

baker's cart was hurrying on its round; the geese and ducks were being driven across the waste ground to shelter for the night. It was cold and grey without; but once inside the widow's parlour, and all changed for warmth and cheerfulness; and not least warm and cheerful was this vigorous old lady, with her keen bright eyes, and old-fashioned gallantry, for she has tasted life in the forties and fifties.

Having swallowed a cup of fresh-made pungent tea, and some of the sweetest of home-made scones, I plunged at once into the subject of my visit.

"Now tell me," I said, "do you really think the Parish Councils will be a distinct boon to the working classes and the village folk?"

"Most certainly I do," she replied while deliberately placing her cup on the work-table by her side. "I've not a doubt about it at all. Village life is unspeakably dull and colourless. I don't mean for myself," she hurried to explain. "I have my books," and her eyes wandered round the room, "and there are visits to pay, and the schoolmistress to help—by the way we are great friends. But what interests have these village people. They can scarcely read, they have but few books, they know nothing of the pleasures of conversation. London is a far-off dream, and electioneering for a Member of Parliament scarce makes their blood move. They have no society, no news-room. What wonder, then, that the men find their way every night to the village Inn, the only centre of brightness, warmth, and light. But these Parish Councils will give them something to think about because its doings will affect the life that lies close to them. The Parish Meetings will do them more good than hours of stump oratory, for at it something tangible can be discussed. When one improvement has been accomplished their eyes will be opened to the necessity of a score of others.

"But what improvements do you expect in the village?"

"Improvements we expect!" she echoed, rising to give the fire a vigorous poke, which sent the flames dancing up the chimney. "Why, plenty of improvements. Can't we manage to improve away the insalubrious smells that greet one when walking up the village street. And have you never noticed that heap of rubbish at the corner of the lane leading down by the churchyard. Ashes, old tin cans, worn-out shoes, old kettles, potato peelings, and cabbage leaves are flung there by the people near. Nature does her best to cover the ugly sight by running a few brier bushes across the mound, and by trying to rear upon it a few blades of grass, but it's no use. If I get on the Council —"

"You're sure to," I interrupted.

"If I get on the Council, I mean to draw public attention to that rubbish heap. Then I strongly object to my water coming from the farm-yard opposite here; it is, to say the least, unpleasant to pick one's way amongst the fowls and past the pig-styes, over the same ground that is traversed morning and evening by the cows. There is a pump at the other end of the village, but one can never get a can of water without tucking one's petticoats up above one's ankles, and wading through a puddle of dirty water. And I have my suspicions about that water when it is pumped up," she added, shrewdly. "Oh! and I always shudder when passing by a cottage, when I find a woman at the door flinging away a basin of

suds, or some cabbage water. Why in the world cannot we have proper drains for waste water?"

"But the expense," I mildly suggested.

"Aye, there's the rub. We poor people have none too much of it. But those who take the rent of the cottages should see that they are kept in decent repair. God forbid that I should sit in judgment. But it is hard that in so rich a country—the richest in the world—there should be such inequality. I don't merely mean as regards money and position, but as regards the merest decencies of life. And surely we are getting to learn the lesson that no member of the community can suffer, not even the lowest, without its influencing those in the highest circles. The poor man who has small-pox, is a danger to the richest who has not. Therefore it is to everybody's interest that our villages be kept pure; and, by everybody, I would also include those who live in towns."

"Yes," I replied, meditatively, "I suppose you think that if our villages were made more attractive from a physical, mental, and even an æsthetic point of view, the inhabitants would not be so eager to crowd into the towns."

"Yes, certainly, that is my opinion. I know for a fact that the brightest and most promising lads, who would have been an ornament to our Council, have either emigrated, if they could scrape together sufficient money, or have tramped to London. I always regret deeply when these intelligent workers are drained from rural districts where they are really needed; but if they found things more interesting for them, I think we could induce them to stay, especially if they had an allotment to work. And I think, too, the Parish Meetings and Councils will give greater effect to the Education Act; for now parents will see that there is some use after all in being able to read, write, and calculate, for, of course, every mother and father will desire to see their children one day have a seat on the Council by the side of the Parson and the Squire."

The old lady paused, and proceeded to refill our cups with tea, and our plates with toasted scone, and then continued—

"Have you not often heard people say, I won't trouble to do anything to this house; the landlord will only raise the rent; or if I do, it's putting money into his pocket; of course, if the place were my own it would be different, I could take an interest in it."

I nodded assent, being still busily engaged with tea.

"Well, now, don't you think that if these village people are given direct interest in the affairs of their parish, and not only direct interest, but responsibility as well, don't you think it will tend to foster the spirit of natural patriotism, which no one needs be told is a power for good. And don't you think it will have the effect of rearing up amongst us a set of people closely allied to the old yeoman class, permeated with the spirit of sturdy independence, which goes far to make up the story of a nation's strength. If the parish manages its own affairs, you may be sure mercy and justice will be meted out to the aged and suffering, for these people know what suffering means; but scant pity will the loafer and idler get at their hands. 'He who will not work neither shall he eat,' is sufficient guide for dealing with these creatures. I am glad," she continued, "that the secular charities have been taken out of the hands of the clergy, for this will raise

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