

NO PARDON

A SHORT STORY

By

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I gave twenty forints to the two male nurses who put him on a stretcher and took him downstairs to the ambulance car. At the clinic I also gave twenty forints each to the day and the night nurses in the ward, and asked them to take care of him. They said I could rest assured they would look in on the patient, every half hour, although fortunately he was not unconscious. The next day was Sunday, so I was able to go and see him. He was still conscious, but talked very little. I heard from the patient next to him that the two nurses had never once looked in – which was small wonder, considering that between them they had a hundred-seventy patients to look after; and on top of that the doctors had not bothered to look at him either, saying they would examine him thoroughly on Monday. This was always the way, said the man in the next bed, with patients brought in Saturday morning.

I went out into the passage, looking for the nurse, but could not find any of those who had been there the day before. After a prolonged search, I managed to trace the nurse on Sunday duty; I gave twenty forints to her too, and asked her to look in on my father from time to time. I also wanted to see the doctor, for I had put a hundred-forint note into an envelope at home, but she said the doctor had been called over to the women's ward to give a patient a blood transfusion; but I shouldn't worry, she said, she would speak to him. I went back into the sick-room, where my father's neighbour in the next bed reassured me that, since the doctor on duty had no time to examine the patient anyway, it was just as well I had no opportunity to hand him the money. They would only have time to examine my father tomorrow, when the ward doctors came in.

"Do you need anything?" I asked my father.

"No, thanks. Nothing."

"I've brought you a few apples."

"Thank you. I'm not hungry."

I sat at his bedside for another hour. I would have liked to talk with him, but we had run out of topics. After a while I asked him if he felt any pain, but he said he did not, so I could not ask any more questions about that. We kept silent. Our relationship had always been very shy and reserved; we had never discussed anything but facts, but any facts that might have come up the day before had shrunk into insignificance and dwindled to nothing today. We had never talked about feelings.

"Well, I'll be going then," I said after a while.

"All right."

"I'll come in and see the doctor tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"The ward doctor won't be in before tomorrow morning."

"It isn't urgent," he said, and his gaze followed me to the door.

They telephoned me at seven o'clock the next morning and said he had died during the night. When I entered Room No. 217 I found his bed occupied by another person. The man in the next bed assured me that my father had not suffered; he had only heaved a sigh, and was dead. I suspected that the man might not have been telling the truth, for it occurred to me that in his place I would have said the same thing in the same words; but then I tried to make myself believe that my father really had died without suffering any pain, and that his

neighbour in the next bed had not deceived me after all.

There were a number of formalities to be settled. In the hospital reception office I was met by a nurse (not the one who had been on duty Saturday nor the one from the day before, but a nurse I had never seen) who handed me his gold watch, his spectacles and his wallet, his cigarette lighter and the paper bag of apples. I gave her twenty forints and continued to dictate the required information about him. After that a man in a leather cap came up to me and offered to wash, shave and dress the body. When he used the word “body” he seemed to mean that the person in question, although no longer alive, was not quite a corpse either, since it was not yet washed or dressed.

I still had the sealed envelope containing the hundred-forint note on me, and I handed it to this man. He tore the envelope open, looked into it, then whipped off his cap and never put it on again in my presence. He said he would arrange everything very nicely, all I had to do was send in some clean linen; he was sure I would be perfectly satisfied. I said that I would bring the linen in the afternoon, and also a dark suit, but that I would like to go and see him now.

“You want to look at the body?” he asked, taken aback.

“Yes,” I said.

“Surely you’d rather see it afterwards,” he suggested.

“I want to see it now,” I said, “I could not be with him when he died.”

Reluctantly he took me to the mortuary, a separate building in the middle of the clinic garden. The cellar was lit by a very strong, unshaded electric bulb. We went down a few concrete steps, and on the concrete floor right at the foot of the stairs I saw my father lying on his back. He lay in a spread-eagle position, the way soldiers killed in action are painted in battle scenes. Only he had no clothes on; there was only a small wad of cotton sticking out of one of his nostrils, while another was stuck to his left thigh—obviously the spot where they had given him the last shot.

“You can’t see anything yet,” said the man with the leather cap apologetically. Even in the ice-cold cellar he stood by my side uncovered. “But you’ll see what he looks like when I’ve dressed him up.”

I said nothing.

“Was he ill for a long time?” the man inquired after a while.

“Yes, a long time,” I said.

“I know what I’ll do,” he said, “I’ll trim the hair a bit. That makes a lot of difference.”

“Whichever way you think,” I said.

“Did he part his hair on one side?”

“That’s-right.”

He stopped speaking, and I said nothing either. There was nothing I could have said or done for my father any more; and there was no one else I could have given money to. There was no way for me to make amends, even if I had myself buried with him.