

THE TRAMPING METHODIST

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The tramping Methodist by Sheila Kaye-Smith

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SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

**THE TRAMPING
METHODIST**

The Tramping Methodist

BY
SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

"Bed in the bush with stars to see,
Bread I dip in the river—
There's the life for a man like me,
There's the life for ever."

R. L. STEPHENSON.

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The Training Methodist

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The Tramping Methodist

CHAPTER I

OF THE METHODIST AT BREDE PARSONAGE

MY father was Rector of Brede, and held in plurality the livings of Udimore, Westfield, Piddinghoe, and Southease. He himself took charge of the first three parishes, which lay near each other, and my elder brother, Clonmel, assisted him as his curate. Between Piddinghoe and Southease an underfed, overworked curate-in-charge galloped an underfed, overworked horse every Sunday.

My father's office was almost a sinecure—there were only two services a week at Brede, and only one at Udimore and at Westfield. On Sunday evening my father took off the priest with his surplice, and lived the life of a fox-hunting squire till he put on his surplice again the next Sunday morning. Clonmel was not a priest even in his surplice, but from week-end to week-end, a combination of the jockey, the sot, and the brute.

We were a large family—my father and mother, my brothers Clonmel, Archie, and Christopher, and my sisters Fanny and Matilda. I have it on the authority of several neighbours that the Lytes of Brede Parsonage were renowned for their good looks, my father and

Clonmel being specially fine men. As for me, I think I can do no better than describe myself in the words of my mother when a visitor admired my face: "Yes, Humphrey would be handsome if his brows were not so black, and if he were not always frowning."

I can clearly remember that frown, though time and peace have long since worn away all traces of it, except two upright lines between my brows. I first noticed it when, as a child of six, I caught sight of myself in a mirror and saw the sullen, swarthy little face, with its beetling brows and angry grey eyes beneath them. I then realised how I deserved the epithets constantly hurled at me by my parents and Clonmel of "Little beast! Little devil!"

I was an unfavourable specimen of childhood—stiff, moody, sullen, and untractable, my bosom always seething with furious passions. I had no affection for my family, as I knew they did not love me or take any interest in me. Archie and Kit were coarse and rough, Fanny and Tilly were vain and would-be-genteel; my mother neglected me, and my father and Clonmel kicked and beat me. So I shunned them all, and would mope by myself about the house, sitting for hours, my head sunk on my breast, in the recess of some window-seat, or on the attic stairs, where, as they were rickety and unsafe with age, I was sure of comparative peace.

My life was miserable, and my heart was full of bitter passions; but one day a kind of happiness dawned for me. My brothers and sisters and I were gathering blackberries in a field near Starvecrow, when the sun suddenly pierced his noontide wrapping of clouds, and shed his beams on the pastures. Then I noticed for the first time how lovely was the country round my home. I saw the Brede River winding

through emerald marshes, like a string of turquoise on a woman's green gown. I saw Spell Land Woods with their foliage gilt right royally, and the glorious scarlet of the roofs of Dew Farm against a background of bice and blue. I felt as if I had been blind up to that hour, and had only just opened my eyes on a world which God saw was very good.

Thenceforth I was an ardent lover of Nature, a mistress who never grows old. I rose early each day that I might see the mists scuttle from the valleys like ghosts at cock-crow, and the sunrise pierce the woods with copper darts. I never went to bed till the fold-star had risen beyond Udimore, and the owls had begun to hoot in the woods of Brede Eye. I used to take long rambles in the lanes and fields, and one night I spent on the lee-side of a haystack by the Rother Marshes. I saw the Zodiac wheel slowly above the horizon, the scales hang over the Five-watering, and the Virgin stand as close as she dare to the flushing moon. I saw the mists creep along the grass and along the breast of the river, writhe between the pollards, and scud like ghosts over the level. I was severely beaten for my escapade when I returned home, but the memory of that night shall go down with me to the grave.

It was well for me that I had this love of field and hedgerow, for my life was empty of all other loves. I hated books, and never opened one of my freewill, though by dint of much whipping I had been taught my letters. My younger brothers and I did not go to school, as we were needed for work on the Parsonage Farm, and our education was confined to three hours' daily reading with our father. I hated this, and, regardless of blows, played truant at every opportunity.