

'Old Ready.'

(James C. Purdy, in 'Youth's Companion'.)

John won his odd title when he was a small patient in the children's ward of the Samaritan Hospital. His broken arm was not yet out of the sling before he was helping Nurse Romaine care for the other children, and the children straightway hit upon his name that fitted him so perfectly, 'Old Ready.' That was ten years ago, and he was still in the hospital. The broken arm got well speedily, but before that happened it was found that the willing worker could not be spared.

First, he was put on the rolls as errand-boy, but he soon outworked those narrow limits and was promoted to higher responsibilities. Step by step he had come up and up since then; the position he held now it would be hard to define exactly, for he found work to do, and plenty of it, in every department within his reach. That had been the case all along; the thing that needed doing was the thing he took in hand, asking no questions, waiting for no bidding. He was still the 'Old Ready' to all in the hospital, from Dr. Ellis, the chief surgeon, down.

Promotion is a pleasant thing for boy or man; all the pleasanter for John because his mother, hard at work in the mill, and his sister Katy, the busy little housekeeper, had such pride and delight in his advancement. He had a hope of making them prouder still; a day, not on the calendar yet, shone away off in the future; the day that should advance him to the pinnacle of his ambition, the position of assistant steward. He was studying hard to fit himself for that.

In the fury of a winter storm, when the bitterest night of half a century was settling upon the world, John was shut up in his room, studying as hard as he had worked all day. Unless specially summoned, he need not open his door again that night. He heard the ambulance arriving with a new case, and he heard the bearers carry the litter into the children's ward.

'Poor little soul!' he muttered. 'I hope it isn't a case of freezing.' A glow of thankfulness warmed him; Katy snug and warm at home, was in no danger of freezing. 'Right sort of night for that, though.'

It was indeed the 'right sort of night for that.' The air was thick with a driving white mist; the ambulance was like a snow-drift on wheels; the litter-bearers and the troubled mother beside them, plunged through deep snow as they came up the steps. In a moment the men were out again and the ambulance was driven away; already there had been another call. John, seeing nothing of all this, only knowing it by the sounds, went on with his studying. Doctor Steel and Nurse Romaine could deal with a case of freezing without his help.

True, but this was not a case of freezing and they could not deal with it; the little form on the cot before them had been cruelly torn by machinery.

'I was working late, and she had just come from the house, bringing me my supper,' the poor mother explained, wringing her hands. 'I was telling her she shouldn't have done that in all the storm, though it's but round the corner, and while I was saying it, and while she was laughing and making light of the

storm—she's always so brave and good!—the belt caught her somehow, and—oh dear! oh dear! You can save her to me, can't you, doctor? You must save her to me!'

'Only one man in the state can do that,' said Dr. Steele, after a swift examination. 'Ellis can, if we can get him here. We must get him, for the case is beyond me.'

He hurried out into the hall. John, in his room, heard him giving a sharp order to Negley, the night messenger; then he heard Negley, as usual, piling up difficulties in the way of what he was told to do.'

'I'm willing enough to start out and try it, Doc. If you can tell me where to go, I'll go, but you say yourself there ain't no clue to follow. And to go wad-in' around through all this snow on a wild-goose chase, why—'

'Stop your grumbling and go!' With that fierce growl the doctor strode back into the ward.

John needed no more calling than this; in two minutes he was out in the hall, looking like an Arctic explorer. Negley was taking his comfort, with no notion of going out except under stronger pressure. He grinned derisively at sight of the high boots and fur cap, but a fellow who would volunteer to go out in such a storm as this was worth seeing under the circumstances.

'Good for you! This lets me out!' he remarked, and instantly he slipped off to a warm corner, quite out of everybody's way.

Just in time, for Dr. Steele had bounced out again to put spurs to his lagging messenger. He saw John, laughed in huge relief, took everything for granted at once, and forthwith gave his orders.

'Ready, I want you to find Dr. Ellis. I don't know where he is, and nobody at his house knows, but find him. Tell him to come here without losing a minute to save life. Tell him that—to save life.'

'All right, sir.'

On his way out, John saw Nurse Romaine knocking at the door of his room. She saw him at the same time and hurried to him.

'I was after you to come into the ward,' she said. 'But if you are going after Dr. Ellis that will be better. You will say so yourself when—afterward. Much better, for you will find him.' She opened the door for him and the blast swept him out.

She shut the door and went back to the ward. 'It is a cruel thing, all round,' she said to herself, 'but this is the kindest part of it all. No pocket can hold the wage of the willing worker, and I pray it may be paid to him in full!'

What a storm this was that John had come out to battle with! He was full of life, and he loved a sharp tussle with the weather, but there was something too much of this. The intense cold found him out through all his warm clothing, and the wind knocked him this way and that in spite of all resistance. Those were trifles that did not count; he could fight the wind, and the fight would keep him warm; the snow was the only thing he really feared, it hindered him so. Of course, he could master the worst of the deepening drifts, if he had time, but there was the trouble; time was a precious thing when Dr. Ellis was sent for to save life.

In front of the Albemarle Hotel, half

a square from the hospital, he got footing on a car; it carried him a few rods, then it stopped in a hopeless drift and he got off, and that was the last car he saw that night. Well, even that short ride had almost frozen him; floundering on foot would keep his blood stirring, at any rate. Even so, his fingers and toes ached with the cold, his nose and ears smarted, his face tingled painfully under the lashing of the frozen snow.

In spite of his best efforts, he was a long time in getting to the Brotherhood Hospital, and that was really only the starting-place he had set for himself. Dr. Ellis came here every evening, and here the clue must be picked up. In two minutes John was out in the storm again, the clue in hand; the doctor had been there, and had gone off to one of his many 'poor cases,' in Prince street. That was afar off, and John could get there only on foot. No matter, the clue led there and he followed the clue with a light heart and in perfect confidence.

He followed the trail to Beppo's house in Rose street; then here, there and everywhere. Dr. Ellis, great surgeon and physician as he was, was at the call of whosoever had need of him, night or day. So, for half the night as it seemed to him, the weary messenger pursued the chase through the hindering drifts, never losing the trail of the man he tracked, but never coming nearer to him.

The storm grew worse, if that were possible. Even on windswept spaces the snow was more than ankle deep; in other places the boy must labor through drifts that swallowed him to the waist. Everywhere he must fight his own way; not a car was moving and no vehicle or horse was to be had. He tried to whistle as he plunged onward, but the wind out-matched him at that and drove the whistle down his throat. That was just as well, for his whistling had but little spirit in it. He acknowledged to himself that the fight had become rather wearing. In truth, it was cruelly hard, and the long fierce struggle was telling fearfully at last, even on his sturdy young strength. He was cold now, terribly cold, and he never in his life had been so tired. He would not confess it, but by this time all of him was exhausted except his courage and his will.

Then the crushing climax came, the stunning hopeless word was spoken. Another messenger, coming in a sleigh with horses enough to drag it through drifts house-high, had found Dr. Ellis first and had carried him quite out of reach. Carried him where? To the Albemarle Hotel—to within half a square of poor John's starting-place.

What to do now? Even John confessed that he could not possibly conquer again these terrible drifts; his feet might as well have been lead for all the life or feeling that there was in them, and he was tired beyond words. The Albemarle had telephone connection! Off to the nearest telephone station, then. If the wires were not working, then, indeed, he must give up; but he would not give up till he had tried this last chance. After that he might rest.

He must rest before that. He had hardly started in his new course when, for the first time, he fell down. He got his frozen feet under him and struggled up again, but only to fall back helpless into the smothering drift. He had twisted his