A Point in Morals

Ellen Glasgow

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"THE question seems to be — " began the Englishman. He looked up and bowed to a girl in a yachting−cap who had just come in from deck and was taking the seat beside him. "The question seems to be — " The girl was having some difficulty in removing her coat, and he turned to assist her.

"In my opinion," broke in a well−known alienist on his way to a convention in Vienna, "the question is simply whether or not civilization, in placing an exorbitant value upon human life, is defeating its own aims." He leaned forward authoritatively, and spoke with a half−foreign precision of accent.

"You mean that the survival of the fittest is checkmated," remarked a young journalist travelling in the interest of a New York daily, "that civilization should practise artificial selection, as it were?"

The alienist shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly. "My dear sir," he protested, "I don't mean anything. It is the question that means something."

"Well, as I was saying," began the Englishman again, reaching for the salt and upsetting a spoonful, "the question seems to be whether or not, under any circumstances, the saving of a human life may become positively immoral."

"Upon that point — " began the alienist: but a young lady in a pink blouse who was seated on the Captain's right interrupted him.

"How could it?" she asked. "At least I don't see how it could; do you, Captain?"

"There is no doubt," remarked the journalist, looking up from a conversation he had drifted into with a lawyer from one of the Western States, "that the more humane spirit pervading modern civilization has not worked wholly for good in the development of the species. Probably, for instance, if we had followed the Spartan practice of exposing unhealthy infants, we should have retained something of the Spartan hardihood. Certainly if we had been content to remain barbarians both our digestions and our nerves would have been the better for it, and melancholia would perhaps have been unknown. But, at the same time, the loss of a number of the more heroic virtues is overbalanced by an increase of the softer ones. Notably, human life has never before been regarded so sacredly."

"On the other side," observed the lawyer, lifting his hand to adjust his eye−glasses, and pausing to brush a crumb from his coat, "though it may all be very well to be philanthropic to the point of pauperizing half a community and of growing squeamish about capital punishment, the whole thing sometimes takes a disgustingly morbid turn. Why, it seems as if criminals were the real American heroes! Only last week I visited a man sentenced to death for the murder of his two wives, and, by Jove, the jailer was literally besieged by women sympathizers. I counted six bunches of heliotrope in his cell, and at least fifty notes."

"Oh, but that is a form of nervous hysteria!" said the girl in the yachting−cap, "and must be considered separately. Every sentiment has its fanatics — philanthropy as well as religion. But we don't judge a movement by a few overwrought disciples."

"That is true," said the Englishman, quietly. He was a middle−aged man, with an insistently optimistic countenance, and a build suggestive of general solidity. "But to return to the original proposition. I suppose we will all accept as a fundamental postulate the statement that the highest civilization is the one in which the highest value is placed upon individual life — "

"And happiness," added the girl in the yachting cap.

"And happiness," assented the Englishman.

"And yet," commented the lawyer, "I think that most of us will admit that such a society, where life is regarded as sacred because it is valuable to the individual, and not because it is valuable to the state, tends to the non−production of heroes — "

"That the average will be higher and the exception lower," observed the journalist. "In other words, that there

will be a general elevation of the mass, accompanied by a corresponding lowering of the few."

"On the whole, I think our system does very well," said the Englishman, carefully measuring the horseradish he was placing upon his oysters. "A mean between two extremes is apt to be satisfactory in results. If we don't produce a Marcus Aurelius or a Seneca, neither do we produce a Nero or a Phocas. We may have lost patriotism, but we have gained cosmopolitanism, which is better. If we have lost chivalry, we have acquired decency; and if we have ceased to be picturesque, we have become cleanly, which is considerably more to be desired."

"I have never felt the romanticism of the Middle Ages," remarked the girl in the yachting−cap. "When I read of the glories of the Crusaders, I can't help remembering that a knight wore a single garment for a lifetime, and hacked his horse to pieces for a whim. Just as I never think of that chivalrous brute, Richard the Lion−Hearted, that I don't see him chopping off the heads of his three thousand prisoners."

"Oh, I don't think that any of us are sighing for a revival of the Middle Ages," returned the journalist. "The worship of the past has usually for its devotees people who have only known the present — "

"Which is as it should be," commented the lawyer. "If man was confined to the worship of the knowable, all the world would lapse into atheism."

"Just as the great lovers of humanity were generally hermits," added the girl in the yachting−cap. "I had an uncle who used to say that he never really loved mankind until he went to live in the wilderness."

"I think we are drifting from the point," said the alienist, helping himself to potatoes. "Was it not — can the saving of a human life ever prove to be an immoral act? I once held that it could."

"Did you act upon it?" asked the lawyer, with rising interest. "I maintain that no proposition can be said to exist until it is acted upon. Otherwise it is in merely an embryonic state — "

The alienist laid down his fork and leaned forward. He was a notable−looking man of some thirty−odd years, who had made a sudden leap into popularity through several successful cases. He had a nervous, muscular face, with singularly penetrating eyes, and hair of a light sandy color. His hands were white and well shaped.

"It was some years ago," he said, bending a scintillant glance around the table. "If you will listen — "

There followed a stir of assent, accompanied by a nod from the young lady upon the Captain's right. "I feel as if it would be a ghost story," she declared.

"It is not a story at all," returned the alienist, lifting his wineglass and holding it against the light. "It is merely a fact."

Then he glanced swiftly around the table as if challenging attention.

"As I said," he began, slowly, "it was some few years ago. Just what year does not matter, but at that time I had completed a course at Heidelberg, and expected shortly to set out with an exploring party for South Africa. It turned out afterwards that I did not go, but for the purpose of the present story it is sufficient that I intended to do so, and had made my preparations accordingly. At Heidelberg I had lived among a set of German students who were permeated with the metaphysics of Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, and the rest, and I was pretty well saturated myself. At that age I was an ardent disciple of pessimism. I am still a disciple, but my ardor has abated — which is not the fault of pessimism, but the virtue of middle age — "

"A man is usually called conservative when he has passed the twenties," interrupted the journalist, "yet it is not that he grows more conservative, but that he grows less radical — "

"Rather that he grows less in every direction," added the Englishman, "except in physical bulk."

The alienist accepted the suggestions with an inclination, and continued. "One of my most cherished convictions," he said, "was to the effect that every man is the sole arbiter of his fate. As Schopenhauer has it, 'that there is nothing to which a man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person .' Indeed, that particular sentence had become a kind of motto with our set, and some of my companions even went so far as to preach the proper ending of life with the ending of the power of individual usefulness."

He paused to help himself to salad.

"I was in Scotland at the time, where I had spent a fortnight with my parents, in a small village on the Kyles of Bute. While there I had been treating an invalid cousin who had acquired the morphine habit, and who, under my care, had determined to uproot it. Before leaving I had secured from her the amount of the drug which she had in her possession — some thirty grains — done up in a sealed package, and labelled by a London chemist. As I was in haste, I put it in my bag, thinking that I would add it to my case of medicines when I reached Leicester, where I was to spend the night with an old schoolmate. I took the boat at Tighnabruaich, the small village, found a local

train at Gourock to reach Glasgow with one minute in which to catch the first express to London. I made the change and secured a first−class smoking−compartment, which I at first thought to be vacant, but when the train had started a man came from the dressing−room and took the seat across from me. At first I paid no heed to him, but upon looking up once or twice and finding his eyes upon me, I became unpleasantly conscious of his presence. He was thin almost to emaciation, and yet there was a muscular suggestion of physical force about him which it was difficult to account for, since he was both short and slight. His clothes were shabby, but well made, and his cravat had the appearance of having been tied in haste or by nervous fingers. There was a trace of sensuality about the mouth, over which he wore a drooping yellow mustache tinged with gray, and he was somewhat bald upon the crown of his head, which lent a deceptive hint of intellectuality to his uncovered forehead. As he crossed his legs I saw that his boots were carefully blacked, and that they were long and slender, tapering to a decided point."

"I have always held," interpolated the lawyer, "that to judge a man's character you must read his feet."

The alienist sipped his claret and took up his words:

"After passing the first stop I remembered a book at the bottom of my bag, and, unfastening the strap, in my search for the book I laid a number of small articles upon the seat beside me, among them the sealed package bearing the morphine label and the name of the London chemist. Having found the book, I turned to replace the articles, when I noticed that the man across from me was gazing attentively at the labelled package. For a moment his expression startled me, and I stared back at him from across my open bag, into which I had dropped the articles. There was in his eyes a curious mixture of passion and repulsion, and, beyond it all, the look of a hungry hound when he sees food. Thinking that I had chanced upon a victim of the opium craving, I closed the bag, placed it in the net above my head, and opened my book.

"For a while we rode in silence. Nothing was heard except the noise of the train and the clicking of our bags as they jostled each other in the receptacle above. I remember these details very vividly, because since then I have recalled the slightest fact in connection with the incident. I knew that the man across from me drew a cigar from his case, felt in his pocket for an instant, and then turned to me for a match. At the same time I experienced the feeling that the request veiled a larger purpose, and that there were matches in the pocket into which he thrust his fingers.

"But, as I complied with his request, he glanced indifferently out of the window, and following his gaze, I saw that we were passing a group of low−lying hills flecked with stray patches of heather, and that across the hills a flock of sheep were filing, followed by a peasant girl in a short skirt. It was the last faint suggestion of the Highlands.

"The man across from me leaned out, looking back upon the neutral sky, the sparse patches of heather, and the flock of sheep.

"'What a tone the heather gives to a landscape!' he remarked, and his voice sounded forced and affected.

"I bowed without replying, and as he turned from the window, and I sat upon the back seat in the draught of cinders, I bent forward to lower the sash. In a moment he spoke again:

"'Do you go to London?'

"'To Leicester,' I answered, laying the book aside, impelled by a sudden interest. 'Why do you ask?'

"He flushed nervously.

"'I — oh, nothing,' he answered, and drew from me.

"Then, as if with swift determination, he reached forward and lifted the book I had laid upon the seat. It was a treatise of von Hartmann's in German.

"'I had judged that you were a physician,' he said — 'a student, perhaps, from a German university?'

"'I am.'

"He paused for an instant, and then spoke in absent−minded reiteration, 'So you don't go on to London?'

"'No,' I returned, impatiently; 'but can I do anything for you?'

"He handed me the book, regarding me resolutely as he did so.

"'Are you a sensible man?'

"I bowed.

"'And a philosopher?'

"'In amateur fashion.'

"With fevered energy he went on more quickly, 'You have in your possession,' he said, 'something for which I would give my whole fortune.' He laid two half−sovereigns and some odd silver in the palm of his hand. 'This is all I possess,' he continued, 'but I would give it gladly.'

"I looked at him curiously.

"'You mean the morphia?' I demanded.

"He nodded. 'I don't ask you to give it to me,' he said; 'I only ask — '

"I interrupted him. 'Are you in pain?'

"He laughed softly, and I really believe he felt a tinge of amusement. 'It is a question of expediency,' he explained. 'If you happen to be a moralist — '

"He broke off. 'What of it?' I inquired.

"He settled himself in his corner, resting his head against the cushions.

"'You get out at Leicester,' he said, recklessly. 'I go on to London, where Providence, represented by Scotland Yard, is awaiting me.'

"I started. 'For what?'

"'They call it murder, I believe,' he returned; 'but what they call it matters very little. I call it justifiable homicide — that also matters very little. The point is — I will arrive, they will be there before me. That is settled. Every station along the road is watched.'

"I glanced out of the window.

"'But you came from Glasgow,' I suggested.

"'Worse luck! I waited in the dressing−room until the train started. I hoped to have the compartment alone, but — ' He leaned forward and lowered the window−shade. 'If you don't object,' he said, apologetically; 'I find the glare trying. It is a question for a moralist,' he repeated. 'Indeed, I may call myself a question for a moralist,' and he smiled again with that ugly humor. 'To begin with the beginning, the question is bred in the bone and it's out in the blood.' He nodded at my look of surprise. 'You are an American,' he continued, 'and so am I. I was born in Washington some thirty years ago. My father was a politician of note, whose honor was held to be unimpeachable — which was a mistake. His name doesn't matter, but he became very wealthy through judicious speculations — in votes and other things. My mother has always suffered from an incipient hysteria, which developed shortly before my birth.' He wiped his forehead with his pocket−handkerchief, and knocked the ashes from his cigar with a flick of his finger. 'The motive for this is not far to seek,' he said, with a glance at my travelling−bag. He had the coolest bravado I have ever met. 'As a child,' he went on, 'I gave great promise. Indeed, we moved to England that I might be educated at Oxford. My father considered the atmospheric ecclesiasticism to be beneficial. But while at college I got into trouble with a woman, and I left. My father died, his fortune burst like a bubble, and my mother moved to the country. I was put into a banking office, but I got into more trouble with women — this time two of them. One was a low variety actress, and I married her. I didn't want to do it. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it, and I did it. A month later I left her. I changed my name and went to Belfast, where I resolved to become an honest man. It was a tough job, but I labored and I succeeded — for a time. The variety actress began looking for me, but I escaped her, and have escaped her so far. That was eight years ago. And several years after reaching Belfast I met another woman. She was different. I fell ill of fever in Ireland, and she nursed me. She was a good woman, with a broad Irish face, strong hands, and motherly shoulders. I was weak and she was strong, and I fell in love with her. I tried to tell her about the variety actress, but somehow I couldn't, and I married her.' He shot the stump of his cigar through the opposite window and lighted another, this time drawing the match from his pocket. 'She is an honest woman,' he said — 'as honest as the day. She believes in me. It would kill her to know about the variety actress — and all the others. There is one child, a girl — a freckle−faced mite just like her mother — and another is coming.'

"'She knows nothing of this affair?'

"'Not a blamed thing. She is the kind of woman who is good because she can't help herself. She enjoys it. I never did. My mother is different, too. She would die if other people knew of this; my wife would die if she knew of it herself. Well, I got tired, and I wanted money, so I left her and went to Dublin. I changed my name and got a clerkship in a shipping office. My wife thinks I went to America to get work, and if she never hears of me she'll probably think no worse. I did intend going to America, but somehow I didn't. I got in with a man who signed somebody's name to a check and got me to present it. Then we quarrelled about the money, and the man threw the

job on me and the affair came out. But before they arrested me I ran him down and shot him. I was ridding the world of a damned traitor.'

"He raised the shade with a nervous hand, but the sun flashed into his eyes, and he lowered it.

"'I suppose I'd hang for it,' he said; 'there isn't much doubt of that. If I waited I'd hang for it, but I am not going to wait. I am going to die. It is the only thing left, and I am going to do it.'

"'And how?'

"'Before this train reaches London,' he replied, 'I am a dead man. There are two ways. I might say three, except that a pitch from the carriage might mean only a broken leg. But there is this — ' He drew a vial from his pocket and held it to the light. It contained an ounce or so of carbolic acid.

"'One of the most corrosive of irritants,' I observed.

"'And there is — your package.'

"My first impulse promised me to force the vial from him. He was a slight man, and I could have overcome him with but little exertion. But the exertion I did not make. I should as soon have thought, when my rational humor reasserted itself, of knocking a man down on Broadway and robbing him of his watch. The acid was as exclusively his property as the clothes he wore, and equally his life was his own. Had he declared his intention to hurl himself from the window I might not have made way for him, but I should certainly not have obstructed his passage.

"But the morphia was mine, and that I should assist him was another matter, so I said,

"'The package belongs to me.'

"'And you will not exchange?'

"'Certainly not.'

"He answered, almost angrily:

"'Why not be reasonable? You admit that I am in a mess of it?'

"'Readily.'

"'You also admit that my life is morally my own?'

"'Equally.'

"'That its continuance could in no wise prove to be of benefit to society?'

"'I do.'

"'That for all connected with me it would be better that I should die unknown and under an assumed name than that I should end upon the scaffold, my wife and mother wrecked for life, my children discovered to be illegitimate?'

"'Yes.'

"'Then you admit also that the best I can do is to kill myself before reaching London?'

"'Perhaps.'

"'So you will leave me the morphine when you get off at Leicester?'

"'No.'

"He struck the window−sill impatiently with the palm of his hand.

"'And why not?'

"I hesitated an instant.

"'Because, upon the whole, I do not care to be the instrument of your self−destruction.'

"'Don't be a fool!' he retorted. 'Speak honestly, and say that because of a little moral shrinkage on your part you prefer to leave a human being to a death of agony. I don't like physical pain. I am like a woman about it, but it is better than hanging, or life−imprisonment, or any jury finding.'

"I became exhortatory.

"'Why not face it like a man and take your chances? Who knows — '

"'I have had my chances,' he returned. 'I have squandered more chances than most men ever lay eyes on — and I don't care. If I had the opportunity, I'd squander them again. It is the only thing chances are made for.'

"'What a scoundrel you are!' I exclaimed.

"'Well, I don't know,' he answered; 'there have been worse men. I never said a harsh word to a woman, and I never hit a man when he was down — '

"I blushed. 'Oh, I didn't mean to hit you,' I responded.

"He took no notice.

"'I like my wife,' he said. 'She is a good woman, and I'd do a good deal to keep her and the children from knowing the truth. Perhaps I'd kill myself even if I didn't want to. I don't know, but I am tired — damned tired.'

"'And yet you deserted her.'

"'I did. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. If I was free to go back to her to−morrow, unless I was ill and wanted nursing, I'd see that she had grown shapeless, and that her hands were coarse.' He stretched out his own, which were singularly white and delicate. 'I believe I'd leave her in a week,' he said.

"Then with an eager movement he pointed to my bag.

"'That is the ending of the difficulty,' he added, 'otherwise I swear that before the train gets to London I will swallow this stuff, and die like a rat.'

"'I admit your right to die in any manner you choose, but I don't see that it is my place to assist you. It is an ugly job.'

"'So am I,' he retorted, grimly. 'At any rate, if you leave the train with that package in your bag it will be cowardice — sheer cowardice. And for the sake of your cowardice you will damn me to this — ' He touched the vial.

"'It won't be pleasant,' I said, and we were silent.

"I knew that the man had spoken the truth. I was accustomed to lies, and had learned to detect them. I knew, also, that the world would be well rid of him and his kind. Why I should preserve him for death upon the gallows I did not see. The majesty of the law would be in no way ruffled by his premature departure; and if I could trust that part of his story, the lives of innocent women and children would, in the other case, suffer considerably. And even if I and my unopened bag alighted at Leicester, I was sure that he would never reach London alive. He was a desperate man, this I read in his set face, his dazed eyes, his nervous hands. He was a poor devil, and I was sorry for him as it was. Why, then, should I contribute, by my refusal to comply with his request, an additional hour of agony to his existence? Could I, with my pretence of philosophic latitudinarianism, alight at my station, leaving him to swallow the acid and die like a rat in a cage before the journey was over? I remembered that I had once seen a guinea−pig die from the effects of carbolic acid, and the remembrance sickened me suddenly.

"As I sat there listening to the noise of the slackening train, which was nearing Leicester, I thought of a hundred things. I thought of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann. I thought of the dying guinea−pig. I thought of the broad−faced Irish wife and the two children.

"Then 'Leicester' flashed before me, and the train stopped. I rose, gathered my coat and rug, and lifted the volume of von Hartmann from the seat. The man remained motionless in the corner of the compartment, but his eyes followed me.

"I stooped, opened by bag, and laid the chemist's package upon the seat. Then I stepped out, closing the door after me." As the speaker finished, he reached forward, selected an almond from the stand of nuts, fitted it carefully between the crackers, and cracked it slowly.

The young lady upon the Captain's right shook herself with a shudder.

"What a horrible story!" she exclaimed; "for it is a story, after all, and not a fact."

"A point, rather," suggested the Englishman; "but is that all?"

"All of the point," returned the alienist. "The next day I saw in the Times that a man, supposed to be James Morganson, who was wanted for murder, was found dead in a first−class smoking−compartment of the Midland Railway, Coroner's verdict, 'Death resulting from an overdose of morphia, taken with suicidal intent.'"

The journalist dropped a lump of sugar in his cup and watched it attentively.

"I don't think I could have done it," he said. "I might have left him with his carbolic. But I couldn't have deliberately given him his death−potion."

"But as long as he was going to die," responded the girl in the yachting−cap, "it was better to let him die painlessly."

The Englishman smiled. "Can a woman ever consider the ethical side of a question when the sympathetic one is visible?" he asked.

The alienist cracked another almond. "I was sincere," he said. "Of that there is no doubt. I thought I did right. The question is — did I do right?"

"It would have been wiser," began the lawyer, argumentatively, "since you were stronger than he, to take the

vial from him, and to leave him to the care of the law."

"But the wife and children," replied the girl in the yachting−cap. "And hanging is so horrible!"

"So is murder," responded the lawyer, dryly.

The young lady on the Captain's right laid her napkin upon the table and rose. "I don't know what was right," she said, "but I do know that in your place I should have felt like a murderer."

The alienist smiled half cynically. "So I did," he answered; "but there is such a thing, my dear young lady, as a conscientious murderer."