

THE FAMILY DOCTOR

A Story That May Have Come True

By J. ADDISON REID

NOT for years had George Ferguson had to do so much of the manual labour on his farm as he was doing this summer. His three stalwart sons had taken most of that burden off his shoulders. But now all three were in khaki at Camp Borden. He counted on having their help for harvest, when the farmer soldiers would be given leave, but he had to get through the haying with the aid of only old Charlie, who had long been a retainer on the Ferguson farm.

And now with the constant forking of hay the old feeling of numbness, which at intervals for a long time had troubled him in the little finger of his left hand, began to cause him serious discomfort. His wife urged him to consult the local physician, but he stubbornly refused. The only occasion on which he had ever required the attentions of a doctor were further back than his memory carried. He had several times had to summon the doctor to the house, but it was always for Mrs. Ferguson, and at these times he usually retreated to the barn, where he pretended to be working at various tasks until someone brought out word that it was a boy and that both Mrs. Ferguson and the baby were doing fine.

Now, no persuasion on his wife's part could induce him to consult the doctor about his finger. In truth, he was much more alarmed about it than he cared to acknowledge; he was afraid that if the doctor once saw it he would want to amputate, and Ferguson would sooner face the prospect of dying by inches than that of having a single inch cut off at one slice by the surgeon's knife.

But now the situation was becoming serious. He doggedly persisted in keeping at the work, although each day it caused him more and more pain.

"Well, George Kirby Ferguson," at length exclaimed his wife, "if you won't do anything for yourself, I'll have to do it for you. I'm going to write this very day to the doctor of the Family Beacon and ask him what to do."

"Doctors don't know anything about such things," he replied, impatiently. "They're just looking for chances to cut you up for practice. That paper doctor can't cut it off anyway, so you can do as you like."

And she did write. She told in detail, albeit ramblingly and with repetition, all the symptoms, and gave a full account of the old injury to his elbow which her husband had suffered when a boy and which he had always maintained was the cause of the trouble in his finger.

THE first week passed without any answer to her question. Next week on Family Beacon day the mail carrier did not have to place the Ferguson mail in the R. F. D. box; Mrs. Ferguson was at the gate to take it from his hands.

Hastening into the house, she nervously spread the paper out on the kitchen table and turned its pages until she came to the one with the column headed, "The Family Doctor." Yes, there it was, her long letter condensed into eight short lines, and the answer almost equally brief, with many words she did not understand, but with the directions for treatment apparently clear and explicit.

This is what she read:

G. K. F., Ont.—Man, fifty-eight, in good health, suffers partial numbness of small finger on left hand. When hand is in certain positions it causes much pain. When patient was about twelve years of age he was struck on elbow. Would this have an effect on present condition of hand? Ans.—It is probable that cicatricial tissue is compressing the ulnar nerve at the seat of the old injury. Dissecting out the nerve might relieve the present symptoms; but fresh symptoms might follow formation of new scar tissue. Iodine internally (two to five grains of the pat. iodide well diluted three times daily) and the tincture of iodine to the seat of injury might cause absorption.

"Tincture of iodine to the seat of injury."

She knew what tincture of iodine was. She had a small bottle of it, the contents of which she applied with a feather to her corns. Why hadn't she thought of this herself? She could begin to use it at once.

"Iodine internally." That must be something different from what she had on her medicine shelf, or it would not have been mentioned separately.

"Two to five grains of the pat. iodide." The last d was evidently a mistake for n. Patent iodine, that's what she must ask for at the drug store. It must be a powder.

"Two to five grains." Her husband's case was getting serious; he had better have the five grains. She would get the druggist to put it up in powders of the proper amounts.

A momentary doubt crossed her mind. Her little

W HETHER this story is actually true, or not, depends a good deal on what may have been the experiences of some people who read it, or of other people they happen to know about. This much is absolute fact: that the newspaper paragraph which Mrs. Ferguson clipped from the medical column of the Family Beacon appeared word for word and letter for letter in a weekly paper of Dominion-wide circulation under date of August the sixteenth, nineteen hundred and sixteen.

bottle of iodine was marked "Poison." But the paper said "patent iodine." Doubtless this meant that the poison had been taken out; or else the tincture part of the bottle's contents was the poison and the iodine without the tincture would be for internal use. Anyway, the Family Beacon doctor wouldn't have prescribed it if it hadn't been all right.

She went over the paragraph again very carefully to make sure she had it right, for she didn't intend to let the druggist know the source of her recipe or to tell him that she had been writing to the paper for medical advice. The Fergusons did not have a reputation for closeness and she didn't intend to have it thought that they were too mean to employ Dr. Macarthur, but had to get their medical advice free from a newspaper. All the same, she cut the paragraph out and placed it carefully in her purse.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ferguson," exclaimed the druggist, coming forward to meet his customer.

"Good morning, Mr. Ross," replied the lady, not quite at her ease. Her conscience was still bothering her a little about not consulting Dr. Macarthur, and, good honest soul that she was, she couldn't help showing something of this mental conflict. But then, George had positively refused to let the doctor see his finger, so what could she do?

"I want to get some patent iodine," she stated.

The druggist looked somewhat puzzled. There was even a trace of suspicion in her face, could she have read it, for her slight agitation had not passed unnoticed.

"Is it tincture of iodine you want, Mrs. Ferguson?" he asked.

"No, I have that at home; this is a powder."

"Iodine comes in crystals. Some of them are pretty small, but you'd hardly call them powder. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, that's it; and Mr. Ross, will you put it up for me in papers with five grains in each."

"What do you want it for, Mrs. Ferguson?"

His suspicions were now clearly aroused, and yet his customer was one of the best known and most irreproachable farmers' wives in the township, and there might still be some reasonable explanation of her agitated efforts to purchase a deadly poison. She also perceived his attitude, but attributed it to a different cause. She knew that Dr. Macarthur was a half owner of the drug store, and did the druggist suspect that she had been writing to the paper doctor for medical advice instead of consulting his partner?

Well, anyway, she was under no obligation to consult him; this was a free country; she could write to the paper if she wanted to, and she didn't have to tell what she wanted to do with everything she bought at a store.

"I want it for medicine," she answered shortly.

"You know you'll have to sign for it in the poison book, Mrs. Ferguson, and you'll have to tell me exactly what you want to do with it before I can sell it to you."

"Poison!" she exclaimed, now thoroughly frightened. "It isn't poison. The doctor told me to give it to him internally three times a day well diluted."

"Give it to whom?"

"Why, to George—to Mr. Ferguson."

"What doctor told you that? It wasn't Dr. Macarthur?"

There was something in his voice and words that frightened her through and through. There came over her a wild desire to tell him everything and to make sure that she wasn't making some terrible fatal mistake.

"It was the Family Beacon doctor," she answered, trembling; fumbling at the same time in her purse; "I wrote to the paper; here it is," pulling out the newspaper clipping and handing it over the counter. The druggist took it and read it over carefully.

As he was doing so, Dr. Macarthur came into the store.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ferguson," he said, cheerfully, holding out his hand.

She took the proffered hand limply and looked up in his face in a frightened way, making no verbal return of the doctor's salutation.

"Is there anything wrong, Mrs. Ferguson?" he inquired, with professional solicitude. "It's a long time since I've had a call to attend the Ferguson family."

"Just cast your eye over that, Doctor," said the druggist, passing the clipping to him. "Mrs. Ferguson asked me for patent iodine and said that what she wanted was the crystals put up in five grain doses for internal use."

"Hmm. Hmm," murmured the doctor, reading over the printed lines. "He evidently intended to prescribe pot. iodide—potassium iodide, that is, Mrs. Ferguson. This would hardly be excusable in a formal prescription to be filled by a druggist. Scattered broadcast to the public this way, it's nothing but da—, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Ferguson—it's a piece of criminal carelessness."

The frightened lady was regaining her self-possession. She had evidently been saved from the risk of poisoning her husband and now what was bothering her most was her first fear that she would be thought too penurious to pay for medical advice.

"I tried and tried to get him to come to you, Doctor, but he wouldn't, so I—," and she told him the whole story.

"But now he'll have to," she declared, with determination. "Why, here he is now," she added, as the tall figure of George Ferguson appeared in the doorway. He had driven his wife in to the village and proceeded with other errands while she was in the drug store.

"But would it really have killed him, Doctor?" she asked, in a frightened tone, as her husband came to her side.

"Well, three grains have been known to be a fatal dose. It's about as poisonous as cyanide of potassium or bichloride of mercury. But even if you had tried to give it to him you would have found that it refuses to dissolve in water. It is only soluble in alcohol—that is the tincture of iodine—or in a solution of potassium iodide in water, the drug that this newspaper man intended to prescribe for you. When you found it wouldn't dissolve you would probably have become suspicious yourself. Anyway it's lucky you told Mr. Ross all about it."

"Your wife has just discovered, Ferguson," he continued, turning to the narrowly escaped victim of wifely solicitude and professional carelessness, "that this newspaper doctor isn't quite reliable."

"I don't know what this is all about," said Ferguson, who had been looking inquiringly from one to the other, "but I didn't intend to take the stuff anyway. If I've got to have a doctor, I'll go to one that I can see and who can see me, and not to one in a newspaper office five hundred miles away. I wish you'd take a look at this finger, Doctor."

"Just come back to the office. Will you come, too, Mrs. Ferguson? I think we may be able to do something better than killing Ferguson off quick with poison. Heard from the boys lately?"

"They're coming back this week for the harvest," said the old man, as the three filed into the Doctor's office.

Worried About the Coal

COAL has recently gone up 50 cents a ton in some eastern cities, owing to increased cost of labour, mining and so forth. The cost of coal is now \$8.50 a ton in Toronto—though very much more than that, up to \$10.50 a ton in Winnipeg. Meanwhile prohibition in Ontario is only a few days distant.

"What are you going to do about liquor this winter, Tom?" asked a man down town of a friend of his.

"Why?" said the other.

"Prohibition," said the other.

"Oh—that's not bothering me. I'm more concerned over the coal question."

"Yes, yes, that's another trouble. Price gone up again?"

"No, that's not it," said the other man reflectively. "But I've got my cellar so cramful of booze there's no room for any coal."