

# CONFESSIONS OF A COUNTRY SCHOOL MASTER.

From the *Acadian Magazine*.

"This is confessedly the age of confession—the era of individuality—the triumphant reign of the first person singular,"—*N. Y. LITERARY GAZETTE*.

The sufferings of country school-masters have been so often given to the public, that I, whose mortal career has certainly been shortened, if not sweetened by the "delightful task," resolved at one time not to "renew the sad remembrance of my fate," but to let a speedy oblivion cover those calamities, "all which I saw," and less fortunate than *Aeneas*, "all of which I was." My story, I feared, would be treated like the certificates of our modern beggars. Public sympathy is nearly exhausted by the drafts already made upon it by that degraded class of beings to which I belong, and any more from the same quarter are liable to be protested. The following circumstance altered my resolution. Catching up an old newspaper the other day, in a fit of ennui, I summoned enough to peruse, for the third time, the pathetic tale of a fellow pedagogue which had attracted much notice on its first appearance, and is evidently the production of a masterly pen. By this it seems he was actually in peril of dying an hungered. What! starvation in a country town of New England! The leading idea of his piece now struck me as a palpable absurdity. To all his assertions, my own experience gave the lie direct. The winning pathos of this writer, his admirable humour, and the fascination of his style in general, all conspire to make upon the reader a deep but incorrect impression of the manner in which our country people treat "the master." To efface this, is my present object. Novelty I have none to offer—artifice I scorn—eloquence ne'er sat upon my lips—my sole attractions are misery and truth.

At the close of the year 1825, my diabolical destiny sent me to H—, a village on the sea coast of a New-England State, inhabited by certain amphibious bipeds, who call themselves farmer fishermen. Here I had contracted to spend eight wintry weeks in cultivating whatever of intellect there might be in forty-five children (if they can claim the name) of both sexes. Fool that I was—as if the "young idea" could shoot in winter more than any other weed, and that too in a soil of the consistency of granite. But a few days of fruitless flogging prompted me to spare my own feelings—the only ones affected by that exercise—and to employ my ferule in ruling the writing books, instead of the scholars; and I did desist soon after, upon discovering that my merits as instructor were estimated by my clemency to the pupils—that is to say, my popularity with the children, and, which is a natural consequence in H—, with their parents, was in the inverse ratio of the flagellations dispensed. One great point was already gained; but another of equal magnitude, though in a cheering state of progression, remained to be fully accomplished; namely, to render myself agreeable as a member of the family where I happened to board. This is no less essential to complete success, than to spare the rod and spoil the child. In justice to myself, however, it should here be remarked, that I am free from the guilt of fulfilling the latter, half of Solomon's maxim; for the children were all spoiled to my hand. The second important qualification of a country preceptor is, that he be able to demolish any given quantity of provisions. This is indispensable. Our country people never starve the master, though I

ignorant. The maw of Ichabod Crane, that pink of pedagogues, we are told, possessed "the diluting powers of an Ananias," and the consequence was, that he eat himself into the good graces of all in Sleepy Hollow. In like manner no teacher can be popular in H—, if he have not the appetite of a shark. The agent's house at which I tarried night and morning, was a mile and a half distant from the anatomy of a building where my pupils daily assembled to shiver—not with terror, but with cold—for all the birch consumed in school, was consumed by the fire, and I have the satisfaction to know, that, as it was never employed to produce heat by impulse, so it never yielded any at a sensible distance. But, a mile and a half was too far to travel for a dinner, I was therefore kindly permitted to dine at Mrs. Dunning's, in the vicinity of the school house. The first forenoon was spent in an idle attempt to learn forty-five christian, I would say, barbarous names, compared with which, the names of Oliver Cromwell's jury dwindle into absolute propriety. At twelve o'clock I returned to Mrs. Dunning's, where a hearty welcome awaited me. Dinner shortly appeared—but as this is the meal, that in a week's time, had well nigh sunk me to the grave, it merits a particular description. It will be sufficient to enumerate the articles spread before me on the first occasion, for I can say to the reader "*ex uno disce omnes*"—which is, being interpreted, there was no variation during twenty-eight days. First, came on an unknown quantity of tea, contained in a coffee-pot that might have served for a moderate sized light house. Secondly, a plate of what Mrs. Dunning, with apparent sincerity, called sliced pork; but what I suspected, from its color and tensity, to be gum-elastic. This was followed by a quart bowl of real pork in a state of fusion. Some one had previously told me, by way of encouragement, that all school-masters lived upon the fat of the land. Alas! the ambiguity of language—till now I had never understood this expression. On one corner of the table stood an article that would have staggered Heliogabalus; namely, a comical turret of dough-nuts—emphatically dough nuts. This detestable esculent, the pride of our country dames sometimes resembles one of your inflexible little soup dumplings; at others, it appears to be a kind of mongrel pan-cake. The opposite corner was defended by a turret of similar shape, and nearly as formidable, consisting of minced dunfish. A plate of brown bread, an irregular mass of junk beef, an apple pie resembling the top of an overgrown toad stool, a bowl of corpulent potatoes in violent perspiration, and a batter pudding of cylindrical shape, livid complexion, and the most appalling specific gravity, completed the dinner. It is difficult to find a simile for this pudding—the reader may obtain a faint idea of its appearance and constitution, by inspecting a leaden clock weight. I sat down with the stubborn resolution of eating till the family were satisfied; a sure, but a terrible path to popularity. "Come Master," said Mrs. Dunning, "reach to and help yourself; when you are amongst poor folks, you must put up with poor folks' fare." I strove to alleviate the good woman's anxiety, by word and deed. I seized a potatoe, squashed it upon my plate, and gazed in silent agony on the four spoonfuls of liquid pork generously poured upon it under the name of gravy. A reputation and twenty-eight dollars being at stake, it would have been rashness in me to refuse the half pound of minced fish, four cups of tea, ninety degrees

nish thought, and pull trigger. A feeling somewhat similar, prompted me to close mine as each mouthful was conveyed to its predestined place, and my jaws labored mechanically, like any other grist mill.

By dint of these conclusive efforts, all the articles just mentioned were soon made to disappear; and now thought I, I have made a deep impression in my favor. Delusive idea! as evanescent as the provender that vanished before the knife and fork of Mrs. Dunning's son, a promising young Vulcan, whose operations I was watching with a jealous eye—and my heart sank within me at the comparative insignificance of my own exploits. The dispondence created by this scene was heightened by an exclamation from Mrs. Dunning: "Ah! Master you wont make out a dinner. I am afraid you dont like our fare." At that instant I wished myself an esquimaux or an ostrich. As it was, I made one more effort and devoured two more dough-nuts; but here a symptom of strangling rendered me stiff necked against all further solicitations. I had realized and could demonstrate an absolute plenum. I pass over the difficulty of walking two rods to the school house, and merely remark, that had I gone to the agent's to dinner, my pupils would have gained half a holiday. Let me stop a moment to remind the reader that this narrative is not written for applause—that sympathy is not expected,—that a smile would be an insult, for, to me it is a memento of any thing but the ludicrous. He may bear in mind, also, that I have disclaimed exaggeration, and professed to be the advocate of truth. These reflections will enable him to meet, without a sneer, the solemn assurance that, in six successive days, I devoured seventeen meals of equal magnitude with the one described. Nor can my sacrifices be fairly censured as extravagant. For although the demon of popularity may be conciliated at dinner, yet his favour is easily lost at supper or breakfast. His votaries must be consistent in their piety. From an imperfect register of these offerings, it appears that, among other articles, I consumed during the first week, six pounds of minced fish, two gallons of tea, a pint and a half of melted pork, a cubic foot of solid ditto, five apple pies, and one hundred and nineteen dough-nuts.

On Saturday morning, three of the agent's hogs followed me to school. I thought of the pork I had eaten, and over and anon cast a timid glance at the swine. "Their tameness was shocking to me." But it shortly ceased to be so; for after this, they followed me with canine regularity, and without any inclination to be witty, I regarded them merely as intolerable bores. A week had now elapsed, and not only found me in existence, but also brought along with it a pleasure I had long been a stranger to—that was the benefit of eating. My popularity was unparalleled, and built upon a foundation too solid for premature decay. Well has a modern writer contended that the stomach is the seat of the soul. It is an ingenious and plausible doctrine, and not without its advocates; for in H—, at least, they estimate a man's intellects by the capacity of his "bread basket." The whole district rang with my praises. "The Master," said they, "is a fine accommodating man—he isn't a mite partickler about his vittles." So much accomplished in a single week would have puffed up any body, and meekness herself might have pardoned the innocent strut that conveyed me to the neighboring village of B—, on Saturday afternoon. An acquaintance met me in the street—was struck with my altered appearance, and expressed much sarcastic regret

but pride must have a fall, and the fall of mine was a heavy one. During that memorable Saturday night, fancy, in the shape of the incubus, caused me to execute a somerser, the like of which was never performed but once, and then it was done by Lucifer. The tumble, however, being only a part of my involuntary freaks and sufferings on the night aforesaid, I shall take the liberty to narrate them in order and at large. As for the reader, be he never so sleepy, the night mare shall keep him awake while we are in company—but if he has not the patience to read a description of it, I heartily wish him the reality, and leave him to his slumbers. At nine o'clock I found myself in bed, and a few minutes after, in the desert of Zaharra—for the night mare is an excellent traveller. Notwithstanding the short period of time occupied in passing the Atlantic, my sides ached horribly. I was less jaded than if the journey had been performed on a trip-hammer. I strained my eyes in vain to find a place of shelter. There was nothing to be seen but a circular plain of reddish sand, bounded by the horizon. Suddenly the heavens assumed a tempestuous aspect; but I hailed this symptom of rain water with ecstasy, for hitherto a burning sun had consumed the outward man, and a burning thirst the inward. O! how longed for one of those well saturated clouds that seemed to withhold their moisture for purpose to tantalize me. In ten minutes could have made a dry sponge of the whole atmosphere. My contemplation of the sky was all at once interrupted by the most frightful grunts, proceeding from myriads of swine who encompassed me round about in concentric circles, and gnashed their tusks in vengeance. They were apparently broiled by the sun and destitute of bristles. The latter of these misfortunes they suffer in common with myself, for terror had made me shed all my hair. Yes—I was attacked literally by a legion of live pork. The horrid circle contracted rapidly around me. Flight, in any sense of the word, was impossible. In this agonizing moment clouds opened and discharged a tremendous shower of—dough-nuts.—Henceforth let melancholic victim of ennui, complain feeling blue, till he has felt the "pelting the pitiless storm." Every nut seemed to me like the ball of a nine pounder. I was reduced to a twinkling. In a short time the clouds began to slacken fire, when I ventured to raise my head, which had been pummelled into the sand, take a peep at the horizon. But, O! horrors, the circle of hogs remained unbroken. They had stopped but a moment to riot on manna which had fallen to invigorate them, and seal my fate. I watched them awhile without power of motion. They soon prepared for their onset, and I was quietly resigning myself to my destiny, when my natural gravitating powers suddenly suspended. For me, this world had its attraction. I fell into the air, rent asunder dense canopy of dough-nuts, tumbled head heels through space, and landed flat upon my back on the broad side of Saturn's belt. The pillow which to my inexpressible dismay, I now found to be an immense batter pudding, of thousands of miles in diameter, was justied out of its orbit—rolled over my carcass, and left it a slaty. The crash awoke me. I was lying on my back with the pillow on my face. After looking out of the window to assure myself that the universe was in good order, I crawled again to bed; and awaited the dawn of day in a state between sleep and waking,—a state from which I sincerely trust the complaisant reader is exempt.

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