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A

COUNTRY DOCTOR

BY
THOMAS
HALL
SHASTID M.D.

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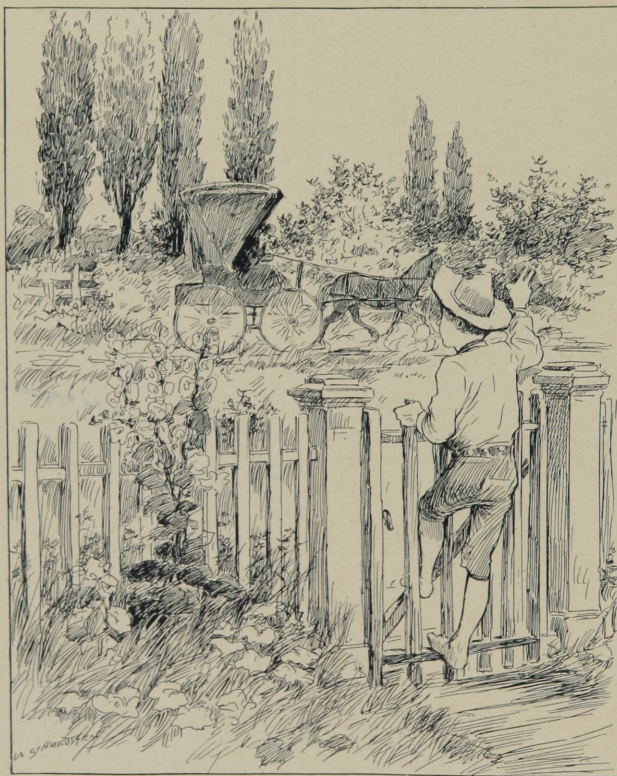
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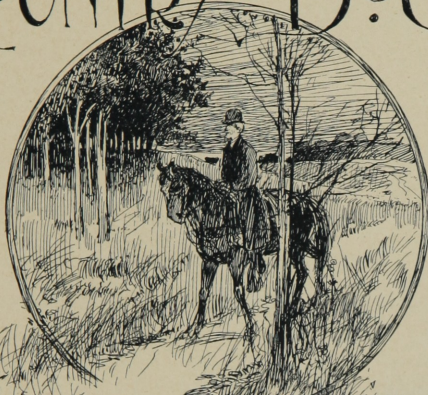
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"UNUS, ONE; DUO, TWO."

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A COUNTRY DOCTOR



BY

THOMAS HALL SHASTID M.D.

BATTLE CREEK MICH.

1898

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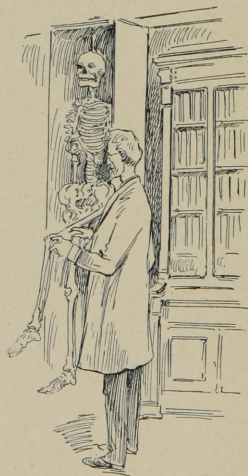
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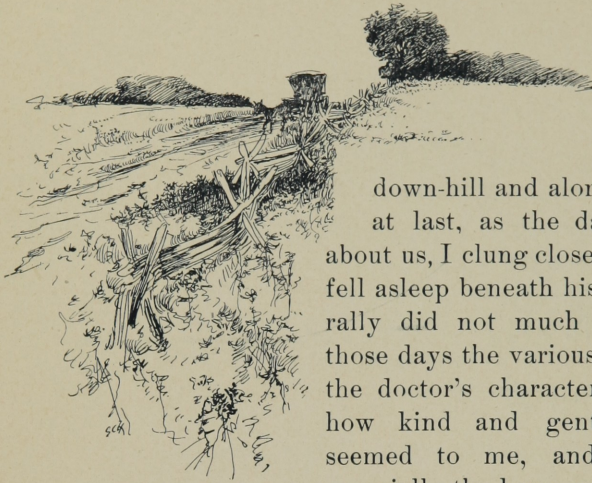
THE SUBJECT OF THE SKETCH

A
COUNTRY DOCTOR.

FOR more than thirty years it has been my good fortune to possess the acquaintance of a certain country doctor—a man unknown to the world at large, but yet, like many another of his class, a man that the world would honor itself in honoring.

Even in my youngest days I knew him. His tall form, his lean but kindly countenance, his thin hair and tuft of chin beard, were among the earliest images of my childhood. Often I played in his yard. Often he would call me into his office where he sat at study, there to read to me from his books, or to demonstrate to me the bones of a skeleton, or, if the day were clear, to show me in his microscope the structure of the kidney or lung. Often, too, I went with him on his rounds; many a long summer day we rode, from farmhouse to farmhouse, up-hill and





down-hill and along prairie, until at last, as the darkness settled about us, I clung close to his side and fell asleep beneath his arm. I naturally did not much understand in those days the various excellences of the doctor's character; but I recall how kind and gentle he always seemed to me, and I remember especially the keen sense of childish pity with which, when I happened to awake one stormy night, I heard him drive from the stable and down street in the cold wind and rain.

In my youth and early manhood it was my pleasant lot to pursue the study of medicine under this doctor, and then I ever found him both a skilful physician and a man of most interesting and amiable personality. His dominant passion, I think, was his love of children. I have never seen another man in whose affections children held so large a place. He used to shout at the children as we passed along the road, and if sickness were not urgent, he would stop his horse, call them to the side of his buggy, and teach them to count in Latin and Greek. How many a bright toy did he not take to sick children of the poor! How many a word of endearment did he not speak



"DRIPPING FROM TOP TO TOE
WITH RAIN."

to them ! And how many a night, when only he was up, did he not study, hour by hour, to relieve the sufferings of children the more especially !

A hundred instances occur to me of the doctor's intense devotion to children. What a night was that when Joe Shepard, worthless fellow, came in at 10 o'clock, dripping from top to toe with rain ! The lightning flashed incessantly, and roar after roar of thunder burst about our very ears. Joe took up his position next the stove : the night was chill. The doctor was abed, where indeed he had been for three days, sick of a fever. Would the doctor come to see his folks ? No ; it was out of the question, he was sick himself. " It's mainly the little feller, Doc." " What ? Not the one I gave the jumping-jack to ?" " Yes, him," said Joe. " All right," said the doctor, " I'll go." And go he did, though I had to help him dress.

The doctor had once in his care a child to whom he had taken a great fancy — a child of poor and shiftless parents who lived far out in the country, " on the back of another man's farm." There was not the slightest prospect of pay in the case, and the house was so situated as to require much time and trouble to reach it. Yet the doctor visited the child regularly, and gave it his most earnest thought and devoted attention. Day after day we went to the cottage, and day after day

the doctor's face grew more clouded and anxious. At last there came a change. Yes ; the child was certainly better, though the disease was treacherous. Then, one day, the doctor took with him a toy book — a brilliantly colored affair — and he showed it to me on the way, and said how cheap and poor a thing it takes to make a child happy, and how much more intense, besides, the happiness of childhood is than the happiness of older life. I stayed in the buggy that day and waited for the doctor. As he entered the doorway, I saw the toy book sticking from his pocket. He was not long gone, and when he came out, his head was bowed, and he had his handkerchief to his nose, blowing vigorously, and from his pocket still projected the toy book.

And the children appreciated the kind doctor. They used always to answer his shout as we passed along the road ; and now and then some urchin more enthusiastic than the rest would come tearing down to the gate, mount it, and shout after us his “ *Unus*, one ; *duo*, two,” until we were out of sight. Many of them used to call him “ *My* doctor.” And I have seldom seen anything more touching than once when a sick, indeed almost a dying, child spread its thin, blue lips into a smile and murmured “ *My* doctor,” as the doctor approached its bed.



"FROM HIS POCKET STILL PROJECTED
THE TOY BOOK."

Next to the doctor's love of children came his love of nature. When, on our rounds, we left a farmhouse, the first thing was, as a matter of course, to discuss the case. That over, he invariably talked of the pleasant sights and sounds around us. It mattered not what the day was — sunny day or cloudy, colored day of autumn, white day of winter, budding green day of spring — all days alike were to him beautiful and pleasant. Even days of storm he found not wholly unacceptable. He used to say that a man listening to the rain on his buggy-top and his horse's hoofs in the pools would, if normal, possess a sense of shelter and snugness never felt elsewhere.

But his favorite days were those of early summer. Then it was that he fairly grew ecstatic. Then it was that he talked by the hour of a meadow-lark that sang from a rail-tip ; of a field of wheat where a red and yellow reaper clicked and clacked round a square of standing grain ; of the blue-vaulted sky and its infinite distances and its massive piled-up clouds that sailed along like chains of floating mountains. The clouds, indeed, which were the doctor's

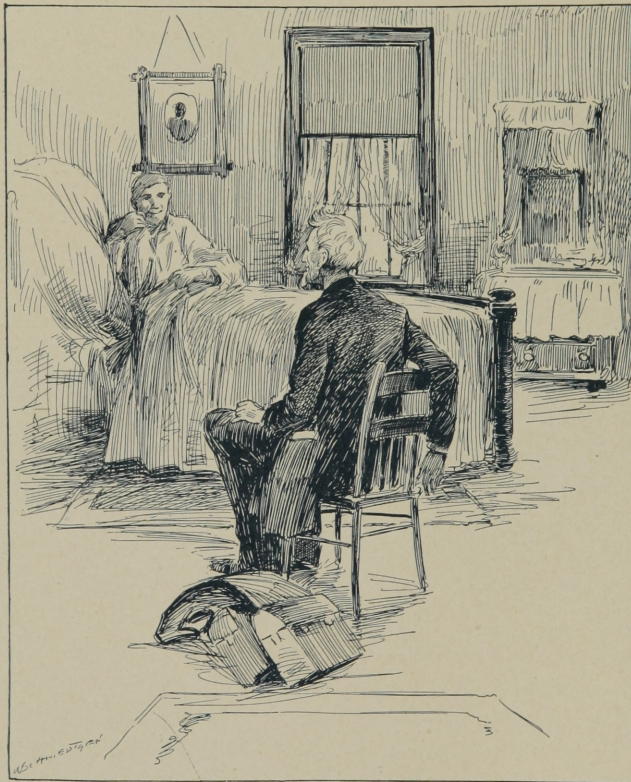




greatest delight of all, sometimes inspired him so much that he broke into verse. His lines were always somewhat stilted and bombastic, but no one could have known it better than he did him-

self, for he always overcharged them purposely as he neared their end, and then laughed at them heartily. Then, too, the clouds always suggested Italy. Italy — that was his theme. Italy — the land of Cæsar and Cicero, of Virgil and Horace — for the doctor was a classical scholar — but, better still, the land where cloud and sky are more than elsewhere on earth of divine and inexpressible beauty. “I shall certainly go to Italy some day,” he would always say, “when I get money enough ahead.”

There was one side of the doctor's character which, upon first acquaintance, you might not have suspected — his humor. Shy and even timid among strangers, he became, at times, among his older families and when we two were alone together in the buggy, the most jovial and jocular of men. Many a moment in the sick-room he



"LISTENING TO HIS HAPPY TALK."

rendered lighter with his merriment, and many a convalescent, leaning on elbow and listening to his happy talk and clear ringing laugh, must have thought that even sunshine could have been no better. In the buggy he sometimes stooped to nonsense. I can hear him now singing:—

“Oh, a green peach pudding and a blackberry pie,
A black cat kicked out a yellow cat's eye.”

But his funny moods never lasted long. He was essentially a grave and serious man, full of cares and full of tenderness and pity for the sick.

Indeed these qualities of tenderness and pity serve to explain, I think, in some measure, his intense devotion to his studies. Medical works were to him not mere dry treatises on science. They were storehouses of facts that were to be of service to suffering humanity. Whenever he read of a disease, he seemed to see some person that had it. Whenever he read of a remedy, he seemed to see some pallid countenance looking up imploringly for relief. Every new book, every new number of a journal, he read with the utmost avidity, as one whose brother was condemned to die might read some legal document in which he expected to find a word of reprieve or pardon.

Even in his experiments, to which, for some years at least, he was greatly given, you could trace the influence of his kindness and sympathy.

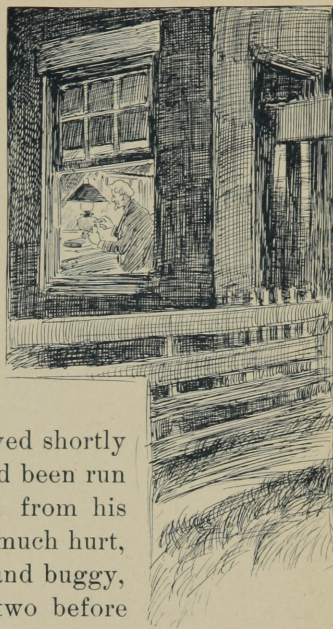
In his little one-room office — an apartment of his house — he would not infrequently sit up half the night, pouring this thing into that, and triturating something else with the other; and the commonest object of his search was — to find some way of rendering nauseous medicines pleasant and palatable. Agreeable pharmacy, you see, we did not have in those days. None of his experiments, I believe, ever came to anything. He lacked the necessary apparatus, and, more than that, he lacked the necessary leisure. But some of the ideas he worked on in those days have since been taken up by large manufacturing houses, and have made them rich and famous.

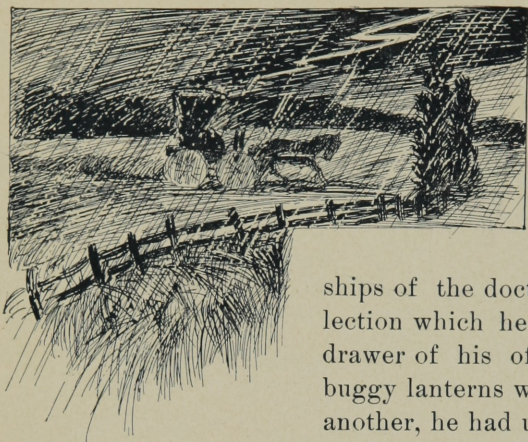
As might be supposed from his great sympathy, the doctor almost never refused a call. Whether he was summoned in the daytime or in the early evening, or in the later evening when only he was up, sitting at his books, or in the far dead of night, he was always ready for duty. Suns were never glaring enough, nights were never dark enough, roads rough enough or muddy enough, rains pouring enough, frosts cold enough, snows deep enough, winds loud or chill enough, to keep him from the sick. And “rich or poor” made no difference. The only question was, Did some one need him?



"THE DOCTOR HAD BEEN
RUN AWAY WITH."

I remember that one morning, after the doctor had been out all of a black and stormy night, we were very much startled by seeing his horse come tearing down street to the gate, without driver, without buggy, and with only a few pieces of harness clinging to his back. A messenger arrived shortly afterward to say that the doctor had been run away with, and had been thrown from his buggy, but that he had not been much hurt, and hence had got another horse and buggy, and would make another call or two before returning home. He was really in a sad and sorry plight, as we found when he got back. His clothing was torn and covered with mud, his face was scratched and bloody, and his arms and shoulders were so badly bruised that we wondered they had not been broken. He was sick, too, for several days. We scolded him not a little, because he had not come back as soon as he was hurt. But what could he do, he said. There was a poor old sick woman a few miles farther down the road, and a few miles farther still, a sick child, both of whom needed assistance badly, and as for himself, why *he* could wait.





I know of nothing more suggestive of the hard-

ships of the doctor's life than a collection which he used to keep in a drawer of his office, of the various buggy lanterns which, at one time or another, he had used in his practise.

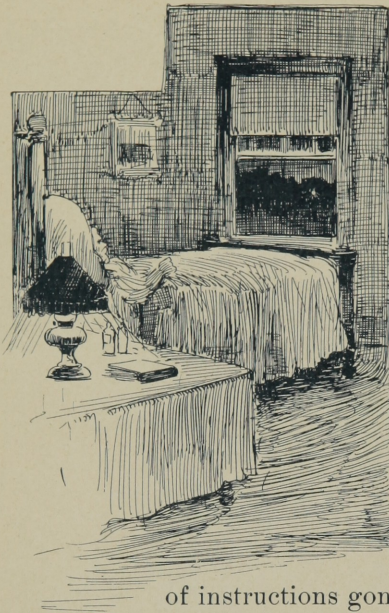
Why he kept them I never knew. All of them were useless. Most of them were eaten out by rust; some of them — curious, patented things — had never been of service; others were mashed and twisted from runaways and wrecks. But they told a story of many a bad night.

A man who once saw those lanterns, said to me that at a time when he was sick for several weeks he used as he lay of a night to watch for the light of the doctor's lantern as it first appeared at the turn in the road. One night he became much worse. And, as he was a poor man and the night was so dark and stormy, he feared that the doctor would not come in time. And, lying there in agony, he took one of those strange fancies that sick men not infrequently take. He said to himself that if the doctor's light appeared by one o'clock, the usual time, he would live; if not, he would die. And he lay and waited. And a little

before one the doctor's light appeared. It seemed to him, he said, the brightest star that ever dawned. I have often thought that in the many years of the doctor's practise ten thousand other eyes must have watched no less eagerly for the light of his lantern as it came shining down the country road, bearing its messages of life and health and happiness and joy.

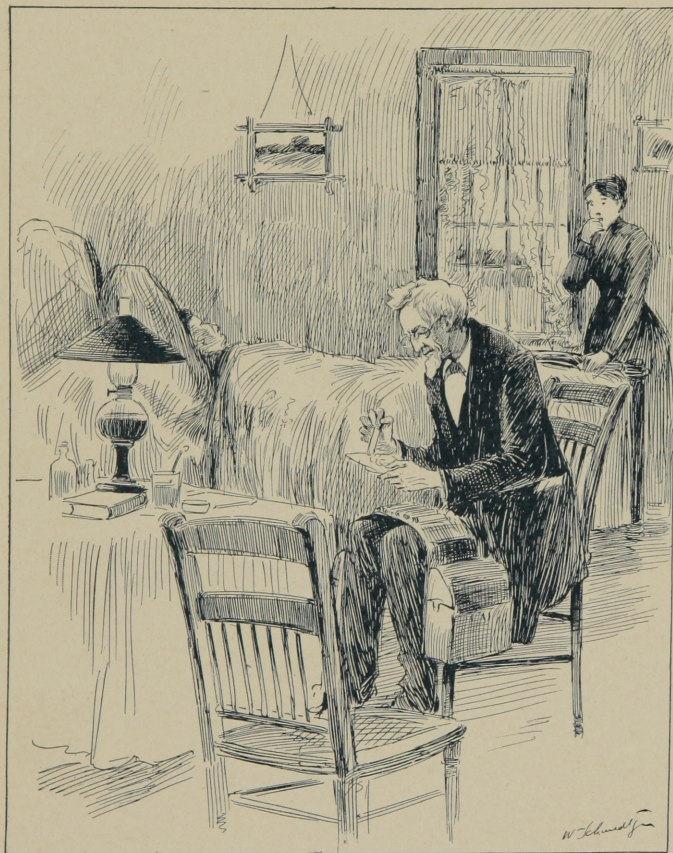
Into the sick-room this doctor must have come like hope. You could tell by the compression of his lips that he meant to save; and you could tell by the calm of his eye that his sympathy had not perverted his judgment. He had a way, when he began to examine a patient, of whistling softly to himself. Then he went slowly and cautiously from symptom to symptom. Nothing escaped him. There was no hurry. No matter how sickly the time or how sleepy and aching his head, everything must be gone over systematically, carefully, critically. Some one thing might make all the difference. I can see him now rubbing his spectacles to make sure he has read his thermometer with the utmost accuracy. Then when he took up his "pill





bags” and placed them with the band across his knees and spread out the powder-papers on the band and took up the bottles and dosed the medicine on the papers, and then took up the papers one by one and folded them, you saw in every step the same great precision, the same thoughtful care. What a void he must have left in the sick-room when, at last, the round of instructions gone over for the second and even the third time, he shouldered his “pill bags” and departed! Surely no money could ever pay such a doctor, and surely, had he not had a family of his own, scarcely a thought of money had ever entered his head.

I must relate an incident that illustrates the doctor’s intense and bulldog-like pertinacity in a hand-to-hand encounter with death. A man who had taken an over-dose of morphin was given up by his other physicians to die. Nothing, they said, could now be of any service to him. Anything further done to keep him awake would be mere unnecessary pain and torture to him. But *this* doctor did not give him up. He stayed with



"AND DOSED THE MEDICINE
ON THE PAPERS."

him day and night. When the lungs threatened to breathe no more, he started them with electricity or with burning paper to the nape of the neck and the spine, or with artificial respiration. The neighbors came about, as neighbors sometimes will, and said it was a sin and a shame, that it ought to be stopped, that the misguided doctor was simply mutilating a corpse. But the doctor did not heed them. He turned his other cases to the other doctors and kept on. He tried everything of which he had read or heard or dreamed. The hours of the night wore slowly away. The hours of the next day wore slowly away. And then those of the next night. Finally, at sunrise on the second day, the last of the effects of the morphin had gone and the man stood up and looked upon the earth and lived. His neck and back were somewhat blistered and sore, but he lived. And he lives to-day.

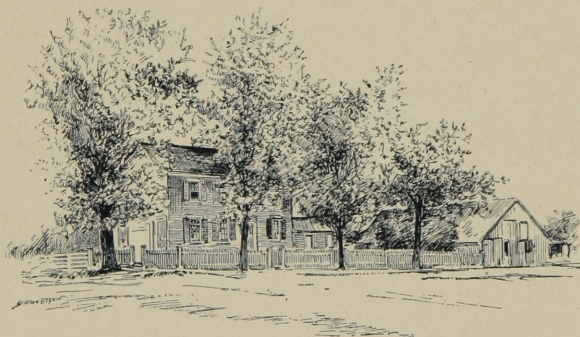
Well—even in these later years my acquaintance with this country doctor does not cease. He is still in active practise, and on my visits to my native town, I always meet him and always ride with him in the country. Our rides have not much changed. Again he discusses the cases, again he shouts at the children, again he talks of the beauty of field and sky, again he says he means to visit Italy some day when he gets money enough ahead.

I am inexpressibly pained, on some of these visits, to observe that the furrows in his face are growing deeper ; that his form, once erect and elastic, is getting stiff and stooped, and that his clear, almost ringing, voice is beginning to show, though happily at long intervals, the tremors and quavers of age. Yet his kindly face and his old-time figure still make, I ween, no less pleasant a picture as they enter the sick man's doorway, and his cheery voice still makes to the sick man's ear no less pleasant and hope-inspiring music. Still he goes about his duties, still he goes on his mission of health-giving and hope-giving, still he responds to the calls of rich and poor alike, by night and by day, in sunshine and in storm. Sometimes I think that he has done enough, that forty and odd years of practise on those hills should constitute sufficient of duties performed for any one man. And yet I know that did he cease to practise, he would be unhappy, and that many a sick child would miss "my doctor," and that many a sick man or woman, looking out at window, would long in vain to see the old white-headed physician come once more, "pill bags" in hand, along the path.

Such, gentle reader, is my weak and inadequate description of the character of my father. Being my father, he naturally occupies in my es-



timation a higher place than could possibly there be given to any other man. And yet, if I err not, there are practising in the length and breadth of this country many hundreds, nay, possibly even thousands, of country doctors who, in skill and in judgment, in geniality and kindliness, and tenderness and sympathy, and ready response to calls, and dogged and never-ending pertinacity in the fight with our old and common enemy — disease — are *almost* the equals of my father. What more could I say for them?





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