

OUR STORY

THE TEA-MEETING AT GOLDTHORPE GREEN

BY LOTTIE H. STRIPP.

THE Nonconformists of Goldthorpe Green had met with a heavy disappointment. The building they and their forefathers had used for worship so many years was falling into decay. Moreover, it was a mile and a half away from the village. They felt they had cause for rejoicing when the old squire of Goldthorpe Hall made them the promise of a plot of ground on which to erect a new one. The plot was close to the Green itself. So eager were they to begin the work of building that they had already begun to despoil the old chapel when Deacon Prosser returned from London. He had been absent a month, and had only heard of the squire's offer by means of a somewhat inexplicit letter from his sister.

"Let's have a look at the title-deeds of the new ground," he said at the church meeting the evening after his return. They had to confess they were not yet in possession of them.

They were a little frightened when they saw his expression of dismay.

"Then I should say you'd better not deposit any more stuff on the land till you can prove your right to it," he said grimly. "And I'd advise you to stop pulling the old place about your ears. You may have to put up with it for some time to come."

They left the vestry and adjourned to the chapel to have a look at the deeds. Some of the pews at the back, which were not used by seat-holders, were already taken down.

The brethren looked at each other sheepishly. Deacon Prosser was apt to be a bit overbearing at times, but they acknowledged he was generally right in the main. He was a keener business man than any of them—had knocked about the world a bit. He went up to town to see his married son twice or three times a year, and had been across to France.

They had a great respect for his opinion, although they were too proud to own it, and fancied they were successful in disguising the fact from him. It was pure fancy, however. He saw through their pretences. He was inclined to think the church would be in a very bad way if it wasn't for his support. He was a retired cornchandler, and, although not actually mean, was in a position to be more liberal if he were so minded.

"The only thing to be done now is to write to Mr. Goldthorpe himself," he said. "I'll do it to-morrow morning too."

"He's abroad, ain't he?" piped Mr. Timbs, the builder. "Wouldn't it be as well for one of us to go over to Mopery and see Lawyer Clayton—his man a' business?"

"It might be as well, certainly, if so be as you don't object to a bit as long as my arm afterwards," replied Mr. Prosser.

After a little further deliberation it was decided unanimously that Mr. Goldthorpe should be approached by letter through the medium of Deacon Prosser.

But the following morning news reached Goldthorpe that the old squire had died suddenly at Madeira, and the estate would pass into the hands of a distant cousin.

"I know the man by hearsay," said Mr. Prosser—"in fact, the old gentleman himself told me what a grief it would be him that the nex'-a'-kin was a bathstee!"

With branches of honeysuckle and ivy in her arms, Priscilla Lorrimer came down the tree-shadowed lane, leaning from Goldthorpe Green to the old chapel which stood at the corner where the lane met the highroad.

Even the mellow glory of the soft September sunshine could not veil its ugliness. It was a square, grey building, with a slate-roofed porch, and three long narrow windows on either side. But Priscilla meant to try and beautify it—inside, at all events—ready for the meeting which was to be held in it that evening. Tea was to be provided in the schoolroom behind.

Mrs. Lorrimer was a woman who always looked on the bright side of things and tried to make the best of them. Her husband was the pastor of Goldthorpe Green Congregational Church. He had had charge of it for three years. Six months ago he had brought his bride to the pretty little cottage which served for a manse. She had not been received with favor, but had fought bravely against the adverse criticisms of her husband's flock—most of them, that is, for there were a few who appreciated and loved her. The disapproving members called her brightness "flippancy," and her unfailing good-humor "shallowness."

"I'm afraid she ain't got no depth of feeling, and is too fond of her clothes," Mrs. Timbs would remark, with a shake of her rusty black-bonneted head. "In my young days a minister's wife 'ud ha' been ashamed to ha' been seen flying about with an 'at; it's unbecoming—a bonnet's the right thing for 'er to wear." Miss Prosser, who had kept her brother's house ever since the death of his wife, could only answer, "that no one pities the minister more than herself."

The pity was wasted, however, for Mr. Lorrimer thought his little Priscilla the best helpmeet a man could possibly have.

She had started out early this morning, for she wanted to get her decorations finished before the more practical business of the day commenced.

Against the stile she would have to force a man was leaning. A black-and-white bull terrier sitting by his side sprang to meet her with a friendly bark.

"Come here, Bob! Don't be rude!" called the man. He was middle-aged, of medium height, and strongly built. His features were large and rugged, his small grey eyes were shrewdly humorous in expression.

He lifted his cap, and held out his hand to help her over the stile. She accepted the offer with a pleasant smile.

"I am a stranger in these parts," he said. "I have some thought of staying here for a few months. Can you tell me why they allow that blot on the landscape?" He pointed in the direction of the chapel.

"It is ugly, isn't it? We had hoped to have built a new one—or started to build

one, I should say—by this time, but they haven't the means to buy the land. We are having a tea-meeting to-day, and there will be some speeches in the evening. We hope to collect enough money to repair the old place."

"Ah, I suppose the new squire wouldn't help you? I heard of two rustics talking about him just now. According to them, he must be the incarnation of evil."

"People say he is an atheist, but then reports are generally exaggerated. It is true that he refused to let us have a piece of land that the old squire had promised as a site for the new chapel. He died—the old gentleman, I mean—before he had signed the deed. It was a pity!"

"And this other fellow—the successor—won't carry out the late squire's wishes?"

"No."

She was going on when he stopped her. "You say 'we' and 'our.' You are interested in the affair, then—the chapel?"

"Very much. I am the minister's wife," she replied, with another smile.

"And I suppose you'd like to see this cantankerous fellow suffer for his sins, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, no; I am sorry for him. Of course, he knows why he has refused the land; he may have good reasons. We mustn't judge him. But he is losing a lot of pleasure."

"What pleasure could it afford him to give these people what they ask for?"

"It is more blessed to give than to receive, and one gets such a lot of happiness oneself in making others happy."

"But if he isn't a Christian, why should he give to a cause he doesn't believe in?"

"Ah, that's why I am so sorry for him, because he doesn't believe, or fancies he doesn't; for, of course, no sane man can doubt there is a God. Someone says, 'The Lord gives by the faith the lips deny,' and it is not always the things that can be proved of which we can be most sure."

"You don't condemn him, then, like the men I overheard just now?"

"Condemn. No. How can I tell what fierce battles he may have with his doubts, and what desires—which are really prayers—may go up from his soul to God to reveal Himself."

"Ah, I never thought of that. As you say, who knows?"

"It may be he has seen so much that is not of God, so much narrowness and strife among Christians. As Tennyson says, 'There dwells more faith in honest doubt than all the creeds.' Faith should be in the Lord Jesus Christ, not in creeds, nor in any of his poor, stumbling followers."

"We do misrepresent Him so," she said. "I don't wonder that people outside fail to find Him. My husband says we are constantly making mistakes, and then blaming—But excuse me, I did not mean to talk so much."

"Your husband thinks as you do, then—that creeds and God are not the same?"

"Oh, yes. Won't you come to the tea-meeting this afternoon? My husband would be pleased to meet you."

"I'll think it over. To tell you the truth, I've never been to one. I should feel out of my element!"

She looked disappointed.

"Very likely I'll be there," he said the next moment.

He watched her turn into the ugly square building.

"Come in, Bob!" he called to his dog.

"I've a great mind to go, after all. I shall have some experiences to relate at the Carlton when I go back to town. But that little woman's a good sort, anyhow."

The stranger in the tweed suit stood in the schoolroom doorway looking round him with an air of timidity which sat ill on his strong features.