

DOCTOR TOPPER TAKES A TURN

What time is it? What day is it? How long have I been here? Shall I ask the figure in white? No. It is too much effort. Anyway, it does not matter.

I sink back into the limbo from which I wakened—the mist produced by hypnotic drugs. Gradually I become aware of my surroundings. I do not see the anxious faces round my bedside. I realize that for the first time in days I am alone. The crushing precordial pain has left me; there now remains only a feeling of discomfort. The sense of impending dissolution of a few days ago has given place to a new hope. I know that I am going to recover. That recovery will be slow and painstaking. I shall be out of action for six weeks or more. That will be the longest spell of inactivity I have ever known. A strange feeling of resignation possesses me. In a sense I have become re-orientated. The things I considered important have become less so, now.

After 25 years in practice I am now able, for the first time, to take stock of myself. My mind goes back to the years of childhood—life at home where everything contributed to smooth my path. Circumstances there were ideal for physical and mental development. Life at University was successful and happy. I was an average, hard-working student who found time for social activities and sport. Success crowned all my undertakings. After graduating I won recognition in my work at hospital, where I proved, by concentrated hard work, to be a popular and promising doctor.

After a fairly all-round experience I started out in general practice. From the outset I adopted a principle of all-out service. I took the uphill course; no stone was left unturned in the interest of the patient. My life became geared to a high pitch. I enjoyed the hard work, but I found that gradually all other interests became subservient to my singleness of purpose—the pursuit of success.

Social life and sport were reduced to a minimum; the time I spent with my family and the enjoyment of home life became less and less. My clinical problems occupied my waking hours at night. Material return followed. A graph of my monthly takings became the measure of success. My attitude towards people changed; individuals were assessed in terms of potential fees; the approach to a given clinical problem now was, 'How much return would it pay?' I did not like this change, but accepted it without resistance.

My attitude towards my colleagues became dominated by the competitive spirit. They were all good men, and I wanted very much to preserve their goodwill and friendship. My overriding ambition often made me say things and do things which were contrary to their interests. I was discreet enough, however, not to expose myself to charges involving the ethical code. I was circumspect in observing the letter of the law.

By now I had gained the confidence of the community. Patients left their welfare unreservedly in my hands—in any decision their attitude was, 'Do as you think best, Doctor'. As I look back now I must confess I abused that confidence. I gave treatment that was not really necessary. I launched forth on undertakings that could have been performed better by those with specialized training. Anyway, 'I got away with it', and that seemed to be all that mattered at the time. The patient was none the wiser, and his confidence in me was unimpaired. This being the case, why should I consider the man who devoted years of study to a particular field? In my arrogance I did not see why I should consider anybody but myself. I developed the faculty to a very high degree of explaining away my mistakes to myself and to others. I reached the stage of self-assurance where mistakes could hardly come into my orbit at all. The world was at my feet.

Another of my achievements was the presidency of the local Branch of the Association. There the general discussions were on a level with those of the Chamber of Commerce; the theme was the profit motive. Material benefits accrued in proportion to my expenditure of energy. In the course of years I had accumulated money and all the things that go to make life comfortable and pleasant. But I did not have time to enjoy much of these, really. For me, the fun seemed to be in the acquisition of this world's goods more than in their use.

Religion played no part in my life. That was something which offered comfort and solace to the poor, the ignorant and the simple-minded. I had no need for the things of the spirit. In my self-sufficiency there was no need to turn to anybody for help. The Bible to me was no more than a fairy tale. My 'scientific'

mind refused to accept the truth of the scriptural writings. In any case, I had no time for these things.

Then I came face to face with a most remarkable Personality. When I saw Him in person I realized why His influence had continued down the ages since the days when He walked on earth. I was rather afraid of what He would say to me. I expected Him to criticize me, to find fault and condemn me. He made no reference to my irregularities and transgressions. He need not have done so. In His presence I saw them in all their magnitude for the first time. He put His finger on the spot for me. The fault lay, He said, in my dedicating my life to the worship of false gods—the gods of material things. Then, with infinite understanding, He showed me His way of life.