



Richard Gordon

Doctor on the Brain



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About the Author



Richard Gordon, real name Dr. Gordon Stanley Ostlere, was born in England on 15 September 1921. He is best-known for his hilarious 'Doctor' books. Himself a qualified doctor, he worked as an anaesthetist at the famous St. Bartholomew's Hospital (where he was also a medical student) and later as a ship's surgeon, before leaving medical practice in 1952 to take up writing full time. Many of his books are based on his own true experiences in the medical profession and are all told with the wry wit and candid humour that have become his hallmark.

In all, there are eighteen titles in the *Doctor* Series, with further comic writings in another seven volumes, including '*Great Medical Disasters*' and '*Great Medical Mysteries*', plus more serious works concerning the lives of medical practitioners.

He has also published several technical books under his own name, mainly concerned with anaesthetics for both students and patients. Additionally, he has written on gardening, fishing and cricket and was also a regular contributor to *Punch* magazine. His '*Private Lives*' series, taking in *Dr. Crippen*, *Jack the Ripper* and *Florence Nightingale*, has been widely acclaimed.

The enormous success of *Doctor in the House*, first published in the 1950's, startled its author. It was written whilst he was a surgeon aboard a cargo ship, prior to a spell as an academic anaesthetist at Oxford. His only previous literary experience had been confined to work as an assistant editor of the *British Medical Journal*. There was, perhaps, a foretaste of things to come whilst working on the *Journal* as the then editor, finding Gordon somewhat jokey, put him in charge of the obituaries!

The film of *Doctor in the House* uniquely recovered its production costs whilst still showing at the cinema in London's West End where it had been premiered. This endeared him to the powerful Rank Organisation who made eight films altogether of his works, which were followed by a then record-breaking TV series, and further stage productions.

Richard Gordon's books have been translated into twenty languages.

He married a doctor and they had four children, two of whom became house surgeons. He now lives in London.

At eight o'clock on a June morning of gauzy London sunshine, the dean of St Swithin's Hospital settled at his study desk, clicked down his ballpoint, and with an expression of intense solemnity started to write.

The tragic death yesterday of Sir Lancelot Spratt FRCS, senior surgeon at St Swithin's, leaves a gap which is only too obvious.

The dean frowned. No, that didn't seem right at all. And it wasn't every day a man found himself writing for the columns of the country's top newspaper. He stared for some time in thought through the open first-floor window of his new home, across a small walled back garden lively with blue delphiniums, pink and yellow lupins and scarlet salvias, towards the exuberantly variegated buildings of St Swithin's itself. Abruptly slashing out the lines, he started again.

The tragic death yesterday of Sir Lancelot Spratt FRCS, senior surgeon at St Swithin's, removes a highly colourful figure from not only the operating theatre but the theatre of life.

Much better! the dean decided. Quite literary, in fact. With more confidence he continued:

Sir Lancelot's rumbustious personality endeared him to many, though admittedly his close colleagues at St Swithin's sometimes found it trying. His dominating mannerisms, such as hurling surgical instruments – once, an amputated leg! – at nurses and students, were unfortunately not restricted to the operating table. He was always liable to be somewhat rough-tongued. Indeed, downright bad-tempered. One could even go so far as calling him outrageously pig-headed. Not to mention aggravatingly self-centred and quite painfully self-opinionated. Oh, yes, he had a sense of humour – or so he claimed. But it was the humour of the schoolroom, I should have said the lower fourth –

'Oh, damn!' The dean ripped the paper in two.

'*De mortuis nil nisi bonum* and all that rubbish, I suppose. Though I really don't see why a man's kicking the bucket should oblige his friends to turn themselves into a bunch of hypocrites.'

The door opened, and he was interrupted by his wife appearing with a tray. 'There you are, Lionel! I wondered where on earth you'd got to. I've brought up your second cup of coffee, as you just disappeared from breakfast like a flash.'

'I thought I'd better get on with Sir Lancelot's obituary notice straight away.'

'Oh!' She too assumed a befittingly reverent look. 'It must be an unhappy task.'

'Unhappy? It's utterly impossible! How can anyone draw a reasonably accurate picture of Lancelot without seeming insulting to his memory? You might try writing a history of Jack the Ripper while delicately avoiding the subject of homicide.'

'Couldn't you concentrate on his nicer qualities?'

'I can't think of any offhand.'

'Let me see... "He was an accomplished after-dinner speaker"?''

'Rubbish. He only had one joke, and I had to hear it about five hundred times.'

'"He was a charming and generous host"?''

The dean snorted into his coffee. He was a short, gnome-like man with a pointed bald head, who sat bouncing gently in his chair – his habit during the flashes of exasperation from the explosive little storms which blew so regularly through his life.

'Why, it was only last month he gave that delightful party for the students' union ball, which we all enjoyed so much,' the dean's wife said.

'I didn't enjoy it. I happen particularly to dislike the students' union ball. They all become far too familiar and expect me to pay for their drinks. I should have avoided it altogether this year, had Muriel not been president of the union.'

'It really is awfully difficult to think of Lancelot as "the late". All our married life I've always regarded him as completely indestructible, like the Himalayas.'

The dean gave a sigh. 'It comes to us all, I suppose, Josephine. However much one tries to suppress it, this sort of task does give one a distinctly chilly feeling up and down the spine.'

'But it's Lancelot's obituary, dear, not your own.'

'Nevertheless, it brings home rather forcefully that all men are mortal and medical science is on occasion inclined to be somewhat unreliable.' He fluttered a hand. "'Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee... The paths of glory lead but to the grave... *Ars longa, vita brevis...*" All that sort of thing, you know.'

'But Lionel, darling!' Josephine was a tall, good-looking, dark-haired, kind-hearted woman, whose soft grey eyes now filmed over with compassion. 'You're still a comparatively young man.'

'I'm a deal older than you.' The dean took off his large round glasses and polished them vigorously. 'You were really so young when we married, Josephine – in those days, quite a child-bride. Now of course girls seem to start raising families between sitting their O-level papers. I suppose it's because they get more meat in their diet, or something.'

Standing behind his chair, she looped her arms gently across his shoulders. 'Promise me you won't entertain any more of those gloomy thoughts?'

'But it's difficult, my dear. I must admit, that for some time now I've had feelings of... well, the utter pointlessness of life. Its complete futility. Surely you must have noticed something about me?'

'I put it down to your old rheumatism playing up.'

'Why are we here? What is our use? From the neonatal cry to the death-rattle?'

'Lionel – !'

'We are but leaves which fall in autumn, to be tidied up and turned into smoke drifting hopefully in the direction of Heaven.'

'Lionel! You're upsetting me.'

'Life goes on like an alarm-clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...then suddenly

dingalingalingaling.'

~~'Lionel! This lovely morning, too.'~~ He leant back on the comforting elasticity of her substantial bosom. 'But quite apart from being a physician, and doing so much good for people, you've led such a successful life.'

'Perhaps that's the trouble? By middle-age I've achieved my ambitions. Every single one. That's the Devil's own punishment for an able man.'

'Aren't you proud of your new knighthood?'

'It only opens another hole in your pocket,' he said churlishly. 'Everyone seems to imagine that because you've got a title you're rolling in it. Anyway, there suddenly seem to be knights everywhere, as thick on the ground as traffic wardens. I remember it was just the same when I qualified. The entire world suddenly seemed populated exclusively with doctors. Odd. Anyway, this came in the morning post. It might possibly provide me with some fresh interest in life.'

He reached for a letter on crested House of Commons paper. Josephine read it over his shoulder.

Dear Lionel,

Can I possibly buy you lunch one day very soon? Today, if you like. A matter of great importance and urgency has arisen in one of my committees. I think you might very well be interested.

As ever,

Frankie.

'That sounds promising, dear. Perhaps the chairmanship of a royal commission?'

'Knowing Frankie, more like the chairmanship of a local political garden party. But I'll get my secretary to phone.' He dropped the letter back on his desk. 'It's always fun to see old Frankie again.'

His wife removed her arms, he thought a shade abruptly. 'If you ask me, you're only getting these quite unjustified feelings of uselessness because our two children have grown up and are leaving home.'

'Ah! A delightful feminine over-simplification. Though I must say it's strange to think of young George as married, and living in Sweden – and God knows what the pair of them are getting up to, judging by the Swedish film posters plastered all over London. And now Muriel's almost a qualified doctor...'

The dean's eye softened as it fell on their elder child's photograph beside the pad of lined foolscap on his desk. His daughter Muriel took after her mother, but the dark hair was drawn back severely to display an intellectual brow, the full lips, which could look as inviting as fresh strawberries, were set in an austere line, and the soft, dreamy eyes seemed to be studying some fascinating rash on the nose of the photographer. 'I suppose we must be grateful she's turned out such a level-headed, serious-minded girl. Not like some of these sex-mad flibbertigibbets you find among the female students these days – even in St Swithin's, I'm ashamed to say. I do so hope she wins the gold medal in clinical medicine.' His tone was heartfelt. 'It's just bad luck she's got such opposition this year. Young Sharpewhistle, you know. The man's perfectly abnormal. An intellectual freak. His brains quite frighten me, sometimes, in the wards.' The dean busily

clicked his ballpoint several times. 'Well, my dear, I must get on. Before I go to the hospital I must get Sir Lancelot sewn up, as it were. What are you doing this morning?'

'Monday's my day for physiotherapy.'

'I was forgetting. I hope that girl in St Swithin's is doing you good? Thank heavens I never let Lancelot succeed in looking at that back of yours! He'd have had a dirty great slit down it in no time at all. Absolute sadists, these surgeons. I suppose that's what drives them to take up such an abnormal occupation at all.'

Once alone, the dean warmed to his task. With the help of *Who's Who* and the *Medical Directory* he rapidly covered four of the foolscap pages, which he read through with a satisfaction approaching smugness. It really was awfully good, he decided. And who knows? he wondered, slipping the paper into an envelope. The editor might be sufficiently impressed to invite him to contribute future articles on a somewhat less specialized topic. For a substantial fee, of course. Envelope in hand, the dean hurried downstairs. He collected his hat and briefcase in the narrow hallway. He called a goodbye to his wife. He opened his front door and stepped into the morning sunshine.

The front door led down a short flight of steps directly on to the pavement. The dean lived in No 2 Lazar Row, the middle of three newly-built joined together three-storey houses which occupied a short cul-de-sac against the walls of the hospital itself. To his left as he emerged, the door of No 3 was ajar. Its householder stood on the front step, a bundle of letters in his hand, sniffing the air while gathering his morning post. He was almost fully dressed, with formal striped trousers, a white shirt and a St Swithin's tie, though wearing instead of a jacket a scarlet silk dressing-gown decorated with large, fearsome golden dragons.

'Morning, Lancelot,' called the dean cheerfully. 'Charming day.'

Sir Lancelot Spratt grunted.

'I'll be seeing you in the hospital at lunch?'

'Doubtless.'

The dean braced his shoulders. 'I must say, I feel I've done one good day's work already. A splendid feeling to start the week. Eh?'

'I should myself much prefer to be spending the morning watching cricket at Lord's.'

'Then why not?' urged the dean. 'Why not play truant? We must snatch our pleasures while we can. Who knows? You may be taken from us this very afternoon.'

'That eventuality was not foremost in my plans for the day.'

'Well, I must be off. There's always a lot of medical school business to get through before my ward round. So convenient, isn't it, being able to stroll from one's home to one's work? I honestly don't know how I put up with that dreadful West End traffic for so long, when we lived near Harley Street. Quite the shrewdest thing I ever did in my life, moving here next door to you.' Sir Lancelot glared. The dean tipped up his chin and took a deep breath. The warm sunshine and the knowledge of the paper in his pocket had momentarily melted his inner gloom. 'A morning like this, Lancelot – doesn't it make you feel glad that you're alive?'

'I have no idea how I should feel were I experiencing the alternative.'

'I mean, doesn't it fill you with *joie de vivre*? Make you think life's worth living? After all, our time is short—'

Sir Lancelot had shut the door.

The dean hurried away with a thoughtful frown. Really, the fellow's becoming surlier than ever, he decided. He had known Sir Lancelot since he had himself been a house physician and Sir Lancelot the St Swithin's resident surgical officer. He had long ago discovered – or as the dean would himself have put it, had bitterly suffered – all the surgeon's idiosyncrasies. But over the past four weeks, since about the time of the students' union May ball, a distinct change for the worse had come over his neighbour. He had seemed more withdrawn, the dean felt. Preoccupied with something. Nervous, ready to jump at a sudden sound, quite unlike his usual unshakable self.

He remembered how Sir Lancelot's eye, when you were talking to him, sometimes wandered as though searching for someone who wasn't there. Very sinister. Once the dean had overheard him talking to himself in his garden, extremely loudly. Premature senility, the dean thought sombrely. Softening of the brain. After all those years of self-indulgence, Sir Lancelot's arteries must be so hardened it was a wonder he didn't crackle when he moved. The dean's bouncy step turned through the hospital gates into the main courtyard. It was sad, but...well, he had been prudent, writing that obituary the very morning the editor's letter requesting it had arrived.

Sir Lancelot too had a first-floor study overlooking the walled rear garden, which had a tiny close-cropped lawn, orderly pink and white rose bushes, and variously coloured stocks arranged as neatly as chocolates in a box. He stood in the middle of the study floor, still in his dressing-gown, reading the first of his letters through half-moon glasses. He slowly stroked his beard for some moments in thought. He raised his thick gingery eyebrows. He reached his decision. With a sigh he sat at his desk, which was separated from the dean's by only a few inches of brickwork.

'I suppose one has one's duty. Even if it is sometimes a depressing and possibly a painful one.' Sir Lancelot uncapped his fountain-pen and reached for a pad of lined foolscap. 'Might as well get on with it here and now, I suppose.'

In bold, flowing hand Sir Lancelot began:

The tragic death yesterday of Sir Lionel Lychfield FRCP, dean of St Swithin's, was an event of more importance to his small circle of friends than to the world at large.

Sir Lancelot grunted. No, that wouldn't do. He crossed out the words and tried again.

The tragic death yesterday of Sir Lionel Lychfield FRCP, dean of St Swithin's, will grieve the many who admired him only through reputation even more than the few privileged to know him personally.

His pen scratched on powerfully. He had always felt a talent for that sort of prose.

The main courtyard of St Swithin's Hospital was separated from a busy north London shopping street of stereotyped ugliness by a line of tall, stout, spiked iron railings, from which the students occasionally suspended banners announcing rag week or their objection to aspects of the political situation, or unpopular members of their own fraternity by their trousers. Inside were half a dozen venerable plane-trees and a pair of statues in memory of the hospital's distinguished Victorian sons – Lord Larrymore, a physician like the dean, who claimed to have discovered the cause of tuberculosis had he not been forestalled by a bunch of damn foreigners like Robert Koch. And Sir Benjamin Bone, a surgeon like Sir Lancelot Spratt, who would have been appointed to Her Majesty's household had the Queen not found his bluff, jolly bedside manner not at all amusing.

The ascetic-looking Lord Larrymore sat in academic robes with an expression of querulousness, left hand forever extended, as though arguing some arcane clinical point across the courtyard with Sir Benjamin. They had not in fact spoken during the final twenty years of their lives, following some complicated quarrel of which they and everyone else had forgotten the cause, communicating with bleakly polite notes transmitted by a hospital porter employed expressly for the purpose. Sir Benjamin stood in full-skirted frock-coat, a cocked head and quizzical expression as he eyed the skull in his huge hand suggesting an aging Hamlet with difficulty in hearing the prompter. Few of the busy hospital passers-by spared them a glance or a thought. Only the London pigeons continued to give them generous attention.

Even the patch of sickly-looking grass between them had now gone, cars and ambulances jamming the broad arena where once consultants clattered over the cobbles behind livened coachmen in their broughams and victorias, and their patients arrived less obtrusively, borne by the neighbours on a window-shutter. The dean hurried up the flight of stone steps to the plate-glass front doors leading to the main hall, briefly nodded good-morning to Harry the porter in his glass box, then made briskly towards his office along the wide, rubber-floored main corridor. Day and night this was always busy with hospital staff, patients on stretchers and wheelchairs, cylinders of oxygen, containers of food, trollies carrying everything from bottles of blood to the morning papers, and emitting a faint, ineradicable smell of phenol and distant long-stewing greens, to old St Swithin's men as hauntingly nostalgic as the perfume of some lost, first love.

At that moment the dean's daughter Muriel was sitting just some fifty yards away in the medical school library. She looked at her large wristwatch with its sweep second hand for the twenty-second time that morning. She bit her lip, suppressing her impatience. The moment was not yet ripe. She must control herself. Otherwise, she couldn't effectively put the carefully thought-out plan into operation.

During her final year as a medical student, Muriel generally left home in the morning before her father. She liked to hang about the casualty department, or nose round the wards – the patients conveniently being roused and exposed to medical attention since well before six a.m. – in the hope of coming upon instructive cases before the other

students began crowding about. Sometimes she disappeared to the library, the gift of a Victorian brewer, with its riotously carved pale oak, vaulted ceilings and almost opaque leaded windows, then thought the necessary background to piety, justice, learning or the medical treatment of paupers. She sat in a bay lined with books, at a table with piled bound volumes of the *British Medical Journal* and *Lancet*, propped open in front of her *Recent Advances in Medicine*, at its side a note-book. That morning she had neither made a note nor read a word. She stared at the printed page through large round metal-rimmed glasses, like the dean's, as unseeing as a nervous patient behind a waiting-room magazine.

Muriel looked at her watch again. Two minutes and a half to nine o'clock. She stood up abruptly. Zero hour. If her timing was correct, running over the ground the morning before, she should arrive at her target precisely at the opportune moment.

She shut the volume of *Recent Advances*. She looked round anxiously. She was still alone. It was early for even a conscientious student to be found in the library, but some girl from her own year might easily have looked in to check some facts, then casually attached herself as Muriel left, ruining the whole scheme. She took off her reading-glasses and slipped them with her notebook into a capacious brown handbag. For a second her fingertips stayed in the depths. It was still there, of course. She fancied it was still even warm.

With a brisk step, Muriel turned towards the library door. She was tall, like her mother, her feet in flat shoes rather too large. Her plain brown dress was new, but like all her clothes seemed to belong to the fashion before last. Her hair was gathered into an untidy ponytail by a twisted rubber band. She was slim – when inspecting herself in her bedroom mirror on the top floor of the dean's house, as she had so frequently over the past few weeks, she had to agree that her anatomy, though no different from any other girl's, was tastefully distributed. It was a conclusion which frightened her a little. Had she tried, she could have made herself look as inviting as any of the hundreds of young women working at St Swithin's. But she told her mother she hadn't the time, and her father agreed beautification was quite unnecessary, the male students at St Swithin's being as indiscriminating as a bunch of sex maniacs newly liberated from Broadmoor.

Muriel left the library for the courtyard, but turned away from the steps of the main hospital entrance. St Swithin's had grown as haphazardly as London itself, and in the four hundred years of its existence had thrown up buildings which met in awkward corners and narrow passages all over its irregular site. She followed a flagstoned alleyway beside the Georgian maternity department, skirted the brand-new sixteen-floor steel-and-glass surgical block and with a quick glance over her shoulder made towards the red-brick baronial battlements housing the pathology laboratories. She hurried past the gothic front door, and with another apprehensive glance turned round the back, then briskly mounted the black metal fire-escape. The door leading into the third floor was slightly ajar. She had left it so the previous afternoon.

Muriel glanced right and left. The dim, bleak, green-painted passage was empty. She walked to a frosted-glass door at the end, marked in red CLINICAL PATHOLOGY. She tapped.

'Come in.'

She opened it. Mr Winterflood, pipe clamped between his teeth, tartan scarf round his

neck, was just taking off his fawn raincoat. Her timing had been superb, Muriel thought. ~~As efficient as everything else she did – well, almost everything else, she supposed, in the circumstances.~~

‘Well! It’s Miss Lychfield. And how’s the dean keeping?’

‘He seems very well, thank you, Mr Winterflood. I’m sorry to catch you just as you’ve arrived.’

‘Wait a sec. I’ll get my white coat on.’ He unwound the scarf. ‘Got to wrap up well, you know. Some of these bright mornings are treacherous. I mean, for a man with all my complaints. “A walking pathological museum”, the dean once called me. Though I expect he can hardly wait to get me downstairs on the post-mortem table. Eh?’

He gave a laugh, and taking a match from the pocket of his thick woollen khaki cardigan filled the small, untidy laboratory with smoke. The chief technician was a small fat man with a thick insanitary-looking moustache and abnormally bright red cheeks. He had been a patient of St Swithin’s since childhood, and if he had succeeded in rising from the severely-drilled ranks in the wards to the hospital staff itself, this was less through his abilities than his doctors’ concern to keep track of him until they could discover exactly what the devil had been going on in his inside.

‘I’ve got a specimen.’ Muriel opened her bag as he pulled on his white coat. ‘I thought I’d bring it up myself.’

‘From one of your patients, is it?’

‘Well, yes. Or rather, well, no. That is, it’s from a friend.’ She produced from her bag a small screw-capped hospital specimen bottle filled with straw-coloured fluid.

‘What’s it for?’ Mr Winterflood held the bottle to the light with a knowing eye. ‘Sugar and albumen?’

‘Well, er, no. Pregnancy.’

‘Ah.’ He put the bottle with a flourish on the laboratory workbench. ‘That simple little specimen, it’s like a bomb, isn’t it? Could change the shape of two people’s lives overnight. I’m a philosophical chap. I often think about that. Some of the ladies, they go into tears of joy knowing that they’re at last going to have a little one. Others...a terrible state they get into. Threaten suicide maybe. Do it sometimes, for all I know. Not so much these days, of course, when such matters can be rectified through the proper channels. But it still puts a fair cat among the pigeons. Strange, isn’t it? Same event, different reaction. As I always say about this life, it’s not what happens to you, it’s the way you look at it. Now, if the Prime Minister took my advice—’

‘When will you have the result?’

‘This evening do you?’

‘I’ll come up.’

‘Don’t bother, Miss. I’ll phone your friend.’

‘She’s not on the telephone.’

‘Oh. Married, is she?’

‘No.’

‘Ah. I see. Might be awkward, leaving a message. She thinks she’s in the pudding club, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Far gone?’

'Not very. In fact, she's not *really* sure. That's why she sent the specimen.'

~~'Nothing like it for making a girl proper impatient, eh?' He lit his pipe again.~~

'That's right.'

'What's the naughty little lady's name?'

'Smith.'

'Come on!'

'Must you really have her name? She's a...very old friend.'

'I must, Miss. Lab regulations. All specimens must be clearly labelled with the patient's name, age and ward. What would happen if the professor came in and found the bottle? Could get me in the cart good and proper. Or he might easily decide to do this very test himself, to demonstrate to the students. He'd have to read out the patient's name—'

Already tense with the anxieties of the morning, Muriel felt her head swim. 'Mr Winterflood, I particularly want *you* to do that test. The professor mustn't come near it. You see, it's mine.'

'Oh.' Mr Winterflood picked up the bottle again and inspected it with more reverence.

'Please will you do this for me?' Muriel implored. 'Of course, it may well be negative. But even so, I don't want the news of it to get about the hospital. Surely you can see that?'

'Don't worry, Miss. You can rely on my professional discretion. I'll mark your name on it in pencil, and rub it out immediately afterwards. How's that?'

Muriel looked nervously at her watch. She had chosen her moment carefully, before the professor usually arrived. But he could walk in any time, and he was an old friend of her father's who had punctured her as a baby with her immunizing injections. It was essential he knew nothing of it. 'That sounds a very sensible arrangement, Mr Winterflood. I must run along now, but I'll be back at five-thirty.'

'Right you are. Let's hope it's just a false alarm, eh?'

Muriel hurried down the fire-escape and retraced her path to the courtyard. She still had twenty minutes before appearing in the wards for her father's teaching round. She had been allotted an interesting case of thyrotoxicosis, and particularly wanted to shine as she presented it to the class. But it was difficult to think adequately about work, or about anything, with that little bottle in Mr Winterflood's laboratory deciding the shape of her entire life to come. As she mounted the stone steps, a voice called her name.

Muriel spun round. 'Tulip? Where had you got to? I haven't seen you since the night of the union ball.

'Oh, I had my midder to finish, then I went to Torremolinos for a fortnight.'

'But how super. Have a good time?'

'Oh, great. All those dreamy pink Scandinavians working off a lifetime's inhibitions as their epidermis peeled in the sun.'

The two girls pushed open the plate-glass doors. Tulip Twyson was neither shapelier nor better looking than Muriel, but her skill in making the most of basic ingredients was like an experienced French chef against a suburban housewife. Her long blonde hair hung loose, her rather sharp face was fashionably tanned, and she wore skirts so short that the dean was continually mystified at the rate the male members of his bedside classes managed to drop their pencils.

'Tulip,' asked Muriel. 'Will you do me a tremendous favour? If anyone asks, say I

spent the night after the May ball in your flat.'

Tulip raised her eyebrows. 'No problem. But who was it?'

'I'd rather not say.'

'OK. What was he like as a performer?'

'Oh...well...I wouldn't know.'

'You mean, you'd passed out?'

'No, not at all. But you see, Tulip...and this is something I'd only tell *you*... I'd never done it before. Ever.'

'Virtuous you.'

'I've never seemed to have the time.' She looked apologetic. 'All my life, I've devoted myself to my work. That's partly through Father, I suppose. You know how severe he is. He thinks I ought to qualify – even win the gold medal – before I start thinking about men.'

'He's like those schoolmistresses who told you masturbation ruins your hockey. Personally, I always found it less exhausting and very much warmer.'

'I know I'm an adult. Why, I'm almost middle-aged compared with some girls I've known who've got married. But I've a career to make. I'm determined on that, you know. I'd really love to be the first female consultant ever elected to the St Swithin's staff.'

'We all have our strange ambitions, love.'

'After all, my father is the dean, and he'd help. That sort of thing goes on all the time at St Swithin's. But he certainly wouldn't if he thought I'd let him down.'

'A pity nothing came of your thing with lovely little Terry Summerbee.'

'That was the trouble. He was a bit too lovely. Other girls got their claws into him while I was toiling over my books.'

They walked along the main corridor for a moment in silence.

'Tulip–' Muriel burst out. 'Tulip, I'm very worried.'

'Oh, you'll win that gold medal, I'm sure.'

'I'm worried that something went wrong. After the ball.'

Tulip stopped. 'Are you overdue?'

'Just about.'

'But didn't you take precautions?'

'Of course. Or rather, he did. In fact, he took two. One on top of the other.'

'H'm...those things can let you down, you know. They say there's a twenty per cent failure rate, though God knows how the statisticians get the figures. Crawl round pub car parks on Saturday nights, I suppose. But aren't you on the pill, and safe for good and all?'

'You don't always carry an umbrella if you live in the desert.'

'No, I suppose not. Well, pregnancy is an eminently curable condition these days.'

'But think of the complications! My father–'

'He needn't know.'

'He will.'

'Well, that's your problem, I suppose.' Tulip was running out of sympathy. 'After the union ball, eh? I must say, you seem to have taken your duties as president rather too seriously.'

'I'd never have done what I did, I'm sure, except I'd been drinking a lot of champagne'

with our party. And I did in fact ask the advice of someone very mature and experienced.'

'What did she say?' Tulip was curious.

'It wasn't a she. It was...another doctor. He said to go ahead and enjoy it. Otherwise, when I did qualify I'd be so busy catching up lost time I'd make Fanny Hill look like Florence Nightingale.' Muriel stopped dead. Immediately ahead, approaching down the corridor, was her mother. Muriel's brain was so strained that morning, she imagined confusedly that her secret trip to Mr Winterflood had already somehow leaked out to the dean. 'I only went up to check on a blood-sugar,' she said at once.

'What's that, dear? Hello, Tulip, you look as though you've been lying under a hot sun somewhere.'

'What are you doing here?' Muriel demanded.

'I'm only a patient,' her mother replied mildly. 'I've come for my physiotherapy. But are you all right, dear? You look as though you'd just remembered you'd left a cupboardful of instruments inside a patient.'

'I...I was thinking. About Daddy's teaching round.'

'Oh, yes, it's almost time, isn't it? And by the way, when he shows you a young man in the corner with puzzling neuritis, the real diagnosis is acute porphyria. He was talking about it in his sleep.'

Muriel and Tulip went on towards the wards. But Muriel had one more task yet that trying morning. Making some excuse, she doubled back towards the students' common-room. There were a handful of male students there, standing admiringly round Edgar Sharpewhistle.

The young man's intellectual fame had by then spread far beyond St Swithin's. As a contestant in the television show *IQ Quiz* he could display his massive brain-power at peak viewing time every Thursday night to some ten million rapt if mystified spectators. Never a man slavishly to court popularity, Sharpewhistle was gratified at the interest shown in him by his fellows, and their new solicitude for his bodily health and mental tranquillity. He felt he had been perfectly right in imagining, since his arrival at St Swithin's as a junior student, that his personal qualities had been overlooked by his contemporaries, often deliberately.

'The last question was really very simple,' he was explaining. 'The old odd-word game. You pick the odd word out of five. The answer, you might remember, was "Loathsome". It was just a matter of noticing that the number of letters between the first and last of each word was three times that of the letters in the word plus three. See? "Loathsome" didn't fit into the series. No trouble, really. Took me eighteen seconds by the clock.'

'And you're through to the next round?' asked a tall, elegant student called Roger Duckham.

'That's it. Mind you, it gets tougher as it goes along.'

'What do you think your chances are of actually picking up the final prize, Edgar?'

'You mean the thousand quid, specially selected library and a trip for two to the Bahamas—'

'Plus a year's supply of some ghastly minced fish instant dinners, I believe?'

'Well, yes,' said Sharpewhistle shamefacedly.

'That's from the firm behind it really. Fish for brains, and those old wives' tales, you

know. A pretty good chance, I'd have thought.'

~~'You mean, you honestly don't know the questions in advance? Not even a hint? Nothing faked at all?'~~ Sharpewhistle looked indignant. 'Well, I hope you win it, Edgar. Very much indeed. I'm sure we all do. Don't we?'

The others agreed warmly. Sharpewhistle was unable to hide a look of pleasure, Roger Duckham having taken pains to be exquisitely arrogant towards him for years. 'I'm only doing it all for the honour of St Swithin's, of course.'

'Of course,' Roger agreed. 'Particularly as we got trounced in the rigger cup. No one who knows you, Edgar, would ever believe you wanted anything out of it yourself. Not even the fish dinners. You keep at it for the sake of us all.' He had noticed Muriel sidle into the room, and smiled at her. Everyone knew of the bitter, sometimes only faintly masked rivalry between her and Sharpewhistle over the examination for the gold medal.

'Time to go and look round before the dean's class.' Sharpewhistle picked his short white coat from a row of hooks on the wall. The brainiest student at St Swithin's was, like such other exceptionally intelligent men as Voltaire or Dr Johnston, not of a handsome presence. He was short, almost a midget, with a flat head, sandy hair drawn forward into a quiff, and a pale moustache which drooped dispiritedly over the corners of his mouth. His complexion was pink and shining, as though he had just been lifted from a pan of boiling water. His voice was squeaky and he had an armpit problem. He was dressed in plain grey trousers and a dark blue blazer with a St Swithin's crest, a throat-torch and three ballpoints in different colours arranged neatly in the pocket.

'Got your thyroid all lined up, then?' Sharpewhistle asked Muriel.

'Yes, I hope so.'

'Good. I'd like to have a quick feel of it before the round, if I may.'

'Of course.' Muriel looked quickly behind. She dropped her voice. 'I've taken the specimen up.'

'When'll you hear?'

'Half past five.'

'We'll have to wait, then, won't we?' Answering IQ questions on television had given him an admirable calmness in emergency.

As the dean arrived breathless outside his wards after trotting up four flights of stairs – he thought the exercise beneficial to the coronary arteries – Sir Lancelot was still in his study coming to the end of his literary exercise.

He is survived by his wife, Josephine, a lady of charm, tact, wide intellect, grace, good taste and generosity, whose qualities so felicitously counter-balanced his own. There are two children, one of whom follows him in the profession.>

Sir Lancelot turned back the four pages and read them closely, fountain-pen poised. But apart from a comma or two, there was really no need for alteration. He congratulated himself on so stylish a depiction of the dean's personal qualities. He supposed these had been rubbed in his face hard enough, since they had first shared cold, late meals and midnight cups of coffee as overworked residents at St Swithin's.

Sir Lancelot suddenly looked up. He straightened himself, as his body froze. His eyebrows quivered. His mouth opened. His eyes flicked anxiously from side to side. The pen started to shake violently in his hand.

'Pull yourself together...!' he muttered.

He managed to set down the pen, sitting for a moment with head in hands. With an effort, he slowly turned round in the chair, his expression indicating barely-suppressed horror at what he might see.

The study was empty.

Sir Lancelot forced himself to his feet. He squared his shoulders. With a determined stride, he looked behind a tall, wooden roll-fronted filing cabinet. Nothing. He pushed aside the single easy chair beneath the reading-lamp. An empty space. There was no more furniture in the small room, but he gingerly reached out to feel behind the curtains. No. He was alone.

'Imagination, I suppose.' He took out a red-and-white handkerchief to mop his broad forehead. 'Still, it gave me a most unpleasant turn...' His large frame shuddered. 'It must be the effect of the chronic strain these last four weeks, getting me down.' He glanced at the bracket clock in the corner, startled to see the time already past ten. He had been carried away by his literary task, and the harrowing appointment of the morning was now pressing. 'Better get going,' he went on to himself. 'Can't funk it, I suppose. Though it takes it out of a man, suffering so many weird new experiences at my age.'

Sir Lancelot slipped the dean's obituary into a desk drawer. He had thought of posting it to the editor straight away, but felt some improvements might occur to him, some little flourishes which might raise it to a classical example of its art-form. He crossed the landing to his dressing-room, changing the golden dragons for a formal black jacket. He walked sedately downstairs to face the blue-overall-covered backside of Miss Fiona MacNish, his much cherished housekeeper, who was polishing the hall floor.

'I shall be dining at home tonight.'

The housekeeper straightened up. She was a freckle-faced, sandy-haired Aberdonian, whose frank green eyes and open smile suggested white heather, buttered scones, teetotal Sundays and similar exemplary, wholesome items from north of the border. 'I thought you might like some tripe and onions.'

Sir Lancelot nodded. His favourite dish.

'And if you're in for tea, I was going to make some fresh hot buttered baps.'

'I shall, alas, be kept at the hospital this afternoon. I am taking the morning off.'

'A morning off? That's most unusual for you, Sir Lancelot, isn't it – ?' She stopped. His eyes had started to roll and his shoulders to twitch. 'Are you all right, Sir Lancelot?' she asked with deep concern.

'It's nothing, nothing...' He stared anxiously round the small hallway. He produced the handkerchief again to mop his face. 'A spasm. Lot of it about this time of the year.'

'You haven't been yourself at all, you know. Not for weeks now. Not since that lovely champagne party you gave for the students' ball. I've been really worried about you, I don't mind admitting. I think you ought to go and see a doctor.'

'Oh, I've no faith in the medical profession. It's a touch of migraine, perhaps. Nothing to worry about.' He picked up his black homburg. 'Should anyone telephone, I am spending the morning conducting family business with my solicitors in the City.'

'Very good, Sir Lancelot.'

The surgeon stepped outside. Well, he thought, at least it's a pleasant day. Almost makes one forget the dreadful humiliation. He started to walk along the cul-de-sac, extremely slowly.

St Swithin's Hospital owned Lazar Row, the site of its sixteenth-century lazar house, where the lepers were segregated and allowed abroad only with bells or clappers to keep terrified uninfected fellow citizens at bay. When leprosy disappeared from Europe a hundred years later, the building was made over to smallpox sufferers, visited by fashionable physicians in buckskin breeches and gilt-buttoned satin coats, wigs and three-cornered hats, and gold-headed canes from which they anxiously inhaled aromatic and hopefully disinfectant herbs concealed therein. After Edward Jenner and his Gloucestershire dairymaids the lazar house fell empty, and becoming dilapidated was used for rabies sufferers and other violent lunatics, on the workmanlike theory that they would be totally unaware of their surroundings anyway. In late Victorian days, it was, like most of St Swithin's, rebuilt in the bright red brick which served with such cheerful adaptability for colleges, chapels or railway-stations, to become the isolation wards – the 'Fever Hospital', a piece of standing scenery in the nightmares of local children, to whom the stoutly-porticoed front door served only too often as the jaws of Moloch.

When antibiotics began to tame infections after the Second World War the building was turned over to the accommodation of junior nurses, and becoming too tumbledown even for this purpose was demolished. The residential area round St Swithin's, having become déclassé, was now réchauffé, with its experimental theatre, amusing little restaurants and boutiques instead of shops. A little guiltily, the hospital built the three comfortable houses on the bones of its lazars, with the excuse that the complexities of modern medicine required a senior consultant always near at hand. They were taken up eagerly, the rent being hardly more than peppercorns.

Each house had its top floor as a self-contained flat, Muriel occupying the one in the

dean's home and Miss MacNish that in Sir Lancelot's. The surgeon made a point of showing his professional visitors the stout front door at the top of his staircase, Miss MacNish being comely, himself a widower, and doctors through long experience of mankind having incorrigibly dirty minds. From the top-floor flat of No 1, the house nearest the main road, a pair of large, well made-up blue eyes were at that moment watching Sir Lancelot closely as he ambled along the pavement.

'Well – !' breathed the owner of the eyes. 'And what does the old fool expect everyone to imagine he's up to?'

It was a morning of mysterious movement for the inhabitants of Lazar Row. Sir Lancelot stopped at the corner. He took out his half-hunter, put it back, clasped his hands behind his back, and stared at the sky as if weighing the chances of rain. He edged a glance over his shoulder. The row was empty. He abruptly strode towards the front door of No 1, taking off his hat and holding it in front of his face.

The woman with the blue eyes had already reached the foot of the staircase as he rang the bell.

'Good morning, Sir Lancelot.'

'Not late, I hope?' He pushed his way hastily inside, shutting the door behind him.

'It's ten-fifteen exactly.' She awarded his punctuality with a smile. She was tall, slim and fair-skinned, her blonde hair clearly tended at great expense, her make-up indicating a good deal of early morning labour, her dress simple but in the latest style. Sir Lancelot put her in the late twenties. He thought of her as the icily efficient type of modern secretary, the sort who bestowed even amiability with the measured care of a physician prescribing drugs. At that moment the lively opening bars of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik* came on the violin from immediately upstairs.

'I suppose he *is* expecting me, Mrs Tennant?' asked Sir Lancelot anxiously.

'Of course.' She looked reproachful. 'He has been feeling a little disturbed this morning.' Sir Lancelot followed her to the first floor. The music stopped in mid-bar as she announced, 'Dr Bonaccord, Sir Lancelot is here.'

Dr Bonaccord stood up, one hand outstretched, violin and bow in the other. 'A great pleasure, my dear fellow. We don't see nearly enough of each other. I don't think I've ever thanked you properly for that delightful champagne party, which my secretary and I enjoyed so much. It's the very first time you've set foot in this house, I believe? We really are a most unneighbourly lot in Lazar Row. Gisela, do take my violin and put it away, there's a good girl.'

'I was unaware that you were a talented amateur musician.'

'Alas, I am a very indifferent one. But I find it soothing whenever I'm in danger of developing a bad temper. "What passion cannot music raise and quell", eh? Do sit down.'

Dr Bonaccord was chubby, with pale eyes and light chestnut hair fashionably cut. He was in his early thirties. He wore an expensive dark suit which Sir Lancelot thought more suitable for a luminary of the acting profession than the medical one, with a brightly-patterned shirt and a flashy tie. He had severe-looking rimless glasses under a bulging forehead, and his face had a pinkish tinge to it. Sir Lancelot always thought of him as a highly intellectual strawberry blancmange.

Like the dean's and Sir Lancelot's studies, the room was small and overlooked a garden, which was largely filled with a hothouse containing orchids and rare pinguicula

plants from South America reputed to eat flies. The walls were a cheerful primrose, the carpet and curtains mossy green, the furniture Sir Lancelot dismissed vaguely as 'Scandinavian'. In one corner was a small white statue which struck him as a boiled egg suspended by spaghetti, in another a crystal vase crammed with crimson, budding roses.

The door shut behind the secretary. Sir Lancelot continued to stare round. 'No couch?'

'I've dispensed with that prop of the comic cartoons. You'll be perfectly comfortable in the easy chair. You can put your feet up on the little pouffe.'

Sir Lancelot sat down obediently, folding his hands across his expansive stomach. He was almost horizontal, facing across the room with only the top of his head visible to Dr Bonaccord. Well, the moment has finally arrived, the surgeon thought. In a way, it was a relief. Though he still thought psychiatry the last refuge of the incompetent doctor, and Bonaccord himself as further round the bend than an acrobat's umbilicus. But desperate illnesses needed desperate remedies.

'You will not, of course, breathe a word to our colleagues at St Swithin's that I have consulted you today?'

'Naturally, I preserve professional discretion about all my patients.' Dr Bonaccord sounded hurt. 'Though I am at a loss, if I might say so, why people should hide the fact they have seen a psychiatrist. If you break a leg, you go openly enough to an orthopaedic surgeon to have it set.' He leant back, pudgy fingertips together. 'Now, I want you to forget I am here. To forget me completely. Imagine you are quite alone, addressing these four bare walls. Good. Well, what's the trouble?'

'The Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte—'

'Ah!' Dr Bonaccord scribbled a note. 'You're really convinced of it, are you?'

Sir Lancelot screwed round his head. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Is the whole thing systematized? Do you suppose I'm Baron Larrey, who did all your amputations at Borodino? Have you been brooding much recently on Waterloo?'

'I don't think I follow?'

'Napoleon. That's who you think you are?'

'I do *not* think I am Napoleon, nor anyone else.'

The psychiatrist looked disappointed. He had suffered under Sir Lancelot as a student, and felt that had the old boy started to develop delusions of grandeur they would have to be of great magnificence to be recognized as at all abnormal.

'Cats,' said Sir Lancelot.

'Cats? By all means. Do go on.'

'The Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte suffered from a pathological terror of cats.'

'Yes, that is quite correct, according to the history books. It's not an uncommon phobia. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts in the First World War had the same trouble. He couldn't bear to be in the same room with one.'

'You may count me among that distinguished company.'

The psychiatrist's eyes glistened with interest. 'How long have you noticed this?'

'I suppose in the mildest of ways all my life. But recently it has become acute. You know my housekeeper, Miss MacNish? About four weeks ago – I remember distinctly, it was the afternoon of the students' May ball – she imported into her flat a couple of stray cats. They are a pair of highly unprepossessing animals. One is grey and thin, the other black and fat. I suspect they suffer from the mange and similar feline ailments. At first I

had only a vague uneasiness in the presence of these disgusting beasts—'

—Sir Lancelot paused, unable to suppress a shiver. 'The condition has steadily grown worse. Yesterday morning I suffered complete demoralization when I discovered one asleep behind the heated towel-rail as I left my bath. I can understand perfectly well how they made Napoleon feel about as imperial as a fruit jelly. They get all over my house, of course. Cats are completely impossible animals to confine. I anyway only have to *imagine* one is in the room, to suffer symptoms of the most painful anxiety. Well, Bonaccord? What's to be done about it?'

'This is of course part of the obsessional symptomatology—'

'I pray you not to beguile me with the delightfully exculpatory theories of Freud.'

'Well, how about tranquillizers?'

'For me or the cats?'

'Or wouldn't it be simpler just to change your housekeeper?'

'My dear man! Do you imagine I am going to deprive myself of the best cook in London? I am not a glutton, but a man of my age and respectability is sadly restricted in his choice of indulgences.'

'We could try some transference therapy. Excellent results have been reported recently in the journals, by bringing patients under the influence of hypnosis or sodium amytal right up against the feared objects — cats, goldfish, bus-conductresses or whatever.' Sir Lancelot continued to look bleakly unenthusiastic. 'Though with a man of your well-integrated personality we could move more simply. You must simply engender feelings of tenderness towards the cats. Stroke them. Pet them. Offer them saucers of milk.'

'I could no more bring myself to touch one of those monsters than to pet a hyena with rabies.'

Dr Bonaccord looked pained again. As he had anticipated, the consultation was a trying one. 'May I finish? You can achieve this quite simply by telling yourself they are not cats at all.'

'What are they, then? Leprechauns in fur coats?'

'Babies. Human babies.'

Sir Lancelot's expression was doubtful. 'I am not particularly fond of babies.'

'Nevertheless, you'll find it works. I can absolutely guarantee it. Next time you see one of those cats, say to yourself, "What a bonnie, dear baby! I must tickle its little tum-tum." You'll be surprised how different you feel at once. We have no fear of the young of our own species.'

Sir Lancelot grunted. 'Worth a try, I suppose.'

'Most certainly. I've had very good results with people like yourself, who are stuck in the anal stage—'

'Kindly do not be disgusting.'

'I am using the term in its psychological sense,' said Dr Bonaccord quickly. 'The preoccupation with the nipple—'

He broke off, with a sharp intake of breath. Sir Lancelot looked round in concern, to see him white-faced, clutching his middle. 'I say, Bonaccord, are you all right? Or have you got this cat thing, too?'

'Just...just my heartburn. It often comes on when I'm suffering psychological strain.'

'Oh?' Sir Lancelot abruptly stood up. 'And how long have you been having that?'

~~'The last few weeks. It's nothing serious.'~~

'I wouldn't be too sure of that. Park yourself in this chair. I'll take a look at it.'

'You really needn't trouble—'

'Come along, man! You don't want to perforate a duodenal ulcer in the middle of a psychoanalysis, do you?' More reluctant patients than Dr Bonaccord had quailed under the command of Sir Lancelot's eye. He submissively lay on the chair, undoing the waistband of his trousers. Sir Lancelot deftly bared him from ribs to pubis, and laid a hand on his paunchy abdomen. 'Hurt?'

'Ooooo!'

'H'm. Could be a p.u.'

'It won't mean an operation, will it?'

'What's the odds? It'll do you a lot of good.' Sir Lancelot always made it sound like a summer holiday.

'You may think I'm terribly stupid, but...well, I have the most intense, if highly unreasonable, fear of anyone cutting me up.'

'You mean, you're stuck in the anal stage, too?'

'I know it's ridiculous. I've tried to overcome it. By transference, you understand. Like you and the cats. Telling myself surgery's some sort of clever conjuring trick, resembling sawing a lady in half.'

Sir Lancelot shot his cuffs. 'I don't think I need get my knife into you just yet. A case for medical rather than surgical treatment, I should have thought. You'd better see a physician. Why not step next door and consult the dean? He may be a miserable old sod as a neighbour, but at least he knows his way up and down the alimentary canal.'

Dr Bonaccord did up his trousers, looking relieved. 'Perhaps I'll call this evening. It may just be the matter of a suitable diet, surely? I eat rather irregularly and unwisely, being a bachelor.'

'Doesn't Mrs Tennant lend a hand?'

'My secretary keeps to her own flat,' the psychiatrist said primly.

'H'm,' said Sir Lancelot. That's not what the St Swithin's students think, he reflected. But he supposed if a medical man shared his house with an attractive young woman separated from her husband, he couldn't be blamed for putting a respectable face on it. 'Well, I'll take your tip about the cats.'

'Come back and see me tomorrow afternoon. Meanwhile, tenderness,' repeated the psychiatrist, stuffing in his shirt-tails. '*Tenderness*. You must grow to love those cats. Let them rub themselves against you. Let them walk over you. Let them sleep at the end of your bed.'

'I shall do my best,' said Sir Lancelot gamely. 'Though I should prefer the affair to remain somewhat platonic, as the pair are undoubtedly heavily infested with fleas.'

The dean hailed a taxi outside the main gate of St Swithin's. He would not after all be lunching in the hospital refectory that Monday. For once, he was sorry that he wouldn't be meeting Sir Lancelot. Nothing can engender such a pleasant glow in a man who for years has been dominated by another, than the secret knowledge that he has the fellow's obituary in his pocket.

The dean had intended posting it to the editor that very morning, but so many little improvements kept edging into his mind. He could for instance change the passage about Sir Lancelot's teaching methods – *undeniably effective, if reminiscent of a Victorian admiral addressing midshipmen on the quarterdeck* – to, *reminiscent of a fearless sergeant-major conducting bayonet practice*. And there was something to be squeezed in about, *he regarded life as one long after dinner, with himself the principal speaker*. He would put it in his desk drawer for a while. Time would only lighten the task, which was like trying to review some spectacular and noisy performance well before the final curtain.

'The Crécy Hotel,' he ordered the driver. His lunch with the Member of Parliament had been fixed for that very day. Frankie Humble was not one to let grass grow under anyone's feet.

The Crécy Hotel overlooking Hyde Park was one of the crop like concrete asparagus which had shot up in central London over the past five years. The dean had been there only once before, to a party of American neurophysiologists, and had thought the prices outrageous. He went through the stylish lobby to the porter's desk.

'Dr Humble?' he asked. 'I'm Sir Lionel Lychfield.'

'Dr Humble has a table in the Starlight Room, sir. The page will show you to the lift.'

When the lift doors opened on the top floor, the dean recognized his professional colleague instantly, even from the rear. No one but Frankie would lunch indoors in a three-foot cartwheel hat of pink and white tulle trimmed with yellow artificial roses.

'Lionel, my *darling*! So delighted you could make it. Was it an awful inconvenience?'

'It is never an inconvenience meeting you, Frankie.' The dean drew on forgotten stores of gallantry as he sat opposite, beside a window overlooking London.

'Sweet man. Have a vodka martini. It's all I allow myself these days. At home, I put a millilitre of vermouth in with a syringe. Weight, you know. These cruel contradictions of life! Eating and obesity, idleness and poverty, love and pregnancy. You must tell me all the latest scandal from dear St Swithin's. How's Sir Lancelot?'

'Dead,' said the dean sombrely.

'What!'

'I mean...not yet. But nearer to it, obviously. That is, nearer than yesterday. Or come to that, than the day before.'

'You *are* gloomy! You'd better get that glassful down your gullet and have a refill.'

Dr Frances Humble MP took a gulp of her third vodka, with onion, not olive. She was tall, fair and sunburnt, and in the ten years since captaining the St Swithin's tennis and golf teams had lost nothing of the look of being instantly ready to strip off and play any

vigorous game that anybody cared to suggest. Like many other medical persons, she had turned to politics as a means of expressing even more fully a natural inclination to make people do what she thought good for them. The dean had admired her since her first professional job as his house-physician – she had seemed so intelligent, so definite, so clean-living and so efficient at everything she cared to indulge in. She was just like his daughter Muriel. Frankie also had small, soft blonde hairs covering her strong, brown forearms, which every time the dean had noticed them for years gave him a hot feeling in the back of the neck.

‘And how’s the political scene?’ he asked, as the waiter brought his second drink.

‘Much the same,’ she told him gaily. ‘Isn’t it remarkable, however many elections we hold the same people seem to bounce to the top, all wearing their broad grins and holding their gin-and-tonics?’

The dean sighed. To any scientist, the ramshackle, haphazard machine of politics was incomprehensible. ‘I often wish I could make some sense out of the manoeuvring of the world’s rulers.’

‘But so do I! Political life’s so full of contradictions. We have socialist millionaires. We have God knows how many Tories living on the old age pension. The rich nations get richer and the poor ones poorer – though admittedly the lamentations about it in the better newspapers are very touching. Our economy pours out a cascade of total inessentials, and men will commit murder to acquire more of them. Quite mad. We only enjoy peace, perfect peace, because war has at last become efficient enough to have a reasonable promise of killing absolutely everybody. The quenelles of lobster here are perfectly delicious. I do hope you’ll start with them?’

‘Thank you. But I mustn’t drink any more.’

‘You’re seeing patients this afternoon?’

‘No, but I have a lot of important administrative work at St Swithin’s.’

‘I’m sure you could do that with your eyes shut. After all, you are one of the greatest deans in the history of the hospital.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Even when I was your houseman, I was staggered by your ruthless efficiency as an administrator.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Yet you manage to be such an utterly delightful person at the same time.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You know, Lionel, what an enormously tender spot I’ve always had for you?’

‘Thank you. How’s your husband?’

‘Didn’t you see in the paper? Just left on a trade mission to South America. He’ll be away six weeks.’

‘Ah.’

‘It’s awfully dreary, alone in the flat.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Particularly in the evenings.’

‘Quite.’

‘Have another vodka.’

‘Thank you. I mean, no.’

'Of course you will. Waiter!'

~~She was wearing a smart red sleeveless dress, and as she summoned the wine waiter the sunlight caught the little hairs on her forearms. The dean felt as though someone had applied an old-fashioned kaolin poultice just above his collar.~~

'Dear Lionel.' She gave the smile which had so often flashed across tennis-nets after administering someone a trouncing. 'I need your help. No, it's more than that. It is *you alone* who can save me.'

'Oh?'

'Lionel, *do* try and talk instead of emitting noises. You know how interested I have become in education?'

'An admirable preoccupation in any politician.'

'Well, it's a good line. We must all have one, of course,' she continued cheerfully. 'It's a quite heartening sight these days, seeing so many professional do-gooders on the make. Against pollution, for instance. Or for consumer protection. They're the latest-model bandwagons. But the voters will get tired of them. People have filthy habits naturally, and only worry about mucking up their environment through feelings of guilt, in this age of excruciating self-indulgence. As for consumer protection – well, selling anything from a beggar's box of matches upwards has always had a robust element of cheap-jackery in it. I think people rather enjoy being slightly diddled, if it's done with style. But education will go on forever. People will never think they can get enough of it – like leisure, the poor dear deluded fools.'

The dean was feeling confused with this brisk political analysis. 'What do you want me to do? Present the prizes at some secondary modern?'

'Lionel, you have a charmingly modest view of your talents.' The waiter set down his third drink. 'I get the barman to make those with genuine Soviet vodka, of course – so much stronger. No, Lionel. As dean of St Swithin's you have gone far in the educational world. I want you to go further. Much further. Ah, here's the head waiter. Let's order. I'll tell you what I've in mind for you when we've finished eating. You look as though you could do with a good meal, I must say. Quite peaky, in fact. Is that wonderful Miss MacNish of yours off form?'

'She has been seduced by Sir Lancelot.'

'What a shame. And Josephine never did claim to shine in the kitchen, did she? I adore *cordon bleu* cooking, of course. Such a pity you didn't wait a few years and marry me instead.'

The warm feeling spread up to the dean's scalp and down his backbone. He suddenly felt quite frightened of himself. He was of course a devoted husband and family man... but it was not only in the kitchen that Josephine might shine less brilliantly than the lithe, blonde, tigerish lady running her eye critically down the menu.

'My God, you *do* look hungry,' she said, glancing up.

Frankie designedly kept the dean waiting until his coffee and brandy before returning to the reason for her invitation to lunch.

'Lionel, have you thought of your future?'

'I don't think I have one. I have achieved all I set myself to do.'

'Then I offer you new worlds to conquer, my dear little Alexander the Great. What would be your next step up from dean?'

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