

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A DAY OF SMALL THINGS.

By A. Fraser Robertson.

The Reverend Mark Sylvester paced the floor of his library. His Sunday services were over, but the evening of his busy day brought the feeling of discontent and irritation that was becoming all too familiar to him since he had accepted the "unanimous call" to St. Bernard's, Moreton.

His brows were furrowed—his eyes bent gloomily on the floor and his hands dug deep in his pockets.

"It's incomprehensible!" he muttered to himself at last.

The minister had a handsome face, with deep-set, dark eyes. The mouth and chin conveyed an earnest purpose, but as he threw out the impatient exclamation, an expression of bitterness momentarily marred it.

A slight girl, pale and indeterminate in colouring, with lips curved in a discontented droop, looked up from a book; whose leaves she was fluttering between yawns.

"What's incomprehensible, Mark?" she demanded. "Oh, I know—the empty church, you mean," she added quickly, replying to her own question.

"Who was it said it required an exceptionally clever man to preach to an expanse of timber?" Mark went on, with a cynical laugh. "This much at least I can vouch for—it takes a clever one than I am."

His sister made no attempt to comfort him.

"Hadlymere has spoilt you," she observed.

The remark did not serve to allay his irritation.

"What is the explanation of it?" he demanded almost fiercely, and as if his sister were to blame. "I take as much pains with my sermons as I ever did. God knows, I exchanged Hadlymere for this, with no thought of self-advancement—simply because I believed it was a door opened to me, I had no right to close. I am not conscious that my spiritual life is at a lower ebb than it was in Hadlymere," he added, half to himself.

Maria Sylvester stretched out a patent toe and examined it thoughtfully, before she spoke.

"It has nothing to do with any of these things," she said at last, deliberately. "It is one of those enigmas that cannot be explained. I have noticed it in other spheres besides the pulpit. A man may draw crowds in one place and be confronted by figuratively empty benches in another. And yet the man himself hasn't changed. It is simply that he has not 'caught on.' I cannot quite express what I mean. It sounds a ridiculous thing to say—but it seems to me that popularity is, to some extent at least, a local thing."

An accentuated frown on the minister's brow appeared to point to his having derived small comfort from his sister's explanations. He took several turns up and down the room in silence.

"Olive won't like it!" he observed at last.

"She'll get accustomed to it," returned his companion, with the philosophy with which a sister, ousted from her brother's house, contemplates possible unpleasantness in store for the interloping wife.

"She won't like it!" he reiterated. "She has seen me minister of a crowded congregation—a centre, in a small way. She isn't in the least prepared for the meagre attendance here. I don't know how to break it to her."

"Don't break it at all!" advised the counsellor. "Let her find out for herself. Her love isn't worth much if it will be influenced by the numbers of your congregation."

Mark dropped the subject, feeling unreasonably annoyed with his sister. But the nightmare of his sparsely-filled church and how it would affect his young wife continued to weigh upon his spirits—to an absurd degree, as he told himself in his more rational moments.

He knew that his hearers in Moreton were a spiritually-minded set, but even this consideration, from which he might have derived consolation, was swamped in the feeling that Olive would consider him a failure.

He took his sister's advice about not breaking the unpalatable fact to her, not that the counsel specially appealed to him, but simply because no other course suggested itself to for him to follow. But throughout the subsequent wedding preparations and the attendant bustle, the thing hung like a brooding cloud on his soul. He even took it into his head that Olive, when she came to know the real state of the case, might accuse him of inducing her to marry him under false pretences!

The first Sunday after the minister brought home his young wife was a glorious one in July. But Mark was oddly absent at breakfast. Something prevented him giving undivided attention to the girlish figure in the white dress behind the coffee-pot. Olive noticed it, but ascribed it to preoccupied thoughts of his Sunday services. Meanwhile the minister was asking himself whether his young wife would look upon him with less partial eyes, when she should discover that he was no longer a widespread influence—a brilliantly shining light—but the humblest, most modest of luminaries.

"Have you got the heads by heart?" Olive asked him with a smile.

"Heads have gone out of fashion," he returned, smiling back at her, absently.

"There is a fashion in preaching as in other things, I suppose?" she mused aloud. "Are you the fashion here, as you were in Hadlymere, Mark?"

The minister winced. The words had struck home. At the moment, the first toll of the church-bells floated out on the still summer air, and secretly relieved, he abruptly dropped the conversation.

Anxiously surveying his audience from the pulpit, the Reverend Mark knew instinctively that the unusually large attendance was due to the presence of his bride and to curiosity. At early dinner, Olive asked innocently:

"Have the people left Moreton for their holidays? Somehow I did not think they would have gone so early," and he answered feebly:

"Why, not! They don't leave till August."

"What was the reason of the poor attendance, then?" she persisted; and he lacked the courage to tell her it was better than usual.

But at evening service numbers had dwindled to their normal. The pews downstairs were sparsely filled. The gallery showed depressing gaps. Yet, strange to say, the minister, unaccountably uplifted, surpassed himself. He ably supplied a stirring and spiritual discourse, although all the time doubly conscious of the state of affairs—seeing them, not through his own merely, but also, as he believed, through Olive's eyes. What would she feel? Inevitably she would be astonished, disappointed, chagrined.

As the service drew to a close, afraid of what he might see on the face of his young wife, he did not trust himself to glance in the direction of the minister's pew. He gave out the final hymn, and his voice was a shade unsteady at the benediction.

Olive was waiting for him at the close, and they walked home, but almost in silence. Supper, too, was a silent meal. A heavy depression hung on Mark like a pall, as his mind insisted on reading into his wife's his own sensations.

When supper was over he could stand it no longer. He stopped pacing the floor abruptly, and came to where she sat.

"You see, Olive," he said, with almost a touch of defiance in his tone, "It is as I said. I am not the fashion in Moreton. You were astonished at the smallness of the morning's congregation. It was larger than usual. I am not the popular preacher here I was in Hadlymere. I don't pretend to be able to explain the why or the wherefore. I may have deteriorated—and I may not."

The young wife raised blue, questioning eyes to his. He had retreated to the hearthrug. She was puzzled, even a little startled. Then gradually they filled with a dawning comprehension. She crossed to the hearthrug and stood by him, laying one hand caressingly on his coat-sleeve. There was silence between them. Then she spoke.

"Popularity has always seemed a flimsy thing to me, Mark—not safe to trust to."

Inwardly astonished at her words, the minister defended himself against the implied reproof. "A man wants to succeed in whatever he puts his hand to. In the cure of souls, as in other spheres, ambition is—permissible—even laudable, to my thinking. There is such a thing as a 'divine discontent.'"

"I know—I know," she agreed quickly, and her hands stretched up and clasped themselves about his arm. "But is success—real, true, lasting success—to be measured by—by crowds?"

The question staggered him. The girl he had married was showing herself in an unexpected light.

"I thought you would mind," he said at last, the words wrong from him, as it were, in his astonishment.

"I—mind?" she echoed, surprised in her turn. "Why should I? And what is there to mind? I was proud of you to-night—as proud of you as I have ever been in Hadlymere, when the pews were packed and chairs in the aisles. Mark, you seemed to me to have grown—spiritually. I do not count crowds as a criterion."

He continued to stare down at her in his surprise. What strange new light was this young wife of his shedding on things—revolutionising his ideas—laying bare to the day a host of unsuspected motives—showing him his inmost self in its unlovely nakedness! He was conscious of a slowly-dawning sensation of shame.

Olive fingered the lapel of his coat in some confusion, as if shy of expressing further sentiments.

When she spoke it was evidently with an effort.

"It has sometimes struck me, Mark," she said slowly, "we are too much for wide fields and big results. It may be the vanity in us—I do not know. But it seems to me that should only 'the corner to shine in' be granted us, we need not feel it too narrow a sphere! Oh, Mark, if you can influence a few souls deeply—for their spiritual good—it is more worth—a thousand times more