



The Minister's Blackberries.

THE TRUE STORY OF A HILL PARISH.

WALL, they needn't try to stuff any such story down my throat," and the strings of the bonnet which Miss Kidder was trimming flapped defiantly. "Picked half a bushel of blackberries settin' in a carriage! Nobody ever heard o' such a thing, an' I've been on every back road in Melrose time an' again. Besides, it's my opinion that with Kate Davis along—" (Here Miss Kidder dropped her voice decorously and simpered as though she were a girl of eighteen.) "It's my opinion the' was somethin' besides pickin' blackberries goin' on. It's really disgraceful the way she runs after him. I don't want to say anything against Mr. Fosdick, of course, but I do think that such ridiculous stories told by a minister tend to bring disgrace on the cause of religion; I really do. Mrs. Johnson an' I think Mr. Fosdick ought to be warned to show more respect for his sacred calling."

"Well, p'raps you're right, Miss Kidder. It does sound perfectly ridiculous, when you come to think seriously of it. But the' ain't no sort o' doubt but what he said it. I myself heard him say he never see the berries so thick in his life, so that they picked 'em from the carriage, an' at the same time he showed a great heapin' basket of 'em that he took to Miss Warner, an' she's made such a parade about. She says they picked 'em all out o' the carriage as they drove along; so we've got it jest straight, an' it's a monstrous tall story."

"Still, Miss Kidder, I don't know as I see what you're going to do about it. Mr. Fosdick's a reel nice young man, and when he ain't runnin' 'round with the teacher he does well by the parish. You don't exactly want to accuse him o' lyin' about a few blackberries."

"The truth is of more consequence than a great many blackberries, Mrs. Johnson," replied Miss Kidder, severely. "An' for one I know what I'll do, I shall bring the matter up in the ladies' prayer meeting on Tuesday, where we can talk it all over deliberately, an' see just how much there is to it. We'll do everything properly and give no occasion for sneers about 'gossipin' women!' O! I jest despise that phrase," and Miss Kidder gave her foot a vicious tap upon the floor of her little shop.

Meanwhile Harold Fosdick was as happy as a newly accepted lover with a good digestion ought to be. Melrose was Fosdick's first parish and it had proved sadly disillusionizing. A year ago he had come out of the Theological Seminary fired with a generous enthusiasm to serve his fellows and to inculcate the gospel of his Master by teaching love rather than theology. He had heard much of the decayed churches, the intellectual and spiritual poverty of the hill towns of New England, and he had resolved to give three years of his youth to warning one such community into spiritual life.

He had found his efforts so far fruitless. Free from self-consciousness and full of missionary zeal, he found himself measured by standards of whose very existence he had been ignorant. Preaching as earnestly and directly as he was able, working constantly by personal contact with the people, he found to his dismay that no one expected his work to bear fruit. Deacon Wadsworth told him that Melrose was too small for a revival; there were not enough young people. The deacon added pointedly that the pastor's true field lay in keeping the people sound in the doctrine. Fosdick found his personality of much more interest to the people than his preaching. His movements were matters of village gossip; his parish calls, the reading circle he had formed, and even the prayer meetings were fields for undisguised social rivalry. It seemed at times that not a human being was better for his year's work. The sympathy of a bright intelligent girl, who by some chance was teaching the village school, was of course most attractive. Miss Davis appreciated his plans, and she showed a practical tact in helping on their execution, for which Fosdick was deeply grateful. Youth, association and sympathy did their appointed work. But, quickly as Fosdick and Miss Davis discovered the meaning of their interest in each other, their neighbors were before them. Before Fosdick had breathed one conscious word of love he found his attachment the latest village joke, and the probabilities of his marriage freely commented upon.

From a drive in the early days of his engagement, Fosdick brought home that basket of blackberries which proved the turning point of his experience. He found one of the little-used mountain roads fringed, and in places almost overgrown with luxuriant blackberry vines, bending under a burden of

fruit. Stray branches reached far over the roadway, and the young people feasted without leaving their seats. At a mountain farm house, Fosdick bought a great basket of the fruit for Mrs. Warner, with whom he boarded, and returning showed the great heap of gleaming berries to Mrs. Johnson, a parishioner, whom they met in the highway. He did not mention that he had bought the berries, fearing that even that slight purchase might be made the subject of discussion. He did describe the large yield in terms that appealed to Mrs. Johnson's housewifely instincts, and in doing so, mentioned the ease with which he and Miss Davis had picked berries from the carriage, little dreaming that he had planted a seed which would outstrip Jack's beanstalk in growth.

Mrs. Warner took good care not to hide her minister's thoughtfulness under a bushel. Her neighbors were given ample opportunity to admire her jars of jam. By the time she had told the story of her prize for the dozenth time, the good woman had come to believe that the minister had picked the berries with his own hand. Certainly the other members of Fosdick's congregation so understood it, and a direful commotion ensued.

The ladies' prayer-meeting proved a stormy affair; it soon divided into two camps, one rallying about Mrs. Meacham, to whom Miss Kidder had committed her view of the case, and the other following the lead of Mrs. Warner, whose zeal for the minister was not seconded by the best judgement, or by skill in debate. Mrs. Meacham was the wife of the richest man in Melrose, a woman of fine presence and experience in public discussion. She felt a slight personal pique at the young minister which was warmed into open wrath by some pointed personal allusions of Mrs. Warner's, and Mrs. Meacham pushed the matter farther than she otherwise would have done. The meeting took no official action, but when it dispersed, with the sweet strains of "Naomi" ringing in the ears of the participants, it carried into every home in the parish the charge that their pastor was a wilful and reckless liar.

When Fosdick heard of the discussion, the carnal man in him triumphed over divine grace, and he raged furiously. When Sunday came, the little church was crowded. Kate Davis' heart sank as she saw Harold walk quickly and defiantly into the pulpit, his face flushed and his eyes shining. The opening prayer seemed a strangely perfunctory performance, and Kate's face paled as she heard the text: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Kate had been conscious without looking at the Meacham pew, that Mrs. Meacham was sitting erect in the stern dignity of her jetted black silk; that Mr. Meacham, with his seldom-worn silk hat on his knee and his lips angrily closed, indicated outraged dignity in every fibre, while Miss Meacham, in white, represented injured innocence. Kate looked at this array as Harold repeated his text slowly and, also, angrily; and she saw Mr. Meacham rise, followed by his wife, his daughter, two sons and some toddling grandchildren, and march slowly out of the church.

The excitement could hardly have been greater had their choir gallery fallen. Harold's face paled and then flushed a deeper scarlet as he waited for the commotion to subside. Then he painted a denunciation of the sin of lying, with a review of the events of the fortnight, that burned with indignation and rankled with injustice and un-Christian wrath. Only a very angry man could have preached that sermon. Before its close, Miss Kidder, Deacon Wadsworth and his wife, and the entire Johnson family, withdrew.

The church was divided from that hour. Deacon Wadsworth requested the pastor to resign. Harold refused but, expressed his willingness to submit the matter to a council, if the church chose to call one. But the supporters of the minister proved to be in a majority, and no meeting was called. Mr. Meacham was not, however, to be easily balked. He declared that never again would he listen to Mr. Fosdick's preaching. So he set up the altar of his faction in the town hall and hired an unsettled minister of the region to preach each Sunday. Rivalry sprang up between the congregations, and the members did not scruple in their methods of securing attendance. People who had not seen the inside of a church for years were recruited for one camp or the other, and "Sunday clothes" were distributed as premiums to sundry persons who declared their inability to attend for the lack of such garments.

The situation was becoming intolerable to Fosdick. He had refused to resign when Kate begged him to do so. Now she had left the village, and he missed keenly the comfort of her presence and the reinforcement which she gave to the higher motives by which he sought to govern his life. He found himself daily called upon to sympathize with pettiness and to approve of questionable tactics employed for the advantage of "his side," and he felt himself rapidly deteriorating under the pressure. The whole struggle had become hateful, but retreat was daily becoming more difficult. In the midst of his struggle came a letter from his old mentor at the Seminary advising him to leave Melrose as soon as possible and take up mission work in the lower part of the city.

Fosdick was moved by this as he had not been for months.

With the letter still in his hand, he found himself on a grassy knoll far above Melrose. He pondered the problem till late in the night. The calm beauty of the valley under the glow of the harvest moon, helped to bring him rest and humility. He watched the lights of the little village disappear one by one, with a kindness stealing into his heart which he had not felt for months. As he thought humbly and penitently of the strife and discord he had planted—in his present mood he could accept all the blame of which he had previously repudiated any part with scorn—in place of the Christian love and quickened Christian living which he had hoped to awaken, it seemed as if no sacrifice could be too great to repair the mischief that had been wrought.

Suddenly he saw a light flicker among the village houses. It disappeared and broke out again with greater brilliancy. Fosdick ran with all his strength down the mountain side. Entering the street he ran shouting toward the red light that now seemed the central spot in the sky, until he reached a house whose roof was in flames, while not an inmate seemed stirring. All his faculties were absorbed by the progress of the spreading flames, and he crashed his way through a glass door, and up the staircase revealed by the lurid light from above, without having become conscious of his surroundings of the house or of aught but the danger. Among the voices that responded to his cries were those of children, and Fosdick made his way to them. The firelight fell through a window upon a bed where two children sat crying, too much frightened to run away. He caught them in his arms and ran to the hall below. Here he found Mr. and Mrs. Meacham, trying in an uncertain way to open the door. There was no time for explanations and as Fosdick caught the key he cried:

"I have the children safe. Are the others all awake?"

"Yes, they will be right down," Mr. Meacham replied; but Mrs. Meacham threw up her arms, exclaiming: "Get the baby! she is in the crib in the room with the others. Quick the fire's falling through the roof," she cried, as Fosdick sprang back up the stairs.

The hall was now thick with smoke and he missed the door. There were no cries to guide him this time, and when he reached the child the walls were ready to break into flames. The varnish on the stair rail was crackling on his return, and he did not dare to carry the child through the blaze. Dashing to a front window, he called to the people below, holding little Alice far out into the reviving air. Almost instantly a mattress was raised and the baby was safely below. A moment later Fosdick crashed into a sturdy lilac bush, and the roof fell.

The embers of the Meacham house smoked in solitude a few hours later. People were discussing the fire in little groups as they entered their houses, rejoicing in the escape of little Alice, and praising Fosdick's bravery. Fosdick and the baby lay unconscious in a house across the way, while Mrs. Meacham wandered about the room wringing her hands. Mr. Meacham stood speechless over the baby's bed, and his son's slender wife, almost a nonentity at other times, knelt feverishly waiting for her darling's returning smile. It came at last, and soon after Fosdick opened his eyes and joined, though weakly, in the general rejoicing. Mr. Meacham hesitated for a moment; then coming over to Harold's bed, he held out his hand, exclaiming:

"Mr. Fosdick, I can't hold hard feelings toward a man who is ready to risk his life for me or mine. A man who can do that is good Christian enough to preach to me. The first Sunday you are able to go back to the pulpit you will find me in my pew, and I hope to listen to your preaching in it for many years to come."

A fortnight later the two congregations had been united. The church was crowded and the text was: "Blessed are the peacemakers."

A year later there was a wedding in the little church, and Meachamites and Fosdickites were mingled so indiscriminately in the pews that the sharpest eye was unable to trace a party line.

Miss Kidder alone remained obdurate. "I always did say," she declared, "that Mr. Fosdick lied about them blackberries, an' I ain't goin' to switch 'round just because he pulled a baby out o' the fire an' then run away. Not that I wonder at the Meachams. They worship the ground little Alice treads on, an' if it hadn't been for Mr. Fosdick they wouldn't have had her now. But I've said I like the new minister best, an' I do, an' I don't believe in palaverin' over this weddin' an' pretendin' I'm the best friend they've got. O, I shall go, I s'pose, in a back pew an' see what the bride's dress is like. But I won't dress up, an' I won't go to Miss Warner's ridiculous reception, so there!"—*Drake's Magazine.*

MAKE the boy's home the happiest spot he can find, and he will prefer it to any other place of resort. Care for the fine carpet has driven many a boy to the sanded floor of the tavern.

A MAN in any station can do his duty, and doing it, can earn his own respect.