

Frail Conqueror



This popular novelist
learned about living life
to the fullest from a
courageous woman who, for 30
years, teetered on the brink of death

By EDWARD STREETER

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IN 1928 a brown-haired, merry-eyed young woman of 18 was training in a New York hospital to become a nurse. She was gay, sought-after, ambitious, and life was spread before her like a lavish banquet.

Suddenly it was discovered that she had tuberculosis, a dread disease in those days. Her family had little money, but they scraped the barrel bottom and sent her to a nursing home in Saranac Lake, N.Y. She resigned herself unhappily to several months of "curing"—but she was destined to remain in bed for 21 years.

To most, that would have been the end of the banquet. Isabel Smith decided differently and gradually achieved a life richer than that of most people who are blessed with good health. During those years, she approached the very threshold of death on several occasions, but through it all she never ceased to pursue the art of living.

Perhaps her greatest triumph was in her relations with people. They came to cheer her but went away cheered themselves.

I first met Isabel in the early 1930s while visiting Dr. Francis B. Trudeau, son of the late Edward E. Trudeau who founded the famous sanitarium at Saranac Lake that bore his name. He told me of the tuberculosis research being carried on there.

"Tomorrow I'm going to introduce you to a young patient," he said. "I moved her in recently, but she has been a patient of mine since 1928."

"She hasn't been in bed all that time, has she?" I asked.

"All that time," he said. "Five years. I think she'll interest you; she's different."

She was. I dread visiting sick people. There is something about the sight of a person lying helpless which leaves me speechless. But Isabel Smith was neither wan nor drooping among wrinkled pillows. She was not even in a dreary hospital room. Her bed was on a sun-drenched porch overlooking the panorama of the Adirondack Mountains. She was curled up on it like a kitten, reading Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*.

"This is the most wonderful book I've ever read," she said, without wasting time on preliminaries. "Do you know it?"

From that moment, she took the conversational

initiative and never relinquished it, pouring out her opinions on books, describing the seasonal changes that took place in her beloved mountains, commenting on events in the outside world. When I left her an hour later, I realized that it was she who had given me a fresh sense of awareness.

I puzzled over that visit for days. What made it so different from dozens of similar, less happy experiences? Suddenly it occurred to me that she had not expressed a single negative thought during our entire conversation.

Sick as she was, she seemed to have achieved complete acceptance of her world and had learned to live in it creatively and positively. It was a tiny world whose horizons had contracted until she could almost reach out and touch them, yet she seemed to sense no boundaries.

As the years passed, I saw her frequently, and we kept up a nonstop correspondence. She loved to write letters, and she had more adventures to pass on to me than I could possibly match. Never did I have occasion to change my first impression, and I never ceased to wonder as I watched her spirit grow and her circle of friends expand.

She once wrote me about those early days when complete rest was a matter of life and death: "I had a frustrated feeling of time slipping away, of wasted hours and days that would never come again. I knew I must in some way or other utilize every precious moment of this life that was mine to live but once."

How Precious Moments Were Used

She had every reason for discouragement. For a period, she would improve until she dared to hope—only to fall back to where she would have to lie flat for weeks and even months. Operation followed operation and always with the same result: slight improvement followed by a slow descent into the valley. She was human; she had moments of black despair. But never did she lose her eager interest in all that went on about her.

Isabel was one of those rare persons born with a fierce thirst for life. She had to drink deeply from its waters or perish. Even when the stream shrank to the merest trickle, she did not permit it to become bitter on her tongue. Rather, she savored it with immense appreciation.

In 1938 a magazine printed an article on tuberculosis which featured Trudeau Sanitarium. In it were three large pictures of Isabel Smith and

the story of her decade in bed. Letters poured in from all over the world. There were more than 3,500 of them, and the odd thing was that a large percentage of the writers wanted to tell her their troubles and seek her advice and help.

The next 10 years saw the same heartbreaking cycle of recoveries and setbacks. Once she progressed to such a degree that she was transferred from her familiar room in Ludington Infirmary to a rest cottage. There, deprived of her mountain view, she trained a chipmunk to jump through a hoop, and she studied geography.

A Climb from a Steep Descent

Cottage life was more than her overtaxed heart could take, however, and eventually she found herself back in Ludington facing her worst crisis. Bound to life by the most fragile threads, she spent months in an emergency room, where only her doctors and the cleaning woman were permitted to enter. One day she discovered that the latter could neither read nor write, so as her strength began to return, Isabel undertook to rectify this, and did.

Shortly after, she wrote: "My senses seem to have attained razor-sharpness. I am seeing and hearing as I never have before, and sniffing, tasting, and touching as well. A far-away stone dropping into the river with a plop is as distinct to my ears as the snap of a nearby twig, and the aroma of newly turned earth in a garden beyond my sight drifts as readily to my nose as the sharp scent of Mount Pisgah's pines."

In the early 1940s Isabel regained sufficient strength to visit her home in Bradford, Pa., which she had not seen for 13 years. To her dismay, she found she was no longer in tune with the noise and bustle of a large town. The tempo of her life had taken on a new and deeper beat. After a few days, she returned to Saranac Lake exhausted—not sorry she had ventured out but glad to be back.

"I am well content," she wrote, "to be in this place where I feel happy just to be alive; where, what little of the world I know, I know infinitely, endearingly well; where it is not so much the number of yards I can cover that matters, but the beauty which unfolds at every step; where I need not hurry through the hours but can pause to taste the richness that a moment offers, knowing that it will never return."

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