

Adventures of a Young Doctor, No. V

A COOL CUSTOMER

By A. J. CRONIN

In this chapter from Dr. Cronin's forthcoming autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds*, he tells of a phlegmatic Scot who seemed to face the threat of death without turning a hair

THE Scots are in many ways a singular people. For centuries they fought their nearest neighbors, the English, and are still a trifle hostile toward them—at least, they treasure the memory of Bruce and Bannockburn as their proudest heritage, and have lately stolen back the Stone of Scone as a gesture of defiance. Inhabiting a small, impoverished country ridged by bleak mountains and ringed by rocky coasts against which rough seas sweep and surge, they are hardy, frugal, thrifty and resolute.

Yet other peculiarities, not all of which are praiseworthy, have been attributed to them, and some of these are entirely without foundation in fact. Perhaps this injustice is self-inflicted—it has been said that one of Scotland's minor industries is the export of stories pertaining to the oddity of her native sons. Be that as it may, there is one quality which is more often and more mistakenly applied to the Northerner than any other: insensitivity. To my mind, the general belief that the average Scotsman is a cold, phlegmatic and unfeeling man is superficial, erroneous and a base aspersion upon the national character. During my sojourn in Tannochbrae, brief though it was, I met with an incident which brought this point home to me in an especially striking way.

One March evening, Willie Craig rang the bell of Arden House, where I was serving as Dr. Cameron's assistant.

"Good evening, Janet," he said to the housekeeper in his quiet, self-possessed voice. "Does the doctor happen to be at home, by any chance?"

"Which of them were ye wanting to see, Mr. Craig?"

"It doesn't matter in the least, Janet. Any of the two of them'll do me fine."

"It's the assistant's night for the surgery. But I'll let Dr. Cameron know you're here if you specially want to see him."

Willie shook his head—slightly, for all his movements were restrained and staid.

"It's all one to me, Janet, woman."

She gazed at him approvingly. Janet dearly admired a man who never got excited, and she showed him into the dining room—a special mark of favor—to wait. Willie sat down and, putting his hands in his pockets, looked with mild interest at the fiddle hung above the mantelpiece.

He was a small, slight man of about thirty-seven, clean-shaven and rather pale about the face, dressed in a neat gray suit and a celluloid collar fitted with a black, "made-up" tie. Willie was the village baker. He had his own tidy business in the High Street where his wife served behind the counter while he worked in the bakehouse in the yard. Willie Craig's mutton pies were famous, his currant cakes second to none in all the county. But though he was well thought of, with a name for good baking, fair measure and sound dealing, Willie's reputation in the town was hung upon a higher peg than these. Willie Craig was famous for his coolness.

"Aye, aye, a cool customer, Willie Craig," was the town's approving verdict.

When, for instance, he played the final of the Winton bowling championship on Knoxhill Green and won a deadly struggle by the margin of a single shot, people cheered him not so much because he won but because of the manner of his winning—pale-faced, unruffled, never turning a hair—while Gordon, his opponent, was nearly apoplectic with excitement.

In the clubhouse afterward, Gordon, with a few drinks inside him, waxed indignant on the subject: "He's not human. He doesn't feel things. He's like a fish lying on a block of ice. That's the trouble with Willie Craig. He's got no imagination!"

So Willie became known as the man with no imagination; and, indeed, he looked stolid enough, sitting there waiting to see me.

"Will ye step this way, Mr. Craig?" Janet said, returning in the middle of Willie's meditation.

He got up and followed her into the surgery.

"Sit down," I said shortly. "What's the trouble?"

I was overworked, and in a hurry, which made my manner more abrupt than usual. But Willie Craig didn't seem to mind.

"It's my tongue, Doctor. There's something on the edge o't that bothers me a bit."

"You mean it pains you."

"Well, more or less."

"Let me have a look."

I leaned across the desk and took a look at Willie's tongue. I took a good long look. Then, in rather a different tone, I said, "How long have you had that?"

"Oh, six weeks or thereabouts, as near as I can remember. It's come on gradual like. But lately it's been getting worse."

"Do you smoke?"

"Aye, I'm a pretty heavy smoker."

"A pipe?"

"Aye, a pipe."

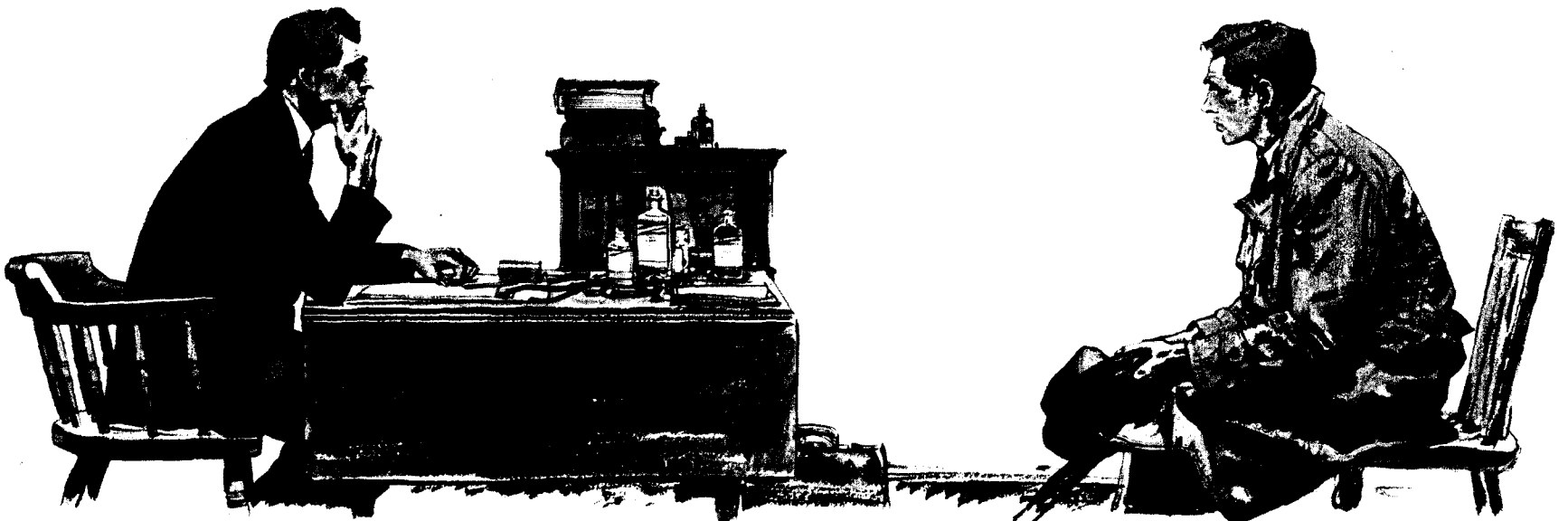
There was a short pause. Then I got up and went over to the instrument cabinet. I took a powerful magnifying glass and, with the most scrupulous care, examined Willie's tongue once again. An angry red spot stood on the edge of the tongue—a spot which was hard to the touch and full of the most sinister implication. I laid down the glass and sank into my chair by the desk.

There were two ways open, I knew, of dealing with the situation. The first, a specious pretense of optimism; the second, to tell the truth. Reflectively, I looked across at Willie, whose reputation for self-possession I knew well. Willie looked back at me calmly. A cool customer, I thought. Not much imagination to trouble him. Yes, I'll let him have the truth.

"Willie," I said, "that little thing on your tongue may be something very serious. Or it may not."

Willie remained unperturbed. "I suppose that's why I'm here, Doctor. I wanted to find out what it was."

"And I want to find out, (Continued on page 57)



There were two ways of dealing with the situation. The first, a specious pretense of optimism; the second, to tell the truth

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT FAWCETT



The water lay but a few feet beneath him. One step, and all his wretchedness, the misery of the operation, the helplessness that lay after that, would be over



AL TARTER

A wall of cocky fighting men, well equipped and highly trained, runs along the borders of Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. Because Iran's boundary with Russia is unprotected, Turkey maintains heavy troop concentrations at Kars and Ardahan, poised to hit swiftly if the Reds move toward the Arab states



RAPHO-GUILLUMETTE

Turkish soldiers are conscripts who serve two years. They draw 11 cents a month, but do not complain, because they are raised to believe they someday will have to fight Russia

OUR

Tough and confident, nearly

WHEN the member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization decided last September to invite Greece and Turkey into the club, the writers were lunching in Paris with an American diplomat, newly arrived in Europe. The conversation inevitably turned to NATO defense problems, and he agreed that these two Mediterranean countries belonged in the Western alliance.

"The more allies we can get, the better," he said. "But I still can't believe the Turks and Greeks are as wonderful as they're cracked up to be. You'd think they were supermen, the way some of our Army people talk about them. Whoever does publicity for them must be a great press agent."

Our companion's skepticism was a natural reaction to the rave notices our new allies invariably receive from American observers who have seen them in action in Korea and the Balkans; in fact, the phrases "rugged Greeks" and "tough Turks" are well on the way to becoming newspaper clichés.

A couple of weeks later, in Athens, we repeated the diplomat's remark to General Thrasivoulos Tsakalotos, the Greek army's able, peppery chief of staff. He laughed and replied, "It's obvious your friend has never been to Greece."

We got a similar reaction from the Turkish chief of staff, stocky, silver-haired General Nuri Yamut. "Supermen?" he said. "Sure. That's exactly what the Russians will run into if they ever attack this country."

There's more than a little swagger in the attitude of most Greeks and Turks; Mediterranean peoples have never been noted for their self-efface-



RAPHO-GUILLUMETTE

General Nuri Yamut, Turkey's chief of staff, indicates concentrations of troops near Iraq

Collier's for December 29, 1951