

## At the "Dead Line."

BY HUDSON KEMPTON.

"Mail!"

"Bring it here, Charlie." And the minister's son deposited three letters and two papers on the minister's study table, and then left the room on the run, for he was one of those boys who are always full of business and not over-gentle in their manners.

The minister looked careworn and gray for a man of fifty years. He spread out the three unopened envelopes and examined them with an air of mingled anxiety and hopelessness.

"Anything from Mr. Robinson?" came from the adjoining room, where Mrs. Shepherd, the minister's wife, was making up the "down-stairs bed."

"No, nor from Smith. There is nothing but a couple of circulars and a short note from Brown of Iowa. But he says there is no self-supporting church vacant in his association, though he will send my name to the State Missionary Board. It's the same old story, wife, I guess I've reached the dead line. The churches no longer have use for a man past fifty. It looks to me as if this was my last pastorate."

As he opened the wrappers and read carefully the news from the churches in the two denominational papers, which he had ordered for a few months only, that he might learn of new openings in the way of vacant pulpits, Mr. Shepherd's mind ran over his own career. He thought with some bitterness of the high standing he had made in college and seminary, and of how his first charge was at Montpelier, a field that required a scholarly pastor. He recalled vividly how hard he had studied and worked to prepare sermons that would be fresh and stimulating to his somewhat critical audience, and he knew now, twenty-five years afterward, that that had been his most successful pastorate. The second had been shorter, the third shorter still, and lately two or three years seemed to be his limit.

Two years had not been completed at Pleasant Valley and yet he knew that it was time for him to go. He had not overheard the worldly Mrs. Dunn's remark that he was "slower than cold molasses;" nor the godly Deacon Sharpe's lament that, "the pastor's sermons don't seem to touch the heart nor interest the young;" nor Mr. Mason's opinion, stated on Odd Fellows' Memorial Day—the only occasion on which he had ever heard the minister—to the effect that he was a "has been from Wayback;" nor pretty Miss Lamont's wish that "our pastor was a little handsomer, and could preach without reading, like the Methodist man." Rev. Mr. Shepherd had heard none of these things, and yet he knew positively that it was time for him to go.

He was not a man to wait for a visit from the faithful Deacon, who felt it to be his duty to inform the pastor that the membership was "vestless" under his preaching, and desired his resignation. He had his resignation carefully written out, and expected to hand it in on the coming Sunday.

And yet Mr. Shepherd wondered why it should be necessary. He was still strong and vigorous—almost in his prime. His wise experience had given him wisdom in managing the business of the church. He had the good will of the community among young and old—of that he was well aware. It is a careless way people wished him success, and would be sorry that it was necessary for him to go. Moreover, he was sure he had never preached better in his life; for he had given much attention to his "delivery," and he had preached the same sermons—the best of them—that had taken so well with that critical audience on his first field of labor twenty-five years before.

The old minister looked up from his paper, and let his eye wander over his well filled book-shelves. Those authors were Standard and sound. He had not bought many books for the last ten years. Why should he? The best of modern books were full of strange ideas and unsettling to the systematic theology he had been trained to preach. They distracted his mind and set him to puzzling over questions he could not answer.

Tat-a-tat, tat!

"Oh! Deacon Sharpe! Come in, Deacon."

But the Deacon declined.

"I jest called to say, pastor, that sister Mason is very dangerous, and if you'll get in with me, I'll drive you out thar. My woman sat up las' night an' says she spoke of you—said she'd like to have you pray with her agin."

Then, after they were in the buggy, and on the road, the Deacon added, "The Masons hev been goin' to hear the Methodist man lately, but sister Mason says your prayers, at her bedside, hev done her a power of good."

The minister said nothing, but though Deacon Sharpe did not know it, he had sent into the soul of a discouraged and desponding man a big ray of comfort—the first for many a day.

A little before noon, Mr. Shepherd was returning home alone. He was walking briskly, for without, the wind was chilly, and within, he had formed a new resolve. He would postpone his resignation for the present, give up hunting for another field, and try what a new round of pastoral calling would accomplish. He would call on every member of the congregation, and, when at all possible, pray in every home.

The clanging of a bell arrested his attention. The fire

bell! Instinctively he looked toward the parsonage, which had just come in sight around the shoulder of the hill. To his horror he saw smoke thick and heavy, pouring from the upper windows, while the ell of the house in which the kitchen was situated, was already ablaze and wrapped in flame.

At the sight, the minister stopped. Involuntarily, his hand went to his hat. He bared his gray head and clasping the hat in both hands convulsively, he looked away over the burning house, and cried: "My Father! Have mercy! It is more than I can bear!" For a minute it seemed that he would faint. He swayed, as if about to fall. A shout arose from the dark crowd around the house he reused himself, and saw the ell roof of the parsonage sink down. Neglecting to replace his hat on his head, Mr. Shepherd ran toward home in a frenzy. As he drew near all stood aside except his wife, who met him weeping, and threw her arms about his neck.

"My books! My papers! My sermons!" he cried, "did you save them?"

"No," she said, "we saved nothing. I was over to sister Lamont's cutting out a dress. I'd left the gasoline stove turned on, boiling the—"

Flames were now reaching and waving out of every window. The minister broke away from his wife, and ran furiously into the arms of Deacon Sharpe and Mr. Mason who were guarding the front door expecting some such onset.

"No! no! my brother. You can't do that! Your life is worth more than your books!"

As it even as the Deacon spoke, the floor of the second story fell, and among the black smoke which blurted from the windows of the study, there floated gently forth sheets of manuscript, which sailed aloft a hundred feet burning as they circled up.

Pitiful, then it was to see the gray haired minister. He turned his back to the fiery ruin of his home covered his face with his hands and wept softly without crying, but with copious tears. And as good Deacon Sharpe put his arms about him and gently bore him away, the crowd looked on with sympathetic wonder and some were affected as was Miss Lamont, who excused her emotion by remarking to Mr. Mason: "It always makes me cry to see a man shed tears."

The next day was Sunday, and for once the church was full.

Mr. Shepherd was in despair. For the first time in his life he entered the pulpit without a manuscript. His sermon from "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into divers temptations," was not entirely new in its main thoughts, but as he delivered it, he felt that his language was so colloquial, his illustrations so personal and homely, that the thought would not be appreciated and the discourse would fall flat. For this reason, he put more energy than usual into his preaching, and, in spite of all its defects, he was conscious as he preached, that the sermon gripped his own soul tighter, and meant more to him than any he had preached for many a day.

At the close, he said:

"Brethren, I had a matter of business to present to you to-day. I have been feeling for some time that my work on this field is done. I had written my resignation, and had it in form to read to you to-day, but it was burned in the conflagration (the only big word he had used that morning) yesterday, and my mind has been so upset that I have not been able to write another, but I now—"

It was never known what Mr. Milton Shepherd intended to then do. At this point, Deacon Sharpe, Brother Mason, and Sister Dunn were all on their feet demanding recognition from the chair, while a dozen others were calling or motioning the minister to "set down."

Mr. Mason was recognized, and said:

"I move that Deacon Sharpe be chairman of this meeting."

Astonished and uncertain as to what was coming, the minister stepped down from the pulpit and moved toward the church door.

"Don't go out pastor," said the Deacon, "just set down and make yourself comfortable. Now, what has brother Mason, got to say?"

"No more than some of the rest of you will say. Only this—our pastor has been burnt out. I don't know how much insurance he had, but I know we ought to stand by him now and show him we appreciate him, and give him a little of that "joy" he was talking about in his sermon. And, by the way, that is the best sermon he's preached since he's been here. (It was the second Brother Mason had heard, though no one but the pastor thought of that.) Now I think we ought to make him a little present of a few hundred dollars, and I want to head the subscription with twenty-five."

The pastor arose as if to protest, but not being recognized by the chair, he retired amid the smiles of the congregation, and was followed from the room by Mrs. Shepherd and her son Charles.

Twenty years have passed since that Sunday, and Rev. Milton Shepherd is still pastor at Pleasant Valley. His sermons, which he has prepared fresh each week, and has not found time to write, and so could not read, are far inferior, from his own standpoint, to those preached to the cultured congregation at Montpelier, but Sister Dunn has

not found them "alow," nor the young folks uninteresting. With the money given him after the fire, he started a new library; but for some reason, the old books of the previous generation were not the volumes to be placed upon his shelves. Most of them he could only find in second-hand stores, and as he investigated, and came to understand the thought of the living men who were writing the new books he found they were really sincere, and not so dangerous as he had imagined. Mr. Mason is now the Senior Deacon, and more than once he has been heard to say to some inquiring visitor: "Yes, our pastors getting along; but let me tell you, stranger, he's strictly up-to-date. He may not swallow all the new notions as they come, but he knows what they are!"

So, take it all together, it still looks to every one, and to Rev. Milton Shepherd as well, as if Pleasant Valley is to be his last pastorate.—Ed.

## "Baptist Knockers."

Notwithstanding the justifiable objection to vulgarisms, slang words creep into general use because they are aptly expressive, or brightly incisive, or necessary to describe some newly discovered condition, or habit, or need. In present hour vernacular, a faithful and irritating complain-er is a "knocker." According to the niceties of distinction observed in the use of "slanguage," a "kicker" is one, however, whose complaints, occasionally at least, may be justified. Not so with the "knocker."

For once we may be pardoned the use of a word which in its present meaning, has not been recorded in the dictionaries. It is just the word to apply to a certain class of Baptists, whose chief, or at least whose frequent delight is to "knock." Far be it from us to prevent any righteously aroused brother from "registering a kick" against that denominational policy which is wrong, that action which is unwise, or that condition which needs correction. Our blessing follows him and our own shoe tips bear marks of contact with stubborn obstacles. But we have no sort of sympathy with him who is always "knocking" against those things which naturally he would be supposed to praise and in which, it would seem, he ought continually to delight.

There is the man, for instance, who is forever finding fault with our Baptist system of independent church government. He is enjoying some of the benefits of that independence even in exercising his right to find fault. He is surrounded by the healthy denominational conditions for which his religious forefathers fought. He may with his fellow church members change the hours and the accustomed forms of worship; he may with a majority of his brethren choose any pastor whom he desires, and may dismiss him when he sees fit, and all without the interference of any other church, or any ecclesiastical authority, or board, or any other creature. He may be as generous or as stingy as he pleases to his support of denominational organizations. He may enjoy all privileges of his denomination share all this honors so far as he is fit, assume or refuse all its duties. He is a religious freeman with all the occasions for spiritual uplift which Baptist democracy provides. And yet, because some denominational measures are proposed which he does not approve, or because some other church or body of churches has adopted some policy which he cannot conscientiously endorse, he joins the American Baptist Confederation of Continual Knockers. Let him stop growling at the new failures caused by the Baptist independence, without which he would be even more miserable. Let him take advantage of his independence to change conditions. Let him go to work.

There is the minister who is everlastingly complaining of "the way we Baptists manage; so differently from the Methodists." He is always prevented, he thinks, from securing a pastorate of a church worthy of his talent. Some state convention "pope" or jealous pastor, is forever "slandering him." A denomination which permits such injustice, he declares, must be composed of "mighty weak" people, or steadily going to the dogs. Nonsense! Let the good man himself wholly worthy mentally, physically and spiritually. If he would adequately fit himself for desirable pulpits and quit "knocking" pulpit committees would be continually knocking at his door.

And then there are—yes, there are plenty more Baptist "knockers," but let them, too, cheer up, and try to see that which is good, true, inspiring and worth praising in our great growing and worthy denomination.—The Standard.

## Devotion Larger Than Worship.

BY REV. HUGH BLACK.

The state of our life registers itself automatically on our work. Our good activities cannot keep themselves alive. That is why we ever need revivals of religion, renewals of living faith. The organization we call the church will keep itself going for a little by its old momentum in a dull and blundering fashion; but that cannot last for long, and even when it lasts it does not amount to much—a name to live when it is dead. A man may sometimes seem to be able to make up in zeal what he lacks in faith; but it soon becomes sound and fury signifying nothing. When passion of the heart grows dull, when spiritual life ceases to be true and fervent, the tide of work wanes out on its long ebb.