

The Test

By Maurice Level

Not a muscle quivered as the man stood with his gaze fixed on the dead woman.

Through half-closed eyes he looked at the white form on the marble slab; milky-white it was, with a red gash between the breasts where the cruel knife had entered. In spite of its rigidity, the body had kept its rounded beauty and seemed alive. Only the hands, with their too transparent skin and violet finger-nails, and the face with its glazed, wide-open eyes and blackened mouth, a mouth that was set in a horrible grin, told of the eternal sleep.

An oppressive silence weighed on the dreary, stone-paved hall. Lying on the ground beside the dead woman was the sheet that had covered her: there were blood-stains on it. The magistrates were closely watching the accused man as he stood unmoved between the two warders, his head well up, a supercilious expression on his face, his hands crossed behind his back. The examining magistrate opened the proceedings:

“Well, Gautet, do you recognize your victim?”

The man moved his head, looking first at the magistrate, then with reflective attention at the dead woman as if he were searching in the depths of his memory.

“I do not know this woman,” he said at length in a low voice. “I have never seen her before.”

“Yet there are witnesses who will state on oath that you were her lover . . .”

“The witnesses are mistaken. I never knew this woman.”

“Think well before you answer,” said the magistrate after a moment’s silence. “What is the use of trying to mislead us? This confrontation is the merest formality, not at all necessary in your case. You are intelligent, and if you wish for any clemency from the jury, I advise you in your own interest to confess.”

“Being innocent, I have nothing to confess.”

“Once again, remember that these denials have no weight at all. I myself am prepared to believe that you gave way to a fit of passion, one of these sudden madresses when a man sees red . . . Look again at your victim . . . Can you see her lying there like that and feel no emotion, no repentance? . . .”

“Repentance, you say? How can I repent of what I have not done? . . . As for emotion, if mine was not entirely deadened, it was at least considerably lessened by the simple fact that I knew what I was going to see when I came here. I feel no more emotion than you do yourself. Why should I? I might just as well accuse you of the crime because you stand there unmoved.”

He spoke in an even voice, without gestures, as a man would who had complete control of himself. The overwhelming charge left him apparently undisturbed, and he confined his defense to calm, obstinate denials.

One of the minor officials said in an undertone:

“They will get nothing out of him . . . He will deny it even on the scaffold.”

Without a trace of anger, Gautet replied:

“That is so, even on the scaffold.”

The sultry atmosphere of an impending thunderstorm added to the feeling of exasperation caused by this struggle between accusers and accused, this obstinate “no” to every question in the face of all evidence.

Through the dirty window-pane the setting sun threw a vivid golden glare on the corpse.

“So be it,” said the magistrate: “You do not know the victim. But what about this?”

He held out an ivory-handled knife, a large knife with clotted blood on its strong blade.

The man took the weapon into his hands, looked at it for a few seconds, then handed it to one of the warders and wiped his fingers.

“That! . . . I have never seen it before either.”

“Systematic denial . . . that is your plan, is it?” sneered the magistrate. “This knife is yours. It used to hang in your study. Twenty people have seen it there.”

The prisoner bowed.

“That proves nothing but that twenty people have made a mistake.”

“Enough of this,” said the magistrate. “Though there is not a shadow of doubt about your guilt, we will make one last decisive test. There are marks of strangulation on the neck of the victim. You can clearly see the traces of five fingers, particularly long fingers, the medical expert tells us. Show these gentlemen your hands. You see?”

The magistrate raised the chin of the dead woman.

There were violet marks on the white skin of the neck: at the end of every bruise the flesh was deeply pitted, as if nails had been dug in. It looked like the skeleton of a giant leaf.

“There is your handiwork. Whilst with your left hand you were trying to strangle this poor woman, with your free right hand you drove this knife into her heart. Come here and repeat the action of the night of the murder. Place your fingers on the bruises of the neck . . . Come along . . .”

Gautet hesitated for a second, then shrugged his shoulders and said in a sullen voice:

“You wish to see if my fingers correspond? and suppose they do? . . . What will that prove? . . .”

He moved towards the slab: he was noticeably paler, his teeth were clenched, his eyes dilated. For a moment he stood very still, his gaze fixed on the rigid body, then with an automaton-like gesture, he stretched out his hand and laid it on the flesh.

The involuntary shudder that ran through him at the cold, clammy contact caused a sudden, sharp movement of his fingers which contracted as if to strangle. . .

Under this pressure the set muscles of the dead woman seemed to come to life. You could see them stretch obliquely from the collar-bone to the angle of the jaw: the mouth lost its horrible grin and opened as if in an atrocious yawn, the dry lips drew back to disclose teeth encrusted with thick, brown slime.

Every one started with horror.

There was something enigmatic and terrifying about this gaping mouth in this impassive face, this mouth open as if for a death-rattle from beyond the portals of the grave, the sound only held back by the swollen tongue that was doubled back in the throat.

Then, all at once, there came from that black hole a low, undefined noise, a sort of humming that suggested a hive, and an enormous bluebottle with shining wings, one of these charnel-house flies that live on death, an unspeakable filthy beast, flew out, hissing as it circled round the cavern as if to guard the approach. Suddenly it paused . . . then made a straight course for the blue lips of Gautet.

With a motion of horror, he tried to drive it away: but the monstrous thing came back, clinging to his lips with all the strength of its poisonous claws.

With one bound the man leaped backwards, his eyes wild, his hair on end, his hands stretched out, his whole body quivering as he shrieked like a madman:

“I confess! . . . I did it! . . . Take me away! . . . Take me away! . . .”