

The Doctor Finds His Way

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WHEN I WAS a medical student in my native Scotland, I served as hospital interne to a surgeon famous throughout Europe. He was an elderly man, tall, spare, and severe, a martinet with a caustic temper whose own perfection gave him a grim contempt for the shortcomings of others.

When I made mistakes, not infrequently due to want of application, he would pierce me with a hawklike glance and rap out a cutting phrase of reproof. He told me that I was not thorough, that I lacked perseverance and stability of purpose, and that I would never succeed until I acquired these invaluable qualities.

What was my reaction to this estimation of my character? While outwardly submissive, I laughed it off. I was young and heedless; I made a joke of it with the other students. The time was not ripe for my moment of inspiration.

I had been in practice as a doctor for almost 10 years when, one day, I developed a gastric ulcer which necessitated a complete rest. Six months in the country was the imperative command imposed on me by a friendly colleague in Harley Street, and so, after making the necessary arrangements, I set off for a small farm near Tarbert, in the Scottish Highlands.

Picture a lonely whitewashed steading set on a rain-drenched loch amid mountains rising into grey mist, with long-horned cattle in the foreground. That was Fyne Farm. Think of a harassed young doctor in city clothes arriving with a pain in his middle and a box of peptonizing powders in his suitcase. That was I.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS of leisure were pleasant enough, but soon the enforced idleness of Fyne Farm became insufferable. I was reduced to feeding the chickens and accompanying old Angus, the farmer, when he herded the cattle. Casting around for something to occupy me, I had a sudden idea. Like many other nonentities, I had often, at the back of my mind, nursed the vague illusion that I might write. I had actually thought out the theme of a novel—the tragic record of man's egotism and bitter pride.

And now, as I stood on the shore of the lonely Highland Loch, I told myself I would write that book.

Upstairs in my cold, clean bedroom was a scrubbed deal table and a very hard chair. Next morning I found myself in this chair, facing a new exercise book open upon the table, slowly becoming aware that, short of dog-Latin prescriptions, I had never composed a significant phrase in all my life. It was a discouraging thought as I picked up my pen. Never mind, I began.

Perhaps the tribulations of the next three months are best omitted. I had no pretensions to technique, no knowledge of style or form; the difficulty of simple statement staggered me. I spent hours looking for an adjective. Yet once I had begun the story, it excited me. I was carried along by the very novelty of what I did. At first, my rate of progress was some 500 labored words a day. By the end of the second month, I was knocking off 2,000.

Suddenly, when I was halfway through, the inevitable happened. A sudden weakness came over me. I felt a wavering of interest and a failure of energy. Why, I asked myself irresolutely, am I wearing myself out with this toil for which I am so preposterously unfitted? What's the use of it? I ought to be conserving my energies, not squandering them on this fantastic task.

I put down my pen. Hesitantly, I read over the first chapters which had just arrived in typescript from an agency in London. No good, no use at all. No one would read it. I saw dismally that I was a presumptuous ass, that all that I had written, all that I could ever write, was wasted effort, sheer futility. Besides,

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What life
and learned men had
not taught this young man,
a simple Scottish farmer did
—and helped give the
world a great
writer

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN FERNIE