



a novel by the author of A CLOCKWORK ORANGE,
NOTHING LIKE THE SUN, THE LONG DAY WANES

THE DOCTOR IS SICK

ANTHONY BURGESS



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CHAPTER ONE

'And what is *this* smell?' asked Dr Railton. He thrust a sort of ink-well under Edwin's nose.

'I may be wrong, but I should say peppermint.' He awaited the quiz-master's gong. Beyond the screens that had been wheeled round his bed the rest of the ward could be heard eating.

'You *are* wrong, I'm afraid,' said Dr Railton. 'Lav^{vy}ender.' Gong. But he was still in the round. 'And this?'

'Probably something cit^{rus}ous.'

'Wrong again. *Terribly* wrong. Cloves.' There was a tone of moral indictment in the gentle voice. Gently Dr Railton sat on the edge of the bed. Gently, with womanish brown eyes, long-lashed, he looked down at Edwin. 'Not so good, is it? Not at all good.' The knives and forks per-cussed and scraped weakly, an invalids' orchestra.

'I have a cold,' said Edwin. 'The sudden change of climate.' The dying English year rattled at the ward windows, as if begging for a bed. 'It was well up in the nineties when we left Moulmein.'

'Your wife came with you?'

'Yes. Officially as my nurse. But she was air-sick most of the time.'

'I see.' Dr Railton nodded and nodded, as though this was really very serious. 'Well, there are various other tests we shall have to try. Not now, of course. We'll get down to work properly on Monday.' Edwin relaxed. Dr Railton, seeing this, pounced with a tuning-fork. He brought it,

sizzling like a poker, up to Edwin's right cheek. 'Can you feel that?'

'Middle C.'

'No, no, can you *feel* it?'

'Oh, yes.' Dr Railton looked grim, allowing Edwin no triumph. He got in quickly with:

'How would you define "spiral"?''

'Spiral? Oh, you know, like a spiral staircase. Like a screw.' Both of Edwin's hands began to spiral in the air. 'Going up and up, turning all the time, but each turn getting progressively smaller and smaller till the whole thing just vanishes. You know what I mean.' Edwin begged with his eyes that this definition be accepted.

'Exactly,' said Dr Railton with his new grimness. '*Exactly*.' But evidently he did not refer to the definition. 'Now,' he said. He got up from the edge of the bed and brutally pushed the bed-screens away. They freewheeled squeakily a yard or so, and a wardful of ice-cream-eaters was disclosed with appalling suddenness. 'Get up out of that bed,' said newly brutal Dr Railton with a no-more-of-this-malingering gesture. Edwin's pyjama trousers had lost their cord somewhere between Moulmein and London, and he blushed as he drew up the stripy folds from around his ankles. The ice-cream-eaters looked on placidly, as at a television advertisement. 'Now,' said Dr Railton, 'walk in an absolutely straight line from here to that man over there.' He pointed to a tense-looking patient who nodded, as showing willingness to participate in any helpful experiment, a patient imprisoned in cages and snakes of rubber tubing. Edwin walked like a drunk. 'All right,' said the tense patient encouragingly. 'You're doin' all right, truly you are.'

'Now walk back,' said Dr Railton. ('See you later,' said the tense patient.) Edwin walked back, drunker than before. 'Now get back into bed,' said Dr Railton. Then, as if none of this really had to be taken *too* seriously, as if he were only paid to be like that and over a couple of pints you couldn't meet a nicer man, Dr Railton, boyishly laughed and play-punched Edwin on the chest, tousled his hair and tried to break off a piece of his shoulder.

'Monday,' he promised laughing at the door, 'we really start.'

Edwin looked round at his ward mates who now lay back replete and tooth-sucking. The tense patient said:

'Know who he was?'

'Dr Railton, isn't it?'

'Nah, we know that. What he was before is what I mean. Mean to say you don't know? That's Eddie Railton.'

'Really?'

'Used to be on the telly when he was learnin' to be a doctor. Played the trumpet lovely, he did. Just goes to show you, dunnit?'

A negro ward orderly came to Edwin's bedside. He caressed the bed-clothes lingeringly, looking liquidly through thick intellectual spectacles. 'Now,' he said, 'you eat.'

'No, really, I don't think I want to.'

'Yes, yes, you eat. Must eat. Everybody must eat.' The deep tones of a negro sermon. He marched gravely towards the door. The tense patient called from his nest of tubes:

'Here, fetch us an evenin' paper. There'll be a bloke sellin' 'em in the 'all just about now.'

'I have no time,' said the negro orderly, 'to fetch evening papers.' He marched out.

'There you are,' said the tense patient in disgust. 'Just goes to show you, dunnit? There's a right good bleedin' specimen of a good Samaritan for you, ennit? I mean, it shows you, dunnit? Fair drives you up the bleedin' wall, dunnit? Straight up it does.'

Edwin toyed with steamed fish and a scoop of mashed potato, depressed as he looked round the ward. Everyone was in bed except his immediate neighbour. Most wore white turbans like Mecca pilgrims, though signs not of grace but of shaven heads. A ward full of sick hajis. Edwin's neighbour sat on his bed in a dressing-gown, gloomily smoking, looking out to the London evening in the still square. His face wore a clinical sneer, part of a complex syndrome. That afternoon, shortly after Edwin's arrival, two visitors from another ward had come, also with sneers, to compare sneers. A sort of sneerers' club. They had sneered good-bye to Edwin's sneerer neighbour and then sneered off. Very depressing.

A staff nurse, depressingly healthy, jaunted in, and the tense man of the cage and tubes said, 'Evenin', staff.' The staff nurse jaunted on to the end of the ward, not replying. 'There,' said the tense man, 'shows you, dunnit? What the bleedin' 'ell I done wrong now? Says good evenin' to her and she don't say good evenin', kiss my arse nor nuffin. Drives you up the wall, dunnit?'

'No,' said Edwin, 'I don't want ice-cream. No, thank you very much, no ice-cream. No, please, no. No ice-cream.'

'Relax,' came the negro preacher's tones. 'You relax, my little friend. That's what you here for, to relax.'

Nobody's going to make you eat ice-cream if you don't want ice-cream. So I just leave the ice-cream here by your bedside just in case you change your mind and want to eat ice-cream some time later on.'

'No,' said Edwin, 'no. I don't like ice-cream. Please take it away.'

'You relax now. Maybe you want to eat it some time later on.' The negro orderly gravely walked off. In a jumpy temper Edwin got out of bed, picked up the chill melting saucerful, ready to throw it. Then he thought: 'Careful now, careful, take it easy, they'd love you to do something like that.'

'If you don't want that,' said the tense man of tubes, 'give it to me. I'll give it to my youngster when he comes in tonight. Loves anythin' like that, he does. Anythin' cold. Fair laps it up, he does.'

Edwin put on his dressing-gown, a Chinese silk one crawling with dragons, and padded over to this man's bed. At its foot there was a glory of many charts – water intake and output, rate of saline flow, protein content of cerebrospinal fluid, as well as temperature and pulse graphs showing peaks, deep valleys. The name on all these was proud and simple – R. Dickie. 'Like me to show you round the gas-works?' said R. Dickie. 'This here tube with that bottle upside down up there is like pouring sort of medicine into me, and this tube here is attached to my old whatnot, and that one goes into my back, and I'm not quite sure where that one goes to. And that sort of crane is so as how I can lift myself up, and that kind of cage is to stop things touching my legs. Marvellous what they can think up, ennit? Mind you don't kick that bottle on the floor over because that tube fixed to it at one end is fixed

to my old whasit at the other. Keeps drippin' in all day it does. Later on they measure it. Marvellous, ennit? Straight up.' He had a red fifty-year-old face and hair much disordered, as if his hospital stay had really been a strenuous cruise in a trawler.

'What happened to you?' asked Edwin.

'Fell off a bleedin' ladder at work. Me, I'm a builder.'

A simple and dramatic accident, a proud hazardous trade. Edwin thought of his own trade, his own accident. A lecturer on linguistics in a college in Burma who had one day, quite without warning, fallen on the lecture-room floor while lecturing on linguistics. He had been talking about folk etymology (*penthouse*, *primrose*, *Jerusalem artichoke*) and then, quite suddenly, he had passed out. He came to to find concerned, flat, delicate-brown Burmese faces looking down on him, himself saying: 'It's really a question of assimilating the unknown to the known, you see, refusing to admit that a foreign word is really foreign.' While he lay on the cool floor he could see quite clearly, on the fringe of the group that surrounded him, one or two students taking down his words in their notebooks. He said: 'While we honour none but the horizontal one.' That, too, was taken down.

The doctors had taken a serious view of the matter, giving him a very dull series of medical examinations. A lumbar puncture had shown a great excess of protein in the cerebrospinal fluid. Dr Wall had said: 'That shows there's something there that shouldn't be there. We'd better send you back to England to see a neurologist.' Here he was, talking to a builder who had fallen off a ladder.

'In Germany it was,' said R. Dickie. 'Perhaps if it had

happened here it might have worked out different. Here they come now, you see. They're lettin' them in.'

They were letting them in. The flowers were being wheeled out on trolleys, the water-bottles filled for the night, and they were letting the visitors in. To R. Dickie's bed came various grey women and a small thumbsucking boy who began to eat Edwin's ice-cream. To the prone Mecca pilgrims came cheerful grape-laden families, including hearty men in pullovers with copies of *The Autocar*. To Edwin Spindrifft came Sheila Spindrifft. With Sheila Spindrifft was a man, unknown to Edwin.

'Darling,' said Sheila. 'Look, this is Charlie. It *is* Charlie, isn't it? That's right. I met Charlie in the pub and he was sweet enough to bring me round here. I wasn't too sure of the way in the dark.' Sheila had a slight unfocused look about her; her black hair was untidy; powder had caked on her face. Edwin could gauge, almost to the nearest cubic millimetre, how much she had been drinking. He didn't blame her, but he wished she hadn't picked up this Charlie.

Charlie took Edwin's right hand in both his large warm horny paws. 'So you're Edward,' he said warmly in a furred Cockney baritone. 'Your wife's been telling the whole lot of us in the public bar about you being ill. It's a real pleasure to me,' he said, 'this is.' He was darkly coarsely handsome in a working-class best blue suit.

'And he brought me all the way here,' said Sheila, 'because I wasn't too sure of the way in the dark. And he's been so sweet. See what he bought for you. He would insist on stopping at the tube station bookstall to buy these. He said you'd want something to read.'

'It's a real pleasure,' said Charlie, and he pulled from his

side-pockets bunches of gaudy magazines – *Girls, Form Divine, Laugh It Off, Vibrant Health, Nude, Naked Truth, Grin, Brute Beauty*. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘your wife here tells me you’re a reading man, same as I am myself, and nothing passes the time better when you’re ill than a good read.’ He fanned one periodical open, as in demonstration, and male and female nudes grinned wanly, postlapsarianly, under the ward ceiling lights. ‘Let’s sit down, shall we?’ said Charlie, and Edwin, feeling he was being a bad host, led his visitors over to his bed. ‘Now,’ said Charlie, ‘what is it your wife here says that you do?’

‘Linguistics.’

‘Aha.’ The three of them sat, leg-swinging, on the bed. ‘I’ve never heard of it,’ said Charlie, ‘and that’s a fact. Mind you, I’m not saying there’s no such thing, but no mention of it has ever come my way before.’

‘Oh,’ said Edwin, ‘it does exist.’

‘That’s as may be, but, if it does exist, it’ll be above the heads of people like me and her.’ He jerked his head towards Sheila. ‘Me, I clean windows. Anybody can understand what that is, and you don’t get put into places like this one if you do a job like that. Mind you, you can get put into a hospital if you’re a window-cleaner, but not in a hospital like this one, because window-cleaning doesn’t affect the brain. Not, that is, if you’re made as you can do the job. Some can’t do it, and I should think it’s more than likely that you yourself couldn’t. I’m not trying to be insulting, but every man to his trade. If you got up there on a ladder you’d as like as not get froze. I’ve seen these young ones just starting – “tumblers” we call them – get froze stuck up there on a ladder, and nothing that anybody can do can get them down if they’re not ready to

come down. What I mean is, they can only get unfroze of their own accord. I remember hacking away at the hands of one of these tumblers, twenty storeys up, who'd got himself froze. It was a very high wind, and there I was on the window-sill hacking away at him with the side of my hand, but nothing I could do could get him unfroze.'

Edwin was an acrophobe. His head began to spin, and he gently lowered his feet to the floor.

'And what are they going to do, darling?' asked Sheila.

'They're going to do tests,' said Edwin. 'I suppose they're going to try and look inside the brain.'

'You keep them off that,' said Charlie. 'If you're not crackers already they'll make you crackers. Then they shut you away and you can't get out and you can't convince anybody that it's all been their fault, not yours. Your brain's your own property and you don't want them fiddling about with it. Catch them trying to see inside my brain,' he said with scorn. 'Very delicate piece of machinery the brain is, not unlike a watch or a clock.'

An Indian sister with a moustache and sideboards came up from behind and said: 'Meesees Speendreeft? Doctor would like a word with you in the office.'

'If they're trying to get your permission,' said Charlie, 'to do things to his brain what they otherwise wouldn't dare to do, you just tell them no. Just that, no. The shortest word in the language and one of the most telling.' But Sheila had already gone to the large glass tank of an office at the end of the ward.

'On a point of information,' said Edwin, 'that isn't the shortest word in the language.' He felt that, shorn as he was of everything but pyjamas, a bed, and a water-bottle, he had to confront this dark horny window-cleaner with a

show of the only authority he had. 'The indefinite article,' said Edwin, 'in its weak form, of course, is the shortest. It's a single phoneme. I refer, of course, to the form of the indefinite article used before a word beginning with a consonant.' He felt better after saying that. But Charlie said:

'A fine girl, your wife is. I say "girl" without intending any offence, meaning more a woman or perhaps a young woman, according to opinion. I'd say she was about the same age as you, and I'd give you thirty-eight, although you've still got a good head of hair. She came into the public bar at the Anchor today and beat Fred Titcombe at darts. She's drunk pint for pint with me. You've got to hand it to her.'

Edwin felt rising another of these unwonted fits of irritation which showed him that he was sick. 'You don't see my point,' he said, 'about the indefinite article. And you don't even ask me what a phoneme is. And I'm quite sure you don't know.'

'Well,' said calm Charlie, 'that's neither here nor there, is it? It's not to the purpose, so to speak. There's lots of things I don't know, and it's too late to start learning them now.'

'It isn't, it isn't.' Edwin held back a gush of tears. 'You know perfectly well it's never too late.' Some of the nearer visitors, longing for the bell to ring them out, having said all, and more, that they had to say, looked towards Edwin hopefully. But, in check, he sat down quietly on the bed again, blinking back the water.

'You'll be all right,' said Charlie. 'You mark my words. You'll get over it and be as right as rain.' Sheila came back at that moment, too bright, too cheerful. She said:

'Well, it seems that everything's going to be all right, there's nothing to worry about at all.'

'Is that all,' asked Edwin, 'that he wanted to tell you?'

'Well, yes, pretty well. He says that you're going to be perfectly all right. That's what he said.'

'Just what I've been telling him,' said Charlie. 'And I'm no doctor.'

A Nigerian nurse, her head an exquisite ebony carving, came in with the bell. 'All visitors out,' she said, 'if you don't mind.' Relief stirred down the ward. Sadly Edwin saw that his wife was only too ready with her kiss, her promise to come the next day, her quick swirl of lipstick for the healthy world outside. Charlie said:

'You read those books I brought you. Keep you cheerful. Stop you brooding about things.'

With the departure of the visitors a sigh of quiet satisfaction seemed to be exhaled through the ward: the bell had rung out what were, after all, aliens. They were, with their bright voices and natty clothes, the frivolous world. Now everyone could go back to the serious business of disease, disease being ultimately the true human state. Grapes and magazines from the alien world lay untouched for a time, time for them to become acclimatised, assimilated. The near neighbour of Edwin, who had had no visitor, who had sat unmoving on his bed, smoking thoughtfully, now spoke to Edwin for the first time. Through a twisted immobile mouth: 'Your wife's a real smasher,' he sneered. 'I like them like that. Brunette, too.' Then he sneered in silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Edwin drew the thermometer from the warm pit where it had lain, read it, and handed it to the nurse. 'Ninety-eight point four,' he said.

'You are not supposed to know your temperature,' scolded the nurse. She was a grim sallow Slav, large-footed. 'You are not even supposed to know how to read the thermometer.' She frowned over his pulse, threw his wrist away, and recorded the evening data. 'Have you your bowels open?' she asked.

'Yes,' lied Edwin. Otherwise, what purgative horrors might she not devise? 'Very much so.'

'It is not necessary to say that. To say yes is enough.'

'Sorry,' said Edwin. And then he added, as she moved away: '*Spasebo, tovarisch.*'

'You need not thank me. It is my duty. Besides, I am not Russian.'

Edwin lay back, his bedlamp flooding warm on his face. He leafed through one of Charlie's gifts, page after page of nudes. Nude; naked. These were nude, not naked. It worried him that he could grow more excited over the connotatory differences between the two words than he could over the nude, or naked, flesh itself, in reality or in representation. Dr Mustafa, plump dark interrogator in the Tropical Diseases Clinic – whither Edwin had first been sent – had worried about that too. 'Can you feel no desire for your own wife? For anybody else's wife? For any woman at all? For nobody?' Then he had leaned

forward in quiet excitement. 'Not for boys? Not for goats?' There was a true scientific approach. 'And how about fetishes?' Dr Mustafa had asked. 'Shoes? Underwear? Spectacles?' Dr Mustafa had sighed deep, deep, deep commiseration. 'Something has gone wrong with your libido. It is very sad.'

Indeed very sad. Vicariously sad, though. The man who had overcome tobacco addiction was universally congratulated. Was this other, though involuntary, loss of an appetite of a very different order? Yes, because, despite Barrie's whimsy, nicotine was not a lady. A lady was not nicotine. One's wife was not a packet of Senior Service. It was, therefore, vicariously sad.

Edwin stared, though now unseeing, at a nude named (why the quotation marks? he had wondered) 'Felicity'. He thought not of felicity but of fidelity. He and Sheila had long ago agreed that sexual infidelity was not really infidelity at all. You could accept a drink or a cigarette from somebody, why not also an hour or two in bed? It was the same sort of thing. Even when she had not been able, for some obscure reason of fancy, to reciprocate a friend's or stranger's desire for her body, she had always been willing to lie still, be the passive food for that appetite. '*Ça vous donne tant de plaisir et moi si peu de peine.*' A favourite slogan of hers. The real infidelity, according to her, should draw to itself total and ultimate condemnation, unforgivable, the sin against the Holy Ghost. To prefer just to *be* with somebody else, to engage of one's own free will in spiritual intimacy with another, that was true adultery.

It had been easy enough to accept this view of morality with one's brain, thought Edwin. It was when pro-

misconduct changed from a concept to a percept that trouble began. Curious how women, so irrational, could exalt reason, could be genuinely puzzled that even a doctor of philosophy should want to bring out a knife when he actually *saw*, actually *heard*. Edwin had actually seen, actually heard, only once, and that had been fairly recently, in a hotel in Moulmein. Sheila had sweetly forgiven his rage; after all, the failure of his libido had already taken place; he was not quite normal.

What Edwin now feared was that his marriage would fail completely because choice had been taken away from her, her right to choose between his bed and all the others in the world. She needed a base from which to conduct her forays; she might now, without deliberately searching for it, find a new one. Edwin did not believe that anyone in any hospital, neurologist or psychiatrist, could put anything fundamental right. The libido had failed for good; the latest phase of one's personality must always be the final phase; he wanted to ensure that he never fell down unexpectedly again while lecturing on folk etymology, but if he smelt cloves as peppermint who was to say that he was wrong? And though he worried vicariously about the end of his sex-life, the test of the durability of his marriage must surely be taken on this very issue. Some day, all marriages had to become sexless, but then they usually had more than fifteen years to look back on. Thirty-eight was (Charlie had been right in his estimate) much too young to pack all those instruments away.

The sneerer next to Edwin was already asleep, toiling hard in it. At intervals he would announce a football result, the scores fantastic.

He really preferred, Edwin decided, being worried over