

# Disputed Passage

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LLOYD C. DOUGLAS



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WITH SINCERE APPRECIATION OF HER  
CONSTANT ENCOURAGEMENT AND VALUED  
COUNSEL THIS NOVEL IS DEDICATED  
TO MY WIFE

Have you learned lessons only of those who admired  
you, and were tender with you, and stood aside  
for you?

Have you not learned great lessons from those who  
braced themselves against you, and disputed the  
passage with you?

WALT WHITMAN

# Chapter I

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IT WAS two o'clock in the afternoon of the last Thursday in September, opening day of the fall semester.

The weather was unseasonably sultry, and the air in Doctor Milton (Tubby) Forrester's lecture-arena lay as inert and stale as the cadavers in the grim old anatomical laboratory adjoining.

But if the atmosphere of the dingy little theater was not refreshingly tonic it was emotionally tense. Whatever it lacked in sweetness it made up in stress; for Anatomy, under the brilliant but irascible Forrester, was reputed to be the stiffest course in the entire four-year curriculum.

Hopeful of being credited at the outset with the flimsy virtue of punctuality, the exceptionally large class of new medical students — one hundred and thirty-three; all men, this year, but eight — had assembled with the nervous promptness of first-time voyagers boarding a ship.

As for the personnel of the class, less than half were newly graduated from the main body of the State University only a mile distant. The rest of them had recently received their degrees — Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science — in colleges of various rating, scattered all the way from the Alleghenies to the Coast. A few of the more gregarious imports had nodded and exchanged casual civilities in the Registrar's quarters, earlier in the day; but everyone felt himself a stranger in this unfamiliar setting; even the men who had been living for a quadrennium within a ten minutes' walk of the Medical College campus.

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But no matter from how near or far they had come, there wasn't a person present this afternoon, in Tubby Forrester's amphitheater, who had not heard the dismaying legends of his impatience, his arrogance, his bad temper, his noisy tantrums. And yet it was largely on account of Tubby that most of them had decided to study medicine here. Tubby was mean as the devil, but he knew his stuff. Not only was he an anatomist of high distinction but a recognized authority on neurological surgery. His office walls were covered with impressive certificates of kudos bestowed by medical schools and renowned scientific societies, tributes embossed on vellum in four languages.

In not many medical colleges did the novice have access to such talented supervision in his early adventures with Anatomy. Tubby maintained that if a man had a natural flair for the subject his gift would show up promptly. He was ever on the alert for budding genius in this field. To his colleagues on the faculty he had confided that he was on a still hunt for potential anatomists who had the makings of neurological surgeons.

The ordinary, run-of-the-mine medical matriculate did not pause to reflect that he might be better off in a school where mediocrity was treated with more patience. The big thing was to earn a diploma bearing Tubby's distinguished autograph. Even a very small and useless spoon achieved some dignity if the word 'Sterling' was stamped on its handle.

But it could not be said that any of the ungifted had been deceived into the error of casting his lot with this great man. Tubby made no bones about the fact that he was interested only in the upper tenth. His attitude toward the large majority of his students was contemptuous and contemptible. His savage sarcasms stung them until their very souls were afire with hate and their eyes burned with defenseless fury. Hundreds of practicing physicians — ranging in age from thirty-five to fifty, and in locale from the Lakes to the Gulf and from Sea to Sea — were proud to be able to say that they had their Anatomy under Forrester, but they in-

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variably added that Tubby was a brute, and many with better memories for the indignities they had suffered at his hands referred to him in terms much more unpleasant than that.

This afternoon, with ample time and a suitable environment for morbid meditation, the new class sat in the steeply ascending semi-circular rows of creaking seats, resting their forearms on the battered desks, scowling at their fidgeting fingers or absently thrumming the corners of their virgin notebooks. Occasionally they lifted an apprehensive glance toward the door leading from Tubby's office. The early Christian martyrs waiting in the arena for the lions' cage to open may have had at least the consolation that their impending discomfort would be brief. There would be four years of Tubby Forrester.

Tradition held that the first session with this erratic bully was guaranteed to be a highly interesting entertainment, provided you were not of the dozen or more who would be singled out, stood up on their feet, and given a chance to make or break themselves irrevocably in a preliminary skirmish where it was dangerous to be witty and a disaster to be dull.

Customarily he opened his address by referring to this meeting as 'The Acquaintance Hour' — a phrase that was expected to fetch a sardonic chuckle, for it was with such verbal lollipops that the University churches and the 'Y' angled for new student patronage. Irreverent as Satan, Tubby loved to toy derisively with these ingratiating clichés of organized altruism. But by the end of 'The Acquaintance Hour' all the subtlety of his mockeries would have been abandoned, and you would have had a taste of the real thing you had let yourself in for when you signed up for Anatomy under Forrester.

'If you have to be petted and patted,' he would growl, 'join the Glad-handers' Club, or the Back-slappers, or the Well-wishers. If you find that your system demands more sugar, there are plenty of institutions in this locality where you may have it for much less than the asking. They will

teach you how to be as friendly as a wet dog. Tea will be served, songs will be sung, charades will be played. If you want your boots licked, they will do it for you. But don't expect any of that nonsense here! This edifice has been dedicated to Science. Here we strive to be precise in our research; honest in our nomenclature. If you are a jackass you will have to go elsewhere to be deceived into the belief that you are a zebra.'

\* \* \* \* \*

He was entering now from his office. Ten minutes overdue, he marched with jerky-gaited pomposity to the waist-high table that served as his desk. This table, mounted on large rubber-tired casters and topped with a two-inch marble slab, was six feet three in length by three feet wide; and you didn't have to be a medical student to guess what use was made of it when it wasn't acting as Tubby's lectern.

The class brought itself to rigid attention as the steely eyes comprehensively surveyed the well-filled theater. There was no need of building up any dramatic suspense here, but Tubby coolly looked the crowd over for a long moment while with both hands he rhythmically tugged at the platinum watch-chain spread across his ample abdomen, a disquieting gesture that suggested the whetting of a carving-knife.

'Dear Christian Friends,' he began, clipping his words. A general grin testified that Tubby was measuring up to the picture of him that everyone had conceived. 'This,' said the attitude of the class, 'is the fellow. No doubt of that. Hard-boiled, all right. A nine-minute egg.'

'It is indeed a pleasure,' railed Tubby, 'to welcome so goodly a number to our Acquaintance Hour. Among those who have preceded you through these charming halls, to take up the arduous activities of the most ancient profession — save one — some may have told you that in this snug little theater, and the more commodious workshop adjacent, we are just one happy family, loving one another all the day long.' He paused to let this mockery soak in and



collect its wages in knowing sniffs and dry chuckles. His penetrating gaze raked the rows, tier by tier; a darting glance that dared you to withhold your tribute to his mordant wit. His attitude was that of a peeved sergeant inspecting a squad with the hope of discovering a loose button.

The pause was alarmingly lengthened. Midway of the top row, Tubby's sweeping search rested for an instant, carried on to the end of the row, returned to the middle, and concentrated upon a face that was quite unaware of the inquisition. There was a dead silence, but the inattentive one had failed to notice the ominous break in Tubby's address, apparently unaware that he was under fire.

Presently the sour flippancies were resumed, but they lacked their previous finesse. Tubby was not intentionally pulling his punches but they hadn't the old steam back of them. Again and again his gaze shot truculently to the center of the top row where it had met that impassive profile. It was a lean, strong, determined face, the features clean-cut as an image on a coin, and as immobile. The lips were in repose but not compressed: they did not denote animosity or disapproval. Had they been primly puckered into an evidence of hostility, Tubby would have been better satisfied. He would give the offended beggar another wallop; give him something to be sore about. But these lips were not registering distaste; not registering anything but unconcern. The deep-set eyes which Tubby had tried vainly to command were vaguely exploring a far corner of the neglected room where a soot-smudged wall met a discolored ceiling. It was obvious that the insufferable fellow either wasn't listening at all or felt that what he was hearing did not rate his respectful attention.

Tubby's speech, stridently satirical, scrambled on through the deep mud with heavy boots. Every man in the class — but one — sensed that an impious hand had been laid upon the halter of the professor's goat, but nobody's curiosity was urgent enough to risk a craning of the neck. The instinct of self-preservation was very active here, today.

The corrosive ironies continued for a few minutes, but Tubby was tiring of this mood. His tone and tempo changed abruptly. He patted his damp brow with a large white handkerchief, smiled briefly, endeavored to be playful, repeated — as if it were original — the old joke about specialization. 'If you must specialize,' he said, 'go in for Dermatology, for your patients will never get well and they will never die and they will never get you up at night.' And everybody laughed at this but one man, the obnoxious chap in the top row who — if he had heard a word of this ancient wheeze — was probably saying to himself that it would be impolite to laugh at a joke so weighted with infirmity. Damn the bounder! Tubby couldn't remember ever having been so befuddled. Again he came to a full stop, changed his gears, lowered his tone, became sincere. He talked of the doctor's life in unexpected phrases of forthright honesty. Properly viewed, he said, earnestly, it was not an occupation but a vocation, a life-commitment rather than a livelihood, an obsession rather than a profession.

'You will quickly classify yourselves into the categories where — by native gift and intention — you properly belong. You will do that in the course of your first year. According to our statistics, fifteen per cent of you are so dull and lazy that you will be fired — for the sake of the College, the public, and yourselves. Fifty per cent of you will make passing grades and receive degrees and diplomas. What you lack in talent and skill you may compensate with a pleasant bedside manner. Relying more upon sentimentality than scientific knowledge you may possibly earn twice as much by the administration of sympathy and aspirin as your contemporaries who may be twice as well informed.

'These two groups will account for sixty-five per cent of you. A quarter of the class will turn out to be better than average students; better than average doctors. You will do your work as well as you can, according to the light that is in you, and you will deserve credit for this fidelity.

‘Of the remaining ten per cent — the top ten per cent — it is conceivable that there might develop something quite promising. Don’t bank on it — but it might happen.

‘I do not know, today, who you are — you of this interesting ten per cent. Perhaps you, yourselves, do not know. I venture a word with you at this time. This counsel is not intended for sluggards, trimmers, time-servers, or potential quacks; nor is it meant for the merely competent, however honest and industrious they may be. I am speaking now to the candidates for rating in the top tenth.’

He glanced up, rather negligently, toward the upper tier, and found himself looking squarely into a pair of ice-blue eyes that might easily have been related to his own. He drew a dry smile, and went on.

‘And it is to be hoped,’ added Tubby — as an afterthought in defining his restricted audience — ‘it is to be hoped that no apathetic day-dreamer, who may have sat here in a coma until now, will too optimistically identify himself as a divinely ordained member of this privileged minority.’

It was very quiet. The class felt that Tubby had paid off somebody for inattention. The mystery concerning the professor’s serious disconcertment was now cleared up. Everybody hoped the affair was a closed incident. The constraint had been annoying.

‘You of the top tenth,’ continued Tubby, ‘will very soon become aware of your rating. You will not have to wait until you see your grades at the close of the semester.

‘One of the most frequent mistakes made, in classroom admonitions, is the teacher’s fatuous promise to his disciples that diligent application is a guarantee of the student’s success. It goes without saying, of course, that the student who does his work to the best of his ability has more to show for the time he has spent in school than the sluggard. But the persons who comprise the upper tenth of the class must have much more to offer than mere diligence, however praiseworthy is their honest industry.

‘There is a homely adage, customarily quoted with a

smile, which discourages any attempt to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. This is far from funny. It is tragic. In the course of my experience here, I have been an unwilling auditor of classroom work sincerely performed by young men and women who had no natural gifts for this undertaking. Perhaps they might have succeeded brilliantly in some other quest: I do not know. But — no matter how hard they worked — they had no chance of achieving distinction. They were biologically ineligible. It was not their fault; it was their misfortune.

‘In a much smaller number of cases, we have had students who gave early promise of future success, but lacked the courage to invest themselves whole-heartedly in their work. They were good for the hundred-yard dash, but they hadn't the wind required to do a mile; much less a marathon.

‘Now it might be supposed that my next statement should extol the happy combination of brains and diligence; and these are, indeed, a promising pair of success-factors. But the upper tenth needs something more. The price of diligence is self-discipline. Concentration upon your work necessarily demands a resolute avoidance of time-wasting and distracting frivolity. You are quite aware of that. And it is a mere platitude to say that if you wish to get anywhere in preparing for this profession, you must give yourself utterly to your job.

‘But that is not all. Self-discipline, in the opinion of the moralist, is always worth what it costs. And perhaps there is something to be said in favor of the martyr who, by living a sacrificial, self-controlled life, earns credits negotiable in some other, better world beyond the sky. I am not an authority on that subject. But self-discipline, practiced for the purpose of leaving one free to do one's chosen work, fails of its performance if one pursues it at the cost of very much fretting and conscious effort.

‘Naturally, there will be occasional days when the collar will gall you. No matter how well you have yourself in hand, there will be times when the animal that is in you

clamors for its rights. But if you find yourself in a continuous running fight with your appetites — to the extent that your mind is constantly disturbed — your sacrifices will not justify their expense.

‘This leads me to say that the self-discipline of the upper ten per cent must be — for the most part — effortless and automatic. And it may become so, very quickly, if the claims of your vocation loom larger than the urgency of your physical desires. When the job becomes important enough to warrant your membership in the fortunate ten per cent, the outside distractions will not worry you.’

Tubby’s voice had lowered to a conversational tone. It was almost as if he were having a heart-to-heart with a single individual in the privacy of a confidential interview. The class sat poised, deeply attentive. The silence would have been broken by a pin-drop. The cognitive little eyes drifted to the upper row of the amphitheater. The blondish young athlete who had ruined ‘The Acquaintance Hour’ was leaning far forward in his seat, with his elbows on his knees and his fists supporting a firm chin. His eyes were intent, his lips compressed. Tubby frowned, and continued.

‘Out of this top tenth of the class, almost anything is likely to emerge. One never knows what may come forth from this exclusive group. Sometimes we run along for years, in this Medical College, without observing the rise of a student who promises to make an important contribution. Once in a blue moon, the upper tenth delivers to Medical Science an explorer, a discoverer, a trail-blazer.’

Tubby’s next sentence sent a thrill through the closely integrated audience. You could feel it bang at your heart and magnetize your spine. You not only felt it yourself, but you knew that everybody else — to a degree — was experiencing this sensation.

‘Is there anyone here,’ asked Tubby, impressively, ‘who will tell us — some day — what we want to know about cancer?... Will one of you — some day — give us a prophylaxis for infantile paralysis? The two important gentlemen who are to perform these feats are — if I may



venture the prediction — already born. May I be still more hopeful and hazard the guess that they are already of age? It may be that they are experienced scientists, now on the eve of their discoveries. It may be that they are students in some medical school.' Tubby paused. The class sat transfixed, welded into one solid chunk. 'These two men,' declared Tubby, in a tone so low as to be barely audible — 'these two men may be in this room — *now!*'

He suddenly booted them out of their hypnosis. He tugged out his watch, shuffled his thick sheaf of registration papers, shifted his stance to the end of the autopsy table. His face lighted a little with a smile that suggested he was going to be funny again. The class straightened its back and drew a long breath, the first long one it had felt the need of for some time. Nobody looked at his neighbor. Nobody wanted anyone else to know how deeply he had been stirred. Tubby had gone at it again in another mood.

'And now,' he was saying, 'to all of you — regardless of your various ratings, regardless of what you are or may become, I charge you that the study and practice of medicine and surgery is a scientific pursuit to be approached with much the same attitude as you might undertake a post-graduate course in Geology. Keep your emotions out of it, and give your brains a chance. The less sentiment you apply to this enterprise, the better will be your workmanship. I have often thought of suggesting to my peers,' extemporized Tubby, 'that at least one year's internship should be spent in a veterinary hospital where the young medical student might pursue his work without the emotional interference of the patient's family.'

This, thought the weary class, was very good indeed. Tubby gave them all a chance to laugh merrily. Even the face in the upper tier broke into a grin. But it was far, far too late for this young Rip Van Winkle to wake up and take an interest. It wouldn't do him very much good now. Tubby sniffed and went on.

'Your present attitude should be that of a researchist seeking exact facts about the construction of the human

body. Unquestionably there is a place where it is in order to consider Shakespeare's apostrophe — "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable!" But that place is not the anatomical laboratory. If you are wise, my Christian Friends, you will leave all that to the poets and parsons. It's their job; not yours. Your business is to study man as a badly made contraption in need of repair. Whether the human animal committed a blunder when — in the course of his evolution — he resolved to stand on his hind legs and face the world in an upright position, is a question I should not presume to discuss in all its phases. Personally, I am just as well satisfied not to be walking on all fours. But when this animal tipped his viscera from horizontal to perpendicular he incurred a flock of disabilities. They begin to show up as soon as he learns to walk.

'You want to keep it in mind,' declared Tubby, seriously, 'that orthodox theology is exactly wrong in its explanation of man's woes. It wasn't Adam's fall that caused the trouble: it was his rise. A dog may become so sycophantic that he will sit up, now and then, for a moment, just to flatter his master by imitation; but he has sense enough not to do it very often or for very long. According to the Bible, Eve was sentenced to bear her young in pain because she plucked an apple from a tree, in disobedience to a divine command. Had she been content to munch the apples that had fallen on the ground, she could have borne her cubs without risk and without help.'

'All this places you in an indefensible position as a student. Your whole training is for the purpose of fitting you to promote the cause of civilization. And the more civilization we achieve, the poorer we are, physically. Civilization has given us many benefits, no doubt; it has also developed habits that have produced defective teeth, defective eyes, ears, noses, bronchia. We still have a few of the old glands that were of earlier value; now a menace. May I repeat — you are to study man as a poorly made

machine that can't even support its own weight for very long at a time, in testimony whereof you are all sitting down to ease your freight at age twenty-three. By the time you're sixty-three, solicitous relatives will be following you about with a chair. You will still have a few years to spend here, perhaps. During the course of your career you may have become wise, noble, renowned. You will also have had your tonsils removed, and your appendix; perchance a kidney. You will be wearing artificial teeth and glasses and maybe a gadget to aid your hearing.... I want you to go into the anatomical laboratory with the understanding that a great many of the things you find out are not as they ought to be. The vital organs were originally intended to function in another position. Forget all this prattle about man being made in the image of God. If it's true, it's no credit to him. Anybody who wants to believe in that sort of thing had better keep out of the dissecting room.

'But — and this should cheer your hearts — while this anatomical laboratory, to which you are shortly to be introduced, is no place to look for fragrance or faith or fairy-stories, it is at least honest, which can't be said of legislative halls or art galleries or cathedrals. You are here in quest of truth. Once a fact is amply attested you are to accept it, no matter how ugly it is; no matter how much you wish it wasn't so; no matter how violently it collides with what you have previously thought and would still prefer to think. And don't make the mistake of imagining that the testimony is all in, and on file. Many a scientist, six feet underground, would suffer all the agonies of the supposedly damned if he could come forth today and read some of his own dogmatic remarks, long since reduced to utter nonsense by new findings. Remember that until a theory has been disproved — no matter how fantastic it may appear in the light of our current knowledge — it should be accorded the respect due to a proposition that might be proved — sometime.'

Tubby closed this sentence in an impressive tone that

signified he had said about everything. He looked up, and consulted the face that had annoyed him. The eyes were wide with interest. They were intensely aware and deeply thoughtful. Tubby didn't care what they thought. He disliked them. The fellow needed a trimming. Tossing open a huge portfolio of papers on the autopsy table, the professor — with a flash-back to the earlier mood of studied mockery — drawled, 'Now — with your patient indulgence, we will call the roll. On this occasion you will stand when your name is spoken, so that I may identify you, and also that you — for purpose of acquaintance — may identify one another. . . .

'John Wesley Beaven.... Kindly arise, John Wesley, wherever you are, and let the congregation see you.'

There was a stir in the top row. Amused faces, at all angles, turned in that direction. Seats squeaked and shoes scraped. Everybody was eager to see how a stranger might react to this kind of teasing.

A tall, handsome, Viking sort of fellow had risen and stood waiting whatever discourtesies the Medical College had to offer at the hands of its witty anatomist. Tubby's little eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue while he deliberated the best technique of punishment for the bounder who had given him such a bad hour. Painstakingly polishing his pince-nez, he consulted the carbon copy of Beaven's registration form.

'I observe, John Wesley, that the first college you attended — where you spent your freshman and sophomore years — is a righteous little institution engaged chiefly in the manufacture and disbursement of Methodist preachers. That fact, coupled with your name, leads me to suspect that you have come to us from a pious home. We will endeavor to be on our guard against the use of any objectionable language in your presence.' Tubby waited for snickers, but apparently the class was hopeful of seeing a sentiment develop in favor of the mercy which almost any one of them might need before the hour was over.