

# Innovations

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"It was Miss Limpton, at the Post Office, that first set me thinking I'd done a foolish thing in hiring the girl straight off, and when one who's been on neighbourly terms with you for years, let alone being a Government official, as you may say, speaks as strongly as she did, it makes a person feel very uncomfortable, and I should just like to hear what you think about it, Mr. Jasper!"

"But you haven't told me yet, Mrs. Gibbins," I managed to interject; "what it is you've done."

"No; but I'm coming to that now. You see I asked Mrs. Seaton, at the register office at Treeford, to look out for a servant for me, and as I was in a hurry to get one she sent the girl over to call upon me—as nice a girl as you need wish to see, and with a good written character from her last two places; and so, like a fool (begging your pardon, I'm always picking up the word from Gibbins), I engaged her then and there——"

"Well, and why not?" I managed to shoot into the conversation again, as she paused for breath. I was somewhat pressed for time, and could see that the "three minutes" pleaded for would be increased tenfold unless one took prompt measures.

"Ah, that's just the point," went on the dear, voluble old creature. "I shall have to explain how it happened."

I saw it was useless to kick against fate, and resigned myself for half an hour at least. I had been espied by my old friend and confidante from her window, as I rode up the lane opposite, and had reluctantly reined in Charlie to listen to the matter on which the good soul wanted my advice.

"You'll not refuse me three minutes, Mr. Jasper, and I'll not keep you longer," she began, by way of preface, and then plunged into the heart of the matter as detailed above.

I had been accustomed as a boy to trot down to the village nearly every day, during holiday times, and scarce a day passed that I did not either see or speak to my old friend. Gibbins was one of my father's most respectable tenants, an honest, prosperous yeoman of the old school. No veto was ever put upon my intercourse with him or his kindly, talkative wife; consequently I got quite intimate with them, and would run in and out as though their place belonged to me.

Later on in life our relations, though differing in character, were just as cordial. Cheesecakes or strawberries and cream had less to do with my visits, it is true; but the intimacy fostered from boyhood continued just as close, with an added deference on the part of the good folk to my opinion, which often amused me and my sister Nan.

On the particular morning to which I am alluding, my only course was to spring down from Charlie's back, tie the bridle to the gatepost, and sacrifice whatever inclination I might otherwise

feel to the needs of the hour. As we paced up and down the gravelled path between the dahlias and hollyhocks (for I drew a line at the doorstep), the important question was at length evolved. The new maid, Mary Lomax, turned out to be a Roman Catholic, and Miss Limpton, voicing the combined opinions of the village, had declared it dangerous and scandalous to keep her.

"And you see, Mr. Jasper," the good woman continued, fanning herself with her handkerchief—for the stating of the case, with digressions unavoidable (as far as Mrs. Gibbins was concerned) into various tangents, had made her warm and somewhat breathless—"there isn't a day that the rector and his lady don't call in at the Post Office to have a chat and ask the news, and the General and the young ladies are continually running in, and you may depend they've discussed it thoroughly, and it's very difficult to know what to do to please all parties."

My advice was to try to please no parties, but to act as her own good sense might dictate; and I found her quite ready to accept it; for in her secret heart she had determined to keep the girl, if she could but get some one to side with her.

My duty done, I resisted all allurements of new milk or home-brewed ale, and trotted off again on my way to make up for lost time.

Our village was nothing out of the common. There was one long, straggling street, made up chiefly of cottages standing in trim gardens, the monotony varied at intervals by more pretentious dwellings. There was, for instance, the "Plume of Feathers," with its signboard swinging in a frame mounted on a high post by the roadside, and its ancient horse-block by the door. Then there was the blacksmith's forge and neatly built house, the wheelwright's place, and others of the same class. The substantial stone house occupied by Gibbins was at one extremity of this street, and the Post Office, which was also the general merchant's, was at the other, standing at the corner of the lime-shaded avenue which framed the church and rectory. Miss Limpton was an important personage in Semperton. Her establishment combined all the qualities of fashionable milliner's show-rooms and fancy stationer's warehouse, with the more homely, but no less necessary grocery and chandlery stores. But what gave the place its prestige was the connection with "the Government," which its position as Post Office involved.

People spoke of it in our village with a reverence approaching awe. You never heard it called "Limpton's" or "the shop," but always "the Post Office" (with an emphasis which suggested capitals). Over this important establishment Maria Limpton ruled with autocratic sway.

She had a father, it is true, who took down the shutters, swept out the "emporium," and made himself generally useful to the female commander-in-chief; but old Sam Limpton had no idea of asserting any rights of his own in opposition to the law laid down by Maria. He was a thin, apologetic old man, with a bald head, and a continual propitiatory smile for all customers. His daughter evidently inherited the character of her deceased mother, for he paid her the dutiful and unswerving obedience which she exacted without a murmur.

Miss Maria was tall, thin, and genteel—extremely genteel—her very cough was ladylike. She was probably about fifty at the time of which this story treats, though I never remember her looking any younger than she did then, even in my boyish days. She dressed in black, of a somewhat fashionable cut, I believe, and affected what used to be called "Madonna braids" in her style of hairdressing. She was also much addicted to linen collars and cuffs and a silk apron. Her English was supposed, by the ordinary run of our villagers, to be the most perfect article which Her Majesty the Queen had at her disposal; but to more critical listeners it lacked somewhat of the finish of Lindley Murray.

My business on this particular morning was limited to calling for my father's letters and my own. "How do, Miss Limpton?"—the usual formula—was my salutation, as the lady in question appeared at the door of her establishment.

"Thank you, Mr. Jasper"—with a genteel cough, partially suppressed by the usual ladylike application of lanky fingers to her lips—"I'm better than I were." This was the invariable answer to such interrogations, and seemed to imply a genteelly delicate constitution, which Miss Limpton's appearance belied.

I expected some communication anent the Gibbins business, and was quite prepared for Maria's subdued tone as she remarked, when handing me my letters—

"What a dreadful thing about poor Mrs. Gibbins!"

"Mrs. Gibbins!" I repeated, in simulated anxiety. "What's wrong with her?"

"Haven't you heard, Mr. Jasper?" returned Maria. "She's brought a Romanist into the place!"

Then followed the account as I had already heard it, embellished with Miss Limpton's own private views of the danger which threatened religion—nay, even life and limb—from the presence in our midst of so terrible a personage.

Needless to say, my morning had slipped away before I got back to my duties at home.

Sunday came, and I rode alone to the church; my father in his weak health was seldom able to get so far in the morning. Mrs. Gibbins again waylaid me with further details of the progress of events.

"Mary is just a treasure, Mr. Jasper," she exclaimed. "If it were not for her religion I should have no cause for complaint. She was off to the chapel at Squire Hemming's first thing this morning, and back again in time to get breakfast for us, for all the two-mile walk there and back. I told her when I hired her, plain and straight: 'You'll never be dragging over to Treeford every Sunday,' says I, 'for we always have a hot dinner, the master will be in a fine way if that's changed. You'd best attend the church here while you are here.' But she spoke out straight, but respectful: 'Oh no, ma'am, I can't do that; but you won't have reason to complain about the dinner. I shall manage to get to Langdon Hall and back again most Sundays, I hope, before you breakfast even.' And so she did, and everything just as Gibbins likes it. You were right, Mr. Jasper, in saying 'keep her'" [I had not said it, but never mind]; "and when I ventured to mention about getting rid of her to Gibbins, he said at once, in his sharp way, 'Don't be a fool, woman; let Ria Limpton say what she likes; keep a good servant when you've got her.' You see he doesn't care for Miss Limpton. 'Her tongue,' he says, 'will do instead of the clapper of the church bell when that breaks. It's loud enough,' he says, 'and easy enough to start.' But, bless me, you'll be late for church if I keep you any longer!" So with a wave of the hand and a smiling bow the good soul trotted in to make her own preparations for worship.

Our ritual arrangements at Semperton were of a primitive order. It was a lovely little Early English Church, quite a gem in its way, but vandalism and neglect had stamped their marks upon it both within and without. Over the door was a large, empty niche where, obviously, the figure of the Patron, St. John, formerly stood. The cross which once surmounted the east gable had fallen into decay, and seemed to have dropped off of itself, for it lay in a corner of the churchyard—huge to our childish eyes, I remember, when Nan and I used to gaze upon it with awe. Its place was occupied by a gilded vane, placed there by some benefactor more utilitarian than aesthetic.

The interior was no less changed from its original condition. A beautiful carved oak screen at the entrance of the chancel had been painted by some would-be renovator a pale-blue; the chancel itself, damp and mouldy, with its worm-eaten communion-table and faded tablets of the Commandments, surmounted under the east window by the royal arms, served merely as a robing-place for the rector, except on "Sacrament Sundays." The pews dated apparently from the epoch of the decoration of the chancel-screen. They were of plain deal, each with its bolted door—typical of proprietary claims on the part of its occupant—those of the farmers and élite had somewhat higher tops; so that good Mrs. Gibbins, sitting within hers in all the glory of her black silk and her lace mantle, could only be detected in her sermon-nap by the suspicious nodding of her plum-coloured plumes.

The "Hall" pew, as ours was styled, stood in a corner apart from the ordinary throng, and commanded a good view of everything from its elevated platform of three steps. Some ancestor, anxious to perpetuate feudal distinctions, had built the chantry-like structure with the remains of some old carved screen from a bygone chapel, so that we were surrounded on two sides by massive uprights and crockets, which enclosed us as in a shrine. There were red curtains to draw at will when one wished for privacy (during a long, dry sermon, for example), crimson felt carpet, and plush cushions; and above our heads, on a brass plate, the legend told how "Jasper Ringwould Esq<sup>i</sup> erected this pew at his sole expense, A.D. 1718."

The service, though considerably more ornate in my time than formerly, was still dreary in the extreme. The droning harmonium, which had supplanted the old bass viol, fiddle, and bassoon in the gallery, accompanied the psalm, sung in shrill tones by the school children, led by a select choir of men and girls, of whom Julia Greenson, Miss Limpton's assistant, in the conscious glory of a smart hat and feathers, was the prima donna. When the singing began the whole congregation turned their backs on chancel and pulpit and faced the gallery, where the singers performed their part with all the assurance of a Handel Festival choir. Mrs. Livery, of the "Plume of Feathers," and her buxom daughter; Miss Limpton, the Gibbinses, and others of the farmer type, formed a connecting link between the extremes of gentry and common folk—the former represented by the Hall, the Rectory, and General Hayes and his daughters, and the latter by the occupants of the free seats under the gallery and the side aisle pews.

Primitive as everything looked to me, it was far in advance of what my grandmother often described to us as children, when the clerk in his desk, with newly curled Sunday wig, answered all the responses and sang the psalm all alone, the congregation maintaining a dignified silence during the vicarious offering of prayer and praise. One can well understand how, with such surroundings, Sempertonians looked with something like dread on the advent of a Romanist to their Church of England community, whose unity had been hitherto unbroken, save by the Wesleyan Methodist butcher, who drove his wife and daughter every Sunday to worship at Treeford.

Miss Limpton more than once, in my daily calls for the letters, broached the subject of the Popish black sheep. "The Rector, Mr. Jasper, is very much annoyed, though of course he doesn't like to offend the Gibbinses. The General, of course, has been abroad so much that he is not such a strict Churchman as one would like, and the young ladies are naturally led by him. When I told Miss Margaret about the sad state of things she only laughed, and Miss Edith said, 'What a joke!'—but then, you know, they're young——" Miss Maria's pursed-up lips and slight toss of the head seemed to add, "And foolish!"

I was called away from these exciting scenes by a long-promised visit to Nan and her husband. On my return, three months or so later, quite a change had come over the place. On my first meeting with Mrs. Gibbins the good soul was beside herself with joy at the opportunity of pouring into fresh ears an oft-repeated eulogium of her domestic treasure, whose worth was at last acknowledged by not a few who had previously had nothing but ridicule and contempt for her.

It was the old story of "virtue its own reward." One of the many petty annoyances which Mary had to suffer was the persistent persecution—for that term alone can express the attitude of these ignorant rustics towards her—on the part of some of the more vulgar-minded. In her Sunday visits to church she had to pass a cottage by the roadside inhabited by the Jackson family—the husband was a drunken labourer, the wife a gossiping slattern—who particularly distinguished themselves by their Protestant zeal.

"Yah! Roman candle!" the little ones would scream, running out in a flock as she passed. "There's holy Mary, bin to worship her idols!" the loutish boy would shout. Both exclamations were driven home by the insolent laugh of mother and elder girl as they ran to gaze after her. Not that their attentions had much effect—as far as one could see—yet, after all, petty humiliations are stinging enough to all of us.

A time came for revenge, and this ignorant Papist servant-maid heaped "coals of fire" on the heads of her persecutors, according to the teaching of the Bible, which was supposed to be kept from her by her priests.

"A fine business!" was James Gibbins's exclamation one day as he came in from the farm.

"Jackson's biggest boy down with small-pox, the doctor says, and the place like a pigstye, and the woman useless; it'll spread through the place you'll see."

Here was the girl's chance. Jackson's eldest daughter was just leaving her place; she could not go home; why not let her come to Mrs. Gibbins, and Mary would nurse the boy? She had done it before; there was no fear for her. Charity asked it (for in bucolic fright the villagers kept entirely aloof), and she would gladly do it.

Constant persistence in her request softened her mistress's opposition, and the girl at last got her way. The family was banished to another empty cottage, and Mary and cleanliness reigned supreme. To the delight of the doctor his orders were faithfully obeyed (these Catholics of course are used to obedience), and the disease was conquered. Not another case occurred, and for this the village was indebted to the self-sacrifice of one whom they had hitherto despised and ridiculed.

Such was the drift of Mrs. Gibbins' story. I was quite prepared to find after this that Mary had risen still higher in the estimation of her mistress. The old lady had even gone so far as to accompany her in a Sunday afternoon visit to Treeford, where she had been present at the service and had made the acquaintance of the priest. "And a very nice, homely young gentleman he is, Mr. Jasper, and always welcome to a cup of tea here when he's passing; and, what's more, Gibbins is as pleased to see him as any man could be; for, as to the religion, it's sensible enough when you know it."

I found by degrees that the attitude of most of our villagers towards Catholicity had undergone a change. George Jessop, the smart young blacksmith, I found, was frequently known to drive Mary over to Treeford on a Sunday morning—for the Gibbinses had waived the question of a hot dinner regularly—and people said that George would probably "turn" himself before long, for he had been seen more than once coming out of the chapel. "But, after all," said some of the young ladies

(perhaps because the grapes were sour), "he's forced to be a Roman Catholic if he wants Gibbins's Mary, for she's too stiff a Papist to take a Protestant, so there's little religion in his chapel-going."

It was not long before I came across the priest one day at the Gibbinses, and was introduced by William as "the young squire." He was a genial, cultured young fellow, and I took a great liking to him, and the result has been that he has often dined with me at the Hall, and scarce a week passes but we have a chat together. One consequence has been the clearing up of many misunderstandings regarding the Catholic Church. I shall put no difficulty, as I told Mrs. Gibbins only the other day (to the good creature's undisguised delight), in the way of a Catholic chapel in the village, now that the starting of a cotton mill about a mile away is likely to bring Lancashire Catholics amongst us; and, moreover, I would gladly help with a subscription.

But there is one staunch Church of England heart which resents all such Popish leanings on the part of our misguided Sempertonians. Miss Limpton is firm in her opposition. "I've no patience, Mr. Jasper," she said to me only last week, "with Jane Gibbins. To think after our long friendship she should go and give me up for a rank Papist servant-girl!"

Mrs. Gibbins had not really given her up, as I had reason to know; but, at a recent meeting at the tea-table, Maria had flown out with such a spiteful attack upon Romanists in general and Mary Lomax in particular, that the good old soul was stirred to wrath. "I told her," she said, when describing the scene to me, "not to meddle with things she knew nothing about, and she flew off in a temper, saying that she'd thank me not to teach her religion, for if any one understood what was true doctrine, surely she ought to do, seeing that not a day passed by that a clergyman did not enter her door, which was more than I could say."

Knowing the real state of things, I ventured to speak up for my old friend and try to smooth things over, but the irate postmistress would have none of my peacemaking.

"It's ridiculous," she cried, "to hear Jane Gibbins prating about Popery, with its medals and *mericles*; I've no patience with such nonsense. It's my belief, Mr. Jasper, that she'll turn Papist herself before many months are out, with that priest visiting the house constant—and she's not the only one that's got the Romanist fever," she added, more angry still, as she caught sight of the amused twinkle which I could not repress. "Mark my words, there'll be plenty to follow her, and some among them who ought to know better."

It was evident that in the concluding words a shaft was lanced at my unlucky self. I was classed among the black sheep, then!

Well, after all perhaps Miss Limpton may prove a true oracle! Who knows?

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