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## The Soldier in My Throat

The extent to which the average person doesn't look where he's drinking, or drink where he's looking, was strikingly illustrated last week when I swallowed half an inch of orange juice out of the baby's mug and was immediately asphyxiated by a prickly, ill-defined but solid object which lodged a quarter way down my throat.

"Get help," I shouted. "I'm choking."

Bent low and blinded by tears I tried to loosen the hedgehog-like obstruction. By leaning slightly forwards and sideways, like an old man in an amateur dramatical performance, I managed to ease a passage for a fine stream of water and air up and down my throat. In this way I began to totter along the damp suburban pavement, under the yellowing leaves of autumn, towards the local hospital.

My son met me half-way along the street. His pink face was puckered up with the strain of collecting car numbers.

"Why are you making that noise?" he demanded.

"I can't help it."

"It sounds like an air-lock."

"I'm choking. I swallowed something out of baby's mug. I'm dying."

"It won't hurt," he told me. "Every muscle in your body will quiver, and then you'll know no more, nor will your now yielding form offer further resistance."

"Tell your mother I'm going to the hospital."

"If it was baby's mug I know what you've swallowed. It's one of my soldiers. She went round putting soldiers in all the mugs."

"Why?"

"It was a practical joke."

"I see."

“They were called japes in your day.”

The young woman doctor in the Out Patients department was thoughtful and practical.

“We’ll take you at once. The other casualties don’t like the noise you’re making. Some of them are growing nervous.”

She pulled out my tongue what seemed at the time a very long way and put a dentist’s mirror down my throat. The air and water were temporarily damned and a frightening situation developed.

“I can’t see anything. Do you know what you swallowed?”

“A tin soldier.”

“That was rather careless of you.”

“I didn’t see it at the time.”

“You swallowed a tin soldier without seeing it?” There was a pause.

“I think we’d better send you down to the Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital. They’ll be able to deal with you better than we can.”

It was Sunday evening and I had no money left at all. I was a walking case, a shuffling, gobbling, regurgitating case, unworthy of the ambulance and unable to afford a taxi. Fortunately my son reappeared on the pavement, having come round to study the processes of death by choking, and was in a position to lend me eightpence in exchange for a signed credit note.

“You don’t look any better.”

“I’m not.”

“I say, I’ve been studying your case. I know what it is that’s sticking. It’s the bayonet.”

There was comfort in the familiar smell and the bald lighting of the specialist hospital. (During the ride in the Tube I had tried to deafen myself in my doubled-up position to what the other travellers were saying about me.) It was reassuring to be booked-in as an obstruction, soothing to sit in front of the sad, deeply brown eyes of the young Lebanese house doctor. He could see nothing. An X-ray was needed and on Sunday night it would take some time to find a radiologist. A lady radiologist must be summoned from South Kensington.

I sat waiting and trying to drink a cup of tea, noticing the broken fall of the liquid as it negotiated the obstruction and shot with added force to the bottom of my gullet. The noise I was

making was now very loud and persistent. The young doctor sat in front of me like a night watchman by some antiquated piece of pumping machinery.

The radiologist appeared and took X-rays of my throat. The sad young doctor shook his head: nothing there. X-rays of the stomach; nothing to be seen. His courtesy and patience were unruffled, but I felt that the radiologist, who now prepared to return to South Kensington, regarded me as a noisy impostor. As the huge clock ticked away past half-past eight a second doctor appeared, a smart charming young Indian in a blazer.

“Your admission card states that you have swallowed a soldier.”

“Yes, doctor, I think so.”

“You think, do you not know?”

“I seem to feel the bayonet when I hiccup.”

“That is not very probable. The fully equipped Western soldier of today carries no bayonet. It is possible that you have unconsciously swallowed some heirloom. I will make an examination.”

The new doctor pulled out my tongue very far, much farther than I should have thought possible. Fresh tears, this time of anxiety, came to my eyes. It was hardly bearable if he should find me wanting. But, after gazing fixedly into the dark mirror he turned to his colleague with quiet reproof.

“You mean to say, doctor, that you did not see anything when you made your examination?”

“No, doctor.”

“Look again, doctor.”

“I see nothing.”

“There is bruising and laceration of the throat. It is extensive.” At last my behaviour was justified. I wrung his hand hysterically.

“You must be admitted to the hospital for the night. Death by choking might result if the foreign body should be regurgitated.”

I was a pariah, without wash-things, in hospital pyjamas much too small for me and a dressing-gown fastened across the middle with a surgical bandage. But I sank back on to the high bed on its glassy sea of oilcloth with an exquisite sensation—the glorious relief of a struggling family man able to abandon all his cares, just for a while, on the broad bosom of National Health. The scene was so dear to me—the middle-aged, coffee-coloured West Indian sister in charge, the Dominican nun coming on to night duty, the lockers full of uneaten fruit and betting slips, the cretonne

screens, the gentle hawking and snoring, the sense that all responsibility was laid on other shoulders, peace.

Most of the patients in D Ward were very much more serious cases than myself and the co-operative walking case who was taking round the last service of tea had a large hole through his throat. Unable to speak, he snatched up a memo pad and handed me a written message:

SORRY, CHUM, NO TEA FOR YOU TONIGHT.

He added:

I EXPECT YOU'RE 'FOR IT' IN THE MORNING.

I tried not to think about this.

The sound of an evening hymn drifted down the corridor. It was Lights Out time. The walking case collected the plastic mugs, stopping by my side only to add the carefully lettered words:

NEXT BED TO YOU IS A CYPRIOT, BUT WE'RE 'NO POLITICS' HERE.

The Dominican nun on night duty smiled at me with angelic kindness. "You're the patient that thinks he's swallowed a soldier. But don't worry. Sister told me to come round every ten minutes and shine the torch on you to make certain you don't go to sleep. That way you'll be sure not to choke, won't you?"

Nevertheless there were hazy periods during which I knew no more, nor did my yielding form offer further resistance until I caught the morning harmony of hospital, the high silvery tinkling of thermometers in water, the deeper tone of teaspoons against teacups. The morning tea was in charge of a very flashy and spike-heeled quadron who produced a deep sensation in the ward. Grey in the early light, unshaven, heroic, the walking case crawled to my bed and wrote on the memo pad:

BE A CHUM. WHISTLE AT HER FOR ME.

As I pursed my lips I became fully conscious and, in a blinding flash, realized that I could swallow and breathe. The soldier had disappeared.

The young Indian doctor on his morning rounds treated me with his old courtesy and soothing appearance of complete belief.

"But, doctor, the soldier's gone."

"Who can tell?"

"And I have to see a client this morning."

“Your client will wait. What is a day or two to him? He is an educated man no doubt and will understand the importance of your bodily health.”

I didn’t feel that my client could wait but I knew that Matron’s scorn was justified as I applied for a form to discharge myself voluntarily.

“We haven’t seen much of this tin soldier,” she said.

“No, Matron.”

“You realize that you take complete responsibility for your discharge. Sign here.”

When I arrived home my son said: “I’ve checked over my complete Allied forces and there’s none of them missing. I’ve counted them all, sixty-seven and two broken.”

“Oh.”

“I’m afraid it can’t have been a bayonet you swallowed.”

“But what about the soldiers baby put in the mugs?”

“She didn’t put them in really. I only said that to calm your nerves.”

“As a jape?”

“Yes.”

But I have evidence, nevertheless; my bruises and lacerations. They, after all, were extensive.