

MY FRIEND THE PASTOR

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THE porter swung down the aisle of the moving train lugging a heavy suitcase behind him. He paused at the side of the man whose belongings were scattered comfortably over the two seats of the section and looked at him with apologetic eyes. The man glanced up from his book into the troubled black face bending reluctantly above him.

“Scuse me, suh,” the porter said with what he hoped was a conciliating smile, but a gemman has jes’ bought yuh upper. He’s back in the washroom talkin’ to the conductuh.”

Without protest the man began to transfer his bags from the seat in front of him. He slipped it under his own seat, stacked it in piles beside him, and gathered about him the books, papers, typewriter, and brief case that he had scattered with a careless hand.

“All right,” he said, and the porter noticed that for once he was not addressed as George (the porter’s name was Orlando, and he much preferred it to George); “tuck him in. I suppose I ought to be grateful for having had the section to myself all afternoon.”

The porter deftly shot the intruder’s suitcase under the vacated seat and moved away as the newcomer arrived, wrestled himself out of his overcoat, banged a newspaper and a magazine down, and rather heavily followed them.

The two men silently regarded each other much as a pugilist eyes his opponent before a fight. Boxed up in the narrow confines of a Pullman section, they would rub knees uncomfortably, crawl over each other, and get their baggage annoyingly mixed for the rest of the journey. Perhaps one of them would want the berths made up early, while the other liked to sit and read until midnight. Would they speak or ignore each other? And if one of them spoke, would the other chap prove to be a terrible bore or an interesting fellow? All the barriers raised by civilisation between chance acquaintances must be crossed. They were both of early middle age, both evidently successful business men, possibly with similar tastes, and yet. . . .

The porter, passing down the aisle half an hour later, found them talking and laughing like old friends. He grinned approvingly. Too many patrons cut his tip in half when he, quite without any fault on his part, put someone into their section.

“So,” Floyd, the original occupant of the section was saying, “we halved the 17th hole; I took the 18th, and by Jove, for the first time in my life got an 88.”

“Pretty good,” agreed Hutchinson, the newcomer, approvingly. “I got an 89 over the Westcliff course two weeks ago, and I haven’t done better than break 100 since.”

They grinned at each other with the friendliness of fellow dubbers, and as the waiter from the dining car sent up his siren, “Second call,” they wandered together down the aisle toward dinner.

“Friday, isn’t it?” mused Floyd as he scanned the menu with a critical thought.

“Are you a Catholic?” asked Hutchinson, looking up in surprise.

Floyd nodded, and gave the waiter his fish order, adding a liberal allowance of vegetables on the side. Hutchinson frowned for a minute and then said to the waiter:

“Make mine the same, but hashed brown instead of French fried.”

Then he looked out the window, gazing with apparent interest at a monotonous string of construction cars along the track.

“I used to be a Catholic, too,” he said.

“Is that so?” Floyd smiled back. “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic, you know. ‘T any rate, I’m glad you’re a Catholic tonight. I don’t like to eat fish alone. As a matter of fact, I much prefer a thick, rare steak.”

They sat back in their chairs as the waiter slipped into place the silverware and the misty glasses of ice-water. Floyd sipped his glass and then regarded his companion with frank interest.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” he said, “just why are you a used-to-be Catholic?”

“Oh, it’s not much of a story, just the same old trouble that lots of people have. I had a row with my parish priest and swore a solemn oath I’d never go into a church again. That was about twenty years ago, and I’ve kept my word.”

“Was it a serious row?” asked Floyd, interested.

“Rather. I was going with a Protestant girl, and we wanted to get married. But she wouldn’t sign the promises before marriage. I’ll admit that it didn’t seem fair to me to ask her to sign away, so to speak, her children, so I didn’t press the matter. But, of course, I wanted to be married by a priest. So I went to see our parish priest, and he refused me point-blank and was none too sweet about it. Told me I was a rotten sort of Catholic and that if I didn’t let him marry us we wouldn’t be married, and that he wouldn’t marry me unless she signed. Threatened me with the wrath of God, too. You know how priests are, always dragging in the wrath of God when they can’t scare you any other way. So that settled it. I walked out of the house and married the girl anyhow. Of course, that ended church for me.”

“Happily married?” asked Floyd, leaning to one side as the waiter placed his white-fish before him.

“No,” answered Hutchinson, slipping a knife inside the browned upper skin of the fish. “We agreed to a divorce after about three years. She’s got our boy, and she’s been rather nasty about letting me see him. She’s married again, naturally, but one experience was enough for me.”

“So,” Floyd commented, addressing no one in particular, unless it was perhaps the whitefish on which he was concentrating, “then the priest was pretty much right after all.”

Hutchinson looked up quickly.

“Nonsense,” he retorted. “We were just temperamentally unsuited. The priest had nothing to do with the case.”

“Possibly he didn’t; but the fact remains that he was right. Priests have a way of being right in cases like that. They speak, you see, with more than one man’s limited experience: They rely on the pretty old and pretty sound experience of the Church. And time proved him right, you see. I’ve noticed, somehow, that time usually proves our priests right.”

Hutchinson removed from his mouth a troublesome bone that had escaped his pains-taking observation and half snorted. “That’s tush. I’ll tell you the honest truth, Floyd; I don’t like priests and I never have liked them. As a boy they frightened me, and as a young man they irritated me. I’ve always run from a Roman collar like I’d run from a scarlet-fever sign.”

As for myself,” smiled Floyd, “I’m going on a week’s fishing trip with my pastor as soon as the spring season opens.”

“Well, frankly, I’d about as soon go with my old Aunt Martha.”

“That’s because you don’t know priests.”

“Maybe not; but that black cassock of theirs has always seemed the right sort of dress for them.”

“Meaning effeminate?”

“Well . . .

“Because if you do, you’re more wrong even than I thought. Certainly you haven’t forgot when our parish priests put off their cassocks and put on the chaplain’s uniform and were he-men in that he-men’s army. The army and navy got to know a lot about the manliness of our priests in the front-line trenches and on the battleships. Priests haven’t changed much, the war proved, since the clays they came to this country in rotten sailing vessels to bring the consolations of religion to the first colonists and then went out and carried the faith to the Indians. They weren’t any more afraid of shrapnel and poison gas than they were of the hardships of pioneer America or the arrows and filthy food of Sioux or Iroquois villages. No one who really knows priests has any doubt about their essential manliness.”

The waiter unconsciously punctuated the conversation with a new supply of butter. They sat silently while he balanced the golden square from his dish of ice to the small pat near their plates.

“I’ve been thinking,” Floyd went on, “of how much priests really matter to the lives of those who get to know them—to my life, for instance.”

“Oh,” Hutchinson protested, “I know what you are going to say: Baptism, First Communion, the parish school, marrying you to your wife, burying your mother, giving your children their First Communion, and all that sort of thing. Charles K. Harris in the good old Nineties used to write songs about subjects like that.”

Floyd laughed, and Hutchinson pursued elusive green peas about in their little china tub as if they were pearls of finest water.

“No,” Floyd said, “I wasn’t thinking precisely of that. Though, after all, the person who has been connected with all that significant part of a chap’s life is rather important, don’t you think? If he baptized me, he somehow or other turned the little pagan that was me into a child of God. If he brought me my First Communion, he brought me

something mighty beautiful and fine. I'm really deeply grateful for the fact that he gave me a parish school to go to and to learn the real meaning of life and a lot of things that I'm using every day—faith, for instance, and decency (I hope), and prayer, frequent Mass, respect for Sisters, something about the Blessed Virgin that makes me feel differently toward women and about the saints that gives me a larger faith in human nature. And I must admit that I'd be grateful to any man who married me to my wife and blessed my marriage at the altar. I'm here to tell the universe that he did a first-class job and gave me a fine start on what has been a powerfully happy twenty-odd years. And he said some wonderfully consoling things when he buried my mother that sent me out from the church feeling that death wasn't the end, and that I'd see her again some day. He has given my children their First Communion, and it's one of the thrilling pictures of my life. So if Charles K. Harris or Irving Berlin, or any of the sob-ballad writers wrote songs about those things, I'll sing 'em myself or listen to Al Jolson sing 'em or tune in on 'em any time I get a chance."

The train paused at a little station and the sudden lull of the roaring wheels made Floyd lower his voice.

"But they've meant so much more to me than even that, priests have," he said.

"I don't get it," answered Hutchinson, carrying the last scrap of fish to his plate and motioning to the waiter to remove the empty platter.

"I was a rough little brat," Floyd went on; "and my mother had many a sad hour over me. Then one day (I was about seven and up to some new devilment every hour) Father Curran, the young assistant at our little church, came to see her. 'How about Tom serving on the altar?' he asked. Mother didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'Why, Father,' she answered, 'he'd wreck the sacristy inside a week.' Father Curran wasn't bothered by that; he took me by the hand, dragged me off to the rectory and started me on the Latin. I remember being strongly tempted to kick his shins. But that feeling didn't last long. I was following him around like a pet pup inside of the threatened week.

"Those altar boys of his were his pride and joy. After school in the evening, he'd take us for walks; he knew a lot about birds and that sort of thing, and he talked so that we could understand him. There were no Boy Scouts in those days, but he had the idea without knowing it. He refereed our games and caught behind the bat like a big leaguer. There was a sort of legend (you know how those things grow up) that he'd turned down a chance with the White Sox to study for the priesthood. And we regarded his whip to second with real respect. He gave me books to read, and I know now that they were good books that I'm glad I read at the right time.

"Then, when I was about twelve, and was worrying like the very mischief over the same old youthful trouble and was wondering whom in the world I could ask about it, he took me into his office one afternoon and talked to me like a father and a saint. My stars, I was grateful. When I came out of that office, the whole world seemed changed, and all the dirty little gutter gossip that I had picked up from the youngsters in the street was cleared away and set right and I was facing the facts of life for the first time with a decent sort of mind."

"I'd have died when I was a kid," said Hutchinson, "before I'd have mentioned the subject to anyone, even to my dad."

"That was just the beauty of it," went on Floyd. "He didn't wait for me to ask. And he never seemed to expect me to say a word the whole time he sat and talked. He ignored my frightful embarrassment and didn't ask a single question. He just touched the subject with his fine, clean mind, and put me right once and for all. You won't be surprised that I sent my own three boys to talk things over with him when they one by one began to get that worried look in their eye. I remembered what he had done for me."

"It was a decent thing to do," agreed Hutchinson.

The waiter swept away the debris of their fish course and deposited two combination salads before them.

"Looks fresh," said Floyd, eyeing his salad approvingly.

"Funny, isn't it, that a few years ago if a man ate salad he was regarded as a candidate for the Ladies' Aid?"

They both laughed, but Floyd was still on his subject.

"After I'd finished high school, I started off to business college. I must admit that I hated it; in three weeks I was utterly sick of it. Then, one morning after Mass, Father Curran (he was the pastor by this time) caught me as I was hurrying off after church. Well, we talked it over, and I told him the truth, and he went to see my mother, a widow then and having none too easy a time of it.

"Tom ought to go to college," he told her with that air of authority he sometimes used. They thrashed it out, and I

didn't know till later that the letter he sent to the college made them cut my tuition in half and give me a job working in the library. You're a college man?"

Hutchinson attacked his salad with a fierceness that slobbered a slice of tomato on to the table cloth,

"No," he said, "I had to work after high school."

"So should I, if it hadn't been for a priest. Well, sir, when I graduated, I promptly fell in love, and like yourself, with a Protestant girl. I didn't want to tell Father Curran, for he was going to be hurt, I felt; still I braced myself and told him flat out. He smiled at me and said, 'That's all right, Tom. Bring her around to see me.' You can imagine she didn't much want to go."

Hutchinson speared a radish with the skill of a whaler handling a harpoon, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't blame her," he said.

"Neither did I," agreed Floyd. "But once I had told her how much he'd meant to me, she was willing enough to meet him. He must have made a special effort that night, for when we walked home, she said with surprised emphasis, 'I didn't know priests were like that. He's pleasant, and I really like him.'

"Then the two of them put up a little game on me. It was his idea, but she agreed readily enough. She went two or three afternoons just, as he put it, to hear what Catholics believe. 'You'll want to understand what Tom is talking about when you're married and he goes trotting off to church,' he told her. After the third instruction, she kept on going because she wanted to find out more, and then because she wanted to become a Catholic. So while I was worrying about the promises she'd have to make and the dispensations I'd have to get, she was studying the Catechism and preparing for her First Communion. Perhaps you don't think the world turned rose and gold when she told me one night, just in a delightful, off-hand way, that we were going to be married at a Nuptial Mass."

"You had luck," Hutchinson commented, though he was still apparently interested in his salad.

"Not luck, precisely; rather a friendship that made all the difference. Of course he married us, and then, shortly after, got a parish out in the suburbs. We followed him, and now we play a little golf together, and he drops in to dinner about once a month. I'm always glad to have him; one ought to have a friendly lawyer, a friendly doctor, and a friendly priest in the family. You're never sure when you'll need one or all of them. The children have come to like him, so that I believe it affects their whole attitude toward religion. Religion is perfectly natural to them, always has been. It's just a part of their life, largely because they like personally the man who represents religion to them.

"I got myself into rather a bad mess not long ago. Took a new partner into the business. He was a clever chap, too clever if you ask me. I've never been associated with a man who could make more money or make it faster. One day he came to me with a scheme. I listened, but it sounded fishy to me.

"Not quite straight, is it?" I said.

"Of course it is," he protested. "There's no law that touches it, and even if it did, don't worry; no law ever touches me."

"It was a big chance and meant a lot of money to me. Just the same, I was worried. If it wasn't absolutely crooked, it was about as close as I had ever skated. My wife saw that I was looking down in the mouth and she asked me about it. I explained the case and added:

"It means a new sedan for you and a trip West for Sue."

"She wrinkled her forehead, and after a moment she gave me the advice that's common enough in our family.

"I think you had better talk it over with Father Curran."

"I did, and he laid his finger without hesitation just on the point where the deal was crooked.

"It's very clever," he said, "but it is just a smart form of theft."

"I stayed out and he was right. My partner of those brief days is serving his term at Leavenworth. The Government thought the same about the deal as Father Curran did."

The waiter offered a menu ingratiatingly. "Dessert?" he asked.

Hutchinson scrawled "Green-apple pie with cheese" on his order and Floyd duplicated the selection.

"That's all fine and very fortunate for you," Hutchinson said. "But it was your luck to meet a very exceptional priest. You found one with sympathy, understanding, and breadth. The type is rare. In my humble opinion, Catholic priests are the supreme type of arrogance and pride. They treat the rest of mankind as if they were on a different level. In fact, they

regard themselves as a distinctly superior race."

Floyd looked up quite seriously.

"If they didn't," he said, "they would be acting a lie."

"What do you mean by that?" his companion asked in astonishment.

"You're wrong, I think, in saying that they are proud and arrogant. There isn't anyone too poor to come to a priest for help. They are one of the very few groups of men who give the same consideration to the man without a penny as the man with a million. The pauper and the millionaire get just the same time and help in the confessional, just the same 'service' at the Communion rail, just the same Sacraments at the hour of death. A priest isn't too proud to walk up on a scaffold when a murderer is going to hang, he isn't too arrogant to go into a pest hospital or a plague centre to hear confessions and bring the Viaticum. I remember an ex-tramp, I think it was Jim Tully, writing that priests were the one race of men who never refused to give money to anybody, deserving or undeserving, who made a touch."

He paused to saw with his fork into the lower crust of the pie.

"It's a bit leathery," he complained, but without resentment. Pie is a thing that one takes as one finds it and blesses heaven when it proves to be tender and true.

"But," he went on, "the priest would be a hypocrite if he pretended that he wasn't specially marked and consecrated by God for something higher than the average man. He is not a minister; he is a priest. He doesn't simply preach; he does wonderful things. The power of forgiving sins doesn't make a priest proud, but it certainly puts him on a different level from you and me. If I knew that I could say Mass every morning and bring Christ down from heaven, I'd not be such a fool as to think that any shoe salesman or plumber or court reporter or supreme court judge was on a footing with me. A priest doesn't think that he is made of superior clay; he realises that he is just the same stuff as the rest of us; but he knows that he has been given the power of opening heaven, bringing Christ down to earth forgiving sins, and sending the dying safely *to* God. That is real power and it lifts him above the rest of mankind, who are quick enough to recognise it.

"I remember talking with a friend of mine one day who is a pagan if one ever lived. He has less faith than an oyster and less supernatural outlook than a contented cow.

"Your priests," he said to me, "are astonishing men. I've travelled a lot, and I've seen all sorts of priests, some very clever, some very dull; some with remarkably fine education and training and some that were thoroughly ignorant men. Some of them I've liked and some I've frankly despised. But for some reason or other, once they go up to the altar or stand in a pulpit, something comes over all of them. They have a power about them and a sense of strength and an assurance of their mission that no other men in the world seem to have. And the dullest and the most ignorant have it quite as much as the most brilliant and the best trained. They may be common, vulgar, almost illiterate men, but when they put on their vestments, they are impressive and powerful. I don't pretend to understand it, but it is a fact the world over."

"And he was quite right. It is a fact. The priest has power and he talks and acts as if he had. It's not unlike what was said of Our Lord. You remember, about His speaking as one having power. He had power and He communicated that power to His priests. They know they have it, for He said, 'He that heareth you, heareth Me,' and if that hasn't enough meaning to give the poorest and most ignorant priest in the world a sense of power and dignity, he doesn't know the meaning of plain words."

He dabbled with two fingers in the finger bowl which the waiter had substituted for the few flakes of pie crust left on his plate.

"After all, Hutchinson," he went on, "it isn't power, it's the abuse of power that makes proud, arrogant men: If priests used their powers for their own advantage, we could think of them as undeserving of them. But did you ever go into a hot church on a hot Saturday afternoon in summer when the mercury was beating the top off the thermometer? In the confessional sits the priest, sweating and hearing confessions. Pleasant sort of job, isn't it? When my mother was taken sick, I remember rushing for Father Curran at three in the morning. He was out of bed and over at the house in half an hour, gave her the Last Sacraments, closed her eyes in peace, and was back to say six o'clock Mass for his people. And in those early days in the suburbs, he used to tramp through the rain or the slush on a sick call at any hour of the day or night. He has a little Ford now, but it is the busiest and most abused car in our parish.

"One Christmas morning I remember feeling particularly bright and chipper and meeting Father Curran after the

last Mass.

“‘Merry Christmas,’ I said airily. ‘It’s a beautiful day.’

“‘It is,’ he answered. ‘And a Holy Christmas to you.’

“Then I took a closer look at him. His eyes were ringed with black; his face was simply chalky; he seemed hardly able to drag one foot after another.

“‘Why, Father,’ I said, ‘you’re all knocked out.’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘but Christmas is a hard time for a priest. We had eleven hours of confessions yesterday; and I had to fast for my two Low Masses, and the Solemn High. But it’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?’

“Eleven hours of listening to people’s tales of woe, comforting them, giving them wise and individual advice, forgiving them, starting them off again with new hope. The power of hearing confessions is a wonderful thing, but it costs the priest dearly who exercises it.

“And priests pay for the power of saying Mass. They have always been so convinced of its importance that they were quite willing to die, as they are dying today in Mexico or Russia, to be able to say it. And you never yet heard of a priest who voluntarily left his flock for any reason except death. When a plague or an epidemic comes, when the flood sweeps down as it did in the South, when the people are reduced to poverty by a strike, the priest sticks with them to the end. The butcher and baker and candlestick maker may pack up and leave a dying people; the priest stays on and dies. No heroics; it’s just his job.

“Priests are mighty proud to think that God has trusted them with the wonderful powers they have, but they are mighty humble and self-sacrificing about the way they use them. And because that is so true, people trust a priest as they trust no one else in the world. The better they know him the more they trust him.”

“I wonder just how much they really trust him,” said Hutchinson with an up-ward flick of his eyebrow.

“They trust him as no one else in the world is trusted. A physician is trusted with men’s bodies; men trust their souls to a priest. Their worries, doubts, family squabbles, business difficulties, all that sort of thing they take as readily to the priest as they take a law case to their lawyer or their money to a banker. They recognise that he has no wife and family of his own just so that he can be father to every one who needs help and advice. And he proves himself the father of the needy, the worried, the young, the ignorant, the doubting. I’ve found that they trust him as sometimes they do not trust their own fathers.”

The waiter placed their checks before them in separate trays. Each man picked up his own and placed a bill on top of it. They were silent while the negro was getting change from the dining-car steward, and when he returned, each picked up his change and left a tip for the waiter. Floyd pocketed his with a quick and thoughtless gesture. Hutchinson held his for a moment, and then stretched out his hand with the money lying in his open palm.

“There,” he said, “in the palm of my hand is the thing I most dislike about the Catholic Church and the Catholic priesthood. Money, the eternal cry for money! I remember the priest in our parish when I was a boy; not a Sunday passed without his demanding money and more money. It was as regular as the reading of the Gospel.

“First he was building a school, and he had to have money for that. The school was hardly finished, when he started a new church, and it was a constant plea for money; we bought bricks and mortar and pews and windows till everybody was sick of the thing. When the church was completed he had to have a huge organ. He got it, but we paid for it, you can bet. Then he started work on a parish hall with bowling alleys and all that sort of thing. Honestly, from the time I can first remember until the night we had our quarrel, my one memory of that priest is his continuous, insistent dinning about money, money, money.”

Floyd threw back his head and laughed.

“I know,” he said. “I’m on the finance committee of our parish, and it does seem a continuous scramble for money.

“But,” he continued, leaning forward across the cleared table, “one thing that you remarked yourself, but apparently without noticing it, is rather important. It was money for a church or a school or an organ or a parish hall. It was not money for the priest himself. He was demanding money that was to be spent on his parish and his people. He wasn’t putting it in his pocket to spend on himself. There’s a lot of difference in those two things.

“He built a parish school so that the faith of the children of his people would be safe. He put up a beautiful church so that his people would have a lovely place to worship God. I’m pretty sure that the people who listened to the organ

got a great deal more joy out of it than he did; I've noticed that parish priests aren't conspicuous for wonderful ears for music. And if the parish hall serves any purpose, it certainly serves the happiness of the people. Just where was the priest benefited by all this? Some day he'll die; the things he built go on serving the people, and everyone will forget inside of five years the very man who built them."

Hutchinson bit off the end of a cigar savagely, struck a match with such force that he broke off the end, but said nothing. Floyd, still smiling, went on.

"It has sometimes astonished me," he said, "just from a business point of view, to see what our parish priests accomplish. I honestly believe that they are the greatest builders in America today. At least, I can think of no group of men that has done half the constructive work, the actual physical putting of brick on brick, that they have done.

"When my wife and I moved out into the suburbs where Father Curran was pastor, we found him in a little frame church in the middle of a prairie. That was only about eighteen years ago. Today he has a really beautiful church that cost three hundred thousand dollars, and is constantly visited by architects and art students from all over the country; he has a parish school that is the last word in modern equipment and that cost another two hundred thousand; he built a parish rectory for thirty thousand, and now he is considering putting up a parish hall that will cost a quarter of a million. The people like him, it's true, and they contribute liberally, but it hasn't put any of them in the poorhouse, and we don't have to listen to money from the pulpit every Sunday.

"Just as a business man, figure out what that means. Here's a priest who has built and who successfully conducts a plant which actually represents an investment close to three-quarters of a million. How many business men do you know with a record of constructive building like that? And if you know any of them, you can bet that they are pulling down salaries of fifty to seventy-five thousand dollars a year. Yet I'm willing to bet that Father Curran never in his life has had three thousand a year, and in the clays when he was putting every cent he could scrape together into his church and school, he was living on less than a thousand. I've done well in business myself, but when it comes to cool, level business sense, the average parish priest can show me a grasp on practical affairs, and a constructive sense that makes me feel pretty second-rate.

"And yet that is merely a side line with them. Their buildings are only a means to an end. Their real work is so spiritual that they can carve 'A. M. D. G.,' 'For the Greater Glory of God,' on the cornerstone of every building they erect, and mean it. If everyone in the world used money as our parish priests use it and built with the same ends in view that dominate them, this world would be filled with beautiful buildings used by people who feel that they actually own them, and used, mind you, for the good of mankind.

"And it has astonished me, too, to see the fine artistic sense of these priests. They don't get any special training as architects, certainly not as art critics; but if it weren't for the Catholic churches that they build, there wouldn't be half the fine architecture there is in America today. Wasn't it Sinclair Lewis who said that when you go into a small town, often the only thing that redeems the ugliness and monotony and utter inartistry of the place will be a Catholic church, graceful and beautiful and keeping something of the splendid artistic tradition of our race? And it's absolutely true.

"I can remember so well," he went on. "the day when Father Curran invited the parish to the dedication of the new church. I've sometimes thought it was the proudest day in the life of many a man and woman in that parish. You see, our suburb was a sort of city of churches, and bigoted as the mischief. There was a Protestant church on every corner, and our poor little frame building was the one insignificant structure in the district.

"But from the moment when Father Curran hung the architect's drawing of the new church in the vestibule of the old one, we began to feel pride in what we were building. We walked out of our way just to see it going up, brick by brick, stone by stone. And when the doors were opened and we walked into it and realised that it was really our church, that we had built that beautiful Gothic structure, with its graceful arches and its mellow windows and those carved altars set back in the curve of the frescoed sanctuary, I tell you every one of our chins went up ten degrees, and we felt a glow of personal achievement and real affection for our church. When the organ pealed out and the Bishop with the altar boys (all in spick and span new cassocks) came up the aisle—well, it was the biggest day many of us had ever known as Catholics.

"And we built our school with the same enthusiasm. Last year one of our parochial school children won the prize essay on citizenship offered by the Chamber of Commerce. Took it away from all the schools of the city. Three years

ago (I don't like to brag, but it's a fact) my second girl won the 'Good Roads' essay prize given by the Motor Club. We're proud of the record of our school children. And it's Father Curran's school that made the record possible."

Hutchinson shook the long ash from his cigar into the ash tray.

"That may be and probably is true," he said. "But brick and stone don't make religion. And you've got to admit that a man of average intelligence gets pretty badly bored by the sort of sermon he has to listen to from Catholic priests. I'd hate to depend for my religion or my intellectual life on the stuff you get from the average pulpit. Maybe the priests build good churches, but they certainly preach rotten sermons in them."

Floyd laughed, took time deliberately to get a fresh light for his cigar, which had burned down to a cold cinder, and then looked up with interest.

"I must admit that I go to church to hear Mass and to go to Confession and to Communion. And I've always found those things done pretty satisfactorily. But about the sermons, old man, you can count at least on this: You aren't going to hear any of our priests making glorious asses of themselves, which is more than you can say for a lot of men who claim to preach the word of God. Did you ever go over the list of sensational, political, topics-of-the-day sermons advertised in the Saturday papers? You may laugh or be disgusted or send in one of them as a clipping to 'Americana,' but you'll not find any Catholic churches or Catholic priests listed there.

"There was a time when I was a little apologetic about Catholic preaching. We had a curate who was certainly no Bossuet or Tom Burke. And I somehow got the idea that the Protestant churches which had practically nothing but preaching must have made it a sort of fine art. Then I came across Bishop Kinsman's book about his conversion. You remember, he used to be an Episcopalian Bishop down East before he became a Catholic. Well, he had had the same idea that you and I had; but when he visited his first Catholic churches, he writes that he had the most astonishing surprise. The priests might not be eloquent, but they were preaching God's word.

They might not be orators, but they were talking about important spiritual things, and not about politics or fashions or the last murder in the papers or the championship baseball team. It didn't take him long to reach the surprised conclusion that preaching in the Catholic Church is vastly better than it is elsewhere, largely because priests preach the truth and preach it fearlessly. They are repeating Christ's message to the world and not some smart idea of their own.

"And, after all, Hutchinson, it's Christ's truth we need. You see, you and I had forgotten that truth is a lot more important than style; and if we are getting truth, we don't need to worry about eloquence. A priest preaching badly about the Real Presence is doing a great deal more for his listeners than a minister preaching brilliantly a denial of the Blessed Sacrament. A priest talking stumblingly about Christ's love for sinners is a great deal more worth listening to than some eloquent preacher talking about the value of aviation to modern life. Truth told simply is a heap sight better than error dressed up with magnificent style."

They were silent for a moment while Hutchinson regarded his companion with puzzled eyes. When he spoke it was slowly and with a distinctly rising inflection.

"It's strange," he said, "that a man like you, apparently independent in your ways and evidently a chap who has made his own way in life, should be so willing to be guided and directed by priests. It frankly beats my time. I'll admit that I'm too independent to want anybody snooping about my private affairs. It makes me see red when any-one tells me how I ought to run my life. Yet I'm willing to bet anything you please that your Father Curran, in spite of his friendliness and that sort of thing, dictates to you all the time about your own private business. Priests are made that way and think that God Almighty gave them that kind of right. I for one would be hanged before I'd stand for it."

"That's a common enough idea," Floyd agreed, "but the fact is that there is mighty little of it that I've ever noticed. Of course they do some powerful interfering in the confessional . . .

"Exactly," said Hutchinson with emphasis. "Some powerful interfering."

"But," went on Floyd, "it's a darn good thing for mankind that they do. When a boy comes in and admits that he's been a rotter, the priest puts his foot down good and hard, and the boy suddenly realises that this is a serious matter, and goes out pretty well scared with the terrible mistakes he's been making. A chap comes in, like you or me, let's say, and says that he's been crooked in a business deal; he can't go out before he's promised the priest that he'll go straight, and the business world can be mighty grateful for that sort of interfering. A young man confesses that he has been hitting the hot spots; a husband tells about his week-end sprees; a woman admits that she's been playing around

rather recklessly. Thank God that the priest is there to interfere and tell them either they must stop or must go out without absolution. And it's been the good, wholesome interfering of the priests in Confession that's kept some of this crazy world of ours sane and decent on the subject of children and marriage. If a few more ministers did that sort of interfering, this world wouldn't be quite so pagan.

"But the satisfying part of the priest's interference is that he interferes in just the same way and usually in about the same words as Christ interfered. You'll have to admit, old man, that Christ interfered a lot with people's lives in His own time and in ours."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," replied Hutchinson dubiously.

"Well," Floyd replied with emphasis, "I am. He told the world that when a chap has done us a dirty deal, we have to forgive him. Not easy, is it? He told us we'd have to be square in business, clean even in thought, keep a silent tongue in our head when we wanted to curse something or someone that had hurt us. He said when we married, it was to be for life even when we made a mistake about the girl we married. When we had done something that we were mightily ashamed of, He told us we'd have to confess to another man even if it took a lot of hard swallowing. And Christ said something about taking up our cross daily, and I never yet found a man who enjoyed doing that to any great extent.

"And when a priest interferes at all, it is simply to repeat what Christ has already said. Outside of that, he minds his own business and lets a chap mind his. You don't find priests in the army of blue-nosed snoopers who go about being miserable whenever they see other people being happy. Priests don't interfere except with things that are sins and forbidden by Christ, and they would be disloyal and false to their duty if they failed to interfere there.

"And believe me, it's because priests try to keep sin out of the lives of men, while representatives of other religions have tried to take away a chap's cigarettes or his pipe and close down his Sunday baseball game or keep him off the links and deprive him of clean sport and anything stronger than lemon soda that Catholics still listen with respect and reverence to the advice of their priests while the sects are so little impressed by what many of their leaders suggest.

"Priests are too busy with God's law to try to inflict small and annoying laws on us. And I honestly don't think that any Catholic can say that a priest really ever interfered in his personal concerns except where, for example, in Confession, it was absolutely for his own good or the good of his family or society. And there he ought to be grateful to the priest for plain and wholesome truths. If that is interfering, then the world would be better for a lot more of it."

Hutchinson laid down the burnt-out stub of his cigar.

"You're probably right there," he said. "Yet with the rest of us struggling so hard for a decent living, it does seem as if priests had rather a soft snap of it. If I wanted an easy job, I'd choose to be a priest."

"Hutchinson," Floyd replied, "you know even less about priests than I thought. I'll admit that they have it on us in a lot of ways; they have the respect that decent men give to a representative of God; they have the consolation of doing a lot of good for a lot of people. They can say Mass and that must be a wonderful thing for any man. But easy? I don't see that. For myself, it would be a fearfully lonely life. After all, just because he carries so many of the world's secrets in his heart, he never can have a really intimate friend. He goes in the evening to a house, not a home. There isn't anyone there who knows him inside out, his strengths and his weaknesses, and who gets between him and the sorrows of life, like, I can say, my wife does. He never has the companionship of children of his own, and I'd miss that fearfully. He belongs so much to everybody that needs him or wants him or persists in wasting his time that he never can really belong to anyone. And that makes a man mighty lonesome or I don't know human nature.

"And a priest has to remember every minute of every day that the eyes of the world are on him. That's a tough thing, if you ask me. From no one else is so much demanded and expected, and no one else is so mercilessly criticised if he fails ever so little. Catholics and non-Catholics alike watch for the priest's slightest mistake. The little human faults that in ourselves and our friends we forgive so readily, if we don't altogether ignore them, we magnify into terrible crimes in the case of a priest. The trifling and almost ludicrous sins of a man of the world become terrifying scandals when a priest is guilty of them. We seem to take it for granted that men are going to swerve occasionally from the straight and narrow; but let a priest swerve ever so slightly, and the pack is on him tearing him limb from limb. I'd hate to think I was living like that in a glass house and that the crowd stood outside with stones in their hands. The priest knows that he must make no allowances for himself, for the world will make no allowances for him;

he must be beyond reproach, or he will be heaped with reproaches; he must be sinless or he will be stoned by the sinful.

Hutchinson moved as if he meant to return to the Pullman.

“Well, Floyd,” he said, “you make out a good case for your priests, but there’s one real test of what you really think of them. You’ve got a son, you say?”

“Three of them.”

“All right. Just wait till the day comes when one of them drops into your office and says, ‘Dad, I think I’d like to be a priest.’ You’ll find that your theorising isn’t worth much then. You’ll tell him to show some sense and pick a job in the world that is worth doing and join a crowd of men that you’ll be proud to see him with. That’s the test.”

Floyd leaned forward with an earnest look on his face. A strange, new seriousness came into his eyes, and he spoke with a low and carefully controlled voice.

“If ever that day comes, Hutchinson, and my boy tells me he wants to be a priest, I’ll go down on my knees and thank God for giving me the greatest blessing of my life. If God takes one of my sons into His service, I’ll face Him on Judgment Day with confidence. He knows better than anyone else could that I’ll be proud to be the father of a priest.”

Slowly the men walked back through the swaying train to their section. Busy with keeping their balance as the train swept along the curves of a difficult stretch of road, they moved without talking. As they reached their section, Floyd spoke again.

“I suppose we’ve about exhausted the subject, but the one thing you really need, Hutchinson, is to meet a real priest.”

“Yes,” he replied, “it might be good for me. But I’d rather not. I’d be shy and probably act like a fool, so we’ll let it go at that.”

Both subsided behind their magazines and silence reigned, but Floyd was thinking fast. Presently he raised his head above the top of the book and asked in an offhand manner:

“Stopping in Chicago?”

“For about a week.”

“What are you doing tomorrow afternoon?”

“Nothing particular.”

“How about a round of golf?”

“Fine; I don’t know many people in Chicago, and I’d be glad of the chance. Thanks for asking me.”

“Well, I’ll be busy at the office in the morning, but I’ll meet you at the Edgewood Clubhouse at three.”

“Fine. I’m itching for the feel of a club.”

The train drew up at a station and Floyd rose and stretched himself. The porter hurried by.

“How long do we stop here?”

“About seven minutes, suh.”

“Thanks.” Then to Hutchinson: “I’m going to stretch on the platform.”

But he didn’t. He hurried into the telegraph office, filled out a blank in a rapid scrawl, and handed it to the bored operator. Then, pocketing his change, he swung on to his Pullman as the train started to move. He was smiling broadly to himself, for over the wires he knew that an important message was singing. It read:

“Rev. Thomas Curran,

“Our Lady of the Wayside Church, “Winnetka, Illinois.

“Important to meet me at the Edgewood Clubhouse tomorrow, Wednesday, at three o’clock. Wear your golf togs. Bring Father Ryan. Will play golf but you have to do some important fishing. I am furnishing the fish. Ask St. Peter for help.

“TOM FLOYD.”
