

Autobiography chapter: Illnesses and Phobias

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The first illness of which I know anything, and that only by hearsay and not by memory, was when I was about two. It was always said to have been German measles and not measles, but this is almost certainly not true – how the error arose I don't know. Ken and I had it together and were pretty ill and had to have the room darkened – a symptom of measles. Also I had German measles much later and it was quite a different thing and I did not catch measles from Anthony or Roger when they had it.

The first illness I actually remember was a severe 'flu that Mum and I had at the same time and Ken had to stay off school to look after us – that would probably be when I was about six.

The standard childhood infectious diseases I tended to have rather late: chickenpox at 10, mumps at 15, German measles at 18, scarlet fever at 19, and whooping cough at 25. Where I caught these was only known in two cases: mumps from Arthur who came to stay with us at half term in 1936 and developed it while with us; and scarlet fever developed then appropriate number of days after going to see "The Great Dictator" in Magdalen Street in 1941. This led to my being hospitalised for the first time – a thing I had always dreaded as a child but which was a great relief when it happened because it had been so wretched being ill alone in my college room the previous year when I had first of all 'flu and subsequently German measles in the same (Hilary) term. Actually the scarlet fever made me less ill than most of the other things, but was a remarkable experience of isolation. I first felt ill on a Wednesday, but went to tea with a group of friends (none of whom caught it). The following day the College nurse called the doctor and I was removed by ambulance about 5.30 pm. The College kept it secret because they were afraid of a panic, so none of my friends had a clue as to why I had disappeared. They informed my parents but gave them the address of the wrong hospital, and when I wrote to them they thought I had got it wrong as to where I was and went on writing to the wrong place. So for about a week I felt as though I had been transported to another world and had no contact with anyone I knew. No wonder it was such a treat to be visited by Dorothy, a fellow patient. I didn't feel at all ill, but was confined to bed for about 14 days or so, the longest I had ever been so confined I suppose.

Apart from the various bouts of colds, 'flu and tummy upsets (to all of which I was fairly addicted) the only other illness I had in my childhood was stomatitis (inflammation of

the inside of the mouth). I became ill at school and was sent home (by tram, train and a half mile walk, all on my own). I was found to have a high temperature (104°F) and the doctor was called late in the evening – I woke from a disturbed sleep to find him there.

I first had tonsillitis while on holiday in Dunoon in 1936, and we had to stay two days extra to get me fit to travel. I was subsequently to have this repeatedly in the 1950s, about twice a year at one stage, but gradually grew out of it.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s I frequently had tummy upsets and occasional tenderness on the right side, which always made me afraid of appendicitis. It came to a head in 1945. We had been to Leeds to Dorothy's mother's for the August bank holiday weekend, and had to stand in the corridor on the train coming back and I began to feel queasy. When we got home Churchill was in the middle of his speech about the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and I felt worse and worse and was sick in the night. I was under the doctor for the rest of the year and he eventually sent me to a consultant who confirmed a grumbling appendix. It was taken out in a nursing home in Manchester in February 1946. I was absolutely petrified with fright when this was decided, but with Dorothy's help finally came to terms with it, and it wasn't anything like such a bad experience as I thought. I was in the nursing home for a fortnight (in those days they still made an incision about four inches long) and off work for seven or eight weeks altogether – but did a lot of theoretical research during my convalescence.

In 1960 I had a major recurrence of tummy trouble – partly attributable at least to overwork and worry over organising an equipment exhibition at Cambridge for the International Crystallography Congress. It was attributed by the doctor to adhesions from the appendix operation, and eventually cured by a strange medicine which appeared to be a kind of detergent.

The most severely debilitating illness I ever had was also digestive, but pretty certainly arose from an infection picked up in Turkey in 1976. It started a week or so after our return and lasted a good three months. I couldn't eat, had pains under the ribs, and lost a lot of weight. It was investigated with X-rays and a barium enema (a horrid procedure), but never identified, and it eventually cleared. Since then I have had a variety of tummy problems, eventually diagnosed as diverticular disease, but never prolonged.

My second operation also occurred in 1976. This was for a hernia that was produced by the stress of snatching our cases off the carousel at Amsterdam airport. A day or two later I found that I was a distinctly unsymmetrical shape in the groin. As we were going to Canada the day after our return from Amsterdam, it was the best part of a rather uneasy month before I was able to take medical advice. In retrospect it is surprising how soon I was seen by a consultant, and within five months or so I was called for the operation at the Churchill Hospital. I was given a very thorough medical examination by a young lady doctor on admission, and she questioned me about every discomfort I had ever felt. On hearing that I had on occasion had pains under the ribs I immediately

became a suspected case of gall bladder trouble, which was apparently a thing that was an absolute mania of that surgical team. They kept me in for an extra two days to test me for it but failed to find it! The idea came up again when I returned to the hospital again later in the year for testing after the infection from Turkey, but I was able to tell them that it had already been discounted.

There was quite a contrast between the experience of the two operations. For the appendix I was lifted on a stretcher off the trolley onto the operating table, given the injection of the spinal anaesthetic lying on my side, and then put out of my misery by an injection on my arm that put me under in about eight seconds. Lying in bed during the following hours I found with my hand some large warm thing in the bed. I could not understand what it could be, and followed it with my hand until eventually finding that it was joined to me at the waist – it was my anaesthetised lower half! The post-operative pain was not as bad as I expected – except for when I laughed which with the four inch suture in the abdomen was very difficult. And I laughed a lot with an eleven year old boy in the next bed who had had the same operation and to whom I had lent some William books! By contrast, for the hernia I was wheeled into the ante-room to the theatre where some sort of injection manifold was inserted into my arm and I was put out there and then, never seeing the theatre. But the post-operative pain was much worse. Also I had supposed that as it was a relatively superficial operation it would not make me feel ill afterwards – merely sore for walking. But this was not true either. I felt very debilitated and weak and sleepy for weeks.

The next occasion when I needed hospital treatment, though only as an out-patient, was in the early part of 1981. Suddenly one lunch time I suffered quite crippling pains at one side of the abdomen. Dr Saunders diagnosed a kidney stone and sent me for an X-ray of the kidneys. This involved an injection of a contrast medium into the circulation that made one feel a bit odd – another patient at the same time nearly passed out. After the first set of photos they said they wanted to take more, and then they took me across to another building for an ultra-sound scan. On the way back the radiologist said “well that’s good, I’ve just proved that you haven’t got a tumour on the kidneys”! What they had found was a large number of fluid filled cysts round the kidneys, and he thought I should have them drained. I was duly sent for about a week later, but saw a different doctor who was very doubtful, and said he couldn’t drain all those. However he eventually decided to drain a few of the biggest. This was done by inserting a long needle through my back and guiding it into them on an X-ray image. The feeling changed immediately from pain to discomfort, and this quite soon disappeared.

In July 1983 I thought it was recurring and got another referral to the hospital. However, before the appointment was due it became evident that the cause of the pain this time was shingles – round my left thigh, and in the groin. This was the most painful illness I ever had, and it was very difficult to wait for the next dose of painkiller. Also at one stage I was given a painkiller to which I turned out to be allergic – it induced profuse

sweating and made me sick. It was six to eight weeks before I could stand car journeys: the jolting attacked the nerve endings.

Twice I had to have very minor surgery on my tongue. The first time was in 1944, when I found a hard hemispherical object at the end of the saliva duct under the tongue. Dr Titcombe removed it in his surgery by just poking it out with a sharp instrument. It was a salivary calculus. The other time was in 1980 when a little tuft, like a tiny pink sea-anemone, grew on the top of my tongue. This was sliced off without any problems in the oral surgery unit at the Radcliffe Infirmary.

I have suffered quite a lot with my teeth. As a child my parents did not dare to take me to the dentist because of my phobia (see below). At Stockport Grammar School there were no medical examinations but there were at Derby School, so the condition of my teeth was picked up some time in 1937 or 1938. All the necessary fillings were done first to prevent further deterioration, and I did not mind this at all – I turned out to have a reasonably high pain threshold in this respect, I think. Finally I had to have twelve teeth removed, all at once. It was done on Sunday 31st December 1939. Dad took me down to the dentist's, and our doctor was there as well. I was put out by an injection in the arm. I remember starting to come round in the middle and being given a second injection. Afterwards I slept for several hours in the recovery room, and then Dad took me home by taxi. The worst thing though was when I had to have the roots of two teeth amputated by cutting through the gum and then grinding them away. On that occasion I nearly fainted, but they managed to bring me back before I went right off.

This brings me to the subject of the phobia that has been the bane of my life. It was originally associated with the sight of blood, but it became much more extensive than that. The first occasion that I remember, and I think it was probably *the* first occasion, must have been when I was about four or five. I wanted to help make the mint sauce for Sunday dinner and I ran the mint cutter up and down on the mint. Then I suppose I tried to get the minty mush off the blades and cut my finger, and in the middle of the concern that this engendered I fainted. The second time must have been fairly soon afterwards, though some months later I think. My father was cutting my nails. He always did his own nails, and mine, with his pen knife, which he reckoned gave a much better result than scissors. He had previously explained to me that one only cut the nail down to the join between the white and the pink, and that if one went lower it would bleed. As I watched him do it I thought "if he goes below there it will bleed", and promptly fainted. As a result, by the time I went to school at six it was well-known that I was liable to faint, and I became very sensitive about it.

The curious thing is that very few occasions were actually due to the sight of blood. Two were, when I bumped my nose – once by falling off the bed when getting up, and once when going upstairs on all fours. But I remember two occasions when I damaged my knees quite badly and didn't faint, and another time when I got a barb of barbed wire stuck right into my calf and didn't faint. In fact I remember telling my mother "I don't

mind knees”, and we laughed about it. I also remember surviving a number of nose bleeds whereas pricking my finger on a pair of scissors when I was ten and producing little more than a red mark sent me off. On the other hand other things started to be effective. I remember Mum and Dad expressing concern about a grazed mark on Ken’s hand caused by sliding down a rope in the gym, and I fainted. I also started doing it whenever I was sick and vomited. Obviously it caused a lot of alarm to my parents, and they would extricate me from any circumstances that might precipitate a faint. I remember a rapid departure from a session of the musical festival at Alderley when a lady adjudicator fell off the steps to the platform and collapsed, and from a church in Tenby when someone in front felt ill and went out. These would both be before I was ten. There were a lot of times when I said “I feel funny” but managed not to faint: two of these were at school at Alderley; one when I had nicked my finger on a piece of grass on the way to school, and the other when Arthur cut his head and was led away with drops of blood falling from his head to his shoulder to the ground. On both these occasions Mother was sent for to take me home. I also survived Dad cutting his hand quite badly when he and I were on an expedition to the Edge to get (steal!) leaf mould, and when a friend at Stockport cut himself badly in a woodwork lesson when I was about twelve.

In fact after I was ten I don’t think any of my (quite numerous) faintings were actually due to the sight of blood. Most of them were immediately before vomiting, and I think there were only three occasions between 1932 and 1944. The first was at school at Stockport in 1934-5. The French master was away, and we were being supervised by the gym master. Our task happened to have been to learn vocabulary relating to parts of the body and the gym master filled in time by giving us a brief lesson on physiology. I survived this but the following period was gym, and he continued the discussion by showing us some radiographs. There was nothing particularly distressing but I passed right out, and was revived by artificial respiration and sal volatile, and after a rest was sent home. The second time was at school at Derby. The headmaster there was addicted to codifying everything into sets of “rules” which he would periodically (about annually) read out at the end of morning assembly. One such set was “rules for what to do in case of accidents”. It was some time in 1937 or 1938 that he decided to read these rules, and as I stood there I felt more and more worried, and when he got to “in case of bleeding” I passed out and was revived outside the door, and eventually sent home. The third time was in 1942 or 1943. Dad and I called at his colleague Mr Capstick’s house in Littleover to ask after his daughter Brenda who was ill, and he described the frightening sequence of nose bleeds that she had had. I got very worried and started to walk away from the door down the garden path, but crashed down half way to the gate.

Since 1944, again there have been a number of occasions of actual fainting associated with vomiting, none actually associated with seeing blood (though on one occasion in 1958 I cut my finger quite badly at Ferodo and had to go under my own steam to the Ambulance Room), quite a number of close calls (but no actual fainting) connected with

people discussing accidents or physiological processes, and just three other occasions. The first of these was in 1947 when I dislocated my jaw; the second in 1948 when Dorothy started to miscarry and the amniotic fluid set me off and the third in 1950 or 1951 when I had tonsillitis and Dr Titcombe gave me an injection of penicillin in the thigh. I didn't look, but he said something which indicated that he had caused a capillary to bleed and told me to hold a piece of cotton wool on it while he went down to his car. In fact there was practically no blood on the cotton wool, but I fainted and dropped it while he was out of the room. That I think was the last time it happened other than through vomiting, which itself last happened in 1983. Since then, thank goodness, I have managed to cope even with Dorothy's catastrophic nose bleeds and with watching her have transfusions.

So all-told I suppose I have actually fainted about 12 times apart from vomiting and perhaps nearly as many times again for that reason, and only about three times were actually due to the sight of blood itself. But these figures are not a real measure of the disability and trouble that the phobia caused me. I doubt whether a single day of my life has passed since the age of four or five on which I have not thought of my trouble or been reminded of it in some way. So many things have served to remind me of it: seeing an ambulance or a hospital, seeing raw meat, reading anything medical or news of accidents are just some of them. I remember as a child being worried about drawing a house because putting in the window frames involved drawing a cross. And of course a great many hymns worried me, and the Salvation Army flag made me shudder.

After Anthony and Roger were born I was very worried that I might pass on my phobia to them. Dorothy was very supportive in helping to avoid this by associating me in an unemotional way with binding up their inevitable minor cuts and grazes. The worst moment was when Anthony was eleven and cut his finger somehow. Dorothy said something about putting something on it to stop it bleeding, and he said "but what if it doesn't stop?". She said "of course it will", but then he said "oh, I'm falling over" and down he went in a faint. I was very worried that this meant that he was doomed to follow in my footsteps, but in fact he didn't. He never showed any sign of it afterwards and became interested in first aid and worked as a hospital porter! And both of them were able to be present at the birth of their children without problems. I was very relieved that the fashion for fathers to do this did not start until some years after our children were born! Also that my schooldays were over before the fashion for biology teaching became widespread!

My other phobia was concerned with passing urine, It started in my early teens, when I had to go to the bathroom and wash while Dad was shaving. I was often slow in starting to pass it at the WC, and Dad would say "get on with it lad", and this just made it more difficult to start, though I always did it in the end. But worse trouble started when I was 14 and we were visiting Ken at Oxford at Whitsuntide 1936. We were walking around seeing the sights and I began to want to go badly and wanted to go and find a "gents". We were in Broad Walk and Dad told me to go and do it against a tree. I just couldn't

start in those circumstances and he said that it couldn't be true that I wanted to go. I don't remember how or where I found somewhere to go but I was in agony for some time. After this I became increasingly inhibited from starting whenever I felt that I could be observed – either visually or audibly. The problem would arise particularly whenever I adjourned to a toilet with someone else (e.g. after a meal, at a meeting etc.) and so had to stand at an adjacent urinal to someone whom I knew, and who might even continue talking. The period when the problem was most troublesome was 1943-9 when I worked in the Test House at Ferodo. In the lavatory there there was just one urinal, but there were a lot of chairs where the workmen off the test machines used to sit for their morning and afternoon break and the cleaner had his base in there. This often led to problems for me, which were only solved by the fact that I could always lock myself into the darkroom, do it into a beaker and wash it down the sink!

But the real trouble arose in hospital. When I was in the isolation hospital, although I had a room to myself there was a window to the kitchen through which the nurses could look at me, and I just could not use the bottle – the first time I had been faced with such a piece of equipment. Eventually after a day of so the nurse in desperation allowed me out of bed (contrary to instructions) and across the corridor to a toilet to use the bottle in there. After that I gradually began to be able to use it more and more readily under the bedclothes.

When I knew that I had to have my appendix out I was almost more worried about the problem of using a bottle than about the surgery itself. At this stage Dorothy did her best to help me by training me to go while she actually watched me do it directly. At first I thought this would be impossible, but eventually I succeeded. Even so I had enormous problems in the nursing home, where I was in a room for three. After having done nothing for a day or so I had to explain to the nurse, and with the screens around I was allowed to sit on the bed with my feet on the floor, and in that position I managed it. Again as the days passed it got easier and easier to use the bottle under the bedclothes.

By the time I had my hernia operation surgical practice had changed from the idea of keeping one on one's back till the stitches were out to getting one on one's feet the day after the operation. Even so I had enormous trouble. I was in a room for four, and was quite unable to use the bottle. On the second day I was supported down the ward to the toilets, but with the nurse waiting outside I was still inhibited. However at about the second attempt I was successful, and being able to get to the toilet I never had to learn to use the bottle. Since then the difficulty has got less and the occurrence of precipitating circumstances has also become rarer.

My most serious and life-threatening illness was in 1993-4. In July 1993 one evening (Tuesday 27th July to be precise) I was mowing the grass, and in turning the machine felt a tight pain in the chest. I paused for a few minutes and then completed the job. It recurred from time to time on Wednesday and Thursday, and I made an appointment to see the doctor. On the Thursday evening it attacked me when we went for a short

walk, and became continuous and insistent in bad. We got the doctor and he sent me by ambulance to the GP Referral Unit at about 2 am. By the afternoon I was transferred to a medical ward and seemed to be doing quite well until Sunday 1st August when some symptoms (that seems quite vague to me) got everyone worried and I was sent down to the Coronary Care Unit. Dorothy and Anthony came to see me there, and they went home about 5 or so. A bit later a consultant came to see me and said that I had got unstable angina, but more importantly that I had also got an aortic aneurism which was more life threatening. They could not do anything about that until the angina was cured, and they therefore proposed to do an angioplasty the next morning. This could cause a heart attack or a stroke, but they thought the risk was worthwhile. The nurse saw I was looking somewhat shocked and asked me what he had said, and let me ring up Dorothy – which I did to say thank you for everything in case it was goodbye. So Dorothy came back to the hospital to see me and Anthony stayed the night with her. The angioplasty was not too bad. I was fully conscious and avoided looking at where they put the catheter into an artery at my right elbow. The whole thing took about an hour, and the end of which I found my gown and sheet were all liberally spattered with blood. I was then taken to a cardiac ward to recover for a day or two.

The angioplasty was successful – the angina disappeared. I was called to the JR to see a surgeon (Jack Collins) who said that they would get me in a few days in advance of the aorta operation for tests. I was called in at the beginning of November, on a Tuesday and thought I would have the operation on about the Thursday, but found I had misunderstood – the whole visit was for tests, including angiography done with a catheter in the groin this time. This was much less bloody, but caused me to run a temperature (as the angioplasty had done) and I had to stay in till the Sunday, and then return as an outpatient on the Monday for a MUGA scan. This involved an injection of technetium and a γ -ray cine picture of my heart in action when I was on an exercise machine. This confirmed that my heart should stand the strain of the operation which I had in February 1994. This involved an incision about 10" long and putting a synthetic woven fabric tube inside the abdominal aorta. I was anaesthetised in the ante-room to the theatre about 2 pm and regained consciousness in the Intensive Care Unit about mid-day the next day with a ventilator tube down my throat and unable to speak. At this stage the doctor told Dorothy that I was “not yet out of the wood”, but I suppose I was by about 6 pm when I was taken back to the ward with all sorts of drips and recording units attached to me. I was there for about ten days.

Recovery was not actually as painful as from the hernia operation – the surgeon was quite incredulous when I said this: he obviously despised hernia operations as elementary. The main problem was that the digestive system was so shocked by the procedure that it packed up for about a week during which I was allowed nothing (food or drink) by mouth, and the aftermath of this was that it was many weeks before I could eat normally and enjoy it. Another problem was that during the week of “nil by mouth” I could not take the beta-blocker that I had been on for six months and was given a different one in

the drip, and this gave me nightmares. However I made a good recovery after about four months.

These three hospitalisations gave me plenty of practice in using a bottle of course, and after initial difficulties I was successful!