

CHAPTER VII

THE DOCTOR

IF I become, as it shall seem, “really too” enthusiastic in my admiration of the personage I am about to describe, I do humbly trust to be excused.

Let the considerate reader review his “list of friends” and confess, that as it respects one, or two, or three in that company, he could never tire of talking and feel a pleasure too in recounting their virtues. Even so is it with my humble self at this present.

The little doctor's very name strikes the electric chord of memory and I am carried back to the sunny fields of Childhood and of Youth and revel in their glad associations. Happily for us, it is impossible to resist these influences, which, at seasons few and far between, burst upon the care-worn spirit in its grave and anxious thought, like gleams of sunshine through the sombre clouds.

Expressions of praise in this good and kind little doctor have already appeared in these pages. He stands before me now, just as he was wont to do when those inevitable maladies, the whooping cough, the measles and other family ailings, brought him to our house. As we mustered just a dozen, there were in “catching” complaints generally three or four down at a time!

Ah! He was something like a doctor! Were we not delighted when he visited us? Though to be sure we knew his visit would be followed by more “doctor's stuff”. But then we loved him, and love, which is said to make all things “beautiful” at any rate made the doctor's physic palatable.

Not a child was there in the whole parish but enjoyed his company - not an adult with whom the doctor was not an especial favourite so that it may be supposed his practice was extensive. Still, he never became rich - he was too good, too charitable, albeit from the range and the respectability of his connection his professional revenue must have been large.

But then consider his habitual benevolence and the extent of his pension-list! Medicine, soup and wine, tea, coffee and sugar - these were all dispensed as they were most required; moreover he would indulge the worn out veteran of sea or land with the means of whiffing his cares away, and supplied the old Scotch soldier's widow with the frequent consolation “o' a wee pinch”. I am thus minute, because many, who were more scrupulous in their gifts, were wont sometimes to cavil at these last-mentioned benefactions of the doctor; but he defended himself by observing that, while he certainly would discountenance offensive habits in the young, in the aged, use had so long confirmed them, that when combined with poverty their prohibition was severely felt.

But it was in the exercise of his profession that his real worth was most conspicuous. How did he give up rest, recreation, everything desirable to his own comfort, for the benefit of the sick and suffering! Early and late, night and day was he in request, never complaining of the self-sacrifice exacted by duty and never better pleased than when his cast-down patient was looking up again.

Then, and at other times, when a sly joke would be “in season”, what happiness was his to let off little humorous quips at which no patient could resist a smile. “Ha Ha! Mrs Muggins”, he would remark to that well-known monthly, “Are you here? Then I'll warrant there's mischief brewing!” Then by pleasantry or pathos, as the case stood in need of rallying or sympathy, would he turn to the “expecting” matron, and leave her more satisfied than ever that there wasn't such another doctor in the world as the subject of our story. During some of his visits, where he found it necessary to divert his patient's attention, he would relate some romantic adventure or tale of danger to which he had been exposed.

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IT was late on a stormy and boisterous night in the dreary month of November, that I had been reading and feeling fatigued with the toils of the day had fallen asleep - an indulgence I rarely enjoy out of bed. I must have slept some time, for on awakening I found myself quite alone, my sister and the servants having long since gone to their comfortable beds. A few last sparks were all that remained of what had been a cheering fire. The candles too showed me, by their long dark shadows that it was high time to be off. I felt cold and uncomfortable and hastened to seek the comfort of a night's rest. I had just reached my chamber-door, when a violent ringing of the night-bell interrupted my progress. Half asleep and cheerless as I felt, you may imagine I was not particularly pleased at the prospect of having to turn out at such a time and in such weather.

Before I could have found time to vent my dissatisfaction in the most summary form of words, the bell was again rung and I bustled to ascertain by whom. Throwing up the window, I shouted “What's the matter? Who are you? What do you want?” The only reply I could get was, “be quick, be quick, for the love of heaven, be quick!” And that too in a tone and with a peculiarity of accent not at all familiar to me. By this time my servant, aroused by the noise, had gone down to the surgery door. I followed him and having opened it, caught a glimpse of a low, shaggy, forest colt, with a man upon it whose legs nearly reached the ground. Both were completely drenched by the rain which fell in torrents and the wind, which was blowing a gale, extinguished the only light we had. Thus left in the dark I had no further opportunity of ascertaining who or what the stranger was, for during the absence of my servant in quest of another light, my questionings were overwhelmed by the man's passionate entreaties that I would go along with him and “be quick, quick, for the love of heaven!”

This would of course have been a sufficient summons had I known the man or the whereabouts of the patient. His hurried answer to my inquiries on these two points was uniform, “I shouldn't know him by his name, if he told me. He had no home but Marian, his dear wife Marian was ill, would I go to her?”

“Where to?” I again eagerly inquired.

“Into the forest,” he this time replied.

“But,” said I, “I know all the people in this part of the forest, tell me your name.”

“No, sir, I can't. I am a stranger and know no one. My wife is ill, indeed, sir, she is ill and needs your aid. Hasten, I beseech you.”

My servant had now obtained a light, and the stranger, having stepped from off his forester, entered the surgery. If any additional circumstance had been required to strengthen my disinclination to accompany so mysterious a visitor into the wilds of the New Forest, at such an hour and in such a night, it would most certainly have been supplied in the very appearance of the stranger, so dark, so gaunt and so brigand-like. And yet there was an evident sincerity in the strong love of the man for his wife that counterbalanced in some degree the repulsiveness of his aspect. Nevertheless, you would have as soon expected to hear a rough-hewn block of granite discourse sweet music, as that such an individual should betray emotions stirred by the tender passion.

My sister had by this time joined us - for you all know how the effect of a storm intensifies the interest of a night-alarm and as she only saw the man, and heard him beg me to go with him into some unknown part of the forest, her affection imagined danger, and she conjured me not to leave her. On hearing this, the poor fellow betrayed the bitterness of his disappointment and, casting a supplicatory look at my sister he repeated a few sentences which, to us, were unintelligible. However, his anxiety increased with my objections and as I hinted that his secrecy and his appearances might reasonably make me hesitate,

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he seemed to catch at the hope of succeeding, for he immediately threw off the slouched hat and uncouth covering in which he was enveloped and placing himself erect, with a look of intense anxiety, he addressed me accompanying all he said with the most animated gestures. But now his appearance was altogether altered. I never saw a finer-looking fellow. His fiery dark eyes seemed to read my very thoughts, an olive, gipsy-like complexion added to a fine set of features, full of energy; his head covered with a profusion of jet black curling hair which hung down his neck, made up a picture which struck me by its boldness, vigour, and expression. Seeing that he was gaining on my opinion he took advantage of the circumstance and immediately proceeded to work on the feelings of my sister in his behalf. If I had been surprised at the manner in which he had addressed me, I was much more so at the style in which he pleaded to her. To say the least of it, it was as much like that of a gentleman as anything I ever witnessed.

He commenced his attack by at once appealing to her kind feelings and no drawing-room beau could have used more insinuating language, yet freer from nauseating flattery or coarseness. His affecting description of the situation in which he left his wife was an eloquent appeal to our human feelings. My sister was won and I could no longer withstand his plea. Fearing it possible I might object on the score of remuneration, he instantly produced a handful of gold, as if to assure me on that point but it was his persuasive manner that won me and I at once ordered the horse and chaise to be brought round. His satisfaction at this announcement was evinced most warmly. We were soon equipped for our mysterious journey but before leaving he addressed my sister again. "Lady," said he, "may the great Ruler of the Stars, whose power governs all, protect you until your brother's safe return and as a tribute of gratitude accept this trifle from a wandering son of our tribe! The star of my destiny has made me seek your aid and never must it be said that the son of a chief of our race forgot his duty to those who befriended him in the hour of trial." Then placing a silver ring, marked with some outré character, on the middle joint of my sister's fore-finger he continued, "should aught of danger or trouble overtake you, seek one of our race and if assistance or aid is within the power of all the tribes, that will demand it. Farewell!"

The chaise was now ready and wrapping myself up for a dreary journey, I directed my servant to follow our guide who had already mounted his forest pony. The wind still blew a hurricane and the falling rain beat so violently into our faces as to render it necessary to keep our heads down; fortunately we had lamps or we should not have seen or kept up with our guide. Wind or rain made no difference to him. On he went, dashing forward most gallantly, while his steed seemed animated by the same spirit and flew on with amazing speed. We had, however, great difficulty in keeping up with him and once or twice we lost him entirely. Calling was of no use.



Hitherto we had kept on the high road and our guide would sometimes halt and join us, then start again and in the lull of the roaring wind, I could hear him shouting to his pony, or urging us to greater speed, a wish we found it impossible to gratify, for the hurricane often threatened to bring us to a stand-still: the moon too, the "pale moon," wont to regard the traveller's benisons, seemed utterly unmindful of ours and about this period in our drive withdrew her face entirely, thus increasing the obscurity of our route. We had turned from the

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high-road and were following the track of the forest timber-carriages and that much to my annoyance, for it was a series of rolling into deep ruts and rapid risings out of them, suggesting at each descent the strong probability of our being tilted into the muddy ravine. We at length approached a dark mass and as our guide suddenly shouted to us to halt, I congratulated myself on being at our journey's end but this idea was soon dispelled by his assurance that I must now alight, as it was impossible for any carriage to proceed farther in the direction in which he wished to lead me.

I had not the remotest knowledge of the locality, a very imperfect acquaintance with my conductor, however, his great anxiety for "Marian, his dear wife Marian" reassured me. To expedite matters, he requested that I would mount his pony, which he then led and in this manner we proceeded for awhile, then our course was checked by a broad expanse of water. At this obstacle my guide, pausing for a moment, gave a long and loud whistle and immediately afterwards commotion was heard from the water. Presently a boy emerged from the stream or lake and to him the pony was resigned - my guide giving me to understand that I must cross on his shoulders, which, as all scruples were just then useless, I did, and thus laden he forded the tide and deposited me safely on the bank.

We then moved forwards for about half a mile and arrived at the tent which contained the object of all his anxiety and here, while I perceived matter for astonishment, I saw none for fear. My coming, delayed as it had been, was most opportune and I am hopeful that it prolonged the patient's life. The result of her sufferings was the birth of a son, at the announcement of which the father's joy knew no bounds.

The crisis over, I was led into another tent where I found a table well laid out for me with everything I could desire - a bottle of port and sherry, brandy, hot water, cold chicken and a ham, &c., and to add to the surprise of the scene, two wax-lights in elegant and massive silver candlesticks, a profusion of plate, and oil, and on the table were five guineas as my fee. Having made as hearty a repast as I could desire, my guide informed me that when it suited my convenience, he was ready to accompany me back to my servant with the chaise. I immediately availed myself of his services, crossed the water by the same process as before, mounted the pony again and returned by the same route.

I will not detain you by recounting all that passed on our homeward journey, in which nothing could surpass the eloquent gratitude of the gipsy. I reached home safely and certainly none the worse for my singular and romantic adventure in the New Forest.