

# A bilious fever

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

George Higby Throop (writing as Gregory Seaworthy), *Nag's Head: or, Two Months among "the Bankers." A story of sea-short life and manners* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, Late Carey and Hart, 1850), pp. 25–32.

## As you read...

### GEORGE HIGBY THROOP

George Higby Throop was a school teacher and tutor from Wilsboro, New York. In 1849, Throop came to North Carolina to teach the children of Cullen Capehart, a plantation owner in Bertie County. In the hot summer months, Throop accompanied the Capehart family to Nags Head. His time in North Carolina was the material for two novels, *Nag's Head; or, Two Months Among "the Bankers": A Story of Sea-Shore life and Manners* and *Bertie; or, Life in the Old Field: A Humorous Novel*.

Although Throop's novels were not popular during his lifetime, they were the first novels to fictionalize antebellum North Carolina society. Throop's novels are a window into the cultural attitudes and beliefs of the elite Southern society in North Carolina during the 1850s.

You can learn more about the life and writings of George Higby Throop from this biography (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/throop/bio.html>) at Documenting the American South.

### DISEASE

In this excerpt, Throop described an epidemic that swept through the sea-side village of Nags Head. His description is fiction, but it was based on the events he witnessed and the people he met while in North Carolina. In the nineteenth century, epidemics like this one were common, and disease was still poorly understood. And although Throop wrote about his illness in a humorous way, epidemics killed many people every year and were widely feared. Before you read this excerpt, you may wish to read the summary (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/throop/summary.html>) of this novel provided by Documenting the American South.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What words did Throop use to describe the scenery at Nags Head?
2. What was Throop's illness? How did he describe his sickness?
3. Who attended him while he was sick? What words did he use to describe these different people?
4. What did the doctors tell him was the cause of his sickness? What did they prescribe for him to help him recover?

5. How did members of his household respond to his sickness? How did they try to help him?
6. What did he say he learned from being sick?
7. We know that Throop based his novels on his own experiences. What parts of this excerpt do you think were true to life? What parts do you think he may have exaggerated for the purposes of the novel?

My first impressions of Nag's Head were very favorable. The mere escape from the malaria, and fevers, and heat of Perquimans<sup>1</sup> was quite enough to raise my spirits; but when we hove<sup>2</sup> in sight of the harbor, in the gray of the morning, and saw the sun rise over Nag's Head, making still more than the usual contrast between the white sand-hills and the dark, beautiful green of its clusters of oak; when we discerned the neat white cottages among the trees, the smoke curling lazily from the low chimneys, the fishing-boats and other small craft darting to and fro, the carts plying between the shore and the dwellings, the loiterers who were eager to know who and how many had arrived, what wonder that I was prepared to be pleased with my new home? And then the dear, delightful sea-breeze, calling up old memories of a lustrum of my life in which I roamed over many a clime of "the big world."

With that same breeze came vigor, strength, and animal spirits to which I had long been a stranger; and, as "it came on to blow"<sup>3</sup> soon after we landed, so violently that our luggage could not be sent ashore, I went forth upon the sands, on the hills, among the oaks, down to the sea-shore, and to the — ten-pin alley<sup>4</sup>. Against this first feeling of vigor I had been cautioned; but I rambled too much, and when the morrow came<sup>5</sup>, I was ill. I commenced the labors of my little school; but with a feeling of languor and a dull aching in every bone of my body. Dr. A— prescribed blue mass<sup>6</sup> and morphine, and I flattered myself that I should be well in a very short time.

I was doomed to be disappointed. There came one morning a feeling of lassitude and dizziness. This was succeeded by a remarkably chilly sensation for the time of year, and this was followed by a raging fever!

With a vague presentiment of long sickness did I go to my little chamber. My cheeks burned, my temples throbbed, and I tossed, in restlessness and pain, from side to side. Dr. A— was sent for; just the man for me, as I found him full of life and fun; of a sanguine, hearty manner, and one of the most agreeable men in the world to converse with.

"Ah! Mr. S—! got a fever, eh! let's see!" and he felt my pulse. "Got you down at last. But I'll have you up again in two days. Most always kill such a fever the first shot. Never fail the second! Take this pill to-night, and with the help of tonics we'll have you on your feet directly!"

And with such encouragement to me, he forthwith retreated with Mr. W— to the piazza for a smoke. His manner, I am fully persuaded, was of as much benefit to me as his prescription. If there be one thing more disheartening than another to an invalid, it is to see his physician come into his apartment with a face as long as an undertaker's or Don Quixote's<sup>7</sup>, or a mute's at a funeral, and shrug solemnly his broad shoulders, and with a sigh and a shake of the head, such as have not been heard or seen since the days of the Round-heads<sup>8</sup>, gravely announce to him, in a tone of profoundest orotund, that he is in a

bad way! Out on them, say I. Give me Apollyon rather than Giant Despair, if I must have either.<sup>9</sup>

On the following morning, I rose at an early hour, feeling decidedly better. There was no recurrence of the chill or the fever. So great was the apparent improvement that the doctor left me no prescription.

“Just keep quiet, now, Mr. Seaworthy,” said he; “be a little careful of your diet, and in a week you’ll have the appetite of a shark. When people come to Nag’s Head, you see, they think they can do anything; run about in the noonday sun; eat soft crabs for supper; dance till midnight, and, maybe, drink a dozen juleps<sup>10</sup>.”

“Pretty well for one day, doctor!”

“Yes; but that’s not all. They go to bed with their windows all open; sleep, perhaps, in a strong draught<sup>11</sup> of air, and then — as a matter of course — come the chill and the fever, and your humble servant the doctor!”

During the day, I took morphine. When night came, there came with it horrid dreams, and deep, exhausting sleep. I awoke in the morning not feeling so well as I had expected. It is a common saying that disappointments never come singly. It proved to be true; and had there not been so much said and written upon the uncertainty of human expectations, I am by no means sure that I should not devote a chapter to that fertile theme.

The chill returned! and, it is needless to add, the fever came after it more intensely than before. Then came the weakness and languor of disease; the thousand whims, the tendency to fretfulness, the ever-changing caprice of appetite, the ungovernable thirst, the longing for company at my bedside. The servants and children were enjoined to be quiet. My visitors stepped quietly and softly when they came in, and ever and anon there would appear, just far enough inside the door to be visible, an inquiring face whose very look was enough to elicit the response

“A little easier!”

“Rather more fever!”

“Doing nicely!” or,

“About the same.”

Mr. W—, who arrived on the very day that I was taken ill, was untiring in his attentions. I could hear him below — my hearing being sharpened by disease — giving particular directions to the servants as to their being quiet, and taking care not to disturb me. And then he would sit by my bedside and talk with me so cheerfully and so confidently concerning my speedy recovery, that

“— the brood  
Of dizzy weakness, flickering through the gloom<sup>12</sup>  
Of my small, curtained prison, caught the hues  
Of beauty spangling out in glorious change,  
And it became a luxury to lie  
And faintly listen.”

Sometimes he would lie on the bed with me, and sometimes read to me. Mrs. W— sent very often to know how I was, and whether she could do anything for me. The elder Mrs.

W—, who seems like a mother to me, was untiring in her kindness. J— would come in and read me asleep. Even little S—, our curly-headed pet, paid me a visit.

My friend Dr. M— came while I was sick; and both he and Dr. A— were my constant and welcome visitors.

Nor ought I here to omit mentioning the kindness and fidelity of the servants. One of the boys slept in the chamber with me. Old ‘Titia, a sort of matriarch among the servants, was ever ready to do anything I requested, and that with the evident good feeling which gives to such offices of kindness their true value. What I say of her I may say of them all.

I grew worse. My disease assumed a more dangerous phase, and I became hourly weaker. My spirits flagged. I grew desponding. I told Mr. W— where to find my private papers. From the first I had had fears as to the new phase of the disease, and had begged for a prescription which had once saved my life. At last Dr. M— prepared it for me, gave it to me, and, on the following morning, I knew and felt that I was BETTER! And a thrill of subdued joy and a silent prayer of thanksgiving to the Great Physician were my morning offering, as the bright, clear August sun rose from his ocean lair.

Slowly, but steadily, I recovered; and oh! how glorious to me were

“The common air, the earth, the sky!”

A new week dawned upon me, and with my little family, my school around me, I gladly resumed my customary round of labor.

There are few — I hope there are none — who have not felt that the chamber of sickness has taught them some of the gravest and best lessons of life. Could we know the first feelings of the restored invalid, prominent among them all would appear a thrill of hearty gratitude to Heaven for the gentleness with which the hand of the Chastener<sup>13</sup> was laid upon him. To the busy, the active and energetic, sickness alone brings the first solemn pause in life, when they must think soberly of other things than markets, and money, and the bustle of the marts of trade.

And then, too, comes — for the first time it may be — the sense of the frailty of the “clay tenement,”<sup>14</sup> upon the strength and symmetry of which we have so complacently and so proudly looked. With this feeling come, naturally and certainly, the charity which so well becomes us for the frailties and faults of others; sympathy for their afflictions and sorrows, and good will to every son and daughter of Adam. In this new phase of earnestness, whatever of imperfection we have seen in the institutions of our blessed religion, all vanishes in the light of its greater excellencies. Our bigotry and our prejudices melt as the morning frost; and if there were a lurking feeling of enmity or revenge lurking in the heart, O! how does it melt away before the deeper feeling of gratitude and love!

It is in the chamber of sickness, too, that the man hitherto skeptical as to the good will of his fellow-men meets with that genuine, disinterested kindness, and the thousand little offices of affection which mock all his misanthropic theories. A world of hitherto undiscovered sympathy survives the surrounding desolation of “total depravity,” like the moss on the fountain’s edge in the depth of winter.

It is a TEST, too — that same sick chamber. It has a voice to which no man ever yet failed to give heed. His energies, whatever they may be, must there be assayed. The mute, but quick and earnest look of inquiry with which the sick man would fain read his probable

fate in the looks of the attending physician, is of itself enough to betray the otherwise secret feeling of intense interest with which he watches the varying symptoms. In this man you behold a calm, noble, fearless spirit, not afraid to meet the Great Source<sup>15</sup> which it, in some degree, resembles. In that, the nervous shrinking from the very thought of death. There is something sublime in the quiet gathering of the energies of a mighty spirit for the last grapple with the grim messenger<sup>16</sup>.

For myself, my chief anxiety as to the close of life is in regard to the nature of the disease which will probably terminate it. Though it has attacked me very seldom, I have long had — perhaps most persons have a similar feeling — a presentiment that sooner or later its agonies will call for my stoutest energies, and master them. I have seen at sea, in a man-of-war, victim after victim held ruthlessly and helplessly in its iron grapple for days and weeks; and then the jack<sup>17</sup> was thrown over them, and the hammock, with shot enclosed<sup>18</sup>, sewn tightly around them.

The shrill pipe and hoarse voice of the boatswain and his mates called that most solemn of all their calls, “ALL HANDS! BURY THE DEAD!” The burial-service was read; there was one dull splash, and the tall ship filled away on her course, leaving my comrade “fathoms deep” in his ocean grave.

Good reader,

“So live  
That, when thy summons come<sup>19</sup>,”

thou mayst go to thy resting-place

“Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

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## Notes

1. Perquimans County, in the northeastern corner of North Carolina.
2. *Hove* means to be suspended or floating — to hover.
3. A common phrase at sea which means the wind began to blow.
4. Ten-pin alley was a bowling alley.
5. The “morrow” means the next morning.

6. “Blue mass” was a type of medicine that contained mercury and was prescribed for a number of different ailments. We now know that mercury is extremely poisonous.
7. Don Quixote is the main character in the novel *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* written in the sixteenth century by the Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (usually referred to simply as Cervantes).

The work is a humorous tale about a wealthy man who becomes obsessed with books about chivalry, the code of honor for knights. Quixote puts on his grandfather’s armor and travels around the countryside looking to prove himself as a knight. The trials he faces are usually invented, and most of Quixote’s friends and family believe he is insane.

Quixote also appears in the novel *The Knight of the Sorrowful Face*. At one point in the novel, Quixote’s friend says to him that he has “the sorriest-looking face I’ve seen recently, and it must be on account of your weariness after this battle, or the molars and teeth you’ve lost.” From this point on in the novel, Quixote refers to himself as the Knight of the Sorrowful Face.

8. In the 17th century, England went through a civil war. The war was fought between Roundheads, or Parliamentarians, who wanted to depose King Charles and introduce a type of democratic government with an elected leader, and the Monarchists, who supported the King.
9. Apollyon and Great Despair are characters in John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, a story that brings to life aspects of the Christian religion. Apollyon is a devil who appears in the form of a dragon, while Great Despair is a giant who lives in a castle. He captures, imprisons, and tortures two main characters, Hopeful and Christian. He is killed later in the tale by two other characters.

The author is saying, presumably, that he would rather fight a dragon — face something active — than deal with a despairing sort of person.

10. A julep is an alcoholic drink served on ice, sweetened with sugar, and flavored with mint.
11. A draught in this context is a draft — a current of cool air in a room or other confined space. Doctors at this time did not believe that fresh air was good for a sick person; they insisted that patients be kept in dark, closed rooms.
12. A quotation from the play “Ion: A tragedy,” written by Thomas Noon Talfourd and first performed in London in 1836.
13. Chastener is a person who chastises or corrects. In this case, Throop is referring to God.
14. A *clay tenement* refers to the body. In the biblical story of Adam and Eve, God created Adam out of clay; thus Christians in the nineteenth century referred to the body as “clay.” Christians also believed that the body was only a temporary house for the spirit, and thus the body was a tenement, which means building or house.
15. “The Great Source” is a reference to God or the divine, the “great source” of life.
16. “The grim messenger” is a reference to the Grim Reaper, which is the personification of death.
17. Jack in this context means the flag of a ship, usually of the country of origin of the ship’s captain, crew, or the owner of the ship — such as the British “jack” (or “Union Jack”) or the American “jack.”

18. Shot were round metal balls fired from a gun or cannon (such as a cannon ball).  
In this case, a shot for a cannon was loaded into a hammock along with the deceased person, which would help the body sink into the ocean.
19. From the poem “Thanatopsis” (Meditation on Death) by the American poet William Cullen Bryant.

## About the author

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