

ENCOUNTER WITH THE DOCTORS

By
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Characters in the story¹

I, the patient

Morton, a 16th century bishop

Argentine, a 16th century physician

Hua Tuo, ancient Chinese physician of the Han Dynasty

William Harvey, 17th century English physician who discovered blood circulation

The Doctor

When I first arrived in Greece I happened to have caught a cold. Reckoning that by the time I managed to locate a doctor somewhere in this ancient country I might as well have recovered by myself, I decided to tough it out. So I rolled into my blanket, and tried to read a history book with an aching head. I heard the door open. In came an old man dressed in solemn medieval robe, with a priest's pointed hat on top of his head.

Morton: I come to bring you salvation, my child.

I: Are you the doctor?

Morton: In faith, I am. Tell me, do you eat well?

I: Well, yes I suppose I do. Is eating well bad for health?

Morton: Of course not. Only that I am pleased to find someone fat in the purse. Nay, food is vital to the body as treasures are to the body politic of the state. So how about some money for the king? I say 500 pounds.

I: I beg your pardon? I'm no subject of your king. Besides, what kind of bill is it that costs 500 pounds for a headache?

Morton: One question at a time, please. It is a parliamentary bill and a *Benevolence*. The quantity of Benevolence is unstrained; it flows from the milk of human kindness and showers like a sweet April rain.

I: I am a scholar; I lead a modest life.

Morton: I am the more pleased to hear it. Modesty is a godly virtue and the sure promise of a purse well filled, so how about some money for the king?

I: I have no money, especially not for a priest. What kind of doctor are you?

Morton: (*Straightening up*) If you must know, I am a Doctor of Canon Law and of Decrees. Now cough up. I will cure you.

I: (*Coughing and thrusting the priest out*) I will kill you if you mention cough again. Out! Out! I want no grasping bishop here with me. Fetch me some of your physicians if you don't know any better, or push off!

Morton: (*Backing away*) Temper, temper! There's no need to be rude, young man. I'll summon my private physician. Argentine!

¹ I got the anecdotes of Hippocrates and William Harvey from BBC's *Horrible Histories* TV series. The plot and dialogues are my own.

(Enter Doctor Argentine, a Tudor physician, with a basin and a knife)

Argentine: Good day to you, my lord.

I: Good day to you. Don't kill me, I am a sick man.

Argentine: Your lordship is joking. A sick man, eh? Suffer me to feel your temperature. *(Starts honing the knife to and fro on a leather belt)*

I: Hold on a minute, what do you plan to do with that?

Argentine: We shall let your blood first, to cool the inner fire of the body. Your lordship has too much blood, a plethora, as we call it. Just lie down quietly, and allow me to fasten your limbs. Hang on, what's that on your left arm?

I: I had a hypodermic test for TB last week. I tested negative, so it really doesn't matter-; please, I beg you to ignore it.

Argentine: Ignore it! *Mamma mia*, no! That should not be for the disciples of Hippocrates. *(Pulling out a saw)* We shall have to amputate this arm.

(Enter Hippocrates, dressed in ancient Greek robes)

Hippocrates: Did anyone just say Hippocrates?

I: Yes, I did! Help me!

Hippocrates: *(to Argentine)* Spare his arm, you Italian mountebank! Alas, how the noble art of Asclepius has declined and fallen in the hands of the Moderns!

Argentine: Whatever you say, Father of Medicine. Show me your art if you're so clever.

Hippocrates: Leave him to my care, and I will make you learn discretion. First, we need a sample of his urine in this bowl.

I: That sounds more like it; our modern doctors do this, too. *(Hands him the water.)* Much obliged.

Hippocrates: *(Handing it to Argentine)* Now, we shall test it.

I: This is what I call medical science—positivism. I wonder what instrument or agent the Greeks use to test urine.

Argentine: Test it? But how?

Hippocrates: Taste it.

Argentine: Yes, but how?

Hippocrates: *Taste it.*

Argentine: Taste *it*...the...wee?

(Hippocrates gracefully motions him to drink.)

Hippocrates: And tell me what it smells like, what it savors like, and what the color signifies. Put your observations down on this sheet of paper.

Argentine: Out of the question. I suspect that you have been trifling with me; I am most certainly out of this ludicrous business; do I look stupid? Tell you what, I think you are a dirty old imposter! Have it for yourself.

(Argentine hurls the bowl at Hippocrates, who ducks; and they fight.)

(Enter Hua Tuo the ancient Chinese physician with a stick, looking sick himself, and Dr. William Harvey with a heavy sack on his back)

Hua Tuo: *(Coughing violently)* Stay your hands, for goodness' sake!

I: A Chinese, a Chinese! A Chinese for my life! I am saved at last!

Hua Tuo: Wouldn't be so self-assured myself, son. What ails you?

I: I have a headache and a fever.

Argentine: And he's got tuberculosis in one of his arms.

I: No I haven't.

Argentine: Yes, he has.

Hua Tuo: Quiet, we shall see. Let me feel your pulse. Is the pain around the temples?

I: Yes indeed, master.

Hua Tuo: Stick out your tongue. Right, I see the tongue is thickly coated, and your pulse is a bit chaotic.

I: I rather think it is the result of some shock that I just received.

Hua Tuo: Tell me, what is your name?

I: Wei.

Hua Tuo: *(Drops stick and suddenly prostrates himself on the ground)* Pardon me for my ignorance and impudence, your noble highness! I never meant to murder the duke my master, please spare my life!

I: Who is the duke?

Hua Tuo: He is my noble master the Duke of Wei. I am his most humble servant! Please save my life!

I: I thought you came to save my life. I am not related to the Duke of Wei in any way.

Hua Tuo: *(Looking confused)* Aren't you? Well it may be so. *(Aside)* Nevertheless I will try my utmost to ingratiate myself into his lordship's favor and be on the safe side, lest the duke should be angry with me. *(Turning to "I" again)* Since your highness's name is also Wei, I'll exhaust my skills to be at your service. I have only intended to try this surgery once, and it was for no less a personage than the Duke of Wei himself. To cure your headache, I will open your skull.

I: No!

Hua Tuo: And as for your arm, I will perform another surgery I once did on a general who was injured in the arm by a poisonous arrow. It was a great success. I see the case is similar here. I shall cut away your rotten flesh and scoop your bone with this thin blade. I have studied the meridian system of the human body, and will ensure that no drop of blood will fall even if you lose a pound of flesh.

William Harvey: With all due respect, your Chinese meridian theory is bosh. You are in for a big surprise. Mind you, this is cutting-edge discovery I have with me, worth knighthoods if my opinion be wanted. I have just discovered, by studying corpses on the battlefield, that the same amount of blood circulates all over the body through a network of arteries and veins (which you mistakenly call "meridians"), pumped

around by the regular movements of the heart. That's what the pulses are for, old man. Now if I can just show you the details on this corpse ... (*Trying to drag a dead soldier's body out of the sack.*) Can anyone else give me a hand?

I: (*Jumping off the bed*) This is more than enough! Shall I make it absolutely clear? There will be no corpses or spare human body parts allowed in my room! Give it a rest, all I need is just the Doctor!

There is a strange whooshing noise, and a blue police box looms in the centre of the room, a man dressed in fancy clothes, who looks excessively like Matt Smith, stumbled out of the box. The noise grows louder; he holds out his hand and grasps my arm.

William Harvey: Who are you?

The Doctor: I am the Doctor.

William Harvey: Yeah, aren't we all? Doctor who?

The Doctor: Yes. (*To "I"*) Quickly, get into the TARDIS!

I: (*Stepping into the police box*) Wow, it is bigger on the inside than the outside!

The Doctor: That's what everybody says. Allow me to apologize for this confusion. The Time Lords have violated the second law of time in order for me to interview my latest incarnation. The result is that we are jammed in a fixed point in the space and time continuum. That's why all the people start to bump into each other. Now just let me reverse the polarity of the neutron flow, and I'll send you back to your right place.

I: By all means, doctor, but do take your time. I have always been a great fan of yours; can I have your signature, please, before I go?

At this moment, the TARDIS began to shake violently. I could see from the screen that we were hurtling through numerous galaxies and nebulae. We lost our balance and fell to the floor. The next minute, the TARDIS ran into a sudden halt; the door flung open by itself. I lost grasp of the chair, and was tossed into the fathomless universe outside.

When I woke up again in my bed with the book on my face, I genuinely thought that I felt a lot better.
