

QUACK

BY IAN WILDING



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CHARACTERS

WATERMAN, 30s

LITTLEWOOD, 60s

NANCY, late 30s

FANNY, 18–19

GUNNER, 50s

RODNEY, 19–20

SERGEANT

CAPTAIN

Roles are doubled as follows:

FANNY / RODNEY

NANCY / GUNNER / CAPTAIN

LITTLEWOOD / SERGEANT

SCENE ONE

WATERMAN *and* LITTLEWOOD.

WATERMAN: Furthermore—I observed pus dripped from the caruncle of his left eye. And inside his lips broke and discharged a thin and putrid matter and copiously so. A bloody dysentery came on with severe gripes with a present and constant tremor and subsultus. The haemorrhage all this while continued to exit from one part or another. His tongue also was vastly black and his mouth so insufferably stinking that it was greatly offensive even at a considerable distance.

LITTLEWOOD *pours and drinks some whisky.*

Of his stools all that can be said is that they were so horribly nauseous and foetid that my now much esteemed colleague Henry fell into vomitings and vertigos whilst sliding them for my scrupulous observance. Furthermore—neither of the portions of blood that had been drawn off by my Henry had separated into crassamentum or serum but coagulated into a bluish livid colour and seemed more purulent sanies than blood. And throughout this the constant dripping of ichor from his nose and yes—the subsultus tendinum.

LITTLEWOOD *has another drink.*

He had been given elixir vitrioli promising a small quantity of rhubarb. Besides this a tincture of roses and cinnamon water with a decoction of Seville oranges and a little Japon Earth as it is called. It had been directed that ferments of aromatics and astringents be applied to the abdomen. A diet of sago and rice and panada. A further quantity of confect of fracast sine melle. But was not until I fully liberated my gastric lavage upon him and that my zenith water arrived to him en masse that through my method and application and divine goodness and the steering of my hand and the constant labours of my lauded colleague Henry that the patient was raised from a state of universal rottenness to perfect health. They toast me in that town.

LITTLEWOOD *has another drink.*

And now I am here. It is only failure if you do not accept your failure. There is no shame in accepting that your measures are short. The

miners' disease is spreading to the general populace is it not? This town then is in the grip of disease. Its scope defies you. I deliver my services.

LITTLEWOOD: I meant why are you in my surgery?

WATERMAN: A conference of minds—if you will.

LITTLEWOOD: I'm very busy.

WATERMAN: A third or more of the mine workforce is away from the head with poor health.

LITTLEWOOD: It is a minor complaint.

WATERMAN: Is that a pun?

LITTLEWOOD: A what?

WATERMAN: And now some smatterings of raised boils and black fingernails and agues amongst the populace general. What is your diagnosis of the moral deterioration of those suffering the disease? Let us continue to call it the miners' complaint. Does the body rule the moral compass or does the moral compass rule the body? Are they sick because of the things they do?

LITTLEWOOD: I am having great success with the malady.

WATERMAN: Are you? Geriatric leeches and hot knives and syrup? You need not fear me.

LITTLEWOOD: Don't touch that.

WATERMAN: It's a museum.

LITTLEWOOD: Get off it.

WATERMAN: I have observed a cluster of strange wounds. Thoughts?

LITTLEWOOD: This is a place for men.

WATERMAN: New methods. New ideas. Great success. That no doubt unsettles you.

LITTLEWOOD: A ridiculous conceit.

WATERMAN: And yet you cling to spontaneous creation. Perhaps things are worse than I feared. I have been looking closely at sputum. It is the very expression of the interior. Have you been reading much of the new literature that is permeating from Stockholm and beyond?

LITTLEWOOD: I have looked into mouths.

WATERMAN: Your water here—as such is putrid—I am here to flush away the disease. I will wash away the sickness the fevers the aches and the moral putridity disabling the town. And how? With the purity of my zenith water. It is blue with purity. So? Are you with me? Shall we cure and improve this town?

LITTLEWOOD: The town has the snuffles. No more.

WATERMAN: Watery boils? Weeping sores? Blood in the stools and urine?

LITTLEWOOD: They will pass. I have seen this before.

WATERMAN: Are you familiar with the Eyjafjallajokull mote postulation?

LITTLEWOOD: Do me the good grace.

WATERMAN: The people in your rooms do well to wait. I am making great strides. Have you heard?

LITTLEWOOD: I have a very important patient. If you wouldn't mind.

WATERMAN: Why are those with this minor complaint as you pun it so concentrated in this town? Water. Water. The answer is?

LITTLEWOOD: If you will excuse me.

WATERMAN: In Reykjavik they are making extraordinary progress with volatile gas in solution.

LITTLEWOOD: I must ask you to leave.

WATERMAN: As you know I have set up my clinic in the chapel. I wanted to invite you up. I'm convening a conference of minds. A pooling of genius if you will. A symposium.

LITTLEWOOD: Is there an attendance fee?

WATERMAN: No. As with the Athenians. All is civic. You can be Galen to my Pelops. I'm certain we will find ideas worthy to implement. Have you read Kontsmann on flume and dispersal?

LITTLEWOOD: I've glanced at it.

WATERMAN: What did you make on his assertions of particles and contagion?

LITTLEWOOD: I in some ways approve of its broad claims.

WATERMAN: Could you be more specific? I come here in the spirit of inclusion and cooperation.

LITTLEWOOD: What is it you want?

WATERMAN: This is not the modern way to deal with a problem.

LITTLEWOOD: What problem?

WATERMAN: The epidemic.

LITTLEWOOD: It's nothing. Some syrup and further therapy if it can be afforded and time...

WATERMAN: Is that what you believe?

LITTLEWOOD: You belittle the past to your own detriment. That is all I wish to say.

WATERMAN: I believe in the future. I'm sorry you don't see yourself in it.

LITTLEWOOD: Please do me the courtesy.

WATERMAN: I am shocked to find you so racked with self-doubt.

LITTLEWOOD: I demonstrated nothing of the sort.

WATERMAN: I would like to help you climb out of this pit of self-loathing and despair.

LITTLEWOOD: You have a brass neck. You have been in town—what? Two weeks?

WATERMAN: Three days. And yet already improvements in the health of so many.

LITTLEWOOD: Gut wash. Plain food. Herbs and flowers. Mineral salts. Silly blue-water. Long walks and prayer. Even their clothes must be as loose and grey as their facial expression.

WATERMAN: Why do you fear me?

LITTLEWOOD: If you wish to believe that I do.

WATERMAN: You deny it?

LITTLEWOOD: To the hilt.

WATERMAN: An impasse. Great shame.

LITTLEWOOD: Our histories will reveal us.

WATERMAN: We must create the future first.

LITTLEWOOD: A truism—your specialty.

WATERMAN: I fear this meeting will end abruptly.

LITTLEWOOD: Good.

WATERMAN: I have heard a great deal about your ‘further therapy’.

LITTLEWOOD: That is because it is an excellent procedure.

WATERMAN: I would like to talk to you about your ‘excellent procedure’.

LITTLEWOOD: I will not reveal its secrets.

WATERMAN: Good. Because I want you to stop.

LITTLEWOOD: Stop what?

WATERMAN: Both. Stop doing it. You will stop doing them.

LITTLEWOOD: You overstep, sir.

WATERMAN: Animal and human combined. You have to agree that your practice is an abomination.

LITTLEWOOD: I do not. And the results are plain to see.

WATERMAN: You know you must stop. I believe your process is linked to the contagion.

LITTLEWOOD: That is libellous and dangerous, sir.

WATERMAN: The town is changing.

LITTLEWOOD: It is not.