

THE APPOINTMENT

by Thomas Hindmarsh

YOU might have met Hicklett yourself sometime. You generally struck him in the pubs between five and six. The trouble was you didn't know which pub he would be in, so it was hard to avoid him systematically. But as soon as you saw him carving his way toward you your first panic impulse was to pretend you hadn't seen him, in the vain hope that he hadn't seen you.

Vain, I said.

"Here, drink that up, brother, and have this one on me."

Famous first words. They were the stone end of your privacy, your reflections, your conversation, your civil rights. You were in the arms of a marathon-winning bore.

Bores love me. When I was small my parents trained me never to interrupt anyone. I grew into a superb listener. I have been sprayed with the saliva of liars, reformers, connoisseurs of horses, women and beer, and historians of tripe and trivia.

I have listened with glazed eyeballs to them all, and nodded, grinned, grimaced, grunted, pouted and sighed until in the end my special effects got embarrassingly out of synchronisation with the narrative. But not with Hicklett. You just listened numbed. His eloquence came down on you with the crashing steadiness of a waterfall.

It won't weaken this story if I tell you right now that he was cracked, quite cracked. He was a one-tracker, a man with a mission. He talked about only one subject, and if you dared interrupt him he'd go right back to the beginning again. Guess what the subject was. Life-saving.

Now, don't leap at the assumption that Hicklett was one of those strapping, bronzed he-men who unselfishly tramp the beaches with their eyes on dog-paddling fools heading out toward the far line of breakers. I doubt if he could swim. But he might have been a handy man to have around when the body was dragged up on to the sand, because he had a theory. It was a theory that existing methods of artificial respiration were all wrong.

Some day the Hicklett method was going to do to the Holger-Nielsen method what the Holger-Nielsen had done to the Schaeffer method, you just wait. It was all very well to laugh about it afterwards, but it was annoying having every glass of beer spilled by this counter-thumping crusader.

Then one day someone told me something about Hicklett. From that moment Hicklett fascinated me. It was somebody who had known him years ago. Before he became cracked. This Hicklett had evidently been a masseur in the days before massaging became dignified by the name of physiotherapy. He must have been one of the last of the old timers and the first of the new. He was there when the thing became a profession. They say he had a remarkably good knowledge of anatomy. And it must have been right back in those days that Hicklett had formed his theory. He never gave a hint of it until one day the chance to demonstrate it came to him in a dramatic fashion.

He had been doing part-time work at the hospital when that day something happened that caused everyone to come running, shouting. Hicklett came too. It was all over a boy who, bored stiff with waiting in the outpatients' department, must have been

fiddling with one of the electric points low down on the wall. No one is very certain what happened, except the result. He was dead. There was not a heartbeat in him.

They say that Hicklett seized the child and set to work on it in the most extraordinary fashion: and presently the child breathed.

There was a terrific to-do over the matter. Hicklett was booted right out of the hospital. Mind you, I can see the hospital's point of view. There are certain regular things to do in cases of electrocution, and sometimes lives have been saved by doing them. True, Hicklett had also saved a life. But what if he had failed?

That broke Hicklett. He went out of physiotherapy for ever. And the other thing became an obsession. He was to become a messiah preaching a lifetime alone. Not quite alone, because I was too shy to admit that I was a disciple. But I knew Hicklett had something.

Maybe it was only curiosity that prompted me to persuade somebody I knew who knew somebody else who knew somebody else who worked in the hospital to dig out the record of the inquiry thirty years ago to discover the name of the boy Hicklett had artificially restored to life.

The disclosure was the most tantalisingly exciting thing that had ever happened to me. The boy's name was Jones. But his forenames must have been given to him in compensation. They were Rufus Regulus. There couldn't have been the shadow of the phantom of a doubt that this was Rufus Regulus Jones, a medical practitioner, considered to be something of a heart specialist.

I went to see R. R. Jones. He was a cool man. Yes, he did know that he had been electrocuted as a child. He did know that some bystander had set to work on him, but he didn't know who he was. When I told this heart man that his own heart had been set in motion by the most heretical method of artificial respiration yet attempted in the hospital, or outside it, and by a no-account mug of a masseur who was kicked out of the hospital for his trouble the doctor blinked. But I never mentioned a word of this interview to Hicklett, not a word. I never breathed that he now had two disciples.

I was in the pub the night Hicklett burst in. It was the first time I had ever seen him speechless. He was shaking a letter. He couldn't even read it to us. I can remember all our fingers tugging it and the ring of our heads around it. It was from Dr Jones, all right. But it was disappointingly cool. It simply said that Dr Jones was interested to discover that Mr Hicklett had a theory of artificial respiration which, on the only occasion it had been put into practice, had proved successful. Would Mr Hicklett like to discuss the matter with Dr Jones sometime... say, next Wednesday at four o'clock? There was not a hint in it that Jones was addressing his rescuer, and it was plain from Hicklett's incoherent conversation afterwards that he had forgotten, if he ever knew, the name of R. R. Jones.

But I'll remember the following Wednesday. Hicklett had a haircut. A haircut was the greatest tribute Hick-



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lett ever paid to any occasion. And he was wearing a suit that made me realise he must have had two.

I had to chase the rest of the story, but I got most of it from the nurse and some of it from a tiny paragraph in the papers.

Hicklett arrived for his four o'clock appointment punctually at quarter past three. The nurse laughingly reported his arrival to Dr Jones, who told the nurse to make him comfortable. Several men waiting out there must have gathered the impression that Hicklett was either very ill or very important because the nurse brought out a special chair for him, plugged in the heater and turned it exclusively toward him, pushed the little round table with the massive vase of flowers on it over to his side, put an ash tray there, then handed him the annual report of the Compost Society for something to read.

"Doctor will see you at four, Mr Hicklett," she whispered.

Hicklett might have been sitting at that table to deal his final hand against Fate. The same Fate that had trumped him all the way. And it was ready to trump him again. He must have turned suddenly in his chair to knock the vase the way he did. The water from it drenched him from the waist downward. He stood up with a flood of profanity. The comedy of it, the pity of it. Imagine his chagrin... on H-hour. of D-Day... and this. The water was

running over his shoes now and through them. They were thin shoes, much thinner than when he had bought them. He was slapping his trousers to shake the wet out of them. Then he stepped backward.

The three men watching him said at the inquest that his body shot across the room as if it had been kicked. One of them explained that Hicklett had trodden on the solitary part of the heater cord that was perished. The current had leapt into his wet body with loving ferocity.

It was all over so soon that Dr Jones wondered who was barging into his room when the three men struggled in carrying Hicklett, and they were all talking at once, telling what happened. He was a cool man, Jones, but he had his coat and collar off in the very motion of descending to his knees, and turned the body face downward and took his place at the head so swiftly you might have thought he had been rehearsing the incident for the last hour. All he said to the men was "Get out." He knew how long, how agonisingly long, he would have to work.

He was still swaying over the body when the only sound beside his laboured breath was the surgery clock striking four. Maybe there was no connection in it whatever, there couldn't have been, but Dr R. R. Jones said something. His words were desperate.

"Nurse, tell that Hicklett to come in, will you?"