

The Love-Germ

By Constance Cotterell

“YES,” said the Professor, thumping on the road with his big stick as he spoke, “I am on its track at last. A few more experiments, and the world will have it in its own hands to free itself from the greatest evil it has ever suffered.”

His nostrils quivered. A little more imagination, and I should have seen flashes from his eyes. I may mention at once that he was not a stage professor, but a nice clean tidy person in real life, the sort of man one could put in a drawing-room without the carpet and curtains swearing at him. He wore clothes that were in fashion, and the only odd thing about him was his rather long hair; but it curled and suited him so well that I sometimes thought that was just vanity. In fact, he was quite the nicest-looking Professor I have ever seen, and shaved himself every morning like the most blatant Philistine.

“Are you so sure,” I ventured desperately, for when he was terribly in earnest he was very convincing, like a loud-voiced preacher, “are you so sure that its only effect is evil?”

He stood still in that narrow lane, and out of the hedge up above the long dog-rose boughs waved their roses at him.

“It is the mightiest instrument of woe that man has ever had to fight,” he said solemnly. “At his strongest and best it smites
him

him down. In the flower of his days it permeates his brain, it undermines his imagination, it corrupts his very reason. Its mildest onslaught warps the judgment. When a man begins to think a woman, of whom he probably knows less than of any other, the best of her sex, the way is open for the germ—if it is not already there. And of women it is the greatest enemy. Where would the sufferings of thousands, *millions*, of them have been, if the germ had never burrowed in their brains? Betrayed, the victims of drunken or depraved husbands, helpless widows with hungry families—all this might have been saved to them!

“But,” I objected, trying to stem his rage, “doesn’t its influence generally pass and leave the brain as healthy as before?”

He looked at me keenly. He did not wear spectacles, and his eyes were not in the least dim or bleary.

“That is true,” he said slowly, “in some cases. After the best years of life have been blighted,” he added quickly. “In most cases the brain-power is weakened for life. In women especially.”

“Why do you say all this to me, a woman?”

“Because,” he answered, “young as you are, I believe you to have a grasp of the seriousness and true import of life which will prevent you, once warned, from falling into this terrible fate.”

I tried feebly to stop him, but praise is the hardest thing to fight. Your own heart is against you, and delighteth to hear.

He walked on in silence a little, snuffing up the scent of the dog-roses, and immensely enjoying himself, I could see. He was resting from the untiring quest of germs, down there in the country where we had come to stay too. I looked at him, with his head thrown back and the passion in his face and the fire in his eyes, and I thought treason. I thought what a magnificent lover he would make.

I went back to my old idea. “Are we not just a mass of germs,

germs, some good and some bad? Why mayn't this supposed love-germ be a good one?"

At the word "supposed" he glared at me in such a manner that I dared not doubt the fiend's existence.

"A good germ," he cried, "that makes men forgetful of right and of their duty, untrue to their religion, unfaithful to their wives?"

"It's responsible for the wives in the first place," I said perversely, "so isn't that rather a righteous judgment?"

He looked annoyed. "Don't quibble," he said. "You call it a good germ that was rampant under Catherine of Russia and Charles II. of England? A good germ that made five miserable women through Henry VIII.? A good germ that led Marc Antony and hundreds like him to dishonour? A good germ that ruins Faustus and Gretchens by the thousand? A good germ that wastes young lives like—like Romeo's and Juliet's, that might have been turned to great account? A good germ that sends honourable men and women to death? It's not natural, and therefore it's not right, for one human being to want to die for another! The first and the most common thing a lover offers is to die for his mistress. Is that healthy?"

"But," I objected rather diffidently, for I could not help quailing before his passion and his array of instances, especially the Faust idea, "but isn't it noble to die for another?"

"Are we here to talk about nobility?" he cried. "We are thinking of what is for the good of the whole race."

He was thoroughly modern, this professor, at least as far as I had got. But then, you never know when you have got to the innermost of a man.

"But isn't the world better for the example of a noble unselfish life than for a selfish existence, always seeking merely to develop itself?"

"And

“And what is more selfish than the love-germ?”

“And more unselfish?” I retorted, though I could not but feel puzzled and discomfited and as though he had had the best of it that time. His enthusiasm bore you down. Then I plucked up heart a little. “If it has done more harm it has done more good too than anything else. Christ had it (“I deny it!” he interrupted); people who give their lives to work among the sick and poor have it (“That I altogether deny,” he said, “it’s a totally different thing”); Mrs. Fry had it; Sister Dora had it; Father Damien had it; Dante too, and we have his poems; all the knights errant who took their lives in their hands (“And who asked them to take their lives in their hands?” he demanded) and righted wrong and broke down oppression——” I stopped for want of breath, and looked defiantly at him.

He smiled kindly upon me.

“That,” said he from professional heights, “is not argument. These great and good people never harboured the love-germ. Nor any relation of it. What dominated most of them was a germ not only of another species but another genus. It was the altruism-germ, which is slowly working out our social evolution, the noblest bacillus the human animal can support. Like those beneficent phagocytic bacilli, of which of course you have heard, it will one day have killed all base and baleful germs.”

I was silent. His words were very big. His manner was very unanswerable. I was not convinced. Who would be? But his very personality, the very air that blew from him to me, was so convincing that I was quashed for the moment.

“There is a girl down here,” I heard him say, as I came out of my baffled vexation; “she has not the germ yet, I believe; I’m not sure. But she is a most likely subject. I intend to watch her. She is ripe. So is a young man who is staying down here

—at

—at her father's very vicarage. If only my experiments were perfect," he almost groaned, "I could spare them and save them alive, two sane, beautiful, useful people!"

"How do you catch it?" I hastened to ask, he seemed so downstricken.

"How do you 'catch' other germs? We do not eat and drink the flesh and blood of our fellow-creatures, but we keep up a constant interchange of germs with them, nevertheless. And this germ is even less material, more ethereal, so to say, than any other."

"A kind of soul of a germ." I suggested. "A higher order."

"No," he said, "never that."

I wanted to ask if he had ever housed the germ himself, but I did not dare. I afterwards found he hadn't.

"It is an almost spontaneous generation," he went on, his face glowing. "It is the result of certain rapid spasms of certain nerve-centres in the brain. When a man or woman looks at another and begins to love, there is set up an unthinkable violent agitation among these molecules. It is a motion so incalculably rapid that it gives a sense of absolute rest, like a stun, as though the working of the brain had stopped dead short. In reality it is a movement more rapid than the mind can conceive; and it is then that the love-germ is engendered."

"Cannot you operate beforehand on a brain, so that the germ may not 'take'?" I cried, moved to enthusiasm by his earnestness.

"I don't know—I don't know. It is my dream," he answered softly, like one thinking on an absent lover.

The rest of our way lay through the fields. He only woke up once to say, "If only it could be proved that a person had died of it, and one could examine his brain!"

We walked across one grass meadow.

"But it never does kill," he added sorrowfully.

I was gazing on the ripening grasses, thinking of what he had said. Having just learnt that the real seat of sea-sickness was in the base of the brain, I was not surprised to hear that love was there engendered also, contrary to the testimony of all the ages. And I recollect thinking confusedly that in the cases of love and sea-sickness both, you were apt to call for death.

"This is she," he said suddenly, almost in a whisper. "Look! In the next field."

I lifted my eyes and saw Pleasance Gurney coming towards us. I remember at the very first I thought her a creature by nature set apart as a victim—to speak in terms of love-germ. We met at the kissing-gate. The wicket, the Professor called it. She bowed to him and looked at me, hanging on her foot as though she would like to stop and speak, but he held the gate for her without a word, and so she went on. She had a high instep and her eyes were blue. That was all I had seen clearly. And there was a ripple in her hair.

Next day the Vicarage people called on us, and after that we were always together, picnicking, rowing, walking, bicycling. The Professor had a very healthy taste in picnics, I cannot but own. Indeed, he had a very healthy taste altogether, except his diseased appetite for germs. In the smallest committee there is always an inner circle, and in our party there was always an inner four. It consisted of Pleasance Gurney and me, of the Professor and the young man staying at the Vicarage, Edward Belton. Sometimes we mixed one way, sometimes the other. The Professor developed a great interest in wild flowers, and began to talk about his young days; which he persisted in shoving a great deal

deal farther off than they really were, on the same principle that he called me "my dear."

Women always hear of men's young days, and like to hear of them.

In our private conversations the Professor became exceedingly elliptical. I found that *it* always stood for the germ, *he* for Edward Belton, and *she* for Pleasance Gurney. When I had once found this out his talk was quite intelligible, and we got on very pleasantly. He had said he would watch Pleasance Gurney, and he watched her very closely. Sometimes I have seen him be half an hour with the party of us and not take his eyes off her. It was a half-wistful, half-penetrating look, and she used to redden under it, but I never could see that she disliked it. I believe he never suffered so much at the thought of the germ seizing on any one as at the thought of Miss Gurney's falling in love with Edward Belton. When we walked home from the Vicarage in the summer twilight he used to talk of it.

"Think of what she might do if she remained sane," he would begin, generally quite suddenly. "Oh, it's piteous, horrible!" His voice would almost break. "Not but what Belton is a fine fellow," he as often as not added, once between his teeth.

I never said anything. I was always wondering if one ought to speak, but I never did.

The Professor came to me one day. After looking uneasily out of window, clearing his throat once or twice, and moving a chair or two,

"Do you know," he said quite nervously, "that that young man, Edward Belton, is—is——"

"Yes?" I said cruelly, sitting and looking at him. I would not help him out.

"Is a victim of the germ?"

He forced it out and looked at me for a start of horrified surprise. He almost gave one himself to see that I did not.

"His eyes, his voice, his absence of mind, his agitation," he went on, "—haven't you noticed?"

"I have noticed."

"Though he has seemed more assured the last day or so."

I smiled.

He became still more nervous.

"I—I think we could help him, if it hasn't gone too far. The only thing is," he went on musingly, more like himself, "I have noticed that even if you do remove the object the germ still remains and another object will very often feed it just as well."

"And how do you propose to remove the object?" I asked, with what no doubt corresponded to my great aunt's much admired bridling.

I saw in his eye that he was going to evade me.

"Well, I always thought," he said with an embarrassed hand through his hair, "that when—it—came, you know, it would be a passion for—for—in fact for Miss Gurney."

"Indeed?"

"Just as I expected she would develop one for him."

"O, I never thought that," said I.

His eye brightened.

"But it was so likely she should. Everything was in favour of it."

"Except just one thing."

"What is that?"

"I can't communicate my view," I said with, I hoped, a fine scientific manner. "Well, I conclude it will be of no use to remove Pleasance Gurney. What do you propose to remove?"

"Well,

"Well, I—I—in fact, it is in your presence that it is most active. Indeed, I am afraid he is in a fair way to be what idiots call in love with you."

I cannot describe how nervous he was as he said this.

"I know it," I said, and felt that he thought me a fool for reddening and grinning in a weak sort of way. He has since told me that he did.

He looked at me and gave a kind of gasp.

"And you?" He could hardly speak.

"Oh, I love him," I said. For the life of me I could not help the cruel happiness bursting through into my voice.

He did not say a word, but turned and left me, a bitterly disappointed man. His back had a heartbroken look as it vanished through the door. I know now that half the bitterness of the blow was the thought that the germ had seized on my brain, permeated it, undermined my imagination, corrupted my reason, and all the rest of it, under his very eyes, while he had never so much as dreamt of it. It is true all his thoughts had been taken up with watching for symptoms in Pleasance and Edward Belton. He would as soon have thought of prying for madness in his own mother as for the germ in me.

I believe he spent a wretched day. None of us saw him again for hours.

"She really is a most interesting girl," he said to me that very night in the old friendly way. "If only she——" and so on and so on.

He had had to take me back. I knew the man must speak to somebody—or grow worse. So he took me back again, though his polite and painful congratulations to Edward are better left unspoken of. For several days he went about us with a sad, forsaken air. He had wept over us and would have gathered us
into

into his fold, and we would not. And then when Edward and I happened to meet each other's eyes the look was a lingering look. And when our hands happened to touch they did not hurriedly untouch again. When the Professor marked these things I have seen his face wrung with pain.

Then I went away for a few days.

When I came back I noticed a certain absorbed look and suppressed excitement about my Professor. He seemed to want to speak to me, but not to be able to force himself to the point. At last he succeeded. I had just come in from a walk and we were sitting in the garden.

"I am certain the germ is attacking her brain," he began in a low voice. "I am certain of it. After all these years I cannot mistake the signs."

"I suppose not," I said dryly. "Oh, no, you cannot possibly be mistaken."

"I cannot," he said uneasily.

"So I said." I fanned myself with my hat.

"She is falling in—love," he said with a gulp. "I don't know with whom. Indeed, failing Edward Belton, who is there for her to fall in—love with?" He gulped again.

I am afraid I stared at him. "Oh, I don't know if you don't," I blundered out.

"I?" said the Professor.

I said nothing.

"It would be interesting," he went on, with a spark of the old enthusiasm I had not missed till I heard it again, "very interesting if the germ developed without any object, if a person were found just in—love without any one special calling it out. At times I find her eyes looking at me like those of an animal in pain, and seeking help from the misery it does not understand. Curious, if
it

it were instinct turning to the only man in the world who knows what is the matter with her ! A man, alas ! who would do anything to help her, but who has not yet found the cure."

He ceased, and remained gazing at the ground, a mere mass of dejection.

"You take a great interest in her," I said stupidly,

His eyes flashed. "And who would not?" he cried. "A young beautiful creature like that, a creature who could make existence so good and glad for hundreds of people. There is nothing she could not do if she remained sane. She is extremely clever. She has taken a great interest in bacteriology, and seems really to grasp the enormous part it plays in life. Who could bear to see it all lost, all frustrated, by a disease of the brain?"

"Of course her being beautiful can't matter," I said cruelly ; "but, if she is so intelligent and so interested in germs, why not explain your theory to her and help her to avoid her danger?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "It is an idea," he said.

"Have you ever spoken of your own particular germ to her?"

"N—no, I haven't," he admitted.

"Why not?" I persisted. I felt I had him at some sort of mean advantage.

"I don't know," he said rather weakly. "I really couldn't say."

"Well," I said suggestively, "I passed her a minute ago, sitting on the seat under the willows by the river, drawing in the sand."

I looked at my shoes attentively for the space of a minute. When I looked up again the other chair was empty.

By-and-by he came back. He looked frightened and anxious and miserable.

"Well?"

At first he affected not to know what I meant, and made as though he would pass me on his way in. Then :

"I have spoken of it to her," he said, and I thought, and still think, hurried into the house.

I put my hat on, and went out of the garden. I went down to that seat under the willows by the river. It was empty. Large and clear in the sand in front were his initials. Somebody had hurriedly tried to scratch them over, but there they were.

Then Pleasance Gurney visited a great deal among her father's poor people in the village. It took her all day long. It was the turn of the visitings to prevent the picnics. But we all went on picnicking just the same, except that the Professor had a great deal of work to do, and could very seldom come. One day I went into his room. A week's dust lay over all his papers. Theories, naturally, one works out in one's head. The others began to remark on his abject face, and to speak to me of it. I, of course, had not noticed it.

He hardly ever spoke to me. Sometimes we sat silent for half an hour. I think he liked that, and felt better for it. He used to begin with his chin on his chest, and his eyes on the ground. Then by little and little his head got higher and higher, till, by the end of the sitting, he was generally looking out straight in front of him, with a far away look in his eyes, and sometimes a dawning smile on his mouth. But as soon as anybody came, or I opened my lips to speak, he would shake his shoulders and pull himself together, and the smile hardened into sternness, and then sank into gloom again.

I do not believe he saw Pleasance all that week. Once she stood under the morning room window, and called up to me that she had stolen some cherries from our trees, for a sick child. As she turned away I looked behind me, and there stood the Professor, craning

craning his neck to look out of the window, with a fine glow on his face. He sat down and drummed with his fingers on the table, though it was open to anybody to go and carry her cherries for her.

I think it was the morning after that that we found ourselves talking almost as we used to talk.

"This has been a terrible holiday for me," he was saying as simply as a child.

"Yes," I murmured.

"Because of her danger." His face was turned away.

"Yes." I found I was eagerly leaning forward.

He looked more comfortable when I leaned back again.

"It is so horrible." He drew a great breath. "No one can understand how horrible it is to me."

"I think I can understand."

"*You?*"

He looked at me with such piercing reproach that the bare idea of my loving Edward Belton seemed for the moment black apostacy.

I dropped my head before him.

"I did not mean to hurt you, child," he said, looking at me as though he did not see me, "but I believe that there is no human being who can understand."

He clasped his hands and gazed out of the window. His head lay against the back of his chair. Gradually, as I had seen it before, the pain died out of his face. His mouth and eyes grew soft, and his hands relaxed. I think he forgot where he was. I think he was not in the body at all.

"And I would give my life to save her," he said to himself very low.

As he heard himself say those words a sudden shock went through him. He sat like a stone.

And in the silence I heard the echo of his words ringing from a few weeks back: *The first and most common thing a lover offers to his mistress—*

“Do you know what has happened?” he said at last, in a strange stifled voice, and I saw that his hands were clenched.

“What?” I asked joyfully, and exulted, till I saw the anguish in his face.

“I too am a victim.”

I caught his clenched hands, I could not help it, and wrung them hard.

“I am so glad,” I cried. “Dear Pleasance! Now she will be happy.”

A little light trembled over his face and was gone in an instant, buried in deepest gloom. He rose up.

“I have a battle to fight,” he said, in such a sad, solemn, earnest way that I held on harder to his hands, and looked pityingly up at him.

But he broke from me and went into his own room. No one saw him again till the evening.

I went out for a long walk.

Once or twice I lingered by his room on tiptoe. I could think of nothing else but the fight going on within. Which would win, those deep hopes and convictions, or the great law of nature, the heritage from his fathers? But in the light of the events of my own life just then, his theories showed so impious, that even I did not sympathise to the full with his life struggle.

In the evening his door was open. The room was empty. Nothing had been touched. All the old dust lay on everything. Only, his chair was drawn up to the empty grate, back to the window. I could see him as he had sat all day with his head bent,

bent, gazing, gazing at that hard, unanswering black-lead, while the fight raged up and down within him.

Then I went out thoughtfully and walked to and fro in the shrubbery. Were two people happy, or were two more people miserable in this world?

Suddenly I heard a voice quite near.

"My heart's love," it was saying, in tones and depths I had never dreamt it had. And then it poured out all the dear silly things that he had certainly never said before, nor heard, but must have known by divine instinct.

I caught one glimpse through the leaves as they passed. His face looked wan and worn from his tremendous battle, but happy—I had never seen the face of a man look so happy.

I crept away.

He was great in his defeat. He was, as I had known, a magnificent lover. I think even Pleasance does not understand her—*my* Professor—as I understand him.

His book on the love-germ is not yet out. But he has just published one on a very fine mixed breed of germs the Americans have lately perfected in their big cities.