

UNCLE DOCTOR AND THE EARTHQUAKE

This is the timely story of a Jewish doctor great in goodness, in whom the Hippocratic Oath of the physician and the precept of Zedakah of the Jew were united to an extraordinary degree in practical, professional idealism. Set against and interwoven with the high drama of the San Francisco earthquake and the ensuing period of recovery, the action shows "Uncle" Doctor Joseph Bayer caring for many hundreds of refugees, both Jewish and Gentile, by whom he was revered and beloved. The piece would be further enriched and livened by many touching and dramatic episodes from the doctor's earlier life.

Shortly after five on that fateful morning the earth rumbled with an awesome thunder, Uncle Doctor's house shook like jello and heaved like an ocean liner. His heavy bookcases pirouetted into the middle of the room and fell on their faces. The big piano slid across the parlour floor and crashed into a large gold-framed mirror. Neighbors clad in their nightgowns rushed out of their houses onto the sidewalks, carrying cherished pets and absurdly useless objects. About forty minutes after the tremor was over, the aging doctor received his first call. To an old house occupied by a poor Jewish family. The first two floors had sunk into the ground. All members were killed save a boy who had been sleeping on the third floor. Uncle Doctor walked directly from the shattered sidewalk through the third story window and then carried the boy out of the dwelling. This was but the beginning of an extended period of indefatigable, selfless activity.

San Francisco's shattering disaster provided a time of dire emergency. That time and the years following brought the career of Uncle Doctor to a climax. But calmer and less dramatic years yielded perhaps even more eloquent evidence of a committed life of service. Here is a typical example: Uncle Doctor is already seventy and seriously ill. At two, one morning, an old man

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became ill. He wanted Uncle Doctor. The doctor's wife pleaded with him not to go; he was in no condition at his age to take such calls; there were younger men available. In less than five minutes Uncle Doctor was up, dressed and out on his mission of healing. Money? Of course the old man had nothing and uncle knew it. But he would have been outraged at the mere suggestion that this should make any difference. He was a DOCTOR, for heaven's sake! He was wanted, needed.

But do not get the notion that he was a dewy-eyed sentimentalist. He believed a physician had the right to earn a decent living for his family. No one ever kept books of account more meticulously. But one was tempted to wonder why. He never pressed for payment. He was a DOCTOR -- trained, pledged, dedicated, committed. Ministering, healing, comforting, sustaining, without regard to remuneration -- this he accepted as an inherent part of living as a doctor. He knew no other way. His disciplined compassion was always conditioned by a fine-grained humanity, a sensitive regard for the dignity of every human being. How many hundreds of times would he accept as little as 25¢ from a patient rather than to risk degrading him by putting his services on the level of charity. When asked by his wife whether in this or that case he wasn't being taken undue advantage of, he would answer with a smile "I haven't time to find out." Moreover, he treated persons, not diseases. Each patient was a total entity whom he knew thoroughly. He was wise, compassionate, firm adviser and confidante as well as healer.

In his fierce integrity Uncle Doctor was all of a piece. These same characteristics which distinguished him as a doctor marked all the other facets of his life as well. Though orthodoxly reared, he remained stubbornly apart from Judaism for many years. Why? He could not, he said, believe in a God who permitted the suffering, the terrible anguish of the innocent as he saw them daily in his practice. But when his son was born he returned to his faith in the only way he would do anything -- wholeheartedly. He joined the Ohabai Shalom Congregation and became one of its

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most devoted and revered trustees.

Who was this greatly good man whom thousands affectionally called Uncle Doctor? He was my father, Joseph Bayer, a Jew of Austrian origin, trained as a physician at the University of Vienna in the days when it had top-ranking medical school of the world. He came to America in the 70's and straightway settled in San Francisco at one of its most colorful periods. The disaster and recovery years, though the climax of his career, were very difficult for him. He felt his energies waning and his days numbered. But up to the very last he kept up to the minute on all new medical developments. Nothing but the very best was good enough for those who needed his care. He always remained up to date but became enraged over any faddishness in practice and what he regarded as quackery wearing a cloak of professional respectability. What makes his story so moving and significant is not that he was a celebrated medico, a prima donna physician, but that the whole of a person -- compassionate heart, vigorous mind, medical acumen, human and special concern were all centered upon and dedicated to the making of a doctor.

The last prescription he ever wrote eloquently epitomized his career. Propped up in a chair in the front parlor of his flat, he was dying. His nurse was administering morphine every two hours to allay pain. The door bell rang. It was a poor Jewish woman in need of help. When told that the doctor was too ill to see her she broke into a fit of sobbing. He heard her and demanded that she be brought in to see him. Fighting off the effects of the drug on his mind, he gathered himself as though for one final effort as doctor to a poor woman in need. He found out what was troubling her; then he called for his prescription pad. His struggle to keep awake and concentrated was heroic. Finally after forty minutes of effort he completed the prescription and handed it to the poor woman. Shortly thereafter his wife phoned the druggist anxiously, to warn him that the doctor had been in no condition to write the prescription. The druggist had already

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received the prescription and assured her that it was letter perfect. Uncle Doctor, even at the end, rose valiantly above all obstacles, heedless of self, pushing away advancing death itself to serve yet once again -- his final act -- as a devoted doctor.

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(A brief outline for a profile on Dr. Joseph Bayer)