

The Passing of Father Philip.

Father Philip went to Mill Creek not before he was needed. When he came in by train he was driven not to his own house but to that of a poor man who lay ill, and had been for several days waiting for the priest. So it will be seen that Father Philip's first act in his new parish was an act of mercy. People thought of it afterwards when his reputation had become established. At another time, long after, they talked a great deal about it too.

This visit was in the morning. That same afternoon, Father Philip sat impatiently waiting until the bell should ring for school. He wanted to go over at once and visit that school, thinking to show himself a dignified man of business, who proposed to keep everything in its proper place in the parish machine. He was the more anxious about conveying this impression because in his inmost heart of hearts he knew that the habits of mind required to build up the parish of Mill Creek were not his at all. Not quite that either. His mind was a busy one enough, but his heart was so tender (some made no bones about calling it soft) that his larger designs for attaining greater usefulness on the part of parish works were likely to be crowded out of his real work by a thousand little details of relieving the wants of individuals of no particular consequence. Thus it sometimes came about that when he had scraped together a few dollars to effect some needed repairs on the school, or to get a new stove for the church, or to buy wood to keep the stove company, no sooner did he begin to make his way up town to accomplish his object than some evil poverty would cross his path. His heart was full. That was the trouble. His heart was too full. When he had money in his pocket his heart was so full of gratitude that he would upbraid himself with vain-glory. He was not vain-glorious. But he had so much humility in his make up that he thought he was. That was another of his troubles. At any rate he was never safe when he had money, and always sure to be made miserable when he hadn't.

That first day then, he sat waiting for the school bell to ring. The school was only a step away, across lots. But as he sat there looking out of his window, he thought of his new field of labor, and then backwards to his home in old Ireland, where he had left his fast aging father to come out here on the mission of the Redemption.

Father Philip looked out of the window, and dimly through his mental retrospect saw in front of him a child, scantily clothed, with an old expression on her little face. She was leading by the hand another and younger child. Without thinking much of what he was doing, the young priest opened his street door, passed mechanically down the street steps, pushed open the front gate and stood before the shrinking children. Soon he had gathered from their talk that the children were suffering for want of simple necessities. He began to walk off with them, when the elder child, thoughtful beyond her years, reminded him that he had not his hat. He got it, went with them to their home, saw the misery there, gave the mother some money, found out that the children were not allowed to go to church because of their clothes. Then he went to one of his parishioners to see if something could not be done for the family—it was a terrible thing to have those children brought up in that way without church or school. A little enquiry brought out the fact that the family were not Catholics at all. He had forgotten about that formality. People somehow found out a good deal about Father Philip's movements, and no one would have been a bit surprised if he had gone back and apologized to the poor woman for having intruded.

So when the bell rang that day, Father Philip didn't hear it. Thus the first plan of his administration was rudely broken in upon. He did not go to the school that day. But next day he did. He was instantly good friends with both boys and girls. He thought it part of his duty to play ball with the boys. Some of his parishioners thought it was hardly becoming in him, and when the reports of this reached him he stopped. One always has candid friends to tell him of these opinions that go about to our detriment.

He had some advanced notions of the advantages of manual training and for a few weeks exercised the boys in company drill. But some one said he was training a lot of young Fenians. So he stopped that too. That was how everything went. But he did not give up his love of the school for all that. He had the keenest interest in all its little affairs. There were two boys who were of special service to him. One was Terry Donovan, the other Jamesy Callaghan. Terry and Jamesy were made altar boys before Father Philip was there a month. If he wanted anything done, these boys did it. They served his daily Mass for years. In return they wore the real lords of his little estate. The first fruits of all things that grow were theirs by common admission. They were fast comrades in spite of differing natures. Terry was frank in his manner, easy going in his habits. Jamesy was closer in keeping his own counsel, but headstrong when he had made his mind up. If there was a difference of opinion about the thing to do at any time, Jamesy had his way. He would not abandon his view and Terry would never press his own. If some farmer sent in a load of hay to Father Philip, Terry and Jamesy were always on hand to do the work of storing it away in the barn. But there was this difference in their methods, which perhaps accounted for the good results Father Philip admired so much; Terry was willing to do nearly all the pitching, while Jamesy gave the directions which ensured the best disposition of it. Jamesy had a very sharp eye, and preferred cultivating his observation rather than his muscle. Terry thought nothing about it until the job was done, when he was prepared to be proud of it.

Father Philip naturally gave a good deal of attention to these two boys. He had hopes of making something of them.

Depend upon it he was not well pleased when Jamesy one day began to work on a little vessel that plied out of Mill Creek. The boat itself was not a great source of danger to the boy, but it opened his way. Before a month he was a sailor on a larger vessel—and that was bad. When he came back he had learned the sailors' habit of drinking. It was a sad blow to Father Philip when he found that out.

The conditions of a small coast town in the winter season are not such as would lead to make any improvement in Jamesy. The rule is for sailors who make good wages in the summer and fall to do very little work in the winter. Indeed there is little work to do. As the years went on and the young man came back more and more confirmed in his habits of drinking and blaspheming, the idleness of winter encouraged the evils yet more. His old taciturnity had passed into a sort of bitter raillery. His tongue was clever enough, and the slow going youth of the village delighted to set it a-going. His old friends gradually drew away from him, and he took for his new associates a band of dissipated wretches like himself. When the habit began to tell upon his constitution, his winter supply of money became less and less, so that before a month had passed he had lost even the show of independence, and was a miserable hanger-on of the taverns, bantering with others around the stove, waiting for an occasional general "treat." As he grew gayer and more gay around the tavern stove or on the corners, in the prospect of another drink, it became noticeable to those who knew the family that his home conduct was unkind and almost unbearable. His mother and sisters were the constant victims of his abuse. Terry Donovan he still met at Jamesy's own home where Terry was a constant visitor and the accepted lover of his sister Mary. But there was no longer any of that friendship which had held the altar boys inseparable in their young days. Terry was working industriously at his trade and soberly saving his youth. There was just one in the whole village who never lost sight of the vagabond. That was Father Philip.

That first year when the boy came home from his vessel and began drinking, Father Philip frequently came to the door of his mother's house with the recalcitrant Jamesy at his side. Time and again the boy promised the good priest to amend his ways, and in the first years he kept the promise. No one ever could tell how Father Philip knew of his excesses, but the little house keeper used to say that sometimes she would hear the good priest late at night pacing uneasily up and down his room. Then he would go out. Who knows? perhaps he went many times when he had no need to, but very, very often he came home late at night and there was a sad look in his eyes in the morning. At first it was easy for Father Philip to get Jamesy away from any company he was in. A wholesome respect still lingered where love and devotion once had been so strong. But the time came when a word from the priest was not sufficient. Did Father Philip go away and abandon his altar boy, his first one? It never entered his mind to do so. Only after that

when he went out on these midnight excursions he took a whip with him. He was a powerful man.

When the hard frosts come in time of still weather, the lake surface near to the shore is frozen over. The first heavy wind breaks up this thin sheet of ice and throws the shattered pieces up on the stony beach. Here as the waves come, each leaves an extra coating. In a time of storm it does not take long before there is a breastwork against the fury of the waters reared by their own operation. These miniature icebergs, icebanks as they are called, being stationary, take upon themselves many fantastic shapes. Sometimes there are great high slippery peaks down which the boys slide in glee, and then again there are caves in which one might hide or take shelter. It is the common sport in the villages for boys to go in parties exploring the many curious formations for miles along the shore. When one can skate alongside the sport is all the more enjoyable.

It was on the eve of Christmas during a winter that was long known as the coldest for half a century, and when everyone had remarked the enormous size of the ice banks, that a thing took place which made people think of that night whenever Father Philip's name was mentioned.

At Jamesy Callaghan's home there was a merry little party. Terry Donovan was there dancing the youngest girl upon his foot and singing the pretty children's songs, and telling the fanciful fairy stories which had made for him a proud place in the affections of the children. Jamesy had not been drinking for more than a month. It was hoped he had broken off for good. He had gone out early in the evening, expecting to return soon. Nine o'clock came and he did not come. As the hands of the clock moved on towards ten, there was an evident painfulness about the play that was going on, and ill concealed distress settled down upon the faces of the elders. At ten, Terry Donovan bade the family good night. Jamesy had not come home.

Terry Donovan did not go home. He went to look for his old companion, and if possible bring him back without excitement. He thought to keep the happiness of the Christmas time unmarred. He found him as he had expected in one of the taverns giving full play to his poor empty wit. When Terry came the fumes of liquor had set Jamesy's blood in that ecstatic whirl which is merry madness. Persuasion proved impossible. The truant preferred his friends. Knowing his stubborn temper, Terry left him. But he determined that though he had retreated he would not abandon the task. He went for Father Philip. He had gone two hundred yards when the priest met him. Then Terry went home.

Father Philip had experienced another of his impulses. After a drive of twenty miles on a bitter cold night, he had only waited long enough to put up his horse before going to Callaghan's. There he arrived just after Terry had left. Finding the prodigal absent, he went out in search. He felt the cold in his limbs, and a tightness about his chest. But his face was burning. He went to the tavern. Jamesy had gone. In that few minutes, something of his better self had risen up only to be smothered by resentment. He went out of the tavern; no one knew whither. The priest tried everywhere to find him. No success. Father Philip knew of many strange places where he had gone before in his drunken cunning. They were empty. The snow fell quietly; no winds caused it to drift. In the morning the footmarks of the priest were every where. It was near morning when his way took him to the icebanks. For an hour he searched there, while the keen wind from the lake chilled him through. At last, at day-break, he found what he sought. In a little cave, as peaceful as a sleeping child lay the priest's first altar boy.

Father Philip lifted the burthen upon his shoulder. He was astonished at the effort it cost him. To his own house he went; put the mass of frozen humanity on his own bed; told the housekeeper to get a doctor; sat down in his chair. He did not say his Christmas Mass that day. At nine o'clock the doctor said he was delirious.

Another Christmas. Terry Donovan is in his own home. Mary, his wife, is trying to persuade their children that it is bed time. Little Mary, the eldest runs over to a helpless cripple sitting by the fire, whose feet and hands it was said had been frost-bitten and had to be removed to save his life. She wants to hear just once the story of the priest whose picture is on the wall. Then Jamesy tells the story of Father Philip as we have told part of it. But he did not forget to remind the children that Father Philip's first deed in Mill Creek was to visit the sick and that his every act was of the same kind, but most of all the last one when he had given up his life for the weakest of his flock. "And now kneel down and say a prayer for his rest, and then go to bed." And it was so.