Letter from . . . Asia

Accidents in the East

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I doubt whether a tourist plumber would feel compelled to install the occasional lavatory, or the travelling mathematician to show off a little differential calculus, but for a doctor—be he retired radiologist, or whatever—it is different. I suspect that most doctors on holiday keep their profession as secret as possible. To have your afternoon snooze at Cannes interrupted by a belligerent American matriarch demanding a cure for her varicose veins must be awful. Worse is the guilt that accrues as you meander through the poorer countries of the world. Every traveller in the third world is presented with moral questions, but the doctor is offered more. What would Hippocrates say to the doctor eating his chicken porridge while watching four malnourished children, two with impetigo, washing in a filthy river?

Crises in Indonesia

While travelling in Indonesia, I have been presented with two medical crises and in both I performed poorly. Ironically—in a land where the vast majority are too poor to own any kind of vehicle, even a bicycle—accidents on the road are a considerable cause of morbidity. The driving is atrocious. You may begin a journey in an Indonesian bus as a healthy atheist, but you are likely to end it a chain smoker, with a bowel ulcerated from lip to anus, praying loudly to Zeus, Christ, Shiva, or any god that comes to mind. Although my heart jumped repeatedly into my mouth I was only in one accident. This happened in Bali. I was crammed into a “bemo,” a small pick-up truck, with about 20 adults, 10 children, a great many baskets, and a very large, black, disgruntled pig tied to a stake. I was in the most inaccessible, the most unpopular, and the most dangerous seat.

I was roused from my reverie when the bemo stopped suddenly. I bent my neck to look through a tiny window and saw a girl prostrate on the road. I struggled to get out but made no progress. Nobody spoke English, and nobody was concerned with me. I then saw that the girl was up and walking. She had clearly not fractured a limb, did not seem to have been unconscious, and was talking. Several people were tending to her, and her only visible injuries were a grazed arm and a bruised temple. At this point, I behaved in either a cowardly or a sensible manner and gave up trying to offer help. My rationalisation was that as I spoke no Indonesian and they no English, I would have great difficulty explaining and assessing the injuries and then would have little to offer anyway. Luckily, in contrast to horrific stories told by travellers to South America of seriously injured people pushed aside to let the next bus through, the girl was taken to a health centre close by and seen immediately by a local doctor.

The second episode was much more pathetic. In every Indonesian hotel you have to present your passport on arrival, and so it is known that you are a doctor. During our first meal at a hotel in North Sumatra I was told by a young Batak waiter that his brother was very ill. I said that I would see him. The next day I was taken to a large hut to see the boy. He had been in an accident exactly five months before that had broken his back and left him paraplegic at the level of L1. He had been taken first to a Muslim hospital, where he had waited 11 hours but had not been able to see a doctor as it was a Muslim holy day. His relatives took him on the bus to another hospital. There he had an x-ray examination, was given an injection, and was catheterised. After two days he left the hospital because they could “do nothing for him.”

When I saw him, he was wasted with gross pressure sores, had a distended bladder with overflow incontinence, a urinary tract infection, and, I suspected, a degree of renal failure. His was a dreadful problem to have in Indonesia. He did not need any complicated medicine, but he needed excellent nursing and long-term hospital care. Such things are very expensive, and at the end of the process a paraplegic cannot work in the fields or fish. His relatives looked at me and surely thought that a representative of a culture that could make a large plane fly five miles high over their village could surely snap his fingers and make this boy well.

I had no idea what Indonesia could offer this boy and so, in my confusion, I made a long journey by boat and bus to see a missionary doctor. She was unsympathetic. She implied that I was a fool to have become implicated. She told me that it was possible for a poor man, who genuinely had no money, to obtain a letter from the headman of his village which would entitle him to free hospital care. She suspected that for the family to leave the boy in such a state they must be “worthless.” Either they had money and were unwilling to part with it, or they had more faith in their native healer. She said also that it was impossible to give me any drugs or a catheter for the boy. I shrank away with my tail between my legs.

I returned to the village and tried to explain things to the brother. I first explained that no doctor in the world could bring back the power or the feeling to his brother's legs. I drew weird diagrams that to him must have seemed like voodoo charts, in an attempt to explain how bones could mend but that the spinal cord never could. I said that I thought he would die if he did not go to hospital and I talked about the possible mechanism for obtaining hospital care. Finally, I designed a conceivable, but rather hopeless, regimen for nursing him at home. I went again and talked to the injured boy. I gave them some money and a day later we left. I felt like a rat leaving a sinking ship.

Thaipusam in Singapore

I felt less guilty, but equally impotent, in a third encounter. Thaipusam is a Hindu festival which proceeds with great energy in Singapore. It is a festival in which Hindu devotees carry kavadis through the streets. Kavadis might be defined as

elaborately decorated torture machines. Spikes stick into the carrier's body; skewers are stuck through his tongue, his cheeks, and his nose; and some walk on shoes of nails. The atmosphere of the festival is wild and heady. The carriers themselves are in a far-flung state of consciousness, and all around them their followers bang drums and tambourines and dance like dervishes. Everywhere people are throwing religious fits. While the young men become more and more excited, the women eat ice cream, chat to old friends, and take photographs. Here, pain and pleasure mix easily. To a Westerner the atmosphere is more reminiscent of a particularly exuberant bank holiday fair than a religious festival.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Ron

A severe frost has seized southern England in its grip, and the woodcock are in. My old colleague, Tom, having abandoned the craft of surgery and the frustrations of the NHS to farm his ancestral acres, has invited me to shoot his land. A swift dash along the (new) motorway brings me to the homestead and a welcome cup of coffee before the other guns assemble. These are in the main conventional enough—a farming friend, his son and fiancée, who have enthusiastically driven many miles over icy fog-bound roads, a colonel from a nearby Army establishment, a young solicitor, and, finally, Ron, lean and weather-beaten, the supreme example of the poacher turned gamekeeper. Having for years systematically denuded my host's land of entirely all the game, both fur and feather, he has at last been persuaded to see the error of his ways and join the party of guns on equal terms. Dressed like the rest of us in waterproof jacket and rubber boots, he carries horizontally in the crook of his arm no elegant sidelock but an aged hammer gun, which the rest of us eye warily.

With silent and menacing tread he glides through the woods as though in moccasins, occasionally halting to point out the barely distinguishable print of a roedeer—the reincarnation of the traditional pioneer frontiersman. His speed on the draw is phenomenal; he never wastes a cartridge. For him the high-rocketing pheasant holds few attractions: he has always shot for the pot.

But December days are short, the light is failing rapidly, and already scattered snowflakes are falling. The labradors have worked nobly, and all the game has been picked. Weary but happy we begin to trudge down the side towards the house, when a sudden detonation is heard on the left flank, and a figure emerges from the gloom holding in triumph a large cock pheasant. Ron has struck again.—A SEYMOUR JONES (retired consultant surgeon, Emsworth, Hampshire).

All passion spent

The heading "Calm of mind, all passion spent" (from *Lycidas*) which you gave to the review of Dr Cicely Saunders's book (13 January, p 110) reminded me of Vita Sackville-West's novel, *All Passion Spent*, which is a study of old age. The heroine is easily identified as the widow of the first Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, since her husband had been Viceroy of India and ambassador in Paris and St Petersburg; even the maternity service founded by Lady Dufferin in India is mentioned. So much is factual but in the story the heroine is made out to be 18 years older than Lady Dufferin actually was at the time of her husband's death—88 instead of 70. She refuses to be taken care of by her family and goes off and takes a house in Hampstead, where she lives alone except for her elderly French maid. Lord Dufferin died in 1904 and the 1914 war is not mentioned so the story is evidently set between those two dates.

The principal male character is also probably based on fact. His name is Fitzgeorge—an uncommon name—and there is some mystery about his background. He claims to have met her in Calcutta many years before, though she does not remember him, and the development of their friendship is described. When he dies it is found that he possessed a small collection of the most beautiful and rare antiques and that he has bequeathed them to the heroine.

George, second Duke of Cambridge and a cousin of Queen Victoria, was a great collector, and in his long life had acquired an immense collection of valuables of all kinds, including articles personal to the royal family, many of which he had inherited from his aunt, the Duchess of Gloucester. As a young subaltern he had married an

No self-respecting Asian would think twice about trying to drive a motorbike through the crowd at Wembley on Cup Final day. Unfortunately, one such enthusiast came off while attempting to drive through this frantic Thaipusam crowd. I heard a crash, turned, saw him spreadeagled—but only for a moment, as he was immediately engulfed by the overexcited crowd. Here was more pain, more excitement, more strange rites. I have no idea of what became of the boy. I felt too out of my depth to offer help.

I left medical school more impressed by the frailty than the power of a doctor. A few weeks "on holiday" in Asia have strengthened that feeling considerably.

actress, Louisa Fairbrother, by whom he had three sons, and she and her family were given the name Fitzgeorge; as the Duke died intestate, the brothers Fitzgeorge inherited the whole of his collection. The members of the royal family and, doubtless, each of the brothers themselves were given the opportunity of acquiring individual items at a valuation, and the sale of the collection thereafter at Christies in 1904 lasted a fortnight. It included the famous "Duke of Gloucester" dessert service, of which each plate now fetches £3000.

In the story the elderly heroine is embarrassed and displeased by her legacy: she no longer wants such beautiful and valuable things and certainly does not want the responsibility for them, and she gives them to the nation. In the end, she dies very quietly in her chair by her fireside.—J PURDON MARTIN (London).

St Anthony's monastery

If you should ever travel from Cairo to the Red Sea you will find that the road takes a turn to the south near Suez. About 60 miles further on a track leads westwards across the desert. In the distance, if you strain your eyes, you will discern a tiny, green oasis at the base of a high escarpment. No matter how long your journey direct your driver to take you there because when you reach the oasis you will step back in time fifteen hundred years.

As you get nearer you will begin to discern that the oasis is a group of olive trees with some ancient buildings scattered among them and surrounded by a stone wall about 20 feet high. It is the Monastery of St Anthony, founded on this spot about AD 320 and essentially unchanged from that day to this. St Anthony chose this place because, here, in the middle of the desert, flows a perpetual spring of crystal clear fresh water which has never been known to dry up in 2000 years.

In the walls of the monastery there is one very heavy door, which may be opened for you if you are lucky; but, more likely, you will be hauled up into one of the turrets in a basket. The door itself is fastened by a massive beam of wood, secured by two wooden pegs that have to be disengaged by inserting a piece of bent wood with two prongs on the end. This is the earliest form of lock and key and the instrument in use is only the second since the door was built. The first key was mislaid three hundred years ago.

The key will be brought by the Abbot who presides over this Coptic community of about 20 monks and he will be delighted to see you. Peaceful visitors are rare in this part of the world, although robbers and bandits have been common enough in the past—hence the unclimbable walls and the usual means of entry in the bread basket. The monks use the basket in reverse to pass bread and olive oil to the wandering Bedouin.

Not only will the Abbot welcome you with mint tea and freshly baked biscuits but he will show you the old chapel filled with mediaeval paintings; the desiccated corpse of one of his predecessors mummified in the desert air; a priceless collection of manuscripts and hand-illuminated books, many 900 years old; an internal fortress into which the monks can retreat under siege and entry to which is quite impossible once the drawbridge is lifted; the most ancient and peaceful of all olive groves, complete with olive press of equal antiquity; and the everlasting spring carefully divided into two streams—one for washing and irrigating and one for drinking.

But, perhaps most incredible of all, he will lift the veil of time for you and show you a glimpse of Christian life as it existed when Christ preached only a few hundred miles from where you are standing. Do not hurry past: time stands still at the Monastery of St Antonius.—R A F COX (Cambridge).