

Poole, of Bethesda.

BY FRANK E. CHASE.



THE wholly disproportionate influence of an ill-fitting collar or an unblacked shoe in determining the conduct of the human race at critical moments has long been noticed by philosophers with deep humiliation. That mere personal discomfort or a sense of incongruity in appearance, working inward upon the souls of men of stern resolve, should be capable of eclipsing their courage and impeding their acts is a most mortifying reflection, but that a general in tight boots, or a diplomatist who, in a fit of absence of mind, had combined the sack coat of leisure with the silk hat of ceremony, would inevitably fall far short of their customary performance, cannot for a moment be denied.

To such suggestions, John Poole, as a consequence of hereditary influences which were widely discussed in the leading medical journals a few years ago, and therefore need not now be considered, presented a fairly thermometric sensibility. What was to other men a merely occasional experience was the habit of his life, the variegated moods and conduct of which were determined solely by his associations and environment. Like the chameleon, he took his color from the nearest object, and retained it only so long as he was under its influence.

It need not be explained, perhaps, that a person so constituted had never made a glittering success of business. It followed quite naturally that he had tried many pursuits, and he was still trying them in obedience to all sorts of external promptings when the sudden death of both his parents left him alone in the world, and so far independent of personal exertions as the very smallest of incomes would permit. Under these circumstances he drifted into absolute idleness, less through any decision of his own than because of a general disinclination on the part of the citizens of

Bethesda, where he lived, to aid him in his kaleidoscopic experiments in bread-winning.

But if Poole had been found unsatisfactory in business relations, he succeeded in partly redeeming himself by the success with which he performed his social duties, and by the unflinching sympathy and good nature which he displayed in the trying relations of neighborly association. Very popular was he, for these excellent reasons, with the ladies of Bethesda, and with none more so than with Miss Mehitable, an estimable spinster whose family name had been so long disused in the familiar intercourse of a small community as to have been half forgotten, and was chiefly treasured by the lady herself as something which she still hoped to give in exchange for the name of Poole.

It was quite characteristic of the owner of this coveted patronymic that he had conducted almost from boyhood one of these protracted courtships which are so common a feature of New England rural life. Every one in Bethesda knew and had always known of John Poole's attachment for Miss Mehitable, and Miss Mehitable's mild passion for John Poole was one of the most cherished sentimental traditions of the place. Yet what was freely mentioned by every one else had never become a topic of conversation between the two persons most nearly concerned; and so, though Miss Mehitable, whose comfortable home and income, to say nothing of her comely self, would have supplied an ample incentive to most men, had been calmly and unemotionally expectant for years, John had never been able to make up his mind to speak.

The income which this tardy lover enjoyed by inheritance from his parents barely sufficed to provide for his bed and board, and afforded no margin for any of the luxuries of life, nor even for the item of clothing which a New England climate and polite convention unite in making indispensable to human well-being. Thus it happened that he depended entirely for the comfort and adornment of his person upon the occasional contributions of two of his more prosperous kinsmen, who lived in a distant city. This circumstance was, as a matter of course, not much enlarged upon by Poole in conversation with his fellow-citizens, and so was not generally known.

Of these two benefactors, one, the Rev. Babblington Brooke,

presided most successfully over a rich and fashionable congregation, with whom he was in great favor and esteem. His predominating characteristic was timidity, externally manifested by extreme diffidence of manner and a mildness of opinion and utterance that verged upon inanity. Under the sway of this temperamental defect, in which his kinship to Poole was subtly manifested, he was prone to enlarge in his discourses upon the spiritual rewards of virtue, and to emphasize as little as possible the disconcerting *post-mortem* possibilities of wrong doing; all of which tended strongly toward popularity with his fashionable congregation, and partly atoned for the soothing dulness of his sermons.

The other kinsman who contributed to the adornment of Poole's outer man stood in that contradictory relation to the rest of his family which professional breeders of the lower animals tersely describe as "a hit." Mr. Torrent B. Rivers, or "Torry," as he was widely and affectionately known in political circles, partook of none of the peculiarities of his kindred, but had originated for himself an entirely independent set of traits. His character presented an atavistic accumulation of all the dispersed self-confidence of his race, which reappeared in his positive and pugnacious person in incredible volume and intensity. Decision of character had, in fact, become a vice in Mr. Rivers, whose cocksureness was never in the least impaired by the circumstance that his decisions were almost invariably wrong ones. This last peculiarity had made the commercial experiments of his early life quite as disastrous to himself and to others as had been those of his relative, Poole, and had finally narrowed the field of his endeavors down to politics, which he had embraced as a last resort with characteristic energy. His services in this field had been finally rewarded by a grateful country with a fat position in the Custom House, where his proneness to err only excited the uninfluential indignation of European tourists.

It was the Rev. Babblington Brooke's charitable practise to make up a box of little gifts and creature comforts when Christmas day came around, and to send it with a kind and cheering letter, conveying the compliments of the season, to his poor relative, Poole. And with these mere superfluities he never failed to enclose a liberal selection of his own cast-off clothing, strongly

tinctured by long and close association with his person, with the shyness which was his distinguishing characteristic. Actuated by a similar generous impulse, Mr. "Torry" Rivers had also fallen into the habit of sending, every Fourth of July, with a jug of seasonable punch made after his own private and much-coveted recipe, an assortment of his own disused garments, which even when hanging aimlessly in the closet offered strong and unmistakable suggestions of their original owner's bristling and emphatic personality. By a fortunate accident the clothing of both these gentlemen fitted Poole to a nicety, and made the mediation of the local tailor, whose indiscreet tongue might otherwise have babbled this harmless secret to the curious world of Bethesda, quite superfluous.

No man is aware of his own weaknesses, and so it was quite as unaccountable to Poole as to his townsmen that every year about Christmas time he took to church going, eschewed bad language, and became in all respects a model citizen. A painful shyness characterized his manner at this season, and a mild optimism tintured his opinions so far as he ventured to express them. Neatly clad in a sober suit whose principles had been originally formed upon the impeccable person of the Rev. Babblington Brooke, he walked mildly forth, clad in righteousness as in a supernumerary garment.

At such seasons Miss Mehitable's gentle affection for him took on a warmer tinge, and she began to shyly wonder if, by any happy chance, this change of heart might be preliminary to the long-deferred declaration. At such times, too, the advantages of domestic life and the comeliness of Miss Mehitable's person roused a strange riot in John Poole's heart, and strongly suggested to him the desirability of embracing both these objects. But, alas! at these precise seasons he was utterly incapacitated by the dominating influence of the parson's clothes for anything like so bold and decisive a step, and so the word remained unspoken. Opportunity was not lacking, for during the reign of the Brooke raiment they met constantly at church sociables and in the Sunday school, where Poole usually took charge of the Bible class; but not even this association, so influential, as a rule, in forcing the tender plant of love to an early bloom, brought matters to a head.

The coming of Mr. "Torry" Rivers's annual jug of punch on the Fourth of July always marked a change in Poole's habits which was wrongly, but not unnaturally, ascribed by local criticism to the demoralizing effects of that potent fluid. Freshly clad in a neat summer suit, also contributed by that bold and roistering benefactor, he walked the streets of Bethesda a changed man. The consumption of the punch — which in his normal state he held in utter loathing — was only a detail of his altered moral condition, under which the late pillar of the church and model of the social virtues turned instinctively to the excitements of the local trotting park, and, upon occasion, took a skilled hand in the game of poker, the laws of which were studied with far greater industry than were the Revised Statutes in the attorney's office over the village bank, and were, perhaps, a source of greater profit to its proprietor. Saturated with the spiritual essence of the dissolute Rivers, John Poole passed through a kind of moulting period of manners, out of which that once shy bird emerged, loud as to voice, gaudy as to plumage, profane as to conversation, bold and truculent in manner — the admiration of the sporting element of Bethesda.

To Miss Mehitable this annual change brought dismay and discouragement. Her sincere affection for the John Poole of the winter and spring was quite unable to extend itself to this changeling, from which she turned in disgust. Thus, though Poole's attachment for her, at once strengthened and emboldened by the subtle influences emanating from the raiment of Mr. Torrent B. Rivers, energetically sought to declare itself, Miss Mehitable stubbornly refused to afford an opportunity for it to do so. All the summer long, carefully arrayed in the most tasteful and striking combinations provided by Rivers's ex-wardrobe, did John Poole seek the lady of his life-long choice. From picnic to lawn party, from yachting excursion to moonlight drive, he constantly pursued his end with an energy and skill which Miss Mehitable as constantly contrived to baffle and defeat. The husking bees of the autumn and the sleighing parties of the early winter were for John Poole battle-fields of love from which he retired beaten and discomfited.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs had gone on for many years,

and might have gone on forever had it not been for two events which were chronicled almost simultaneously in the city papers, whose accounts of them were read by Poole in distant Bethesda with deep concern, but with slight appreciation of their full bearing upon his own circumstances.

The Rev. Babblington Brooke was replaced in his comfortable pulpit by a younger and more attractive clergyman, and Mr. Torrent B. Rivers, through an overturn in politics, lost his position in the Custom House and was again thrown upon a cold world. Brooke characteristically dried up in the face of this disaster and retired to the editorial room of a religious newspaper at an exiguous salary, while Rivers overflowed his banks in a freshet of disgusted dissipation and presently died. The immediate practical result of these lamentable events was the cessation of the annual box of clothes from both sources.

The full effect of this privation was not immediately felt by John Poole, as he had on hand a closet full of available garments, melancholy mementoes of both his benefactors, when the sad news came to him. But in a year or so these had succumbed to the erosive effects of time and their wearer's sedentary habits, and upon a certain fateful Christmas morning he discovered with pain that the trousers of the last remaining suit of the Rev. Babblington Brooke had irremediably given out, as even so meek and lowly a thing as trousers will do if too industriously sat upon. There was still left to him, however, a pair of pantaloons that had once graced the energetic legs of the late T. B. Rivers, and though these were somewhat incongruous in effect, he was fain to put them on in the interests of propriety.

Never in his life had he felt so distracted in mind as he did that morning when he went down to breakfast. Wild and contradictory impulses chased one another through his brain, and his conversation was remarked upon afterwards as having teemed with strange inconsistencies. He ate the dropped egg, which was the invariable overture to his day, with a languid appetite, and more than once during the progress of the meal his landlady was startled to feel his foot pressing upon hers underneath the table. A more or less pronounced tendency toward such blandishments usually characterized Poole's behaviour during his swash-buckling

summer season, but such a demonstration in the winter was a great surprise to his landlady, who, however, passed it over in silence.

As he was finishing his coffee a parcel arrived by a messenger. He opened it with pleased curiosity, for parcels and he had been strangers for many months; and when he had removed the innermost wrapper of tissue paper, there lay upon his knees, with the gaudy but determined pantaloons of "Torry" Rivers by way of background, a beautiful pair of embroidered slippers — a Christmas gift from Miss Mehitable.

Without a word he pushed back his chair, rose, and, putting on his hat and overcoat, left the house and walked rapidly in the direction of Miss Mehitable's pleasant home. An agony of shyness possessed his mind, still thoroughly under the sway of the cast-off coat of the diffident Brooke, but all the energy of the deceased Custom House officer seemed to have passed into his sole remaining pantaloons, as if by legitimate inheritance, and resistlessly urged forward the reluctant legs of their present occupant. A cold perspiration of fear streamed down his face, overshadowed by the hat of the timid parson, and his throat, encircled by the collar of that shrinking ecclesiastic, was parched with apprehension. But still his resolute and unflinching legs bore him swiftly on.

His frightened arms made wild clutches at telegraph poles and other promising anchorages, but quite in vain. His desperate purpose of casting himself down before a loaded team, or of hurling himself from the dizzy center of the suspension bridge, over which his course led him, were dexterously defeated by the cunning of his inspired lower limbs, which carried him prudently clear of every longed-for disaster. As he neared Miss Mehitable's house he saw her watch-dog, Boxer, under ordinary circumstances a truculent brute, of whom he stood in great bodily fear, running down the path. A wild hope surged up in his mind that Boxer might spring at his throat and, bearing him maimed and helpless to the earth, at least put a stop to this fearful progress. But no! the perverse brute only sniffed menacingly at his heels and urged him on still faster.

On, on he went, through the garden gate, up the long path between two high banks of snow as between the strong walls of a

prison, through the front door without even stopping to knock, and straight into Miss Mehitable's cozy front parlor, where she sat placidly knitting. And then and there his masterful legs wound up their awful performance by decisively plumping him down upon his knees before her in a position that admitted of but one explanation.

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In what precise terms John Poole made that explanation and what ensued thereupon are not known, nor would it be discreet or profitable to inquire. It may be fairly presumed that he did make it and that it was quite satisfactory to Miss Mehitable, from the circumstance that they were married early in the following spring, the Rev. Babblington Brooke coming down expressly to perform the ceremony.

