

A Mistake

By Maurice Level

“Doctor,” said the man, “I want you to examine me and tell me whether I am suffering from tuberculosis. I want to know the truth. I have enough courage to bear the worst without flinching. I consider, too, that it is your duty to speak with perfect frankness, and that it is my right to know my exact condition. Will you promise to do as I ask?”

The doctor hesitated, pushed back his armchair, leaned against the chimney-piece beneath which burned a large fire of logs, and replied:

“I give you my word. Will you undress yourself?”

While the patient took off his clothes, the doctor questioned him:

“You feel weak? You have night-sweats? . . . You have had them, but don’t know. Do you cough much! Little fits of coughing early in the morning? . . . Are your parents still alive! Do you know what they died of? . . .”

The man, his chest bare, said:

“I am ready.”

The doctor began to sound him. The sick man followed the examination carefully, listening attentively as he stood with his heels together, his arms drooping, his chin raised. In the silent room the taps of the finger sounded like a hollow scale. Afterwards came the auscultation, long and careful. When he had finished, the doctor gave him a little slap on the shoulder and smiled:

“Dress yourself. You are very highly-strung, essentially nervous, but I can assure you there is nothing wrong, absolutely nothing . . . You don’t seem particularly glad to hear it??

The man, who was dressing himself, stopped, his arms in the air, his head half out of the front of his shirt: there was a piercing expression in his eyes, and it was with a mocking laugh that he replied:

“Oh, yes, I am . . . Very glad . . .”

He put on the rest of his clothes in complete silence. The doctor was at his desk, writing a prescription. He stopped him with a gesture:

“Useless . . .”

He took a louis from his pocket, put it on the corner of the table, sat down, and in a voice that trembled slightly began to talk:

“Now for a little conversation. Eighteen months ago, a patient came here asking you, just as I did a few minutes ago, to tell him the truth. You examined him, quickly, it is true, then told him that he was tubercular, that his state was very grave—Oh! don’t protest, don’t defend yourself, I am certain of all I say—and that he must never marry, much less have children.”

“I don’t remember,” murmured the doctor, “but it is possible . . . I have so many consultants . . . But I can’t quite see what you are leading up to . . .”

“To this: that I was that consultant. I lied to you when I said I was unmarried. I was married and the father of children. When the door shut behind me, you never gave me another thought. I was only a negligible unit among the thousands of unhappy creatures who die every year of consumption. But for me your diagnosis had awful consequences.”

He passed his hand over his eyes and went on:

“When I got home my wife and little girls were waiting for me. It was winter, but indoors it was the essence of comfort. A big fire blazed on the hearth. Warmth, sweetness, happiness . . .”

all were there. Till that day I had loved the hour of return, the rest with my dear ones grouped round me: I loved my wife's embraces, the kisses of my children, and all day long I looked forward to the moment when I should be free to forget with them the worries of business and all my troubles. When my wife held her lips up to me that evening I drew back, and I pushed away my little girls when they ran to me.

"The seed you had sown in my mind was beginning to grow.

"We sat down to dinner. During the meal I tried to hide my preoccupation. But I was sad; heart-broken, thinking of the beloved beings I should soon have to leave, of my home deprived of its support, of the children who would grow up fatherless.

"To others who know themselves condemned there remains the consolation of being able to press to their hearts those they must leave behind: they face the Hereafter filled with the happiness such compensation means. But I! . . . A permanent danger to everyone I went near, I carried Death in me. Still alive, I was cut off from the number of the living: I had no longer any right to the joys of other men.

"When bed-time came my children clustered round me as they did every evening.

"I pushed them away. My mouth, my horrible mouth, must never go near theirs again. Presently I went to bed. Slowly all became quiet in the house and the streets. I put out my lamp and lay awake near my wife, whose quiet breathing I could hear.

"The interminable hours of a sleepless night dragged by. I pressed my hands on my chest, trying to discover with my fingers the weak spots in my lungs. I had no pain, hardly enough discomfort to make me believe in the truth of your verdict. Such unreasonable revolts are natural. The wish father to the thought, I ended by believing that you had made an error of judgment. I said to myself: 'It's impossible: I will consult another doctor . . .'

"Suddenly I heard coughing in the next room. I started. The cough, which came from my children's room, sounded again, dry, sharp and ending in a sort of rattle. Terrified, I stretched, out my hand to my wife, but I was afraid to wake her, and I waited. The coughing began again. I got up quietly and went into the room where the children slept. In the glimmer of the night-light, I could see them lying in their beds. It seemed to me that the older one was flushed. I touched her hand. It seemed hot. I bent over her. She coughed several times, and turned restlessly on her pillow. I stayed beside her a long time: she kept coughing. I went back to bed, but hardly had I lain down when a terrible thought took possession of me: 'Like me, she is tubercular!'

"I had no doubt about it. I accepted it as a fact."

He leaned forward, and his hands grasping his knees, asked:

"At that moment you had no idea of what you had done, had you!"

"The next day was unbearable. I dared not tell my wife that our child was ill. I had not the courage to call in a doctor. I was afraid of what he would say, of what I knew he was going to say: I was ashamed of myself, and cowardice kept me silent.

"But my mind did not stand still. It was no longer only a question of contagion. A still more terrifying specter confronted me: that of Heredity. My children had inherited my physical condition, just as they had my eyes, my hair. Even if they had escaped that awful law, the mere fact of my being near them had contaminated them.

"Imagination, you say? Nonsense. You and the whole fraternity, haven't you taken pains to educate the ignorant public through the newspapers and magazines, by conferences? . . .

"All that I had read and heard surged up in my memory.

“One after another my wife and little daughters would gradually fade, dragging out martyred lives till the fatal end came . . . And I, I should watch it all: in their faces, in their wasting bodies, I should follow the progress of the disease. No science could alter the inevitable.”

He lifted his finger and spoke in a deep, low voice.

“Then—follow me carefully—living haunted by this thought, I grew to believe that there are cases when it is a man’s duty to stop suffering which he knows to be inevitable: that he has the right to undo what he has done, to suppress, make an end of beings condemned to physical torture, the right to be the Destiny that saves them from such a fate.

“You shudder, you are afraid of understanding! . . . Yes, with my own hands I killed my children and my wife, killed, you hear me, killed them. I poisoned them, and did it so quickly and cleverly no one ever suspected me.

“At first I meant to put an end to myself as well, but I deserved punishment, not for having killed them, for I believed my action a legitimate one, but for having brought them into the world. And what greater expiation could I have imposed on myself than that of bearing alone, full of misery, the burden of the existence from which I had saved them, the sufferings from which I had set them free?

“And now, see what happened. Some weeks after they were gone strength began to come back to me. The pain in the side went, the blood-spitting ceased. I ate with appetite. I began to put on flesh. Yes, I began to grow fat!

“At first I believed that in some mysterious way the progress of the disease had momentarily stopped so that it might reassert itself later with greater violence. But after some months I was obliged to recognize facts: I was growing better, I was cured. I say ‘cured.’ Had I ever been tubercular?

“This thought, vague at first, took shape. Do you understand what it meant? If I were tubercular, what I had done was necessary. If I were not, I had murdered without excuse, for no reason.

“I gave myself a year to make sure, hoping that the arrested disease would reappear, trying by every kind of imprudence to set it working again. Useless. Then came the conviction, the certainty, that you had been wrong, had been guilty of a shameful error of judgment. An overwhelming sadness took possession of me. I had deliberately ruined my life, killed innocent creatures, plunged myself in the years of mourning through which I was dragging my way—And why? Because of your mistake. And I have come here to-day to hear you yourself confess it, that mistake!”

He rose and crossed his arms on his chest.

“Could you have admitted it more stupidly? You didn’t see my eyes just now when you assured me that there was nothing wrong with me, ‘absolutely nothing.’ No, for if you had seen them you would have trembled with fear, you would have read in them what I am going to tell you . . .”

The doctor was very pale as he stammered:

“*Mon Dieu*, I am not infallible . . . Now-a-days this idea of tuberculosis has become an obsession, creeps into everything . . . It influences one unconsciously . . . one is apt to give importance to a sound that may be accidental, temporary . . . I may have been wrong. . . the greatest physicians have made mistakes in their diagnoses . . . I will examine you again. . . .”

The man burst into a terrible laugh:

“You will, will you! . . . For what kind of a fool do you take me! You run yourself on to the point of a sword, and you think you can get free by a graceful twist! There is nothing wrong with

me! You have told me so. Nothing, nothing, nothing! This time—and for the best of reasons—I will accept your word without question.

“But you have made me into an assassin, and you are my accomplice. Unconscious accomplice! I agree with you. You were the brain, and I, I was the arm. And as Justice is everlastingly the same, I—‘the highly-strung, the essentially nervous!’—I judge, I condemn and I execute. You first. Myself afterwards.”

Two shots rang out. The servants rushed in to find the two bodies lying on their backs.

Some brain and blood had splashed on the table and made a crimson mark on an unfinished prescription that ran:

Bromide 15 grammes

Distilled water.