

A STEP IN TIME.

Mrs. Britton was a chronic affliction to herself and to her acquaintances, within which later class her friends and relatives could be easily included. Invalids generally exemplify the perfect work of patience in one or two ways—either through their own lives or through those of their attendants. Mrs. Britton had always had quite enough to attend to in her own life; if any lessons of restraint were taught in her vicinity she was more apt to be the good than the model. As a disciplinary force she had worked most lasting good. Maids had gone forth into the world from her sick-room to meet the ill of life like long lost friends that had assumed some base disguise as a jest. Physicians had acquired a proper estimation of their services through frantic desires for some sort of revenge. Clergymen had been taught that rare ghostly consolation which reacts like a balm after having received a rebuff. What, then, ailed Mrs. Britton? She was fat, she was lazy, she was greedy, one of those emancipated maids have said. She ate to mounch, she drank to mounch, she would not exercise; and she stored away irritability from very indulgence. Mrs. Britton combined exquisite sensibilities with unusual physical development and plethora of blood, the physicians would have smilingly stated. She required rest and composure on one hand, while on the other her material demands had to be met by systematic and thorough nourishing. A difficult case, a peculiar case, fortunate only in the circumstance that great wealth permitted recourse to all known alleviations. And the clergyman, with grace acquired through her exertions, could they be expected to say what they really thought, or, indeed, to think what they knew? Should one of them in a moment of unrestrained confession: She is possessed by a legion, and their chief is selfishness. His remorseful prayer, "Lord, have mercy on me, a miserable sinner," would doubtless have been answered. The maids went forth though the wages were liberal, and those friendly ill a myriad. The clergyman from time to time exchanged parishes or were sent to Europe against an impending decline. And the physicians—well, they shrewdly recommended a change, now the mountains, now the woodland, and now the salt air, with medicinal directions as to diet, hygiene, medication, to be sent daily by mail; and then jingled their fees gaily in their pockets like schoolboys enjoying a hard earned vacation. But though maids escaped, and clergyman became fatigued and physicians intrigued, Ruth remained in constant service; for Ruth was the invalid's deceased husband's only child. It happened one Summer that Dr. Zanco, the physician in charge—and he charged well, too—fearing lest his strength would not be up to his needs, he thought himself of Nantakese as just the retreat for this intolerable yet invaluable patient. The island was remote, with but sparse communication by mail and with none by wire. It was healthful—that was a main point, for a golden egg is never so impossible as when the goose has been killed—and the heavy salt air was supposed to be tranquilizing for—well, to speak plainly, for temper. "Go, by all means, my dear Madam," urged the doctor. "I have here from the agent a description of just the cottage you wish; ample, in perfect order, with the latest sanitary improvements, situated on the cliff, with view of the harbour and the ocean unsurpassed. You may trust me to send the most explicit directions with such medicines as the daily reports from your doctor may indicate. Dr. Ruggles, the local physician, and I, as a matter of course, will cooperate to the extent of his abilities, which are by no means small. I would recommend a generous diet of course, yet moderate, with the attempt at least once each day, say in the cool of early evening, at a stroll on the piazza. "What nonsense—that driving nonsense!" screamed Mrs. Britton; "when you know that I can't put one foot in front of the other. If you can give me no wiser advice, doctor, you might as well stay at home and send the office boy, the cook, the scullion, the stableman." "Tut, tut," said the doctor, soothingly. "You are so impatient, so vivid. You think so rapidly; your imagination is so unconfined. I was but picturing one of the happy results which I will secure, from your visit. Meanwhile, any precipitate action would be highly imprudent. You have your wheel-chair and your two porters, Pomp and Jerry, and Mrs. Hurlbert, the nurse, and, above all, Ruth."

Jerry assigned to seats in the ordinary coach, and the largest parlor compartment had been converted into a coach for the invalid, with a drug shop dispersed around, and Mrs. Hurlbert and Ruth equipped with fans and thermometers and atomizers, and instructed as to temperature and stated draughts of stimulants, then, when the train rolled out and was absolutely gone beyond the recall of that pudgy hand or that cracked, imperative voice, Dr. Zanco wiped his brow and ejaculated: "Thank God," and went home to enter an important item in his ledger. Perhaps the consciousness of a day well spent, despite of trials, moved his heart to pity; for he composed himself to sleep that night he murmured, "Poor Ruth!" A few passengers for Nantakese Island already aboard the Queen were most interested in a little sense after the train had arrived at Cape station. Down the wharf in a rolling chair came a vast red-faced woman, wrapped and unwrapped in a multiplicity of costly shawls and propelled by two colored servants. At one side was an elderly woman in black, solitary, with a fan, and behind a tall young girl bearing a vinaigrette with the impressive air of a Princess held in hopeless captivity. So at least thought a melancholy Goth, who was leaning against the rail on the upper deck, and who, as his was his own, immediately applied the reflection to his own personality. "She perfectly exemplifies my own feelings," he murmured, and then he sighed. The gangway was strotched, but at the instant of the car's approach the crew were engaged in stowing some cargo within. The porters were evidently flurried, resenting the vehement and contradictory orders of their mistress on each other. To their frightened gaze the plank seemed too narrow and fragile, just as to impartial eyes it was sufficiently wide and strong. The patient was arbitrary and obstinate, insisting on proceeding the more the man held back. Then it was, when the carriage was at the verge and required no strength to push, that the young girl calmly waved the porters away and assumed the handle. Then it was that these men in retreating scuffled and stumbled. Then it was that the young man above, fearing lest the plank should slip, swung down and grasped one of its ropes. And the plank did begin to slip in very truth; but before a catastrophe could occur a dozen pairs of stout arms, outstretched from the channells, firmly lifted on board car, patient young girl, plank, and all. And so no one was harmed, except that the man's mouth, and he clung so convulsively to the rope that he was twitched off his feet, his limbs marked, his clothing torn, and his hat irretrievably smashed. "Tis ever thus," he muttered, as he trod himself away in an obscure nook on the forward deck. After the steamer was under way the young girl came on deck and accosted the redoubt. "You tried so hard to help us," she said. "I thank you so much, and trust you are not hurt. My name is Ruth Britton, and we are bound to Nantakese for the Summer. Perhaps we may have a moment's conversation." "Doctor," said the gloomy youth. "Better let him enquire alone. Of course, I tried, and consequently I failed. My name is Dawkins, and if this fatal appellation doesn't warn you, why, nothing will." And he sighed as if there were a fog ahead, and he the cautionary horn. Ruth gazed in some perplexity as to what was the particular form of consolation required for so mysterious a case. At this juncture a man who had been seated near by stepped forward, and addressed her. "I beg your pardon," began the stranger, "but I couldn't help, or at least, I didn't help overreaching your name. I am sure you must be Dr. Miss Britton regarding whose mother Dr. Zanco has written me at some length. I am Dr. Ruggles, at your service." Ruth saw before her a tall, broad-shouldered man of thirty, dressed rather carelessly, and in a certain conformity with the bluntness of his speech. She saw an honest face, shadowed by a close, heavy beard, and lighted by frank, almost merry brown eyes, and she felt that she had found a friend. So she extended her hand, and responded almost heartily to his greeting. Perhaps latent loneliness inspired the intuition, for youth is ever in the demands for sympathy. "Mother is lying down in the cabin," she continued. "If you would like to see her now—" and then she stepped in sudden confusion, as she perceived that Dawkins had crept back into his nook, and there was displaying such signal signs of disfavor toward the new-comer, as could be indicated by scowls and furtive fist shakes. Dr. Ruggles followed her glance. "Did I drive your friend away?" he asked. "You seem to have driven that young man away," replied Ruth, rather pointedly; "but that need not keep you from your first, professional call on my mother. You will find it the pleasantest of the many you will doubtless make."

Ruth complied rather sulkily. "I'm sure there's nothing I can tell you about my mother," she rejoined; "nothing at least which you would care to believe." "Why not?" "Because I think all doctors like to look on the gloomy side; and, after all, I don't wonder, for all their shops are situated there." "Miss Britton," said Ruggles, firmly. "I don't like any such speech any more than I admire the flippancy way in which you refer to your invalid parent." "Perhaps not," retorted the girl, excitedly; "but I'm sick of dissimulation, and I do not crave your admiration. Let me tell you one thing—for all physicians seek an honest diagnosis, do they not?—there is nothing in the world the matter with my mother, excepting—excepting—oh, I don't know what," and she hurried away. As Ruggles sat and pondered over this singular statement, Dawkins came out from his nook and over to his side. "If I thought you had intended to be rude," he began, "I'd teach you a lesson, Sir." "Are you deaf? Is everybody deaf?" interrupted Ruggles, irritably. "I never met such a variety of people. I was nothing to do with you, young man, and mark me, I won't stand an instant of insolence. As for my lessons you may have to teach, devote them to yourself, there is ample need—"

"Oh, you know about me," cried Dawkins; "you and the whole world. Where shall I find a spot to hide from the contempt, the derision—and he struck his face so violently, with such a gesture of ungovernable despair, that Dr. Ruggles straight-way became compassionate. "Come, now, my good fellow," the doctor urged. "I know nothing whatsoever about you, except that you seem to misjudge very business-like into which I just had with that young lady. Sit down and let's see if we can't form more friendly relations over a social smoke." Dr. Ruggles possessed a certain personal quality which was very winning. Likely in the pseudo-scientific jargon of to-day, it would be termed magnetism, but in simpler, truer speech it may be described as kindness. Dawkins hesitated, gulped nervously, sat down, as if determined not to be moved, and, lighting a cigar, puffed vigorously. "My name is Dawkins," he said at length; "Ebenezer, Dawkins, and now the truth is out." "I care nothing, except your name, which you may be sure I'll remember," rejoined Ruggles, pleasantly. "What I haven't you heard? Don't you read the newspapers?" "Never. I'm a busy man." "Then you see not aware that I made a wretched fiasco of the public exhibition I gave two days since, since in the city, of an invention which has been my life work." "No, indeed. Perhaps you exaggerate." "At all events, won't you tell me of your disappointment?" "And you won't laugh?" "I respect intelligent endeavor," said Ruggles heartily. "Success is only an incident like clothing to an honest man." "But perhaps you may question the intelligence? However, I'm beginning to like you, and I'm so forlorn, it will be a comfort for me to talk. Know then, that since boyhood I have devoted myself to electricity, and its generation and use through the conservation of natural force. You, as a physiologist, know that every time you lift your finger, for instance, a certain force is exerted, and expended, you would probably add. But dissipated would be the more correct term. Nothing is ever wasted, except alas! my career, my life! But to resume, with the resolve, too, of keeping separate the practical from the emotional I have held the theory that the adjuncts of living heretofore deemed absolutely essential like eating and walking, are such a drain on the vital resources that the energies are all-nigh exhausted for the most, spiritual undertaking. Hence, I reasoned, if I can make any muscular movement do for two, I shall be a greater benefactor than he who causes two blades to sprout in the place of one. Do you apprehend me? Alas! I sometimes feel that I should be apprehended and incarcerated with the mentally un sound. Yet, believe me, there is virtue in my theory. I have proved it even in my defeat. Inflamed, then, with this ambition, I set my attention on the attempt to make the lifting of a foot do the work of putting it forward. That would make walking easier, wouldn't it? And see how the simple idea developed itself. Imagine a storage of such force under perfect control, and whether might it not lead? To say an extraneous glide certainly; to flying in all probability. Well, then, with infinite pains I constructed a pair of electric shoes, not differing in appearance from the shoes of commerce, but containing such a reservoir for energy, that the mere act of lifting the foot sent each one forward to the extent of the leg. In connection with these, I prepared a pair of wings fitted to the shoulders, and intended solely for the purpose of steadying. Does not such a conception, and such an execution indicate a trained intellect, if not genius? And yet, which I vainly thought all things ready, that had I neglected the most important detail of all. In the first flush of success I announced a public exhibition of my wonderful invention in the City Park two days ago. There was an immense crowd present, with a hundred Thomases to one Peter; but I needed not their doubts. I donned shoes; I leaped, I kicked; and then I fairly flitted over the lawn. Ah, it was beautiful to see me. The people rose as one man, and burst into tumultuous applause, while father and factor I sped, and lost and less did my feet depend on the ground for support. To say that I felt like an archangel, is to use the most moderate simile that occurs to my humility. Yet even as I soared, of a sudden the fearful thought came to me, how was I ever going to stop? My limbs shot out with such impetus that a large portion of the power was conserved and thus kept exerting and re-exerting itself. Besides, I had forgot to provide a brake. Of course, I might take off my shoes—that is, I might if I could—but the wings prevented me from reaching them. "Speech!" "Stop and make a speech!" the spectators shouted; and then they eyed me, appreciated my predicament, for they looked on me as a man who did Roman populace while holding down their thumbs over some poor defeated gladiator imploring for life. They did not reek of my peril, which was imminent, I assure you. For aught I know, I might have been carried high into the air, and even now be treading the firmament, had not a lucky impulse directed me toward the lake, into which I plunged head first. I am an expert swimmer, and by persistently sticking my feet out of the water I managed to induce some bystanders to hold my legs and take off those fatal, fatal shoes. And thus I escaped, but to receive as the meed of ceaseless altruism to offset the universal custom from which I am even now fleeing. My zeal ran away with him, commented one newspaper: "The only kind of brake the inventor seem to have was a bad break, jested another, and every one re-echoed the taunts. Can you wonder that I seemed somewhat abrupt and churlish to you?" "Dr. Ruggles, indeed I have suffered."

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So I'm going to confide in you. When Mr. Britton married this woman Ruth was a little child, and he a silly old man. An accident occurred which Mrs. Britton showed some bravery and received some hurt, both of which her husband greatly exaggerated. He loved that she had saved his life almost at the expense of her own; that her nervous system had received such a shock that for the future she would be an absolutely helpless invalid. Was it surprising, then, that when he died—which he did in the very height of his infatuation—his will provided that while she remained his widow and was totally incapacitated by her injury, she should have the use of his vast property with power of disposal, but that in default of either of these conditions one-half should vest at once in Ruth with the remainder after the said mother's death. Was it strange, too, that this woman should have immediately determined that through no act or admission would she deprive herself of this estate? After all, her part has not been difficult. Her very appetites have tended to make her sluggish. She has been able to gratify every caprice at the simple cost of never taking a step. But her porters, her servants, her poor step-daughter!

beyond endurance. The ridiculous old-thing must go back to the house and bring me there. Very well; Mrs. Hurlbert fairly flew on her mission, it seemed, she returned so quickly with another pair. These were done and laced, but proved no more to the invalid's liking. Her fury culminated; she roared, she howled, she roared, beating her feet together and against the rung of the chair. Then a strange event occurred. Despite of all resistance of her will, Mrs. Britton suddenly sprang to her feet and began to circle through the trees. At first she gyrated slowly; but gradually so increased in speed as to scarcely touch the sward. Her attendants stood bewildered; all, except Mrs. Hurlbert, who drew a kodak out from her shawl and leveled it with the accuracy of a reporter. When it seemed that the invalid was about to soar to heights unimagined, then from a thicket, Dr. Ruggles and Dawkins emerged, and firmly held her, until Mrs. Hurlbert had dutifully cast off the electric shoes. These latter straightway bounded forward and away into the sea, ricocheting far over the waves. "It's base conspiracy," vociferated Mrs. Britton, so wild with anger as to see no one near her except Mrs. Hurlbert. "You did something to my shoes, you know you did."

"That's a likely story," retorted Mrs. Hurlbert, "when opposed to what we all can testify to. You simply were so ugly that you forgot to control yourself, and that's the truth. How would you like the picture I just snapped exhibited in court? Why, a skirt-dancer isn't a circumstance to it. You fancied I was a poor, down-trodden mental, now, didn't you? too spiritless to ever leave you? Ugh! you old devil; I've been in the employ of Miss Ruth's friends for years. You might as well yield. Here's Dr. Ruggles himself saw you operating in a way most shamefully for a woman of your age."

Then, for the first time, Mrs. Britton perceived that the young doctor stood by her side; the young doctor whose generous countenance had awakened within her obscure but, and long since dormant, a contrition struggled within her for mastery; at length she threw herself on the physician's manly chest, gasping. "I have done wrong; but I'll repent; I'll be good, if you only won't desert me."

And at the same juncture, Mrs. Hurlbert breathed in the young man's ear, "I should have warned you more definitely; now you know why she was so amiable."

Foot Dr. Ruggles; he was so embarrassed; so uncertain, he wouldn't hurt any one's feelings for the world; but, then, hadn't he just begun to nourish other hopes; and of all things did he want to marry an elderly, discredited widow? Alas, for fatal kindness! He made an evasive answer, and suffered himself to be led back to the house like a highly intelligent lamb prepared for a protracted slaughter. There should be some special protective law for tender-hearted young men who can't say No. And, following slowly, Dawkins triumphantly explained to Ruth the details of his wonderful invention. "I couldn't have managed it, he confessed, "had it not been for her balloon sleeves." They answered for wings, you know. And if Ruth smiled encouragingly, who would begrudge a victor his meed? Marriages are made in heaven, and if Ruth and Ruggles each made at length the choice which to the worldly seemed unwise that merely proved that the Divine economy is not subject to the limitations of human judgment—N. Y. Weekly Times.

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