

One Day's Journey with a Country Doctor

by A.H.M., Westmeath, Ontario

We left the village shortly after 4 pm. Our first call was quite six miles away, probably more as we went "across Country". Our conveyance was a closed cutter which I nick-named "the Pillbox". The doctor drives a good horse and does not spare it. About a mile from the village we leave the road and start through the fields and thereafter we are in them almost continually.

The going was anything but good. The snow was deep. For the most part it had been well marked by bobsleighs, but the thaw had spoiled that and it was full of holes with occasional "pitch-holes". The weather was moderate when we started and we were fairly comfortable. As a matter of fact the Pillbox had been built for one only, not two full grown men in fur coats plus the doctor's grips. Only the day before the worthy doctor had narrowly escaped serious trouble in a farm yard when his horse had become frightened and bolted and the Pillbox came to grief at the pump. The windows were smashed but no more serious damage done. So we were without our "lights". Cardboard is a poor substitute.

At the school house on the Bromley Line we turned north to face some rough country. By this time it was blowing hard with the snow in "clouds". In order to see a blizzard in all its glory one must watch it sweep over a wide open field. That joy was mine.

In the midst of the gale we made our first call for a poor woman suffering from lonesomeness and consequent breakdown? But assuredly his visit is a wholesome tonic! The country can be lonesome to an extent undreamt by the city dweller.

The visit over, the minister squats in the Pillbox again, and the "Doc" before entering seeks to turn the sometimes cumbersome conveyance but it balks and is on the point of overturning when the man of the house grabs the uplifted runner and restores it to level again. Somebody laughs, but not the minister! We trace our steps – rather the horse does, and it is marvelous how sure-footed a horse can be. Back to the school house, we turn east for our last call. Daylight is fading; the storm is still raging and with sundown Jack Frost takes possession more strongly.

In a farm house a devoted woman is nearing the end of the road. How devoted she has been! Nearly threescore years and ten and unmarried, she has been a "Sister in Isreal", beloved of the seven children in her brother's house. Her praise is sung throughout the community. Doctor and minister perform their last services for the dying. A few hours more and the worn out heart has ceased to beat.

In that well ordered farm house, the supper is on the table and we are pressed to stay. But we are anxious to be one the road before the pall of darkness comes down. The farmer does all he can for our safety and comfort. A lamp is found and fixed on the top of the Pillbox. It helps to make the darkness more intense but it shines a light on the horse's hips and partly on the road. Then we are packed in the Pillbox and set out for the village. To a city-bred man this is a matter of wonder how horse and cutter escape disaster on such roads on such a night!

Joy-riding in the auto is tame and uninteresting compared with "cross-country" work in a cutter in winter; especially after dark! Skirting holes, skimming past gates posts, pitching down into holes, turning out in the side of a big field in deep snow for another cutter which you hardly see, one hour of thrilling life may contain all that. One admires the skill of the driver and the grit of the horse, that faithful friend of man.

Well, we are back in the village and I crawl out of that rig somewhat cramped and stiff. But thankful, I bid the doctor good-night and in my heart admire him more than ever, for I have seen something of the self-sacrificing required of a country practitioner.

How few think of it! Like the sailor on the sea, the doctor and his night calls are forgotten. The lonely trips by night, often in below zero weather. The roads full even the tracks across the fields obliterated by the storm! If there be no heroism in religious life in our day, there is heroism in the medical profession in rural Canada and Scotland too. The doctor who in mid-winter answers the call to help some poor woman in the hour of her trouble or to bring relief to those who agonize in pain is a hero. Often in times like these, his only reward is a good conscience, for money is scarce on the farm.

All honour to the country doctor who stays with his job! Once on a time his praise was sung by Ian MacLaren in "*A Doctor of the Old School*", which W.E. Gladstone declared to be the finest sketch in the Scottish dialect.

This account appears without attribution or date in the Tweedsmuir Book.

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