

HYPOCRITES

The Reverend Osbert Heather smoothed his hands over the black silk of his clerical robe and patted his rounded sides. Solemnly stepping from his office he confronted two lines of black-frocked, white-collared choir singers. He smiled slightly and raised his hand. The choristers bowed their heads. A hush fell. An organ note sprang into the silence. The choristers filed into the chancel, dividing to stand at pews on either side confronting one another.

The Reverend smoothed the island of white skin on the top of his head, and stepped onto the chancel. The lights were bright, tinselling the glass of the chandeliers. The red carpet flowed from under his feet down the three steps into the nave and along the aisles to disappear under the glass-paned doors at the back of the church. Walking to the back of the chancel he confronted the cross in prayerful dedication. Bright yellow Mowers clustered in vases on either side of him. As the Reverend turned and walked by the choir, the choristers sat down together, followed by the congregation in bright coats, the feathered caps, the business suits of black and navy blue.

Miss Jacobs watched Reverend Heather, the vision of the Reverend Dr. Andrews, shouldering his red-lined cape, appeared to her. Mrs. Jacobs had watched Dr. Andrews begin over twenty years of services in that church. The doctor's dramatic entrance of running swiftly across the chancel, his cape drifting behind him, its red colour sparking his flight, and humbly kneeling on a stool before the cross was so indented in her mind that she still stared in surprise when the rotund figure of Mr. Heather stalked majestically in its place. Dr. Andrews had become a kind of super being for her, so that she had trouble remembering that he was now in a hospital bed.

The organ swelled and brought everyone to their feet about her, hymn books in hand. Almost all of the pews were filled this Sunday morning. The sun enriching the colours in the ascension of Christ depicted in the great window at the back of the chancel brightened the faces of the church elders scattered throughout the congregation. Mr. Leywood burst into a throaty baritone, which moved too quickly for the cadence of the hymn. He hated having to wait for the organ at the end of each line. His wife, standing shortly beside him, reflected on his increased interest in Church. At breakfast that morning she had said, "What! no dressing gown? Don't tell me we're going to Church again this Sunday."

"If it weren't for the Scottish Heather, dear, I'd let you stay in bed."

"Listen to who's talking. How many times ..." She reddened and lowered her face to her hymn book as she remembered how often she had played the goat to her husband.

When Heather read the Scripture Lesson his voice softened as if he were reading to children before bedtime. His round face intimately bent over the lectern as his voice rolled out the words of the passage. In a pew at the back of the Church, Mrs. Heather was absorbed in watching the people sitting about her. She thought how interested they looked. She admired the widely spaced pews glistening like new furniture, their light-grained wood shining in the light from the

chandeliers, the dark panelling of the walls, the many colourful windows, the unconscious air of respectability of an upper middle class congregation, a sense of wealth engendered by the conservative taste in the decoration and atmosphere of the building. She sensed that the prospect of staying permanently in the Knox Church seemed very likely.

During a soprano solo, Heather sat in the chair reserved at one side of the chancel. He slid his stubby hands along the worn wood of the arms and dangled his fingers over the edges to feel the deep cuts of the intricate carving. Abstractly looking over the knave, he tried to pick out people he knew. The white head of the chief elder, Edward Thomas, appeared in one of the front pews. Heather knew he was a great friend of Dr. Andrews. The elder's tall imposing figure rose importantly from those about him. Heather grimaced as he pictured Dr. Andrews hopping from his hospital bed while shouting to a nurse, "They can't keep us old fellows down."

Heather's eye darted to a younger man, whose name he had forgotten, and near him stood Mr. Leywood, whose presence reassured him. "The young, executive type," he thought. "They seem to like me." Several familiar faces he ignored instinctively because they did not merit the thought needed for recognition. He was searching for Mrs. J.H. Davenport and felt a throb of pleasure when he recognized the large frame of the elderly widow. His wife had been the first to tell him that she was "the" social leader in the city. "Anything she says goes, eh?" he had mused. He thought of how successful he had been with her to date, She was a clever woman but easy to flatter. She admired poetry. Should he dedicate a poem to her? He toyed with idea again, but modesty about his craftsmanship warned him against it.

Grounding in the lower registers, the organ faded to the finishing bars. Heather pushed on his palms and approached the lectern to grasp its sides and stare steadfastly over the congregation.

"Our elders wish that all church members will attend an important meeting this Friday, the twenty-six of January at seven-thirty in the vestry," he announced unconcernedly. He added, smiling, "I hope you will all be there," as if to say, "Please go, for my sake."

Jim Robins elbowed his friend and whispered, "Hope he makes it." Jim was among the young people whom Heather attracted to a Sunday night discussion group. Although the discussion became a monologue, he and his friends liked to gather about the clergyman. The air of authority and the confidence Heather gave everyone around him was worth the hour spent in the group, he thought. "If it weren't for his sermons," he told his mother, "I wouldn't go to Church."

When the Reverend Heather preached a sermon, he held his round figure impressively straight in the pulpit lifting him to a superior height. Above the pulpit hung a round lamp of the same circumference and dark wood. Around its sides small bulbs gave a soft indirect lighting hovering over the minister's head like a halo. When he lifted his finger to stress a point, Mrs. Jacobs thought he resembled a prophet. When his voice thundered to the back of the Church, Mr. Leywood stared in vivid appreciation. Then, dropping his voice to the level of table talk, Heather

seemed to absorb the congregation into a ball in front of him. Everyone listened, although unsure that they understood all he said. He quoted from literary

people; he told of his experiences—"and I would sit at the feet of that great man and listen to him read"—and thrust his arms at his listeners. To Mrs. J.H. Davenport he looked like a solid piece of flotsam bobbing indignantly on the rocking sea of the congregation. She thought of Dr. Andrews, how he would deliver a simple sermon, how he paced about in the pulpit when he became excited. His white hair and round honest eyes had given him a 'holy' look that came only from a lifetime of devotion to religion. Heather's chubby face, transfixed in eloquence, did not look holy, despite the light haloing his head. Yet the church was now filled where it had been half-empty before he arrived.

Sitting near her an elderly woman bit her upper lip and glared suspiciously at Heather. The card in the name plate at the end of the pew designated her, "Miss Gore 2 places". She remarked to the church secretary when she paid her pew rent every month, "You see I always take an extra place in case I bring a Mend." When, occasionally, she did bring a friend, she showed her the small window placed in honour of her great-grandmother when the Church was built.

Miss Gore was thankful that she did not have a friend with her today. She would be embarrassed to bring anyone to hear Reverend Heather, she thought. "That man doesn't preach! He pontificates and swings his arms," she had told Mrs. Jacobs. "Now I just know Dr. Andrews is going to be well enough to come back to preach again. These people who want to change ministers, and especially those who want this Heather, are wrong; and if you want the whole truth, I think they're crazy." She bit her upper lip and angrily shook her grey curls.

"It's been rumoured that we're to meet to select a new minister," ventured Mrs. Jacobs.

"Yes, I've heard it. But I'm not going. You wouldn't catch me attending a meeting for the dismissal of Dr. Andrews. I'd feel like a traitor. Anyway he's not that old. He must be only our age."

"Well, about," murmured Mrs. Jacobs.

"No, I'm not going. The elders have to have a certain percentage of approval before anything can be done. And I have enough faith in our congregation that they won't change a saint for a clown."

Mrs. Jacobs stared at the ceiling, expecting the wrath of God to create itself there. When it came to blaspheming ministers, she was still a Calvinist.

At the end of every service Mr. Heather liked to stride down the main aisle as everyone was rising after his final benediction and station himself at the large centre door, to greet all those coming out the centre aisle (especially Mrs. Davenport), and if anyone from the other aisles wished to shake his hand, as they often did, they could cross over by the hall, which, on cold or rainy days, formed a social vestibule after the service.

Among the women's voices forever tuned to superlatives lauding his sermon, Heather beamed cherub smiles between two popping red cheeks and added compliments of his own.

"I really must congratulate you. I think it's beautiful." Mrs. Davenport glided toward him like a ship entering harbour. The morning's program dangled in a doubled sheet from the end of her upraised arm where it was pinched between finger and thumb. "No one can write poetry like you," she said. Three stanzas of poetry bordered in green on the front of the program appeared before the eyes of those people standing near them. Spontaneous cries of appraisal caused Heather to blush at Mrs. Davenport, his eyes fused with appreciation. He happily caught his wife's eye, bright with excitement.

Jack Leywood measured out the Scotch whisky with a certain eye, added soda water, and presented a glass to Ken White, who had just returned from his holidays.

"Here's putting it in the pocket," and Leywood took a long gulp of his whisky. He mastered his facial muscles with the control of a gourmet. "Takes a Presbyterian to drink Scotch whisky, you know."

"Talking about Presbyterians, what's all this hulla-balloo about the new minister we've got?" asked White.

"That's right, you've missed all that," Leywood laughed. "It was a lot of fun, boy. About a month ago they had a meeting to pick someone to replace the old doc who's been harbouring in bed for the last four months or so. Most of us were sure he wouldn't be well enough to come back, and anyway, he was getting on, you know; voice a little weak, took the steps to the pulpit sort of slowly, used to look so damn pale half-way through his sermon—I thought he'd drop dead. Anyway, this Heather's got quite a record, and he really pleased everybody. He's got a good personality, he's young and all the rest; but there are always those cronies who've sat in the same pew for the last ninety years, who wouldn't change anything for anybody. I bet it's a big decision when they change their coats. And also there were those types who wanted to try out some others before choosing; but we didn't have the time. If we didn't take Heather then, we would have lost a good man to another church"