

THE TIMES

NEW BLOOMFIELD, PA.

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VOL. XV.

NEW BLOOMFIELD, PA., TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1881.

NO. 43.

THE TIMES.

An Independent Family Newspaper,
IS PUBLISHED EVERY TUESDAY BY
F. MORTIMER & CO.

TERMS:
INVARIABLY IN ADVANCE.

\$1.50 PER YEAR, POSTAGE FREE.
50 CTS. FOR 6 MONTHS.

To subscribers residing in this county, where we have no postage to pay, a discount of 25 cents from the above terms will be made if payment is made in advance.

Advertising rates furnished upon application.

The Parson's Visitor.

THE Wednesday evening prayer-meeting was over. The fifteen or twenty parishioners, mostly womenfolk, who had been in attendance, had scattered up and down the quiet rural street in the direction of their homes. The Rev. Amos Dale, who had that evening to perform the double function of sexton and pastor, the sexton having hired out to a farmer at some distance from the village for the planting and hoeing season, lingered behind his flock to put out the kerosene lights in the lecture-room. This done he came up the basement stairs, and out on the stone steps, where he stopped to lock the door. A tall, awkward man, the Rev. Amos Dale, with straight, iron gray hair, a trifle too long, and deep, rugged lines in his face. He is extremely nearsighted, and has much ado to see the keyhole in this doubtful light, but at length the door is locked, and with his hands clasped behind his back, and his head bent a little forward, he strolled away up the street, the most absent-minded and biggest-hearted man you will see in many a day.

Walking thus toward the post-office for his evening paper, with no eagerness for good or evil tidings, but with a heart at peace with itself, the good man is aware of how heavily freighted the sweet June dusk is with the fragrance of the locusts and syringas.

"Come for yer mail, Elder?" asks Joel Bean, the postmaster, looking up from the paper which he is reading behind the counter, for the post-office and and store are together.

The minister replies pleasantly in the affirmative, and Joel hands him out a paper. The Rev. Amos takes it and turns to leave, but the postmaster says,

"Hold on a minute, Elder, you've got a letter to-night, too," and as he gives it to him he looks inquisitively at his face. The letter is addressed in a lady's handwriting, graceful and refined.

Nothing remarkable in this, surely, and yet it startles Amos Dale a little as he looks at the letter lying in his hand.

He bids Joel Bean good-evening, and goes on his way up the hill to the parsonage, thinking as he goes how long it is since he has had a letter from a woman.

His thoughts fly back to a packet of old letters, yellow of paper now, and faded of ink, lying in a corner of a private drawer in his desk; letters written to him while he was a student, more than fifteen years ago, full of maidenly reserve and yet of a woman's love.—There had come a day when the number of these letters was complete, never to be added to. That other letters could be written and another love won, it had never entered the heart of the Rev. Amos Dale to conceive.

He soon reached his own gate, and a few of his long strides took him through the old-fashioned box-bordered garden to the door of the parsonage between the lilac bushes. He went into the sitting-room—a large, bare, orderly room. A red and black table cover was on the centre-table; firmly planted in the middle stood a broad-shouldered lamp with a green paper shade. Beside the table, darned stockings, sat Hannah Breeze, his distant relative and housekeeper, who had come directly home from the prayer-meeting.

Hannah, who was not of the fairest among women, having a general effect of dull gray—hair, eyes, complexion, alpaca and all—looked up when the

minister entered, but did not speak. It was not her way.

The Rev. Amos Dale, having hung his hat on its proper nail, as every member of a well-regulated household should, proceeded to draw an arm-chair up to the table, sat down, broke the seal of his letter unostentatiously, and read.

It was a short letter, and he soon dropped it on his knee, looking around with an expression of consternation.

"Hannah!" he exclaimed, "here is an agent—a woman at that—bearing down upon us. What is to be done?"

"Hend her off, if ther's time," was the concise reply.

"Let's see," said the Rev. Amos, taking up the letter again: "I am coming to Fairfield to canvass for the *Complete Analytical Commentary*—there's resolution for you, Hannah!"

"Takes book agents for that."

"I shall hope to make my home in your family, if perfectly convenient to Mrs. Dale"—Amos Dale read this with an odd smile about his mouth.

"Umph!" was all Hannah vouchsafed.

He read on in silence, but suddenly sprang to his feet, looked up at the clock on the wooden shelf, and said,

"No heading her off now. This letter has been detained on the way.—See, the date is three days ago. She is coming on the 9:30 train this very evening, and I have only just time to meet her."

"I don't see 'you've any partikeler call to meet her. Them book agents isn't in the habit of being bearded around much, I guess. Say, Mr. Dale," she called, for he had his hat on and was out of the room already, "you'll take her to the tavern, won't you, or to Deacon Bush's?"

"Mrs. Bush is sick. We shall have to keep her to-night, for all I see. Get the east room ready, and you may as well put the kettle over, Hannah, the poor woman will be tired"—and the Rev. Amos closed the door and strode off towards the little station, half a mile away, leaving Hannah to do his bidding faithfully, albeit with some grumbling.

"He'll take in every analytical tramp that comes along with a commintery; don't make no difference whether it's man or woman," she said to herself, a little confused as to the new adjective which had impressed her as valuable if vague.

Mr. Dale walked rapidly along the shadowy, grassy path, thinking as he walked of the sort of woman whom he was probably going to meet—substantial of form, harsh of feature, profuse and emphatic of speech, a trifle dense of sensibility—yes, he knew the type well and did not fancy it overmuch; all the same he must do for this woman, this Mrs. Emily Payne (for so she had told him to address her, in case there was anything in the way of her coming to Fairfield) all that Christian courtesy demanded.

He reached the station just in time to see the train coming in sight around the bend, flinging showers of sparks, and glancing colored lights into the quiet dewy fields. There was a brief pause, then the train swept on again, and the Rev. Amos Dale was peering about in the dark, with near-sighted eyes, for the person he had come to meet.

A slight little woman, dressed in deep mourning, who had been the only person to alight from the train, came towards the door of the waiting-room, stopped seeing him looking thus, and then stepped timidly up to him.

"Ah!" said the minister, "is this Mrs. Emily Payne?"—he spoke each word slowly and distinctly.

"Yes, sir," was the reply, in a quiet, clear-toned voice. Mr. Dale, I think?

He took her into the waiting-room, and left her while he went to find her valise. As she came into the light, he saw what he had felt when she spoke, that she was a lady. She had a pale face, with smooth brown hair under her widow's cap; there was a refined, spiritual character in the features, and an expression of sadness in the gray eyes.—Altogether, the Rev. Amos Dale found difficulty in believing that this was one of the persevering book agents whom he had always held in disfavor.

As they walked along the quiet road, he carrying the valise himself, much against her will, there being no convey-

ance at the depot, he found that he could not tell her that he should have discouraged her coming if he had received her letter in time, or that Fairfield if fair was not promising as a field for book agents. Some way he preferred that she should feel herself welcome and her way made easy.

Arrived at the parsonage, he was pleased to see Hannah's grimness relax a little before Mrs. Payne's gentle voice and smile. He was glad to see her enjoy her cup of tea, and when, immediately after, she asked to be shown her room, and followed Hannah and her candle up the winding staircase, he was sorry she had gone quite so soon. Nothing had been said of her mistake with regard to his being a married man. He had found a certain awkwardness in mentioning the matter, and so had left it to explain itself. Mrs. Payne told Hannah the next day that she had been misinformed on the subject.

At breakfast Mr. Dale frankly discussed the outlook with his guest. He told her that Fairfield was wholly a farming community, and that the farmers were not greatly given to buying books.—Moreover he did not himself at present own a horse, and it was wholly impossible to hire one in the neighborhood at this busy season.

To this Mrs. Dale replied cheerfully that she expected and was able to walk, and would start immediately after breakfast.

Mr. Dale offered to go with her to some of the most promising places, but this she declined gratefully but with quiet decision.

He then drew a rude map of all the principal roads in Fairfield, with the farmhouses where she would be likely to be well received, and soon after she started out bravely on her first day's campaign, a copy of the *Complete Analytical Commentary* under her arm—too heavy a book, thought the Rev. Amos, for such a little woman to carry.

He had put down his own name for a copy of that valuable work, taking a little pains, after doing so, to put out of sight a copy of an earlier edition which had stood for many years on his book shelves. This he could give to the Sunday school library.

That evening Mrs. Payne had a long talk in the twilight with her host and Hannah Breeze. She told a few simple facts of her own history, which enlisted their interest and sympathy for her more strongly than ever. Her husband had been a minister, of the same faith as Amos Dale. Ten years ago he had died, leaving her with a baby girl.—Through the kindness of friends she had soon obtained a position as clerk to a government official, and strange to say had retained it until a few months ago, when it had been taken from her by political changes.

She could not wait for a good situation to open—her little daughter, who was now at a boarding-school, must be supported as well as herself. The agency for this book was suggested to her as a temporary shift until she could find something better, and she had undertaken it. It was evident that she was full of homesickness and anxiety for Rose, her little daughter, whom she had always kept with her before, but she showed in all that she said, a spirit of faith and patient waiting, which the Rev. Amos Dale found very refreshing to his own spiritual experience.

During this conversation Mrs. Payne proposed that she should find a boarding place elsewhere, but upon this point Mr. Dale was firm; while she tarried in Fairfield her dwelling was to be under the parsonage roof, and Hannah added, "You might as well stay where you be. You don't make no trouble to speak of. 'Tain't nothin' to put on an extra cup and plate, and I always keep cooked up."

This signified that the stranger had found favor in Hannah's sight in the highest degree.

The days went on. The first morning at prayers the Rev. Amos Dale had prayed for grace and strength for "the stranger that was within his gates," but after that the heavenly benediction was asked upon "our friend who abides with us for a season."

Each morning Mrs. Payne set out on her wearisome round, uncomplainingly, full of courage and hope. At night,

when she returned, she would tell over to Amos Dale and Hannah the adventures of the day, in a quaint merry way of her own, which gave a charm to the simplest thing she told. On the whole she was succeeding in selling her book beyond her expectations; and the Rev. Amos bethought him of many a road and district which she must not fail to visit, even if it did lengthen her stay in Fairfield beyond her plan. He was sure that the pure air and the quiet of the place were good for her; he thought a little color was coming in her cheeks.—He even proposed that she stay with them a month, do her work leisurely and rest between times. To this she would in no wise consent. She must leave Tuesday morning at the very latest.

Sunday came, and Mrs. Payne sat with Hannah in the minister's pew, down in front. When the Rev. Amos Dale stood up in the pulpit to open service, and caught sight of her sweet, quiet face turned reverently towards him, it startled him with a sensation strange and agitating. There was no other face with just that look in all his congregation. What a help it might be to a man—but hush, what thoughts were these?—"The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

That evening there was a prayer-meeting. Mrs. Payne went again with Hannah and "gave in her testimony" in a few words, taking up the thought of the morning sermon, and applying it with delicate spiritual insight in another direction.

"Truly," thought the Rev. Amos Dale, and he sighed, "sister Payne has old George Herbert's 'famous stone which turneth all to gold.'"

Monday morning was hot and sultry, the sun burning with a fierceness like July, the air full of suffocating dust.—Amos Dale watched his guest as she started off on her last long walk in Fairfield with a dumb heartache. It hurt him to have her subjected to such weariness and toil.

That afternoon he gave up to making pastoral calls. It seemed to afford him a little comfort to place himself in the same conditions with that frail little woman. So with his long strides he measured a good portion of his parish, and returned at tea time, heated and covered with dust.

Mrs. Payne had reached home before him, and was standing in the doorway in a cool, light dress, with no sign of heat or dust about her.

She greeted him pleasantly. "Hannah has been called up to Mr. Green's I believe it is—they have a very sick child. She could not tell how long she might be gone. Tea is ready whenever you are."

A few minutes later the Rev. Amos Dale found himself seated at the tea-table, opposite Mrs. Payne, who was pouring his tea, and bearing herself with that unassuming dignity which made embarrassment to either impossible.

Some way the table had a different air to-night; the cloth was laid smoother, the dishes placed with greater care.

In the centre of the table, in the one vase belonging to the parsonage was a spray of sweet-brier, a handful of daisies and some graceful grass. What a wonder that little touch wrought! It pleased the Rev. Amos Dale greatly. He had never had flowers on his tea-table before.

"You gathered them on your way home this afternoon, did you not?"

"Yes sir, I wanted more, but I could not carry them very well."

"I saw a great many of those wild roses, and I thought myself they looked pretty, but it did not occur to me to bring them home. Hannah and I are not quite up to that kind of thing, I guess. We are very matter-of-fact"—and he smiled a little wistfully.—He was beginning to feel in many ways how much had been left out of his life.

That tea-time was a wonderful one to Amos Dale. The simplest act and word of it seemed beautiful and full of meaning to him. Afterward he watched Mrs. Payne as she moved about in housewifely fashion clearing the table; and when she went away into the kitchen to wash the dishes, for this she would do, he would have followed her, but he did not quite dare.

Hannah came home at eight o'clock, bringing a good report of the sick child,

and soon after they all bade each other Good-night.

It was the custom at the parsonage, at morning prayers, for each one present to repeat a text of Scripture. Tuesday morning the Rev. Amos Dale repeated—and his voice was a trifle husky—

"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for there by some have entertained angels unawares."

Hannah followed with "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass."

Then Mrs. Payne said, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

There followed a moment in which none of them cared to speak, and then Mrs. Payne left the room without a word and went up-stairs. When she came down she was equipped for her journey, and it was time to start for the station.

When the Rev. Amos Dale, having put Mrs. Payne on board the train, with many little cares for her comfort, stood watching it speeding on out of sight, all the will within him rose and said, "She shall come back."

And for Emily Payne, all day her thoughts travelled back to Fairfield, and she kept wondering if there were ever a man so pure in heart, so single in purpose, as the lonely man whom she never expected to meet again.

It was on a wet afternoon of August that Hannah Breeze, having been on an errand to Deacon Bushes', stopped in at the post office for a pound of green tea

Joel Bean weighed it out for her, and as he made up the parcel he said, glancing shrewdly at Hannah through his glasses, "It takes the Elder a mighty sight of letter-writin' to finish up that there Commintery business, don't it?"

"Spose likely," said Hannah shortly.

"Yes," said Joel slowly, the twine between his teeth, "about two letters more or less a week, on an everidge, allowin' me to be the judge."

"Well," returned Hannah, who would not for worlds have betrayed that this was news to her, "I shouldn't wonder if the Elder was capable of tendin' up to it without none of my help nor your'n, Mr. Bean;" and the discreet Hannah took her green tea, raised her umbrella, gathered up her calico skirt, and went on her way.

One day in October the Rev. Amos Dale informed Hannah that it was necessary for him to go that week to Burlington, the city forty miles distant, to see about the new hymn-books.

"Umph!" said Hannah to herself, "There'll be sumptin' seen about besides new hymn-books, I guess."

But she made everything ready for him, and he went, and was gone two days.

After that, according to Joel Bean, the "everidge" of letters on the Commintery business was sustained.

June again in Fairfield, "tossing the fields full o' blossoms, leaves an' birds." The parsonage is bright and fresh with new paper, paint and carpets. In the sitting-room the tea-table, for it is evening, is sumptuously set forth, and about it three women hovering, Hannah Breeze, Mrs. Bush, and Mrs. Robbins, looking with critical eyes at the array of cakes, tarts, biscuits, preserves and cold meats, to see if anything has been forgotten.

Mrs. Robbins being satisfied with her inspection, returns to the subject they have been discussing with ever new interest—

"Where is it you say she's been teaching, Hannah?"

"At Ashton, a little ways out of Burlington; her daughter was there to school last year when she come to Fairfield."

"She didn't canvass for that Commintery only a few months, anyway, did she?" asks Mrs. Bush.

"No," Hannah replies, rather contemptuously, "t'wan't no business for her, no way. She done pretty well at it, though, for all"—and she goes out to the front doorstep, the others following.

"How awful rusty them laylocks does look," Hannah remarks, looking disapprovingly up at the bushes.

"Yes but the syringas have blowed out jest in time," says Mrs. Bush.

"And them red pinies, too," adds Hannah, "they're han'some now."

At that moment they heard a shrill,