

Oliphant Margaret

# The Rector



Маргарет Олифант

**The Rector**

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# Mrs. (Margaret) Oliphant

## The Rector

### CHAPTER I

It is natural to suppose that the arrival of the new Rector was a rather exciting event for Carlingford. It is a considerable town, it is true, nowadays, but then there are no alien activities to disturb the place – no manufactures, and not much trade. And there is a very respectable amount of very good society at Carlingford. To begin with, it is a pretty place – mild, sheltered, not far from town; and naturally its very reputation for good society increases the amount of that much-prized article. The advantages of the town in this respect have already put five per cent upon the houses; but this, of course, only refers to the *real* town, where you can go through an entire street of high garden-walls, with houses inside full of the retired exclusive comforts, the dainty economical refinement peculiar to such places; and where the good people consider their own society as a warrant of gentility less splendid, but not less assured, than the favour of Majesty itself. Naturally there are no Dissenters in Carlingford – that is to say, none above the rank of a greengrocer or milkman; and in bosoms devoted to the Church it may be well imagined that the advent of the new Rector was an event full of importance, and even of excitement.

He was highly spoken of, everybody knew; but nobody knew who had spoken highly of him, nor had been able to find out, even by inference, what were his views. The Church had been Low during the last Rector's reign – profoundly Low – lost in the deepest abysses of Evangelicalism. A determined inclination to preach to everybody had seized upon that good man's brain; he had half emptied Salem Chapel, there could be no doubt; but, on the other hand, he had more than half filled the Chapel of St Roque, half a mile out of Carlingford, where the perpetual curate, young, handsome, and fervid, was on the very topmost pinnacle of Anglicanism. St Roque's was not more than a pleasant walk from the best quarter of Carlingford, on the north side of the town, thank heaven! which one could get at without the dread passage of that new horrid suburb, to which young Mr Rider, the young doctor, was devoting himself. But the Evangelical rector was dead, and his reign was over, and nobody could predict what the character of the new administration was to be. The obscurity in which the new Rector had buried his views was the most extraordinary thing about him. He had taken high honours at college, and was "highly spoken of;" but whether he was High, or Low, or Broad, muscular or sentimental, sermonising or decorative, nobody in the world seemed able to tell.

"Fancy if he were just to be a Mr Bury over again! Fancy him going to the canal, and having sermons to the bargemen, and attending to all sorts of people except to us, whom it is his duty to attend to!" cried one of this much-canvassed clergyman's curious parishioners. "Indeed I do believe he must be one of these people. If he were in society at all, somebody would be sure to know."

"Lucy dear, Mr Bury christened you," said another not less curious but more tolerant inquirer.

"Then he did you the greatest of all services," cried the third member of the little group which discussed the new Rector under Mr Wodehouse's blossomed apple-trees. "He conferred such a benefit upon you that he deserves all reverence at your hand. Wonderful idea! a man confers this greatest of Christian blessings on multitudes, and does not himself appreciate the boon he conveys!"

"Well, for that matter, Mr Wentworth, you know – " said the elder lady; but she got no farther. Though she was verging upon forty, leisurely, pious, and unmarried, that good Miss Wodehouse was not polemical. She had "her own opinions," but few people knew much about them. She was seated on a green garden-bench which surrounded the great May-tree in that large, warm, well-furnished garden. The high brick walls, all clothed with fruit-trees, shut in an enclosure of which not a morsel except this velvet grass, with its nests of daisies, was not under the highest and most careful cultivation.

It was such a scene as is only to be found in an old country town; the walls jealous of intrusion, yet thrusting tall plumes of lilac and stray branches of apple-blossom, like friendly salutations to the world without; within, the blossoms drooping over the light bright head of Lucy Wodehouse underneath the apple-trees, and impertinently flecking the Rev. Frank Wentworth's Anglican coat. These two last were young people, with that indefinable harmony in their looks which prompts the suggestion of "a handsome couple" to the bystander. It had not even occurred to them to be in love with each other, so far as anybody knew, yet few were the undiscerning persons who saw them together without instinctively placing the young curate of St Roque's in permanence by Lucy's side. She was twenty, pretty, blue-eyed, and full of dimples, with a broad Leghorn hat thrown carelessly on her head, untied, with broad strings of blue ribbon falling among her fair curls – a blue which was "repeated," according to painter jargon, in ribbons at her throat and waist. She had great gardening gloves on, and a basket and huge pair of scissors on the grass at her feet, which grass, besides, was strewn with a profusion of all the sweetest spring blossoms – the sweet narcissus, most exquisite of flowers, lilies of the valley, white and blue hyacinths, golden ranunculus globes – worlds of sober, deep-breathing wallflower. If Lucy had been doing what her kind elder sister called her "duty," she would have been at this moment arranging her flowers in the drawing-room; but the times were rare when Lucy did her duty according to Miss Wodehouse's estimate; so instead of arranging those clusters of narcissus, she clubbed them together in her hands into a fragrant dazzling sheaf, and discussed the new Rector – not unaware, perhaps, in her secret heart, that the sweet morning, the sunshine and flowers, and exhilarating air, were somehow secretly enhanced by the presence of that black Anglican figure under the apple-trees.

"But I suppose," said Lucy, with a sigh, "we must wait till we see him; and if I must be very respectful of Mr Bury because he christened me, I am heartily glad the new Rector has no claim upon my reverence. I have been christened, I have been confirmed – "

"But, Lucy, my dear, the chances are he will marry you," said Miss Wodehouse, calmly; "indeed, there can be no doubt that it is only natural he should, for he *is* the Rector, you know; and though we go so often to St Roque's, Mr Wentworth will excuse me saying that he is a very young man."

Miss Wodehouse was knitting; she did not see the sudden look of dismay and amazement which the curate of St Roque's darted down upon her, nor the violent sympathetic blush which blazed over both the young faces. How shocking that elderly quiet people should have such a faculty for suggestions! You may be sure Lucy Wodehouse and young Wentworth, had it not been "put into their heads" in such an absurd fashion, would never, all their virtuous lives, have dreamt of anything but friendship. Deep silence ensued after this simple but startling speech. Miss Wodehouse knitted on, and took no notice; Lucy began to gather up the flowers into the basket, unable for her life to think of anything to say. For his part, Mr Wentworth gravely picked the apple-blossoms off his coat, and counted them in his hand. That sweet summer snow kept dropping, dropping, falling here and there as the wind carried it, and with a special attraction to Lucy and her blue ribbons; while behind, Miss Wodehouse sat calmly on the green bench, under the May-tree just beginning to bloom, without lifting her eyes from her knitting. Not far off, the bright English house, all beaming with open doors and windows, shone in the sunshine. With the white May peeping out among the green overhead, and the sweet narcissus in a great dazzling sheaf upon the grass, making all the air fragrant around them, can anybody fancy a sweeter domestic out-of-door scene? or else it seemed so to the perpetual curate of St Roque's.

Ah me! and if he was to be perpetual curate, and none of his great friends thought upon him, or had preferment to bestow, how do you suppose he could ever, ever marry Lucy Wodehouse, if they were to wait a hundred years?

Just then the garden-gate – the green gate in the wall – opened to the creaking murmur of Mr Wodehouse's own key. Mr Wodehouse was a man who creaked universally. His boots were a heavy infliction upon the good-humour of his household; and like every other invariable quality of dress,

the peculiarity became identified with him in every particular of his life. Everything belonging to him moved with a certain jar, except, indeed, his household, which went on noiseless wheels, thanks to Lucy and love. As he came along the garden path, the gravel started all round his unmusical foot. Miss Wodehouse alone turned round to hail her father's approach, but both the young people looked up at her instinctively, and saw her little start, the falling of her knitting-needles, the little flutter of colour which surprise brought to her maidenly, middle-aged cheek. How they both divined it I cannot tell, but it certainly was no surprise to either of them when a tall embarrassed figure, following the portly one of Mr Wodehouse, stepped suddenly from the noisy gravel to the quiet grass, and stood gravely awkward behind the father of the house.

"My dear children, here's the Rector – delighted to see him! we're all delighted to see him!" cried Mr Wodehouse. "This is my little girl Lucy, and this is my eldest daughter. They're both as good as curates, though I say it, you know, as shouldn't. I suppose you've got something tidy for lunch, Lucy, eh? To be sure you ought to know – how can I tell? She might have had only cold mutton, for anything I knew – and that won't do, you know, after college fare. Hollo, Wentworth! I beg your pardon – who thought of seeing you here? I thought you had morning service, and all that sort of thing. Delighted to make you known to the Rector so soon. Mr Proctor – Mr Wentworth of St Roque's."

The Rector bowed. He had no time to say anything, fortunately for him; but a vague sort of colour fluttered over his face. It was his first living; and cloistered in All-Souls for fifteen years of his life, how is a man to know all at once how to accost his parishioners? especially when these curious unknown specimens of natural life happen to be female creatures, doubtless accustomed to compliment and civility. If ever any one was thankful to hear the sound of another man's voice, that person was the new Rector of Carlingford, standing in the bewildering garden-scene into which the green door had so suddenly admitted him, all but treading on the dazzling bundle of narcissus, and turning with embarrassed politeness from the perpetual curate, whose salutation was less cordial than it might have been, to those indefinite flutters of blue ribbon from which Mr Proctor's tall figure divided the ungracious young man.

"But come along to lunch. Bless me! don't let us be too ceremonious," cried Mr Wodehouse. "Take Lucy, my dear sir – take Lucy. Though she has her garden-gloves on, she's manager indoors for all that. Molly here is the one we coddle up and take care of. Put down your knitting, child, and don't make an old woman of yourself. To be sure, it's your own concern – you should know best; but that's my opinion. Why, Wentworth, where are you off to? 'Tisn't a fast, surely – is it, Mary? – nothing of the sort; it's Thursday —*Thursday*, do you hear? and the Rector newly arrived. Come along."

"I am much obliged, but I have an appointment," began the curate, with restraint.

"Why didn't you keep it, then, before *we* came in," cried Mr Wodehouse, "chatting with a couple of girls like Lucy and Mary? Come along, come along – an appointment with some old woman or other, who wants to screw flannels and things out of you – well, I suppose so! I don't know anything else you could have to say to them. Come along."

"Thank you. I shall hope to wait on the Rector shortly," said young Wentworth, more and more stiffly; "but at present I am sorry it is not in my power. Good morning, Miss Wodehouse – good morning; I am happy to have had the opportunity – " and the voice of the perpetual curate died off into vague murmurs of politeness as he made his way towards the green door.

That green door! what a slight, paltry barrier – one plank and no more; but outside a dusty dry road, nothing to be seen but other high brick walls, with here and there an apple-tree or a lilac, or the half-developed flower-turrets of a chestnut looking over – nothing to be seen but a mean little costermonger's cart, with a hapless donkey, and, down in the direction of St Roque's, the long road winding, still drier and dustier. Ah me! was it paradise inside? or was it only a merely mortal lawn dropped over with apple-blossoms, blue ribbons, and other vanities? Who could tell? The perpetual curate wended sulky on his way. I fear the old woman would have made neither flannel nor tea and sugar out of him in that inhuman frame of mind.

"Dreadful young prig that young Wentworth," said Mr Wodehouse, "but comes of a great family, you know, and gets greatly taken notice of – to be sure he does, child. I suppose it's for his family's sake: I can't see into people's hearts. It may be higher motives, to be sure, and all that. He's gone off in a huff about something; never mind, luncheon comes up all the same. Now, let's address ourselves to the business of life."

For when Mr Wodehouse took knife and fork in hand a singular result followed. He was silent – at least he talked no longer: the mystery of carving, of eating, of drinking – all the serious business of the table – engrossed the good man. He had nothing more to say for the moment; and then a dread unbroken silence fell upon the little company. The Rector coloured, faltered, cleared his throat – he had not an idea how to get into conversation with such unknown entities. He looked hard at Lucy, with a bold intention of addressing her; but, having the bad fortune to meet her eye, shrank back, and withdrew the venture. Then the good man inclined his profile towards Miss Wentworth. His eyes wandered wildly round the room in search of a suggestion; but, alas! it was a mere dining-room, very comfortable, but not imaginative. In his dreadful dilemma he was infinitely relieved by the sound of somebody's voice.

"I trust you will like Carlingford, Mr Proctor," said Miss Wodehouse, mildly.

"Yes – oh yes; I trust so," answered the confused but grateful man; "that is, it will depend very much, of course, on the kind of people I find here."

"Well, we are a little vain. To tell the truth, indeed, we rather pride ourselves a little on the good society in Carlingford," said his gentle and charitable interlocutor.

"Ah, yes – ladies?" said the Rector: "hum – that was not what I was thinking of."

"But, oh, Mr Proctor," cried Lucy, with a sudden access of fun, "you don't mean to say that you dislike ladies' society, I hope?"

The Rector gave an uneasy half-frightened glance at her. The creature was dangerous even to a Fellow of All-Souls.

"I may say I know very little about them," said the bewildered clergyman. As soon as he had said the words he thought they sounded rude; but how could he help it? – the truth of his speech was indisputable.

"Come here, and we'll initiate you – come here as often as you can spare us a little of your time," cried Mr Wodehouse, who had come to a pause in his operations. "You couldn't have a better chance. They're head people in Carlingford, though I say it. There's Mary, she's a learned woman; take you up in a false quantity, sir, a deal sooner than I should. And Lucy, she's in another line altogether; but there's quantities of people swear by her. What's the matter, children, eh? I suppose so – people tell me so. If people tell me so all day long, I'm entitled to believe it, I presume?"

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