

¶Is killing a man ever justifiable?

MERCY-KILLER CONFESSES

I KILLED a patient last month by an over-dose of morphine. He was in the last stages of cancer of the stomach. I believe that death to end his unceasing agony was the only kindness I could do for him.

He was a fine man. I had become fond of him. For days after his death I was emotionally upset, but I have not regretted my action.

All through my training as a nurse I was appalled by the unnecessary suffering of patients in general hospitals.

"While there's life, there's hope," they say. In too many cases that glib axiom is definitely false.

Some diseases, especially cancer in advanced stages, bring patients to a state in which there can be no faint chance of recovery.

They linger on in dreadful hopelessness, their agony only partly relieved by frequent injections of morphine.

Even when I was a young trainee it seemed to me stupid and cruel to permit such people to live on in futile misery.

The law forbids euthanasia—merciful death. Medical convention is against it.

Long ago I determined that if ever the opportunity occurred I would put my principles into practice and give merciful release to a patient obviously doomed to a horrible, lingering death.

And yet, when the chance came, I funk'd taking it immediately. That is my only regret—that I hesitated for weeks.

This patient whom I killed was a man of sixty, a wealthy bachelor.

He had no relatives or friends living with him. Two servants looked after his house.

The doctor and the nurse whose place I took told me that the case was hopeless.

The man had cancer of the stomach. He had waited far too long before seeking medical advice. Surgery had been tried, but the condition was too advanced. It was inoperable.

I could see that there was no chance. The patient was frightfully weak. His body was ema-

ciated. He was rarely able to digest, or even retain food. He was wasting away by slow starvation, plus the burden of intense pain.

There was little I could do for him except attend to his few needs and give him injections of morphine to ease his suffering.

I knew at once that this was a time when I should act upon my conviction that such sufferers should be released from their misery. But the man attracted me and I hesitated.

He had a marvellous spirit. Never did he complain. He always had a smile for me. His eyes shone with gratitude for each service I did for him. He was forever making jokes and forcing himself to seem cheerful.

He even made a jest of his condition and its inevitable outcome, but I soon realised that this was a mask. Actually, his utter helplessness humiliated him bitterly.

He rarely had visitors, preferring that relatives and friends should not call on him. He did not want them to be upset by his terrible state, and I suspect he hated them to see him so. He was fearful lest they should pity him.

Life was worthless to him. He realised it as fully as I did.

I had not been with him long when one day, as I was going to prepare his injection, he said, "Be a sport, Sister. Give me an overdose this time."

I feel ashamed when I remember how I replied to him, with false professional optimism, "Don't be silly. You've still got a chance."

His smile told me that he knew I was lying.

Often after that he repeated the request. He used, calmly and rationally, all the arguments I believed.

Like a coward I procrastinated. Perhaps the fact that he had asked held me back, for, foolishly, I shrank from the thought that he should know what I was doing. Besides, I had become attached to him. I admired and respected him and even tried to convince myself that there might be a chance of recovery.

Week after week went by and I knew beyond doubt that it was futile to hope. Often the doctor told me that the case was entirely hopeless, but that he might linger for weeks and even months.

At last I could no longer bear to see him suffer. It did not need his reiterations for me to know that life was a burden to him.

Despite his unfailing courage and utter lack of self-pity, I knew that his mental suffering was almost as great as the physical torment. It hurt his pride terribly to be in such a state of helplessness and dependence, and to witness the revolting rotting away of his own body.

It was more than any brave soul should be allowed to bear.

One night I decided at last that he should have his wish and go off into a deep, peaceful, endless sleep.

There was little risk of my being found out. The doctor gave me drugs whenever I asked for them, without, apparently, keeping any check on the quantities used.

In one small bottle about three grains of morphine tablets remained. I dissolved the lot and filled the hypodermic syringe. It was his last injection for the night.

I swabbed his arm with iodine and plunged the needle under the skin. Although I felt outwardly calm, I was intensely nervous, and perhaps something in my manner betrayed me.

I believe he guessed what I was doing. He looked at me with what I took to be supreme gratitude,

and murmured, "Thank you, Sister."

I tried to give no sign. I carried out as calmly as I could the usual routine of settling him down for the night.

"Good night," I said, and my voice shook only a little. "Just ring the bell if you need me."

"I won't want anything, thank you, Sister. Good night."

Soon he was asleep. He never awakened.

My feelings were mixed. There was no remorse or shame for what I had done. Indeed, I felt proud that I had summoned the courage to give him the release he wanted—the merciful release which should be the right of all who are similarly doomed.

Yet there was an emotional sense of loss. I had come to know him as a very gallant gentleman, full of courage, and we were friends.

He might have lived on in degrading agony for weeks; even months. At least I had saved him from that.

Perhaps I had a selfish fear that further suffering would break his spirit. I know he had some such dread, and that was why he preferred to leave life while he was

still able to laugh at it and face the end unflinchingly.

I gave him his wish, and I have never regretted it. I shall do the same again if necessity arises, un-

til the law makes it possible for incurable sufferers to be relieved painlessly of their misery.—*Anon, condensed from Smith's Weekly, Australia.*

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A NEW OIL KING

UNLESS you happen to live in Pittsburgh, or are in the oil business—where his name is a legend—it is an odds—on bet that you never heard of Michael L. Benedum. He is one of the nation's dozen wealthiest men, one of the largest, if not *the* largest, income taxpayer in America, and by all odds the most successful oil wildcatter in history.

Benedum has created a dozen multi-millionaires, made hundreds of men and women independently wealthy. He controls 15 or 20 major corporations, but holds no corporate office of any kind, except president of one oil company and director of a Pittsburgh bank. He has never bought a ticket on a horse race, tossed a chip on a roulette table, owned a share of stock on margin, or even bet a nickel on a game of penny ante, and he regularly denounces gambling to his associates. Yet he is the greatest gambler in America, casually tossing as much as three million dollars into a wildcat prospect before a well ever sinks into the earth. And that is the wildest kind of gambling, for on more than one occasion he has staked his hopes on hunches that would make a dream book lottery player's system seem like conservative finance.

A few years ago the government sued him and the Tex-Penn Oil Company for 79 million dollars in the back income taxes. His attorney was the same man, John W. Davis, who had represented him against Standard Oil when both were youngsters. While the suit was in progress Benedum received a wire from his friend, Amon Carter of Texas, reading, "Congratulations on having Uncle Sam think you are worth nine million dollars." Evidently a clerical error had caused the omission of the word "seventy." Mike wired back, "don't insult me: it is seventy-nine." Eventually the Supreme Court decided that Benedum owed no back taxes.

Although his fortune is so enormous that he could not possibly spend it, Benedum is wildcatting today with the same eagerness that he showed 40 years ago.—*Ted Leitzell, from Ken.*