

**JOHN LOGAN**

**THE  
SUCCESS**

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

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**John Logan**

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# Introduction

## “The Success” by John Logan

Resistance in the treatment situation refers to the ways, conscious and unconscious, in which patients obstruct the aims and process of therapy. Silence, discussing trivia, missing appointments, avoiding charged topics are but a few of its concrete expressions. Whatever styles patients use to protect themselves from painful self-awareness, resistance is self-defeating and a major obstacle to therapeutic progress unless worked with appropriately. The central focus of “The Success” is a particular style of resisting therapeutic involvement. Here, psychologizing and intellectualizing are used by an obsessional patient to avoid authentic feelings and direct contact with the therapist. In Logan’s story, the patient succeeds in his quest for failure.

# The Success

*John Logan*

I lived these journeys always with anticipation and with dread, letting my mind race for mooring: preparations, protections, occult cheers, hopes, plans, dialogues. I was afraid to be cast from the jaws of the elevator naked and alone and in a questionable form.

Already in the machine I thought rather desperately of the doctor *asvoyeur*, interested in the tabooed places of man, and of a critic like myself as a sort of scatologist, interested in (devoted to) man's effluvia—the invisible dross of his brain and breath cast onto the pages of books. This suggestion so disgusted me that if I were not at the moment rising into the heights toward the holy oracle I would have gone off to a bar. I thought of the one just to the left of the entrance to the building. Remembered I was broke anyway. But how should one protect himself from his own ideas? I was too old to run to mamma like a child afraid of the pictures he had drawn with terrible crayons.

As I crossed the small fourteenth floor court toward the doctor's suite I saw in the marble fountain (sculpted as a boy on a dolphin) a young Jonah on a young whale, and I thought that at that age it is almost as easy for the boy to carry the fish as it is somewhat later for the huge fish to drag the man out to sea. If only one could time things so that he could devour the fish before it got

him! Standing in the court before the fountain I knew I had stopped in order to delay my entrance into the doctor's office, but my mind seemed to fill with dolphin images and allusions like a school breaking and leaping in a sea. I was no longer young and had a wife and family to support, but I thought of myself now as a sad youth wafted by dolphins, given to crying with the figures in fountains, constitutionally confusing the devouring shark or whale with the gentle, riding dolphin—and the erotic fish with the Christian one. I wished that any one of those marine animals—or the monster of Tobias, or that of Hippolytus—would come clear and bear me away again.

Having at last crossed that long court I sat in the foyer with its hodgepodge of French provincial and modern worked-iron furniture, its foolish books, its view of a garment warehouse where grotesque and naked dummies gestured at the windows like dying women, and its stairway to The Presence—to The Hulk in the Corner that said hello without meaning it, while listening, whirring and watching and listening. The encounter with the doctor imminent as it was, I suddenly thought that the truth about myself was simple: I was a member of the species of Catholic Neurotics—a mediocre group, like most Catholic societies. But I was fairly distinguished myself as a drinker and as a narcissist, fascinated by my own nocturnal images. I was willing to have the doctor look over my shoulder at the pools of my dreams, but it was also necessary to protect oneself. At the moment my defense against the narrowing eyes of the physician, in the process now of recognizing

me, was my decision to relate my most recent dream and to keep quiet about my thoughts of the instant, the last of which was a kind of wondering why I always turned to the right instead of to the left as I lay down on the couch—was it because the doctor’s stairway had spiraled to the right? (Or was it left?) The doctor himself sat hidden behind my head.

## II

A moment of recollection and I was able to get started with the dream, diving into myself at the chosen angle: there were jewels, pearls and exquisitely designed ceramic boxes every detail of which I could remember, and shining large ornate trays which I thought of as Achilles’ shields I had myself designed. And there were lucent, glass vases with mythological legends etched on them in excruciating patterns of light on light—Orpheus and the Thracian women, Actaeon and Diana, and others I couldn’t remember. Jung’s archetypes maybe, I said smugly. The thought of the burrs or the sand on the glass, as I supposed they used, was painful and for some reason reminded me, I said, of a stone going through the ducts of a man’s guts cutting fine, colorless lines in which the secretive blood did not appear until sometime later.

As for pearls, I remembered that one of the secretaries at my publishers wore just such earrings, dew-drop pearls in a golden and baroque set. Or stag-tooth-shaped pearls, slightly curved; wasn’t a stag’s tooth slightly curved? I now realized for the first time, I said, that the stag’s teeth pearls



always seem to bite the lobes of the secretary's ear—and I always expected to see blood appear in a moment under the red ringlets of her hair or upon the gold of the jewels. Oedipus stabbed himself in the eyes with his mother's golden brooch, and a brooch is an instrument of sexual attractiveness. Also the piercing earring of the girl, I said, was like the branding iron stuck through the ears of whores and rogues and peasant slaves in *Hamlet*. I didn't mention the historical date of the edict alluded to in the play, because although it came to mind, I was afraid of sounding pedantic. Instead, I said I was now beginning to see the connection of the pearls dream with another I had had the same night. . .

It occurred to me to pause and see if the doctor had anything to say, but the doctor did not. Still I knew that even if the lips were quiet the slits of the doctor's eyes (which I could not see) changed and changed.

I felt shocked but went on: in this other dream, I said, one of my incisor teeth came out in my hand, having been loosened as I pulled many shreds of carrot from around its root. I thought to myself and did not say that I hated this part of the dream with its connotation of rabbits, silly innocuous and cuddly kinds of rats, and I admired my own virtue and courage as I proceeded. The connection between the two dreams, I said, is that the tooth is a dew-drop pearl—removing the tooth was removing the potency of a playful rabbit, whose nature it is to gnaw with his incisor teeth on carrots. Suddenly I admitted, with a welling up of feeling, my dislike of the rabbit figure in my

dreams, but there it was, I said and, regaining control, I added that probably it was something from the Collective Unconscious of Jung.

The doctor was silent.

And the pearl in the ear of the girl, I went on, was the organ of the playful rabbit placed there like poison in the ear of Hamlet's father. That didn't ring right I realized, and growing angry at the doctor's silence, tried again: or the word-swords of Hamlet in his mother's ear. That was better, I thought, and at the same time noticed with a certain delight how much "word" was like "sword" and commented on it. I certainly thought the doctor should speak here, but still there was no sound; only, I knew, the doctor showed his eyes like a pair of powerful teeth.

Or if the tooth is not put in the girl's ear to kill, I went on, then, to get back to the stag—since a stag is a stud isn't it, or a stallion—the stag tooth (which I said I preferred anyway to the rabbit tooth) placed in the girl's ear meant I wanted to do something else to her, maybe to fuck her. I was always uncomfortable saying sexual words in the doctor's presence and went ahead rapidly: I often watched the girl primping in her tiny mirror, I said, and once she had caught me out of the corner of her eyes, which had narrowed. Perhaps she wanted to turn me into a stag and set her dogs on me to rend me with their teeth! The story of Diana, I said, marveling at my gift of finding relations, was one of the legends on the vase in the dream. And the Thracian

women tore the poet's flesh, though not with the teeth of dogs. The dog's tooth, I now remembered, is also a violet: Laertes wanted the flesh of his sister to become violets. Suddenly I felt that I was, after all, trying to say something to myself; and I almost whispered, "The hyacinth is mournful as the mandrake is."

### III

Whatever it was I wanted to do to the girl, I said, after a pause (and in fact somewhat choked), kill her or kiss her, in any case I was being punished, because the tooth or organ being removed represented a form of castration and on one occasion I explicitly thought of castration when I happened to keep a dental appointment in a guilty frame of mind—mortal sin, I said to myself—and found that a tooth I thought was going to be filled actually had to be pulled. Now, the rabbit truth, or rabbit tooth, I corrected myself quickly (and blushing), when it was pulled in the dream had caused me much pain. I had never experienced pain in a dream before, I said, and had waked up moaning and taken an aspirin. I paused.

I thought I was doing extremely well and hoped for some encouragement or some indication of my grade, so to speak. But there was still no sound from the region at the back of my head. In this general area there came to my mind as I paused an indistinct figure, which I killed—a composite man with the ears of a great rabbit and great rabbit eyes, pink as wounded flesh. I

then began again without mentioning the bloody battle in which I had just been victor.

As for the pain, I said, I had been worried that the tooth that was pulled would cause me a lot of trouble afterwards, because I felt I deserved it. The dentist had quite a hard time getting the tooth out, hacked and pried it with his tools, and it wouldn't budge until—and I felt a flush as I related it—I had made an act of contrition; then it came out immediately. I said I felt that the guilt I had brought to the dentist's office—it had started with drinking, I confessed, but had already decided not to go into it unless the doctor insisted—was *assuaged*. I repeated the word, lengthening the vowels. As though the dentist had put me in a state of grace, I said. I had never had the nerve to ask the doctor whether he was Catholic, but thought to hell with it now. After I left the dentist's I said I had felt that I would never get drunk, etcetera, again, but instead would become a man. I felt, I said strongly, that I was *initiated* by the experience of the tooth pulling, having made—I couldn't help laughing—the rites of passage in a dentist's office. I had started to say "doctor's office," but checked myself in time. But, I admitted, to be made a man by a kind of castration *did* seem strange. Still there was circumcision, excision and such related practices I had read about. These were painful and shocking forms of initiation, like the rites where boys had to crawl across the blood-and-guts-spattered naked bodies of men in order to get to the throne of the king, or the rite—Australia was it?—where the mother squats over the youth and grunts

with mock labor before turning him over to the men. I said this seemed particularly brutal. As for castrated heroes, spread-eagling and crucifying were common in myths and religious stories and Jesuit martyrs like Southwell were drawn and quartered alive, a kind of extended spread-eagling, as well as being castrated: a horse pulled on each limb, four of them, like Thracian women, and sometimes their guts were rolled out on sticks. I myself, I said, once had a nightmare—four of them, I thought, one mare on each limb—in which I thought I was being fondled but instead was being stripped and my hands staked to the ground for, I supposed, castration, but had waked up in fright without finding out. I paused. The stakes went through the hands into the natural earth, I said, believing that the phrase “natural earth” as I uttered it had a rather mysterious sound. Raskolnikov bowed down to kiss the earth in expiation after his crime, but he didn’t really mean it until in the epilogue of the novel when he first convicted himself in a dream and then, his eyes freed at last of Tobias’s scales, was able to look at the beautiful countryside around him. The dactylic rhythms of this last remark I realized were the result of artifice, and I paused for a minute to temper my control over the fantasy, which I was afraid was beginning to sound too much like a poem, or like a critic’s gloss on a poem. In any case, I thought, the whole thing was getting away from me a little too uncomfortably. I made myself stop thinking, and a feeling of irritation at the doctor’s silence grew stronger as I paused over-long.

#### IV

The forty-five minutes were nearly gone, I figured. What was the doctor thinking? What were the doctor's eyes and teeth doing? Was the doctor perhaps reflecting that I was trying to treat myself, remembering the cigars in my breast pocket and the new hat on the chair, forced forms of manhood? And perhaps resenting my ability to analyze my own dreams? For which I paid the said doctor a rather penitential sum?—when I could. One time in one of these silences I had point blank asked the doctor what a certain dream of mine meant. And the doctor had answered, "I don't know what it means." This had seemed enigmatic at the time, the awful deceit of a god. Now, today, nothing at all had issued from the corner, nothing since the initial and ritualistic, "What's on your mind today," when, upon entering, I turned to the right (or was it the left, I thought) and spread-eagled myself on the couch. After waiting in the foyer, I thought, after passing the boy and his beast in the weeping court, after coming to the surface in the elevator. I began immediately to relate the elevator dream I had just remembered.

The elevator was new-fangled, I said, a complicated one, buttons, lights flashing, levers, numbers. I couldn't operate the machine right to get off it and just rode up and down by myself, until someone got in with me, someone who obviously—the way only things in dreams are obvious—knew how to run it and who was a kind of authority or official. The trouble was partly in the floor—there was a zero floor, a number which puzzled me among the others, I

said, and at the same time it seemed to be the number of the floor I was going to. I said I thought the companion was the doctor. (So it had once turned out in a dream about riding in a truck through dry brush country looking for the turn to the right to the pleasant land.) Now the helper suggested we try to find my floor, I continued, by starting at the top and stopping at each one in turn. So we tried that but seemed to slip right past it anyway. What a queer feeling, I said and immediately wished I had used another word. And we made the trip several times together, the lights flashing and the new machinery grinning, or rather glittering. And the dream ended then, I said, a bit breathless.

I went on to interpret that the floor I was trying to locate, the zero floor, was my unconscious—unknown, strange, cold in a way, like absolute zero. I realized the weakness of this association as I produced it but went on, rather courageously I thought: I said the dream meant I needed the doctor's help and that I couldn't go where I wanted without him. The doctor was trying to show me that one has to go floor by floor or step by step to make the unconscious conscious, to drain the Zuider Zee, in Freud's phrase, I said, or that ocean which Horatio had warned Hamlet not to go closer to for fear it would make him mad. Not angry, I said, mad. Suddenly my voice took on excitement and my arms began to flail like windmills beside the sea: of course, I said, Hamlet found himself by paying no heed to Jocasta and saying to hell with Calypso. He faced the coils of the sea, he left the ship that swallowed him, and he returned

to Denmark naked and alone to be king of the court in a graveyard for a dog's day, like a boy in a court yard who masters the dogfish and sees for the first time all his mothers in their opened graves. I found my throat constricting tightly and I choked with phlegm and tears. And I heard the doctor's voice echoing quietly inside its ancient skull:

"Zero is not unknown, is it? X is unknown." And I could not answer and did not know what the oracle meant, but the voice pulled at my guts like a pliers on a tooth tugged from its socket or like the rod on a cage in the sucking elevator shaft.

The voice continued now, "Zero is *no* place. There *is* no such floor. You are saying you don't want to go anywhere and you want me to help you fool yourself. You are satisfied to ride around in the elevator with me, trying the different buttons and the new machinery of the treatment and making the lights flash. You want me to let you believe you are going someplace. You seem to think something will happen to you to change you just by coming here and bringing me your dreams."

Eggs, I thought, but did not answer. Sucking eggs. My dreams are colored, fantastic eggs I bring to calm the sacred snake. And now it rolls its egg-shaped eyes and spits at. . .

"Your dreams are for you," the doctor was saying, "not for me." I found myself answering, "But I want to give you something. I want you to like me



and I know you don't."

"You want to bribe me," the doctor said, "so that you won't have to know yourself. Actually the only discomfort you are willing to suffer is the slightly unpleasant motion of a new elevator, which you would quickly come to enjoy while you waited. You used to wait for a religious miracle to happen to you. Now you are waiting for something scientific to take place. As for your thinking I don't like you—it is you who think you don't like yourself. You see me as you see yourself."

I felt the dragon's bites and knew it was only a matter of time. I was done for, but would fight. "No," I said. "No. You are always right but this time you are wrong. I *do* want to go someplace. I *am* going someplace. I know transportation dreams have to do with a man's desire for change. I have dreamt of buses, cars, trains, and now elevators. I don't know why I never dream of airplanes—I'd like to dream of them—they have so much grace and open air and light around them. They suggest ecstasy. I suppose I am afraid of ecstasy, of being blasted by it, or else I love it too much. Still an elevator is not just a bus or train. It goes up. It's a start toward an airplane, a connection between land and air transportation." My excitement rose as I saw a break in the battle I had lost—"And therefore," I said, "to dream of you helping me take the elevator means you will help me to ecstasy, to happiness, to life . . . the willingness to abandon myself to life as one unafraid of freedom and unashamed of it." (The superior person of Jung, I thought to myself, the one

with the necessary moral strength.) “I want you to know me,” I said, solidly ending my foray.

“You want me to know you,” the doctor said, “because you don’t want to know *yourself*, which should be the reason why you are here. You have a misconception of psychiatry.”

God, the teeth of the snake! I thought. “But I can prove I need you,” I said. “I didn’t get drunk (drinking is a means to ecstasy, it occurred to me) for a month and thought I was cured, and then just before this elevator dream I was stinking.” (Ecstatic and stinking, I thought. A blasted youth. Real Dionysian.)

The doctor said, “No, your getting drunk was not to prove to me that you needed me. It was to prove that you *don’t*. You can leave it alone or take it, you are telling me—go for a month without it if you want or go get drunk if you want. Coming to see me makes you think you’re doing something about yourself whereas it’s actually providing you with the license to do as you please. You don’t want to be responsible for your behavior.”

“Good god why do you always make me sound so despicable!” I said, heated and feeling my throat grow tight with sobs again.

“Well, you think I’m criticizing you,” the doctor said, “but I’m only explaining you to yourself. You think of me as a kind of priest suitable for adults, who can make you hang your head and who will provide you with

feelings of relief for your anxieties and sops for your conscience while you continue to put things off. You want to weep because you want to remain as you are. Children weep to get what they want.”

I heard and ignored the last two sentences—“Put off what?” I asked. “Put off what?” I knew the answer to this because it came up in every session and I found myself responding to my own question, “Put off the responsibility that would force me to earn a decent living for myself and my family by my talent. I have let my talents go to my head . . . I mean I have put my genius into my dreams and thoughts instead of into my work, where it might buy bread.” I rather liked the rounded way in which the sentence emerged.

The doctor said, “You do not act on the basis of what you have already learned about yourself. You continue to put off. And you do not want to learn more.”

Yes, I thought. Yes. I am one of the inferior. I will never unravel the secrets. “But I want to understand the mystery of the flesh,” I said sadly.

The snake hissed. “Where’s the mystery?” it asked. “You don’t want a psychiatrist at all. You just want somebody else in the elevator, a playfellow and a confidant. What you want is another rabbit.”

I had an image of two giant, friendly rabbits, and heard their teeth click together like the eyeglasses of nearsighted lovers. The dragon’s victory was now complete: using its words for teeth it had bridged the gap from its corner

lair, attacking from behind and above as was its habit, and it had bit clean through every mask. The hissing was terrible!

I realized slowly that the buzzer was ringing, signalling the arrival of the next patient. My thoughts shaped into lines I did not say:

Already the next neurotic  
Knocked at the gates,  
Crowded his several selves  
In the casement, bore his several  
Hats and heads at the half open door.

Emptied of energy, unable to rise yet, though I knew it was over, I struggled for air and for the shapes of words that could be let loose into space. "It's like a figure in Kafka," I said. "I have failed and I don't know why or at what."

The doctor rose from his corner and standing between the couch and the door said: "No, not Kafka. You are like Hamlet. You prefer that anyway, I believe: your visits here are occasions for eloquent and suffering soliloquies, filled with literary allusions, edited for an audience, and actually serving as delays. You have failed at what you do not want to do. Therefore you have succeeded. I believe you might just as well go on as you are, and we'll let the matter of another appointment go for now, at least until you find some way to pay your bill. Good-bye." The doctor touched the knob of the door.

I forgot to check whether the staircase spiraled to the left or the right.

My mind went instead to the fountain in the court outside, which would soon be dry for the winter, and there would be white stains on the concrete mould of the basin. I entered the elevator alone and it began its dive: a night journey under the sea, I thought, and said aloud, "But I shall not be born again. I wonder if there is such a thing as a cursed trout, doomed to be drowned."

Suddenly I remembered the doctor's reference to Hamlet, and I decided the doctor was being sarcastic. It had seemed until its mention of Kafka an illiterate snake, never speaking of books often as they came into my reveries. The elevator was docking. "*I have* succeeded," I said to myself, "shall at least avoid the dragon's eye, pale as ivory buttons that flash by the elevator door like the teeth of a whale."