Library of America • Story of the Week
From *American Flash Fiction: An Anthology* (LOA, 2026) pages 28-32.
First published in *Schopenhauer in the Air: Seven Stories* (1899).

Sadakichi Hartmann

Critical Moments

(To W. D. Howells)

The door bell rang timidly as if avoiding unnecessary noise.

The mother, starting up from her dejection, ejaculated: "The doctor!" then in an ardent undertone: "Virgin Mary, save, oh save my child."

The father made a gesture: "Now we will see," and nodding complacently shuffled into the hall; he returned next moment with a spectacled young man, who by his nervous mien, assuming notwithstanding an air of importance, showed his inexperience.

He hastily opened his bag and stepped to the lounge where a little boy lay bedded among pillows and sheets: a long, narrow, emaciated form, like a figure drawn by Grünewald.

The kerosene lamp spread its spare light on the faded red cover on the table, leaving the rest of the sultry room in semi-darkness. A faint odor of perfumes seemed to lay on every object. The clock ticked offensively loud, telling with every second that a human life neared its end. A half-finished meal stood on the mantelpiece, its drapery moved sadly with every draught. Now and then the window panes trembled when the Elevated passed by.

The mother, with beating heart, busied herself in the adjoining kitchen, brewing some medicaments which her neighbor, a gossiping old maid had recommended to her.

The father, with lips slightly apart, stupid and helpless, as men generally are at such moments, stood behind the doctor.

The doctor at once felt the seriousness of the case, shrugged his shoulder and asked for the lamp. The father moved the table awkwardly to the bedside, and stared at the trembling shadows on the ceiling.

The doctor felt the child's pulse, sitting down on the edge of the couch, whereby he upset a glass of water; he looked embarrassed at the carpet consuming the moisture, and forgot to count.

The father also glanced down with an expression which seemed to imply: "That doesn't matter—but the child, it's all over, isn't it?"

The young doctor continued to count, moving his lips rapidly, then took the temperature, and felt the pulse again. It was his first case of the kind; at college he had always neglected children's diseases—why bother with them if there are such things as female complaints in the world—and now in his anxiety he realized that he did not know any more than the parents about the ailment of his patient, whose breath was scarcely audible at times. He only felt that the child was very sick and probably would die under his hands. Why hadn't he refused to come at this late hour.

Suddenly boisterous dance music and the noise of gliding footsteps interrupted the silence.

"What is that?" asked the spectacles. He still held the hand of his patient not knowing what to do, endeavoring in vain to remember something he had never known.

"The Hungarians upstairs celebrate a wedding."

"My, how can they—I would—"

"They don't care, they all have more children than they want."

"That's so," smiled the doctor, "yes, yes, they come rather quick, don't they—therefore one does not feel their loss—excuse me—I mean—"

"But this is our only one," came plaintively from the kitchen.

"Oh, is it," cold perspiration stood on his forehead. What should he say, surely he had to say something, and he desperately groped about in his bag.

Then it grew silent again in the little sick-room; above the floor shook with a droning sound under the stamping measures of a Czarda as far as it can be indulged in in a little flat.

The confused screaming of joy intermingling with the music that poured through the open windows, ablaze with light, into the otherwise so silent street, told all curious neighbors that the intoxication of wine and the senses had well intermingled, that at least in this flat there were people who believed they were happy.

"Well?" The mother came back from the kitchen, looking at the two men with an enquiring, imploring look.

The doctor, in despair at his ignorance, shook his perspiring head, with tears of shame in his eyes, which the good people took for sympathy.

She shaded the lamp with a newspaper, so that the light did not fall on the face of him whose birth had almost cost her life, in deep thought took up the little ten-cent china statue of the Virgin Mary and put it down again, then nodding her head in silent prayer, she sank down in a chair, her hands folded in her lap.

"What good will that do?" said the husband, almost roughly, drawing his underlip forward.

"Oh, God can not be so cruel to take him away from us."

"Well, pray on and see if he will help us. Damn it, I wish he could!"

"I won't believe in God any more if he takes him away from me."

The husband paced softly up and down, now and then stopping to put things in order on the mantelpiece, or brushing with his hand one piece or another of his scant wardrobe hanging in a corner. He thought of the religious quarrels he had so often had with his wife, fierce quarrels, as they both were stupidly bigoted, he in his unbelief, she in her faith.

"Damn religion altogether! If the child would only live!" and he thrust his hands into the pockets of his pants. How much had he to pay that doctor, anyhow, who sat there so glum without saying a word. One dollar, two dollars, or even three dollars—he had only a five dollar bill, how could he change it in the meanwhile?

The doctor had a faint smile on his lips, ready to grin nervously at any moment, should they look at him.

The noise upstairs continued. It seemed the bride and bridegroom had left, and the remaining guests behaved more frantic than before. Why not! Such chances of enjoying ourselves at the expenses of others after all do not occur so often in life. And the young people, madly whirling about, grew intoxicated with each other's presence, and in hungry silly flirtation realized a foretaste of the disenchantment of married life.

Below the cold hand of the dying child lay still in the trembling fingers of the doctor, who suddenly let it fall, and with unsteady eyes, and blanched face, motioned for more light.

The father mechanically seized the lamp and held it with a nerveless arm.

The mouth of his child lay open, a round black hole, the cheeks were hollow, a dark violet ring under the eyes, the white of which had turned a disagreeable bluish-yellow. The hair, without a trace of light, lay in lank strings around his face, and the shadow of his nose almost looked comical, the father held the light so low.

"Dead."

"Dead!"

"Dead!" a frightful scream rang through the room, and drowned the noise above. Her fingers had groped tremblingly over the clammy body of her child.

She clenched her fists and bursting into ghastly laughter, tore the agnus dei from her breast and flung it into a corner.

The band upstairs struck up a maddening gallop.

"Come, let us be gay with the Hungarians," and she sank sobbing to the ground. In this chaotic moment of dull piercing pain she had not only lost her child, but also her faith.

The father stood nodding in the middle of the room. "This had to come, but,—" there was a confusion of ideas in him; he wanted to say some word of consolation; he tried to express something, but could not, something of that we all feel in the critical moments of our life, but which we never utter, as our human language is insufficient. And as if he knew that only music could express such tumult and agony, he grunted a few inarticulate sounds . . . , ending with, "Well, we must bear it—but as the old woman said, this was our only one," then he felt relieved; his greatest pain was over.

The young doctor had sneaked away without giving the father a chance to pay him. It was a sad experience; he might have died anyhow—yet a sting of conscience made him take up the neglected study, and to-day he is considered on the Eastside an expert on children's diseases.

1894