

# The Taint

By Maurice Level

The prisoner had listened to the charge in complete silence and had replied to the questions of the judge in evasive phrases.

“I was alone when my child was born. I tried to get up, to call for help. I had not the strength. I put it beside me in my bed . . . Afterwards I must have lost consciousness. When I came to myself in the morning, its body was cold . . . Had I overlain and suffocated it? . . . Was it dead when I placed it by my side? . . . How could I possibly know seeing I hardly remember anything that happened before I fainted? . . .”

“Did it cry?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you explain your composure in the presence of your maid? Witnesses will tell you presently that you were quite calm when you saw the little corpse. Let us suppose for a moment that it was an accident. You buried its father three months before the child was born. Having lost your husband, his child ought to have been doubly dear to you, for it seems—if I speak of the evidence of one witness, I neither can nor will pass over in silence that of others—it seems your marriage was one of inclination, of love, and that you had been perfectly happy in the union. Yet if we leave these moral considerations and turn to material proofs, the doctors will tell you that the neck showed marks of strangulation, scratches like those made by finger-nails, and that not only was the child likely to live, but that it had lived, you understand, had lived for a considerable time . . .

She lost her assurance and burst into sobs. When she was calmer, the judge went on:

“Come now, think: what have you to say in reply?”

With a gesture of weariness she lifted her long widow’s veil, and at the sight of her face, pretty in spite of being swollen with tears, her trembling lips and reddened eyes, a feeling of pity passed through the court, and the silence became intense, almost respectful.

“You must please forgive me for having evaded your questions for so long,” she said. “I can’t lie any more. This suffering is too much for me. Perhaps it will comfort me if I tell the truth. I confess: it was I, yes, I, who killed my child.”

The judge made a gesture. She stretched out her hands as if to stop a coming accusation.

“But I did not premeditate my crime, I swear I did not. I will explain as quickly as I can so as to end it all as quickly as possible, never again to hear any one speak of it . . . never . . . never . . .

“I was enceinte when my husband fell ill. Till then his health had been perfect. At first I believed it was some passing indisposition and attached no importance to it. He himself tried to behave as if he were quite well. But I ended by becoming anxious, more because of his curiously preoccupied manner than because of any actual suffering. He had always been so good-tempered, so light-hearted, but when I begged him to tell me what was wrong with him, he replied nervously, almost angrily:

“ ‘Nothing at all . . . I assure you it’s nothing . . . Don’t worry me . . . I’m just a little out of sorts . . . Nothing of any importance . . . In a few days I shall be all right again . . .’

“I asked him to see a doctor: he became violently angry.

“Finding him so changed in manner, so changed in his attitude towards me, I began to wonder whether I had been mistaken in my estimate of him. Was it possible his character was so different from what I had believed it to be?”

“Then came an evening when, just as we were finishing dinner, he complained of violent pains in his head. Almost at once his eyes became glazed, he jumped up, upsetting his chair, and without any warning fell flat on the ground, dragging the plates and glasses from the table with him. He struggled, making inarticulate cries, foaming at the mouth. The servants were terrified. I knelt down and spoke to him: he did not hear me, did not know me.

“The doctor who came—they had brought the nearest one—made a very slight examination. I know now that it was not necessary to look long to understand. He asked me if I were subject to attacks of the kind. I replied:

“ ‘This is the first. What can it be?’

“He looked curiously at me, no doubt very astonished by my question, shook his head, and said gently:

“ ‘Sooner or later you will have to know. It is epilepsy.’

“Ah! that word, that terrible word. It still rings in my ears. I remembered how I had never heard it without feeling terror and a sort of disgust. Once, passing a crowd in the street with my father, we stopped to see what had happened, but my father drew me away quickly. ‘Don’t look . . . it’s an epileptic.’

“And here my husband was one . . . I stood stupefied, not daring to go near the unfortunate being they were holding down on the floor.

“ ‘I am very sorry,’ said the doctor, probably regretting his brutal frankness, ‘but you must not let the word make the thing seem more terrible than it really is. It is useless to deny that it is a grave form of illness, but it is much more common than is usually believed, and there is little real danger for those who are able to be properly looked after. Your husband will recover from this attack and will probably not have another for months, for years . . . All I can do is to warn you that for some time to come you must not let there be any chance of your having a child.’

“ ‘I have been enceinte for two months . . .’

“He bit his lips, prescribed a sleeping draught, and left. My husband recovered consciousness during the night. When he saw me by his bedside he hardly dared to hold out his hand to me, hardly dared I put mine in his . . . I had become convinced that he had known all along about his disease, and that his refusals to allow himself to be looked after, his black moods, his ill-temper, had all been due to the fear that in the end I must inevitably know the truth.

“I did not say anything to my parents. I was divided between the fear of finding myself alone with my husband and that of revealing the nature of his illness to others. But the desire to know for certain had got possession of me. Nor was it difficult to find out. People are always only too happy to tell you about the misfortunes of others. And in a few days I had learned the history of my husband’s family.

“His father—died of epilepsy.

“One of his brothers, who was supposed to have gone abroad and had never been heard of since, was shut up in a lunatic asylum.

“Another—an idiot who died at twenty.

“My husband—epileptic since the age of fourteen.

“This was the horrible family line that stretched itself out before me. The same taint had affected them one and all, and I became terrified as I wondered whether the child I was carrying in me might come into the world cursed in the same way.

“Now that I am confessing, I will make a clean breast of it. You may condemn me as a bad wife and unworthy daughter if you like before you pass judgment on me as a criminal mother—what does it matter? I wish you to understand that from that moment my life was a hell; that I lived through weeks of perpetual nightmare: that I grew to hate equally the parents of my husband who had forced this terrible inheritance on him, my husband himself for having cruelly deceived me, and my own parents who had neglected the chief of their duties, that of knowing to whom they gave me.

“Nevertheless, because I respected myself, and also because I felt ashamed, I remained silent.

“Six weeks later my husband had another attack, more violent than the last. After that the fits became more frequent. He soon had one every day, then two. Nothing did him any good, and at last he died in horrible convulsions.

“His death effaced my bitterness. I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I excused the poor dead soul, knowing that it was his great love that had made him hide the truth from me.

“The months that followed had no special interest. I lived through them absorbed in my own thoughts as I waited for the birth of my child.

“I must have made a mistake in my calculations, for it came ten or fifteen days sooner than I expected. That explains the absence of a nurse, midwife or doctor. I had not the strength to get to the bell. But the thought of the child that would so soon be mine comforted me, and I was almost happy in my agony.

“But just as it was born a frightful clearness of vision came to me. I said just now that I didn’t hear it cry. I lied. I heard the sharp little cry, and it was that cry that pierced my brain like an arrow.

“Awful visions flashed before my eyes. I saw its father and his ghastly agonies. I imagined I saw the brother struggling in his straight waistcoat: the other, the repulsive idiot, and the grandfather, the root from which these branches sprang, epileptic also. I saw clearly what my child in his turn would be. I was afraid both of what I seemed to see and of what I probably should see in the future.

“But that was nothing compared with what followed. Suddenly, as I felt the little piece of living flesh move against my side, a mad terror overwhelmed me. I tried to soothe myself by saying it was my child, my own child. But a voice seemed to hiss in my ears:

“ ‘Child of a madman! Child of a madman!’

“I began to shudder as one would at the touch of some loathly reptile . . . It is unbelievable . . . How can any one understand? . . . A mother afraid of *her own child* . . . of a thing so fragile, hardly alive . . . But it was so, and I could not dominate the feeling. I pulled myself away from it, and it seemed as if I was bound to defend myself against something terrible . . . something monstrous . I flung myself on it . . . I seized the little neck that slipped under my fingers, and stretching out my arms so that if there were any instinctive resistance it could not even touch me, miserable wretch . . . savage . . . criminal . . . I tightened my fingers . . .”

She broke off, and falling on her knees, her face in her hands, sobbed:

“Oh! my baby.. . my little baby. . . afraid of you . . .”