

## The Two Churches Of 'Quawket.

by H. C. Bunner

The Reverend Colton M. Pursly, of Aquawket, (commonly pronounced 'Quawket,) looked out of his study window over a remarkably pretty New England prospect, stroked his thin, grayish side-whiskers, and sighed deeply. He was a pale, sober, ill-dressed Congregationalist minister of forty-two or three. He had eyes of willow-pattern blue, a large nose, and a large mouth, with a smile of forced amiability in the corners. He *was* amiable, perfectly amiable and innocuous—but that smile sometimes made people with a strong sense of humor want to kill him. The smile lingered even while he sighed.

Mr. Pursly's house was set upon a hill, although it was a modest abode. From his window he looked down one of those splendid streets that are the pride and glory of old towns in New England—a street fifty yards wide, arched with grand Gothic elms, bordered with houses of pale yellow and white, some in the homelike, simple yet dignified colonial style, some with great Doric porticos at the street end. And above the billowy green of the tree-tops rose two shapely spires, one to the right, of granite, one to the left, of sand-stone. It was the sight of these two spires that made the Reverend Mr. Pursly sigh.

With a population of four thousand five hundred, 'Quawket had an Episcopal Church, a Roman Catholic Church, a Presbyterian Church, a Methodist Church, a Universalist Church, (very small,) a Baptist Church, a Hall for the "Seventh-Day Baptists," (used for secular purposes every day but Saturday,) a Bethel, and—"The Two Churches"—as every one called the First and Second Congregational Churches. Fifteen years before, there had been but one Congregational Church, where a prosperous and contented congregation worshiped in a plain little old-fashioned red brick church on a side-street. Then, out of this very prosperity, came the idea of building a fine new free-stone church on Main Street. And, when the new church was half-built, the congregation split on the question of putting a "rain-box" in the new organ. It is quite unnecessary to detail how this quarrel over a handful of peas grew into a church war, with ramifications and interlacements and entanglements and side-issues and under-currents and embroilments of all sorts and conditions. In three years there was a First Congregational Church, in free-stone, solid, substantial, plain,

and a Second Congregational Church in granite, something gingerbread, but showy and modish—for there are fashions in architecture as there are in millinery, and we cut our houses this way this year and that way the next. And these two churches had half a congregation apiece, and a full-sized debt, and they lived together in a spirit of Christian unity, on Capulet and Montague terms. The people of the First Church called the people of the Second Church the “Sadduceeeceders,” because there was no future for them, and the people of the Second Church called the people of the First Church the “Pharisee-mes”. And this went on year after year, through the Winters when the foxes hugged their holes in the ground within the woods about ’Quawket, through the Summers when the birds of the air twittered in their nests in the great elms of Main Street.

If the First Church had a revival, the Second Church had a fair. If the pastor of the First Church exchanged with a distinguished preacher from Philadelphia, the organist of the Second Church got a celebrated tenor from Boston and had a service of song. This system after a time created a class in both churches known as “the floats,” in contradistinction to the “pillars.” The floats went from one church to the other according to the attractions offered. There were, in the end, more floats than pillars.

The Reverend Mr. Pursly inherited this contest from his predecessor. He had carried it on for three years. Finally, being a man of logical and precise mental processes, he called the head men of his congregation together, and told them what in worldly language might be set down thus:

There was room for one Congregational Church in ’Quawket, and for one only. The flock must be reunited in the parent fold. To do this a master stroke was necessary. They must build a Parish House. All of which was true beyond question—and yet—the church had a debt of \$20,000 and a Parish House would cost \$15,000.

And now the Reverend Mr. Pursly was sitting at his study window, wondering why all the rich men *would* join the Episcopal Church. He cast down his eyes, and saw a rich man coming up his path who could readily have given \$15,000 for a Parish House, and who might safely be expected to give \$1.50, if he were rightly approached. A shade of bitterness crept over Mr. Pursly’s professional smile. Then a look of puzzled wonder took possession of his face. Brother Joash Hitt was

regular in his attendance at church and at prayer-meeting; but he kept office-hours in his religion, as in everything else, and never before had he called upon his pastor.

Two minutes later, the minister was nervously shaking hands with Brother Joash Hitt.

“I’m very glad to see you, Mr. Hitt,” he stammered, “very glad—I’m—I’m—“

“S’prised?” suggested Mr. Hitt, grimly.

“Won’t you sit down?” asked Mr. Pursly.

Mr. Hitt sat down in the darkest corner of the room, and glared at his embarrassed host. He was a huge old man, bent, heavily-built, with grizzled dark hair, black eyes, skin tanned to a mahogany brown, a heavy square under-jaw, and big leathery dew-laps on each side of it that looked as hard as the jaw itself. Brother Joash had been all things in his long life—sea-captain, commission merchant, speculator, slave-dealer even, people said—and all things to his profit. Of late years he had turned over his capital in money-lending, and people said that his great claw-like fingers had grown crooked with holding the tails of his mortgages.

A silence ensued. The pastor looked up and saw that Brother Joash had no intention of breaking it.

“Can I do any thing for you, Mr. Hitt?” inquired Mr. Pursly.

“Ya-as,” said the old man. “Ye kin. I b’leeve you gin’lly git sump’n’ over ’n’ above your sellery when you preach a fun’l sermon?”

“Well, Mr. Hitt, it—yes—it is customary.”

“How much?”

“The usual honorarium is—h’m—ten dollars.”

“The—*whut?*”

“The—the fee.”

“Will you write me one for ten dollars?”

“Why—why—” said the minister, nervously; “I didn’t know that any one had—had died—”

“There hain’t no one died, ez I know. It’s *my* fun’l sermon I want.”

“But, my dear Mr. Hitt, I trust you are not—that you won’t—that—”

“Life’s a rope of sand, parson—you’d ought to know that—nor we don’t none of us know when it’s goin’ to fetch loost. I’m most ninety now, ’n’ I don’t cal’late to git no younger.”

“Well,” said Mr. Pursly, faintly smiling; “when the time *does* come—”

“No, *sir!*” interrupted Mr. Hitt, with emphasis; “when the time *doos* come, I won’t have no use for it. Th’ ain’t no sense in the way most folks is berrid. Whut’s th’ use of puttin’ a man into a mahog’ny coffin, with a silver plate big’s a dishpan, an’ preachin’ a fun’l sermon over him, an’ costin’ his estate good money, when he’s only a poor deaf, dumb, blind fool corpse, an’ don’t get no good of it? *Naow*, I’ve be’n to the undertaker’s, an’ hed my coffin made under my own sooperveesion—good wood, straight grain, no knots—nuthin’ fancy, but doorable. I’ve hed my tombstun cut, an’ chose my text to put onto it—we brung nuthin’ into the world, an’ it is certain we can take nuthin’ out’—an’ now I want my fun’l sermon, jes’ as the other folks is goin’ to hear it who don’t pay nuthin’ for it. Kin you hev it ready for me this day week?”

“I suppose so,” said Mr. Pursly, weakly.

“I’ll call fer it,” said the old man. “Heern some talk about a Perrish House, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” began Mr. Pursly, his face lighting up.

“‘Tain’t no sech a bad *idee*,” remarked Brother Joash. “Wal, good day.” And he walked off before the minister could say any thing more.

\* \* \* \* \*

One week later, Mr. Pursly again sat in his study, looking at Brother Joash, who had a second time settled himself in the dark corner.

It had been a terrible week for Mr. Pursly. He and his conscience, and his dream of the Parish House, had been shut up together working over that sermon, and waging a war of compromises. The casualties in this war were all on the side of the conscience.

“Read it!” commanded Brother Joash. The minister grew pale. This was more than he had expected. He grew pale and then red and then pale again.

“Go ahead!” said Brother Joash.

“Brethren,” began Mr. Pursly, and then he stopped short. His pulpit voice sounded strange in his little study.

“Go ahead!” said Brother Joash.

“We are gathered together here to-day to pay a last tribute of respect and affection—“

“Clk!” There was a sound like the report of a small pistol. Mr. Pursly looked up. Brother Joash regarded him with stern intentness.

“—to one of the oldest and most prominent citizens of our town, a pillar of our church, and a monument of the civic virtues of probity, industry and wisdom, a man in whom we all took pride, and—“

“Clk!” Mr. Pursly looked up more quickly this time, and a faint suggestion of an expression just vanishing from Mr. Hitt’s lips awakened in his unsuspecting breast a horrible suspicion that Brother Joash had chuckled.

“—whose like we shall not soon again see in our midst. The children on the streets will miss his familiar face—“

“Say!” broke in Brother Joash, “how’d it be for a delegation of child’n to foller the remains, with flowers or sump’n’? They’d volunteer if you give ’em the hint, wouldn’t they?”

“It would be—unusual,” said the minister.

“All right,” assented Mr. Hitt, “only an *idee* of mine. Thought they might like it. Go ahead!”

Mr. Pursly went ahead, haunted by an agonizing fear of that awful chuckle, if chuckle it was. But he got along without interruption until he reached a casual and guarded allusion to the widows and orphans without whom no funeral oration is complete. Here the metallic voice of Brother Joash rang out again.

“Say! Ef the widders and orphans send a wreath—or a Gates–Ajar—*ef* they do, mind ye!—you’ll hev it put a–top of the coffin, where folks’ll see it, wun’t ye?”

“Certainly,” said the Reverend Mr. Pursly, hastily; “his charities were unostentatious, as was the whole tenor of his life. In these days of spendthrift extravagance, our young men may well—“

“Say!” Brother Joash broke in once more. “Ef any one wuz to git up right there, an’ say that I wuz the derndest meanest, miserly, penurious, parsimonious old hunks in ’Quawket, you wouldn’t let him talk like that, would ye?”

“Unquestionably not, Mr. Hitt!” said the minister, in horror.

“Thought not. On’y thet’s whut I heern one o’ your deacons say about me the other day. Didn’t know I heern him, but I did. I thought you wouldn’t allow no such talk as that. Go ahead!”

“I must ask you, Mr. Hitt,” Mr. Pursly said, perspiring at every pore, “to refrain from interruptions—or I—I really—can not continue.”

“All right,” returned Mr. Hitt, with perfect calmness. “Continner.”

Mr. Pursly continued to the bitter end, with no further interruption that called for remonstrance. There were soft inarticulate sounds that seemed to him to come from Brother Joash’s dark corner. But it might have been the birds in the *Ampelopsis Veitchii* that covered the house.

Brother Joash expressed no opinion, good or ill, of the address. He paid his ten dollars, in one-dollar bills, and took his receipt. But as the

anxious minister followed him to the door, he turned suddenly and said:

“You was talkin’ ’bout a Perrish House?”

“Yes—“

“Kin ye keep a secret?”

“I hope so—yes, certainly, Mr. Hitt.”

“The’ ’ll be one.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I feel,” said the Reverend Mr. Pursly to his wife, “as if I had carried every stone of that Parish House on my shoulders and put it in its place. Can you make me a cup of tea, my dear?”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Summer days had begun to grow chill, and the great elms of ’Quawket were flecked with patches and spots of yellow, when, early one morning, the meagre little charity-boy whose duty it was to black Mr. Hitt’s boots every day—it was a luxury he allowed himself in his old age—rushed, pale and frightened, into a neighboring grocery, and cried:

“Mist’ Hitt’s dead!”

“Guess not,” said the grocer, doubtfully. “Brother Hitt’s gut th’ Old Nick’s agency for ’Quawket, ’n’ I ain’t heerd th’t he’s been discharged for inattention to dooty.”

“He’s layin’ there smilin’,” said the boy.

“Smilin’?” repeated the grocer. “Guess I’d better go ’n’ see.”

In very truth, Brother Joash lay there in his bed, dead and cold, with a smile on his hard old lips, the first he had ever worn. And a most sardonic and discomfoting smile it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Reverend Mr. Pursly read Mr. Hitt's funeral address for the second time, in the First Congregational Church of 'Quawket. Every seat was filled; every ear was attentive. He stood on the platform, and below him, supported on decorously covered trestles, stood the coffin that enclosed all that was mortal of Brother Joash Hitt. Mr. Pursly read with his face immovably set on the line of the clock in the middle of the choir-gallery railing. He did not dare to look down at the sardonic smile in the coffin below him; he did not dare to let his eye wander to the dark left-hand corner of the church, remembering the dark left-hand corner of his own study. And as he repeated each complimentary, obsequious, flattering platitude, a hideous, hysterical fear grew stronger and stronger within him that suddenly he would be struck dumb by the "clk!" of that mirthless chuckle that had sounded so much like a pistol-shot. His voice was hardly audible in the benediction.

\* \* \* \* \*

The streets of 'Quawket were at their gayest and brightest when the mourners drove home from the cemetery at the close of the noontide hour. The mourners were principally the deacons and elders of the First Church. The Reverend Mr. Pursly lay back in his seat with a pleasing yet fatigued consciousness of duty performed and martyrdom achieved. He was exhausted, but humbly happy. As they drove along, he looked with a speculative eye on one or two eligible sites for the Parish House. His companion in the carriage was Mr. Uriel Hankinson, Brother Joash's lawyer, whose entire character had been aptly summed up by one of his fellow-citizens in conferring on him the designation of "a little Joash for one cent."

"Parson," said Mr. Hankinson, breaking a long silence, "that was a fust-rate oration you made."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," replied Mr. Pursly, his chronic smile broadening.

"You treated the deceased right handsome, considerin'," went on the lawyer Hankinson.

"Considering what?" inquired Mr. Pursly, in surprise.

“Considerin’—well, *considerin’*—“ replied Mr. Hankinson, with a wave of his hand. “You must feel to be reel disapp’inted ’bout the Parish House, I sh’d s’pose.”

“The Parish House?” repeated the Reverend Mr. Pursly, with a cold chill at his heart, but with dignity in his voice. “You may not be aware, Mr. Hankinson, that I have Mr. Hitt’s promise that we should have a Parish House. And Mr. Hitt was—was—a man of his word.” This conclusion sounded to his own ears a trifle lame and impotent.

“Guess you had his promise that there *should* be a Parish House,” corrected the lawyer, with a chuckle that might have been a faint echo of Brother Joash’s.

“Well?”

“Well—the Second Church gits it. I draw’d his will. Good day, parson, I’ll ’light here. Air’s kind o’ cold, ain’t it?”