

A Time to Operate

by David Miller

THE MASTER SURGEON RESTED his hands on the balcony railing, oblivious to the melee in Macquarie Street three floors below the elegant *Craignish* rooms.

The time was half past eight on a hot October morning. The year was 1906.

Sir Victor's bristling moustache twitched at the salty tang of the unseasonal nor'wester that was taking his attention. This dry breeze gusted down the harbour, ruffling whitecaps past the point off Lady Macquarie's Chair and buffeting the tall palm fronds in the botanical gardens across the road from his rooms.

He had been standing there for ten minutes or more, imperceptibly rolling from one foot to the other, his feet a shoulder width apart on the sturdy timber decking. Behind him stood his nurse Miss Laidley in her starched linen uniform and three-cornered veil. She was awaiting orders. Knowing her boss, she knew better than to say anything at this time.

A honking motor car horn drew his attention for a moment and he glanced down into the swirling willy-willies of fine dust from the road. A horse and sulky was jostling with a four-in-hand for right of way. The car bullied through the horses which scattered and reared in all directions. A Chinese porter skilfully trotted through the whole scene, his long black queue swinging from side to side as his bamboo pole jiggled in time with his pace, his woven cane baskets filled with squawking chickens en route to market.

The new century was a time of rapid change, but in the surgeon's opinion, the recent federation of states was acting far above its station for a junior colony. These upstart politicians had banded together and imposed a tax on income.

The states, he thought, had ruled much better when they were divided, when they were squabbling over silly issues like the correct distance apart for railway lines, rather than picking on hardworking citizens with the imposition of a tax on their legitimate income.

"Threepence in every pound I earn. Iniquitous!" he fumed inwardly, grasping the wooden rail that was exactly built to the height of his elbows. He had a standard measurement for everything. His gloomy dark furniture, his yacht and his operating table were all built to his own cubit measure.

Sir Victor was feeling irritated, like everybody, by the westerly wind. He was brooding that he would like to leave this barbaric land and sail back to his beloved Jersey in the Channel Islands.

In an adjoining room in the spacious professional apartment, his promising young assistant Dr Wall was also keeping out of the way, quietly reassuring the anxious patient and her husband Mr D'Arcy, who, Sir Victor had been informed, was a tax collector for the newly formed Federal Tax Office.

"Do you think, Dr Wall, Sir Victor will decide to operate on my wife?" Mr D'Arcy enquired. In these times, women were rarely drawn into decision making, even when it affected them directly. Australian women had only just won the right to vote as recently as 1902.

When Dr Wall had examined the patient, he had advised Mr D'Arcy that his wife's condition would, in all probability, call for an immediate operation if the optimum results were to be achieved. He had informed Sir Victor of his findings but had not received the usual pro-active response, which made him apprehensive.

"Sir Victor always knows what's best," the young doctor answered, trying to reassure the couple. At the same time he harboured some gnawing doubts about the objectivity of his chief's motives in this instance. He was familiar with that posture, the set of his squat neck, that look out to sea. He had seen it before.

So, it was hard for him to believe his own words.

As Dr Wall steepled the tips of his elegant fingers and glanced over his immaculate nails, gauging the patient's husband, he was hoping intently for an outcome that he knew in his heart was not to be. He suspected that Sir Victor's inclination was going

to be rather the other way, and he worried for the patient. Because of his own confident opinion that an operation was urgently indicated, and having already conveyed this advice to the patient, he was not feeling very comfortable.

Tension was palpable in the room as everyone awaited the master's decision.

Dr Wall was aware that his chief knew that now was the perfect time to operate. He was also aware that Sir Victor was out on the balcony and that he was feeling the strength of the nor'westerly.

Mrs D'Arcy had a severe case of recurrent cholecystitis. It had been diagnosed by Dr Wall and followed up with a timely referral to his chief for gall bladder removal.

Because she had not suffered an attack of gallstones for over six weeks, the young doctor knew that it was a good time to operate, before the next bout which could happen anytime. There would be fewer inflammatory adhesions to deal with. In the expert hands of the master surgeon and his assistant, who worked as a team at a seemingly telepathic level, the risk of severe bleeding would be much less than with any other surgeon in the country. Blood lost, of course, could not be replaced in those times.

The increasingly agitated hand gestures of the young surgeon alerted Mr D'Arcy to the uncertainty that was building around the case of his wife's condition. The anxious body language of the elegant Dr Wall seemed in total contrast to that of Sir Victor whose hands remained square and strong as they gripped the railing. These hands reminded Mr D'Arcy more of a seasoned sailor than a doctor.

A strong puff of wind gusted through the open French doors, scattering the neatly arranged clinical notes on the doctor's desk.

THE CREW OF THE yacht *Ada* were getting ready as they did every day. The mooring lines holding the stylishly raked tops'l schooner tugged restlessly at

the dockside of the Royal Prince Albert Yacht Club. This time the lined and salty sailing master Mr Punch had a feeling 'in his water' as they say, that 'the old man' – as the owner was referred to in whispers by the crew – might be wanting to sail.

He knew that Sir Victor would be aching to take the helm to reach the powerful yacht across the unrelenting westerly down harbour, clearing the weather side of the Sow and Pigs shoal. He could see in his mind's eye his master sailing her beyond the new Wedding Cake Beacon, heading up within a biscuit toss of North Head, then laying off seawards to pass safely the rocky fangs of Long Reef near Collaroy, but keeping close to the protection of the coast for a smooth fast ocean run.

Mr Punch shouted at his crew to complete an inspection of already immaculate blocks, running, rigging, steering, lines coiled Bristol fashion, and the thousand other details essential to the smooth running of a complex yacht, because he knew that as the *Ada* rounded lonely Barrenjoey Point, she would be slicing into the oncoming swell, lashing seaspray and sucking tides off Lion Island in a beat towards Sir Victor's secret sheltered anchorage at Patonga Basin in remote Broken Bay.

HE SEEMED TO HAVE all that life could offer. His Rolls Royces were the latest, his yacht the most advanced and his surgical skills had become legendary. Sir Victor prided himself on being a technical man in tune with his time, but he had no time for the dreamy ideas of Dr Sigmund Freud.

"If you can't cut it out, it's not a disease," he had snapped at a student who was silly enough to enquire about the relevance of psychological medicine.

He was interested in the more down-to-earth medical research that had revealed a few things about post-surgical wound infection. It was a condition he loathed so much that someone's head would likely roll when this surgical complication occurred – not to mention the likely demise of his patient, a death usually spread slowly and agonisingly over time. It was a waste of his time and expertise.

Tragic endings notwithstanding, with Sir Victor the fiscal side of things was never neglected. In