

stop and grin at. Somehow I was not minded to return and announce the fact.

"Why," they would say, "*you* were the one who did not believe in ghosts. It was *you* who preached of vile superstitions, and yet merely at the sight of a shadow you rush in with trembling hands and bristling hair to bid us lay it with bell, book, and candle. Where is your faith, O prophet?"

It was nonsense; the heat and all my incessant political work had tried me and I was mistaken. That tramp was a drunken, or perhaps a crazy creature, afflicted with some skin disease such as are common among his class. Why did I allow the incident to trouble me?

I went home and washed out my mouth, and sprinkled my clothes with a strong disinfectant, for, although my own folly was evident, it is always as well to be careful, especially in hot weather. Still I could not help wondering what might happen if by any chance smallpox were to get a hold of a population like that of Dunchester, or indeed of a hundred other places in England.

Since the passing of the famous Conscience Clause many years before, as was anticipated would be the case, and as the anti-vaccinators intended should be the case, vaccination had become a dead letter amongst at least seventy-five per cent. of the people.* Our various societies and agents were not content to let things take their course and to allow parents to vaccinate their children, or to leave them unvaccinated as they might think fit. On the contrary, we had instituted a house-to-house canvass, and our visitors took with them forms of conscientious objection, to be filled in by parents or guardians, and legally witnessed.

At first the magistrates refused to accept these forms, but after awhile, when they found how impossible it was to dive into a man's conscience and to decide what was or what was not "conscientious objection," they received them as sufficient evidence, provided only that they were sworn before someone entitled to administer oaths. Many of the objectors did not even take the trouble to do as much as this, for within five years of the passing of the Act, in practice the vaccination laws ceased to exist. Nor is this to be wondered at, for what board, or officer, was likely to go to the trouble of working up a case and to sanction the expense of bringing it before the court, when, to produce a complete defence, or at any rate a defence which in practice no Bench of Magistrates refused to accept, the defendant need

only declare that he had a conscientious objection to the law under which the information was laid against him? Many idle or obstinate or prejudiced people would develop conscientious objections to anything which gives trouble or that they happen to dislike. For instance, if the same principle were applied to education, I believe that within a very few years not twenty-five per cent. of the children belonging to the classes that are educated out of the rates would ever pass the School Board standards.

Thus it came about that the harvest was ripe, and over ripe, awaiting only the appointed sickle of disease. Once or twice already that sickle had been put in, but always before the reaping began it was stayed by the application of isolation rules terrible in their severity.

Among some of the natives of Africa when smallpox breaks out in a kraal, that kraal is surrounded by guards and its inhabitants are left to recover or perish, to starve or to feed themselves as chance and circumstance may dictate. During the abeyance of the smallpox laws the same plan, more mercifully applied, prevailed in England, and thus the evil hour was postponed. But it was only postponed, for, like a cumulative tax it was heaping up against the country, and at last the hour had come for payment to an authority whose books must be balanced without remittance or reduction. What is due to nature that nature takes in her own way and season, neither less nor more, unless indeed the skill and providence of man can find means to force her to write off the debt.

Five days after my encounter with the red-headed vagrant, the following paragraph appeared in one of the local papers: "Pocklingham. In the casual ward of the Union house for this district a tramp, name unknown, died last night. He had been admitted on the previous evening, but, for some unexplained reason, it was not noticed until the next morning that he suffered from illness, and, therefore, he was allowed to mix with the other inmates in the general ward. Drs. Butt and Clarkson, who were called in to attend, state that the cause of death was the worst form of smallpox. The body will be buried in quicklime, but some alarm is felt in the district owing to the deceased, who, it is said, arrived here from Dunchester, where he had been frequenting various tramp's lodgings, having mixed with a number of other vagrants, who left the house before the character of his sickness was discovered, and who cannot now be traced. The unfortunate man was about forty years of age, of medium height, and red-haired."

The same paper had an editorial note upon this piece of news, at the end of which it re-

* Since the above was written a few months ago tens of thousands of children have been exempted on the ground of their parents or guardians "conscientious objections." In one town alone the exemptions are reported to amount to no less than forty thousand!