

a corporate body holding one and the same, and that one his own, he spoke to his parishioners, and the words fell upon them like words spoken through water. What was under the bubble and froth of this egregious arrogance? Was there anything or nothing? Did he mean to assert that they were all bound to succumb to his lightest word? Were white-haired men, who looked back through a long experience at the good old time which never is, but always was, and shook their heads over the degeneracy of the present—were these to follow meekly a lad like this as an infallible oracle?

The reverend Ralph did not understand his parishioners—did not attempt to understand them. If they did not think exactly as he did, then what they thought was unimportant, except that it must be put down as error. Just at present he had no space to attend to them, or their private opinions. He wanted—a great many things; but first of all, a new musical instrument of some sort. He even had resource to that importunate gadfly of clerical life, the subscription list; and to his utter astonishment and disgust, he was still put off. People did not like doing things in such a hurry. The old organ had done its work for many years, and surely there was no need for such hot haste in sweeping it away, they wanted time to think about it.

Time to think about it!

The curate called to mind the whistling and sneezing of the bellows, the spasmodic groans which heralded every fresh start of the unwieldy hymn-tune, with the jerking interlude perforce repeated between each verse, the listless yawns of the congregation, and twists and trills of the singers. Last but not the least, perhaps, his own misery under the infliction.

Time to think about it, indeed! He tore up the obnoxious subscription list and scattered it to the four winds; he walked up into the town, selected the very best harmonium procurable there for the money, and engaged the services of a professional player and choir-master.

After this specimen of his untiring energy, it was humiliating to find that he had made a mistake. Not in his choice of an instrument; his musical ear was too good for that; but in his utter disregard of the feelings and wishes of his parishioners. Of course, they had meant to subscribe for an organ; they had given him to understand that; no one had the least idea of refusing to give.

Then Ralph came down out of his cloud to listen, with a growing haughtiness and impatience that threatened to gain the mastery over his usual self-control.

“It is quite true, Mr. Smith. I believe I have made known my wish at every house in the parish before taking this step.”

“And no one in the parish meant to disregard your application.

“I am too accustomed to believe what people say not to unriddle a possible ‘yes,’ from a wordy ‘no.’ I met with what I interpreted as refusals in every direction. I dislike temporizing. If a thing is necessary, it should be done at once. I therefore purchased out of my private purse the best harmonium I could get; I am aware of its inferiority to a good organ, but, at present, I did not feel justified in——”

“If you had given us a little time,” remonstrated Mr. Smith. To him it was no palliation of the curate’s hot-headed rashness that the harmonium was paid for. For he took it, indeed, rather as an insult to the parish generally, and to himself as the richest man in the parish, and a church-warden. “If you had given us a little time, we—I speak from personal knowledge—should all have been glad to respond to your call upon us. As it is——”