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A PRACTICAL JOKE; OR, THE CURATE'S VALENTINE.

CHAPTER I. 'A clerical prig?' said the eldest Miss Grantly.

The three Misses Grantly put their heads together, in order probably to converse more in private. They need not have been frightened.

'The wax candles were getting short, the tables had a dissipated look, with the litter of prints, and drawings, and photographs, about which so many wise things had been said in the course of the evening.'

'One of Broadwood's new patent would content me,' said Miss Grantly—'and they are not dear. But then papa sticks to anything old, whether it's good or bad.'

Of course this was rank heresy on the young lady's part; but then the old piano annoyed her; and, besides, the colonel didn't hear.

It was not the piano, however, which now occupied the attention of the Misses Grantly. Among the few guests had been the curate of the parish, the Rev. Wilfrid Seltum, called by his intimates, Will; and he had been this evening what the young ladies chose to designate 'Crawley.'

'In fact,' said the eldest sister, 'he left off to go and flirt with Bell Lindhurst. Any one could see that.'

'Are you sure it's Bell?' said another. 'I thought it was Frances.'

'Ob, neither will do,' said the other, 'since a man with a curacy can only flirt. But it's Bell of course. Well, he has spoilt our evening completely, and we owe him something; I wish I could think of a real good trick.'

'I know of something,' said the youngest Miss Grantly, who was also the quietest, and had a sad, plaintive way of speaking. 'But then he would never open a Valentine.'

'Not if he knew it,' said the eldest; 'but he need not. What's your plan?'

There was a good deal of whispering, a little laughing, and then a lull. 'Yes, a large blue envelope—official-looking—and I've got a seal with a Cupid on it, holding a letter on his arrow; but the poor stupid man will never see that, and one must have the sign manual of a Valentine about it.'

candles, during which Miss Grantly whispered into Bell Lindhurst's ear softly, 'I'll come to your room a bit, dear. Franky is sleepy, so she can go to bed.'

Probably Bell would have preferred going to bed too. The cousins—the kinship was in reality of that remote degree which is calculated broadly at forty-two removes, but Miss Grantly rather made a point of it nevertheless—the cousins, though good friends enough, were not always quite comfortable together, and did not exactly suit each other.

'Is my hair wrong?' said Bell, standing over the fire, and pulling it down. 'Or are pearls and velvet too old? What is it, Cis?'

'No, dear, nothing of that sort. We just want you to direct an envelope for us, that's all. A bit of fun; in fact a Valentine, and our writing is known.'

Bell Lindhurst put out her hand indifferently for the pen, and waited, with one hand on the official looking envelope.

'The Rev. Wilfrid Seltum,' dictated Miss Grantly. 'Write it large, please. Your's is such a nice bold hand, like a gentleman's.'

But the pen never stirred. A slight access of color came to Bell's cheeks and she kept them for a moment bent down over the letter.

'I think,' she said, 'that I would rather not do this.'

'Oh, Bell, why? You'll spoil our fun. He has never seen your writing, or if he has, he won't know it. Where is the harm in a bit of fun?'

'Bits of fun,' said Bell slowly, 'hurt sometimes, don't they?'

'Hurt? Who ever heard of a Valentine hurting any one! You can't read it, because it's sealed, but look at the Cupid on the seal.—Hurt, indeed! But certainly,' said Miss Grantly, sneering a little, 'if you are so far gone as all that, by all means don't let us disturb his peace of mind. I wouldn't try to cut you out for the world, Bell. I knew there was a flirtation, but if your heart is really and truly touched—'

Bell looked up steadily from one sister to another, back again at the envelope, and wrote the address. A volley of gratitude began to descend upon her, but she drew back.

'No,' said she, 'no kisses. I have done what you want because it is not the least consequence to me about Mr. Seltum's peace of mind. Good night.'

CHAPTER II

The curate looked through the window of his little parlor, and turned his back upon it abruptly. Of course the fourteenth of February ought to have been all that is brightest and most full of the promise of Spring; but it wasn't, and probably he did not even know that it was the fourteenth. He turned away from the window because it was snowing, and then he turned from the fire, because it sent a great puff of smoke into his face, and nearly choked him.

When this passed away, he sat down to the breakfast table, and saw that there were two letters for him. The first, to tell the truth, was a bill; and, moreover, it was 'To bill delivered;' which is a very shocking sentence for a young fellow who has only his stipend, and has boasted that he can make that enough for him.

The curate's face grew long as he put this first missive down; and I believe he was thinking of certain wild fellows he had known at St. John's, and what they used to do with such reminders. He was not, and never had been, an extravagant man; but this managing on his curacy was new work to him, and he had a good many things to learn. At first he had thought it would be rather fun, but occasionally circumstances seem to come lightly in the way of the fun. Neither was he especially anxious for wealth. He did not spend his time in castle building as to what he would do with somebody else's money if he had it; nor in making sardonic compliments to the fate that had bound down a Seltum to the suburban curacy of a provincial town. He would have liked a living as well as any man, and in time hoped to have one; but as long as he had only himself to keep, he did not fret greatly in the matter. These bills, however, had grown to be teasing. He kept no debtor and creditor account with himself, and somehow his money went, and he couldn't find out how. He had to think about means to settle the little obtrusive little document in his hand, and he thought about it for a long time; and when he had done thinking he sighed, and put out his hand absently to open the second letter—a letter with a big business like envelope, and directed in a free, large handwriting.

When the curate had thoroughly taken in the contents of this letter, his first impulse was to shake a fist of scorn at the 'little bill,' his next to walk up and down the room, and say to himself that Fortune was good to him; he hadn't de-

ceived it, &c.; and, after all, the snow was reasonable, and made people enjoy the fire; and the smoke was not so very bad after the first fit was over.

Then his landlady brought in his coffee, which he proceeded to pour into the sugar basin, and discovering his mistake actually blushed, although no one was there to see, and ejaculated, either to the coffee-pot or himself, 'Baby!' for he had looked in the glass above the mantelpiece and seen therein the future rector of Greenbam-cum-Oakes; and his first business after breakfast would be to answer Sir Harry Lindhurst's generous letter.

He did just wonder what sort of place it was and where, since he had never heard the name; and he wondered where Sir Harry had heard the glowing account of his, Will Seltum's, personal character, of which the baronet spoke.—But what matter? and what matter where in civilized England his tent should be pitched, if he had where withal to furnish it? Sir Harry's modest depreciation of the living as 'only four hundred pounds per annum,' made him smile, and again shake his fist at the 'little bill.'

I have said that he was not mercenary—and he was not; but when a man, not used to pinching, has been pinched; when he has, so to speak, put on boots which he thinks will wear out his feet in his efforts to stretch them, he cannot help being glad at the prospect of exchanging them for a good roomy pair.

'And won't I work the parish,' mused the reverend Will, in his new energy. 'This bother to make two ends meet cramps one. It takes up one's time and thoughts. A clergyman ought not to be so hampered. It's a mistake, and won't be improving.'

It is impossible to say how, but a little breath of rumor did get abroad in Mr. Seltum's parish to the effect that he was going to leave it, that he had been offered something better, &c.; and even the name of Sir Harry Lindhurst, was mixed up with the airy rumor.

The curate perhaps had been worried by some of the 'aggrieved parishioners' into blurring out that he should not be there long to aggravate them. Then the landlady probably saw the letter addressed to Sir Harry Lindhurst, and put two and two together; or the retired baker next door, who was a violent theologian, and opposed to Sir Harry on political points, might have assisted her to do so. At any rate, mysterious hints of the matter did circulate, and even got into the Grantly dining-room, where the colonel, seated at his pretence of luncheon, lifted his eyebrows, and said, 'What does Sir Harry know about Seltum—eh, B.?'

Bell Lindhurst had also opened her eyes and ears in astonishment. There was no living in her uncle's gift vacant just now—that she was sure of; and if there had been of all unlikely things, the most unlikely was that he should give it to a stranger. Lifting her head, however, she caught a gleam of intense amusement on the faces of the three Misses Grantly, and also a telegraphic signal from one to the other for silence and caution.

In that moment the whole thing flashed upon Bell, but she never betrayed that it did. She finished her bit of biscuit and drank her half-glass of Buccellas before she answered the colonel, who was still looking his question.

'I don't think there's anything vacant in Uncle Harry's gift,' she said, very coolly.—'Most probably it's all a tale. We had a curate in Lindhurst who was always having livings given to him by report. He used to laugh, and say the real thing would come some time; and so it did.'

'But if Mr. Seltum really had this offer,' said the colonel, 'he would be obliged to write to your uncle, either accepting or refusing; then you would know the truth, Bell.'

'I don't think Sir Harry a likely man to speak of his private letters to any one,' replied Bell.

'Ah, I forgot,' said her uncle; 'you're not friends with him. He quarrelled with you because you wouldn't marry George. Why wouldn't you, Bell? To be sure he's a heavy dragoon (very), but then he's the future baronet. To which the young lady vouchsafed no answer. As to the colonel, Mr. Seltum's affairs were of very little importance to him, so he merely added, 'False reports—most likely,' and forgot all about it: while his daughters, knowing that the curate was to dine with them, probably anticipated a little fun.'

'Fanny,' said Bell Lindhurst, when they had gone to dress, and she sat before the glass with the brush to her hand, idly, 'I'm afraid I've done a very bad thing.'

Miss Lindhurst was less moved than the confession seemed to call for: she only went on with her arrangements, and said calmly, 'Have you, Bell? Worse than usual?'

Then Bell threw down the brush, and told all she knew and suspected.

actly how you are looking, so I won't turn my head. Isn't it bad?'

'Very bad,' was the reply; 'I wonder you were not more cautious.'

'I haven't your head on my shoulders, Frank,' said Bell. 'And they said things which—but never mind. Tell me what to do, but don't be cross.'

'I'm not cross, only vexed,' said Miss Lindhurst. 'I don't want to say anything against the Grantlys, especially now we are in their house; and besides, they are good natured to us in their way. But, Bell, they are fast, forward girls, and this trick is unladylike and in bad taste; I am sorry you should be mixed up in it.'

Bell, however, was in her secret heart afraid of something worse than bad taste: she was afraid of possible credulity on Mr. Seltum's part, and certain disappointment; but somehow she could not speak of this.

'So am I sorry,' she said, 'very sorry. But you don't tell me what to do.'

Miss Lindhurst considered a little. 'Get dressed, Bell,' she then said. 'If I were you I should go down to the drawing-room.—They say Mr. Seltum is always the first arrival: I would go, for the chance. And if any other visitor is there, you could still speak to him.—Mind, if you had had no hand in this affair, it would be meddling to undecieve him; as it is, I think you ought to do it, that the fun might be stopped.'

'You wouldn't—' began Bell. 'You wouldn't, I suppose—'

'Do it for you?' interrupted Miss Lindhurst. 'No, you goose. That would be telling of my sister. Come, here is your dress, make haste. If the girls see you, it will only be something for them to be witty about. We don't mind that.'

Consequently, Mr. Seltum, having been a few minutes alone in the drawing-room, was startled from a retrospective view of what he had said to Sir Harry, by the appearance of Sir Harry's niece from the conservatory door. She was dressed in a way which her cousins pronounced 'bad style,' but which, whenever he thought about it afterwards, appeared to the curate the height of perfection. And if she was nervous, she only showed it by a little extra pink in her cheeks, which was very becoming.

'Mr. Seltum,' said the young lady, 'I want to speak to you. I have—done a very bad thing,' she was going to say, but checked herself. 'I have lent my assistance to a practical joke, a thing I detest as much as you can do. Will you tell me if you had a letter from my uncle on the fourteenth?'

'The fourteenth,' said he, 'was that Tuesday? Yes, I had.'

'Is it too much to ask you to show it me?' said Bell. 'The envelope will do.'

The curate hesitated—it was rather a queer request: moreover, it is not exactly a general thing, perhaps, for gentlemen to carry big letters in their dress coats when they go out to dinner; out the fact was, he had the letter with him, and was a little self-conscious, and ashamed. He produced it, however, at last, and said—'You can read it if you like; there are no secrets in it. It is simply offering me the living of Greenbam-cum-Oakes.'

At another time Bell could not have restrained a smile at the smartness of her cousin's nomenclature; but now she was too vexed. She gave him back the letter without reading it; and put her hands together, looking down at the carpet.

'Oh, Mr. Seltum,' she said, 'you should read Oakes with an H before it. There is no such place as I know of, and my uncle has only two livings in his gift—Lindhurst Magna and Lindhurst Parva. I directed that letter.'

'You!' was all the curate could get out.

the subject, and investigate it; and Will did not bear malice. It was punishment enough for her that her trick had, so far as she knew, proved a failure. On the whole, the triumph was all on his side; but then, his letter to Sir Harry, and the 'little bill,' and the boots that had pinched, that he had so nearly kicked off, and must pull on again.

There were times in the evening when he forgot to talk; a moment or two when his brows would meet, and his hands press each other hard. And Bell Lindhurst, seeing all this, was so sorry for him, that she could almost have gone, as she used to go to her father years ago, and put her soft fingers over his forehead to smoothe out the wrinkles. She knew a little about poor curates, and could understand the disappointment. It would not have mattered if the offer had never been made; but to have the thing in his grasp, as it were to have reckoned on it securely—and then to close his hand upon a myth!

'I hope you will forgive me,' she said, when he wished her good-night. She could not help it.

Will Seltum replied that he had nothing to forgive; and then, on his way to the door, he turned and looked at her—an odd look—such as he might give to a picture which he was anxious to fix in his mind, and keep there. These two had liked each other before, now they would think of each other. There had been a secret which they shared, a sort of confidence between them, and a confidence rather out of the common way. It could never come to anything, of course, since a poor curate can only flirt; but I am not sure that Will Seltum's thoughts were all given to the lost living when he got back to the little parlor, which was dingy, after all, and did smoke, and would harbor more 'little bills,' he feared. I think, in the midst of his troubles, from time to time, the darkness slipped away, and showed for a moment a young girl coming towards him with clasped hands, and saying, 'Mr. Seltum, I want to speak to you.'

At any rate, he took out the unhappy Valentine, made a face at the seal, put the letter—the cramp disguise of which he could detect well enough now—into the fire, and the envelope—never mind where.

CHAPTER III.

It was February again, and the blinds were down over the rectory windows of Lindhurst Magna. There was a little regret in the village, not much. A good man gone to his rest, but he had been feeble for years, and past his work, so perhaps it was as well. Doubtless some one more vigorous would step into his place. We don't think much of the worn-out worker when he dies; it is more natural to turn to the young blood that shall rise into the veins of his office, where his own had long flowed sluggishly.

Up at the Hall, in the suggest of snug morning rooms, there was a young girl in a riding-habit, half-kneeling, half-crocheting, beside an old man, who sat in a big chair, grumbling, with a gouty foot. And the young girl looked very well in her habit, with the color of exercise on her cheek, and its light in her eye; and the baronet, as he looked at her, thought so, and felt his mouth twitch.

'You Gipsy!' he said; 'you think you can do anything with a childish old man.' 'No, uncle,' she said; 'and you know you are anything but childish. I have been very unhappy because you were angry with me—I have, indeed; but now that George is married—'

'Ugh!' (It is impossible probably to represent this sound on paper.)

'And married so well—'

'Fiddlestick!' he exclaimed.

'You ought not to be angry with me any more,' she continued; 'so I come to you.'

'I see you are. Now you want something?'

'Yes, I do want something,' said the young girl; 'I want it very much; but I should have come to you all the same if I had not. You know very well that I should.'

The old man looked at her a moment, and his face grew soft.

'My dear,' said he, 'you will never know why I made a pet of you; you simply know that I did do so. You wouldn't be nearer to me, and marry my son; so I was angry—naturally angry. George has got a fine wife, with an 'honorable' tacked to her name, so all that is settled. I don't deny that I'm glad to see your sunny face again—there. And now you want me to give Lindhurst Magna to a fellow who once had the impudence to write and thank me for—'