

MY QUEER PARISHIONERS.

I had lately been appointed to a new rectory. My parish was a large one, embracing an area of some thirty miles, and the little town where the quaint old church, of which I was the only minister, stood had been historic in those times—a century ago—when men formed communities according to their tastes and descent, not as now, wherever commerce, following on the heels of the railroad, calls them. There was a pretty parsonage, but it was under repair, and I spent the few weeks necessary to its renovation with one of my church-wardens, a young farmer, whom I was proud to find well-bred and well-read.

I was anxious to know something of my people in order that I might the more readily understand their needs, and put myself at one with them, not only as regarded the next world, but this; for it has always appeared to me that unless a parson knows a little, at least, of his people's lives in the world, their successes, their failures, their aims, their hopes, their pleasures and their trials, he may preach till the day of doom, but he will never get at their hearts and so lead them up to the heart of Him, the Father and Lord of us all.

It was a lonely afternoon in late July, the hay was in, the peas were nearly ready, the wheat promised well, the cattle in the field looked lazily well-to-do, the colts, well-grown and already showing their points, frisked around the grave old mares, the trees were in full leaf and had that fully developed and robust look that gives July its glory, and though the roads were dusty, the sun hot and the grass somewhat scorched, we, my church-warden and I, bowed along in his top-buggy very cosily, talking as we went.

My parish stood high, and overlooked a wide valley, and as we went along the stony high-road that skirted the lower levels, more than one church spire, surrounded by a cluster of dwellings, showed in the distance, and told of population and human endeavour.

It was a pretty scene from the hillside, for the tin-covered spires shone like silver in the sun. Many of the larger houses, square, well-proportioned, and embosomed in tall sails of a ship or two moving slowly along the canal that threaded the valley told of those great waterways by which people have traversed the continent ever since Nature stretched out wealthy hands to whosever should come and take. I was absorbed in the thoughts that the prosperous view called up, when my companion remarked, as he pointed with his whip to a large stone house in the midst of wheat-fields: "Yonder live some people you will find very queer, and probably hard to get along with."

"Indeed!" I replied. "Why are they queer, and who are they?"

"The family consists of two old men and one old woman. They have lived there ever since I can recollect, and I have often heard my mother say they lived there when she and my father were married and came to Crab-Tree Farm."

"They must be very old," I remarked.

"Nearer seventy than anything less."

"And what is queer about them?"

"Everything. They do all their own work, farm and dairy, except such help as a boy can afford. They build their own farm waggons, scrub the floors of cow-house and stable, and never visit nor receive visitors."

"How, then, am I to make their acquaintance?"

"I fancy they do not consider their rector a visitor; their house but once, I believe. But he had no tact, and was always treading on somebody's corns. Mr. Pelham got on with them excellently, and I hope you will. There is some secret about their lives, and if they wish they have a right to conceal it. Nevertheless, they are queer, and it is the wonder of the district how these old people manage to get through so much work, and also what they do with their money, for they must be rich."

"Why do you think they are rich?"

"Two hundred acres well-tilled, no rent to pay, wood for the cutting, and nothing beside tea and sugar and a bit of clothing to buy is generally reckoned a good income for a man with a family. I am not better off myself, yet I have a little in the bank."

"What is the general impression about these people, and what name do they bear?"

"They are English—so English people say, but no two agree as to where they came from. Their name is Smith, and they are regarded as cracked, that is all."

"Do they attend church?"

"Regularly. And they pay punctually both pew-rent and tithes. Moreover, they give to such collections as are

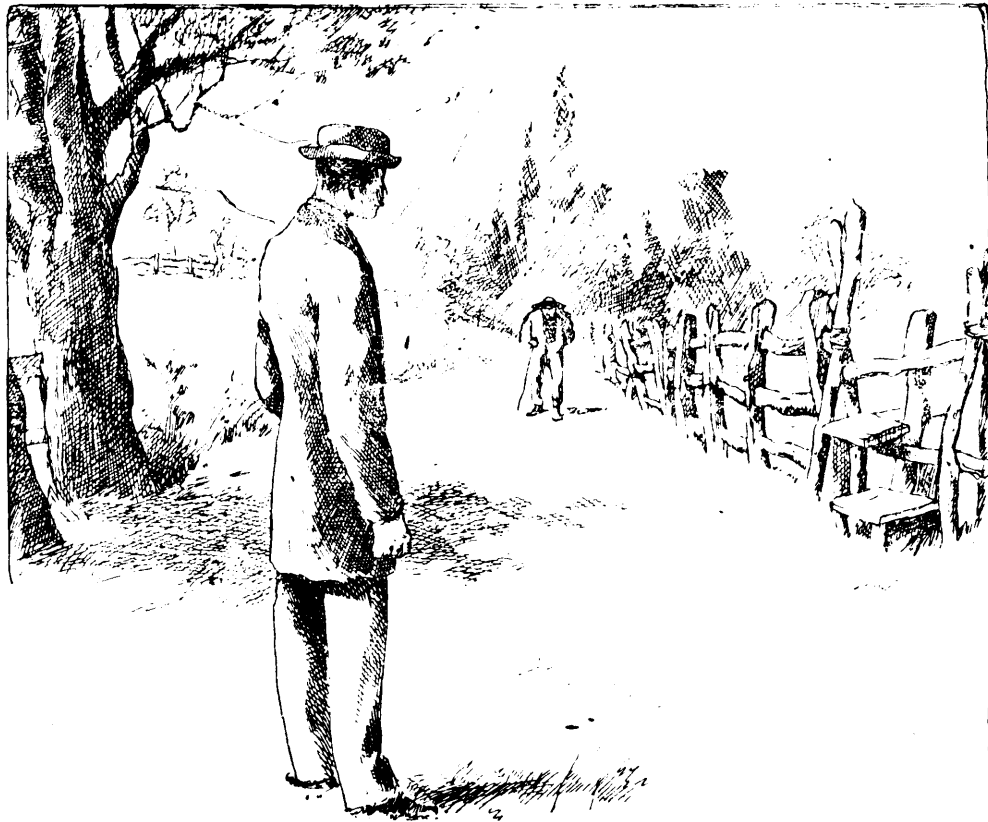
made in the church, but nothing out of it."

"Tithes! Why that is a demand not in force here, is it not?"

"No. There are no tithes in Canada, save in the Lower Provinces; still the Smiths insist that all ought to pay tithes for the support of whatever church they believe in, and therefore your salary has these self-imposed tithes in its make-up."

I was very proud, and did not like the idea of using money contributed as a tithe—a legal claim, as it is considered in the older countries—and yet if all my parishioners had contributed the tenth of their means, leaving out of the computation the poor or labouring class, I should have been a much better paid rector than I was; indeed, there would have been a good sum left for charitable and mission work over and above a fair income for myself. But these are the days of *quid pro quo*, and spiritual service is not reckoned as an asset.

Not many days elapsed before I called on my queer parishioners. As I approached the house I was struck by the exceeding neatness of everything. The very bee-hive benches were white with good scrubbing, and the stone steps of the great, square, dark-looking house, built of a stone that easily took the weather, leaving its lime-mortar in white lines between the courses, were as white as if newly quarried.



"I PERCEIVED A MAN COMING TOWARDS ME."

I knocked, but no one came to the door, and so I anticipated all might be at work on the farm. I went round the house to see what I could see. Three or four hens with young chickens in coops were clucking and calling in a little yard fenced off by high rails and a run of string above. At the side of the house the shutterless windows shone bright in the south sun and were shaded by white curtains, very homely and pleasant to see. An old orchard of apples, pears and filberts stood on the side of a little hill that fell away to the valley, and a large pig-sty, with several grunters lay further away from the back of the house. The kitchen door, shaded by a stoop, stood open, but I could neither see nor hear any person within. A great white cat came forward to greet me, however, and I felt that human hearts beat in the breasts of my queer parishioners, if a cat meant anything. Looking around, I perceived a man, apparently seventy years old, very much bent with long white hair, calm and stern eyes, and a mouth that had once been handsome and firm before the teeth had departed, coming towards me. I bowed and advanced.

Notwithstanding the shrivelled arms, the brown skin (the usual farming skin), a shirt of homespun grey flannel and brown homespun trousers the worse for the weather, I perceived at once that this man was no clod. I introduced myself, and was asked to enter, not by the kitchen door, but from the front. We entered a wide hall ornamented with a hatchment, showing that somewhere in the family was, or had been, nobility. Several pairs of horns, a musket, two rifles—strange place for modern rifles, I thought—and an oak bench furnished this apartment; but I was shown into a room on the right hand, evidently the parlour.

Saying "Pray be seated, sir, I will call my brother and sister," my host left me and I was at liberty to look around. Not a vestige of carpet was on the floor, it was polished like a mirror, but the colour was of the natural

wood, a hard wood, evidently, but I could not tell what. A black satin embroidered screen on a gilt stand stood near the open fire-place. A large oval mahogany table occupied the centre of the room, and the legs of it were beautifully carved. So also were a very high-backed lady's chair and two easy chairs, which, together with a large secretary having a book-case top, completed the furniture of the room. Ornaments stood about and they were all very old-fashioned and costly; books filled the case, but I could not see what they were from my seat. Evidently my queer parishioners were people of culture, or had succeeded to the property of such people. But further conjecture was stopped by the entrance of my hosts themselves. Both the men had on coats donned for the occasion, and slippers—home-made, evidently—instead of their farm boots. They bowed; the elder, whom I had already seen, introduced the younger, a man very like himself, but taller, not so bent, grey, and with a stern, hard mouth, and he in his turn introduced me to the lady, whom he simply called "my sister."

Miss Smith was younger than either of her brothers. She was slight, wiry, bent, but her hair was nearly black, wavy and gathered in a loose knot, leaving it at liberty to fall into curls when loose or long enough. Her eyes were soft, gentle, but melancholy, and she was dressed in a black satin dress, made when she was a girl, I concluded, its short waist, straight skirt, puffed sleeves, which had been lengthened by some other black stuff, reminding me of my grandmother's wedding dress, which had often been displayed to us youngsters to show us the style of fifty years ago.

We talked for some minutes on ordinary topics, and there was nothing in the manner of my hosts to indicate any "queerness," save that they were very old to be living alone and doing the hard work of a farm of two hundred acres. And I left them with a feeling of content, mingled with some constraint, since I knew something must be in hiding to have placed and kept three well educated, well-bred and good-looking people on a lonely farm for so many years, without them having formed any ties of love or friendship among their neighbours.

In most parishes the rector has the happiness of numbering one wise, good and helpful lady among his parishioners. I had such a one in Mrs. Keesor. She was a widow with sufficient income to live on like a lady and allow her to do the many little charities that a kind and sympathetic heart will find to do wherever human beings are congregated.

"It is my firm belief," said this lady to me one day as we were talking about my queer parishioners, "that their name is not Smith, and that they are working out a vow of some kind. Even twenty years ago they looked as old as they do now, and lived quite as secluded a life, though many of us showed them attention and invited them to our houses.

They always thanked the inviter and begged to be excused, as "they never went out," and if any one pressed them by jest or remark they were at once resolutely snubbed.

"Are they never ill so as to need help?"

"I never knew them ask for help but once, and then Samuel, the eldest brother, fell off the hay-waggon and broke his arm. No hired man could be had, but young Rogers offered to help the harvest through, and to his great surprise his offer was gratefully accepted. They did not speak of wages, as ill-bred people would have done, but they sent him a beautiful yearling heifer, together with their grateful respects in the following summer. That the sister works as hard as the brothers is, I think, not strange, as, if they kept a servant or man, it would be a kind of incubus on the purely family life, and therefore unendurable, unless they were prepared to live in more general relations with their surroundings than they are willing to do. Certainly they are morbid on the subject of cleanliness, but such a life cannot fail to develop some craze or other, and cleanliness is as desirable as it is comparatively unusual on our farms.

"Then there is nothing for me to do but call when I think it expedient; watch over them from a distance until one or other of them breaks down under the strain of life, and take their tithing as it comes." [I forgot to mention that these tithes were paid in kind, even to fruit, and not in money at all. My predecessors had mostly turned the levy into money, but at their own risks.]

"I think not. I am glad they like you, however, as it is a comfort to them, I am sure, to have a friend in their clergyman; if they were irreligious it would be different.

(To be continued.)

All the Canadian exhibitions of this fall have proved successful.