DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

RICHARD GORDON

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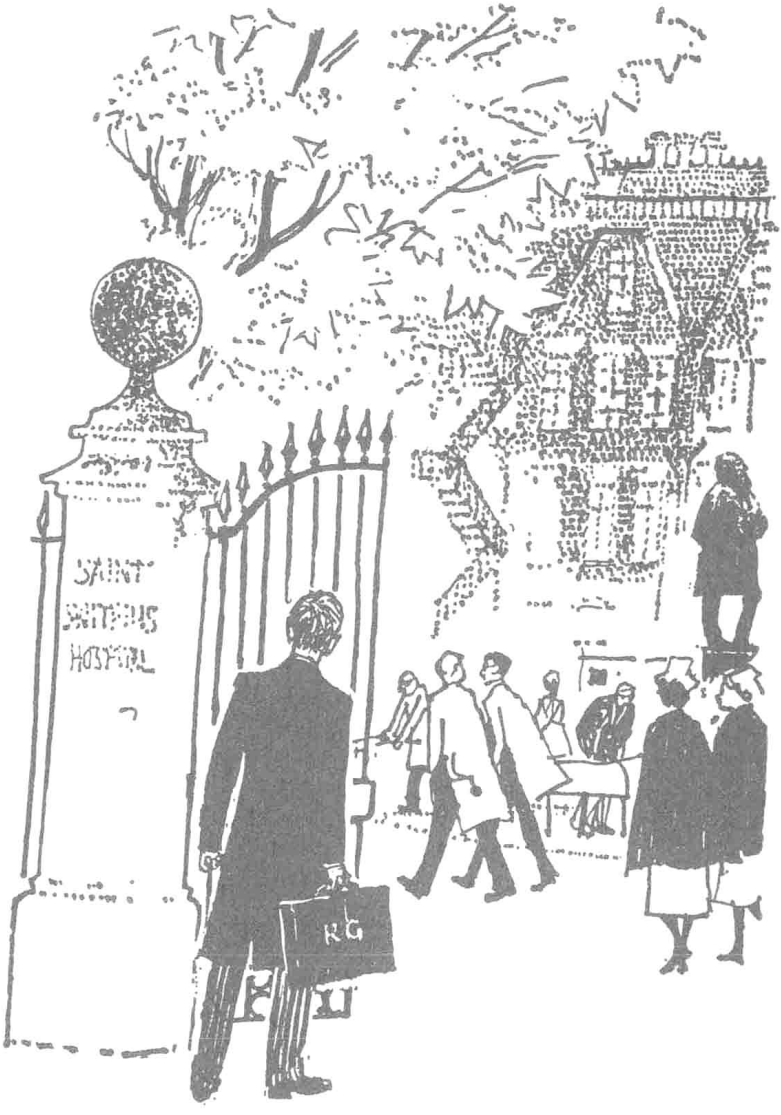

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I

My father had a large and splendid set of surgical* instruments in a heavy black wooden box. Some years ago he had put the box away at the bottom of a tall cupboard. It had become covered with old medical papers and advertisements which my father had thrown in there from time to time, in the belief that he might want to refer to them one day.

Sometimes, looking through the dusty paper, he used to see the box and feel sad for a moment. He had once been certain that he would be a great surgeon*, and the instruments were an expensive gift from his admiring mother on the day when he qualified as a doctor.

My grandmother and grandfather were, unluckily, the only ones to share his confidence in his professional future. My father took the examination of the Royal College of Surgeons twice a year for six years before he realized the truth that his ability was not powerful enough to drive his ambition. He gave up the idea of becoming a surgeon, got married and went into general practice outside London.

He became a successful, and even fairly good doctor, and he remembered his dead ambitions only when he saw his case of instruments or thought seriously about the education of his son.

Like most doctors' children, I had from my earliest schooldays thought of a medical qualification as a kind of title to be passed down from father to son. Qualifying as a doctor seemed a future event over which I had no control; indeed, neither my parents nor I thought that I would earn a living by any other means. My father sometimes wondered if I might realize his own ambitions of becoming a surgeon, but experience made him cautious about talking in advance of his son's possible success.

In my youth I had certainly not shown any leanings towards my already settled future profession. The practice of medicine was no more to me than a number of mysterious people coming twice a day through the front door, and a faint acid smell which had been in my nose as long as I could remember, like the smell of the sea to a fisherman's son.

Once my father made me stand up on a chair, and he showed

*See the glossary at page 89

me the photograph that hung above it. It was the football team of his old hospital. The photograph had been taken in the year in which my father had managed to get into the team, because one of the regular players had had a fortunate attack of illness.

"Which one's you?" I asked, running my finger along the double row of solemn young men.

My father pointed to a thin fellow at the end of the back row.

"Good old St Swithin's!" he said sadly. "You'll be there one day, my boy. And be sure that you get into the first football team as your father did."

His love for his old hospital, like one's love for the home of one's youth, increased steadily with the length of time he had been away from it. As a medical student, he had felt a wave of loyalty to the place only for an hour or more a week on the football field; now it represented a glorious time in his life, when he had no family and no responsibilities. I grew to believe that St Swithin's was a really wonderful combination of medical excellence and sporting delights. For most of my schooldays St Swithin's was a pleasant but not very exact place, like Heaven, and it was not until I found myself on the point of going there that I took the trouble to think clearly about it.

St Swithin's was, in fact, a not very distinguished general hospital, which spread its grey, dusty-looking walls across a dirty part of North London. It was not even one of the oldest hospitals in the capital, and, as old age is honoured in England as the first of the virtues, this alone gave the staff and students of St Swithin's a faint feeling of being lower and poorer in quality.

I had not seen St Swithin's until the morning when I went to meet the Dean* of the Medical School. The Dean had replied to my father's letter and had told him that the school was always glad to see the sons of former Swithin's men, but he added that the governors' rules made it necessary for him to see all those who applied for admission, and he could admit them only on the strength of the ability they showed for the practice of medicine.

As the course of study was fixed by law for a time of not less than six years, this struck me as being as difficult as deciding the sex of one-day-old chickens. For a week my father solemnly taught me the answers to every question that the Dean could possibly ask; then I put on my best suit and went up to London.

St Swithin's was heavily disappointing. It was like the time I saw my first elephants: it was clear enough, but not nearly so large, clean and important-looking as I had imagined.

I walked into the front courtyard, which was separated from the main road by a long line of heavy iron railings. It was a busy place, as the staff of the hospital seemed always to be going to and fro across the courtyard. One could easily pick out the surgeons, for they always moved from one spot to another as if they were in a great hurry. This made people think that their services were urgently needed in many places at once, and it was good for their professional reputations. The younger doctors had soon copied the habit: they too walked quickly across the courtyard, their short white coats flying behind them, and they wore that very serious and thoughtful look seen only in the faces of very young doctors.

There were nurses too, in long dresses and stiff white caps that turned up at the back like the tails of white birds. They walked quickly from one building to another and to the Nurses' Home at the back. Of all the people in the courtyard they were the only ones really in a hurry, for they had so little time to themselves that they spent their lives in an endless rush to get on and go off duty.

There were other people walking in the courtyard too, but I was not able to tell what their work was. Apart from the doctors and nurses, a hospital has to employ plenty of men and women for other kinds of work. There must be cooks to prepare the food, and special people to tell them what to cook; there must be girls to work the machines and clean the floors, and men to help with the coal, and, as all these people must be paid and controlled, there must be a large number of clerks and secretaries as well. The number of staff at St Swithin's was four times as large as the number of patients, and seemed to be increasing naturally, like a large flower covering a small pool.

There were patients* too in the courtyard. Two of them lay in their beds, covered with red bed-clothes and trying to get well in the dirty London air. A few more moved about with difficulty on their sticks in the middle of all the hospital activity. One or two fortunate ones had found quiet spots and stayed there, like fish resting under the bank of a stream full of rocks.

I asked for the office of the Dean, Dr Lionel Loftus. A porter* showed me into a small bare waiting-room, where the only ornaments were black and white pictures of past deans, running along the walls like a row of dirty plates. As there were no chairs, I sat on the dark polished table and swung my legs. The surroundings, and a week of my father's teaching, had made me sad and anxious. My mind was filled with the awkward

questions that Dr Loftus was going to ask me, and to my surprise I found that I could give no satisfactory replies to any of them. I wondered what I should say if he simply asked me why I wanted to be a doctor. The answer was, I suppose, that neither my parents nor I myself had the originality to think of anything else, but this didn't seem a suggestion likely to help me into the medical school.

These miserable thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the waiting-room door. An old man stood there, looking at me in silence. He wore a heavy black coat buttoned high in the chest, narrow trousers and a two-inch collar. In his hand he held a pair of glasses which were attached to his coat by a thick black silk ribbon. He put his glasses on his nose with a slow, shaking movement, and took a closer look at me. I jumped to my feet and stood in front of him.

"Gordon?" he said. "Mr Richard Gordon?"

"Yes, sir. That is correct, sir," I replied with great respect.

"So you have come for entrance to St Swithin's?" the old man asked slowly.

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Your father is a Swithin's man, I believe?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"I am not the Dean," he explained. "I am the medical school Secretary. I was Secretary here long before you were born, my boy. Before your father, probably. I remember well enough when the Dean himself came up to be admitted."

He took off his glasses and pointed them at me.

"Now, young fellow," he said, "I've got some questions to ask you."

I folded my hands and prepared for the worst.

"Have you been to a public school* ?"

"Yes."

"Do you play football?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that you can afford to pay for your medical course?"

"Yes."

He then left the room without a word. I tried to ease my anxious mind by looking at the line of black and white deans, studying each in turn. After ten minutes or so the old man returned and led me in to see the living holder of the office.

Dr Loftus was a short fat cheerful man with white hair. He was sitting at an old desk that was piled high with copies of

medical papers, letters and reference books. On top of these, he had thrown a hat, a pair of yellow gloves*, and his stethoscope*. He was clearly in a hurry.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, old man," he said. "I was delayed at the hospital. Have a seat."

I sat down on a hard leather chair beside the desk.

"Now," the Dean began, "have you been to a public school?"

"Yes."

"Your parents can afford the money for your course?"

"I believe so."

"You play football, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

The Dean began to look interested.

"What position?" he asked.

I told him. He drew a piece of paper towards him and made fifteen dots on it in the positions of a rugby football team.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Almost eighteen, sir."

"First football team at school?"

"Oh yes, sir."

The Dean made lines through some of his dots, put a cross against others, and then looked through a pile of papers beside him. He moved back in his chair and looked at me from head to foot.

"You're rather thin, aren't you?" he said. "I suppose you've got speed in running?"

"Yes, I've got prizes for running," I told him eagerly.

"Well, you may develop all right."

He looked solemnly at his piece of paper for a few seconds. His face suddenly brightened, and I saw that he had come to a decision: my hands held the arms of the chair tightly as I waited to receive the news. Rising, he shook me by the hand and told me that he had pleasure in admitting me to St Swithin's.

I wondered for some time afterwards how he had been able to discover from these questions that I had the qualities of a successful doctor, but I later found out that even this short meeting was not necessary. The Dean always took the advice of his old secretary, and if this old man did not like the look of a person applying for admission, the Dean always told him that there were no places left at St Swithin's.

2

The medical school of St Swithin's hospital was near the main buildings and had its own entrance on the main road. It was a tall building that held three floors of laboratories*, a lecture* room and the worst-smelling lavatories* in the district.

The school had been built by one of the richest tradesmen in London, who was fortunately knocked over by a carriage outside the hospital one icy winter's morning in 1875. He was brought back to health inside the hospital and, as a reward, he gave the hospital money to start a medical school. The place was now far too old, dark and small for the needs of the students, but, as the hospital had little hope of seeing such an accident repeated, it was impossible to tear the building down.

At the beginning of October thirty new students collected there for a lecture of welcome and introduction by the Dean. I found my way to the lecture room and sat down at the end of a row of seats at the back. Most of the new students had already arrived, and had scattered themselves here and there in the seats. A few seemed to know one another and were talking softly among themselves. The rest were alone and silent and they looked straight at the blackboards in front of them, like people in church waiting for the service to begin.

The clock on the wall above the desk reached twenty past ten. The Dean was late again. We later found that this often happened, as he showed his power over his students by being careful never to arrive on time for his appointments.

I was still looking at the blackboards when the door behind me opened and another student entered.

"I say, do you mind if I come and sit here?" he asked. "I hate being far from the door."

I quickly moved along the hard seats. The new man was striking in appearance. He was tall and good-looking, with thick black hair. He wore a long brown coat, narrow trousers, a green shirt and a yellow silk square instead of a tie. He set down a polished black walking-stick on the floor beside him, and, taking an eye-glass from his pocket, looked through it at his companions with extreme disgust.

"Good heavens!" he said.

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He then opened a newspaper and began to read it.

The silence in the room continued for another ten minutes. It was broken only by the sound of my new neighbour turning over the pages of his newspaper.

At ten-thirty, half an hour late, a small door behind the desk opened and the Dean came gaily in. He was full of smiles. He stood for a moment and looked cheerfully at the class in front of him.

The Dean was not only late but in a very great hurry. In a few words he welcomed us to St Swithin's, made some remarks about its history and customs, quickly ran through the rules of the medical profession and then explained that in future we would be bound by professional secrecy, and forbidden to make love to our patients' wives or to walk on the grass in the hospital courtyard. He made a few final remarks of encouragement and then disappeared. His address had lasted seventeen minutes. The student next to me had paid no attention at all; he had merely folded his paper twice over and read it under cover of the man in front.

"Oh, he's finished, has he?" he said, as the sound of students getting to their feet disturbed him. He looked at the clock through his eye-glass.

"He's cut three minutes off his best time so far," he said. "Next year I expect the old boy will get it down to fifteen minutes."

I was rather afraid of this critical young man but I could not help asking him a question.

"You've heard this lecture before?" I asked with hesitation. "You mean, you haven't just arrived in the hospital like the rest of us?"

"This makes the fourth time I've heard old Loftus say his little piece," he replied, smiling faintly. "I wouldn't have come today, but I got the dates mixed up. I was expecting another lecture."

The rest of the class was walking past us through the door and going downstairs with a great deal of noise. We rose and joined the end of the line.

"You must be a very advanced student," I said in a respectful voice.

"Not a bit, old boy." My companion moved a piece of paper to one side with a stick. "I'm not at all in advance of you. And at the end of the year I shall probably be back here again."

"But surely," I said from behind him as we went downstairs, "if you've already had four years of study . . ."

He laughed.

"The simplicity of youth! Four years' study, or at least four years' occasional attendance at the medical school, is of no importance. Examinations, my dear old boy, examinations," he explained with feeling. "You'll find that they control your progress through hospital like the signals on a railway line. You can't go on to the next part if they're against you. I've failed in my examinations four times now," he added cheerfully.

I sympathized with him over this misfortune.

"Don't sympathize, old boy. I'm grateful to you, but your sympathy is wasted. All my failures were gained with careful thought in advance. As a matter of fact, it's often more difficult to fail an examination than to pass it, you know. Come along and have a beer. The King George will be open."

We left the medical school and crossed the road to the King George. It was one of those dark, comfortable little public-houses that seem to be fast disappearing from the London scene. The hospital's influence on it was noticeable immediately. The walls were covered with framed photographs of past football and cricket teams. In a glass case, like a prize fish, was the football cup for three years running. Next to it hung a fireman's brass hat. Behind the beer glasses a fat old man in a waistcoat and a grey hat looked sadly across the empty room.

"Good morning, Padre*," my guide called cheerfully.

The old man gave a smile of welcome and stretched out his hand.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Well! This is a pleasure to see you here again! Back for the new term, sir?"

"Every autumn, Padre, I return faithfully to my studies. Allow me to introduce a new student — what's your name, old boy?"

"Gordon — Richard Gordon."

"Mr Gordon, Padre. My name's Grimsdyke, by the way," he explained.

The landlord shook hands warmly.

"And very pleased to meet you, sir," he said. "What will you have, gentlemen?"

"Beer for me. Bitter," said Grimsdyke, settling himself on a wooden chair. "Will you take the same?"

I agreed.

"I ought to explain," Grimsdyke continued, "that our landlord is really called Albert something or other, I believe."

"Mullins, sir."

"Mullins, yes. But if you called him that, no one in St Swithin's would know who you were talking about. For the memory of living man he has been known as the Padre . . . how many years have you been giving out the beer here, Padre?"

"Just about thirty-five, sir."

"There you are! He remembers the present hospital staff when they were students themselves. This place is now as necessary a part of the hospital as the main operating room."

"But why the Padre?" I asked.

"Oh, it's a custom started by the doctors. One can say in front of patients, 'I'm just going to church at six this evening' without any trouble. But our dear patients might be really disturbed if they got the idea that their doctors drank. Besides, the old landlord here is like a sort of priest to us – a kind of father, friend and guide to the boys sometimes. You'll find out about it before you've been here much longer."

For a moment we drank our beer in silence.

"There's just another thing," I began.

"Speak on, my dear old boy. I'm always glad to give any help I can to new students. After all, I have been a new student myself now five times."

I pointed at the fireman's shining brass hat on the wall.

"Oh yes, the sacred hat of St Swithin's, by heavens! It is feared and desired by every medical school in London. I must tell you about it. No one knows how it got there. It's been the property of the football club for longer than even the Padre can remember, so I suppose one of the boys must have stolen it years ago. Now it's become almost an object of worship. For our important football matches the hat is laid on the field for luck and encouragement. After the match, it is filled with beer and emptied by all the members of the team in turn."

"It would hold a lot of beer," I said.

"It does. And on the occasion of medical qualification, birthday, marriage, or death of a rich relative, the thing is taken down and the lucky man is given a hat full of beer by his friends. Are you married or expecting to be married soon?" he asked.

"Good Lord, no!" I said. I was surprised. "I've only just left school."

"Will you have another beer?" Grimsdyke asked.

"No thanks. I don't drink much, you know. Hardly at all, in

fact. Only if I've been out for a long walk or something and I'm thirsty."

I saw Grimsdyke's look of pain.

"Of course, one must remember . . . " he began. "You will find that in a little while at St Swithin's you will learn enough bad habits to help you to bear the life here. However, there is time enough for that. Padre!" he called. "More beer for me, if you please."

"Could you tell me . . . ?" I began, feeling that I should collect all possible information from my companion while he was willing to talk.

"Yes?"

"Why – why do you fail your examinations on purpose?"

Grimsdyke's face had a mysterious look.

"That is a little secret of my own," he said. "Perhaps I'll tell it to you one day, old boy."

I learned about Grimsdyke's little secret earlier than he expected. It was common knowledge in the medical school and it reached the new students within a few weeks of their arrival.

Grimsdyke's desire to fail his examinations was entirely the fault of his grandmother. She was a wealthy old lady who had passed her old age in Bournemouth. As she had nothing else to do, she developed a great number of illnesses, which were cured, all in good time, by the expensive attentions of charming doctors. Her regard for the medical profession grew stronger with each illness, and she was filled with regret that she had not a single medical gentleman in her own family.

The only person who could have corrected this omission was young Grimsdyke. So his grandmother had the idea, while he was still at school, of attracting him into the profession by offering to pay his expenses for the medical course. Unluckily, the grandmother then developed an illness beyond the skill of her doctors to cure. She died, but in her will she left a thousand pounds a year to young Grimsdyke during the time that he was a medical student.

Grimsdyke did not immediately understand the full importance of this, and he had begun his first year of study at St Swithin's before he realized that he had an excellent opportunity to spend the rest of his life in London on a comfortable allowance, without the annoyance of doing any work. He was therefore very careful always to fail his examinations.

He came to the hospital once or twice a week, paid the money for the course regularly and on time, and always behaved himself

which was enough for St Swithin's. He had a flat in a fashionable quarter of London, an old car, a large number of friends and plenty of spare time. "I sometimes think," he used to admit to his friends, "that I have discovered the secret of good living."

About the time that I joined the medical school, however, Grimsdyke's life began to change. He had fallen in love with a girl and asked her to marry him. She was a clever young woman, and she not only discovered the secret of his existence, but refused to accept him unless he changed it.

"A future doctor, yes," Grimsdyke used to explain sadly, "but a permanent student at a medical school, no. I was forced to go out and buy some books. The power of women, my dear old boy. It is for them that men climb mountains, fight wars, go to work and such unpleasant things."

She must have possessed a very strong character, for from that time on Grimsdyke applied himself to his studies as eagerly as anyone else in the hospital.

3

As there were no classes arranged for the day of the Dean's lecture I had the afternoon to myself. I left the King George quietly soon after a crowd of older medical students burst in and started to have a noisy drinking party with Grimsdyke. I was rather afraid of the light-hearted way in which my new companions drank pints of beer. I drank very little, for I had recently left school and I believed that more than two glasses of beer ruined your football and led to equally serious moral weaknesses.

"So you are going in for medicine?" my teacher had said to me during my last term at school.

"Yes, sir."

"A very respected profession, Gordon, as you should know. Unluckily, I find that the means of entrance to this profession seems to have a bad influence on boys of even the highest character. I must warn you to be very careful indeed."

"Oh yes, sir. I will, of course, sir."

"I expect you will soon become as bad as the rest," he said sadly.

I had lunch alone at a cheap restaurant and then went to a medical bookshop to buy some books. I had to get a copy of Gray's *Anatomy**, the medical student's Holy Book, the best and

most respected guide to the study of anatomy. When I saw the book my heart sank under its weight. I looked quickly over the two thousand pages of full description of anatomy, split up by beautiful bold drawings of yellow nerves, bright red arteries* and blue veins* twisting their way between the brown muscle. I wondered how anyone could ever manage to learn all the little facts packed between its covers as thickly as the grains in a bag of wheat. I also bought a set of books giving directions on how to cut up bodies, and full of pictures of rabbits being cut up.

"Is there anything else, sir?" the man in the shop asked politely.

"Yes" I said. "A skeleton*. Do you happen to have a skeleton?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're out of skeletons at the moment. The demand on them is very heavy at this time of the year."

I spent the rest of the afternoon hunting for a skeleton to use in the evenings with the books on anatomy. I found one at last and took it back to my rooms.

For the first two years of their course medical students are not allowed within striking distance of a living patient. They learn the essentials of their art in a harmless way, by means of dead bodies. The morning after the Dean's lecture the new class was ordered to gather in the anatomy room to begin the term's work.

It was a high, narrow room. The bright lights that hung in strips from the ceiling gave the students themselves a kind of pale blue, dead look. On the wall was a blackboard covered with drawings of anatomy details in coloured chalks. In one corner was a table full of bottles, with parts of the body preserved in them, like bottles of food in a shop; and in another corner hung a pair of skeletons, like dead criminals at a crossroads.

Down the centre of the room, in two rows, were a dozen high, narrow tables, with glass tops. And on the tables, in different stages of separation, were six or seven dead bodies of men and women.

I looked at the bodies for the first time curiously. They were the bodies of old people, and their medical preservation had made them look even older and more dried up. Four of these bodies, not yet touched, lay ready for the new class, but at the other tables the more advanced students were already at work. Some of them had made so much progress that the part which they were cutting up could not be recognized by a new student like myself; and here and there a little dried hand stuck out, as if in silent prayer, from the centre of a close group of busy workers.

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