

MY FIRST CRUSADE By Gertrude E. Mackenzie

MY FORTNIGHT'S vacation in the little town of Burgerville had become a continuous battle with flies. These pestiferous insects executed tailspins about my nose when I tried to read or write, and at mealtime, not satisfied with plain living (or even high flying) insolently demanded the best that the commissary afforded. To them, the cream pitcher represented a public bath; the carefully baked pies were dancing pavilions; a dish of ice cream presented alluring possibilities as a toboggan slide, and it was only after a little surreptitious shooing that I could determine definitely whether plain rolls or currant buns were being served for supper.

Of course, I reached the limit of my patience before long, and appointed myself a committee of one to see what could be done about it. Charity begins at home; but I soon found out that crusades don't. My efforts met with a discouraging lack of response. The highbrow college professor at our table objected to organized fly-swatting on the ground that the idea had originated in another country and therefore savoured of un-Americanism. The truck driver for the neighbouring screen factory was positive that Local 666 would oppose any movement which might lessen the demand for screens.

The following Sunday afternoon found me on my way to the home of the village preacher. I had heard a lot about his benevolent interest in civic affairs.

The parson was at home. He was entertaining the local medico, who had just dropped in to talk over some improvements which the church was to make in the parsonage. I expressed my appreciation of the morning sermon, and his hospitable friendliness made me feel at home at once. Sure at last of a sympathetic audience, I was soon waxing eloquent on the subject of my crusade.

"My dear madam," he declared when I had finished, "your suggestions truly do credit to your zeal for the common good, and I am indeed glad to learn that my poor feeble words of this morning on the beauty of Service have been an inspiration. It is one of a minister's deepest satisfactions to see his efforts bearing fruit. It is then he feels that the Blessing of the Lord is upon—"

"Yes, I'm sure of it," I agreed, "and may I count on your help?"

"You may be assured of my sympathy with any worthy Movement. I will remember your wish for a clean and healthful town in my daily Petitions, and will pray that God in His infinite goodness may—"

"But will you use your influence to arouse your congregation to the necessity of preventing the spread of flies and mosquitoes? It could be done if they would only drain that big swamp behind the graveyard. How can you get rid of the bugs if you leave them a place like that to breed in?"

"Well, I'd—it's—er—that is, I'm not quite convinced as to the advisability of proceeding along that exact line," he stammered. "You see, the swamp land does not belong to the town. It would have to be purchased. I have never considered business projects a proper subject for Sunday discussion." I raised my eyebrows and glanced at the doctor, remembering the parsonage improvements. The preacher caught my look, and added hastily, "From the pulpit."

At this point the doctor interposed. "The fact is," he said, "the owner of that marsh

is an honoured member of our congregation. You can doubtless understand that it would be—well—a trifle embarrassing to bring up a subject which might savour just a little of criticism of our brother."

"But," I demanded, a little bluntly, "doesn't he deserve criticism if he deliberately keeps his land in such a condition that it is a public nuisance and a menace to health?"

"One of our pastor's most charming traits," replied the doctor pleasantly, "is his studious avoidance of hurting the feelings of those with whom he comes in contact."

I protested tartly. "Well, I can't see why the owner of a free bug dispensary like that is entitled to so much consideration."

"Let us pray that our hearts may be kept from all uncharity." The pastor's calm, unruffled voice fell upon my ear with a note of gentle rebuke. "This brother, whom you are so ready to condemn, is our most generous contributor to the work of carrying the Gospel to the heathen who sit in darkness. He has endowed our college, and it was he who first suggested that the parish should remodel the parsonage. Besides, we have always had flies. Like the poor, they will doubtless be with us always. Since they were created by Him Who doeth all things well, they must have been sent for some wise purpose beyond our poor power to understand. Then, too, consider the cruelty we should foster in the Innocent Heart of Childhood by encouraging the wholesale slaughter of these defenceless little creatures. Remember the Scriptural Command, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill.'"

"And besides," the doctor joined in, "even from a more worldly point of view, this scheme of yours is open to criticism. Consider the disastrous effect upon the trade of our screen factory if these marshy lands were suddenly drained. Think of the men who would be thrown out of employment. Why, your program would be revolutionary. It would practically amount to confiscation of profits without due compensation to the factory owners and would therefore be, in a way, unconstitutional."

"Is the owner just holding the land from purely philanthropic motives, to give the screen factory workers a job? I should think he'd get tired of paying taxes on worthless property."

"Oh, the taxes don't amount to much," explained the doctor. "That's one of the main reasons why it's left as it is. In fact, the owner did plan, a few years ago, to drain the property and build upon it. It was the prospect of the increased tax bill which made him abandon the project."

"And I suppose the town has to levy heavier taxes on other land—including this corner lot here—to make up for what it loses on the swamp."

"No, certainly not on this corner lot," came the pastor's hurried correction. "This is Church Property. It belongs to God, and is tax exempt. But we pride ourselves on some rather fine buildings that pay a pretty sum into the public treasury. Besides that, every single industry in our little town pays its share. Would you believe it: even the boot-blacks and the peanut vendors enjoy the Blessed Privilege of contributing their Little Mite in the form of licence fees. You can see how just and impartial our taxation system is."

"M-mebbe so," I assented doubtfully. "What does Mr Moneybags pay taxes on?"

"Why, our brother pays on his property—his splendid house and its furnishings; and on his screen factory. And, of course, a trifle is assessed against that marshy land."

"Oho! he owns the screen factory, does he?" I began to see daylight. "And you tax him for everything he does to serve or improve the town, and threaten to bankrupt him if he dares to convert that pestilence-breeding cesspool into useful property! But," I ventured one more suggestion, "I should think he'd be glad to have the swamp taken off his hands, if it's useless to him and he can't afford to improve it."

"Well, he would," explained the pastor, "but a new Express Highway is going to be built, and will probably run through the property. As a good business man, our brother is holding the land in the sure expectation of making a profit on it."

"And this profit," I expostulated, "will go, not to the community which builds the road, and which has patiently battled all these years with insects and malaria, but to a man who has simply sat tight and done nothing!"

"My dear madam," returned the doctor, "you surely do not blame anyone for pursuing the natural, businesslike course and accepting whatever profit is legally his, do you?"

I was beginning to lose hope now. "No, I guess not," I conceded. "But what about the system that makes such a course natural and business-like, and the laws that not only allow but virtually compel him to do it?"

"Why," exclaimed the pastor in pained surprise, "you are the very first person I have ever heard complain of our system of raising revenue. I am afraid you do not fully understand these matters. Let me invite you to join the Ladies' Auxiliary of our church! This delightful society meets every week, and this summer they are making a special study of the plant life of Ancient Judea."

"Thanks a lot," I retorted. "I'm more interested in the insect life of modern Burgerville."

"My dear sister," the doctor reassured me, "there is really no necessity for you to be so concerned. Flies are harmless enough if one takes the precaution of keeping his system in good order—under the guidance of a reliable physician."

My host courteously followed me to the door, shook my hand with pious fervour, asked me to call again, and kindly volunteered to pray for my soul, and for the health of the townspeople.

And on my way back to the boarding house, to renew my losing battle with bothersome flies and disease laden mosquitoes, realizing the futility of trying to improve conditions in a town in which there existed a vested interest in bugs, whose breeding place was an asset to its doctors and was owned by the man who was most influential in the church which supported a tactful pastor, and whose congregation included the man who endowed the college which shaped the views of its faculty and who owned a controlling interest in a screen factory upon which employees depended for a living—well, I quietly discharged my committee of one and resigned my self-appointed job as crusader. Next summer I'll spend my vacation in the mountains.