

“For Nothing”

By Maurice Level

Certainly this Jean Gautet did not look like a dangerous criminal.

He was a sickly little being of uncertain age with an air of premature suffering. The eyes that wandered about behind the eyeglasses which from time to time he adjusted on his nose with a quick movement were quiet and mild; he had the look of a child who fears being scolded rather than that of an assassin.

But arrested a few hours after he had committed the crime, he had not even attempted to defend himself, had confessed the moment the policeman laid a hand on his arm. Since then he had taken refuge in almost complete silence.

“Why don’t you explain your action?” said the judge at length. “Seeing you declare you did not know your victim, seeing you did not steal anything from his house, why did you kill him?”

“For nothing . . .”

“You must have had a reason . . . No one goes to a man’s house and drives a knife into him without a motive. . . Why did you do it?”

“For nothing . . .”

“Had he harmed you in any way? . . .”

This time he flinched, lowered his eyes, made a vague gesture and murmured:

“No . . .”

But suddenly changing his tone, he added:

“Well, yes! . . . It wasn’t for nothing . . . There was a reason . . . If I have kept silent all this time it is because I didn’t explain at first, and it was hard to do it afterwards . . . Some confessions are very difficult to make. . .

“I am an illegitimate child. My mother had to work very hard to keep me. I had a joyless childhood . . . Too many tears were shed in my home. At school they called me the ‘Bastard.’ I didn’t understand, but I soon found it meant something very sad, for when I asked my mother about it she hid her face in her hands and cried. Instinctively I avoided using the word again. She never complained and never told me her story till she lay on her death-bed . . . I was then fourteen years old.

“At fourteen I found myself alone in the world, without relatives, without friends, tired of life before I had begun to live.

“Just at first it was not so hard. I found a place where they fed me and gave me a bed. From time to time they gave me old clothes. The years passed . . . When I was twenty I became dependent on myself, and then I learned what poverty meant . . . For two years I had to keep myself entirely on a pound a week, and as I wasn’t a laborer—I was a clerk in a wholesale house—it was necessary for me to be properly dressed . . . To get clothes I had to economize in what I spent on food. I could only afford one meal a day—and there was very little of that . . . Sometimes I became faint and giddy in the streets, had to lean against a wall to keep myself from falling . . . hunger, of course.

“One morning when I got to the office, my employer said to me:

“ ‘I am not pleased with the way you are doing your work. For some time you have been making mistakes. You don’t seem to concentrate on what you are doing . . . Then you are

careless about your appearance, and I don't like that. My clerks must look neat and respectable.' He touched the frayed revers of my coat. 'That's not the way to come to this office.'

'I tried to make excuses, but he wouldn't listen.

'Nonsense! A man need never be ragged.'

'The other clerks were coming and going as he spoke, and I felt the blood rush to my head at the thought that they might hear . . .

'That day I had nothing at all to eat.

'When the stomach is empty, the brain works. The tears kept coming into my eyes as I bent over my desk. I wept from hunger and shame, and as I sat there in despair there came to me for the first time the idea that I could not be alone in the world seeing that my father was still alive. After all, I had a father. The thought comforted me and strengthened me. I resolved to go and find him. I would explain my position to him. He was rich, and he would be sure to help me when he knew my circumstances. Was I not his son?

'Next day I rang his bell. I felt almost tenderly disposed towards him. He was a little bowed old man with a pallid face and shuffling walk; everything about him showed he was ill, worn out. He said:

'Who are you? What do you want?'

'The tone of his voice froze me. I stammered as I tried to explain the object of my visit. But hardly had I begun when, trembling, he interrupted me.

'Not so loud . . . Lower your voice . . . Some one may hear . . .

'He got rid of me as quickly as possible, pushing me towards the door with vague words.

'Leave me your address . . . I will see what I can do for you . . . Yes . . . I will see . . . I am ill . . . I will write to you . . .'

'I went home trying to collect my ideas.

'I waited a whole week; he made no sign. I dared not go back to him, fearing I might upset him again. I told myself he could never let me die of hunger. I took to walking near his house. As far as I could without letting them guess my secret, I got the neighbors to talk.

'Oh!' said one of them, 'if you are hoping to move him in any way, you'd better give it up at once . . . He has no more heart than a paving-stone. In any case, his money won't be of any use to him much longer. He is so ill he can hardly drag himself about. . .'

'I risked asking whether he had any relatives or friends.

'Friends!' The man shrugged his shoulders. 'As to relatives, he may have a great-nephew in some corner in France, but he won't get anything. Everything he has will go to the woman who has been his housekeeper for fifteen years. She boasts about it. She declares he has often told her that not a halfpenny of his money is to go to his family, that he was not such a fool as to let his death make them rich, that she shall have everything. You will guess whether she counts the coppers.'

'Suddenly I began to hate my father. Was he not the cause of all my misfortunes?

'I went away and wandered about the streets, paying no attention to where I was going. A sense of injury blotted out every other feeling. I must have been walking a very long while when, almost fainting with hunger, I went into a low eating-house, near the fortifications I think it was . . . When I had paid the bill I had not one farthing left, and there were still six days before the end of the month. What was to become of me? As I wondered, my fingers touched the knife I had used to cut my bread. It was a long knife, thin, pointed—I don't know why I took it, but I did.

'I am not trying to excuse myself or lessen my crime, but the feeling of having that knife in my pocket, close against my side, turned my brain . . . I grasped the handle . . . I tried the blade with

my fingers . . . And without knowing how or why it happened, I found myself standing in front of my father's house.

"I didn't argue with myself about it; there was no fighting against any horrible ideas. I wasn't thinking at all. Deliberately, without any kind of hesitation, I rang the court-yard bell . . . The door opened. I muttered the first name that came into my head . . . and I went up the stairs.

"When I got to the door of my father's flat, I stopped, vaguely aware of the madness of what I was doing. If I rang, no one would open the door at that hour of night . . . If I made any noise, the neighbors would come out to see what was the matter . . . I should be flung downstairs.

"I felt in my pocket for the key of my own door and slipped it quietly in the key-hole. It went in without a sound . . . I turned it as easily as a burglar would . . . Something gave way . . . The door opened. Stupefied by the coincidence of the key of my door exactly fitting his, I stood perfectly still in the dark for some seconds, asking myself for the first time what I was doing there.

"At the same moment I saw a line of light on the carpet. Very quietly I opened a second door.

"A man—my father—was sitting with his back to me. He did not raise his head.

"A lamp with a lowered green shade lit the table over which he was bending. All the rest of the room was in deep shadow. He was writing. I could only see his bald head and thin shoulders. Holding my breath, I stole behind him and drew myself up on tiptoe. A large sheet of paper lay on his blotter. I read:

'THIS IS MY WILL.'

Underneath there were three lines of smaller writing. The words the neighbors had spoken flashed into my mind, and I seemed to see the avaricious old servant who had taken the place that ought to have been my mother's.

"A frenzy ran through me. So I, his son, I who was going to die of hunger, I was beside him starving at the very moment when with a few strokes of his pen he was going to do this abominable thing, make it irrevocable. Not a farthing would come to me, his own flesh and blood, who would die for need of it . . . All was for the old harridan who was counting the minutes till he died . . . It was impossible. He should not do it . . . I bent forward and read:

'I leave all I possess, money, houses . . .'

"I ground my teeth. He started violently, turned his head, and seeing my face, which at that moment must have been terrifying, cried out, with an instinctive movement covering the paper with his arm as if to prevent my seeing it.

The knife was in my hand . . . I drove it forward, and with a force that seemed to make my own bones creak, sent the blade through his neck above his collar . . .

"Then I realized what I had done . . . I rushed away . . . You know the rest . . ."

He took off his eyeglasses and dried his eyes. Drops of sweat were running down his face; he was trembling violently.

The judge, who had been watching him closely, unfolded a large sheet of paper stained with a brown mark, and said:

"And you read nothing else on this page?"

He shook his head.

"Well, listen. I will read the rest to you:

" 'THIS IS MY WILL.

“ ‘I leave all I possess, money, houses, and furniture to Jean Gautet, my son, asking him to forgive me for having been the bad father I—’

“You didn’t leave him time to finish.” The murderer drew himself up with a jerk, his eyes wild, his mouth gaping as he stammered:

“To my son! . . .Me? . . . I? . . .” There was a pause; then he burst into a shriek of wild laughter, beating his head, and swaying about as he yelled:

“I am rich! I am rich!”

He had gone mad.