

ONE

I

How could I, Georg Letham, a physician, a man of scientific training, of certain philosophical aspirations, let myself be so far carried away as to commit an offense of the gravest sort, the murder of my wife? And to commit this crime chiefly for financial reasons? Or so it would appear to the outsider. For money was in fact the one thing I could never get from that woman, who was doglike in her attachment to me. Am I reviling her with this word “doglike”? No. I am only attempting to explain, and so far I have not succeeded. There is a gaping internal contradiction here, and yet that is how it was.

There was astonishment in legal circles and among the general public, as represented by opinions in the metropolitan press, that during my trial, when it was a matter of life and death to me, I yawned. It was the third day of the trial, the heat was oppressive, the oral arguments were telling me nothing new, and yet – how could a person accused of such a crime be so blatantly uninterested in the outcome of his trial? But this contradiction is only apparent, unlike the many true contradictions in my character. It may have interested others what became

of me. But it could not interest me what others thought of my crime or by what “punishment,” under what section of the law, they exacted redress for the purpose of “retribution and deterrence.” I could not have gone through all I had gone through and still acknowledged the logical connection between crime and punishment. What law would apply to me? Common law and traditional law do not do me justice. And natural law? Too often I had seen the innocent suffer, while the guilty – vile and despicable creatures – attained happiness. They could sentence me. But they could not force me to recognize this sentence, execution or exile to C., where yellow fever and other tropical scourges were at that moment raging, as punishment.

Or were these arguments supposed to be enlightening me about my antisocial nature, about my “morbid character,” about my unfitness to live as a respectable citizen in a well-ordered state? My own experience of this “well-ordered state,” as whose moral exponent the court presented itself, had shown me that it was anything but a healthy, moral organism of orderly character.

But I had done the deed. Indeed I had, and nothing else mattered. And if a human being has on his conscience a crime so irrefutable that it can never be denied or glossed over or excused – if I had actually been driven to extinguish a human life, what is the good of talk, of lengthy oratory and presentations of evidence? The one who committed the crime cannot save himself now. But then he never could, not even *before* his crime. Even if he had foreseen *everything*, would not the internal forces that drove him still have been stronger than the counsel of reason?

His outward fate may be decided now. There is hardly anything left to hope for. If my skin is thick, I will survive a good deal. If I am sensitive,

I will perish. What is, is. Everything has happened. Everything is over.

In my youth, after my father had carried out his educational experiments on me, I worshipped objective knowledge in the form of natural science and subjective enjoyment of life in the form of money. Money was more than a superficial pleasure – it seemed to me the only and therefore the best substitute for God in our otherwise faithless time. Money is the ground beneath one's feet. He who has money at least has something. He is standing on the securest foundation there is in the contemporary world order.

To know and to possess as much as possible – such a simple recipe, and yet so difficult to follow! How devotedly I toiled, in my heart always disinterested, cold, and isolated, in the service of these two gods, spending my nights in experimental bacteriological facilities and pathology laboratories or at the gaming table – and in both my endeavors I had luck. With the help of my winnings, I carried out the most extravagant experiments (chimpanzees and rhesus monkeys are incredibly expensive). I sought distraction in work when I was tired of gambling, and sought distraction in gambling when I no longer had the drive and concentration necessary for intellectual work. At the green baccarat table, I had new ideas for scientific experiments. My fortunes were happy, but I was seldom happy myself.

I lost my mother early. My siblings, one brother, one sister, were strangers to me. My father played a central but calamitous role in my life; we could not be friends.

Though I had long since become weary of my way of life, I refused a chair at a small university. I had no interest in teaching. I did publish the results of my bacteriological experiments, which threw light on an

interesting rare disease, rat-bite fever, but for the time being I was not pursuing them. I had won a fairly large amount at gambling. I locked my door and traveled. I met my future wife. She was very well-to-do, unbeautiful, no longer young. Thoughts of financial gain were far from my mind at first. There was nothing about community of property in our marriage contract, which we drafted one heavenly morning beneath palms and fruit-laden orange trees. And there was (and still is) a daughter from my wife's first marriage; she was her legal heir and would soon be of marriageable age. Looking out over the azure sea, we discussed our future ménage. Far too many rooms, but only the one (shared) bedroom. A luxurious household, whose upkeep would come from my wife's interest earnings and my income as a physician, contributed on an equal basis.

I had completely forgotten that I was not only a researcher but also a credentialed, qualified physician. And I was a good diagnostician, even if I knew human diseases and physical abnormalities more from the lecture hall, from the dissection table, and from the microscope than from bedside clinical observation. Modern scientific analytical methods – X-ray examination, chemical analysis, biological-function testing – are so well developed now that these accurate tests are an ample substitute for bedside experience.

I also had adequate manual skills from my experiments. Vivisection experiments, experiments on living material, cannot be performed without a certain degree of surgical skill. The laws of asepsis, the secret of all surgical practice, are also applicable here.

More than anything else, I had a certain interest in surgery and gynecology, an interest that deepened when I spent some months working as a volunteer at a large clinic following my return. Thus I considered

moving and eventually did move from theoretical science to practical surgery and gynecology.

I married and became a practicing physician. My wife was soon devoting all her energy and irrepressible vitality to making things easier for me. I opened a private clinic on a lovely quiet street in the city. Medical colleagues who had previously sought my advice as a pathologist sent me patients, and everything seemed to be going well. Illnesses interested me, the ill did not. This is the case and is necessarily the case with ninety percent of all surgeons. Of my own free will I had promised my wife (she was softhearted, much too much so) that I would end my experiments with animals and never again set foot in a casino. I led a well-ordered life.

What was it at bottom that I wished to do “of my own free will”? To become a human being, as millions are. Then came the war. I was inducted, but was not deployed as a field surgeon. Instead I was granted the special favor, so it was thought, of being assigned to a bacteriological laboratory. A mobile task force, sent to trouble spots when needed. It was a time not only of senseless waste of life – millions dead – but also of terrible epidemics. All manner of bacteria were being unleashed, and these were necessarily more dangerous when people were starving, careworn, weakened, and half dead from loss of blood than they would have been in peacetime. Under the wretched hygienic conditions prevailing among the people of Europe in the final years of the war, Spanish gripe took forms that recalled the plagues of the Middle Ages. People dropped like flies.

I was not lazy. I worked day and night. I did my utmost. I had superiors and subordinates. I had regulations to follow and orders to carry out. Serum supply, epidemic control, practical research. It made a difference.

I expressed no views about the whys and wherefores of the war and the strategic operations. Nor was anything said to me about them.

My wife wrote to me every day. I wrote back when I could. I was surrounded by people, but did not speak of personal matters for weeks on end. I was respected. I won no friends, but I did win commendations and decorations. After my crime many years later, I was sentenced not to the guillotine but only to exile, and I have these tokens of appreciation for my patriotic effort to thank for that. For the person who had had a hand in epidemic control during that critical period had rendered outstanding service to his country.

But about what that time destroyed in me – I will say nothing. How it brought to fruition what my father had begun – I will not describe it. He – my father – and my country too, in fact all the countries of the world, are hardly blameless for the development of my character. But is there any way to tell that to the judges, the jury? Better to cover mouth with hand and yawn discreetly.

II

Yes, my father had a determining influence on my youth. My life was the continuation of that of my parents by other means. My parents were in conflict with each other, and so I was in conflict with myself. My mother died comparatively young. From her I reaped the benefit only of a good physical looking after and the usual maternal warmth – she taught me how to talk. My father taught me how to think. Whatever I am as a thinking person, for better or worse, I owe to him. It took me a long time to escape from this childish thralldom. My wife, too, kept me in thrall – a thralldom of kindness, if I may put it that way.

I married her so that I would not be alone. The idea was that she

would be around, give me the illusion of companionship, but not control me. Unfortunately she had other ideas about our relationship. She was ugly, as I said, a light brunette who wrongly thought herself blonde, narrow shoulders, broad hips, a clay-colored face as flat as a sheet of paper, with a snub nose, large nostrils into whose hairy interior it was possible to see. The usual depilatories were no help, only aggravated this ugly feature. Her teeth were few and unlovely, and so she did not like to show them when speaking or laughing. Later they were replaced with splendid dentures. For she was not without vanity and did more to conceal her ugliness than many women of acknowledged beauty do to maintain it. Her eyes were light brown to light gray – a rare tint, although it harmonized with her also light, fairly luxuriant eyebrows. From the beginning her ugliness had not repelled me but, in combination with her good social standing, her positive attitude toward life, and her unassuming nature, had actually attracted me, since I knew that this was not a lady who would ever lead me astray with her beauty and sensual appeal. Those gifts by which women generally influence men like me could in her case never have driven me to such an act as I have committed. But there are other complications, other conflicts.

My father had dominated me because he impressed me by his very existence. He would have existed without me, but not the reverse. He dominated me all the more strongly because of his formidable ability to take hold of people, to handle them. Taking hold implies letting go, and handling is never far from manhandling. He was older than I was. This was not yet a reason to look up to him. But he was also stronger and more beautiful (beauty, even in the oddest forms and guises, has always had an almost magical effect on me). But most of all he dominated me – banal, but true – because I loved him. He was aware of all

this. For he was clever with people, perhaps because he was psychologically independent of anyone and everyone during the greater part of his life. Later, when he needed *me*, when, with graying but always dyed hair, with bitter creases appearing in his small, sharp-featured face, with deepening and ever more depressing perceptions of life, he was rapidly growing solitary, suddenly he was stranger to me than any stranger.

He was feared at work, and he was influential, more influential than the minister. He was polite, rich and tightfisted, pious and an anarchist, a misanthrope since his unsuccessful expedition, and always and in all things basically insincere – perhaps even against his will at times. He had wearied of lying, dissembling, playacting. They were no longer worth his while. He had attained everything they could attain for him. But he had to go on as he was. I no longer asked his advice, I had only myself to thank for my scientific career. The two of us reluctantly sorted out financial matters directly; in my youth, when they were important to me, they had been settled through his attorney and my legal guardian. The estate inherited from my mother was soon no longer worth talking about anyway.

In the postwar years he repeatedly came to me and guardedly stated his interest – but he never gained any insight into what was of critical concern to me. He suddenly took it into his head to drop his artificial mask of youth, which he had cherished for too long. Once I spent some time away, vacationing with my wife in a southern port. When I came back, he had snow-white hair. But, strange to say, his white, slightly curly, still thick hair looked like a wig in a theatrical hairdresser's window. Yes, it was like the journeyman's piece of a hairdresser's assistant, resting on a milliner's block. I smiled and held my tongue. I looked at

him as though he were a wax doll in a carnival museum and gravely wished him all the best on his most recent promotion, which made him directly subordinate to the minister. He had risen that high already. The ministers changed and he remained.

He had awakened my compulsion to heedlessly, ruthlessly, look to the heart, had shown me as a defenseless child how to get to the bottom of things and ideas, how to control people and circumstances. He had told me of his experiences on his unsuccessful voyage to the North Pole. Not to amuse me. The impact he had on me was like that of a torpedo on a ship in passage. Over time I got to the heart of him too, of course, for finally what made him tick was no simpler and no more complex than what makes most people tick. He no longer needed to tell me anything. I looked at him steadily. I spoke of the events of the day as described in the most recent newspapers, we did not argue, we were in agreement about everything, asked nothing of each other, exemplary father, exemplary son, we both smiled, we shook each other's hands, offered each other a glass of wine or the like; I inquired, feigning an interest I did not have, as to the health of my siblings, he responded to my questions with a wave of his hand – they're immaterial to me too – but then he became more serious and asked how I had invested my money. As though he were unaware that everything belonged to my wife and nothing to me. But I ignored that, only smiled and said: "Wisely, of course!" Nothing more. And yet this point concerned me a great deal. My father and I were strangers to each other. More than that: he bored me. I understood him and he bored me. What did he have to say to me? I knew his ballad of the rats.

He bored me to tears with his love especially. Just the same as my wife. No, different in one way. Loving and not being loved did her heart

good. Most women never entirely cast off masochism. If not in every respect the ideal man as imagined by a woman of her age, to her I was certainly like a child particularly cherished by its mother because of the pain and perils of bringing it into the world. If only she had kept her demonstrations of affection to herself! All too often she behaved toward me like a brooding hen, all warmth and filthy plumage, or like an imbecilic, sanctimonious, provincial wet nurse, or something. Unfortunately my father had picked up this manner from her, and it was often enough to drive a person to distraction. Had she given me hard cash (or a gun) instead of all the endearments and demonstrations of love, everything would have turned out differently. But no doubt her feelings were too soft for that. Both of them had considerable fortunes. But she kept hers from me, perhaps as a last way of binding me to her if it came to that. I could have understood that, certainly. But why shower a defenseless person – one internally at odds with himself – with demonstrations of a feeling that he will not and cannot reciprocate!

I was less a stranger to my wife than I was to my father. When *she* derived pleasure from suffering, *I* learned to find pleasure in making her suffer. We complemented each other splendidly. I experimented with great care to see how far I could go without losing her love. I went as far as I could imagine. Almost all the way – the thread still held, though stretched to the breaking point. But it snapped under the ultimate test. I had credited a human being with superhuman capacities for the “pleasures and sorrows of love,” and I had to pay the price. For human nature is fragile, and the average character never transcends it. So I had bet too much, and the bet was too risky. It was a calculated risk, but I had miscalculated.

But was I sorry on that account? No. Even the death penalty held

no terrors for me. I am thinking of the time of the trial. Any earthly court was too weak, too absurd, too petty to punish me. God or Satan himself would have had to reveal himself to me. I yawned. I would have repeated my infernal experiment under different test conditions if it had been in my power, but I still would have done away with that love-addicted old woman, that bottle blonde with shining, light gray eyes in her flat, enameled face and blue varicose veins on her legs, and if possible my good old hoary-headed father too. There are such people.

III

There is someone else I must mention, someone who may have been the most important person for me – perhaps. Who knows? Walter, a contemporary of mine in medical school. Once during a lecture we had a singular experience, whose details I thought I had forgotten. But while I was in custody, in the interval between crime and verdict – during those difficult hours of solitude when I was left to my own devices, brooding and analyzing in the extraordinary anguish to which isolation will drive anyone, particularly if he has led an intellectually vigorous life until then – this episode, insignificant in itself, came back to me.

It happened during a long lecture on the optical properties of the human eye. As the old physiology professor was speaking, a small door opened to one side of the large blackboard. Through this door the lecture hall communicated with the rest of the physiology department.

At first we paid no attention. We were focused on the difficult calculations and formulas that the professor was writing with squeaking chalk on the blackboard, now dazzlingly illuminated by the midday sun.

I can still see my comrade's hand, shapely, slender, yet masculine in its strength and sinewiness, copying down the formulas in a somewhat