The Greatest Good of the Greatest Number

Gertrude Atherton

Table of Contents

The Greatest Good of the Greatest Number

Gertrude Atherton

MORTON BLAINE returned to New York from his brief vacation to find awaiting him a frantic note from John Schuyler, the man nearer to him than any save himself, imploring him to "come at once." The appeal was supplemented with the usual intimation that the service was to be rendered to God rather than to man.

The note was twenty−four hours old. Blaine, without changing his travelling clothes, rang for a cab and was driven rapidly up the Avenue. He was a man of science, not of enthusiasms, cold, unerring, brilliant; a superb intellectual machine, which never showed a fleck of rust, unremittingly polished, and enlarged with every improvement. But for one man he cherished an abiding sympathy; to that man he hastened on the slightest summons, as he hastened now. They had been intimate in boyhood; then in later years through mutual respect for each other's high abilities and ambitions.

As the cab rolled over the asphalt of the Avenue, Blaine glanced idly at the stream of carriages returning from the Park, lifting his hat to many of the languid pretty women. He owed his minor fame to his guardianship of fashionable nerves. He could calm hysteria with a pressure of his cool flexible hand or a sudden modulation of his harsh voice. And women dreaded his wrath. There were those who averred that his eyes could smoke.

He leaned forward and raised his hat with sudden interest. She who returned his bow was as cold in her coloring as a winter night, but possessed a strength of line and depth of eye which suggested to the analyst her power to give the world a shock did Circumstance cease to run abreast of her. She was leaning back indolently in the open carriage, the sun slanting into her luminous skin and eyes, her face locked for the benefit of the chance observer, although she conversed with the faded individual at her side. As her eyes met those of the doctor her mouth convulsed suddenly, and a glance of mutual understanding passed between them.

Then she raised her head with a defiant, almost reckless movement.

Blaine reached his friend's house in a moment. The man who had summoned him was walking aimlessly up and down his library. He was unshaven; his hair and his clothing were disordered. His face had the modern beauty of strength and intellect and passion and weakness. A flash of relief illuminated it as Blaine entered.

"She has been terrible!" he said. "Terrible! I have not had the courage to call in any one else, and I am worn out. She is asleep now, and I got out of the room for half an hour. The nurse is exhausted too. Do stay tonight."

"I will stay. Let us go up−stairs."

As they reached the second landing two handsome children romped across the hall and flung themselves upon their father.

"Where have you been?" they demanded. Why do you shut yourself up on the third floor with mamma all the time? When will she get well?"

Schuyler kissed them and bade them return to the nursery.

"How long can I keep it from them?" he asked bitterly. " What an atmosphere for children−−my children!−−to grow up in!"

"If you would do as I wish, and send her where she belongs−−"

"I shall not. She is my wife. Moreover, concealment would then be impossible."

They had reached the third floor. He inserted a key in a door, hesitated a moment, then said abruptly: " I saw in a paper that she had returned. Can it be possible?"

"I saw her on the Avenue a few moments ago."

Was it the doctor's imagination, or did the goaded man at his side flash him a glance of appeal?

They entered a room whose doors and windows were muffled. The furniture was solid, too solid to be moved except by muscular arms. There were no mirrors nor breakable articles of any sort.

On the bed lay a woman with ragged hair and sunken yellow face, but even in her ruin indefinably elegant. Her parted lips were black and blistered within; her shapely skinny hands clutched the quilt with the tenacious suggestion of the eagle−−that long−lived defiant bird. At the bedside sat a vigorous woman, the pallor of fatigue on her face.

The creature on the bed opened her eyes. They had once been what are vaguely known as fine eyes; now they looked like blots of ink on parchment.

"Give me a drink," she said feverishly. "Water! water! water!" She panted, and her tongue protruded slightly. Her husband turned away, his shoulders twitching. The nurse held a silver goblet to the woman's lips. She drank greedily, then scowled up at the doctor.

"You missed it,"she said. "I should be glad, for I hate you, only you give me more relief than they. They are afraid. They tried to fool me, the idiots! But they didn't try it twice. I bit."

She laughed and threw her arms above her head. The loose sleeves of her gown fell back and disclosed arms speckled as if from an explosion of gunpowder.

"Just an ordinary morphine fiend," thought the doctor. "And she is the wife of John Schuyler!"

An hour after dinner he told the husband and nurse to go to bed. For a while be read, the woman sleeping profoundly. The house was absolutely still, or seemed to be. Had pandemonium reigned he could hardly have heard an echo of it from this isolated room. The window was open, but looked upon roofs and back yards; no sound of carriage wheels rose to break the quiet. Despite the stillness, the doctor had to strain his ear to catch the irregular breathing of the sick woman. He had a singular feeling, although the most unimaginative of men, that this third floor, containing only himself and the woman, had been sliced from the rest of the house and hung suspended in space, independent of natural laws. It was after the book had ceased to interest him that the idea shaped itself, born of another, as yet unacknowledged, skulking in the recesses of his brain. At length he laid aside the book, and going to the bed, looked down upon the woman, coldly, reflectively−−exactly as he had often watched the quivering of an animal−−dissected alive in the cause of science.

Studying this man's face, it was impossible to imagine it agitated by any passion except thirst for knowledge. The skin was as white as marble; the profile was straight and mathematical, the mouth a straight line, the chin as square as that of a chiselled Fate. The jaw was prominent, powerful, relentless. The eyes were deeply set and gray

as polished steel. The large brow was luminous, very full−−an index to the terrible intellect of the man.

As he looked down on the woman his thin nostrils twitched once and his lips compressed more firmly. Then he smiled. It was an odd, almost demoniacal smile.

"A physician," he said, half aloud, "has almost as much power as God. The idea strikes me that we are the personification of that useful symbol."

He plunged his hands into his pockets, and walked up and down the long thickly carpeted room.

"These are the facts in the case," he continued. "The one man I love and unequivocally respect is tied, hand and foot, to that unsexed dehumanized morphine receptacle on the bed. She is hopeless. Every known specific has failed, must fail, for she loves the vice. He has one of the best brains of this day prolific in brains; a distressing capacity for affection, human to the core. At the age of forty−two, in the maturity of his mental powers, he carries with him a constant sickening sense of humiliation; a proud man, he lives in daily fear of exposure and shame. At the age of forty−two, in the maturity of his manhood, he meets the woman who conquers his heart, his imagination, who compels his faith by making other women abhorrent to him, who allures and maddens with the certainty of her power to make good his ideal of her. He cannot marry her; that animal on the bed is capable of living for twenty years.

"So much for him. A girl of twenty−eight, whose wealth and brain and beauty, and that other something that has not yet been analyzed and labelled, have made her a social star; who has come to wonder, then to resent, then to yawn at the general vanity of life, is suddenly swept out of her calm orbit by a man's passion; and, with the swiftness of decision natural to her, goes to Europe. She returns in less than three months. For these two people there is but one sequel. The second chapter will be written the first time they are alone. Then they will go to Europe. What will be the rest of the book?

"First, there will be an ugly and reverberating scandal. In the course of a year or two she will compel him to return in the interest of his career. She will not be able to remain; so proud a woman could not stand the position. Again he will go with her. In a word, my friend's career will be ruined. So many novelists and reporters have written the remaining chapters of this sort of story that it is hardly worth while for me to go any further.

"So much for them. Let us consider the other victims−−the children. A morphine−mother in an asylum, a father in a strange land with a woman who is not his wife, the world cognizant of all the facts of the case. They grow up at odds with society. Result, they are morbid, warped, unnormal. In trite old English, their lives are ruined, as are all lives that have not had a fair chance."

He returned abruptly to the bedside. He laid his finger on the woman's pulse.

"No morphine to−night and she dies. A worthless wretch is sent where she belongs. Four people are saved."

His breast swelled. His gray eyes seemed literally to send forth smoke; they suggested some noiseless deadly weapon of war. He exclaimed aloud: " My God! what a power to lie in the hands of one man! I stand here the arbiter of five destinies. It is for me to say whether four people shall be happy or wretched, saved or ruined. I might say, with Nero, 'I am God!'" He laughed. "I am famed for my power to save where others have failed. I am famed in the comic weeklies for having ruined the business of more undertakers than any physician of my day. That has been my rôle, my professional pride. I have never felt so proud as now."

The woman, who had been moving restlessly for some time, twitched suddenly and uncontrollably. She opened her eyes.

"Give it to me−−quick!" she demanded. Her voice, always querulous, was raucous; her eyes were wild.

"No," he said, deliberately, "you will have no more morphine; not a drop."

She stared at him incredulously, then laughed.

"Stop joking," she said, roughly. "Give it to me quick−−quick! I am very weak."

"No," he said.

Then, as he continued to hold her eyes, her own gradually expanded with terror. She raised herself on one arm.

"You mean that?" she asked.

"Yes."

He watched her critically. She would be interesting.

"You are going to cure me with drastic measures, since others have failed?"

"Possibly."

Her face contracted with hatred. She had been a rather clever woman, and she believed that he was going to experiment with her. But she had also been a strong−willed woman and used to command since babyhood.

"Give me that morphine," she said, imperiously. "If you don't I'll be dead before morning."

He stood imperturbable. She sprang from the bed and flung herself upon him, strong with anger and apprehension.

"Give it to me!" she screamed. "Give it to me!" And she strove to bite him.

He caught her by the shoulder and held her at arm's−length. She writhed and struggled and cursed. Her oaths might have been learned in the gutter. She kicked at him and strove to reach him with her nails, clawing the air. She looked like a witch on a broomstick.

"What an exquisite bride she was!" he thought. "And what columns of rubbish have been printed about her and her entertainments!"

The woman was shrieking and struggling.

"Give it to me! You brute! You fiend! I always hated you! Give it to me! I am dying! I am dying! Help! Help!" But the walls were padded, and she knew it.

He permitted her to fling herself upon him, easily brushing aside her jumping fingers and snapping teeth. He knew that her agony was frightful. Her body was a net−work of hungry nerves. The diseased pulp of her brain had ejected every thought but one. She squirmed like an old autumn leaf about to fall. Her ugly face became tragic. The words shot from her dry contracted throat: "Give me the morphine! Give me the morphine!"

Suddenly realizing the immutability of the man in whose power she was, she sprang from him and ran frantically about the room, uttering harsh bleatlike cries. She pulled open the drawers of a chest, rummaging among its

harmless contents, gasping, quivering, bounding, as her tortured nerves commanded. When she had littered the floor with the contents of the chest she ran about screaming hopelessly. The doctor shuddered, but he thought of the four innocent people in her power and in his.

She fell in a heap on the floor, biting the carpet, striking out her arms aimlessly, tearing her nightgown into strips; then lay quivering, a hideous, speckled, uncanny thing, who should have been embalmed and placed beside the Venus of Milo.

She raised herself on her hands and crawled along the carpet, casually at first, as a man stricken in the desert may, half−consciously, continue his search for water. Then the doctor, intently watching her, saw an expression of hope leap into her bulging eyes. She scrambled past him towards the wash−stand. Before he could define her purpose, she had leaped upon a goblet inadvertently left there and had broken it on the marble. He reached her just in time to save her throat.

Then she looked up at him pitifully. "Give it to me!"

She pressed his knees to her breast. The red burned−out tear−ducts yawned. The tortured body stiffened and relaxed.

"Poor wretch!" he thought. "But what is the physical agony of a night to the mental anguish of a lifetime?"

"Once! once!" she gasped; "or kill me." Then, as he stood implacable, "Kill me! Kill me!"

He picked her up, put a fresh night−gown on her, and laid her on the bed. She remained as he placed her, too weak to move, her eyes staring at the ceiling above the big four−posted bed.

He returned to his chair and looked at his watch. "She may live two hours," he thought. "Possibly three. It is only twelve. There is plenty of time."

The room grew as still as the mountain−top whence he had that day returned. He attempted to read, but could not. The sense of supreme power filled his brain. He was the gigantic factor in the fates of four.

Then Circumstance, the outwardly wayward, the ruthlessly sequential, played him an ugly trick. His eyes, glancing idly about the room, were arrested by a big old−fashioned rocking−chair. There was something familiar about it. Soon he remembered that it resembled one in which his mother used to sit. She had been an invalid, and the most sinless and unworldly woman be had ever known. He recalled, with a touch of the old impatience, how she had irritated his active, aspiring, essentially modern mind with her cast−iron precepts of right and wrong. Her conscience flagellated her, and she had striven to develop her son's to the goodly proportion of her own. As he was naturally a truthful and upright boy, he resented her homilies mightily. "Conscience," he once broke out impatiently, "has made more women bores, more men failures, than any ten vices in the rogues calendar."

She had looked in pale horror, and taken refuge in an axiom: "Conscience makes cowards of us all."

He moved his head with involuntary pride. The greatest achievement of civilization was the triumph of the intellect over inherited impressions. Every normal man was conscientious by instinct, however he might outrage the sturdy little judge clinging tenaciously to his bench in the victim's brain. It was only when the brain grew big with knowledge and the will clasped it with fingers of steel that the little judge was throttled, then cast out.

Conscience. What was it like? The doctor had forgotten. He had never committed a murder nor a dishonorable act. Had the impulse of either been in him, his cleverness would have put it aside with a smile of scorn. He had never scrupled to thrust from his path whoever or whatever stood in his way, and had stridden on without a

backward glance. His profession had involved many experiments that would have made quick havoc of even the ordinary man's conscience.

Conscience. An awkward guest for an unsuspected murderer; for the groundling whose heredity had not been conquered by brain. Fancy being pursued by the spectre of the victim!

The woman on the bed gave a start and groan that recalled him to the case in hand. He rose and walked quickly to her side. Her eyes were closed, her face was black with congested blood. He laid his finger on her pulse. It was feeble.

"It will not be long now," he thought.

He went toward his chair. He felt a sudden distaste for it, a desire for motion. He walked up and down the room rather more rapidly than before.

"If I were an ordinary man," he thought, "I suppose that tortured creature on the bed would haunt me to my death. Rot! A murderer I should be called if the facts were known, I suppose. Well, she is worse. Did I permit her to live she would make the living hell of four people."

The woman gave a sudden awful cry, the cry of a lost soul shot into the night of eternity. The stillness had been so absolute, the cry broke that stillness so abruptly and so horridly, that the doctor, strong−brained, strong−nerved as he was, gave a violent start, and the sweat started from his body.

"I am a fool," he exclaimed angrily, welcoming the sound of his voice; "but I wish to God it were day and there were noises outside."

He strode hurriedly up and down the room, casting furtive glances at the bed. The night was quiet again, but still that cry rang through it and lashed his brain. He recalled the theory that sound never dies. The waves of space had yielded this to him.

"Good God!" he thought. "Am I going to pieces? If I let this wretch, this criminal die, I save four people. If I let her live, I ruin their lives. The life of a man of brain and pride and heart; the life of a woman of beauty and intellect and honor; the lives of two children of unknown potentialities, for whom the world has now a warm heart. 'The greatest good of the greatest number'−−the principle that governs civil law. Has not even the worthy individual been sacrificed to it again and again? Does it not hang the criminal dangerous to the community? And is that called murder? What am I at this moment but law epitomized? Shall I hesitate? My God, am I hesitating? Conscience−−is it that? A superfluous instinct transmitted by my ancestors and coddled by a woman−−is it that which has sprung from its grave, rattling its bones? 'Conscience makes'−−oh, shame that I should succumb when so much is at stake−−that I should hesitate when the welfare of four human beings trembles in the balance! 'Conscience'−−that in the moment of my supreme power I should falter!"

He returned to the woman. He reached his finger toward her pulse, then hurriedly withdrew it and resumed his restless march.

"This is only a nightmare, born of the night and the horrible stillness. To−morrow in the world of men it will be forgotten, and I shall rejoice. . . . But there will be recurring hours of stillness, of solitude. Will this night repeat itself ? Will that thing on the bed haunt me? Will that cry shriek in my ears? Oh, shame on my selfishness! What am I thinking of? To let that base, degraded wretch exist, that I may live peaceably with my conscience? To let four others go to their ruin, that I may escape a few hours of torment? That I−−I−−should come to this! 'The greatest good of the greatest number. The greatest'... 'Conscience makes cowards of us all!'"

To his unutterable self−contempt and terror, he found his will for once powerless to control the work of the generations that had preceded him. His iron jaw worked spasmodically, his gray eyes looked frozen. The marble pallor of his face was suffused with a tinge of green.

"I despise myself !" he exclaimed, with fierce emphasis. "I loathe myself! I will not yield! 'Conscience'−−they shall be saved, and by me. 'The greatest'−−I will maintain my intellectual supremacy−−that, if nothing else. She shall die!"

He halted abruptly. Perhaps she was already dead. Then he could reach the door in a bound and run downstairs and out of the house. To be followed . . .

He ran to the bed. The woman still breathed faintly, her mouth was twisted into a sardonic and pertinent expression. His hand sought his pocket and brought forth a case. He opened it and stared at the hypodermic syringe. His trembling fingers closed about it and moved toward the woman. Then, with an effort so violent he fancied he could hear his tense muscles creak, he straightened himself and turned his back upon the bed. At the same moment he dropped the instrument to the floor and set his heel upon it.