

Mrs. Saxton did weep in dead earnest as she set about making preparations for dinner, and saw through the open door what went on. Aunt Susanna tied on a huge gingham apron, got the invalid's feet in a hot bath, and had him making a face over the familiar drink of his boyhood before half an hour went past. When dinner was on the table she had him snugly tucked up on the lounge and the shades down so he could take a nap.

'I feel as if I could eat something,' said the patient feebly, as the odors of stewed chicken, fresh rhubarb pie, and warm biscuits floated in through the open door.

'Not right after that tea,' said the nurse in charge. 'You take a nap, Howard, and then I'll prepare something special for you. I know Emma is a first-rate cook, but sick people need nourishing things that are not too heavy.'

So he dutifully drifted off to slumber, while the family enjoyed the delicious things in the dining-room and talked in subdued tones. The hot bath, the tea, and the quiet kept him asleep until the middle of the afternoon, when he woke up ravenously hungry. Aunt Susanna was ready for him, and appeared with a dainty tray set forth with a tiny bowl of chicken broth, two crackers, and a spoonful of boiled rice. Mr. Saxton looked at the meagre outfit with dismay, but there was no use protesting. His elderly relative had said he must stay on the lounge, and he was forced to obey.

All the afternoon Mr. Saxton really enjoyed himself talking about his complaints, but at supper time he was not allowed to partake of the good food with the family. It was simply maddening to smell the fried ham, and to know that fresh doughnuts were served with the fine coffee, when his own repast consisted of a little custard and a soft-boiled egg. Hot milk was the beverage, and Aunt Susanna said doubtfully that she felt she might be giving him too much to eat.

'How did you sleep? How do you feel?' asked Mrs. Hume next morning, pouncing upon her nephew, as he was trying to steal from the bedroom to the pantry. 'I don't think it's best for you to be up walking around. You just go right back to the lounge or the arm chair, and I'll bring you a drink of fresh water. That is what you need first thing in the morning.'

'I feel rather faint,' said Mr. Saxton, truthfully. 'Seems to me a little coffee and a doughnut would—'

'Coffee and doughnut! Man alive! Do you want to commit suicide? Didn't you tell me just last night how your heart fluttered when you did any work? I'm astonished at you. You can't take anything as solid as a doughnut. I've always known it was one of the features of disease to ask for unreasonable things, but you can't have them. Surely you know me well enough to be sure I won't let you injure yourself.'

Mrs. Saxton was worried almost to distraction to see Aunt Susanna fuss after her nephew all day, and encourage him to tell his troubles. She sympathised with him in his woes and potted after him constantly, making little dainty dishes for him and coddling him until the poor wife wondered how she could exist once the old lady was gone.

'Emma,' said Aunt Susanna solemnly the second morning of her stay, as Mrs. Saxton came into the kitchen, 'I think things have come to the place where you'll have to make some sacrifices for your husband. Last night I heard a noise, and what do you think I saw? Howard was coming down to the pantry to get some cookies in spite of everything, but I caught him just in time. Now do you think you and the children could do without cake and rich food until he gets better? It is a constant temptation to him to smell these things.'

'Why, yes, if I thought it would do any good,' said the bewildered mistress of the house.

'It's either that or locking the pantry, Emma. He'll get all right in time if he doesn't eat unsuitable food.'

So the cookie jar was allowed to go empty, and the doughnuts no longer tempted the master of the house. Once his wife caught him guiltily rummaging the pantry, but there was nothing visible but a few crusts of bread, so no harm was done. Anything that could be cooked and eaten at once Mrs. Hume approved of, so no one suffered at the table from hunger, and she saw to it that her patient's tray was supplied with only small portions of food.

'I think I'll go to town this afternoon,' announced Mr. Saxton one beautiful day. 'A ride in the fresh air will do me good, and Ethel has some letters she wants mailed. I'll get Edward to put Nellie to the little buggy and get back before it is cool in the evening.'

'I'm glad you said that, Howard,' said Aunt Susanna promptly. 'I've been wanting to do some errands this long time. I'll be ready in a few minutes.'

Mr. Saxton groaned inwardly, but there was nothing to be done but submit to the guardianship of his aged relative. He had been fondly hoping to slip into a restaurant on a back street and get a steak or something his appetite craved, but if she went with him no such proceeding would be tolerated. In silence he sat beside her all the way to town and in silence he returned, though she asked all manner of questions in regard to his health and the effect of the drive upon him.

For two weeks Mr. Saxton endured the continental attentions and the restricted diet as best he could, but one day when his wife was darning stockings in the sitting-room and his aunt out in the garden getting sage leaves for fresh tea, he asked abruptly, 'How much longer is Aunt Susanna going to stay here?'

'I really don't know,' said Mrs. Saxton. 'She said when she came she would probably be with us six weeks or so. I hope she will stay as long as possible, for she takes care of you so nicely.'

'You wouldn't think so if you had her pottering after you,' said Mr. Saxton bitterly. 'I can't say my life's my own for her miserable rules and the things she makes me eat. If she don't go home pretty soon I'll die.'

'Howard, I think you are very ungrateful. When I tried to cheer you up and get you to take exercise, you complained that I wanted to see you suffer. And now that your aunt is looking after you night and day you growl about her. She is alarmed about you, and—'

'She can save herself the worry,' said the man of the house, throwing off the blankets and getting to his feet. 'Where are my shoes? I won't be cooped up here a minute longer when there's nothing the matter with me.'

That last sentence slipped out unawares, but it was too late to recall it, so he hurried into his shoes and coat to make his escape.

'I'm going to mend that hole in the fence where the pigs get through.'

The liquid diet and the long stay in the house made him weaker than he expected, but he resolutely stuck to his task. Mrs. Hume tearfully begged him to come in and lie down, but he said in no uncertain terms that he had been fussed over long enough. 'If you really want to do something for me, get me something decent to eat, for I'm starved,' he said grimly. 'No more dishwater for me!'

Mrs. Hume declined to have anything to do with the solid food her nephew demanded, and sniffed audibly when Mrs. Saxton set out good bread and butter, some cold roast beef, and the remains of the dinner dessert, a baked apple with cream. She also made remarks about people trying to rush to their graves, but the hungry man paid no attention to anything but the delicious food to which he had been a stranger too long. When the little repast was ended he possessed himself of the wheel hoe, and set out to cultivate the onions in the garden.

Edward Saxton was speechless with astonishment that evening as he returned from the corn field and found that his father was not on the lounge. A look from his mother silenced him, and presently a very tired, pale man appeared from the garden. The high fence hid him from view and no one saw how many times he had to rest that afternoon the few hours he was in the garden, but his face had lost the old sad look, and his step, in spite of the hard work, had a spring to it long absent.

'How do you do, Mr. Saxton? How are you?' called a voice from the shady lane, as a light buggy drove into the yard. 'How about getting a night's lodging?'

'Not to-night, I think,' said Mr. Saxton stiffly. 'My wife has been working very hard lately.'

'I'll pay you in medicine, if you'll take me in,' said the smooth voice. 'I've been hurrying all around to get here, for I thought you might be out.'

'I am out and I intend to stay out, Mr. Golden. I don't blame you for taking me in. That's your business to hunt for easy people, but you can't do it again. I'm done with patent medicines and complaining. I'd rather die in the harness than lie about the house wearing out my family talking about complaints I never had till I let you persuade me I had them.'

'Why, Mr. Saxton,' said the agent pleasantly, 'I can see from your talk that your liver is out of order. Now our extract of—'

'If it is out of order it will stay out of order. Good day! Supper is ready, and I'm hungry.'

'Is that the young man who sold you the stuff that helped you so much?' said Aunt Susanna from the door behind him. 'Why don't you ask him in? I'd like to meet him.'

There was something in her tone that reminded Mr. Saxton of the bygone days, and turning in a hurry he caught the flicker of a smile in her kind, keen eyes.

'Aunt Susanna, are you at your old tricks?' he cried, springing up. 'I might have known you were joking all the time, for I have never forgotten how you bandaged my foot the day I wanted to go to the circus after running away from school on account of a little sore. You dear old fraud! Well, I'm glad you came, anyway, for you've saved this whole family a lot of misery. The only thing that will induce me to forgive you is the promise of a cherry pie and a lot of doughnuts to-morrow.'

'Bless your heart! I don't want to be forgiven, sonny! I'll make the pie and doughnuts this very evening, if you'll only promise never to disgrace your bringing up any more. I thought all my boys had been taught never to pity themselves, and it almost broke my heart to see my big, brave boy a whining coward. Forgive me, dear, but it was the truth. I know it will never happen again, so my heart is mended. And now let's help eat Emma's good supper, and be friends for ever and ever.'

'And to think I dreaded to have you come!' said Mrs. Saxton, wiping away the happy tears. 'Auntie, I can never thank you enough.'

'Nonsense!' said the old lady, with a little laugh. 'You don't owe me anything. I enjoyed doing it.'

'Yes, I think you did,' said her nephew with conviction, 'but I didn't!'