

by Chris Ellis

The Baron's Last Ride

In a curve of the river that ran below the village where I practiced, nestled a small farm redolent of the old colonial days. The wide tiled verandahs of the farm house were all wicker and palms and brookie lace under the eaves. At the end of the garden there was a small trout pond and then lucerne fields leading down to the river. It was one of my favourite housecalls for one of my favourite diseases; advanced eccentricity.

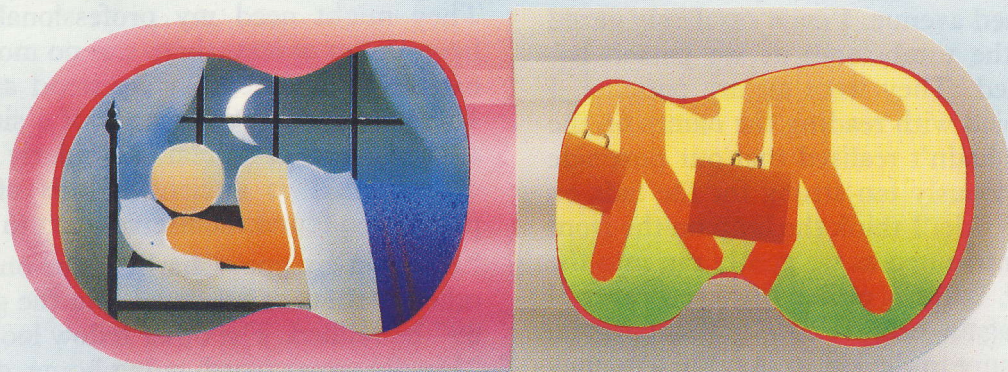
The Baron Hubert Pont de Villadent had settled there after the independence of the Belgian Congo. He was a man of massive ancient proportions (about 100 kg in the buff), a leonine face and only one eye. The other eye had been removed by a leopard while on a hunting trip in Central Africa. He rose late each morning, put on an extravagant silk morning jacket with a matching eye patch and after his toilette and croissants was ready by midday to receive various visitors for drinks on the verandah. The visitors were the remnants from the African colonies, who now seem to head for Natal, the

last resting place. There were several fairly substantial, one foot wide, military moustaches complaining to each other about the quality of pith one gets in the helmets these days and some dessicated memsahibs who sat amongst the fronds and ferns with labradors called Winston panting at their feet. In amongst all this wicker would weave Khumalo (who's an absolutely splendid fellow and I don't know what we'd do without him) serving egg and water cress sandwiches to the guests. The order of play was gentle snorts to the sound of tonic effervescing in gin to be followed by a passionate game of croquet in the afternoon.

I enjoyed my visits to the periphery of this content group, who led a questionless life based on values from a former period in history. Sadly it came to pass one day that the Baron died at the age of eighty eight. The Belgian community arranged his funeral and I was asked to be one of the pallbearers. The service was conducted in the catholic church in the village and afterwards the procession made its way to

Once-a-day Tranxene[®]

The bedtime tranquilliser with a dayful of benefits



Tranxene convenient once a day dosage

Tranxene a good night's rest

Tranxene calm and alert throughout the day

Tranxene indicated for anxiolytic therapy

Tranxene keeps medication discreet

Tranxene encourages compliance to a set course of treatment

dipotassium clorazepate 15mg capsules



the tree lined cemetery on the outskirts. We arrived at the cemetery gates and the pallbearers gathered to discuss tactics. I immediately realised that out of the six of us I was, by about forty years, the youngest. It was a reunion of fairly distinguished octogenarians. I felt obliged to take the role of team leader. It was a difficult team to organise or give a pep talk to. One was deaf; I placed him rear left and another, a rather faded thin gentleman who had been in a prisoner of war camp with the Baron in the First World War, I placed rear right.

He hardly spoke but stared trance-like into the distance, lost somewhere between Ypres and the Somme. In mid positions I placed the Belgian Consul to Swaziland and a distant relative who was in mild cardiac failure. I took up the front left station. A retired estate agent who unfortunately had a marked limp from a broken hip was at the front right station. In retrospect I can see that my positioning may have been the cause for what happened later.

The coffin with its large occupant was slid from the hearse onto a metal trolley on wheels and we were to push or pull this depending on our position to the grave which was on the far side of the cemetery. We had to proceed to the middle of the cemetery and take a sharp right turn down another avenue where the other mourners were already gathered round the grave, about three hundred yards away. Standing in our positions we looked like a geriatric rowing team that had lost its oars.

I must admit we started off quite well down the hedge lined avenue. I even carelessly gazed at some of the tombstones as we passed by. I was appalled. They were all my patients. I was so occupied with reading the names on the stones that I hadn't realised that our port side team was obviously too strong for the lads on the starboard side. I think the limp on the front right also contributed as we gently ran into the privet hedge. After a rather flustered reversal we set off again and I now gave continual counter pressure to the left to stop the tendency to veer to the right.

There now must have been an imperceptible slope because slowly at first then with alarmingly rapidity we started to gain an inexorable momentum. The sheer weight of our charge was taking over. The turn was a short way off still

but I realised we had made a serious miscalculation. We were gaining speed far too fast. The trance at the back was holding on just to keep upright while the cardiac failure in front of him was beginning to hiss out his breath like a kettle. I had a vision of an unbelievable social disaster. The Baron's last journey was going to be through the air. We were faced with the right hand turn with an approach speed too great even for Emerson Fittipaldi.

On occasions like these, men of action can make split second decisions which save the day. Perhaps if we'd all leaned into the turn we could have skidded her round, but it was not to be. We overshot, collecting some jars of poppies as we went steaming by.

The day was saved by a sudden upward slope which slowed us to a gracious halt. We paused only for the adjustment of medals, gently reversed her and turned down into our final journey. This time we got it right and arrived at our destination in reasonable order.

There now came a very tricky bit. We had to slide the coffin off the trolley onto two slings over the grave which would lower it down to the bottom. We started to tip it when our man with the limp faltered. I felt the whole thing going. A picture flashed in front of my eyes of us all being buried alive like geriatric virgins to serve the Baron in his later life. I think we all reacted together and with a rallying effort we held on and the old man's journey gently came to a halt on the slings.

I surreptitiously glanced at my breathless crew. They might need my professional assistance later on but at least there was no more business for the undertaker. As we stood at the grave I was reminded of the story of a similar scene at the funeral of a great and elderly Hollywood comedian. Two ancient friends of the same persuasion found themselves next to each other. "How old are you, Charlie?" the one asked the other as they stared down into the grave, "I'm 89" he replied. The other fellow looked at him, "Hardly seems worth going home, does it?"

Please address your correspondence to:

*The Editor
SA Family Practice
PO Box 40447, Arcadia 0007*