

Max Thorek, *A Surgeon's World; An Autobiography* (New York: Somerset Books, 1943); 153-156.

PART IV: GOLDEN TWENTIES

Chapter 14

THOUGHTS ON TURNING FORTY

A man's fortieth birthday is a momentous milestone. Up to that time one's thoughts, ideas, plans and hopes have always some of the unfettered freedom of Pegasus, at liberty to trample the clouds. After that time, one may no longer escape the hard necessity of making dreams pull in difficult double harness with experience. One is no longer a "promising" young surgeon. Promises, and especially those promises a man makes to his young self, are falling due. Now or never they must be carried out.

Reaching this milestone, I took stock of myself. By every test by which most men measure satisfaction in their hearts, I was fortunate.

I had a tremendous practice. Long study, conscientious endeavor, incessant hard work, and my fluency in a number of languages had given me a professional standing which drew to me people of all sorts, from all walks of life. The practice of surgery was still, as it always has been, a high and holy adventure to me. Never for a moment did I regret my choice of calling.

The material rewards for my work had been great. From the first, I had turned over my income to Fim and she had shown real genius in managing first the meager fees of a

beginning physician and then the steadily growing income of a man starting to succeed. Through judicious investments, she had doubled, trebled, quadrupled the original sum. We were becoming affluent.

And we were, as I think we almost guessed at the time, on the threshold of even great affluence-the Golden Twenties when I, like thousands of others-bankers, brokers, business men, doctors, lawyers, surgeons-seemed miraculously to acquire the Midas touch. [end page 153]

As the twenties began, I still remember to this day occasionally with her one failure as an investor-that purchase of the Lake Shore property, now seedier and more unprepossessing than ever. I thought of that bad guess one afternoon when one of the engineers of Lincoln Park came to my office at the hospital to take home his mother, for whom I had performed an operation.

"Aren't you ever going to extend Lake Shore Drive?" I asked him.

He shot me a quick, sidelong glance.

"Do you want it extended?" he said.

"Of course I do," I told him. "Don't I own property up there?"

And then, because his silence seemed to confirm my own suspicions, I added:

"I guess I'd better just cross that off as a bad investment and forget about it!"

He laughed and went on his way, with a shrug of his shoulders.

A few weeks later I knew the reason for the shrug and for the laugh. Scores of workmen were on the scene. They were filling in the Lake Front, getting ready for the new road! Overnight, that worthless property of ours turned into a gold-mine. It was worth a thousand dollars a foot. We had a hundred feet of front and our tract was four hundred feet deep. Fim had been right, as usual!

And Fim went on being right. She divided the land into two two-hundred-foot parcels, one facing east across the Lake, the other fronting on Frontier Avenue. The second of these we held for our own use. Fim's genius erected there a fifty-apartment building called "The Frontier." It was valued at close to half a million dollars and it would have kept us affluent throughout our lives-except- Well, it's better to forget the Frontier now. We lost it in the debacle of October, 1929.

Roy F. France, popular architect, bought the other lot, paying us with a second mortgage, which incidentally behaved as second mortgages were wont to do in those chaotic days when markets and investments went to smash. But before the smash came, we saw the magnificent edifice of Lake Shore Towers rise from the ground sixteen stories above the

spot where our old fisherman once lived so peacefully. It was a cooperative apartment building, one of the many being built in those days, and it was perfect in structure and in appointments. When Mr. France pro- [end page 154] proposed an adjustment in the mortgage through transfer to us of ownership in apartments in this building, we accepted with alacrity. And shortly thereafter we took possession of our new home.

Fim's genius has made that dwelling a gracious setting for our lives as well as a place of comfort and convenience. As soon as one steps into the reception room, with its brocaded walls and its mirrors reminiscent of Versailles, one is already far away from the hurly-burly of a great modern city. One can feel the refreshment of a day long past.

Success lay well within my grasp—financial success and the much more precious professional success for which I had worked so long and so hard. I ought to be the happiest of men, I told myself on that fortieth birthday of mine. And I knew in my heart that I was not wholly happy. Neither advancing reputation nor mounting possessions was an antidote to the restlessness which was always with me.

The real root of my trouble was much deeper than a parent's nostalgia at a son's coming to manhood. And the trouble itself was an old one. It was an uneasy realization that the practices in the world of medicine in which I was now a full citizen fell far short of the ideals which practitioners honored with lip-service. It was a growing consciousness that those who should have been working to close the gap between things professed and things done were, for the most part, complacently looking the other way.

The bitterest disappointment of my life, a disappointment recurring again and again-and still recurring even today-has been the discovery and rediscovery that surgery can be, for many surgeons, a business, not a profession. If all of us agree to keep together, these men seem to say, if none of us goes pioneering out in front, setting a pace too hard for the majority to match, we shall all do well and do it easily. Getting ahead in the profession is a matter of politics, they imply. It is not *what* you know but *whom* you know that counts.

Politics is a tough, shrewd battle of wits. Perhaps it has its place in life, but that place is not in the hospitals, the professional schools, the associations in which professional men gather to seek the highest good of their profession. Whenever I have met it in such surroundings-and how many, many times I have so met it-it has seemed to me that I was witnessing the great be- [end page 155] trayal of all the high ideals which thousands of real surgeons are striving to serve.

That game, played by small men who are jealously fearful that the newcomer with the new idea threatens their security and peace, is responsible for the almost insurmountable barriers placed in the way of scientific progress. It holds back, slows up sometimes to century-long standstill, the free forward march of those who should be concerned only with the alleviation of human misery.

The way of the pioneer is hard. Probably it is right and just that it should be. There is wisdom in the old counsel:

"Be not the first by whom the new is tried,

Nor yet the last to lay the old aside."

.... [page 156]