

"THE ROMANCES of a COUNTRY DOCTOR"

A Paper Read By

The Country Doctor's Grand-Daughter

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The Romances of a Country Doctor

In giving you this story of the romances of my maternal grandfather, Dr. Samuel Shaw of Plainfield, Massachusetts, I want to confess that practically all my material is derived from an account written by my uncle, Mr. Charles Lyman Shaw, nearly half a century ago. And, while I shall tell you of Dr. Shaw's love affairs, other events in this life of a by-gone era can surely be properly termed romantic.

Samuel Shaw was born May 6, 1790, at Abington, Massachusetts, about 20 miles southeast of Boston. When he was nearly 2 years old his father moved to Plainfield, Massachusetts. The family made the long journey from the coast in February 1792, travelling in a covered sleigh. Emerging from the damp forest which covered Bear Mountain and filled the valley of Swift River, they were met and welcomed by their good kinsman, Deacon Richards, who brought them a luncheon prepared by his skilful wife. The tired and hungry child remembered with delight until old age the surpassing flavor of the doughnuts sent by his Aunt Lydia. Reaching at length their farm in the southeast part of the township the immigrants found temporary shelter in a rude cabin until a frame house could be built.

Samuel's boyhood was spent on his father's farm, which, besides mowing and pasture land, usually contained five acres of flax, five of corn, two of wheat and as many of rye. The flax was pulled about the first

of August. To pull one-quarter of an acre was thought to be a good day's work, but the boy Samuel often exerted his extraordinary strength and astonished his father by doing the work of two men.

While he was at work hoeing corn in 1806 he saw the memorable eclipse of the sun.

In the autumn of 1807 he was dangerously ill with typhoid fever: in the following autumn he had a second attack, caused, Dr. Bryant thought, by excessive labor. The young man then resolved to fit himself for a profession. He bought his time from his father, and in the winter of 1809-10 he spent seven weeks with Parson Moses Hallock in Plainfield, studying grammar: the next winter he studied arithmetic with a Mr. Bassett. During both seasons he was a clerk in Mack's store in Plainfield. At this time he saw much of Jonas King, later a missionary to Greece. The stupidity of this fellow-clerk astonished Samuel who saw in the plodder no signs of future greatness.

Hard work and a simple diet made the young student athletic. He liked to try his strength in wrestling matches, and he performed many wonderful feats. In later years he delighted to tell his children that he had lifted an iron shaft weighing 952 pounds: that he had raised and held at arm's length two iron weights of 56 pounds each: that he had jumped over a cord held by two persons at the height of his head, five feet ten inches: that he had carried a barrel of flour from the road to his cottage: that he once lifted a barrel of cider, carried it some distance, put it into a cart, and then unloaded

it, while his father looked on in astonishment; and that at the age of twenty-five he jumped eleven feet, clearing ten.

In order to acquire the means needed for the prosecution of his medical studies, he taught school six successive winters, from 1811 until 1817. He began his labors as schoolmaster in Windsor, Massachusetts, where he received eleven dollars a month: the next two winters he taught in Plainfield, receiving twelve dollars a month: he then gave to Ashfield the benefit of his instructions which were so highly esteemed that his wages were raised the second season from fifteen dollars to eighteen dollars a month: in 1817 he taught his last school on the heights of Peru, Massachusetts.

Intervals of leisure during these years he devoted to study. In 1813 he spent some time at Parson Hallock's school in Plainfield in order to acquire some knowledge of Latin and greek. The Freshman class at Williams College was composed largely of graduates from this school and Plainfield claims to have sent out more men of eminence than any other town of the same size in the western hemisphere. Among them were Marcus Whitman, who saved Oregon for the United States, William Cullen Bryant and Jonas King, first missionary to Greece.

In the following year Samuel Shaw began the study of medicine with Dr. Peter Bryant at Cummington, Massachusetts. The summer of 1817 he spent at the Bryant Homestead, studying and visiting patients with the doctor whose poet son William Cullen shared with

Samuel the garret as sleeping quarters.

Samuel rapidly became so skilful in the treatment of diseases that Dr. Bryant did not hesitate the following winter to leave the sick people of Cummington under the student's care during his own absence in the Massachusetts Senate.

In 1818 Dr. Shaw entered into a partnership with Dr. Bryant which however, lasted less than two years. Dr. Bryant later left his medical library to his former pupil.

Two subsequent winters, 1819-20 and 1820-21, Dr. Shaw spent in Boston, attending medical lectures. On account of his medical talents he was treated with great attention by two professors, Dr. Warren and Dr. Jackson, and was invited by several families to settle in Boston.

Cummington Hill, however, had greater attractions. His life there had not been wholly devoted to the study and practice of medicine. In the society of Dr. Bryant's lovely daughter Sarah, he had often found greater pleasure even than in that of her poetical and philosophical father, and of her brother William Cullen, whom our family thought "a bear". In some delightful ramble by the "Rivulet", through the wood, or up the heights of Remington Mountain, Samuel doubtless told his love and learned that he had found favor in Sarah's eyes. They were married September 13, 1821. This union was blessed by only one child, who was born at the Bryant Homestead October 24, 1822.

For several years the people of Plainfield had been begging Dr. Shaw to become their physician. In 1824 he yielded to their entreaties and removing to their village, occupied the house known later for many years as the Winslow Cottage. Here his life was soon saddened by the loss of his beloved wife who died December 12, 1824. I have always been told that she went to the Bryant Homestead to visit, slept in damp sheets and developed "galloping consumption". Sarah Bryant Shaw was buried in the Shaw family lot in the Plainfield cemetery and her tombstone bears the epitaph;

"Farewell, Sarah, no rolling sun,
Shall e'er to me thy life restore
In vain below I seek to find
Thy many virtues, now no more."

In her memory William Cullen Bryant wrote the poem "The Death of the Flowers" beginning "The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year and concluding;

"And then I think of one who in her youthful beauty died
The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side
In the cold moist earth we laid her when the forests cast
the leaf
And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief
Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young friend of ours
So gentle and so beautiful should perish with the flowers."

For six years Dr. Shaw lived a widower cheered occasionally by the efficient housekeeper, Annis Joy. His sorrowful life before long excited the sympathy of his friend Dr. Joseph H. Flint of Northampton, who in 1830, advised Dr. Shaw to marry again, recommending, as a suitable companion, a young lady of Pleasant Street, the lovely and accomplished Elizabeth Owen Clarke.

This young lady, after having received a good education, had spent several years in the south engaged in teaching. She also gave important aid, in the preparation of historical charts, to her sister, Miss Anne Laura Clarke, who was the first woman lecturer in the United States. In 1825 she was in Philadelphia and was present at the reception given to General Lafayette. The death of her brother, Joseph Hawley Clarke, in November, 1825, called her home. Here she was occupied with the care and education of his orphaned children when in 1830 she met Dr. Samuel Shaw.

In the letter in which Dr. Flint urged Dr. Shaw to make her acquaintance that encouraging friend wrote "You have the recommendation of easy circumstances, good professional business, an enviable standing in your own neighborhood, and are neither so rude nor unpolished nor so ignorant nor old nor wrinkled but that a sensible woman might even love you as a wife should her husband." Dr. Flint further gave this alluring description of her character and charms; "Elizabeth Clarke is the daughter of Joseph Clarke who was adopted and educated by Major Hawley (his uncle-in-law) and inherited his estate. She is sister to Anne Clarke, the historical lecturess, a woman of rather extraordinary powers of mind and of very considerable literary acquirement. She is now delivering a course of lectures in Boston. Elizabeth, the younger sister, is about twenty-three, rather below ordinary size, a good form and not fat. She has a good complexion, brilliant black eyes and shows

as fine a set of teeth as you ever beheld. She has been associated with her sister in teaching the young idea how to shoot and is quite proficient in the accomplishments deemed so important in female education, such as music, painting, etc, etc. Her parents are dead. Her mother was said to have been a most estimable woman in every relation and Elizabeth is said to bear her resemblance. She has spirit and independence and has not the least thought of truckling to any one. But from long and intimate acquaintance and under circumstances, too, when she could not dissemble, I know her temper is sweet and amiable and that she preserves her spirits and good humor under all circumstances. This is saying a great deal, doctor, of any lady; but I aver it is the truth and nothing but the truth."

Dr. Flint's invitation and description proved irresistible; Dr. Shaw came, saw, and soon won the accomplished Elizabeth.

To quiet any fear that the elder sister on her return home would be able to break the engagement, Dr. Flint wrote in June " But I know better. Elizabeth Clarke is not in leading strings; mild and pleasant as she always is, she has, nevertheless, decision of character and will never be dissuaded from purposes of which her judgement approves. " This skilful matchmaker saw his scheme crowned with success October 16, 1830, when the handsome doctor carried away the lovely Elizabeth to his mountain home.

In 1833 he built the large house which is still in the possession of his descendants. Elizabeth's friends told each other that she "had gone up to live in a great big barn of a house." Very possibly the thirteen-room house was at first not over-stocked with furniture. From the grounds adjacent, glimpses may be obtained of a beautiful landscape in which hill rises beyond hill in successive ridges until Blandford Church and Sweetman Mountain seem with other distant points to meet the southern sky.

For forty years Dr. Shaw was a member of the Massachusetts Medical Society. Twenty years after his death his opinions were still quoted in the Society. His cheerful disposition, intuitive judgement, and great skill made him a popular and successful physician. During one epidemic he did not have his clothes off for an entire week. When a man once said to him "You're a rich man, Dr. Shaw" his reply was "It takes all that I earn in the daytime to support my family. Whatever I have been able to lay up I have earned while other men slept."

He continued in active practice until 1854. One evening in September of that year he was hastily summoned to West Cummington to attend his married daughter, Ellen. On the steep road that leads from West Hill to the Westfield Valley his horse took fright and he was thrown from his carriage with such violence that he received injuries from which he never recovered, though

he lived for sixteen years.

During his long practice of more than forty years he had many stirring adventures and narrow escapes. Once when he was driving through a wood in a thunder storm a blinding flash of lightning struck his gig, rendering him for some time unconscious. Many times he forded the Westfield River when the bridges had been carried away by freshets and sometimes, swept far downstream by huge cakes of floating ice, horse and rider barely escaped destruction in the whirling torrent. Once, while riding on horseback along a lonely road, he was startled by the sudden appearance of two horsemen who rode out from behind a clump of bushes. For some distance they rode in silence on each side of him, quickening their pace whenever he tried to leave them behind. Expecting every moment to be attacked, the doctor was surprised and relieved when the mysterious horsemen turned into a thicket and disappeared. Often braving winter storms he had to dig a way for his horse through deep snowdrifts and sometimes, drowsy with fatigue and cold, he would wrap himself in the warm buffalo robes and, giving loose rein to his horse, would sink into a deep slumber, fortunately to be awakened by the sudden stopping of his sleigh under his own shed.

Dr. Shaw enjoyed sufficient popularity among his townsmen to be chosen selectman eight times. He was first elected to this office in 1826. A public-spirited citizen, he persuaded some of the villagers to join him

in constructing an aqueduct, which was originally composed of short sections of logs with a hole bored through them. In later days I was for many years secretary and treasurer of this Plainfield Aqueduct Company, which secured pure spring water from sources that have furnished for over one hundred years this association of eleven families. At the annual meeting bills for work and supplies were always presented, and the company voted to assess the members an amount sufficient to cover the stated expenses. I can remember one year when the total cost to the company was about seven dollars and a half and each family received a bill for sixty-nine cents for the year's water supply. Now we pay an annual water tax of four dollars per family, in order to have cash in reserve in case of unusual expenses. In some of the houses the water still runs into a water barrel --unchecked night and day. Dr. Shaw also united with other leading townsmen in building a new church in 1846.

Samuel and Elizabeth Shaw had six children, four daughters and two sons. Of these my mother Laura A. Shaw was the youngest. All six survived the diseases of childhood except the oldest daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, who died of croup September 26, 1834.

During his declining years Dr. Shaw received the best of care from his wife and daughters. His devoted wife Elizabeth died of pneumonia September 27, 1863. He lived to see his eightieth birthday but on September 24, 1870 he too passed away.

