

Family Reading.

THE CURATE OF ST. MATTHEW'S.

CHAPTER IV.

When lawyers get a case into their hands, no living conjurer can divine when their clients will get it out again. The hardest problem in Euclid was never more difficult to solve than that. Mr. Brandon came up to town on the Monday morning, bringing me with him; he thought we might be detained a few days, a week at the utmost; yet the second week was now passing, and nothing had been done; our business seemed to be no forwarder than it was at the beginning. The men of law in Lincoln's Inn laid the blame on the conveyancers; the conveyancers laid it on the lawyers. Anyway, the upshot was the same—we were kept in London. The fact to myself was uncommonly pleasant, though it might be less so to Mr. Brandon.

The astounding news—that the Reverend William Blake was to have St. Matthew's—and the return of Miss Cattledon from her visit to the sick lady at Chelmsford, rejoiced the ears and eyes of the parish on one and the same day. It was a Wednesday. Miss Cattledon got home in time for dinner, bringing word that her relative was better.

"Has anything been heard about the living?" she enquired, sitting, bonnet in hand, before going up to dress.

Miss Deveen shook her head. In point of fact we had heard nothing at all of Sir Robert Tenby or his intentions since Mr. Lake's interview with him, and she was not going to tell Cattledon of that, or of Sir Robert's visit on the Sunday.

But, as it appeared, the decision had been made public that afternoon, putting the whole parish into a ferment. Dinner was barely over when Dr. Galliard rushed in with the news.

"Only think of it!" he cried. "Such a piece of justice was never heard of before. Poor Lake has not the smallest interest in the world; and how Sir Robert Tenby came to pick him out is just a marvel. Such a stir it's causing! It's said—I don't know with what truth—that he came up here on Sunday morning to hear Lake preach. Mrs. Herriker saw a fine barouche draw up, high-stepping horses and powdered servants; a lady and gentleman got out of it and entered the church. It is thought now they might have been Sir Robert and Lady Tenby."

"I shouldn't wonder but they were," remarked Miss Deveen.

"Has Mr. Lake really got the living given to him?" questioned Cattledon, her eyes open with surprise, her thin throat and waist all in a tremor, and unable to touch another strawberry.

"Really and truly," replied the doctor. "Chisholm tells me he has just seen the letter appointing him to it."

"Dear me!" cried Cattledon, quite faintly. "Dear me! How very thankful we all ought to be—for Mr. Lake's sake."

"I dare say he is thankful," returned the doctor, swallowing down the rest of his glass of wine, and preparing to leave.

"Thank you, no, Miss Deveen; I can't stay longer; I have one or two sick patients on my hands to-night, and must go to them—and I promised Mrs. Selwyn to look in upon her. Poor thing! this terrible loss has made her really ill. By-the-by," he added, turning round on his way from the room, "have you heard that she has decided upon her plans, and thinks of leaving shortly?"

"No—has she?" returned Miss Deveen.

"Best thing for her, too—to be up and doing. She has the chance of taking to a little boys' preparatory school at Brighton; small and select, as the advertisements have it. Some relative of hers has kept it hitherto, has made money by it, and is retiring—"

"Will Mrs. Selwyn like that—to be a

schoolmistress!" interrupted Cattledon, craning her neck.

"Rather than vegetate upon her small pittance," returned the doctor, briskly. "She is an active, capable woman; got all her senses about her. Better teach little boys and live and dress well, than enjoy a solitary joint of meat once a week and a turned gown once a year—eh, Johnny Ludlow?"

He caught up his hat, and went out in a bustle. I laughed. Miss Deveen nodded approvingly: not at my laugh, but at Mrs. Selwyn's resolution.

The stir abroad might have been pretty brisk that evening; we had Dr. Galliard's word for it: it could have been nothing to what set in the next day. The poor, meek curate—who, however good he might have been to run after, could hardly have been looked upon as an eligible, *bona fide* prospect—suddenly converted into a rich rector; six hundred a year and a parsonage to flourish in! All the ladies, elder and younger, went into a delightful waking-sleep, and dreamed dreams.

"Such a mercy!" was the cry: "such a mercy! We might have had some dreadful old drony man here, who does not believe in daily services, and wears a wig on his bald head. Now Mr. Lake, though his hair is getting a little grey, has a most luxuriant and curly crop of it. Beautiful whiskers too."

It was little Daisy Dutton said that, meeting us in the Park road; she was too young and frivolous to know better. Miss Deveen shook her head at her, and Daisy ran on with a laugh. We were on our way to Mrs. Topcroft's, some hitch having arisen about the frames for Emma's screens.

Emma was out, however; and Mrs. Topcroft came forward with tears in her eyes.

"I can hardly help crying since I heard it," she said, taking her handkerchief out of the pocket of her black silk apron. "It must be such a reward to him after his years of work—and to have come so unsought—so unexpectedly! I am sure Sir Robert Tenby must be a good man."

"I think he is one," said Miss Deveen.

"Mr. Lake deserves his recompense," went on Mrs. Topcroft. "Nobody can know it as I do. Poor Mr. Selwyn knew—but he is gone. I think God's hand must have been in this," she reverently added. "These good and earnest ministers deserve to be placed in power for the sake of those over whom they have charge. I have nothing to say against Mr. Selwyn, but I am sure the parish will find a blessing in Mr. Lake."

"You will lose him," remarked Miss Deveen.

"Yes, and I am sorry for it; but I should be selfish indeed to think of that. About the screens," continued Mrs. Topcroft; "perhaps you would like to see them—I am sorry Emma is out. One, I know, is finished."

Not being especially interested in the screens, I stepped into the garden, and so strolled round to the back of the house. In the little den of a room, close to the open window, sat Mr. Lake writing. He stood up when he saw me and held out his hand.

"It is, I believe, to you that I am indebted for the gift bestowed upon me," he said, in a low tone of emotion, as he clasped my hand in his, and a wave of feeling swept over his face. "How came you to think of me—to be so kind? I cannot thank you as I ought."

"Oh, it's nothing; indeed I did nothing—so to say," I stammered, quite taken aback. "I heard people say what a pity it was you stood no chance of the living, after working so hard in it all these years; so, as I knew Sir Robert, and knew very well Lady Tenby, I thought it would do no harm if I just told them of it."

"And it has borne fruit; and very grateful I am; to you, and to Sir Robert—and to One who holds all things, great and small, in his hands. Do you know," he added, smiling at me and changing his tone to a lighter one, "it seems to

me nothing less than a romance."

This was Thursday. The next day Mr. Lake paid a visit to the bishop—perhaps to go through some formality connected with his appointment, but I don't know—and on the following Sunday morning he "read himself in." No mistake about his being the rector after that. It was a lovely day, and Mr. Brandon came up in time for service. After he knew all about it—that I had actually gone to Sir Robert, and that Mr. Lake had got the living—he asked me five or six hundred questions, as though he were interested, and now he had come up to hear him preach.

You should have seen how crowded the church was. The ladies were in full force and flutter. Cattledon got herself up in a new bonnet; some of them had new rigging altogether. Each individual damsel looked upon the rector as her especial prize, sure to be her own. Mr. Lake did every scrap of the duty himself, including the reading of the articles; that delightful young deacon's cold had taken a turn for the worse, through going to a water-party, and he simply couldn't hear himself speak. Poor Mrs. Selwyn and her daughter sat in their pew to-day, sad as the crape robes they wore.

Did you ever feel nervous when some one belonging to you is going to preach—lest he should not come up to expectation, or break down, or anything of that sort? Mr. Lake did not belong to me, but a nervous feeling came over me as he went into the pulpit. For Mr. Brandon was there with his critical ears. I had boasted to him of Mr. Lake's preaching; and felt sensitively anxious that it should not fall short.

I need not have feared. It was a very short sermon, the services had been so long, but wonderfully beautiful. You might have heard a pin drop in the church, and old Brandon himself never stirred hand or foot. At the end of the pew sat he, I next to him; his eyes fixed on the preacher, his attitude that of one who is absorbed in what he hears. Just a few words Mr. Lake spoke of himself, of the new relation between himself and his hearers; very quiet, modest words bearing the ring of truth and good-fellowship.

"That man would do his duty in whatever position of life he might be placed," pronounced old Brandon, as we got out. "Robert Tenby's choice has been a good and wise one."

"Thanks to Johnny Ludlow, here," said Miss Deveen, laughing.

"I don't say but what Johnny Ludlow has his head on his shoulders the right way. He means to do well always, I believe; and does do it sometimes."

Which I am sure was wonderful praise, conceded by old Brandon, calling to my face no end of a colour. And, if you'll believe me, he put his arm within mine, a thing he had never done before, and walked so across the churchyard.

The next week was a busy one. What with Mrs. Selwyn's preparations for going away, and what with the commotion caused by the new state of things, the parish had plenty on its hands—and tongues. Mr. Lake had begged Mrs. Selwyn not to quit the rectory until it should be quite and entirely convenient to her; if he got into it six or twelve months hence, he kindly urged, it would be time enough for him. But Mrs. Selwyn, while thanking him for his consideration, showed him that she was obliged to go. She had taken to the school at Brighton, and had to enter upon it as speedily as might be. A few days afterwards she had vacated the rectory, and her furniture was packed into vans to be carried away. Some women went into the empty house to clean it down, that it might be made ready for its new tenant. Poor Mr. Selwyn had repaired and decorated the house only the previous year, little thinking his tenure of it would be so short.

Then began the fun. The polite attentions to Mr. Lake, as curate, had

been remarkable; to Mr. Lake, as rector, they were unique. Mrs. Topcroft's door was besieged with notes and parcels. The notes contained invitations to teas and dinners the parcels small offerings to himself. A parson about to set up housekeeping naturally wants all kinds of articles; and the ladies of St. Matthew's were eager to supply contributions. Slippers fell to a discount, purses and silk watch-guards ditto. More useful things replaced them. Ornamental baskets for the mantelpiece, little match-boxes done in various devices, card-racks hastily painted, serviette rings composed of coloured beads, pincushions and scent-mats for the dressing-table, with lots more things I can't remember. These were all got up on the spur of the moment; more elaborate presents, that might take weeks to complete, were put in hand. Chairs and ottoman seats to be worked in wool or silks, banner-screens for the mantelpiece as elaborate as Emma Topcroft's wax flowers to be preserved under a glass case, beautiful antimacassars, costly cushions for sofas, knitted counterpanes, carved leather picture-frames, and so on—you never heard of such a list. In vain Mr. Lake entreated them not to do these things; not to send anything; not to trouble themselves about him, assuring them it made him most uncomfortable; that he preferred not to receive presents of any kind; and he said it so emphatically, they might see he was in earnest. All the same. He might as well have talked to the moon. The ladies laughed, and worked on. Daisy Dutton had the impudence to dress a wax doll to send him; it was the only sort of work she knew how to do, she said, and perhaps he'd accept it for that reason; when every lady was working for him, she did not like to be the only idle one left out.

"Mrs. Topcroft, I think you had better refuse to take the parcels in," he said to her one day, when a huge packet had arrived, which proved to be a market-basket, sent conjointly by three old maiden sisters. "I don't wish to be rude, or do anything that would hurt kind people's feelings; but, upon my word, I should like to send all the things back again with thanks."

"They would put them into the empty rectory if I did not take them in," returned Mrs. Topcroft. "The only way to stop it is to talk to the ladies yourself. Senseless girls!"

Mr. Lake did talk—as well, and as impressively as he knew how. It made not the slightest impression; and the small presents flocked in as before. Mrs. Jonas did not brew a "blessed great jug of camomile tea," as did one of the admirers of Mr. Weller, the elder; but she did brew some "ginger cordial" from a valued receipt of her late husband, the colonel, and sent it, corked up in two ornamental bottles, with her best regards. The other widow, Mrs. Herriker, was embroidering a magnificent table cover, working against time.

We had the felicity of tasting the ginger cordial. Mrs. Jonas gave a small "at home," and brought out a bottle of it as we were leaving. Cattledon sniffed at her liqueur-glass surreptitiously before drinking it.

"The chief ingredient in that stuff is rum," she avowed to me as we walked home, stretching up her neck in displeasure. "Pincapple rum! My nose could not be mistaken."

"The cordial was very good," I answered. "Rum's not a bad thing, Miss Cattledon."

"Not at all bad, Johnny," laughed Miss Deveen. "An old sailor uncle of mine, who had been round the world and back again more times than he could count, looked upon it as the panacea for all earthly ills."

"Anyway, before I would lay myself out to catch Mr. Lake, as that widow woman does, and as some others are doing, I would hide my head forever," retorted Cattledon. And, to give her her due, though she did look upon the parson as safe to fall to her own lot, she did not fish for him. No presents, large or