

CLASSICS TO GO

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ALAN EDWARD NOURSE

Amazing Stories

Volume 60

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An Ounce of Cure

The doctor's office was shiny and modern. Behind the desk the doctor smiled down at James Wheatley through thick glasses. "Now, then! What seems to be the trouble?"

Wheatley had been palpitating for five days straight at the prospect of coming here. "I know it's silly," he said. "But 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 now, 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 almost ten years!"

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

"*Feeling* well!" The doctor stared in horror. "But my dear fellow, no checkup since January 1963! We aren't in the Middle Ages, 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.

"You know that fifty-five is 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 ten 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 at the root of

the trouble, is it? That's just treating symptoms. Medieval quackery. Medicine has advanced a long way since your last checkup, my friend. And even treatment has its dangers. Did you know that more people died last year of *aspirin* poisoning than of *cyanide* poisoning?"

Wheatley wiped 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 in your toe. 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—"

"Very 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 beautiful pylorospasm!"

"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."

"Fluorosaortogram?"

"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 Journal last July: 'The Inadequacies of Modern Orthodiagramatic 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 worried 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 Valve 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, 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 and the Rheumatologist was on vacation, so Wheatley was sent to Functional Clinic instead. "Always have to rule out these things," the doctors agreed. "Wouldn't do much good to give you medicine if your trouble isn't organic, now, would it?" The Psychoneurotist 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. Heads met in a huddle; words and phrases slipped out from time to time as the discussion grew heated.

"—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 Osmoreceptorologist 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 slipped 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, yes," James Wheatley said hesitantly. "You see, I've been having a pain in my right little toe...."

Meeting of the Board

It was going to be a bad day. As he pushed his way nervously through the crowds toward the Exit Strip, Walter Towne turned the dismal prospect over and over in his mind. The potential gloominess of this particular day had descended upon him the instant the morning buzzer had gone off, making it even more tempting than usual just to roll over and forget about it all. Twenty minutes later, the water-douse came to drag him, drenched and gurgling, back to the cruel cold world. He had wolfed down his morning Koffee-Kup with one eye on the clock and one eye on his growing sense of impending crisis. And now, to make things just a trifle worse, he was going to be late again.

He struggled doggedly across the rumbling Exit strip toward the plant entrance. After all, he told himself, why should he be so upset? He was Vice President-in-Charge-of-Production of the Robling Titanium Corporation. What could they do to him, really? He had rehearsed his part many times, squaring his thin shoulders, looking the union boss straight in the eye and saying, "Now, see here, Torkleson—" But he knew, when the showdown came, that he wouldn't say any such thing. And this was the morning that the showdown would come.

Oh, not because of the lateness. Of course Bailey, the shop steward, would take his usual delight in bringing that up. But this seemed hardly worthy of concern this morning. The reports waiting on his desk were what worried him. The sales reports. The promotion-draw reports. The royalty reports. The anticipated dividend reports. Walter shook his head wearily. The shop steward was a goad, annoying,

perhaps even infuriating, but tolerable. Torkleson was a different matter.

He pulled his worn overcoat down over frayed shirt sleeves, and tried vainly to straighten the celluloid collar that kept scooting his tie up under his ear. Once off the moving strip, he started up the Robling corridor toward the plant gate. Perhaps he would be fortunate. Maybe the reports would be late. Maybe his secretary's two neurones would fail to synapse this morning, and she'd lose them altogether. And, as long as he was dreaming, maybe Bailey would break his neck on the way to work. He walked quickly past the workers' lounge, glancing in at the groups of men, arguing politics and checking the stock market reports before they changed from their neat gray business suits to their welding dungarees. Running up the stairs to the administrative wing, he paused outside the door to punch the time clock. 8:04. Damn. If only Bailey could be sick—

Bailey was not sick. The administrative offices were humming with frantic activity as Walter glanced down the rows of cubbyholes. In the middle of it all sat Bailey, in his black-and-yellow checkered tattersall, smoking a large cigar. His feet were planted on his desk top, but he hadn't started on his morning Western yet. He was busy glaring, first at the clock, then at Walter.

"Late again, I see," the shop steward growled.

Walter gulped. "Yes, sir. Just four minutes, this time, sir. You know those crowded strips—"

"So it's just four minutes now, eh?" Bailey's feet came down with a crash. "After last month's fine production record, you think four minutes doesn't matter, eh? Think just because you're a vice president it's all right to mosey in here whenever you feel like it." He glowered. "Well, this is

three times this month you've been late, Towne. That's a demerit for each time, and you know what that means."

"You wouldn't count four minutes as a whole demerit!"

Bailey grinned. "Wouldn't I, now! You just add up your pay envelope on Friday. Ten cents an hour off for each demerit."

Walter sighed and shuffled back to his desk. Oh, well. It could have been worse. They might have fired him like poor Cartwright last month. He'd just have to listen to that morning buzzer.

The reports were on his desk. He picked them up warily. Maybe they wouldn't be so bad. He'd had more freedom this last month than before, maybe there'd been a policy change. Maybe Torkleson was gaining confidence in him. Maybe—

The reports were worse than he had ever dreamed.

"Towne!"

Walter jumped a foot. Bailey was putting down the visiphone receiver. His grin spread unpleasantly from ear to ear. "What have you been doing lately? Sabotaging the production line?"

"What's the trouble now?"

Bailey jerked a thumb significantly at the ceiling. "The boss wants to see you. And you'd better have the right answers, too. The boss seems to have a lot of questions."

Walter rose slowly from his seat. This was it, then. Torkleson had already seen the reports. He started for the door, his knees shaking.

It hadn't always been like this, he reflected miserably. Time was when things had been very different. It had meant something to be vice president of a huge industrial firm like Robling Titanium. A man could have had a fine house of his own, and a 'copter-car, and belong to the Country Club; maybe even have a cottage on a lake somewhere.

Walter could almost remember those days with Robling, before the switchover, before that black day when the exchange of ten little shares of stock had thrown the Robling Titanium Corporation into the hands of strange and unnatural owners.

The door was of heavy stained oak, with bold letters edged in gold:

TITANIUM WORKERS

OF AMERICA

Amalgamated Locals

Daniel P. Torkleson, Secretary

The secretary flipped down the desk switch and eyed Walter with pity. "Mr. Torkleson will see you."

Walter pushed through the door into the long, handsome office. For an instant he felt a pang of nostalgia—the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across the long buildings of the Robling plant, the pine paneling, the broad expanse of desk—

"Well? Don't just stand there. Shut the door and come over here." The man behind the desk hoisted his three hundred well-dressed pounds and glared at Walter from under flagrant eyebrows. Torkleson's whole body quivered as he slammed a sheaf of papers down on the desk. "Just what do you think you're doing with this company, Towne?"

Walter swallowed. "I'm production manager of the corporation."

"And just what does the production manager do all day?"

Walter reddened. "He organizes the work of the plant, establishes production lines, works with Promotion and Sales, integrates Research and Development, operates the planning machines."

"And you think you do a pretty good job of it, eh? Even asked for a raise last year!" Torkleson's voice was dangerous.

Walter spread his hands. "I do my best. I've been doing it for thirty years. I should know what I'm doing."

"Then how do you explain these reports?" Torkleson threw the heap of papers into Walter's arms, and paced up and down behind the desk. "Look at them! Sales at rock bottom. Receipts impossible. Big orders canceled. The worst reports in seven years, and you say you know your job!"

"I've been doing everything I could," Walter snapped. "Of course the reports are bad, they couldn't help but be. We haven't met a production schedule in over two years. No plant can keep up production the way the men are working."

Torkleson's face darkened. He leaned forward slowly. "So it's the men now, is it? Go ahead. Tell me what's wrong with the men."

"Nothing's wrong with the men—if they'd only work. But they come in when they please, and leave when they please, and spend half their time changing and the other half on Koffee-Kup. No company could survive this. But that's only half of it—" Walter searched through the reports frantically. "This International Jet Transport account—they dropped us because we haven't had a new engine in six