

THE MINISTER AND THE TRAMPS

Some of Saturday's Trials in the Canadian Manse

By MURDOCH MACKINNON

SATURDAY is "tramp" day for the minister. Early in the week you are bound to miss them and to find that when you trudge home at half-past six one of these citizens of the highway has just left, disgusted with your irregular hours. In fact they know your time-table far better than you know theirs and without regard to Professors James and Starbuck they have the psychology of your religion down to a science. It takes some constructive ability to prepare even a passable sermon, but the stiffest text a minister faces from one end of the week to the other is the Saturday morning tramp. There is no need of a formal introduction, it is true, but there is ample scope for impromptu exegesis and much practical application.

What would you do, for example, with a man who comes to you in great penitence and asks you to implore the Higher Powers in his behalf? The tremour of his voice, the tears that course down his cheeks and the downright religious character of his request all bespeak an anxious seeker after treasure. For no sooner are you up from your knees than he tests the genuineness of your prayer by asking for the price of a ticket to a neighbouring town where his wife lies sick, his children seized of some terrible plague and where one sinner at least is determined to make a fresh start. If you are a novice you will grant him his request, comforting yourself with the thought that you are carrying out the golden rule. I took the precaution, however, of buying the ticket for him and seeing him aboard the train. He got off at the outer station, used my name in re-selling his ticket and returned to the city to celebrate Saturday night.

All tramps have certain characteristics in common. They have the same defective boots and you cannot escape noticing them, the same desire to be clothed upon and the same willingness to do work which unfortunately you never have on hand. But more important still they are, as far as I know them, all religiously inclined. It is this tendency that brings them so often to the minister. They know he is a specialist in religious matters and that they can rely upon his giving them something worth having. That they put the goods on the market is not to be wondered at. Deacon Jones does the same thing when he expects you to buy in his store as a matter of right, because he goes to your church. But while they have many traits in common, tramps have also their own individuality and special methods of attack. They vary the programme according to circumstance and believe firmly in the value of individual work for individuals. Many a minister might well take a hint at this point for his success also depends not upon his eloquence or academic career but upon his ability to adapt his message in a particular situation and to interpret human nature as it comes before him.

"He is not in," the maid said to a sturdy specimen who came one afternoon "to see the minister," as he termed it. Not in? How absurd! "When will he be in?" he enquired peremptorily. He returned at six only to find that his victim had not yet arrived. He was shown into the study, but a few moments later he was found in the drawing-room balancing a sterling silver dish on the tips of his black fingers, muttering to himself all the while, "When is that man coming back? I want to see that man right now." Things were beginning to look blue about the house when as fortune would have it I alighted from my bicycle and walked in. He was somewhat taken aback at my size and foreboding aspect, for he gathered that I did not receive in the drawing-room. Nevertheless he began his speech: "When you are in trouble you go to see your minister. I am in trouble and I have come to you for assistance. I am a Presbyterian from —" I gave him assistance in a direction he hadn't counted on and when he suddenly landed on the sidewalk he realised that he was not the only Presbyterian in the block. The moral is that a minister should never be late for tea especially on Saturdays when he is supposed to be in his study. Strange how a man sometimes eases his conscience by visiting, that is, becoming something of a tramp himself when he should be working over his sermons!

Even tramps make mistakes, however, and are deceived by outward appearances. A daughter of

the Emerald Isle presented herself one day and pleaded for her sick husband and other relatives. "Have you any children?" I asked. "Yes, Father, but they are too young to work and one of them is after being sick for foive months." I told her that I had a good many people needing help in my own Presbyterian congregation and suggested that her best course was to see the priest. Finding that she had made an unfortunate slip she tried to put things right by saying that her husband was a Catholic, "but I go to St. Paul's (Anglican) sometimes and yours is the faith I was brought up to (she couldn't recall the name 'Presbyterian'—it was not in her vocabulary) and I have a warm place for it in my heart still." Very warm, almost suffocating, I thought. Denominationalism has its defects but it has one excellent merit in this connection, for, by using the *argumentum ad Lominem*, you can with a clear conscience get rid of nine-tenths of your Saturday intruders.

I had another proof of the religious bias lately when a man carrying a small bundle tied in a red handkerchief, a favourite trade mark, presented a written petition signed by two local doctors and the "Rite Rev. Bishop" of the diocese. It read something like this: "The bearer, Norton Twist, is suffering from siatic stoppage of spitch and is deserving of charity benefit." Knowing that the good bishop seldom signed himself "Rite Rev. Bishop," and that, in any case, he did not write the same identical hand as the two medical men referred to, I made bold to question the trustworthiness of the document. But he assured me that his jaws were really affected, indicating the exact place on mine by way of illustration. I warded him off but he persisted in arguing his point and vouching for the bishop's signature. He became very emphatic at last, especially when I hinted at possible interference from the police, but it was not until after he had gone that it occurred to me, his self-defence was sufficient contradiction of his document.

Pity is an aspect of religion and this fact is fully appreciated by your tramps. "Ugh! for mercy sake!" A scream came from the door one cold winter day. "There's a man here with a terrible arm and he wants help." I got suspicious at once for it couldn't have taken him any time to make known his ailment. As I went to him he punctuated his very first statement by whipping back the ripped sleeve and exposing a horrible wound on his forearm, a wound received ostensibly while rescuing a child from a fire. A noble cause! A brave man! It is worth while losing an arm to do the heroic on occasion. A man like that should have a medal struck in his honour. But heroes do not proclaim their valour from the house-tops, nor do they exhibit their wounds from door to door.

For one thing this man's wound seemed too geometrical in outline and the sleeve rather conveniently arranged. I asked him to call back. It was not for the health and safety of the community to have this free exhibition, so I called up police headquarters. Yes, they knew him. They had run him in often. He created this wound himself and kept it going by means of certain acids and had refused free treatment at the dispensary. "Where is he now?" they asked. "He will be back here in a few minutes," I volunteered and when he arrived one policeman opened the door for him, another stepped up behind and they led him to his own place.

Tramps are on principle in favour of the separation of church and state and regard it as an outrage to have these combine to break up their cleverly laid plans.

It is hard even for a Calvinist to be stern always, especially when his tormentor is of the female persuasion. "I knew as soon as I laid my eyes on the sweet face of you that you were a minister," (still another proof of the religious bias), said a blind woman whose eyelids twitched terribly as she spoke. In the face of an ingenuous and overwhelming compliment like that it is easier to give a quarter and encourage theft and untruthfulness than to summon the courage to refuse. This case is not unlike that of the deaf mute who sold lead pencils around here at five cents each. He indicated the price so neatly by holding up the fingers of his right hand that to refuse him would be like tempting Providence and showing a spirit of ingratitude for the gift of speech.

In an unfortunate moment he struck the Deaf and Dumb Institution when, lo! the game was up.

It is suggestive to think that the clergy have impressed themselves upon the tramp fraternity as men of money. There is many a millionaire who doesn't get half the recognition. "I'll let daylight into you if you say one word," thundered a bluff fellow one night as he covered the minister's head with a loaded gun. "I am here in search of money." "Is that so?" said the minister springing up with alacrity; "wait till I get a lamp and I'll help you look."

It would be worth while investing in a buck saw and a cord of wood to test these "willing workers," whose common tragedy seems to be their inability to obtain employment. But where is the tramp who really wants to work when he can make five times more money out of the maudlin sensibility of the people? "Now look here, I know Mr. Claxton," one of these anxious inquirers said to me one day as I gave him the address of the city missionary who would provide him with work, "I know Mr. Claxton, and I tell you he is no earthly good."

"I heard of a minister with a small stipend whose shoes had come to look rather shabby in the pulpit. His wife presented him with a new pair. Late Saturday afternoon one of our old friends called and had a profitable interview. Sunday morning the minister appeared in the same worn-out foot-gear. "Why don't you wear your new shoes, John?" queried his good wife, "I got them for your Sunday best." "I gave them to a poor man who called yesterday afternoon," he announced innocently. "But, dear me, why didn't you give him your old ones and keep the new ones for yourself?" "Oh, well," he replied, anxious to drop the subject, "he said he had old ones already."

Many a man who has resolved to have absolutely nothing more to do with this tribe has been taken in by the very next man with a new wrinkle. For the success of a tramp depends on his ever appearing under a new guise. Here is a man to-day from my own native county. He is the hundredth man who is honest as against the ninety-and-nine unjust persons who have no claim on your charity. He knows the whole neighbourhood and names some people who are familiar to you. While his face is strange he has the accent and intonation and there is no doubting his birthplace. He is one of the crew off the ship that went ashore in the storm last week. True enough the ship he names did go ashore and that may be the reason why every tramp in town has suddenly become a member of that crew. Before giving him a contribution toward the price of his ticket home, I satisfied myself by asking a few specific questions which I thought were quite heart-searching. The answers were satisfactory and to convince me of his straightforwardness he took my address with elaborate precision that he might remit in due time. The very next day in walks another shipwrecked mariner and without a single query on my part he answered all the questions of the day before in one breath and presto! I found that my address had been passed around, possibly sold and I with it!

Like all parasites, tramps are not utterly useless. They stand before us the naked and unvarnished product of our social and economic system. At bottom they are but our own sins bodied forth. The fine points by which a business man accumulates inordinate wealth, the craving of many for the race track and the stock exchange, the straining for effect in the pulpit without the legitimate process of preparation are all but variations of the tramp principle—*getting something for nothing*. The "ocular proof" of our imperfect humanity are these mendicants, and while as a social phenomenon they may require to be specially dealt with, we may say this much, that as long as society is what it is, we shall always have them with us and when there are no tramps to deceive the unwary, there shall be no need of ministers to serve as their victims.

Combative but Kind.

ONE of George Meredith's sayings was: "Let us be combative, but let us be kind." He believed that women should be granted the vote, but he was not at all in sympathy with the tactics of the militant suffragettes. "Those rowdy scenes are terrible," he once said, "I am not in agreement with anything that is bad taste and bad strategy."