

Choice Literature.

LAICUS.

OR THE EXPERIENCES OF A LAYMAN IN A COUNTRY PARISH.

CHAPTER I.—HOW I HAPPENED TO GO TO WHEATHEDGE.

About sixty miles north of New York city, not as the crow flies, for of the course of that bird I have no knowledge or information sufficient to form a belief, but as the *Mary Powell* ploughs her way up the tortuous channel of the Hudson river,—lies the little village of Wheathedge. A more beautiful site even this most beautiful of rivers does not possess. As I sit now in my library, I raise my eyes from my writing and look east to see the morning sun just rising in the gap and pouring a long, golden flood of light upon the awakening village below and about me, and gilding the spires of the not far distant city of Newton, and making even the smoke ethereal, as though throngs of angels hung over the city unrecognized by its too busy inhabitants. Before me the majestic river broadens out into a bay where now the ice-boats play back and forth, and day after day is repeated the merry dance of many skaters,—about the only kind of dance I thoroughly believe in. If I stand on the porch upon which one of my library windows opens, and look to the east, I see the mountain clad with its primeval forest, crowding down to the water's edge. It looks as though one might naturally expect to come upon a camp of Indian wigwams there. Two years ago a wild-cat was shot in those same woods and stuffed by the hunters, and it still stands in the ante-room of the public school, the first, and last, and only contribution to an incipient museum of natural history which the sole scientific enthusiast of Wheathedge has founded—in imagination. Last year Harry stumbled on a whole nest of rattlesnakes, to his and their infinite alarm—and to ours too when he afterwards told us the story of his adventure. If I turn and look to the other side of the river, I see a broad and laughing valley—grim in the beautiful death of winter now, however—through which the Newtown railroad, like the star of empire, westward takes its way. For the village of Wheathedge, scattered along the mountain side, looks down from its elevated situation on a wide expanse of country. Like Jerusalem of old—only, if I can judge anything from the accounts of Palestinian travellers, a good deal more so—it is beautiful for situation, and deserves to be the joy of the whole earth.

A village I have called it. It certainly is neither town nor city. There is a little centre where there is a livery stable, and a counting-store with the post-office attached; and a blacksmith shop and two churches, a Methodist and a Presbyterian, with the promise of a Baptist church in a lecture room as yet unfinished. This is the old centre: there is another down under the hill where there is a dock, and a railroad station, and a great hotel with a big bar and generally a knot of loungers who evidently do not believe in water cure. And between the two there is a constant battlement to which shall be the town. For the rest, there is a road wandering in an aimless way along the hill side like a child at play who is going nowhere, and all along this road are scattered every variety of dwelling, big and little, sombre and gay, humble and pretentious, which the mind of man ever conceived of—and some of which I devoutly trust the mind of man will never again conceive. There are solid, substantial, Dutch farm houses, built of unheaven stone, that look as though they were out-growths of the mountain, which nothing short of an earthquake could disturb; and there are fragile little boxes that look as though they would be swept away, to be seen no more forever, by the first winter's blast that comes tearing up the gap as though the bag of *Moloch* had just been opened at West Point and the imprisoned winds were off with a whoop for a lark. There are houses in sombre grays with trimmings of the same; and there are houses in every variety of colour, including one that is of a light pea-green, with pink trimmings and blue blinds. There are old and venerable houses, that look as though they might have come over with Peter Stuyvesant and been living at Wheathedge ever since; and there are spruce little sprigs of houses that look as though they had just come up from New York to spend a holiday, and did not rightly know what to do with themselves in the country. There are staid and respectable mansions that never move from the even tenor of their ways; and there are houses that change their fashions every season, putting on a new coat of paint every spring; and there is one that dresses itself out in summer with so many flags and streamers that one might imagine Fourth of July lived there.

All nations and all eras appear also to be gathered here. There are Swiss cottages with overhanging chambers, and Italian villas with flat roofs, and Gothic structures with incipient spires that look as though they had stopped in their childhood and never got their growth, and Grecian temples with rows of wooden imitations of Doric architecture, and one house in which all nations and eras combine—a Grecian porch, a Gothic roof, an Italian L, and a half finished tower of the Elizabethan era, capped with a Moorish dome, the whole approached through the stiffest of all stiff avenues of evergreens, trimmed in the latest French fashion. That is Mr. Wheaton's residence, the millionaire of Wheathedge. I wish I could say he was as catholic as his dwelling house.

I never fancied the country. Its numerous attractions were no attractions to me. I cannot harness a horse. I am afraid of a cow. I have no fondness for chickens—unless they are tender and well cooked. Like the man in the parable, I cannot dig. I abhor a hoe. I am fond of flowers but not of dirt, and had rather buy them than cultivate them. Of all ambition to get the earliest crop of green peas and half-ripe strawberries I am innocent. I like to walk in my neighbour's garden better than to work in my own. I do not drink milk, and I do drink coffee, and I had rather run my risk with the average of city milk than with the average of country coffee. Fresh air is very desirable; but the air on the bleak hills of the Hudson in March is at times a trifle too fresh. The pure snow, as it lies on field, and fence,

and tree, is beautiful, I confess. But when one goes out to walk, it is inconvenient to have the sidewalks shovelled.

At least that is what I used to think five years ago. And if my wife had endeavoured to argue me out of my convictions, she would only have strengthened them. But my wife!—

Stop a minute. I may just as well say here that this book is written in confidence. It is personal. It deals with the interior history of a very respectable church and some most respectable families. It contains a great deal that is not proper to be communicated to the public. The reader will please bear this in mind. Whatever I say, particularly what I am going to say now, is confidential. Don't mention it.

My wife is a diplomate. If ever I am President of the United States—which may heaven forbid—she shall be Secretary of State. She never argues; but she always carries her point.

She always lets me have my own way without hinting an objection. But it always ends in her having her own. She would have made no objection to letting Mason and Slidell go—not the least in the world. But she would have somehow induced England to entreat us to take them back. She would not have dismissed Catacazy—not she. But if she did not let Catacazy, Gortschakoff should have recalled him, and ever known why he did it.

"John," said my wife, "Where shall we spend the summer?"

It was six years ago this spring. We were sitting in the library in our city house, Harry was a baby; and baby was not. I laid down my newspaper and looked up with an incipient groan.

"The usual way, I suppose," said I. "You'll go home with the baby, and I—shall camp out in New York."

"Home" is Jennie's home in Michigan, where she has spent two of the three summers of our married life, while I existed in single misery in my empty house on Thirty-eight Street. Oh, the desolateness of those summer experiences. Oh, the unutterable loneliness of a house without the smile of the dear wife, and the laugh and prattle of the baby boy. I even missed his cry at night.

"It's a long, long journey," said Jennie, "and a long, long way off; and I did resolve last summer I never would put a thousand miles between me and my true home, John. For that is not my home—you are my home."

And a soft hand stole gently up and toyed with my hair. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the preacher. To which I add, especially husbands. No man is proof against the flatteries of love. At least I am not, and I am glad of it.

"You can't stay here, Jennie," said I.

"I am afraid not," said she. "It is Harry's second summer, and I would not dare."

"The sea shore?" said I, interrogatively.

"Not one of those great fashionable hotels, John. It would be worse for Harry than the city. And then think of the cost."

"True," said I, reflectively. "I wish we could find a quiet place, not too far from the city so that I could come in and out, during term time, and stay out altogether during the summer vacation."

"There must be some such, many such," said Jennie.

"But to look for them," said I, "would be, to use an entirely new simile, like looking for a needle in a haystack. There must be some honest lawyers at the New York bar, and some impartial judges on the New York bench, but I should not like to be set to find them."

I had been beaten in an important case that afternoon and was out with my profession.

"Suppose you let me try," said Jennie—"that is to find the quiet summer retreat, not the honest lawyer."

"By all means, my dear," said I. "And I have great confidence that if you are patient and assiduous, you will find a place in time for Harry to settle down in comfortably when he gets ready to be married."

Jennie laughed a quiet little laugh at my incredulity, and sat straightway down to write half-a-dozen letters of inquiry to as many different friends in the environs of New York. I resumed my paper. As to anything coming of her plans I no more dreamt of it than your grandfather, reader, dreamt of the Atlantic cable.

But though I had been married three years I did not know Jennie then as well as I know her now. I have since learned that she has a habit of accomplishing what she undertakes. But this again is strictly confidential.

That June saw us snugly ensconced at Mr. Lane's. Glen-Ridge is the euphonious title he has given to his pretty but unpretending place. Jennie had written among others to Sophie Wheaton, *nee* Sophie Nichols, an old schoolfellow, and Sophie had sent down an invitation to her to come and spend a week, and look for herself, and she had done so; save that two days had sufficed instead of a week. Glen-Ridge had taken her fancy. Mr. Lane had met her house-wifely idea of a good house-keeper, and she had selected the rooms and agreed on terms, and left nothing for me to do except to ratify the bargain by a letter, which I did the day after her return. And so in the early summer of 1866 the diplomate had carried her first point, and committed me to two months' probation in the country; and two very delightful months they were.

CHAPTER II.—MORE DIPLOMACY.

I now verily believe that Jennie from the first had made up her mind that we were to settle in Wheathedge. Though I never liked the country, she did. And I now think that summer at Wheathedge was her first step toward a settlement there. But she never hinted it to me.

Not she. On the contrary, she often went down to the city with me and shortened the carriage by half. We kept the city house open. She exercised a watchful supervision over the cook. The sheets were not damp, the coffee was not muddy, the library table was not covered with dust. I blessed her a hundred times a week for the love that found us both this Wheathedge home, and made the city home so comfortable and cozy. Yet I came to my house in the city less and less. The car ride grew shorter every

week. When the courts closed and the long vacation arrived, I bade the cook an indefinite good-bye. My clients had to conform to the new office hours, ten to three, with Saturdays struck off the office calendar, and, in the dog days, Mondays too. Yet I was within call, and business ran smoothly. The country looked brighter than it used to do. I learned to enjoy the glorious sunrise that New Yorkers never see. I discovered that there were other indications of a moonlight night than the fact that the street lamps were not lighted. Harry grew fat and rosy, and his little chuckle devolved into a lusty laugh. Jennie's headaches were blown away by the fresh air that came down from the north. I found the fragrance of the new-mown hay from the Glen-Ridge meadow more agreeable than the fragrant odours which the westerly winds waft over to Murray Hill from the bone boiling establishments of the Hudson River. Every evening Jennie met me at the train with Tom—Mr. Lane's best horse, which I liked so well that I hired him for the season; and we took long drives and renewed the scenes of former years before, when Jennie was Jennie Malcolm, and I was just graduating from Harvard law-school. And still the diplomate never hinted at the idea of making a home at Wheathedge.

But one day as we drove by Mr. Sinclair's she remarked casually, "What a pretty place!" It was a pretty place. A little cottage, French gray with darker trimmings of the same; the tastiest little porch with a something or other—I know the vine by sight but not to this day by name—creeping over it and converting it into a bower; another porch fragrant with climbing roses and musical with the twittering of young swallows who had made their nests in little chambers curiously constructed under the eaves and hidden among the sheltering leaves; a greensward sweeping down to the road, with a few grand old forest trees scattered carelessly about as though nature had been the landscape gardener; and prettiest of all a little boy and girl playing horse upon the gravel walk, and filling the air with shouts of merry laughter—all this combined to make as pretty a picture as one would wish to see. The western sun poured a flood of light upon it through crimson clouds, and a soft glory from the dying day made this little Eden of earth more radiant by a baptism from heaven.

I wonder now if Jennie had been waiting for a favourable opportunity and then had spoken. I do not know; and she will never tell me. At all events the beauty so struck me, like a landscape fresh from the hand of some great artist—as it was indeed fresh from the hand of the Great Artist—that I involuntarily reined in Tom to look at it. "It's for sale, too," said I. "I wonder what such a place costs?"

The artful diplomate did not answer. The books and newspapers talk about women's curiosity. It is nothing to a man's curiosity when it is aroused. Oh, I know the story of Bluebeard very well. But if Mrs. Bluebeard had been a strong minded woman and had killed her seven husbands, I wonder if the eighth would not have taken a peep. He would not have waited for the key but would have broken in the door long before. If men are not curious why do the authorities always appoint them on the detective police force?

"Mr. Lines," said I that evening at the tea table, "you know that pretty little cottage on the hill just opposite the church. I see there is a sign up, 'for sale.' What is the price of it, do you know?"

"No," said Mr. Lines, "but you can easily find out. It belongs to Charlie Sinclair; he lives there and can tell you."

Three days after that as I was driving up from the station, it struck my fancy that I should like to see the inside of that pretty house. "Jennie," said I, "let's go in and look at the inside of that pretty cottage." But I had no more idea of purchasing it than I have now of purchasing the moon.

"It would hardly be the thing for me to call," said the diplomate. "Mrs. Sinclair has never called on me."

"I don't want you to make any call," said I. "The house is for sale. I am a New Yorker. I am looking about Wheathedge for a place. I see this place is for sale. I should like to look at it. And of course my wife must look at it too."

"Oh! that, indeed," said my wife, "that's another matter. I have no particular objection to that."

"Besides," said I, "I really should like to know the price of such a place in Wheathedge."

"Very good," said Jennie.

So we drove up to the gate, fastened the horse, and enquired of Mrs. Sinclair, who came in person to the door, if we could see the house. Certainly. She would be very happy to show it to us. And a very pretty house it was—and is still. There was a cozy little parlour with a bay window looking out on the river, there was an equally cozy little dining-room, and there was an L for a sitting-room—which I instantly converted in my imagination into a library—which looked with one window on the river and with another on the mountains. There was a very convenient kitchen built out in a wing from one end of the dining-room, and three chambers over the three downstairs rooms, from the larger one of which, over the sitting-room, we could take in at a glance the Presbyterian church, the blacksmith shop, and the country store, with the wandering and aimless road, and a score or two of neighbour's homes which lay along it; for the cottage was on the hillside, and elevated considerably above the main roadway. It was charmingly furnished, too, and was full of the fragrance of flowers within, as it was embowered in them without.

Besides looking at the house we asked the usual house-hunting questions. Mr. Sinclair was in the city. He wanted to sell because he was going to Europe in the spring to educate his children. He would sell his place for \$10,000 or rent it for \$500. For the summer? No! for the year. He did not care to rent it for the summer nor to give possession before fall. Would he rent the furniture? Yes, if one wanted it. But that would be extra. How much land was there? About two acres. Any fruit? Pears, peaches, and the smaller fruits—strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries. Whereupon Jennie and I bowed ourselves out and went away.