

GARLIC AND OLD HORSE BLANKETS

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(Being Some Presenile Reminiscences)

HAVING occasion to visit, not long ago, the offices of a prominent internist of my acquaintance, I was aroused to certain reflections on the exterior aspects of medicine in these United States. My colleague's secretary, exquisitely tailored and exhaling a faint but unmistakable aroma of Prince Matchabelli, greeted me with a manner so sweet as to arouse a distinct sensation of nausea. One well-groomed gentleman, presumably a patient, was reading *Esquire* in the waiting-room. The silence was broken only by the occasional buzz of a telephone in a glassed alcove. It was promptly answered by a second sweet-voiced secretary, saying: "I'm afraid not. The earliest Dr. X could possibly see you would be a week from Friday at 3:15." Two or three excellent etchings adorned the walls, which were a pale beige. The curtains were of mauve satin and indirect lighting was furnished by concealed lamps in a cornice-cove.

After a decent wait, I was ushered into the sanctum. It was approximately the size of my living-room at home and paneled from floor to ceiling in ancient oak. An air conditioner hummed almost inaudibly and the doctor rose to greet me from depths of green leather. I rubbed my eyes. Where were the examining table, the sink, the

tongue depressors, the basins? Any, in fact, of the appurtenances ordinarily appertaining to the doctor's office. I pinched myself. Was I, in fact, in a doctor's office or had I stumbled into the library of Mr. Vincent Astor?

My thoughts flew back to the spot in which my first medicinal instincts were nurtured. They flew back, in brief, to the office of my father and his associates at 602 Brandeis Theatre Building, Omaha, Nebraska, that city once dubbed by a Chamber of Commerce bard, for all eternity, the Diamond Stick-pin on the Bosom of the West. That was a doctor's office and no one could make any mistake about it. I could remember, of course, an older office which one entered by a flight of steps from the street, but this was a relatively new one on the sixth floor of an office building with elevators. The period over which my memories roamed was that of 1917 to 1929.

Located one block from the busiest corner in town, Sixteenth and Farnam, it was only three blocks from the corner where I was born. The vacant lots where we used to play ball were now convenient as parking lots. My grandmother's rambling frame house was torn down and the big yard was filled with yellow brick flats. Room signs were on all the old houses, our house next door to the flats bearing a peculiarly self-conscious one. It read, in fact: "Ethical Sleeping Rooms."

The families which had lived on this fine old street, running down the hill from the high school, with gardens in the middle, had years ago gone west in a flight which has continued to this day in an insatiable quest for more space and higher mortgages. It was in this old house on Capitol Avenue, come to think of it, that I first began to be affected by things medical. My father did not

have an office in the house, but, worse yet, had a laboratory built onto it. It opened off the dining-room, and the smell of xylol, carbolic acid, and formaldehyde, which emanated from it with our meals, is among my earliest recollections. Here he examined his slides, cut sections, and made cultures of an evening. There were also white rabbits in the barn, which I would just be learning to know when several of them would disappear from their cages. I only learned later that they were experimental animals and had been led away to the slaughter. When inoculations did not work on the rabbits, he tried them on me. My sister and I are numbered among the guinea pigs, which included my father himself, who were inoculated for the first time with pure cultures of the pneumococcus from a case of so-called "pink-eye." All I remember of it is the peculiar sensation of waking up in the morning with lids glued together and having them washed and irrigated by my father before the day's activities could begin. We claim no credit for this piece of work. Unlike the heroes of yellow fever, we did not volunteer, but were simply drafted. More distinct is the memory of a later experiment, when my father was interested in skin-grafting. He injected some novocaine into my arm, shaved off a small piece of skin quite painlessly, and replaced it with a piece of his own skin, including a small mole, which was held in place by a dressing. I remember it now, but next day forgot it and played under the lawn sprinkler in a bathing suit. This carelessness had to be confessed that evening when my father examined his work and found that the mole was gone.

But I am drifting from the old office. The arrangements at the office were made for use rather than for satis-

faction of the aesthetic sense. Facing the door of the outer office was the middle-aged woman at the desk who would now be called a receptionist. She had been there since I could remember and her pompadour and shirt-waists had never changed in style during that time. Her manner was kind, but not conducive to light chitchat. She was surrounded by her files and backed by the conventional iron safe. By the door where the patients went out was another girl in a sort of bank-teller's office who took the money, or, in certain cases, notes contingent on next year's crop. She was a tall, dark-haired girl of Polish extraction, named Kate, who had a lynx eye for chiselers. She would bring in a card to my office, saying: "Better give me a charge on this so I can collect it. He lives at a rooming-house on North Sixteenth Street." When she was told by my father or one of us "No charge" she would look crestfallen and go back to her work without a word. This was very often the case, since the clinics in Omaha took care of relatively few people, and almost all doctors took care of many patients whom they knew could never pay anything. My father was especially soft about this. Not only did he never refuse to do what he could for anyone, but, not uncommonly, he would be forced to dig into his own pocket for return railroad fare.

From the front office, one passed down a hall flanked by small offices into a waiting-room which looked like that of the railroad station in Wahoo, Nebraska. There were chairs and benches of honest wood, most of them innocent of upholstery and usually renewed after a hard life of about two years. Out of this room were doors to testing-rooms, darkrooms, treating-rooms, from which

doctors or their girls would pop from time to time, cutting out whichever patient and his family were desired.

The treating-room was an institution which would fill the soul of the modern city doctor with horror. Eight chairs were lined up opposite the north windows, faced by a long table covered with the necessary instruments of torture. The chairs were often all filled by patients, with two of us working at them from opposite ends of the row, our girls helping them out and replacing them with fresh ones during the treating period. It was not an ideal arrangement for maintaining the delightful intimacy that should exist between doctor and patient, but it was a place in which to get the work done.

The office opened every day at 8:30 and continued open, most days, until past 6:00. There were rumors that an appointment system had once existed, but it had long since broken down. Since 75 per cent of the patients came from the farms and small towns of Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas, they came when they could come and were taken care of when we could take care of them. They were in no hurry. Such a practice was subject to seasonal fluctuations, by turns desolating and overwhelming. In the winter, when roads were bad, there would be dull days when one was reduced to listening to the complaints of city-dwellers. But in summer, when the corn was laid by or the hogs brought in to market, there were times when the sights, sounds, and smells in that office would startle even our jaded senses. Then trains would be missed, babies lost, patients placed in the wrong room and found at the end of the day, and chaos would reign supreme.

The patients came and they brought their families—three or four, as a rule, to each patient. They came and

some of them brought their meals. The feeding of infants by nature's method was a simple matter and nobody paid the slightest attention to it. It was by far the neatest of the methods employed.

The trip to town, the first for many of them, was enjoyed by all, as were the contacts made in the waiting-room. The patients loved to talk of their operations and here they were sure of a qualified audience. They talked of their crops, the drought around McCook, the floods at Nebraska City, the chinch bugs at Tekamah. They were touchingly grateful for anything we could do for them, and, when the news was bad, they took it, as a rule, with the same stoicism as the droughts and dust storms. The neurotics of the city doctor's practice were rare. These farmers seldom came unless there was something really the matter with them and it was a pleasure to do what could be done about it.

They came and they talked in tongues: The Germans from Villisca, the Czechs from Wilbur, the Swedes from Gothenberg, the Poles and Italians from South Omaha, the old Yiddish mothers from north of Cuming Street in Omaha. We learned to speak a few set phrases, chiefly concerning the opening and shutting of the eyes, in most of these tongues, use of which would sometimes set off a flood of language which required minutes to stop.

The dialect of Milt Gross was well represented. It defies memorization, but the following description of symptoms sticks in my mind: "I'm getting all da time feber in mine hies. Wenn I'm going in da street smokes me some-deeing in mine hies, und dann I'm getting, oi, such a haddick."

Die Schönste Lengevitch was heard in passages which would have made Kurt Stein's mouth water. Old Mrs. Moos of Fairfax, South Dakota, was being visited on the day after her operation. Said the doctor: "Guten morgen, Frau Moos. Wie geht's bei Ihnen?" The reply was short and practical: "Ganz gut, Herr Doktor, aber mein bowels haben noch nicht gemooft."

Besides the farmers, there came a fair number of cowboys and ranchers from Wyoming. They wore big hats and short boots of soft leather with stitched designs. They were clean, but the scent of horses clung to them. We learned to appreciate their carefree ways and a lack of concern over financial matters which distinguished them from our much more canny farmers.

There were men from the railroad shops and packing-houses, the latter exhaling the authentic packing-house perfume. Some of them were Negroes and some Italians with their own aroma of red wine and garlic. On certain days it seemed as if a particularly complicated mixture was just being brought to boil in the melting pot. Altogether it was nicer in summer when the windows were open. I am not sure whether halitosis and B.O. had been invented at that time, but if not, it would have been necessary for us to invent them.

The ultimate in both these commodities was furnished by a small, but exceedingly powerful, group of native Americans. The door of my testing-room being usually open, for various reasons, I would become conscious of a remarkable aroma coming all the way from the front door. Basically it was composed of a very special B.O. and old horse blankets, but these were woven into a fascinating pattern in which could be detected wafts of

meat, tobacco, firewater of a type suggesting wood alcohol, and Sen-Sen. It was probably the Sen-Sen, a confection chewed by no other race, which made it evident that the redskins had come. They always descended on us in bands of four to ten, squaws, bucks, and papooses, wearing innumerable strata of clothes collected during the years and never changed. They had deteriorated from the days when they roamed the plains and showed a tendency, especially our Omahas, to become inordinately fat after the age of twenty.

If an Omaha squaw of forty did not tip the beam at two hundred and fifty it was likely that she was suffering from a wasting disease. They were sent by the agents at the Omaha or Rosebud reservations, and nearly always because of trachoma or granulated lids. Usually one of them was sent, but, when examined, all members of the family were found to have it. At first it was the routine to examine them and give their interpreter the directions to the hospital, whereupon they would all go back to the reservation and never be seen again. Finally we hit upon an arrangement which worked. The Indian agent would give the patient and one relative a one-way ticket to Omaha and no cash. We would put the patient in the hospital, treat him for two or three weeks, and only then buy his return-trip ticket. It was the relatives who gave us more trouble than the patients. There were only two hotels in Omaha which would admit Indians, and these were of an especially unsavory type. Firewater could always be procured, somehow, and we found ourselves the guardians of a group of three hundred pound children busily engaged in painting the town their native color. I remember one boy of sixteen, George Cow by name,

whose daily treatments required the full muscular activity of two doctors and two nurses. He told us, in a burst of confidence, that they had once tried to make him go to school, so he had simply burned down the school. Then there was Clarence Hairy Shirt, a young buck who came to town as his father-in-law's interpreter. The old chief required a cataract operation and, since he spoke no word of English, it was necessary to do his dressings only when Clarence could be there. This was difficult to arrange, as he was seeing the town in his own way and often could not be located. When he was located, he was always recovering from a bad night and in urgent need of financial assistance in succumbing to the town's temptations, or, as he put it, to pay his hotel bill. "Agent, he pay you," he would say. This had gone on for some time with varying success when the limit was reached one Sunday noon. His hotel-keeper telephoned and said I must pay him ten dollars at once or he would put Clarence out in the street. This I warmly urged him to do, hung up, and returned to our dinner guests. The meat was no sooner on the table than a taxi steamed up to our door, discharging the hotel-keeper and Clarence, both much exalted with liquor and with a distinctly unsocial manner. After measuring my own weight against theirs, the bill was paid, including, of course, the taxi bill. It was agreed, however, that Clarence was to leave for home next day. When asked how the old chief could make his wants known, he said: "I show you Indian sign language." This, so far as was confided to me, consisted in two signs. The first was conveyed by one finger held in the palm of the other hand; the second by two fingers similarly placed. The significance of these signs may be left to the imagination. With

these and a few other impromptu signs and grunts, the old chief seemed to get along quite well without Clarence, and he was finally returned to the land of his fathers in care of the conductor on the C.St.P.M. & O.

There was a picturesque little group of Mennonites who came from a community near Yankton, South Dakota. They were Russian Germans, who had brought trachoma, along with their religion, first from Germany to Russia and then to America. They spoke a peculiar but perfectly intelligible type of German and were perfect patients. The men, as is well known, never shaved, and used no buttons, their costume being trousers and coat of gray homespun made by their wives and fastened by hooks and eyes. The women wore large black cotton skirts and blouses and piquant little white bonnets. The patients used no money themselves and were always brought in by their pastor, a competent and honest man, who paid their bills with scrupulous care. I always meant to visit their community but never did. I suppose it has now been bought by the canning trust.

I have said that the patients were grateful for anything which was done for them. This was true, and it was also true that when nothing which they considered useful was done, their feelings were never sicklied over by the pale cast of politeness. The following letter from Bakey's Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor in Beatrice, is from a victim of bifocalitis:

DR.

Rec'd lens and tried them and am sorry to say I can't use them at all. I was working without glasses until I got your lens and was getting along pretty good and when I put your lens on my nerves just flew all to pieces. They also hurt my eyes made

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them water and blur. The bottom part blurred so much I could not see the hair feed through the comb. Dr. There must be a screw loose somewhere as they are the worst ones of the whole bunch and I have about enough lens to go in the optimist business. I wish now I would have stayed home from Omaha. I appreciate your cutting the bill down but at that you got more out of it than I did, I guess.

There was another which I will not quote but which began. "Received your bill for alleged services."

Frankness in inquiry was also characteristic, as shown by the following letter:

DEAR DR.

Will drop you a fue lines. What do you charge to operate on eyes? I have a boy with cross eyes and I like to have it strating it out. Do you guarantee your work? You know cye is a perticular thing and my boy is afraid you may cut something of that he Can't see. He might complain me for. Answer soon.

I became accustomed to having patients ask: "Say Doc, can you operate as good as your pa?" One patient was just leaving the room after arranging for an operation with my father when he turned back for one last question: "Say Doc, you're the best in town, ain't you?"

There was a certain esprit de corps about the patients. They had contributed to the office and felt they had a stake in it. They liked to see it busy, even if they did have to wait longer, and were disappointed if they happened in on a quiet day. Some of the more chronic ones came to feel they were definitely part of the family. Sam Francis, an old Armenian with glaucoma, came in one day during one of my father's rare vacations and was referred to me.

"Your old man go way?" he said. I replied that he was on a trip to the West Indies.

"My God!" he said. "He take the old woman with him?"

The whole office revolved about the dynamic and, to me, almost epic figure of my father. If the average doctor consumed his energy in terms of milliamperes, my father burned kilowatts. We all of us burned kilowatts in a vain attempt to keep up with him. In all the years I worked with him, I never remember seeing the man rest, except when he was asleep. When he was not working, he was doing something else, and doing it hard. He was at the hospital by 7:30, seeing the worst patients, and by 8:30 was at the office, occasionally climbing the stairs if no elevator was waiting for him. He knew all the old patients by name and he usually knew just what had been done to them. He seemed to favor the oldest and worst looking ones, who usually had something the matter with them. The fussy city patients, who wanted medical soft soap, were his abomination. It was up to the rest of us to dispense enough of this material to satisfy them, if possible.

The daily stint ran without a break until 6:00 or 6:30. He never went out to lunch and would have nothing brought in to him. His time with each patient was limited, but to each real problem he brought an attention as fresh as that which was brought to his first case and a judgment which I came to realize was exceptionally unstereotyped and individual. The routine was varied by operations on Wednesdays and Saturdays when, from 1:00 to 6:00, six to ten major and a number of minor procedures would be clicked off. There were no pauses

between operations for a smoke or a story, and everyone on the staff worked under full steam so that there would be no waits. Clinics for the students would be held the mornings of these days, after an early tramp through the woods.

Evenings were for reading and writing, after the experiments of early years. Of special medical journals there were four in English, two in French, and three in German per month. There were also journals of natural history, as he was an amateur botanist and ornithologist of sorts, old books of travel, and to top it all off the socialist papers, the *Nation*, the *Survey*, and even the *Crisis*, a magazine devoted to the welfare of the Negro race. He read standing up at a high desk, or walking up and down the hall stairs, for which a special light was arranged. When asked why he did not sit down, he admitted that if he did he would go to sleep. He also claimed to prefer his fallen arches to the exacerbations of sciatica produced by sitting. I never knew how much sleep he actually got, as I would find him at 11:00 taking a nap with all his clothes on and again at 1:30 writing at his desk. He found some time for play, chiefly botanizing and trying various measures to stem the depredations of our old Missouri River on his farm.

This game, with which some of you may not be familiar, was known as rip-rapping. It consisted, and still consists, in reinforcing the river bank of one's farm in various ways so that the river will not carry it away, or, in freakish mood, actually decide to flow right through the farm some fine spring day. Not only that, but the work may be conceived in such a way that the river will actually fill in various areas of brush barriers with alluvial dirt and

add to, instead of subtracting from, one's acreage. When it did this, to be sure, it usually washed away the farm of some less vigorous rip-rapper across the river, but such events were not counted to anyone's discredit. There was endless amusement to be obtained in this work, which had all the elements of chance among its fascinations. My father was the unsung inventor of a form of concrete cross which was threaded on a cable and sunk in the river. Brush and trees were wired to the cable and allowed to wash down to the cross until the whole length of the cable was solid with brush. Possibly as the result of this, the farm became typical of the Missouri bottom farms, a certain number of acres which were on the surveyor's map for tax purposes and twice that amount of willows and sand bars, which might conceivably be farmed some day.

Then there were the squatters to attend to. There was one of these who built a house on the land, fenced his part of it, armed himself with several guns, and defied the sheriff or anyone else to put him off. His position gained support from the fact that, due to the river's meanderings, nobody was sure whether the land was in Sarpy County, Nebraska, or Pottawatomie County, Iowa. At any rate, neither sheriff cared to do anything about it. I wish it could be said to my father's credit that his ingenuity or personal bravery had been successful in expelling the intruder. I learned only last week, however, that the man is still there, and that a colored farmer, who was found plowing some of our land near-by, showed a paper proving that he had, in good faith, leased ten acres of our land from the squatter.

My father played a violent game of tennis till he was sixty-five. I remember his wistful protest about that time at the fate which made it necessary to stop such things as tennis just when one was learning a few good shots. In the late years there were a few naturalizing voyages—to British Guiana and Ceylon with his friend, Casey Wood, and to Africa. For no special reason, I remember his account in a letter, when he was sixty-nine, of coming to the Indian Ocean near Mombasa and stripping for a swim in the warm surf, all by himself. Tennyson's picture of the aging Ulysses comes to me and, on looking it up, I find some lines which seem somehow appropriate but which I shall forbear to quote.

After all, there is nothing really poetic about an old man taking a swim. I think my father would be more amused at having preserved the picture of him as he appeared one Sunday morning. He was reading in his study, in dressing gown and slippers, when, glancing out of a window, he saw a cow walking down Dewey Avenue, dragging her rope. He waited for a minute, expecting to see her owner, but nobody came. Full of compunction for the owner of the lost cow, he rushed out into the street and followed the cow, now half a block ahead. It took another two blocks to catch up with her, and when this was done grave doubts as to the situation began to occur. Here he was, in his dressing gown with a cow on his hands. What to do with her? He turned back up Dewey Avenue, avoiding the amused greetings of people just arriving at the Congregational Church, leading the cow in the direction from which she had come. It was not until 38th Street that the owner of the cow arrived on the scene and took charge of her.

There was an old coat in the closet, of the type worn by teamsters, of cowhide with the fur outside. This my father insisted on wearing when the weather got near zero. He wore it once to a medical meeting in Norfolk, Nebraska, on a cold night. When he appeared at the hotel desk asking for a room, the clerk looked dubiously at him and said: "Sorry, but we have nothing except a room with bath." "Well, I guess I'll have to take it," said my father. The coat was finally suppressed when my mother-in-law's maid, a strong-minded Bohemian woman, mistook him for a tramp one wintry night. She refused to open the door or even discuss the subject of identification, until he had gone home, a matter of some three blocks, changed the coat, and telephoned an announcement of his proposed arrival.

This fur coat was not his only sartorial eccentricity. In the summer he insisted that he was cooler in a starched collar, one size too large for him, because it did not touch his neck. In winter he preferred peculiar high soft collars because they kept the neck warm. His costume when tramping through the woods was not one to inspire the confidence of passing strangers. The suit was no sport suit but simply any old worn-out coat and pants. It was complemented by leather puttees which fitted none too well and did not connect too well with the shoes. These were of various types, waterproofed with various substances. My favorite was a pair which he ordered from Sears-Roebuck, fascinated by the description of their aluminum soles with rockers to obviate bending. Unfortunately, walking in them produced intense pain, so that one excursion more than exhausted their usefulness. If anyone in the family wished to get a mild rise out of my father,

he or she had only to say: "Father, what ever happened to those shoes you had with the rockers on them?" The really distinctive feature of the costume, however, was the headpiece. Heaven only knows where he got it. It was a brown straw creation shaped like a conductor's cap, with a green visor, but the crown was at least six inches high. It was worn because of its system of triangular ventilating holes, which were said to be ideal. Over his shoulder would be an axe, or at times a special instrument which he had devised called a golf-axe. This was an iron golf club with the blade sharpened so that weeds or shrubs could be cut off at the ground with one magnificent stroke. In this costume were passed the happiest hours of his life.

Like every other good doctor, he made an effort to follow interesting cases. I remember a letter he wrote about a patient with a disease of the central nervous system and the reply of the general practitioner. He wrote: "I would like to know when you last saw Jens Jensen. Can you tell me what his vision was at that time, whether the pupils reacted to light, whether the right lid still drooped, and if you know where he is now located?" The reply follows: "I last saw Jens Jensen two years ago; vision was 0/0 in each eye, the pupils did not react to light or distance, both lids drooped completely, and he is now located in the Lutheran cemetery at McCook."

One more characteristic picture of him comes back to me. He was presiding at a meeting of the State Medical Society in Lincoln. The meeting was in the Senate Chamber of the old State Capitol, reopened out of season for this meeting and hence no screens were on the windows. It was a warm June evening and the June bugs were

abroad in the night. A large light hung over the chairman's desk and the June bugs, attracted by the light, often became confused between it and its reflection on my father's bald head beneath. As each bug landed, my father would swing on it vigorously, then open a drawer in the speaker's desk, deposit the captive bug, and close the drawer. I have never heard what the speaker of the senate said when he opened the drawer next fall.

I had not intended to run on so long about my father in a vein which could, no doubt, be bettered by any of you on the subject of your own fathers. But his whims, eccentricities, and strokes of genius made up the most important part of the Omaha climate for me during those years, and it has never been the same without him. For he died, as he had often said he hoped to do, suddenly at the age of seventy, never having shown even the premonitory symptoms of senility. He died in a firm belief in the perfectibility of the human race; in a conviction that a very desirable state of socialism would come during my lifetime; that the Russian experiment was the beginning of it; that the solidarity of the working class would make another war impossible. For the short expected balance of the capitalist era, he felt that his belief in the soundness of Omaha real estate had been justified. Dying in 1929, he never knew how lucky he was.

Looking back on those Omaha days, one feels a wave of nostalgia for the place and the people in it. Those were the days when working was easy and there was plenty of it to do. There was so little waste motion about it; so little fuss and bother with fussy people. They came to get something done; they got it done; they went home full of gratitude when all went well; they paid when and

if they could. After twelve years away from it, a vague discomfort creeps at times into consciousness. They may still be doing things the same way in Omaha. But here and in many other places, is it possible that the medical profession is slipping? Are we losing a certain virility that was almost a necessary component of the doctor in those days? I find, on looking into it, that a Breughel print is on the wall of my own examining room and that the room is camouflaged to look somewhat like a library. It would be possible to mention other details suggesting that a certain softening-up process has been taking place. Did I, only today, spend more time than necessary over the celebrated Mrs. B's organ recital when there was real pathology in the waiting-room? Is it possible, in fact, that the first symptoms of incipient city sissysism are at hand? Is reminiscence itself a possible symptom of that disease? It is more than possible. I do, however, here promise a libation of corn whiskey to Aesculapios, with a prayer that by holding fast to the memory of my Lares and Penates, the disease may be held in check. And that, if the condition becomes inoperable, I may be taken out to some old ladies' home and quietly put to sleep.

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