

From the Berwick Advertiser 21st November 1863

ACCIDENT FROM CRINOLINE

On Tuesday a rather distressing accident occurred in Woolmarket. A girl, seven years of age, daughter of Mr John Walker, Woolmarket, while carrying a child scarcely 2 years old upon her back was met by 2 women passing up the street who, with distended skirts, pushed against the girl in passing. The girl was thrown to the ground and one of her thighs was fractured. Either unconscious of the nature of the accident or heedless of the consequence, the women rendered no assistance but proceeded in leaving the poor girl to the care of others who witnessed the accident. The unfortunate girl has since been under surgical treatment.

Fractured Screams

It all happened so quickly that afterwards nobody could say who the women were or why no-one had stopped them. It's aye noisy in Berwick's Woolmarket. The good warm weather over the previous few days with only the lightest of breezes had brought crowds into Marygate and Woolmarket, so it was especially busy on that darkening Tuesday afternoon in late November, 1863. The marching, up and down, of the soldiers from the barracks, the shouts of their sergeant, the crash of muskets on the ground, the shop-keepers crying their wares, children, playing and screaming. It was pandemonium. It was here that two elegantly dressed women, both wearing crinolines, brushed past a small girl with a baby on her back and knocked her down. John Cowe noticed the attractive young women wearing crinolines walking up the street, talking excitedly. Mary Burgon saw the girl fall but such was the crowd that she thought it would be difficult to push through to help, so she told a policeman nearby.

It's odd how the young girls scream the loudest and everyone's used to that but the fallen girl's screaming was different. She was a wee lass, alternately crying and screaming. There was a thin leg poking out from under her body. "Stand aside, there !" the butcher, Thomas Simpson, yelled. "Give me room !" He knelt down and saw the girl's face contorted with pain. "What ails you, lass ?" "The pain, the terrible pain, in my leg" she sobbed.

He started to lift her up; her screams trebled in volume, and startled he lowered her back onto the ground, just as the leg that was under her moved out of the way.

Astonished, he realised that there had been a baby under her. The butcher lifted the smaller child in his brawny arms, holding her against his bloody apron. "Hold, lassie, you're safe now." His wife lifted her from him, and her crying gradually eased off.

Meanwhile, the policeman, having got there, assessed the situation and spoke to a boy of about 10, "Tommy, do you ken where Dr MacLagan bides in Ravensdowne?" "Aye, sir, I do." "Run and tell him there's a young lass in mortal pain in the market, as fast as you can. Tell him he'll need his tools and a stretcher." As Tommy sped off, the policeman called for help to the army sergeant and with his squad's help cleared the area around the butcher's shop, of onlookers, and then the soldiers marched up to Ravensdowne to clear the way.

The poor girl had stopped screaming now. The policeman knelt down and decided that she was still breathing but possibly in too much pain to be questioned. The occasional whimper came out. "Lass, what's your name?" There was no answer. The butcher's wife called over "I think I know her, her mother occasionally buys scrag end when she's got money. Her man's a sailor." "Where does she live?" "I've no idea." The sudden quiet in the market as people asked each other what was happening enabled the policeman to hear a faint shout. "Please sir, I know her, she lives in this street". "Come over here" ordered the policeman. A teenage boy pushed himself through the throng. "Who are you?" "Ted Clark, sir." "Where does she live and what's her name?"

"I don't know her name, but her brother, Eddie, is a railway clerk; I think their dad is a sailor." "Thanks son, I ken the family now."

Just then, the doctor arrived, brown leather bag in hand and saw the girl lying on the ground. "Is this her?" The policeman nodded and told him that the butcher's wife was looking after a baby girl. Dr MacLagan knelt down, held the girl's wrist. He gently moved her limbs, one by one, and was rewarded by a light scream and pain contorting her face when he moved her left leg. "Kath?" he called. "I'm here, Pa; the stretcher's on the cart, just coming down Ravensdowne." Dr MacLagan rose, told the policeman that he wanted the stretcher cart beside him and two soldiers to help. He rummaged in his bag, drew out a bottle and a cloth.

“I can’t give her much as she’s so young, but I have to give her something so that the shock of being lifted onto the stretcher doesn’t kill her.” The girl was placed on the stretcher and slowly lifted onto the cart, the soldiers bearing the weight and the doctor and his teenage daughter keeping it steady. The cart turned round, they walked the cart slowly along Woolmarket, into Ravensdowne and up to the hospital. The policeman talked to the butcher and his wife and some of the other bystanders to ask what they knew, asked the butcher’s wife to take the baby up to Dr MacLagan’s, then went to Mary Walker to break the news.

Mrs Walker lived in a downstairs room of a cottage with her 5 children. He was about to knock on the door when he heard swearing “Where’s Molly got to, blast her? It couldn’t be simpler. Lizzie, you’ll have to go and see.” “Yes, Ma.” He knocked loudly. A teenage girl answered. “Yes?” she asked. “Get your mother, please.” It was meant to be an order but he whispered it so as not to alarm her. Mrs Walker came to the door. “Have you got a wee daughter and a baby, out?” “Aye” she said “they’ve gone to get tatties.” “Advancing, he took her hands. “They’ve been knocked down.” “Oh, my God, are they hurt?” “They’re up at Dr MacLagan’s. Get your coat, I’ll take you up.” “Mercy me, how will we afford it, with John away? Lizzie, run up to the station and tell Eddie, see if they’ll let him come down to the doctor’s.” Lizzie put on a shawl and her clogs and left for the station. Mrs Walker put shoes on to a small girl, added a thick shawl and said “I’m ready now. I’ll just leave Caroline and Meg next door.”

Dr MacLagan’s hospital is an elegant Georgian townhouse in Ravensdowne, a residential road running from the barracks down towards the shore. It was a familiar sight to both of them though Mary Walker had never been inside; until now, she had never needed to suffer the expense of a doctor – the midwife being sufficient for the birth of her children. Her fear of her children’s accident, her apprehension of going to the doctor showed in her face but PC Gordon did his best to calm her as they walked up to the house. A wee girl, not much older than Lizzie, answered the door and showed them into the waiting room where they found Mrs Simpson, the butcher’s wife sitting, and soon after, Katherine MacLagan came to talk to them. “The doctor is examining 2 girls, are they your children?” Before she could answer, PC Gordon said “She’ll need to see them, she was at home at the time.” “Of course,” Miss MacLagan said, “I’ll just go and see if my father has finished yet”.

She returned a few minutes later carrying a small boy, a beaming smile on her face as she sucked a sweet. “Christopher” cried Mary Walker as she held out her hands to take the boy. “Is he all right ? What about my other child ?” “Christopher is fine, some minor bruising, he’ll be as good as new in a few days time. Your daughter is resting on a bed. I’ll take you in but her condition is fragile so you mustn’t touch her until she’s a bit better, d’ye understand ?” Miss MacLagan took PC Gordon aside, whispered to him about restraining the mother if she should rush towards her daughter. PC Gordon nodded and the three of them went into the surgery. As anticipated, the moment Mary Walker saw her daughter lying unconscious on a bed, she tried to rush forward only to be restrained by PC Gordon.

“Is that your daughter ?” asked Dr MacLagan. “Yes, that’s my Molly. Is she...” She took a breath. “Is she going to be all right ?” Dr MacLagan turned to his daughter and said “Would you arrange for a pot of tea for all of us, please ?” and he went out. He suggested that they should all sit down while he discussed Molly’s treatment. “There’s no cause for alarm, at the moment. She’s had a bad accident, knocked over by a lady in a crinoline, and the suddenness and her young age caused to be very frightened – that’s why she’s unconscious. I think she’ll come round when the pain and fright has eased, if the situation changes, I’ll send for you. Molly has a closed fracture of her left thigh. I think I’ll be able to bind the bones together so that they knit together and she’ll be able to walk. Her bones are still growing so there’s a chance she’ll be lame. She’ll have to remain here for a week or two; she won’t be able to walk for a couple of weeks and she needs to be kept still.”

In the pause that followed his announcement, Mary Walker opened her mouth, closed it, started to relax, then said “My poor Molly, thank you doctor, I don’t know if we can afford to pay, is it going to cost a lot ?” “I can’t say yet. I’ll need to take some details.” Mary gave him her address, told him that her husband was a sailor who would be back in week or two, about her 6 children including Meg and her 17 year old son, who worked in the office at the station. “Do you know the women in the crinolines ?” asked Dr MacLagan. “No, sir, but I expect they’ll come forward and I expect they’ll pay for her treatment. If they don’t, Mrs Walker can apply to the Inspector of the Poor.” “We don’t want to go to the workhouse, they say conditions are terrible. Oh, the shame of it.” Dr MacLagan took Mary’s rough hand in his. “Now, don’t worry. The workhouse won’t take you in without Molly and she’s biding here.

You can come and visit her in a few days time, I'll send someone to tell you. I'm sure something will be worked out."

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"Danny. No need to greet so. A bit of blood, a few scratches, but no bones broken, thank God. Not like the time when my thigh was broken – do you mind the story?"

"Aye, Ma. What was it like in the hospital?"

"It was strange in the hospital – a bed all to myself but no-one to talk to, save Kate and the Doctor and he didn't come in much. I don't mind all the details, though. The food was wonderful, meat or chicken broth every day, a piece of butcher-meat at dinner-time, sometimes beef, chicken, pork, venison or lamb, a fish to eat on Friday; a piece of fruit, three times a day; bread, a small sweetmeat at tea and a sweet cordial to drink in the morning and at night. I missed Caroline and Chris and Meg. Your Aunt Lizzie was working then and stopped by after work, went home to look after the others, so that Granny could come and see me. After a about a week, I was able to walk a bit, I was so weak, it was difficult at first but I gradually improved. I put on a bit of weight there.

"Did they find those women that knocked you over?"

"Granny said the vicar (we were going to Holy Trinity then) preached a long sermon about the dangers of wearing crinolines, he said there were articles in the paper about crinolines about women whose crinolines had caught fire from a stove, a burning coal or a candle and they died and other women whose skirts had got caught in machinery or carriage wheels. He talked about my accident and asked the women who might have knocked me over to come and see him. The minister at Wallace Green also preached a sermon about the iniquities of crinolines; he hoped that women would stop wearing them, and he talked about my plight." Molly chuckled. "The minister's wife, wasn't happy about the sermon, she had been hoping that he would buy her a crinoline. The appeal worked; the two women that knocked me over went to the minister. They had been hurrying to the station to meet their uncle, a soldier in India, but they were late and he met them in Castlegate. That's why your uncle Edward never saw them at the station. They were ever so sorry. They came to see me in the hospital and gave me a wee pendant, a shiny new quarter rupee from India on a silver chain."

Molly paused, took the chain from around her neck and showed him the coin. “Isn’t it pretty ? Those ladies took Granny a basket of fruit and some flowers, I mind Granny exclaiming ‘Flowers, bought flowers in my house !’ They paid the doctor’s bill, too. It was 3 guineas ! Granny and Pappa could never have afforded that. I reckon Dr MacLagan saved my life, I could have been left a cripple but I was good as new again. That man deserves a statue. Now, you’ve stopped bleeding and you’re nice and clean, so go out and play. Be careful, mind !”

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