

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE.

SKETCH FROM THE NOTE BOOK OF AN OLD GENTLEMAN.

Never shall I forget the dignity and sense of importance which swelled my mind when I was first pronounced old enough to go to meeting. That eventful Sunday I was up long before day, and even took my Sabbath suit to the window to ascertain by the first light that it actually was there, just as it looked the night before. With what complacency did I view myself completely dressed! How did I count over the rows of yellow gilt buttons on my coat! how my good mother, grandmother, and aunts fussed, and twitched, and pulled, to make every thing set up and set down, just in the proper place! how my clean, starched white collar was turned over and smoothed again and again, and my golden curls twisted and arranged to make the most of me! and, last of all, how I was cautioned not to be thinking of my clothes! In truth, I was in those days a very handsome youngster, and it really is no more than justice to let the fact be known, as there is nothing in my present appearance from which it could ever be inferred. Every body in the house successively asked me if I should be a good boy, and sit still, and not talk, nor laugh; and my mother informed me, in terrorem, that there was a tithing man, who carried off naughty children, and shut them up in a dark place behind the pulpit; and that this tithing man, Mr. Zephaniah Scranton, sat just where he could see me. This fact impressed my mind with more solemnity than all the exhortations which had preceded it--a

proof of the efficacy of facts above reason. Under shadow and power of this weighty truth, I demurely took hold of my mother's forefinger to walk to meeting.

The traveller in New England, as he stands on some eminence, and looks down on its rich landscape of golden grain and waving cornfield, sees no feature more beautiful than its simple churches, whose white taper fingers point upward, amid the greenness and bloom of the distant prospects, as if to remind one of the overshadowing providence whence all this luxuriant beauty flows; and year by year, as new ones are added to the number, or succeed in the place of old ones, there is discernible an evident improvement in their taste and architecture. Those modest Doric little buildings, with their white pillars, green blinds, and neat enclosures, are very different affairs from those great, uncouth mountains of windows and doors that stood in the same place years before. To my childish eye, however, our old meeting house was an awe-inspiring thing. To me it seemed fashioned very nearly on the model of Noah's ark and Solomon's temple, as set forth in the pictures in my Scripture Catechism--pictures which I did not doubt were authentic copies; and what more respectable and venerable architectural precedent could any one desire? Its double rows of windows, of which I knew the number by heart, its doors with great wooden quirls over them, its belfry projecting out at the east end, its steeple and bell, all inspired as much sense of the sublime in me as Strasbourg Cathedral itself; and the inside was not a whit less imposing.

How magnificent, to my eye, seemed the turnip-like canopy that hung over the minister's head, hooked by a long iron rod to the wall above! and how apprehensively did I consider the question, what would become of him if it should fall! How did I wonder at the panels on either side of the pulpit, in each of which was carved and painted a flaming red tulip, bolt upright, with its leaves projecting out at right angles! and then at the grape vine, bass relieved on the front, with its exactly triangular bunches of grapes, alternating at exact intervals with exactly triangular leaves. To me it was an indisputable representation of how grape vines ought to look, if they would only be straight and regular, instead of curling and scrambling, and twisting themselves into all sorts of slovenly shapes. The area of the house was divided into large square pews, boxed up with stout boards, and surmounted with a kind of baluster work, which I supposed to be provided for the special accommodation of us youngsters, being the "loopholes of retreat" through which we gazed on the "remarkabilia" of the scene. It was especially interesting to me to notice the coming in to meeting of the congregation. The doors were so contrived that on entering you stepped down instead of up--a construction that has more than once led to unlucky results in the case of strangers. I remember once when an unlucky Frenchman, entirely unsuspecting of the danger that awaited him, made entrance by pitching devoutly upon his nose in the middle of the broad aisle; that it took three bunches of my grandmother's fennel to bring my risibles into any thing like composure. Such exhibitions, fortunately for me, were very rare; but still I found great amusement in watching the distinctive and marked outlines of the various people that

filled up the seats around me. A Yankee village presents a picture of the curiosities of every generation: there, from year to year, they live on, preserved by hard labor and regular habits, exhibiting every peculiarity of manner and appearance, as distinctly marked as when they first came from the mint of nature. And as every body goes punctually to meeting, the meeting house becomes a sort of museum of antiquities--a general muster ground for past and present.

I remember still with what wondering admiration I used to look around on the people that surrounded our pew. On one side there was an old Captain McLean, and Major McDill, a couple whom the mischievous wits of the village designated as Captain McLean and Captain McFat; and, in truth, they were a perfect antithesis, a living exemplification of flesh and spirit. Captain McLean was a mournful, lengthy, considerate-looking old gentleman, with a long face, digressing into a long, thin, horny nose, which, when he applied his pocket handkerchief, gave forth a melancholy, minor-keyed sound, such as a ghost might make, using a pocket handkerchief in the long gallery of some old castle.

Close at his side was the doughty, puffing Captain McDill, whose full-orbed, jolly visage was illuminated by a most valiant red nose, shaped something like an overgrown doughnut, and looking as if it had been thrown at his face, and happened to hit in the middle. Then there was old Israel Peters, with a wooden leg, which tramped into meeting, with undeviating regularity, ten minutes before meeting time; and there was Jedediah Stebbins, a thin, wistful, moonshiny-looking old gentleman,

whose mouth appeared as if it had been gathered up with a needle and thread, and whose eyes seemed as if they had been bound with red tape; and there was old Benaiah Stephens, who used regularly to get up and stand when the minister was about half through his sermon, exhibiting his tall figure, long, single-breasted coat, with buttons nearly as large as a tea plate; his large, black, horn spectacles stretched down on the extreme end of a very long nose, and vigorously chewing, meanwhile, on the bunch of caraway which he always carried in one hand. Then there was Aunt Sally Stimpson, and old Widow Smith, and a whole bevy of little, dried old ladies, with small, straight, black bonnets, tight sleeves to the elbow, long silk gloves, and great fans, big enough for a windmill; and of a hot day it was a great amusement to me to watch the bobbing of the little black bonnets, which showed that sleep had got the better of their owners' attention, and the sputter and rustling of the fans, when a more profound nod than common would suddenly waken them, and set them to fanning and listening with redoubled devotion. There was Deacon Dundas, a great wagon load of an old gentleman, whose ample pockets looked as if they might have held half the congregation, who used to establish himself just on one side of me, and seemed to feel such entire confidence in the soundness and capacity of his pastor that he could sleep very comfortably from one end of the sermon to the other. Occasionally, to be sure, one of your officious blue flies, who, as every body knows, are amazingly particular about such matters, would buzz into his mouth, or flirt into his ears a passing admonition as to the impropriety of sleeping in meeting, when the good old gentleman would start, open his eyes very wide, and look about with a resolute

air, as much as to say, "I wasn't asleep, I can tell you;" and then setting himself in an edifying posture of attention, you might perceive his head gradually settling back, his mouth slowly opening wider and wider, till the good man would go off again soundly asleep, as if nothing had happened.

It was a good orthodox custom of old times to take every part of the domestic establishment to meeting, even down to the faithful dog, who, as he had supervised the labors of the week, also came with due particularity to supervise the worship of Sunday. I think I can see now the fitting out on a Sunday morning--the one wagon, or two, as the case might be, tackled up with an "old gray" or an "old bay," with a buffalo skin over the seat by way of cushion, and all the family, in their Sunday best, packed in for meeting; while Master Bose, Watch, or Towser stood prepared to be an outguard and went meekly trotting up hill and down dale in the rear. Arrived at meeting, the canine part of the establishment generally conducted themselves with great decorum, lying down and going to sleep as decently as any body present, except when some of the business-loving bluebottles aforesaid would make a sortie upon them, when you might hear the snap of their jaws as they vainly sought to lay hold of the offender. Now and then, between some of the sixthlies, seventhlies, and eighthlies, you might hear some old patriarch giving himself a rousing shake, and pitpatting soberly up the aisles, as if to see that every thing was going on properly, after which he would lie down and compose himself to sleep again; and certainly this was as improving a way of spending Sunday as a good Christian dog could

desire.

But the glory of our meeting house was its singers' seat--that empyrean of those who rejoiced in the divine, mysterious art of fa-sol-la-ing, who, by a distinguishing grace and privilege, could "raise and fall" the cabalistical eight notes, and move serene through the enchanted region of flats, sharps, thirds, fifths, and octaves.

There they sat in the gallery that lined three sides of the house, treble, counter, tenor, and bass, each with its appropriate leaders and supporters; there were generally seated the bloom of our young people; sparkling, modest, and blushing girls on one side, with their ribbons and finery, making the place where they sat as blooming and lively as a flower garden, and fiery, forward, confident young men on the other. In spite of its being a meeting house, we could not swear that glances were never given and returned, and that there was not often as much of an approach to flirtation as the distance and the sobriety of the place would admit. Certain it was, that there was no place where our village coquettes attracted half so many eyes or led astray half so many hearts.

But I have been talking of singers all this time, and neglected to mention the Magnus Apollo of the whole concern, the redoubtable chorister, who occupied the seat of honor in the midst of the middle gallery, and exactly opposite to the minister. Certain it is that the good man, if he were alive, would never believe it; for no person ever more magnified his office, or had a more thorough belief in his own

greatness and supremacy, than Zedekiah Morse. Methinks I can see him now as he appeared to my eyes on that first Sunday, when he shot up from behind the gallery, as if he had been sent up by a spring. He was a little man, whose fiery-red hair, brushed straight up on the top of his head, had an appearance as vigorous and lively as real flame; and this, added to the ardor and determination of all his motions, had obtained for him the surname of the "Burning Bush." He seemed possessed with the very soul of song; and from the moment he began to sing, looked alive all over, till it seemed to me that his whole body would follow his hair upwards, fairly rapt away by the power of harmony. With what an air did he sound the important fa-sol-la in the ears of the waiting gallery, who stood with open mouths ready to seize their pitch, preparatory to their general set to! How did his ascending and descending arm astonish the zephyrs when once he laid himself out to the important work of beating time! How did his little head whisk from side to side, as now he beat and roared towards the ladies on his right, and now towards the gentlemen on his left! It used to seem to my astonished vision as if his form grew taller, his arm longer, his hair redder, and his little green eyes brighter, with every stave; and particularly when he perceived any falling off of time or discrepancy in pitch; with what redoubled vigor would he thump the gallery and roar at the delinquent quarter, till every mother's son and daughter of them skipped and scrambled into the right place again!

O, it was a fine thing to see the vigor and discipline with which he managed the business; so that if, on a hot, drowsy Sunday, any part of

the choir hung back or sung sleepily on the first part of a verse, they were obliged to bestir themselves in good earnest, and sing three times as fast, in order to get through with the others. 'Kiah Morse was no advocate for your dozy, drawling singing, that one may do at leisure, between sleeping and waking, I assure you; indeed, he got entirely out of the graces of Deacon Dundas and one or two other portly, leisurely old gentlemen below, who had been used to throw back their heads, shut up their eyes, and take the comfort of the psalm, by prolonging indefinitely all the notes. The first Sunday after 'Kiah took the music in hand, the old deacon really rubbed his eyes and looked about him; for the psalm was sung off before he was ready to get his mouth opened, and he really looked upon it as a most irreverent piece of business.

But the glory of 'Kiah's art consisted in the execution of those good old billowy compositions called fuguing tunes, where the four parts that compose the choir take up the song, and go racing around one after another, each singing a different set of words, till, at length, by some inexplicable magic, they all come together again, and sail smoothly out into a rolling sea of song. I remember the wonder with which I used to look from side to side when treble, tenor, counter, and bass were thus roaring and foaming,--and it verily seemed to me as if the psalm was going to pieces among the breakers,--and the delighted astonishment with which I found that each particular verse did emerge whole and uninjured from the storm.

But alas for the wonders of that old meeting house, how they are passed

away! Even the venerable building itself has been pulled down, and its fragments scattered; yet still I retain enough of my childish feelings to wonder whether any little boy was gratified by the possession of those painted tulips and grape vines, which my childish eye used to covet, and about the obtaining of which, in case the house should ever be pulled down, I devised so many schemes during the long sermons and services of summer days. I have visited the spot where it stood, but the modern, fair-looking building that stands in its room bears no trace of it; and of the various familiar faces that used to be seen inside, not one remains. Verily, I must be growing old; and as old people are apt to spin long stories, I check myself, and lay down my pen.