

Old Jimmy's Quandary, and How He Settled It.

BY SARAH ANNE CURZON.

Mr. James Hazeldean, farmer, Fourth Concession of Maple, in the flourishing county of Queen, or "Old Jimmy," as he was popularly styled, sat thinking. Apparently his cogitations required great freedom, and to that end he had laid down his old straw-billy, the brim of which was on the point of parting with the crown, had loosed his braces an inch or two, had unbuttoned his shirt collar and had put his feet, encased in long top boots, upon the window sill near him. He was a rather tall man, slim and brown, his eyes were set deep in his head, and his curly hair, rapidly turning grey, shadowed a good square forehead. His neighbours called him a "well-lookin' kind of a man," though they seldom saw him in any other attire than his present, of blue home spun pants, red flannel shirt, stained white braces and a straw-billy—a shapeless sort of a wide-brimmed hat made up by his wife from straw he had grown and plaited himself, as other farmers at that time did.

Old Jimmy, then, sat thinking, each hand held hard to the arm of the patchwork-cushioned rocking chair in which he had esconced himself; his pipe was in his mouth, and furnished evidence by the frequent puffs of blue smoke it emitted that the smoker's thoughts were somewhat perturbed. Apparently, his old collie, which lay under the chair between the rockers, thought something was amiss, since, at short intervals, he would carefully disentangle himself from the perils on either side of him, and, after stealing round to the front, would scan his master's face, and, by way of sympathy, would thrust his cold nose under one of the brown hands, and then retire to his former situation.

After these manifestations of perturbation on the one side and of sympathy on the other had lasted some time, the farmer suddenly withdrew his feet from their elevation, took his pipe out of his mouth and laid it upon the top of the door-jamb, banged his billy on his head, and, with a reassuring pat to the collie, which had risen as hastily as his master, descended the steps of the stoop and, saying to himself, "Golly, I'll do it; an' to-morrow, too!" took his way to the barn.

The low of cattle and the whinnying of a horse which followed the opening of the door betokened the welcome that dumb creatures never give but to those who are kind to them, and a glimpse of the interior whence proceeded the subtle and agreeable odour of cows and sweet hay, gave ample assurance that plenty and comfort reigned within.

The sound of the hustling of straw and the short command to "Haw" or "Gee, now!" or to "Git up!" told the farmer's errand to his barn and stables, which were all under the same roof, and when he emerged once more and shoved the great wooden bolt into place across the doors not a doubt of a comfortable night for the cattle could be entertained.

The farmer had apparently left all comfort behind him, for his countenance was even more troubled than it had been under the trying ordeal of thinking, and instead of going straight indoors, the early April night having fallen, the farmer stood still, hands in pocket, and viewed the sky. The young moon was just rising over the east, the breath of the early spring night was sweet, if cold, and more than a consciousness of tender young life was visible upon the elm and beech that bounded the farmer's vision on all sides but one. On that side the mellow farm-land lay, some in fallow, more under plough, and a good deal in fall wheat. Near the house a small orchard stood, and immediately before the kitchen door lay a rough space covered with the chips and knots of the wood pile, now much reduced in dimensions from its generous amplitude at the beginning of the winter. Passing across the lot to the end of the house, which was a pretty large one, having its four small windows, its little parlour and its immense kitchen, all on the ground floor, Old Jimmy, still accompanied by his collie, proceeded with slow steps and head bent towards a little hill at about a hundred yards distance, clothed with bushes, and looking at that season of the year somewhat unkempt. A wimpling creek ran at the foot of the hill, across which the farmer stepped with one long stride and the collie with a leap. A well-worn path through the bushes looked as if it had long been customary for some one to visit the hill, and certain signs visible at the top showed the reason why. A sort of plateau had been cleared, which, though covered with rough brown grass and a few bushes of syringa and lilac was divided off into rows, by what the farmer called "tomb-stuns." These were slabs of wood, mostly unpainted, rounded off at the top and set upright into the ground. Letters roughly and irregularly cut upon the face of each, showed that survivors had not been unmindful of the claims of the dead upon their remembrance. There were ten of these "stuns" of different dates and sizes, but upon most of them lichen and moss had done their embroidering so richly that the inscriptions were undecipherable. The newest and largest "stun" had received a coating of white paint, and the sunk letters were picked out carefully in black. A little bit of garden stood in front of it, in which the budding of a few roses was apparent. Before this Old Jimmy stood, and after contemplating the inscription for a few minutes proceeded to read it aloud:—

Here Lyeth the Bodie
of Jane,
the Beloved Wife of
JAMES HAZELDEAN.
In sure and certain promise of second appearing.
Died Nov. 29, A.D., 1839.
Aged 57.
Weep not for me—tears are in vain—
Some day you'll see me come again.

"Seems to me," he soliloquized, "when poor Jenny writ that epitaf she might ha' left out about 'second appearin'." She was always good at posie-verses, but when she took to epitafes and writ that 'fer herself,' as she said, I never meant ainy harm laffin at her, fer how could I think she would be 'took and me left,' as says Scripture. I allays counted on us livin' together all 'ur lives and dyin' of old age and bein' buried side by side. I didn't think much about 'second appearin' when she was first took, fer often and often it seemed to me Jenny was there a-helpin' me to git my bits o' meals. But it looks different o' late. I've bin so lonely. 'Taint easy to get through the winter when the thrashin's all done, an' the snow's a foot deep; an' if the little gell hadn't been took when she was gittin' handy 'twould ha' been different. P'raps she never thought, poor thing, that there wa'n't nobody when she was took; an' I'm hanged if I can get on by myself. Them hired gells aint any good, and Jenny allays hated havin' 'em round, an' I've done my level best to keep things goin' as she used ter. But I can't do it, to say nothing of havin' to get somebody else's woman to bake yer bread and do yer bit of washin', and gettin' yer meals yerself after a hard day. An' now the summer's a comin' on fast, and the men'll ha' to be fed somehow; an' if I get a gel in for the time, goodness knows what sort o' goins-on there'll be. How can I help it, spite o' 'second appearin', and all that! Jenny never was spiteful, an' I guess she'd reither I'd have a good woman as 'ud take care o' things; 'n go on as this 'ere. Poor Jenny! I certainly liked her a lot!" Old Jimmy took a turn round the "buryin' lot" as if in search of some token of comfort, and stopping at an old half fallen "stun," his old dog at his heel, muttered, "Mother, what do you say 'bout this here? O, mother, if ye were only here yerself 'twouldn't be to ask, for I wouldn't be lonely an' shifless." And a little patter on the stiff brown grass at his feet awakened a tiny grey-bird that had been prospecting for nest-building.

CHAPTER II.

"Teemorrer" came; but what with milking, cooking, ploughing, bed-making, in which latter he only indulged himself three times in the week, it was again evening before Old Jimmy had time to "do it." His preparations for action were elaborate, if few. He shaved himself at a bit of broken glass placed in the kitchen window, and after putting it carefully back on the top shelf of the dresser and throwing out the cold water in his shaving tin, he proceeded, the lather still on his face, to hunt up a white shirt; then he laid out his black suit; it had been new at his wedding, and he had only worn it once (at the funeral service) since his deceased wife's burial. The memory struck him with a certain awe, and the words "second appearing" were written upon his retina in white flame. Then he set upon his bureau a stiff black satin stock, and took out a spotted red handkerchief for his pocket—he had but one white one, and it was nowhere to be found. Then, in the seclusion of his summer kitchen he "tubbed," for the ice was not all gone out of the river, and it was yet too cold to bathe. Next he proceeded to dress himself, and lastly, after combing his hair, which was still curly and thick, though getting grey, he blacked his boots, his highlows, not the top-boots.

During these elaborate preparations his mind was busily occupied. He had quite made up his mind to "do it," and the next thing was to choose the lady. He knew that everybody had foreseen his present fix and had selected the Mrs. Hazeldean No. 2 time and again. There was the most industrious creature in the village, Miss Mollie Smith, but she had a cross eye, and old Jimmy liked to know when he was being looked at. And the Widow White, a good manager, everybody said, but with a tongue like the clapper of a bell. And the minister's wife, poor as a church mouse, and to whom a good home would be a novelty, but Jimmy wasn't marrying to give any woman a home; and there was the squire's eldest daughter, Miss Henrietta, that would have been a *parti* of so honourable a connection that even Jimmy would not object, he thought, but Miss Henrietta had no heart or she might have been married long ago, and he hated women that didn't love little children. Then there was the cooper's widow down at the village, Susie Wright that was. What a time that poor thing had had! How her man used to drink, to be sure, and leave poor Susie without either food or clothes enough for herself or her four children, and yet she kept 'em so clean, and had given 'em all a bit of education. Why, there was that eldest son of hers, Walter, able to keep the miller's books, though but a lad of sixteen, and as steady as if his father had been a inister! And that little lame gell, Ria, poor thing, so pale an' pretty, an' the two little fellers. How did the poor mother manage for them all—though he had heard Jenny say more than once that the cooper's widow was better off without her man than ever she had been with him, if she had to go out chorin' an' doin' a bit of sewin' at quilting time? Couldn't do any harm to go an' see the widow, and surely Jenny wouldn't put in any "second appearin'" if it wur the widow. Second appearin' was queer things, anyhow; but he'd heard of 'em, to be sure, an' they had allays seemed to him awful.

Merely saying to the collie as he closed his door, "Watch, Nelson!" old Jimmy took his way to the village in all the glories of feathers and war-paint, but with anything but a warrior's boldness at his heart. He did not walk, for that would have spoiled his boots, the roads were so muddy, and, moreover, the village was fully seven miles distant, and no farmer is good for a long walk, it is so much easier to drive. Old Jimmy therefore took his buggy,

into which he had hitched up the young mare Polly, and with a "Gee-up, little one!" drove off through a somewhat tumble-down affair of a gate towards the village. At an interval in the thick growth of trees that skirted the road-side, Jimmy looked across lots to the hill whereon lay his burying-ground, and saw glaring very plainly at him the white "tomb-stun" with the dread inscription. For a moment he hung his head as though in shame, but picking up courage as he went along, his soliloquies grew more and more governed by the reasonableness of his intention than the ghostly threat of the defunct. "'Taint in nature that a man should live alone. I've heard Jenny herself say so mayny and mayny a time; and hoo in the name o' reason a man is to cook for ten or a dozen men, and look after his harvestin' at the same time beats me. To be sure, I might get the widow, Susie Wright as was, to bring her little girl Ria and come and keep house for me till harvest's over, but there'd be nobody to mind her house and cook and wash for her, and the little fellers might get into mischief, there's no tellin', while mother was away."

It did not occur to Old Jimmy that "Susan Wright that was," or any other woman, would have to be taken into council and her consent gained before any conclusion could be come to. But at last it dawned on him that "folks" might expect it of him, to show that their opinions, which they had taken good care should reach his ears, were not entirely disappointed. So, as he had to pass the house, he made up his mind to call on Miss Molly Smith, the "industrious model of the village." Accordingly, he drew up at her mother's door, dismounted and knocked. Then his heart gave a great bound, for he didn't want to marry Miss Smith, and if he gave her the opportunity to say yes, and she said it, what a mess he would be in.

Miss Smith opened the door herself, and said, "Good evenin', Farmer, won't you come in?"

"Reyther not, Miss Smith, if you don't mind. I called to ask if Mrs. Smith wants to sell the brindle cow?"

"O, indeed! yes. Mother'll sell her if she gets her price—it's twenty pounds she asks. Did you want her for yourself?"

"Well, yes, Miss Smith, and I'll take her at the price, but I can't stop now, hevin' to go to the post office. Will to-morrer do?"

"Yes, Mr. Hazeldean, to-morrer'll do."

"Good evenin'," Miss Smith.

"Good evenin', sir."

"Couldn't stand that ooman's eye no how! Lucky I thought on the cow," soliloquized Old Jimmy, as he mounted his buggy. "Big price, too, I give."

"That man's a-goin' a courtin' as sure as my name's Mary Ann Smith, an' its my belief he cum here with that intent," remarked Miss Smith as she recounted the visit to her mother. She evidently "knew the signs," notwithstanding crooked vision.

As Jimmy turned the road corner into the village street, he heard the sound of loud voices, and found that it was the Widow White in high altercation with her hired man, who had left the pasture gate unfastened and thus allowed the oxen to stray down the road. With a quick nod the farmer jerked up the mare to a gallop, saying to himself as he did, "Ef there's one thing I hate it's a scold, Jenny, my lass, no 'second appearin'!" 'ud be necessary to make me miserable w' such a poman as that. My gracious! Why, what's that?"

"That" was merely too little boys of seven and nine staggering under the load of half a tree which they were endeavouring to get home for firewood. Being just half way across the road, their unusual aspect startled the farmer's young mare, and it was with difficulty he prevented her from running away. The boys saw the mischief and tugged valiantly, but the great log was only to be moved an inch at a time.

"Gracious me!" cried Old Jimmy, "whose boys be ye? Where's yer father—he ought to be doin' that kind of work, not lettin' little uns like you pull yerselves to pieces at it. What's yer names?"

"Tom and Jackie Williams, please, sir," replied the elder, as he pushed back his straw-billy to look at the speaker.

"God bless me! so it is," cried the farmer.

"Here, boys, git up and show me where yer mother lives, and I'll see that the log gets hum all right."

A few minutes later the Widow Williams, "Susie Wright that was," looked out of the small window of her little log house to see where the sound of a man's laugh came from. It was Old Jimmy, one boy on his knee and another at his side, who was driving up the rough road that lay between two little bits of pasture where a young heifer was cropping the dry brown grass.

"Mother! mother!" cried the boys in chorus, "Mr. Hazeldean says he'll fetch the wood home, and he wants to see you about work. An' he says if you'll let us he'll fetch us up to Hazeldean farm to see the new cow and get some apples."

Farmer Jimmy had already begun his courting, it was very evident.

"I want to see you, Mrs. Williams, very patickler, so if you'll let the little boys mind the mare, I'll be glad; her's safe."

"Yes, Mr. Hazeldean. Will you walk in?"

The visitor walked in, and was glad to find the little kitchen vacant, but he hardly knew what to say, so he looked about him. There was a settee, a table, three chairs and a bench in the room, and that was all, with the exception of a bit of crockery on a couple of shelves, a tray against the wall, a curtain on the window and a couple of candlesticks