

THE MINISTER'S WIFE.

"No good will ever come of it, now mind what I tell you! The idea of a sober respectable man of forty marrying a chit of a girl like that! But it appears to me that the longer I live the more convinced I am that men are awful fools when it comes to love. It just appears to knock all the sense out of them that they ever did have." And Mrs. Hezekiah Winters settled her spectacles firmly on her nose, as though she meant they should always stay there, and then jammed her needle energetically through her sewing.

You see, Mrs. Hezekiah Winters was a prominent member of the sewing society at L—, and was generally first spokeswoman everywhere.

"I agree with you entirely," said Mrs. Antony Evans, a meek-faced woman who seldom had an opinion of her own, but always agreed with somebody.

"And he being a minister of the gospel, too," said Mrs. Sophrona Dobbles. "I don't know what the world is coming to, I am sure," said Mrs. Edith Richfield; and there was a general sigh of dissatisfaction from all the members of the sewing society.

"I know that the duty of every member of this society is to convince that inexperienced child of her duty as a minister's wife; and I am morally sure that something dreadful will happen to those children of his afore six months. To think of the way she has started out already—got a new croquet set!" And Mrs. Araminta Wright tossed this remark like a bombshell into their midst.

The ladies dropped the precious garments intended for the heathen, and such other trifles as they could be expected of her. "Did you ever?" And again Mrs. Richfield tried to imagine what the world was coming to.

"Now, I don't think it looks very well to see the whole society swoop down on one person like Imogene," interrupted Mrs. Arthur Wilton, who had not been a member of the sewing circle very long. "We had better wait until she is here to defend herself," said Mrs. Henry Parsons, a meek second to Mrs. Wilton.

"I see plainly, Mrs. Wilton, that you and Mrs. Parsons are taken by her silly, childish ways. But I formed my opinion of her that Sunday when she laughed right out in meeting just because a little poodle-dog barked at the choir."

This awful evidence of the total depravity of the minister's new wife was revealed by Mrs. Hezekiah Winters. "Almost everybody laughed at that," responded Mrs. Parsons. "Anything seems so much funnier if you hadn't ought to laugh."

"And just to think what she said to me," said the owner of the aforementioned poodle. "Why, when I asked her to join our society she said she had two little heathens at home to sew for, and that they took the most of her time; but if we want to sew for the neglected children living under the shadow of our own church spires, she would spare time to help us. Just as if we wanted the lower strata in our church!" And Miss Sophrona Dobbles sniffed the air disdainfully.

"Now this is enough for one time," interrupted Mrs. Wilton. "Would that ministers could have two wives, so that we might divide the blame."

The ladies looked bewildered, and some of them laughed a little; then they launched into a discussion on the coming picnic.

It was to be the regulation kind of a picnic, for the ladies and children only; and they were to have such a nice time, with ham sandwiches, pressed chicken, and lemonade made on the grounds, and bugs and mosquitoes of infestation.

When the day of the picnic arrived, Mrs. Merton, the much-talked-of minister's wife, went. People had said that they "didn't reckon Merton would go, as the church was at the bottom of it," and when they saw her there, they said "it was just like her to go to every picnic."

Nevertheless, the church people at L— were like church people everywhere—they said a good deal that they didn't mean, and with a few exceptions blue-eyed, fair-faced Mrs. Merton was cordially treated, and her friends when she made them, were very true to her, and always defended her when she ran the gamut of society's tongue.

The picnic seemed a success generally, everybody was having "such a splendid time," and the mosquitoes had voted picnics a beautiful invention, and were singing rithms of praise at the prospect of a "good square meal," when suddenly there was a splash and suffocated cries, and two little forms disappeared under the gliding surface of the stream that would like a huge serpent through the woods.

There were shrill screams of genuine terror, and white faces stared at the rush of waters in agony as the awful peril of the children seemed to paralyze them. Mrs. Evans, whose little dark-haired boy had loosened the canoe from its fastening to take Vinnie Merton for a ride, and had while rocking it rocked too far, and tipped it over, was now, while her boy was almost drowning, lying in a helpless heap on the bank of the river. Some were beginning to recover there self-pos-

sessed, and were calling for ropes, when Mrs. Merton, stepping out of her slippers, poised herself a moment on the bank; then the slender figure, clad in a wonderful array of Swiss muslin and pale blue ribbons, dropped like an arrow into the water, and struck out with the move of an expert where little Elmer Evans was battling with the current, and holding him so that his head was above water swam easily to shore, where many hands lifted him to the bank; and then swimming back to her rebellious little step daughter, she carried her, half suffocated with the waves, back to terra firma.

Vinnie, by general advice from without, had managed to keep an almost continual warfare at home, although she was naturally a generous-hearted child; but when she had recovered from her fright, and made sure she had not swallowed all the water in the river, she looked at her step-mother's soiled garments and said, slowly:

"If you don't care, Mrs. Merton, I'll call you mamma, now."

After that day, Mrs. Merton had many friends; for you can always reach a mother's heart through her children, and every woman seems a mother to any child in the hour of danger.

"She was brave and self-possessed, and she saved my Elmer, and I don't mean to say another word against her, if she never goes with the church." That was what Mrs. Evans said at the next meeting, and as she seldom expressed an opinion for herself, the ladies for the most part agreed with her, except Mrs. Hezekiah Winters, who said:

"Well, I dunno; she may be all right; but a woman that could entrap a man of forty, and he a minister, kind of looks to me as though she was a flirt."

And Miss Sophrona Dobbles nodded her false frizzes emphatically as she said:

"I agree with you, Mrs. Winters. We mustn't all be taken in by one good act."

Well, to tell the truth, folk did, generally speaking, keep an eye on her; but everything seemed satisfactory. She did nothing that scandalized their ideas of propriety, and they had almost made up their minds that with proper advice she might do for a minister's wife after all.

But the town of L— was visited one day by a travelling theatre troupe, and everybody was going who wasn't a pillar in the church, and "wouldn't encourage no such institution of Satan." Mrs. Winters was especially bitter against them. The theatre, long ago, had led her one son from his home, and the only sweet, sacred spot in Mrs. Winters' hard religious life was her love for her boy—her baby, as she called him although he was almost a man when he went away.

The day the troupe arrived, Mrs. Winters was at home alone, and the faint sound of distant music was arousing to utterance the grief she had kept buried so long.

"I'll just go to the sewing circle and forget my sorrow by listening to something or other." And away trudged Mrs. Winters to Mrs. Richfield's, whose turn it was to entertain the society.

Everybody was busy and gossiping, and Mrs. Winters was listening to the report of the bad behaviour of the girl of the period, when Miss Araminta White came busting in.

"La, me! ladies, have you heard?" and without waiting for an answer she continued: "Oh, the dreadful actions of Imogene Merton! Sarah Halcomb, that lives next door, seen it with her own eyes, and she told me all about it. And poor, dear Mr. M— on away on church business!"

"What is it?" "Do tell!" "Go on, Araminta, and explain," were the words from all sides.

"Well, to begin with, my feelings are awfully riled up; but you all know that they theatre fellows came to-day. Well, one of them—I know he was one, because he got off the train with them—came to Mrs. Merton's to-day, and she was settin' in that room of hers with them windows that swings out; and he, instead of going to the front door and ringing the bell like a man—why, when he saw her sittin' in the room, with her back to the window, he just slipped up, sly and sneak-like, and stepped in through the window and then jumped clear across the room, and such huggin' and kissin' was never seen in a minister's house afore! Now, ladies, I know this is so, because Sarah Halcomb told it for a solemn truth, and that ain't the worst of it. After he had stayed an hour or so, he went to the hotel and got another feller, and them two walked straight to the minister's house, and she opened the door, fixed up fit to kill. Now, I say it is the duty of every member of this society to look into this matter. The minister is gone, and we have got the respectability of the church to sustain. We should go immediately and hear what that dreadful creature has to say for herself!"

"La me! Who would have thought it!" The most scandalous thing I ever heard of!"

"May be there is some mistake," put in Mrs. Evans, who hadn't forgotten the brave swimmer the day of the picnic. It was a solemn-visage group that

filed into the minister's sitting-room. Mrs. Hezekiah was to be the chief spokeswoman, as she generally was on all church occasions. Mrs. Merton greeted them, her face all smiles.

"I had just sent for you, Mrs. Winters; I have such a pleasant surprise for you!" And she actually kissed the old lady's withered cheek, while Miss Sophrona Dobbles muttered "Judas!" under breath.

"Just come right in here, while I talk to the ladies. And Mrs. Winters followed, her face white with indignation. Suddenly there was a strange, glad cry from the wrathful lady, and in answer to words, "Eddie, my boy!" some "one" said "Mother!" and then Mrs. Merton went back to explain matters to the astonished ladies.

"My brother came to-day, and in his travelling he came by chance upon Edgar Winters. Edgar is travelling with the theatre troupe that is here, and they being friends," Luke brought Edgar here, and I sent for Mrs. Winters; but she came before my note reached her."

The ladies now began to feel ashamed, but they were generous. Mrs. Araminta said:

"If I'm the bearer of scandal again, it shan't be about you, Mrs. Merton."

All hardness seemed melted out of Mrs. Winters' nature as she returned to the sitting-room.

"I want you to forgive me if you can, Mrs. Merton. I came here to-day to denounce you, and on circumstantial evidence only; but I'll be your friend in the future, remember that." The ladies by turns apologized for having troubled her so much.

"Oh, I am getting used to being a minister's wife, and I don't mind such things, you know." Perhaps this last remark was ungracious; but it was true to say, and I thereafter on minister's wife was not made the subject of ill-natured gossip.

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