FRANK NASH WESTCOTT

HEPSEY BURKE

Frank Nash Westcott

Hepsey Burke

Westcott F.

Hepsey Burke / F. Westcott — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Frank N. Westcott
Hepsey Burke

CHAPTER I
HEPSEY BURKE

The noisy, loose-jointed train pulled out of the station, leaving behind it a solitary young man, enveloped in smoke and cinders. In the middle of the platform stood a little building with a curb roof, pointed at both ends like a Noah's Ark; and the visitor felt that if he could only manage to lift up one side of the roof he would find the animals "two by two," together with the cylindrical Noah and the rest of his family. There was no one in sight but the station-master, who called out from the ticket office: 12

"Did you want to go to the village? The 'bus won't be down till the next train: but maybe you can ride up on the ice wagon."

"Thanks," the stranger replied. "I think I'll wait for the 'bus, if it's not too long."

"Twenty minutes or so, if Sam don't have to collect the passengers goin' West, and wait for a lot o' women that forget their handbags and have to get out and go back after 'em."

The new arrival was good to look at—a handsome, well-built fellow of about twenty-five, dressed in a gray suit which was non-committal as to his profession, with a clean-shaven face which bore the unmistakable stamp of good breeding and unlimited good-nature. He tilted his suit-case on end and sat down on it; then he filled his briar pipe, crossed his legs, and looked about to take stock of the situation. He gazed about curiously; but there was nothing of any special interest in sight, except, painfully conspicuous on the face of a grass terrace, the name of the village picked out in large letters composed of oyster-shells and the bottoms of protruding beer bottles stuck in the ground. The stranger found himself wondering where a sufficient number of bottles could be found to complete such an elaborate pattern. The only other marked feature of the landscape in the 13 way of artistic decoration was the corrugated base of an old stove, painted white, which served as a flower vase. From this grew a huge bunch of scarlet geraniums, staring defiantly, and seeming fairly to sizzle in the hot, vibrant atmosphere, which was as still as the calm of a moon-lit night.

As the man on the suit-case gazed about him at the general air of dilapidation and neglect characteristic of a country town on the down grade, and recalled the congenial life of the city which he had left, with all its busy competition, with all its absorbing activities, the companionship of the men he loved, and the restful, inspiring intimacy with a certain young woman, he felt, for the moment, a pang of homesickness. If the station were a sample of the village itself, then life in such a place must be deadening to every finer sensibility and ambition; it must throw a man back on himself and make him morbid.

The momentary depression was relieved by the station-master, who suddenly appeared at the door of the Ark and called out:

"Here comes Hepsey Burke. Maybe she'll take you up; that'll be a dum sight more comfortable than Lipkin's 'bus."

There was nothing to be seen but a cloud of dust, advancing with the rapidity of a whirlwind along the 14 highway, from which there gradually emerged a team and a "democrat," containing a woman, a boy about fourteen, and a middle-aged man.

As the turn-out drew up, the man took the reins from Mrs. Burke, who jumped out of the wagon with remarkable agility for one of her size and years, and, nodding to the station-master, came on to the platform.

Hepsey Burke was rather stout; and the lines from her nose to the corners of her mouth, and the wisps of gray hair which had blown about her face, indicated that she had passed the meridian of life. At first glance there was nothing striking about her appearance; but there was a subtle expression about the mouth, a twinkle about the large gray eyes behind the glasses she wore, that indicated a sense of humor which had probably been a God-send to her. She was strong and well, and carried with her an air of indomitable conviction that things worked themselves out all right in the long run.

The boy was obviously her son, and in spite of his overalls and frayed straw hat, he was a handsome little chap. He looked at you shyly from under a crop of curly hair, with half closed eyes, giving you the impression that you were being "sized up" by a very discriminating individual; and when he smiled, 15 as he did frequently, he revealed a set of very white and perfect teeth. When he was silent, there was a little lifting of the inner brow which gave him a thoughtful look quite beyond his years; and you were sadly mistaken if you imagined that you could form a correct impression of Nicholas Burke at the first interview.

The man wore a sandy beard, but no mustache, and had a downcast, meekly submissive air, probably the depressing effect of many years of severe domestic discipline.

Mrs. Burke was evidently surprised to find no one there but the man on the suit-case; but as he rose and lifted his hat, she hesitated a moment, exclaiming:

"I beg pardon, but I was lookin' for a parson who was to arrive on this train. You haven't seen anything that looked like a parson, have you? You can generally spot 'em every time."

The young man smiled.

"Well, no; I seem to be the only passenger who got off the train; and though I'm a clergyman, you don't seem to find it easy to 'spot' me."

Mrs. Burke, with a characteristic gesture, pulled her glasses forward with a jerk and settled them firmly back again on the bridge of her nose. She surveyed the speaker critically as she questioned: 16

"But you don't seem to show the usual symptoms—collar buttoned behind, and all that."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Madam, but I never travel in clerical uniform. Can't afford it."

"Well, you've got more sense than most parsons, if I may say so. Maybe you're the one I'm lookin' for: Mr. Donald Maxwell."

"That is my name, and I am sure you must be Mrs. Burke."

"Sure thing!"—shaking his outstretched hand heartily. "Now you come right along with me, Mr. Maxwell, and get into the democrat and make yourself comfortable." They walked round to the front of the station. "This, Mr. Maxwell, is Jonathan Jackson, the Junior Warden; and this is my son Nicholas, generally known as Nickey, except when I am about to spank him. Say, Jonathan, you just h'ist that trunk into the back of the wagon, and Nickey, you take the parson's suit-case."

The Junior Warden grinned good-naturedly as he shook hands with the new arrival. But Hepsey continued briskly: "Now, Jonathan, you get into the back seat with Nickey, and Mr. Maxwell, you sit with me on the front seat so that I can talk to you. Jonathan means well, but his talk's limited to crops and symptoms, even if he is an old friend, my next door neighbor, and the Junior Warden." 17

Jonathan obeyed orders; and, as he got into the wagon, winked at Maxwell and remarked:

"You see we have to take a back seat when Hepsey drives; and we have to hold on with both hands. She's a pacer."

"Don't you let him frighten you, Mr. Maxwell," Hepsey replied. "Jonathan would probably hold on with both hands if he lay flat on his back in a ten-acre lot. He's just that fearless and enterprisin'."

Then, starting the horses with a cluck, she turned to Maxwell and continued:

"I guess I didn't tell you I was glad to see you; but I am. I got your note tellin' me when you were comin', but I didn't get down to the station in time, as the men are killin' hogs to-day, and until I get the in'ards off my hands, I haven't time for anything."

"I am sorry to have put you to the trouble of coming at all. I'm sure it's very good of you."

"No trouble; not the least. I generally look after the visitin' parsons, and I'm quite used to it. You can get used to 'most anything."

Maxwell laughed as he responded:

"You speak as if it weren't always a pleasure, Mrs. Burke."

"Well, I must admit that there are parsons and parsons. They are pretty much of a lottery, and it is 18 generally my luck to draw blanks. But don't you worry about that; you don't look a bit like a parson."

"I think that's a rather doubtful compliment."

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. There are three kinds of people in the world; men, women, and parsons; and I like a parson who is a man first, and a parson afterwards; not one who is a parson first, and a man two weeks Tuesday come Michaelmas."

Donald laughed: he felt sure he was going to make friends with this shrewd yet open-hearted member of his flock. The pace slackened as the road began a steep ascent. Mrs. Burke let the horses walk up the hill, the slackened reins held in one hand; in the other lolled the whip, which now and then she raised, tightening her grasp upon it as if for use, on second thoughts dropping it to idleness again and clucking to the horses instead. It was typical of her character—the means of chastisement held handy, but in reserve, and usually displaced by other methods of suasion.

As they turned down over the brow of the hill they drove rapidly, and as the splendid landscape of rolling country, tilled fields and pasture, stretching on to distant wooded mountains, spread out before him, Maxwell exclaimed enthusiastically, drawing a deep breath of the exhilarating air: 19

"How beautiful it is up here! You must have a delightful climate."

"Well," she replied, "I don't know as we have much climate to speak of. We have just a job lot of weather, and we take it regular—once after each meal, once before goin' to bed, and repeat if necessary before mornin'. I won't say but it's pretty good medicine, at that. There'd be no show for the doctor, if it wasn't fashionable to invite him in at the beginnin' and the end of things."

Jonathan, who up to this time had been silent, felt it incumbent to break into the conversation a bit, and interposed:

"I suppose you've never been up in these parts before?"

"No," Maxwell responded; "but I've always intended to come up during the season for a little hunting some time. Was there much sport last year?"

"Well, I can't say as there was, and I can't say *as* there wasn't. The most I recollect was that two city fellers shot a guide and another feller. But then it was a poor season last fall, anyway."

Maxwell gave the Junior Warden a quick look, but there was not a trace of a smile on his face, and Hepsey chuckled. Keeping her eyes on the horses 20 as they trotted along at a smart pace over a road none too smooth for comfortable riding, she remarked casually:

"I suppose the Bishop told you what we wanted in the shape of a parson, didn't he?"

"Well, he hinted a few things."

"Yes; we're awful modest, like most country parishes that don't pay their rector more than enough to get his collars laundered. We want a man who can preach like the Archbishop of Canterbury, and call on everybody twice a week, and know just when anyone is sick without bein' told a word about it. He's got to be an awful good mixer, to draw the young people like a porous plaster, and fill the pews. He must have lots of sociables, and fairs, and things to take the place of religion; and he must dress well, and live like a gentleman on the salary of a book-agent. But if he brings city ways along with him and makes us feel like hayseeds, he won't be popular."

"That's a rather large contract!" Maxwell replied with a smile.

"Yes, but think what we're goin' to pay you: six hundred dollars a year, and you'll have to raise most of it yourself, just for the fun of it."

At this point the Junior Warden interrupted: 21

"Now, Hepsey, what's the use of upsettin' the young man at the start. He's–"

"Never mind, Jonathan. I'm tellin' the truth, anyway. You see," she continued, "most people think piety's at a low ebb unless we're gettin' up some kind of a holy show all the time, to bring people together that wouldn't meet anywhere else if they saw each other first. Then when they've bought a chance on a pieced bed-quilt, or paid for chicken-pie at a church supper, they go home feelin' real religious, believin' that if there's any obligation between them and heaven, it isn't on their side, anyway. Do you think you're goin' to fill the bill, Mr. Maxwell?"

"Well, I don't know," said Maxwell. "Of course I might find myself possessed of a talent for inventing new and original entertainments each week; but I'm afraid that you're a bit pessimistic, Mrs. Burke, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. There's a mighty fine side to life in a country parish sometimes, where the right sort of a man is in charge. The people take him as one of their family, you know, and borrow eggs of his wife as easy as of their next door neighbor. But the young reverends expect too much of a country parish, and break their hearts sometimes because they can't make us tough old critters all over while you wait. 22 Poor things! I'm sorry for the average country parson, and a lot sorrier for his wife."

"Well, don't you worry about me; I'm well and strong, and equal to anything, I imagine. I don't believe in taking life too seriously; it's bad for the nerves and digestion. It will be an entirely new experience for me, and I'm sure I shall find the people interesting."

"Yes, but what if they aren't your kind? I suppose you might find hippopotamuses interestin' for a while, but that's no reason you should like to live with 'em. Anyway, don't mind what people say. They aint got nothin' to think about, so they make up by talkin' about it, especially when it happens to be a new parson. We've been havin' odds and ends of parsons from the remnant counter now for six months or more; and that's enough to kill any parish. I believe that if the angel Gabriel should preach for us, half the congregation would object to the cut of his wings, and the other half to the fit of his halo. We call for all the virtues of heaven, and expect to get 'em for seven-forty-nine."

"Well—I shall have to look to you and the Wardens to help me out," he said. "You must help me run things, until I know the ropes."

"Oh! Bascom will run things for you, if you let 23 him do the runnin'," she replied, cracking her whip. "You'll need to get popular first with him and his—then you'll have it easy."

Maxwell pondered these local words of wisdom, and recalled the Bishop's warning that Bascom, the Senior Warden, had not made life easy for his predecessors, and his superior's exhortation to firmness and tact, to the end that he, Maxwell, should hold his own, while taking his Senior Warden along with him. The Senior Warden was evidently a power in the land.

They had driven about a mile and a half when the wagon turned off the road, and drew up by a house standing some distance back from it; getting down, Mrs. Burke exclaimed:

"Welcome to Thunder Cliff, Mr. Maxwell. Thunder Cliff's the name of the place, you know. All the summer visitors in Durford have names for their houses; so I thought I'd call my place Thunder Cliff, just to be in the style."

Jonathan Jackson, who had kept a discreet silence during Hepsey's pointers concerning his colleague, the Senior Warden, interjected:

"There 'aint no cliff, Hepsey, and you know it. I always tell her, Mr. Maxwell, 'taint appropriate a bit."

"Jonathan, you 'aint no Englishman, and there's no 24 use pretendin' that you are. Some day when I have a couple of hours to myself, I'll explain the whole matter to you. There isn't any cliff, and the house wants paintin' and looks like thunder. Isn't that reason enough to go on with? Now, Mr. Maxwell, you come in and make yourself perfectly at home."

CHAPTER II
GOSSIP

That afternoon Maxwell occupied himself in unpacking his trunks and arranging his room. As the finishing touch, he drew out of a leather case an exquisite miniature of a beautiful girl, which he placed on the mantelpiece, and at which he gazed for a long time with a wistful light in his fine gray eyes. Then he threw himself on the lounge, and pulling a letter from his inner pocket, read:

"Don't worry about expenses, dear. Six hundred 26 is quite enough for two; we shall be passing rich! You must remember that, although I am a 'college girl,' I am not a helpless, extravagant creature, and I know how to economize. I am sure we shall be able to make both ends meet. With a small house, rent free, a bit of ground for a vegetable garden, and plenty of fresh air, we can accomplish almost anything, and be supremely happy together. And then, when you win advancement, as of course you will very soon, we shall appreciate the comforts all the more from the fact that we were obliged to live the simple life for a while.

"You can't possibly imagine how I miss you, sweetheart. Do write as soon as possible and tell me all about Durford. If I could just have one glimpse of you in your new quarters—but that would only be a wretched aggravation; so I keep saying to myself 'Some day, some day,' and try to be patient. God bless you and good-by."

Donald folded the letter carefully, kissed it, and tucked it away in his pocket. Clasping his hands behind his head, he gazed at the ceiling.

"I wonder if I'd better tell Mrs. Burke about Betty. I don't care to pass myself off as a free man in a parish like this. And yet, after all, it's none of their 27 business at present. I think I'd better wait and find out if there's any possibility of making her happy here."

There was a knock at the door.

"Talk of angels," murmured Maxwell, and hurriedly returned the miniature to its case before opening the door to Mrs. Burke, who came to offer assistance.

"Don't bother to fuss for me," she said as he hastened to remove some books and clothes from a chair, so that she might sit down. "I only came up for a moment to see if there was anything I could do. Think you can make yourself pretty comfortable here? I call this room 'the prophet's chamber,' you know, because it's where I always put the visitin' parsons."

"They're lucky," he replied. "This room is just delightful with that jolly old fireplace, its big dormer windows, and the view over the river and the hills beyond: I shall be very comfortable."

"Well, I hope so. You know I don't think any livin'-room is complete without a fireplace. Next to an old friend, a bright wood fire's the best thing I know to keep one from getting lonesome."

"Yes—that and a good cigar."

"Well, I haven't smoked in some time now," Mrs. 28 Burke replied, smiling, "so I can't say. What a lot of things you've got!"

"Yes, more than I thought I had."

"I do love to see a man tryin' to put things to rights. He never knows where anything belongs. What an awful lot of books you've got! I suppose you're just chuck full of learnin', clean up to your back teeth; but we won't any of us know the difference. Most city parsons preach about things that are ten miles over the heads of us country people. You can't imagine how little thinkin' most of us do up here. We're more troubled with potato bugs than we are with doubts; and you'll have to learn a lot about us before you really get down to business, I guess."

"Yes, I expect to learn more from you than you will from me. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to come so far out in the country."

"Hm! I hope you won't be disappointed."

Mrs. Burke adjusted her glasses and gazed interestedly about the room at some pictures and decorations which Maxwell had placed in position, and inquired:

"Who is the plaster lady and gentleman standin' on the mantelpiece?"

"The Venus de Milo, and the Hermes of Praxiteles." 29

"Well, you know, I just can't help preferrin' ladies and gentlemen with arms and legs, myself. I suppose it's real cultivated to learn to like parts of people done in marble. Maybe when I go down to the city next fall to buy my trousseau, I'll buy a few plasters myself, to make the house look more cheerful-like."

Maxwell caught at the word "trousseau," and as Mrs. Burke had spoken quite seriously he asked:

"Are you going to be married, Mrs. Burke?"

"No such thing! But when a handsome young widow like me lives alone, frisky and sixty-ish, with six lonesome, awkward widowers in the same school district, you can never tell what might happen any minute; 'In time of peace prepare for war,' as the paper says."

Maxwell laughed reassuringly.

"I don't see why you laugh," Mrs. Burke responded, chuckling to herself. "'Taint polite to look surprised when a woman says she's a-goin' to get married. Every woman under ninety-eight has expectations. While there's life there's hope that some man will make a fool of himself. But unless I miss my guess, you don't catch me surrenderin' my independence. As long as I have enough to eat and am well, I'm contented." 30

"You certainly look the picture of health, Mrs. Burke."

"Oh, yes! as well as could be expected, when I'm just recoverin' from a visit from Mary Sam."

"What sort of a visitor is that?" asked Maxwell, laughing.

"Mary Sam is my sister-in-law. She spends a month with me every year on her own invitation. She is what you'd call a hardy annual. She is the most stingy and narrow-minded woman I ever saw. The bark on the trees hangs in double box-plaits as compared with Mary Sam. But I got the best of her last year. While I was cleanin' the attic I came across the red pasteboard sign with 'Scarlet Fever' painted on it, that the Board of Health put on the house when Nickey had the fever three years ago. The very next day I was watchin' the 'bus comin' up Main Street, when I saw Mary Sam's solferino bonnet bobbin' up and down inside. Before she got to the house, I sneaked out and pinned up the sign, right by the front door. She got onto the piazza, bag, baggage, and brown paper bundles, before she caught sight of it. Then I wish you could have seen her face: I wouldn't have believed so much could be done with so few features."

"She didn't linger long?" laughed the parson, 31 who continued arranging his books while his visitor chatted.

"Linger? Well, not exactly. She turned tail and run lickety-spindle back for the 'bus as if she had caught sight of a subscription paper for foreign missions. I heard Jim Anderson, who drives the 'bus, snicker as he helped her in again; but he didn't give me away. Jim and I are good friends. But when she got home she wrote to Sally Ramsdale to ask how Nickey was; and Sally, not bein' on to the game, wrote back that there was nothin' the matter with Nickey that she knew of. Then Mary Sam wrote me the impudentest letter I ever got; and she came right back, and stayed two months instead of one, just to be mean. But that sign's done good service since. I've scared off agents and tramps by the score. I always hang it in the parlor window when I'm away from home."

"But suppose your house caught fire while you were away?"

"Well, I've thought of that; but there's worse things than fire if your insurance is all right."

Mrs. Burke relapsed into silence for a while, until Maxwell opened a box of embroidered stoles, which he spread out on the bed for her inspection.

"My! but aren't those beautiful! I never saw the 32 like before. Where did you get 'em?"

"They were made by the 'Sisters of St. Paul' in Boston."

Hepsey gazed at the stoles a long time in silence, handling them daintily; then she remarked:

"I used to embroider some myself. Would you like to see some of it?"

"Certainly, I should be delighted to see it," Donald responded; and Mrs. Burke went in search of her work.

Presently she returned and showed Maxwell a sample of her skill—doubtless intended for a cushion-cover. To be sure it was a bit angular and impressionistic. Like Browning's poems and Turner's pictures, it left interesting room for speculation. To begin with, there was a dear little pink dog in the foreground, having convulsions on purple grass. In the middle-distance was a lay-figure in orange, picking scarlet apples from what appeared to be a revolving clothes-horse blossoming profusely at the ends of each beam. A little blue brook gurgled merrily up the hill, and disappeared down the other side only to reappear again as a blue streak in an otherwise crushed-strawberry sky. A pumpkin sun was disappearing behind emerald hills, shooting up equidistant yellow rays, like the spokes of a cart-wheel. Underneath 33 this striking composition was embroidered the dubious sentiment "There is no place like home."

Maxwell examined carefully the square of cross-stitch wool embroidery, biting his lip; while Hepsey watched him narrowly, chuckling quietly to herself. Then she laughed heartily, and asked:

"Confess now; don't you think it's beautiful?"

Donald smiled broadly as he replied:

"It's really quite wonderful. Did you do it yourself?"

"To be sure I did, when I was a little girl and we used to work in wool from samplers, and learn to do alphabets. I'm glad you appreciate it. If you would like to have me embroider anything for the church, don't hesitate to ask me." She busied herself examining the stoles again, and asked:

"How much did these things cost, if you don't mind my askin'?"

"I don't know. They were given to me by a friend of mine, when I graduated from the Seminary."

"Hm! a friend of yours, eh? She must think an awful lot of you."

Hepsey gave Donald a sharp glance.

"I didn't say it was a lady."

"No, but your eyes and cheeks did. Well, it's none of my business, and there's no reason that I know of 34 why the Devil should have all the bright colors, and embroideries, and things. Are you High Church?"

Maxwell hesitated a moment and replied:

"What do you mean by 'High Church?'"

"The last rector we had was awful high." Hepsey smiled with reminiscent amusement.

"How so?"

"We suspected he didn't wear no pants durin' service."

"How very extraordinary! Is that a symptom of ritualism?"

"Well, you see he wore a cassock under his surplice, and none of our parsons had ever done that before. The Senior Warden got real stirred up about it, and told Mr. Whittimore that our rectors always wore pants durin' service. Mr. Whittimore pulled up his cassock and showed the Warden that he had his pants on. The Warden told him it was an awful relief to his mind, as he considered goin' without pants durin' service the enterin' wedge for Popish tricks; and if things went on like that, nobody knew where we would land. Then some of the women got talkin', and said that the rector practiced celibacy, and that some one should warn him that the parish wouldn't stand for any more innovations, and he'd better look out. So one day, Virginia Bascom, the 35 Senior Warden's daughter, told him what was being said about him. The parson just laughed at Ginty, and said that celibacy was his misfortune, not his fault; and that he hoped to overcome it in time. That puzzled her some, and she came to me and asked what celibacy was. When I told her it was staying unmarried, like St. Paul —my, but wasn't she mad, though! You ought to have seen her face. She was so mortified that she wouldn't speak to me for a week. Well, I guess I've gossiped enough for now. I must go and make my biscuits for supper. If I can help you any, just call out."

CHAPTER III
THE SENIOR WARDEN

"It's a fine morning, Mr. Maxwell," Mrs. Burke remarked at breakfast next day, "and I'm goin' to drive down to the village to do some shopping. Don't you want to go with me and pay your respects to the Senior Warden? You'll find him in his office. Then I'll meet you later, and bring you home —dead or alive!"

Maxwell laughed. "That sounds cheerful, but I should be glad to go."

"I guess you better, and have it over with. He'll 37 expect it. He's like royalty: he never calls first; and when he's at home he always has a flag on a pole in the front yard. If he's out of town for the day, his man lowers the flag. I generally call when the flag's down. I wish everybody had a flag; it's mighty convenient."

The center of Durford's social, commercial and ecclesiastical life was the village green, a plot of ground on which the boys played ball, and in the middle of which was the liberty pole and the band-stand. On one side of the green was a long block of stores, and on the opposite side a row of churches, side by side, five in number. There was the Meeting House, in plain gray; "The First Church of Durford," with a Greek portico in front; "The Central Church," with a box-like tower and a slender steeple with a gilded rooster perched on top—an edifice which looked like a cross between a skating rink and a railroad station; and last of all, the Episcopal Church on the corner—a small, elongated structure, which might have been a carpenter-shop but for the little cross which surmounted the front gable, and the pointed tops of the narrow windows, which were supposed to be "gothic" and to proclaim the structure to be the House of God.

Just around the corner was a little tumble-down 38 house known as "The Rectory." The tall grass and the lowered shades indicated that it had been unoccupied for some time. Mrs. Burke called Maxwell's attention to it.

"I suppose you'll be living there some day—if you stay here long enough; though of course you can't keep house there alone. The place needs a lot of over-haulin'. Nickey says there's six feet of plaster off the parlor ceilin', and the cellar gets full of water when it rains; but I guess we can fix it up when the time comes. That's your cathedral, on the corner. You see, we have five churches, when we really need only one; and so we have to scrap for each other's converts, to keep up the interest. We feed 'em on sandwiches, pickles and coffee every now and then, to make 'em come to church. Yes, preachin' and pickles, sandwiches and salvation, seem to run in the same class, these days."

When they arrived in front of the block, Mrs. Burke hitched her horse, and left Maxwell to his own devices. He proceeded to hunt up the post office; and as the mail was not yet distributed, he had to wait some time, conscious of the fact that he was the center of interest to the crowd assembled in the room. Finally, when he gained access to the delivery window, he was greeted by a smile from the postmistress, 39 a woman of uncertain age, who remarked as she handed him his letters:

"Good morning, Mr. Maxwell. Glad to meet you. I'm a Presbyterian myself; but I have always made it a point to be nice to everybody. You seem to have quite a good many correspondents, and I presume you'll be wantin' a lock box. It's so convenient. You must feel lonesome in a strange place. Drop in and see mother some day. She's got curvature of the spine, but no religious prejudices. She'll be right glad to see you, I'm sure, even though she's not 'Piscopal."

Maxwell thanked her, and inquired the way to the Senior Warden's office, to which she directed him.

Three doors below the post office was a hallway and a flight of stairs leading up to Mr. Bascom's sanctum. As he ascended, Maxwell bethought him of the Bishop's hint that this was the main stronghold for the exercise of his strategy. The Senior Warden, for some reason or other, had

persistently quarreled with the clergy, or crossed them. What was the secret of his antagonism? Would he be predisposed in Maxwell's favor, or prejudiced against him? He would soon discover—and he decided to let Bascom do most of the talking. Reaching the first landing, Donald knocked on a door the upper panel of which was filled with glass, painted white. On 40 the glass in large black letters was the name: "Sylvester Bascom."

The Senior Warden sat behind a table, covered with musty books and a litter of letters and papers. In his prime he had been a small man; and now, well past middle age, he looked as if he had shrunk until he was at least five sizes too small for his skin, which was sallow and loose. There was a suspicious look in his deep-set eyes, which made his hooked nose all the more aggressive. He was bald, except for a few stray locks of gray hair which were brushed up from his ears over the top of his head, and evidently fastened down by some gluey cosmetic. He frowned severely as Maxwell entered, but extended a shriveled, bony hand, and pointed to a chair. Then placing the tips of his fingers together in front of his chest, he gazed at Donald as if he were the prisoner at the bar, and began without any preliminary welcome:

"So you are the young man who is to take charge of the church. It is always difficult for a city-bred man to adjust himself to the needs and manners of a country parish. Very difficult, Mr. Maxwell—very difficult."

Maxwell smiled as he replied:

"Yes, but that is a fault which time will remedy." 41

"Doubtless. Time has a way of remedying most things. But in the meantime—in the meantime, lack of tact, self-assertiveness, indiscretion, on the part of a clergyman may do much harm—much harm!"

Mr. Maxwell colored slightly as he laughed and replied:

"I should imagine that you have had rather a 'mean time,' from the way you speak. Your impressions of the clergy seem to be painful."

"Well," the lawyer continued sententiously, "we have had all sorts and conditions of men, as the Prayer Book says; and the result has not *always* been satisfactory—*not* always satisfactory. But I was not consulted."

To this, Maxwell, who was somewhat nettled, replied:

"I suppose that in any case the responsibility for the success of a parish must be somewhat divided between the parson and the people. I am sure I may count on your assistance."

"Oh yes; oh yes; of course. I shall be very glad to advise you in any way I can. Prevention is better than cure: don't hesitate to come to me for suggestions. You will doubtless be anxious to follow in the good old ways, and avoid extremes. I am a firm believer in expediency. Though I was not consulted in 42 the present appointment, I may say that what we need is a man of moderate views who can adjust himself to circumstances. Tact, that is the great thing in life. I am a firm believer in tact. Our resources are limited; and a clergyman should be a self-denying man of God, contented with plain living and high thinking. No man can succeed in a country parish who seeks the loaves and fishes of the worldling. Durford is not a metropolis; we do not emulate city ways."

"No, I should imagine not," Maxwell answered.

The parson gathered that the Senior Warden felt slighted that he had not been asked by the Bishop to name his appointee; and that if he had bethought himself to sprinkle a little hay-seed on his clothing, his reception might have been more cordial.

At this point the door opened and a woman, hovering somewhere between twenty-five and forty, dressed in rather youthful and pronounced attire, entered, and seeing Donald exclaimed:

"Oh, papa, I did not know that you were busy with a client. Do excuse me."

Then, observing the clerical attire of the "client," she came forward, and extending her hand to Donald, exclaimed with a coy, insinuating smile:

"I am sure that you must be Mr. Maxwell. I am 43 so glad to see you. I hope I am not interrupting professional confidences."

"Not in the least," Donald replied, as he placed a chair for her. "I am very glad to have the pleasure of meeting you, Miss Bascom."

"I heard last night that you had arrived, Mr. Maxwell; and I am sure that it is very good of you to come and see papa so soon. I hope to see you at our house before long. You know that we are in the habit of seeing a good deal of the rector, because—you will excuse my frankness—because there are so few people of culture and refinement in this town to make it pleasant for him."

"I am sure that you are very kind," Donald replied. Miss Bascom had adjusted her tortoise-shell lorgnette, and was surveying Donald from head to foot.

"Is your wife with you?" she inquired, as one who would say: "Tell me no lies!"

"No, I am not married."

At once she was one radiant smile of welcome:

"Papa, we must do all we can to make Mr. Maxwell feel at home at Willow Bluff—so that he will not get lonesome and desert us," she added genially.

"You're very kind."

"You must come and dine with us very soon and 44 see our place for yourself. You are staying with Mrs. Burke, I understand."

"Yes."

"How does she impress you?"

"I hardly know her well enough to form any definite opinion of her, though she has been kindness itself to me."

"Yes, she has a sharp tongue, but a kind heart; and she does a great deal of good in the village; but, poor soul! she has no sense of humor—none whatever. Then of course she is not in society, you know. You will find, Mr. Maxwell, that social lines are very carefully drawn in this town; there are so many grades, and one has to be careful, you know."

"Is it so! How many people are there in the town?"

"Possibly eight or nine hundred."

"And how many of them are 'in society'?"

"Oh, I should imagine not more than twenty or thirty."

"They must be very select."

"Oh, we are; quite so."

"Don't you ever get tired of seeing the same twenty or thirty all the time? I'm afraid I am sufficiently vulgar to like a change, once in a while—somebody real common, you know." 45

Miss Bascom raised her lorgnette in pained surprise and gazed at Donald curiously; then she sighed and tapping her fingers with her glasses replied:

"But one has to consider the social responsibilities of one's position, you know. Many of the village people are well enough in their way, really quite amusing as individuals; but one cannot alter social distinctions."

"I see," replied Donald, non-committally.

Virginia was beginning to think that the new rector was rather dull in his perceptions, rather *gauche*, but, deciding to take a charitable view, she held out her hand with a beaming smile as she said:

"Remember, you are to make Willow Bluff one of your homes. We shall always be charmed to see you."

When, after their respective shoppings were completed, Maxwell rejoined Mrs. Burke, and they had started on a brisk trot towards home, she remarked:

"So you have had a visit with the Senior Warden."

"Yes, and with Miss Bascom. She came into the office while I was there."

"Hm! Well! She's one of your flock!"

"Would you call Miss Bascom one of my lambs?" asked Donald mischievously. 46

"Oh, that depends on where you draw the line. Don't you think she's handsome?"

"I can hardly say. What do you think about it?"

"Oh, I don't know. When she's well dressed she has a sort of style about her; but isn't it merciful that we none of us know how we really do look? If we did, we wouldn't risk bein' alone with ourselves five minutes without a gun."

"Is that one for Miss Bascom?"

"No, I ought not to say a word against Virginia Bascom. She's a good sort accordin' to her lights; and then too, she is a disconnection of mine by marriage—once removed."

"How do you calculate that relationship?"

"Oh, her mother's brother married my sister. She suspected that he was guilty of incompatibility—and she proved it, and got a divorce. If that don't make a disconnection of Ginty Bascom, then I don't know what does. Virginia was born in Boston, though she was brought up here. It must be terrible to be born in Boston, and have to live up to it, when you spend your whole life in a place like Durford. But Ginty does her very best, though occasionally she forgets."

"You can hardly blame her for that. Memory is tricky, and Boston and Durford are about as unlike as two places well could be." 47

"Oh, no; I don't blame her. Once she formed a club for woman's suffrage. She set out to 'form my mind'—as if my mind wasn't pretty thoroughly formed at this time of day—and get me to protest against the tyranny of the male sex. I didn't see that the male sex was troublin' her much; but I signed a petition she got up to send to the Governor or somebody, asking for the right to vote. There was an opposition society that didn't want the ballot, and they got up another petition."

"And you signed that too, I expect," laughed Donald.

"Sure thing, I did. I'm not narrow-minded, and I like to be obliging. Then she tried what she called slummin', which, as near as I can see, means walkin' in where you 'aint wanted, because people are poorer than you are, and leavin' little tracts that nobody reads, and currant jelly that nobody eats, and clothes that nobody can wear. But an Irishman shied a cabbage at her head while she was tryin' to convince him that the bath-tub wasn't really a coal bin, and that his mental attitude was hindside before.

"Then she got to be a Theosophist, and used to sit in her room upstairs projecting her astral body out of the window into the back yard, and pulling it in again like a ball on a rubber string—just for practice, 48 you know. But that attack didn't last long."

"She seems to be a very versatile young woman; but she doesn't stick to one thing very long."

"A rolling stone gathers no moss, you know," Mrs. Burke replied. "That's one of the advantages of bein' a rolling stone. It must be awful to get mossy; and there isn't any moss on Virginia Bascom, whatever faults she may have—not a moss."

For a moment Mrs. Burke was silent, and then she began:

"Once Virginia got to climbin' her family tree, to find out where her ancestors came from. She thought that possibly they might be noblemen. But I guess there wasn't very much doin' up the tree until she got down to New York, and paid a man to tell her. She brought back an illuminated coat of arms with a lion rampantin' on top; but she was the same old Virginia still. What do I care about my ancestors! It doesn't make no difference to me. I'm just myself anyway, no matter how you figure; and I'm a lot more worried about where I'm goin' to, than where I came from. Virginia's got a book called 'Who's Who,' that she's always studying. But the only thing that matters, it seems to me, is Who's What."

"I wonder she hasn't married," remarked Donald, innocently. 49

"Ah, that's the trouble. She's like a thousand others without no special occupation in life. She's wastin' a lot of bottled up interest and sympathy on foolish things. If she'd married and had seven babies, they would have seen to it that she didn't make a fool of herself. However, it isn't her fault.

She's volunteered to act as Deaconess to every unmarried parson we've had; and it's a miracle of wonders one of 'em didn't succumb; parsons are such—oh, do excuse me! I mean so injudicious on the subject of matrimony."

"But, Mrs. Burke, don't you think a clergyman ought to be a married man?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, t'aint me that's been doin' the thinkin' along those lines, for most of the parsons we've had. I've been more of a first aid to the injured, in the matrimonial troubles of our parish, and the Lord only knows when love-making has got as far as actual injury to the parties engaged,—well thinkin' 'aint much use. But there's Ginty for example. She's been worryin' herself thin for the last five years, doin' matrimonial equations for the clergy. She's a firm believer in the virtue of patience, and if the Lord only keeps on sendin' us unmarried rectors, Ginty is goin' to have her day. It's just naturally bound to come. I 'aint sure whether 50 she's got a right to be still runnin' with the lambs or not, but that don't matter much,—old maids will rush in where angels fear to tread."

Maxwell smiled. "Old maids, and old bachelors, are pretty much alike. I know a few of the latter, that no woman on earth could make into regular human beings."

"Oh, yes; old bachelors aren't the nicest thing the Lord ever made. Most of 'em are mighty selfish critters, take 'em as they run; and a man that's never had a real great love in his life doesn't know what life is."

"That's quite true," Donald responded, with such warmth that Mrs. Burke glanced at him suspiciously, and changed her tune, as she continued:

"Seems to me a parson, or any other man, is very foolish to marry before he can support a wife comfortably, and lay by somethin' for a rainy day, though. The last rector had five babies and seventeen cents to feed 'em with. Yes, there were little olive branches on all four sides of the table, and under the table too. The Whittimores seemed to have their quiver full of 'em, as the psalmist says. Mrs. Whittimore used to say to me, 'The Lord will provide,'—just to keep her courage up, poor thing! Well, I suppose the Lord did provide; but I had to do a lot of hustlin', just 51 the same. No sir, if a parson marries, he better find a woman who has outgrown her short skirts. Young things dyin' to be martyrs with a good lookin' young parson, are a drug in the market. Better go slow." And Hepsey looked up at him significantly.

"Then you think it would be inadvisable to propose to Miss Virginia immediately, do you?" Donald asked, as if humbly seeking guidance.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be any immediate hurry about it. Now if you'll open the gate to Thunder Cliff, I'll be much obliged to you. If I don't get my mind on something less romantic than Virginia, we shall have to dine off airy fancies—and that won't suit Nickey, for one."

CHAPTER IV
MILKING

Betty, my love:

I can imagine that just about this time you have finished your dinner, and are enjoying your after-dinner coffee in the library with your father. I would give all that I possess, though heaven knows that is mighty little, to be with you and get you to talk to me, and let me tell you all that has happened since I left you. But instead of that I am alone in my room with your picture on the table while I write, and it is the middle of the evening with 53 us on the farm. I have a bright wood fire on the hearth, as it's a bit chilly to-night.

To-day I have almost completed my first round of parish visits, and the experience has been a revelation to me of the mixture of pathetic narrowness, hardship, and self-denial of the people up here in the mountains. One minute I am all out of patience with their stupidity, and the next I am touched to the heart by their patience with unendurable conditions, and their generosity and kindness to each other. I hope to be able to adjust my mental equilibrium to the situation before long and to learn to understand them better; I find that a country parson must be a man of many accomplishments, and that I have to learn my profession all over again. Yesterday I called on a poor shriveled old woman who, I was told, was in trouble. When I asked her what I could do for her, she brightened up and informed me that her apple trees were full of worms! So there was nothing for it but to take off my coat and vest, roll up my sleeves, and burn out the worms. I must have destroyed about a bushel, more or less. It took most of the afternoon; but she was pleased, and appeared in church this morning for the first time in six years.

I have learned a lot about the rotation of crops, helped to dig a well, and attended a barn dance. I 54 have eaten pickles by the score at teas given in my honor, rather than offend the hostess; and have had horrible nights in consequence. Every morning Nickey and I take the milk down to the creamery before breakfast. I am so tanned that you would hardly recognize me; and I must confess with shame that I am never more happy than when I am able to put on my soiled working clothes and do manual labor on the farm. I suppose it is the contrast to my former life, and the fact that it takes my thoughts away from the longing for you.

The men up here seem to think I know mighty little. It's very humiliating! But since they discovered that I am neither "'ristocratic" nor "pious," they seem to be friendly enough. I often find myself wondering if much of the work in the seminary wasn't a sheer waste of time, when I am brought up against the practical, commonplace, everyday life of these people. My friend Mrs. Burke has a fund of common sense and worldly wisdom which is worth more than any Ph.D. or S.T.D. represents, to help a man to meet the hard facts of life successfully; and she has been very nice and considerate in making suggestions to me—always wrapped up in a humor all her own. I have found it practically impossible to get into touch with the farmers of the neighborhood 55 without becoming more or less of a farmer myself, and learning by actual experience what the life is like. One man was so openly supercilious when he found out that I did not know how to milk, that Mrs. Burke, who is nothing if not practical, offered to show me.

I have acquired a suit of overalls, and a wide-brimmed straw hat; and so, attiring myself in the most orthodox fashion, Mrs. Burke and I went to the shed yesterday where Louise, the Jersey cow, abides, and I took my first lesson in milking. Mrs. Burke carefully explained to me the *modus operandi* I was to pursue; and so, taking the tin pail between my knees, I seated myself on the three-legged stool by the side of Louise, and timidly began operations. She seemed to know by some bovine instinct that I was a tenderfoot; and although I followed Mrs. Burke's instructions to the letter, no milk put in its appearance. Mrs. Burke was highly amused at my perplexity. Finally she remarked:

"You've got to introduce yourself, and get Louise's confidence before she'll give down. She thinks that you are too familiar on a short acquaintance. Now talk to her a bit, and be friendly."

This was somewhat of a poser, as Louise and I really have not much in common, and I was at a loss 56 where to begin. But something had to be done, and so I made a venture and remarked:

"Louise, the wind is in the south; and if it doesn't change, we shall certainly have rain within three days."

This did not seem to have the desired effect. In fact, she ignored my remark in the most contemptuous fashion. Then Mrs. Burke suggested:

"Get up, and come round where she can see you. No lady wants to be talked to by a gentleman that's out of sight."

So I got up and went around by her head, fed her some clover, patted her on the neck, rubbed her nose, and began a little mild, persuasive appeal:

"Louise, I am really a man of irreproachable character. I am a son of the Revolution; I held three scholarships in Harvard; and I graduated second in my class at the General Sem. Furthermore, I'm not at all accustomed to being snubbed by ladies. Can't you make up your mind to be obliging?"

Louise sniffed at me inquiringly, gazing at me with large-eyed curiosity. Then as if in token that she had come to a favorable conclusion, she ran out her tongue and licked my hand. When I resumed operations, the milk poured into the pail, and Mrs. Burke was just congratulating me on my complete success, 57 when, by some accident the stool slipped, and I fell over backwards, and the whole contents of the pail was poured on the ground. My! but wasn't I disgusted? I thought Mrs. Burke would never stop laughing at me; but she was good enough not to allude to the loss of the milk!

Some day when we are married, and you come up here, I will take you out and introduce you to Louise, and she will fall in love with you on the spot.

My most difficult task is my Senior Warden—and it looks as if he *would not* make friends, do what I will to "qualify" according to his own expressed notions of what a country parson should be. But I rather suspect that he likes to keep the scepter in his own hands, while the clergy do his bidding. But that won't do for me.

So you see the life up here is interesting from its very novelty, though I do get horribly lonesome, sometimes. If I had not pledged myself to the Bishop to stay and work the parish together into something like an organization, I am afraid I should be tempted to cut and run—back to you, sweetheart.

And there was a post script:

"I've not said half enough of how much Mrs. Burke's wisdom has taught and helped me. She is a shrewd observer of human motives, and I expect 58 she has had a struggle to keep the sweetness of her nature at the top. She is, naturally, a capable, dominating character; and often I watch how she forces herself to let persuasiveness take precedence of combativeness. Her acquired philosophy, as applied to herself and others, is summed up in a saying she let drop the other day, modified to suit her needs: 'More flies are caught with molasses than with vinegar—but keep some vinegar by you!' *Verb. Sap.!*"

CHAPTER V
THE MINIATURE

It happened that the Reverend Donald Maxwell committed a careless indiscretion. When he went to his room to prepare for supper, he found that he had left the miniature of a certain young lady on the mantelpiece, having forgotten to return it to its hiding-place the night before. He quickly placed it in its covering and locked it up in his desk, but not without many misgivings at the thought that Mrs. Burke had probably discovered it when she put his room in order. 60

He was quite right in his surmise, for just as she was about to leave the room she had caught sight of the picture, and, after examining it carefully, she had exclaimed to herself:

"Hm! Hm! So that's the young woman, is it? In a gilded frame set with real glass rubies and turquoises. I guessed those letters couldn't come from his mother. She wouldn't write to him every blessed day; she'd take a day off now and then, just to rest up a bit. Well, well, well! So this is what you've been dreaming about; and a mighty good thing too—only the sooner it's known the better. But I suppose I'll have to wait for his reverence to inform me officially, and then I'll have to look mighty surprised! She's got a good face, anyway; but he ought to wait awhile. Poor soul! she'd just die of loneliness up here. Well, I suppose it'll be my business to look after her, and I reckon I'd best take time by the fetlock, and get the rectory in order. It isn't fit for rats to live in now."

Mrs. Burke's discovery haunted her all day long, and absorbed her thoughts when she went to bed. If Maxwell was really engaged to be married, she did not see why he did not announce the fact, and have it over with. She had to repeat her prayers three times before she could keep the girl in the gilt frame out 61 of them; and she solved the problem by praying that she might not make a fool of herself.

The next morning she went over to Jonathan Jackson's house to see what her friend and neighbor, the Junior Warden, would say about the matter. He could be trusted to keep silent and assist her to carry out some provisional plans. She knew exactly what she wished and what she intended to do; but she imagined that she wanted the pleasure of hearing some one tell her that she was exactly right.

Jonathan Jackson was precisely the person to satisfy the demand, as his deceased wife had never allowed him to have any opinion for more than fifteen minutes at a time—if it differed from hers; and when she had made a pretense of consulting him, he had learned by long experience to hesitate for a moment, look judicially wise, and then repeat her suggestions as nearly as he could remember them. So Jonathan made a most excellent friend and neighbor, when any crisis or emergency called for an expert opinion.

Mrs. Burke had been an intimate friend of Sarah Jackson, and just before Mrs. Jackson died she made Hepsey promise that after she was gone she would keep a friendly eye on Jonathan, and see that he did not get into mischief, or let the house run down, or 62 "live just by eatin' odds and ends off the pantry shelf any old way." Mrs. Jackson entertained no illusions in regard to her husband, and she trusted Hepsey implicitly. So, after Mrs. Jackson's mortal departure, Hepsey made periodic calls on Jonathan, which always gave him much pleasure until she became inquisitive about his methods of housekeeping; then he would grow reticent.

"Good morning, Jonathan," Hepsey called, as she presented herself at the woodshed door, where she caught Jonathan mending some of his underclothes laboriously.

"Well, I declare," she continued, "I'm blessed if you 'aint sewin' white buttons on with black thread. Is anybody dead in the family, or 'aint you feelin' well as to your head this mornin'?"

His voice quavered with mingled embarrassment and resentment as he replied:

"What difference does it make, Hepsey? It don't make no difference, as long as nobody don't see it but me."

"And why in the name of conscience don't you get a thimble, Jonathan? The idea of your stickin' the needle in, and then pressin' it against the chair to make it go through. If that 'aint just like a helpless man, I wouldn't say."

"Well, of course sewin' 'aint just a man's business, anyway; and when he has just got to do it–"

"Why don't you let Mary McGuire do it for you? You pay her enough, certainly, to keep you from becomin' a buttonless orphan."

Mary McGuire, be it said, was the woman who came in by the day, and cooked for Jonathan, and intermittently cleaned him out of house and home.

"She don't know much about such things," replied Jonathan confidentially. "I did let her do it for a while; but when my buttonholes got tore larger, instead of sewin' 'em up, she just put on a larger button; and I'd be buttonin' my pants with the covers of saucepans by now, if I'd let her go on."

"It is curious what helpless critters men are, specially widowers. Now Jonathan, why don't you lay aside your sewin', and invite me into your parlor? You aren't a bit polite."

"Well, come along then, Hepsey; but the parlor aint just in apple-pie order, as you might say. Things are mussed up a bit." He looked at her suspiciously.

When they entered the parlor Mrs. Burke gazed about in a critical sort of way.

"Jonathan Jackson, if you don't get married again before long I don't know what'll become of you," she remarked, as she wrote her name with the end of her 64 finger in the dust on the center-table. "Why don't you open the parlor occasionally and let the air in? It smells that musty in here I feel as if I was attendin' your wife's funeral all over again."

"Well, of course you know we never did use the parlor much, 'cept there was a funeral in the family, or you called, or things like that."

"Thank *you*; but even so, you might put things away occasionally, and not leave them scattered all over the place."

"What's the use? I never can find anything when it's where it belongs; but if it's left just where I drop it, I know right where it is when I want it."

"That's a man's argument. Sakes alive! The least you could do would be to shut your bureau drawers."

"What's the use shuttin' bureau drawers when you've got to open 'em again 'fore long?" Jonathan asked. "It just makes so much more trouble; and there's trouble enough in this world, anyway."

"You wouldn't dare let things go like this when Sarah was livin'."

"No," Jonathan replied sadly, "but there's some advantages in bein' a widower. Of course I don't mean no disrespect to Sarah, but opinions will differ about some things. She'd never let me go up the 65 front stairs without takin' my boots off, so as not to soil the carpet; and when she died and the relatives tramped up and down reckless like, I almost felt as if it was wicked. For a fact, I did."

"Well, I always told Sarah she was a slave to dust; I believe that dust worried her a lot more than her conscience, poor soul. I should think that Mary McGuire would tidy up for you a little bit once in a while."

"Well, Mary does the best she knows how. But I like her goin' better than comin'. The fact is, a man of my age can't live alone always, Hepsey. It's a change to live this way, till–"

"Oh, heaven save the mark! I can't stay here talkin' all day; but I'll tidy up a bit before I go, if you don't mind, Jonathan. You go on with what you call your sewin'."

"Go ahead, Hepsey. You can do anything you like," he replied, beaming upon her.

Mrs. Burke opened the blinds and windows, shook up the pillows on the lounge, straightened the furniture, dusted off the chairs and opened the door to the porch. She made a flying trip to the garden, and returned with a big bunch of flowers which she placed in a large glass vase on the mantel. Then she hung Jonathan's dressing gown over the back of a chair, 66 and put his slippers suggestively

near at hand. In a few moments she had transformed the whole appearance of the room, giving it a look of homelike coziness which had long been foreign to it.

"There now, Jonathan! That's better, isn't it?"

Jonathan sighed profoundly as he replied:

"It certainly is, Hepsey; it certainly is. I wonder why a man can't do that kind of thing like a woman can? He knows somethin's wrong, but he can't tell what it is."

Hepsey had almost forgotten her errand; but now that her work was done it came back to her with sudden force; so, puckering up her lips and scowling severely at the carpet, she began:

"The fact is, Jonathan, I didn't come over here to dust the parlor or to jolly you. I've come to have a confidential talk with you about a matter of great importance."

"What is it, Hepsey?"

"Matrimony."

Jonathan started eagerly, and colored with self-conscious embarrassment; and after clearing his throat, nervously inquired:

"Did you think of contemplatin' matrimony again, Hepsey?—though this 'aint leap year."

"I, contemplate matrimony? Oh, land of Gideon, 67 *no*. It's about some one else. Don't get scared. I'm no kidnapper!"

"Well, who is it, then?" Jonathan inquired, with a touch of disappointment.

"My adopted son."

"You don't say! I've heard rumors about Maxwell and Virginia Bascom; but I didn't take no stock in 'em, knowin' Virginia."

"Virginia hasn't nothin' to do with it."

"Well, who has then, for land's sake!"

"I don't know the girl's name; but I saw her picture on his mantelpiece yesterday mornin', and I've had my suspicions for some time."

"Well, I suppose his marryin' 'aint none of our business anyway, be it?"

"Yes, it is our business; if he's goin' to get married, the rectory's got to be fixed over a whole lot 'fore it's fit to live in. You know the Senior Warden won't lift his finger, and you've got to help me do it."

Jonathan sighed profoundly, knowing from past experience that Hepsey's word carried more weight than all the vestry.

"I suppose I have, if you say so, Hepsey."

"Yes sir, you've got to help me do it. No decent girl is goin' into that house as it is, with my consent. It's the worst old rat-trap I ever saw. I've got the 68 key, and I'm goin' through it this afternoon, and then I'm goin' to plan what ought to be done."

"But it seems to me you're venturin' some. You don't *know* they're goin' to be married."

"No, but all the symptoms point that way, and we've got to be prepared for it."

"But the people round town seem to think that Virginia has a first mortgage on the rector already."

"No doubt *she* thinks she has; but it 'aint true. He's made a blunder, though, not announcin' his engagement, and I'm goin' to tell him so the first chance I get. I don't see why he should air his private affairs all over the town, but if he don't announce his engagement before long, Virginia Bascom'll make an awful row when he does."

"Yes, and to the best of my knowledge and belief this'll be her fifth row."

"Well, you meet me at the rectory at two o'clock sharp."

"But we ought to consult the vestry first," the Junior Warden cautioned her.

"What for, I'd like to know?"

"'Cause they are the trustees of the property."

"Then why don't they 'tend to the property? The vestry are a lot of–" 69

"Sh! Hepsey, be careful. I'll be there, I'll be there!"

Mrs. Burke rose and started for the door; but Jonathan called out to her:

"Hepsey, can't you stay to dinner? I'd like awful well to have you. It would seem so nice and homelike to see you sittin' opposite me at the table."

"Am I to consider this a proposal of marriage, Jonathan?"

"Well, I hadn't thought of it in that light; but if *you* would, I'd be mighty thankful."

But Hepsey was beating her retreat.

Jonathan stood for a minute or two in the middle of the room and looked very sober. Slowly he took off his coat and put on his dressing gown. Then he sat down, and cautiously put his feet in another chair. Next he lighted a cigar—gazing about the room as if his late wife might appear at any moment as an avenging deity, and drag him into the kitchen where he belonged. But nothing happened, and he began to feel a realization of his independence. He sat and thought for a long time, and a mighty hunger of the heart overwhelmed him. Before he knew it, a tear or two had fallen on the immaculate carpet; and then, suddenly recollecting himself, he stood up, saying to himself—such is the consistency of man: 70

"Sarah was a good soul accordin' to her lights; but she's dead, and I must confess I'm powerful reconciled. Hepsey Burke's different. I wonder if–"

But he put he thought away from him with a "get thee behind me" abruptness, and putting on his coat, went out to water the stock.

CHAPTER VI
THE MISSIONARY TEA

"Hm!" Mrs. Burke remarked to Maxwell abruptly one day during supper. "We haven't had a missionary tea since you came, and I think it's high time we did."

"What sort of a missionary tea do you mean?" the parson inquired.

"Well," Mrs. Burke responded, "our missionary teas combine different attractions. We get together and look over each other's clothes; that's the first thing; then some one reads a paper reportin' how 72 things is goin' in Zanzibar, or what's doin' in Timbuctoo. Then we look over the old clothes sent in for missionaries, mend 'em up, and get 'em ready to send off. Then we have tea and cake. I've had my misgivin' for some time that perhaps we cared more for the tea and cake than we did for the heathen; but of course I put such a wicked thought aside. If you value your reputation for piety, don't you ever speak of a missionary tea here except in a whisper."

"But I suppose the tea helps to get people together and be more sociable?"

"Certainly. The next best thing to religion is a cup of strong tea and a frosted cake, to make us country people friends. Both combined can't be beat. But you ought to see the things that have been sent in this last week for the missionary box. There's a smoking jacket, two pairs of golf-trousers, several pairs of mismated gloves, a wonderful lot of undarned stockings, bonnets and underclothes to burn, two jackets and a bathin' suit. I wonder what people think missionaries are doin' most of the time!"

On the day appointed for the missionary tea the ladies were to assemble at Thunder Cliff at four o'clock; and when Maxwell came home, before the advent of the first guest, he seemed somewhat depressed; and Mrs. Burke inquired: 73

"Been makin' calls on your parishioners?"

"Yes, I have made a few visits."

"Now you must look more cheerful, or somebody'll suspect that you don't always find parish calls the joy of your life."

"It's so difficult to find subjects of conversation that they are interested in. I simply couldn't draw out Mrs. Snodgrass, for instance."

"Well, when you've lived in the country as long as I have, you'll find that the one unfailin' subject of interest is symptoms—mostly dyspepsy and liver complaint. If you had known enough to have started right with Elmira Snodgrass, she would have thawed out at once. Elmira is always lookin' for trouble as the sparks fly upwards, or thereabouts. She'd crawl through a barbed wire fence if she couldn't get at it any other way. She always chews a pill on principle, and then she calls it a dispensation of Providence, and wonders why she was ever born to be tormented."

"In that case," laughed Maxwell, "I'd better get some medical books and read up on symptoms. By the by, is there any particular program for this missionary meeting, Mrs. Burke?"

"Yes, Virginia Bascom's goin' to read a paper called 'The Christian Mother as a Missionary in her own Household.' To be sure, Ginty's no Christian 74 Mother, or any other kind of a mother; but she's as full of enthusiasm as a shad is of bones. She'd bring up any child while you wait, and not charge a cent. There goes the bell, so please excuse me."

The guests were received by Mrs. Burke. Miss Bascom entered the parlor with a portentous bundle of manuscript under her arm, and greeted Donald with a radiant smile. Pulling a pansy from a bunch in her dress, she adjusted it in his buttonhole with the happy shyness of a young kitten chasing its tail. After the others had assembled, they formed a circle to inspect the clothing which had been sent in. There was a general buzz of conversation.

As they were busily going through the garments, Virginia remarked, “Are all these things to go to the missionaries at Tien Tsin?” and she adjusted her lorgnette to inspect the heap.

“Yes,” Mrs. Burke responded wearily, “and I hope they’ll get what comfort they can out of ’em.”

“You don’t seem to be very appreciative, Mrs. Burke,” Virginia reproved.

“Well, I suppose I ought to be satisfied,” Hepsey replied. “But it does seem as if most people give to the Lord what they can’t use for themselves any longer—as they would to a poor relation that’s worthy, but not to be coddled by too much charity.” 75

“I think these things are quite nice enough for the missionaries,” Virginia retorted. “They are thankful for anything.”

“Yes, I know,” Mrs. Burke replied calmly. “Missionaries and their families have no business to have any feelings that can’t be satisfied with second-hand clothes, and no end of good advice on how to spend five cents freely but not extravagantly.”

“But don’t you believe in sending them useful things?” Virginia asked loftily.

“So I do; but I’d hate that word ‘useful’ if I was a missionary’s wife.”

“Might I inquire,” asked Miss Bascom meekly, “what you would send?”

“Certainly! I’d send a twenty-five-cent scent bag, made of silk and filled with patchouli-powder,” said Hepsey, squarely.

“Well,” Virginia added devoutly, “satchet bags may be well enough in their place; but they won’t feed missionaries, or clothe them, or save souls, you know, Mrs. Burke.”

“Did anybody say they would?” Mrs. Burke inquired. “I shouldn’t particularly care to see missionaries clothed in sachet bags myself; the smell might drive the heathen to desperation. But do we always limit our spending money to necessary clothes and 76 food? The truth is, we all of us spend anything we like as long as it goes on our backs, or down our throats; but the moment it comes to supportin’ missionaries we think ’em worldly and graspin’ if they show any ambition beyond second-hand clothes.”

“Do you live up to your preachin’, Mrs. Burke?” a little sallow-faced woman inquired from a dark corner of the room.

“Oh, no; it hits me just as hard as anybody else, as Martin Luther said. But I’ve got a proposition to make: if you’ll take these things you brought, back with you, and wear ’em for a week just as they are, and play you’re the missionaries, I’ll take back all I’ve said.”

As, however, there was no response to this challenge, the box was packed, and the cover nailed down.

(It is perhaps no proper part of this story to add, that its opening on the other side of the world was attended by the welcome and surprising fragrance of patchouli, emanating from a little silk sachet secreted among the more workaday gifts.)

The ladies then adjourned to the front piazza, where the supper was served.

When the dishes had been cleared away, the guests adjusted their chairs and assumed attitudes of expectant 77 attention while Virginia stood up and shyly unrolled her manuscript, with a placid, self-conscious smile on her countenance. She apologized for her youth and inexperience, with a moving glance towards her pastor, and then got down to business. She began with the original and striking remark that it was the chief glory and function of woman to be a home-maker. She continued with something to the effect that the woman who forms the character of her children in the sanctity of the home-life rules the destinies of the world. Then she made a fetching allusion to the “Mother of the Gracchi,” and said something about jewels. Nobody knew who the “Gracchi” were, but they supposed that they must be some relatives of Virginia’s who lived in Boston.

She asserted that the modern methods of bringing up children were all wrong. She drew a striking picture of the ideal home in which children always stood modestly and reverently by their parents’ chairs, consumed with anxiety to be of some service to their elders. They were always to be immaculately neat in their attire, and gentle in their ways. The use of slang was quite beneath them.

These ideal children were always to spend their evenings at home in the perusal of instructive books, and the pursuit of useful knowledge. Then, when 78 half-past seven arrived, they were to rise spontaneously and promptly, and bid their parents an affectionate good-night, and retire to their rooms, where, having said their prayers and recited the golden text, they were to get into bed.

Portions of Virginia's essay were quite moving. Speaking of the rewards which good mothers reap, in the virtues and graces of their dutiful offspring, she said:

"What mother does not feel a thrill of exquisite rapture as she fondly gazes into the depths of her baby's eyes and sees there the budding promise of glorious womanhood. What mother does not watch the development of her little son with wondering pride, as she notes his manly, simple ways, his gentle reverence, his tender, modest behavior. What mother–"

Here Virginia came to an abrupt stop, for there was a terrible racket somewhere overhead on the piazza roof; a rope was suddenly dropped over the edge of the eaves, and almost immediately a pair of very immodestly bare legs were lowered into view, followed by the rest of Nickey Burke's person, attired in his nightshirt. It was the work of a moment for the nimble boy to slide down the rope onto the ground. But, as he landed on his feet, finding himself 79 in the august presence of the missionary circle, he remarked "Gee Whitaker bee's wax!" and prudently took to his heels, and sped around the house as if he had been shot out of a gun.

Several segments of the circle giggled violently. The essayist, though very red, made a brave effort to ignore the highly indecorous interruption, and so continued with trembling tones:

"What more beautiful and touching thing is there, than the innocent, unsullied modesty of childhood? One might almost say–"

But she never said it, for here again she was forced to pause while another pair of immodest legs appeared over the eaves, much fatter and shorter than the preceding pair. These belonged to Nickey's boon-companion, the gentle Oliver Wendell Jones. The rest of O. W. J. followed in due time; and, quite ignorant of what awaited him, he began his wriggling descent. Most unfortunately for him, the hem of his nightshirt caught on a large nail in the eaves of the roof; and after a frantic, fruitless, and fearful effort to disconnect himself, he hung suspended in the breeze for one awful moment, like a painted cherub on a Christmas tree, while his mother, recognizing her offspring, rose to go to his assistance.

Then there was a frantic yell, a terrible ripping 80 sound, and Oliver Wendell was seen to drop to the ground clad in the sleeves and the front breadth of his shirt, while the entire back of it, from the collar down, waved triumphantly aloft from the eaves. Oliver Wendell Jones picked himself up, unhurt, but much frightened, and very angry: presenting much the aspect of a punctured tire. Then suddenly discovering the proximity of the missionary circle and missing the rear elevation of his shirt about the same time, in the horror and mortification of the moment, he lost his head entirely. Notwithstanding the protests of his pursuing mother, without waiting for his clothes, he fled, "anywhere, anywhere out of the world," bawling with wrath and chagrin.

The entire circumference of the missionary circle now burst into roars of laughter. His mother quickly overtook and captured Oliver, tying her apron around his neck as a concession to the popular prejudice against "the altogether." The gravity of the missionary circle was so thoroughly demoralized that it was impossible to restore order; and Miss Bascom, in the excess of her mortification, stuffed the rest of her manuscript, its eloquent peroration undelivered, into her bag.

When the last guest had departed, Mrs. Burke proceeded to hunt up Nickey, who was dressed and sitting on the top of the corn-crib whittling a stick. His mother began:

"Nicholas Burke, what in the name of conscience does all this idiotic performance mean, I'd like to know?"

Nickey closed his knife. Gazing serenely down at his mother, he replied:

"How'd I know the blamed missionary push was goin' to meet on the front porch, I'd like to know? Me and Oliver Wendell was just playin' the house was on fire. We'd gone to bed in the front

room, and then I told Ollie the fire was breakin' out all around us, and the sparks was flyin', and the stairs was burned away, and there was no way of 'scapin' but to slide down the rope over the roof. I 'aint to blame for his nightshirt bein' caught on a nail, and bein' ripped off him. Maybe the ladies was awful shocked; but they laughed fit to split their sides just the same. Mr. Maxwell laughed louder than 'em all."

Hepsey retired hastily, lest her face should relax its well-assumed severity.

Maxwell, in the meantime, felt it a part of his duty to console and soothe the ruffled feelings of his zealous and fluent parishioner, and to Virginia's pride his offer of escort to Willow Bluff was ample reparation for the untoward interruption of her oratory. She 82 delivered into his hands, with sensitive upward glance, the receptacle containing her manuscript, and set a brisk pace, at which she insured the passing of the other guests along the road, making visible her triumph over circumstance and at the same time obviating untimely intrusion of a tete-a-tete conversation.

"You must have given a great deal of time and study to your subject," remarked Maxwell politely.

"It is very near to my heart," responded Virginia, in welling tones. "Home-life is, to me, almost a religion. Do you not feel, with me, that it is the most valuable of human qualities, Mr. Maxwell?"

"I do indeed, and one of the most difficult to reduce to a science,"—she glanced up at him apprehensively, whereupon, lest he seemed to have erred in fact, he added,—"as you made us realize in your paper."

"It is so nice to have your appreciation," she gurgled. "Often I feel it almost futile to try to influence our cold parish audiences; their attitude is so stolid, so unimaginative. As you must have realized, in the pulpit, they are so hard to lead into untrodden paths. Let us take the way home by the lane," she added coyly, leading off the road down a sheltered by-way.

The lane was rough, and the lady, tightly and lightly 83 shod, stumbled neatly and grasped her escort's arm for support—and retained it for comfort.

"What horizons your sermons have spread before us—and, yet,"—she hesitated,—"I often wonder, as my eyes wander over the congregation, how many besides myself, really hear your message, really see what *you* see."

Her hand trembled on his arm, and Maxwell was a little at a loss, though anxious not to seem unresponsive to Virginia's enthusiasm for spiritual vision.

"I feel that my first attention has to be given to the simpler problems, here in Durford," he replied. "But I am glad if I haven't been dull, in the process."

"Dull? No indeed—how can you say that! To my life—you will understand?" (she glanced up with tremulous flutter of eyelids) "—you have brought so much helpfulness and—and warmth." She sighed eloquently.

Maxwell was no egotist, and was always prone to see only an impersonal significance in parish compliments. A more self-conscious subject for confidences would have replied less openly.

"I am glad—very glad. But you must not think that the help has been one-sided. You have seconded my efforts so energetically—indeed I don't know what I could have accomplished without such whole-hearted 84 help as you and Mrs. Burke and others have given."

To the optimistic Virginia the division of the loaves and fishes of his personal gratitude was scarcely heeded. She cherished her own portion, and soon magnified it to a basketful—and soon, again, to a monopoly of the entire supply. As he gave her his hand at the door of Willow Bluff, she was in fit state to invest that common act of friendliness with symbolic significance of a rosy future.

CHAPTER VII
HEPSEY GOES A-FISHING

Mrs. Burke seemed incapable of sitting still, with folded hands, for any length of time; and when the stress of her attention to household work, and her devotion to neighborly good deeds relaxed, she turned to knitting wash-rags as a sportsman turns to his gun, or a toper to his cups. She seemed to find more stimulus for thought and more helpful diversion in the production of one wash-rag than most persons find in a trip abroad.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.