

The Turn of a Wheel

By Isabelle E. Mackay

CHAPTER II.

THE afternoon sunshine was flooding the pretty dining-room of the manse, and Mrs. MacDougall in a trim apron was carefully brushing the crumbs from the carpet. The minister watched her in silent admiration. Presently she captured the last crumb and stood upright.

"There," said she, "let no matron of Middleborough convict me of having an untidy house, and now for fun. Though, alas, I fear it is not seemly for me, a minister's wife, to mention it. Do you really think, Will" (with a merry glance at him), "that I shall ever come to say 'I shall now enjoy a little recreation'?"

"No, I do not," said he, with perhaps just a tinge of regret in his voice, "though I have no doubt the congregation would like it better if you did."

"I think the congregation are the funniest people I ever saw," said she, folding up her apron carefully; "they are awfully nice, though, and I would talk like that just to please them if I could, but the meaning we attach to words is different. What they call 'recreation' I call 'boredom,' and what I call 'fun' they call 'unseemly amusement.'"

"To return to the subject," rejoined the minister, "what 'fun' are you going to have this afternoon?"

"Well, I thought of two or three things. Mrs. Walton's quilting is one. But as Mrs. Nathan Strange is to be there I fear it will be too much in the nature of 'recreation.' Then I might run over to Mrs. Dr. Green's for that recipe she promised me, only I would have to stay an hour at least and answer a whole catechism of questions. So I won't go there. I think on the whole that the funniest thing would be to take my bike and wheel over to Miss Janet Macdonald's. It is a perfect day for a ride, and Miss Janet is the best fun out, and for a miracle I believe she likes me."

During this speech of his wife's the minister had been growing more and more nervous. He had known well enough from the beginning that whatever her decision might be it would be certain to include the bicycle. A week ago he would have smiled indulgently. He longed to do so now, but he felt it his duty to do otherwise. Indeed, since the first appearance of Mrs. William MacDougall on her bicycle, tongues had been so busy that even the long closed ears of Mr. MacDougall had been opened to receive some inkling of how affairs stood. He had been astonished and offended. But nevertheless he felt that it was time to speak a word in season. So seizing this opportunity he cleared his throat and began.

"My dear Ada."

Mrs. MacDougall looked around quickly, and he cleared his throat again.

"My dearest Ada, you have just said that you thought our people peculiar——"

"I said 'funny'," interrupted his wife.

"Funny, then, and perhaps they seem so to you who are not used to them. But I have been brought up among them and understand them better. They have certain prejudices and ways of thinking which are born and bred in their very natures, and allowances have to be made for these."

"Do you mean that people can really be born with a prejudice against an organ, for instance?"

But the minister interrupted her in a horrified voice.

"Whatever you do, Ada, don't ever mention organ around here. And that is not the question anyway. I have been told—at least it has been intimated to me—that some of our members do not like the idea of their pastor's wife riding a wheel. Grant that it is unreasonable and behind the times, still if such is the feeling;—and then there is the skirt."

Mrs. MacDougall burst into a peal of laughter. "You don't really mean that they object to the skirt?" cried she; "that is too funny. Did you ever see Mrs. Nathan Strange coming to church in her best gown over a muddy road? Or Mrs. Dr. Green on a wet day? Or Mrs. Monroe when she milks the cows? Oh, I see you have! Well, how do their skirts compare with mine under those circumstances?"

"Yes, of course," said the minister uneasily; "but you must admit that there is a difference."

"Oh, certainly," said she, "a difference of some inches."

The Rev. Mr. MacDougall was fain to declare himself defeated. "Well, my dear," said he, "you must use your own judgment, but it is nevertheless true that there is trouble brewing somewhere. They can hardly make it a church question that my wife wears a bicycle skirt. But another bit of gossip which may become awkward springs from the fact that you go about the country alone so much. Of course when you are on your wheel I cannot accompany you."

"There may be something in that," said his wife thoughtfully; "I'll go over to Miss Janet Macdonald's and ask her opinion."

"You couldn't do anything better," said he.

Miss Janet was resting behind the flowers in her sitting-room window that afternoon when she saw a trim figure in a natty tweed suit, the skirt of which was a trifle shorter than usual, coming swiftly up the garden path.

"If they didna' ca' it a bicycle skirt wha wad ken the differ?" said she to herself; "an' I maun say it sits her weel." Then aloud, "Come awa hen, Mistress MacDougall, ye've ta'en a bonny day for yer pleasin'."