

The Use of Force

They were new patients to me, all I had was the name, *Olson. Please come down as soon as you can, my daughter is very sick.

When I arrived I was met by the mother, a big startled looking woman, very clean and apologetic who merely said, Is this the doctor? and let me in. In the back, she added. You must excuse us, doctor, we have her in the kitchen where it is warm. It is very *damp here sometimes.

The child was fully dressed and sitting on her father's *lap near the kitchen table. He tried to get up, but I motioned for him not to bother, took off my overcoat and started to look things over. I could see that they were all very nervous, *eyeing me up and down distrustfully. As often, in such cases, they weren't telling me more than they had to, *it was up to me to tell them; that's why they were spending three dollars on me.

The child was *fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes, and no expression to her face whatever. She did not move and seemed inwardly, quiet; an unusually attractive little thing, and as strong as a *heifer in appearance. But her face was *flushed, she was breathing rapidly, and I realized that she had a high *fever. She had magnificent blonde hair, in *profusion. One of those picture children often reproduced in advertising leaflets and the *photogravure sections of the Sunday papers.

She's had a fever for three days, began the father and we don't know what it comes from. My wife has given her things, you know, like people do, but *it don't do no good. And there's been a lot of sickness around. So we *tho't you'd better *look her over and tell us what is the matter.

As doctors often do I *took a trial shot at it as a point of departure. Has she had a sore *throat?

Both parents answered me together, No...No, she says her throat don't hurt her.

Does your throat hurt you? added the mother to the child. But the little girl's expression didn't change nor did she move her eyes from my face.

Have you looked?

I tried to, said the mother, but I couldn't see.

As it happens we had been having a number of cases of *diphtheria in the school to which this child went during that month and we were all, quite apparently, thinking of that, though no one had as yet spoken of the thing.

Well, I said, suppose we take a look at the throat first. I smiled in my best professional manner and asking for the child's first name I said, come on, Mathilda, open your mouth and let's take a look at your throat.

Nothing doing.

Aw, come on, I *coaxed, just open your mouth wide and let me take a look. Look, I said opening both hands wide, I haven't anything in my hands. Just open up and let me see.

*Such a nice man, put in the mother. Look how kind he is to you. Come on, do what he tells you to. He won't hurt you.

At that I *ground my teeth in disgust. If only they wouldn't use the word "hurt" I might be able to get somewhere. But I did not allow myself to be hurried or disturbed but speaking quietly and slowly I approached the child again.

As I moved my chair a little nearer suddenly with one cat-like movement both her hands *clawed instinctively for my eyes and she almost reached them too. In fact she knocked my glasses flying and they fell, though unbroken, several feet away from me on the kitchen floor.

Both the mother and father *almost turned themselves inside out in embarrassment and apology. You bad girl, said the mother, taking her and shaking her by one arm. Look what you've done. The nice man...

For heaven's sake, I broke in. Don't call me a nice man to her. I'm here to look at her throat on the chance she might have diphtheria and possibly die of it. But that's nothing to her. Look here, I said to the child, we're going to look at your throat. You're old enough to understand what I'm saying. Will you open it now by yourself or shall we have to open it for you?

Not a move. Even her expression hadn't changed. Her breaths however were coming faster and faster. Then the battle began. I had to do it. I had to have a throat *culture for her own protection. But first I told the parents that it was entirely up to them. I ex-

Glossary

- abject** deserving contempt because behaving in a cowardly or self-abasing manner
- admonished** warned
- almost turned themselves inside out** *This use of exaggeration for emphasis is typical of American speech.*
- brat** a contemptuous word for "child"
- bred** past participle (and past tense) of **breed**, here "be the cause of"
- clawed** used (her) fingernails to attack, as an animal uses its claws
- clenched** held together tightly
- coaxed** asked gently, encouragingly
- culture** a sample of (throat) tissue to be tested for infection in a laboratory
- damp** slightly wet
- desisted** stopped
- diphtheria** a serious infectious disease of the throat
- dread** great fear
- ensuing** following
- eyeing (me) up and down** looking at (me) from head to toe
- fairly eating (me) up** was looking at (me) very intently; here, fairly means "almost" (rural colloquialism)
- fever** an above-normal body temperature
- flushed** red; here, because of a fever
- gagged** choked
- ground** past tense of **grind** "rub together with great force"
- heifer** a young cow [he-fə]
- it don't do no good** *Standard English would be "It hasn't done any good." The father's manner of speaking is typical of people with little formal education.*
- it was up to (me)** it was (my) responsibility
- lap** the front part of a seated person's legs from the waist to the knees
- look her over** give her a medical examination
- membrane** soft, thin tissue; here, a sign of disease
- molars** the back teeth
- Oh yeah** Oh yes?; an expression of skepticism (informal)
- Olson** a common family name of Scandinavian origin
- operatives** here, the immediate, compelling motives

- photogravure section** a special section of the weekend newspaper filled with colored pictures reproduced by the photogravure process, in which a picture is reproduced on a metal plate from a photographic negative; the final printing is done from the plate
- profusion** abundance *abundant*
- shrieked** screamed
- spatula** a tool with a wide, flat, flexible blade; here, it refers to the tongue depressor
- splinter** a small, sharp fragment (of wood, glass or metal)
- such a nice (man)** *A formula used by mothers to reassure their children about kind strangers.*
- tho't** thought
- throat** the passage inside the neck
- tongue depressor** a thin, flat piece of wood used by a doctor to hold down a patient's tongue in order to examine his throat
- tonsils** the two small oval masses of lymphoid tissue in the back of the throat
- took a trial shot** made a first attempt; here, an attempt to diagnose the illness

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

- | Fact | Inference & Interpretation* |
|---|--|
| 1. Who is the narrator, the "I"? | |
| 2. Whom did he go to see? | What sort of people were the Olsons? Describe each of them. |
| 3. Why was the family in the kitchen when the doctor arrived? | What time of year was it? |
| 4. Why did they not tell the doctor "more than they had to"? | The doctor says, "As often, in such cases." What sort of cases does he mean? |
| 5. How much did the doctor's visit cost? | |

6. What did the daughter look like? How old do you think the daughter was?
7. What indicated that she was sick?
8. How long had she had a fever? What had her parents done to treat it?
9. What was the doctor's first question? What was the parents' response? Why do you think the mother asked her daughter "Does your throat hurt?" when the question had just been answered?
10. What was the doctor's next question? What was the mother's response?
11. What did all three adults fear? Why didn't the Olsons speak openly about their fear?
12. What was the child's name?
13. What did the doctor ask her to do?
14. How did the mother try to help the doctor? What was the doctor's reaction? Why was the doctor "disgusted" by the mother's approach to her child?
15. What did Mathilda do when the doctor moved closer to her? Why did Mathilda react so violently to the doctor?
16. How did the parents react? Why were the parents so embarrassed?
17. Why did the doctor object to being called "a nice man"?
18. What did the doctor tell Mathilda to do? How did she react?
19. Why was it so important for the doctor to see the child's throat? Why does the doctor describe the final events of the story as a "battle"?
20. How did the mother attempt to force the child to comply?

21. What was the doctor's reaction to the mother's attempt?
22. Why couldn't the father hold his daughter still? We are told that the father was "a big man" and that "he was almost fainting." Aren't these descriptions contradictory?
23. Why did he insist that the doctor continue trying?
24. What was the mother doing?
25. What did the doctor finally order the father to do?
26. What was the child's reaction? Why did Mathilda finally break her silence? Or, why had she not spoken before?
27. What did the husband tell his wife to do? Why did the doctor speak so sharply to Mathilda?
28. What did the doctor use to force open the child's mouth?
29. What did Mathilda do when he had almost succeeded in seeing her throat? Why did Mathilda's mother yell at her? What do you think the mother was feeling?
30. What did the doctor use next to force her mouth open? The doctor suddenly shifts from simple to sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure. What effect does that have?
31. Why did the doctor not wait an hour or two and then try again? The doctor says, "I too had got beyond reason." Who else was in that state?
32. What did the doctor find when he finally saw Mathilda's throat? Why had Mathilda lied about having a sore throat?
33. What was Mathilda's reaction when the doctor discovered her "secret"? Why did she react that way?

* These questions are the most important for class discussion.