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Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES
NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

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We hope the Medical profession won't take offense with this story — but when you get right down to it, maybe Wheatley received more than—

An Ounce Of Cure

by

Alan E. Nourse

THE doctor's office was shiny and modern. Behind the desk the doctor smiled down at James Wheatley through thick glasses.

Wheatley had been palpitating for five days straight at the prospect of coming here. Now he said, "Doctor, I've been having a pain in my toe."

"Indeed!" said the doctor. "Well, now! How long have you had this pain, my man?"

"About six months, I'd say. Just now and then, you know — it's never really been bad. Until last week. You see —"

"I see," said the doctor. "Getting worse all the time, you say."

Wheatley wiggled the painful toe reflectively. "Well — you might say that. You see, when I first—"

"How old did you say you were, Mr. Wheatley?"

"Fifty-five."

"Fifty-five!" The doctor leafed through the medical record on his desk, "But this is incredible. You haven't had a checkup in over twenty years!"

"I guess I haven't," said Wheatley, apologetically. "I'd been feeling pretty well until —"

"Feeling well!" The doctor stared at him. "But my dear fellow, no checkup since January 1955! We aren't in the middle ages now, you know. This is 1972."

"Well, of course —"

"Of course you may be *feeling* well enough—but that doesn't mean everything is just the way it should be. And now, you see, you're having pains in your toes!"

"One toe," said Wheatley. "The little one on the right. It seemed to me—"

"One toe *today*, perhaps," said the doctor heavily. "But *tomorrow*

—” He heaved a sigh. “How about your breathing lately? Been growing short of breath when you hurry upstairs?”

“Well — I *have* been bothered a little—”

“I thought so! Heart pound when you run for the subway? Feel tired all day? Pains in your calves when you walk fast?”

“Uh—yes, occasionally, I —” Wheatley looked worried and rubbed his toe on the chair leg.

“Fifty-five can be a dangerous age,” said the doctor gravely. “Do you have a cough? Heartburn after dinner? Prop up on pillows at night? Just as I thought! And no checkup for twenty years!” He sighed again.

“I suppose I should have seen to it,” Wheatley admitted. “But you see, it’s just that my toe—”

“My dear fellow! Your toe is *part* of you. It doesn’t just exist down there all by itself. If your *toe* hurts, there must be a *reason*.”

Wheatley looked more worried than ever. “There must? I thought — perhaps you could just give me a little something —”

“To stop the pain?” The doctor looked shocked. “Well, of course I could *do* that — but that’s not getting to the root of the trouble, is it? That’s just treating symptoms. Medieval quackery. Medicine has advanced tremendously since your last checkup, my friend. And even

treatment has its danger — did you know that more people died last year of *aspirin* poisoning than of *cyanide* poisoning?”

Wheatley wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. “I—dear me! I never realized —”

“We have to *think* about those things,” said the doctor. “Now, the problem here is to find out *why* you have the pain. It could be inflammatory. Maybe a tumor. Perhaps it could be, uh, functional . . . or maybe vascular!”

“Perhaps you could take my blood pressure, or something,” Wheatley offered.

“Well, of course I *could*. But that isn’t really my field, you know. It wouldn’t really *mean* anything, if I did it. But there’s nothing to worry about. We have a fine Hypertensive man at the Diagnostic Clinic.” The doctor checked the appointment book on his desk. “Now if we could see you there next Monday morning at nine—”

“**V**ERY interesting X-rays,” said the young doctor with the red hair. “*Very* interesting. See this shadow in the duodenal cap? See the prolonged emptying time? And I’ve never seen such a beautiful spastic pylorus!”

“This is my toe?” asked Wheatley, edging toward the doctors. It seemed he had been waiting for a very long time.

"Toe! Oh, no," said the red-headed doctor. "No, that's the Orthopedic Radiologist's job. I'm a Gastro-Intestinal man, myself. Upper. Dr. Schultz here is Lower." The red-headed doctor turned back to his consultation with Dr. Schultz. Mr. Wheatley rubbed his toe and waited.

Presently another doctor came by. He looked very grave as he sat down beside Wheatley. "Tell me, Mr. Wheatley — have you had an orthodiagram recently?"

"No—"

"An EKG?"

"No."

"Fluoroaortogram?"

"I—don't *think* so—"

The doctor looked even graver, and walked away, muttering to himself. In a few moments he came back with two more doctors. "—no question in *my* mind that it's cardiomegaly," he was saying, "but Haddonfield should know. He's the best Left Ventricle man in the city. Excellent paper in the AMA last July — he called it 'The Inadequacies of Modern Orthodiagrammatic Techniques in Demonstrating Minimal Left Ventricular Hypertrophy.' A brilliant study, simply brilliant! Now *this* patient —" He glanced toward Wheatley, and his voice dropped to a mumble.

Presently two of the men nodded, and one walked over to Wheatley,

cautiously, as though afraid he might suddenly vanish. "Now, there's nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. Wheatley," he said. "We're going to have you fixed up in just no time at all. Just a few more studies. Now, if you could see me in Valvular Clinic tomorrow afternoon at three—"

Wheatley nodded. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Serious? Oh, No! Dear me, you *mustn't* worry. Everything is going to be all right," the doctor said.

"Well— I— that is, my toe is still bothering me some—it's not nearly as bad as it *was* you understand, but I wondered if maybe you—"

Dawn broke on the doctor's face. "Give you something for it? Well now, we aren't Therapeutic men, you understand. Always best to let the expert handle the problem in his own field—" He paused, stroking his chin for a moment. "Tell you what we'll do. Dr. Epstein is one of the finest Therapeutic men in the city. He could take care of you in a jiffy. We'll see if we can't arrange an appointment with him after you've seen me tomorrow—"

MR. Wheatley was late to Mitral Valve Clinic the next day because he had gone to Aortic Valve Clinic by mistake, but finally he found the right waiting room. A

few hours later he was being thumped, photographed, and listened to. Substances were popped into his right arm, and withdrawn from his left arm as he marveled at the brilliance of modern medical techniques. Before they were finished he had been seen by both the Mitral men and the Aortic men, as well as the Great Arteries man and the Peripheral Capillary Bed man.

The Therapeutic man happened to be in Atlantic City at a convention, so Wheatley was sent to Functional Clinic instead. The Psychoneurotologist studied his sex life, while the Psychosociologist examined his social milieu. Then they conferred for a long time.

Three days later he was waiting in the hallway downstairs again.

"—no doubt in my mind that it's a—"

"But we can't ignore the endocrine implications, doctor—"

"You're perfectly right there, of course. Bittenbender at the University might be able to answer the question. No better Pituitary Os-

moreceptorologist in the city—"

"—a Tubular Function man should look at those kidneys first. He's fifty-five, you know—"

"—has anyone studied his filtration fraction?"

"—might be a peripheral vascular spasticity factor—"

After a while James Wheatley rose from the bench and quietly slipped past the doctors and out the door, limping slightly as he went—

THE room was small and dusky, with heavy Turkish drapes obscuring the dark hallway beyond. A suggestion of incense hung in the air.

In due course a gaunt, swarthy man in mustache and turban appeared through the curtains and bowed solemnly. "You come with a problem?" he asked, in a slight accent.

"As a matter of fact," said James Wheatley hesitantly, "I've been having a pain in my toe—"

THE END