

The cure

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THE CURE

by Orlando Gibbons

Dr. Palmer had not come. Hank Mercer twisted around in his high hospital bed as much as the twenty-four pound weights attached to his feet would allow. His eyes searched the wrist watch—5:30 p.m. If by 5:15 Dr. Palmer had not paid his visit to room 410 on the fourth floor of the «Harter Hospital For Surgery», he wouldn't show up at all. Hank closed his eyes. He had been «in traction» as Big Nurse Halfter called it, for five weeks. Five endless weeks, he had to lie still, the iron weights strapped to his ankles, a corset squeezing his midriff, sixteen hours a day. Only at night did Dr. Palmer allow the torture to be removed. True enough, as long as he was lying absolutely immobile, the pain in the back subsided. But the very moment Curtis, Ramon or another male nurse took off the weights, after a brief moment of bliss, the pain shot through the spine again, into the right leg, down the calf into the heel. And if those darkies weren't careful, they would bruise the ankles and skin to which old leather straps were attached... 5:45. Why should Dr. Palmer forget him? Hank shifted his left foot—he could drag it two or three inches—and decided to ask Curtis when he would bring the dinner, or what passed for dinner at Harter Hospital...

Hank glanced out of the window: the trees in Lenox Park were shedding their leaves; the decrepit rocking chair on the tiny verandah moved back and forth in the wind like a ghost; and as the dusk fell over the neighboring Harlem slum houses, over the pond, over the whole desolate, neglected landscape, Hank started the same old duel within himself.

The duel involved one part of Hank, so to speak his Louisiana self, and the colored people who worked, served but mainly ruled at Harter. All through his twenty-seven years, Hank had shied away from any close contact with negroes. Of course, he had had a colored nurse, enormous, motherly Catherine who had nourished and bullied him. In his father's office there had been negroes, cleaning, sweeping, doing odd menial jobs. But they counted as much as the office furniture or the typewriters. In the cotton fields Hank had watched the laborers, stripped to the waist, their ebony backs glittering with sweat. At Padre College, there had been one negro student, shy, strong Raoul Dashiell, who won all the prizes in athletics and whom Hank, in secret fascination, used to watch from his window: that lithe, lean body with the rippling muscles jumped with the grace of a ballet dancer. But when Raoul once had ventured a timid «hello», Hank had run off. He had always shied away from «them», just as he had refused to face the truth about himself, his dreams, his desires—until, that is, he moved to New York and started working for Hammer & Croy, Advertising and Layout.

After five weeks there, Larry Cox, one of his co-workers, had invited Hank to a party—boys only. After five more weeks, Larry had invited Hank to stay over night: and then Hank finally faced up to the truth. He couldn't fight it any longer, he had secretly waited for the seduction, and though Larry had lost interest in Hank as rapidly as Hank in him, they remained good companions. With Larry as a guide, Hank had started the Grand Tour of New York's giddy, hectic sad underground world. Larry, extrovert, bubbling, aggressive, rarely went home alone. He changed partners as easily as he changed shirts. One

week, it would be a delicate Chinese staying at the huge place on Charles Street, the next a German immigrant who baked cakes, and sometimes a strapping, colored student from N.Y.U. whom Larry had trouble shaking off: those dark boys became devoted too easily. Hank, however, remained adamant. He avoided all contact with negroes. He had observed the black boys in the bars, some enormous like bears, others slim and with the look of haunted deer, and, occasionally, a group of freaks, the teen-age queens, their hair dyed the color of egg yoke... Hank would move away as far as possible, and he would leave Larry's carefree stag parties if a negro appeared, even if he were, like so many, damned handsome...

«Something to eat, Mr. Mercer?», a soft voice said. Curtis put the dinner on the contraption over the bed, his movement as fluid as those of a cat. He wore a freshly laundered uniform, and the starched white made his face even browner. His eyes, amazingly enough, were green-blue, and he wore his thick hair so short that no curl ever showed. As the café-au-lait hands darted over the tray like agile birds, Hank watched the face closely: the straight nose, the small ears, the fine-pored, flawless skin showing no hair whatsoever. Only the mouth was large, the lips «gave away the negro», as they called it at home. A faint, sweet perfume reached Hank, like a greeting, over the all-pervading odor of ammonia that ruled Harter Hospital.

«Dr. Palmer didn't show up?» Curtis, after a quick glance at the door settled on one of the ugly high chairs which some benevolent woman must have donated to the hospital in 1910. Hank shook his head. Broth... chicken... mashed potatoes... His appetite faded; it left him like a guest who gets tired visiting. Curtis hadn't taken his eyes off Hank's face. Now, he quickly slipped around the foot of the bed. In a few seconds, the cumbersome traction machinery slipped to the floor. Hank loosed the corset and didn't protest when Curtis pushed the tray closer. No one could eat with the iron weights on but Hank knew that Curtis was taking a risk: if Big Nurse saw it, if Mrs. Halfter caught him, he would be punished. One-eyed, middle-aged Mrs. Halfter did not rule: she terrorized the fourth floor and her hatred of her colored and Puerto-Rican help made Hank uneasy—he didn't want to share even his aversions with her. Mrs. Halfter, born in a Mississippi slum, called him «my Southern cousin». She fawned on the physicians and mistreated the nurses. She never paid any attention to her charges' comfort; often the fourth floor remained unswept, and those patients whom she despised as either weak or poor, received their food cold, too early or too late. She would have been happy supervising a Marine Penal camp, and if she caught a nurse talking too long to a patient, she flew into one of her famous tantrums. Dr. Palmer, however, to her was supreme. Yet her ravings about his miracle operations only strengthened a nagging fear in Hank that Dr. Palmer would operate anyone, if the Group Insurance Plan paid sufficiently, and that he didn't care what happened to his patients as long as his surgical factory functioned profitably...

The beef broth, surprisingly, was excellent. While tasting it, Hank suddenly realized that Curtis had smuggled the broth in. It came from Mrs. Schnitzer in 411, the charming, elderly Viennese woman whose family brought home-cooked dinners in, day after day. Hank wanted to thank Curtis, but Curtis was getting up, darted toward the door, looked out and hurried back. «She is eating», he said. «The Monster is devouring her bloody steak.» His voice still betrayed the gentle melody of the West Indian islands. He smiled and took away the cup

Hank had set down. As he came close, Hank suddenly experienced an unexpected warmth. An urge welled up in him to stroke that smooth skin, to touch the high cheekbones. Deep down, something began to move, something Hank had thought anesthetized by weeks of misery, of insomnia and morphine.

Hank blushed. Don't ever touch brown skin, he had sworn to himself. Negroes are animals, potent and greedy, so much more expert at love-making than the timid whites whom Puritanism kept in an emotional prison. And now, in this disarranged hospital bed, helpless and dirty as he was, with a beard grown five weeks, here, of all places he wanted that thin, strong brown hand to touch him. Hank turned away, embarrassed and filled with a new longing. All at once, he heard Curtis speak with unprecedented urgency.

«Listen, Mr. Mercer. I haven't much time. She'll be back any minute. Perhaps you don't like me because you are from New Orleans and Southerners hate us even worse. But you must know something . . .»

He rushed around, put the iron weights back on. Then he came quite close, his green-blue eyes glittering, as his hand, long and bony, came to Hank's shoulder and gripped it hard.

«I don't know why I do this. It can cost my job. But I like you, beard and all. Don't let Palmer operate on you. Listen: I have seen his patients afterwards. He messes up the disc cases. Always. Yes, you have a slipped disc. They didn't tell you. But I have seen your chart. When she retires to the drug room, I can sneak up on her records. They want to operate you next week. Get out of here. Call your friends to come for you in the morning. Transfer to the Medical Center on 116th. Dr. Edward Brill—that's your man. Best disc surgeon in town. You can get out, yes, it is your right. Don't let them brainwash you . . .» Curtis stopped. The hand that had been stroking Hank's shoulder rushed off, the tray was taken away and, in a wink, Curtis vanished just before Big Nurse entered majestically, her one good eye fixed in a marvelously false smile on Hank. «And how are we doing tonight, Mr. Mercer, my Southern cousin from Louisiana . . .»

By midnight, Hank had made up his mind. It hadn't been easy. His body remembered Curtis, and the urge for love and affection, kept dead for so long, would not go away. Though Hank knew that something within had crumbled, crushed, broken and shattered, right now, another part of his mind was able to reason calmly: Dr. Palmer loathed him. It was even clear, why. Those first questions about girls, marriage and sex . . . No, it was obvious. And no surgeon should operate someone he disliked. Mrs. Schnitzer, too, couldn't abide Palmer. No, Hank had to leave before it was too late.

He dialed Larry again. Finally, an answer. Obviously, Larry was just settling down with someone for a bit of fun, but Larry was a true friend: he would be up at Harter, he would arrange everything.

«Listen, Hank, you can release yourself,» Larry kept repeating. «Don't weaken. Some nurse will sign you out. I'll call the Medical Center early. Dr. Brill—I wrote it down. I'll be with you by ten. With lots of money and a taxi waiting. Don't worry, kid. I'm glad you're getting out. In my non-medical opinion, Harter should have been burned down twenty years ago.»

Around two a.m., Hank was aroused from an uneasy slumber. Curtis closed the door and started putting things into Hank's worn bag. When he had finished, he sat on the bed and took Hank's hand. Hank wanted to withdraw—he was

sweaty, ugly, unshaven and he mustn't let this happen—but he yielded to the irresistible touch.

«Ramon will be here early. I'm off in the morning. It's Thursday, Mrs. Freedman's day. She is the best of the head nurses. Your friend Larry just called me. He'll be here. Ramon knows the score. Don't let them browbeat you . . .»

Suddenly, Hank heard himself talk in a hoarse whisper that wasn't his voice. «How can I thank you, Curtis . . .» One hand groped for the night table, for the wallet . . . «Here, for the time being . . .»

«Put it away. Don't make me angry . . . Hank.» Curtis pushed the wallet aside. «One day, when this nightmare is forgotten, have a drink with me . . . if you can stand to have me around when I'm your nurse no longer.»

Hank just nodded. No word would come. Again, the faintly spicy scent came close, a mouth, gentle and soft like velvet, touched his lips, just for a second, in a kiss that was brotherly and promising and so swift Hank wasn't sure it ever happened.

«Take this pill in the morning,» the voice said. And then he was alone.

The next morning rushed by so quickly, Hank couldn't remember it afterwards. Larry, as bright and unconcerned as ever, swept aside all resistance. Dr. Palmer shouted, Mrs. Freedman tried to mediate, and Ramon, grinning like a little monkey, carried the bag to the elevator. As Hank limped away on Larry's arm, Mrs. Schnitzer's voice came after him, Viennese and quite clearly: «Viel Glück. Es wird alles besser werden dort . . .»

At Medical Center he didn't have to wait. Dr. Brill, quiet, tall, gray around the temples, took him in right away. Together with two assistants he worked on Hank systematically. However, they seemed to agree on a diagnosis in a very short while. The disc had to be operated, immediately. Before even limping to his room (No 82 on the Neurosurgical floor), Hank signed the papers that would enable them to give him the inevitable myelogram, the painful, delicate spinal X ray which Dr. Palmer had refused to apply. Oddly enough, it didn't turn out to be so painful. When, a few hours later, Dr. Brill showed him the plates, Hank himself could make out the splinters. His disc had broken into more than fifteen pieces. If Hank consented, Dr. Brill would operate the next day. Hank consented without a quiver. He felt as much pain as before but, for the first time since all this had befallen him, he was filled with a quiet confidence. Not only because No. 82 was as clean as 410 had been dirty; not only because the nurses at Medical Center were available, efficient and not afraid of any Big Nurse spreading terror. No, Hank trusted Dr. Brill who, by the way, had not asked a single personal question, and he trusted young Madeline, his assistant from Switzerland, who radiated confidence without being obnoxious.

Right now, she was helping him to sit up. She wiped clean a spot on his arm for the injection. Tomorrow, he'd be on the operating table at 8:30. Was he afraid? No—Hank found no fear within him. When Madeline explained he would need 24-hour-service for the next three days, Hank just nodded. He even smiled at Dr. Brill who dropped in to wish him good luck and, in plain words, explained the technical angle.

«You don't seem to be scared,» Dr. Brill remarked as he shook hands to leave. He possessed the most efficient hands Hank had ever seen and they reminded him of those of a tennis player he had once watched.

«No, I trust you, the hospital, everything.» Hank stroked his now smooth cheeks—they allowed him to shave and bathe the moment he entered Room 82. Harter had not permitted either . . .

«Your day nurse will be Mrs. Muller,» Dr. Brill remarked before closing the door. By that time, Hank was already drowsy. «You'll be helpless for three days. Then things will improve.»

The wave of sleep was blissful. Dark and powerful, it engulfed Hank like an ocean. Yet one thing was clear, and it rose like a huge tower above the waves of sleep: Curtis, the negro, the member of the one race Hank had always feared and loathed, Curtis had saved his life. The old Hank, the Louisiana cousin, was luckier than he deserved. Now that the ruins of his former self were around him, Hank was dimly aware that he had hated because he was afraid he might surrender to what was deeply secreted, the fatal magnetism of the forbidden . . . Again, the waves roared up and Hank surrendered to oblivion.

He woke up to find a wrinkled, motherly face bent over him. And, how strange, the first thing his senses noticed after the operation, was the smell of talcum powder Mrs. Muller used. Hank's back was heavily bandaged, and there was something like a knife stabbing at his spine, and the glucose was dripping through a tube slowly into his left arm. Mrs. Muller never left until the night nurse arrived who, to Hank, seemed to be her twin. Two days passed without Hank's being aware of time. A few cards were brought in. Larry and the other boys at Hammer and Croy wished him well on laboriously sarcastic cards. One card was unsigned. It was entirely black, leaving out only a small white square with a printed: LUCK.

It was the morning of the fourth day when Dr. Brill ripped off the first layers of the bandage. In the afternoon, he ripped off the rest. The scar looked good. The same afternoon, Mrs. Muller left, promising to visit him at home when he had recovered. On the evening of the fourth day, Dr. Brill stopped feeding him the heavy, numbing drug. Sure enough, the pain attacked right away. But it was a different pain. It was a promising pain, and Hank could think again, think and take stock. He had to start from the bottom. Not at a new job—Larry assured him that the bosses and the crew at Hammer & Croy wanted him back, soon. He even would return to the same small apartment on Bank Street, but he had to clear away the broken walls, the crumbled fundamentals of his deepest prejudices. He had to admit, for the second time in New York, that he had lied to himself. His secret self did not loathe those of a darker color. Something deep inside wanted their affection, their tenderness, their warmth. As Hank lay there, letting the past months and weeks pass by his mind, he was worried. He had to admit to many errors, and he could never make good all the rejections he had given those who had approached him with an open heart. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he seemed unchanged: a bit thinner, his blond-brown hair too long, the narrow face even narrower, and he had probably lost 20 pounds. He was really too skinny. Next to Curtis, he would look positively . . . It was now, at the end of the fourth day after the operation that Hank Mercer admitted to the stern court sitting in judgement within him, that he longed for Curtis, that he desperately wanted to do something for him . . . Hank sighed and decided he would take Curtis to the best restaurant he knew as soon as . . . At this, sleep overcame him again.

It was during the night from the fourth to the fifth day that the door to Room 82 on the Neurosurgical ward at Medical Center opened slowly. Hank

awoke only with difficulty. As he blinked his eyes, there stood Curtis, again in a starched, immaculately white uniform. On the shoulder it read «Med. Center. Extra. Night».

«Don't sit up, for heaven's sake,» Curtis said. His tone was light, almost bantering, and Hank was grateful. He could bear no pity now. «How do you feel, Hank?»

Hank tried to answer the usual but the usual wouldn't put in an appearance. «I feel alive now . . .», he finally brought out. «Newly built. With a lot of rubble still to be cleared away. But how come you are here, in uniform? Not that I'm not happy to see you.»

Curtis grinned—the first free grin Hank had seen. «I work here one night a week. It's illegal but I don't care. I am going to transfer from Lenox, anyhow. I don't like to be where I'm not wanted.»

Tentatively, Hank stretched out a hand. It hurt in the lower vertebrae but he had to do it. Slowly, Curtis took the hand and squeezed it between his two bony, thin hands which were not unlike those of Dr. Bill. Only, they had a prettier color. «You saved my life, Curtis,» Hank started. «Without you, I . . .»

«Hush, child, I'm going to send you the bill, you know that. When will you show me your place and give me that promised drink?»

«When I'm out and back to my old life. No, that's wrong. My old life died on the operating table here. It really started dying when you spoke to me at Harter, Curtis. You'll have to help me rebuild those ruins . . .»

Curtis got up. «I have no building permit, Hank, but I'll help you. A nurse can handle all emergencies. We've been taught that in Nursing School. And you, Hank Mercer, have been the toughest and nicest emergency I've ever known. You'll be out here next Friday, by the way. I'll take you home if your Larry . . .»

«Larry is not my Larry, and he has nothing to do with anything,» Hank said. All of a sudden, his voice sounded stronger than he had heard it for a long while. «You'll spend that weekend at Bank Street. I still need help.»

Curtis nodded. The green-blue eyes were grave, and there came a tenderness to Hank he could feel like something physical. Then Curtis turned and was gone. When the night nurse arrived with the pain killer, Hank shook his head. «I feel all right, Miss Madeline. I don't need a pain killer now. I think I'm going to be cured.»

Situation normal ?

by P. NITE

As I start this I think I will probably never finish it—and yet I know if I do put it all down I shall feel better afterwards.

We had completed two plays for the service personnel by the end of September, 1958. I played the lead in the first one and was assistant to the director for the second—both had been well received. The participants of the plays decided to form a little theater group on the base. I was elected as one of the officers and was the only civilian in the group.

That was the night it happened; I mean the night that I was elected to this little theater group, the night that I first knew Bill existed... It was so strange too because Bill had participated in both other plays and I had spoken to him before. He had been working on props and stage settings and had also been to several of my other shows on the base. To this day I don't remember seeing him before that