

From:

William Andrus Alcott, *Forty Years in the Wilderness of Pills and Powders* (1859)

CHAPTER XXIII.

ABOUT TO DIE OF CONSUMPTION

I have already mentioned more than once,--or at least done so by implication,--that I hold my existence, on this earth by a very feeble tenure. Consumption, by right of inheritance, made very early claims; and its demands, as I approached manhood, became more and more cogent, in consequence of measles, dropsy, Lee's Pills, and the injudicious use of medicine and many other errors. My employment, too, as school teacher had been far enough from favorable to health. While thus engaged from winter to winter, and sometimes from year to year; I was accustomed to have cold upon cold, till at length especially towards the close of winter and at the opening of the spring, I was often apparently on the verge of a rapid decline. A ramble up and down the country, with a summer or part of a summer on the farm or garden, did indeed for a time partially set me up again, so that I could return to my favorite employment of teaching in the autumn and during the winter; and thus time with me went on.

A course of medical lectures which I heard in 1825-6, left me, in March, 1826, in about as bad a state of health as school keeping usually had done. However I was too indigent, I might even say too destitute, to be idle. Scarcely was my license to practise medicine and surgery fairly in my pocket, than I found myself turning towards the district school again. Yet I did not continue it many weeks before my old enemy returned upon me with renewed strength; till I was at length compelled to abandon the school entirely. I had as much as I could do, in attempting to keep up a successful war with cough, night-sweats, purulent expectoration, and hectic fever.

This was one of the darkest periods of my life. Destitute of money, and even somewhat in debt, yet too proud or self-relying to be willing to ask my friends to aid me; my hopes of usefulness defeated in two favorite fields of activity, teaching and medicine; and practically given up to linger out a year or two and then die, how could I avoid discouragement? Was it strange even, if I approached at times, the very borders of despair?

For some time prior to this crisis--indeed at certain seasons all my life long,--I relied not a little on medicine, in various forms, especially in the shape of tonics. Strange that I should have done thus, when my general impressions were so unfavorable to its exhibition; and yet such inconsistencies have been, and may be again. Huxham's tincture, quassia, ale, and other bitter infusions and tinctures, had been successively invoked, and I still clung to ale. I also used some wine, and I attached a good deal of importance to a stimulating diet. But it was all to no purpose, the disease was marching on steadily, and appeared destined to triumph; and that, too, at no very distant period.

In these circumstances, I repeat, what could be done? Nature's extremity is sometimes said to be God's opportunity. But without assuming that there was any special providence about it, I will say, that I was driven to desperation, nay almost to insanity or madness. I deemed myself on the very verge of a mighty precipice, beneath which yawned a gulf unfathomable. I must make a last mighty struggle, or perish irretrievably and forever.

It was July 4th, the anniversary of American Independence; I sought and found a few moments of calm reflection, and began to interrogate myself. Why was I so dependent on the physician and the apothecary's shop, and so tremblingly alive to every external impression of atmospheric temperature, or purity? Why must I, at the early age of twenty-eight, be doomed to tread the long road of decline and death? Why can I not declare independence of all external remedial agents, and throw myself wholly on nature and nature's God? I know, full well, the laws of my being. If trust in these, and faithful and persevering obedience will not save me, nothing will. Thus I mused; but alas! it was to muse only. Though almost ready to take the critical step,--I will not say make the desperate plunge,--the fourth of July finally passed away, and found me still lingering, to use a Scripture expression, "between the porch and the altar."

July the fifth at length arrived. And is it all over? I said to myself. Has the "glorious" Fourth gone by and I have not acted up to the dignity of a well-formed and glorious resolution? Must I, alas! now go on to woe irretrievable? Must I go down to the consumptive's grave? Must I perish at less than thirty years of age, and thus make good the declaration that the wicked shall not live out half his days?

A new thought came to me. "One of the South American provinces celebrated her Independence to day, the fifth. I will take the hint,--I will yet be free. I will escape from present circumstances. I will fly from my native home, and all that pertains to it. I will fly from myself,--It is done," I added, "and I go with the first conveyance."

I could indeed walk a little distance, but it either set me to coughing, severely, or else threw me into a profuse perspiration which was equally exhausting. One favorable symptom alone remained, a good appetite and tolerable digestion. Had there been, in addition to the long train of troublesome and dangerous symptoms above mentioned, a loss of digestive power and energy, with colliquative diarrhoea, my hopes must have been forever abandoned.

But I had made my resolution, and was prepared to execute it, let the consequences be what they might. With little more than a single change of clothing, I contrived to find a conveyance before night, quite beyond my immediate neighborhood. Fatigued, at length I stopped, and without much delay, committed myself to the friendship of Morpheus.

On the top of a considerable eminence, in the very midst of a mountain range, one of the most delightful in all New England, only a few miles from the place of my lodging, was a tower some sixty or seventy feet high, which commanded a view of the surrounding country. I had often wished to enjoy the prospect which this tower afforded. Was there, now an opportunity? I had the leisure, had I the needful strength? Could I possibly reach it? And by what means?

I rested for the remainder of the day and the night following, at the foot of the eminence, in order to prepare myself for the excursion of the following morning. It was as much as I could do, that night to take care of my irritable and irritated lungs. At length, however, I slept, and was refreshed. The only drawback upon my full renewal, was my usual night--or rather as I ought to say morning--perspiration, which was quite drenching and exhausting; though not much worse after all my fears than usual.

God is good, I said to myself, when I saw from my chamber window the top of the hills I wished to climb, and perceived that the first rays of the morning sun were already falling upon them. By the middle of the forenoon I was at the foot of the mountain, and prepared to ascend it. After a

little rest, I wound my way to the tower, and finally to its top, when I took a survey of what seemed to me like a new world. Here I renewed my declaration of independence with regard to those earthly props on which I had so long been wont to lean, and of dependence on God, and on his natural and moral enactments.

Here, too, I formed my programme for the day and for the week. Distant from the point which I occupied not more than eight miles was a most interesting educational institution I had long wished to see; and near it was an old acquaintance, with, whom I might perhaps spend the Sabbath, which was now approaching. Could I carry out my plan? Had I the needful strength?

My resolution was at length made; and no sooner made than begun to be executed. The public houses on the way were miserable things; but they were better far than none.

They gave me a temporary home, such as it was. I reached the institution, had a partial view of it, and, half worn out with my week's labor, was glad to rest the seventh day, "according to the commandment," in the house of an old acquaintance.

Monday morning came, and with the aid of the intervening Sabbath, brought to my attenuated and almost sinking frame a new recruit of strength. With a new object of interest some fifteen miles distant, I was once more on the road. I could now walk several miles a day without greatly increasing my cough, or ride in a stage coach many miles. Nor was the nightly perspiration, nor even that which was induced by exercise, any more distressing than it had been, if indeed it was as much so.

In due time I reached my point of destination, and curiosity became fully gratified. What next? A few miles distant was a high mountain which I greatly desired to climb. I reached its base; but the heat was great, so dog-days like, that my courage failed me. I had the necessary strength, but dared not use it for such a purpose. Perhaps I acted wisely.

Twelve miles in the distance still was my father's house, now grown from a few patrimonial acres to full New England size; viz., a hundred acres or more, and well cultivated. My wandering abroad had given me a little strength and very much courage. Why should it not? Was it not truly encouraging that while I was making a long excursion, chiefly on foot, in the heats of midsummer, my cough and hectic and night sweats should become no worse, while my muscular strength had very much increased?

My mind's eye turned towards my father's house as a place of refuge. In a day or two I was in it; and in another day or two I was caparisoned as a laborer, and in the field. It is true that I did not at first accomplish a great deal; but I held the implements of husbandry in my hands, and spent a certain number of hours every day in attempting to work. Some of the workmen laughed about me, and spoke of the vast benefits to be derived from having a ghost in the field with them; but I held on in spite of their jokes. I had been accustomed of old to the labor of a farm, which greatly facilitated my efforts. Habit is powerful.

Not many weeks passed ere I was able to perform half a day's work or more in a day. My consumptive tendencies, moreover, were far less exhausting and trying. In a word, I was better. The Rubicon was already passed. I did not, indeed, expect to get entirely well, for this would have been a hope too big for me. But I should not die, I thought, immediately. Drowning men, as

you know, catch at straws; and this is a wise arrangement, for otherwise they would not often be saved by planks.

One point, at least, I had gained. I was emancipated from slavery to external forms, especially medicated forms. But I had not only declared and found myself able to maintain independence of medicine, but I had acquired much confidence in nature and nature's laws. And this faith in the recuperative powers of nature was worth more to me than worlds would have been without it.

Much was said, in those days, not only in books but by certain learned professors, about shaking off pulmonary consumption on horseback. Whether, indeed, this had often been done--for it is not easy, in the case of a joint application of various restorative agencies, such as air, light, full mental occupation etc., to give to each agency its just due--I am not quite prepared to say. But as soon as I was able to ride on horseback several miles a day, the question was agitated whether it was or was not advisable.

In prosecuting this inquiry, another question came up. How would it do, thought I, to commence at once the practice of medicine? But difficulties almost innumerable--some of them apparently insurmountable--lay in my way. Among the rest, I had no confidence in my medical knowledge or tact; I was a better school-master. But teaching, as I had every reason to fear, would bring me down again, and I could not think of that: whereas the practice of medicine, on horseback, which at that time and in that region was not wholly out of date, might, as I thought, prove quite congenial.

Besides being "fearful and unbelieving" in the matter, I was still in the depths of poverty. I had not even five dollars. In fact, during my excursion already described, I had lived on a few ounces of solid food and a little milk or ale each day, in order to eke out my almost exhausted finances; though, by the way, I do not know but I owed my partial final recovery in no small degree to this very starvation system. However, to become a practising physician, money would be indispensable, more or less. What could be done without it? My father had credit, and could raise money for me; but would he? He had never wholly approved of my medical tendencies and course; and would it be right to ask him to aid me in an undertaking which he could not conscientiously approve?

Just at this time our own family physician wanted to sell, and offered me his stand. His practice, he said, was worth a thousand dollars a year. He had an old dilapidated house and a couple of acres of miserable land, and a horse. These, he said, he would sell to me for so much. I might ride with him as a kind of apprentice or journeyman for six months, at the expiration of which time he would vacate the field wholly.

The house, land, and horse were worth perhaps one-third the sum demanded, but probably not more. However, the price with me, made very little difference. One sum was much the same with another. For I was so anxious to live, that I was willing to pay almost any price which might be required by a reasonable man, and till that time, it had not entered my heart that a good man would take any serious advantage of a fellow being in circumstances so desperate. And then I was not only anxious to live, but very confident I should live. So strong was my determination to live on, and so confident was I in the belief that I should do so, that I was willing to incur a debt, which at any other period of my life would have discouraged me.

There was another thing that tended to revive me and restore my courage. The more I thought of commencing business, and talked about living, the more I found my strength increasing. That talking about dying had a downward or down-hill tendency, I had long known; but that the tendency of talking up-hill was exactly the reverse, I had not fully and clearly understood.

My father tried to dissuade me from a hasty decision, but it was to no purpose. To me, it seemed that the course I had proposed was my only alternative. "I must do it," I said to myself, "or die;" and life to me, as well as to others, was sweet. But although it was a course to which I seemed shut up, and which I must pursue or die, it was a step which I could not take unaided. I had not the pecuniary ability to purchase so much as a horse, or, had I needed one, hardly a good dog.

It was at length proposed by my medical friend, the seller, to accept of a long credit for the amount due for the place and appurtenances, provided, however, I would get my father or some other good man to be my endorser. But here was a difficulty almost or quite insurmountable. My father had always said he would endorse for nobody. And as for asking any one else to endorse for me, I dared not.

But I cannot dwell at this point. My father at length became my endorser, and the bargain was signed and sealed. It was indeed, a desperate effort, and I have a thousand times wondered how I could have ventured. Why! only one or two years before, I was miserable for several days because I was in debt to the extent of only two dollars for a much-needed article, and actually procured the money with considerable difficulty, and went and paid the debt to get rid of my anguish; whereas now, without much pain and without being worth fifty dollars in the world, I could be willing to contract a debt of from twelve to fifteen hundred dollars, and involve my good old father in the consequences besides. How entirely unaccountable!

But mankind love life, and fear death. The scheme proposed was, as I believed, not only a dernier but a needful resort. It was a wrong step no doubt, but I did not then think so. I believed the end "sanctified" or at least sanctioned the means. How could I have done so? "What ardently we wish, we soon believe." I had most ardently wished, I now began to believe!

My consumptive tendencies now receded apace, even before I was astride of my horse. The stimulus of the hope of life with a forgetfulness of myself, were better tonics than Huxham or ale or rich food. There was the expectation of living, and consequently the beginning of life. Mind has great power over even inert matter; how much more over the living animated machine!