

Choosing A Wife From My Flock.

When I was a tadpole—that is to say, neither a layman any longer nor as yet a clergyman, but wriggling in that intermediary state enjoyed by students of theology—I learned wisdom from old Professor Lovejoy.

"My dear young gentlemen," he used to say, "three things are too wonderful for me: the way of a minister who meddles with his choir, the way of a minister who antagonizes his church treasurer, and the way of a minister who picks a wife from his own congregation."

That was twenty years ago, yet I can still see the twinkle in Professor Lovejoy's eyes as they peep out from over his steel-rimmed spectacles when he came to this remark about ministerial matrimony. But it was a short-lived twinkle. The good soul laid aside his notes and went at us extempore in downright earnest. As my irrelevant roommate put it, "The old chap talked to us like a father to a sick pig. This had its effect, at least in my case. I wrote upon the tablets of my heart a solemn commandment: 'Thou shalt not take unto thee a wife from thine own congregation.'"

When I emerged from the tad-pole state and got to be a full-fledged parson, with a little white belfry to my church and as many as eight sermons in the drawer I called my "barrel," I found out what an exceedingly tough commandment I had bound myself to keep. Not that the girls of my parish set their caps for me; not at all! They were nice girls, much too womanly for that. And even had they not been, forewarned is forearmed, and I had steeled my heart against the most captivating smiles and the endearing glances. The thing that scared me was my discovery at the very outset that my congregation was determined to furnish me a wife. Hardly a day passed without their hinting. Some of them went further, pointing to this girl or that, calling over her perfectly evident merits, and assuring me that she would "do." It was clear that these benevolent schemers were not laboring in the interest of my wives. They told me frankly that they were laboring in my own interest and in that of the church. I "needed a help-meet"; of the church "needed to have the parsonage occupied."

Now, I was enough like other young fellows of twenty-six, I meant to marry, yet it struck me that a preliminary love affair would not be out of place, and so far I had escaped falling in love. Imagining swooping down on an innocent creature who never did you any harm in her life and saying to her, "Girl, by order of the committee and intending no discourtesy, I am forced to propose. Will you be my wife?" Besides, I objected to having my own very precious future looked after by outsiders. Though a minister, I thought I ought to do the choosing myself. "Down with the bosses!" I cried. But what especially worried me was my salary. Say all you like, a help-meet is a help-meet, and I had just six hundred a year.

Still, I could see why my people felt as they did about the parsonage. There it stood, bleak and tenantless, its fireplace cold, its blinds shut, its door locked—a constant reminder, by contrast, of the hospitable home it had been and of the warm, welcoming, joyous parish center it ought to once more become. It belonged to my people, and at present it was worse than dead property. Meanwhile, here was I, with a study in the farmhouse where I boarded and not by any means a pastor easy to get at. If they came to see me, my parishioners had first to squirm past the farmer's wife. No offense to that agreeable dame, yet I must say that she was gifted with rare fluency and persistence of speech.

Later on I found out what my people meant by my "needing a help-meet." They wanted two ministers for one salary. This was reasonable—in the sense that a yard of silk at the price of half a yard is "reasonable." It was reasonable in another sense also. Time out of mind our little church had paid its preacher, and got the services of its preacher's wife free. She had taught the Bible class, played the organ, managed fairs and sales, visited the sick, and been a blessing to the parish in a thousand ways. Better still, she had policed her husband.

Personally, I thought I could police myself, but here I was mistaken, and I soon realized my mistake. I was not a skittish person, or more than normally "susceptible." I walked circumspectly. And yet this was insufficient. A country parson must not only avoid flirtation; he must have at his side a living, visible preventive of flirtation. Otherwise, gossip sets in and in the ministry the things people say of you count for very nearly as much, one way or the other, as the kind of man you really are. Within two months Dame Rumor had me paying court to three different girls, in whom, as a matter of fact, I had only a pastoral interest. True, I had called twice in each instance—but I had called twice on every member of my parish.

Though I was a good deal vexed, I could understand how naturally these suspicions got talked around. Anything that people desire to see and expect to see, they easily convince themselves that they do see. To my parishioners a minister was "a marrying man," and no lad in our pretty village ever thought of bringing in a wife from afar; he married the nearest girl; consequently I would pick a wife from my own congregation, and it only remained to guess which girl I would favor.

But while pressure from without urged me toward matrimony, there was also pressure from within. It

urged me in the same delightful direction. At times I came perilously near forgetting Professor Lovejoy's advice. I never passed the empty parsonage without reminding myself what an adorable home it would make. Besides, I was lonely. I missed my old friends. Worst of all, I realized that I was more or less of a captive in the farmhouse. The family "owned" me—or assumed that they did, which came to the same thing—and for the sake of my parish work I needed independence. A minister ought never to be "owned" except by his entire flock.

Then, too, there were fresh, girlish faces looking up into mine, Sunday after Sunday—faces that responded. I grew tenderly fond of them, and I am sure my wife will forgive me when I confess that they are a dear and beautiful memory to this day. How well I came to know those girls! It is a wonder, I think, that none of them got a strong enough hold on my heart to drive Professor Lovejoy's instructions clean out of my head. Perhaps, had I stayed in the village that very thing would have happened—granting, of course that Mamie or Susie or Jennie found me half as interesting as I found them.

Luckily, I remained only a year, completing the time I had engaged for and then moving on to a town of something over twelve thousand souls. In this I obeyed another of the old professor's maxims: "To be sweet, a first pastorate must be short."

The change was to my advantage in various ways. It doubled my audience, gave me more sophisticated listeners, and kept me in contact with cultivated people. Incidentally, I had a salary—eighteen hundred dollars. If I liked, I could marry, but no one urged me to. My new parishioners had too much delicacy for that, and I believed that hardly any of them cared whether I married or not. My predecessor had been a widower for nine years. The parsonage was rented. The church got on successfully without a minister's wife and could continue to. As for gossip, there charming town-folk had other things to busy their minds with; I could come and go as I chose, and never shake like the poor terrified creatures in "Lives of the Hunted."

This had the natural effect. No longer dragged toward matrimony by the hair of my head, I conceived a huge and highly jubilant resolve to marry—only of course I would not pick a wife from my own congregation. I was sorely tempted to, though or rather, I was tempted to try. The chance of failure made the adventure appear the more enticing. These were very different young ladies from the country lasses of my first parish. My city breeding no longer gave me the advantage. I had come among equals and more than equals. But while riskiness appealed to the man in me, it acted just the opposite way on the minister in me. What if one day Deacon Bradford should be saying to Deacon Eldridge, "Brother, our beloved pastor has received the mitten?" On the whole, then, I determined to stick by Professor Lovejoy and his precept.

I suppose there is nothing on earth much more ridiculous than a young man looking for a wife, and it cannot be denied that I was looking—with both eyes and a searchlight. Of course I found no wife. A girl catches a man at that trick, and backs away. I must avoid being too specific, else I might tell of several slight skirmishes outside my congregation. I took them a good deal to heart at the time, for a witness readily imagines himself in love.

Then, all of a sudden, came a revelation. One Sunday morning while the organ was playing. The girl walked up the middle aisle with her mother and sat down in the fourth pew from the front. I knew in an instant that she was the girl, although I had never set eyes on her before. She was back from a year's trip abroad.

Now, when I call her The Girl, I mean this: All others dwindled to nothing; my responsibilities dwindled to nothing; if you had reminded me of Professor Lovejoy, I should have felt like smiting you on both cheeks. And I was not thinking of her as a possible minister's wife, either. I was thinking of her as a girl I would leave the ministry for, if necessary, provided only that she would have in me. Yes, that was just what was in my mind at the moment, and thank God it is still there! I could find other fields of Christian usefulness, but I knew I should never find another girl I could bring myself to marry.

How I knew it? Well, that is a story by itself, and a long one. The problem that pertains at present is how I ever managed to pull through the service that Sunday morning without giving an intimation of an utter, abject idiot. Nevertheless, I did pull through, perhaps because the wonderful blue eyes seemed to say, "Oh, don't let anyone find out!" Honestly, I fancied they said that; and I think proper to admit it, as it will show you the mood I was in.

After the benediction I stepped down from the pulpit, as my custom was, to shake hands with my people, and her mother introduced me to her. That afternoon I called. That evening I walked home from church with her. That night I paced the floor of my boarding house room till the hours began to grow big.

Consider it. I had repudiated a resolution, staking everything on what I had been taught to regard as a professional blunder, and risking grave damage to my career. All this I realized, cheerfully enough. The torment of it was the question of right and wrong. What business had I to pick a wife from my own congregation, when the choice would make trouble in my church?

Well, what business has a man to get struck by lightning, or to be drowned at sea, or demolished by a railroad train? This affair was not of my seeking, nor could I have prevented it. It was a splendid accident. It simply happened.

I was in no way responsible myself; and if responsibility was involved anywhere, it rested henceforth with my people, who ought to stand by me. What right has any organization, Christian or pagan, to spoil a man's existence by depriving him of the one sole thing he wants and has to have—especially when it is a beautiful, sacred thing, and good for the soul? The church would survive, in any case. That enough of me would survive to be worth the space I took up, if I let my profession wreck my happiness. I seriously doubted.

Along toward four in the morning I reached a conclusion. I convinced myself that the church would stand by me; I even believed that the old Professor would agree with me, if he understood the circumstances. My people were broad minded. They were generous. They were above gossip. They were all ready to respect my independence. They seemed not to care whether their pastor was married or single. I loved them and they knew it. Surely, they could not help loving her—nobody could! So, if ever a minister had a right to be true to his best impulses and disregard consequences, I was that minister. I threw myself on my bed and fell asleep.

According to the clerical calendar the next day should have been Blue Monday. Instead, it was a rosy Monday, an exceedingly rosy Monday, for I spent it with her and her mother in a sail boat up the river. I had never been so happy in all my life.

Within a few weeks the story of our engagement leaked out, and my woes then began. To my horror, I found about seven-eighths of my flock arrayed against the dear shepherdess I had selected for them. I was furious at the time, though both she and I have since come to appreciate how natural and how human their opposition was. My people recalled only too vividly the days when she had worn her hair down her back and climbed trees; they could not look up to her: it was like the case of the prophet who was not without honor save in his own country. Another thing, the prospect of her promotion from the ranks to a position of leadership annoyed the women who were leaders already; they could have yielded much more gracefully to a stranger coming in from outside, but it displeased them to have to yield at all. Then, too, it appeared that my alliance with her family and her set made me seem less a servant of the parish in general. Finally, there was a side of the matter that I hate to speak of, but will, because it belongs to the story. Years later I learned to my astonishment that several benevolent match-makers had had designs on me and resented my escape.

Now you are not to suppose that anything shocking or sensational took place in our church. Far from it! My parishioners treated me with entire courtesy. Congratulations poured in. But they were formal, perfunctory, carefully worded congratulations, evidently thought out beforehand and quite lacking in exuberance. They hurt. They made me angry. They grieved her. They disturbed her mother. My indignation grew. I could no longer trust myself to preach without notes; I wrote my sermons, trying my best to put into them the warmth, the kindness and the devoted enthusiasm that had died out of my heart. Of course I failed. A curious aloofness had come over my people. It chilled me to look into the faces that had once lighted up so gratefully and were now listless. No matter how faithfully I toiled over my manuscripts, they were like dried leaves when I took them into the pulpit. Preaching, you know, depends as much on the listeners as on the speaker. Unless they do their part, he can never hope to do his. And when I went calling I met the same difficulty. I was politely received, politely entertained. But the old, sweet spirit of confidence had slipped away. I felt that I was being held at arm's length. This made me self-conscious. In a word, things had come to pass literally and precisely as Professor Lovejoy had told us they would.

Months went by before I could bear to talk the situation over with her, and oh! but I was sorry I did, even then. She blamed herself, poor child. She said there would be a smash, sure as fate, and that it would be her fault. She said she had spoiled my career. She cried on my shoulder till her mother heard her and came running in to see what the matter was. Quite a scene we had, discussing our plight—I protesting I would resign, she insisting I mustn't, and her mother vehemently entreating us to be patient, as she "knew" everything would turn out right in the end. I agreed to wait another week before making up my mind.

The following Sunday a famous preacher exchanged with the pastor of a church three blocks from mine. I had expected a somewhat diminished congregation, but never the humiliating defection that occurred. There were empty pews by the dozen—proof positive that I had "lost my hold." My feet were heavy as lead as I climbed the pulpit stairs. Presently she came up the aisle, beaming encouragement at me, but when she reached her seat I saw her lip quiver. I looked away, over the rows of deserted pews, and as I looked I noticed something unusual. Three stately old gentlemen, entire strangers, were being shown in. At least I could preach to them. And certainly I could preach to the handful of my own parishioners who had come. For these must be friends. My heart went out to them. It was like old times.

I was myself again, and when I stood up to preach I wholly forgot that I had brought along a manuscript. I forgot everything but my message and the beloved few who were there to receive it. I was once more a true minister of God, aflame with enthusiasm. Her face shone, and so did others—particularly those of the three stately old gentlemen.

After the service they introduced themselves to me, without explana-

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tion, and said they would like to meet her. I thought it queer. Still queerer was their smiling request, a moment later, that we take a little walk with them. Then it struck me what it all meant—a committee! I could have hugged those old gentlemen. As for my fiancée, words can never describe the flush in her cheeks or the glow in her eyes or the captivating diffidence in her manner, when the statelyst of the three committeemen said to her, "I suppose I ought to tell you that we have something on our minds and want your advice. We need a minister at our church in Springfield. Do you think this young man will do?"

That I accepted the call I need hardly add, any more than I need add that when she and I were married, a few weeks afterward, it was good Professor Lovejoy who came four hundred miles to tie the knot, or that she has been for eighteen happy years the chief source of my ministerial success. There is, however, a thing I ought to add, as it surprised me at the time and I infer that it reveals a side of human nature that people often overlook. It was this: The minute I announced my intention of leaving, all hostility vanished. I was not teased to stay, but expressions of regret were cordial and numerous, and, I believe, sincere; the parish showed its good will toward her in every conceivable way; it has been a pleasant experience to go back there ever since. To be sure, my people had said: "We will not have this home-grown young woman to rule over us." Yet they had also said, "She is a treasure, nevertheless." As for their attitude toward me, well, they at least gave me credit for ginger.—A Pastor, in The Ladies' World.

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