

Under Chloroform

By Maurice Level

“As for me,” declared pretty young Madame Chaligny, “if ever I were obliged to have an operation and it was absolutely necessary to give me an anæsthetic, I would not place myself in the hands of any doctor I didn’t know personally . . . When I come to think of it, it seems to me that it would be ideal to be chloroformed by a man who was in love with you.”

At this the old doctor, who had been sitting listening in silence, probably because they were speaking of his profession, shook his head.

“No, Madame, no. You are quite wrong there. That is the very last man you ought to choose.”

“Why? With a man who loved her a woman would feel completely at ease; her thoughts would be concentrated on him, and she would not run the risk of having her mind distracted in a way that might prove dangerous at such a moment. There must be even a sort of rare voluptuousness in sinking into unconsciousness with beloved eyes gazing into yours. . . Then, think of the enchantment of coming to . . . of the return to consciousness . . .”

“Don’t make any mistake about that return,” smiled the doctor. “There’s very little poetry about it. The sick person emerges painfully from the heaviest of all intoxications, and at such a moment the prettiest woman in the world lacks charm and runs the risk of disenchanting the most ardent lover.”

After a little silence, he added gravely:

“She runs a still more terrible risk—that of never returning at all.”

As every one protested he went on:

“I will tell you a story to illustrate what I mean, an old and very sad story. I am the tragic hero of it, and if I am able to speak of it to-day, it is because the telling can no longer compromise any one. I am the only one left of those who played a part in it, and you will lose your time if you try to discover the names of people who are now in their graves. I am seventy years old; I was twenty-four then, so you see . . .

“I was house-surgeon at a hospital when I first met the woman who was the great and only love of my life. I would have done the maddest things to be able to see her; to keep her happy, out of the reach of any trouble, I was capable of making any and every sacrifice; I would have killed myself without regret rather than have a breath of suspicion touch her.

“We were very young. They had married her to a man twenty years older than herself, and I can say with truth, though the words sound strange from the mouth of an old man, that she loved me as much as I loved her.

“We had found complete happiness in each other for some months, discreetly, and without causing the slightest remark, when one morning I received a hasty line from the husband begging me to come and see his wife who was ill. I rushed to the house. I found her in bed, very pale, with the anxious face, blue-circled eyes, pinched nose and lifeless hair I had so often seen at the hospital. The night before she had been seized with violent pains in the side; they had put her to bed, and since then she had lain there moaning, hiccoughing between her sobs, warding off with terrified gestures any hand that approached her, her appealing eyes begging no one to touch her.

“There was not an hour, not a minute to lose. We sent for my Chief, and it was decided to operate there and then.

“You must have been through it to understand the difference between calmly preparing to operate on people you don’t know, and the horror of doing it for some one very dear to you.

“While they were getting the next room ready for the operation, my poor little darling beckoned to me, and trying to keep the pain out of her voice whispered:

“ ‘I’m not afraid . . . Don’t worry about me . . . you will put me to sleep, won’t you? . . . ’

“I protested with a gesture, but she persisted:

“ ‘I beg you to do it. You must . . . No one but you . . . ’

“I had neither the time nor the strength to say no. They came and carried her away.

“Then began my Calvary.

“While my Chief and the other doctors and nurses moved about the room, I took the bottle of chloroform and the compress.

“She started back as she inhaled the first few drops, then smiled at me and gave herself up without further resistance. But she did not go off properly. Perhaps it was that, too moved to measure it carefully, I gave too little chloroform, letting too much air pass between the handkerchief and her lips. Also I could not help thinking of all the accidents that might happen, of the cases of syncope I had seen or heard of, and it was not astonishing that my eyes were not as sharp as usual, my fingers uncertain.

“My Chief, his sleeves turned up, his streaming hands stretched out, came up:

“ ‘Has she gone off?’

“The sound of his voice braced me. It took my mind to the hospital, and I pulled myself together as I replied:

“ ‘No, Sir, not yet.’

“ ‘Hurry . . . ’

“I bent over her asking:

“ ‘Can you hear me? . . . ’

“She opened her eyes and lowered the lids twice to say ‘yes.’

“ ‘Is there a buzzing in your ears? . . . What can you hear?’

“She murmured:

“ ‘Bells . . . ’

“As she spoke she seemed to shrink a little. One of her arms fell inert on the table; her breathing grew even, her face paler, and little blue veins appeared ‘at the side of the nose. I bent over her: her breath was sibilant, and heavy with the smell of chloroform: she was asleep.

“ ‘You can begin now, Sir,’ I said to my Chief.

“But when I saw the knife move along the white body, leaving behind it a red line, my agitation returned. As I watched them cut and pinch her flesh, it seemed to me that they were cutting and pinching my own. My hand stole up mechanically and stroked her face. Suddenly her legs moved with an instinctive gesture of defense, and she moaned.

“My Chief straightened himself:

“ ‘But you haven’t got her under.’

“I poured some drops of chloroform on the compress; they made a large gray stain on the fine batiste.

“The operator bent over her again.

“But again she moaned and began to mutter incoherent syllables.

“How I longed for it all to be over; longed to see her come to herself, to have done with the awful nightmare! She was now motionless, but she continued to moan and mutter, and suddenly among the murmurings she pronounced distinctly a name, mine: Jean.

“A shudder ran through me. Speaking as if in a dream she went on:

“ ‘Don’t worry . . . I’m not afraid . . .’

“Great God, it was I who was afraid!

“Not so much afraid that she would never come to, that she would die in my arms, but afraid that in her delirium she would betray our secret.

“She began to stammer words that increased my fear. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I said:

“ ‘Sir, she is not completely under . . .’

“ ‘Because she chatters! . . . What does that matter so long as she doesn’t move? . . .’

“At that moment her voice rose clearly, every word distinct:

“ ‘I’m not afraid . . . You are with me . . . You put me to sleep. . . .’

“There was no knowing what she might say next, and terrified, I administered more chloroform . . . Four, five times, tilt on tilt, I poured it on the compress and held it to her face. Her voice, now uneven, came to me muffled by the handkerchief I held against her mouth.

“ ‘I am asleep . . . I can hear the bells . . . When I am well again we will go for walks together like we used to . . .’

“I lost my head. I thought that her husband, who was in the next room and probably near the door, would hear, that the others would understand. She, so proud, she whom no suspicion had ever touched, who till then had been above all suspicion, would be dishonored.

“To get her quite under, to try to keep her silent, I tilted the bottle, I tilted it again. The compress became heavy in my hand.

“ ‘We shall be together . . . at night,’ chanted the voice. ‘And you will take me in your arms again . . . you will . . .’

“I lost my reason. What would the next words be? I poured . . . I poured . . . I no longer knew what I was doing.

“Then came the moment when I found that the bottle was empty. I realized that I had given too much. Terrified, I flung the compress away; with a hasty finger I lifted one of her eyelids and saw that the pupil of the eye was fixed, dilated so that there was nothing left of the iris but a transparent ring. I wanted to shout: ‘stop! . . .’

“The word was strangled by the contraction in my throat.

“At the same moment I heard the voice of my Chief, short and anxious:

“ ‘What’s this . . . What . . . the blood-pressure is low.’

“With a violent movement he pushed me away:

“ ‘But she’s not breathing . . . Some oxygen . . . some ether . . . quick . . .’

“Alas! Too late.

“Her poor head rolled lifeless; her blue eye, the eyelid still up, was glazed and looked at me with an empty stare . . .

“We tried everything, but nothing was any good. Syncope, the horrible white syncope, as we call it, had taken her from me.”

For a few moments he sat lost in thought, then went on:

“I know perfectly well that such accidents happen frequently; that no one is safe from the treachery of chloroform. But I also know that if I had not loved her and had done my work with cold indifference; if I had not been overwhelmed by the double anguish of holding her life in my hands and hearing her unconsciously betraying the secret that would ruin her, I should not have to reproach myself with causing her death . . .”

He was silent. A wave of sadness passed through the room as if it had been carried in on the chilly autumn wind that blew against the damp window.

Madame Chaligny, her head on the back of her armchair, sat gazing into space like a person lost in a dream.

The party broke up early that night.