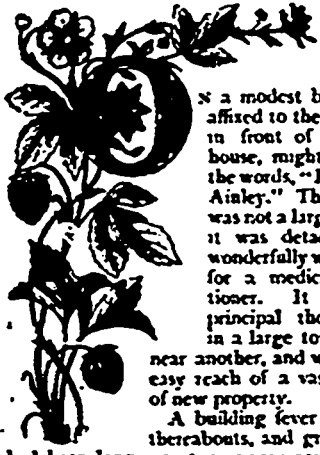


DOCTOR AINLEY'S TWO HOLIDAYS.

By RUTH LAMB.

CHAPTER I.



As a modest brass plate affixed to the palisades in front of a corner house, might be read the words, "Dr. Fergus Ainley." The dwelling was not a large one, but it was detached, and wonderfully well placed for a medical practitioner. It faced a principal thoroughfare in a large town, it was near another, and was within easy reach of a vast amount of new property.

A building fever had set in thereabouts, and ground that had been long vacant, was now covered with houses of many sorts and sizes, the better dwellings to the front, and behind them, apparently endless streets of cottages.

Dr. Ainley had taken the Corner House ten years before, and at four-and-twenty had started to work up a practice for himself.

Most of his friends were doubtful, or worse than doubtful, as to the wisdom of such a step.

Young, unmarried, unknown, from a distant county, possessing no local influence and very little money, who would be likely to employ him? Not patients of the better class, certainly. If Fergus Ainley had been able to command enough capital to make some outside show, well-to-do patients might have been immediately attracted thereby. Surely he would have been wiser to act as assistant to some well-known doctor, say for two or three years, before beginning practice on his own account.

It is a sad and significant sign of the days in which we live, that people are drawn to the shops which are already crowded with customers, to the professional men whose ante-rooms are already thronged with waiting patients, to churches, because they have been told there is not a seat to be let.

There seems to be a fascination in having to pay a high price and wait, uncomfortably perhaps, for the article, the advice, or the place we want, just because other people do it. Whereas, if we were to believe in the possibility of finding good articles in small establishments, and of discovering highly qualified medical men and faithful teachers amid more modest surroundings, we might get all we want at less cost of time, money, and convenience. Besides these advantages to ourselves, we should help to replenish empty pockets and cheer on able and gifted professional men, struggling sometimes for bare bread, instead of making coffers overflow which are already full enough.

Fergus Ainley was not to be daunted either by his own knowledge of the ways of the world, or by the croakings of his well-wishers. He knew by what years of earnest, constant study he had won a long list of honours at school, college, and hospital work. He had shown his might when he had to do, and had won golden opinions from men of the highest honour in the medical profession to what he had devoted himself. And he meant, God helping him, to win and to win the confidence

of those who should place the care of health and life in his hands.

Fergus Ainley would have felt lonely at the outset, but for the helpful presence of a sister who undertook to manage his modest household when he first began practice in the Corner House, or rather, when he began waiting for patients to come there.

Everybody knows how much harder it is to wait for work than to do it. The young doctor was never idle. He was always adding to his stores of knowledge; but, for all that, he would have found the waiting time terribly long had Margery not been with him to console him when inclined to be down-hearted, and to utter cheery prophecies of success in the near future.

"You are certain to do well, Fergus," she would say. "Of course you have to wait a little, because other people do not know what a clever brother I have. But success will come, and by-and-by your waiting-room will be too small for patients, and we shall see a pretty brougham standing at the door ready for the busy doctor to take his place in it."

"The success is long in coming, but I am not going to be disheartened. What should I have done without you, Margery, in the meanwhile? I wonder the father and mother spared you to me."

"You wonder! How dare you wonder at any loving, unselfish thing that they do for their children! The doing without me for your sake, is only a bit out of a great whole. Have they not always been thinking of and planning for the one lad of the family? Beside, they have Bertha and Nelly, so they were willing I should share your establishment."

"It is banishment, Margery, after all. But there was no room for another medical man within a long distance of the old rectory, and I must turn to the best account the advantages the rest of you have been the means of giving me by general self-denial and—"

Margery's pretty hand was placed over her brother's lips, and the sentence thus brought to an untimely end. But a sisterly kiss which promptly followed might have reconciled any brother to such despotic treatment.

"If you dare to say a word about self-denial, I will pack my boxes and go off home. There! pray what would you do when I was gone?"

"Do? I should send for Bertha or Nelly to take your place. There would be a squabble as to which should come, and I might perhaps have two girls to plague me instead of one, because neither would give in. Remember, Midge, you are not my only sister, whilst I am the brother of the family," said Fergus triumphantly.

"And you are as much spoiled as a single brother always is amongst a tribe of sisters. I am resolved to stay with you, as I am the eldest girl, and the only one who can manage you properly."

Margery did stay on, and was a source of infinite comfort to her brother. Patients began to come, though not very remunerative ones, and all who experienced the skill and kindness of Fergus Ainley had a good word to say for both. The poorest were sure of being tenderly dealt with, and in cases where it was needful to inflict pain with a view to healing, sufferers feared no rough treatment at his hands. They were certain of the young doctor's sympathy, and were not slow to

speak of this along with his other good qualities.

At the end of three years, Dr. Ainley was making an income sufficient to meet all the expenses of his modest establishment. The brougham which Midge had pictured as waiting his pleasure, was still in the far distant future; but Fergus was contented with the meed of success already attained, and hopeful of more.

Then came an unlooked-for trouble—the young doctor's father died suddenly. He had been in unusually low spirits for some time, and had suffered from bodily weakness. No one knew that he had cause for anxiety, but attributed the low spirits to failing health. After his death, it was found that Mr. Ainley had been cruelly victimised by a man in whom he trusted implicitly, and that the property which ought to have provided comfortably for his widow and family was gone.

Mr. Ainley had lacked courage to make his wife and children acquainted with his position. The remnant of his capital had been used to supply their wants whilst it lasted, and now the family had to face the double trial of bereavement and poverty.

The girls proved unselfish and brave. No word of reproach fell from their lips with regard to their late father.

"He was deceived, and that man's treachery cost him his life. How he must have grieved for us! He was always good, loving, indulgent to us all. He hid the trouble because he could not bear to grieve us, and yet, if we had known, we could have lightened his burden by taking it on our strong shoulders."

Such were the words used by the girls in speaking of the father who was gone, and they helped to comfort the mother who was left to them.

They were all highly educated, and Nelly possessed rare musical gifts, which had been carefully cultivated. The home and its contents belonged to Mrs. Ainley. There were no debts, and there was no dishonour in connection with their changed circumstances. So Bertha and Nelly worked bravely on, turning to account the talent they possessed, and doing their utmost to prevent their mother from noticing any great change in her daily comforts and surroundings.

Margery remained with her brother, chafing a little, it must be owned, at not being able to contribute more directly to the support of those at home, though really she did her part in another way.

"I must have a housekeeper, Midge," said Fergus. "If you leave me, some fairly capable woman must take your place, though no one could fill it as you do. You do not realise how important it is for me to have a lady at the head of my household affairs. I am sure I owe much of the success I have gained, to your presence, and your good management has made my stay here possible. Do not leave me, Midge—mother has the other two and I want you badly."

"But I cost you money instead of helping to earn it. It is dreadful to think that Nelly and Bertha are working and I am maintained by you, and causing nothing, either for mother or myself."

"You are earning by helping me, and by saving in every possible way, you enable me to do more and better for the dear mother and girls at home."

These needed all, and more indeed, than Fergus could do for them. Heavily as Bertha and Nelly might exert themselves, it was not