The Trials of Being Both Minister and Father

by

Margaret Foster

When the minister preaches his first sermon for a new congregation, he usually expounds and expostulates, and astonishes the people with his eloquence. They congratulate themselves on having hired a “jewel.” However, on the following Sunday, after observing three young hopefuls down on the second row, with mischief-seeking eyes, they know that most anything is apt to happen almost any time. I speak with authority, because my father is a minister, and I, for a number years, was his gravest apprehension. After surviving four years of my reign of terror, he was able to accept the boys with calm philosophy. He was sure they couldn’t be any worse, but sad to relate, he didn’t know the boys.

I started out piously enough for anyone. As an infant I smiled sweetly upon all members of my father’s flock, and graciously accepted dolls, chewing gum, gold watchchains, or anything else they had to offer. I even told them the story of Pocahontas, and recited the twenty-third Psalm from the top of the communion table, at the age of three years. It looked like a great beginning for the ideal minister’s daughter. But, it didn’t last. I am sure that somewhere in my dim, distant past there must have been a wayward ancestor, and I struck right out on this sinful creature’s path at a very tender age.

Possibly you remember the popular jazz hit of years gone by, called “I Love the Ladies.” My Mother, blissfully unaware of my true nature, sang it often as she worked. I gave her away one Sunday morning by singing one line of it with great feeling and still greater volume during an inspiring sermon. Right then and there my parents began to suspect me, and I think, to distrust me as well. Then there was the occasion on which I slipped from mother’s loosened grasp and ran down the aisle, gleefully shouting back to her, “I’ll bet you can’t catch me!” Lectures concerning my future conduct began during the oatmeal next morning.

As I grew older, I read my Sunday school papers at the services while my younger brothers entertained the audience. They followed my noble example with great pleasure and Daddy could always count on them to keep even the habitual snorers awake. They practically earned his salary for him. Charles, especially was a super-showman. He always sang with the choir, and invariably went on a few bars for good measure after the music ceased.

Both boys gave great promise of being future Fosdicks, but it didn’t “pan out.” Their mutual goal was to be able to sit in the awe-inspiring, upholstered chairs on either side of the pulpit. Finally Daddy reluctantly consented to let Vernon try it one evening as an experiment. He was on his good behavior all evening, and sat up in great state, looking for all the world like a Napoleon. The next Sunday night, Charles was given permission to occupy the other chair, but not seeming so ecclesiastically inclined as was his brother, he did so only once.

Imagine Daddy’s mortification when in the middle of his sermon he observed broad smiles upon the faces of his usually attentive sheep, and turned to see his son strutting around behind him and holding a raised umbrella over his head. From that time Charles sat in the accustomed place, with Mother between him and the aisle.

As we became more mature, and hence more dignified, Mother began to cause trouble for Daddy. She was not always satisfied with his per-
sonal appearance. True, she started him out to church looking his best, but by the time she arrived his costume was disarranged. This ruined the day for Mother, until he conceived the idea of pointing out his imperfections to him from her seat in the choir. Poor Daddy never could understand sign language, and when it was accompanied by queer facial expressions he was practically helpless. There was but one way to protect himself, and long-suffering Daddy did it. One night he stopped his discussion to announce, “I can see by my wife’s signals that something is the matter with my hair. Pardon me a moment while I fix it.” He carefully adjusted the stray lock, while Mother mentally shrank to the size of a worm. For once Daddy was victorious.

Pitty the poor minister. He has the trials of Job. He does everything from washing dishes at missionary banquets, to the impromptu teaching such classes as the “Buds of Promise” and “Knights of the Cross,” who never live up to their pretentious titles. His life is truly one of hardships, but none of them can compare with the humiliation of having a son who tells the class that he can’t attend their party on Friday, because “we take our bath on Friday night.”

ANNOUNCEMENT
The June number of MSS. will feature the prize-winning entries in the 1934 Butler Literary Contest, in the upper-classman section.