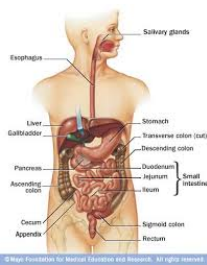


# Norm Bladdon, Private G.I.

by Con Chapman

I screwed the top back on the bottle of J.T.S. Brown bourbon I kept in my desk drawer at Mass. Gastrointestinal Hospital, or "Mass Gas" as it is more commonly known, and stared out the window at the thin sliver of the Charles River I could see from my decidedly unprestigious office.

I'd had a long, hard fall from the pinnacle of the profession, which I occupied to the exclusion of any other practitioner a paltry three years ago. It was then that I made the mistake of accepting a mouse pad, a coffee mug and a fleece pullover with the logo of Upchux, an experimental anti-reflux drug, on the left breast, right where you'd get heartburn.



The next thing you know an anonymous tipper had turned me into the State Board of Medicine for accepting an illegal gratuity, and my license was suspended for two years. Sure, I was able to make some money on the side, selling Tums to fans stupid enough to eat the Italian sausage, peppers and onions on sale outside Fenway Park,

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but I had to sell my house and my BMW. After a while they let me come back and look at X-rays--whoop-de-freaking doo--and every day my stomach would churn when I saw Mr. Anonymous Himself--George Heinz-Ward--stroll into my old office with its stunning river view. He insisted that people pronounce his first name European-style: "GAY-org," not "Jorge." If that wouldn't drive you to drink, I don't know what would.

I was tired. It was time to knock off for the day and head to Bill's Pub, voted Boston's Most Depressing Bar and Grille for the fourth consecutive year, and try to turn the broken shards of my medical dreams into beach glass with wave after wave of Bill's long-neck Budweisers.

I had turned off the fluorescent overhead light, leaving just the muted downward glare of my desk lamp to see by, when I felt the presence of something warm and humid at my door.

"Excuse me--Dr. Bladdon?" If kittens could talk, their purrs would sound like her.

"That's me," I said, turning around slowly. I didn't want to startle whatever feline presence had come to visit.

"My name is Margaret Stamfield. I've . . . heard you are an expert in the diagnosis and treatment of--digestive diseases."

I didn't know what her game was, but I sure wanted to find out. If it was "Operation," I hoped she'd make my buzzer sound.

"That's a subject on which there is a difference of opinion," I said in a flat tone. I was a bitter man, but from what I've heard women like guys who are positive, cheerful, upbeat. I can't fake emotions, but I can hide them.



"Which side are you on?" she said with a sultry, coquettish air and one eyebrow arched skyward in a look that said--"Come hither."

"I'm on my side, sweetheart," I said as I reached in my desk drawer for the J.T.S. Brown and some sample medicines. Pepto-Bismol, Zantac and my favorite--Tagamet. "Whose side are you on?" I asked as I poured us both two fingers of booze into Old Fashioned glasses and plopped a pill in each.



"I . . . I don't know," she said, taking her glass and knocking back half the contents in a single gulp. It took her a second to recover. "I was seeing Dr. Heinz-Ward, but . . ."

"But what?"

"He . . . importuned me."

I pulled my College Edition of Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language down from my bookshelf. "This is a helluva time for obfuscation," I said with irritation.

"I'm sorry," she said, and she was sniffing now. "I just can't bring myself to use clear, straightforward language. It's too painful."



"Here it is," I said after flipping through the first eight letters of the alphabet and part of the ninth. "'To trouble with requests or demands; urge or entreat persistently or repeatedly.' Have I hit it yet?"

"Keep going."

"'[Rare] to ask for urgently; demand. [Obs.] to trouble; annoy.'"

"That's it."

"But that's an obsolete usage," I said, a little skeptical.

"I'm an old-fashioned girl," she said, and then, finally and completely, she broke down, her calculated facade of reserve cracking into a million little pieces.

"There, there," I said as I moved to comfort her.

"Where, where?"



"That's an expression. It just means I'm going to try and make it better."

"Oh, will you?"

She gazed up into my eyes with a crazy, mad look that said she was mine. So I smothered her with kisses, like a Salisbury steak that's suffocating under the weight of plump, juicy mushrooms and gravy in the Swanson TV dinner that would spend the rest of this night in my freezer.

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After an hour of poking and probing her esophagus, I thought I'd found the root of the problem. "It's your sphincter," I said with clinical finality.

"But you haven't been looking at *that* end of me, have you?" she said, all flustered modesty.

"You've got another sphincter, sweetheart," I said. "And it's suffering from peptidergic innervation. You've got Hirschsprung's Disease."

Her face took on a deathly pallor. "Is that bad?"

"Well, it sure ain't good," I said, echoing the Duke Ellington-Paul Francis Webster standard.

"You shouldn't say 'ain't'," she said. I figured she was upset and taking it out on me.

"You'd be surprised," I said, yielding no ground on a question of usage I get worked up about. "Middle-class characters in Jane Austen novels use it--why can't I?"



*"Ain't that amazin'!"*

"I'm sorry," she said, slumping against me with exhaustion after sixty minutes of being poked at like a baked potato. "Is there anything you can do for me?" I knew what I wanted to do, and I think she wanted me to do it, too. "Do you want to . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Do what?"

"Do do that voodoo that you do so well?"

"So . . . you've heard about me?" I asked.

"I'm out of your network--I had to get a referral."

"Oh. In that case . . ."



She moved her hand to her bodice and began to unbutton her fabulously unstylish Mary Astor-style dress. "Let's finish what we started," she said. I could feel my stomach churning with gastric acids. It felt so right, but it was so . . .

"Hello, Bladdon." It was Heinz-Ward, looking like the cat that just ate the first robin of spring.

"Hello, GAY-org," I said with a sneer.

"Don't let me stop you," he said. "I'm sure the Board of Registration in Medicine will want a full report on your unauthorized practice of medicine--and extend your suspension!"

"Oh, Gay-org," Margaret said, and she threw herself at the little twerp, dwarfing him with the pendulous, heaving breasts that lay beneath the frilly lace ruffle at her neck. "It's not what you think!"

"It's not? Did he accept a fee for medical services?"



It was my turn to get emotional. "Maybe in your twisted little mind it was, but not in mine," I said. "It was love--something you'll never understand, because all you care about is publishing boring articles in leading medical journals that no one will ever read, and which you don't even write."

"He doesn't?" Margaret asked, incredulous.

"Are you kidding?" I replied with a sneer. "This guy couldn't write a grocery list. He shoves all the grunt work off on me."

"You're . . . a writer?" Margaret asked. Whatever she thought of me before, she thought more of me now.

"That stuff I was telling you before?" I began.

"About 'ain't' and Duke Ellington and Jane Austen?"

"No--about peptidergic innervation of the internal anal sphincter in Hirschsprung's Disease. That's mine--I wrote it!"

"The article that appeared in the Journal of Gastrointestinal Surgery? Volume 11, no. 3?" she asked, her eyes glimmering like reflections of stars on a moonlit night in a kid's wading pool.

"The same."

She turned to Heinz-Ward with cold, repressed fury. "You . . . you fraud. You . . . little . . ."

"Wait," he said. "Don't get mad at me!"

"Why the hell shouldn't I?" she demanded.

"Because I just came back from a golf outing sponsored by Procter and Gamble, and they gave me this free, pink Pepto-Bismol make-up kit. It's all yours!"

*From the forthcoming "Everyday Noir."*

