

A MATCH FOR THE CANDLE

Exactly in the centre of the hormonized, masquerading mutation of grass, designated as lawn, the hospital stood; a polished, square monolith devoid of personality or ornament. No curve delighted the human eye. Squat and frigid, it was a monument to science and computerized procedures. Occasionally, cars drew up at the electrically-controlled double doors, the occupants reluctantly leaving the security of their mechanical wombs to enter a larger, more complex sanctuary. As they, themselves, tended their mobile shells, they were in turn about to be given a scientific overhaul and receive treatment.

All the wonders of scientific and technological advances were here. Machines would examine and diagnose, computers would prescribe and dispense, the inexorable X-ray eye would probe unerringly. Blood would be replenished, organs replaced and antibiotics rout unwanted alien elements. Thus was the human body dealt with and regulated. Nor was the human mind forgotten or neglected. Science had proclaimed after a long and weary struggle that it was equipped to cope with this traditional cloister and its elusive variations. When the deviations stemmed from malfunctioning glands the treatment was comparatively simple and the recovery swift; when retentive depression and anti-social behaviour were more deeply seated the treatment was extensive and prolonged; but the chosen therapy usually had the desired results. This, in fact, was the most prevalent disorder, and one on which the nation's most brilliant scientists were working constantly with meticulous care and dedication.

True, there were some who remembered the recuperative effects of a quiet holiday in the country, a planned lessening of work, or even — that most hackneyed solution of bygone days — a relaxing sea voyage. But, as the scientists were quick to point out, a quiet holiday in the country was not easy to come by and a relaxing sea trip was usually transformed into a hectic programme of social pursuits and heightened stimulation. In any case, they asserted, the desire for leisure and less high pressure endeavour was, in itself, merely another symptom of maladjustment. No, they explained kindly and patiently to the malcontents, you must trust us, ours is the only way. And truly, this seemed to be so. Men and women were expertly steered back into the accepted mould, returning eventually to their respective activities. If there were some doctors whose eyes

betrayed signs of doubt or despair, very few noticed. Life was so exciting and rewarding.

The hospital lobby was carpeted throughout. Chairs, repudiating any acquaintanceship with cosiness or beauty but solely designed for correct posture and easy cleaning were geometrically spaced against the walls; piped music, that could, with intense effort of listening and some imagination be associated with the human voice, filled the air. A few white-clad figures moved with precision along the corridors; poised, courteous and completely uninvolved. Each step a tribute to training, each syllable an accolade to clear, uncommitted attitudes. Plastic flowers trailed their pathetic imbecilities over the rims of vases and jars which had never known the contamination of water. The flowers flaunted their coloured blossoms and green foliage without need of moisture — except an occasional wipe with a sponge suitably impregnated with chemicals to remove the dust. A credit they were to the factory that produced them. This was doubly satisfying when the particular specimen was perfumed; violets particularly, There were those who remembered the unsynthesized perfume of natural violets and vouched for the similarity of scent. If there was a look of frustration in their eyes as they made the judgment, very few noticed. The wonders of science were so exciting and rewarding.

In a private room on the fifth floor an old man lay dying.

Sitting beside him was another man of the same age. Strange, no one else appeared to see the second man. This had puzzled the patient considerably at first and he had grown extremely agitated, necessitating deep sedation. But as the days slipped by, leaving their added quota of weakness within him, he ceased to worry and his acceptance and contentment grew greater with each succeeding hour. There was joy, too, because the patient had discovered that when they were alone at night he felt strong enough to have long, reflective conversations with the visitor. In fact, he had made one wonderful last discovery; the visitor was his other self, lost sight of many years ago when he had been called upon to make the most crucial decision of his life. He had pondered sometimes through his long, lusty living what the results would have been had he taken the other road. Now he was finding out. He waited contentedly as the nurse drew the curtains against the darkening window. She switched on the muted bedside lamp, and through his failing vision her white uniform shimmered in a pearl-like mist.

The nurse bent over him. "Comfortable, Mr Andrews?"

He nodded his head. She poured a tumbler of water and held it out to him. The old man took the water, and she extended her right hand palm upwards with two small, white pills. "Here, take these sleeping pills."

She leaned closer to hear his response.

"I don't need them."

"You must sleep, Mr Andrews."

"I do."

The nurse, following the exact routine of many previous nights, placed the pills on the bedside table and said as usual, "Well, they're there, if you need them."

She moved to the door and closed it gently behind her.

The patient lay for a few moments with eyes closed. Then he whispered, "The same routine every night — conditioned — like Pavlov's dogs, you know."

"No, I don't know," the visitor replied.

"Of course you don't. You've already told me you never read much."

The old man rubbed a hand laboriously over his forehead.

"Now — where were we?"

"I'd just finished telling you how I'd started to build my fortune."

"That's right. I always knew money could be made in that venture. But I chose to go to Spain. I lived in a state of perpetual fear there — fear of death — fear of mutilation."

He paused for a moment; his eyes flickered with a surge of added awareness. "You know, bursting bombs are not a bit like fireworks, as they have so often been described. You know what they *are* like? Tossed posies — red and gold — dying in the darkness, and the bodies flung grotesquely in death looked like incomparable acrobats giving a final performance. Those thoughts came unbidden and stimulating. I was ashamed. The mind — ah, the mind. But the war gave me Estrella."

"Tell me about Estrella."

"I first saw her dancing in a tavern; her flashing eyes, black hair coiled on the back of her neck like a cowrie shell — remember the cowrie shells we collected on that summer holiday?"

"I remember."

"I knew her later, a rifle strapped across her back. We lived in a cave, many of us, and she danced for us there, too."

"What happened?"

"She died at Guernica." The old man sighed. "I loved other women, but the pattern of those months in Spain dominated the rest of my life."

The patient closed his eyes and said, "You must have had your fears too; it is a requisite for living. Tell me, did you ever wonder what had become of me?"

"Frequently."

With difficulty, the patient reached again for the tumbler of water, drank thirstily and said, "Do you think between us we make a complete

man?"

"I don't know what a complete man is."

"Neither do I. It was a silly question."

The light fell softly on the spotless bed and the two age-spotted hands lying in utter acquiescence on the covers.

"I was just about to ask you another stupid question — but it's gone. Instead, I remember a poem by Walt Whitman; about life being a bountiful supper table, and how we set up a futile resistance against leaving the food, wine and good comrades; how we try to delay the inexorable departure. Have you known the joys of friendship?"

"I have."

"And love?"

"That too."

"Perhaps it's true that most men share these two experiences. I've learned that much, have you?"

"Yes, I think so."

The patient's hands moved restlessly, plucking at the sheets, his head moving mechanically from side to side.

"What else have you learned?" he asked, weakly. "What else? You won wealth and power — I did not — what have they taught you?"

"That life is conflict."

"So." The patient sighed. "That is the sum of my learning too. Two different roads have brought us to the same conclusions." He raised his death-signed hands with difficulty, and held them towards the chair. "And the same end." The patient moved his position slightly and lay for a long time, still and silent.

The door opened, and the illuminated corridor flung a narrow golden path from door to bed. The night nurse closed the door softly and moved towards the old man. For a moment she bent over him. Then as she turned to go, he uttered a piercing cry of corroding pain. Quickly, she unlocked a compartment of the cabinet and took out a phial and hypodermic syringe. She filled the needle swiftly and calmly, as the old man moaned over and over again, his eyes staring at the chair, "Don't go — don't go!"

"I'm not going," the nurse said reassuringly.

"Not you — not you," the patient cried urgently.

"There's no one else here," she said authoritatively.

He looked at her in bewilderment.

"This will take away the pain. Relief will come in a moment." The nurse plunged the needle into the thin arm. He felt nothing; she was procedure perfect and compassionate.

For a few moments she stood quietly at the bedside, until his intense

pain receded. Then she turned away. The transient bright path gleamed again for a moment and was gone.

The patient lay completely still while the powerful drug did its work. Slowly, the twitching tortured flesh sank into blessed oblivion. He felt weightless and free. Again, he turned on to his side facing the chair. "Is there any joy on earth so sweet as the departure of pain?" he asked. He lay sleeping for a long time. A lessening of dark against the curtains, a diminishing of light from the bedside lamp. Faint sounds crept into the room. A trolley with muted wheels rumbled in a whisper past the door, accompanied by hushed footsteps. A buzzer sounded in the distance. The patient opened his eyes.

"Remember my pug dog?" he asked. "I always thought he had a face like a crushed pansy." He sighed. "So many things to remember and ask." His voice changed and he asked abruptly, "What do you think of the space programme?"

"A waste of money."

"Sometimes that thought occurs to me too. But man was born for endeavour and adventure."

"Better the money for other things."

"You mean a welfare programme — medical research perhaps? I don't know, there are marvels of medical research now. Pain is almost conquered — they have made dying so easy."

"Drugs to relieve pain may also destroy the patient. They won't allow unnecessary suffering, because it is an added burden to the medical profession and the nursing staff."

"You're a cynic."

"Perhaps."

"No. The relief of pain is unconditionally good. Dying should be as painless to the participant as birth. Some day it will be like that. *Life* is for struggle, pain and achievement. Death is the conclusive denial."

Daylight was entering the room. Like a sentient presence, sauntering, resting gently on familiar objects, preparing like an expected guest for a prolonged visit. This appeared to agitate the patient whose voice quavered with urgency.

"What did your money bring you?"

"Comfort and security."

"Adventure?"

"No — not that."

"You've never sailed a small craft in a storm?"

"Never."

"Pitted your strength, alone, against the natural elements?"

"No."

"Not in any way? Not climbed a mountain – swum a roaring river – ridden a fractious demon of a horse – fought a good fight?"

"None of those things."

"You've wasted your life!" the patient cried angrily. "You told me you'd learned life is conflict. What were your conflicts?"

"Those of most men; the conflict of getting and holding."

"Getting and holding what?"

"What I now possess. I told you; comfort and security."

"Well," the patient drew a deep breath, "what about the mind?"

"That's not easy to answer."

"Did you ever worship a painting or pray to hear a symphony when your time came to die? Were you ever curious? Did you question the old, established standards? Were you ever horrified at the darkness of your thoughts? Terrified of your emotions? Did you look into yourself and recoil from your discoveries? Did you at some glorious moment have a glimpse of your potential – and find a simple, perfect beauty in some sudden flash of comprehension?"

"Enough, I think, to understand you."

The patient smiled. "Then it is universal as I thought. But you smothered it?"

"Yes."

"When the search became an obscure nightmare, what did you do?" The old man's voice shook. "What did you do?"

"Obtained the necessary treatment."

"Did it work?"

"Yes. But it had to be constantly renewed."

The morning light was taking control. The sound of traffic, like distant surf drifted into the room; a siren, faint as sound in a dream joined it.

"The factory summons," the patient said. "Man's going to work. I don't have much more time."

"Time?"

"My craft needs no more attention; I can drift now."

"And me?"

"You too."

The day nurse slipped silently into the room and looked closely at the patient. With regulated movements, like an intricate machine obeying implicitly the authority of infallible control, she held the bedside lamp closer to his face. The patient opened his eyes.

"Did you sleep, Mr Andrews?"

He made a faint gesture of assent.

"Much pain this morning?"

"None."

She smiled — the smile of a victor. On a chart secured to the foot of the bed she wrote the necessary information, switched out the light and left the room. The patient said urgently, "You see. Physical pain is their enemy. They understand it, because in some degree or another they have experienced it. Pain is humanity's easily discernible and most stereotyped experience."

"You said the conquest of pain was unconditionally good."

"It is. It is."

The patient struggled to turn more fully towards the chair.

"But our minds — what is happening to our minds?"

"There is exploration and research being done."

"I know, I know. But it's being done in isolation — it should be embodied in all other fields of discovery. The effects should be linked with scientific and technological advances and procedures. It is all fruitless otherwise." The patient lay back on the pillow. "It's such a simple truth."

"I can't really understand you — I've never been able to understand you."

"You see! If we two can't truly communicate with each other, how can the whole human race?"

"Is that necessary?"

"It's more than necessary, it's the ultimate goal of beauty and joy."

The door opened noiselessly. Doctor and nurse stood by the bed.

"He seems slightly agitated," the doctor said. "The tranquillity is not deep enough." He stooped to the bed, his ear close to the patient's mouth. "All unintelligible," he announced. "Nurse, give him another injection." He hesitated and then once again bent his head, listening intently. His eyes flickered slightly, he paused, then said briskly "The usual hallucinations. He thinks there is someone else in the room. Visit him every quarter hour and keep the pain under control."

The nurse closed the venetians slightly and followed the doctor from the room.

"I'm tired," the patient said, "dying is very easy."

Sunlight completely enveloped one side of the room, leaving the bedside corner in deep shadow.

"The conflicts are what should be considered — the conflicts within us engendered by our environment." The old man grew more and more agitated. "And they keep on aggravating these conflicts. Why can't they see this? Instead of medication to help us bear it, we need to change it!"

He lay silent. Millions of motes asserted themselves in the bright sunlight as a stray wisp of breeze invaded the sanctuary. With it came the faint sound of whistling, almost instantly silenced, but bouncing round the

room to be heard from the bed.

"Whistling," the patient whispered. "Men don't whistle much any more. Have you noticed that?"

"Yes — although I wasn't really aware of it until now."

"I don't think women sing much about the house now, either. I can't really recall when I last heard a woman sing spontaneously and joyously."

The sounds of human activity filled the room. Quick, daytime footsteps passed the door, a vacuum cleaner whirred monotonously, traffic noises increased and an electric train rumbled far below. The sounds were slight, deadened by the almost sound-proofed walls, but to the old man it seemed as though the increasing volume filled the room with a fierce fury. He thought his voice rose to a scream, but in reality he merely whispered.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Then rest on your oars."

He let his arms droop to his sides in pure compliance. His lips moved laboriously with the force of the inmost essence of concentration.

"Sad they could not hear our conversation."

Downstairs a porter wiped the plastic flowers, straightened the coffee-table magazines and placed the chairs in their allotted positions. A white-clad doctor walked briskly past, the electronic device in his breast pocket pipping out its summons; a larger electronic signal infallibly flashed its messages on a suspended frame. The receptionist prepared her paraphernalia and facial expression. Nurses in unblemished uniforms and veils folded with meticulous precision made their way unerringly to their assigned duties. Outside the mower whirred its never ending battle with nature. A gardener sprayed his own particular solution against life on to flower and shrub. A desolate bird chirped incongruously in the wilderness, searching hopelessly for a worm.

Cars came to a standstill to disgorge their passengers. Patients, relieved and hopeful wended their way inside.

A young, pregnant woman got clumsily out of an ambulance. Under the trees, dappled sunlight, like the hide of a piebald pony, flickered over her distended belly, causing it to quiver as though the new life inside grew impatient for release. A young man carrying a suitcase took her arm and smiled down at her.

Upstairs on the fifth floor an old man died.