My Skirmish With Madness

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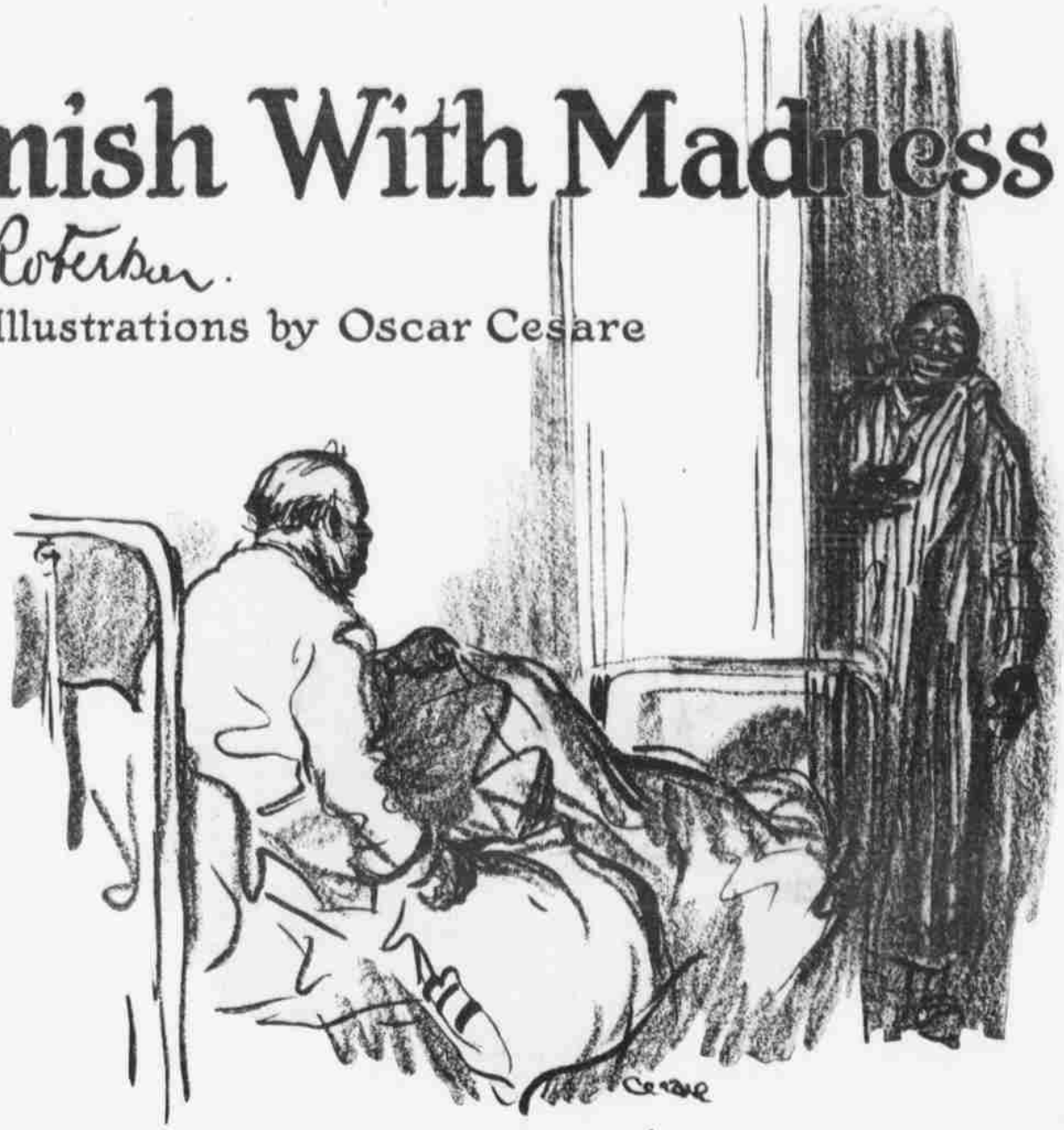

"What are you laughing at?" I demanded. "What's wrong with me?" "I dunno, boss, but I jess got to laugh at you, suh. You look so funny"

FOR twelve years I had thought that in me was latent insanity that only needed extra mental strain to make active. The usual mental strain incident to short story writing was always with me, and I had eased it by moderate drinking. In this I had a better excuse than had Jack London, who drank because of suggestion and availability, but I do not offer it as an excuse — only as an explanation. Alcohol, by the way, never was a mental stimulant to me, only an inhibition of troubling thought, mainly of my coming madness, enabling me to concentrate my mind on my work. Until my physical health gave out it worked well, as I never got drunk and could always turn down an invitation if I felt that I had enough. But some three years prior to this writing I met with an accident, and, being poor, sought no medical attention. So, imbued with an early code of conduct — which decrees that a man must not quit work until he drops in his tracks — I limped around until rheumatism set in. For years I could not sleep at night without an opiate. And then one day, with fifteen cents in my pocket, and not knowing where the next money was to come from, I told my trouble to a friend who listened sympathetically.

"The hospital for you," he said at length; and, for half an hour he kept the telephone busy, calling up the powers that be in New York, then said to me: "Go down to Bellevue in the morning and see the Medical Superintendent. I've had him on the wire, and he'll take care of you."

And now, having thrown up my hands, a strange tranquillity came to me, utterly at variance with my habit of mind, which had never known tranquillity or peace except after some temporary victory in the battle of life. I slept well that night, and with the nerve of a gambler signed a check for a good breakfast in a chop house where I had spent much money and owed none, then with my fifteen cents in my pocket, started for Bellevue Hospital, a mile distant. I remember that a policeman stopped me close to the hospital, and allowed me to proceed on my staggering way when I stammered: "Bellevue." I staggered from weakness, for I had drunk nothing that day. The next I remember was talking to the Medical Superintendent, a man who listened to me kindly, but whose face I would not recognize now.

ABOUT all I can recall of the interview is that I said I needed help from the outside — that, while I had been able to advise and assist others in trouble I could not care for myself. I cannot recall what he said to me, or whether or not he said anything; but I know that he led me out of his office, across the grounds, and into a two-story brick building standing alone. Here, I somewhat came to myself and began to take notice. I was left in the presence of a doctor and a white-clad nurse.

My tranquillity of mind — or was it apathy — was still with me, though I was now shaking convulsively and my thick tongue could hardly articulate an answer to the questions of the doctor. And as the nurse led me through a door into a ward — a long, wide hall bordered by sleeping rooms — this mind state was in no wise disturbed by the sight of a man on his knees before an arm chair, praying fervently. "Some poor devil whose time has come," I thought, as I followed the nurse, wondering, too, when I might be on my knees.

The nurse was a plump, pretty young woman, with smiling eyes, and as she led me into a room turned to me with those eyes slightly moist and her face saddened by sympathy — genuine sympathy, as I learned later.

"Now, you poor fellow," she said, "take off your clothes and get into bed for a good rest. I'll help you undress."

"Can I have a drink?" I answered, selfishly, not appreciating the sympathy to which I was not accustomed.

"No; but I'll bring you something just as good. Let me help you with that necktie."

I had thrown off my outer clothing, and she removed my collar and tie. Then she pulled down my suspenders and began unbuttoning my shirt; but here I balked. I was ever a modest man, even when dying.

"You must be undressed," she said, kindly, yet firmly, "and get into pajamas."

I sat down on the bed and looked her squarely in the face.

"Now, you're not going to stay here while I undress, are you?" I asked, as kindly and firmly as I could in my agitation.

"Would you rather I'd go? Can you undress alone?"

"I can," I replied promptly.

"I'll send in a man," she said, and departed.

A white-clad male nurse — a pleasant-faced young giant — came in with a book, and stripped me down. Then he entered my various measurements in the book, and stowed my limp limbs into a suit of pajamas.

"Going to take my finger-tips?" I asked, as I looked at the book.

"Going to kill anybody?" he asked in answer.

"I may," I said, thinking of some editors I knew. "That is, if I get well."

"Forget it. You'll never kill anything." I wondered what he meant, as I turned in.

My friendly nurse returned and gave me a dose of aromatic ammonia. Then, when the nerves within me had straightened out a little, another nurse arrived. She was a slim girl, with a sweet face and pleasant voice, and she gave me a tablet and a swallow of water. "You're to take one every half hour until you've had six," she said.

"Do I get anything to eat?" I asked, as the rattle of dishes came to my ears.

"Not until supper time. You're dieting today."

"Well, can I have a smoke? I brought my pipe and tobacco."

"You must ask the doctor," she said evasively.

No doctor appeared, and I made the best of it until, when she brought the third tablet, she also brought a piece of plug chewing tobacco and a cuspidor.

"Don't overdo it," she said, "but I know you are suffering for a smoke, and this will take away the craving."

SHE was right. I had not chewed tobacco for a great many years, and a small morsel of that plug went a long way. I talked with this girl until her duties called her, and felt that we were getting acquainted; but when my fourth tablet was given me and I resumed the conversation I was surprised at the nurse's lack of response.

"Do you chew tobacco?" she said, as she noticed the plug on the window sill.

"Why, you gave it to me," I answered, "to stop the craving for a smoke."

"I?" she laughed. "Why, I'm just back from lunch. I was going out when you were admitted, but I'm taking care of you now. You must take me for Miss ———"

She pronounced a Russian or Polish name which I cannot yet pronounce, nor spell.

I looked at her, but could not believe her. My defective mental vision would not separate the two girls, yet, in physique, voice and temperament, they were opposites. Not until the next day could I tell which was which, though that afternoon they often visited my room together. I have gone into this detail to show that I was pretty far gone.

This third nurse deserves a better description than I can give her, not because of her beauty, though it was of an order to first impress a normal observer. It did not impress me at all, and now, as I write, I cannot visualize her face, and perhaps would not know her in the street without her white uniform and cap. It was her wonderful personality that sank into my soul and made me respect her, admire her, and at last fear her. She had a rich, strong, musical voice