
Magnificent Obsession

by
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I

IT HAD LATELY BECOME COMMON CHATTER AT BRIGHTWOOD Hospital — better known for three hundred miles around Detroit as Hudson's Clinic — that the chief was all but dead on his feet. The whole place buzzed with it.

All the way from the inquisitive solarium on the top floor to the garrulous kitchen in the basement, little groups — convalescents in wheeled chairs, nurses with tardy trays, lean internes on rubber soles, grizzled orderlies trailing damp mops — met to whisper and separated to disseminate the bad news. Doctor Hudson was on the verge of a collapse.

On the verge? . . . Indeed! One lengthening story had it that on Tuesday he had fainted during an operation — mighty ticklish piece of business, too — which young Watson, assisting him, was obliged to complete alone. And the worst of it was that he was back at it again, next morning, carrying on as usual.

An idle tale like that, no matter with what solicitude of loyalty it might be discussed at Brightwood, would deal the institution a staggering wallop once it seeped through the big wrought-iron gates. And the rumor was peculiarly difficult to throttle because, unfortunately, it was true.

Obviously the hour had arrived for desperate measures.

Dr. Malcolm Pyle, shaggy and beetle browed, next to the chief in seniority, a specialist in abdominal surgery and admirably spoken of by his colleagues as the best belly man west of the Alleghenies, growled briefly into the ear of blood-and-skin Jennings, a cynical, middle-aged bachelor, who but for his skill as a bacteriologist would have been dropped

from the staff, many a time, for his rasping banter and infuriating impudences.

Jennings quickly passed the word to internal-medicine Carter, who presently met eye-ear-nose-and-throat McDermott in the hall and relayed the message.

"Oh, yes, I'll come," said McDermott uneasily, "but I don't relish the idea of a staff meeting without the chief. Looks like treason."

"It's for his own good," explained Carter.

"Doubtless; but . . . he has always been such a straight shooter, himself."

"You tell Aldrich and Watson. I'll see Gram and Harper. I hate it as much as you do, Mac, but we can't let the chief ruin himself."



Seeing that tomorrow was Christmas, and this was Saturday well past the luncheon hour, by the time Pyle had tardily joined them in the superintendent's office each of the eight, having abandoned whatever manifestation of dignified omniscience constituted his bedside manner, was snappishly impatient to have done with this unpleasant business and be off.

When at length he breezed in, not very convincingly attempting the conciliatory smirk of the belated, Pyle found them glum and fidgety — Carter savagely reducing to shavings what remained of a pencil, Aldrich rattling the pages of his engagement book, McDermott meticulously pecking at diminutive bits of lint on his coat sleeve, Watson ostentatiously shaking his watch at his ear, Gram drumming an exasperating tattoo on Nancy Ashford's desk, and the others pacing about like hungry panthers.

"Well," said Pyle, seating them with a sweeping gesture, "you all know what we're here for."

"Ab-so-lute-ly," drawled Jennings. "The old boy must be warned."

"At once!" snapped Gram.

"I'll say!" muttered McDermott.

"And you, Pyle, are the proper person to do it!" Anticipating a tempestuous rejoinder, Jennings hastened to defend himself against the impending din by noisily pounding out his pipe on the rim of Mrs. Ashford's steel waste basket, a performance she watched with sour interest.

"Where do you get that 'old boy' stuff, Jennings?" demanded Pyle, projecting a fierce, myopic glare at his pestiferous crony. "He's not much older than you are."

Watson tilted his chair back on its hind legs, cautiously turned his red head in the direction of Carter, seated next him, and slowly closed one eye. This was going to be good.

"Doctor Hudson was forty-six last May," quietly volunteered the superintendent, without looking up.

"You ought to know," conceded Jennings drily.

She met his rough insinuation with level, unacknowledging eyes.

"May twenty-fifth," she added.

"Thanks so much. That point's settled, then. But, all the same, he wasn't a day under a hundred and forty-six when he slumped out of his operating room, this morning, haggard and shaky."

"It's getting spread about too," complained Carter.

"Take it up with him, Doctor Pyle," wheedled McDermott. "Tell him we all think he needs a vacation — a long one!"

Pyle snorted contemptuously and aimed a bushy eyebrow at him.

"Humph! That's good! 'Tell him we all think,' eh? It's a mighty careless, offhand damn that Hudson would give for what we all think! Did you ever . . ." He pointed a bony finger at the perspiring McDermott, ". . . did you ever feel moved to offer a few comradely suggestions to Dr. Wayne Hudson, relative to the better management of his personal affairs?"

McDermott rosily hadn't, and Pyle's dry voice crackled again.

"As I thought! That explains how, with so little display of emotion, you can advise somebody else to do it. You see, my son," — he dropped his tone of raillery and became sincere — "we're dealing here with an odd number. Nobody quite like him in the whole world . . . full of funny crotchets. In a psychiatric clinic — which this hospital is going to be, shortly, with the entire staff in strait-jackets — some of Hudson's charming little idiosyncrasies would be brutally referred to as clean-cut psychoses!"

The silence in Mrs. Ashford's office was tense. Pyle's regard for the chief was known to be but little short of idolatry. What, indeed, was he preparing to say? Did he actually believe that Hudson was off the rails?

"Now, don't misunderstand!" he went on quickly, sensing their amazement. "Hudson's entitled to all his whimsies. So far as I'm concerned, he has earned the right to his flock of phantoms. He is a genius, and whosoever loveth a genius is out of luck with his devotion except he beareth all things, endureth all things, suffereth long and is kind."

"Not like sounding brass," interpolated Jennings piously.

"Apropos of brass," growled Pyle, "but — no matter.

. . . We all know that the chief is the most important figure in the field of brain surgery on this continent. But he did not come to that distinction by accident. He has toiled like a slave in a mill. His specialty is guaranteed to make a man moody; counts himself lucky if he can hold down his mortality to fifty per cent. What kind of a mentality would *you* have" — shifting his attention to Jennings, who grinned, amiably — "if you lost half your cases? They'd soon have you trussed in a big tub of hot water, feeding you through the nose with a syringe!"

"You spoke of the chief's psychoses," interrupted McDermott, approaching the dangerous word hesitatingly. "Do you mean that — literally?"

Pyle pursed his lips and nodded slowly.

"Yes — literally! One of his notions — by far the most alarming of his legion, in so far as the present dilemma is affected — has to do with his curious attitude toward fear. He mustn't be afraid of anything. He must live above fear — that is his phrase. You would think, to hear his prattle, that he was a wealthy and neurotic old lady trying to graduate from Theosophy into Bahaism. . . ."

"What's Bahaism?" inquired Jennings, with pretended naïveté.

"Hudson believes," continued Pyle, disdainful of the annoyance, "that if a man harbors any sort of fear, no matter how benign and apparently harmless, it percolates through all his thinking, damages his personality, makes him landlord to a ghost. For years, he has been so consistently living above fear — fear of slumping, fear of the natural penalties of overwork, fear of the neural drain of insomnia. . . . Haven't you heard him discoursing on the delights of reading in bed to three o'clock? . . . fear of

that little aneurism he knows he's got — that he has driven himself at full gallop with spurs on his boots and burrs under his saddle, caroling about his freedom, until he's ready to drop. But whoever cautions him will be warmly damned for his impertinence."

Pyle had temporarily run down, and discussion became general. Carter risked suggesting that if the necessary interview with the chief required a gift for impertinence, why not deputize Jennings? Aldrich said it was no time for kidding. McDermott again nominated Pyle. Gram shouted, "Of course!" They pushed back their chairs. Pyle brought both big hands down on his knees with a resounding slap, rose with a groan, and sourly promised he'd have a go at it.

"Attaboy!" commended Jennings paternally. "Watson will do your stitches, afterwards. He has been getting some uncommonly nice cosmetic values, lately, with his scars; eh, Watty?"

The disorder incident to adjournment spared Watson the chagrin of listening to the threatened report of Jennings' eavesdropping, an hour earlier, on the dulcet cooing of a recently discharged patient, back to tender her gratitude. Emboldened by his rescue, he dispassionately told Jennings to go to hell, much to the latter's faunlike satisfaction, and the staff evaporated.

"Let's go and eat," said Pyle.

As they turned the corner in the corridor, Jennings slipped his hand under Pyle's elbow and muttered, "You know damned well what ails the chief, and so do I. It's the girl!"

"Joyce, you mean?"

"Who else?" Jennings buttoned his overcoat collar high about his throat and thrust his shoulder against the big front

door and an eighty-mile gale. "Certainly, I mean Joyce. She's running wild, and he's worrying his heart out and his head off!"

"Maybe so," Pyle picked his footing carefully on the snowy steps. "But I don't believe it's very good cricket for us to analyze his family affairs."

"Nonsense! We're quite past the time for indulging in any knightly restraints. Hudson's in danger of shooting his reputation to bits. Incidentally, it will give the whole clinic a black eye when the news spreads. If the chief is off his feed because he's fretting about his girl, then it's high time we talked candidly about her. She's a silly little ass, if you ask my opinion!"

"Well, you won't be asked for your opinion. And it's no good coming at it in that mood. She may be, as you say, a silly little ass; but she's Hudson's deity!"

Jennings motioned him to climb into the coupé and fumbled in his pockets for his keys.

"She wasn't behaving much like a deity — unless Bacchus, perhaps — the last time I saw her."

"Where was that?"

"At the Tuileries, about a month ago, with a party of eight or ten noisy roisterers, in the general custody of that good-for-nothing young Merrick — you know, old Nick Merrick's carousing grandson. Believe me, they were well oiled."

"Did you — did she recognize you?"

"Oh, quite so! Came fluttering over to our table to speak to me!"

"Humph! She *must* have been pickled! I thought she was getting on, all right, at a girls' school in Washington. . . . Didn't know she was home."

Jennings warmed his engine noisily, and threw in the clutch.

"Maybe she was sacked."

Pyle made some hopeless noises deep in his throat.

"Too bad about old Merrick. . . . Salt of the earth; finest of the fine. He's had more than his share of trouble. Did you ever know Clif? "

"No. He was dead. But I've heard of him. A bum, wasn't he? "

"That describes him; and this orphan of his seems to be headed in the same direction."

"Orphan? I thought this boy's mother was living — Paris or somewhere."

"Oh yes, she's living; but the boy's an orphan, for all that. Born an orphan!" Pyle briefly reviewed the Merrick saga.

"Perhaps," suggested Jennings, as they rolled into the club garage, "you might have a chat with old Merrick, if he's such a good sort, and tell him his whelp is a contaminating influence to our girl."

"Pfff! " Pyle led the way to the elevator.

"Well, if that proposal's no good, why don't you go manfully to the young lady herself and inform her that she's driving her eminent parent crazy? Put it up to her as a matter of good sportsmanship."

"No," objected Pyle, hooking his glasses athwart his nose to inspect the menu, "she would only air her indignation to her father. And he likes people to mind their own business — as you've discovered on two or three occasions. He keeps his own counsel like a clam, and doesn't thank anybody for crashing into his affairs, no matter how benevolent may be the motive. . . . It would be quite useless, anyway.

Joyce can't help the way she's made. She is a biological throwback to her maternal grandfather. You never knew him. He was just putting the finishing touches to his career as a periodical sot when I arrived in this town, fresh from school. Cummings was the best all 'round surgeon and the hardest all 'round drinker in the state of Michigan for twenty years; one of these three-days-soused and three-weeks-sober drunkards. This girl evidently carries an over-plus of the old chap's chromosomes."

"You mean she is a dipsomaniac?"

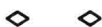
"Well — that's a nasty word. Let's just say she's erratic. Ever since she was a little tot, she has been a storm center. Sweetest thing in the world when she wants to be. And then all hell breaks loose and Hudson has to plead with the teachers to take her back. Oh, she's given him an exciting life; no doubt of that! And lately it's booze!"

"Hudson knows about that part of it, of course!"

"I presume so. How could he help it? She makes no secret of it. At all events, she's no hypocrite."

Jennings sighed.

"Rather unfortunate she has this one embarrassing virtue; isn't it? But, that being the case, I dare say she'll have to go to the devil at her own speed. We must persuade Hudson however to clear out and take a long leave of absence. He can take her along. Lay it on with a heavy hand, Pyle. Be utterly ruthless! Tell him it affects us all. That ought to fetch him. I never knew anybody quite so sensitive to the welfare of other people. Save that card for the last trick: tell him if he doesn't clear out, for a while, he will do up the rest of us!"



For the first half hour of their conference, which was held in the chief's office the following Tuesday, Pyle stubbornly held out for a trip around the world, Joyce to accompany her father. Indeed, the idea had seemed so good that he had armed himself with a portfolio of attractive cruise literature. He had even made out an intriguing itinerary — Hawaii, Tahiti, ukeleles — Pyle was a confirmed land-lubber with a dangerously suppressed desire to lie on his back, pleasantly jingled, under a trans-equatorial palm, listening to the soft vowels of grown-up children unspoiled by civilization — the Mediterranean countries, six months of hobnobbing with brain specialists in Germany. The latter item had been included as a particularly tempting bait. Hudson had often declared he meant to do that some day.

The chief listened preoccupiedly; tried to seem grateful; tried to seem interested; but as Pyle rumbled on with his sales-talk the big man grew restless, refilled his fountain-pen, rearranged his papers in neater piles, had much difficulty hunting a match-box. Then he shook his head, smiling.

No, much as he appreciated Pyle's friendly concern, he wasn't going around the world; not just now. Of course he had been sticking at it too steadily. Lately he had had it on his mind to build a little shack in some out of the way place, not too far off, and put in there from Friday afternoon to Tuesday morning, at least in decent weather, tramp, fish, botanize, read light novels, sleep, live the simple life. He would begin plans on such a place at once. Spring would be along soon.

"And — meantime?" persisted Pyle, gnawing at the tip of his uptilted little goatee.

Hudson rose, slammed a drawer shut with a bang, swung a leg over the corner of his desk, folded his arms tightly, and faced his counsellor with a mysterious grin.

"Meantime? . . . Pyle, I hope this won't knock you cold. I'm going down to Philadelphia, week after next, to marry my daughter's school friend, Miss Helen Brent."

Pyle's eyes and mouth comically registered such stunned amazement that the Hudson grin widened.

"And then the three of us will be spending a couple of months in Europe. I've arranged with Leighton to come over from the university and take care of such head cases as Watson can't handle. Watson's a good man; bright future. Oddly enough, I was on the point of asking you in to talk this over when you said you wished to see me."

Pyle bit off the end of a fresh cigar and mumbled felicitations, not yet sufficiently recovered to pretend enthusiasm.

"Doubtless you think me a fool, Pyle."

Hudson took a turn up and down the room, giving his colleague an opportunity to deny it if he wished. Pyle puffed meditatively.

"Seventeen years a widower," mused Hudson, half to himself. He paused at the far corner to straighten a disordered shelf of books.

"A man accumulates a lot of habits in seventeen years." He returned to his desk-chair. "Sounds like the wedding of January and June, eh?"

Had Jennings been in Pyle's place, his eyes would have twinkled as he replied, "*January!* What! You? *January?* Nonsense, Chief! Not a day over October, at the farthest!"

Pyle smiled wanly, and shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth.

"I came by this valuable new friendship early last year when Miss Brent was made Junior advisor to my Joyce."

Something of sympathetic comradeship in Pyle's reviving interest, now that he was partially coming to, encouraged Hudson to toss aside what remained of his reticence and tell it all.

To begin with — Miss Brent was an orphan; parents reputable Virginians; most interesting French background on her mother's side; same kind of blood that the guillotine spilt in 1789. . . . "Quite pronouncedly Gallic, she is — at least in appearance."

Jennings, had he been there, would have been audacious enough to suggest, slyly chuckling, "Oh — in that case we should amend June to *July!*" Then he would have watched the chief's face intently.

But Pyle, who had no traffic with psychoanalysis, attached no significance whatever to the fact that the young lady's probable temperament was somewhat on the chief's mind.

"About Thanksgiving," Hudson was saying, "Miss Brent, after a brief encounter with influenza, left the school and spent a few days at home. No sooner was she gone than Joyce slipped out, one night; attended a party, down in the city; defied some house rules as to hours; flicked all her classes next day; stormed until the shingles rattled when they rebuked her; and, in short, contrived to get herself suspended, notwithstanding that her record — thanks to Miss Brent's influence — had been quite above reproach ever since she matriculated, a year ago last September."

The story went forward rather jerkily. Hudson was not

given to confiding his perplexities to anybody. Pyle discreetly remained silent.

"Well — she came home and plunged immediately into a series of hectic affairs; out every night; in bed most of the day; nervous, testy, unreasonable. I can't tell you, Pyle, how thoroughly it did me in. . . . She's all I have, you know.

"At my wit's end, I suggested that she invite Miss Brent up to visit us through the holidays. Twice before had she been our guest for a few days, and I had seen something of her on my occasional visits to Washington. Believe me when I tell you that this charming girl was no more than across our threshold last week, than Joyce was another creature, poised, gracious, lovable — a lady!"

He paused to take his bearings before going further; impelled to explain how the swift movement of events, that first evening at dinner, amply accounted for his decision to ask Helen to marry him; reluctant, even in the interest of plausibility and self-defence, to give words to the memory of that occasion. It had all been so natural; so unimpeachably right; so precisely as it ought to be! He had remarked — perhaps a bit more ardently than he intended, for his heart was full — how happy it had made him — and Joyce — that she had come. "I don't see how we can ever let you go!" he had said; to which Joyce had added impetuously, "Why need she ever go? She's happier here than anywhere else; aren't you, darling?"

Pyle recrossed his legs and cleared his throat to remind the chief that he was still present.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Brent is certain to be happier with us than she was at home. Since childhood, she has lived with an uncle, her father's elder brother, an irascible,

penurious, not very successful old lawyer. There are no women in the family. And I have reason to suspect that her cousin, Montgomery Brent, is a bit of a rake, though she has idealized him out of all proportion; calls him 'Brother Monty,' thinks him vastly misunderstood by his father and everybody else . . . that kind of a girl, Pyle . . . espouses the cause of homeless cats, under dogs, misunderstood cousins, my flighty, wilful Joyce . . . and now — thank God — she has promised to join forces with *me!* I think she's making something of a mission of it, Pyle. I was quite willing to wait until she had finished school in June; had some serious misgivings, indeed, about that; but she dismissed the thought lightly. If I needed her, I needed her *now*, she said. . . . I hope to God it works out! "

Pyle said he believed it would; moved to the edge of his chair; looked at his watch; asked if this was a secret.

Hudson stroked his jaw, his eyes averted.

"I don't object to their knowing. . . . Let's consider it sufficient, for the present, that I'm going to Europe with my daughter." He mopped his broad forehead vigorously. "The rest of it they can learn in due time. Report to Aldrich and Carter and the others that I'm off on a vacation."

"Any special word for Mrs. Ashford, Chief?" Pyle paused with his hand on the door-knob.

Hudson thrust his hands deeply into his trouser pockets and walked to the window, staring out.

"I'll tell her myself, Pyle," he answered, without turning.



Doctor Hudson named his isolated retreat Flintridge. It was quite remote from the beaten trail of travel. A mere

acre had been tamed to serve the cottage for which his hasty sketches, before leaving, were elaborated and executed in his absence by his loyal friend, Fred Ferguson, the best architect in town.

It was an inhospitable bit of country, thereabouts. Sheer cliffs, descending abruptly to the black water (a long flight of wooden steps led to the little boat-house and adjacent wharf) had discouraged such colonization as had long since developed the western shore, two miles distant. Deformed pines clawed the rocks, sighing of their thirst in summer, shrieking of nakedness in winter.

Almost from the first, Flintridge never knew certainly, for there was no telephone, when its master would appear for a week-end. It anticipated, made forecasts, baked ineffable angel food cakes, caught vast quantities of minnows for bait, and held itself in instant readiness to welcome the big man with the ruddy face (just a shade too ruddy, any heart diagnostician could have told him), silver-white hair, gray eyes with deep crows-feet, and expressive hands eloquent of highly developed dexterity.

When and if he came, it would be on Saturday, late afternoon. Once only had he brought Joyce and Helen — strangers, passing them, presumed they were both his daughters — but that was merely temporizing with his promise to seek a retreat. And he now needed days off, if ever; for his young wife's gregarious disposition and charming hospitality had multiplied his social obligations in the city.

How easily she had adjusted herself to his moods! How proud he was of her, not quite so much for her exotic beauty, as because of her exquisiteness of personal taste and the tact with which she met the rather exacting problems of fitting

neatly and quickly into his circle of mature acquaintances. It delighted him that she chose the right word, wore the right costume, intuitively knew how to manage a dinner-party without seeming concerned as to what misadventures might have occurred in the kitchen. Yes; the affair was "working out" — how often he used that phrase! — immeasurably better than he had dared hope.

Even the women liked her! They had accepted her on approval at first; but when it became evident that she had no intention of taking on airs because their grizzled spouses fluttered about her with the broad compliments privileged to fifty addressing twenty-five, they admitted she was a dear.

But, however pleasant it was for Hudson to note his wife's growing popularity, certified to by the increasing volume of their social activities, his new duties contributed little to the reinvigoration of that fatigued aorta which had worried Pyle.

"The chief's in better fettle — think?" said Jennings.

"Temporarily," conceded Pyle. "But you don't mend an aneurism with late dinners, three a week. I'm afraid he'll crash, one of these days."

Not infrequently some visiting colleague — for Brightwood now not only attracted patients from afar but had become a mecca for the ambitious in the field of brain surgery — would be driven out into the country to rusticate for a day or two. They seemed singularly alike, these brain-tinkers from elsewhere; moody, abstracted men, in their late forties and early fifties, most of them; seldom smiling, ungifted with small talk, not unusually inclined to be somewhat gruff. Hudson preferred to hold conferences with them at the lake, for their conversation would be tiresomely technical. And anyhow, men who trafficked daily with Death could not be expected to enliven a house party.