

THE MAN WHO WAS A HOSPITAL

Jerome K. Jerome

It was my liver that was out of order. I knew it was my liver that was out of order, because I had just been reading patent liver-pill circular, in which were detailed the various symptoms by which a man could tell when his liver was out of order. I had them all.

It is a most extraordinary thing, but I never read a patent medicine advertisement without being impelled to the conclusion that I am suffering from the particular disease therein dealt with in its most virulent form. The diagnosis seems in every case to correspond exactly with all the sensations that I have ever felt.

I remember going to the British Museum one day to read up the treatment for some slight ailment of which I had a touch – hay fever, I fancy it was. I got down the book, and read all I came to read; and then, in an unthinking moment, I idly turned the leaves, and began to indolently study diseases, generally. I forget which was the first distemper I plunged into – some fearful, devastating scourge, I know and, before I had glanced half down the list of “premonitory symptoms,” it was borne in upon me that I had fairly got it.

I sat for a while frozen with horror; and then, in the listlessness of despair, I again turned over the pages. I came to typhoid fever – read the symptoms – discovered that I had typhoid fever, must have had it for months without knowing it – wondered what else I had got: turned up St. Vitus's Dance – found, as I expected, that I had that too, – began to get interested in my case, and determined to sift it to the bottom, and so started alphabetically – read up again and learnt that I was sickening for it, and that the acute stage would commence in about another fortnight. Bright's disease, I was relieved to find, I had only in a modified form and, so far as that was concerned, I might live for years. Cholera I had with severe complications; and diphtheria I seemed to have been born with. I plodded conscientiously through the twenty-six letters, and the only malady I could conclude, I had not got, was housemaid's knee.

I felt rather hurt about this at first; it seemed somehow to be a sort of slight. Why hadn't I got housemaid's knee? Why this invidious reservation? After a while, however, less grasping feeling prevailed, I reflected that I had every other known malady in the pharmacology, and I grew less selfish and determined to do without housemaid's knee. Gout, in its most malignant stage, it would appear, had seized me without my being aware of it: and zymosis I had evidently been suffering with from boyhood. There were no more diseases after zymosis, so I concluded there was nothing else the matter with me.

I sat and pondered. I thought what an interesting case it must be from a medical point of view, what an acquisition I should be to a class: Students would have no need to “walk the hospitals”, if they had me. I was a hospital in myself. All they need to do would be to walk

round me, and, after that, take their diploma.

Then I wondered how long I had to live. I tried to examine myself. I felt my pulse, I could not at first find any pulse at all. Then, all of sudden, it seemed to start off. I pulled out my watch and timed it. I made it a hundred and forty-seven to the minute. I tried to feel my heart. I could not feel my heart. It had stopped beating. I have since been induced to come to the opinion that it must have been there all the time, and must have been beating, but I cannot account for it. I patted myself all over my front, from what I call my waist up to my head, and I went a bit round each side, and a little way up the back. But I could not feel or hear anything I tried to look at my tongue. I stuck it out as far as ever it would go, and I shut one eye and tried to examine it with the other. I could only see the tip, and the only thing that I could gain from that was to feel more certain than before that I had scarlet fever.

I had walked into that reading-room a happy, healthy man. I crawled out a decrepit wreck.

I went to my medical man. He is an old chum of mine, and feels my pulse, and looks at my tongue, and talks about the weather, all for nothing, when I fancy I'm ill; so I thought I would do him a good turn by going to him now. "What a doctor wants", I said, "is practice. He shall have me. He will get more practice out of me than out of seventeen hundred of your ordinary, commonplace patients, with only one or two diseases each." So I went straight up and saw him, and he said:

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

I said:

"I will not take up your time, dear boy, with telling you what is the matter with me. Life is brief, and you might pass away before I had finished. But I will tell you what is not the matter with me. I have not got housemaid's knee. Why I have not got housemaid's knee, I cannot tell you; but the fact remains that I have not got it. Everything else, however, I have got."

And I told him how I came to discover it all.

Then he opened me and looked down me, and clutched hold of my wrist, and then he hit me over the chest when I wasn't expecting it – a cowardly thing to do, I call it – and immediately afterwards butted me with the side of his head. After that, he sat down and wrote out a prescription, and folded it up and gave it to me, and I put it in my pocket and went out.

I did not open it. I took it to the nearest chemist's and handed it in. The man read it, and then handed it back.

He said he didn't keep it.

I said:

"You are a chemist?"

He said:

"I am a chemist. If I were a co-operative stores and family hotel combined, I might be able to oblige you. Being only a chemist hampers me."

I read the prescription. It ran:

"1 lb. beefsteak, every 6 hours.

Ten-mile walk every morning,

Bed at 11 sharp every night.

And don't stuff your head with things

You don't understand."

I followed the directions, with the happy result – speaking for myself – that my life was preserved and is still going on.

NOTES

"The man who was a Hospital" is a fine example of humorous exaggeration. The author wishes the reader to have a laugh at his expense. But he was not wholly wrong in concluding that he was suffering from almost all diseases. Quite a large number of diseases have common symptoms and if you read a book on diseases and their symptoms you will find that you have many of those symptoms. Behind all this fantastic exaggeration is the sound advice – don't stuff your head with things you don't understand.

Words Explained:

symptom :	condition in body which is sign of disease
impelled :	driven forward
virulent :	poisonous
ailment :	disease
indolently :	lazily
distemper :	a contagious disease
premonitory	
symptoms :	forewarning symptoms
borne .. me :	I realized
St. Vitus's Dance :	name of a disease
sift ... bottom :	to know thoroughly
plod :	go on working, walking, slowly but without stopping
slight :	insult
invidious reservation :	a reservation that gives offence

grasping :	selfish
pharmacology :	theory of the use and sale of medical drugs
malignant :	serious, violent
acquisition :	something worth acquiring, a rare thing to have
crawled ... wreck :	walked out slowly like an old and feeble person who has broken down
butted :	gave blow, pushed with head
hamper :	obstruct
scourge :	to afflict

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. How did Jerome K. Jerome come to suspect that his liver was out of order? What were the diseases he thought he was suffering from on reading a book on the treatment of diseases?
2. What was the disease he discovered he didn't have?
3. Was he pleased to find he didn't have it?
4. What was his first reaction?
5. Why should he be an acquisition to the medical class?
6. Describe his visit to the medical man.
7. He thought he was doing the doctor good turn by going to him. Why?
8. What was the prescription given to him by the doctor?
9. Describe his visit to the chemist.
10. What is the significance of the doctor's advice: don't stuff your head with things you don't understand?
