

PILLS, PROPHETS, AND PORTERS

Three or four months is a long period of convalescence for a man whose life has been one continuous span of energetic self expenditure, seldom broken up by illness or inactivity of any kind. The doctor kept Clem bedfast for longer than anyone would have believed possible. Only the patient's own determination to be completely mended and well again could account for a reasonable condescension on his part to be pampered and nursed. He despised pills, and threatened more than once to discontinue the prescribed medication. During one of the doctor's regular house calls he revolted at an unusually large dose of medicine. "Confound it man, you must think you're a horse doctor."

"No," Doc replied, "but you're not the first stubborn mule I've doctored in my time either."

"Pshaw, you'd think I was on my death bed the way you make all this needless fuss and bustle over me. I'll probably outlive the whole lot of you. Besides, firmness is what is needed to conquer any disease. I believe a lot of sickness and infirmity is pure humbug."

"Hell, I know that as well as you do. In fact, I think I know it a damn sight better than you do, but there's nothing humbug about a broken leg and a severed tendon. Now, open your mouth and take your medicine."

A visit that same afternoon from Clem's old maid sister confirmed his suspicions about humbug disease. She politely inquired as to his condition but before he had a chance to open his mouth wide enough to get a few words out, she had begun a long winded rehearsal of her own ailments.

According to Clem she tended to follow the sickness fad of the day, and whatever disease proved to be fashionable she would acquire it sooner or later. She reported that she was planning to attend a health lecture that evening and that she'd be able to tell him more about her own condition tomorrow.

"I'll swan," he said in Dellie after his sister had gone, "she manages to have new ailments I've never heard of before, and she'd never have either if hadn't heard someone else talking about them first. She'd be tolerably better off if she didn't go to that health lecture tonight. Tomorrow she'll afflicted with the symptoms of any disease they happen to talk about."

Not all of his visitors were "Job's comforters." Dozens called in to cheer him up during the time he was bed-ridden, including a blind accordion player whose music lifted his spirits and left him in a jovial mood. But this visit was climaxed by the appearance at his bedroom door of the Prophet of the Church, Heber J. Grant, who had driven up from Salt Lake to express his concern. The Prophet sat by his bedside and read poetry to him for an hour. Suddenly Clem, who had never really cared that much for poems, decided he liked poetry. He was enchanted in the presence of this great man and would have been equally impressed if he'd been reading him the funny papers.

Before he left, the Prophet took Clem's hand in his and pressed it reassuringly while expressing sympathy and understanding for the death of his brother. "You know," he said, "I believe the counsel of President Joseph F. Smith, that misfortune and evil are

not attributable to the will of God. We ought not, in light of the gospel, to charge the weaknesses, the mistakes or errors, the crimes and wickedness of men and the evils that exist in the world to God; nor the sorrow or strife nor sickness either. I just don't see the hand of God in all things. I admit, though, that He has given us the power to do both good and evil, to make errors in judgment or to learn good rules of health and safety, and, to abide by the spirit of the word of wisdom or to reject it. Take comfort, brother, the Lord loves you."

After his departure Clem said to Dellie, "I've prayed since years ago when the miseries and tribulations of the war troubled my mind, that I might someday hear words like that from the lips of the prophet himself. Now I have my answer."

When the days of his mending were over and he was able to be about his normal activities again, the doctor encouraged him to take advantage of an opportunity to attend a Red Cross convention in California. At first he had declined, feeling that the organization's funds could be better spent for more needy things. But, after it was pointed out to him by the committee that someone would go to represent the county chapter even if he didn't, he relented. He found the experience to be one of the most rewarding of his entire life.

He had frequently ridden the train between Brigham City and Salt Lake, but not since his return from serving a two-year mission for the Church in California before the turn of the century had he traveled such a distance on a train. He had never before slept in a Pullman berth, or had the services of a Pullman porter. In fact, he could remember but very few contacts with black people during his somewhat provincial and sheltered life. During the terms of service in the state legislature and the senate, he had found the black attendant in the senate chamber cloakroom to be friendly and cordial, but Clem had not taken time to get acquainted. For as long as he could remember, the black people had been referred to as darkies, not out of any sense of disrespect or derogation, but rather as an identifying appellation of all blacks.

The journey had hardly begun when a porter came along the aisle to where Clem and Dellie were sitting. His cheerfulness and friendly manner put them at once at ease as he presented himself as their porter for the trip, and assured them that he would make up their berths for them later in the evening or whenever they were ready. Clem reached out and shook hands with him and told him that he was much obliged. As he did this he noticed the disapproving glance of the man seated across the aisle.

The porter had hardly retreated back up the aisle before the man with the disapproving glance leaned across the aisle and voiced his displeasure. "Apparently you're not a seasoned traveler. It was not proper for you to shake hands with a negro porter. You demean yourself that way and you'll lose the respect of all decent people on this train."

"Why, I never heard such tommy rot," Clem replied. "That man was a gentleman with me and I'm not of a mind to let him be more of a gentleman than I am."

"Just the same, these people have got to be kept in their place and it doesn't help any for someone like you to encourage them to step out of line."

"You've got a cankered soul, brother, and I feel sorry for you," Clem said. "There's nothing more degrading than social condescension," the man muttered in an

off-side to the passenger sitting beside him. "But, I suppose some white trash don't have to descend, they're already at the lowest level anyway."

Clem was now aware of the thick southern accent and observed, "You must be a long way from home, Mister. We don't have feelings like that out here." He was about to say more but Dellie tugged on his coattail as he was getting to his feet and he decided to sit back down and drop the subject.

Before the evening was over with, Clem had good reason to be more confident than ever concerning his judgment of character. The porter had noticed that he favored one leg with a limp' and had assisted him twice to the washroom and then finally had escorted Clem and Dellie into the diner at the first call to dinner. Clem had not known a stranger before who was so solicitous of his comfort. Of course, he realized that it was the man's job and that he would expect to be paid for it, but there was more to it than that. There was something genuine about this man's interest in other people.

After dinner he talked with his new acquaintance in the vestibule while Dellie went back to her bed which had been made up for her while they were in the diner.

"I've heard them calling you George, but I don't know your last name," Clem said.

"Oh, my name really isn't George. That's just a name used by lots of people for porters. My Christian name is Julius and my sir name is Franklin."

"Where would a man with a name like that come from? You don't sound like the other porters. There's a good deal of polish in the way you talk, like a man with a first rate education."

"I come from Alabama and I have a degree from Tuskegee Institute."

"Do you like being a porter better than using your schooling in some other kind of work? You must be happy with your job, you spread good cheer and make a fellow feel lifted up in spirits."

"Well, mister, I just learned to cooperate with what life deals me. Did you ever stop to think what it's like for a colored man to try to get a white collared job in times like these when millions of white men can't find that kind of work? And then, I suppose, I just got tired of walking. All my growing-up years, in order to get to school and back, I walked bettern' twenty miles a day. And when it was allover I swore I'd never walk that much again in anyone day as long as I lived if ever I could help it."

He was smiling and chuckling to himself now as he continued his story.

"You know," he said, "I got on a train one day and I've been riding ever since. Besides, I like people."

"Mister Franklin the world would be a much more tolerable place to live in if there were more people like you," Clem said, as he realized their conversation had extended through the space on nearly an hour. "I'll say good night to you now, and I'm pleased to have met you."

“You’re one of the few white men I ever talked with for an hour who didn’t remind me that I’m not white,” Julius commented as the two men shook hands. He assisted Clem along the aisle and up the ladder to the upper berth in the space above the lower where Dellie was already sound asleep.

The next morning Clem managed to climb down from his bunk into the aisle below, and was on his way to the washroom when he noticed the man with the disapproving glance coming toward him. The meeting in the narrow passageway allowed no alternative but for one of them to give the right - of - way to the other.

“ I never turn out for white trash,” the man said with contempt.

“I always do,” Clem said, stepping to one side to allow his antagonist to pass.