

The Son by Arthur Schnitzler

Extracts from a doctor's manuscripts

It's midnight, and I'm still seated at my desk. The thought of that unfortunate woman won't leave me in peace ... I can see the gloomy courtyard room with the antiquated pictures; the bed and the pillow stained with blood, and laid upon it that pale face with the eyes half-closed. And it was, to cap it all, a dull rainy morning. And in the opposite corner of the room, legs crossed on a chair and sporting a defiant air, sat that monster, the son who had lifted the hatchet against his mother's head ...

Yes, there are people like that, and they are not always out of their minds! I pondered this scornful face, trying to read something in it. A malevolent, pale face, not ugly or stupid, with bloodless lips, the eyes dull, the chin sunk in his crumpled collar and a cravate loosely tied around the neck, one end of which he twisted between his slim fingers. Sitting like that, he waited for the police to come and take him away. Meanwhile someone kept watch outside, in front of the door.

I had bandaged the temples of the unfortunate mother, who had remained unconscious. Then I left her, after getting a call from a woman in the neighbourhood who asked me to attend her and in the stairwell ran into the policemen on their way to arrest the murderer. The inhabitants of this inner city tenement were very excited, and stood in groups in front of the entrance to the building and made comments about the sad event. One or two even asked me how things were going up there, and whether there was any hope for the victim. But I was unable to give them a categorical reply.

One person I recognised, a no longer quite so young woman married to a minor civil servant whom I had seen on a house-visit once before, held me back a bit longer. Leaning on the balustrade of the stairwell, she appeared devastated: 'all that is much more awful than you imagine, Doctor!' she said, shaking her head. 'Much more awful?' I queried. 'Yes, Doctor! If you only knew how she loved

him!' 'She loved him?' 'Yes, she spoiled him, pampered him.' 'That lad? And why?' 'Yes, why? ... You see, Doctor, the young man was corrupted from his infancy: she allowed him everything ... She forgave him the worst kind of escapade ... We often had to warn her, the people in the building. That rascal used to be a drinker when he was a boy, and then when he got older, the stories!' 'What kind of stories?' 'For a while he was in a business but then he had to get out!' 'He had to?' 'Yes, he got up to all kinds of stupidities, and even stole from his boss ... And his mother reimbursed the money, that poor woman who hardly had a roof to her mouth!

'What does she do for a living then?'

'She was a seamstress, and her income was really paltry. And the young man, instead of supporting her took the little bit that she earned and blew it in the pub and God knows where. But even that wasn't enough for him. The cutlery, two or three paintings, the grandfather-clock, nearly everything that wasn't nailed down ended up at the pawnbroker's ...!'

'And she accepted it?'

'Accepted it?! — She loved him even more! None of us could understand it ... And then he wanted money ... She gave him what she had ... He threatened her: he had to have money!'

'How do you know all this?'

'It was common knowledge in the building. We could often hear him shouting in the lift-cage and when he returned drunk at night or even in the day he started shouting and complaining as soon as he got in the door. The poor woman had debts everywhere: sometimes there was no bread up there ... Those of us in the building sometimes helped out although none of us is that well-off. But things only got worse. She seemed to be completely blind to the situation. She saw everything as being youthful high spirits, and sometimes she apologised to us for the din he made

when he came back at night and staggered up the stairs. Yes, Doctor, that's the kind of son he was! But that it could come to this ...'

And now she told me the whole story.

'Last night he came back in the small hours. I heard him stumbling on the steps to our building. He was singing I don't know what with his raucous voice. I suppose he demanded money as usual upstairs. He had left the door open, and we could hear him ranting ... just imagine, all the way from the fourth to the second story. And suddenly, there was a cry. Another cry. People poured up the stairs at that point, and then we saw it. Apparently he just stood there and shrugged his shoulders ...!'

I went on my way. Behind me I heard laboured footfalls. They were taking the matricide away. Men, women and children were standing in the passageways, and ogling at what was going on: nobody said a word. I had turned on the landing, walked down the stairs, left the building and started on my routine calls in a very dejected frame of mind. Shortly after midday I returned to the house in which the event had happened; I found the victim as I had left her, unconscious and breathing with some difficulty. The patient's attendant told me that meanwhile the enquiry committee had dropped by to establish the elements of the crime. It was so dark in the room that I asked her to light a candle and place it on the little night-table at the head of the bed ... What an expression of suffering was etched into the dying face of that woman! I asked her a question. She became agitated, groaning and opening her eyes a little. But she couldn't speak. After having prescribed what was needed I left the room ... When I came up in the evening, the poor woman seemed to have rallied somewhat. She responded when I asked her how she was feeling. 'Better,' she said, and tried to smile. Then she fell back in the same state of

unconsciousness she had been in before ...

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Six o'clock in the morning!

It was after midnight ... I had just written the last line in my diary when there was a vigorous ringing of the bell ... Frau Martha Eberlein — that was the name of the injured woman — was asking for me. Some young lad from the building had been sent to fetch me; I was to go to her now, right away, right away ... Was she delirious with fever; was she breathing her last ...? The boy had no idea other than that it was extremely urgent.

I followed the heels of the young emissary. While he stayed below with a small wax candle in his hand as illumination I tore up the stairs of the building with my surgical bag in my hand. The last steps were lost in the darkness, and the feeble, flickering light of the candle only accompanied me at the foot of the stairs. But a strip of light shone in my direction from the half-open door of the ill woman's apartment. I entered, and crossing the antechamber which served as a kitchen, stepped into the bedroom looking on to the courtyard. The attendant had stood up when she heard my steps and came over to me. 'What's the matter?' I whispered ... 'She absolutely insists on talking to you, Doctor,' said the woman.

I was already at the bedside; the patient lay immobile in front of me; her eyes were wide open and staring at me. Then she said, in a low voice: 'Thank you, Doctor, thank you!' I took her hand; the pulse was stronger than I'd expected. I adopted the cheerful tone that we always have to assume even when we don't feel like it. 'Well, Frau Eberlein, I see you're doing better, that is very heartening!'

She smiled. 'Yes, better ... and I have to talk to you.'

'Oh yes?' I said. 'Well, I'm listening.'

'But only for your ears!'

I told the attendant to take a 5-minute break.

'Outside!' added the patient.

With another questioning gaze in my direction, the attendant left the room,

closing the door gently behind her. I was alone with the patient.

'Please take a chair,' she said, motioning with her eyes to the chair which was at the foot of the bed. I sat down, took her hand in mine, and edged closer so that I could understand her better.

She started talking in a rather low voice. 'I took the liberty, Doctor,' she said, 'since it is very important that I speak to you.'

'What can I do for you, my dear lady?' I asked ... 'Whatever you do, don't exert yourself too much!'

'No, no ... it's just a few words I have to say ... You have to set him free, Doctor!'

'Who?'

'Him ... my son!'

'My dear Frau Eberlein,' I replied, very moved ... 'You know very well I don't have the power to do that!'

'Oh, but it is in your power, if there is any justice ...'

'Please, I must ask you ... do nothing to get upset ... I can see you consider me a friend and I thank you for your confidence; but I'm also your doctor and I have the right to order you about a little, wouldn't you say? In that case, you must rest, above all rest!'

'Rest,' she repeated, while her eyes and mouth twitched with pain ... 'Doctor, you have to listen to me ... it's such a burden on my soul!'

Having read on my speechless face what she thought was an invitation to talk she began, fiercely gripping my hand as she did so:

'He isn't guilty — or at least less guilty than people can suspect. I've been a wretchedly bad mother ...'

'You?'

'Yes, me ... I've been a criminal!'

'Frau Eberlein!'

'You'll understand me soon ... I'm not Frau Eberlein ... I'm Fräulein Martha Eberlein ... People think I'm a widow ... And although I've done nothing to hoodwink them, I couldn't go around telling these old stories to everyone.'

'That may well be, but you don't need to torment yourself now because of that!'

'Oh, not because of that! It was 20 years ago that he walked out on me ... abandoned me, before he was born, my

son, our son. And then ... it's only a pure stroke of luck that he's alive, Doctor, because ... the first night I wanted to kill him ... Yes, don't look at me like that! I was alone and desperate ... But I don't want to exonerate myself ... I took bedcovers and sheets and laid them over him and thought he would suffocate ... Then, in the morning, when I lifted the covers off, scared as anything ... he whimpered, and breathed — he was alive! The poor woman wept. I couldn't find a word to say. Then she resumed, after a few moments of silence:

'He looked at me so wide-eyed and wouldn't stop whimpering! And in front of this little thing, that wasn't even a day old, I started trembling ... I still clearly remember this baby staring at me for perhaps an hour and thinking: what a reproach there is in those eyes! And perhaps it has understood and will accuse you! And perhaps it has a memory and will accuse you for ever and ever ... And he grew up, the little thing: and there was always the same reproach in those big child's eyes. When he lifted his little hands to my face, I thought: yes ... he's going to scratch you, he's going to take revenge, he remembers the first night of his life when you buried him under the covers ...! Then he began to babble and talk. I was afraid of the day when he would really be able to talk. But that took such a long time, a very long time. And I was still waiting; whenever he opened his mouth, I was still waiting: now he's going to say it to you. Yes, yes, he's going to tell you that he's not a dupe, that all the kisses, all the caresses, all the love in the world can't make you a real mother. He defended himself, he wouldn't let himself be kissed, he was unruly, he didn't love me ... I let him strike me when he was just 5 years old, and later too, I allowed myself to be hit and smiled ... I had a terrible desire to be rid of my guilt, and knew that it would never happen! How could I ever make amends for it? And he always looked at me with the same frightful eyes! When he got older and went to school, it became completely clear to me that he saw through me ... And I accepted everything, with a contrite heart ... Ah, he wasn't a good boy, but ... I couldn't be cross with him! Cross! I

loved him, loved him to the point of madness ... And more than once I fell at his feet, kissing his hands and his knees and his feet! Oh, he didn't forgive me. He never showed me a glance of affection or a friendly smile ...! He turned 10, 12 years old; he hated me! He wasn't good at school ... One day he came home with defiant words: 'I'm through with school, and they don't want to have me anymore ...' Oh, what a stir I was in that day! I wanted him to learn some skilled occupation: I pleaded with him, begged him, but he remained obstinate: he didn't want to hear a thing about work. He hung around on the streets ... What could I say to him, rebuke him with? A glance from him stripped me of all my courage. How I trembled at the thought of the day when he'd cast it in my face: 'You, my mother! You've forfeited your rights over me!' But he never said it ... Sometimes, when he came home drunk, I thought drunkenness would loosen his tongue ... But no ... Sometimes it even happened that he collapsed and lay on the floor until midday. And when he came to and saw me sitting next to him, he looked at me with disdain ... with a smile on his lips, as if he had understood everything and wanted to say: 'Yes, we certainly know where we are with things ...!' And he needed money, lots of money, and I had to cough it up ... But things didn't always work out the way he planned, and then he'd become nasty, extremely nasty: often he was violent with me ... And when I slumped down on the bed, he stood in front of me with that disdainful grin that said: No, I'm not going to give you the mercy blow ...! Finally, this morning, he staggered up the stairs ... 'Money! Money!' God help me but I didn't have any! 'What do you mean, you don't have any?' And I pleaded with him to wait until next week, tomorrow, this evening! No! I had to give him money ... He bellowed that I'd hidden it away and searched everywhere and ripped open the cupboards and pulled up the bed ... and swore ... And then ... And then ...'

She stopped talking ... After a moment, she added:

'And wasn't it his right?'

'No!' I said ... 'No, Frau Eberlein ...! You freed yourself of blame long ago. All your

acts of kindness have long since atoned for what you once did out in the brief distress of being prey to a delusion ...!'

'No, Doctor!' she retorted, 'it was no delusion! I remember that night only too well ... I wasn't crazy, I knew what I wanted ...! And that's why you have to go the court, Doctor, and explain to them what you've heard from me; they will set him free, they have to ...!'

I saw that it would be difficult to go against her will. 'Now, Frau Eberlein,' I said, 'we'll speak about this again tomorrow. Today you have need of rest ... You've already tired yourself out far too much ...!'

She shook her head.

'Doctor! A dying person's wish is sacrosanct ... You have to promise me you'll do it.'

'You won't die. You're going to get better.'

'I am going to die ... because I want to ... Will you testify before the court ...?'

'Before anything else, you're going to follow my orders: don't forget that I'm your doctor! I'm ordering you now to be quiet and to rest.'

I stood up on saying these words and called the attendant in. But Frau Eberlein didn't let go of the hand which I had extended to her to say farewell ... a question glowed in her eyes.

'Yes!' I said.

'Thank you!' she replied. Then I gave the requisite instructions to the attendant and left, expressing my intention of returning as early as possible the next day ...

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The next morning I found the patient unconscious; by midday she was dead ... Her secret is still within me, concealed in these pages, and I'm free to execute — or not to — her last will. Whether I go to the courts or not ... that's neither here nor there for the miserable son of this unfortunate mother! No judge in the world will agree to accept the mother's misdeed as a circumstance that might mitigate her son's crime: his is a crime that deserves the death sentence. It was more than enough for that poor woman that she had to atone for what she did through the

delusion of seeing that terrible night recast as a perpetual accusation in her son's eyes.

Or might it be possible after all? We all have blurred recollections of the first hours of our life: we can't interpret them any longer and yet they haven't disappeared without trace ... Is perhaps a ray of sunlight falling through the window the prime cause of an untroubled nature? And when a mother's first look swaddles us with love isn't its dulcet and lingering afterglow what we find in the blue of children's eyes? On the other hand, when the first look is one of despair and hate, why shouldn't its destructive force keep burning in the infant soul, which takes in thousands of different sense-impressions long before it can decipher them? And what happens to the sensibility of a child when its first night is spent in the nightmarishly unconscious fear of death? Nobody has ever been able to render an account of the first hour of his life ... and none of you — that's what I'll say to the judges — can know how much of the good and bad in him is owed to the first breath of air, the first ray of light, or his mother's first glance! Yes, I'll stand before the court. I've made my decision, since it seems to me it's still far from clear enough how little we are permitted to want and how much we are obliged to do.

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