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Angels of the Sick Room

Sickness is a universal form of emergency which requires assistance for the afflicted. On the American frontier physicians were scarce and trained nurses were unknown. The pioneers had to depend upon their own resources of common sense, household remedies, and generous sympathy for the relief of pain. Every community had its benevolent matrons who looked after the sick. The Norwegian settlement in Story County was typical.

Our kind pioneer neighbor, Mrs. Kjetil Knutson, freely gave her services to the sick, diagnosing cases as if by intuition, and caring for her patients devotedly. On one occasion she was called to minister to a son of Lars Henryson, whose illness had caused grave intestinal trouble and whose death was thought imminent. My father found his friend Lars in tears at the bedside of the boy, breathing a psalm of resignation at the thought of the parting he felt soon must come. Father was deeply grieved, saw no hope, yet thought to suggest the summoning of Kjetil's Anna, as a possible help. She came, sensed the situation quickly, and acted promptly. She soused

several bed sheets in hot water and forthwith wrapped the patient therein. The warm moisture wrought potently upon his system, revived him, and set the body to work to expel its pent-up impurities. Through her solicitous care the boy recovered, as did many another patient.

Another woman of broad sympathies and helpful spirit was Mrs. Kristian Karolussen, whose intelligent, hearty ways suffused the sick room with an atmosphere of hope and good cheer. She helped usher into the world scores of future citizens and, with her encouraging, infectious smile, drew answering twinkles from the eyes of the world's greatest doers, the devoted mothers, whom she tended with loving care and devotion in their hour of trial. With her heart in her eyes and her whole aspect one of solicitude and kind resolve she inspired strength and calm in her patients. The emoluments she received for her services were so slight as to be almost negligible. People could afford to be born, even buried, in those days.

Other kind helpers in sickness and distress could be mentioned, among them being my Aunt Helga Christenson Tjernagel, Mrs. Catharine Knutson Meltvedt, and Mrs. Haaver Thompson. Helga's large, commanding presence, together with her jolly manner, imbued the sufferer under her care with confidence. Her great figure was

often discerned crossing the prairie to convey tempting edibles to those in sickness and suffering.

Catharine's sparkling eyes and beaming countenance could not fail to uplift the ailing as with her clear, expressive voice she spoke words of comfort and solace to warm their hearts. Her cheery greetings and other happy expressions were so engaging that the listener would forget his troubles to make response in kind. She became bed-ridden for a considerable period herself, but retained to the last her ability to make bright the atmosphere about her and to send her visitors away refreshed and heartened. It was indeed a privilege to have the opportunity to converse with this courageous survivor of the early days.

Mrs. Haaver Thompson was known, especially, for her kindly, hospitable attitude toward children. Indeed, the Thompson home might well be likened to an asylum where love reigned in the hearts of the inmates, for there Mary, Anna, Ellen, and George, the children of Enoch Thompson, found a home after the death of their parents; and there were domiciled for a time the three Wooster children. The old log house was small, but the welcome sincere; hence none felt out of place or unhappy in the rather cramped quarters.

Professional medical and surgical assistance not being readily accessible in the early days, per-

sons in distress often called upon their neighbors for help. Toward evening of a day of rough, wintry weather a neighbor came to the door of a motherly pioneer woman and begged her to accompany him at once to care for the wife who would soon need attention. The storm was so bad, however, that the good woman's husband advised her not to go. But the need was sore and she could not hear of suffering without trying to help, so she decided to brave the elements, dangerous though it might be. At first they proceeded confidently, but presently the storm developed into a blinding blizzard and they lost their way. After scouting about for hours and being well-nigh spent from cold and exhaustion, they finally discerned a light through the seething, snowy mist, and they were home at last.

Imagine their dismay upon entering to find the mother lying helpless on the floor with a new-born babe at her side. Besides her ordeal she had endured the horror of fending off a large dog which had taken it into his head that the child did not belong there and that he must protect his mistress against it. Moreover, the fire had gone out and the icy cold greatly augmented her misery. Though her hands were numb with cold, our benefactress immediately started to work over her patients, whom she resuscitated; but as for herself

she did not regain the full use of her frost-bitten fingers for several months.

It is easy to underrate the importance of such humble services for such good deeds are not widely heralded. Fame is largely a matter of fate. Yet as much ability is often required to act creditably in a lowly station as in a higher one. Transfer a famous woman to a simple pioneer home, impose upon her the duties and responsibilities thereto attached, together with the strictures of the times, and observe whether her abilities would be less severely taxed. There have been a good many heroines in simple Iowa homes, and it is to be feared that scarcely any one but God has noticed them.

Dentistry in the old days lacked the degree of perfection it has since attained; nor was the price charged for extracting teeth at all commensurate with modern rates. Knut Eglund felt that he was sufficiently remunerated when he was given ten cents a tooth for such work. He used his minor blacksmith tools, not with the thought of making money, but to help people out of their misery. He would drop his horseshoeing or other gainful work and spend much time and patience to relieve such suffering. His wife helped, too, steadying the patients and keeping their courage up with encouraging words. They were a formid-

able-looking pair, for both were unusually large and strong. A victim felt as if in the grip of remorseless fate when held in position by Mrs. Eglund's powerful arms, enabling Knut the better to manipulate the fearsome tongs. Some teeth seemed to defy removal, and then Maria's pity for the bleeding wretch in her arms would overcome her and she would cry out, "You are killing him!" But Knut thought it the greater mercy to oust the offending member at once, and wrenched, pulled, and twisted till it surrendered its hold.

When the first physicians came they, too, were obliged to yank out teeth, though usually unskilled in such practice. Their instruments, however, were less clumsy than those used by Knut the blacksmith. It was more an act of mercy than a professional service with them, too. Tooth-filling and the fitting of false teeth was, hereabouts at least, unknown in early pioneer times. Fewer sweetmeats and more roughage called for more thorough mastication and helped preserve the teeth. Father, for instance, kept practically all his natural teeth till he died at the age of eighty-three. Milk, meat, and whole-grain meal furnished healthful rations for the pioneer, kept him strong, and helped to minimize tooth decay.

As doctors were few and far between, solicitous mothers kept home remedies handy to be used for

their ailing ones. A generous drink of whisky was said to be good for snake bites. Whether my mother administered such a dose I have not learned, but she frequently did send those afflicted with colds off to bed with a bowl of hot water seasoned with alcohol. Peppermint and camphor were kept within easy reach. Flax-seed poultices were used for many aches and pains. Besides this mother had various homely medicaments that acted like magic.

At that time a patent medicine, supposed to cure all ills and bearing the grim name of Hostetter's Bitters, had its devotees. For external ailments a noted Pain Killer had but to be applied, and presto! all pain would vanish — according to the advertisement. It was kept in many a medicine chest. So was Ayer's Sarsaparilla. One day as Jacob Kalvig was walking past a neighbor's place he stopped abruptly to glare at a blatant sign painted on the front gate which read: Ayer's Pills. Jacob repeated this with a snort and added in the same breath, "rotten, worthless stuff!" Having spoken his mind, he was so perturbed that he forgot where he was going, and started off in the opposite direction, mumbling his disapproval of such quackery. Yet many people allowed themselves to be buncoed, then as now.

N. TJERNAGEL

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