

George Barker Windship
"AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF A STRENGTH-SEEKER"

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"There goes the smallest fellow in our class."

I was crossing one of the paths that intersect the college green of old Harvard when this remark fell upon my ears. Looking up, I saw two stalwart Freshmen on their way to recitation, one of whom had called the other's attention to my humble self by this observation, reminding me of a distinction which I did not covet.

It was not quite true. There was one, and only one, member of the class of '54 who was as small as I. Some consolation, though not much, in that! But the air of amused compassion with which the lusty Down-Easter, who had made me feel what the *digito monstrari* was, now looked down on me, raised a feeling of resentment and self-depreciation which left me in no mood to make a brilliant show of scholarship in construing my "Isocrates" that morning.

"True, I am small, nay, diminutive," I soliloquized, as I wended my way homeward under the classic umbrage of venerable elms. "But surely this is no fault of mine.--Hold there! Are you quite sure it's no fault of yours? Are we not responsible to a much greater extent than we imagine for our physical condition? After making all abatement for insurmountable hereditary influences upon organization,--after granting to that remorseless law of genealogical transmission its proper weight,--after admitting the seemingly capricious facts of what the modern French physiologists call *atavism*, under which we are made drunkards or consumptives, lunatics or wise men, short or tall, because of certain dominant traits in some remote ancestor,--after conceding all this, does not Nature leave it largely in our own power to counteract both physical and moral tendencies, and to mould the body as well as the mind, if we will only put forth in action the requisite energy of will?"

This disposition to cavil at received axioms has beset me through life. No sooner does a truth present itself than I want to see it on its other side. If I hear the Devil spoken ill of, I puzzle myself to find what can be said in his favor. The man who thus halts between conflicting opinions, solicitous to give both their due, and to see the truth, pure and simple and entire, may miss laying hold of great convictions till it is too late for him to act on them; but what he accepts he generally holds.

My meditations on the subject of my inferior stature led me to a determination to try what gymnastic practice could do to remedy the defect. For some thirty years, gymnastics, first introduced into this country, I believe, at the Round-Hill School at Northampton, then under the charge of Messrs. Cogswell and Bancroft, had languished and revived fitfully at Cambridge. It was during one of the languishing periods that I began my practice. For some five or six weeks I kept it up with enthusiasm. Then I began to grow less methodical and regular in my habits of exercise; and then to find excuses for my delinquencies.

After all, what matter, if, like Paul's, my "bodily presence is weak"? Were not Alexander the Great and Napoleon small men? Were not Pope, and Dr. Watts, and Moore, and Campbell, and a long list of authors, artists, and philosophers, considerably under medium height? Were not Garrick and Kean and the elder Booth all under five feet four or five? Is there not a volume somewhere in our college library, written by a learned Frenchman, devoted exclusively to the biography of men who have been great in mind, though diminutive in stature? Is not Lord John Russell as small almost as I? Have I many inches to grow before I shall be as tall as Dr. Holmes?

These consolatory considerations softened my chagrin at the contemplation of my height. "Care I for the limb, the thews, the stature, bulk, and big assemblance of a man? Give me the spirit, Master Shallow,--the spirit!"

And so my gymnastic ardor, after a brief blaze, flickered, fell, was ashes. But it was destined to be soon revived by an incident, trifling in itself, though of a character to assume exaggerated proportions in the mind of a sensitive boy. A youth, who had considerably the advantage of me both in inches and in years, and whose overflow of animal spirits required some object to vent itself upon, selected me as the victim of his ebullient vivacity. He began by tossing my book down stairs. This seemed to me rather rough play, especially from one with whom I was not, at the time, on terms of intimacy; but, making allowance for the hilarity of classmates just let loose from recitation, I picked up, without a thought of resentment, the abused volume, and took no further notice of the matter. I subsequently found that it was merely the commencement of a series of similar annoyances. This lively classmate would even play tricks on me at the dinner table.

What was to be done? I mentioned the grievance to a friend, and he remonstrated with my lively classmate, threatening him with my serious displeasure. "Pooh! how can he help himself?" was the reply which came duly to my ears.

Sure enough! How could I help myself? The aggressor was my superior in weight and size. It was a plain case that I should get badly and ridiculously whipped, if I attempted to cope with him in any pugilistic encounter. But how would it do to demand of him the satisfaction of a gentleman? True, I knew nothing of pistol-shooting, and had never handled a small-sword. No matter for that!

But another consideration speedily drove this scheme of vengeance *a l'outrance* out of my head. Not many years before, a peppery little Freshman had been insulted, as he thought, by a Sophomore. The Soph, I believe, had knocked the young one's hat over his eyes, as they were kicking foot-ball in the Delta. Freshman sent a challenge, the effect of which was to excite inextinguishable laughter among the Sophs convened over their cigars in the aggressor's room. Amid roars, one of the conspirators penned an acceptance, fixing as the weapon, hair triggers,--time, five o'clock in the morning,--place, the Delta,--second, the bearer, Mr. M---, the writer of this reply.

It was a cruel business. A sham second was imposed on poor little Fresh. Brave as Julius Caesar, he sat up all night writing letters and preparing his will. Prompt to the moment, he was on the chosen ground. An unusually large delegation for such a delicate affair seemed to be present. One rascal who wore enormous green goggles was pointed out to the innocent as Dr. Von Guldenstubbe, a celebrated German surgeon, just from Leipsig. Little Fresh shook hands with him gravely, amid the smothered laughter of the conspirators. The distance was to be five paces; for it was whispered so as to reach the ear of Fresh, that Soph was thirsting for his heart's blood. They take their places,--the signal is given,--they fire,--and with a hideous groan and a wild pirouette, the Soph falls to the ground.

The Freshman is led up near enough to see the fellow's face covered with blood, and to hear his cries to his friends to put him out of his misery. Intensely agitated, poor little Fresh is hurried by pretended friends into a carriage, and driven off; and it is not till a week afterwards that he learns he has been the victim of a hoax.

No! it would never answer for me to run the risk of being "sold" in any such way as this. I must select a surer and more practical vengeance. I thought the matter over intently, and finally resolved that I would put myself on a physical equality with my persecutor, and then meet him in a fair fight with such weapons as Nature had given us both. I accordingly said to the friend and classmate who had played the part of intercessor, "Wait two years, and I promise you I will either make my tormentor apologize or give him such a thrashing as he will remember for the rest of his life."

Thus was my resolve renewed to accomplish myself as a gymnast, and, above all, to develop my physical strength. My previous attempts in the gymnasium had been spasmodic and irregular. Having now a definite object in view, I set about my work in earnest, and went through a daily systematic practice of a little more than an hour's duration.

The gymnasium was kept by a Mr. Law, and, though ordinary in its accommodations, had a good arrangement of apparatus, of which I faithfully availed myself. The spring-board, horse, vaulting-apparatus, parallel bars, suspended rings, horizontal and inclined ladders, pulley-weights, pegs, climbing-rope, trapezoid, etc., were all put in frequent requisition. My time for exercise was generally in the evening, when I would find myself almost alone,--while the clicking of balls from the billiard-rooms and bowling-alleys down-stairs announced that a busy crowd--if amusement may be called a business--were there assembled.

Naturally indolent, it was not without a severe struggle that I overcame a besetting propensity to confine myself to sedentary pursuits. The desire of retaliation soon became extinct. My pledge to my friend and sympathizer, that in two years I would cry *quittance* to my foe, would occasionally act as a spur in the side of my intent; but my two best aids in supplying me with the motive power to keep up my gymnastic practice were *habit* and *progress*. What will not habit make easy to us, whether it be for good or for evil? And what an incentive we have to renewed effort in finding that we are making actual progress,--that we can do with comparative facility to-day what we could do only with difficulty yesterday!

Two years, while we are yet on the sunny side of twenty, are no trifle; but for two years I persistently and methodically went through the exercises of the gymnasium. At the end of that time I had quite lost sight of my original object in cultivating my athletic powers; for all annoyances towards me had long since been dropped by my old enemy. But punctually on the day of expiration, the friend who had listened to my pledge came to me and claimed its fulfillment. From some evidences which he had recently had of my strength he felt a soothing assurance that I should have no difficulty in making good my promise.

I accordingly called on the lively young gentleman who two years before had indulged in those little frolics at my expense. With diplomatic ceremony and circumlocution I introduced the object of my visit, and wound up with an "ultimatum" to this effect: There must either be a frank apology for past indignities, or he must accompany me, each with a friend, to some suitable spot, and there decide which was "the better man."

If he had been called on to expiate an offence committed before he was breeched, the young gentleman could not have been more astounded. Two years had made some change in our relative positions. I was now about his equal in size, and felt a comfortable sense of my superiority, so far as strength was concerned. My shoulders had broadened, and my muscles been developed, so as to present to the critical and interested observer a somewhat threatening appearance. Mr. --- (who, by the way, was a goodfellow in the main) protested that he had never intended to give me any offence,--that he, in fact, did not remember the circumstances to which I referred,--and finished by peremptorily declining my proposal. When I reflected on the disparity between us in strength, which my two years' practice had established, I felt that it would be cowardly for me to urge the matter further, especially as it was so long a time since he had given me cause of complaint. I have only to add, that we parted without a collision, and that, in my heart, I could not help thanking him for the service he had rendered in inciting me to the regimen which had resulted so beneficially to my health.

The impetus given to my gymnastic education by the little incident I have just related was continued without abatement through my whole college life. Gradually I acquired the reputation of being the strongest man in my class. I discovered that with every day's development of my strength there

was an increase of my ability to resist and overcome all fleshly ailments, pains, and infirmities,--a discovery which subsequent experience has so amply confirmed, that, if I were called on to condense the proposition which sums it up into a formula, it would be in these words: *Strength is Health*.

Until I had renovated my bodily system by a faithful gymnastic training, I had been subject to nervousness, headache, indigestion, rush of blood to the head, and a weak circulation. It was torture to me to have to listen to the grating of a slate-pencil, the filing of a saw, or the scratching of glass. As I grew in strength, my nerves ceased to be impressible to such annoyances. Another good effect was to take away all appetite for any stimulating food or drink. Although I had never applied "rebellious liquors" to my blood, I had been in the habit of taking a bowl of strong coffee morning and night. Now a craving for milk took the place of this want, and my coffee was gradually diminished to less than a fourth of what had been a customary indulgence.

At last arrived the eagerly looked-for day of release from collegiate restrictions and labors. I graduated, and the question, so momentous in the history of all adolescents, "What shall I be?" addressed itself seriously to my mind. My father was desirous that I should choose medicine for a profession, and become the fourth physician, in lineal sequence, of my family on the paternal side.

Medicine. I cavilled at it awhile, that I might bring out to view its grimmest and most discouraging aspect. The cares, trials, humiliations of a young physician, his months and years of uncompensated drudgery, passed in awful review before me. I thought of his toils among the poor and lowly, the vicious and depraved,--of his broken sleep,--the interruptions of his social ease,--and then of the many scenes so repugnant to delicate nerves which he has to pass through,--scenes of pain and insanity, of maimed and severed limbs, and all the eccentricities and fearful forms of disease. These considerations pressed with such weight on my mind that for a time my ancestral craft was in danger of being ignominiously rejected by me. Indeed, I began to think seriously of adopting a very different vocation. And here I will make a confession, if the gentle reader will take it confidentially.

It is a familiar fact, that every college-boy has to pass through an attack of the rhyming frenzy as regularly as the child has to submit to measles and the whooping-cough. A less frequent, but not less trying complaint, is that which manifests itself in a passion for the stage and in an espousal of the delusion that one was born for a great actor. At any rate, this last was the type which my juvenile *malaise-du-coeur* finally assumed.

I have heard of a young gentleman who, whenever he was hard up for money, went to his nearest relatives and threatened them with the publication of a volume of his original poems. This threat never failed to open the paternal purse. I do not know what effect the intimation of my histrionic aspirations would have had; but one fine day I found myself on my way to Rochester, in the State of New York.

My *role* of dramatic characters was a very modest one for a beginner. It embraced only Richelieu, Bertram, Brutus, Lear, Richard, Shylock, Sir Giles Overreach, Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth. My principal literary recreation for several years had been in studying these parts; and as I knew them by heart, I did not doubt that a few rehearsals would put me in possession of the requisite stage-business. And yet my familiarity with the theatre was very limited. I had never been behind the scenes. Once, with a classmate, I had penetrated in the daytime to the stage of the old Federal-Street Theatre, and looked with awe on the boards formerly trodden by the elder Kean; but a growl from that august functionary, the prompter, sent us back in quick retreat, and I had never ventured again into those sacred precincts.

Arrived at Rochester,--which place I had selected for my *debut* because of its remoteness from home,--I looked in, the evening of my arrival, to see the performances at the theatre. It was a hall of humble dimensions, seating an audience of five or six hundred. The piece was a travesty of "Hamlet," neither edifying nor amusing. A little of the *couleur-de-rose* which had flushed my prospect faded that night; but the few friends at home to whom I had confided my plans had so pertinaciously assured me that

I--the most diffident man in the world--could never appear before an audience without letting them see I was shaky in the knees, that I resolved to do what I could to show my depreciators they were false prophets.

And so I called on the manager,--with a beating heart, as you may suppose. He was a small, quiet, gentlemanly person, whom I regret I cannot, consistently with historical truth, show up as a Crummies. But not even Dickens could have found any salient trait for ridicule in the man. Frankly and kindly he went into the statistics of the theatrical business, and showed me, that, unless I was rich, and could afford to play for my own amusement, the stage held out few inducements; it was barren of promise to a young man anxious to make himself independent of the world.

I did not reply, "Perish the lucre!" but said that I would be content, in the early part of my career, to labor for reputation. He soon satisfied me that he could not give up his stage to an experimentalist, and I did not urge my suit; but bade Mr. S. good morning, and, a day or two afterwards, started for Niagara. Here, wet by the mist and listening to the roar of the great cataract, I speedily forgot my chagrin, and took a not unfriendly leave of the illusions which had lured me on to try my fortune on the stage. Even now they return occasionally with all their fascination.

While at Rochester, as I was passing through the principal street, I met a crowd assembled about a lifting-machine. On making trial of it, I found I could lift four hundred and twenty pounds. I had then been for four years a gymnast, and I supposed my practice would have qualified me to make the crowd stare at my achievement. But the result was far from triumphant. I found what many other gymnasts will find, that *main strength*, by which I mean the strength of the truckman and the porter, cannot be acquired in the ordinary exercises of the gymnasium.

Returning home, I began the study of anatomy and physiology, and in the autumn of 1854 entered the Harvard Medical School. The question of the extent to which human strength can be developed had long been invested with a scientific interest to my mind. One of the greatest lifting feats on authentic record is that of Thomas Topham, an Englishman, who in Bath Street, Cold Bath Fields, London, on the 28th of May, 1741, lifted three hogsheads of water, said to weigh, with the connections, *eighteen hundred and thirty-six pounds*. In the performance of this feat, Topham stood on a raised platform, his hands grasping a fixture on either side, and a broad strap over his shoulders communicating with the weight. An immense concourse of persons was assembled on the occasion,--the performance having been announced as "in honor of Admiral Vernon," or rather, "in commemoration of his taking Porto Bello with six ships only." Being a descendant myself from the Vernon family of Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, England, I have reserved it for future genealogical inquiry to learn whether the Admiral was connected with that branch of the Vernons. If so, a somewhat remarkable coincidence is involved.

I now informed my father that I intended to go through a series of experiments in lifting. He was afraid I should injure myself, and expressly forbade any such practice on his premises. To gratify him, I gave up testing the question for a whole year.

But the desire re-awoke, and I had frequent arguments with my father in the endeavor to overcome his objections.

"Look at that man," he said to me one day,--pointing to a large, stout individual in front of us,--"you might practise lifting all your life, and never be able to lift as much as that big fellow."

"Let me construct a lifting-apparatus in the back-yard, and I will soon prove to you that you are mistaken," I replied.

Finding that I was bent on the experiment, he at length gave a reluctant consent.

It was now the August of 1855, and I was in my twenty-second year. My first lifting-apparatus was constructed in the following manner. I first sank into the ground a hogshead, and into the hogshead a flour-barrel. Then I lowered to the bottom of the barrel a rope having at the end a round stick transversely balanced, about four inches in diameter and fifteen inches long. A quantity of gravel, nearly sufficient to bury the stick, was then thrown into the barrel; some oblong stones were placed across the stick and across and between one another, and the interstices filled with smaller stones and gravel. When I had by this method about two-thirds filled the barrel, taking care to keep the axis of the rope in correspondence with the long axis of the barrel, I judged I had a sufficient weight for a first trial. I now formed a loop in the end of the rope over the top of the barrel, and put through it a piece of a hoe-handle, about two feet long; and standing astride of the hogshead, and holding the handle with one hand before me and the other behind,--straightening my body, previously a little flexed,--with mouth closed, head up, chest out, and shoulders down,--I succeeded in lifting the barrel, containing a weight of between four and five hundred pounds, some five or six inches from the bottom of the hogshead.

It was no great feat, after all, considering that I had been for five years a gymnast. I found that I was inharmoniously developed in many points of my frame,--was perilously weak in the sides, between the shoulders, and at the back of the head. However, the day after this trial, I succeeded in lifting the same weight with somewhat less difficulty. This induced me to add on a few pounds; and in three or four weeks I could lift between six and seven hundred. I now had the satisfaction of seeing the stout gentleman, whom a few months before my father had pointed out as possessed of a strength I could never attain to, introduced to an inspection of my apparatus. Through the blinds of a back-parlor window I watched his movements, as, encouraged by *pater-familias*, he drew off his coat, moistened his hands, and undertook to "snake up" the big weight. An ignominious failure to start the barrel was the result. The stout gentleman tugged till he was so red in the face that apoplexy seemed imminent, and then he dejectedly gave it up. The reputation he had long enjoyed of being one of the "strongest men about" must henceforth be a thing of the past till it fades into a myth.

In the December of 1855 I was admitted to the arcana of the dissecting-room, and forthwith commenced some experiments with the view of testing the sustaining power of human bones. Some one had told me, that, in lifting a heavy weight, there was danger of fracturing the neck of the thigh-bone; but my experiments satisfied me, that, if properly positioned, it would safely bear a strain of two or three thousand pounds. And so I concluded that I might securely continue my practice of lifting till I reached the last-named limit.

In order to get all possible hints from the inspiration and experience of the past, I studied some of the ancient statues. The specimens of Grecian statuary at the Boston Athenaeum were objects of my frequent contemplation,--especially the Farnesian Hercules. From this I derived a proper conception of the bodily outline compatible with the exercise of the greatest amount of strength. I was particularly struck by the absence of all exaggeration in the muscular developments as represented. I saw by this statue that a Hercules must be free from superfluous flesh, neatly made, and finely organized,--that form and quality were of more account than quantity in his formation. Some years earlier I might have been more attracted by the Apollo Belvedere; but it was a Hercules I dreamed of becoming, and the Apollo was but the incipient and potential Hercules. Two other statues that shared my admiration and study were the Quoit-Thrower and the Dying Gladiator. From the careful inspection of all these relics of ancient Art I obtained some valuable hints as to my own physical deficiencies. I learned that the upper region of my chest needed developing, and that in other points I had not yet reached the artist's ideal of a strong man.

Good casts of these and other masterpieces in statuary may be had at a trifling cost. Why are they not generally introduced into the gymnasia attached to our colleges and schools? The habitual contemplation of such works could not fail to have a good effect upon the physical bearing and development of the young. We are the creatures of imitation. I remember, at the school I attended in my seventh year, the strongest boy among my mates was quite round-shouldered. Fancying that he

derived his strength from his stoop, I began to imitate him; and it was not till I learned that he was strong in spite of his round shoulders, and not because of them, that I gave up aping his peculiarity.

On the 29th of January, 1856, I lifted seven hundred pounds in Bailey's Gymnasium, Franklin Street, Boston. The exhibition created great surprise among the lookers-on; and at that time it was, perhaps, an extraordinary feat; but since the extension and growth of the lifting mania, it would not be regarded by the knowing ones as anything to marvel at. The fourth of April following, my lifting capacity had reached eight hundred and forty pounds.

On Fast-Day of that year, two Irishmen knocked at my door and asked to see the strong man. I presented myself, and they told me there was great curiosity among the "ould counthrymen" in the vicinity to ascertain if one Pat Farren, the strongest Irishman in Roxbury, could lift my weight. "Would it be convanient for me to let him thry?" "Certainly,--and I think he'll lift it," I modestly added.

Soon afterwards a delegation of Irishmen, rather startling from its numbers, entered the yard. Among them was Mr. Farren. They surrounded my lifting-apparatus, while I, unseen, surveyed them from a back window. I saw Mr. Farren take the handle, straddle the hogshead, throw himself into a lifting posture, and, straining every muscle to its utmost tension, give a tremendous pull. But the weight made no sign; and his friends, thinking he was merely feeling it, said, "Wait a bit,--Pat'll have it up the next pull." Mr. Farren rested a moment,--then threw off his coat, rubbed his hands, and, seizing the handle a second time, tugged away at it till his muscles swelled and his frame quivered. But he failed in starting the barrel, and a burst of laughter from his friends and backers announced his defeat.

It is now but justice to Mr. Farren to say that it could hardly be expected of him to lift such a weight at either the first trial or the second. A want of confidence, or the maladjustment of the rope, might have interfered with the full exercise of his strength. I need not say that his discomfiture was witnessed by me from my hiding-place with the liveliest satisfaction; for I had begun to pride myself on being able to outlift any man in the country.

In May, 1856, I received the appointment of medical assistant to Dr. Walker, at the Lunatic Hospital, South Boston, and gave up for a couple of months my practice of lifting. The consequence was a rapid diminution of strength, which suggested to me a return to the lifting exercise. Near the hospital was a large unoccupied building, formerly the House of Industry. In the cellar of this building I put a barrel, and loaded it with rocks and gravel as I had done in Roxbury. Immediately overhead, on the first floor, I cut a hole, about six inches square, and passed up a rope attached to the barrel. This rope I looped at the end, for the reception of a handle. On the floor I nailed two cleats between three and four feet apart, as guards to keep my feet from slipping. Beginning with about six hundred pounds, I added a few pounds daily, till I was able, in November, 1856, to lift with my hands alone nine hundred pounds.

Returning home the ensuing winter, I attended a second course of medical lectures, and, in the routine of labors incident to a medical student's life, omitted to develop further my powers as a lifter. In the summer of 1857 I became a practitioner of medicine. In the autumn of that year, a gentleman, who had been looking at my lifting-apparatus, remarked to me, "If you are as strong as they tell me, what is to prevent your seizing hold of me, (I weigh only a hundred and eighty pounds) holding me at arm's-length over your head, and pitching me over that fence?" To this I replied, that, if he would give me six weeks for practice, I would satisfy him the thing could be done. He agreed to be on hand at the end of the time named.

In order to be sure of the muscles that would be brought into play by the feat, I procured an oblong box with a handle on either side running the whole length. Into the box I threw a number of brick-bats,--then raised the box at arm's-length above my head, and threw it over my vaulting-pole, which was at an elevation of six and a half feet from the ground. Subsequently I added more brick-bats, till gradually their weight amounted to precisely one hundred and eighty pounds. Having practised till I could easily handle and throw the box thus charged, I informed my challenger that I was ready for him. He came,

when, seizing him by the middle, I lifted him struggling above my head, and threw him over the fence before he was hardly aware of my intent. As he was somewhat corpulent and puffy, and the act involved an abdominal pressure which was by no means agreeable, he expressed himself perfectly satisfied with the experiment, but objected very decidedly to its repetition.

In June, 1858, I commenced practising with two fifty-pound dumb-bells, and subsequently added one of a hundred pounds, which I was prompted to get from hearing that one of that weight was used by Mr. James Montgomery, at that time a celebrated gymnast of New York City, and afterwards a successful teacher at the Albany Gymnasium. Not having given much attention to the development of the extensor muscles of the arms for several months previous, it was a number of weeks before I could put this dumb-bell up at arm's-length above my head with one hand. As soon as I succeeded in doing this with comparative ease, I procured another hundred-pound dumb-bell, and in a few months succeeded in exercising with both of the instruments at the same time, raising each alternately above my head. I then commenced practice with a dumb-bell weighing one hundred and forty-one pounds. It consisted of two shells connected by a handle, which, being removable, allowed me to introduce shot, from time to time, into the cavities of the shells. After a few months of practice, I could, with a jerk, raise the instrument from my shoulder to arm's-length above my head. My first public exhibition of this feat took place in Philadelphia, in April, 1860.

The spring of 1859 was now drawing nigh, and I began to think of giving a public lecture on Physical Culture, illustrating it with some exhibitions of the strength to which I had attained. My father approved the venture, but, bethinking himself of my extreme diffidence, significantly asked, *when* I would be ready to permit a public announcement of my intention. "Oh, in a few days," I replied, as if it were as small a matter for me to lecture in public as to lift a thousand pounds in a gymnasium. Weeks flew by, and still to the galling inquiry, "*When?*" I could only answer, "Soon, but not just yet." February and March had come and gone, and still I was not ready. Finally, to the oft-renewed interrogatory, I made this reply: "As soon as I can shoulder a barrel of flour, a feat which I am determined to accomplish before an audience, you may announce my lecture."

I had then been practising some two months with a loaded barrel, so contrived that it should weigh a little more each succeeding day; and it had now reached a hundred and ninety pounds. About this time it occurred to me, that, among my many experiments, I had never fairly tried that of a vegetable diet. I read anew the works of Graham and Alcott; and conceiving that my strength had reached a stagnation-point, I gave up meat, and restricted my animal diet to milk.

A barrel of flour weighs on an average two hundred and sixteen pounds. I therefore could not succeed in shouldering one until twenty-six pounds had been added to my loaded barrel. Day after day I shouldered my one hundred and ninety pounds, but could not get an ounce beyond that limit. My grand theory of the possible development of a man's strength began to look somewhat insecure.

"So fares the system-building sage,
Who, plodding on from youth to age,
Has proved all other reasoners fools,
And bound all Nature by his rules,—
So fares he in that dreadful hour
When injured Truth exerts her power
Some new phenomenon to raise,
Which, bursting on his frightened gaze,
From its proud summit to the ground,
Proves the whole edifice unsound."

JAMES BEATTIE

The shouldering of a barrel of flour is a feat, by the way, which many an old inhabitant will tell you that he, or some friend of his, could accomplish in his eighteenth year. Why it should always be among

the *resgestae temporis acti* cannot be readily explained. It is a common belief that any stout truckman can do the thing; but I have been assured by one of the leading truckmen of Boston, that there are not, probably, three individuals in the city who are equal to the accomplishment.

The mode of life that I had hitherto found essential to the keeping up of my strength was quite simple, and rather negative than positive. From tobacco and all ardent spirits, including wine, I had to abstain as a matter of course. Beer and all fermented liquors had also been ruled out. Impure air must be avoided like poison. Summer and winter I slept with my windows open. Badly ventilated apartments were scrupulously shunned. Cold bathing of the entire person was rarely practised oftener than once a week in cold weather or twice a week in warm weather. A more frequent ablution seemed to over-stimulate the excretory functions of the skin, so that excessive bathing defeated its very object. The "tranquil mind" must be preserved with little or no interruption. Great physical strength cannot coexist with an unhappy, discontented temper. You must be habitually cheerful, if you would be strong. With regard to diet,—that was the very experiment I was trying,—the experiment, namely, of going without solid animal food. With me it did not succeed. So far from gaining in strength, hardly did I hold my own. Suddenly I resolved to give up my vegetable diet, and return to beef-steaks, mutton-chops, and loins of veal. A daily appreciable increase of strength was soon the consequence. Within ten days I succeeded in shouldering the loaded barrel weighing two hundred and sixteen pounds; and a day or two after I shouldered, in the presence of our grocer himself, a barrel of flour.

I had now no further excuse for deferring my promised lecture. The month of May had arrived. My father delicately broached the subject of the announcement. Being a little fractious, perhaps from some ebb in my strength, I hastily replied,—

"Announce it for the 30th of May."

"What hall shall I engage?"

"Any hall in Boston. Why not the Music Hall?" I added, affecting a valor I was far from feeling; but, like Macbeth, I now realized that "returning were as tedious as go o'er."

Mercantile Hall, in Summer Street, was engaged for me,—it being central, modest in point of size, commodious, and favorably known. At this time I was in excellent health and weighed one hundred and forty-three pounds. But from the moment of the public announcement of my lecture, my appetite for food, for meat particularly, began to fail me. "How peevish and irritable he is growing!" I heard one member of the family remark to another. Soon the grocer's scales indicated that my weight was diminishing. It fell to one hundred and forty-one,—then to one hundred and forty,—then to one hundred and thirty-eight,—and finally, when the 30th of May arrived, I found I weighed only one hundred and thirty-four pounds!

The crisis was now at hand. Do not laugh at me, ye self-assured ones, with your comfortable sense of your own powers,—ye who care as little for an audience as for a field of cabbages,—do not jeer at one who has felt the pangs of shyness and quailed under the imaginary terrors of a first public appearance. For you it may be a small matter to face an audience,—that nearest approximation to the many-headed monster which we can palpably encounter; but for one whose diffidence had become the standard of that quality to his acquaintances the venture was perilous and desperate, as the sequel showed.

Never had time rolled by with such fearful velocity as on that eventful day. Breakfast was hardly over before preparations were being made for dinner. Small appetite had I for either. Before I had finished pacing the parlor there was a summons to tea. It was like the summons to the criminal: "Rise up, Master Barnardine, and be hanged." With a most shallow affectation of *nonchalance* I sat down at the table. A child might have detected my agitation; and yet, with horrible insincerity, I alluded to the news of the day, and asked the family why they were all so silent. They saw from my look that they might as well have joked with a man on his way to execution.

Having dressed and adorned myself for the sacrifice, I returned to the parlor, when the rumbling of coach-wheels, the sudden letting down of steps, and then a frightfully discordant ring of the doorbell, sent the blood from my cheeks and made my heart palpitate like a trip-hammer. "Is th-th-that the off-officer,--I mean the coachman?" I stammered. Yes, there was no doubt about it.

Straightening my person, I affected a dignified calmness, and assured my dear, anxious mother that I was not in the least nervous,--oh, not in the least!

It was a gloomy night, and the streets wore a dismal aspect. The hall was distant about three miles; but in some mysterious manner, or by some route which I have never been able to discover, the coachman seemed to abridge the distance to less than half a mile. We are in Summer Street,--before the door. Some juvenile amateurs, attracted by stories of the strong man, surround the carriage to get a sight of him.

"Ha! what are these? Sure, hangmen, That come to bind my hands, and then to drag me Before the judgment-seat: now they are new shapes, And do appear like Furies!"

The words of Sir Giles Overreach, one of the parts I had studied during my histrionic *accés*, were not at all inappropriate to the state of mind in which, with knee-joints slipping from under me, I now made my way up-stairs. Having reached the upper entry, I paused, and glanced at the audience through the windows, before entering the little retiring-room behind the stage. With an inward groan at my presumption, I passed on. To think, that, but for my own madness, I might have been at that moment comfortably at home, reading the evening paper! Nay, were it not better to be tossing on stormy seas, driving on a lee-shore, toiling as a slave under a tropic sun, than here, with a gaping audience waiting to devour me with their eyes and ears?

The first thing I did, on reaching the retiring-room, was to give way to a fearful fascination and take another peep at the audience from behind a curtain at the side-entrance. I then looked at my watch. Twenty minutes to eight! People were pouring in, notwithstanding the inclement weather. The hall was nearly crowded already. One familiar face after another was recognized. Surely everybody I know is present.

Another look at my watch. Quarter to eight! Suddenly the frantic thought occurred to me, What if I have lost my manuscript? Where did I put it? 'Tis in none of my pockets! Good gracious! Has any one seen my manuscript? Come, Jerome, no fooling at a time like this! Where have you hidden it? What! You know nothing about it? *Hunt* for it, then! Wouldn't it be a charming scrape, if I couldn't find my lecture? Isn't this it, in the drawer? Oh, yes! I must have put it there unconsciously.

Being in a high state of perspiration, and wiping my forehead incessantly, I disarrange my hair. Where's that brush? No one can tell. Agony! Where's the brush? Here on the floor. Oh, yes! There! What a blaze my cheeks are in! The audience will think they are flushed with Bourbon. No matter. That manuscript has disappeared again. Confusion! Where is it? Here in your overcoat-pocket. All right.

Five minutes to eight. Grasping the scroll, I rush to the side-entrance. The audience begin to manifest their impatience by applause. Suddenly I hear the bell of the Old South Church strike eight. The last vibration passes like an ice-bolt through my heart. Wrought up to desperation, I thrust aside the curtain. This gives a portion of the audience a sight of me, and I hear some one exclaim, "There he is!" Horrible exposure! I dodge back out of view, as if to escape the discharge of a battery. A round of impatient applause rouses me. I count three, and precipitate myself forward to the centre of the stage.

The hall is filled,--all the seats and most of the standing-places occupied. But I can no longer recognize any one. Friend and foe are confounded in an undistinguishable mass; or, rather, they are but parts and members of one hideous monster, moving itself by one volition, winking its thousand eyes all at

once, and ready to swallow me with a single deglutition. However, the plunge is made. The worst is over. I rallied from the shock, and in a clear, but unnecessarily loud and ponderous voice, pitched many degrees too high, I commenced my lecture.

For some ten minutes, if I may believe the tender reports in the newspapers the next day, I got on very respectably. I had won the attention of the audience. But, at an unlucky moment, a fresh arrival of persons at the door made the monster turn his thousand eyes in that direction. I mistook it for an indication that he was getting weary of my talk. My attention was distracted. Then came a suspension of all thought, an appalling paralysis of memory. Having learnt the first part of my discourse by heart, I had been reciting it without turning over the leaves of the manuscript; and now I was unable to recollect at what point I had left off, or whether I had given five pages or ten.

Frightful dilemma! Stupefied with horror, I gazed intently on the page before me till the lines became all blurred, and a blue mist wavered before my eyes. Then came a pause of intensest silence. The monster lying in wait for me evidently began to anticipate that his victim's time was come, and so, like a crafty monster, he remained still and patient. Who could endure a nightmare like this? I felt myself reeling to and fro. Then a pleasant thrill, like that, perhaps, which drowning men feel, ran through my frame. All became dark,—and the strong man dropped, like a felled ox, senseless on the stage.

When consciousness returned I was lying flat on my back, and several persons were bending over me.

"Keep down,—don't rise," some one said.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Nothing,—only you were a little faint."

"Faint? A man who can lift a thousand pounds faint—at the sight of an audience? Absurd! Let me rise."

And in spite of all opposition I rose, grasped my manuscript, walked to the front of the stage, and resumed my lecture. Alas!

"Reaching above our nature does no good; We must sink back into our own flesh and blood."

I had not proceeded far before I felt symptoms of a repetition of the calamity; and lest I should be overtaken before I could retreat, I stammered a few words of apology, and withdrew ingloriously from public view. Fresh air and a draught of water, which some obliging friend had dashed with *eau-de-vie*, soon restored me. But I took the advice of friends and did not make a third attempt that evening.

The audience, had it been wholly composed of brothers and sisters, could not have been more indulgent and considerate. One skeptical gentleman was heard to say,—

"I don't believe he can lift nine hundred pounds."

And another added,—

"Nor I,—any more than that he can shoulder a barrel of flour."

"Or raise his body by the little finger of one hand," said another.

Whereupon a venerable citizen, a gentleman long known and respected as the very soul of honor, truthfulness, and uprightness, came forward on the stage before the audience, and with emphatic earnestness, and in a loud, intrepid tone of voice, exclaimed,—

"Ladies and gentlemen,--The heat of the room was too much for the lecturer; but he can easily do all the feats announced in the bills. *I've seen him do them twenty times.*"

The dear, but infatuated old gentleman! He had never seen me do anything of the kind. He hardly knew me by sight. He thought only of coming to the rescue of an unfortunate lecturer, prostrated on the very threshold of his career; and a friendly hallucination made him for the moment really believe what he said. His unpremeditated assertion must have been set down by the recording angel on the same page with Uncle Toby's oath, and then obliterated in the same manner.

Ten days after the above-mentioned catastrophe, having engaged the largest hall in Boston, (the Music Hall,) I delivered my lecture--in the words of the newspapers--"with *eclat*." The illustrations of strength which I exhibited on the occasion, though far inferior to subsequent efforts, were looked on as most extraordinary. The weight I lifted before the audience, with my hands alone, was nine hundred and twenty-nine pounds. This was testified to by the City Sealer of Weights and Measures, Mr. Moulton. My success induced me to repeat my lecture in other places. Invitations and liberal offers poured in upon me from all directions; and during the ensuing seasons, I lectured in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Albany, and many of the principal cities throughout the Northern States and the Canadas.

To return to my lifting experiments. I had promised my father to "stop at a thousand pounds." In the autumn of 1859 I had reached ten hundred and thirty-two pounds. An incident now occurred that induced me to reconsider my promise and get absolution from it. One day, while engaged in lifting, I had a visit from two powerful-looking men who asked permission to try my weight. One of them was five feet ten inches in height, and a hundred and ninety-two pounds in weight. The other was fully six feet in his stockings, and two hundred and twelve pounds in weight,--a fearful superiority in the eyes of a man, under five feet seven and weighing less than a hundred and fifty pounds. The smaller of these men failed to lift eight of my iron disks, which, with the connections, amounted to eight hundred and twenty-seven pounds. The larger individual fairly lifted them at the second or third trial, but declined to attempt an increase. They left me, and I soon, afterward heard that they were practising with a view of "outlifting Dr. Windship."

My father had incautiously remarked to me, "Those huge fellows, with a little practice, can lift your weight and you on top of it. You can't expect to compete with giants." This decided me to test the question whether five feet seven must necessarily yield to mere bulk in the attainment of the maximum of human strength. I had the start of my competitors by some two hundred pounds, and I determined to preserve that distance between us. In the autumn of that year I advanced to lifting with the hands eleven hundred and thirty-three pounds, and in the spring of 1860 to twelve hundred and eight. I have had no evidence that my competitors ever got beyond a thousand pounds; though I doubt not, if they had had my leisure for practice, they might have surpassed me.

In July, 1860, I commenced lifting by means of a padded rope over my shoulders,--my body, during the act of lifting, being steadied and partly supported by my hands grasping a stout frame at each side. After a few unsuccessful preliminary trials, I quickly advanced to fourteen hundred pounds. The stretching of the rope now proved so great an annoyance, that I substituted for it a stout leather band of double thickness, about two inches and a half wide, and which had been subjected to a process which was calculated to render it proof against stretching more than half an inch under any weight it was capable of sustaining. But on trial, I found, almost to my despair, that it was of a far more yielding nature than the rope, and consequently the rope was again brought into requisition. A few weeks of unsatisfactory practice followed, when it occurred to me that an iron chain, inasmuch as it could not stretch, might be advantageously used, provided it could be so padded as not to chafe my shoulders. After many experiments I succeeded in this substitution; but the chain had yet one objection in common with the rope and the strap, arising from the difficulty of getting it properly adjusted. I contented myself with its use, however, until the spring of 1861, when I hit upon a contrivance which has proved a complete success. It consists of a wooden yoke fitting across my shoulders, and having two chains connected with it in such a manner as to enable me to lift on every occasion to the most advantage.

With this contrivance my lifting-power has advanced with mathematical certainty, slowly, but surely, to *two thousand and seven pounds*, up to this twenty-third day of November, 1861.

In my public experiments in lifting, when I have not used the iron weights cast for the purpose, I have, as a convenient substitute, used kegs of nails. It recently occurred to me, that, if, instead of these kegs, I could employ a number of men selected from the audience, the spectacle would be still more satisfactory to the skeptical. Accordingly I contrived an apparatus by means of which I have been able to present this convincing proof of the actual weight lifted. I introduced it after my lecture at the Town-Hall in Brighton, Massachusetts, on the 9th of October, 1861; and the following account of the result appeared in one of the city papers:--

"Standing upon a staging at an elevation of about eight or ten feet from the floor, the Doctor lifted and sustained, for a considerable time and without apparent difficulty, a platform suspended beneath him on which stood twelve gentlemen, all heavier individually than the Doctor himself, and weighing, inclusive of the entire apparatus lifted with them, *nearly nineteen hundred pounds avoirdupois*. In the performance of this tremendous feat, Dr. W. employed neither straps, bands, nor girdle,--nothing in short but a stout oaken stick fitting across his shoulders, and having attached to it a couple of rather formidable-looking chains. At his request, a committee, appointed by the audience, and furnished with one of Fairbanks's scales, superintended all the experiments."

The exact weight lifted on this occasion was eighteen hundred and thirty-six pounds. A few evenings after, I lifted, in the same way, in Lynn, eighteen hundred and sixty; in Brookline, eighteen hundred and ninety; in Medford, nineteen hundred and thirty-four; in Maiden, nineteen hundred and two; and in Charlestown, nineteen hundred and forty.

As my strength is still increasing in an undiminished ratio, I am fairly beginning to wonder where the limit will be; and the old adage of the camel's back and the last feather occasionally suggests itself. I have fixed three thousand pounds as my *ne plus ultra*.

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