

This Is All

By Barry Pain

It was a very hot summer day. The doctor's brougham had been waiting in the shade of the big white house. Then a servant brought out a message.

'Morning, Jameson'—he knew the coachman. 'Stopping to luncheon—you're to go round to the stables.'

'I guessed as much. What—is he worse this morning?'

'No, not a bit of it.' Then confidentially: 'Between ourselves, there's no more the matter with Mr. Wyatt nor there is with you nor me.'

'So I've always supposed.' If you can be surprised at anything you will not make a good coachman.' Well—see you again later.' And the wheels crunched slowly along the gravel.

In the meantime Mr. Alexander Wyatt paced the entire length of his great library. He was lean, tall, bent in the shoulders. His hair was gray and rather too long; his face was clean-shaven and ashy in colour. He looked worried—hunted.

Dr. Holling watched him narrowly. The doctor was no younger, but his hair was black. He was a giant—his chest was broad and deep, and he stood six foot three in his socks. His face was slightly florid, and his figure showed some tendency to-wards corpulence. But he looked like a man of the world, and not like a mere sensualist—there was that distinction. Under the heavy brows were the eyes of a man who knows what he wants to know and is quite sure that he knows it. He looked confident and clever.

'My dear fellow,' said the doctor, 'the long and short of it is that you ought to have come to me long ago. I don't mean in Harley Street—I mean here at home. Of course, I wouldn't see any ordinary patient here; but an old friend like you—yes, really you ought to have come to me.'

'I might have gone up to Harley Street. It's only an hour away. You go there and back most days in the year, and I might have taken the journey for once. I don't know why I didn't—I had thought of it—but you're always so busy.'

'Busy? Well, yes. But I don't let myself be so busy that I can't see a friend who's ill.'

Wyatt sighed heavily.

'And now you're spoiling one of your rare holidays for my sake. I say, old man, do take a fee—a proper fee—something in proportion.'

'Now, don't talk like that, if fees had had anything to do with it, could I have come to you and suggested that it might be as well if I just went over you? Besides, I wouldn't give up a day of my holiday for any fee. Why should I? I've already made more money I shall ever spend. I'm not stopping because I've got a patient. I'm stopping because an old friend is ill.'

'It's very good of you—very, very good.'

'Come back to the point. Why didn't you send for me before—you must have known that you were ill?'

'I had my suspicions. I—I didn't want to think about it.'

'And so you waited until, from mere casual observation, I also had suspicions, and told you so. I think you were foolish. Come now: what were you afraid of? I haven't hurt you.'

'No, no,' said Wyatt. 'Of course not. But I didn't want to know that I was going to die.' There was a longish pause, and Wyatt's eyes grew rounder and stared. 'O, my God! O, my God!' he muttered to himself.

‘Well?’ said Dr. Holling.

He hated these exhibitions, but he spoke sympathetically.

‘I can’t die!’ stammered Wyatt. ‘It—it—it mustn’t be.’

‘You will find ultimately that you can die,’ said Dr. Holling. ‘We all shall. If you will persist in working yourself up into this condition of shivering coward—of nervous panic, you will die rather sooner, or possibly very much sooner, than you otherwise would. Come, man, you may have another ten or a dozen years, if you’ll avoid every kind of stress. You’re wealthy, have no ambitions, have no hard work, are not passionately attached to anybody. It is highly unlikely that the stress will come upon you from the outside—take care that it does not come from yourself.’

‘You’re right, you’re right. I shall pull myself together,’ he said; but he still spoke excitedly. ‘I only gave way for the moment. Ten or a dozen years at the least; with absolute moderation, quiet living, self-restraint, and so on, who knows that it might not be a score years?’

The doctor looked at him curiously said nothing.

‘There, you see—I’m all right. I’ve faced the situation. And now tell me exactly what’s the matter with me.’

‘Heart,’ said the doctor laconically.

‘I know that,’ Wyatt said irritably. ‘I want to know the name of the disease, and if there’s any complication.’

‘Well, I shan’t tell you. You’d try to look yourself up in your old edition of Roberts’s “Theory and Practice of Medicine,” and you’d find something more or less like yourself, and it wouldn’t do you any good.’

‘Some doctors would have told me.’

‘Hang it! then, go and ask them,’ said Dr. Holling quite quietly. ‘Whomever else I meet in consultation, it’s quite certain I won’t meet my own patient.’

‘Of course not. I only mentioned it. I’m not silly enough to go to any other doctor— never dreamed of it. Of course, I know very well that you’re the first man on heart. I’m not so ignorant of medicine as you suppose.’

‘Ah!’ said the doctor cheerfully, ‘I wish you were twice as ignorant, or else knew a thousand times as much as you do.’

Luncheon was announced. The doctor rose smiling. Poor Wyatt did what he could during luncheon to shake off the heavy depression that weighed on him, but he did not make much of a host. He could only talk of his own illness, and speculate on what death really was. On these subjects Dr. Holling had little to say, but he spoke of the rising value of land in the neighbourhood; and Wyatt was a landlord. Wyatt heard with a wretchedly simulated cheerfulness his sad-eyed, sallow face. What would it profit him though he gained this whole world?

Wyatt had been in his day the brightest and best of companions; but when a man’s material heart within him has taken on autumnal tints the man’s spirits droop also. Both, the doctor knew, were symptomatic.

And he who knew this, and had the old Wyatt, was patient; but when he was being driven away from the great white house he became very sad.

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That afternoon Wyatt sat crouching in a big easy-chair in his library, alone. It was a hot day, but he had a shawl wrapped round his feet: latterly his feet had been always cold, as though already

they felt the chill of wet earth. There was a pile of books on the table beside him, and on the floor. He turned avidly and restlessly from one to the other. There were comforting books of religion; there were terrifying books of religion; there were works of metaphysics; there were blasphemous diatribes; there was science conscious of its limitations. Now he would take for company some drunken tinker jeering at the notion of a here-after, repelling by its brutal ignorance but appealing by its complete self-confidence. And now again he would hear the calm voice of science: 'There are beautiful stories, but I dare not tell you that they are true. In some places, where it has been possible to test them, I have tested and found they were not true. As to the rest, those stories seem more beautiful than probable. I still wait for verification or disproof.—not with folded hands, but working at other things.

He had always feared death, and now for many long days and nights he had busied himself in this futile search for something certain about it. He heard a hundred voices all crying differently, and knew not to which he should listen.

He used to make attempts, from time to time, to pull himself together; he made one now.

'What does all this concern me?' he said aloud. 'I'm not going to die. Holling said so. Holling gave me twenty years, with reasonable care, and he knows what he is talking about.' He pushed the books aside contemptuously. 'Pack of nonsense!' He picked up instead a catalogue that his wine merchant had sent him. There was some of a fairly recent vintage that he wished to put down. 'That's it,' he said, marking the catalogue with pencil, 'we'll say fifty dozen.' He rubbed his chilly hands together, and hummed a light tune.

At five his man Jackson brought in a glass of whisky-and-water, carefully measured. Wyatt had got into the habit of drinking a good deal of strong tea in the afternoon while he pottered over his collections—one philatelic, the other eighteenth-century autographs. The doctor had forbidden tea, and Wyatt, even when he was pulling himself together, obeyed the doctor.

Holling had forbidden late hours also. Wyatt had induced—actually induced—the habit of insomnia. Before the doctor's interference he would never go to bed before two or three in the morning. After one of his own delightful dinners, or if he had been dining out, he would still sit up. He professed that these hours were of incalculable value—that he could not live in society unless for a little time each day he lived absolutely alone. All the lights were put out except in the library; the rest of the house went to sleep. Wyatt smoked, read, thought about things. At intervals he sipped strong coffee. It was only when he found himself unable to keep awake that he lit his candle and went upstairs. Every night, or early morning, as his candle lit the long mirror on the landing, he saw himself reflected, and the reflection always came as a surprise. He never looked as he supposed that he looked: sometimes the reflection seemed almost unrecognisable.

'I can't sleep before three in the morning,' Wyatt had maintained to the doctor.

'Then it must be morphia,' said Holling.

He called that night with a hypodermic syringe, and that night Wyatt went up to bed at ten o'clock and slept at once.

'But I mustn't go on with morphia, of course,' said Wyatt knowingly.

'It won't be necessary,' said Holling. 'You see, after I've given it you for three nights, I shall have broken through your habit. Then you at once return to the normal state, and go to sleep at the ordinary time.'

The doctor reeled off this absolute nonsense with an air of the utmost gravity and conviction. He knew his patient. He had never given him any morphia at all—he had punctured the skin, but injected nothing. Wyatt's insomnia yielded completely to discreet and masterly humbug and the abolition of his after-dinner coffee.

Strong tea and late hours were quite given up now. Wyatt was positively anxious to give things up; in his mad terror of death he had grown to regard it as a monster to be appeased by sacrifice. He had a notion—vague but deeply rooted—that the more he gave up the longer he would live, he was almost disappointed that the doctor did not forbid stimulants.

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Jackson, Wyatt's servant, had been with him for twenty years. When Wyatt was alone it was Jackson himself who made the after-dinner coffee—for on this point Wyatt mistrusted women. Jackson was a creature of habit. For over a week he had diligently remembered that coffee was forbidden. To-night he forgot it; habit asserted itself, and twenty minutes after Wyatt had left the dining-room for the library, Jackson entered the library with the coffee. He was considerably startled at his reception.

Fits of deep depression sometimes alternate with fits of extreme irritation. Wyatt flew into a mad rage. He swore the wretched man was trying to kill him, ordered him out of the house, and abused him virulently, loudly, and at length. 'Go, go!' he shrieked finally.

Jackson conveyed the news to the kitchen that there was only one thing the matter with Mr. Wyatt—he was clean off his head, that was all.

As Jackson left the library Wyatt dropped into a chair, his face contorted, covered with sweat, bending forward, his hands tightly fixed against his chest. That awful angina pain! No, it had never been like that before. It must mean death. Ah, if he could only get to that bell! He tried to call. The words, 'Dr. Holling . . . at once,' came out in a whisper.

The pain ceased, almost suddenly. A strange calm came over him, and for the first time in many days he thought of other people. Dr. Holling? Of course he would not send for him. It would be too bad, at that time of night—altogether too bad. Besides, it was his own fault. He had given way to temper, and had been punished for it. Why, he might have died. Upon his word, it would have served him right if he *had* died. Poor Jackson! It was the first time in his life he had spoken to Jackson like that. Well, when he came to die Jackson was remembered in his will, and would forgive him. After all, why live so long, at such care, with such trouble? Nature calls—obey cheerfully.

And the calm became drowsiness, and the drowsiness became sleep all very quickly. It was a lovely sleep, with a consciousness of well-being permeating its faintly-sketched dreams.

Jackson looked in at ten o'clock, at a quarter-past, at twenty-five minutes past, and at half-past.

Then he sought Mrs. Palfrey, the housekeeper.

'He's still asleep,' said Jackson.

You're sure it's sleep?' said Mrs. Palfrey gloomily.

'Oh, I leave to-morrow, anyhow, whatever he says,' said Jackson. 'It's the responsibility I can't stand. It's wearing me. But come and see for yourself.'

They opened the library door cautiously and peered in.

'The top of his shirt-front's moving,' said Mrs. Palfrey in an undertone. 'He's asleep.'

'Don't he look awful? I 'on't wake him. I swear I 'on't wake him.'

'Better not. Put his candle on the table, by the lamp; cough, as if accidental, as you go out. Then if he wakes, so much the better. If not, we'll all go to bed, and you'll put the lights out, same as in the old days.'

Jackson shivered, and followed this advice carefully. The cough (as if accidental) was unavailing, and the lights were put out. Only in the library the lamplight fell on the gleaming

shirt-front, still moving. And on the landing the full-length mirror waited, its eyes closed in the darkness, but ready to wake as the lighted candle came slowly up the staircase, and to reflect in a moment the figure of the master of the house, dishevelled, late, on his way to bed.

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He was awake. The lamp had burned itself out; the dawn, the early midsummer dawn, was already advanced; its light came, tempered, yet sufficient, through the ugly Venetian blinds. From the garden and the country beyond came the shrill concert of innumerable birds. A heavy cart jolted and bumped to early work on some distant road. No, there was no need of the candle; he would go to bed by daylight, with that delightful sense of well-being, that firm conviction that there was good in worry or argument, still comforting him.

Ah! how often at this hour he trod the stairs, with a fantastic curiosity to see what he looked like in the tall mirror. By this time his head should have appeared in it coming close to the Japanese cabinet. There in the mirror gleamed the pale gold of the cabinet and there was the blue-and-white of the tall Oriental vase, and there were the masses of dark shadow beyond. Alexander Wyatt found all there but himself. Him only the mirror gave back no more.

Back! back to the library as in a panic. Something has happened!

And there in the library the spirit of Alexander Wyatt, that the mirror saw not, found in the easy-chair the huddled body, dressed in clothes that no longer moved to the breathing.

'I am dead,' said Alexander Wyatt, 'and this—this—this is all.'