

CHAPTER XVI

THE MIRACLE WORKER

In Hoc Signo Vincet.

—The motto of Constantine

FRANCIS MCSPIRITT, a farmer's son, was born at Templeport, County Cavan. Although his primary education was obtained in Ireland at St. Augustine's Seminary,¹ he does not seem to have had any immediate intention of entering the priesthood.

At the age of twenty-four he, his sister Ann and brother John emigrated to New York. After a brief stay he and Ann came on to Toronto where another sister, Mrs. Kauffman, had settled.¹ Within a year Francis enrolled at St. Michael's,² as a student of philosophy, and while there seems to have definitely made up his mind to become a priest, and to have begun the study of theology. After a course at the Grand Seminary he returned to Toronto and was ordained in the Cathedral by Archbishop Lynch, who sent him to Wildfield as curate.

Erect and broad-shouldered, he stood about five feet eight. Thick, dark curly hair crowned a square and ruddy face and a broad, high forehead. Father O'Connor and his parishioners looked the young Irish priest over, wondering just what sort of a man the newcomer might be. The author recalls the piercing gaze of his bright black eyes. Honest folk found them friendly, if at times disturbingly ironical; but when they detected fraud or meanness their blaze was terrifying.

His voice was strong and resonant, and his usual manner, though rather abrupt, was easily adapted to the occasion. Children were drawn to him at sight; his attitude towards evil-doers was harsh and uncompromising. To the afflicted he was tender and compassionate, to the honest, inspiring, and to decent folk invariably cordial.

When Caledon parish was created Father Mac, as he was already affectionately called, became its first resident priest,³ and soon earned the respect and support of those to whom he ministered. The presbytery was at Silver Creek, and stations were scattered throughout northern Peel and

the Townships of Adjala and Mono. The priest soon learned his way along trails, over hills and through swamps, for there were as yet few improved roadways in his extensive parish.

After five busy and fruitful years he was transferred to St. Patrick's, Niagara Falls, where his small congregation consisted principally of poor and struggling families. Parishioners had little cash and paid church dues in pork, veal, mutton, butter, milk, vegetables, wool, maple sugar and cordwood. His needs were few and simple, and he did not require all the farm produce given him. Instead of selling the surplus, he sent it direct to the public committee at the town depot for distribution among newly-arrived, penniless immigrant families. Father Mac ignored a few bigots who charged him with proselytizing, and carried on as he thought best.⁴

It was at Niagara Falls that he began to establish a reputation as a miracle worker, although this self-effacing clergyman was already aware of his wonderful endowment. Once, when a mere lad, he slipped and sprained his ankle. For a time he lay powerless; no one was within call of this lonely spot. Tentatively he rubbed the injured limb and prayed for help. The pain went and he rose and walked to the house without discomfort. Often he lamented that he had not realized that he had this God-given power in time to prolong the life of his beloved mother.⁵

Having, soon after his arrival at Niagara Falls, restored sight to an American citizen and cured a Canadian girl of St. Vitus's dance, Father Mac's fame in both countries spread like prairie fire.⁴ He did not, however, treat co-religionists only, but seems to have been as ready to cure Protestants as he was to restore to health members of the Church of Rome.⁶

Always ready to receive callers, regardless of their religion, Father Mac was careful to point out that none but adherents of the Church of Rome could receive the full benefit of his ministrations. Outsiders came of their own free will and he promised them nothing, although he once said he had treated more Protestants than he had Catholics.⁵

When tales of Father Mac's remarkable cures reached Archbishop Lynch, that ever diplomatic and wary prelate

earnestly besought him to give no further "thaumaturgic exhibitions".⁴ But in vain did the Archbishop tell him that a charge of charlatanry might be brought against him. Father Mac was not to be turned aside. He regarded himself as a divine instrument and under command from the Master to use his gift for the alleviation of human misery. To the ever-recurring question, how he worked his miracles, his simple reply was, "It is between the afflicted and God; I know nothing of it."⁷

Perhaps the Archbishop thought it wise to remove a man such as Father Mac from a centre like Niagara Falls where he was bound to arouse comment, and possibly ridicule or hostility. Accordingly, the Carmelite Fathers were installed at Niagara Falls. Greatly regretted by his flock and many Protestants,⁴ Father Mac was sent in 1875 to the parish of Adjala, to work with people he already knew well.¹

He was happy there among his Irish parishioners. He understood and liked them. Old folk who remember him describe him as "a lovely man". He was simple and unassuming, and never advertised himself nor his healing gift.

In Adjala, as at Niagara, he was besieged by suppliants. Only once is he known to have refused assistance. A group of young people came to him from Niagara Falls. Turning to one girl whom he had confirmed, he said, "Well, well, Mary, and what can I do for you?"

"Father," she replied, "I still have the epileptic fits, but they are getting so bad I don't think you can help me."

The priest simply responded, "Well, since you have no faith, I won't try. Good-bye Mary."⁸

Susanna Pallister, widow of John Doran,⁹ an Albion township parishioner, although ninety-five is still hale and alert and has given the author much information.

The Doran children sometimes played with a crippled child, Mary Elizabeth Parr, who periodically suffered intense pain which the doctors had been unable to relieve. Mrs. Doran believed in Father Mac, but plead though she might the child's father, an active Orangeman, would have nothing to do with the priest.

Time passed. The Dorans moved away. One day Doran met Parr on the road, and learned from the anguished

father that the little girl could not live much longer. To Doran's amazement Parr asked, "Do you think Father Mac can do anything for her?" Doran answered, "Sure he can," and it was arranged that he and his wife should call for Mary the following Sunday and take her to Adjala. But when the Dorans arrived they found Mrs. Parr full of doubts, and it was only after considerable time and much talk that the five set out over the rough roads to see Father Mac.

They were late for Mass, and as Father Mac had gone on to another station they sat on the presbytery stoop to await his return.

Father Mac listened to Doran's description of the child's ailment, and how it came about that she was brought to him. "Why didn't the Parrs take this little girl to their own pastor?" he asked gruffly. "I can do nothing for them."

While John Doran and his wife pleaded with the priest, Mrs. Parr's reluctance was fast returning and they saw that their trip was likely to prove in vain. Finally, Father Mac said challengingly, "And if this little girl is cured, will her father promise to become a Catholic?"

"I will do anything to help my poor child," Parr replied.

Father Mac then took the two women into his study where Mary lay on a couch. After gazing at her for some time he asked, "Do you really believe, my little girl, that I can cure you?"

"Oh, yes, I know you can, Father," she unhesitatingly replied.

"And if you grow well and strong, will you be a good Catholic when you grow up?"

"Oh yes, Father, I surely will."

The priest knelt at her side in prayer, and on rising told them to "Take Mary home." As they drove back to Albion she laughed and sang, happy and free from pain, and within a short time was romping about with her playmates.¹⁰

The news of the Parr cure spread quickly; more and more Protestants made the long journey over the rutty roads. Father Mac always asked why they had not been cured by their own pastors. But he did not always insist



Given by artist to Perkins Bull Collection

T. MOWER MARTIN, R.C.A., O.S.A.

SPRINGFIELD ON THE CREDIT

Scene of many of the early observations of Ernest Thompson Seton and other nature lovers.

that supplicants should change their religion for favours anticipated or received. Once, when he asked a pilgrim why he had not sought help from his own minister, the reply was, "They say you have some power of witchcraft."

"Get down on your knees," Father Mac ordered. "Make with me the Sign of the Cross. Now, go home and tell your friends it was by the Sign of the Cross you were cured."¹¹

There were, however, Protestants who were not at one with the Roman Catholics. Such was John Crisp¹² of Ballycroy, son of a prominent Palgrave Orangeman. John's Catholic wife, Bridget Morrison, fell ill and asked for Father Mac. Her husband, enraged, threatened bodily harm to the priest if he dared enter the house. Regardless of this, a Catholic neighbour set out for Father Mac. Neighbours, fearing for their beloved pastor's life, hastened to intercept him.

"John will not harm me," Father Mac assured them.

He was right. There was no unpleasantness when he reached the Crisp home. Mrs. Crisp recovered and her husband, to the utter disgust of his Orange relatives, went over to the Church of Rome.¹³

Father Mac had no set ritual in performing a cure, though he always used the Sign of the Cross and generally offered up a short audible prayer.

Records of Father Mac's cures of epilepsy abound. A son of the Protestant Bradleys¹⁴ of Palgrave developed the disease. His parents reluctantly overcame their scruples and took the boy to Father Mac. After about fifteen minutes alone with the afflicted child, Father Mac told the anxious parents, "He will probably have one more fit, but none after that."

Bradley inquired diffidently what he owed.

Father Mac smiled and shook his head. "Nothing, nothing at all. But it would please me if your wife would abstain from eating meat on Fridays, as a reminder to you both of God's mercy. But you, Bradley, need strength for your labour, and would only suffer if you went without."

Bradley worried as to how to thank their benefactor. Finally one moonless night, knowing the priest to be out, he dumped a load of oats in the rectory stable bin.

As for the little boy, he had a fit on the way home,

but from that time until his death from diphtheria he was free of the dread disease. Throughout her life the grateful mother kept faith with Father Mac and ate no meat on Fridays.

The clergyman's penances were seldom burdensome. Often Catholics were told to refrain from eating meat on Saturdays and Wednesdays, in addition to their usual abstinence on Fridays. Occasionally he asked them to refrain from amusement and labour on Sundays.¹ At times women were asked not to comb their hair on Fridays, and some men were requested to abstain from strong drink; others might be allowed a couple of drinks a day, or perchance be forbidden to shave on the Sabbath.¹⁵ It is puzzling, though, to understand why he sometimes gave ten cents to a patient with the injunction not to buy "bulls'-eyes".

His penances frequently hit at pet foibles and weaknesses. One Niagara youth, William Waters, thought it fun to break up service at the Free Methodist church. This boy, an epileptic, was finally taken to Father Mac. The priest told him that if he would never again annoy or bother the Free Methodists he would recover. He promised, and while he kept his word all went well. But one day, overcome by the spirit of mischief, he started back to the Free Methodist church. As he crossed the threshold he fell into a fit, and was subject to attacks until his death some years later.⁸

When Mrs. John Doran's doctor advised an operation she said, "I am not going under the knife of any medical doctor, all I want is Father Mac. If he can't help me, I will die as I am."

Her distracted husband at once drove away to see Father Mac. The priest, greeting him, asked, "Well John, what's the matter?"

"The wife's sick, Father, and she thinks you are the only doctor who can help her."

"Maybe I am. What's the trouble? Put your horse in the barn and feed him, and then go you into the kitchen and get something to eat," Father Mac directed.

John shook his head, "No Father, she's too sick, I couldn't do that."

"Go on, John, and obey me. Be sure you eat a good

dinner, and when your horse has finished his oats, hitch up and drive home, but don't speak a word to a living soul until you are in your own kitchen."

As he was about to pull out the priest added, "Now John, I am not putting any penance on your wife. I am going to put it on you. You can keep a bottle in the house and take two drinks a day, any time you like, but no more than two a day. But if you break this promise, trouble will come back to your wife." Such then were John's penances. When he reached home his wife was sitting up in bed knitting him socks.¹⁰

Father Mac knew full well how dearly Doran loved to gossip with whomever he met along the road, so that once he set out there was no knowing when he would get home. Next to idle talk, or perhaps before it, John loved his bottle. But so great was Father Mac's influence, that "John kept his pledge for many years, and during his total abstinence periods, as after his death, his wife enjoyed good health."¹⁰

Although the priest might punish John Doran for liking to chat along the roadside, there were few things Father Mac himself enjoyed more than gossip.

Isabella Dwyer,¹⁶ who married John Finnerty's son Simon, says:

"One day I was striding along barefooted, my skirt kilted above my knees, as farmers' daughters wore them when herding cows. Just as I turned a corner, I saw 'old Grey Charlie' drawing a rickety buggy with a man in a shabby cassock and a stovepipe hat, followed by the old mongrel dog 'Sturdy'. Hastily pulling my skirt down, I dived into the bushes.

"'Whoa!' cried out Father Mac, 'You there, behind that bush, come out here. I know what you're doing. I saw those shins when you couldn't walk on them.'

"Of course I had to come out, and for about an hour Father Mac questioned me about who were sick or in trouble, and what courting was going on in the parish; he wanted to know how some of the wild fellows were behaving. Satisfied at last that he was in full knowledge of what all his people were doing and saying, he blessed the cows and set Grey Charlie jogging along."

Among northern Peel Catholics the McCarty family was outstanding. Back in 1832 Dennis purchased land north of Caledon East. He took a prominent part in the building of St. Cornelius's church. His son James,¹⁷ one of the earliest students at St. Michael's, later attended the first

business college in Toronto. After a few years in the city he returned to the homestead and married Mary McLaughlin,¹⁸ grand-daughter of both Cornelius Murphy and Francis McLaughlin, and thus a sister of Mrs. Michael Dwyer.

Father Mac was wont to drop in on James at odd hours. On a certain afternoon, when the clergyman drove into the yard, it was empty save for a Dwyer girl standing at the pump. She mistook the shabbily dressed priest for a cattle drover she knew. So, when he ordered her to fetch the hired man to attend to his horse, she replied flippantly, "If you want your horse put away, unhitch it yourself. I'm not your hired girl."

She quailed before Father Mac's withering gaze. Mrs. McCarty bustled out of the house full of apologies, and her trembling niece, realizing the mistake, began to cry. The priest patted the sobbing girl and put her at ease.¹⁹

Soon after he came to Adjala Father Mac took an English orphan, Willie White, into his home. Willie, who lived at the presbytery almost eighteen years, delighted in chatting with the author about his master's home life and habits. He said:

"Father Mac was more than a father to me; he was certainly the only father I knew. He was very good to his help. When he went to Toronto he always brought some treat back, frequently oranges or fresh fruit, for the housekeeper and myself. His own food was very simple, seldom more than a potato and plenty of bread and butter, but he would never sit quietly and enjoy a meal. Out he would come to the kitchen to see that we were eating enough. Sometimes, when he didn't think we were, he would pile up our dishes and even cut up the food, standing over us until we ate it all."

Father Mac's charity was all embracing; he did not inquire too closely into the antecedents of those he assisted. Called to one home, he found a large family of small children in dire want, and promptly supplied food and clothing for the whole household. On the way home the well-to-do parishioner who had brought him remarked: "Well, Father, it's a fine thing to be charitable, but you're making a mistake. This man is simply lazy; if I had taken life as easy as he does, my family would be in want too."

Father Mac's characteristic retort was: "Don't you see that Almighty God did not give this man the capacity to be prosperous, and don't you forget that if He had not given it

to you, you would not have succeeded either.”¹¹

He held it his duty to relieve misery wherever he found it, but he could not easily be imposed upon. He had a grim way with glib talkers, and would ruthlessly expose a sham.

A similar measure of sincere, unfaltering uprightness characterized his spiritual life. Deeply pious, he wasted neither breath nor time on trivialities;¹ he was filled with a burning zeal for all that was worthy and godly, and was righteously indignant with idle foolishness.⁵ In the pulpit he was didactic, rather than persuasive, hammering home in brief trenchant sentences his views on death, judgment, hell and heaven.¹

While Father Mac ministered indefatigably to his flock, he took no care of himself; though indifferent as to his personal appearance and comfort, he was scrupulously clean.¹⁵ His weather-worn “stove-pipe”, alleged to have been brought from Ireland,⁵ was an impressive ruin, and his cassock was of the shabbiest; his buggy rattled and creaked; his living quarters were bare and comfortless, and he would doubtless have frozen to death if somebody had not seen to it that he had a woodpile and kept the fire burning.

He ate sparingly of the plainest fare,⁵ and often, unless reminded, would go without. Parishioners organized an informal committee to look after him, but he was difficult. In stormy weather, even when ill, he insisted on making his usual parochial calls. When age disqualified Grey Charlie he bought a young mare, “Red Kitty”. He also bought a new buggy, but that was for the curate. Father Mac drove Grey Charlie and Red Kitty alternately, and unfailingly accompanied Willie White to the stable at nights to hold the lantern while the lad unharnessed the horse, and saw to it that the mangers were full and the stalls clean and that there was plenty of hay and bedding.¹⁵

There had been other ascetic priests in County Peel, but never one quite like Father Mac. The author recalls the luncheon hours during his Brampton High School days, when the thaumaturgic Father’s miracles were subjects of discussion. Sons of Orangemen and students who hoped some day to become medical doctors argued against Father Mac’s faith cures; Catholic students defended them with ardour; while others now took one side, now the other. But

through it all Father Mac was never referred to as a faker or a quack.

At fifty, though the parish priest was still at their service day and night, evidences of his failing health worried his flock. When Father Mac came to Adjala it was a struggling parish, but now its folk thought the church was too small and worn out. Pilgrims from afar brought money when they came appealing for the priest's blessing, and so with prosperity there arose a demand for a finer and larger church.

Father Mac felt unequal to the task, and his thoughts turned to St. Patrick's Wildfield, the scene of his first pastoral labours and home of his earliest Canadian friends. His old church was fallen from its high estate; its parish boundaries had been narrowed, and the agricultural college closed. An aging priest could now tend it alone, so in 1887 he again took up quarters in Wildfield presbytery.¹

Afflicted folk from far and near continued to find their way to his door. Willie White remembers a British nobleman who crossed the Atlantic for treatment, and gave him a sovereign for holding his horse. Folk arrived afoot, on horseback, in carts, buck-boards, buggies, carriages, waggons and rigs of all sorts. The four daily trains brought pilgrims to Kleinburg, six miles from Wildfield, and as many suppliants were folk of substance it was a real harvest for hack owners.¹⁵

But there were others not so affluent. An American couple, too poor to hire a cab, carried their five-year-old crippled boy from the station to the priest's house. Returning hot and weary, they fell asleep near the station while waiting for the home-bound train, and were awakened by the shouts of their hitherto helpless child coming to tell them that the train was in sight.²⁰

But the parish priest seldom permitted pilgrims to go home tired. If the beds and couches in the rectory were all taken he would make other provision for them. Miss Anna Doherty of Niagara Falls told the author:

"Ever since I was a little girl I had the most awful headaches. At last I went to Wildfield, in the full belief that Father Mac alone could cure me. Just think! The only thing he did was to make the Sign of the Cross, and say a short prayer, and I haven't had a headache since. My only penance was never to comb my hair on Friday, but that is easy."

"After supper, Father Mac said 'There is no train back to Niagara tonight'. Then he told Willie to take my sister and me over to Michael Murphy's.²¹ Turning to us, he said, 'Michael is one of my most faithful parishioners, and you will be well cared for there. No, don't think it will put him out; it's all arranged.'"

He liked to see well-fed folk about him, and would not allow anyone to go away hungry. As a consequence, the housekeeper was ever busy preparing meals for strangers who dropped in at all hours of the day and night. The seemingly endless stream of suppliants and the priest's uncertain moods made the presbytery hard to run, and housekeepers were continually arriving and departing.

At Silver Creek rectory Ann McSpiritt kept house for her brother, but when he was sent to Niagara Falls, she opened a boarding-house in Toronto. Father Mac, though gentle, liked to have his own way, and complained that his sisters "tried to run things".¹⁵

Mrs. Quinlan of Adjala and Miss Kate Gaffney²² of The Gore of Toronto were among his Adjala housekeepers. A new crop came on the scene at Wildfield. From one of them, Mrs. Patrick Keenahan²³ of Albion, the author has learnt much concerning the last few years of Father Mac's life. She avers:

"He was severe with men, women and children, and with priests too, if he thought they were careless or acting foolishly. 'The devil's in the women today!', he shouted one morning when some trifling was going on in the kitchen."

The priest slept on the ground floor to be within call if needed. One night Michael Kennedy²⁴ tapped on the window and said his wife had just given birth to twins and was very sick. "Go home," quoth Father Mac, "she will be all right. I will be around in the morning." But there was no mention of a penance, and Michael, on reaching home, found things as the priest had said.¹⁵

Samuel Beamish,²⁵ an Orangeman, lived on the farm adjoining St. Patrick's on the south. Medical aid having failed to restore his bed-ridden son, Sam in despair sought Father Mac's help. In a short time the invalid was up and back at work. Willie White is not sure which, but either Samuel or his son was forbidden to attend Lodge.

Monsignor Treacy, in conversation with the author, recalled his first meeting with Father McSpiritt. A woman

had asked him to take her crippled husband to Wildfield. With a cold eye Father Mac looked the young priest over and said, "Father Treacy, if you had any faith, you'd cure him yourself."

Then Father Mac took the cripple alone into his study. In about an hour the man, his face flushed and his eyes staring, came walking unsteadily out of the room, his crutches left on the study table, and, unaided, climbed into the buggy. Later he told Dr. Treacy that after making confession, he had been commanded to abstain thenceforth from intoxicants.

Father Mac, though stern with evil-doers, was never pitiless. A Malton man who enjoyed the reputation of overcharging visiting pilgrims whom he drove from the local Grand Trunk station to Wildfield, one day came complaining of "a bad eye".

"I know you have," the thaumaturgist grimly replied, and then proceeded to tell him exactly why. Upon receiving professions of contrition, he sent the man joyfully away.²⁰

Journeying around his parish Father Mac in a low voice would recite the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. If he had a companion he expected the responses. He had a great devotion for the Blessed Virgin,¹⁵ and each night at eight o'clock he would assemble his household in the kitchen and recite "Our Father" and "Hail Mary", while they joined in the responses.⁵

Parochial visits and interviews with suppliants pretty well consumed his time. But no matter how busy, he devoted an undisturbed period every day to meditation and devotional reading.⁵ Newspapers and mundane affairs interested him but little unless they concerned his ever-beloved Ireland.

He liked a pipe with special friends, and while he generally introduced the topics he did not monopolize the conversation. Few could match him in argument. If mere frivolity or low talk was persisted in, he would get up and leave.

Mrs. Keenahan says:

"He was death on waltzing, but didn't mind any other kind of dancing. He did not like socials or other secular entertainments in connection with his church, and in his time even the famous Wildfield picnics were stepped down a bit."

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination Father Michael V. Kelly,²⁶ a descendant of the pioneer McLaughlins of Mono Mills, went to congratulate him and was surprised to find the priest alone in his study enjoying a smoke.

"Oh yes," the old parish priest replied casually, "two or three men calling themselves a committee did notify me that a purse had been collected, and that the priests would be here today. I told them to give their money back and tell them to stay at home. I will be in purgatory long enough without giving in to the vanity of having addresses and presentations made to me."¹¹

With advancing years he had grown somewhat testy and short-tempered, and though never angry long his wrath was devastating. One of his last entries in St. Patrick's Register of Deaths reads:

"Julia . . . One Julia was quite enough in a province, quite enough in a century, and one too many in the Catholic Church for a whole continent; socially and religiously a nonentity, I believe she possessed one moral virtue that outtriumphed her other defects in the divine balance. May she rest in peace. . . ."

During the later years of his life, every time he drove into his own yard he would find folk waiting his return. Once, at the close of a strenuous day, over a dozen rigs were lined up. "Look at that!", he said to Willie White. "Well, too bad, but I cannot handle so many to-night."

He spoke sharply to the crowd, and the people began to disperse. One woman, however, declared she would stay over and pay her board until she was granted an audience. Two others, encouraged by this spirit, also refused to go. In the end he asked all three to stay for dinner.¹⁵

Usually very gentle, Father Mac could on occasion use physical force to good effect. One evening as the McDevitts' chore boy was bringing home the cows, Father Mac's sudden appearance scared them. The boy rounded the cattle up, only to have them scatter again.

"You're having a hard time with the cows, my boy," said he, kindly.

"If you'd get to hell out of the road I wouldn't have such a hard time," snapped the youth.

Without a word Father Mac stood aside. The next day he called at the school and had the lad sent out; just what

transpired between them is not recorded, but years later the boy confessed that he never again used that expression.

Once, at least, he undertook to chastise an adult. A painter from Claireville, while at work outside the priest's window, was horrified to see Father Mac pummelling a stranger in a quite professional manner. As a rule Father Mac was not one to explain his actions, but in this case he told the painter, "The devil was in that man as big as a hound dog, and when I couldn't talk it out of him, I just beat it out of him."²⁰

Again and again stories told refer to Father Mac's love for children. One Niagara Falls man said, "If he had wanted to, he could have taken a school and run right away with it."⁴ Sometimes, though, despite their affection for him, children were inwardly terrified by his unceremonious ways.¹⁰

The Wildfield rectory boasted a good orchard to which Father Mac devoted much time. It was the best in the neighbourhood. When the apples began to ripen boys, as a matter of course, began to steal. No child with an orchard at home was allowed fruit from the church farm, but when the fruit was ripe Father Mac threw the orchard open to poor children, Protestant and Catholic alike.

He loved to have young people about. He brought up two or three boys, treating them with affection and consideration, practically adopting them. If one of these was not at hand to accompany him on parochial visits, he would borrow a boy from one or other of his parishioners.

John Doran's son Eddy was at times a companion. When the lad was only ten Father Mac had scolded him for not knowing his catechism, so Eddy ran and hid any time he saw the priest coming. One Sunday during a terrible storm Eddy, sighting Father Mac's old buggy nearing the house, promptly made off. Father Mac asked for him, but it was not until Mrs. Doran had called several times that the fugitive appeared, all in a tremor. Father Mac took him by the arm, "Now Eddy, come along and see me over the bad hills," he said, making no mention of the catechism.

Off they went through the rain and mud. When they reached the top of a particularly bad hill Eddy unhitched the horse, led it down to the bottom, and then went back

first for the buggy and afterwards for Father Mac. When at last they reached the presbytery Father Mac, slipping a piece of silver into Eddy's hand, said kindly, "You've been a good boy, Eddy. Just be sure you don't forget that catechism." When Eddy reached home and gave his mother the money, he remarked, "That Father isn't nearly as cross as he pretends to be."¹⁰

The priest loved to go fishing. Trout were plentiful, and he knew all the best grounds. In later years his favourite haunt was Milburn's Creek, just north of Centreville. Here he threw off all his cares—it was his holiday. Nearly always he was accompanied by a buggy full of small boys with whom he laughed and joked. When they reached the spot decided on, he would shout, "A shilling to the first boy to catch a fish." At once, the lads would strip and plunge into the water, splashing and shouting. To Father Mac and his urchins this was grand fun.

But when he really wanted to catch fish he would take Willie White or John Wallace,²⁷ or perhaps wander off alone. Seldom did he come back without a good string. Monsignor Treacy, then a young man, would often come up from Dixie for a day's fishing or other outing with his fellow Irishman.

It was a more or less known practice, then as now, for anglers to take with them some strong refreshment. But intemperance was Father Mac's pet aversion, and there was no cessation in his campaign against it. There were many disreputable little taverns stranded by the advent of the railroad. Once these pubs had been regular places of call for long lines of horses and oxen hauling cordwood and farm produce to market. Now they depended almost wholly on local callers, and had become for the most part mere drinking dives. Father Mac put the fear of the Lord into the innkeepers, and those who aroused his displeasure soon left the district.

The author's father, president of the local prohibition association, and Father Mac were close friends in temperance work.

Father Mac had left Adjala largely because he had felt unequal to undertaking the building of a new church. Now a similar situation confronted him at Wildfield.¹⁵ Money poured in freely in his declining years, and although he gave

full vent to his charitable inclinations he still had enough and to spare. St. Patrick's, old and dilapidated, could not accommodate the parishioners and the throngs of visitors who resorted to it on Sundays. A new and larger church was necessary.

It was decided to raze the old building, and Father Mac worried about how to get the steeple down. The local blacksmith volunteered to "fell it exactly where the priest would have it drop".

When the time for action came Father Mac retired into the presbytery, unwilling to witness the demolition of his beloved church. However, Willie White stood around to watch and says that just as he opened wide the cemetery gate the steeple crashed on the selected spot; the fragments of the shattered cross lay on what is now Father Mac's shrine.

Willie rushed indoors to tell the priest. Father Mac ordered that every splinter, however small, be carefully picked up and brought to him. In a short time Willie returned with arms full of bits of wood. Father Mac took each fragment separately, kissed it and, setting it aside, murmured a sort of requiem something like: "You stood all the curses and blasphemies while on the spire, you survived them all, and had to be knocked down; you didn't fall."¹⁵

The section of the cross here illustrated was loaned to the author by Father Mac's last housekeeper who declared, "It is my most sacred relic, for Father Mac himself blessed it and put it in my hands."⁵

The priest chose to build the new church a little further south, on a knoll from which the ground falls steeply away on three sides. Thus the tall spire of the new St. Patrick's can be seen for miles.

This church was opened free of debt. Willie White was under the impression that the priest put a good deal of his own money into it. As was customary, everyone helped. Willie assisted by carrying water, stone and brick; besides he kept a record of quantities of materials used in the foundation.

When, in 1895, it was thought that Father Mac was dying, people flocked to the presbytery, asking anxiously what they would do when he was gone. He told them, "A bit of earth from my grave will do ye. Say a little prayer

for the repose of my soul when you take it."

To his grieving household he said, "I can cure others but not myself. Do not fret. I have served my time here."⁵

During those long summer days, though confined to bed he seemed to know what was going on outside, and often surprised Willie White and Mrs. Keenahan with remarks about neighbours or recent happenings in the parish.⁵

At nightfall his nephews John Henry and Eddie Kauffman, together with Willie White, would go to his room to keep him company. If they grew bored and sleepy, Father Mac would poke them with the fishing-rod he kept beside his bed.¹⁵

At this time his brother John, a tall, dark man with a smooth face, made his first journey from New York to see him. The brothers discussed where the priest was to be buried. John McSpiritt said it should be under St. Patrick's, the church he had built. But Father Mac would have none of it, insisting that his body should lie in the churchyard among the people he had served and loved.¹⁵

Dr. McKenna came from Toronto to see the dying man, and suggested that a few days in St. Joseph's Hospital might be of some benefit. While waiting for a cab from the city Father Mac, turning to Willie White, said quietly, "I will not live after the fifteenth of August."

Many stops were made along the road to Toronto to say farewell to parishioners whose homes they passed. The cab driver grew impatient and undertook to tell Father Mac to hurry.

"Don't be in such a rush," the priest told him. "We don't know if we'll even live to reach Toronto."

At Wildfield the household anxiously watched the calendar. To keep his mind



ARM OF CROSS,
FATHER MCSPIRITT'S
CHURCH, WILDFIELD

from too much worry, Willie White suggested to Father Whitney, the curate, that it would be nice to have the bell properly hung in the church so that as a surprise it could greet their beloved pastor upon his return. The curate agreed, and undertook to have the opening in the belfry adjusted. For weeks after the church was opened Willie had pestered Father Mac about this, but he was too sick to be interested. He had finished with the church, and now his anxiety was to be at peace with his Maker.¹⁵

On 14th August Father Mac breathed his last. His body was brought back and placed in St. Patrick's close to the sanctuary railing so that his flock might look upon his face once more.

There was neither drinking nor smoking at his wake. Wildfield never saw such a funeral. The entire country-side was there. The church bell, carefully installed to welcome him home a well man, instead now tolled him to his last resting-place.

His will provided a surprise. He left \$8,870.13, out of which, after debts, funerary and testamentary expenses had been paid, he directed that \$160 be expended for his tombstone and bequeathed \$1,000 to his brother, \$500 to his nephew John McSpiritt Jr., and \$600 each to another nephew, John Henry Kauffman, and Willie White. To Father Treacy he left his library, to Justin McCarthy's "Home Rule Fund", to the Separate School Board of The Gore of Toronto, for Masses for the repose of his soul, and to his sister Ann, \$300 each.²⁸

One thousand dollars was bequeathed to Archbishop Walsh for the poor and destitute, \$700 to the Sisters of St. Joseph, and \$1,000 to the House of Providence, Toronto, with a proviso that if his sister Ann wished to make her home there, she could do so on payment of six dollars a month.

Willie White says that Ann was enraged, and declared she "would break the spurious will". She calmed down, however, and entered the House of Providence in 1897.¹⁵ As for Willie, he went to Toronto with Father McEntee.

Almost before Father Mac's grave was filled in, people began to carry away earth from it, and since then it has been refilled again and again.

Many cures have been ascribed to it; John Doran's

grand-daughter Marie²⁰ got part of a pin-feather in her eye. Her mother tried in vain to get it out, but soon something like a cataract formed. Mrs. Horan was unable to take Marie to Toronto for treatment, so she rubbed the child's eye with earth from Father Mac's grave. Three days later a visiting Protestant neighbour, taking little Marie on her knee and looking carefully into the injured eye, was astonished to see it entirely healed.

The mother told what she had done, adding now what she had forgotten, that when Father Mac had spoken of the earth's healing powers he had said that a cure would not be apparent for three days. The neighbour listened amazed. Marie grew up and throve free of any eye ailment.

There is, perhaps, another side to some of these stories. A physician practising in the district had a matter-of-fact explanation. He said that sick people were easily alarmed, and either sent for a doctor or pinned their faith to something reputed to have curative powers. Most of them got well, as doubtless they would have done in any case, but the tendency was to give credit for their recovery either to the doctor or to the miraculous, such as earth from a holy man's grave.

Be that as it may, both this doctor and another practitioner in the same district bore ungrudging witness to the great hold that Father Mac had on the imagination of all who knew him, Catholics and Protestants alike. There are plenty of worthy and saintly priests to whom their parishioners ascribe no miraculous powers, and to whom neighbouring Protestants remain indifferent. No one thinks of making a pilgrimage to their graves after they are dead.

Although Father McSpiritt has been dead forty-four years, the reverence of his memory and the belief in the efficacy of earth from his grave seem to be ever on the increase. Indeed, as this volume goes to press word comes of the completion, at his grave, of a shrine erected by a grateful suppliant.

Many visitors, some to pay homage and some to regain health, come to the secluded little village of Wildfield. Father McSpiritt's body may be dust, but his good deeds live after him.

Sincerity was the touchstone he applied to all, but not

everyone could stand the test. His influence was felt by good men of whatever faith, the example of his saintly life raised the moral tone of the community. His own people flocked to him to confess, to ask advice and to be strengthened against temptation. The sick and dying begged for his assistance. He did remarkable things, but the man was always bigger than his work.

