

## THE VICAR'S BATH.

Why a Minister Was Compelled to Appear in a Bathing Costume.

The Rev. Mr. Texter, Vicar of Dottington, and his pretty daughter Daisy were having a *le-to-let* one brilliant August morning in the pleasant little room which the Vicar called his study. That the *le-to-let* was not altogether of an agreeable nature was very evident from the agitation of the girl and vehemence of her father—a portly ecclesiastic with several chins and a pompous, self-satisfied manner.

"I don't consider that he's a fit man to be your husband," the Vicar resumed, after a pause in the talk. "I think one has only to look at the style and cut of his clothes to form a very fair estimate of the sort of life he leads in town. I know him to be in debt, to disgrace his mother tongue with the most hideous of metropolitan slang, to drink between meals—and yet you, Daisy Texter, daughter of the Vicar of Dottington, sigh and sob that you never can and never will love any other man. It's quite—but, gracious me! There's nine o'clock striking and the confirmation's at ten, so that the Bishop will be here at a quarter to, and I haven't had time to take my morning swim—thanks to your foolish love-sick chatter! Still, if I rush off now there's just time for a hurried dip, and as I'm nothing without it, as it will clear my head and freshen me up for the duties of the day, I will be off, and we will defer any further discussion until a more convenient opportunity," saying which the vicar left the room by the door, and the girl slowly went out by the French window, crossed the lawn, and descended to a narrow, shady lane, where was waiting a young gentleman with an honest brown face, who was attired in a check suit of dittoes which, although of ordinary London cut, had produced no small impression from the variety of its hues on the obscure villagers, who rarely saw anything but the parson's broadcloth and the parson's corduroys.

"It's no use, Gerald!" she exclaimed, when they met. "The parson is in an awful temper this morning, and has been calling me all sorts of horrid names for loving you and declaring I would continue to do so."

Mr. Gerald Maldon, who was the son of the Squire of Dottington, took the girl to his arms and kissing her quivering lips, said:

"What's his objection to me, Daisy?"

"Why, he says you are what is called 'fast,' replied the girl, 'and he doesn't like your style of life, your style of conversation, nor your style of dress, dear.'"

"Style of dress, by Jove!" exclaimed the young man, surveying the suit he had on with no little complacency. "Surely he doesn't judge a fellow by his dress. Why, when the bishop was at our house last spring I wouldn't have given the old fellow eighteen pence for all he had on."

"That reminds me, Gerald," said Daisy, "there's a confirmation today, so the bishop is coming and the whole place will be upside down. This, perhaps, has worried papa a little; therefore matters may not really be so bad as they now appear. He, however, would not miss his bath, so he has just gone down to the river to take his usual swim. It will doubtless cool his temper as well as his body."

"Gone down to the river for a swim!" exclaimed the young man. "By Jove! I'd give something to see him! I should have thought he'd have been above such rakish diversions. But a happy thought strikes me, Daisy dear. The bishop, as you know, is a rare good fellow, and being an old college chum of the governor's, and my godfather, he would, I believe, do anything for me. Keep your spirits up, therefore, my darling, for the great man is certain to come in and lunch at our house, and I will get the guy to ask him to say a good word for us to the vicar. So good-bye, my wife that is to be, for I know it will be all right. I wouldn't miss seeing my future father-in-law taking his morning bath for a good deal."

Gerald Maldon, having kissed the girl again, hurried down the lane in the direction of the river. Carefully keeping himself out of sight, he reconnoitred. The pompous ecclesiastic had just finished arranging his clothes in a neat heap on the bank, and was descending into the water with as much gravity and consequence as if he were going down his pulpit stairs. Mr. Gerald watched every movement and saw the vicar slowly duck his head and ponderously strike out into the middle of the stream, until his bald head and full shoulders were twenty yards away. Then quick as thought the young man crept forward, gathered up the reverend gentleman's garments under his arms, leaving only his towels and his boots, deposited the clothes under a hedge about a hundred yards off and returned to his post of observation.

The church clock chimed half-past nine; the vicar in the water heard it and struck for the bank. His amazement and horror may be imagined when he saw that his clothes had disappeared and that nothing but the towel and the boots re-

mained. For a moment he stood as if thunderstruck. Then girding the towel around his loins, he rushed about in all directions in a state of most uneclesiastical excitement and searched the bushes, peered under hedges, looked up into the trees, all the time hurling a complete communication service on the heads of the unprincipled scoundrels who had made away with his wardrobe. A quarter to ten struck. The church, the distracted vicar thought, would be now filling; the carriages of the country gentry would be dashing through the village street; his right reverence the Lord Bishop of Virginia Water would have arrived, and there was he, the vicar, shivering on the banks of a river in a towel and a pair of boots!

The position was a terrible one. But no ship-wrecked mariner ever desisted sail, or desert traveller ever saw water with more genuine joy than did the vicar hear the sounds of approaching footsteps. Quickly he divested himself of towel and boots, sprang back into the stream and waited to see who was coming. The steps were those of someone evidently not pressed for time and who, from the nature of the song he was caroling, had certainly no intention of attending the ceremony at the village church, but they were the footsteps of a man, and at that moment the vicar felt that he could have hailed the presence of the most irreclaimable member of his parish with delight.

The seconds which elapsed between his first hearing the footsteps and the appearance of the figure seemed to the vicar like hours, but at length Mr. Gerald Maldon emerged from the shrubbery with a pipe in his fingers and a ballad on his tongue commemorating the duplicity of a certain Duke of Seven Dials.

"Hi! Mr. Maldon! Mr. Maldon!" shouted the vicar. The young man stepped short in the middle of the chorus, looked up in the trees, away over the fields, behind him and straight ahead of him—in fact, everywhere but in the right direction.

The vicar renewed his cries. "Hi! Mr. Maldon! Here! It is I, the vicar. I'm in the river! Some thief's gone off with all my clothes and I've to be at the church at ten to assist at the confirmation! What on earth am I to do?"

The young man gazed with admirably feigned astonishment at the bald head and the agonized red face of the half-submerged vicar and giving vent to a prolonged whistle said:

"By Jove, sir, if you've to be at the church at ten you'll have to hurry up, for it only wants five minutes now. The bishop has already arrived, for he was yarning to the governor about a quarter of an hour back."

This was not strictly true but it had the desired effect of intensifying the vicar's agony.

"But I say, Mr. Maldon," said the wretched vicar, "what am I to do? I haven't time to get any fresh things from the vicarage. I can't go to the church as I am—no, no, I don't mean that. But really I don't believe any man was ever in such a predicament before? What can I do?"

"Well," said Gerald, "there's only one way out of the difficulty that I can suggest. My suit is not, perhaps, of a particularly clerical cut and color, but it wouldn't show much under a surplice, and you could run over to the church in it without anybody noticing you. Why shouldn't you put it on?"

"But what are you to do?" gasped the vicar.

"Oh, it doesn't matter about me," replied Gerald. "I've nothing to do and I've lots of tobacco and shall enjoy myself all right here."

"But how can I assist at a confirmation suit?—in a kind of seaside shooting suit? Still, I suppose there's nothing else to be done," said the vicar, wadding out of the water and drying himself as fast as he could. "I'm sure, Mr. Maldon, I'm indebted to you—that I am. But don't you trouble, thanks—that is, a little long in the legs, perhaps—oh! thanks!—no; never mind the peckles. There, that will do, and now I'll make a rush for it."

So saying the vicar doubled across the field as fast as his untrained condition would allow him, leaving Gerald with the towel and the boots and exploding with laughter at the ridiculous figure of the person out, ambling and stumbling along in the much-maligned suit of dittoes.

The vicar arrived at the church just as the clock was striking half-past ten. To his horror the first person to meet him was the bishop, who fairly staggered at the spectacle presented by the most precise and pompous minister in his diocese.

"Extremely sorry, my lord," panted the exhausted vicar. "Had an accident—explain all afterwards." The bishop said nothing, but his look spoke volumes although, being a prelate of an eminently humorous disposition, he of course saw that some contretemps had happened.

What the poor vicar underwent during that interminable service nobody but himself knew. The surplice he wore was short. Gerald Maldon's trousers were long. The sun streamed down full upon him as he stood within the chancel rails,

and he felt that the eyes of the whole congregation, from the county-folk in the high pews to the country boobies in the low benches, were fixed upon the astonishing pether garments of the man who had never been known to relax so far from orthodox broad-cloth as even to put on cricketer flannels. It was in vain that he endeavored to pay a proper attention to the ceremony at which he was assisting. He edged, he manoeuvred, he dodged and he pulled the surplice down at the sides until it split at the neck with a crack and exposed the collar of Gerald's "seaside shooting coat," as its present wearer styled it. The perspiration now stood out in great beads on the poor vicar's forehead; his hands were hot as fire and he performed his part of the ceremony in such a nervous, agitated manner that the beads thought he was going to be ill, and brought him a glass of water.

The unfortunate vicar, who saw the bishop looking at him, determined that the moment the ceremony was concluded, and he should have an opportunity in the vestry, he would tell the whole story to his grace. But when the moment came he was so overwhelmed with confusion that he was dumb, and he mistook the humorous twinkle in the bishop's eye for a look of scorn and indignation.

"Really, Mr. Texter," said the prelate at length, "you must excuse me if I remark upon the exceedingly unclerical style of dress in which you have appeared upon so solemn and public occasion."

"My Lord," gasped the vicar, "apologies are against me, I acknowledge. But when I have related to you what has happened you will admit that I followed the course open to me; and, although I am fully aware that clergymen, as a rule, do not officiate in garments of such a pattern as those I am wearing at this moment, I think you will admit that I should have fallen far more short of my duty if I had not put in an appearance at all."

So Mr. Texter related to the bishop the morning's adventure.

"Well, sir," said the bishop, when the vicar had finished, "all that I can say is that you are very deeply indebted to the person who made such a self-sacrifice in order to extricate you from your unfortunate dilemma."

"I feel that, my lord, and I hope to show it in some substantial way."

"May I ask the name of your friend in need?" continued the bishop.

"Gerald Maldon," replied the vicar.

"What! Gerald Maldon! the son of my old college chum?" asked the bishop, with astonishment.

"The same, my lord."

This news burst upon the worthy bishop like a revelation. He was aware of Gerald's love for Daisy Texter, and also of the difficulties that had been thrown in his way by her father. He therefore soon formed an opinion of his own as to how the little accident had occurred to the vicar's clothing. Suppressing, however, the smile that the thought brought to his venerable face, and with a determination to try and say a useful word for his friend's son, the worthy prelate took the vicar's hand, and said:

"I am delighted to hear it, and I trust that, in the same way as you accepted the young fellow's own suit for your own convenience, you will accept his other for your daughter's happiness."

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