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THE HERESY OF PARSON
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BY

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"The Victory of Ezry Gardner."



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THE HERESY OF PARSON MEDLICOTT.

THERE was no doubt but that Parson Medlicott failed in his later days ; at least that was the verdict of Broadmeadows. Certainly he grew slower in step, hearing, and sight — the hearing, in especial, of evil against others, and the sight of little petty defects which are the grain of humanity itself. One thing about him, however, remained young despite all the mutabilities of life : he came to old age with the heart of a little child. Broadmeadows, noting the encroachments of the years upon her pastor with apologetic leniency, condemned particularly this trustful simplicity on his part. It seemed an evidence of spiritual blindness, an ossification of conscience — a result that of old age surely ! — that made the lapse of doctrinal wisdom so apparent. In short, the parson was too tolerant. As he expressed it himself, he was fond of “the sunny side of the way.”

“But one side of the road has to be in shadow,” objected Dr. Aldham, whose pessimism was as bit-

ter as his pills, and who had undertaken to point out to the minister the defects of his system.

“Then come over where I am,” laughed the parson; “there ’s plenty of room and plenty of God’s sunshine for us all.”

What could be said in extenuation of one who thus trifled away the serious questions of life? A spasm of righteous indignation coursed up and down Broadmeadows; the gravity of the situation was alarming. The kindest thing, of course, was to acknowledge that the old man was failing, but such an admission curtails the power, if any remains, in the person himself. From that hour the sun of Parson Medlicott’s supremacy hastened toward its setting.

It seemed as if, after that voicing of his philosophy, — if such it could be called, — every one in Broadmeadows fell to watching the minister and treasuring up scraps of his talk, not to find little nuggets of gold imbedded therein, but to turn and sift, and sift again, until only slag remained. And the pity of it was that he was unconscious of this secret tribunal where he was daily arraigned as he passed blithely among them, a tall, bowed figure in a broad-brimmed felt hat and clerical clothes, whose original black had grown greenish from long service, with his little dog — his inseparable companion — pressing close at his side. Such was

the honesty of the man, however, that, had he been aware of this scrutiny of his words and deeds, he would not have altered them by an iota. Still there was no doubt that he was entangling himself in a net wrought by his own carelessness.

There was that day, for instance, when he had talked so long with Mrs. Thurston's brother, who in his travels about the world had outgrown the simple Broadmeadows faith and was indeed of no religion. Did the parson seek to reclaim him? Did he point out the evils of non church-going? According to Oswald Shaw's own testimony, "the parson had not talked shop." The conversation had been mainly of foreign countries, bits of experience out of the traveller's scrip, to which the old man had listened with avidity; he had only spoken to tell some pretty stiff stories about the intelligence of the small terrier at his feet.

Then there was that day — that gray, misty Sunday in early June — when he had encountered Judge Dana and his guest, the noted lawyer from the city, both of them in old clothes, taking the short cut past the parsonage, — the short cut that every one in Broadmeadows knew led to North Brook. He had actually stopped to speak to them, and Miss Cornelia Slater, walking slowly by on the opposite side of the way, had heard the entire con-

versation. Not a mention of church, not even a word of warning or exhortation, only a genial interchange of greetings. Miss Cornelia could hardly believe her ears. She could see, if her minister could not, the fishing-rods the two men carried; still, there were people in Broadmeadows who maintained that age was dimming the clerical eyes, and the remark the old man let fall as he turned away convinced the listener that this infirmity was accountable for his neglect of duty.

"It's a fine day," he said, then he repeated half wistfully, "a fine day."

Miss Cornelia cast a quick glance at the soft, gray sky. The air was damp and cool against her cheek and sweet with the fragrance of June, yet there was the hint of coming rain in its breath. A sunless day — and he had called it fine! Poor old Parson Medlicott! Her pity lessened considerably when the lens of masculine intelligence disclosed the hidden meaning of the phrase. The defect on the delinquent's part was what Dr. Aldham pronounced "a case of moral strabismus," but Miss Cornelia herself called it winking at sin.

Meanwhile the charges against the parson were accumulating with lamentable rapidity. His fondness for novel-reading, his delight in a joke, and, more than all, his attitude toward the children,

convicted him on every side. It was supposed, by those who knew, that a minister should so comport himself that the youth in his charge should regard him with sentiments of awe and reverence. But Parson Medlicott, with his laughing, cheery words and his faithful dog, inspired no such feelings among the children of Broadmeadows — he was their friend, and more, he was one of them. The climax of his misdemeanors, however, was reached when little Tony Dana was rescued from drowning by the Judge's great dog, Don, at the expense of the latter's life.

The boy was inconsolable at the loss of his friend, and the Judge himself openly sorrowed with him, but he could give no satisfactory answers to the volley of anxious questions with which he was assailed. He had not been ashamed of the mist in his eyes when the noble old fellow lay deaf and still for the first time to the sound of his voice, and the child's piercing cry, "Is this the end?" had awakened a similar one in his own breast.

"Go ask the dominie," he said at last; "he can tell you better than I — I don't know."

So to the dominie Tony went. The study door was closed, but a pleasant voice bade him enter, and he set it wide gladly. The unpretentious room was like some simple shrine which many had sought burdened with griefs and doubts, going

thence comforted in great measure; the perplexities of life always assumed lesser proportions in its peaceful atmosphere than elsewhere. But no deeper bitterness of heart than little Tony Dana's had ever gone there for relief.

The child hesitated after closing the door behind him, though the kindest face in the world was turned his way, and the friendliest hand extended in welcome. It was only a step to where the parson sat, but for a long minute the boy waited. Between him and that chair where comprehension stayed for his grief stood Major, the parson's dog, — a little, useless fox-terrier who had never saved a person's life, who had never done anything great or noble. Just an old, rheumatic, half-blind dog — and yet he was alive! The boy's breast swelled with resentment; he could not pass him. The dog advanced closer, making friendly overtures, and the master sat watching the scene with eyes which all Broadmeadows thought were failing, though they saw deep into child nature, and seeing — understood.

“Major,” he called softly, “*I want you.*”

The next moment the boy stooped and patted the small head with a trembling hand. Parson Medlicott removed his glasses. “Well — little man.”

The voice was a caress, the touch of the encir-

cling arm was tenderness itself; under its embrace the tenseness in the child's breast was loosened, he breathed more freely. He crept close to the old man's side and leaned against his shoulder.

"It's — it's about Don, sir. Sarah says he's of the beasts that perish, and Thomas thinks there's no doubt about it. But it can't — can't be. He saved me from drowning, sir; he laid down his life for another's sake, you know. I should think that ought to count for something."

"Surely — surely."

"I don't want to go to Heaven if Don is n't there. It would be lonesome if he was n't at the gate to meet me — you know how — and glad to see me no end. I should think there'd be plenty of room up there, and he never was an interferin' dog. Gran'ma says it's scand'lous to talk this way, and mother's sorry about Don, only she agrees with gran'ma, and — and — gran'pa is sorrier than all the others put together, but he does n't know — he said you'd tell me."

The child's voice broke with the stress of his inquiry; he turned his eager eyes upon the parson, who seemed lost in thought. It was very still. From somewhere in the house a clock struck four, slowly and distinctly, and in the room itself one of the logs in the fireplace dropped asunder and a shower of glittering sparks sput-

tered out on the hearth. The Major gave a little yap of disgust and retreated to a safer distance.

"He said you'd tell me," the boy cried shrilly, letting his hands fly out in sudden wild desperation.

"So I will, Tony, so I will. This is a sad time for you, little man, for you've lost a dear friend, — we understand, you and I, how dear a dog friend can be, — and, moreover, Don gave his life for yours, as you say, — he was faithful unto death! And now questions that have puzzled older and wiser heads are troubling you. You want to know about Don's future. Well, I believe that all that measure of love, and faithfulness, and trust cannot be lost. If the earth was wide enough to hold it, Heaven will not crowd it out, else, missing it, it would not be Heaven."

The child drew a deep breath and laid his tear-stained cheek against the time-furrowed one.

"Gran'pa said you could tell," he whispered.

"In just what likeness I cannot say," the man went on, "but one thing is sure: the memory of Don will abide as tangible as the presence, and — very likely, the presence — who knows — who knows? God is more loving than any words of ours can frame, little lad. It does n't do to doubt him."

In that way Tony Dana found peace, and when

he left the study some time later it was with a vastly lighter heart. He moved along confidently and even passed with a steady step through the home gate where no dog ran to meet him, though a great lump rushed chokingly into his throat. He went directly to the library and unburdened his content to the Judge, sitting there in sore perplexity; after that he sought his mother and grandmother in the drawing-room, where, in his excitement, — oblivious to the visitors present, — he poured forth a happy jumble of incoherent sentences wherein the only things clear were the fact of Don's eternal salvation and the boy's declaration that he was going to try to be just as faithful and noble as Don — so Parson Medlicott had said. Those soft, childish lips that had pressed a kiss of gratitude upon the wrinkled cheek were unwittingly the ones to betray the old man to the people of Broadmeadows.

The next evening Squire Poindexter, Dr. Aldham, and little Mr. Loring waited upon the parson — Judge Dana, whose voice was of considerable authority in local matters, absolutely refusing to make one of the party. They found him in his study reading by the light of the green-shaded lamp upon his table, while the Major snored peacefully upon the rug.

At their entrance the parson laid down his

book and advanced to meet them. It was no individual grief that had brought them collectively, on so cold a night, to his door — of that he was aware; but the gravity of their faces indicated the importance of their errand and set him wondering. There had been innumerable demands made upon his strength that day and he was more than ordinarily fatigued; still his welcome lacked no whit of its usual warmth. He had on a long black dressing-gown, girded at the waist by a cord, which gave him an odd, monk-like appearance and increased the frailty of his slender, bowed figure, while the tempered light made his hair seem whiter than usual. There was no doubt that he was old — old. The Major, as if mindful of his duties as host, got up stiffly from his slumbers and went forward to proffer his greetings also, but finding his presence ignored, he retreated to his master's side and regarded the newcomers with disapproval.

“We felt we should find you at your books,” Mr. Loring said airily, after the three men had seated themselves and the parson was about to resume his chair. “Some polemical treatise, sir; you put us to shame with your untiring zeal.”

The parson threw back his head, laughing like a boy. “No polemical treatises for me,” he declared; “I gave ’em up long ago. This is a romance full of stir, and dash, and glory — won-

derful, wonderful; with a thread of a love story through it all that makes a man eighteen again."

Squire Poindexter cleared his throat ominously and shot a furtive glance at his companions.

"Oh, a little mental recreation of that sort is excellent," he said a minute later in a large, tolerant voice which seemed to be wondering at itself and which set his friends gaping with astonishment; "the saying about Jack holds good in every case. And there's no doubt you've earned your play — you've been a long time in the field, sir."

The parson pressed the tips of his fingers together meditatively and looked smilingly at his guests.

"More than fifty years," he answered, "and thirty-five of 'em spent in Broadmeadows. It's wearing on to sundown, friends."

There was no reply to the little sally, each man thinking it clearly the other man's cue to speak, and just then, as if to make it easier for them, the Major, who had borne social ostracism long enough, started to take possession of the vacant chair. His master lifted him up gently, making him comfortable on the cushion, then he seated himself by the little animal's side, crowding into as small a space as possible.

"You are very fond of your dog, sir."

It was half question half assertion; there was a tentative quality in the hesitating tone.

The old man raised his unsuspecting eyes from the small head he was caressing and glanced at the speaker, then he looked about the room almost wearily. There was a moment's silence before he spoke.

“You come from a house, Squire,” he said gently, “where there are many voices — a wife's voice and the chatter and laughter of little children. There are pleasant voices in your home, Mr. Loring, and in yours, too, Doctor, but here you find no such happy echoes. My youth was full of loneliness. I had no close ties, and when — when I sought to form one, that was denied me. There has only been one chair at my fireside through all the years, and that my own. But I have been rich in friends, thank God, faithful friends, — young and old, — and yet there have been times of discouragement and failure when I have longed for the nearer companionship of wife and children. You never suspected that in the old man, did you? One day, eleven years ago, a young lad whom I — who fancied I had aided him, came to bid me good-by; he was going West to begin life afresh there, and he brought me a mite of a dog. I had no need for the little creature, and besides I was afraid Deborah wouldn't like it, but I couldn't

hurt the boy's feelings, so I accepted his gift. I remember I felt as awkward as any country lout brought suddenly into fine company when I found myself alone with that little fox-terrier puppy. He barked for a long time at me, evidently thinking I had driven his friend away, then finally, tired out, he came whimpering up to make a pact of peace. I lifted him on my knee and he settled down with a satisfied sigh, resting his head on my hand. I sat very still looking at him after he had fallen asleep, and suddenly it occurred to me that he was my own. The thought was especially comforting, because it had been a day of sore trial when my loneliness had pressed heavily upon me.

“During the week that followed I was a dozen minds about keeping the little fellow, and every day I studied him with keener interest, watching the trust and love grow in his eyes as I would watch the unfolding of some beautiful flower. He may have studied me in like fashion. I cannot say. I only know the friendship between us strengthened with every passing hour. There is a vast difference, believe me, between coming home to a silent house and hearing only your own steps break the stillness, and in coming back to a warmhearted welcome, even if it be given by a dog. You feel there is some one who cares. For eleven years

now this little friend has had that welcome for me. Gentlemen, I love my dog."

"But surely you do not believe in any future state for him? He has no soul" —

"Not as we have, I grant you; yet so good a man as John Wesley believed implicitly in the future state of animals. 'They too,' he said, 'are immortal.' And why not — why not? If I am made happier here by the wealth of love in this little breast, shall I be happier there missing it? Is n't Heaven large enough to hold all this fidelity and nobleness of heart? Shall we place bounds to God's goodness?" He paused abruptly; by a lightning's flash of intuition the reason of their coming was made clear to him. A wave of color surged into his face.

"I said something like this to little Tony Dana yesterday," he added simply.

"The whole town knows it, the whole town is shocked by it. Your motive was undoubtedly prompted by kindness, but it was ill-advised — it was begging the question. It was comforting the boy at the expense of his spiritual welfare" —

"Stop!" thundered Parson Medlicott; "it was no such thing. He came to me in great distress and I helped him as far as lay in my power. People laugh at and minimize the sorrows of childhood, but they are often harder to bear than those

which are fitted upon older shoulders. Besides, this was no trifling sorrow, it was a real grief, such as would have laid my own heart bare had it befallen me. Tony had lost a friend, though you and others say he was only a dog."

"Admitted that the boy suffered," Mr. Loring interposed shrilly, "but that was no reason why you should give him the impression you did. It was pernicious — there is no other word! It pains me, sir, to take this stand against one whom for years I have deeply admired, but I" —

The minister pushed back his chair and rose to his feet, cutting short the other's eloquence; without a word of apology he crossed the room. Four pairs of wondering eyes were turned upon him as he opened the door of the cabinet above the mantel and took out a small vase, then he returned to the table carrying it carefully against his breast. It was a bit of Salviati glass that had been brought him from Venice by a parishioner, and all Broadmeadows had laughed at the incongruity of the gift. He held it close to the lamp, letting the light accentuate the exquisite shape with its delicate coloring of rose and green and amber and the gleaming incrustations of gold. For the moment he seemed oblivious to his guests, who looked first at him, as if they doubted his sanity, and then at one another in corroboration of the theory.

“Beautiful,” he murmured half aloud, “beautiful; and yet the slightest jar would shiver it to atoms.” He raised his head and regarded his companions with something like sternness in his benignant face. “It is not so beautiful as a child’s faith, nor so fragile. If I break this I am accountable to no one but myself—it is my own. If I break the other, by whom shall I stand arraigned? What can I say in excuse of my careless stewardship? You do not think it foolish in me because, knowing how brittle this bit of glass is, I put it out of harm’s way, do you? That is all I did with Tony Dana’s faith. I put it into the hands of God for safe-keeping, out of the reach of a doubt that might have crushed it irreparably.” He shook back his hair, a slow smile gathering in his eyes. “I know no more than Tony in this matter, friends; we are both of us little children trusting a Father’s love.”

He restored the vase to its shelf, then he came back to his chair and stood looking down gravely.

“They say no two persons see the same thing exactly alike,” he went on after an appreciable interval, “it’s what each brings to the seeing, I think, as well as the angle of vision, that makes the difference. And we all have our ideas of Heaven—you yours, I mine; ’t would be folly to quarrel about ’em. For myself, it is not so much

the golden streets that I hope to see as it is the flowers — such flowers as I have known here, the little common ones that make a glory of wayside and gardens — and the faces of my friends, not one alone, but all.” He stooped as he spoke and touched the dog fondly, then he raised his head and looked directly at his judges.

“I was not quite honest when I brought John Wesley’s name into this discussion,” he said, his face reddening slightly. “It is true I hoped to impress you and disarm criticism because a worthier man than I had had the courage to express his convictions, heedless of the world’s approval. I — I beg your pardon, and his as well. What are John Wesley, Charles Kingsley, and the rest of those fearless thinkers to me? I am willing to stand alone in this matter without the support of any man living or dead, and I ask no one to share this belief with me.”

“This is sadly unorthodox,” murmured Mr. Loring, while his companions sat with down-cast eyes, blind to his mute appeal for support, — “sadly. It was partly because of these — ah! — these views of yours that we are here to-night. You cannot imagine the consternation they have caused throughout the town.”

The parson let his glance stray for a moment to the thrilling romance upon the table, and from

it to the excited face opposite. "I'm sorry," he said gently, "but I cannot change 'em."

"Mr. Loring is right in saying they have disturbed us," Squire Poindexter hastened to bridge over the awkward pause. "Our visit, however, is due to another project. It has occurred to us, sir, that at your advanced age your duties must be very arduous, and we have concluded you need an assistant" —

"Eh!" interrupted the parson slowly, "eh!"

"We should still want an occasional sermon from you, and I suppose our young folks would n't think they were properly married unless you did the coupling. There'd be demands enough on your time once we made you pastor emeritus, but the burden of the labor would be lifted to other shoulders."

"It's to spare you, sir," little Mr. Loring chimed in, "what" —

"I don't want to be spared," Parson Medlicott cried hotly; "I have n't complained, have I? There's mettle still in the old man, and ink enough in the inkstand for new sermons; when they give out I've a barrel full of old ones — what's worth hearing once is worth hearing again. You need n't fear I'd fail you."

"Tut! tut! we've implicit confidence in your abilities, and though at times we think you over-

tolerant, we know it's your nature to hate sin, and yet love the sinner, and to be ready to pardon every incompetency; still it has been deemed wisest to have a younger man to coöperate with you. We have taken no definite steps, hoping you might indicate some one" —

"I — I will serve you, but for the moment I cannot think."

"Oh, as to that, it's all in the air at present; a few weeks hence will do."

The men rose with evident relief and prepared to go.

"You must take more care of yourself, dominie," the doctor blustered with an attempt at cheeriness. "Jaunts over to Little Silver to see old Betsy Fleming are out of the question. I saw you there this afternoon. She's good for a number of years, so the next time she sends for you, don't humor her. It's too far — you must be very tired."

"Ye-es, I am tired. I had not thought of it before."

"You'll like this idea of an assistant once you're used to it. It's a good thing to rest with folded hands after one's work is done. A few years hence I shall look about for a successor myself" —

"Do so, sir, do so, before you hear the word that puts you without the door."

"Dominie — parson!"

“There, there, forget it all. The old man is bitter and peevish; bear with him, friends. Yes, yes, you’re right about a new hand at the helm — we’ll talk of it again, and soon. It will be better so — better so.”

He followed them into the hall, while Mr. Loring explained at length the duties of a pastor emeritus, and Squire Poindexter expatiated upon the esteem and veneration with which Broadmeadows regarded, and always would regard, her beloved parson. The doctor alone said nothing as he hurried his voluble companions away; the sight of the pain in the old man’s face had placed a heavy check upon his own tongue. He glanced back from the gate at their host standing on the doorstep, a black-robed, silver-haired figure holding a lamp aloft to guide their steps, and by his side that faithful friend of his looking gravely out into the darkness of the night.

The parson closed the door after a moment and went back into his study. He stood gazing about him for a time with unseeing eyes, then he seated himself again at the table, but made no effort to resume his book, nor did he notice the dog at his feet trying to jump up to his knees. Sometimes the Major could take the leap easily; at others he seemed to doubt his own powers and would hesitate, making futile springs; then finally, van-

quished by his fear, he would settle back on his haunches, looking piteously for aid to the hand that had never failed him. He went through this small pantomime now, whimpering softly until the man, attracted by the sound, lifted the supplicant in his arms.

“Old, little fellow,” he said slowly; “why, so am I — so am I. And they’ve tired of me after all these years — that’s what it means, despite their fair words.” He pressed the dog against his breast, his resentment dying down on the instant. After a while he went on, murmuring disjointed sentences half aloud:

“Through the burden and the heat of the day till sundown — Eh! they mean it kindly — they mean it kindly — they’re full of tolerance for my shortcomings. Yet I’d hoped to die in harness — wear out, not rust out. How we cling to our brief authority, thinking we and we only can be of use!”

He was silent for a few moments.

“What’s that Emerson says? H-m! how does it go? ‘It’s time to be old, to take in sail.’ Yes, that’s it — apt! apt! — and those other lines:

“ ‘As the bird trims her to the gale
I trim myself to the storm of time,
I man the rudder, reef the sail;
Obey the voice at eve, obeyed at prime.’ ”

He let a long pause intervene; then, with a

sudden straightening of his bowed shoulders, he sat erect and repeated the rest of the poem as though the words possessed a significance unperceived until that moment :

“ ‘ Lowly, faithful, banish fear,
Right onward drive unharmed ;
The port, well worth the cruise, is near,
And every wave is charmed.’ ”

His voice dropped into silence, his hand fell to the little head nestled against his breast. He raised the dog higher and, with a gentle touch, turned the slender muzzle upward until the Major's eyes, dewy with sleep and yet alert to the demand, looked directly back into his own. For a long minute master and dog gazed at each other, love and faith on either side, then a sudden beautiful smile broke over the old man's face.

“ We can trust, little comrade,” he said softly, “ we can trust.”





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