**A Ramble in Aphasia**

O. Henry

My wife and I parted on that morning in precisely our usual manner. She left her second cup of tea to follow me to the front door. There she plucked from my lapel the invisible strand of lint (the universal act of woman to proclaim ownership) and bade me to take care of my cold. I had no cold. Next came her kiss of parting—the level kiss of domesticity flavored with Young Hyson. There was no fear of the extemporaneous, of variety spicing her infinite custom. With the deft touch of long malpractice, she dabbed awry my well-set scarf pin; and then, as I closed the door, I heard her morning slippers pattering back to her cooling tea.

When I set out I had no thought or premonition of what was to occur. The attack came suddenly.

For many weeks I had been toiling, almost night and day, at a famous railroad law case that I won triumphantly but a few days previously. In fact, I had been digging away at the law almost without cessation for many years. Once or twice good Doctor Volney, my friend and physician, had warned me.

“If you don’t slacken up, Bellford,” he said, “you’ll go suddenly to pieces. Either your nerves or your brain will give way. Tell me, does a week pass in which you do not read in the papers of a case of aphasia—of some man lost, wandering nameless, with his past and his identity blotted out—and all from that little brain clot made by overwork or worry?”

“I always thought,” said I, “that the clot in those instances was really to be found on the brains of the newspaper reporters.”

Doctor Volney shook his head.

“The disease exists,” he said. “You need a change or a rest. Court-room, office and home—there is the only route you travel. For recreation you—read law books. Better take warning in time.”

“On Thursday nights,” I said, defensively, “my wife and I play cribbage. On Sundays she reads to me the weekly letter from her mother. That law books are not a recreation remains yet to be established.”

That morning as I walked I was thinking of Doctor Volney’s words. I was feeling as well as I usually did—possibly in better spirits than usual.

I woke with stiff and cramped muscles from having slept long on the incommodious seat of a day coach. I leaned my head against the seat and tried to think. After a long time I said to myself: “I must have a name of some sort.” I searched my pockets. Not a card; not a letter; not a paper or monogram could I find. But I found in my coat pocket nearly $3,000 in bills of large denomination. “I must be some one, of course,” I repeated to myself, and began again to consider.

The car was well crowded with men, among whom, I told myself, there must have been some common interest, for they intermingled freely, and seemed in the best good humor and spirits. One of them—a stout, spectacled gentleman enveloped in a decided odor of cinnamon and aloes—took the vacant half of my seat with a friendly nod, and unfolded a newspaper. In the intervals between his periods of reading, we conversed, as travelers will, on current affairs. I found myself able to sustain the conversation on such subjects with credit, at least to my memory. By and by my companion said:

“You are one of us, of course. Fine lot of men the West sends in this time. I’m glad they held the convention in New York; I’ve never been East before. My name’s R. P. Bolder—Bolder & Son, of Hickory Grove, Missouri.”

Though unprepared, I rose to the emergency, as men will when put to it. Now must I hold a christening, and be at once babe, parson and parent. My senses came to the rescue of my slower brain. The insistent odor of drugs from my companion supplied one idea; a glance at his newspaper, where my eye met a conspicuous advertisement, assisted me further.

“My name,” said I, glibly, “is Edward Pinkhammer. I am a druggist, and my home is in Cornopolis, Kansas.”

“I knew you were a druggist,” said my fellow traveler, affably. “I saw the callous spot on your right forefinger where the handle of the pestle rubs. Of course, you are a delegate to our National Convention.”

“Are all these men druggists?” I asked, wonderingly.

“They are. This car came through from the West. And they’re your old-time druggists, too—none of your patent tablet-and-granule pharmashootists that use slot machines instead of a prescription desk. We percolate our own paregoric and roll our own pills, and we ain’t above handling a few garden seeds in the spring, and carrying a side line of confectionery and shoes. I tell you Hampinker, I’ve got an idea to spring on this convention—new ideas is what they want. Now, you know the shelf bottles of tartar emetic and Rochelle salt Ant. et Pot. Tart. and Sod. et Pot. Tart.—one’s poison, you know, and the other’s harmless. It’s easy to mistake one label for the other. Where do druggists mostly keep ’em? Why, as far apart as possible, on different shelves. That’s wrong. I say keep ’em side by side, so when you want one you can always compare it with the other and avoid mistakes. Do you catch the idea?”

“It seems to me a very good one,” I said.

“All right! When I spring it on the convention you back it up. We’ll make some of these Eastern orange-phosphate-and-massage-cream professors that think they’re the only lozenges in the market look like hypodermic tablets.”

“If I can be of any aid,” I said, warming, “the two bottles of—er—”

“Tartrate of antimony and potash, and tartrate of soda and potash.”

“Shall henceforth sit side by side,” I concluded, firmly.

“Now, there’s another thing,” said Mr. Bolder. “For an excipient in manipulating a pill mass which do you prefer—the magnesia carbonate or the pulverised glycerrhiza radix?”

“The—er—magnesia,” I said. It was easier to say than the other word.

Mr. Bolder glanced at me distrustfully through his spectacles.

“Give me the glycerrhiza,” said he. “Magnesia cakes.”

“Here’s another one of these fake aphasia cases,” he said, presently, handing me his newspaper, and laying his finger upon an article. “I don’t believe in ’em. I put nine out of ten of ’em down as frauds. A man gets sick of his business and his folks and wants to have a good time. He skips out somewhere, and when they find him he pretends to have lost his memory—don’t know his own name, and won’t even recognize the strawberry mark on his wife’s left shoulder. Aphasia! Tut! Why can’t they stay at home and forget?”

I took the paper and read, after the pungent headlines, the following:

“Denver, June 12.—Elwyn C. Bellford, a prominent lawyer, is mysteriously missing from his home since three days ago, and all efforts to locate him have been in vain. Mr. Bellford is a well-known citizen of the highest standing, and has enjoyed a large and lucrative law practice. He is married and owns a fine home and the most extensive private library in the State. On the day of his disappearance, he drew quite a large sum of money from his bank. No one can be found who saw him after he left the bank. Mr. Bellford was a man of singularly quiet and domestic tastes, and seemed to find his happiness in his home and profession. If any clue at all exists to his strange disappearance, it may be found in the fact that for some months he has been deeply absorbed in an important law case in connection with the Q. Y. and Z. Railroad Company. It is feared that overwork may have affected his mind. Every effort is being made to discover the whereabouts of the missing man.”

“It seems to me you are not altogether uncynical, Mr. Bolder,” I said, after I had read the despatch. “This has the sound, to me, of a genuine case. Why should this man, prosperous, happily married, and respected, choose suddenly to abandon everything? I know that these lapses of memory do occur, and that men do find themselves adrift without a name, a history or a home.”

“Oh, gammon and jalap!” said Mr. Bolder. “It’s larks they’re after. There’s too much education nowadays. Men know about aphasia, and they use it for an excuse. The women are wise, too. When it’s all over they look you in the eye, as scientific as you please, and say: ‘He hypnotized me.’”

Thus Mr. Bolder diverted, but did not aid, me with his comments and philosophy.

We arrived in New York about ten at night. I rode in a cab to a hotel, and I wrote my name “Edward Pinkhammer” in the register. As I did so I felt pervade me a splendid, wild, intoxicating buoyancy—a sense of unlimited freedom, of newly attained possibilities. I was just born into the world. The old fetters—whatever they had been—were stricken from my hands and feet. The future lay before me a clear road such as an infant enters, and I could set out upon it equipped with a man’s learning and experience.

I thought the hotel clerk looked at me five seconds too long. I had no baggage.

“The Druggists’ Convention,” I said. “My trunk has somehow failed to arrive.” I drew out a roll of money.

“Ah!” said he, showing an auriferous tooth, “we have quite a number of the Western delegates stopping here.” He struck a bell for the boy.

I endeavored to give color to my rôle.

“There is an important movement on foot among us Westerners,” I said, “in regard to a recommendation to the convention that the bottles containing the tartrate of antimony and potash, and the tartrate of sodium and potash be kept in a contiguous position on the shelf.”

“Gentleman to three-fourteen,” said the clerk, hastily. I was whisked away to my room.

The next day I bought a trunk and clothing, and began to live the life of Edward Pinkhammer. I did not tax my brain with endeavors to solve problems of the past.

It was a piquant and sparkling cup that the great island city held up to my lips. I drank of it gratefully. The keys of Manhattan belong to him who is able to bear them. You must be either the city’s guest or its victim.

The following few days were as gold and silver. Edward Pinkhammer, yet counting back to his birth by hours only, knew the rare joy of having come upon so diverting a world full-fledged and unrestrained. I sat entranced on the magic carpets provided in theatres and roof-gardens, that transported one into strange and delightful lands full of frolicsome music, pretty girls and grotesque drolly extravagant parodies upon human kind. I went here and there at my own dear will, bound by no limits of space, time or comportment. I dined in weird cabarets, at weirder *tab* *les d’hôte* to the sound of Hungarian music and the wild shouts of mercurial artists and sculptors. Or, again, where the night life quivers in the electric glare like a kinetoscopic picture, and the millinery of the world, and its jewels, and the ones whom they adorn, and the men who make all three possible are met for good cheer and the spectacular effect. And among all these scenes that I have mentioned I learned one thing that I never knew before. And that is that the key to liberty is not in the hands of License, but Convention holds it. Comity has a toll-gate at which you must pay, or you may not enter the land of Freedom. In all the glitter, the seeming disorder, the parade, the abandon, I saw this law, unobtrusive, yet like iron, prevail. Therefore, in Manhattan you must obey these unwritten laws, and then you will be freest of the free. If you decline to be bound by them, you put on shackles.

Sometimes, as my mood urged me, I would seek the stately, softly murmuring palm rooms, redolent with high-born life and delicate restraint, in which to dine. Again I would go down to the waterways in steamers packed with vociferous, bedecked, unchecked love-making clerks and shop-girls to their crude pleasures on the island shores. And there was always Broadway—glistening, opulent, wily, varying, desirable Broadway—growing upon one like an opium habit.

One afternoon as I entered my hotel a stout man with a big nose and a black mustache blocked my way in the corridor. When I would have passed around him, he greet me with offensive familiarity.

“Hello, Bellford!” he cried, loudly. “What the deuce are you doing in New York? Didn’t know anything could drag you away from that old book den of yours. Is Mrs. B. along or is this a little business run alone, eh?”

“You have made a mistake, sir,” I said, coldly, releasing my hand from his grasp. “My name is Pinkhammer. You will excuse me.”

The man dropped to one side, apparently astonished. As I walked to the clerk’s desk I heard him call to a bell boy and say something about telegraph blanks.

“You will give me my bill,” I said to the clerk, “and have my baggage brought down in half an hour. I do not care to remain where I am annoyed by confidence men.”

I moved that afternoon to another hotel, a sedate, old-fashioned one on lower Fifth Avenue.

There was a restaurant a little way off Broadway where one could be served almost *al fres* *co* in a tropic array of screening flora. Quiet and luxury and a perfect service made it an ideal place in which to take luncheon or refreshment. One afternoon I was there picking my way to a table among the ferns when I felt my sleeve caught.

“Mr. Bellford!” exclaimed an amazingly sweet voice.

I turned quickly to see a lady seated alone—a lady of about thirty, with exceedingly handsome eyes, who looked at me as though I had been her very dear friend.

“You were about to pass me,” she said, accusingly. “Don’t tell me you do not know me. Why should we not shake hands—at least once in fifteen years?”

I shook hands with her at once. I took a chair opposite her at the table. I summoned with my eyebrows a hovering waiter. The lady was philandering with an orange ice. I ordered a *crème de men* *t* *he*. Her hair was reddish bronze. You could not look at it, because you could not look away from her eyes. But you were conscious of it as you are conscious of sunset while you look into the profundities of a wood at twilight.

“Are you sure you know me?” I asked.

“No,” she said, smiling. “I was never sure of that.”

“What would you think,” I said, a little anxiously, “if I were to tell you that my name is Edward Pinkhammer, from Cornopolis, Kansas?”

“What would I think?” she repeated, with a merry glance. “Why, that you had not brought Mrs. Bellford to New York with you, of course. I do wish you had. I would have liked to see Marian.” Her voice lowered slightly—“You haven’t changed much, Elwyn.”

I felt her wonderful eyes searching mine and my face more closely.

“Yes, you have,” she amended, and there was a soft, exultant note in her latest tones; “I see it now. You haven’t forgotten. You haven’t forgotten for a year or a day or an hour. I told you you never could.”

I poked my straw anxiously in the *crème de men* *t* *he*.

“I’m sure I beg your pardon,” I said, a little uneasy at her gaze. “But that is just the trouble. I have forgotten. I’ve forgotten everything.”

She flouted my denial. She laughed deliciously at something she seemed to see in my face.

“I’ve heard of you at times,” she went on. “You’re quite a big lawyer out West-Denver, isn’t it, or Los Angeles? Marian must be very proud of you. You knew, I suppose, that I married six months after you did. You may have seen it in the papers. The flowers alone cost two thousand dollars.”

She had mentioned fifteen years. Fifteen years is a long time.

“Would it be too late,” I asked, somewhat timorously, “to offer you congratulations?”

“Not if you dare do it,” she answered, with such fine intrepidity that I was silent, and began to crease patterns on the cloth with my thumb nail.

“Tell me one thing,” she said, leaning toward me rather eagerly—“a thing I have wanted to know for many years—just from a woman’s curiosity, of course—have you ever dared since that night to touch, smell or look at white roses—at white roses wet with rain and dew?”

I took a sip of *crème de men* *t* *he*.

“It would be useless, I suppose,” I said, with a sigh, “for me to repeat that I have no recollection at all about these things. My memory is completely at fault. I need not say how much I regret it.”

The lady rested her arms upon the table, and again her eyes disdained my words and went traveling by their own route direct to my soul. She laughed softly, with a strange quality in the sound—it was a laugh of happiness—yes, and of content—and of misery. I tried to look away from her.

“You lie, Elwyn Bellford,” she breathed, blissfully. “Oh, I know you lie!”

I gazed dully into the ferns.

“My name is Edward Pinkhammer,” I said. “I came with the delegates to the Druggists’ National Convention. There is a movement on foot for arranging a new position for the bottles of tartrate of antimony and tartrate of potash, in which, very likely, you would take little interest.”

A shining landau stopped before the entrance. The lady rose. I took her hand, and bowed.

“I am deeply sorry,” I said to her, “that I cannot remember. I could explain, but fear you would not understand. You will not concede Pinkhammer; and I really cannot at all conceive of the—the roses and other things.”

“Good-by, Mr. Bellford,” she said, with her happy, sorrowful smile, as she stepped into her carriage.

I attended the theatre that night. When I returned to my hotel, a quiet man in dark clothes, who seemed interested in rubbing his finger nails with a silk handkerchief, appeared, magically, at my side.

“Mr. Pinkhammer,” he said, giving the bulk of his attention to his forefinger, “may I request you to step aside with me for a little conversation? There is a room here.”

“Certainly,” I answered.

He conducted me into a small, private parlor. A lady and a gentleman were there. The lady, I surmised, would have been unusually good-looking had her features not been clouded by an expression of keen worry and fatigue. She was of a style of figure and possessed coloring and features that were agreeable to my fancy. She was in a traveling dress; she fixed upon me an earnest look of extreme anxiety, and pressed an unsteady hand to her bosom. I think she would have started forward, but the gentleman arrested her movement with an authoritative motion of his hand. He then came, himself, to meet me. He was a man of forty, a little gray about the temples, and with a strong, thoughtful face.

“Bellford, old man,” he said, cordially, “I’m glad to see you again. Of course we know everything is all right. I warned you, you know, that you were overdoing it. Now, you’ll go back with us, and be yourself again in no time.”

I smiled ironically.

“I have been ‘Bellforded’ so often,” I said, “that it has lost its edge. Still, in the end, it may grow wearisome. Would you be willing at all to entertain the hypothesis that my name is Edward Pinkhammer, and that I never saw you before in my life?”

Before the man could reply a wailing cry came from the woman. She sprang past his detaining arm. “Elwyn!” she sobbed, and cast herself upon me, and clung tight. “Elwyn,” she cried again, “don’t break my heart. I am your wife—call my name once—just once. I could see you dead rather than this way.”

I unwound her arms respectfully, but firmly.

“Madam,” I said, severely, “pardon me if I suggest that you accept a resemblance too precipitately. It is a pity,” I went on, with an amused laugh, as the thought occurred to me, “that this Bellford and I could not be kept side by side upon the same shelf like tartrates of sodium and antimony for purposes of identification. In order to understand the allusion,” I concluded airily, “it may be necessary for you to keep an eye on the proceedings of the Druggists’ National Convention.”

The lady turned to her companion, and grasped his arm.

“What is it, Doctor Volney? Oh, what is it?” she moaned.

He led her to the door.

“Go to your room for a while,” I heard him say. “I will remain and talk with him. His mind? No, I think not—only a portion of the brain. Yes, I am sure he will recover. Go to your room and leave me with him.”

The lady disappeared. The man in dark clothes also went outside, still manicuring himself in a thoughtful way. I think he waited in the hall.

“I would like to talk with you a while, Mr. Pinkhammer, if I may,” said the gentleman who remained.

“Very well, if you care to,” I replied, “and will excuse me if I take it comfortably; I am rather tired.” I stretched myself upon a couch by a window and lit a cigar. He drew a chair nearby.

“Let us speak to the point,” he said, soothingly. “Your name is not Pinkhammer.”

“I know that as well as you do,” I said, coolly. “But a man must have a name of some sort. I can assure you that I do not extravagantly admire the name of Pinkhammer. But when one christens one’s self suddenly, the fine names do not seem to suggest themselves. But, suppose it had been Scheringhausen or Scroggins! I think I did very well with Pinkhammer.”

“Your name,” said the other man, seriously, “is Elwyn C. Bellford. You are one of the first lawyers in Denver. You are suffering from an attack of aphasia, which has caused you to forget your identity. The cause of it was over-application to your profession, and, perhaps, a life too bare of natural recreation and pleasures. The lady who has just left the room is your wife.”

“She is what I would call a fine-looking woman,” I said, after a judicial pause. “I particularly admire the shade of brown in her hair.”

“She is a wife to be proud of. Since your disappearance, nearly two weeks ago, she has scarcely closed her eyes. We learned that you were in New York through a telegram sent by Isidore Newman, a traveling man from Denver. He said that he had met you in a hotel here, and that you did not recognize him.”

“I think I remember the occasion,” I said. “The fellow called me ‘Bellford,’ if I am not mistaken. But don’t you think it about time, now, for you to introduce yourself?”

“I am Robert Volney—Doctor Volney. I have been your close friend for twenty years, and your physician for fifteen. I came with Mrs. Bellford to trace you as soon as we got the telegram. Try, Elwyn, old man—try to remember!”

“What’s the use to try?” I asked, with a little frown. “You say you are a physician. Is aphasia curable? When a man loses his memory does it return slowly, or suddenly?”

“Sometimes gradually and imperfectly; sometimes as suddenly as it went.”

“Will you undertake the treatment of my case, Doctor Volney?” I asked.

“Old friend,” said he, “I’ll do everything in my power, and will have done everything that science can do to cure you.”

“Very well,” said I. “Then you will consider that I am your patient. Everything is in confidence now—professional confidence.”

“Of course,” said Doctor Volney.

I got up from the couch. Some one had set a vase of white roses on the centre table—a cluster of white roses, freshly sprinkled and fragrant. I threw them far out of the window, and then I laid myself upon the couch again.

“It will be best, Bobby,” I said, “to have this cure happen suddenly. I’m rather tired of it all, anyway. You may go now and bring Marian in. But, oh, Doc,” I said, with a sigh, as I kicked him on the shin—“good old Doc—it was glorious!”