

## *Dr. Puffer's Lost Opportunity*

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by Mary Kyle Dallas  
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Dr. Puffer was an old bachelor—a physician, who belonged to that class of medical practitioners who, having learnt certain rules and laws by rote, and having obtained a diploma, go to work on the principle that all men must be doctored in the same way or in none. And that a patient is a creature formed to swallow nauseous doses which do him no good, without complaint—to foot great bills without a murmur and to die of a dispensation of Providence, making no accusations against the doctor.

As for the idea that a physician's mission is to heal, that never entered Dr. Puffer's mind. As a general thing it is the last idea that does enter a doctor's head, save as the reputation of having mastered a difficult case may increase fees and practice. But somehow in Dr. Puffer's case the truth had come to knowledge, and after seeing his gig wheels wheeling softly behind the mourning coaches of the numerous funerals of victims of quinine, calomel and other relics of medical superstition, which occurred in his field of labor, people began to shrink from patronizing Dr. Puffer, the difference in the bills of mortality in that district being noticeable at once. To be sure, doctors of the same style remained—men who always have been “called in a little too late,” or who “mistake the treatment” a dozen times and only discover the cause of the malady after the patient has sunk under it. But they were not found out yet. Many never are. Perhaps Dr. Puffer did not talk enough or was not bold enough. Certainly his practice died out, and he found himself in straightening circumstances, with nothing but the annuity of two hundred dollars which had been left him by his parents, at an age when men who make fortunes at all have usually made them.

The doctor consequently had begun quite seriously to consider the comparative merits of prussic acid and strychnine, when the following letter from a sister, who had a few years before married a very old physician, aroused him from his torpor. It was a very amiable letter, stating the fact that her husband had decided to retire from a business which had been wonderfully lucrative to him, he (of course this was not in the letter) having been able to browbeat and insult people to such an extent, that, being an ignorant old wretch, with a smattering of Latin and a diploma, he had really made a great reputation; that when he had done so, a wonderful practice would be vacant, and that they had decided no one would be so suitable to fill it as Brother Paul.

“I've heard you were not getting on as well as you could wish,” the letter went on, “and this is a splendid opportunity for you. I've coaxed the doctor to give it to you, and it's been hard work, I tell you, for he could sell out at any price. Come immediately.”

And it may be supposed that Dr. Puffer went. He found his relatives living in splendid style, surrounded by a retinue of servants, and everything bearing testimony to the fortune of its owner.

He was received in friendly fashion and taken in as a partner, preparatory to the complete resignation of his brother-in-law.; and being believed in immediately by long-suffering families

of patients whose grandfathers had died under the old doctor's hands and who had only been saved themselves by the secret disobedience of some old nurse who had obstinately taken her own way, or by their repugnance to black draughts and blue pills, was already prospectively a rich man. Moreover, his home was with his brother, and but for one circumstance he would have been happy.

This circumstance was one which would scarcely have made any one else wretched. Perhaps I should rather speak of it as a combination of circumstances. His sister had a little girl, and the little girl had a big doll. This was all, but it was enough to poison Dr. Puffer's cup of happiness.

Dr. Puffer was one of those people who hate things which other people invariably like. He hated strawberries. He hated peaches. He hated roast turkey. He hated a warm Spring day. He hated an evening party. He hated eggs. He hated tea. He hated handsome young men and pretty young girls. He hated fresh young mothers and their babies. He hated ice cream. He hated talkative people who laughed a good deal. He hated Newfoundland dogs. He hated the opera. He hated a comedy. He hated to hear two young people sing a duet. He hated celebrated persons, and popular preachers, and new novels. He hated flowers and he hated trees. He hated to travel by steam. He hated to see dancing. He hated all children, and particularly little girls. He hated to see them roll hoops, or jump, or run. But if there was anything he hated worse than all other things, it was to see a little girl playing with a doll; and this little girl played with nothing else.

In vain, hating children as he did, had he invaded a toy store, and purchased a little cart, a stove and a churn, and presented them to the child in hopes that thus she might be weaned from her favorite pastime.

Milly played with them, it is true, but only in conjunction with her doll. Any woman would have known that this would be the case, but it was an unexpected blow to the old bachelor. She took the doll to ride in the cart; she churned imaginary butter for its eating; she baked mud pies in the oven of her stove, chatting all the while with her speechless beauty, in imitation of her mother's conferences with the cook. Nothing was gained by the gifts but new annoyance. The doll, too, was in Dr. Puffer's opinion, the most horrible of its species. It was a large, gutta-percha likeness of a week-old baby. It was the same size. [Its] head was bald. Its glass eyes could both shut and open; and, moreover, squeezed at the mouth, and it emitted the exact imitation of the cry of a young infant.

Milly was always making it cry, and her mother often appealed to Uncle Puffer to say if the juvenile drama constantly going on between Milly and her doll was not "too cunning." In view of the wonderful opening, Dr. Puffer was necessitated to reply, hypocritically, that it was.

If he could only have locked Milly out of his own peculiar office, it would not have been so bad; but this would have been an unwarrantable act in the eyes of her parents. He dared not do it. Therefore, every day, just as Dr. Puffer was at his busiest, the door would open, and Miss Milly, in the shortest of frocks, the lowest of bodices, and the glossiest of curls, would walk in with the doll on one arm and a basket of toys on the other, and commence the exercises by requesting Uncle Puffer to say "tiss Dolly," after which performance she would say:

“Now tiss Uncle Puffer, Dolly,” and would rub the [gutta-percha] head, warm from much embracing, against the gentleman’s mouth.

Then Miss Milly would declare that “Dolly must do s’leep,” and sitting down upon a small bench, she would sway to and fro singing, “Bye, bye, baby,” at the top of her little voice until coming to the conclusion that “Dolly was bad and would not do to seep,” she would whip it, shake it, scold it, and set it upon her knee preparatory to conversation.

“Aint oo samed not do to seep?” she would inquire, squeezing the crying machinery; “and aint oo samed to turb Uncle Puffer by tying?” Machinery again. “Oo want a baff?”

One squeak to signify yes. Then a production of a tin bath-tub capable of holding the doll’s red shoe. Water requested from Uncle Puffer’s pitcher, and a toilette in imitation of her own; with the conversation of [mamma] and the maid dished over in baby English; and generally, as finale, the precipitation of Dolly into the old bachelor’s waistcoat, with the recommendation to “do play with Uncle puffer while I bake pie and take.”

Then out came the stove, the [wagon,] the churn, a monkey on a pole, a set of tea things, a village in a box, and goodness knows what else, all offering [scenic] effects for the performance of Dolly’s role in what was a grand comedy to Milly and a woeful tragedy to [Bachelor] Puffer.

“Isn’t she *too* cunning,” would [mamma] say, coming in at last to bear her darling away, “Isn’t she *too* cunning?”

And Milly would say:

“‘Es, aint I *too* cunnin’, uncle? Hold my Dolly till I tum bat.”

In view of the practice, Bachelor Puffer bore all this much longer than might have been expected. But even long suffering must have an end. One night when Dr. Puffer’s feelings had been much overwrought, he found the doll for once neglected and in his power. The temptation was great. The savage man could not control his longing to be rid of it.

Perhaps, he argued, this niece of his would refuse to be consoled by another doll, and would forsake the sport together. It was worth trying. At least just such another horrible, bald-headed creature could not, the doctor felt sure, be procured so easily; and he would in any case punish the innocent cause of his misery in some slight degree.

It was late when he discovered the neglected toy. But, nevertheless, he waited for more than an hour to be quite sure that all the inmates of the house were wrapped in slumber before proceeding to carry out his strange intent.

He had observed around the corner of a poor street, a block or two away, one of those garbage boxes common to New York tenement houses, and also noticed that it was emptied at periodical

intervals. Here he purposed to bury the enemy of his peace out of his sight forever. Accordingly he went to his study, and taking from a shelf an empty cigar-box of large size, put the doll within it. He grinned savagely as he did so, and muttered in the most fiendish manner. Then he went to the door and looked out. There was no one in sight. Dr. Puffer went out into the street, and proceeded with his burden toward the corner which led toward the locality containing tenement houses and garbage boxes. In due course of time he reached the receptacle of filth which he had observed, and there paused. He was so delighted that as he paused he actually laughed aloud.

“Ha-ha!” he said, “you won’t bother me again with your penny whistle bag-pipes. Here you go!”

But before he could give the box the accompanying fling, two great hands caught his own, and somebody said:

“No you don’t, sir!”

And, in a moment more, one policeman held him firmly, and another had taken possession of the box.

“You’ll come along with us—you’ve been caught in the act, you know!” said one of these guardians of the law.

“I’ve caught gals at it, but never a man before—come along!”

“Where to?” asked Dr. Puffer, struggling.

“To the station-house,” said the policeman.

“Why it isn’t a punishable offence—is it?” gasped Dr. Puffer.

“It’s a great annoyance—I—“

And, dragged forward most indecorously by his collar, Bachelor Puffer was not in a condition to talk much for a while. He was not in the least brilliant; and, having had the fear of his sister before his mind, he forgot that any mistake was possible, and believed that he had been arrested for the act of stealing and attempting to destroy Milly’s doll—perhaps, even at her mother’s [instance!]

Not until the box had been carefully and solemnly taken care of, and he himself conducted to a solitary cell, did the truth flash upon him. He stood quite still under the sudden influx of light, and put both hands to his hair, and stared into the darkness with his light blue eyes.

“It looks like a baby!” he gasped. “They think it’s a dead one—they think I’ve committed infanticide! Oh, good Heavens! what a horrible thing. Let me out—I want to explain.”

But he was locked up for the night, and no explanation was possible until morning.

Of course, the farce could not continue long. In due course of time it was discovered that the murdered infant was made of [gutta-percha,] and Dr. Puffer was relieved from durance vile. But the news of his arrest for infanticide having reached his sister and her husband, it became necessary that they should know the trouble. Indeed, the papers had caught at it as an excellent joke, and it was impossible to conceal it from their ears.

In that household the husband was ruled by the wife, the wife by the child. The insulted Milly could not be appeased; neither could mamma nor papa. A serious family quarrel ensued, and Dr. Puffer was notified that the partnership must be discontinued. Moreover, that the practice would be sold to another physician without delay; and the sequel of this fatal act was his departure from the scene of his excellent opening with what is vulgarly called a flea in his ear.

When last heard of, he kept an apothecary's shop, and had just given (by mistake) arsenic instead of cream of tartar to a very little girl who was fond of playing about his shop door with an immense doll in her arms.

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