

OUR HERO IN BLACK.

We always spoke of ourselves as a "garrison town," we good folks of Donjonville. And why should we not? Had we not barracks and a company of Foot, and, more than all, a Government chaplain and a Government chaplain? What more would you have to constitute a garrison town? We had no fortifications, it is true—nothing, in fact, that, strictly speaking, could be garrisoned—but then we had our noble and massive old castle, with its walls nine feet thick, which had stood a siege of six months by Robert Bruce, and a bombardment of six minutes (two shells did the business) by one of Cromwell's generals. We swore by that castle, we swelled with conscious pride as we spoke of it; and a cynical tourist, who was overheard to describe it as "a gray squat building," narrowly escaped being lynched upon the spot. This ancient fortress had, indeed, degenerated into a common goal, a fact which somewhat detracted from the romance of its associations; but, despite the painful penitentiary cleanliness and order of its interior, there was still a fine old feudal look about portions of its exterior, and we Donjonvillites could, at any rate, boast that there was not in the three kingdoms any castle of its age in such perfect preservation.

We were a trifle dull, perhaps, at Donjonville—prejudiced persons from neighbouring towns, envious of our historical prestige, sometimes pronounced us stagnant, indeed, a distinguished novelist, who once honoured us with a flying visit, afterwards described Donjonville as "probably the dullest spot on the habitable globe." But, then, how could he possibly be able to judge from seeing Donjonville for a few hours on a miserably wet day; and what weight, after all, does any sensible person attach to the slipshod utterances of a shallow scribbler? Not, mind you, that we were not sometimes conscious ourselves of being dull, and at such times we were wont to execrate the dullness of Donjonville with singular unanimity and forcibleness of expression. But then it was one thing to pass unfavourable criticisms upon Donjonville ourselves, and quite another to tolerate such structures from strangers. On the whole, a pretty wide experience of English provincial towns induces me to think that Donjonville was, after all, not so dull as many places which make far greater pretensions to liveliness.

We rejoiced of course in a plethora of gossip, for you will generally find that the smaller the town the bigger the gossip; and we had an admirable assortment of gossip-mongers of both sexes, the male element, however, being, I am bound to say, the preponderating one. We had an American "colonel," a retired sea-captain, and a militia major, whom I would have backed both as retailers and inventors of scandal against any three in the world. But rich as we were in accomplished gab about us, we were even richer in original "characters," whose eccentricities kept us constantly provided with enterainment. Foremost among these, by right of his individuality not less than by right of his social position, stood our Government chaplain, who was also practically the vicar of Donjonville, their being no other "Established" place of worship within a mile of the town. The Rev. Joseph Stickler—"the last of the Sticklers," as he used, half-proudly, half-pathetically, to style himself, for he was a widower, and his only son had been killed at sea—was a remarkable man in many ways. In height he was not more than five feet three inches, but in girth his proportions were gigantic. I have never seen so short a man carry the middle button of his waistcoat in anything like such an advanced position as Joseph Stickler carried his. His knees had been hidden from his sight for year. He had a leg—or I should say two legs, for he possessed the normal complement—of perfect shape. If Mr. Stickler had any mundane vanity, and even the best of men are not without it, his legs were the object of that vanity. It was because he was just a little vain of them, I suspect, that he clung to the good old fashion of knee-breeches, black-silk stockings, and buckled shoes long after the rest of the civilized world had discarded those integuments, though probably, if all the leaders of fashion had possessed such elegant extremities as our Government chaplain, the modern trouser would have been unknown. In deportment the Rev. Joseph Stickler could have given Mr. Turveydrop a lesson. He carried himself with such dignity, that when he stood talking on the parade with "Cunnie" Hiram B. Fulton, a lanky "Down-Easter" of six feet three, the person struck you as being by far the bigger

man of the two. His florid clean-shaven face would have been handsome had it been a trifle less fleshy; and, at any rate, no one could deny that it was a good resolute English face, full of courage and sense.

So much for the Rev. Joseph Stickler's physique. But his manners were even more remarkable than his figure. He had a blunt forcible way of calling a spade a spade, both in the pulpit and in private life, which often shocked persons burdened with a particularly squeamish sense of propriety. I heard him once put an extinguisher upon an affected and foolish lady, who was expatiating on the virtues of the son whom she had just sent to school, by blurting out gruffly and brusquely:

"Humbug, madam, humbug! There never was a boy yet who wasn't a thief and a liar. A good boy is a monstrosity, madam a *lusus nature*, sure to come to the gallows or some equally bad end. There's some hope of a bad boy; flog the vice out of him at school, and it's ten to one he'll turn out a decent man when he grows up."

So far you will say that there was not much that was heroic about Joseph Stickler; and possibly, had you "sat under him" and listened to his pulpit utterances, the sound common sense of which was constantly marred by his grotesque habit of stopping in the full flood of his discourse to remonstrate, in the homeliest fashion imaginable, with the drowsy or heedless members of his congregation, you would have probably found it still harder to see anything heroic in our eccentric parson. But for all that he was a hero, and this fact I am sure you will admit readily enough before you reach the end of my story. For, whatever Ouida and "Guy Livingstone" may try to persuade you to the contrary, a hero need not by any means be a giant in height and a Hercules in strength, with Norman brow and Grecian nose; indeed, I take it that there have been far more heroes under five feet six inches than over that standard, and far more snub-noses among them than even Roman ones. However, to come back to our muttons, you shall hear why and how Joseph Stickler came to be considered a hero. It was with the younger male portion of the community that he first established his claim to that title, and the manner of it was remarkable.

I have already mentioned our parson's propensity to administer homely, but at the same time fearfully impressive, rebukes to those of his congregation whose conduct seemed to him indecorous during divine service. The most frequent recipients of this verbal chastisement were the unhappy Sunday-school children, whose horribly uncomfortable pens—I cannot call them seats—were immediately facing the pulpit. But the punishment of those unfortunates was not confined to words. The Rev. Joseph Stickler had a sturdy henchman who was as vigorous a disciplinarian as his master, and a scarcely less original and eccentric character. Billy Marks—for such was the somewhat undignified name of this representative of Donjonville Bumbledom—filled a rather nondescript ecclesiastical position before service he acted as vorger, during prayers he acted as clerk, when the sermon commenced he vacated his desk and went aloft to the gallery, where, armed with a long cane, he stationed himself immediately behind the school-children. Heaven help the hapless boy or girl who dared to doze or exhibit the slightest symptoms of inattention during the preacher's discourse! Softly would the artful and lynx-eyed William creep along the cocoa-nut matting until he was within striking distance of his prey, and then the cane was cautiously raised, to descend upon the head or shoulders of the luckless victim with a thwack that sounded all over the building. And if the watchful Billy, whose attention to his master's homily must have been of a rather divided sort, failed to detect a delinquent, the stern voice from the pulpit, which he knew too well, would at once call his attention to the omission. It was on one of these occasions, when Billy was guilty of a dereliction of duty, that the first memorable exploit of our hero in black was achieved. The circumstances were these:

The offices of the "garrison," four in number, occupied a pew in the gallery not far from the *enfants terribles* who were Billy Marks's special charge during sermon-time. It was a warm day in summer, and, what with the heat and the sonorous eloquence of the preacher, there was a general disposition to drowsiness among the congregation which nothing but a strong sense of duty and the exercise of considerable self-control could overcome. Even the vigilant custodia of juvenile morals nodded at his post, and forgot that there was an eagle eye upon him. Suddenly the preacher paused, and, in a

voice that had more of sorrow than of anger in it, called "Billy Marks!"

Up to his feet in an instant sprang Billy, conscious of his own backsliding, touched with remorse by the reproachful accents of his master, burning to atone for his fault by some extraordinary display of zeal. The first object which met the zealous and repentant William's eyes, as, confused and only half awake, he glared around him for a victim, was the head of a very young ensign who was peacefully slumbering in the corner of the officers' pew. Without pausing to think of the consequences, Billy brought his cane down, thwack! right upon the nose of the sleeping warrior. That gallant youth sprang instantly upright at the touch of this rude Ithuriel's spear, and gazed round him with a wild bewildered stare. On all sides he saw grinning faces—in audible titter ran through the school-children—sounds suggestive of suppressed exultation came from behind pocket-handkerchiefs applied ostensibly to the normal use; the cheeks of his fellow officers were undistinguishable in colour from their uniforms, and their heads were bent in an attitude which could scarcely be accepted as devotional. A ghastly and horrible suspicion stole into the mind of the young ensign that he was the object of all this unseemly mirth, and that he had somehow, though he had no the faintest idea how, made himself supremely ridiculous. With crimson and perspiring countenance he sat as rigid as the tinted Venus for the remainder of the sermon, suffering all the agonies of a martyr at Smithfield. Whether the Rev. Joseph Stickler had perceived Billy Mark's mistake or not, no one could tell; he went on imperterbably with his sermon as if nothing had happened; but if he had thoroughly realized all that had happened, and I am inclined to suspect that he had, the control which he exercised over his nerves was of itself heroic, and worthy of an ancient Stoic or an Indian brave. Be this as it may, however, the sequel was a scene which none who witnessed it would ever forget.

The barracks were but a short distance from the chapel, both being situated in the imposing and spacious square which Donjonvillites spoke of proudly as "the parade," and which was pronounced by a Donjonville cabinet-maker, who had once visited London, to be far superior to even the world-famed Trafalgar-square. The officers had marched the "garrison" back to barracks, and had retired to their own quarters, before one half of the congregation had emerged from St. Mary's. In the privacy of their own apartments they at once began to "roast" their juvenile and verdant comrade. The senior captain, Spofforth, a portly florid man, who belied his appearance by being really "the coolest hand going," having closed the door, addressed the young ensign with great seriousness.

"You know, Sparke," he said, "this is not the first time the regiment has been grossly insulted by the chaplain. This abominable outrage is simply the culminating point of a long series of deliberate insults. But now the thing must be promptly stopped. I must insist upon your demanding a public apology at once from Mr. Stickler."

"Ye'er," stammered Sparke, who was exceedingly angry still, and very red in the face, but didn't quite see how his senior's injunction was to be carried out.

"You will oblige me and your brother officers, Sparke, by meeting Mr. Sackler as he crosses the parade from the chapel to his house, and immediately demanding an ample apology on behalf of the regiment, which has been outraged in your person."

The recollection of that sounding thwack from Billy Mark's cane roused in Ensign Sparke's mind; his blood tingled at the thought of that monstrous indignity, and he answered firmly.

"You may trust me, Captain Spofforth. The dignity of the regiment will not suffer in my hands. I will go at once and confront Mr. Stickler, and extract an apology from him on the spot."

Big with self-importance as the accredited champion of the regiment, Ensign Sparke clapped on his shako fiercely, and strode out into the square to exact prompt reparation from the insult.

Meanwhile, unconscious of all these machinations, the Rev. Joseph Stickler quietly disrobed himself in the vestry, and then proceeded to cross the parade to his house. Just as he was opposite the barracks and in front of the barrack-windows, he became aware of a tall figure, in scarlet, approaching him with rapid steps. In another instant the Rev. Joseph found himself confronted by the insulted subaltern,

who, with glaring eyes and flaming cheeks, addressed him thus:

"Sir, I have been most grossly insulted and assaulted by your orders. The whole regiment, sir, has been affronted in my person. I demand an apology!"

"A what!" exclaimed the chaplain, falling back, and surveying his interrogator with a look of supreme amazement.

"An apology, sir; an ample apology!" repeated young Sparke hotly.

"Young man," said the Rev. Joseph Stickler severely, "I don't know what this buffnery means. If it were not so early in the day I should say that you were drunk, sir."

"What, sir!" exclaimed the enraged ensign; "you refuse to apologise—you dare to add to the insult by insinuating that I am not sober! Let me tell you, sir," assuming an air of bollicosity that might have awed even a bubbly-jock, "that if it were not for your cloth, sir, I would give you the deuce thrashing you ever had in your life!"

The face of the "last of the Sticklers" grew black as thunder; lightning blazed from his eye; his whole body heaved with the volcano of indignation that raged within him. For an instant he seemed petrified, but only for an instant; then, with an agility quite extraordinary in a man of his obesity, he divested himself of his coat, planted his feet firmly and defiantly, and said, with grim irony.

"O, don't let my cloth for a moment interfere with your desire to inflict corporal chastisement. Proceed, sir; you are quite at liberty to thrash me, sir—if you can."

A peal of laughter burst like a volley of musketry from the vicinity of the barracks. Sparke glanced hurriedly around; there was the whole "garrison" crowded at the barrack-gates, convulsed with merriment, and there, in the windows of the officers' quarters, was—no, he must be mistaken—yes, a fact!—there was Spofforth himself, holding his sides while the tears ran down his purple face. Too late it flashed upon the unhappy Sparke that he was both making a fool of himself, and being made a fool of. Sharply turning on his heel with a smothered oath, which, like the parish-clerk's sweeping curse, seemed to include "all persons that on earth do dwell," Ensign Sparke hurried back, a piteous spectacle of mingled shame, rage, and discomfiture. Whilst the Rev. Joseph Stickler, as he struggled back into his coat, was distinctly heard to ejaculate:

"Preposterous young puppy! Talk of thrashing me, indeed!"

And so, amid the ill-suppressed applause of the lookers-on, the parson strode, fuming and furious, to his house.

From that moment the Rev. Joseph Stickler was a hero in the eyes of the "Garrison" and the youth of Donjonville. Staid and respectable middle-aged society shook its head, and declared that the chaplain had behaved in a most undignified manner, and had quit forgotten what was due to his cloth. I suppose these dour people were right, and that it would have exhausted even the resources of Turveydropian deportment to have carried off such a scene with dignity. But that was the only time that Joseph Stickler was ever known to allow his eccentricity to imperil his dignity; as a rule, the latter was invariably the accompaniment and correction of the former.

Middle-aged propriety, then, might be excused for failing to see anything heroic in conduct which had only won the irreverent admiration of persons addicted to taking a sporting view of even the gravest matters, but not the less among that class had the Rev. Joseph Stickler established himself as a hero. It was not long, however, before even the "uncoged" of Donjonville were compelled to admit that their respected and esteemed, though eccentric, parson was veritably and unmistakably a hero—of the sort which a d-lighted and sympathetic Sovereign is proud to decorate with the Victoria Cross or the Albert Medal. And this was the startling incident which suddenly revealed to Donjonville the fact that the black coat and knee-breeches of Joseph Stickler inclosed as brave a man as ever faced a battery or charged a square in all the glory and glitter of scarlet and gold.

On Christmas afternoon as the chaplain was passing the barrack-gates, he noticed that there was something unusual taking place in the courtyard. The soldiers were gathered in excited groups, and there was that indescribable air of agitation about them which is always noticeable in a crowd when something tragic is afoot. The Rev. Joseph Stickler walked in and inquired the cause of the commotion. He was told that one of the men, a wild fellow named Kennedy, had gone mad with the libations which