Bitters for Uncle Phin

By Janet S. Porter
The Life and History of Phineas Wolcott Cook,
p. 16-17, using his own words

CHARACTERS (3 – 2 males, 1 female)

Phineas Wolcott Cook

His father Phineas Cook

His Sister Mary Ann Cook

Narrator: The year 1839 was a bad year on the Michigan prairie. Many were afflicted with fevers, and the few doctors were too busy to attend to all the sick. Phineas Wolcott Cook was still recovering from his sickness the year before. He had almost died and was unable to work long days. Yet as the summer passed, his father continued sick in bed and was too tired to work. Slowly it became obvious to the family that their father needed motivation to get out of bed or he would never regain his strength.

(Phineas Sr. could be sitting on a chair or two chairs propped up by a pillow)

PWC: Pa, are you feeling any stronger today? I'm about worn out with cutting the hay.

Phineas Sr. You're young and strong, son. You always were able to outwork any man in town.

PWC: That may have been true in years past, but since my fever and sickness last summer, I've been too weak to put in my usual 15-hour days. I'm wondering when you'll feel better so you can help me, or if we should hire someone before I collapse.

Phineas Sr. I wondered the same thing about you last year, son. This year it's my turn to lie in bed.

PWC: Pa, we have to take down the chimney and build it up again. We have to gather corn and dig potatoes. We have to cut and stack the hay and take care of the stock. There's so much to do to prepare for winter, I have no strength to do it all.

Phineas Sr. Perhaps you'd better call for the doctor.

PWC: We already did that, remember? The doctor is too busy to come to everyone who needs help.

Phineas Sr. I'm tired. I need a nap. And you need to get to bed so you can be up at 4 a.m. and get to work.

(Phineas Sr. falls asleep and PWC's sister Mary Ann comes in the room.)

Mary Ann: I tried to get him to take the medicine which helped him last time he was sick, but he won't take anything the doctor doesn't recommend.

PWC: He's very stubborn. If he calls for the doctor but he doesn't come, Pa may never get out of bed.

Mary Ann: I have an idea. Let's make him some bitters by taking a quart of whiskey and put in a teaspoon of quinine and aloes. I'll write the directions on a piece of paper and put it round the neck of the bottle. Then you bring it to the door and disguise your voice to sound like the doctor.

PWC: And do you think it will work?

Mary Ann: Pa is far enough from the front door he won't hear well. I think it will work. At least it's worth a try. We know the quinine would help him but he won't take it unless the doctor tells him to.

PWC: All right, let's do it.

(PWC leaves the room.)

PWC: (Loud knocking. His voice disguised) Hello, anybody home?

Mary Ann: *(Pretends to open a doo*r) Why, Doc. Upjohn, it's so late for you to be out. But thank you for coming.

PWC: Can't come in. Too many sick people. Tell Uncle Phin to take these bitters and he'll feel better right away.

Mary Ann: Pa, did you hear that? The doc wants you to take these bitters. *(She takes the bottle to her father.)*

Phineas Sr. Let's see. It says on this paper around the bottle "take a tablespoonful three times a day before eating."

Mary Ann: I'll get the spoon

Phineas Sr. *(He takes the medicine)* Yes, this is exactly right. I feel better already, and pronounce it good. I think I'll be up and around in a day or two.

Mary Ann: *(Runs to the door and shouts)* Thank you, Doc Upjohn. Pa feels better already.

(PWC steps into the room)

PWC: When Pa feels better, I feel better.

Mary Ann: Now he won't die in that bed.

PWC: Thanks, Doc Upjohn.