQuinn, after all.

CORA—You mean it won't be necessary?

HAL—Not exactly that.

CORA—But what you wrote about McQuinn in the Monthly—?

HAL—Every word of my exposure was true.

CORA—But you've said so often the whole defense of the magazine in McQuinn's suit against it rests on your testimony alone.

HAL—Yes, yes.

CORA (disappointed)—I see. You mean the Monthly has decided to retract?

HAL—No.

CORA (not quite grasping the significance)—Is this why you walked with the snow beating in your face?

HAL (with feeling)—This is the silent place! I'm not going to testify in this suit, after all. Please don't question me about it, dear.

CORA (restraining her instinctive impulse to question and placing her hands on his shoulders)—Whatever is the reason, I know you must have suffered. It is not like you to give up. (He lowers his eyes.) You've never asked anything greater of me than this silence.

HAL (deeply moved)—Perhaps I've never given anything greater, Cora.

(The phone rings again; they look toward it.)

CORA (slowly)—Did you give our number to any one?

HAL (nervously)—No.

CORA—Nobody ever rings here but you. (She goes apprehensively to the phone in spite of his movement to restrain her.)—Yes, this is Cora Warren. . . . Who? . . . Mr. McQuinn! (They look at each other. She quickly controls herself and speaks casually.) Mr. Merritt? You're mistaken—why should he be here? . . . There's no need of ringing me up later. (She hangs up the receiver.) He laughed, Hal. He laughed! (She goes to him.) He has found out about you and me!

HAL—No, no.

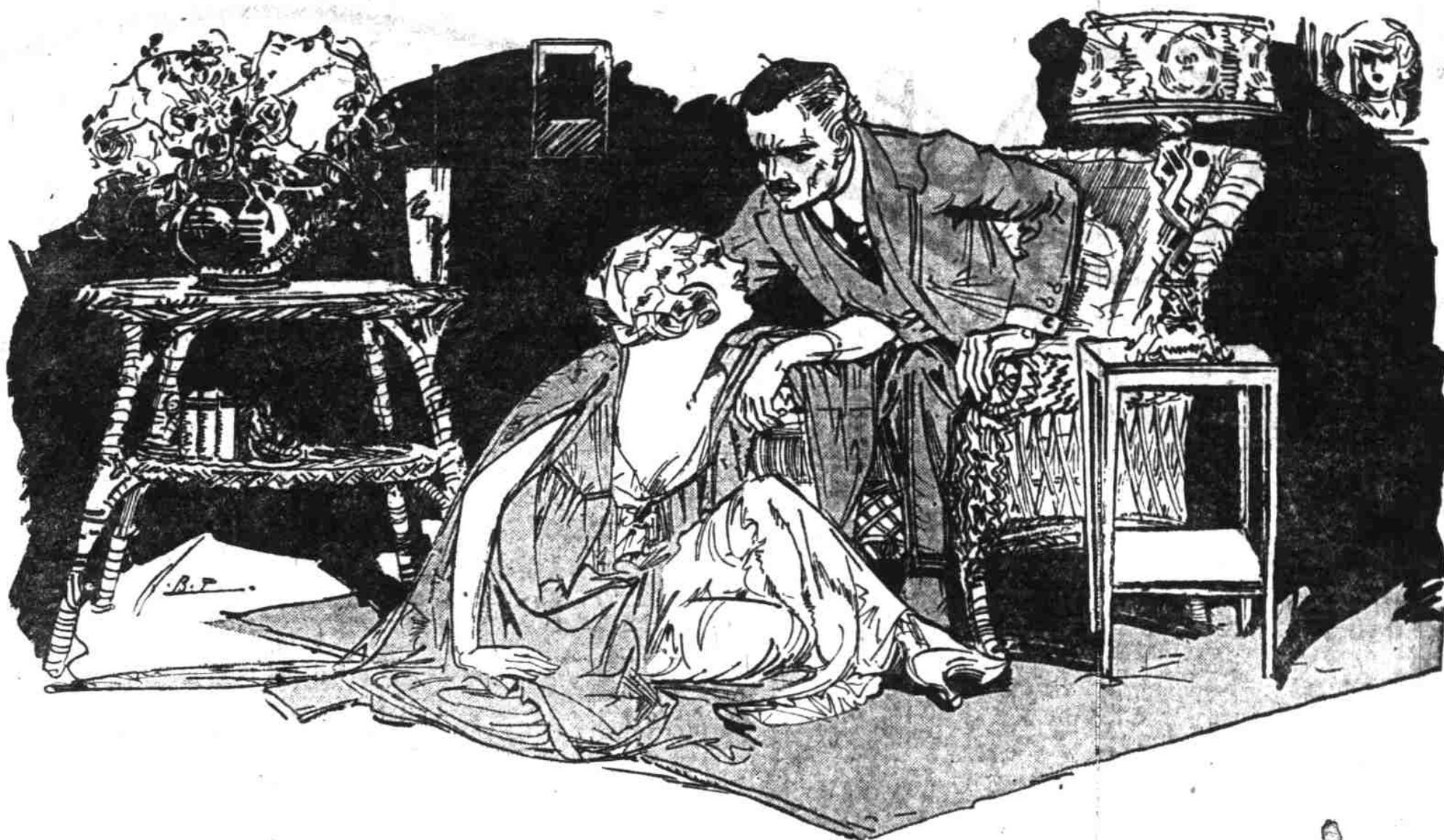
CORA (shaken)—That's what it is. It was the way he laughed!

HAL (confused)—Nonsense.

CORA (slowly grasping the situation)—For months you've told me McQuinn has been fighting for his political life, desperate over your exposures. He's been doing everything to "get" your witnesses—to "get" something on you. Why, he offered you money—enough to make you independent for life. You refused all that; but, now, you're going to do what he wants.



"I shall go on the stand, produce a record that you phoned me twice, and corroborate his statement that you tried to blackmail him into silence."



CORA (smiling)—Just for the freedom it would give me to share everything in the open with you. That's all. Just for the freedom we can't have now.

HAL—I'm doing what I want, I tell you; what I want.

CORA—That's not so. This investigation has been your absorbing passion for months. You've seen what it means to the hundreds of women and children who have suffered by his exploitations. He's got something on you, something you had to give in to.

HAL—No, no!

CORA (slowly)—Hal, it is that. Answer me, boy. It is that— isn't it?

HAL (admitting it, after a futile denial)—And I didn't want you to know.

CORA—He threatened to tell about our relations together if you testified against him?

HAL—Yes; the blackguard.

CORA (moved)—And you love me more than—

HAL (tenderly)—I only did what any man would. (She lowers her head.) Dearest, don't take it so hard. I'm glad a chance came to show you how I loved you.

CORA—I knew without this proof, Hal; I knew. (She sits with her face buried in her hands. He stands beside her.)

HAL—McQuinn met me to-night, on the street, alone. He said he knew about our three years—our Summer abroad—this place—all. He said he hated to hit a woman, but he knew he was beaten and had to use any weapon he could find. All he asked of me was silence and he would give me the same about us—or for me to forget a bit on the stand or muddle my testimony. Of course, I saw what it would mean to the case; but it was the only way to save you. (He shrugs his shoulders.) He must have guessed I'd come straight to you. He has ways of finding out phone numbers. I suppose he wanted to frighten you and thus make sure I wouldn't change my mind.

CORA (slowly)—Did he mention your wife?

HAL—Yes.

CORA (desperately)—Did you tell him you and she had been separated before you met me? That she didn't love you, that she hated you, yet clung to your name because she knew you wanted freedom to marry me? Did you tell him she wouldn't give you that freedom because of a few words mumbled over her by an official and because she said she was "a good woman"?

HAL—I did not discuss the matter. It was my wife who told him about us.

CORA (bitterly)—And the law gives a woman like that the right to keep you—a woman whose body is dry and her love cold—and it discards me, who—oh!

HAL (sarcastically)—It was my wife's way of disentangling me. She thought I'd rather give you up than this case. She thought I'd sacrifice you. But she didn't know me; she never knew me.

CORA—And she knew me!

HAL—It's done. Now we must forget and go on.

CORA (gazing dully before her)—What are you going to do now?

HAL—That's what we must think of.

CORA—It will mean you will have to leave the Monthly.

HAL—Yes. They're tired of the suit, anyway. Their advertising has fallen off. (Putting his arm about her.) We have each other.

CORA (ominously)—And always we'd fear McQuinn knocking at our door.

HAL (trying to cheer her)—Nonsense, dear. He'll never bother to come up our stairs.

CORA—How we women hamper you men. (He protests.) Yes, we do. Your wife's "respectability"—and my—

HAL—Hush, dear. It's not our fault.

CORA—That we love? No. But because we've spoken the whole language of love the world blames us. (With growing emotion.) If I'd kept my love hidden, worn myself sapless without expression, then I'd have been "a good woman!" If I'd seen you casually, or if I'd let you come near me, with the flames smouldering, burning us both inside so that there was nothing in our thoughts but fire; nothing of comradeship and beauty that we now have—then I'd still have been "a good woman." But because I let you see my love, because I wasn't a contemptible tease, because I knew all things were equally important in love, because I gave myself to you, I'm not "a good woman!" (She laughs ironically.)

HAL—We live in the world, dear.

CORA—And we must go on living. (With a quick resolution.) But there is no need of our being cowards!

HAL—Cowards!

CORA—Yes. Up to now, Hal, as I see it, we have not been that. We did what we believed was right, no matter what others may say. But now you and I are thinking of doing what we know is wrong; and that is the test of our courage.

HAL—You mean?

CORA—That now we're asking somebody else to pay the price; the hundreds of women and children in this city whom McQuinn would still go on exploiting if you did not go on the stand and drive him out of power.

HAL (losing momentary control)—It's true; it's true. But how could I ask that of you?

CORA—Why not?

HAL—No, no. We must think of ourselves now—ourselves. What people think of you means everything to me.

CORA—Nothing will be harder than cowardice.

HAL (going to her)—I can't do this—I can't. They'd think me a cad to sacrifice you like this.

CORA—That thought has made liars and cowards of many men! HAL—We mustn't be foolish. There's nothing greater in life than what two people feel for each other.

CORA (desperately)—That's why I am asking this of you. Don't make it harder for me—don't!

HAL—You are thinking of those out in the city; I am thinking only of you.

CORA—But you mustn't!

HAL—You're worth more to me than all of them.

CORA—But you must think of the people.

HAL—The people? That mob any fool can lead with a few catch phrases? That ignorant mass that cheers one day and crucifies the next? What do they really give anybody? I'll tell you. Nothing but ingratitude and scars while you live with immortals and a monument when you're dead. Why should I sacrifice you for them?

CORA—Hal! You don't know them—

HAL—Oh, yes, I do. They can't sustain their moral attitudes. It's all a periodic fit with them. They shout a lot while the brass band plays and they cheer any fool in the red light. Then they settle back into their old self-righteousness while the McQuinns are always on the job.

CORA—You're unjust. You don't know what you're saying. It's because they are ignorant that strong leaders like you should go to them. (He laughs.) You must not forget those others who are working with you against McQuinn.

HAL—The Reformers? Huh. I know them, too. I'm sick to death of political reforms and reformers who plant together but reap their fruits separately.

CORA (trying to stop him)—They're human and—

HAL—Yes; that's it. Human! Why, even now they're squabbling over who shall run for Mayor once they put McQuinn out of power. They're fighting, just like the grafters, with all the same petty jealous personalities. Reformers! Would they put you in their visiting list even if they knew you sacrificed your reputation for them? With all their political morality do you think they'd dare go against public opinion on private morals? No! They couldn't run for office themselves if they did. They'd think you unclean—

CORA—No, no!

HAL—Yes; just as they think McQuinn unclean. They'd accept your sacrifice. But they'd use it as they use their causes—to ride into power themselves. Reformers! I shan't sacrifice you for them. What do they care for you and me?

CORA—But it's not a sacrifice to do what is right.

HAL—Others will try to do what I have failed in. There are always plenty of reformers. I don't want the glory. I've seen the graves of martyrs. No, no. I'll go through with what McQuinn demands just because it's you and me who matter—you and me.

CORA—With McQuinn always waiting at the door. (The phone rings sharply again.) You see?

HAL—Why doesn't he leave us alone?

CORA—We'll never be alone again.

HAL—I'll fix him.

CORA (with calm strength)—He must be answered now as well as later.

HAL (as she starts to the phone)—You shan't do this.

CORA—I'll not let your work be ruined by my cowardice.

HAL—I tell you I'm through with that work.

CORA—But you're not through with my love! It's my love speaking now for our love, which I must keep clean in my own eyes. Our love which the law punishes by denying it freedom to live in the open! Our love which keeps me from being "a good woman"—like your wife! (She goes to the phone. Hal, seeing the futility of further words, sinks back into his chair overcome by what the future holds.) Yes. This is Cora Warren. . . . Who wishes to talk to Mr. Merritt? . . . Is this Mr. McQuinn talking? . . . Mr. McQuinn, I'm glad you rang up. . . . I'm fully acquainted with the particulars of the case. . . . Yes, of course, we're going to be sensible. . . . What are you going to do? . . . Thanks for putting it so clearly. I wanted you to say that so me also. We're not at all anxious to have this story come out. . . . No. But Mr. Merritt is going on the stand to-morrow to tell the truth. . . . Yes. . . . And . . . if the story is subsequently published . . . or if he is cross-examined by your lawyers about our relations, I shall go on the stand, produce a record that you phoned me twice, and corroborate his statement that you tried to blackmail him into silence. . . . You are quite sure you understand? . . . You're sorry for me? . . . Oh, that's all right, Mr. McQuinn. . . . What's that? (Her voice trails off.) Yes, I knew I'm "a hell of a fine woman." (She hangs up the receiver and goes slowly to Hal.) You did what you thought best for me. I did what is best for you.

HAL (holding her close as she kneels beside him)—Poor dear, brave girl. He'll publish it. I know him. And then—oh!

CORA—Yes, dearest. But he didn't laugh this time! (There is a triumphant smile upon her face.)

(The curtain falls.)