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Be Ye Wise as Serpents.

By H. W. Hemingstone, Wapella. Specially Written for W. H. M.

The loud, assertive voice rose to a shout in a final unctuous crescendo, the whirling arms gesticulated for a moment even more furiously,—then silence.

Producing a large red handkerchief, the Rev. James MacDuff mopped his perspiring face; then, with a furtive glance around, waddled slowly across the road. Replacing his black clerical hat upon his scantily thatched head, and grasping his stick by the middle in his right hand, while with the left he caught up his bag, he moved off deliberately down the hot, dusty trail.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the minister had just been rehearsing tomorrow's sermon.

On these occasions he was accustomed to seek a retired spot; and there, after carefully reconnoitering the surrounding country to make sure that no boys, who were the plague of his life, were lying in ambush, he drove the point of his walking-stick into the ground, and hung his hat upon it; and then, retiring to a suitable distance delivered his discourse in full to this curious audience.

The afternoon was terribly hot, not a breeze stirred to temper the rays of the scorching sun, and the minister was not built to stand heat easily. His patchy and shiny suit of navy blue cloth was tightly buttoned over a short, very rotund figure, surmounted by a rubicund and not unkindly face, and added to an almost entire absence of neck, gave him somewhat the appearance of a cottage-loaf on two stumpy legs.

For twenty-five years he had been a familiar figure upon a trail which wound over thirty miles of varied country—from the railway through regions where thickly scattered poplar bluffs afforded a grateful shelter from the biting winds, and then ceasing abruptly gave place to leagues of rolling prairie, where the early frosts run a close race with the ripening crops, sometimes winning by a neck, onward up to the wooded slopes of the Long Mountain.

Usually on foot, and at the rate of some two miles an hour, he travelled from house to house, bearing in one hand the familiar stick, while the other grasped a strap which encircled a small brown leather bag—its mouth gaping full three inches wide with a miscellaneous stuffing of manuscripts, clothes and literature.

The minister's thoughts as he moved slowly onward were perplexing and tinged sometimes with sadness.

Twenty-five years previously, a young man whose lack of scholarship was atoned for by a boundless enthusiasm, he had accompanied to these parts a hardy band of settlers from the far north of Scotland.

These latter, a mixed company of men and women, by the help of a benevolent landlord, had been able to exchange their barren holdings for the wider and more fruitful West. Those early years had been a hard struggle, but the canny Scot had won through; and the Rev. MacDuff had watched the settlement's gradual growth, from the first rude huts of sod and pole stables banked with manure, then the more substantial clay-chinked whitewashed log dwellings, to the pretentious frame houses and lofty barns now dotting the countryside.

But his scrip and staff were still the minister's sole earthly possessions and whatever might be the store of riches awaiting him above, here below he felt himself no longer wanted. A younger generation, "which knew not Joseph," was arising, and cleverer and more brilliant men from the recognized organizations were invited to fill the posts at the new churches continually springing up.

Amongst some of the older people, those who still clung to the Gaelic, he was still sure of a hearty welcome; and it was a small tribute to his tact and discernment, that though inevitably mixed up in the various quarrels and feuds that at times disturb all rural communities, he had made very few enemies. Indeed his capacity for sitting on the fence, dealing out well worn platitudes to each faction and finally landing with a "plop" on the winning side, was remarkable.

It was at the old-timers' houses then that he held his weekly services, sometimes in Gaelic, and at others in English. On these occasions, he was wont, after

first carefully dusting it and removing any stray articles from the interior, to pass around his hat, with the words, "We will now proceed to worship the Almighty by taking the collection!"—and this he did. The few small coins the hat gathered sufficed for his personal needs; transferring these deftly to his left hand, and tilting himself at a dangerous angle, he shot the lot into his trouser's pocket.

Once only had he been known to possess a whole \$5 bill; but this extraordinary occurrence had such an effect upon him, that with a truly regal generosity, he straightway presented it as a christening present to an infant whom he happened to be baptizing.

When warned by a shabbiness no longer to be ignored, that a new wardrobe was absolutely necessary, the Rev. James was accustomed to draw up a wondrous document, upon which each member of his flock put down his name for a small sum. To obtain these signatures was a long and arduous process, entailing a complete tour of the district and no little persuasion, so that the minister's garments were usually perilously near the line of decency ere its accomplishment.

The list being then presented at the local store with due form and much ceremony and the signatures honored, he was rigged out afresh from top-to-toe.

He was now upon his way to the widow McBains', where he never failed to arrive every two weeks. Here his welcome was warmest and here, if he could be said to possess one, was his home.

Mrs. McBain and her husband had not accompanied the original party of settlers, but had followed them two years later—"at our own expense," as she never failed to impress upon her hearers when speaking of that time: thus as she considered permanently assuring her social status. The husband, "honest man," had barely patented his homestead when a bad blizzard, which caught him returning from a too enthusiastic celebration of Scotland's patron saint, prematurely closed his career; and the young wife found herself a widow with a few cattle, a farm "in embryo" and three small children.

After the first shock, she had set her shoulder to the wheel, and with the occasional help of the neighbors, managed to make both ends meet, until her two boys were old enough to take over the task. The eldest child, a girl, had lately married and soon the two boys also were to leave home, one to the machine shops in Montreal and the other to a homestead in the far West. So that the widow was again to be left desolate.

She had never taken a second husband and until lately it was thought she never would: all designs on the part of eligible suitors having been effectually quashed by the fate of Red Kenneth McNeil. Now "Kennedy," as he was called, was as good natured a fellow as ever stepped, though a trifle slow in maturing his ideas; and was therefore an easy mark for any chaff that might be flying round.

On one occasion when Kennedy was getting his horses shod, the blacksmith had related to him an exceedingly funny anecdote.

Kennedy listened with a solemn and attentive face, but never a smile.

"Oh Aye," he remarked ponderously at its close. Two days later the blacksmith, walking up the street of the little town, met Kennedy, whose face was radiant with smiles, while his body shook with laughter. "What's up now, Kennedy?" said he. "I was just thinking o' that story you told me the other day" was the guileless reply.

So it was after long and profound reflection that Kenneth McNeil, having caught the widow in the cowshed, haltingly made his proposal. "I was thinking Mrs. McBain," said he scratching the back of his head, "I was thinking it would be good if you and I was married." To which the widow had made the historic answer—"No, Kennedy, No I was married once and that was enough for me."

But lately it had become common gossip in the neighborhood that Angus McRae, a shrewd and prosperous farmer, was paying serious attentions to the widow, and it was thought not unlikely that he would be successful.