

# The Kiss

By Maurice Level

“Yes, *ma Soeur*, it was for a woman he did it, my poor boy. Soon after he knew her he changed completely. He had always been so quiet and good-tempered, and he suddenly became irritable and short in his answers. He invented all sorts of stories so as not to have to give me his wages on Saturdays. Sometimes I waited up for him till two in the morning, and when I heard the door shut and knew he was in bed, I used to go quietly to his room, and I could see that his eyes were swollen. Once the tears were still wet on his face.

“At first I thought he had got into trouble at the factory. I went to see the master, and he told me there was nothing wrong there, but that the boy didn’t work as well as he used to and that it was to be feared he had fallen into the hands of bad companions. I took care not to let him see that I was watching him, but I made enquiries, and I found that he was often with a woman, a low woman, a prostitute—excuse me, *ma Soeur*—who walked the streets at night.

“If it had only been a working-girl like himself, in spite of my being old and needing all the help he can give me, I would have married them. But that! One day I went to see her. I asked her to leave him alone; I told her he was all I had in the world. She used awful language and turned me out, and as I went downstairs she called after me:

“ ‘I have taken him away from you, have I; all right. You shall have him back right enough—you’ll see . . .’

“Next day they brought the poor child home on a stretcher. He had a shot in his chest. From what I could learn or guess they had quarreled because of me, and because he didn’t give her enough money. When he realized that he no longer amused her, that she didn’t want to see him again, he lost his head, and without thinking of himself, or me, or anything, he tried to kill himself. Ah! it is hard to bear such things at my age.”

Standing near the narrow hospital bed, the nun had listened in silence. The sick youth, who had been in a state of coma, was beginning to give little broken cries like calls. Trembling, the mother asked:

“What does the doctor say? Is there any chance of his getting well?”

“I’m afraid, poor mother, that he is very ill. But we haven’t lost hope. He is young . . . Now you must go home. He must not have the excitement of seeing you when he first recovers consciousness. You may be quite sure he will be well looked after. You can come again to—morrow for a few minutes . . . every day if you like.”

Weeping bitterly, but biting her lips to prevent her sobs being heard by those in the other beds, the old woman walked slowly away, turning every few steps to look back.

A deep silence fell on the ward. The shadows of night were creeping in. The whisperings and turnings caused by an exit or an entrance gradually died away. It was the hour when the sick, tired by a long, weary day, fall gently asleep. The nun sat down by the pillow of the boy.

She was very young. Her eyes were clear as crystal, and there was still in them something of the wonder you see in those of children. Her lips were curved; there had been no time for them to take the lines given by the never-ceasing murmur of prayers. Her face was round and rosy; little curls with golden lights in them sometimes escaped from under the white band that circled her forehead. But notwithstanding her fresh young laughter, she knew all the words and ways that

soothe pain. When she spoke to the sick men her voice had tender inflections like those of a mother or elder sister.

Towards the middle of the night the boy recovered consciousness. The nun had not left his side. He wanted to ask questions, but she told him he must keep quiet. He obeyed, docile as a child, and fell asleep.

During the first days he saw her constantly, for she rarely left his side. Timid, almost ashamed, he hardly ever spoke, lying motionless for hours with his eyes shut. It was only when the door opened or shut that he raised his eyelids, and they would fall again immediately.

More than once on these occasions he had spoken, saying shyly:

“*Ma Soeur* . . .”

But when the nun had bent over him with a: “What is it, little one?” he turned away his head, murmuring:

“Nothing. . . Nothing . . .”

One morning he had more courage:

“Tell me, please, *ma Soeur*, if any one has come to ask about me since I came here?”

“But of course. Your mother—you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes . . . But any one else!”

“No, nobody.”

He turned away his head, but she saw there were tears in her eyes.

“Come, come, little one, this won’t do. What’s the matter?”

A pressing need to confide in some one after his long silence drew the confession from him:

“It is so unkind. I can tell you anything... you are so good to me . . . and I shall feel better if you know . . . Mother doesn’t know, she thinks it was an accident . . . But it wasn’t. I tried to kill myself . . .”

The nun stopped him with a gesture:

“She knows all about it.”

“Ah!”

For some time he was silent, slowly shaking his head.

“My poor old mother . . . I have given her so much trouble. She will forgive me, for she knows it wasn’t my fault . . . I was so unhappy. When that woman turned me away, I thought I couldn’t go on living without her. I loved her so much . . . She could have done anything she liked with me . . . And you see that even though she knows it is because of her I am here, she has never even come to ask how I am. Whenever I heard the door open I thought I should see her walking towards me . . . But now I know she will never come . . . I don’t want her to, either . . . I shall leave off thinking of her . . . I shall leave off loving her . . . No, I don’t love her at all now . . .”

The tears that were in his eyes gave the lie to his words.

Presently he asked:

“It is a great sin, isn’t it, *ma Soeur*, to try to kill yourself?”

“A very great sin. The greatest of all.”

“But if you are too unhappy . . . wouldn’t God know that, and understand? . . .”

She bowed her head and clasped her hands; her shoulders moved, and the wings of her white head-dress trembled as she replied in a low voice:

“Shh. . . Sbh. . . You must not tire yourself, little one . . . You must shut your eyes and go to sleep . . .”

He seemed to do so, but about two in the morning he became very restless. They sent for the nun.

“Well, and what’s all this about?” she said as she bent over him. “You are not being good!”

He burst into harsh, incoherent words that came in gasps.

She took one of his hands in hers and with the other gently wiped the perspiration from his forehead, trying to calm him.

Soothed as if by a caress, he grew quiet. He breathed more easily, his voice was even, his words intelligible.

“Yes, I know I am late . . . It was my work that kept me . . . I will come earlier next time. You don’t like the flowers! . . . On Sunday we will pick a lot . . . We will go to the river for the day, we will have dinner on the grass . . . We will go home early, and you will see how much I love you . . . If you only knew how much I love you! I love your eyes and your hair. . . all of you. Your skin smells like flowers.”

This was said in a tone of supplication, and it sounded like a passionate prayer. But soon he was talking too quickly again, the words running into one another.

The nun, her eyes anxious, let him talk on, and the prayers she murmured mechanically sounded like the accompaniment to a Song of Love.

He began to moan and shudder, and suddenly he sprang up:

“What! Going away? Never see you again? . . .”

He was panting now, the breath coming in short, painful gasps. The nun hurriedly brought a light and looked carefully at him.

He was livid, and his eyes were wild. Deep shadows stretched from the eyes to the corner of the lips; the temples seemed to have fallen in. Drenched with perspiration, his hair was sticking in wisps to his forehead, and his palpitating nostrils seemed to draw all the rest of his face to them.

Ah! she knew them, these agonized faces that looked as if the mind were trying in one minute to live over again the whole of a life .

Softly, so as not to disturb those in the other beds, she said to a night-nurse:

“Quick . . . quick . . . bring the doctor and send for the chaplain . . . No. 6 is very ill. . .”

Kneeling by the bed, she began to pray:

“Thy will be done, O God, but pardon, oh, pardon this poor child.”

The dying boy had taken her folded hands in his and went on talking, but his voice was now quiet, far, far away.

“Don’t go . . . I will give you everything you want . . . Anything, if you only will stay with me . . . If you leave me, I shall die . . . Come . . .”

His head brushed against the forehead of the nun. His neck stretched forwards, he bent towards her.

“Come . . . I adore you . . .”

He was touching her eyes and cheeks . . . He reached her lips—

She started back and tried to rise.

But he grasped her shoulders, and his dream carrying him right over the threshold of eternity, he implored:

“Oh, stay . . . I love you . . .”

She shut her eyes and bent her head. He pressed his lips on hers in a long, fervent, noiseless kiss, one of those deep kisses in which two beings merge their identity, a kiss like those he had learned in the arms of the prostitute.

Under it the trembling lips of the nun opened—was it in a last prayer? Or had her thoughts flashed back to the fiancé whose death had turned her life to God?

