

# Curing the Head of the Family

By Mary Heaton Vorse.

Illustrations by IRMA DEREMEAUX.

It Helped the Patient but made Life Strenuous for the Vigorous Appetite.

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NOTHING shocked me so dreadfully when I first came to live with my uncle Solon's family as to see how indifferent the children felt about their father's health, but now that I have been here a little while, I have become indifferent myself, because you get used to a person's being sick all the time just as you do to anything else sad in life. And then, the longer I live here, the less I can keep from wondering if Uncle Solon is as sick as he thinks he is, and whether, if he didn't stop thinking of his ailments, they would trouble him so much.

It's his stomach that's the matter with him; but in spite of its being so troublesome, I've never yet seen Uncle Solon so sick that he couldn't eat a hearty meal; and then afterwards he groans about it. So I've become as callous as the rest; when Uncle Solon says after supper, "That cake sets very heavy," I don't look up from my book.

When I first came, I was so sympathetic that he told me all his symptoms, and everything that he had taken for his attacks for the last fifteen years, which was very embarrassing from an uncle that one has hardly seen. We were never allowed to speak of our stomachs by mamma. She said there were two things that a gentleman never referred to; one was her poverty and the other was her stomach.

Aunt Matilda takes Uncle Solon's ups and downs seriously. She's just as excited about every fresh attack as the children are indifferent, and spends evenings arguing with him about having a doctor, and fixing him hot drinks, and getting him to try different remedies. She says to the girls before he comes home:

"I do hope your father's luncheon will have agreed with him."

I've never heard any of them answer her, or take the slightest interest, except when Pauline said:

"I wish to goodness, ma, you'd let us get out from under the shadow of papa's stomach some time!"

Poor Aunt Matilda was so shocked at this that it touched Pauline's heart, and she went out to the kitchen and made peach flap-doodle for dinner, which she makes very well; then Uncle Solon ate so much of it that Aunt Matilda had to spend the evening putting hot compresses on him.

I tell all this here because you'll understand better the great importance of the few words which Melly let drop when I came back from the art school about two weeks ago. She looked up with her little, round face, and said:

"Papa's never going to be sick again." Then she read out of a book which was spread open on the bed:

"Fill in center of flower with chain stitch."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Mamma's found a way to cure him," Melly answered, looking over to the magazine again to see just how the needle was placed in the picture to make a certain stitch, and pulling it through exactly like it. "Mamma's got a new book about eating, and she's gone out to get the things it tells you ought to have. It isn't indigestions that's the matter with him, it's his fat—and that's got to come off. Mamma said so. She read it in the book," Melly added conclusively.

"What do you mean?" I asked, "when you say that Aunt Matilda's gone out to get the things the book tells you ought to eat?"

Melly took three stitches before she answered. Then all she said was, "I don't know."

Melly is my youngest cousin and I room with her. She is eleven years old, and a very good little thing—much better than her sister Gladys, who is sometimes very exasperating, although she has a great deal of good in her, and for some reason I can't help being fonder of her than I am of Melly.

It would be a very glorious thing indeed for all of us if Uncle Solon could be cured, because, as Pauline said that day she got angry, we live in the shadow of Uncle Solon's bad health. When he is comparatively well, we enjoy ourselves, but the times when he isn't, both he and Aunt Matilda are so wrapped up in gloom, and they talk so constantly about every symptom, that although the children seem callous, yet none of them escapes the depressing influence.

You might say that my Uncle Solon's health is the barometer which measures the happiness of this household. No one could be happy, even supposing you couldn't hear Uncle Solon groaning, when Aunt Matilda comes out looking like some 1830 actress doing a Greek play, holding up a long finger and saying:

"H-s-h! Your father's very bad to-night."

I went out to the front room, where Gladys was. She looked up from the evening paper and said:

"He's confessed! I knew he did it all along. But if I'd killed anybody, and had kept from confessing for as long as that, I wouldn't have confessed ever. What's the good? Men act so silly!"

"I hear auntie's found a way to cure Uncle Solon," I told her. I never encourage her to talk about the awful things she's so fond of reading in the papers.

"It's going to be fierce, isn't it?" said Gladys. She stuck her head into the paper again. "How much do you suppose it would cost," she said, "to get this lotion for removing freckles made?"

If Gladys had the money, she'd have every one of the beauty lotions made up that are printed in the daily papers. She loves to smear things on her face—otherwise she's perfectly careless of her personal appearance.

I didn't understand what she meant by saying wasn't it "fierce," and I asked her.

"You haven't lived through," she explained, "any of father's cures. We have—and that's all we have done!"

"Gladys," I replied, "I don't think you take the

interest in your poor father's health that you ought to."

Just here Aunt Matilda came in.

"I hear what you said, Daisy," she told me, "and I'm very glad to have you say it. The children—none of them—realize their poor father's sufferings. I suppose it's like childhood to get used to anything, but when I think what Solon was when I first knew him, and what he is to-day and has been for the last ten years, my heart bleeds—I never get used to it. Oh, how often I say to your Uncle: 'If you'd only been born up in Massachusetts instead of in Pennsylvania! Oh, my dear, it's a wonder that any of those Pennsylvania Dutch people live to tell the tale! Where I came from it's a land of plain living and high thinking; and I tell Solon where he comes from it seems to be a land of high living and no thinking. It was lucky for your poor dear mother's constitution that she was married young and moved to New England. Many a time I've asked my relatives for recipes of things—I will say they do taste awfully good—and they always began with, 'Take a quart of cream and a dozen eggs, and you know for yourself that no stomach can possibly endure when every blessed thing that's put into is based on a quart of cream and a dozen eggs—or if it isn't, it's something rich and fried—and all awfully good! Well, that's the life your poor uncle lived for years and years, and it shows what a splendid constitution he has that he isn't in his

prettily—sometimes I think she is too pretty. She looks like the photographs of girls that you see on the outside of Sunday papers. Gladys broke the news to her with: 'We're all going to be starved to death again!' 'Pauline dropped onto a sofa. 'You don't mean that you've found another cure for father?' she asked, discouraged. 'You don't know what it means,' she continued, turning to me, "when mother gets a cure for father. We all get awful things. One time our food gave us hives. Another time we nearly died with eating some awful hay cereal. Another time it was a water cure, and we drank and drank until I felt like an artesian well." Here Aunt Matilda began all over again all about the nutritious quality of raw food while Pauline fixed her hair in the glass. She has a great quantity of hair, all her own, and she fixes it so it looks like the hair you buy and pin on.

Finally she said: 'Well, mother, it seems to spell 'empty stomach' to me, but if you think that it will help father—' At this Gladys broke forth indignantly.

"Go ahead and do the dutiful daughter—do! You get lunch down-town; you'll fill up on great hunks of steak. But I get three meals at home—not that I call salad 'n' fruit meals! I'm a growing girl, that's what I am, and I get awful hungry—I'm awfully hungry this minute, and if that's what I'm going to have for dinner—!"

"Gladys, as soon as your stomach has shrunk to its normal size," said my aunt, "more food than that which this book prescribes will seem nauseous to you."

"Any of that food seems nauseous to me!" replied Gladys, with the impertinence of despair.

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I woke next morning with a feeling that something disagreeable had happened, and then I remembered what it was. It was that we were to have practically no breakfast. Instead of the pot of steaming coffee, there was the table set with more raw eggs, cheese, and a great big pile of apples, which looked insultingly round and red. They were flanked by a cold, unfriendly pitcher of milk.

The cook is a long, lean, lachrymose creature, who has seen better days, and she moved around the room groaning things to herself, "I never seen the like—the're crazy!"

It was not a cheerful manner of beginning the day.

Nobody knows how great a part food plays in their lives until they haven't any. As the days followed one another, with their horrid procession of raw things, I found myself thinking of meals I had eaten. I dreamed of shortcake at night. If you've never tried it, you can't know how desolate it is to sit down at a table and see nothing but cheese and fruit—never anything good and hot, never anything before you that you want to eat, and yet to be so hungry that you could eat anything at all. Besides it was very bad for my art.

Now that it's over, I'm glad I have been through it, because it taught me a great many things. Ever since then I've been able to understand history better, because I know how fanatics act and the curious strength that they have to buoy them up. For Aunt Matilda acted this way. She declared she felt years younger, and called our attention to how much better we all were looking, and especially Uncle Solon; and really, he did seem to suffer very much less.

The children got crosser and crosser. Every

conversation; and I noticed that Aunt Matilda didn't ask Uncle Solon anything about lunch, and in some ways my aunt is a very tactful woman. Instead, she turned the children's attention away from their father by saying:

"You make me ashamed of you, Rob! Look at your little sister Melly. She makes no complaint. She eats her food and says nothing, and she's the youngest of you all. She's glad to help her father along."

"Yes, look at Melly," said Rob. "She looks sick, if you ask me!"

We all looked at Melly. She was a very queer color.

"She feels perfectly well," asserted Aunt Matilda. "Don't you, Melly, dear?"

At this Melly rushed from the room. Aunt Matilda followed her anxiously. In a moment I heard her calling for me. I went in, and so did Pauline. Melly was a very sick little girl indeed. Aunt Matilda looked down on her youngest child, worried and helpless.

"No wonder!" the doctor exclaimed. "But how, on the healthy diet we've been having, she could get a gastric attack, I don't know. Have you been eating anything between meals, Melly, dear?"

Melly is usually a placid child, as I have told you, and a good one, but this question of her mother's stung even her spirit into rebellion. Between gasps and groans she cried:

"Between meals! Between meals! When have we had any meals? I couldn't eat anything between meals. There ain't any meals to eat anything between!"

Uncle Solon joined us. He can't bear to have anything the matter with any of the children. "It isn't in the least necessary, father," replied Aunt Matilda. "It's just one of Melly's gastric attacks, which I can perfectly handle myself."

Uncle Solon, however, plodded gravely out and took down the receiver, and pretty soon the doctor was there. I notice that when he does come, Aunt Matilda is as glad to see him as anybody.

"What food," he wanted to know, "has this child been eating?"

"That's the queer part of it, doctor," said Aunt Matilda. "I don't understand it at all. She's been eating nothing but the most healthful food."

"Not been having any cures around lately?" the doctor asked with a suspicious look. "No 'no breakfast' fad, no cereal craze? I notice Mr. Shoemaker looks pretty well, and I thought you might have been starving him a little lately. If you could just keep him from eating so much—"

Here Rob laughed a bitter laugh.

"Eating so much! We haven't had a square meal for weeks—we kids haven't; but bet your life pa hits the grub when he's downtown!"

"Robert!" cried Aunt Matilda, scandalized.

"Raw eggs an' cheese is what we've been eating, doctor, and apples!" said Rob.

"No wonder!" the doctor exclaimed. "that that child's stomach is upset. Salad and apples for a growing child! It's all very well for you, Mrs. Shoemaker, and your husband, to eat, because you masticate properly; but children always swallow everything whole. I've always told you that dieting was what your husband needed. He probably gets on good meal downstairs."

At this point Uncle Solon walked with dignity down the corridor. Nor was Aunt Matilda anxious to press the point.

"And you really think, doctor," she quavered, "that this is what ails Melly?"

"What more would you want?" the doctor inquired. "It's enough to give any child indigestion."

Uncle Solon, his dignity unimpaired, walked back.

"I've decided, Matilda," he said, "to give up the cure. However good it is for me, I won't have the children's stomachs impaired. I'd rather suffer than have them suffer."

As Aunt Matilda would have spoken he held up a large hand.

"No," he said, "we won't argue the point. I don't often interfere in the running of the family, but when I do, as you see, it is final. We'll go back to our ordinary diet to-morrow."

I suppose it was on account of Melly's being sick that I didn't sleep very well that night, and kept waking and falling asleep again. Melly was restless too. It must have been at two in the night that I was awakened by her crying. I sprang to her bedside.

"What is it, Melly?" I asked. "Are you sick again?"

"Tisn't that," she sobbed, "tisn't that. It's that I'm so bad—but I can't tell them—oh, I can't tell them!"

"What do you mean, Melly?" I asked her again, turning up the gas.

"I'll tell you, Daisy, but don't you tell them; but I've got to tell some one!"

"What do you mean, Melly?" I asked again. "Oh, I've done something dreadful!" she wailed, lifting up her pale little face to me. "I'm a hypocrite. Oh, you don't know how bad I am!"

"What have you done?" I asked her, as gently as I could.

"Go look in my lower bureau drawer, under my clothes, in the right-hand corner, and then you'll know."

I did as she told me. There, wrapped in precise, neat little packages were part of a mince pie, in another package some doughnuts, and in a paper bag some bananas.

"That's why I'm sick," wailed Melly. "The Lord made me sick because he's angry with me. I got so hungry I couldn't stand it. Oh, Daisy, it's an awful thing to say, but I love to eat, and there wasn't anything to eat! And I broke open by bank full of my 'Easter offering,' and now I'm sick! Oh, I'm awful sick. Perhaps I'll die!"

"Nonsense, Melly," I said. "You're not going to die."

She laid herself down on the bed again. "I feel better for having told," she sighed.

I put my arms around her and kissed her. "It wouldn't have been so bad," she sobbed, "if I hadn't done it with my Easter offering."

"I soothe her, and kissed her, and when I thought I had got her all right, she burst out crying again."

"Don't feel so bad about it," I said. "When you get well, you can tell your mother, and I'm sure she'll forgive you."

"Tisn't that I'm crying for, Daisy," she sobbed. "It's because—oh, I'm going to be so hungry when I'm well—and the Easter offering's all gone!"

"That doesn't make any difference," I said. "Uncle Solon's given up the cure."

At this a look of perfect peace spread itself over Melly's face. "You're certain they're going to have cooked things again?" she asked.

"Yes," I assured her.

With the look of a cherub she folded her little hands, closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

I sat there a long time to make sure that everything was all quiet. Then I sat down and ate what was left of the pie, and all the doughnuts and bananas, and took a quarter out of my purse and put it in Melly's bank.



AUNT MATILDA LOOKED DOWN ON HER YOUNGEST CHILD, WORRIED AND HELPLESS.

grave to-day—and when you add to that a tendency to put on fat—!"

While she was talking, my aunt Matilda had put down several parcels and had untied her veil. While she was talking, Gladys poked into the packages.

"Goody!" she said. "You've bought lots of nuts and fruit—lots of salad, too. What made you get so much salad—everybody hates salad."

"That," said Aunt Matilda impressively, "is what we're going to live on in the future."

"Guess again!" Gladys exclaimed. "When I eat I like to eat food, not hay!"

Aunt Matilda ignored her daughter's remark. "Yes," she said, "primitive man lived on uncooked foods. He was always healthy. There are available to us more uncooked foods than there were to him, with milk, raw eggs, delicious salads, fruits and nuts—all the world could revert, if it wanted to, to a perfect diet. That's what we're going to do. That's how your poor father is going to be cured. Cheeses, which are nitrogenous, take the place of meat. On this diet, no superfluous fat can possibly be gathered."

Gladys listened with perfect seriousness to her mother's description of the menu. When Aunt Matilda had finished she announced with deep conviction:

"Gee! This is the worst yet!"

"And the best of this diet," her mother went on, "is its delicious qualities."

"Huh!" snorted Gladys.

At the time I was very much impressed. Telling this in retrospect, as I am, I can't pretend to put the feeling into it that I had when my aunt first told me. After I had heard her talk a while, I felt that the troubles of the family were solved forever, and that Uncle Solon was to be a saved man from that day, and that we should all live to be a hundred if we only ate uncooked food, although even then, under the contagion of her enthusiasm, it didn't look very attractive to me, nor so very nourishing either. Things in parcels don't.

My aunt talked on enthusiastically until Gladys broke in with:

"Do you mean that all we're going to have to eat—all?" she asked, pointing her finger at the packages with a gesture as dramatic as Aunt Matilda's; "no meat—no potatoes—no dessert—nothing, nothing but that—that raw eggs?"

Just here there was the click of a latch key and Pauline came in. Pauline is eighteen and very

"What does father say to this?" Pauline inquired.

"Your father doesn't know about it yet," replied Aunt Matilda. "It'll be a happy surprise for him when he comes home."

It wasn't very long before Uncle Solon crept wearily into the room. Not one of us but could have told what his remark was going to be by the expression of his face. This was:

"Nothing seems to sit now!"

He wore that indescribable look that I notice on the faces of so many men here, who first trouble with the office all day and then come home hanging from straps. Before Aunt Matilda could speak, Gladys shrieked:

"She's got another cure!"

Uncle Solon sank heavily into the Morris chair, and put his face in his hands.

"That's what I say too!" cried Gladys.

"Hush, Gladys!" Aunt Matilda commanded sternly. And she told it all over again, and just as dramatically.

Uncle Solon didn't move. At last he lifted his tired face to my aunt and said:

"It's never done any better on queer foods than on any other kind."

"Oh, this time it's no food at all," Gladys told him.

"If I had the slightest hope, Matilda, there isn't anything I wouldn't eat. But you know, and I know, that as far as it is concerned, hope is dead for me."

Pauline started to her room, saying to me: "A first he always acts like that about it."

As soon as he was a little bit rested, Uncle Solon got over his despair at the thought of being cured, and even asked a few questions, and when we got to the table, and the theory was put into practice, he made a few feeble protests like, "I felt that some hot soup would be soothing."

I shall never forget that meal. Rob came in just as we were sitting down. He glanced at the table and at all of us, and said:

"Stung again!" which was the only remark he made, except to say, "I'll never eat raw eggs."

Each of us solemnly ate salad and nuts. Afterwards we each had an apple.

Melly was the only one who made no disagreeable comment. She ate what was put before her, as her mother said, "like a little lady," but it seemed to me that her round face shrank in size, and that her eyes rested piteously on the Life Food.