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**FORTUNATE
MAN**

The Story of
a Country Doctor

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1967

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

One of them shouted a warning, but it was too late. The leaves brushed him down almost delicately. The small branches encaged him. And then the tree and the whole hill crushed him together.

A man breathlessly said that a woodman was trapped beneath a tree. The doctor asked the dispenser to find out exactly where: then suddenly picked up his own phone, interrupted her and spoke himself. He must know exactly where. Which was the nearest gate in the nearest field? Whose field? He would need a stretcher. His own stretcher had been left in hospital the day before. He told the dispenser to phone immediately for an ambulance and tell it to wait by the bridge which was the nearest point on the road. At home in the garage there was an old door off its hinges. Blood plasma from the dispensary, door from the garage. As he drove through the lanes he kept his thumb on the horn the whole time, partly to warn oncoming traffic, partly so that the man under the tree might hear it and know that the doctor was coming.

After five minutes he turned off the road and drove uphill, into the mist. As often up there above the river, it was a very white mist, a mist that seemed to deny all weight and solidity. He had to stop twice to open gates. The third gate was already slightly open, so he drove through it without stopping. It swung back and crashed against the rear of the Land Rover. Some sheep, startled, appeared and disappeared into the mist. All the while he had his thumb on the horn for the woodman to hear. After one more field he saw a figure waving behind the mist - as if he were trying to wipe clean a vast steamed-up window.

When the doctor reached him the man said: 'He's been screaming ever since. He's suffering something terrible doctor.' The man would tell the story many times, and the first would be tonight in the

village. But it was not yet a story. The advent of the doctor brought the conclusion much nearer, but the accident was not yet over: the wounded man was still screaming at the other two men who were hammering in wedges preparatory to lifting the tree.

'Christ let me alone.' As he cried 'alone' the doctor was beside him. The wounded man recognized the doctor; his eyes focused. For him too the conclusion was nearer and this gave him the courage to be quieter. Suddenly it was silent. The men had stopped hammering but were still kneeling on the ground. They knelt and looked at the doctor. His hands are at home on a body. Even these new wounds which had not existed twenty minutes before were familiar to him. Within seconds of being beside the man he injected morphine. The three onlookers were relieved by the doctor's presence. But now his very sureness made it seem to them that he was part of the accident: almost its accomplice.

'He had a chance,' said one of the kneeling men, 'when Harry here shouted but he went and turned about the wrong way.'

The doctor set up the plasma for a transfusion into the arm. As he moved around, he explained what he was doing to try to reassure the others.

'I shouted at him,' said Harry, 'he could have got clear if he'd looked sharp.'

'He would have got clear like that,' said the third.

As the morphine worked, the wounded man's face relaxed and his eyes closed. It was then as though the relief he felt was so intense that it reached the others.

'He's lucky to be alive,' said Harry.

'He could have got clear like that,' said the third.

The doctor asked them if they could shift the tree.

'I reckon we can if we are three now.'

Nobody was kneeling any longer. The three woodsmen were standing, impatient to begin. The mist was getting whiter. The moisture was condensing on

the half-empty bottle of plasma. The doctor noticed that this fractionally changed its colour, making it look yellower than normal.

'I want you to lift,' he said, 'while I put a splint on his leg.'

When the wounded man felt the reverberations in the tree as they levered it, he began to moan again.

'We could injure him worse than ever,' said Harry, 'getting him out.' He could see the crushed leg underneath like a dog killed on the road.

'Just hold it steady,' said the doctor.

Again the doctor, whom they knew so well, seemed the accomplice of disaster as he worked under the tree on the leg the fourth of them would lose.

'We'd never believed you'd got here so quick, doc,' said the third.

'You know Sleepy Joe?' asked the doctor. 'He was trapped under a tree for twelve hours before any help came.'

He gave instructions on how to lift the wounded man on to the door and then into the back of the Land Rover.

'You'll be all right now Jack,' said one of them to the wounded man whose face was as damp and pallid as the mist. The third touched his shoulder.

The ambulance was waiting at the bridge. When it had driven off, Harry turned to the doctor confidentially.

'He's lost his leg,' he said, 'hasn't he?'

'No, he won't lose his leg,' said the doctor.

The woodman walked slowly back up to the forest.

As he climbed he put a hand on each thigh. He told the other two what the doctor had told him. As they worked there during the day stripping the tree, they noticed again and again the hollow in the ground where he had been trapped. The fallen leaves there were so dark and wet that it was impossible to distinguish the blood. But every time they noticed the place they questioned whether the doctor could be right.

She is a woman of about thirty-seven. There is just still about her the air of a schoolgirl: one of the less bright girls who is physically more developed than the others but whose physical maturity has already made her slow and maternal rather than shifting and sexy. There is just the last trace of this air about her. In two years it will have vanished. She looks after her mother and it is now for the mother rather than the daughter that the doctor usually visits the cottage.

He first saw the daughter ten years ago. She had a cold and cough and complained that she felt weak. Her chest X-ray was normal. He had the impression that she wanted to talk about something. She would never look at him directly but kept casting him quick anxious glances as though somehow by these to bring him closer. He questioned her but could not gain her confidence.

A few months later she was suffering from insomnia and then asthma. All the tests for allergy proved negative. The asthma got worse. Now when he saw her, she smiled at him through her illness. Her eyes were round like a rabbit's. She was timid of anything outside the cage of her illness. If anybody approached too near her eyes twitched like the skin round a rabbit's nose. But her face was quite unlined. He was convinced that her condition was the result of extreme emotional stress. Both she and her mother insisted, however, that she had no worries.

Two years later he discovered the explanation by chance. He was out on a maternity case in the middle of the night. There were three women neighbours in attendance. Whilst waiting he had a cup of tea with them in the kitchen. One of them worked in a large mechanized dairy in the nearest railway town. The girl with asthma had once worked there too. And it turned out that the manager – who was in the Salvation Army – had had an affair with her. Evidently he had promised to marry her. Then he was overcome by remorse and religious scruples and had

abandoned her. Was it even an affair – or did he only once, one evening, lead her by the hand out of the creamery up to his leather-chaired office?

The doctor once again questioned the girl's mother. Had her daughter been happy when she worked at that dairy? Yes, perfectly. He asked the girl if she had been happy there. She smiled in her cage and nodded her head. Then he asked her outright if the manager had ever made a pass at her. She froze – like an animal who realizes that it is impossible to bolt. Her hands stopped moving. Her head remained averted. Her breathing became inaudible. She never answered him.

Her asthma continued and caused structural deterioration of the lungs. She now survives on steroids. Her face is moon-shaped. The expression of her large eyes is placid. But her brows and eyelids and the skin pulled tight over her cheekbones twitch at every movement and sound which might constitute a warning of the unexpected. She looks after her mother, but very seldom leaves the cottage. When she sees the doctor, she smiles at him as now she would probably smile at the soldier of the Salvation Army.

Before, the water was deep. Then the torrent of God and the man. And afterwards the shallows, clear but constantly disturbed, endlessly irritated by their very shallowness as though by an allergy. There is a bend in the river which often reminds the doctor of his failure.

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