

began. So, father had sex with her. But mother did nothing. Is that right?

Françoise looked at the nurse and nodded. Father blamed her for the pregnancies.

She had not uttered a word to anyone.

“This talking — will it make her better?” Richard held her small, roughened hands.

After the interview, the psychiatrist conferred with the nurse.

“She had no one before Richard. She’s not suicidal — it’s severe trauma with obsessions,” the psychiatrist looked grim. “It’s devastating to face — she needs help.”

“I lived in her town,” the nurse said. “I knew the family — but not this.”

“I need someone to follow her,” the psychiatrist stroked his brow. “There are legal issues, family issues. May I call you later?”

“Yes.”

At eleven-thirty the nurse phoned to tell her family she would be late. Then she drove home.

When she entered, her husband frowned. He was sweeping the kitchen.

Two daughters morosely put away the washed breakfast dishes.

“My wife is late,” the husband moaned. “She forgets she has a family.”

The nurse absently took a glass and held it to the light.

It was clear and clean and sparkled in the sunlight.

She put it away.

She had no words left.

Ronald Ruskin

Department of Psychiatry
Mount Sinai Hospital
Toronto, Ont.

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Annotation

The surgeon and the nurse

One of the most unflattering portrayals of a surgeon ever to appear in English literature is surely this introductory stanza from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s narrative poem, “In the Children’s Hospital” (1880).

Our doctor had call’d in another, I never had seen him before,
But he sent a chill to my heart when I saw him come in at the door,
Fresh from the surgery-schools of France and of other lands —
Harsh red hair, big voice, big chest, big merciless hands!
Wonderful cures he had done, O, yes, but they said too of him
He was happier using the knife than in trying to save the limb,
And that I can well believe, for he look’d so coarse and so red,
I could think he was one of those who would break their jests on the dead,
And mangle the living dog that had loved him and fawn’d at his knee —
Drench’d with the hellish oorali — that ever such things should be!¹

With the mention of oorali — i.e., curare, a South American arrow poison that induces paralysis but not a loss of consciousness — Tennyson likens this ham-handed fellow to a diabolical vivisectionist.

Fortunately for surgeons, the poem is not judged one of Tennyson’s best: it is a decidedly mawkish rendition of a story the poet heard from Mary Gladstone, daughter of the English statesman. But it has a narrative complexity typical of the dramatic monologue form perfected by another Victorian, Robert Browning. The speaker is a nurse; she addresses herself to a sympathetic listener, an unnamed benefactor of the hospital. In 72 lines her tale manages to include a kindly generalist, the callous surgeon, a boy mangled in an industrial accident, a winsome orphan named Emmie, afflicted with an unspecified but riskily operable disease, and “wise little Annie,” her spiritual confidante in the next bed.

The nurse, in contrast to the godless surgeon, seeks through prayer the fortitude to bear “the sights and the loathsome smells of disease.” Not to mention the tragedies over which she powerlessly presides. Young Emmie, after overhearing her physician say that she will not survive surgery, implores God to take her directly to heaven, sparing her the ordeal. Sadly but mercifully, her prayer is answered. — Anne Marie Todkill, *CMAJ*

REFERENCE

1. Tennyson A. In the children’s hospital, lines 1–10. In: Hill R W. *Tennyson’s poetry: authoritative texts, juvenilia and early responses criticism*. New York: Norton; 1971. p. 447.