

Is There a Doctor . . . ?

By

Richard Gordon

Adapted from "Punch", April 13, 1955

Lecturers in medical schools often wonder during their last twenty minutes of class what can be occupying the dozen or so students who are not fiddling with their note-books, sharpening their pencils, staring encouragingly at the clock, or reading a newspaper under cover of their desks. These pupils are sitting with their chins in their hands and their pens in their mouths, lost in thought. They are, in fact, indulging in the same little day-dream, which runs like this:

The student, in his best suit, is walking down Oxford Street on a sunny afternoon, which is suddenly disturbed by the squeal of brakes and a scream. Immediately a crowd gathers. This respectfully divides as he hurries up, pulling out his stethoscope and announcing "I am a doctor." In the road lies the most beautiful blonde he has ever seen. Behind her stands her mother in hysterics and a distraught taxi driver. "I'll take charge here," says the student crisply. "No fractures." he adds, running his hands professionally over her limbs. "Constable—don't stand there staring, man! Fetch an ambulance. Don't worry, my dear, you're in good care". He visits her daily at the hospital, and during her convalescence they get married. Afterwards they live happily in a large country house, because her father turns out to be unbelievably

rich, and she bears him several beautiful children.

Such happy accidents unfortunately never happen. The first one I attended, a week after passing my finals, may have involved a blonde heiress—I never found out. Pushing my way into the crowd I came against a large man in a check overcoat who spun round and shouted "Who the hell d'you think you're shoving, sonny?" "I am a doctor," I explained with dignity. For a second he looked me up and down, assessing my youthful face, my only suit, and the collar that should have been at the wash. "And I'm Madame Butterfly", he said, returning to his savouring of the disaster.

At my next accident I reached the centre of the crowd, where I found a drunken Irishman holding his foot with one hand and trying to fight a lorry driver. As I attempted to minister to him he tried to fight me instead, and I was glad to be hustled away by the police. My third accident occurred in Cornwall. This time I won the esteem of the audience, so much so that a week later I was summoned to give evidence in the local police court. The case was a complicated one, and had to be adjourned several times. Later it developed into a civil action at the local assizes. By then I was beginning to think of giving up my London practice and settling in Truro.

Now I wouldn't even answer an appeal for a doctor in the middle of a West End musical—it would be only one of the stage hands down with his rheumatism again. This attitude is not wholly compatible with the Hippocratic Oath, but it agrees with the forthright gentleman who taught me surgery, Old Blood and Thunder. "Never stop for a street accident, gentlemen," he declared during a lecture on fractures. "It'll land you in the coroner's court quicker than anything. Besides you'll be spoiling a lot of fun. Do you realize that every street in the country's full of men, women and Boy Scouts who've got a first-aid certificate and are longing for a chance to slap on a pair of splints in dead earnest? Let them get on with it, gentlemen—they know a damn sight more about pressure points and bandages and black eyes than we do. If ever I'm dragged out of the Thames I'll have a healthy policeman do artificial respiration, thank you, not some overweight doctor who's soon more asphyxiated than I am. Besides," he added, "you'll never get a fee for it. Remember, gentlemen, that human bones are filled not with red marrow but black ingratitude.

The public nevertheless enjoys seeing a man dashing up with a stethoscope, and the medical profession is never thought of more highly than when it is getting in the way of two trained attendants trying to push a stretcher into an ambulance. For drama, a doctor in a hurry is better than a fire-engine and almost as good as a smash-and-grab. This was de-

monstrated by a fellow-student of mine who enjoyed passing his spare evenings at one of big Palais de Dance in Tottenham Court Road. The man who shared his digs rang up one night and asked if his friend might be brought to the telephone, adding, for prompter service, that the dancer was a doctor. The management, who recognized free entertainment by instinct, immediately stopped the band and ordered a roll on the drums. The conductor stepped to the microphone and announced solemnly that Dr. Smith was needed urgently on the phone. Smith happened to be in the middle of the floor, and was picked out by a red spotlight and he hurried towards the exit through awe-struck couples, who reverently made way. He said he felt disappointed himself, when his friend asked where he had put the sausages for supper.

Another student at Edinburgh some years ago was less fortunate. He was riding in a tram down Princes Street one morning shortly after his arrival when it knocked over a pedestrian. The vehicle's first-aid box was produced, and an untidy old gentleman who had been sitting opposite shakily tried to apply a toniquet. After watching him fumble for some time the student said "Here, old chap you'd better let me have a go at that. I'am a medical student".

"By all means, young man, if you wish," was the reply. "Though I don't suppose you'll have much more success, because I'm the Professor of Surgery."