

The Father

By Maurice Level

When the last spadeful of earth had been shoveled in and the last handshake given, the father and the son went home, walking slowly, as if every step were an effort. They were silent, for there had suddenly fallen on them the great weariness that follows an effort that has been too long sustained.

The house, still impregnated with the scent of flowers, calm again after the agonies, the comings and goings of the last few days, seemed strangely empty and new. The old servant who had come home before them had put all in order. They had the feeling of having returned after a long journey, but there was no joy in the home-coming, nothing of that deep sigh that means: "Ah! How good to be in one's own place again . . ." Yet outwardly all was as before. Curled up in a ball, a cat purred softly before the fire, and the winter sun shone with mild brightness on the windowpanes.

The father sat down by the fire, shook his head and sighed:

"Your poor mother . . ."

Two tears rolled down the kind, round face that was a little congested by sorrow, the cold of the street, and the warmth of the room.

Presently, moved by the desire to hear something more than the purring of the cat, the tic-tac of the clock and the crackling of the wood in the grate, conscious, perhaps, of a kind of satisfaction in still being alive while others had gone forever, he began to talk:

"Did you see the Duponts? They were all there; the presence of the grandfather touched me very much . . . Your mother was very fond of them all . . . How was it your friend Bremard wasn't there? . . . But perhaps he was; in such a crowd one can't see every one . . ."

He sighed again: "My poor lad" . . . his thoughts turning with redoubled tenderness to this big son of twenty-five who sat silently near him, his mournful eyes fixed on the fire.

The old servant came quietly in, so quietly they did not hear her open the door.

"Come, come, sir, you musn't sit here like this! You must have something to eat."

They raised their heads.

It was true. They must eat. Life must go on as before. They were hungry, not with the delightful hunger of the days when it is a pleasure to sit down to a well-spread table, but with the hunger of the animal whose stomach is empty. Till now a kind of self-consciousness had held them back. As she spoke they looked at each other silently, both desiring, yet fearing, the first tête-a-tête at a table made too large by the empty place.

And the father, the tears again rising in his eyes, murmured:

"Yes, you are quite right . . . Get dinner ready . . . You must eat something, my boy. . ."

The son nodded and rose.

"I will change my coat, then I will come."

He went out, shutting the door behind him. His steps went automatically towards his mother's room, and his hand was on the door-handle when the old servant approached, saying in a low voice:

"Monsieur Jean, I have something for you . . . a letter your mother gave me eight days ago just after she knew she couldn't get well . . . She told me to give it to you . . . when it was all over . . . Here it is."

Surprised, he stopped and stared at her. She was looking at him in a curious, hesitating way; the fingers in which she held the envelope were trembling, and instantly he had the conviction that some great secret, some great sorrow, was about to be revealed to him.

His throat contracting, he said:

“Give it to me . . .” and went into the room.

Without noticing what he was doing, he turned the key in the door.

The room, the bed too flat, the curtains too far drawn, the grate fireless, and the furniture arranged in too orderly a way, had already a look of being disused, deserted.

For some time he stood turning the letter about in his fingers, transfixed by the sight of the living handwriting of the dead woman, the dear, familiar writing that here on the slightly crumpled envelope showed itself less firm than usual.

Through a partition of curtained glass he could hear the comings and goings of the servant who was laying the table in the next room.

He tore open the envelope and read:

“My beloved child,

I feel that the moment for the eternal farewell is very near. I go without fear, almost without regret, knowing you are a man now and for a long time have been able to get on without my help. My conscience tells me I have been the best of mothers. Yet a very grave secret lies between us, one I have never had the courage to tell you, but which it is essential you should know.

“The woman you have so much loved and, above all, respected, she to whom you ran with every childish trouble, to whom you have brought all the perplexities of your manhood, your mother, my darling, has been guilty of a great sin. You are not the son of the man you have always called ‘father.’

“There has been in my life a great, an immense love, and my chief fault has been that I have never confessed it. Your father, your real father, is alive. He has watched you grow up, and he loves you!. You are now old enough to decide the big things of life for yourself. You can completely change your life if you wish to do so. You can be rich to-morrow if you have the courage that has always failed me. I know I am doing a cowardly thing . . . but having acted so badly during my life, it seems inevitable I should end in the same way. A hundred times I have been on the point of leaving the house, taking you away with me. But I have not had the energy to do it. The slightest thing would have given me that energy: a suspicion . . . a harsh word . . . But there has never been anything . . . Not a cloud . . .”

He ceased reading, overcome by the revelation. His mother had consistently deceived her husband! . . . She had been able to live a lie all these years. She had been able to go on talking and smiling without in any way betraying either her wrongdoing or any kind of repentance. And he, till now pitiless towards the weakness of women, he for whom all pride, all joy, all veneration had been summed up in the word: “Mother! . . .” he had grown up there an intruder, a living insult to the good man whose attitude towards him had invariably been one of kindness, of tenderness! . . .

All his childhood rose before him. He saw himself again a tiny child walking about the street clinging to his father’s hand . . . He grew older . . . For months a very severe illness had held him between life and death, and he saw again his father sitting by his bedside, tears in his eyes as he tried to smile . . . Time went on . . . Business troubles had come, and memories were of a still more touching kind . . . the conversations he had overheard at night after he had been tucked into bed. The mother very quiet; the father saying: ‘I will retrench in every possible way . . . I will give up smoking . . . I will give up cafés and my club . . . My clothes are still quite good . . . Whatever happens the child must not suffer . . . The bad moment will soon pass . . . If I

economize in every way we shall be able to prevent his feeling it . . . These little ones have all their lives to suffer in . . . it is cruel to sadden them while they are young! . . .”

And this was the man she had deceived.

He sat down and buried his head in his hands. A phrase in the letter came back to him: “You are old enough now to decide the big things of life for yourself.”

It was true. He had not the right even to hesitate. The idea of money never crossed his mind. It was just a question of having the courage she had lacked. He would leave the house without saying anything about it. . . . He would go away somewhere, far away, and never come back. In that way the shame, the shame that he now knew of, would go with him. How could he ever sit down again at that table without flushing as he heard the kind voice calling him: “My dear boy,” and talking fondly of the “poor mother”? . . .

He had decided, but he was sobbing:

“Oh, mother mother . . . What have you done? . . .”

It was good-bye to the quiet home life, the daily return to a house made sacred by memories; he could not, must not, had not the right to carry on the lie.

As he sat down, lost in his sad thoughts, a sound came from the dining-room.

. . . “Poor boy . . . He feels it so keenly . . . He is in his mother’s room . . . Let him stay there if he wants to . . . How it has changed our lives . . . I feel as if I have grown old, old. Thank God I still have him. He is a good boy; he won’t leave me.”

He raised his head, biting his lips. The father went on talking, and as he listened his thoughts went off in another direction. The course on which he had decided seemed less easy, his duty not so clear.

“He won’t leave me . . .”

Had he the right to abandon this poor soul, to leave him to grow old alone in a deserted home? . . . To go away—was that all he could do to repay his unfailing kindness, his efforts for him, his self-denial?

But he was not his son . . . His presence under his roof had in it something intolerable, odious . . . Yet he must decide at once; if he hesitated it would be too late.

He was still holding his mother’s letter. He went on reading it:

“The slightest thing would have given me that energy: a suspicion . . . a harsh word . . .
But there has never been anything. . . not a cloud . . .”

Behind the partition, the voice of the father was saying: “Yes, I have lived twenty-seven years with her, and during the whole of that time there was never a cloud . . .”

The same words . . . the same phrase . . .

He went back to the letter:

“And now I am going to tell you the name of your real father. It is . . .”

The paper trembled in his fingers. If he turned the page the name would be forever engraved in his eyes, in the depth of his being . . . and then. . . he could no longer. The voice called gently:

“Come along, dear lad, dinner is waiting on the table . . .”

He drew back his head and shut his eyes for a second. Then he took a match, raised his arm, and set fire to the paper. He watched it burn slowly, and when the flame got down to his nails, he opened his fingers. A square of black ash fell on the floor. A little white corner burnt itself out . . . Nothing was left . . .

He opened the dining-room door, looked for a moment at the good man who stood waiting for him, the mild face full of affection, the eyelids swollen, the hands tremulous—and with a gesture like that of a child, he flung his arms round the stooping shoulders as one might embrace a beloved being they had imagined they would never see again. And there was a catch in his voice that sounded like a sob as he said:

“Father! My dear old father!”