

The Use of Force

(William Carlos Williams)

"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. 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. 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 on 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 doesn't do any good. And there's been a lot of sickness around. So we tho't you'd better look her over and tell us what the matter is."

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 doesn'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 catlike 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 that 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 explained the danger but said that I would not insist on a throat examination so long as they would take the responsibility.

"If you don't do what the doctor says you'll have to go to the hospital," the mother admonished her severely.

"Put her in front of you on your lap," I ordered, "and hold both her wrists."

But as soon as he did the child let out a scream. "Don't, you're hurting me. Let go off my hands. Let them go I tell you." Then she shrieked terrifyingly, hysterically. "Stop it! You're killing me!"

"Do you think she can stand it, doctor?" said the mother.

"You get out," said the husband to his wife. "Do you want her to die of diphtheria?"

"Come on now, hold her," I said.

Then I grasped the child's head with my left hand and tried to get the wooden tongue depressor between her teeth. She fought, with clenched teeth, desperately! But now I also had grown furious – at a child. I tried to hold myself down but I couldn't. I know how to expose a throat for inspection. And I did my best. When finally I got the wooden spatula behind the last teeth and just the point of it into the mouth cavity, she opened up for an instant

but before I could see anything she came down again and gripped the wooden blade between her molars. She reduced it to splinters before I could get it out again.

"Aren't you ashamed," the mother yelled at her. "Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of the doctor?"

"Get me a smooth-handled spoon of some sort," I told the mother, "We're going through with this." The child's mouth was already bleeding. Her tongue was cut and she was screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. Perhaps I should have desisted and come back in an hour or more. No doubt it would have been better. But I have seen, at least, two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases, and feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it.

In the final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was - both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes.

About the Author

William Carlos Williams (1883 - 1963) practised medicine in Rutherford, New Jersey, the factory town in which he was born. *Selected Poems* appeared in 1949, *Collected Later Poetry* (1950), and *Collected Poems* (1951). His long epic poem, *Paterson*, won the National Book Award for poetry in 1950. *Desert Music* appeared in 1954, *Journey to love* in 1955. He has also written novels, *White Mule* (1937) and *In the Money* (1940); short stories, *Life Along the Passic* (1938) *Selected Essays* (1954); and an *Autobiography* (1951). He received the *Bollingen Award* for poetry in 1953. The simple and direct language in this short story heightens the intensity of the feelings of the doctor, the parents, and the child.

Theme

The use of force, in certain conditions, when sick children resist to get themselves examined, becomes necessary to save their lives. Otherwise, there is every likelihood of the danger of their death for not getting medically treated. The doctor, while examining a sick child suffering from high fever, first behaved gently. But when the sick child resisted to open her mouth, the doctor had no choice but to overpower her, and forced her to open the mouth by placing the heavy silver spoon at the back of her teeth, and saw the tonsils covered with membrane - the real cause of her illness.

Reading Notes

startled	shocked
motioned for him not to bother	directed him to remain in that position
distrustfully	not trusting or believing
eating me up	looking angrily
heifer	young cow
tho't	thought
diphtheria	acute infectious disease with inflammation of throat
coaxed	get somebody to do something with kindness and patience
embarrassment	to make feel ashamed or awkward
admonished	gave a mild warning
contemptible	deserving or provoking contempt
hysterically	with violent motion
clenched	tightly shut (closed)
furious	angry
spatula	tool with a wide blade
splinters	pieces, bits

EXERCISES

I. Choose the correct answer.

- i. Who is 'T' in the story?
 - a) the father
 - b) the doctor
 - c) the mother
 - d) the sick child
- ii. The parents were nervous because
 - a) they did not want to tell the doctor anything.
 - b) they did not know what to say.
 - c) they wanted the doctor to tell them everything.
 - d) the child did not tell anything.

- iii. The doctor was impressed
- by the beauty of the child.
 - by the patience of the child.
 - by the patience of the parents.
 - by the picture of the child he had seen in Sunday's paper.
- iv. The doctor took a 'trial shot of it' means
- he made a wild guess to begin with.
 - he gave her a shot (injection).
 - he took parents to task.
 - he examined the girl carefully.
- v. The doctor feared that the child might be suffering from diphtheria.
- from the appearance of the child
 - The parents told him so.
 - from the examination of the child
 - He guessed because there had been such cases in the local school.
- vi. The child did not respond to the doctor's instructions because
- she was afraid of the doctor.
 - she was a stubborn child.
 - her parents had tried to open her mouth.
 - she was angry.
- vii. The doctor ground his teeth in anger because
- the child did not respond.
 - the mother told the girl, "he would not hurt you".
 - the parents did not let him handle the child.
 - the child had knocked his glasses.
- viii. The doctor had almost succeeded in opening the mouth of the girl but failed to see because
- the child resisted strongly.
 - the parental love made the father release her at the last moment.
 - the rough handling hurt the child.
 - the mother stopped him.

2. Mark the sentences true or false.

- The story is about a sick child.
- The parents take the child to the doctor.
- The doctor is impressed by the innocent beauty of the child.

- iv. The doctor thinks that the girl may be suffering from diphtheria.
- v. The doctor makes a guess because there have been some diphtheria cases in the local school.
- vi. The girl refuses to open her mouth for examination.
- vii. Parents joined the doctor in opening her mouth.
- viii. They succeeded in opening her mouth.

3. Answer the following questions.

- i. What was the condition of the parents on the arrival of the doctor?
- ii. What was the behaviour of the child towards the doctor?
- iii. She had a fever for three days, hadn't she?
- iv. Did the girl change her expression when the doctor said, "Does your throat hurt you?"
- v. Why did the doctor call the sick girl by her first name?
- vi. Did the sick girl promptly respond to the instruction of the doctor?
- vii. Why did the parents rebuke her?
- viii. What was the threat of the doctor to the child if she did not show her throat?
- ix. Why did she break the wooden blade?
- x. What was the condition of the tonsils of the sick girl?

4. Answer the following questions in 50 - 100 words.

- i. How did the child look by appearance?
- ii. Why did the parents keep the sick child in the kitchen?
- iii. How did the doctor succeed in examining her throat?
- iv. Describe the feelings of the doctor in his struggle to diagnose the disease.
- v. Compare and contrast the conduct of a healthy child and a sick child.
- vi. Under what circumstances can the use of force be justified?

5. Write down the correct form of the verb in each sentence.

- i. When I (arrive) I (meet) my mother.
- ii. I (motion) for him not to bother.
- iii. I (move) my chair a little nearer.
- iv. She (knock) my glasses flying and they (fall).
- v. I (explain) the danger.
- vi. They (grow) more and more (crush).
- vii. Then she (shriek) terrifyingly.
- viii. Then I (grasp) the child's head with my left hand.

- ix. She (open) up her mouth for an instant.
- x. She (reduce) it to splinters before I (can) get it out again.

6. Punctuate the following lines.

does your throat hurt you added the mother to the child but the little girls expression didn't change nor did she move her eyes from my face

7. Use the following words in your sentences.

start, motion, trust, magnificent, leaflet

8. Fill in the blanks.

- i. I mentioned it _____ her.
- ii. It was _____ to me to tell them.
- iii. I took a trial shot _____ it.
- iv. We were all quite thinking _____ that.
- v. I haven't anything _____ my hands.

9. Use the following phrasal verbs in your sentences.

- i. sit on
- ii. sit in
- iii. come from
- iv. come off

10. Answer the questions given at the end of the paragraph.

Then I grasped the child's head with my left hand and tried to get the wooden tongue depressor between her teeth. She fought, with clenched teeth, desperately! But now I also had grown furious – at a child. I tried to hold myself down but I couldn't. I know how to expose a throat for inspections. And I did my best. When finally I got the wooden spatula behind the last teeth and just the point of it into the mouth cavity, she opened up for an instant but before I could see anything she came down again and gripped the wooden blade between her molars. She reduced it to splinters before I could get it out again.

- i. Why did the doctor become furious?
- ii. What instrument did the doctor use to open her mouth?
- iii. Why did she grip the wooden blade between her molars?
- iv. Write down the main idea of the paragraph.