



# Richard Gordon

The Summer of Sir Lancelot



**Richard Gordon** was born in 1921. He qualified as a doctor and then went on to work as an anaesthetist at St Bartholomew's Hospital, and then as a ship's surgeon. As obituary-writer for the *British Medical Journal*, he was inspired to take up writing full time and he left medical practice in 1952 to embark on his 'Doctor' series. This proved incredibly successful and was subsequently adapted into a long-running television series.

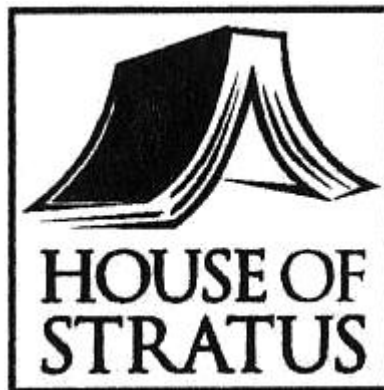
Richard Gordon has produced numerous novels and writings all characterised by his comic tone and remarkable powers of observation. His *Great Medical Mysteries* and *Great Medical Discoveries* concern the stranger aspects of the medical profession whilst his *The Private Life of...* series takes a deeper look at individual figures within their specific medical and historical setting. Although an incredibly versatile writer, he will, however, probably always be best known for his creation of the hilarious 'Doctor' series.

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SURGEON AT ARMS

# The Summer of Sir Lancelot

*Richard Gordon*



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It was one of those glorious blue and gold mornings in May, sent to fool us that summer for once won't be the usual programme of rain and bad light stopping play, Wimbledon flooded, frostbite at Henley, and the Derby run in a thunderstorm. Instead there seemed the chance at last of farmers ruined by drought, half the Guards fainting at Trooping the Colour, roads jammed to the coast, and the New Forest going up in flames. It was a Saturday, so Clarice and Edna could get out their little motor scooter and putter away from Birmingham right after breakfast. They'd planned a picnic among the Herefordshire orchards, which, like the two girls, were all dolled up in their best spring finery.

It was a flagon of cider with the sardine sandwiches which braced them to press across the borders of Wales, where the mountains had drawn handkerchiefs of cloud over their faces to sink into an afternoon doze. But even such pretty girls on a motor scooter got nudged a good deal by the passing traffic, until they found refuge in a peaceful lane which wandered among the mountains before bringing them suddenly to the banks of a river. They stopped. The water frisked and laughed among the rocks, spreading into a deep clear pool at their feet. Birds swooped and skimmed over the surface. Bright-coloured flies hovered indecisively in the air. Oaks spread benevolent arms over soft new knee-high bracken. As for the human race, it seemed for the moment to have gone out of production.

'It's lovely,' breathed Clarice, switching off the engine. 'You wouldn't think, would you,' observed Edna, the thoughtful one, 'we were hardly a hundred miles from the office and Mr Stallybrass?'

'I know what — ' Clarice unbuckled her shiny white helmet. 'Let's have a swim.'

'A swim?' Edna's eyebrows, drawn with special care that morning, shot upwards. 'But we haven't got our swimsuits.'

'Who said anything about swimsuits?' Clarice was the daring one, who even cheeked Mr Stallybrass. 'Come on, Edna, there isn't a soul for miles. It'll be ever so cooling after the ride.'

‘Oh, no! Not without swimsuits. My mum wouldn’t like it.’

‘Your mum would never find out, would she?’

The water gurgled a throaty invitation.

‘But not a word to Mum, mind,’ said Edna breathlessly.

It took the two pretty girls hardly a minute to slip out of their clothes and come giggling through the downy bracken to the water’s edge. I hasten to add, in case you’re thinking of giving this book to Auntie for Christmas, that nothing in the slightest rude is going to happen. It was but a scene of sunlit, innocent gaiety, which would have had Renoir reaching hastily for his paintbox.

‘Go on, Edna,’ laughed Clarice, ‘you first.’

‘No, you first. I bet it’s proper cold.’

‘Both together, then!’

Hand in hand the two pretty girls fell into the pool, and with little shrieks started splashing each other’s back.

A large hawthorn bush standing alone on the bank opposite emitted a howl.

‘Hey! You!’

The girls submerged to the neck.

‘You pair of cretinous vandals!’ A red-faced bearded gentleman in tweed knickerbockers and deerstalker emerged from the quivering bush. ‘You couple of barbaric morons, get out of my river this instant.’

‘We — we’re swimming,’ Clarice’s startled head addressed from the surface.

‘You don’t imagine I think you’re waiting for a blasted bus?’

‘We’ve a perfect right-’

‘Do you realize, you half-witted harpies, I’ve been stalking a fish there for two entire weeks? Don’t you understand I have spent the whole day in this highly uncomfortable piece of shrubbery solely in the hope of seeing him stick his neck out of the water for a fly? Do you know you are now probably trampling the thing to death under your feet? Get out of that water, before I call the bailiff.’

‘We’ve no clothes on!’ screamed Edna.

‘I’ve seen more naked women than you’ve had hot dinners,’ the fisherman informed her briskly.

‘He’s mad!’ Edna had underwater hysterics. ‘Mad! Like you see in the papers.’

‘Give over, Edna! We can’t expose ourselves, can we?’

‘Oh, Clarice! Let’s get out. Before we’re both assaulted.’

‘If you’re not ashore in two seconds,’ added the bearded gent furiously, ‘I shall wade in and gaff the pair of you.’

Indiscretion seeming the better part of valour, the two pretty girls scrambled blushing up the bank, climbed breathlessly into their clothes, and made damply for their motor scooter and safety from bearded monsters who clearly embarked upon assaults as lightly as bidding you good morning. They left behind a more or less harmless old-fashioned Englishman, gazing sadly at the muddied waters of a favourite pool now as much use for fishing as the fountains in Trafalgar Square.

‘Ye gods,’ was all Sir Lancelot Spratt could bring himself to say. ‘What is the world coming to?’

‘Ye gods,’ repeated Sir Lancelot over breakfast the following Monday morning, ‘what is the world coming to?’

‘That’s the nineteenth,’ remarked Lady Spratt absently, reading a letter. ‘Nineteenth what?’

‘The nineteenth time you’ve made that observation over the weekend.’

‘Well, what *is* it coming to?’ Sir Lancelot notched the score to twenty, brandishing his *Times* like the banner of the Old Guard at bay. ‘Look at this - a group of family doctors have formed what they describe as a “Ginger Group” to get more pay from the Government. How on earth does the profession expect to retain even the shreds of public respect if it persists in behaving like a gang of disgruntled boilermakers? It is totally beyond me. I suppose next they’ll be working to rule, and shoving a dirty great gastroscope down everyone complaining of a bellyache. Thank God I’ve retired! Who’s that letter from?’

‘Nikki Sparrow. Simon’s wife.’

‘Ha! She’s expecting again?’

‘If she is, she doesn’t find it a matter worth mentioning.’

‘How’s Simon like being registrar to old Cambridge? Stout feller, Cambridge,’ Sir Lancelot reflected. ‘Never saved a life and never lost



one. Such are the salt of the surgical earth.'

'Simon has decided to put in for your old job on the senior staff of St Swithin's,' Lady Spratt informed him. 'The election's been definitely fixed for the end of summer.'

'Oh?' returned Sir Lancelot distantly. 'Indeed?'

'Nikki Sparrow shares your own exquisite tact, my dear,' continued Lady Spratt, a little fluffy thing who against her husband was very much a *soufflé* compared to sirloin, 'by not saying in so many words she'd desperately like you to exert a little influence for Simon.'

'That would be most unethical.'

A little sigh fluttered from his wife. 'And to think in your time you've pulled more strings than a band of Welsh harpists. You could at least write to my brother.'

'My dear Maud, I wish you'd realize I have left St Swithin's finally and completely. I wouldn't attempt to influence goings-on in the place any more than I would in the blasted Kremlin.'

'Very well.' She filed the letter under a plate for further action.

'*Most* unethical.' Sir Lancelot reached for the stoneware jar of Beaulieu's Bespoke Marmalade, the treacly stuff which has apparently stickied our royal fingers every morning since George the Fourth. He was very fond of it. Breakfast at the Spratts' was always quite a spread with interesting things sizzling in little dishes round the edge, Sir Lancelot believing the modern habit of everyone sitting at the kitchen table neurotically shaking it out of packets to be the cause of such contemporary phenomena as juvenile delinquency, road accidents, broken homes, and the decline and fall of the British Empire.

'And how are you intending to occupy today?' she asked.

'I'm going after that trout in Witches' Pool, ifl don't happen to find the place in use as a lido.'

'And tomorrow?'

'In the morning I am on the Bench, of course. In the afternoon I shall go fishing again.'

'I simply can't understand how you manage to spend day alter day doing absolutely nothing.'

'I wish you wouldn't fall into the vulgar error of thinking angling is doing nothing,' objected Sir Lancelot, munching a slice of toast loftily.

'It is a skilful and absorbing pursuit, blessed by some of the finest pens in the English language. Ah, good morning, my dear,' he broke off, as his eighteen-year-old niece Euphemia came in for breakfast.

'Good morning, Uncle. Good morning, Auntie. What a delightful day! I've been up for simply hours walking down by the river. It was so marvellous! The water seemed to be chortling to itself over some delicious secret it was hurrying to confide in the sea.'

'Any fish rising?' asked Sir Lancelot.

'Surely, Effie,' Lady Spratt cut in, pushing across the Beaulieu's Bespoke, 'you'd like me to take you down to London for a week or two? Just to see a few shops and shows and have a little fun? You must find it quite as dull here as Cinderella in that beastly kitchen. And I'm afraid you won't have much time for gadding about once you start at St Swithin's.'

'But I don't find it dull here at all, Auntie.' Euphemia opened her big blue eyes a couple more stops. 'Honestly, I don't. I sometimes wish I could stay with you for ever.'

You may be surprised to find a delicate blossom like Euphemia sprouting on such rugged ancestral timber. The daughter of Sir Lancelot's younger brother Jasper, who'd settled out East and opened some of the most influential stomachs ever to be filled in Raffles Hotel, Singapore, she was a little blonde with a figure as slim as a bottle of hock, a laugh as gay as the splash of a fountain, and a smile which would have melted an abominable snowman. It had, in fact, managed to achieve a certain liquefaction of Sir Lancelot.

'What the devil does that cadger Jasper think I am?' he'd demanded, slamming down a letter on that same breakfast table three months before. 'A cross between Little Nell's grandfather and the YWCA?'

'I expect Effie will be extremely nice,' Lady Spratt countered briskly. 'She certainly looks it in our photograph.'

'Might I suggest that certain hormonal changes have possibly taken place since the age of five?'

Sir Lancelot glared at the letter. It appeared that Euphemia had suddenly declared in Singapore she wanted to uphold family tradition by training as a nurse at St Swithin's Hospital, and Mr Jasper Spratt, FRCS, had agreed only on condition that she solemnly promised to

put herself in the strict moral guardianship of Uncle Lancelot. After all, Jasper had once been a student in the place himself. Much to the surprise of her family

Euphemia had accepted the plan with enthusiasm, which was more than could be said for Uncle.

'I know exactly what she'll be like. The same as all those other ghastly lank-haired adolescents hanging round coffee bars, doting on weedy young men in atrocious trousers playing the banjo, or whatever it is, and staying out till all hours. No wonder the Registrar-General's annual report these days reads like *Lolita*. Anyway she's bound to pinch all the bathwater,' Sir Lancelot ended briefly. 'The whole project's out of the question.'

'We'll see,' said Lady Spratt.

But that May morning, a month after meeting Euphemia with his Rolls at London Airport, Sir Lancelot had to confess himself impressed with the child's qualities - her quietness, her serious-mindedness, her love of the country, her appetite for surgical reminiscence and gluttony for fishing stories. Odd, he felt, a bounder like Jasper should have produced such a daughter. The feller must have married into a decent set of genes. He bestowed on his niece across the breakfast table a look of approval wobbling on affection.

'The early dew was sparkling on the lawn so,' Euphemia continued, reaching for the toast, 'I wanted to take off my shoes and sing and dance.'

'You mustn't do that, my dear, you might get a chill,' advised Sir Lancelot, furling *The Times* and pushing back his chair. 'Do you suppose that demobilized druid we have in the kitchen has prepared my sandwiches?' He dabbed the last speck of Beaulieu's Bespoke from his beard with a yellow silk handkerchief. 'I shall be out on the river till dinner.'

'Lancelot! You know perfectly well the Vicar is coming to lunch.'

'Although it is extremely unlikely the Vicar will go to hell,' remarked Sir Lancelot affably, making for the door, 'I will simply record that I should have no objection.'

An old-fashioned Englishman out for a day's fishing needs a good deal of equipment. Apart from such essentials as rods, lines, nets, and all those pretty flies, he requires chicken sandwiches, Stilton and

Bath Olivers, a slice or two of fruit cake, bottled beer, Thermos of tea, the morning paper, pipe and tobacco, shooting-stick, anti-midge lotion, sunglasses, raincoat, hip-flask, and *The Angling Letters of G E M Skues*. All these supplies swung from various parts of Sir Lancelot as he majestically descended the front steps to a garden set for the opening of summer, with roses bursting at the seams, gladioli impatiently awaiting their cue, and the laburnum in the corner dripping on to the lawn like split scrambled eggs. Contentedly sniffing the day and softly whistling a snatch from *The Gondoliers*, he strode towards that world of woods and water where the peace of the fisherman passeth all understanding.

Fishing, as Izaak Walton would have argued more elegantly with Lady Spratt, is a rest to the mind, a cheerer of the spirits, a diverter of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a moderator of passions, a procurer of contentedness, that begets habits of peace and patience in those who profess and practise it. This list, Sir Lancelot admitted when the year before he retired prematurely from the St Swithin's surgical staff, neatly matched his needs.

But Sir Lancelot, like God, with whom he was sometimes understandably confused, moved in mysterious ways. He'd simply delivered the St Swithin's annual Founders' Lecture — his theme was 'The Importance of the Family Doctor', and he'd never been in better form at a lectern — dropped his resignation into the Secretary's office, collected his hat, and disappeared. Admittedly, he was known to have trouble with his intervertebral discs, but as most consultant surgeons hang on to their jobs as doggedly as prime ministers he left his colleagues trying to decide if they were more astonished than affronted.

'I have saved sufficient lives to satisfy my conscience,' he'd explained to his surgical friend Mr Hubert Cambridge. 'I have saved sufficient money to satisfy my needs, and sufficient students from the errors of their ways to satisfy posterity. I have no intention whatever of chasing guineas through the London traffic until I have one foot on the coroner's doormat. I simply wish to pass such time as may remain to me quietly fishing.'

'I fancy Professor Hindehead was rather put out you said goodbye only to Harry the doorman,' Mr Cambridge ventured.

‘Harry the doorman provided me with valuable racing information for twenty years. Professor Hindehead wouldn’t even give me a second opinion.’

The St Swithin’s consultants didn’t elect his successor at once, but invited an amiable urologist from Johns Hopkins in Baltimore to take over his wards for a year. They hadn’t forgotten when Sir Lancelot diagnosed an inoperable cancer of the stomach from his own X-rays, gave his Rolls to Mr Cambridge, and left for Italy to die. Six months later he was back with a new set of X-rays announcing he’d made a mistake, which was awkward for everybody, particularly as he wanted the Rolls back.

The surgeon was so deep in agreeable reflections on fish as he tramped down the path towards Witches’ Pool that he nearly bowled over Millichap, his faithful gillie, gardener, chauffeur, handyman, and former theatre porter.

‘Ah, Millichap.’ Sir Lancelot beamed. On such a delightful morning he radiated generosity like the men in the trading stamp advertisements. ‘I shan’t be needing you on the river. Take the day off,’ he invited handsomely.

‘That’s very good of you, sir.’ Millichap was a tall red-faced man whom twenty years in Sir Lancelot’s service, unhooking fish and carrying from his presence such offensive items as amputated legs and fainting first-year students, had left with the look of rotund dignity seen in those really well-nourished Victorian bishops.

‘Not at all, Millichap, you deserve it. By the way,’ Sir Lancelot recalled, ‘I believe Lady Spratt would like you to drop into Abergavenny with the Rolls first, to pick up the groceries.’

‘As you say, sir.’

‘And I suppose this afternoon those new flies will be ready in Brecon, if you’ve an hour to spare to drive over and collect them.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And I mentioned, I believe, I may have guests to collect from Cardiff this evening? Good. Well — enjoy yourself.’

Millichap shifted his feet. ‘Will you be going to court tomorrow, sir?’

‘Of course I shall. Car at the door by nine sharp, if you please. I say, is anything the matter?’ He caught the man’s eye. ‘Not a recurrence of the dyspepsia?’

‘No, sir. I am burdened with a problem of a rather personal nature.’

‘But you must let me share it!’ Sir Lancelot offered heartily.

‘I fancy you may well,’ ended Millichap gloomily, moving off through the undergrowth with a rich episcopal sigh.

Sir Lancelot shrugged his shoulders. Arriving at Witches’ Pool, he set up camp behind the hawthorn bush, detached a small butterfly net from somewhere on his knickerbocker suit, and danced excitedly with it for some minutes among the brambles.

‘*Baetis bioculatus*,’ he grunted, inspecting his catch with some surprise. ‘The pale watery olive.’

Selecting a pale watery olive from the buffet of flies on the peak of his deerstalker, he fell on his face. He inched towards the bank. The hands which had explored an army of abdomens gently parted the final tufts, and the eyes which had scanned half a million umbilicuses relaxed in watchful repose across the water. Sir Lancelot was waiting for Percival.

Percival was the only local inhabitant for whom he had any affection. They’d eyed each other on and off over the past few summers, but to Sir Lancelot’s disappointment they had never met. Percival was the largest trout in the legends of the river — and believe me, those Welsh legends all come in Vistavision and Technicolor - who filled the surgeon’s idle thoughts with the problem of his transference from the little backwater opposite to a glass case over the dining-room door. Sir Lancelot now lay on his stomach waiting excitedly for the plop like a hippopotamus leaving a bog, which would announce that Percival was coming up for his elevenses.

The surgeon suddenly quivered all over. His face wrinkled like an animated walnut. You might have thought someone had connected him up to the mains. A yard away stood a little bird-faced man in gold-rimmed glasses, busy trying to sort out a tangle in his cast.

'Ye gods,' muttered Sir Lancelot to himself, '*what* is the world coming to?'

He decided the beastly fellow was a straying guest of his neighbour, one of those pleasantly dotty admirals with which the Royal Navy so agreeably enriches the English countryside. The tongue would regretfully have to be substituted for the toecap.

'Here, let me do that.'

Sir Lancelot rose with his rod from the camouflage.

'Oh!' The little man jumped. 'I'm sorry. I thought you were some kind of animal.'

'The name is Spratt.'

'How do you do? I am Mr Chadwick. You seem quite an expert,' he added admiringly, as his fellow-fisherman deftly sorted out the coils.

'Not the first time I've had my fingers on a length of nylon thread,' Sir Lancelot returned a shade smugly. 'I happen to be a surgeon.'

'Of course, of course.' The birdlike head gave a few pecks. 'The Admiral did mention it.'

'You are staying at Trafalgar Lodge for a day or two?' inquired Sir Lancelot, leading up to frontier demarcation.

Mr Chadwick gave a beaky smile.

'A week?' demanded Sir Lancelot more shortly. 'Even a month?' he added anxiously.

The little man laughed. 'Dear me, longer than that.'

Sir Lancelot glared. 'I must say, the Admiral is extremely generous in his hospitality.'

'But the Admiral has left.'

'Left?'

'For Madeira,' explained the intruder mildly. 'He seems to think the move would benefit both his chest and his income tax. I have bought the property.'

'Bought it!'

Sir Lancelot's face took on the expression of a well-established bulldog eyeing the new postman.

‘Yes, my business activities have become much less these days, and I wanted to pass such time as may be left to me quietly fishing. I really couldn’t resist the property — though the Admiral drives a hard bargain, dear me, a very hard bargain indeed — when I found it included this delightful Witches’ Pool.’

‘This-’ Sir Lancelot quivered to his rod-tip ‘-happens to be *my* Witches’ Pool.’

‘Oh, dear me, no,’ countered Mr Chadwick calmly. ‘I agree that for many years you left the Admiral under that impression, but I have been through the deeds carefully and there can be no mistake. No mistake,’ he repeated, flicking his fly across the river, ‘whatsoever.’

For some moments Sir Lancelot stood with his beard moving violently, but the sound had apparently broken down.

‘I intend to consult my solicitors,’ he managed to get out at last.

‘I should be glad for your peace of mind if you would.’ Mr Chadwick seemed unruffled by this well-flung gauntlet. ‘Though I fear they will provide you with only the same opinion.’

‘Damn you, man!’ thundered the surgeon. ‘I’ll take you to court.’

The bird’s eyes blinked mildly. ‘I trust you will not think me discourteous if I say the prospect fails to alarm me.’

‘I’ve fished this ruddy pool every summer holiday since I bought the house.’ The flies on Sir Lancelot’s cap danced a brisk fandango. ‘I’ll have you know I’m not used to being contradicted, particularly by every blasted trespasser — ‘

‘Ah, my guest of the morning,’ Mr Chadwick interrupted, as though Sir Lancelot were some noisy but passing irritation like a wasp. ‘Dear me, what a coincidence! My visitor is in the same profession as yourself. Dr Tolly, I’d like you to meet Dr Spratt.’

‘It wouldn’t be “Doctor” it would be “Mister” and anyway it’s Sir Lancelot,’ snapped the surgeon.

‘G-glad to meet you,’ said Dr Tolly.

‘Why?’ barked Sir Lancelot.

‘Young Dr Tolly has taken over Dr Eweny’s practice in the village,’ Mr Chadwick explained politely. ‘He has already effected an absolutely miraculous cure of my gout.’

Sir Lancelot glared at doctor and patient impartially. ‘You don’t need a miracle to cure gout. You need to cut down on the port.’



‘But I drink only hock and soda-water,’ objected Mr Chadwick mildly. ‘Then it’s probably the wrong diagnosis. Tolly? Tolly? I know you.’ The meteorology of Sir Lancelot’s thunderous brow worsened further. ‘I examined you in your surgery finals last year, didn’t I?’

‘That’s... that’s right, sir.’

‘You were the candidate who, when I asked the cause of this sinus scar on my own forehead, answered, “It’s your leucotomy, sir”?’

‘I -1 was flustered, Sir Lancelot,’ agreed Dr Tolly, turning pink.

The glance which Sir Lancelot focused on him was one of curiosity. He merely wanted to observe more closely what form this offender against the laws of Nature took. He saw a slim young man in T-shirt and jeans, garments which he had frequently described in public as fit only for the end of Blackpool pier. Furthermore, he half suspected the young pup had one of those fancy modern haircuts. He snorted. He could cheerfully have disposed of this junior fellow-practitioner for purposes of vivisection.

‘Which hospital d’yer come from, boy?’

‘St Agnes’, gulped Dr Tolly.

‘I might have known!’

Sir Lancelot folded his arms decisively, the members of any other London hospital being regarded in St Swithin’s as not only underprivileged and mentally handicapped, but probably making their own trousers as well.

‘Come,’ interrupted Mr Chadwick, mindful of his duties as host. ‘We must proceed to our fishing lesson.’

Dr Tolly climbed shakingly on a convenient flat rock. He had, in fact, recently been giving a good deal of thought to his reunion with Old Slasher Spratt, and the projected scene hadn’t been on these lines at all. He nervously took Mr Chadwick’s rod, while Sir Lancelot watched with an expression etched into the souls of countless house surgeons fumbling through their first appendicectomy.

‘It is really quite simple,’ explained Mr Chadwick. ‘You simply flick the rod, like a whip.’

‘Like that?’

‘Exactly, my dear Doctor! See how your fly falls on the surface of the water? If you will permit me to say so, the rod looks remarkably natural in your hand.’

‘And if you will permit *me* to say so,’ commented Sir Lancelot, ‘it looks about as much use as a razor to a eunuch. Good God! Hang on, boy, hang on! Play him, you fool, play him! Let out line, let out line!’

Dr Tolly’s rod would have aroused the admiration of an aspen. The fisherman himself stood on one leg with his mouth open. Mr Chadwick tripped into the brambles. Sir Lancelot excitedly ploughed through the bracken firing broadsides of advice. The ownership of Witches’ Pool and Dr Tolly’s surgery finally fled from his mind. Had the Montagues been fishermen, in the excitement of the catch they would have forgotten even the Capulets.

‘Net, Chadwick, net!’ snapped Sir Lancelot, as though needing the artery forceps in a hurry. ‘Go on, man, shove it under the fish’s belly, don’t tickle the back of his neck with it. That’s right, boy, reel in. Now you’ve got him safe and sound...’

His voice faded away. He stood on the bank in silence as the pair landed an aldermanic trout and dispatched it with blows to its shapely head.

‘I say, what a splendid specimen!’ Mr Chadwick’s gold-rimmed glasses flashed as he glanced round excitedly. ‘Really, Sir Lancelot, you must admit the young doctor here—’

But Sir Lancelot had gone. He was stalking through the brambles with tears running from his eyes. Lying in state on that flat rock beside the river was undoubtedly Percival. The beastly couple had gone and killed his best friend.

‘Ye gods,’ he muttered brokenly, ‘what is the world coming to!’

Five minutes later he was clattering across his front hall shedding fishing tackle.

‘Maud!’

His tears were dried in the flames of anger. He grabbed the telephone as though drawing a sword.

‘I want Evans,’ he barked to the exchange.

‘Evans the milk or Evans the telly?’

‘The solicitors.’

‘Oh, Evans the law. Just a minute, love.’

‘Evans, Evans, Evans, Evans,’ came a sombre voice up the line, ‘and Evans.’

‘Caradoc? Spratt here—‘

‘Oh, good morning to you, Sir Lancelot. I believe I observed you making for the river earlier. Did you have any luck?’

‘No, I did *not* have any luck! You are to come to my house instantly.’

‘Goodness me, man! What’s the matter? You sound as though you’d committed murder.’

‘That is precisely what I hope your professional opinion will prevent.’ Sir Lancelot slammed down the telephone. ‘Maud! Maud!’

He stormed through the hall, making the very fish tremble in their glass cases. He strode into the garden. He came to a halt. His wife and niece were emerging from the shrubbery with a stranger.

‘Oh, Lancelot, I’m so glad you decided to return for lunch,’ smiled Lady Spratt. ‘This is Mr Finnimore, who’s come all the way from London. I quite forgot to tell you about the appointment. One gets utterly amnesic embalmed here in the country,’ she apologized to her guest.

With Mr Chadwick and Dr Tolly, Sir Lancelot felt he had witnessed sufficient unpleasant sights for one day. But apparently this was not to be. He found himself facing a pale slim young man in a silk suit and a pair of glasses with rims like bus tyres.

‘I’m from *The Countess*,’ the young man explained, offering an apparently filleted hand.

Sir Lancelot’s eyebrows shot up. ‘The Countess of Mull and Islay? Did her bladder a couple of years ago. If there’re any complications see Mr Cambridge in Harley Street. I’ve retired.’

‘No, no, *The Countess* magazine,’ explained Lady Spratt.

The cold front moved back on Sir Lancelot’s brow.

‘As you know,’ amplified the silk-suited man, ‘we run a photographic feature every issue on Famous Faces.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘All slightly off-beat, naturally. Last week we had Cecil Fleury in his new ballet, and this week we’ve that absolutely side-splitting comedian, Jimmy-‘

‘Thank you. I have thought it necessary to have only two photographs taken in my life. One was for my passport and the other for my obituary. I regret that I am unable to invite you to stay for lunch. Good morning.’

‘Really, Lancelot!’ Lady Spratt now shook like a *soufflé* on a trampoline. An orange one, too — she was pretty indignant. ‘Perhaps you don’t realize that half London society is fighting to get into Mr Finnimore’s viewfinder? He is quite as famous a photographer as Lord — ‘

‘If I require any photographs I shall call at Studios Williams in the village in my own good time. He does excellent studies of fish and funerals and makes no damned fuss. Has this country come to regard privacy as lightly as it regards morality?’ he demanded loudly in general. ‘I go out this morning to discover my neighbour blatantly poaching my water, and I come home to find photographers overrunning the place like rabbits. It is altogether too much. Good morning.’

He turned and strode back to the house. He slammed the door of his downstairs study. He sat and exchanged glances for ten minutes with another stuffed fish.

‘Evans!’

Sir Lancelot threw open the study window as the solicitor’s little black car came crunching hurriedly up the drive.

‘Evans, I wish you to institute proceedings instantly against this despicable scoundrel Chadwick.’

Mr Caradoc Evans, a thin white-haired man with the air of a dyspeptic undertaker with an overdraft, approached between the flower-beds.

‘You mustn’t talk like that, Sir Lancelot,’ he chided, ‘or you’ll be fighting a slander action instead. I understand Mr Chadwick is a most respected figure in the City of London.’

‘I have not the slightest doubt of that, if he extends his total disregard for other people’s property to his commercial activities.’

‘He’s Beaulieu’s Marmalade, you know,’ explained Mr Evans, leaning on the windowsill.

Sir Lancelot nearly vomited up his breakfast.

‘And Peregrine’s Pickle and Cholmondeley’s Chutney and all the other things you keep seeing advertised on the telly. Quite a little empire he’s built up in the preserves line, so I believe. A very tough nut, too, by all accounts.’

‘He’s a poacher,’ Sir Lancelot interrupted. ‘A common poacher. Look here, I’ve fished Witches’ Pool long enough to know every damn minnow in it by name — ‘

‘Oh, Witches’ Pool?’ Mr Evans managed a little smile. ‘Frankly, Sir Lancelot, it’s always been a wonder to us down at the office how you managed to get away with it so long.’

‘Who the hell’s side are you on, anyway?’ demanded Sir Lancelot, as Caesar might have put it to Brutus when the dagger went in.

‘The side of truth,’ returned Mr Evans glancing heavenwards, as if to make sure the remark was noted in the right quarters.

‘Ye gods!’ Sir Lancelot wiped his face with the yellow silk handkerchief. ‘Come inside. I want a drink.’

‘Alas! I never touch a drop.’ The solicitor was a strict teetotaler, except for the whisky he swallowed for colds, to which he was a martyr. ‘But if you want to indulge-‘

‘Perhaps you could manage just *one* study,’ broke in the persistent tones of Mr Finnimore from the garden. After all, he had once photographed charging big game in Africa. ‘Where you are in the window will be quite delightful, I assure you.’

There is a time when even the most steadfast martyr is liable to cave in and tell the lads with the iron bars to lay off, now he comes to think of it he was probably in the wrong all the time. Sir Lancelot gave a sigh.

‘Very well,’ he muttered. ‘Very well.’

‘Perhaps one leg over the windowsill?’ invited Mr Finnimore, producing his Leica and brightening up.

‘Like that?’ demanded the subject dully.

‘Perfect! A posture of elegant repose. If you can just hold it... Perhaps a *little* farther forward... ‘

‘Ahhhhhhhh!’ said Sir Lancelot.

The Vicar, cycling up the drive, had his mind on the best strategy for extracting the cost of a new church stove from Sir Lancelot. It would be the hard touch, he reflected sadly, on a morning that put stoves as laughably out of mind as plum puddings. Perhaps something could be managed with the fruits of the earth, Harvest Home, the countryside glittering prettily under six feet of snow, and the organist’s bronchitis. But at least he was in for a decent lunch,

and the claret - w hich he took for his blood — was the best in the diocese.

‘Oh, horror!’ he cried.

The scene by the front door resembled the final stages in the *Plaza de Tows*. Sir Lancelot lay on the flower-bed, bellowing. Dancing round were Lady Spratt, that pretty little niece, and Mr Evans of all people, trying to set him on his feet. On the fringe a little man with a camera was recording the event for posterity.

‘Flat, damn you, leave me flat!’ Sir Lancelot was advising his ministering angels. ‘Do you want to wreck what’s left of my blasted intervertebral discs?’

‘I’ll run and phone Dr Tolly,’ offered Euphemia breathlessly.

‘No you bloody well won’t! I’m not having that callow charlatan lay a finger on me.’

‘Well, you can’t lie here all night,’ Lady Spratt pointed out. ‘You’ll get damp.’

‘Haven’t you people got the nous of a troop of Boy Scouts? Go and get something hard and flat to shift me on.’

‘Hard?’ pondered Lady Spratt. ‘Flat?’

‘Screw the ruddy lid off the grand piano, if you like.’

‘Why, here’s the Vicar,’ she broke off affably. ‘My poor husband’s gone and sprained his old back again. Will you be a good Samaritan while we find some sort of litter? Thank you so much. Come along, everybody, we must search the lumber room. I’m sure we’ll discover an old billiard table, or something.’

‘My dear, dear Sir Lancelot,’ sympathized the Vicar, kneeling beside him and for the moment regretfully shelving stoves. ‘I am indeed sorry to find you in this plight. Only today I was thinking with quite unforgivable envy of your enjoying these lovely mornings beside that delightful Witches’ Pool of yours —’

A scream came from the kitchen.

‘Heaven save us!’ The cook had observed the holy gentleman with hands clasped over the casualty. ‘He’s dead! The old b’s dead! And after all my trouble with those sandwiches, too!’

Half-hours between young ladies and young gentlemen before breakfast, according to the novelist Trollope, are very serious things. You'd have gathered as much from Euphemia's expression as she slipped out of Sir Lancelot's house at seven the next morning, glanced nervously at her uncle's window, tripped hurriedly over the damp lawn, and scampered anxiously down the path between the brambles towards Witches' Pool. Tim Tolly was waiting beside the hawthorn bush as usual. He'd set his alarm before six, to ensure he wouldn't be late.

'Darling!' Euphemia came running down the slope. 'Darling!' She threw herself into his arms like an express overrunning the buffers. 'Darling,' she added breathlessly, 'Uncle seems to have taken a dislike to you.'

'That,' agreed Tim, 'is the biggest understatement since Queen Victoria was not amused.'

'But why on earth?' Her blue eyes were as round as any of Sir Lancelot's stuffed trouts'. The notion of anyone taking a dislike to Tim struck the girl as outrageous as anyone taking a dislike to Father Christmas. 'You don't even know him,' she exclaimed, strengthening her argument.

'We did meet once professionally,' Tim mentioned. 'And yesterday we had a bit of fishing together. Though it seems Uncle has it in for Charlie Chadwick as well.'

They sat on the flat rock where Percival had swum away into the darker waters of the Styx.

'Uncle's a bit peculiar at the moment, admittedly,' Euphemia added feelingly. 'He fell out of a window yesterday and hurt his back.'

'Good lord, not serious?' Tim looked up. 'Fractured spine? Totally incapacitated, perhaps?'

'No, I don't think it's bad, but he's making a frightful fuss. I wanted to send for you — I thought how wonderful it would be if you just came along and cured him with a quick twist.'

'H'm,' said Tim Tolly.

‘All yesterday evening,’ she went on, snuggling up, ‘he lay in bed drinking champagne and saying things about you.’

‘What — er, sort of things?’

‘I don’t know, darling. I shut my ears to them. But some men called Burke and Hare seemed to come into it a good deal.’

‘Dear Uncle is a bit of a monster, I must say.’ Tim nuzzled her round the left angle of the mandible. ‘You can almost hear him saying, “Fe fi fo fum” at the start of his operating list.’

‘He absolutely scares the daylights out of me,’ confessed Euphemia. ‘As well as treating me as if I were about ten years old. Do you know, he’d no sooner met me at the airport than he gave me a terrible lecture about using all the bathwater. I have to stand up and sponge down in about an inch of it.’

Tim Tolly closed his eyes, the better to picture this scene of self-denial. ‘And his house! It quite gives me the creeps. All fish and antlers. Those horrid angling stories, too!’ She shuddered. ‘Surely, darling, it can’t be such a complicated business simply catching a beastly trout?’

‘Seemed pretty straightforward to me, Effie my sweet.’ Tim tickled the back of her neck. ‘Nothing to it, I’d say.’

‘Uncle makes it sound like naval manoeuvres,’ she pouted, snuggling further.

Tim Tolly felt that discovering Euphemia in the village was like biting on a diamond in a black pudding. We have perhaps not seen the poor doctor at his best, for he was really an intelligent, gay, even dashing young man — but Sir Lancelot would have wiped the smile from the face of the Laughing Cavalier.

A couple of months’ locum in the Welsh hills had struck him as just the thing for a quiet rest while waiting to start his new job. Once Dr Ewenny had disappeared to see his daughter in Canada, leaving behind a good cook and not a bad cellar of tonic wine (like the other professional men in the district Dr Ewenny was strictly teetotal), Tim settled quietly every evening among the over-polished furniture in the parlour catching up with all the books he’d been meaning to read while busy getting qualified. The weather was wonderful, and he’d cured a marmalade tycoon’s gout. He should have radiated quiet contentment like the tranquillizer advertisements in the *Lancet*.



But a strange feeling of sadness began to hang round him, like his stethoscope. All alone in a strange house it's easy to imagine you're developing something, probably nastily neurological. Tim tested his patella reflexes so often with his little rubber hammer, at the end of a week he'd developed housemaid's knee. Or perhaps, he wondered nervously, he was switchbacking down a manic-depressive psychosis? You can't imagine how difficult it is, propping *The Practice of Psychiatry* against the bathroom mirror and performing a do-it-yourself psychoanalysis. He even thought of consulting Dr Uanrhys across the valley, but he'd already discovered the old fellow became as testy with patients as with any other interruptions to the fishing season.

The diagnosis dawned when Tim found himself making too many visits to Davis the chemist's, where young Bronwen Davis dispensed bottles with the air of an overtired film star signing autographs. You can't suddenly give up all your usual female company without ill-effects, Tim told himself soberly, any more than you can give up all your usual vitamins.

Meanwhile, Euphemia was feeling exactly the same. She put it down to Sir Lancelot's fishing stories.

They met when Euphemia called at Davis' shop for Sir Lancelot's toothpaste. Tim offered her a lift home in his car. Their love grew as quickly and firmly as a prize marrow. Already they were coyly discussing together those exciting fundamental questions, like whether to have oil-fired or gas central heating. And all this before breakfast, mind you, a time when Don Juan might be forgiven for preferring his morning paper.

'But Tim — !' Euphemia unsnuggled suddenly. 'You must do *something* about Uncle.'

'I suppose I can't go on being a blot on his bad books,' he agreed gloomily. 'Without his clearance, your father wouldn't let you marry Dr Kildare himself.'

'He'd make me a ward of court, or whatever it is. Then we'd have to fly to Gretna Green. Or would that be unprofessional conduct?'

'I don't think the General Medical Council's had much experience of the situation.' Tim rubbed a well-shaved chin. 'Odd, isn't it, how some people positively invite you to put your foot in it, like an old

slipper? That's exactly the case with old Slasher — I mean, dear Uncle. For some reason we don't seem to drive through life on the same side of the road. I've half a mind you know, Effie, simply to march up the front drive, ring the doorbell, and tell the old boy to his bearded face that I'm going to marry you. Do you think that would do the trick? You could always see the dogs were chained up somewhere, I suppose.'

He stared for a moment across the swirling surface of Witches' Pool.

'Anyway, darling, I've a month left to work on him before you start at St Swithin's.'

'Tim' - Euphemia bit her lip. 'Do you know why I really decided to be a nurse?'

'So that you could marry a charming young doctor, like all the others. And in the end you needn't have bothered, you see.'

'No, it wasn't that, but I think I'd better tell you that in fact I want to —'

'Good lord!' Tim leapt up. 'Is that the time? I've all my visits to finish this morning before surgery. I've got to be in town by ten.'

'You're wanted at the hospital?'

'Well, no, not exactly, it's a sort of civic meeting I'm obliged to attend.'

'Darling! That sounds frightfully impressive.'

'Yes, I'm sure it will be. See you tomorrow, dear - same time, same place? One day we'll uproot this hawthorn bush and plant it in our front garden. And rely on me to cook up something for Uncle,' he added, as she resnuggled briefly. 'With a little applied psychology I guarantee I'll soon have him eating out of my hand like a bearded budgerigar. Meanwhile, though,' he reflected, 'I think I'd better keep out of his sight for a bit.'

Ten minutes later Sir Lancelot, rising stiffly from his bed, glanced through the window to observe his niece walking briskly in the garden. He gave a grunt of approval. He had always advocated to his patients a sharp walk before breakfast, and these early strolls certainly seemed to be doing the child a world of good. He stretched painfully. 'Enter,' he commanded, as a knock came at the door.

It would be seven forty-five precisely, and Millichap with his tea.

‘Good morning, Sir Lancelot. I hope the back is somewhat better?’

‘Thank you, Millichap, the spasm is definitely less. I should like a couple of codeine, if you please, and you’d better give me half an hour’s massage.’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘You know, Millichap,’ conceded Sir Lancelot generously, rolling over for him to start operations, ‘I really don’t know how we could exist without you, especially so far from civilization here in the country.’

‘Most good of you to mention it, sir,’ returned Millichap gravely.

‘I certainly couldn’t struggle to court today without your expert assistance,’ Sir Lancelot added warmly. ‘What’s for breakfast?’

‘Mrs Jones is doing you some kidneys and a chop, sir.’

‘Excellent!’ He rubbed his hands. ‘You can’t dispense justice on an empty stomach. “Fair round belly with good capon lin’d”, eh, Millichap? She’s got that jar of Chivers’ marmalade for me, I hope?’ he remembered suddenly.

A couple of hours later the faithful servitor was asking, ‘May I tuck this rug round your knees, sir?’ as he eased his master into the seats of justice at the local magistrates’ court. ‘We must not be deceived by the sunshine from noticing quite a nip in the air this morning.’

Sir Lancelot drew out his half-moon glasses.

‘Thank you, Millichap, most considerate. You may withdraw now.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Oh, and Millichap — ‘

‘Sir?’

‘I intend to fish Witches’ Pool this afternoon. I expect I shall be needing some assistance to get down the bank.’

‘I expect you will, sir,’ agreed Millichap politely, bowing himself off into the wings.

‘Sir Lancelot has ricked his back,’ Mr Caradoc Evans explained sombrely to their fellow magistrate, Miss Morgan-Griffiths, a woman with rimless glasses and a hat like a trifle. ‘He fell out of a window.’

‘Indeed?’ she remarked, not at all sympathetically. She knew Sir Lancelot to be an unabashed consumer of spirits while she was, of course, a total abstainer, apart from the invalid port prescribed by her doctor for after dinner.

‘Well, what have we today?’ Sir Lancelot looked benignly round the little outpost of justice and rubbed his hands as though launching into a list of gastrectomies. He rather liked being a magistrate. I suppose after thirty years of crushing into place students, housemen, nurses, and even theatre sisters, it was a pity not to use his talents for the benefit of the community. ‘The usual homicidal maniacs, I suppose?’ he added.

Leading into the town was a straight stretch of highway, where motorists who had been winding among the mountains astern of lorries like ambling mammoths could at last clap their feet joyfully to their floorboards. Unfortunately they ignored the forbidding glance from those red-rimmed eyes marked ‘30’, affording such a keen couple of local sportsmen as Constables Howells and Jenkins, patrolling in their little black MG, as much fun as fishing their favourite stretch of river.

‘Quite a good bag today, I see,’ murmured Sir Lancelot, adjusting his glasses and glancing briefly at a list. ‘About eighteen brace, I’d say.’

Mr Evans blew his nose loudly, which seemed accepted as the starting signal.

I won’t harrow you with the heart-rending stories behind each case conjured from the shiny black notebooks of Police Constables Howells and Jenkins. Old grandmothers were on their deathbeds, distant wives seized with sudden illness, children had rained down from trees, boilers burst, houses blazed, tremendous business deals hung in the balance. None of these reasons struck Sir Lancelot as an excuse for proceeding to the scene of the tragedy at over thirty miles an hour.

‘I am not in the slightest interested if your wife had gone off with a hairy great sailor,’ he declared after some time, when his back was starting to hurt again. ‘If you wished to catch the lady *in flagrante delicto* at Cardiff docks you should have started earlier.’

‘But I couldn’t, Your Worship. When she left she took the alarm clock.’

‘There is a perfectly good call system on the telephone designed for exactly those circumstances. It is no excuse whatever for your proceeding along the highway at a rate which threatens to make the

casualty departments of our overworked hospitals resemble the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo. Your behaviour was utterly antisocial, and I only regret the treatment I am empowered to prescribe can't be more radical.'

He glanced down at the dock, as though having something in mind involving drawing and quartering.

'Fined five pounds and licence endorsed,' he ended briefly. 'By the way,' he added in an undertone to Mr Evans on his left, 'I want another word with you later about Witches' Pool.'

'I fear there is nothing you can do about it.' The solicitor blew his nose twice, as though sounding the Last Post. 'I've looked up the deeds again. They are quite specific.'

'Rubbish, man! I believe you're merely scared of that swindler Chadwick and his money. You wait till I've stoked up a bit of fire in your belly. Next case.'

'Ernest Herbert Millichap,' came a voice below him.

Sir Lancelot frowned. 'Who?'

'Ernest Herbert Millichap,' the Clerk of the Court repeated helpfully. Sir Lancelot glared at the Clerk. He glared down at his list. He glared at his brother justices on each flank.

'What the devil are you doing there?' he demanded, finally glaring at the accused.

'Your own chauffeur it is, Sir Lancelot.' Mr Evans raised his eyebrows. 'Dear, dear! I suppose you'd better withdraw.'

'Withdraw? How the hell can I withdraw? I can't get out of this ruddy chair without Millichap down there to help me.'

'It would be most improper otherwise,' added Miss Morgan-Griffiths, wagging her trifle.

'*Most* improper indeed,' agreed Mr Evans, glancing heavenwards to see the remark registered.

'Very well.' Sir Lancelot folded his arms loftily. 'I shall withdraw in spirit. With my back in this condition you can hardly expect me to embark on a game of musical chairs. Or possibly you do not trust me, Evans,' he added cuttingly, 'to avoid involving myself in the slightest with the case? My dear man, everyone in court can simply ignore me completely. Now do get on with it. Millichap has plenty to do except stand there all day.' Constable Howells rendered an

account of the crime while Millichap stood with dignity in the dock, like a Victorian bishop waiting for the hymn to finish before he could pitch into the sermon. Sir Lancelot sat tugging his beard, his complexion steadily progressing through the colours at the lower end of the spectrum.

‘That would be his third offence,’ concluded Mr Evans, as Sir Lancelot hit ultraviolet.

Miss Morgan-Griffiths pursed her lips. ‘On the same stretch of road, too, Mr Evans.’

‘Six months’ disqualification, I think, Miss Morgan-Griffiths?’

‘A year I’d say myself, Mr Evans.’

‘Damnation, Evans,’ Sir Lancelot burst out, ‘surely you must preserve some sense of proportion? This man is a most careful and considerate driver — ‘

‘But that’s not evidence, Sir Lancelot, not evidence-‘

‘Damn the evidence!’ Sir Lancelot thumped the desk. ‘You can’t take Millichap’s licence away.’

‘Why not, pray?’ demanded Miss Morgan-Griffiths.

‘Because how the hell would I get home from court?’ Sir Lancelot explained crossly. ‘Not with a back like this.’

‘We have our duty,’ she declared, with a sharp wag of the trifle.

Sir Lancelot eyed her like a trout who’d refused his fly. ‘In that case I wish to make a special plea on behalf of the accused.’

‘But, Sir Lancelot!’ Mr Evans put a hand over his eyes, hoping heaven wouldn’t overhear that one. ‘You can’t defend the prisoner, man! Not from the Bench.’

‘I’m not on the blasted Bench. In spirit I’m down there in the well of the court trying to inject some reasonable advocacy into the proceedings. Do you realize, Evans, you will be depriving this man not only of his licence but his livelihood? I assure you I cannot possibly afford to employ both Millichap and another chauffeur. He has a wife and children, Miss Morgan-Griffiths,’ Sir Lancelot continued, with the air of Marshall Hall warming up at the Old Bailey. ‘Moreover, the poor fellow would be utterly lost in any employment but mine. He will go on the dole and even drift into a life of crime, causing misery to his family and eating great holes in the rates. You

may he precipitating a ghastly human tragedy. Not something I'd care to go to bed with on *my* conscience, Evans.'

'Well — ' faltered Mr Evans, who suffered badly from insomnia already. Millichap cleared his throat.

'Your Worships, I happened to overhear the plea for leniency made on my behalf by Sir Lancelot, it was very moving, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart. But I could have saved him the trouble. In the past twelvemonth I've got fair browned off driving all over the countryside on his little errands, and I've been wanting an excuse to turn in this chauffeuring lark all winter. So I have today entered employment as gillie to a local gentleman, Mr Charles Chadwick — '

'What!' Sir Lancelot quivered. 'How dare you! You renegade! You turncoat! You rat! I've employed you now for twenty years — '

'But this has nothing whatever to do with the case!' cried Mr Evans, fluttering his handkerchief

'How the devil can you — Evans, I do wish you'd take something for that blasted cold - how the devil can you bring yourself to work for that blood-blister Chadwick?'

'Very simple reason, sir. Twice the wages.'

Sir Lancelot banged the desk, shaking the lion and unicorn overhead. 'Have you no speck of loyalty, man?' he roared.

'No, sir. Not after the miserable pay you've been getting away with all these years. Half a mind to report it to the TUC, I have.'

'Really, really!' complained Mr Evans, glancing nervously not only at heaven but the reporter from the *Brecknock Bugle* as well.

'Ye gods, what is *the world* coming to?' concluded Sir Lancelot, thumping the desk again and rattling the glass on the water jug, the windows, and Miss Morgan-Griffiths' teeth.

'Next case, next case,' demanded Mr Evans hurriedly. 'Twenty pounds, six months' disqualification.'

'Timothy Aldous Tolly,' announced the Clerk.

Sir Lancelot paused. He looked up. He stroked his beard. His expression changed.

'Well, well,' he said.

His tone would have gone unnoticed only in Robespierre at his nastiest.

‘Well, well,’ he repeated. ‘Timothy Aldous Tolly, eh?’ He adjusted his glasses and Millichap was blotted from his mind by even blacker fogs of infamy. He squared his shoulders like a man settling down to a good dinner. ‘Proceed,’ he directed.

Tim stood in the dock feeling as confused as Alice during similar proceedings in Wonderland. This fellow Spratt, like the eye of God, seemed to be everywhere. While driving at twenty-eight mph to court his head had buzzed with ideas to ingratiate himself with the old man, from setting fire to his house and dragging him out of the flames — after, of course, rescuing Euphemia first - to writing respectfully for reprints of his latest papers in *Gut*. Now, he reflected, as Police Constable Howells recited the familiar story of wickedness, there would be rather more leeway to make up.

‘Disgusting,’ pronounced Sir Lancelot. ‘Here are you, a registered medical practitioner, into whose hands unmerciful Providence has delivered the lives of this community, and you go hurtling about the countryside as though there were gross unemployment among coroners.’

‘I think I can explain, sir — Your Worship.’

‘Please do,’ invited Sir Lancelot promptly.

‘I was on my way to a maternity case.’

‘That does put rather a different light on it,’ conceded Miss Morgan-Griffiths.

‘Rubbish. The good doctor sees he’s given plenty of warning. Damn it, madam, the thing doesn’t come out like a Polaris missile. Five pounds, licence endorsed,’ Sir Lancelot ended briskly, ‘and I sincerely trust, young man, I shall not be seeing you here again. Next case.’

Timothy Aldous Tolly,’ sang up the Clerk’s voice.

‘No, we’ve just had him.’

‘Timothy Aldous Tolly,’ repeated the Clerk.

‘Good grief,’ muttered Sir Lancelot, ‘the man’s a confirmed criminal.’ It was Police Constable Rees who took up the tale of lawlessness.

‘I do wish people would realize that parking their cars for half an hour in the middle of the High Street on a busy Saturday morning is just as antisocial as laying sleepers across railway lines, and on



occasion equally dangerous,' pronounced Sir Lancelot. 'The country is paved with official car parks, but the younger generation seems totally incapable of walking more than twenty yards at a stretch. No wonder everyone's arteries resemble the stems of clay pipes.'

'I think I can explain, Your Worship,' Tim tried again.

'Please do.'

'I had my bag with me. I was calling on a bed-ridden patient to administer an injection of intravenous iron.'

'Ah, an errand of mercy,' observed Mr Evans, with another glance in the direction of the Recording Angel.

'Nonsense. If you take half an hour to get a needle into a vein, young man, you ought to be struck from the medical *Register*. As it is, I shall merely fine you forty shillings. Next case.'

'Timothy Aldous Tolly,' continued the Clerk.

Trespassing, I see,' murmured Mr Evans, eyeing his list.

'Had' Sir Lancelot rubbed his hands. 'Now we're getting somewhere!' The case was in fact viewed by Sir Lancelot with strict impartiality, the prosecutor being a bad-tempered local farmer whom he disliked almost as much as he did Dr Tolly. He listened to the evidence in silence, but the black thoughts which had retired to the edge of his mind came scudding back thickly across his consciousness.

'One moment — ' Sir Lancelot held up a hand. 'Let us recapitulate. It appears, Tolly, you were encountered by the landowner on four separate occasions beside, if you please, a board announcing "Trespassers Will be Prosecuted". You were making your way across his fields at quarter to seven in the morning?'

'Yes, Your Worship,' agreed Tim meekly.

'An hour, Tolly, when you might consider yourself unlucky to meet anyone?'

'I - I suppose so, Your Worship.'

'Do you know where that path leads to, Tolly? To one spot, Witches' Pool. It brings me to suspect you were about to embark on the very much more serious crime of poaching.'

'Of course I wasn't.' Tim bit his lip. 'I didn't even have a fishing-rod, did I?'

‘Naturally,’ rounded Sir Lancelot, like one of those tedious lawyers who always win on the telly, ‘you hid it under the hawthorn bush, as have several generations of local poachers.’

‘But I don’t even own a rod!’ Tim burst out. ‘And as a matter of fact I think fishing is a pretty stupid pastime altogether, Your Worship.’

‘Oh?’ Sir Lancelot’s beard jutted at him like the firing squad getting down to business. ‘Then what were you doing by Witches’ Pool at that early hour?’

‘I — I had an appointment.’

‘Indeed?’ scoffed Sir Lancelot. ‘May I ask with whom?’

‘I’m afraid I have no intention of telling you,’ returned Tim calmly.

‘A likely tale! An appointment, begad! At seven o’clock in the morning? I’m not at all certain I shouldn’t consider your committal for perjury.’

‘Very well,’ Tim countered briskly, ‘it was your niece, Your Worship.’

‘My niece?’

‘Yes, Euphemia.’

‘There! I told you the feller was lying!’ exclaimed Sir Lancelot in triumph. ‘He doesn’t even know her.’

‘On the contrary.’ Nothing is quite so savage as the bite of a turned worm. ‘I’ve met her before breakfast at Witches’ Pool every morning for three weeks, Your Worship.’

Sir Lancelot stared. The penny dropped, like the blade of the guillotine.

‘Moreover,’ continued Tim, discovering, doubtless like St George and the Dragon, it wasn’t half as hard as it looked once you got started, ‘I want to marry her.’

‘Marry her?’ Sir Lancelot looked blank.

‘I fear we are getting rather away from the facts-’ cut in Mr Evans.

‘Marry her?’ repeated Sir Lancelot. ‘Do I hear aright? Look here, you direct descendant of Sweeney Todd - ‘

‘Sir Lancelot! This will never do!’ Miss Morgan-Griffiths’ trifle bobbed excitedly. ‘You must remember you are on the Bench — ‘

‘You’ve as much chance of marrying that girl as marrying Cleopatra, and she’s been dead two thousand years.’

‘Oh, the Press, the Press!’ cried Mr Evans, blowing a despairing note on his nose.

‘Evans, you must get an antrostomy done on that beastly sinus,’ snapped Sir Lancelot. ‘Listen to me, you young rake — ‘

‘Save us!’ added Mr Evans looking heavenwards, this time for the dividend.

‘You can think yourself damn lucky the old-fashioned practice of horsewhipping,’ Sir Lancelot continued, straining across the desk, ‘which I regard as a perfectly healthy corrective for under-ripe Bluebeards like yourself, has unfortunately dropped from the — Ahhhhhhhh!’

Heaven obliged its faithful servant. The senior magistrate’s back had gone again.

I can briefly describe the exits of our principals in this courtroom drama. Constable Rees and the Clerk bore Sir Lancelot to the retiring-room. Miss Morgan-Griffiths dabbed his forehead with her eau-de-Cologne. Mr Evans adjourned the case *sine die*. The reporter from the *Brecknock Bugle* started writing MEDICAL MAGISTRATE HAS SEIZURE ON BENCH. Constables Howells and Jenkins drove the invalid home in his Rolls.

‘Ye gods,’ was all he could manage to utter on the way, ‘what is the world *coining* to?’

He screwed down the window as the car halted in his front drive.

‘Euphemia,’ Sir Lancelot invited, ‘I should like a little word with you.’

‘Nurse Spratt,’ announced the Sister in Virtue Ward, ‘Matron wants you immediately.’

‘Yes, Sister,’ said Euphemia.

I fear we should hardly recognize the girl sporting gaily by the river bank and dancing barefoot on dew-spangled lawns. Like all young ladies starting at St Swithin’s, Euphemia had been put through the de-sexing machine they seemed to keep down in the Matron’s office.

‘You may leave polishing those bedpans till you come back, Nurse.’

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘And Nurse James can sort your soiled bed-linen for you.,

‘I have already done it, Sister.’

‘Oh? Well, make yourself tidy, Nurse. I don’t want you a disgrace to the ward.’

‘I hope I should never be that, Sister,’ asserted Euphemia, dropping her eyes.

Sister Virtue nodded. Not a woman given to generous assessment of her staff- she reduced three or four a week to tears as regularly as she ate her breakfast —she was forced to admit that Nurse Spratt’s approach to her job like a maniac stakhanovite, combined with the girl’s demeanour in her own presence of a particularly self-effacing worm, raised her slightly from the level of the pert gadflies they seemed to let into the hospital these days.

‘Very well, Nurse. Don’t forget not to speak until the Matron addresses you.’

It was a Thursday morning three weeks later, at the toothsome kernel of the English year when the second Test is starting at Lord’s, Wimbledon waits to ping into life the following Monday, Royal Ascot froths with hats and champagne, the London parks greet you with a fanfare of roses, and strawberries are down to half-a-crown a punnet. Usually, of course, all this is carried on under a monsoon lost on the way to Assam, but that summer the weather was giving a gala performance, and the sun which dappled the contentious surface of

Witches' Pool pierced the London haze and the dusty plane trees to flood the venerable soot-pickled courtyard of St Swithin's Hospital.

That courtyard hasn't much changed since I first edged in nervously as a student, with a brand-new stethoscope sticking out of my pocket and a brand-new collar sticking into my neck. In fact, it hasn't much changed since Wren stood thoughtfully licking his pencil over the smoking ruins of Old St Paul's. The inscription across the main gate announcing SUPPORTED ENTIRELY BY VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS has at last been chiselled out, the place having been supported for some years by entirely involuntary ones from the taxpayer. The nurses' dresses now show another daring inch of calf, and those lady medical students would in my day have caused as much flurry as the Dagenham Girl Pipers marching through the Athenaeum. But the patients sitting quietly under the trees drawing strength from the London sun look exactly the same. Perhaps they are. The complaints of some of them were extremely chronic.

There was a crash from the main gate. A hospital dustbin rolled across the courtyard, emitting a mixture of used bandages and uneaten chips. A Rolls-Royce had halted under the red notice demanding SILENCE with its horn baying. A red-faced, bearded, old-fashioned-looking Englishman had his head out of the driver's window, addressing a youth pushing a hand-trolley.

'I don't give a damn if you are possessed of some perverted ambition to see inside the orthopaedic wards,' he was observing, 'as long as you don't achieve it by denting my highly expensive coachwork.'

'You oughter look where you're going, you oughter,' rounded the youth.

'Young man — it so happens this is the only place in London where other people are expected to look where I am going... Morning, Dicky,'

Sir Lancelot added amiably through the window in the direction of the Professor of Surgery. 'Have you heard? England won the toss and Australia are fielding. Turnbull was out first ball.'

He drove across the courtyard, and parked on the far side in a space labelled CHAIRMAN OF THE GOVERNORS ONLY.

‘Oh no!’ exclaimed the Professor’s Registrar, beside his chief. ‘To think we were talking of that particular devil only this morning.’

He fingered the latest copy of *The Countess* in the pocket of his white coat.

‘Well, well,’ murmured the Professor. ‘We must utter a pious hope, I suppose, that the visitation is only a temporary one?’

He gave a smooth smile. Professor Richard Hindehead was a youngish man with a pale smooth complexion, smooth dark hair, long smooth hands, a voice which smoothed the most unwilling patients into surgery, and shirts which somehow stayed smooth to the end of a whole day’s emergency duty.

‘But he’d become such an utter hermit in Wales,’ protested Paul Ivors-Smith, the Registrar. ‘He’d cancelled all his medical journals and resigned from the BMA — rather rudely, I gather.’

‘Yes, the poor fellow was becoming very peculiar towards the end,’ agreed the Professor, resuming their walk from the lecture theatre towards the surgical block. ‘Good morning, Nurse,’ he broke off smoothly. ‘Enjoying life on your new ward? I’m so glad.’

Paul Ivors-Smith, a tall, fair-haired, droopy young surgeon in his thirties, thoughtfully stroked his chin. He hadn’t much of it, but it did for the purpose.

‘I would make no secret,’ Professor Hindehead continued, ‘that Slasher Spratt’s translation into a Cambrian troglodyte bettered your chance of becoming one of my colleagues instead of one of my staff.’

‘You mean getting that vacancy as a consultant?’

The Professor nodded. ‘Exactly. The post must be advertised, of course, but that is merely a formality. You’ve only one serious rival, Simon Sparrow. Luckily for us, his sponsor Cambridge is utterly useless in committee. He simply sits drawing extraordinary animals on his blotting paper. With Slasher *hors de combat* you can certainly rely on me to swing things in your favour. Good morning, Mr Jeavons,’ he interrupted himself. ‘Stitches out yesterday? Good. Why, you’ll be swimming at the seaside in a couple of weeks.’

Paul anxiously twitched his old school tie. ‘The committee might elect some brilliant outsider,’ he suggested. ‘From New Zealand or... Manchester, or somewhere.’

‘My dear boy, we *never* elect outsiders at St Swithin’s. It tends to make us a race of intellectual Pitcairn Islanders, but at least one knows where one is.’ The Professor gave a sigh. ‘And brilliant men are so often quite unreliable in matters of dress, eating habits, or political views. Anyway, Paul,’ he ended more briskly, ‘your work on the new steroid alone deserves the recognition of consultant status.’

‘Awfully good of you to say so, sir.’

‘How’s Sir John, by the way?’ the Professor added casually.

‘Father’s in fine form, thanks. He hopes you’ll come to dine soon. Oh, and — ‘ Paul shot a glance over his shoulder, ‘he says to sell your holding of Imperial Coppers.’

The Professor’s eyebrows quivered.

‘Indeed? As an academic clinician one does so dislike becoming involved in commerce, but... I’ll phone my broker straight away.’

‘Perhaps Sir Lancelot won’t choose to stay long in the hospital,’ added Paul more hopefully as they neared the steps of the surgical block, ‘with the students making a pin-up of him chucking himself from a window.’

‘Oh, that picture? Collapse of stout surgical party, eh?’ The Professor laughed. ‘We shall see the back of him in a day or two, mark my words. You understand, Paul, he means nothing here any more. Nothing at all. The day of the surgical mastodon is over.’

All the same, as the Professor watched Sir Lancelot with gay step reenter those rubber-floored disinfected corridors of power, he wished that window had been rather higher up.

‘Good morning, Nurse. Good morning, Sister,’ beamed Sir Lancelot, making his way briskly down the main surgical corridor in his country tweeds. ‘Good morning, Harry. Anything good for the Gold Cup this afternoon? Oystercatcher? I’ll risk a pony.’

Through a door at the end he strode into the Nurses’ Home, and tapped on the door marked MATRON.

‘Good morning, Matron. Good morning, my dear,’ he greeted his niece, who was standing with clasped hands in the corner. ‘You’re looking well on it, anyway. Enjoying the work?’

‘I find it very rewarding, thank you, Uncle,’ replied Euphemia, with an air that made a Jane Austen heroine look like one of James Bond’s girl friends.

‘Splendid. Studying hard in the evenings, I hope?’

‘Yes, Uncle. I have just finished the kidney.’

‘It was very good of you to take Miss Spratt a month early,’ he added to the Matron. ‘I fear she was becoming rather — er, bored in the country. I am sorry I could not bring her personally, but I have been totally incapacitated for some weeks with my back.’

‘Really, Sir Lancelot? I’m so sorry.’

The Matron, a large, pink, well-starched lady resembling those polished blocks of pink granite in the geological museums, handed him a cup of the greyish liquid laughingly passed off in nurses’ homes as coffee.

‘I do hope you are quite recovered?’

She gave him a glance of tender concern. Sir Lancelot and the Matron hit it off rather well together. Everyone in the hospital always wondered why.

‘Completely, thank you. No late passes for this young lady?’ Sir Lancelot continued, stirring his cup. ‘No weekend leave? Lights out by ten?’

‘Naturally, I followed your suggestions, Sir Lancelot.’

The surgeon nodded. He had decided that the Nurses’ Home for Euphemia would make a nunnery look like the Establishment of Madame Tellier.

‘It’s all for your own good, my dear,’ he added in Euphemia’s direction. ‘You must remember you are at a very impressionable age.’

‘Of course, Uncle.’

‘Though I expect you will want to stand her a treat or two while you are in London, Sir Lancelot?’ smiled the Matron. ‘By her ward reports, I think she deserves it.’

‘Alas, I have no intention of staying in the Great Wen longer than twenty-four hours. Not while the fish at home are biting like famished alligators. I wouldn’t have come at all, were it not for a few tedious errands - some solicitors to see about my property in Wales, an agency to visit for a new chauffeur. I had to let Millichap go, you know. The poor fellow was getting very rocky on his pins recently. I also want to buy a new fishing-rod and get an X-ray of my back.’ He



put down his cup. 'I don't suppose anyone happens to know the latest score?'

'England fifteen for one, Uncle,' put in Euphemia quietly. 'Turnbull, lbw, bowled Duffy, nought, Trevor-Drake eight, the Reverend Chambers six, one extra. I thought you might like to know, so I looked specially at the ward television.'

They were simple words, but they buried her past. Sir Lancelot shot an approving glance at the little figure with the mauve dress reaching towards her ankles and the starched cap turning up behind like a dove's tail. Now she was cured of her bout of bucolic insanity she was taking interest in the right things of life. After all, she came from damn good stock.

'You and I will take a little stroll round the courtyard in the sunshine, Euphemia,' he announced. 'With Matron's permission.'

'But of course, Sir Lancelot...'

'Got anything on the Gold Cup, Matron? I have been given Oystercatcher.'

'Oh, Sir Lancelot!' She fluttered as much as a block of pink granite can flutter. 'You *are* a naughty man!'

'Come, Euphemia.'

His niece followed him demurely into the courtyard, where he talked to her for half an hour about the kidney. She listened in respectful but absorbed silence. Like Sherlock Holmes, Euphemia had her methods.

'You are quite clear on the difference between a glomerulus and a tubule?' he ended, opening his pocket watch. 'Excellent. Now I must go and fix myself an X-ray. Good-bye, my dear. We look forward to your company next long weekend leave, now — er — Dr Ewenny has resumed his practice at home.'

Sir Lancelot strode across the courtyard where he had reigned for so many years with a flamboyant authority worth an approving nod from the Bourbons, and reached Out Patients in a mood as benign as the weather.

'My dear Sister, don't bother yourself,' he boomed, as Sister Out Patients came fluttering up. 'I am here merely for an X-ray, and perfectly able to look after myself. You would be far better occupied

attending to that small child, who I fancy is about to vomit into the fire bucket.'

He buried himself among the crowd.

The Out Patients Department at St Swithin's hasn't much changed since my day, either. It still greets you with an incurable smell of damp raincoats, Dettol, and distant frying fish. It's still as busy as the rush-hour at a London terminus, which with its grimy glass roof and iron pillars sprouting weird Victorian decorations it rather resembles.

But certain touches suggest the patients are no longer assumed to come entirely from the pages of Mayhews *London Labour and the London Poor*. A small counter in the corner now sells them tea and iced buns. The word PLEASE has appeared on some of the notices. There is an appointments system, so that instead of patients arriving when they felt like it and having to wait half an hour before seeing the doctor, now they come when they are told and wait an hour instead. But the long wooden benches are still as bare as butchers' blocks, and the patients still sit on them furtively reading their case-notes, like their forebears in suffering who were marshalled by uniformed porters with the bedside manner of Guards drill sergeants.

Sir Lancelot automatically cast an eye at the large blackboard where housemen were expected to chalk their more reputable whereabouts, and abruptly came to a halt. He stiffened. He stared.

'I know you,' he announced shortly.

'Well, well! If it isn't Sir Lancelot. A pleasure, I'm sure.'

A small cloud blew into the sunshine of Sir Lancelot's day.

'You're Crimes.' He narrowly eyed a little man with a face like a well-worn brown boot, leaning against the blackboard in a blue uniform with St Swithin's crested silver buttons. 'What the devil are you doing here? And all dressed up like that?'

'Why, it's my new post, sir,' the porter told him affably. 'And a very happy one, I'm glad to say. The pay's only fairish, mind you, but what's that if you meet a load of interesting people?' With a matchstick he seemed to be searching for some attractive dental cavity. 'Besides,' he added, 'I thought it might come in convenient, like. Ch?'

He gave a loud laugh.

‘Quite,’ agreed Sir Lancelot briefly. After a pause, he added, ‘You’re keeping well?’

‘Well? Fit as a flea what’s been at the liver salts, thank you, sir.’ He inspected the point of his matchstick. ‘And how about yourself, if I may ask?’

‘I am perfectly well,’ the surgeon told him briskly.

‘Apart,’ he added more hesitantly, ‘from some completely minor trouble with my back.’

‘The back?’ Crimes’ eyebrows eased upwards. ‘That’s something new, ain’t it, Sir Lancelot?’

‘I told you, it is a totally trivial matter. I have simply come for an X-ray.’

‘Still,’ observed Crimes, ‘you never know, do you?’

There existed between the two men a relationship of great delicacy. One which, I believe, has never been touched on before in literature. It had started thirty years previously, when one was beginning his career as a London surgeon and the other his career as a London taxi-driver.

‘I have some excellent news for you,’ announced the young Mr Spratt, arriving one morning at Crimes’ bedside up in Virtue ward. ‘I have decided that it will be unnecessary to operate.’

The young Crimes’ face creased into a smile. ‘Well, that’s a relief, and no mistake. I wasn’t looking forward to it as much as my summer holidays, I don’t mind telling you.’

‘In fact, it will not be needful for you to stay here at all.’ Mr Spratt stroked his ginger beard. ‘You may go home. This afternoon, if you wish.’

‘Go on?’ Crimes could hardly believe his luck.

‘I don’t think it necessary to give you more treatment in a formal way,’ the surgeon continued. ‘But I should like to know how you get on in the next few months.’

This was Sir Lancelot’s most tactful formula for announcing the case was inoperable and the outlook hopeless. It had failed him only once, with a professional colleague who knew the ropes and answered grimly, ‘Just keep an eye on the front page of *The Times*.’

But young Crimes showed as much reluctance to join his forebears as any other tedious family gathering. Ten years passed.

The mysterious lump in his liver remained as large as life, and so did the patient.

‘You’re *sure* you’re feeling quite well?’ the surgeon had demanded a shade impatiently, at one of Crimes’ regular visits to the Follow-up Clinic.

‘Never better, thank you, Doctor. Though mind you, I’ve taken a softer job driving an old bloke in the City. I reckoned the cabs were a bit rough for a chap with only six months to live.’

‘Six months? How the devil did you get that idea in your head?’

‘Why, from my notes, of course.’

‘It was extremely improper of you to read them. Your case-notes are nothing to do with you.’

‘I got what you wrote off by heart.’ Crimes leant back in his chair. ‘A most interesting case. I must have him in St Swithin’s for the postmortem. My provisional diagnosis is GOK.” Eh, Doctor? Now - as man to man, what does “GOK” stand for? After all,’ he complained mildly, ‘I’m the one who’s got it.’

Mr Spratt paused. ‘If you insist, it stands for “God Only Knows”. Look here, Crimes, I simply didn’t want to hurt your feelings — ‘

‘Hurt my feelings? But, Doctor, it doesn’t worry me a scrap that by rights I oughter be dead.’ He produced his matchstick for running dentistry. ‘See here, sir, I believe in a bit of give and take. You keep an eye on the old ‘ealth, and I’ll come every six months until the unfortunate eventuality what you’ve prepared for takes place. That’s a bargain, eh?’

‘The interests of medical science — ‘ tried the surgeon uncomfortably. ‘There’s just one thing, though,’ Crimes mentioned. ‘I’m forty next birthday, and you’re forty-two. Pardon the liberty, I looked you up in my governor’s *Who’s Who*. So there might be a bit of a race of it in the final straight, eh?’ He laughed. ‘But don’t worry, sir,’ he added affably, ‘I’m a sportsman, and I can see you are too.’

And now, Sir Lancelot reflected as he eyed his reluctant patient beside that blackboard, the fellow was actually employed in the hospital. It was like the lamb to the slaughter being taken on as a household pet.

‘I’m glad you find the job congenial, Crimes,’ Sir Lancelot nodded briskly. ‘I should avoid any heavy lifting.’

‘I’m sure that’s good advice, Doctor.’ He gave a wink. ‘We all begin to feel our age some time, don’t we, sir?’

Sir Lancelot strode into the crowd of out-patients without replying. That wink of Crimes’ always had a stupidly uncomfortable effect on him.

‘Can I help you?’

Sir Lancelot looked up. A pretty young girl in a smart mauve uniform stood smiling in front of him.

‘Help me?’ he asked blankly.

He noticed a badge on her bosom saying HOSTESS. It’s odd that our age seems to need a hostess at everything, from a transatlantic flight to a supermarket.

‘I expect you’re a new patient, aren’t you?’

She gave a smile which was friendly and reassuring but not inviting. She had been trained specially to produce it.

‘My dear young lady, I assure you I can find my way perfectly well — ‘

‘Now, shall we go over here first?’

The hostess took him gently by the sleeve. She had been trained specially to handle argumentative old men.

‘Miss Eernlove — ‘

A nineteen-year-old girl with bright blond hair and jet-black eyebrows was leaning behind a counter in a mauve overall.

‘I have a new patient, Miss Eernlove. Will you take his particulars, please?’

‘Name?’ demanded the girl, her tone indicating the intrusion interrupted some particularly attractive private thoughts.

Sir Lancelot drew himself up. He didn’t want unduly to offend these two females, but they had to be put in their place.

‘The name,’ he announced majestically, ‘happens to be Spratt.’

‘One “t” or two?’ asked the girl.

‘Really!’ harked Sir Lancelot. ‘I take it you are a new employee here? I should be obliged if you would kindly — ‘

‘Initial?’ invited the girl tonelessly.

Sir Lancelot banged the counter.

‘Now, now!’ The hostess gently waved a finger. She had been trained specially to handle violent cases.

‘Really, madam, I must call a halt to this... this... ‘

He glanced round wildly. There was nobody official in sight. No Sister Out Patients. Not even Crimes.

‘Initial?’ repeated the girl flatly.

‘L,’ snapped Sir Lancelot.

‘L for Lionel?’

‘L for Lancelot, damn you!’

‘Mind yer language!’ snapped the girl, coming to life.

‘I’m afraid these questions are all necessary, Lancelot,’ purred the hostess. ‘You see, the doctors couldn’t continue their great work of healing here otherwise. Just tell Miss Fernlove your age, now.’

Sir Lancelot produced the yellow silk handkerchief.

‘Twenty-one,’ he declared.

‘Occupation?’ inquired Miss Fernlove.

‘Deipnosophist.’

‘Religion?’

‘Warlock.’

‘Got a letter from your doctor?’

‘No,’ Sir Lancelot swallowed. ‘No, young lady, I have not got a letter from any doctor.’

‘Got your P/P?’

‘Thank you, but it was unnecessary to bring a specimen.’

‘That’s the form you get from the porter by the blackboard,’ explained the hostess gently.

‘Good God!’ Sir Lancelot re-exploded. ‘I’ve come here for an X-ray, not to renew my ruddy dog licence-’

‘Will you kindly remember you are in a hospital, Mr Spratt?’ The hostess’ smile, which had been steadily dimming, finally went out. ‘You must try and conduct yourself appropriately.’

‘Look here, young woman, I’ve spilt more blood in this place than you have circulating in your entire body — ‘

‘Please!’ She shut her eyes. ‘Don’t be crude.’

‘Has everybody gone mad? Is the entire hospital in a state of anarchy?’ Sir Lancelot took another bang at the counter. ‘Where is Sister? Where’s Mr Cambridge? I have had more than enough of this blasted tomfoolery, and I demand to be taken this instant to — Ahhhhhhhh!’

His back had gone again.

‘Now, now! Come and sit down on this wheelchair.’ The hostess, finding a clinical condition on her hands, was all solicitude again. ‘The back, is it? We mustn’t overstrain ourselves, must we? You just relax and be comfortable,’ she advised, draping a highly insanitary-looking pink knitted shawl round his shoulders, ‘and I’ll wheel you to see the doctor. We don’t want you to worry a bit, Grandpa.’

‘Grandpa!’ croaked Sir Lancelot.

Luckily for his nursemaid, he found further speech impossible.

Simon Sparrow was having a trying morning. His chief, Mr Hubert Cambridge, FRCS, was an amiable taskmaster but of such vague outlook that everyone in St Swithin’s wondered how he avoided leaving his patients stuffed with swabs like teddy bears. He had totally forgotten the arrival of another weird group of doctors assembled by the United Nations and shot round the world to widen medical knowledge, forge links, and so on, and Simon had suddenly found himself left to run Out Patients alone. This professional advance since the days Simon and I were slung out of pubs together may surprise you, but it’s always the way in medicine. As a student you reckon the housemen embody a wisdom stopping just short of Hippocrates. When you move up to Registrar, you wonder how<sup>7</sup> a bunch of dolts like them ever got qualified. And when you finally turn into a consultant, you thank your lucky stars there’re so many people to make all the mistakes first.

Simon had just got rid of a patient with an involved history going back to the Blitz and was snatching a cup of coffee when a nurse dashed in exclaiming, ‘Oh, Mr Sparrow! There’s a patient outside in a wheelchair — ‘

‘Then I expect he’s unable to walk, Nurse,’ returned Simon briefly. As I said, it had been a trying morning.

‘But Mr Sparrow! He’s the spit and image of Sir Lancelot Spratt!’

‘Good God!’ Simon swept his feet off the desk and pushed the coffee cup into a drawer. ‘Good — good morning, sir,’ he added as a nurse wheeled the surgeon in.

‘Good morning, Simon,’ he greeted his former protégé blackly. ‘Perhaps you would have the kindness to tell me what I may do with this?’ The hostess had given him an iced bun.

‘Nurse, a vomit bowl,’ suggested Simon quickly. ‘This is indeed an unexpected pleasure, sir.’

‘One which I fear I am unable to share. Where’s Cambridge?’

‘He’s gone to lunch with some Russians and Ghanaians and Americans, and people,’ explained Simon in confusion. ‘I can easily get him - ‘

‘No, you’ll do. It’s only a minor spasm, thank God.’ He rose stiffly from his wheelchair, the fires of anger now turned to ashes of exasperation. ‘That stupid woman with the overdeveloped maternal instinct insisted on this conveyance. I have only come for an X-ray. How’s my godson?’ he asked gruffly, suddenly remembering. ‘Put him down for a decent school and the MCC, I hope?’

Simon managed a smile. ‘I’m afraid all that rather depends on my chances in the staff election this autumn.’

Sir Lancelot grunted. ‘I wish to have a little talk with you about that some time.’

With that frightful female propensity for returning to the point, Lady Spratt had been reminding him of it for the previous three weeks.

‘I now want to get my back X-rayed before the radiological department knocks off for lunch. You will kindly sign the necessary form.’

Simon raised an eyebrow.

‘I don’t want to be tedious, Sir Lancelot, but don’t you think I should take the history and perform an examination first?’

‘Don’t be impertinent!’ The embers of Sir Lancelot’s wrath flared up. ‘Are you suggesting I don’t know my own mind?’

‘No,’ returned Simon calmly, ‘I’m only suggesting the decision to have you X-rayed or not should be your doctor’s responsibility. If you’d like me to get Mr Cambridge — ‘

‘Good God, have you gone as insane as everyone else in the hospital? Who the devil put ideas like that into your head?’

‘You did,’ nodded Simon. ‘For years you drummed into us that every patient had to be thoroughly examined, even if it meant stripping a duchess to the buff in a horsebox — ‘

‘All right, all right,’ snapped Sir Lancelot, taking off his jacket. ‘But by George! You’d better be bloody good.’



‘I think our next step should be an X-ray,’ announced Simon a few minutes later.

‘I am extremely gratified,’ declared Sir Lancelot, doing up his cuff-links, ‘that your exhaustive history and examination should have brought you to the conclusion I already provided.’

‘I’ll take you down to X-ray myself,’ continued Simon calmly, signing the form. ‘Yes, Crimes?’

‘Thought you’d like to know<sup>7</sup>, Mr Sparrow, we’re making quite a stand at Lord’s. Eighty-six for one, sir, and his Reverence has got his fifty. Sorry to see you’ve lost the use of your legs, sir,’ he added to Sir Lancelot from the door.

‘You keep a civil tongue in your head, you pantomime Dracula,’ snapped the surgeon. ‘No, I do *not* want that beastly pink shawl! Get a move on, Simon man, for God’s sake. Can’t you see I’ve already had more than enough to put up with this morning?’

The X-ray Department at St Swithin’s was a cellar under Out Patients, originally designed for the storage of such hospital necessities as splints, strait-jackets, coal, and the Governors’ port. About the start of the century one of the younger surgeons acquired a machine for emitting the Röntgen rays, and was given a corner down there to play with it — the fellow was clearly a mug for passing fads, having already bought himself one of those motor cars.

Since the nineteen-hundreds X-ray apparatus has flourished in the cellar like mushrooms, into a frightening jungle of clicking and sparking machinery which certainly alarmed the pretty little girl alone in the tiny waiting-room — she was perhaps a sister of Miss Fernlove’s — who thought it all as spooky as the Ghost Train at Battersea Fun Fair. Having an X-ray was pretty silly anyway, she reflected, because everyone knew she caught her cough when the mingy office turned off the central heating prompt on the first of April. But it was a morning off, and something to talk about all afternoon, and now they saw how she’d landed up in hospital they might keep the central heating on a bit longer next year.

She looked from her magazine as a handsome doctor in a white coat brought in some poor old man with a beard. He must have been a very sick old man, she felt soulfully, because the doctor was making a terrible fuss of him.

'I'll fetch the senior radiographer, Sir Lancelot, if you'll kindly go into that cubicle and remove your coat and shirt.'

'I presume I sit here in a state of profound hypothermia until you return?'

'Oh, no, there's a garment in there to slip on. Perfectly sanitary,' Simon added quickly. 'It's washed between patients.'

The pretty girl went back to her magazine, until she found one of those ladies in white overalls saying to her, 'We're almost ready now, my dear. Just go into the cubicle and slip off your dress and bra. You'll find a smock thing in there to put on.'

The smock thing was a bit weird, the girl had to admit, but she made herself look as pretty as possible before going back to her magazine. The poorly gentleman was still there, sitting on a chair reading that dull newspaper without any pictures. Suddenly she trembled. The old man was staring at her, with a look which fair chilled the blood in the veins. She gave a little gulp. The pair of them were all alone. The same thoughts shot into her head as had struck Clarice and Edna in midstream. The assault -such a widespread hazard for pretty young girls these days, it seemed - was actually about to descend on her. She drew her breath. The old man's mouth moved. His hands clenched and unclenched. She jumped up. She screamed.

'Good God, what's the matter?' gasped the handsome doctor, rushing in with another lady in white.

'It's him!' The pretty girl directed a trembling red-tipped finger. 'He's looking at me something awful!'

'Madam,' shouted the poor old man, 'I do wish you would stop having hysterics. I have merely been wondering, since you stepped out of the cubicle, whether you would have the kindness after your X-ray examination of letting me have my shirt back?'

Simon shrugged his shoulders. 'Looks even better on a man,' was all he could bring himself to say.

Sir Lancelot Spratt strode down Piccadilly. It was five o'clock the same day and still sunny enough to keep the policemen in their shirtsleeves, the pigeons dozing on the balconies, and the couples locked on the grass all over Green Park. But inside him it was blackest Arctic midnight.

His day had been as discouraging and frustrating as Napoleon's at Waterloo. His back was still sore. When the X-ray showed no lesion whatever, he accepted the verdict with annoyance rather than relief. St Swithin's Hospital seemed to treat him like Rip van Winkle's little brother. Simon Sparrow had been priggish to the point of impertinence. And that blasted girl had got lipstick all over his shirt.

Worse still, his solicitors were damn fools.

'All I want from you,' he'd explained in the office of Boarcastle, Perwit, Dewberry and Cramps in Austin Friars, 'is some sort of definitive opinion that I can wave in the beastly fellows face, declaring that Witches' Pool is unequivocally mine.'

'Well, yes,' agreed Mr Dewberry.

After the sinusoidal opinions of Mr Evans, Sir Lancelot drew confidence from this ancient City Ollice filled with so many dusty objects well worn in the service of the law, such as Mr Dewberry.

'There is of course no doubt whatever about the Pool being on my land.'

'Well, no,' agreed Mr Dewberry again, fingering the deeds on his desk. He was a tall, thin man with a hanging lock of grey hair, which he often chewed thoughtfully. 'Though of course —'

'Come, come, Dewberry! Surely you, my own London solicitor, cannot doubt my word in the matter?'

'Well, yes and no,' conceded Mr Dewberry. He took a brief chew at his hair. 'Naturally, Sir Lancelot, there can be no doubt in your own mind about the rightness of your cause, and I can thoroughly sympathize with your attitude.'

'Good! Get your clerk feller to draw up the document.'

'Unfortunately, of course... ' Mr Dewberry put his dirty fingernails together. 'There is a certain... shall one say, ambiguity? An area, one

might put it, of vagueness? A clause in the deeds, one might express oneself, somewhat in doubt?’

Sir Lancelot frowned. ‘What exactly are you trying to say, man?’

‘I am doing my best, Sir Lancelot, to be quite explicit.’ The solicitor sounded hurt. ‘I am only trying to put my opinion that the claim of both yourself and Mr Chadwick to Witches’ Pool can be disputed.’

‘Very well.’ Sir Lancelot banged the desk. ‘We’ll dispute it in court. Brief Sir Geoffrey.’

Mr Dewberry helped himself to another *bonnebouche* of hair. ‘When I say, as I put it, the claim *can* be disputed, I mean, you understand, that in such a dispute you would not yourself, I fear... indeed, I very much regret... am very sorry to say... you would not... er, have a leg to stand on.’

‘But that’s outrageous!’

‘I agree, Sir Lancelot, but it is also the fact of the matter. Shall I send the deeds back to you by registered post?’

Half an hour later Sir Lancelot was in another office, in Grosvenor Square. The interview was even briefer. The tall pale man with the gardenia, who ran the manservants’ bureau like an ambassador dealing with the heads of painfully dependent states, agreed that he certainly had chauffeurs but none who could equally handily gaff a salmon or net a trout.

‘I’ll teach the feller,’ Sir Lancelot offered handsomely. ‘A couple of afternoons on the river with me, and he’ll be an expert.’

‘My clients are *extremely* particular,’ observed the ambassador coldly, ‘and I do not think we have any of the rustic type.’

Not before time, Sir Lancelot felt as he finally strode down Piccadilly, he could turn into a haven of sanity and peace.

You may have noticed the establishment of Brackett and Knockett, on the right opposite Green Park. You could describe them as fishing-tackle merchants, but that would be like calling Chateau Margaux a drink or the Mona Lisa a bit of wall decoration. The old gentlemen in striped trousers, moving gently behind the delicate screen of rods inside the door, admittedly sell lines, reels, spoons, wobblers, Devons, boot dryers, trout disgorgers, priests, tailers, creels, bottled minnows, and little paraffin things to keep your hands warm. But the transaction is merely incidental to swapping the latest

gossip about fish. Sir Lancelot could spend hours in the place, describing a single battle of wits between him and a trout. It did him much more good than tranquillizers.

'Afternoon, Pytchley,' he began, striding to the counter and mellowing at once. 'Did you hear who won the Gold Cup?'

'Why, it's Sir Lancelot! Good afternoon, sir. Quite a pleasure to see you again. It was Oystercatcher, sir.'

'Har!' Sir Lancelot rubbed his hands. 'Harry the gateman was right again. Now I can afford a really decent rod.'

'Would you care to browse through our selection, Sir Lancelot? I have another gentleman just choosing some waders. I shall be with you in a minute, sir.'

Sir Lancelot ran an eye along the rods. Selecting one or two, he took them outside to the pavement and whisked them powerfully among the pedestrians, as though after a catch among the traffic. People stared, a cabby or two became witty, but such interruptions are midge-bites to a man concentrating on his casting. Sir Lancelot grunted. Any Brackett and Knockett rod was a work of art, naturally, but none seemed exactly what was wanted to belabour Percival's successors. Another caught his eye. The first switch told him this was the weapon of a fisherman's lifetime. He was like some master violinist at last getting his hands on a Stradivarius. The thing twitched in his hands with such lightness and power, he could see himself depopulating Witches' Pool in a couple of afternoons.

'I'll have this one,' he announced. 'Damn the cost.'

'I'm afraid, Sir Lancelot,' Pytchley apologized, 'that one is already sold.'

'Sold?'

'Yes, Sir Lancelot. Perhaps you did not observe the label on the handle? This gentleman bought it before trying on the waders.'

'You!' thundered Sir Lancelot.

'My dear sir,' murmured Mr Chadwick. 'Good afternoon.'

'What the devil are you doing in London?'

Mr Chadwick blinked his bird's eyes. 'I hardly feel I am entirely obliged to answer that question. But I will say how sorry I am that business brings me temporarily from our delightful countryside. On

an evening like this, I could wish no more in the world than to be standing beside Witches' Pool — ‘

Sir Lancelot had quit the shop. He was standing on the pavement, quivering.

‘This is the end!’ he cried.

But it wasn't quite. His eye fell on a newspaper placard displaying yet another regular feature of our native summer scene.

## ENGLAND COLLAPSE

it said.

'I suppose I did put up a bit of a boob with Sir Lancelot,' decided Simon Sparrow.

'Well, darling, you don't seem to have assumed your most charming bedside manner,' suggested his wife Nikki.

'Anyway, I was in the right.' Lie wondered if he was trying to convince her or himself. 'Any patient coming in and flatly demanding an X-ray has to be examined first, whether he's the President of the Royal College of Surgeons, the Prime Minister, or even Sir Lancelot. I couldn't take the risk of letting the old boy go with an abdominal aneurism or something ghastly brewing inside, could I? He could always have sent for Hubert Cambridge,' he added a shade pettishly, changing gear.

It was the evening of the following day, and Simon was driving his Mini from their house in Dulwich to have dinner with the Ivors-Smiths in Chelsea.

'You didn't feel inclined to risk even a hairline fracture of your principles?' sighed Nikki.

'No, not even if it meant spiking my own heavy artillery in this battle for the job. You see — ' Simon slipped between a couple of surly buses. 'What would you say if I told you that was exactly the result I wanted?'

'I'd tell you to drop into Simpson's and buy a hair shirt, darling, just to complete the picture.'

'I'm going to land this job under my own steam,' Simon announced firmly. 'Well, without Sir Lancelot's steam, anyway. Do you know what would happen if the old boy actually pushed me on to the staff? I'd have

him hanging round my neck at St Swithin's for the rest of his life, which is bound to be an embarrassingly long one.'

'But, darling,' complained Nikki, 'he's become an absolute hermit in the middle of all those mountains.'

'Don't you believe it! I know my Lancelot. Whatever he says, he's bored with nobody to talk to except Lady Spratt and the fish. I can just see him now, wandering into my theatre every day and looking

over my shoulder and sniffing in that irritating way of his. Honestly! I've had about enough of that caper.' Simon became so heated he nearly ran into an ice cream van. 'Sir Lancelot has absolutely dominated me since Grim and Tony Benskin and Taffy Evans and all the rest of us shook in our shoes as his first firm students and I'm jolly well not going to stand for it any longer.'

'Very well.' Nikki folded her hands in her lap. 'But it's all helping Paul.'

Simon frowned. 'Remember, it isn't Sir Lancelot who's Chairman of Governors but his brother-in-law, and you know what *he's* like. He won't have much time for the convolutions of Tricky Dicky Hindehead — Great Scott!'

A look of horror crossed his face.

'Yes, darling?' cried Nikki in alarm.

'I was in such a rush leaving the hospital I missed the close of play score.'

'England 212 all out, Australia 325 for 6, Jowler 5 for 90,' Nikki recited.

'Jowler, eh?' exclaimed Simon. 'While the wild man from the moors is in good nick, there's always hope, don't you think?'

'Yes, darling,' said Nikki.

A dutiful wife, she found cricket as difficult to follow as the intricate manipulations of the microscopic genes determining heredity, which she'd had to learn as a medical student. It also seemed a good deal less interesting.

'How absolutely delightful you could come,' Deirdre Ivors-Smith greeted them at the top of her front steps. 'Is that ducky little car yours? Yes, they're frightfully useful in town, aren't they? Paul has such terrible trouble parking the new Bentley. Was the traffic awful? You know, I really envy you living right out there in the suburbs. I often wonder how I put up with existing in the centre of things, but of course it is so frightfully convenient for Harrods and Fortnum's and so on. Do come in.'

'Thank you,' said Nikki.

'And it *does* make all the difference now we've our own little place in the country for weekends. When one gets away one wants to get *right* away, don't you think? You must come and rough it with us



down there in Wiltshire one day. But how *are* you, Simon? It must be ages and ages.'

'Yes, at least,' nodded Simon vaguely.

The Ivors-Smiths lived in a fashionable little house in one of those fashionable little back streets in Chelsea, originally laid out as terraced dwellings for City clerks until someone came along to paint the front doors pink and stick up a few window boxes and noughts on the prices. Deirdre led her visitors into the charming hall, which like the halls of all fashionable Chelsea houses wasn't big enough to open your umbrella in. Paul was waiting in the bijou sitting room, with the striped mauve paper and the amusing little prints. The dinner had been his idea. He wanted to seem absolutely fair and civilized towards his rival. Deirdre had agreed enthusiastically. She particularly wished the Sparrows to see her new Chelsea home, and once Paul was on the consultant staff you couldn't go inviting mere registrars.

'How's the son and heir?' Paul greeted Simon with a weak handshake. 'Bouncing with health, if the baby-sitter hasn't set fire to the house. We could only get hold of a teenager with a leather jacket, a Cleopatra hairdo, and one of those fashionable paranoid attitudes to life.'

'*Such* a problem, baby-sitters.' Deirdre sipped one of her husband's Martinis. 'Paul, a cigarette... I must say I'm glad we've got one of those college-trained nannies living in. Atrociously expensive, of course, but one does so feel one can *rely*, you know. A light please, Paul. But naturally, in your case,' she added to Nikki, 'you'd know exactly what to do when the child was ill, or anything.'

'Yes, I send for a paediatrician.'

When Deirdre Ivors-Smith had been Staff Nurse Pott on Virtue ward at St Swithin's she had never really liked the female doctors.

'I think that's the Breadalbanes' Aston Martin, darling,' Paul remarked, glancing through the window.

'You know the Breadalbanes, of course?' Deirdre asked her guests. 'Don't you? But, my dear, I thought absolutely everybody in London knew the Breadalbanes. Teddy Breadalbane's a director of United Drug. They've put up the money for this steroid Paul's working on.'

'I haven't sold my soul, though United Drug would probably take over even that.' Paul gave a smile. 'They made a donation, but as my work on the steroid is controlled by the Ministry, even United Drug hears nothing till the report comes out.'

'Teddy Breadalbane's *such* fun,' asserted Deirdre as the doorbell rang. 'Don't you remember, Paul, that time at the Dorchester?'

Mr Breadalbane was youngish and fat, and radiated such hearty benevolence that Simon found it difficult to understand how he brought himself to rake in the enormous profits he obviously did.

'I suppose you play the market a bit like everyone else these days, Doctor?' he suggested when Simon was wedged in one of the corners. 'Even if it's just a bit of stagg, what?' he added mysteriously, giving a laugh.

'Fraid not,' Simon smiled. 'As far as cash is concerned I seem to have a sock-under-the-bed mentality.'

'You could do far worse than some of our own shares, y'know,' added Mr Breadalbane, sipping his drink.

'I don't think my patients would care to know I had a vested interest in illness.'

'Oh, UD branches out in all directions these days. I bought a couple of custard companies this very afternoon.'

'Go on?' Simon looked impressed.

Mr Breadalbane threw a quick glance round. 'Look, Doctor,' he added quietly, 'you're a pal of Paul's. Like to make a quick gain? Get your broker to buy Beaulieu's Marmalade.'

'What, you mean the sort "Fit For The Royal Toast"...?'

'That's it.' He winked. 'You won't go wrong. Ah, dinner. Isn't Deirdre's cook wonderful?'

The Ivors-Smiths and the Breadalbanses were apparently very close friends, and had many other close friends in the higher-priced districts of London, whom they discussed over dinner at some length. Simon sank into his own thoughts. Business was always a mystery to him. How on earth did people like Mr Breadalbane make millions and millions, he wondered, just sitting at a large desk tooling about with pieces of paper? Behind all those mahogany boardrooms and smart secretaries and heavy luncheons and ten-thousand-quid computers it was probably childishly easy. Easier than doing a mitral

valvotomy, anyway. He sipped the delightful Burgundy. He smiled softly as he caught his wife's eye across the table. He had something, Simon told himself fondly, greater than either of those polished and prosperous fellows possessed. He was indeed a very lucky man. He took another sip. Yes, it was only by chance the year before at Lord's he'd managed to collect Pete Jowler's autograph.

As both Simon and Paul had an early start at St Swithin's the evening wasn't a late one, and they separated on the steps, Mr Breadalbane fairly bursting with bonhomie, well before eleven. About then, another party was getting under way behind St Swithin's mortuary gate.

'Darling,' Tim Tolly called softly. 'Are you all right?'

'Darling!' Euphemia fell into his arms like a paratrooper going into action. 'Yes, Anne James gave me a leg up.'

'Sure nobody saw you?' he whispered urgently.

'Not a soul, darling,' she told him breathlessly. 'I put a bolster in my bed. But we'd better get moving.'

'My sweet, I could hardly bear waiting for you under that ghastly gate,' declared Tim, driving his car towards the West End. 'But with these light evenings we could hardly have risked it earlier.'

'It's been such ages,' returned Euphemia, fondling his hand on the MG's little gear lever.

'Twenty-three days exactly since your Uncle Lancelot sewed you up in a sack and dropped you into the Bosphorus. I've counted all of them.' Tim gave a laugh. 'And to think the old ogre's miles and miles away in Wales.'

'No, he isn't. He's in Harley Street.'

'Oh,' said Tim.

'But he's only staying tonight. At first he said he was going home this morning. I met him yesterday,' she added.

'Did he mention me?' inquired Tim.

'No, as far as I remember he only mentioned the kidney.'

'I hope his horsewhip's in for a refit. Thank heavens I didn't pass him on the road, or he'd probably have run me in for speeding on the spot. As it was, I left on the tail of Charlie Chadwick — he's asked me to dinner at his place in Richmond, by the way,' Tim added a touch proudly. 'My prescribing some benemid for his gout seems to

have teamed me up in Charlie's eyes with Sir William Osier and Lord Lister. Where shall we go?'

'A night club,' said Euphemia firmly.

He looked surprised. 'A night club?'

'Yes, please,' nodded Euphemia.

'All right, darling.' Tim shrugged his shoulders. 'Anything you say.'

'The Asquith,' added Euphemia.

Tim raised his eyebrows. 'Very well. It's a rather fleshy pot, but if you want to, the Asquith it is.'

You must remember that Tim Tolly had known Euphemia only on the river bank in the open air before breakfast. She was to him the Amaryllis Milton kept wanting to sport with in the shade. He'd thought her as much the nightclub type as the girl on the Ovaltine tin, and now she wanted to live it up in the Asquith Club. He didn't know much about the place, except its being creepily expensive.

'Just a minor formality, sir,' explained the man in the striped waistcoat as Tim vaguely filled up membership forms in the foyer. 'I really don't know why we still bother our guests with it, sir.'

'I'd like a quiet table in a corner,' Tim addressed the headwaiter as Euphemia appeared from the plushy ladies'.

'Will you be dining, sir?'

'No, as a matter of fact, we — '

'I'm ravenous,' cut in Euphemia gaily.

'Dining,' nodded Tim.

'I want champagne,' she announced brightly, sitting down. 'And oysters.'

'Oysters! I'm afraid they're out of season.'

'Then I'll have caviar.'

'They... they don't serve it here.' Tim hurriedly turned over the menu. 'We'll have a bottle of champagne,' he added to the waiter. 'And some crisps.'

'This place is quite nice,' Euphemia conceded, looking round.

'Well, it *has* a certain repute, you know.'

She puzzled him. Down by Witches' Pool she'd been as delightfully sunny and natural as the weather. Now she was behaving like some jaded actress gritting her teeth with the latest admirer. After all, Tim told himself a shade chillingly, he'd been

captivated by this pretty girl without knowing anything of her background and family, except that she had a highly peculiar uncle. But then, he quickly tried to reassure himself, any girl is likely to seem odd after stuffing bolsters down her bed and dropping from mortuary gates.

As they danced Euphemia seemed to soften into her Witches' Pool mood. 'I can just imagine Matron's face if she knew I was here!' she laughed. 'As for Sister Virtue, I don't think the poor dear would ever get over it.'

'How are you enjoying being a handmaiden of healing?' Tim grinned back.

Euphemia wrinkled her nose. 'Are there any models here, darling?' she asked suddenly.

'Models? What, you mean the real ones you actually see in adverts? I believe they all have to work so hard they go to bed with a glass of milk at ten-thirty.'

'But how about the men who employ the models? You know, the agencies. Like Collins, McKnight, and Wade. Are any of them here?'

Tim laughed. 'They're much more likely to be at home, swallowing alkali for their ulcers.'

'Look - ' Euphemia pointed. 'Who's that man in a macintosh?'

'Macintosh?'

'Yes, up in the band.'

'I suppose he's one of the cabaret turns.' Tim shrugged his shoulders. 'Though he doesn't seem quite the Asquith's usual style.'

'Why, there's another one,' she indicated. 'And another.'

'It must be some elaborate comic act. Anyway, now the music's stopped we'll soon find out.'

‘Nothing up my sleeve,’ asserted Mr Geoffrey Nightrider, MP. ‘Nothing whatsoever. Observe.’

He shot his cuffs. He was a tall, bony, bald fellow, with a marked air of dedicated superiority. You felt he would have looked good done in stained glass.

‘Here I have a perfectly plain silk handkerchief, as may be purchased in any haberdashery. Kindly note the front...the back. I screw the handkerchief thus in my fist. And behold! The answer’s a lemon.’

With finger and thumb he placed the fruit delicately on the sideboard. Mr Nightrider was a keen amateur magician. He entertained his family with it generously, and all his friends were privileged to sit through an hour or two’s tricks after dining.

‘My next,’ he continued, still looking saintly, ‘will be the Afghan Bands. Nothing, I assure you, up my sleeve. Ah, good morning, Mrs Chuffey,’ he broke off, hastily shoving his implements into a drawer.

‘Good morning, sir. Going to be another scorcher later on, I’d say.’

‘My breakfast,’ he announced, rubbing his hands. Though a man with strict views on self-indulgence, his fifty press-ups every morning in the bedroom had left him a confirmed breakfast-addict.

‘Oh, no, sir. This tray’s for the Master, sir.’

‘Indeed?’ He looked at her with the expression of a saint whose halo had fused at a particularly awkward moment.

‘I just came to get the best dining room cruet, sir.’

‘Mrs Chuffey — ‘ He surveyed bleakly the steaming porringer, the brace of boiled eggs cosy in their little woolly jumpers, the neat toast in its silver rack, the coffee pot exhaling so fragrantly. He continued in a fruity voice, ‘I do not wish to sound legalistic, but I think I must point out that *I* am the Master now.’

‘Oh, no, sir,’ she insisted politely. ‘Sir Lancelot will always be the Master to me.’

‘Is that,’ he demanded sternly, ‘my *Times*?’

‘It was the one in the hall, sir.’

‘If you please, Mrs Chuffey!’ He held out his hand. ‘At least I shall insist on reading my newspaper first, even if I must eat my breakfast second. What damn cheek!’ he added as the cook carried the tray upstairs. ‘Thank heavens the fellow is going to decamp before lunch.’

He stared grimly through the dining room window at a hazy summer’s Saturday morning in Harley Street. It had seemed such a sound idea when his sister Maud had suggested a few weeks before that he rent her London house. The delightful new home Mr Nightrider was building in Kent had progressed at the speed of the pyramids, suddenly leaving his family roofless. Anyway, he wanted to stay the summer in town, having added to his duties in the House and in the Chair of both St Swithin’s Governors and the National Council of Morals, Chairmanship of the new Committee of Commonwealth Culture — he collected committees as other men collect stamps or wives. The rent was pretty stiff, of course. But Harley Street was delightfully central, the house big enough comfortably to entertain cultured guests from the Commonwealth, the furniture was tasteful, the cook was in residence. And his brother-in-law, Sir Lancelot, was permanently occupied fishing in Wales.

Mr Nightrider rubbed a chin like the front of a tank. A fair and righteous man, he had felt it only proper to lodge Sir Lancelot in the spare room for his night in London. Though he found his company as congenial as a dental abscess — the man seemed to have no respect whatever for Governors of hospitals or of anything else — he felt a second night’s hospitality reasonable when his brother-in-law pronounced himself exhausted with frustrating and unfinished business. He now hoped the goodness of his heart wouldn’t have to show further elasticity.

‘If only I had not to preserve the dignity of a Member of Parliament,’ he muttered, ‘how I would give that fellow a piece of my mind!’

He sat down and started reading *The Times*, wondering when breakfast was going to appear. It did in twenty minutes, simultaneously with Sir Lancelot.

‘My dear fellow, good morning, good morning,’ the surgeon began heartily. ‘What a good omen this mist is! When it clears by and by, it will help Jowler get a bit of movement off the wicket.’

‘I am afraid I am not familiar with the niceties of cricket. Tennis is a more rewarding spectacle to me, and I hope on Tuesday to take advantage of my ticket to Wimbledon.’

‘Girls in frilly knickers playing pat-ball,’ Sir Lancelot dismissed it genially. ‘Do get on with your breakfast if you want, Geoff. I’ve had mine.’

‘So I noticed.’

‘Good gracious, man, you don’t eat that Beaulieu’s marmalade stuff, do you?’ added the surgeon. ‘You know they soak the oranges in sulphuric acid till the skins drop off? Where’s the paper?’ he demanded, looking round.

‘I don’t know, but possibly my wife or Hilda have it in their rooms,’ replied Mr Nightrider bleakly.

He had just hidden it under the cushion of the armchair, being fond in the evening of doing the crossword, which Sir Lancelot mutilated briskly on sight.

‘I don’t suppose anything interesting’s happened.’ Sir Lancelot settled in the chair and lit his pipe. ‘Though I always miss *The Times*. It does one good to have at least one real laugh a day.’

‘You mean the Fourth Leaders? I myself sometimes find them quite amusing.’

‘Good grief, no! There’s no need to be *deliberately* funny in *The Times*, any more than to be deliberately funny in *Punch*. Do get on with your bacon, Geoff, it’ll be quite disgusting cold.’

You may remember we last saw Sir Lancelot standing on the pavement outside a fishing shop, radiating black thoughts like gamma rays from a radioactive isotope. Now he was staring benevolently at his brother-in-law forking up breakfast, with an air of docility suggesting he’d undergone the leucotomy Tim Tolly suggested. Why, you may ask, this surprising change of mood? I’ll tell you. It was through a letter Mrs Chuffey carried up with the boiled eggs.

‘My dear Lancelot, [it said]



So good of you to drop me a line while you are in Town. I'm glad to say I've never been fitter, and give thanks to your great care and skill every time I sit down to eat. I shall be quite up to the Lord Mayor's banquet next winter - which as you may have heard will be a somewhat important one for me personally!

As for Chadwick, he is rather a tough customer but perfectly straightforward, and quite a decent little person at heart. It is strange you should ask after him, for I heard in the City only today that he is in difficulties — rather serious ones. Take-over trouble, I believe. You will realize that I cannot put more on paper, I'm sure.

What a miserable start to the Test. I do wish England could find a decent pair of openers.

Yours ever,  
Kenneth.'

Sir Lancelot took it from his pocket and read it over again. 'Difficulties,' he murmured fondly. 'Rather serious ones.' He already saw himself buying up Witches' Pool at the auction. He twitched his MCC tie. His back felt splendid.

These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by his brother-in-law-clearing his throat.

'I still have that nagging pain in the right side,' he announced gloomily.

After all, it Sir Lancelot insisted on staying he might as well cadge some medical advice. Like many men with a youth spent grinding their fellows into the mud of football fields or proceeding at great rates up rivers in reverse, Mr Nightrider was a chronic hypochondriac.

'Perhaps you should try loosening your waistcoat.'

'It comes on immediately after meals,' persisted Mr Nightrider, indicating the pathological area. 'I fear it may be something organic. The appendix, perhaps? The gall bladder?'

'Wind,' diagnosed Sir Lancelot briefly. 'Yes, Mrs Chuffey?'

'What would you be fancying for lunch, Sir Lancelot?'

'Lunch!' Mr Nightrider spilt his coffee. 'But surely, Lancelot, you are leaving this morning? I mean, the congested roads this time of the year — '

‘I have to get a haircut, and I might as well spend the afternoon at Lord’s. I think a grilled Dover sole, Mrs Chuffey, and one of your apple pies. They are quite delicious, Geoff,’ he added as the door shut.

‘I’m afraid I’ve not had the opportunity of judging. Her cooking has been somewhat uninspired during our tenancy.’

‘That reminds me.’ Sir Lancelot relit his pipe. ‘I was down at my solicitors’ on Thursday. You don’t seem to have paid your first quarter’s rent.’

Sir Lancelot had his hair cut in London only at Humble’s in St James’s, an establishment all mahogany and discreet whispers which had snipped the heads of Church and State for nearly two centuries. When an hour later he turned the familiar corner from Piccadilly, he drew up aghast. Where Humble’s had once stood with the durability of the Rock of Gibraltar was now a large hole with mechanical grabs and bulldozers mudlarking in the bottom of it.

‘Blasted property developers!’ he snorted.

Wandering towards Piccadilly Circus as the sun began to melt the morning mist Sir Lancelot’s eyes fell on a pair of glass doors labelled GENTLEMEN’S HAIRDRESSER AND STYLIST.

‘Good morning,’ fluted the young man in a nylon overall buttoned round the neck like the doctors on American television shows. ‘And what can we do for you?’

‘I want a haircut.’

‘*This way*, if you please. And how would you like your hair cut, sir?’

‘In silence.’

The hairdresser gave a watery smile. ‘I mean, in what sort of style? We have several very fetching ones for the older man. “The Diplomat”, perhaps? “The Coronet”? Extremely popular is our “Presidential Executive”. Or perhaps,’ he suggested, inspecting the site of operations, ‘something more dashingly younger? An exciting little fringe over the brow — ‘

‘Short back and sides and the morning paper,’ snapped Sir Lancelot, taking the chair.

The surgeon stared absently at a picture paper for some time, until thought transported him to more agreeable surroundings. If he stayed at Lord’s until the close of play, he reasoned, he would

unhappily miss his twilight fishing at Witches' Pool. But one could not have everything, and perhaps for once he could break his rule about fishing on a Sunday. He gave a grim smile. At least the pool would be free from intruders. Perhaps permanently? His informant, like all City bankers, was never given to overstatement.

'Shampoo and set afterwards?' the hairdresser's voice broke into these happy thoughts.

'Thank you, no.'

'Attention to the beard?'

'Thank you, no.'

'Toilet water? Deodorants? Bath essence?'

'Thank you, no.'

Sir Lancelot turned a page of his paper. He would be leaving unfinished business in town like forgotten swabs in a belly, he reflected, but he couldn't stand Geoff Nightrider for more than a couple of days on end — it was perfectly outrageous how the fellow treated the Harley Street house exactly like his own home. And that wasn't to mention his ghastly hookworm of a wife, nor those oversights of Borstal, Felicity, Randolph and the twins.

He wrinkled his nose.

'What's that?'

'Male Cologne, sir.' The hairdresser produced a large fancy bottle. 'Dab or two behind the ears, sir?'

'If you so much as touch me with that stuff, young man, I shall take great pleasure in emptying the entire contents up your — Ahhhhhhhhh!'

Sir Lancelot jumped up. The bottle crashed to the tiles.

'Ye gods!' he barked. 'What infamy!'

His eyes, straying idly across the paper, found themselves exchanging glances with Euphemia. Beside her was that parboiled sex maniac, Tolly. The rest of the photograph was filled with policemen.

'You've gone and smashed our nice Cologne,' complained the hairdresser peevishly. 'Fresh opened this morning, too.'

'What odium! What disgrace!'

The paper shook in his hands. He managed to focus on a headline, DOCTOR, NURSE IN PUNCH-UP. He forced himself to

read on:

‘Dr Timothy Tolly and fiancée Nurse Euphemia Spratt enter a police van after last night’s raid on Mayfair’s classy Asquith Club. The doctor’s black eye came in a scuffle with police as the pair tried to make a getaway. Both appear this morning at Addlestreet Police Court.’

‘What humiliation! What turpitude!’

‘You’ll have to pay for the damage what you done to Sidney’s Cologne,’ threatened another young man in a nylon overall. ‘It’s no good turning nasty.’

‘What debasement! What obloquy!’

Sir Lancelot’s eyes reached the bitter end:

‘Nurse Euphemia should come in useful with that eye. She is the niece of former Harley-street surgeon Sir Lancelot Spratt.’

‘What scandal! What stigma!’

‘You watch your language in our saloon,’ complained several other overalled young men, gathering round. ‘We’ve got some very nice customers.’

‘Get me a cab!’ Sir Lancelot blindly pushed notes into somebody’s hands. ‘St Swithin’s Hospital!’ he thundered to the driver, climbing in. ‘Main gate. What a ghastly stink!’ he added, throwing open both windows. ‘Who the devil did you have in here last trip, man? The entire chorus from Drury Lane?’

‘Ullo, Sir Lancelot!’ Crimes paused from pushing a trolley across the St Swithin’s courtyard. ‘Have you heard the great news, sir? Jowler got the last four wickets this morning for five runs. Them Yorkshire tykes don’t half lap up Aussie blood once they’ve got their tails up.’

But Sir Lancelot took no notice, not even of this momentous news. He strode grimly from the gate towards the Nurses’ Home.

Crimes sniffed. The old gaffer pongs a bit, I must say,’ he muttered to himself. ‘P’raps it’s a sign of old age.’

‘Come in,’ invited the Matron crisply. ‘Oh, it’s Sir Lancelot. I thought you had gone home to Wales?’

‘Matron, I demand an explanation,’ he began at once. She raised her eyebrows. ‘I should have thought that I was the one entitled to voice that remark. Sister Tripp,’ she broke off to the thin woman in

the starched bonnet who acted as her familiar. 'Will you open the other window? It seems to have become rather stuffy in here.'

'I demand an explanation,' continued Sir Lancelot, quivering, 'why you gave permission for my niece not only to visit haunts of sin, but to do so in the most undesirable company.'

'I trust you do not imagine that she did so *with* my permission?'

'How the devil could she have left the hospital without showing her late pass?' demanded the surgeon impatiently.

'Over the mortuary gate.'

'Rubbish! My niece would never commit an underhand act like that.'

'Please show Sir Lancelot the bolster, Sister Tripp,' directed the Matron. 'Sister Tripp,' she broke off sharply, 'have you taken to using perfumery?'

'Perfumery, Matron! On duty, Matron? Dear me, dear me!'

'Then it must be my imagination. Nurse Spratt left this in her bed,' she explained calmly.

'The little devil!' Sir Lancelot hissed, eyeing Exhibit A. 'By jove, she shall pay for this! I'll rain down fire and brimstone on her thicker than a cloudburst at Old Trafford. I'll make her ears tingle as though she'd dipped the pair of them in hydrochloric acid. I'll certainly-'

'I'm sure you will, Sir Lancelot.' The Matron gave a little sniff. Old Tripp absolutely reeked of eau-de-Cologne. She'd be going about in a padded bra and eyeshadow next.

'And where exactly *is* the black lamb of my family?' the surgeon ended hotly.

'You will remember she has an appointment this morning in Addle Street.'

'And me a magistrate too!' He snorted. 'I think it would be more appropriate if you administered the wiggling, Matron. In the first instance, at any rate.'

'But I'm afraid it is nothing to do with me, Sir Lancelot.'

He frowned. 'But you're the Matron, dammit.'

'Miss Spratt has, of course, automatically become expelled from the hospital.'

'Expelled?' Sir Lancelot looked blank. 'Expelled?' He tugged his beard. 'But... but... you can't *expel* her.'

‘My dear Sir Lancelot! I have in the past had the disagreeable duty of banishing girls for far less.’

‘You are not going to expel Euphemia!’ he commanded.

‘Why not, pray?’

‘Because... because, damnation! She’s my niece.’

‘Really!’ The Matron stared. ‘I should have thought you were the last to encourage favouritism in the hospital - Come in!’

The *corpus delicti* entered.

‘How much were you nicked?’ demanded Sir Lancelot at once.

‘Good morning, Uncle.’ Euphemia wore the expression of Joan of Arc at lighting-up time. ‘Forty shillings.’

‘H’m.’

‘Miss Spratt,’ began the Matron, taking from Sister Tripp a pink Ministry card headed WOMAN 18 AND UNDER 65 (PINK). ‘I must ask you to remove your personal belongings from the hospital within the hour, as we shall be wanting your room.’

‘Yes, Matron.’

‘Look here,’ exploded Sir Lancelot. ‘This is utterly preposterous. It was a mere girlish prank - ‘

‘A prank!’

A grin spread like oil across his storm-tossed features. ‘Of course it was, Matron. A mere lark. The whole evening was conceived in a spirit of pure fun. Wasn’t it, girl? Eh? Eh?’ he barked. ‘After all, Matron, you must make allowance for her being but a child of eighteen.’

‘If she is old enough to nurse, Sir Lancelot, she is old enough to behave herself properly.’

‘Besides, she was seduced.’

‘What!’ cried Sister Tripp.

‘I mean in the abstract sense, dammit!’

‘I’m sorry, Sir Lancelot.’ The Matron sounded a shade weary. ‘But you cannot seriously expect me — ‘

‘Euphemia,’ ordered Sir Lancelot, ‘leave the room.’

There was a pause.

‘Sister Tripp,’ requested the Matron, ‘see if the second post has come. I am perfectly impervious to blandishments, Lancelot,’ she added when they were alone.

‘That girl’s name is Spratt.’

The Matron said nothing.

‘A name borne honourably through the wards of this hospital for three generations. I don’t intend to see it disgraced by the headstrong frolic of an overgrown schoolgirl under the influence of a faintly camouflaged medical student.’

The Matron pursed her lips.

‘She’s a good nurse, isn’t she? Liz Virtue says so, and she’d have blackened Florence Nightingale herself.’

The Matron murmured, ‘Admittedly so.’

‘I assure you I have never asked anyone in the hospital to do me a favour until this very moment. Give that girl any punishment you like short of the sack. In return I personally guarantee her conduct in the future will be impeccable.’

‘That is, of course, an impressive pledge — ‘

‘Besides, Hester,’ he added, quietly, leaning on the desk, ‘you haven’t forgotten the past, have you?’

Once they had shared a mad, mad moment. Sir Lancelot had been a young registrar. Matron was a junior nurse. It was late. They were alone in a darkened corridor. Their emotions had melted from the heat of an exhausting day in the operating theatre. She passed him with a kidney-dish. He pinched her behind. Somehow, she had never forgotten it. Nobody had pinched it since. As a matter of fact, nobody for years could possibly have thought of such a thing.

‘There were only a few circulars,’ announced Sister Tripp, reappearing.

‘Please send in Nurse Spratt,’ asked the Matron.

Outside in the sunlit courtyard Sir Lancelot mopped his face with the yellow silk handkerchief. He wanted to get away from the hospital. He wanted to inhale the tranquillizing atmosphere of Lord’s. He wanted to collect his thoughts. He wanted a drink.

‘Well, that was a near squeak.’ He turned to Euphemia, at his side. ‘I will confine myself, my dear, to the single observation that should anything in the slightest irregular occur in future I will simply ship you straight home to Singapore.’

‘Yes, Uncle,’ said Euphemia meekly.

‘And that includes setting eyes on this man Tolly.’

‘Yes, Uncle.’

A little tear glistened in the sunshine. Sir Lancelot tried hard to ignore it.

‘Look here, Effie,’ he admitted brusquely, ‘I — I have perhaps not afforded you the guidance you deserved, arriving in a strange land to start an exacting career. You see, having — rather unhappily - no offspring of my own, I am rather out of touch with such problems. Why not let me stand you a treat in some restaurant or other tonight?’ he offered more heartily. ‘Perhaps we can iron out some of the wrinkles? I am quite prepared for your sake to put off my return to Wales for another twenty-four hours.’

‘Thank you very much, Uncle,’ agreed Euphemia quietly.

‘How much did Tolly get nicked, by the way?’ he added suddenly.

‘Ten pounds, Uncle.’

‘Cheap at the price. Who did you get against? Old Bisby? He’s been much less fierce since I removed his prostate, I fancy.’

‘Tim has left London anyway, Uncle,’ explained Euphemia, swallowing. ‘He starts his job today at the Nicol Jarvie Hospital in Edinburgh.’

‘The Nicol Jarvie? But dammit girl! That’s a nuthouse.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, Uncle. Tim is going to be a psychiatrist.’

‘Har!’ Sir Lancelot rubbed his hands. ‘Of course, that would explain everything.’ Sir Lancelot accepted all psychiatrists as mentally unbalanced by definition. ‘Well, goodbye, Euphemia. Be at my house in Harley Street tonight at seven-fifteen prompt.’

‘Yes, Uncle. Goodbye, Uncle.’

‘Oh, and Euphemia...’ Sir Lancelot twitched his nose. ‘Just a tip from an old man. If you want to keep out of trouble, don’t use so much Cologne in future. It makes you stink like a kept woman.’



'But I saw it!' exclaimed Sir Lancelot jubilantly. 'Every single ball of it! Square cuts, cover drives, late hooks, tickles round to leg... I saw the lot. It was an experience as unforgettable as one's first view of the Acropolis.'

He rustled *The Times* against the coffee pot. A headline on the sports page announced:

ENGLAND SAVED  
STRONGI'TH'ARM AND WINTERBOTTOM PUT ON 225

'I'm sure you want me to tell you all about it,' he offered handsomely.

It was breakfast time the following Monday morning. Mr Nightrider was getting abreast of events from his wife's *Daily Mirror*, between glaring at *The Times* which Mrs Chuffey had loyally whisked straight to Sir Lancelot's bedroom. His wife was toying with a kipper, wondering if the remains of the coming luncheon party would stretch for supper. His twenty-one-year-old daughter Felicity was thinking of a young man called Ron, with whom her parents were as yet unacquainted. His eighteen-year-old son Randolph had his mind fixed on Folkestone, a popular English seaside resort. His younger twins, Hilda and Herbert, released from their highly relieved institutions for half-term, were independently wondering how to attach a tin can, or preferably the cat's tail, to the rear bumper of Sir Lancelot's Rolls. Both had a sharp sense of humour.

Nobody round the table was taking any notice of Sir Lancelot, because none of them was in the slightest interested in cricket. And neither, it suddenly occurs to me chillingly, might you be. So I will skip his account of the historic partnership between Yorkshireman and Lancastrian that sunny Saturday afternoon at Lord's, when even the mighty Australian Duffy was hammered all the way from the Warner Stand to the Tavern -those interested can anyway look it all up in *Wisden* — and return to the scene as Sir Lancelot was ending magnificently, Then with the very last ball of the day, b'ellowman got

Strongly 'th' arm in the gully with his chinaman. What do you think of that?'

He replaced the salt cellar, pepper pot, and butter knife with which he had been illustrating his talk.

'I must see Mrs Chuffey in the kitchen,' announced Mrs Nightrider, rising quickly.

'I am glad you have good weather for your journey home this morning,' added Mr Nightrider as his children disappeared as well.

Spreading *The Times* across his knees in the armchair, the surgeon felt for his pipe. His departure had been delayed further through a generous decision to spend Sunday taking Euphemia to the Zoo, the Tower of London, the British Museum, and Madame Tussaud's. She had expressed herself extremely interested in each.

'As I'm here, Geoff, I might as well look into Lord's before driving on west,' he mentioned.

Mr Nightrider groaned inwardly — but so loudly it nearly resonated through.

'I do not in the slightest wish to appear inhospitable, Lancelot,' he said quickly, 'but I had planned a small luncheon party here today for Anthony Waterfall. The author, you know.'

'I hope you didn't imagine I would intrude?' Sir Lancelot started operations on the crossword. 'I shall be taking a luncheon basket to Lord's.'

'Excellent!' exclaimed Mr Nightrider. There is no condiment, I believe, to match fresh air. I shall be bringing my own tea to Wimbledon tomorrow. I am much looking forward to it.'

'"Poet asleep on the heather",' murmured Sir Lancelot, chewing his pencil.

'I am a little concerned about the health of my daughter Felicity.' Mr Nightrider felt he might as well slip in a quick consultation before his guest left. 'Since starting that temporary job in the Chelsea bookshop, she has become peculiarly fidgety and feverish. St Vitus dance, do you think? These last few days she has been quite unable to keep still for a moment. I trust no form of tubercular infection? The thyroid gland, I understand in young persons —'

'"Kipling"!' announced Sir Lancelot, writing it in. ' "Kip-ling". Felicity off colour? I'd give her a good old-fashioned dose of salts.'

‘And the pain in my own side is no better,’ Mr Nightrider added gloomily. ‘I have also developed the most distressing symptom of waking at night with a violent start.’

‘It’s probably your missus kicking you. Yes, Mrs Chuffey? For my luncheon basket? Something quite simple — say, smoked salmon sandwiches and a bottle of hock.’

‘My own guests will be obliged to make do on potted shrimps,’ observed Mr Nightrider pointedly as the door shut.

‘I’d have thought you could lash out a bit more, Geoff. After all, you’re living here at a peppercorn rent.’

‘Some peppercorns!’ he grunted, reaching for his parliamentary hat and broly. But at least, he told himself, he would have an absentee landlord on his return.

Sir Lancelot continued operating on the crossword. He had great fun changing a carthorse into an orchestra and pig mines into impinges, and had just transformed pied mice into an epidemic when the door slowly opened.

‘Uncle Lancelot — ‘Felicity edged in.

He looked up. He neither approved nor disapproved of his brother-in-laws daughter. She was a tall, thin, pale, sandy female, given to acne. She was not a girl who found herself noticed much by young men. Indeed, she was not a girl who found herself noticed much by anybody.

‘Uncle Lancelot, have you views on the Arts?’ she inquired.

Sir Lancelot frowned. Felicity stood twisting her fingers round a grubby handkerchief. Apart from the acne, the poor dear had chronic sinusitis.

‘Daddy’s terribly keen on the Arts, now he’s on this Cultural Committee,’ she continued quickly. ‘And of course every year he goes to the Royal Academy. But I’ve begun to wonder if our civilization isn’t cruel to the more unconventional younger poets and things.’

‘It always has been, my dear,’ replied Sir Lancelot patiently. ‘I am perfectly certain Shakespeare much disliked having to hold all those beastly horses.’

She gave a sniff. ‘You mean, Uncle Lancelot, they are just as deserving of a subsidy as — well, the National Theatre and the

Festival Hall?’

‘I have never believed any talent should be buried. If it turns out to be counterfeit, it will ring false soon enough.’

‘Thank you, Uncle Lancelot!’ She gave her colourless smile. ‘Oh, and Uncle Lancelot — do you believe in class distinctions?’

‘My dear girl, don’t be ridiculous. To a medical man there are only two classes. Alive and dead.’

‘*Thank* you, Uncle Lancelot,’ she ended gratefully. ‘Now I must rush for my bus.’

She left the surgeon pondering on an Australian bird with a cautious tail in nine letters, from which his thoughts shortly strayed to Euphemia. At least his own side of the family, he told himself with a touch of conceit, didn’t go about looking like illustrations from a textbook on deficiency diseases.

‘“Cassowary”!’ he exclaimed. ‘C — A — S — S — O — W — ‘

‘I say, Uncle Lancelot.’

He threw a highly unwelcoming glance at the door. Randolph entered on tip-toe, closing it softly behind him.

‘Uncle Lancelot — ‘

The youth stood biting his lip. He was one of those pudgy pink-faced shining young men who always look as though they’ve just stepped from a cold shower.

‘I say, will you help me have a bit of fun?’ he invited.

Sir Lancelot raised his eyebrows. ‘What have you in mind? Hunt the slipper? Socratic debate? Thought reading? Rape?’

‘Uncle, you’re a sportsman — ‘

Sir Lancelot’s look became even less hospitable. Not least among his lessons of life was discovering that this phrase generally ushered in a touch.

‘I mean, you’ve bashed round racecourses and things,’ Randolph continued, standing on one leg.

‘I have occasionally diverted myself with the Turf, like many English monarchs.’

‘Jolly good. That is, you know the ropes and all that,’ Randolph persisted, standing on the other one.

‘What exactly are you trying to get at?’ snapped Sir Lancelot.

‘You see, I obviously don’t know much about all that caper. I mean to say, with Dad being — you know.’ He changed legs again. ‘Particularly as I’m waiting to go up to Cambridge next term with a scholarship from the Youth Morality Foundation. Wouldn’t do, you see.’

‘I fail to entirely, but go on.’

‘Fact is, I’d rather like to have a little bit of a flutter.’

Sir Lancelot let out a guffaw.

‘Great Scott, man, I imagined you wanted to nobble the favourite for next year’s Derby.’

‘You see, I’ve been filling in with this welfare job down in Hoxton,’ Randolph continued, expanding and raising a grin. ‘I met a very sound fellow down there who’s mixed up in this horse business somewhere, and he told me the one which is absolutely certain to win the first race this afternoon at Folkestone.’

‘Excellent.’ Sir Lancelot slapped his knee. ‘Not half enough sporting spirit in the young these days.’

‘Yes, but how do I put the money on?’ asked Randolph, looking puzzled. ‘I suppose I could go to Folkestone, but it seems an awful long way — ‘

‘Here — ‘ Sir Lancelot scribbled on a strip torn from his newspaper. ‘Ring that number, ask for Alf and mention my name.’

‘That’s awfully good of you, Uncle — ‘

‘And now get out. I want to finish this damn crossword.’

‘Yes, of course, Uncle.’ He hesitated. ‘The horse’s name is Goose Pimple, in case you’re interested,’ he added generously.

‘I never bet on meetings at seaside courses, but put your few bob on and jolly good luck to you.’

Sir Lancelot bent his mind to the gap in ‘Where’s my — of old Nile? (*Ant. and Cleo.*)’, until a minute later he was interrupted by the appearance of Hilda and Herbert, in tears.

‘Ye gods! I might as well be sitting in the waiting-room at Euston Station. Go and blow your noses and find your mother,’ he commanded.

‘We’ve lost Cissy the eat,’ they wailed together.

‘It has probably been run over. It was an extremely unpleasant animal anyway. Now clear off.’

‘She was our special pet,’ lamented Hilda loudly.

‘No doubt your father will provide a replacement. Hop it.’

‘Daddy says he can’t afford another one,’ cried Herbert.

Sir Lancelot threw his paper aside. ‘Look here, you beastly pair of felinophils, London is positively crawling with stray cats. Go and hunt round the dustbins till you find one. If you smother it with DDT you’ll keep most of the fleas out of the drawing-room. Now get out before I bid you farewell with the toe of my boot.’

‘S — E — R — P - F. — N - T,’ Sir Lancelot pencilled in with satisfaction, picking up his paper again. He gave a groan. The door was opened. But it was only Mrs Chuffey.

‘Ah, my luncheon basket, no doubt,’ he exclaimed.

‘No, sir. There’s a gentleman to see you, sir.’

‘A gentleman?’ Sir Lancelot frowned. ‘What sort of a gentleman?’

‘Oh, quite respectable, sir. He brought this letter.’

It was addressed simply, ‘Sir Lancelot Spratt, MD, MS, FRCS.’ He opened it.

‘Dear Sir Lancelot, [it said]

I was utterly delighted to hear you were seen back in St Swithin’s the other day, and have presumably resumed your private practice in London. I am sure it would be a terrible loss to surgery if you persisted in living in the country. Believe me, as your last house surgeon before you retired, I am enormously relieved that I can once again call upon your wise counsel for my clinical problems. These at the moment, I regret to say, are heavy.

I have a general practice in this suburb, but I find the work somewhat hard going and not at all as things were in St Swithin’s. I should be glad if you would kindly give me your opinion of this patient to begin with. I have been trying to make an appointment but something seems wrong with your telephone arrangements. However, I remember Mondays are your usual private consulting days. He is Mr Bovis, a wholesale grocer, who has had dragging pains in his left side for thirty years. I can make nothing of him.

With best wishes from your ever grateful former pupil,

Clement E Dinwiddie.’

'Dinwiddie?' Sir Lancelot's eyebrows shot up. 'Sound feller. In g.p., eh?' He grunted. 'Pity he's got the wrong end of the stick about me.'  
He turned the letter idly in his hands.

'Where did you put the visitor?'

'In the waiting-room, sir. The new drawing room, that is.'

'H'm.' Sir Lancelot stroked his beard. 'Er - Mrs Chuffey, I presume my couch and so on are still in Mr Nightrider's study?'

'Oh, yes, sir.' She looked shocked at such mention of sacred relics. 'I would never let them be moved for a moment, sir.'

He paused. He looked at the letter. He rose. 'You know, I think I rather fancy the idea of getting my hands on an abdomen again. Mrs Chuffey -show the patient in.'

He strode from the room with the expression of one setting out on a promising morning for Witches' Pool.

'Here we are,' announced Mr Nightrider, as their taxi turned into Harley Street, at lunchtime.

'By the way, did anyone hear the score?' asked his old friend the Bishop of Montserrat, a fat man with the same sallow complexion as the pawpaws he regularly enjoyed for breakfast on his island.

'We were all out for 351,' grunted General Bunch. 'Last I heard, the Australians were ten for one. Jowler got Foreman pretty quickly.'

'I shall take my pleasure tomorrow afternoon at Wimbledon,' smiled Mr Nightrider. 'I fancy von Schiermacher might well beat Gary Burkett.'

'My country will soon be playing at Wimbledon,' asserted the fourth passenger, a delegate from one of those African states which these days keep turning up so confusingly with a brand new name, Hag, and national anthem, and a prime minister we've just let out of clink. 'Our honoured President is very keen on sport. Oh, yes. He has opened many acres of tennis courts in our capital.'

'I doubt if the weather will hold,' complained Mr Anthony Waterfall, who was being squeezed into the corner. He was anyway a thin fellow, a good deal craggier than the photographs on the dust jackets of his books. If he always looked pretty miserable, it was through having a tortured soul. His soul had been tortured as regularly as the appearance of his publisher's autumn list for about twenty years, and he did rather well out of it. The lunch was to persuade him into lecturing about this soul all over Africa, preferably at his own expense.

All five glanced anxiously heavenwards as they climbed from the taxi. Like every previous day that June it had started as clear and blue as a starling's egg, but by midmorning great surly clouds were elbowing their way across the sun, until the sky now looked as grey and unattractive as a plate of cold porridge.

'You must find this house remarkably convenient, Geoffrey,' observed the Bishop of Montserrat as the taxi was paid off.

'Yes, I rented it for the summer from my brother-in-law. He's Sir Lancelot Spratt, you know — the surgeon.'



‘Ah, yes.’ The Bishop nodded. ‘He took the stomach out of Mandalay.’

‘A surgeon?’ Anthony Waterfall looked startled. ‘I hope there is nothing surgical left about? I have such a horror of things like that. I always faint immediately at the sight of blood.’

‘Dear me, no, Mr Waterfall,’ his host assured him. ‘All the medical impedimenta are kept strictly out of sight. And my brother-in-law himself, whom I invited for a few days, left this morning.’

‘I do so hope you’re right,’ said Anthony Waterfall doubtfully. ‘If I even go to the dentist’s, I am upset for weeks.’

‘In my country we have many famous surgeons,’ mentioned the African. ‘Oh, yes. Our honoured President is very keen on surgery.’

‘So pleasant for your children to be near Regent’s Park,’ remarked the Bishop as they all mounted the steps. ‘They flourish, I trust?’

‘Indeed yes, Arthur. My eldest, I am glad to say, suddenly seems to be taking a great interest in literature. Randolph is preparing his mind for serious work at Cambridge. And the two little ones shared the Good Conduct Prize at school. Here we are, Mrs Chuffey,’ he added, opening the front door.

He was glad to notice her fresh white overall as she gathered the hats and umbrellas. He felt it important when entertaining members of Government committees to make a good impression. One never knew where it might lead to.

‘A glass of sherry?’ he invited, leading his four guests into the drawing room. He wondered if he might squeeze in a few conjuring tricks afterwards.

Mr Nightrider pulled up. He frowned. In armchairs on opposite sides of the fireplace sat an elderly man and a smart middle-aged woman, both concentrating on old copies of *The Field*. Neither took the slightest notice of the new arrivals.

‘Doubtless friends of my wife’s,’ he whispered quickly to his companions. ‘She will not be joining us at lunch, naturally.’

He grimly determined to raise the matter, as he often put it rather nastily in the House, at a later and appropriate occasion.

‘You won’t mind us, I’m sure?’ he asked the elderly visitor jovially.

The man looked up. ‘I’ll shift my mac,’ he murmured, freeing a chair. He got on with his *Field* again.

‘Luncheon will be ready in a minute, I am sure.’ Mr Nightrider reached for the decanter. ‘Ah, here is Mrs Chuffey now,’ he added with relief. ‘Perhaps, gentlemen, if we take our sherry glasses—’

‘Mr Gregson,’ said Mrs Chuffey.

The elderly man rose and followed her out.

‘Extraordinary!’ muttered Mr Nightrider.

‘Most,’ grunted the General in agreement.

Mr Nightrider noticed the middle-aged woman eyeing him sternly over the top of her magazine.

‘Forgive me for not introducing,’ he remarked hastily, raising a smile. ‘This is the Bishop of Montserrat, Mr N’agga, General Bunch, and of course Anthony Waterfall. No doubt you are waiting to see my wife?’

‘Very kind of you, I’m sure, but I’m waiting to see the doctor.’

The smile switched off at the mains. ‘The...the...? One...one moment.’ He shot outside. ‘Mrs Chuffey! Will you please inform that woman in the drawing room this very instant that the house is no longer in use for purposes of medical practice.’

‘Oh, but it is,’ she returned calmly. ‘Sir Lancelot is consulting. Dr Dinwiddie sent him quite a batch of new cases.’

‘Sir Lancelot!’ Mr Nightrider’s eyes flashed to the closed door of his study. ‘Consulting, indeed! In my house! I think I’ll just have a word with —’

‘*Would* you mind?’ Mrs Chuffey barred the way. ‘You can’t go interrupting a surgical consultation like that. Really, sir! I’d have thought a gentleman like you’d have known better.’

Mr Nightrider halted. He wiped his bald head with his handkerchief. ‘Perhaps we could have some lunch?’ he asked weakly.

‘The shrimps are on the table, sir.’

‘A slight but quite ludicrous mistake by the domestic staff,’ he explained to his guests in the drawing-room. ‘I am sure you will overlook it when you see what excellent fare they provide. Would you now come through to luncheon? No, not you, madam, only the gentlemen.’

‘I’m afraid I’m not very hungry,’ protested Anthony Waterfall, sniffing in the hall. ‘The smell of antiseptic or whatever it is seems to

linger in these doctors' houses. It quite turns my stomach.'

They all sat down to their shrimps.

The author's appetite revived when he noticed the cold lobster and Chablis to follow, and Mr Nightrider, who usually took only mineral water with his food, downed half a bottle of wine and began looking less like a badly defeated amendment. By the end of the meal he was addressing his guests as though they were his right honourable friends on the benches opposite.

'Culture, of course, is our most priceless export,' he mentioned as Mrs Chuffey cleared away the strawberries and left them with the decanter.

'In my country we are already very cultured,' pointed out Mr N'agga. 'Oh, yes. Our honoured President is very keen on culture.'

'Have you thought, Mr Waterfall, how your delivering fifty lectures on "The Novelist's Soul in the Atomic Age" would be a contribution to our export drive quite equal to, shall we say, the Metal Box Company's? Port? We already have our glasses, Mrs Chuffey,' he broke off crossly as she burst in and started rummaging in the sideboard.

'Beg pardon, sir. I was just looking for a specimen bottle.'

'A what?' Anthony Waterfall's jaw dropped.

'A bottle for a specimen, sir. No, that's for blood.' She discarded one. 'And that's for urine.' She put aside another. 'This is the one for the stomach contents,' she added in the direction of the author. 'Sir Lancelot is just drawing them out of a patient with a stomach tube.'

'I don't think I feel very well,' announced Anthony Waterfall.

'Mrs Chuffey!' Mr Nightrider jumped up. 'This is outrageous! Can't you see we're in the middle of our—'

'I'm sorry, sir,' she apologized, hurrying off with a pint-sized jar, 'but I can't keep Sir Lancelot waiting. Not while he's got a stomach tube down a patient, can I?'

'Mr Waterfall, I must most deeply apologize! Some quite exceptional combination of unfortunate circumstances —'

'Somebody give me air,' muttered the author, pulling at his collar.

'Perhaps the lobster was a trifle heavy,' murmured the Bishop as the General threw open another window.

‘My country has the biggest lobsters in the world. Oh, yes. Our honoured President is very keen on — ‘

‘Remember reading a story once,’ the General broke his silence. ‘By Conan Doyle. Or Cronin, perhaps? Can’t recall. Chap affected by sight of blood like our friend here. Wife being operated upon upstairs. House like this, y’know. Moulded ceilings. Chap noticed bloodstain up there. By the chandelier. Gets bigger. Bigger. Splash! Drop starts to fall — ‘

‘I think I want to go home,’ decided Anthony Waterfall, rising shakily.

‘My dear, dear, sir!’ Mr Nightrider hurried round the table. ‘Perhaps a little sit-down-‘

‘In the end it wasn’t blood at all, o’course,’ explained the General.

‘I want to go to bed. Somebody take me home and put me to bed — ‘

‘I’m sure that a few minutes in the chair by the window, my dear Mr Waterfall — And what the hell are you doing here?’ he demanded as his daughter Felicity burst in.

‘Daddy — ‘

Her chin was in the air. Her flattish chest was heaving. Her sniffs resonated round the room.

‘Daddy, I wish to become married.’

‘What? What?’ cried Mr Nightrider. ‘Felicity, this is neither the time nor place — ‘

‘Doesn’t your daughter’s happiness come before anything else in the world?’ she countered breathlessly.

‘Perhaps you would like us to withdraw at such a delicate domestic moment?’ inquired the Bishop, who had been fanning Anthony Waterfall gently with his table napkin.

‘No, no! I am sure she has merely some form of acute hysteria — ‘

‘Mrs Chuffey!’ Sir Lancelot’s voice bellowed outside. ‘I want a vomit bowl.’

‘Vomit bowl? Vomit bowl?’ she muttered, reappearing to rummage in the sideboard again. ‘I don’t know, really, I can’t seem able to find a thing since the place was let.’

‘His name is Ronald Bald, and he’s a poet,’ Felicity declared, her nostrils dilated like a winning filly in the final furlong. ‘I love him,’ she

added.

‘Hurry up, woman!’ roared Sir Lancelot. ‘Or do you want to mop up the blasted floor?’

‘Excuse me,’ apologized Mrs Chuffey, tipping the fruit from the cut-glass bowl on to the tablecloth. ‘Coming, Sir Lancelot!’

There was a groan, as Anthony Waterfall heeled into the grapes.

‘Better fetch a doctor,’ grunted the General.

‘No, no!, Mr Nightrider grabbed his daughter. ‘Drag him to the window, Arthur, there’s a good fellow, while I try to find the brandy... What’s all this nonsense?’ he snapped to her, out in the hall.

‘This is Ron,’ Felicity indicated.

‘Lo,’ said a thin youth with a dirty shirt and side whiskers.

‘Get out of my house this very instant.’

‘Oh no you don’t,’ replied Ron affably. ‘I ain’t the sort to be pushed around. Get me?’

‘Ron has a terribly independent mind,’ Felicity explained.

‘Get out of this house before I—’

‘Ron’s a terrific poet, Daddy. Honestly! Soon he’ll be better known than T S Eliot. He’s writing a wonderful poem called *Tea and Wads*. He’ll read you some of it, if you like.’

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ conceded Ron.

‘He wants a grant from your Committee, Daddy,’ she continued, sniffing eagerly, ‘to keep him till he finishes it.’

‘Do you know who I have in there?’ snapped Mr Nightrider. ‘None other than Anthony Waterfall — ‘

‘Strictly for Stonehenge,’ Ron dismissed him.

‘If Ron can’t get a grant, Daddy,’ Felicity went on brightly, ‘we’ll get married and you can support us for a year.’

Mr Nightrider clasped his bald head. ‘I’m asleep. Yes, I must be asleep. Any minute Mrs Chuffey will come in with the tea. Felicity... Felicity, my child... He ground one fist in another, as though pulverizing Ron’s bones in a pestle and mortar. ‘What on earth gave you the idea of introducing this... this gentleman to your own home?’

‘Why, Uncle Lancelot, Daddy. *He* doesn’t believe in class distinction and *lie* certainly thinks poets should be subsidized. He told me so this very morning.’

Mr Nightrider reached the study door as Mrs Chuffey emerged with the bowl.

‘You certainly can’t enter now,’ she told him shortly, ‘Sir Lancelot is in the middle of a very delicate investigation.’

His hot reply was stifled by Randolph bursting through the front door, his usual tomato complexion turned to boiled parsnip. ‘Father, something terrible’s happened.’

His father glared.

‘I — I put some money on a horse, Father. And it lost.’

‘Really, Randolph!’ he snapped. ‘I cannot be expected to give attention to your minor misdemeanours at this very moment. For goodness sake, man! If you’ve lost a few shillings on some bet, you’ll have learnt your lesson - ‘

‘But it wasn’t a few shillings, Father. It was - er, three hundred pounds. My scholarship for Cambridge from the Youth Morality Foundation,’ he explained. ‘I wanted a car,’ he amplified further, standing on one leg.

‘Three hundred pounds!’ gasped Mr Nightrider. Even Ron looked impressed. ‘Your entire grant? Great heavens! What on earth put such wickedness in your mind?’

‘Uncle Lancelot, actually.’ Randolph stood on the other leg. ‘I had a chat with him this morning, and he gave me the name of his bookie.’

‘Fit to travel, I think,’ grunted the General, as the luncheon party appeared from the dining-room, bearing Anthony Waterfall like Hamlet’s corpse.

‘Yes, yes! I’ll get a taxi.’ Mr Nightrider threw open the front door. On the steps were Hilda and Herbert, a policeman, a lady in a red hat, and a pair of Siamese cats.

‘These your children?’ asked the policeman.

‘Mine? Yes, of course they’re mine. But what on earth—’

‘They stole my cats!’ complained the woman loudly. ‘Stole them! Right under my very nose. Champions, they are, too. Extremely valuable, I’ll have you know.’

Mr Nightrider glanced round in panic. ‘I’m sure, madam, that some mistake — ‘

'I'll have to take particulars, sir.' The policeman produced his notebook.

'*And* they were being cruel to the poor darlings,' continued the woman. 'There'll be other charges, mark my words,' she added with satisfaction. The RSPCA - '

'But how on earth,' broke in the Bishop, still supporting Anthony Waterfall, 'could respectable children like this possibly get the notion of stealing cats?'

'Uncle Lancelot,' explained Hilda, bursting into tears. 'He told us this morning to help ourselves round the dustbins.'

'Good gracious, what's this, a revivalist meeting?' broke in Sir Lancelot jovially, advancing through the hall. 'Good day, Mrs Conolly,' he added to his patient. 'I'm sure you'll have no trouble with it in future. Just go and see Dr Dinwiddie if you do. I will send my account later. Well, Geoff, you *do* seem to be busy. Why, you look like the end of an all-night sitting.'

'Lancelot — ' He swallowed. 'I want a very serious word — '

'My dear fellow, I can't possibly stop now. I must get to Lord's at once. Didn't you hear the lunch-time score? The game is in a most exciting stage. They're forty for four, and Jowler's got his tail up. With a hundred and ninety-four to get, if the weather breaks we may have 'em struggling by tomorrow night. I know you, don't I?' he added affably to the General. 'Weren't you next to me in the pavilion on Saturday?'

'Certainly. Capital cricket.'

'Magnificent! Are you free, my dear sir? Then come along, before it starts to rain. My car is in the mews. Goodbye, Geoff, thanks for putting me up. Don't bother about my luggage, Mrs Chuffey has already put it in the boot. Excuse me, officer. Hello, Randolph, did it win? Madam, what delightful Siamese cats! Now out of my way you pie-faced little horrors,' he directed to Hilda and Herbert. 'You a fisherman, sir?' he asked the General. 'Thank heavens, in a few hours I shall have in my ears once more the delightful music of my own trout stream. Ahhhhhhhh!' he added, as Herbert stuck his foot between Sir Lancelot's legs and sent him rolling down the steps into Harley Street.

'I feel faint again,' declared Anthony Waterfall.

‘Leave me flat, blast you, leave me flat!’ roared Sir Lancelot from the pavement. ‘Don’t sit me up, you idiots! You’ll shell out my intervertebral discs like peas from a pod. Flat, man, flat! Dammit, officer, didn’t you do any of your first-aid training at all?’

It started to rain.

It rained all that night. The following morning came widespread thunderstorms, killing sheep and cattle, and one or two golfers. The Test Match was abandoned as a draw. The Centre Court shimmered like the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. The rain rattled steadily on the windows of the best bedroom of the Harley Street house, where Mrs Chuffey had shifted Sir Lancelot. It ran down the panes of the drawing room, as Mr Nightrider stood looking miserably into the streaming street. His son was corrupted, his daughter infatuated, his two little ones confirmed cat-stealers. The luncheon had been a ghastly failure. His authority in the Cultural Committee was in tatters. Sir Lancelot lay immobile upstairs, probably for the span of his remaining days. And no Wimbledon.

He heard a sound behind him.

‘Daddy-’ It was Hilda and Herbert.

‘Yes, my children?’ he returned patiently.

‘Daddy, there’s a smashing old movie on the telly tonight. It’s called *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Can we stay up and watch it please, Daddy?’

‘No. No, you cannot stay up and watch it. Television is a very stupid diversion. It is not nearly so dramatic as real life.’

Mr Nightrider looked out of the window again. He bit his lips. Hot, unparliamentary, unutterable, almost unthinkable phrases jostled behind them.

‘If only,’ he told himself, ‘I could be given the Chiltern Hundreds, just for ten minutes.’



All July it rained. Icy gales swept the beaches, where holidaymakers huddled against groynes or behind barricades of deck-chairs, determined to enjoy themselves. The lifeboatmen had barely time to dry their oilskins, and floods swept half Hunstanton into the Wash. Bisley was shot in a downpour, even the Durham Miners' Gala was damped, the raspberry crop was ruined, and the weather men on television made Job look like Mr Micawber.

The rain quite spoiled the effect of the Ivors-Smiths' new Bentley, when Simon returned the dinner invitation in Dulwich one Friday towards the end of the month.

'What a darling little house!' Deirdre exclaimed in the hail. 'Thank you, Simon, do take it, it's quite warm indoors.' The evening had been chilly enough to necessitate wearing her mink. 'And you're not really in the depths out here in Dulwich, are you, Nikki?'

'Well, we don't actually hear the beat of the tom-toms.'

She sighed. 'I'm afraid I always feel utterly lost once beyond Knightsbridge.'

'But, Deirdre,' asked Simon mildly, unstopping the sherry, 'didn't you start your nurse's training at the old Clapham Fever Hospital?'

'Oh, but that was years ago,' she said quickly.

'Surely, my dear,' asked Nikki sweetly, 'you can't want us to pretend you're *that* ancient?'

'Getting much tennis this year, Paul?' Simon cut in.

'Yes, we took on our students last Saturday.' Paul gave his weak smile. 'I'm afraid they trounced us terribly.'

'You and I are rapidly approaching the age when it's wiser to challenge the porters at bowls.'

'Paul will be giving up tennis next year, anyway,' observed Deirdre, twirling her glass.

'Really?' Simon was surprised.

'He just won't have the time. Will you, Paul? I mean, of course if...if he's elected to the staff.' Deirdre gave a laugh. It sounded to Nikki as joyful as the crack of a window-pane. 'The best man win, and all that, Simon, you know,' she ended jollily.

‘Excuse me.’

The telephone was ringing.

‘Hello? Mr Sparrow here,’ Simon said outside in the hall. ‘I’m on second call-’

‘Spratt here.’

‘Oh, good., .good evening, Sir Lancelot. I do hope you’re feeling better?’

‘Thank you, I have recovered by treating myself with masterly inactivity. I want a word with you.’

‘Yes, of course—’

‘Be at my Harley Street house by nine sharp tomorrow morning.’

He rang off.

‘My house surgeon, about a drip,’ Simon explained, rejoining the party. ‘We were talking about holidays,’ Deirdre informed him. ‘Where are you going this year? I suppose we shall be doing our usual stint at Cannes.’

‘That woman!’ complained Nikki bitterly, tying her apron for the washing-up after her guests had gone. ‘From the way she carries on you’d imagine she was the daughter of a hundred earls, instead of a superannuated staff nurse from the prostate ward.’

‘She’s entitled to crow a bit, after drawing a cash prize in the marriage lottery,’ Simon conceded generously while reaching unenthusiastically for a drying-cloth.

‘I suppose being terribly rich must help getting on the staff of a hospital,’ added Nikki gloomily, turning on the hot water. ‘Like it does with everything else.’

‘Must be useful having a stockbroker for a father,’ decided Simon, vaguely starting work on a saucepan. ‘You know, that sort of lark is quite beyond me. It’s the most I can do to fill in my pools. But old Paul, now, he reads the *Financial Times* quite as closely as he does the *Lancet*. Where does this go?’ he added, waving the pan.

‘Really, Simon! You ought to know the anatomy of the kitchen by now. Up there. I can’t understand,’ she went on, starting work with the steel wool, ‘why Paul doesn’t simply retire to the Bahamas, without bothering to become a consultant at all.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. It’s a pleasant life for a man being “on” at a London hospital.’ Simon leant reflectively on the draining-board. ‘You

have a common room and top table in the refectory. Your lunch is always hot and everyone laughs at your jokes. You're soon so important, people soon start forming processions behind you almost automatically. You have the last say in everything, from a patient's beer for lunch to life and death. Also, you get paid about three times as much as a GP,' he ended, picking up the colander.

His wife started scraping the plates. 'If you don't get the job, darling — what next?'

'I'll find a niche in some surgical Siberia. How would you like to live up North?'

'I don't exactly jump for joy at the idea of leaving our home.'

'I'll send you out to work,' smiled Simon, polishing a soup spoon. 'You should be in good practice, after your do-it-yourself revision course in obstetrics and paediatrics. Good Lord!' The spoon hit the floor. 'I quite forgot — it was Lancelot on the phone this evening.'

'Really?'

'He wants to see me tomorrow.'

'Indeed?'

'But aren't you surprised? It must mean he's decided to stir himself about the job, despite the fact I made it pretty plain that morning in Out Patients I intend to cherish my independence.'

'No, I'm not surprised at all,' said Nikki. 'Don't put that ladle away, darling. It hasn't been washed yet.'

By nine the next morning Simon had his red Mini parked in Harley Street. He mounted the steps and was about to ring the bell when the door flew open. He faced a tall, bowler-hatted, saintly-looking man, whom he recognized as the Chairman of the Governors.

'Oh!' exclaimed Simon. 'Is — is Sir Lancelot Spratt in?'

'Sir Lancelot Spratt is *always* in,' snapped Mr Nightrider, hurrying off. The surgeon was at that moment in the drawing-room reading *The Times*— his brother-in-law had long ago taken to ordering two copies-and bidding farewell to Lady Spratt.

'I hope you have better weather in Majorca, my dear. There would seem to be six feet of snow on the Costa Brava.'

'You're sure you'll be all right driving to Wales tomorrow?'

'Perfectly. I walked eighteen times round Regent's Park yesterday, and I haven't had a spasm for a week. By George! I'll be glad to feel

a rod in my hands again. Particularly as I heard from Brackett and Knockett that piece of river pollution, Chadwick, is still in London. And I won't be sorry leaving Geoff,' he added feelingly. 'The feller has hardly gone out of his way to be hospitable to us.'

'Here comes Simon Sparrow,' Lady Spratt announced, glancing through the window. 'I want you to promise you'll definitely do something for him.'

'Really, Maud,' returned Sir Lancelot impatiently. 'It is all most unethical, and anyway nothing is quite so boring as hospital politics.'

'You know who'll get the job instead, of course? Paul Ivors-Smith.'

'Rubbish! Not that chinless belly-farrier,' Sir Lancelot dismissed him. 'But he has Professor Hindehead behind him.'

Sir Lancelot grunted.

'And you know perfectly well, Lancelot, that in hospital politics the Professor would make Machiavelli look like Eric or Little by Little.'

'But why on earth,' exploded Sir Lancelot, 'should the Professor support that feeble —'

'Really, Lancelot! Be your age. You know Paul's father's a wealthy stockbroker?'

'Yes. Pompous little twerp.'

'The Professor's after him for a packet to finance research on his Unit - it will help his long-range attack on the Honours List.'

'Tricky Dicky a knight?' His eyebrows shot up. 'Where did you get all this from?' he added quickly.

'It was all in the letter Nikki Sparrow sent me yesterday.'

'Nonsense! I read it.'

'Ah, but you only read the lines. You should know by now, my dear, that women always put the important items between them.'

'Your taxi for the airport, madam,' announced Mrs Chuffey at the door. 'And a gentleman to see you, sir.'

'Show him in,' ordered Sir Lancelot, rising. 'Off you go, Maud. Have a good time and bring me back a bottle of Fundador. Come in, Simon,' he added, after briskly kissing his wife goodbye. 'I wish to have a talk with you on a matter of some seriousness.'

'Yes, of course, sir,' agreed Simon, switching on an expression of solemnity and standing by the fireplace.

Sir Lancelot cleared his throat. 'I gather,' he began, 'you are aspiring for the honour of a place on the St Swithin's consultant staff?'

'That's quite right, sir.'

'H'm. It is, of course, nothing to do with me, but - good morning, my dear,' he broke off as Felicity appeared at the door. 'Heard from young Randolph? He can't be liking it much on that farm your father sent him to in Scotland, not in this weather.'

'I was just going out, Uncle Lancelot. Did you want anything from the shops?'

'Thank you, no. By the way, didn't I see in the paper this morning your friend Ron has had a play accepted for television? The title escapes me, but I fancy it was something to do with bedbugs. You must be extremely pleased,' he told her genially. 'Perhaps your father will be more inclined to receive him as a successful West End playwright?'

She sniffed. 'Yes, Uncle, of course. Naturally, Uncle.'

'His television thing is at the end of next month, I believe? I really must tell Mrs Chuffey to watch. Quite a sound girl, that,' Sir Lancelot added to Simon. 'She has become most considerate towards me over the past few weeks. But of course her father has been behaving so oddly. Where was I?'

'The St Swithin's staff, sir.'

'Yes, of course.' Sir Lancelot sat down. 'I have myself, of course, retired completely from the hospital — How's that niece of mine getting on?' he asked suddenly.

'Very well, I should think. Sister Virtue's already promoted her from the soiled linen to the washing-up.'

'She'll be a useful member of St Swithin's, mark my words, now she's got over her juvenile infatuations. I soon put a stop to that, by Harry!' He produced his pipe. 'What was I saying?'

'About how you'd retired,' supplied Simon patiently.

'Exactly. I have really no right whatever to raise my voice in St Swithin's politics,' Sir Lancelot continued, leaning forward to knock the pipe out against his heel. 'I have moreover not the slightest — Ahhhhhhhhh!'

'Are you all right?' cried Simon, leaping forward.

'Lay me flat, boy, lay me *flat*'. Damnation! Do you know less surgery than the trainer of Tottenham Hotspurs?'

Simon looked round wildly. 'I - I don't seem to see anything flat.'

'What's wrong with the blasted floor? That's better,' conceded Sir Lancelot gruffly, as Simon dragged him to the hearthrug.

'Don't you think I ought to have another look at this back?' asked Simon, sounding concerned.

'I am quite able to treat my own complaints, thank you.'

'You know perfectly well what you taught us, Lancelot,' insisted Simon firmly, rolling the surgeon on to his face, 'that doctors make rotten patients and *vice versa*. May I pull up your shirt?'

'You blasted well leave my underwear alone!'

'There doesn't seem anything wrong,' Simon confessed five minutes later, ignoring protests as calmly as a paediatrician.

'Nothing wrong? Then why do you imagine I am getting these attacks of excruciating agony, blast you?' countered Sir Lancelot.

'Perhaps you should have another X-ray?' Simon considered.

'When I've only just had one? You young profligates are all the same with the Government's money. No wonder I have to pay such ghastly taxes.'

'As a matter of fact, I think I should do a lumbar puncture,' Simon decided.

'Not bloody likely! With a spinal needle you'd leave my back looking like double top on a dart-board.'

'Then I can only suggest radiant heat and procaine.'

'Radiant heat? You might as well rub me with a live toad at the full moon.'

Simon bit his lip. 'I do wish you didn't find it necessary always to be so rude, Lancelot. I am only doing my best.'

'Oh? So we've become rather grand, have we?' snarled the surgeon from the hearthrug. 'When you were one of my students, boy, you were glad enough I was merely rude, instead of reporting you to the Dean as lazy and incompetent.'

Simon went pink. 'Perhaps you will allow me to point out that I am, in fact, no longer a student?'

'I sometimes find that difficult to believe.'

‘Yes, Lancelot.’ Simon nodded briskly. ‘It was always your greatest fault in the wards, missing the blatantly obvious.’

‘Get out.’

‘Is that the painful spot?’ asked Simon, pressing.

‘Get out!’ roared Sir Lancelot. ‘You incompetent swollen-headed little twit! Get out before I—’

He was alone on the hearthrug.

It was twenty minutes before coherent thought could be restored. ‘Ungrateful young cad!’ he muttered, easing himself up. He found with relief he could get to his feet. ‘Only a brief spasm, thank God,’ he grunted, pulling himself by the marble mantelpiece. ‘I wonder what exactly it is?’ he mused, eyeing himself in the mirror. ‘I wonder if I should really see a neurological specialist?’ he added, tugging his beard. ‘Or some other specialist?’ He thumped the marble. ‘By George! I’ve got it! No ruddy specialist at all. What I need is the opinion of a down-to-earth straightforward family doctor. Mrs Chuffey! Mrs Chuffey!’

‘Sir?’

‘The telephone directory, if you please, A to D.’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘And, Mrs Chuffey — bring me a bottle of Bollinger. A trifle early, but I am in need of both a sedative and an analgesic.’

Sir Lancelot rang the bell.

Nothing happened for several minutes, which were extremely uncomfortable because the rain was seeping down the neck of his overcoat.

He rang the bell again, and stamping his feet on the mat turned to survey the suburb of Leafy Grove.

This part of London — which is probably an earthly paradise for its inhabitants, from the way they fight to board the Southern Electric and return there each night — consists mainly of Anne Hathaway's cottages for stockbrokers' clerks. At that hour of the morning these were usually kissing the wife, patting the dog, and battenning on their bowlers, before leaving to broke stocks furiously in the City until it was time to pat the dog, kiss the wife, and unbatten again. But it was Sunday, when the glistening road was empty save for a milk float crawling up the wrong side, and the railway station, which other days made the Black Hole of Calcutta seem pretty roomy, was deserted except for a cat sniffing the misdirected fish.

'Well, it certainly isn't Las Vegas,' grunted Sir Lancelot. 'Is everybody dead in there?' he bawled, ringing the bell again and bashing the knocker for good measure.

Something offensive caught his eye in the porch of the little detached stucco-fronted house.

'A doctor should have a clean plate quite as much as a clean collar,' he declared, producing the yellow silk handkerchief and imparting lustre to the name 'Clement E Dinwiddie, MB, BS.'

'I've been beating on this blasted door since daybreak,' he continued, shouting through the letter box.

A window flew open upstairs. 'Just coming, just coming! Is Mrs Peckwater in labour?'

A few seconds later Dr Clement E Dinwiddie himself stood blinking in the doorway.

'Good heavens, Sir Lancelot-' He scratched a head just off the pillow. 'I didn't expect you so soon.'



‘Good morning to you, Dinwiddie. I thought we might get the consultation over early, then I could drive straight home to Wales. I have my luggage in the car.’

He indicated the Rolls at the kerb. He had left the Harley Street house before seven, his brother-in-law having got up specially to escort him down the front steps with great solicitude.

‘I’m afraid I was asleep,’ apologized Clem, adjusting his big round glasses. ‘I was up most of the night with a haematemesis. I’ll go and put some clothes on, sir.’

‘I assure you that won’t be necessary,’ declared Sir Lancelot, removing his damp overcoat in the narrow hall. Though he had to admit Dr Dinwiddie — who as a student was never a flashy dresser, with holes in his socks and elbows and sometimes suspending his trousers with string — standing in moth-eaten dressing gown, odd pyjamas, and an old pair of plimsols, presented a rather unprofessional appearance.

‘Would you like a cup of tea, sir?’ Clem invited. ‘I’m afraid Mrs Bowler, who usually does for me, never turns up on a Sunday.’

‘Thank you. Milk but no sugar.’

Sir Lancelot followed him into a kitchen which seemed to have been ransacked during the night by a gang of burglars-and famished ones, too, from the scraps of half-eaten food lying all over the place.

‘Sorry the place is a bit rough,’ Clem apologized as an afterthought. ‘I was meaning to have the house done up, but I bought one of those new electrocardiographs instead.’

Sir Lancelot frowned. ‘But surely the National Health Service pays for your equipment?’

‘No such luck!’ Clem gave a dry laugh. ‘Though I gather some of my fellow GPs use the modest expense allowance for papering the parlour.’

Sir Lancelot stroked his beard. The haziness of consultants towards family doctoring matches that of generals towards bayonet-fighting.

‘Tell me,’ he asked, as he sipped his tea, ‘what on earth induced you to plunge into general practice? You could have stepped straight from your finals into a research laboratory. Or you might have taken

up surgery. You'd have got your Fellowship blindfold and in handcuffs.'

'It was you, sir,' replied Clem, shifting a microscope and the remains of some egg and chips.

'It was I?'

Clem nodded. 'Yes, you were always telling us how your lather was a GP up North, and the family doctor was the backbone of the profession. The front-line troops in the battle for survival — you remember, sir? I was most impressed.'

Sir Lancelot shifted on the kitchen chair.

'And that last lecture you gave, sir, on the importance of the family doctor. I still recall every word of it. I'd only just qualified, and I decided there and then that becoming a family doctor would be my best contribution to suffering humanity. Unfortunately,' he added, tidying away a skull and two empty tins of baked beans, 'humanity now doesn't seem to be suffering half as much as I am.' He gave a brief sigh. 'Shall we get on with the consultation, sir? Naturally, I'm terrifically honoured that you asked me. The surgery's through here,' he indicated, leading the way to a damp and chilly apartment at the front.

'You've got some decent equipment here, Dinwiddie,' Sir Lancelot remarked approvingly.

'Though it's a bit disorganized, I'm afraid.' Clem straightened the greyish cover of the examination couch and tipped a half-eaten tomato sandwich into the dirty-dressing bin. 'I expect I'll get straight one day, when I've a moment.'

'You find the work hard?' Sir Lancelot demanded.

'Some of the patients *are* rather exacting.' He broke into a wheezy cough. 'And this devilish asthma plagues me every summer, which doesn't make the job any easier.'

'But why don't you take a summer holiday, man?'

Clem shrugged his shoulders. 'Can't afford to pay a locum,' he wheezed.

'Can't afford it?' Sir Lancelot frowned. 'But surely, the National Health Service provides a holiday replacement free of charge? What? No?' Clem shook his head. 'How utterly disgraceful! Why don't you write to *The Times*?'

‘It’s my own fault, I suppose.’ The young doctor leant dejectedly against the examination couch. ‘I seem to be in debt, rather. I’ve absolutely no idea how to cope with cash. It was only the other week I found the bank sometimes sends those statement things in black ink as well.’

‘Then get a wife,’ suggested Sir Lancelot heartily. ‘She’d feed you and tidy up the place and keep the accounts. Any young woman would break a leg to marry a doctor. In fact, some of them do,’ he added reflectively.

Clem burst into another bout of coughing. Eyeing the poor fellow sharply as he leant on the couch, Sir Lancelot was shocked with the suspicion he was indulging in a quick blub as well.

‘But I’ve got a wife,’ Clem managed to explain at last. ‘At least, I ought to have. Her name’s Iris Micklejohn. She’s a New Zealander who works in the local day nursery. We — we were going to get married tomorrow.’

‘What, she’s jilted you?’ Sir Lancelot’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Come, come, my dear fellow, cheer up! There’re plenty more fish in the — ‘

‘No, we love each other,’ Clem corrected him. ‘I had a pal fixed up to do my locum on the cheap — Henry Hopworth, you remember him from St Swithin’s? — but it fell through, so we’ve had to put off the wedding till the autumn. Locums are pretty impossible to find this time of the year, anyway,’ he added philosophically, brushing some cake-crumbs off the instrument trolley. ‘We can easily wait, with Iris’ people being in Auckland, because we are keeping things pretty secret, and — ‘

‘Have you a licence?’ demanded Sir Lancelot.

‘I’m afraid I never have time to watch television — ‘

‘A marriage licence, you idiot. You have? Good.’ He rose. ‘I am sure that a week’s honeymoon would do you the world of good. I have a plan,’ he smiled, ‘but before I discuss it, take off that filthy pyjama coat. I think it high time someone took a look at your chest.’

Even for doctors Sunday is — more or less — a day of rest, and Monday was never a popular morning in Leafy Grove for visiting the surgery. With the washing, the weekend mess, the kids to send clean to school, the shopping, and the cold joint to mince for

shepherd's pie, if you wanted to sit down and enjoy your elevenses you couldn't indulge in medical consultations as well.

But Mrs Perrins called regularly on Dr Dinwiddie at eight-thirty every Monday — except, of course, when she was on holiday or ill. It was part of her weekly routine and without it she felt as upset as missing her favourite television programme.

'Good morning, Mrs Bowler, here we are again,' she announced cheerfully on the doormat. 'Thank heavens that nasty rain's stopped. I've brought Gregory.' She pushed a small adenoidal boy through the door. 'I think he's a hospital case,' she whispered darkly, with satisfaction. After all, having your child in hospital created a bit of a stir among the neighbours, and vaguely raised your status in the road.

Mrs Perrins settled heavily in her usual chair in the empty waiting-room, while Gregory sat idly kicking the paintwork from the fireplace. She always came early to avoid the rush - you never knew what you might pick up from all those awful people who kept patronizing doctors' surgeries. She would, as she often explained over a teacup, have visited Dr Dinwiddie as a private patient, because she didn't agree with this National Health Service, which made everyone lazy and caused all those strikes, but you had to pay your taxes so you might as well use it, mightn't you, my dear?

She looked up sharply from her shredded magazine. Such an experienced patient sensed something amiss. Mrs Bowler, a thin woman in a flowered apron, had an unusually feverish air as she dropped cigarette ash on the haircord carpet and flicked her duster over The World's Greatest Paintings — presented free by some drug firm anxious to enlarge public appreciation of the arts, in what strikes me as rather uphill conditions.

'Something the matter?' demanded Mrs Perrins, watching the housekeeper nervously light one Player's Weight from another.

'Matter? Don't make me laugh!' She grimly polished the Mona Lisa. 'It's a madhouse, that's what it is.'

'Not poor Dr Dinwiddie?' gasped Mrs Perrins. 'He always did look the nervous type.'

'He's gorn.'

'Gorn?'

Mrs Bowler nodded, turning to the Lady at the Virginals. 'Rushed out at seven this morning, fair jet propelled.'

'You don't mean he's in trouble, Mrs Bowler?'

'Nothing *but* trouble, if you ask me.'

Mrs Perrins pursed her lips. To the public there is only one sort of trouble that doctors get into. She rapidly ran through her mind all female acquaintances who were fellow-patients.

'He's gone and got a locum in,' continued the housekeeper, starting on *The Night Watch*. 'A Dr Spratt.'

'Really?' Mrs Perrins sat up. 'What's he like?'

Mrs Bowler picked up the *Bridge at Arles*. 'He wanted kidneys for breakfast,' she explained.

'I mean, is he an old doctor?' asked Mrs Perrins. 'Or is he an — er, young one? Gregory, stop that kicking this instant! You'll hurt your shoes. He's English, I hope,' she added nervously.

'He's old and fat with a dirty great beard,' replied Mrs Bowler, pocketing her duster as the door-bell rang.

Sir Lancelot was just coming downstairs, rubbing his hands. He was in an excellent mood, despite cornflakes for breakfast. 'This should be a proper holiday for me,' he assured himself. 'If I had my time over again, by George! I'd be a GP like a shot. *That's* where the real medicine is. Mrs Bowler, send the first patient into the surgery, if you please,' he added to his handmaiden.

His back that morning was splendid.

'You're Mrs Perrins?' Sir Lancelot greeted his first caller jovially, picking up a record card and pushing a pair of Dr Dinwiddie's socks from the consulting desk. 'And this charming lad is yours? What's your name, my little man? Gregory? Right, sit down there, Gregory, and keep quiet. Now, madam,' he continued expansively as she eased herself into the patients' chair, 'what's the trouble?'

Mrs Perrins didn't like the look of the fat old man in the tweed suit. She wondered where Dr Dinwiddie had dug him up. But as an old customer of the firm, she'd stand no nonsense from anyone fresh across the counter. Opening her handbag, she produced a sheet of writing paper.

'First of all there's my list,' she began firmly.

Sir Lancelot frowned. 'You mean you are walking down on one side?'

'I want some cotton wool, of course, bottle of aspirin, cream for my poor hands, tinted lip salve, blackcurrant throat pastilles — Gregory so loves sucking them - liquid paraffin, surgical spirit, bottle of sparkling glucose drink, that surgical detergent, and my usual mixture.'

Sir Lancelot frowned harder. 'I don't think I quite follow you.'

'I want a prescription for them, of course,' she explained to the new man. 'And can I get a hot-water bottle on the Health as well?'

Sir Lancelot rose. 'I fear you have been misdirected. I noticed the cash chemist's on the far side of the railway station. Good morning. Mrs Bowler! The next case.'

'But I always have these!' exclaimed Mrs Perrins in surprise. 'I'm entitled to them. I've stuck on my stamps, the same as everyone else.'

'I fear you are confusing the Ministry of Health with the King Korn Company.'

She bit her lip. 'Anyway, there's my chest,' she retreated. It wasn't her idea of a consultation to leave empty-handed.

'Very well,' Sir Lancelot agreed. 'Remove your garments and I shall examine you.'

'Examine me!' This was too much. 'But I don't want my chest *examined*. I was examined thoroughly the winter before last. I only want some more medicine.'

'Either I examine your chest or you take it to another doctor. Mrs Bowler!'

'Yers?'

'Kindly step in while I examine a female patient.'

'I've got my dusting to think of.'

'And I've got my reputation to think of. Gregory, you will kindly shut your eyes and face the wall.'

'Now perhaps I can have my bottle of medicine,' Mrs Perrins asked grimly, doing up the last buttons of her blouse afterwards.

'But, madam, you do not require a bottle of medicine. You need a skipping rope.'

She looked blank.

‘You are grossly overweight, that is all. You must eat only one meal a day and skip for half an hour before and after. I much regret that the rope must be provided by Woolworth’s rather than the Government. Good morning.’

‘I’ve never been treated like this in my life, neither by a so-called doctor nor anyone else,’ she burst out indignantly. ‘And if you won’t give *me* proper treatment,’ she declared, dragging her trump card from the corner, ‘perhaps you’ll take pity on this little child. There’s a nasty lump on his wrist,’ she added with maternal pride.

‘Indeed? Let me see, boy. Ah, a ganglion. Mrs Bowler! Bring me a bible.’

‘A wot?’

‘Perhaps you are unable to lay your hands readily on the Good Book? This will do equally well.’

Reaching for Price’s *Medicine* in the bookcase, Sir Lancelot hit the affected part with it, as though swatting a wasp.

‘You’ve hurt the little darling, you brute!’ cried Mrs Perrins as Gregory let out a howl.

‘No doubt, but I have effected a cure. These harmless swellings are traditionally dispersed with a sharp blow from the family Bible. You will find that — ‘

‘He ought to be in hospital, the poor mite!’

‘He ought not, but that is anyway a matter only for myself to decide. Good morning.’

‘I’ll write to the papers!’

‘Please do. Good morning.’

‘I — I’ll report you to the authorities,’ she quivered.

‘I hope so. Those authorities will be most interested to hear of your pharmaceutical shoplifting over the years. Good morning.’

She grabbed little Gregory. She stormed from the surgery. She stamped across the hall, slamming the front door hard enough to knock out one of the little panes of coloured glass.

‘Next patient, if you please, Mrs Bowler,’ demanded Sir Lancelot calmly. ‘After that pantomime let us hope we can get down to some real medicine.’

‘There’s been a call for you to go to Sycamore Avenue.’ Mrs Bowler lit another Weight. ‘Name of Hardjoy, with a sprained foot.’

‘That can wait till I’ve finished. When I go out kindly clean up this clinical pigstye. How on earth did halt a steak pie get in the sterilizer?’

The next half-dozen patients all complained of headaches. It felt like a weight on the top of their heads and had tilled every waking moment for many years. All seemed surprised when Sir Lancelot immediately stripped them to perform a complete neurological examination.

‘Madam, I am a doctor, not a clairvoyant,’ he complained rather peevishly to the last of them, a pretty young woman in a hat like the cover of a seedmaker’s catalogue. ‘All must be removed, I’m afraid, including the charming headgear. Mrs Bowler!’

‘I am perplexed,’ he announced, by the time the hat could be replaced again. ‘Everyone in Leafy Grove seems to be suffering from severe headaches and I can discover nothing to cause a single one of them.’ He stroked his beard. A thought struck him. ‘Married long?’ he asked the patient suddenly. ‘Eight years, Doctor.’

‘Your husband, madam. His occupation?’

‘Travelling salesman.’

‘H’m. Not at home much?’

‘Not much, Doctor. And... and...’ She hesitated.

‘Doesn’t take much notice of you then?’

‘That’s it, doctor.’ She looked relieved.

‘It is your husband,’ explained Sir Lancelot kindly, showing her to the surgery door, ‘who must cure your headache, unfortunately not myself’

‘But he doesn’t know any medicine, Doctor!’

‘Luckily for us all, scientific knowledge is not necessary. Just pass my message on. Good morning.’

She tripped across the front hail. She was so perplexed, she let the door slam and knocked out another pane of glass.

‘Surely this isn’t general practice?’ Sir Lancelot muttered to himself. ‘These people don’t need medicine. All they want is a sympathetic ear. The doctor’s job is to cure the sick, not to coddle the well.’ He stared across a row of back gardens under the grey summer sky, ending at the parish church next to a cinema



announcing BINGO TONIGHT. 'Though this place is enough to give Mark Tapley a shocking melancholia,' he concluded sombrely.

The next patient was a worried-looking man with a cough, complaining he had been passing worms.

'How many cigarettes a day do you smoke?' cut in Sir Lancelot, eyeing his mahogany fingers.

'About sixty or seventy, Doctor, I suppose. Bit more at weekends.'

'Good grief, man! Think yourself lucky you didn't see a fall of soot. Bring a specimen. Good morning.'

He was followed by a girl turned sixteen who wanted him to persuade her parents she should get married.

'Married?' He looked astounded. 'What on earth is wrong with young people these days? Marriage is something which sets in much later, like arthritis.'

'Gerry and I have been going steady six months,' she told him pertly. 'We know our own minds.'

'On the contrary, young lady, I would advise you to remember your endocrine cycle still has its L plates on. Good morning. Next case.'

There followed five people wanting certificates for a week off work. 'This will never do.' Sir Lancelot threw open the waiting room door. 'The old St Swithin's technique, I feel, is needed. Kindly stop talking, everybody,' he announced briskly. 'All those hopeful for certificates, free milk, bottles of medicine, new teeth and glasses, stand up. Come on now!' he commanded as one or two patients rose uncertainly. 'Right — over by the window. All coughs, a group by the fireplace. Stomach disorders in the corner, and rheumatics under the Rembrandt. Your name, madam?' he asked the one still seated.

'Mrs Peckwater, Doctor.'

'You are near term, I believe? Please step this way.'

'I got here before she did,' muttered a man in the corner.

Sir Lancelot glowered. 'Possibly. But at least I can be sure this lady is suffering from a genuine clinical condition. Mrs Bowler, sweep up this glass. I don't want to spend the entire day suturing feet.'

'I'm going,' his helpmeet announced, folding the flowery apron. 'Going? Rubbish! How do you imagine I can examine a female patient without you?'

‘It’s a wonder the poor things let you lay hands on them at all,’ she retorted, stubbing out her Weight. ‘Bluebeard!’ she added, slamming the front door and knocking out the rest of the glass.

‘What impudence!’ Sir Lancelot grabbed the telephone. ‘Hello? Mrs Chuffey? You are to come to my Leafy Grove address at once. I don’t care if he is holding a luncheon party for the entire Cabinet, you must arrive here on the first train. Thank you. Kindly take a seat in the waiting room,’ he added to a red-faced man hobbling through the front door with a stick.

‘You the new doctor?’

Sir Lancelot eyed him. ‘That is so.’

The man’s glance was as friendly as fall-out. ‘I’m Mr Hardjoy. I sent for you a good two hours ago.’

‘The doctor is not sent for,’ returned Sir Lancelot briskly. ‘He is asked to call.’

‘Don’t give me that. I’ve paid my contributions.’

‘Mr Hardjoy — ‘ Sir Lancelot tugged his beard. ‘As I doubt whether you are entirely familiar with the book of Ecclesiasticus, I will mention that you are enjoined by Holy Writ to honour a physician. But as you are a coward — ‘

‘What? You call me a coward-‘Mr Hardjoy raised his stick.

‘You are a coward,’ continued Sir Lancelot evenly, ‘because you know my profession gives its services without thought of reward, convenience, or even personal health, and you behave towards it in a manner that would not be tolerated by a shopkeeper or publican or anyone else entitled to throw you out on your rather filthy neck.’

‘You... you... ‘ Mr Hardjoy lifted a fist. ‘I’ll raise this with the Medical Council!’ he shouted.

‘Please do. Most of the members are personal friends of mine. Please don’t push, damn you!’ he added shortly to a little man in a black suit trying to edge through the front door. ‘Take your place in the queue, like everyone else.’

‘Dr Dinwiddie?’

‘Sir — Dr Spratt. I’m his locum.’

The man gave a thin smile. ‘I am Dr Fudds, from the Ministry of Health. I have called - dear me, you really should get this glass swept up -we do send so many circulars about tidy surgeries — I

have called to raise with Dr Dinwiddie the matter of over-prescribing for his patients. We are most concerned about such things at the ministry, you know. Most concerned. A very serious business indeed. If I may now take half an hour or so of your time — ‘

‘Ye gods!’ cried Sir Lancelot. He stamped into the surgery. He slammed the door. He snatched up a sheet of writing paper.

‘The Secretary,’ he wrote rapidly. ‘The “Ginger Group” Dear Sir, I wish to join your Society at once. I enclose my cheque. Yours, L Spratt.’

He threw down his pen. He stared blankly through the window. ‘Surely *something* can save the doctor for doctoring?’ he demanded.

An object outside caught his eye. ‘I wonder,’ he murmured. He stroked his beard. ‘I wonder... ‘

‘Mrs Perrins?’ asked Mrs Chuffey severely in the waiting room. ‘Aren’t you an old patient? This is Sir Lance - Dr Spratt’s morning for new ones. But I shall inquire whether he is able to make an exception.’

It was a fortnight later, the last Wednesday of July, with the country still freezing from Margate to Llandudno.

‘I didn’t actually want to bother the doctor,’ replied Mrs Perrins meekly. ‘I’d just like to bring a few things back.’ She indicated a shopping-bag filled with pharmaceutical supplies. ‘And can you tell the doctor how I’m enjoying my new treatment?’ she added, as Mrs Chuffey collected the booty. ‘*Such* a nice man he sent me to! So understanding.’

‘You’re an old patient, too, aren’t you, Mr Hardjoy?’

‘I only called to give the doctor these, with my compliments.’ He offered a bunch of sweet peas. ‘It’s fair wonderful the job he’s done on my foot. And what a bloke! In my trade - I’m on demolition - we’re not given to mincing words, and neither is the doctor. Man to man, he is. The first time I met him, d’you know he called me a coward? A coward! And I respect him for it. He must have been a braver man than me to say it. Every time he’s treated my foot — ‘

‘I shall put the flowers in water for him,’ interrupted Mrs Chuffey briskly.

‘No more patients this morning?’ asked Sir Lancelot cheerfully, as Mrs Chuffey appeared in the surgery. ‘I certainly seem to be weeding them out. Though I fancy it was only the hard core who took advantage of poor little Dinwiddie. No doubt he will enjoy an easier run when he gets back tomorrow. Particularly as I gather his wife was a lady hammer-throwing champion in New Zealand.’

‘And I’ll have finished the spring-cleaning by tonight, sir,’ she told him. ‘Excellent. You know, Mrs Chuffey — ‘ Sir Lancelot stared musingly through the window, ‘ — this family doctoring is considerably more difficult than I imagined. In hospital surgery, you simply cut ‘em up and leave someone else to clear the mess. Here,

it's the other way round. But the new therapist I co-opted seems to be doing a splendid job, I must say.'

'I gather he's a very nice young man, sir. I met his housekeeper in the greengrocer's.'

'Housekeeper? He's unmarried, eh? All the more time for dealing with that batch I sent him. There's the doorbell, Mrs Chuffey, and it may well be someone to say Mrs Peckwater's started. Oh, and Mrs Chuffey—'

'Sir?'

'Ring Harry the gateman at St Swithin's, will you? I want something sound for Goodwood this afternoon, if the blasted meeting isn't snowed off.'

'Miss Felicity, sir,' announced Mrs Chuffey a moment later.

'My dear! What brings you to this outpost of civilization?' Sir Lancelot rose in surprise as Felicity Nightrider entered the surgery. 'Not, I trust, need for more advice about Ron?'

'Please, Uncle!' She sniffed. 'Please don't talk to me about him again.' Sir Lancelot raised his eyebrows. 'I'm sorry you've had an estrangement now he's moving among television personalities.'

'And please don't talk to me about television personalities.' She shuddered and sniffed at the same time. 'Particularly female announcers. Uncle — ' She came to the point. 'I want a job.'

'A job?'

She nodded. 'You know how Daddy made me give up the nice job in the bookshop because of... of Ron? Ever since, I've been working in that actuary's office, and I hate it. Do you think you could make me a nurse?' she asked eagerly. 'I was always jolly good at first-aid on the hockey field.'

'Alas, my dear, tomorrow afternoon I am quitting London for good. At last I shall be able to enjoy myself fishing in Wales.'

'Oh, Uncle! I'm so unhappy.' Her lips trembled, and she burst into tears over the sphygmomanometer.

'Am I to play Miss Lonelyhearts to every lovesick member of the family?' muttered Sir Lancelot, becoming impatient.

'Ever since that day you told me to bring Ron home, Father's been so horrid — '

‘Good grief, girl, you’ll be blaming me for the filthy weather next - yes, Mrs Chuffey? Is it Mrs Peckwater?’

‘The Vicar, sir.’

‘I shall be delighted to meet him. Please take this young lady out and give her a nice cup of tea. The Reverend Peter Gwatkin, I believe?’ he added a moment later, when Mrs Chuffey had deftly replaced his niece with the local incumbent.

‘Er —yes,’ agreed the Reverend Gwatkin.

‘Have a pew - chair,’ indicated Sir Lancelot. ‘Is this a professional visit?’

‘Er - no.’ The Vicar was a tall young man with prominent ears, which at that moment were red. He nervously twitched his clerical grey trousers. He had imagined the doctor to be slovenly, ignorant, and probably insane. The distinguished-looking forthright figure he now-found behind the consulting desk made it difficult to raise the subject of his visit.

‘Gwatkin? Gwatkin?’ muttered Sir Lancelot. ‘Didn’t you once play cricket for Oxford?’

‘That’s right,’ he admitted, the ears becoming more incandescent.

‘Medium-pace bowler with a good leg cutter, it I recall? How can I be of service?’ the surgeon invited.

‘Doctor, I am — er, naturally anxious to do all I can for my parishioners. And particularly for these fifty or so you’ve sent me in the past fortnight. But I am not a medical man, Dr Spratt.’

‘Neither are they medical patients,’ Sir Lancelot told him genially. ‘Do you realize the surgeries of this country are choked with people who’ve nothing wrong with them except a failure to cope with the ordinary, relatively simple and usually extremely dull problems of everyday life?’

And that the useless drugs they swallow would alone pay for the upkeep of your entire Establishment?’

‘I agree, Dr Spratt, people seem to take rather a lot of pills here in Leafy Grove.’ The Rev. Gwatkin shifted in his chair. ‘But it’s the doctors who sign the prescriptions,’ he pointed out.

‘They don’t want pills,’ declared Sir Lancelot. ‘They want sympathy. Their own families have heard the tale of woe so often they’re fed to the back teeth. People used to confide in you fellers

before medicine became respectable, but now they reckon the doctor with all his scientific mumbo-jumbo is a better bet. I suppose,' he broke off reflectively, 'it's because we try to achieve our results in this world and you in the next.'

'Naturally, Dr Spratt,' continued the Vicar defensively, 'I am always ready to listen to anyone's troubles but —'

'You did a capital job on Mrs Perrins, by the way,' Sir Lancelot congratulated him. 'You've made an honest woman of her. I mean, you've restored her sense of moral values. Sympathy!' Lie gazed through the window. 'By George!' He jumped up, seized with an idea. 'Felicity, my dear!' he called through the surgery door. 'I have a job for you. My niece, Miss Nightrider,' he introduced her, as the Vicar's ears, which had dimmed a little, switched on again.

'You have a spare downstairs room in that enormous vicarage, I'm sure? Good. Then I would like you to start the country's first sympathy clinic. I will pay you a small salary, Felicity, and after six months I shall expect enough material for a paper in the *Lancet*. It may well be a milestone in family doctoring,' he ended, rubbing his hands.

'But, Dr Spratt! I — I'm afraid it may not be thought quite regular in some quarters,' muttered the Vicar, his ears now seeming in danger of bursting into flames.

'Rubbish, man. Her father runs the Morality Foundation. By the way, Felicity,' he added, scribbling on a piece of paper, 'you might get these two items at the chemist's. One you rub on and the other you inhale — ah, the doorbell,' he broke off. 'I suspect it is the herald of Mrs Peckwater's coming baby. I'll answer it,' he boomed genially to Mrs Chuffey. 'Ye gods!' he cried on the doorstep.

Sir Lancelot's face, which had been wearing an expression far sunnier than the weather, instantly frosted over.

'What the devil do you want?' he barked.

'I just had to talk to you, sir.'

In the excitement of running a general practice Sir Lancelot had totally forgotten Tim Tolly.

'The feeling is not reciprocated.'

'But, sir!' complained Tim. 'My whole life is ruined.'

'I am sorry, though I find it difficult to believe.'

'Euphemia's written to say you've forbidden her to see me again.'

'An extremely sensible course. Good morning.'

'She says you'll send her home to Singapore if I do.'

'By the very first aeroplane. Good morning.'

'But, Sir Lancelot!' He stuck a foot in the door. 'She is half of my very self!'

'In that case you must tolerate the amputation. Hello?' he said as the hall telephone rang. 'For Mrs Peckwater? Right. I shall be along instantly. Mrs Chuffey! The maternity bag, if you please.'

'Harry the gateman says Ganymede, sir,' Mrs Chuffey announced, handing him the heavy leather case.

'Ring Alf and stick a pony on.'

'Very good, sir.'

'But I can't live without her,' expostulated Tim Tolly, following Sir Lancelot down the garden path.

'You managed to exist for some twenty-odd years in that condition. You have possibly gathered that I'm extremely busy at the moment? I really must ask you to leave. Good morning.'

'Sir Lancelot! I've come all the way from Edinburgh specially to see you.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, man!' Sir Lancelot exploded. 'All right, jump in the car. You'll come in useful for giving the analgesia.'

Tim had no chance of discussing his broken heart on the way to Mrs Peckwater's, as Sir Lancelot insisted on driving his Rolls at fifty miles an hour against all the traffic lights, bawling 'Maternity case!' through the window at startled pedestrians in explanation.

'I'm glad Mrs Peckwater's obligingly gone off during my last day,' was all he said to his passenger. 'Haven't had the chance of doing a delivery for forty years.'

'Forty years!' Tim looked concerned. 'But I suppose the midwife will be on hand?' he added consolingly.

'Midwife? You don't suppose I'm going to be mucked about by some interfering Sarah Gamp who thinks she knows more than I do? Childbirth, Tolly, is a perfectly natural process. All the doctor does is field the little thing in the slips. I am much looking forward to the experience. And here we are, with the nervous father leaning over the gate. You may carry the bag.'



‘Dr Spratt? I am, of course, Mr Peckwater,’ This was a thin fair man with one of those precise flat voices you often hear asking questions at public meetings. ‘It happens to be our fourth happy event, Dr Spratt — ‘

‘Thank you, I already have the obstetrical history.’

‘And I was thinking, Dr Spratt, after I had read a very moving article in the Sunday paper, not to mention seeing an extremely educational television programme, that I should like to be present to observe the miracle on this occasion, Dr Spratt.’

‘What an utterly ghastly suggestion,’ muttered the surgeon, stamping into the house.

‘It was said in this article,’ continued Mr Peckwater, ‘that the father’s place in childbirth is at the mother’s side. This is Gran,’ he broke off.

‘Charmed to meet you, madam.’

‘Her time is very near, Doctor,’ warned Gran.

‘Psychologists tell us — ‘ went on Mr Peckwater.

‘Oh, all right, all right, Mr Peckwater! Come and sit in if you like. After all, it’s your party.’

Father went upstairs with the two doctors.

‘Well, my dear, quite comfortable!’ began Sir Lancelot, breezing into the bedroom. ‘H’m.’ He stroked his beard. ‘Gran’s right. Things certainly seem more advanced than I should have imagined when I called with the pethidine earlier this morning.’

‘After all, she is a multip., sir,’ murmured Tim Tolly at his side.

‘When I wish for your advice, young man, I shall ask for it. Please put a spare mask on the husband, though why the devil the man can’t spend the time in the pub like a normal father is beyond me. Then show the patient how to use the trilene inhaler.’

‘Dr Spratt,’ Mr Peckwater continued undaunted through his mask, ‘have you read that most informative work, *Childbirth Through Relaxation*?’

‘The only obstetrical book I’ve ever read was McGregor’s *Fundamentals*, and it’s been out of print for twenty years.’ Sir Lancelot rolled up his sleeves. ‘Have we plenty of boiling water, Tolly?’

‘Gran has four kettles on, sir.’

‘Good. Bring me a newspaper.’

‘A newspaper? But sir -1 mean, you’ll hardly have time to sit about —’

‘I want to put my gear on it, you fool, not read the racing results. Newsprint is sterile, Tolly. Sterile. Don’t they teach you anything useful at St Agnes?’

Sir Lancelot laid his instruments on the dressing table with the precision he demanded in the operating-theatre at St Swithin’s. Tim fiddled with the inhaler. Mr Peckwater continued to chat affably about the miracle of childbirth, as though it were some new sort of detergent. Sir Lancelot laid a hand on the patient’s shoulder.

‘Now, I don’t want you to worry, my dear,’ he instructed, in a voice that radiated confidence like the Eddystone lighthouse. ‘You could manage this inhaler by yourself, but the other doctor will help you. I assure you that all will be perfectly straightforward.’

‘Thank you, Doctor...’

‘Right you are, Tolly.’

The patient became drowsy. Sir Lancelot started operations. There was a thump behind him.

‘I knew that blasted idiot would faint! Tolly — get him out of here at once.’

Gran, waiting expectantly on the landing, was surprised to see one of the doctors emerge not with a bawling baby but with the husband, apparently dead.

‘He just fainted, Gran, that’s all,’ Tim explained breathlessly. ‘Give him a glass of water and put his head between his knees and he’ll be all right.’

‘People will be demanding to see their wives’ appendices removed next,’ growled Sir Lancelot as Tim reappeared. ‘Now get back to the top end.’

‘Everything all right, sir?’

‘Of course everything’s all right!’

Leaning against the bed, Tim fell to thinking of Euphemia. How on earth could she sever him from her life like that? Surely she couldn’t be so scared of the old ogre Spratt? Why was she so frightened of being bundled home to Singapore? Once separated from his own

company, he felt, it must be quite immaterial to the girl where she was.

His speculation was broken by the sound of heavy breathing. He glanced anxiously at the patient. But the noise was emanating from Sir Lancelot.

‘All well, sir?’ he asked again. ‘Will you be needing the forceps?’

‘I am not in the habit, Tolly, of receiving suggestions from my anaesthetist.’

He bit his lip. ‘Sorry, sir.’

A couple of minutes later he noticed Sir Lancelot was sweating rather freely.

‘Tolly...’ Sir Lancelot’s voice sounded strange. ‘I can feel a foot.’

‘Then it’s a breech!’ Tim exclaimed.

He joined the surgeon.

‘I expect it will work out all right,’ Sir Lancelot muttered.

‘Not the way you’re setting about it, it won’t,’ Tim told him crisply.

Sir Lancelot glared.

‘You don’t know the first thing about this, do you?’ Tim continued quickly.

‘How — how dare you make such a suggestion?’ returned Sir Lancelot, a little uncertainly.

Tim took another look. ‘Why, you’re making an absolute dog’s breakfast of it.’

‘What? I have never, in my entire career, been treated with such infernal discourtesy —’

‘Get out of the way, you old fool,’ snapped Tim, giving the surgeon a shove. ‘I’m going to scrub up.’

‘Ahhhhhhhhh!’ cried Sir Lancelot, tripping over the leather bag. ‘My back!’

To Gran, ministering to Mr Peckwater on the landing, this didn’t sound at all like the cry of a new-born baby. She was even more surprised a second later to see one doctor emerging dragging the other.

‘Just lay him flat and keep him quiet, Gran,’ Tim instructed briefly. ‘It won’t be much longer now.’

‘Any more casualties,’ muttered Gran in contusion, ‘and I’ll have to do the job myself.’

I am glad to say that Tim skilfully delivered Mrs Peckwater of a baby daughter. He and Gran cleared up the mess. Mr Peckwater returned to his usual informative self. The two men carried a strangely subdued Sir Lancelot down to his Rolls.

They hardly exchanged a word as Tim drove him home. In fact, they hardly exchanged a word for the rest of the day. Mrs Chuffey insisted Sir Lancelot went to bed and sent Tim on all his visits. Only after finishing the evening surgery into the bargain Tim found time to tap nervously on the surgeon's bedroom door.

'Enter! Oh, it's you, Tolly.'

Sir Lancelot sipped the whisky and soda in his hand.

'Tolly...' His voice was quiet. 'What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?'

'I—I hadn't thought, sir.'

'You may have my bacon. You saved it for me this morning. Sit down.'

There was a silence.

'I suppose you realized, Tolly, in that little suburban bedroom a long and — I believe — honourable career could have been besmirched for good?'

'I'm afraid I didn't particularly, sir. I just wanted to get the baby out alive.'

Sir Lancelot grunted. 'Yes, you were perfectly right to view it so. I did something that was totally unforgivable in any doctor. I took a chance on my own ignorance. Though things may have been all right in the end—'

'I'm sure they would, sir.'

'It could have been touch-and-go. Luckily for the patient and myself you happen to be a singularly strong-minded young man and took steps to bring my incompetence to my notice.'

'You're... you're very kind, sir.'

'I might perhaps have benefited from your acquaintance earlier in my career,' Sir Lancelot reflected. 'The enormous disadvantage of being a consultant is that nobody tells you you're wrong. Except the pathologist.' He took another sip. 'You love my niece Euphemia?'

'Very much, sir.'

‘H’m. Well, Tolly, you may see her if you wish. Whether the romance blossoms again is, of course, no concern of mine.’

‘That’s awfully good of you.’ Tim jumped up. ‘I’ll go up to London straight away, if that’s all right with you.’

‘That is *not* all right with me. Someone must look after the practice while I am incapacitated. You have three days’ leave, I understand?’

‘Yes, I — er, had permission to visit the library of the London Psychological Society.’

‘I’m afraid you are going to find it extremely expensive, young man, courting Euphemia with the assistance of British Railways.’

‘As a matter of fact,’ Tim explained with a faint smile, ‘the trip’s being subsidized by a mutual friend — Charles Chadwick.’

Sir Lancelot’s mood was so suppressed he could manage only a muffled snort.

‘He seems rather to have taken to me since I cured his gout,’ Tim went on. ‘He won’t see another doctor, but keeps sending for me. The old chap’s got a bit of dyspepsia, which I think is due to business worries.’

‘After all, I suppose marmalade *is* his bread and butter,’ Sir Lancelot conceded.

Tim gave another smile. ‘He gets quite lyrical about marmalade sometimes. Apparently his ancestor the original Beaulieu was a Palace footman, who hit on the magic formula when the royal marmalade boiled over as he was kissing George the Fourth’s cook. Charlie Chadwick insists he married her afterwards - he wouldn’t like anything in the slightest unrespectable about the firm. He’s terribly upset because one of the big drug companies is trying to take him over.’

‘I don’t think I am very interested in the financial embarrassments of Chadwick,’ announced Sir Lancelot wearily. ‘You will meet my niece tomorrow, as I wish you to chauffeur me to St Swithin’s. This is no passing spasm, and I fear that I can shirk no longer having myself warded there under the Professor. He may be the biggest wart on the body surgical, but he knows more about the nervous system than I do.’ Sir Lancelot took another sip. ‘By the way, Tolly, did you happen to notice if Ganymede won the Goodwood Stakes this afternoon?’

‘Unplaced, I’m afraid, sir.’

Sir Lancelot gave a sigh. ‘Indeed, I seem to be having a very bad day of it altogether.’

August started hot.

Bank Holiday trippers collapsed by the hundred, the yachts at Cowes lay gasping for a breath of air, and they were hosing down the elephants in the Zoo. The windows of St Swithin's Hospital stretched imploringly for a passing breeze, and Sir Lancelot lay in his private room on the ground floor covered only by a sheet. It was ten days after his disastrous maternity case, and he had just finished his lunch.

The lunch at St Swithin's was carefully designed by the hospital dietician to be nutritious yet easily digestible, though admittedly a shade uninteresting. Sir Lancelot had added one or two items of personal taste, such as a pot of *pâté de foie gras*, preserved aubergines, pineapple in kirsch, and a half of champagne. He was pouring some Bisquit Dubouche, into his tooth mug, and after carefully stowing the bottle behind the barley water in his locker reached for his bedside telephone.

'Main gate, please. Harry? Spratt here. Anything good for this afternoon at Newmarket? Midsummer Madness, eh?' Sir Lancelot grunted thoughtfully. 'All right, ring Alf at Crutchford's and put a monkey on for me. My dear man, I am quite aware that five hundred pounds is a great deal of money, thank you,' he ended, putting down the instrument, 'I shall very likely have no further use for the stuff, anyway,' he added to himself, 'with the Professor operating on me tomorrow. Come in!'

Crimes appeared.

'Well, well, well!' announced the porter cheerfully. 'Sorry to see you, Sir Lancelot, in such a plight.'

'I am not, Crimes, in *any* plight,' returned Sir Lancelot severely. 'I am extremely thankful that I may shortly enjoy the benefits of modern surgery.'

'You have a very nice way of putting these things, if I may say so, sir,' observed Crimes, producing his matchstick.

'If you are impertinent, Crimes, I shall simply report the matter to the Hospital Secretary.'

‘Sorry, sir. I brought your evening paper.’

‘And what precisely happens to be your function in St Swithin’s at the moment?’ Sir Lancelot inquired, taking the paper. ‘I thought you were the Out Patients’ oddbody?’

‘I’ve been promoted from that, sir,’ Crimes told him proudly. ‘Though this week I’m helping Harry on the gate and tilling in holiday reliefs. Monday I’m back on my proper job.’

‘Which is?’

‘Mortuary porter,’ Crimes informed him cheerfully.

‘H’m,’ said Sir Lancelot.

‘So we might be meeting again professionally, as it were? I meant that only in a humorous way of course,’ he added, picking a front tooth.

‘Your sense of fun, Crimes, at times touches heights positively Gilbertian.’

‘Thank you, sir. O’course, it’s all round the hospital how the Professor’s going to chop up your poor old back.’

‘I wish to damp your sense neither of humour nor of the dramatic,’ Sir Lancelot told him briskly, ‘but in the interests of truth I will point out that the Professor is performing merely an exploration to investigate the cause of my pain.’

‘Ar,’ nodded Crimes, ‘that’s what they all say to you.’

‘Get out!’ barked Sir Lancelot. ‘And once I’m on my feet again the first thing I’ll do is break your blasted neck.’

‘Right-ho, sir. Goodbye,’ ended Crimes cheerily, ‘and good luck.’

‘blasted clockwork ghoul,’ muttered Sir Lancelot.

He turned to the lunch edition of the evening paper. An item on the front page caught his eye:

SCENES ON STOCK EXCHANGE  
BROKERS FAINT  
UNITED DRUG PLUNGE

‘H’m,’ he observed. ‘I haven’t got any of their ruddy shares, anyway.’ He studied the racing form for some time, then finishing his tooth mug switched on his bedside fan, pulled up his sheet, gave a yawn, and composed himself for an afternoon nap.



‘Enter!’

A redheaded nurse of Euphemia’s age put her head in the door.

‘Good afternoon, Sir Lancelot. I’ve come to make you comfortable.’

‘Thank you, Nurse. I am perfectly — ‘

‘Sister said specially, Sir Lancelot,’ she added firmly, striding in.

She proceeded to make him comfortable, by sitting him up, violently shaking his pillows, slapping him down again, and tucking in the bedclothes so firmly that any movement was impossible save gentle respiration.

‘Sleep well, Sir Lancelot,’ she called gaily, shutting the door. ‘Pleasant dreams.’

‘Comfortable!’ growled the surgeon, fighting his way out of the strait-jacket. ‘The damn woman seems to think I’m a corpse already.’

After some minutes he had sheet and pillows arranged to his taste. He snuggled down his shoulders. He closed his eyes.

‘Enter!’

It was the redheaded nurse again.

‘Did you want a bottle before you dropped off Sir Lancelot?’

He eyed her. ‘My dear girl, I have known how to make such wishes public since I was in the bottom form at school.’

‘Right you are, Sir Lancelot,’ she said lightly. ‘Sleep tight.’

He shut his eyes again.

‘Enter!’ he bawled, as another knock rang out. ‘What the devil do you want?’ he asked angrily as Crimes reappeared.

‘Harry sent up a telegram, sir.’ Crimes laid it on the bedside locker with a sniff. His eyes travelled to the empty tooth mug. ‘Glad you had your little drop after lunch, Sir Lancelot. The prisoner ate a hearty breakfast, eh?’ He gave a laugh.

‘Get out.’

‘We might as well enjoy these things while we can, I always say.’

‘Get out.’

‘Nice flowers you got here,’ he went on, smelling the vase.

‘I will save you the bother of enlarging on your innuendo,’ Sir Lancelot told him wearily, ‘by suggesting you are doubtless thinking how much better the display will be at my forthcoming funeral.’

Crimes looked shocked. 'I'd never imagine a thing like that, would I? I'm all care and sympathy for you, Sir Lancelot. It's just that I feel a bit funny standing here on my own two feet while you're the one flat on your back awaiting the old chopper.'

'You have five seconds, Crimes,' Sir Lancelot told him evenly. 'In which time either you will have left this room or I will have telephoned the Hospital Secretary to evict you with your cards in your pocket.'

'Very good. Nothing personal meant o'course, Sir Lancelot.' His head poked round the door again a moment later. 'I'll be seeing you tomorrow, sir — I've just heard I'm on a day's theatre duty.'

'Get out!' roared Sir Lancelot. 'You ruddy stuffed vulture! Come in!' he added loudly. 'No, I was *not* the patient calling for the bedpan!' he informed the redheaded nurse. 'I might just as well try and get a bit of kip slap in the middle of Selfridge's Bargain Basement.'

He opened the telegram. It was from Lady Spratt in Majorca, saying she was sorry to hear of the news and was hurrying home. He gave a sigh. He looked at his watch. He tugged his beard. Drawing the sheet to his chin he closed his eyes again. He had in fact tottered over the hard edge of consciousness into the soft billows of sleep when the next tap came at his door.

'Go away, blast your guts!' He sat bolt upright. 'Oh, come in, my dear,' he added more quietly, as Nikki Sparrow appeared.

'I hope it's quite convenient, visiting you now?' she asked with a smile. 'Perfectly,' he told her coldly. 'It is the afternoon I hold open house.'

'I've brought you some grapes.' She put them down beside the tooth mug. 'I had to come now because it is my last chance of seeing you alone. Simon's safely scrubbed up in the theatre. I don't want him ever to know I've been here, of course.'

'Indeed?' Sir Lancelot plucked a grape. 'At my age I can hardly indulge in clandestine meetings with young married women.'

Nikki sat on the edge of his bed and crossed her slim legs. Sir Lancelot ate another grape and mellowed slightly.

'My husband has a great ambition,' Nikki announced.

'I am already perfectly aware that he wishes to become a St Swithin's consultant.'

‘Yes, but he also wants to be the very first one ever elected without so much as twitching a string.’

Sir Lancelot grunted. He reached for a third grape.

‘And every time there’s a chance of your pulling a few for him, Lancelot, the pair of you seem to end up in a flaming row.’

‘I didn’t want to be over-severe on Simon, my dear. But I should have thought him better advised to save his impertinence towards me until he was actually on the staff.’

‘It’s only a defence mechanism on both sides, of course,’ Nikki continued calmly. ‘You get rumbustious because you don’t want to be accused, ever so faintly, of nepotism. He gets snappy because you’ll make his life a misery afterwards, continually pushing into his theatre and belittling him in front of his students.’

‘I do *that*!’ Sir Lancelot looked shocked. ‘Never!’

‘What about when poor Mr Cambridge was first elected? He had to keep altering the times of his operating lists.’

Sir Lancelot shifted uncomfortably.

‘So you see, Lancelot, Simon wants you to help him get on the staff quite as much as you do yourself,’ she explained evenly. ‘And he’s just as pig-stubborn as you are. So Paul Ivors-Smith will get the job when Simon is a far better surgeon, far more intelligent, and of a far sounder character,’ she stated simply.

‘H’m,’ said Sir Lancelot.

‘And the Professor will utterly dominate the hospital.’ Nikki threw another faggot on Sir Lancelot’s smouldering doubts. ‘Paul is, poor man, quite spineless. You ought to see the way he lets his wife treat him.’

‘I am not particularly enamoured of Mrs Ivors-Smith,’ agreed Sir Lancelot, taking another grape. ‘Her transition from the sluice-room to the drawing-room has not been a happy one.’

‘Then perhaps you will write a letter to Mr Nightrider?’ continued Nikki briskly, opening her handbag. ‘Just stating how strongly you feel Simon is exactly the one for the job. I’ve brought Biro and paper with me.’

‘My dear — Come in!’ bawled Sir Lancelot. ‘For heaven’s sake, man, can’t you keep away? The blasted wake hasn’t started yet.’

‘Visitor for you,’ grinned Crimes, drawing himself up.

‘I am not at home.’

‘His Honour the Chairman of the Hospital Governors,’ announced Crimes impressively.

‘Great Scott, what does Geoff want?’ muttered Sir Lancelot.

‘I’d better go,’ announced Nikki hastily. ‘I’ll come and see you again when you’re better.’

‘Ah, Lancelot, there you are. I wish - I beg your pardon, madam,’ started Mr Nightrider, stumbling over Nikki in the doorway. ‘Lancelot, I must have a word with you. At once. It is a matter of great importance.’

‘I am, of course, a sick man awaiting operation. Did you suppose I should find this sudden craving for my company flattering?’

Mr Nightrider stood fingering his lapel, looking like a saint limbering up for a needle fixture with the sinners.

‘Have a grape,’ Sir Lancelot invited.

‘I must speak to you in the strictest confidence.’

‘How’s that daughter of yours?’ Sir Lancelot cut in amiably.

‘Felicity? She seems very happy in that post of yours. Extremely so. Though she insists on working outrageously long hours down there. Sometimes I worry about her health. Lancelot, something has occurred to the great detriment - ‘

‘And Randolph? Does he know anything good for the Ebor Handicap?’

‘Our hospital has been shamed,’ Mr Nightrider announced impatiently.

‘Indeed?’

‘You’ve seen the papers? This remarkable business in the City. United Drug falling like that. I lost a quite considerable sum myself, I might add.’

‘Oh, hard luck,’ Sir Lancelot remarked genially.

‘You know why the shares fell, of course?’

‘I wouldn’t have the slightest — come in! No, young lady, I shall *not* be needing any occupational therapy. I am quite occupied enough as it is. Good afternoon — how the devil should I know?’ he ended shortly to his brother-in-law. ‘I’m not a financier.’

‘There has been a leak,’ declared Mr Nightrider darkly. ‘This new steroid drug the Professional Unit is working on. Apparently it’s no

good.'

'The sooner the fact were common knowledge the better, I would think.'

'But don't you understand?' Mr Nightrider jumped about testily. 'Everyone knew United Drug had indirectly put up the money for the research, and would be allowed to produce it. The shares went up enormously. You know what profits can be made from even one successful drug. Look at penicillin.'

'My dear Geoff, if a number of widows and orphans have been ruined I am extremely sorry, but I fail to see what concern it is of mine. Now I really should like a little sleep. A not unreasonable request, I feel, as this time tomorrow I shall have a ruddy great slit all the way down my back.'

'But Lancelot! Don't you recall the findings were to be kept secret until published by the Research Council next week? Surely you remember the procedure? Somebody at St Swithin's has broken professional secrecy. A most distasteful business.'

'H'm.' Sir Lancelot tugged his beard. 'One of the lab. technicians, perhaps? Bribed, possibly.'

'I don't know, but I cannot conceive it would be one of the medical staff. That is why I want you to have a word with the Professor. Obviously, in my position I can't start some sort of inquisition.'

'Oh, very well, very well,' he agreed wearily. 'I'll raise it when he makes his round this evening. Now if you would have the kindness to leave me in peace - '

'Yes, of course. I will say goodbye, Lancelot, in case I don't see you again. Before your operation, that is,' he added hastily. 'By the way,' he remembered at the door, 'the cistern is leaking badly again. I really feel you ought to get it repaired for us.'

Sir Lancelot lay down. He closed his eyes. But inside his head thoughts revolved and collided like atoms in a cyclotron. After half an hour's hot restlessness under his sheet he sat up again.

'I wonder... ' he murmured. 'I wonder.'

He picked up the telephone.

'Bank 8080. Thank you. Hello? Lord Itchen there? Sir Lancelot Spratt, a personal friend. Yes, it is fairly urgent. Hello, Kenneth? I wonder it - one moment. Come in! Great Scott, girl, what's that?'

'Your tea, Sir Lancelot,' announced the redheaded nurse, setting down a tray.

'But dammit! I've only just had lunch.'

'Sorry, Sir Lancelot, but the teas are rather early today. Sister thinks the patients sleep so heavily all afternoon they never have a chance to drop off at night.'

The patients' supper at St Swithin's was planned with the same care as the lunch, to provide a sustaining meal which would yet lie lightly on the stomach during the night. Sir Lancelot disposed of his fairly quickly, before starting on certain supplements of his own — a pot of caviar, bottled partridge in aspic, a Camembert, and half a bottle of burgundy. Replacing his brandy behind the barley water afterwards, he settled down with his tooth mug to think deeply about his coming interview with the Professor and Paul Ivors-Smith.

'Enter!'

Euphemia came in.

'My dear!' exclaimed her uncle.

He hardly recognized the child. She wore a gold silk dress which to his first startled gaze seemed in danger of putting on public view the young lady's entire thorax. Her big blue eyes shone from heavy frames of bronze make-up. Her golden hair was shaped as elaborately as a Viennese pastry.

'Good grief, you look like a left-over from the Denning Report,' he declared.

'Uncle, will you do me a terrific favour?' she asked breathlessly.

He looked bleak. 'Precisely what sort of favour had you in mind?'

'Let me climb through your window.'

'H'm,' said Sir Lancelot.

'I'm absolutely desperate.' Her voice quivered. 'It's my first pass for weeks, and Matron's cancelled it. I dropped a patient's jelly,' she explained.

As Sir Lancelot sipped his brandy a glow of indulgence spread slowly across his frost-bound features. He saw several points in the girl's simple request. She would be able to meet this excellent young man Tolly, who had suffered not only the expense but the rigours of British Railways to see her again so soon. She would enjoy a few hours' relaxation from the drab life of the hospital. And it would be one in the eye for the Matron, who on reflection he felt had been a toffee-nosed old fusspot over the nightclub affair.

‘I can just slip down and run past the Throat Department out into the street,’ Euphemia continued eagerly. ‘I’ve worked it all out.’

Sir Lancelot gave a smile. ‘I am only sorry that my condition precludes my giving you a leg-up.’

‘Oh, Uncle! You’re fabulous!’

She gave him a hearty kiss.

‘I’m glad for your sake it’s a hot evening,’ he added benevolently. ‘Otherwise I fear you would be in serious danger of catching a chill.’

With a flash of legs over the sill, Euphemia was gone.

Sir Lancelot swilled his brandy round the mug. When a man knows he is to be operated upon in the morning, it concentrates his mind wonderfully. Twenty-four hours in Tim Tolly’s company at Leafy Grove had convinced him the young man wasn’t a bad sort of fellow at all. Mind, he had no interest in cricket or fishing, but apparently he was keen on the violin instead. He was admittedly a psychiatrist, so automatically insane, but he wasn’t half as mad as the other ones. Sir Lancelot took another sip of brandy, then with furrowed brow transferred his thoughts to the Professor. The meeting would be difficult. It hardly does getting your knife into a man who is already booked shortly to get his into you.

‘Come in!’

Tim Tolly burst through the door.

‘I’m afraid the bird has flown.’ Sir Lancelot eyed him with mild surprise. ‘If you want to catch her up, that is the way from the nest,’ he added, indicating the window.

‘I never wish to set eyes on Euphemia again as long as I live.’

‘What?’

‘So she got away through there, did she?’ he exclaimed bitterly. ‘You’re in the conspiracy against me too, are you? I have no hesitation in describing your conduct as perfectly filthy.’

‘You keep a civil tongue in your head when you’re addressing me!’ snapped the surgeon.

‘Why should I?’ Tim continued furiously. ‘I’ve lost every shred of respect for you. I was in love with Effie. I wanted to get engaged, perfectly honourably. And there you go, egging her on to play fast and loose with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in London.’



‘How dare you! I merely let her effect her escape because the Matron had unfairly cancelled her pass.’

‘You’re telling the story too? Of course the Matron hasn’t cancelled her pass.’

‘And to whom, may I ask,’ thundered Sir Lancelot, ‘are you indebted for that information?’

‘The Matron. I’ve just been to see her.’

Suddenly running out of fuel, Tim sat heavily on the bed.

There was a long silence.

‘Have a grape,’ offered Sir Lancelot.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ apologized Tim. ‘I was a little overwrought.’

‘So it would seem. And if you continue to grind your teeth like that, young man, I fear you will be in danger of damaging the enamel. Perhaps you would have the goodness to tell me,’ he invited, ‘as a perfectly innocent bystander, exactly what is going on?’

Tim shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’d come to take Effie out to dinner with...well, with Charlie Chadwick. The old fellow sent for me yesterday. Rather urgent. You know I’ve been treating this anaemia and dyspepsia of his? It’s been worse with all his business worries. I travelled down overnight.’

‘To visit the Psychological Society Library, no doubt,’ suggested Sir Lancelot shortly.

‘This morning he seemed a changed man.’ Tim got up and started pacing about with his hands in his pockets. ‘Apparently, the drug firm which wanted to take him over has gone half bust, or something. Anyway the danger’s past. Instead of a consultation he asked us to a celebration dinner at his flat.’ Tim kicked the dirty-dressing bin. ‘This afternoon I sent Effie a letter through her pal, Nurse James. It was Nurse James who showed up in the courtyard just now with this cancelled-pass story. I smelt a rat.’ He took another kick. The whole tale came out,’ he continued miserably. ‘There’s someone else. There’ve been little notes, telephone messages, bunches of flowers, and all that. She’s been out with him several times already. He’s got a white Jag,’ he ended in despair.

Sir Lancelot tugged his beard.

‘She slipped out through your window to avoid running into me,’ Tim added weakly.

‘As much as I sympathize with your predicament,’ the surgeon remarked after a pause, ‘you can hardly expect me to give such matters attention when I am to suffer a major operation in about twelve hours’ time.’

‘Don’t bother to think about it.’ Tim opened the door. The girl means absolutely nothing to me any longer. This white Jag bloke will make her a much more useful husband. He must be filthily rich. As for me, the only way I could manage that evening in the nightclub was by pawning the gold medal.’

‘Gold medal? What gold medal?’

The one I won at St Agnes’ for midwifery. I think I shall just go and walk the streets for a bit. With any luck I shall be run over by a bus.’

He shut the door, leaving Sir Lancelot wondering disturbedly precisely what his niece was up to at that moment.

She was in fact roaring towards South Kensington in the white Jag with Mr Perry Quest.

‘Well, well, Nursie,’ said Mr Quest, narrowly missing a couple of trustful citizens on a zebra. ‘You certainly do me good every time I set eyes on you.’

‘Sorry I was so crashingly late,’ returned Euphemia calmly. The surgeon kept me in the operating theatre. I was in charge of the blood. It was a matter of life and death.’

‘Ugh!’ Mr Quest’s good-looking face creased. ‘You, Nursie darling, are the only piece of hospital I want to see again in my life.’

‘But just think, Perry, if it hadn’t been for your appendix we’d never have met.’

‘“Query appendix”, my love, I insist. At least they released me to the land of the living after a couple of days. It was just too much champagne at Sue Gresham’s party, I suppose.’

‘You mean Susan Gresham the film-star?’ Euphemia’s bronze-ringed eyes widened. ‘You actually know her?’

‘But of course,’ murmured Mr Quest, stroking his little moustache and crossing a yellow traffic light.

Euphemia had known Mr Quest only a fortnight.

‘Nurse Spratt,’ Sister Virtue had greeted her coming on duty one morning, ‘go to that new man in Number Six and tidy the disgusting mess on his locker.’

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘And Nurse Spratt, tell him I will not countenance squalor in my ward.’

‘Yes, Sister.’

Euphemia straightened the soap and toothbrush without taking much notice of the patient. Neither did he take much notice of her. That morning Mr Quest wasn’t taking much notice of anybody. He was too scared.

Euphemia idly picked up his case-notes. The board suddenly shook so violently she nearly broke the thermometer she was waiting to slip under Mr Quest’s tongue. The bib of her apron heaved. She had read the simple words, ‘Occupation: Managing Director, Quest Model Agency.’

Simon appeared in the ward later that morning and decided there was no need to operate. Mr Quest sat up in bed in orange silk pyjamas, feeling much better. Before long he was being observed keenly by the nursing staff, and vice versa. Euphemia inspected him behind screens, round transfusion stands, and across bed-cradles with particular interest. By the time she’d held his pulse for four and a half minutes that evening, she felt she was drawing away from the field.

The next morning was Sister Virtue’s day off. She spent it quietly with her cousin who ran a riding stable in Epping.

‘Anne,’ whispered Euphemia urgently over the breakfast bread-and-butter in the ward kitchen, ‘will you let me do Number Six’s back this morning? He’s being discharged this afternoon.’

Nurse Anne James looked doubtful. She sometimes felt her dear friend Effie Spratt pushed her about just the teeniest bit.

‘He’s my patient,’ she returned possessively.

‘Oh, come on! Be a sport. It’s absolutely vital, honestly.’

‘The Staff Nurse will notice it.’

‘Of course she won’t. She never notices anything. Look, I’ll give you my new pair of fifteen denier Christian Dior’s.’

‘Oh, all right,’ succumbed Nurse James.

‘Mr Quest,’ began Euphemia, drawing screens feverishly round his bed an hour later, ‘I’ve come to do your back.’

‘But what’s the rush, Nursie?’ Mr Quest tossed aside his *Vogue*. ‘I rather hoped you’d take your time, then we could have a nice little chat.’

‘Did you?’ responded Euphemia eagerly.

‘*Particularly* as it’s you, Nursie,’ purred Mr Quest.

‘Mr Quest,’ she burst out, ‘I - I’ve got something I really must tell you.’ She started to rub the small of his back vigorously with surgical spirit.

He looked surprised. ‘Go on?’

‘It’s — it’s a fabulous secret.’

‘You don’t look old enough to have any, Nursie.’ Mr Quest began to look extremely interested.

‘Do you know why I’m a nurse?’

‘Because you want to succour the sick and dying.’

‘No.’ Euphemia shook her head. ‘I utterly hate nursing. I only took it up so my parents in Singapore would send me to England. I — I want to be a model, Mr Quest.’

Mr Quest, lying on his side, reached for a cigarette from his locker and lit it.

‘I’m sure I’d be ever so good at it, Mr Quest. All my friends say so. I’ve done modelling at home in Singapore — the golf club dance posters, you know. I’ve got a lovely figure,’ she assured him.

‘So I see, even in those bell-tents they make you wear.’ Mr Quest rolled on his back and inspected her through half-closed eyes. ‘The right-shaped face, too... h’m... yes, Nursie dear, you might have quite a future there.’

‘Do you think so, Mr Quest?’ she asked breathlessly. ‘Could you give me an audition, or whatever it is, at your office? I could get away somehow any afternoon.’

‘These things aren’t done quite so formally, you know.’ He flicked his cigarette into the fish-paste jar issued as an ashtray. ‘We do so like to keep the business side as undreary as possible. Why don’t we meet for a quiet drink to discuss the whole project, once I’m out of this charnel house?’

Euphemia bit her lip.

‘That’s the usual practice,’ murmured Mr Quest off-handedly, flicking into the fish-paste jar again.

‘Yes, I’d love to,’ Euphemia decided quickly. ‘When?’

After all, once she was on the cover of every magazine in London and asked to the Asquith every night by film-stars, Uncle Lancelot could hardly stop her from marrying Tim. Then he could give up that awful job in Edinburgh and they’d live in a delightful flat overlooking the Park and have lots of wonderful friends. That drink with Mr Quest, she told herself, would be the same as her preliminary interview with the Matron. She bought the gold dress and a novel about models and decided she would have to be more sophisticated.

After the drink, Mr Quest suggested dinner, explaining it was a long job picking a really successful model — ‘it’s the personality *inside* the face, not outside, Nursie dear,’ he informed her, several times. A couple of nights later he took her to dinner again. Each time, the white Jag brought her back to the hospital prompt at ten. Mr Quest was the perfect gentleman.

‘Well, here we are, Nursie,’ Mr Quest now explained, drawing up the Jag shortly after Euphemia’s escape through Sir Lancelot’s window. ‘My flat’s on the top floor of the block.’ He gave her a playful pat on the knee. ‘But don’t worry, there’s a lift.’

‘I hope we haven’t kept the others waiting,’ she remarked worriedly, as he helped her from the car.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Mr Quest assured her.

As they rose in the satin-lined lift Mr Quest explained, ‘Larry my photographer may be a few minutes late. Now I come to think of it, I sent him out for some shots with a couple of my girls by the river.’

‘But Mr Collins and Mr McKnight and Mr Wade will be coming to see me photographed?’ Euphemia added anxiously.

‘Sure enough, Nursie dear. They’ll probably be waiting already - I told Jim Collins on the phone to go straight in and mix themselves some drinks. Though on the other hand,’ he added, producing his key as the lift stopped, ‘they may be a little delayed too. After all,’ he laughed, ‘Collins, McKnight, and Wade are a busy agency. They make even my outfit seem feed for pretty small chickens.’

Mr Quest nevertheless confessed himself pained that none of the other four gentlemen had yet shown up.

‘What a pity!’ Euphemia looked disappointed. ‘But I expect they won’t be long.’

Mr Quest answered with a pleasant little laugh.

‘What a nice flat,’ she told him politely.

‘You like it? I’m so glad. Try the sofa, Nursie darling. It’s most comfortable. And we might as well have a little drink?’

‘Yes, I’ll have a screwdriver,’ returned Euphemia, remembering the sophistication.

‘Anything you say,’ agreed Mr Quest warmly. ‘Cigarette?’

‘I’m corpsing for one.’

‘The sun’s rather bright in here,’ he continued, returning from his kitchen with the drinks. ‘Do you think I might draw the curtains a little?’

‘Yes, sun is utterly vulgar, isn’t it?’

She sipped her screwdriver, which she was sorry to find turned out something nasty in orange juice.

‘Perhaps a little soft music?’ suggested Mr Quest, anxious to give his guest every comfort.

‘That would be dreamy.’

‘Ellington, do you think? Or the darling Ella? No, something with lots of strings,’ he decided, starting the record-player. ‘Like it? Rather romantic. In fact, quite sexy. I suppose like all nurses you have very broadminded views on sex?’

‘Of course,’ said Euphemia.

‘I think I’ll slip off this heavy jacket,’ he announced. ‘It’s getting rather warm in here.’

Mr Quest reappeared from the bedroom in a polka-dot dressing gown and slippers. He picked up his drink and sat on the sofa beside her.

‘Well, well,’ he said brightly.

Euphemia smiled.

‘You know,’ he went on, switching his voice into the lower gears, ‘you are the most ravishing girl I have ever set eyes on.’

‘Oh — thank you,’ she told him courteously.

‘You have an effect on me which I find utterly overpowering.’

‘Really?’ asked Euphemia.

‘My darling! You can’t imagine how I’ve panted for days at the thought you might soon let me see you alone.’

‘But we’re not alone,’ Euphemia pointed out. ‘I mean, the others are coming.’

Mr Quest gave a grin. ‘Yes, it is rather stupid, isn’t it, how we cling to these little conventions? *I* knew we’d be just together, and *you*, my angel, knew we’d be just together, and *I* knew that’s how *you* knew that *I* knew — ‘

Euphemia spilt her screwdriver. ‘But I didn’t know!’

‘Oh, come, darling,’ laughed Mr Quest. ‘You’re a big girl now. Still, what’s the difference? We love each other.’

‘But we don’t love each other!’ Euphemia jumped up. ‘At least, I don’t.’

‘You don’t love me?’ Mr Quest looked slightly shocked. ‘Then why did you agree to come up to my flat?’

‘But I didn’t — I mean, I wasn’t — oh dear! I want to go home!’ cried Euphemia.

‘You angel cake!’ laughed Mr Quest, moving into the tackle. ‘You’re a terrible little tease.’

‘Let me go! Take your hands off me! Mind my dress!’

‘You luscious little love apple,’ declared Mr Quest, getting all excited. ‘Go away, you beast!’ Euphemia leapt over the sofa. ‘No, I tell you! It’s all a terrible mis — oh, my dress, my dress!’

‘What a romp!’ cried Mr Quest leaping after her joyfully. ‘How I love it! But now let’s be friends and both go quietly into the — ‘

He may, of course, have been meaning to finish with ‘rights and wrongs of the matter’, but Euphemia never found out because she hit him over the head with the standard lamp.

‘Oh!’ she gasped, ‘I’ve killed him!’ She stared in horror at the victim. ‘What on earth will LIncle Lancelot say now?’ was the first thing she asked herself.

Uncle Lancelot was at that moment being tucked in by the redheaded nurse.

‘And here are your sleeping pills, Sir Lancelot,’ she was telling him brightly. ‘You’re first on the list tomorrow morning,’ she added gaily. ‘And now I’m going off duty for a lovely cold swim in the baths. Night night!’

Sir Lancelot grunted. He placed the two shiny bright blue capsules on his locker. The Professor hadn’t yet done his round, and he

wanted to keep a clear head.

He reached for a magazine brought him by the redheaded nurse. He was becoming quite interested in the story of a young woman in love with her doctor, when the door opened.

'I just looked in to see if you were absolutely comfortable, Lancelot,' announced Professor Hindehead smoothly from the threshold. 'This time tomorrow it will be all over. I don't suppose for one moment we shall find anything in the slightest alarming, shall we, Paul?'

'I'm quite certain we won't,' agreed Paul Ivors-Smith behind him. 'Please come in.' Sir Lancelot tossed the magazine aside. 'Come along now,' he added firmly. 'Kindly sit down.' He indicated the foot of his bed. 'I want a word with you, Dicky. And you, Paul,' he added, as the Registrar was slipping away. 'The Unit has been doing some important work on a new steroid, I hear?'

The Professor nodded. 'Yes, and it's been extremely interesting. Though Paul here earns most of the credit.'

'And I gather the results will shortly be apparent?'

The Professor gave his smooth smile. 'The somewhat elephantine pregnancy is coming to an end, I'm glad to say. Though I'm afraid we can't let you view the baby yet - you know those rather tedious regulations about the Research Council publishing first.'

'The United Drug Company, of course, put up the money?'

Professor Hindehead shrugged his shoulders under his white coat. 'I think that's an open secret.'

Sir Lancelot put his fingertips together. 'You had some shares in United Drug, Dicky?'

'My dear Lancelot!' He laughed briefly. 'You really can't ask me to remember such things. I have absolutely no head for business. Possibly I once had one or two.'

'You had more than one or two, and you sold them yesterday.'

'Really, Lancelot!' The Professor's smooth cheek went pink, i must say, prying into my private affairs is a bit thick.'

'You know the news that your steroid is in fact useless was leaked to the City?' Sir Lancelot persisted.

'You can't expect me to keep such things as secret as the atom bomb.' The Professor for once looked ruffled. 'Possibly one of the



technicians or a houseman let the cat out of the bag. Our last resident was a pretty shifty piece of work. What on earth are you making so much fuss for?' he complained, if a few people in the City have lost some money, they can well afford it. It's not a matter of importance to the hospital.'

Sir Lancelot tugged his beard. 'On the contrary, it is a matter of the utmost importance to the hospital. I have information that a complete copy of your typewritten report was in the office of Ivors-Smith, Hardcastle, and Potter in Moorgate by last night.'

Paul looked up.

'I can explain that quite easily—'

'I can save you the bother,' snapped Sir Lancelot. 'You decided to line your pocket with the tatters of your professional honour.'

Paul bit his lip. 'Well, I — I admittedly had rather a lot of shares. My... my wife didn't see why we should lose the money.'

'This is all rather inconsequential, Lancelot.' The Professor rose to go. 'You are making a mountain out of a molehill.'

'Out of a dunghill,' Sir Lancelot corrected him. 'The respect we receive in our profession must be nourished with our own self-discipline. We must labour under a stricter ethical code than the public at large. Anyone breaking it lets down not only his colleagues but his forebears who painfully built up the status of the modern doctor. Such a person, to my mind, is not fit to be a member of the profession.'

'Oh come,' objected the Professor, edging towards the door. 'You're quite out of proportion, Lancelot. A doctor's entitled to be a human being. We're not a collection of saints.'

'I agree. I will qualify my remark. Such a person is not fit to be on the consultant staff of a distinguished hospital.'

'Uncle Lancelot!' cried Euphemia from the window. 'Help!'

'Great Scott!' Sir Lancelot leapt out of bed and caught her. 'What on earth's the matter, girl?'

'Quick!' The Professor pushed Paul into the corridor. 'Let's get out of this.'

'Have you been in an accident?' Sir Lancelot demanded anxiously.

'I - I've had a terrible experience, Uncle.' She buried her tousled head in his pyjamas and burst into tears. 'It was awful!' He produced

the yellow silk handkerchief. 'That dreadful man!'

'The white-car feller?'

Euphemia nodded tearfully. 'The damage is quite irreparable.'

'What!'

'To my dress,' she explained.

'The villain is not in pursuit, I trust?'

'I - I don't think so, Uncle. I left him unconscious.'

'Did you, by George? Good girl!' exclaimed Sir Lancelot warmly. 'But I think you had better sneak back to your room before someone comes and catches —'

'Sir Lancelot!' Tim Tolly burst in without knocking. 'Effie!' he gasped. 'Oh, Tim, darling!' wailed Euphemia, transferring her custom to Tim's chest and breaking into tears all over again. 'Oh, Tim! I love you so much.'

'Good grief,' muttered Sir Lancelot. 'What premedication for an operation!'

'Uncle!' Euphemia's blue eyes widened amid the smudged bronze. 'You're walking.'

Sir Lancelot looked in surprise at his feet. 'So I am,' he exclaimed confusedly.

'Effie, my love,' murmured Tim into her hair. 'You are so wonderful. It was all psychosomatic,' he added to Sir Lancelot. 'Think back, and you'll find it only came on in moments of stress.'

'Dammit boy! Are you implying I'm a nut case?'

'No, only a hysteric. Effie, my sweet,' Tim continued, 'what on earth has happened to you?'

'I might inform you that wasn't the diagnosis of a Professor of Surgery,' Sir Lancelot told him briskly.

'Good lord, one should never send back pains to *surgeons*. But Sir Lancelot — !' He collected himself, 'I've got Mr Chadwick in the car outside.'

Sir Lancelot's brows furrowed.

'I - I'm afraid I've made a bit of a boob,' Tim confessed, still holding Euphemia. 'All summer I've diagnosed a straightforward hypochromic anaemia, but it was only tonight I suspected he's bleeding into his gut. He's looking pretty poorly at the moment, poor chap. I'd come along to implore advice —'

Sir Lancelot chucked the sleeping pills into the dressing bin.

‘Take the case into casualty,’ he commanded.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Tell private block theatre to stand by. It may possibly be needed.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’ve grouped the blood? Good. See if the Senior Resident Anaesthetist is on duty.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And tuck that young woman up in bed.’

‘Yes, sir.’

i must just scribble a line to the Chairman of Governors — ‘ he reached for Nikki’s sheet of writing paper. ‘By the way,’ he broke off, i don’t suppose you know if Midsummer Madness came home at Newmarket this afternoon?’

‘As a matter of fact, I noticed it in the paper, sir. At thirty-three to one.’ Sir Lancelot did a quick calculation on the corner of the paper. ‘Five hundred pounds at thirty-three to one makes sixteen thousand five hundred.’ He rubbed his hands. ‘Things are looking up.’

An old-fashioned Englishman out for a day's fishing needs a good deal of equipment, but this is no hindrance to the day's sport when carried a respectful five paces behind by his faithful gillie. Sir Lancelot's load was only his rod as he once again made his way down the familiar path among the brambles to Witches' Pool that warm and clear September morning.

'There'll be a good few rising later on, mark my words,' he declared.

'Wouldn't be surprised if we got a hatful,' agreed Crimes.

The pair stopped at the hawthorn bush.

'I trust you will find this employment congenial, Crimes?' Sir Lancelot inquired.

'Sir, I'll say a little prayer every night to my old governor what I chaffered — just to thank his soul for teaching me fishing.'

'I am glad you are well suited.'

'You know, it had always been my wish, sir, to end my days nice and quiet in the green of the country.' Crimes dropped the fishing gear and produced his matchstick. 'And now I shall, sir. So shall we both, eh?' he added with a wink.

Sir Lancelot gaffed him with his eye.

'Crimes, I appreciate your disappointment that I was not, after all, operated upon last month by the Professor. But I wish to make clear that I find our topic of mutual interest somewhat wearisome. So much so, that should you raise the matter again, even by your delicate implications, I shall automatically sack you on the spot.'

'Yes, sir. Very good, sir.'

'If you wish to make conversation, confine yourself to the fish.'

'As you say, sir.'

'And furthermore, you will chuck away that filthy matchstick. It has irritated me continually now for thirty years. Ah, Charles,' he broke off heartily, as another party approached along the bank.

'What a splendid day to take up my rod again after the operation!' exclaimed Mr Chadwick, blinking behind his glasses.

‘I’m sure we’re in for good sport. ‘Morning, Millichap. You know my own new man, I suppose? I say, Charles, you’re fishing double-barrelled today, or what?’

‘The rod is for you.’ Mr Chadwick reverently handed it over, i know how you admired it that afternoon in the shop. And after all, Tim Tolly tells me you saved my life.’

‘But my dear fellow — ‘ protested Sir Lancelot modestly. He felt it would be nearer the mark to say he had saved Tim Tolly’s skin.

‘It is considerate of them to fix the wedding after the season ends,’ smiled Mr Chadwick. ‘We shall not lose a single day’s fishing.’

‘I unfortunately have to attend my other niece Felicity’s blasted nuptials next week, but I’m hoping for an hour on the water before leaving.’

‘I’m delighted we came to such an amicable agreement over this lovely Witches’ Pool,’ observed Mr Chadwick. ‘You own it, of course, my dear Lancelot,’ he added hastily. ‘Quite indubitably. Informing my solicitors to that effect was my very first act after the operation. And how- much I appreciate your generosity, leasing me the fishing rights in perpetuity for nothing. I only hope my health will remain strong enough to enjoy it.’

‘Of course it will, man,’ Sir Lancelot told him bluffly. ‘Though when you’re in town for Effie’s wedding you might as well have a check-up. See Simon Sparrow in Harley Street - capital feller, on the staff of my own hospital. Great Scott!’ He grabbed Mr Chadwick so fiercely he nearly broke an arm. ‘Did you see that one? Bigger than Percival, I’d say. Have a go at it, Charles.’

‘Oh, no, Lancelot. You saw it first. Your fish.’

‘Rubbish, man! After all you’ve been through you deserve a bit of fun. Ye gods! Look at the rise under the tree.’

The two fishermen faced each other. Slowly a look of rapture crossed their faces. It crept on them that Witches’ Pool, not having been fished all summer, was quivering with enormous and highly gullible trout.

‘Both together!’ Sir Lancelot gave the battle cry.

‘Glad to see Surrey won the Championship again,’ Crimes was observing as the two gillies settled to watch their employers from the shade of the hawthorn bush.

Millichap looked up. 'You interested in cricket?'

'You bet I am, mate. Only thing that kept me going in London. The Oval's a second home to me.'

'Go on? I'm dead keen on it myself. I'd have given a month's pay to have seen that Saturday in the Lord's Test.'

'I was there, mate,' Crimes informed him proudly. 'All afternoon. One of the St Swithin's doctors had a spare ticket. I saw Strongi'th'arm and Winterbottom, every ball of it.' Crimes made himself comfortable on the crisp bracken. 'I remember like it was yesterday, Strongi'th'arm came in at the Pavilion end when England were fifty-four for two. Haggert had taken off Duffy a couple of overs before, and McGregor was on at the Nursery end trying to get a bit of turn out of the wicket with his left-arm leg spinners —'

'I'm on!' cried Sir Lancelot. 'I've got the brute!'

So we come to the close of that bewitching, irritating, fascinating, frustrating feminine thing, an English summer. We leave one pair of gentlemen quietly fishing, and another pair contentedly discussing cricket. I really cannot imagine a happier ending.

Unless, it occurs to me alarmingly, you not only find cricket a frightful bore but aren't much interested in fishing either.

## RICHARD GORDON

### DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

Richard Gordon's acceptance into St Swithin's medical school came as no surprise to anyone, least of all him — after all, he had been to public school, played first XV rugby, and his father was, let's face it, 'a St Swithin's man'. Surely he was set for life. It was rather a shock then to discover that, once there, he would actually have to work, and quite hard. Fortunately for Richard Gordon, life proved not to be all dissection and textbooks after all... This hilarious hospital comedy is perfect reading for anyone who's ever wondered exactly what medical students get up to in their training. Just don't read it on your way to the doctor's!

'Uproarious, extremely iconoclastic' — *Evening News*

'A delightful book' — *Sunday Times*

### DOCTOR AT SEA

Richard Gordon's life was moving rapidly towards middle-aged lethargy — or so he felt. Employed as an assistant in general practice — the medical equivalent of a poor curate - and having been 'persuaded' that marriage is as much an obligation for a young doctor as celibacy for a priest, Richard sees the rest of his life stretching before him. Losing his nerve, and desperately in need of an antidote, he instead signs on with the Fathom Steamboat Company. What follows is a hilarious tale of nautical diseases and assorted misadventures at sea. Yet he also becomes embroiled in a mystery — what is in the Captain's stomach remedy? And more to the point, what on earth happened to the previous doctor?

'Sheer unadulterated fun' — *Star*

### DOCTOR AT LARGE

Dr Richard Gordon's first job after qualifying takes him to St Swithin's where he is enrolled as junior Casualty House Surgeon. However, some rather unfortunate incidents with Mr Justice Hopwood, as well as one of his patients inexplicably coughing up nuts and bolts, mean that promotion passes him by — and goes instead to Bingham, his

odious rival. After a series of disastrous interviews, Gordon cuts his losses and visits a medical employment agency. To his disappointment, all the best jobs have already been snapped up, but he could always turn to general practice...

### DOCTOR GORDON'S CASEBOOK

'Well, I see no reason why anyone should expect a doctor to be on call seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. Considering the sort of risky life your average GP leads, it's not only inhuman but simple-minded to think that a doctor could stay sober that long.

As Dr Richard Gordon joins the ranks of such world-famous diarists as Samuel Pepys and Fanny Burney, his most intimate thoughts and confessions reveal the life of a GP to be not quite as we might expect... Hilarious, riotous and just a bit too truthful, this is Richard Gordon at his best.

### GREAT MEDICAL DISASTERS

Man's activities have been tainted by disaster ever since the serpent first approached Eve in the garden. And the world of medicine is no exception. In this outrageous and strangely informative book, Richard Gordon explores some of history's more bizarre medical disasters. He creates a catalogue of mishaps including anthrax bombs on Gruinard Island, destroying mosquitoes in Panama, and Mary the cook who, in 1904, inadvertently spread Typhoid across New York State. As the Bible so rightly says, 'He that sinneth before his maker, let him fall into the hands of the physician.'

### THE PRIVATE LIFE OF JACK THE RIPPER

In this remarkably shrewd and witty novel, Victorian London is brought to life with a compelling authority. Richard Gordon wonderfully conveys the boisterous, often lusty panorama of life for the very poor — hard, menial work; violence; prostitution; disease. *The Private Life of Jack The Ripper* is a masterly evocation of the practice of medicine in 1888 — the year of Jack the Ripper. It is also a dark and disturbing medical mystery. Why were his victims so silent? And why was there so little blood?



‘... horribly entertaining... excitement and suspense buttressed with authentic period atmosphere’ — *The Daily Telegraph*

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