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The MINISTER'S SURPRISE

...By...
Katherine Young Thaxter
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The Rev. Calvin Morris was quite annoyed.

He was in anything but a ministerial mood when he tossed his hat on the table amid the confusion of books and papers and sat down in his study to think it over. It was such a ridiculous situation that at first he had been mildly amused at it, but now—pshaw! Why couldn't he ignore it?

But it had passed the stage when it could be ignored. In the past three days he had been told five times that his congregation would like very much to see him married. Nor had these remarks been the half-jocular words on his bachelor condition that he had often heard since coming to the church at Littleton, but had been earnest words of advice expressed by the most prominent members of his flock.

He was popular in the parish, and his two years' pastorate had been productive of good results, but there had been one thing lacking. Accustomed for years before his advent to the service of a most devoted minister and his able wife whose home had been the center for a vigorous church life, the people simply could not get used to a minister in a boarding house. Besides, there stood the fine new parsonage empty. Certainly it was his duty to live up to the demands of his people. When Miss Gilbert, the wealthy maiden lady who had contributed so much to the church, both in money and good deeds, died two years ago the parsonage she was building for the church was not quite finished.

The Rev. Calvin Morris knew he would use it in time. Indeed, all unknown to his people, vague plans had been floating through the minister's head for some months, and he had frequently looked very reflectively at the quiet house beside the church.

But the real vexing, disquieting point of the whole matter was that the congregation had not only decided that he should marry, but apparently had

fixed on whom he should marry. This was assured the night he took tea with Mrs. Thorpe, one of the most active ladies in his church, when the chief topic of conversation was Miss Nell Gilbert.

Now, Mr. Morris had taken a most unreasonable and unministerial dislike to Miss Gilbert, a member of his church whom he had never seen. She was the niece of the great Miss Gilbert and had lived with her aunt until the latter's death, when the great house on the hill had been closed. Since then the young lady had traveled, so the minister had never seen her. He had heard a great deal of her, though, and had formed an impression of a person of undoubted energy and ability, accustomed to have things just as she wanted and inclined to be domineering. "Miss Nell" had ideas of her own on church music. "Miss Nell" had designed this and had attended to that. It seemed to the minister there was a little too much of "Miss Nell" everywhere.

Tall and muscular and aggressive himself, accustomed to shouldering burdens and clearing difficulties, the Rev. Calvin had, of course, an ideal of feminine grace very different from his own vigorous personality. Indeed, as he sat thinking in his study that morning a smile rose to the firm lips and softened the austere lines into which he had framed them as he saw in his mind's eye a petite, graceful form, soft, appealing dark eyes and masses of cloudy brown hair. Alas for the plans of the people who had made up their minds that "Miss Nell" and the minister would be an eminently well fitted pair.

But the vision faded quickly, and the many hints that had been dropped during the last few days flashed in rapid succession through his mind. "Miss Nell" was coming home next week. He would be thrown at her head and she at his by his well-meaning flock until something happened. Oh, he well knew how it would be done. The opportunities a congregation possesses for annoying its minister and making him do things he does not want to do are legion. He supposed every lady of the aid society had planned some function to which he must go and meet "Miss Nell." The minister groaned. Already the subject had assumed alarming proportions. He could not, he would not, stay round and be made a football of, to be tossed into any woman's arms. Again came unbidden that alluring

vision of brown hair and eloquent eyes. It was preposterous! How could they badger him now, just as his heart was beating more madly every day for some one? Ah, if he were only sure! Did that friendship, formed a few short months ago, that soul-satisfying friendship, mean to the girl of the vision what it had come to mean to him? Could he, dare he, offer her his love? He had been living since then in a beautiful dream. Suppose that dream should be fulfilled?

He hesitated. Dreaming had been so sweet he feared the awakening. Dare he risk "the last leaf?" With a bound he sprang to his feet. He could and he would. He would please himself in the choice of a wife anyway, and, if fortune favored him, give his officious congregation a surprise and a sharp lesson.

A short phone message to a neighboring town secured a supply for next Sunday's pulpit. "Urgent business out of town" was the message left for the church officers, and the minister found himself on the train bound for the east and the "vision."

The minister's wooing was brief and blunt, but Miss Helen Atwater was not very much taken by surprise. The acquaintance begun in Scotland the previous summer had ripened fast on shipboard on the return passage and had been brought to fruition by some months of correspondence. She even consented to a speedy marriage, and as she was living with a married cousin in Boston, the minister took his bride from there ten days from the day he left Littleton.

But the blissful days of his honeymoon failed to blot out entirely the remembrance of his church and his work and his people. True, in the tumult of happiness that had possessed him since that day when their clumsy interference had driven him, actually driven him, into the joy that was now his he had almost forgotten their plans for him, but now it all came back to him and he realized that he did owe them something, for who knows how long he would have doubted and feared had not the terror of "Miss Nell" been upon him?

Suddenly the minister laughed aloud. It was all so funny to him now. Mrs. Morris, sitting beside her husband, was astonished at his mirth and looked it.

"Well, dearest, I know you'll think me crazy, but it is really too good to keep. You didn't know that I asked you to marry me so as to prevent my congregation marrying me to some one else, did you?" And out came the whole story, his mental picture of "Miss Nell" and all.

"You know," he concluded, "I never for a moment thought of her side of it. I was concerned for my own safety. What in the world a woman like her, with money and property and the world at her feet, would want with a poor struggling minister I can't conceive. But I had heard so much of her and the people so evidently had set their minds on it, I tell you I was in a regular funk over it. It drove me to put my timid hopes to the test for you, sweetheart."

There was a peculiar smile hovering around Mrs. Morris' lips, and for a minute or two she said nothing.

"What is it, dear?" asked the minister anxiously. "You are not vexed, are you?"

"No," hesitatingly, "not exactly, but I am just thinking how beautifully you have played into my congregation's hands, for, do you know, Calvin, you have really and truly married that domineering person, 'Miss Nell.'"

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"Married 'Miss Nell!'" repeated the minister blankly, staring at his wife's flushed, laughing face.

"Yes, truly. I am Helen Gilbert Atwater, called 'Miss Nell' at the old home in Littleton. Listen, dear. I had no thought of deceiving you at first. I did not know you were in the church at Littleton till we reached New York on our voyage home. You know we were pretty well acquainted then, but I—neither of us knew our own heart. I often intended to tell you in a letter, but somehow I couldn't. I felt that if you knew it might make a difference. You were poor, comparatively. I had all that money and property. And—and I loved you, dear, too much then to have you leave me.

"Then at the end you took me by storm. I have been too happy to talk of anything like that, and I had been waiting till you would say something of your work to tell you all about myself."

"But, my dear, why Atwater? It was, always Miss Nell Gilbert." The minister was still bewildered.

"Yes, my aunt did not like my father, the man whom her young sister married, and never mentioned his name."

"I was always called Gilbert at home, but of course I had no reason for discarding my name. There are plenty of people in Littleton who know my real name, but never used it, for I was but a baby when I went to live with my aunt after my father's death. Really, dear, you needn't be alarmed. I am not half as bad as I was painted. I won't try to run the church or manage the organist or—"

"Or any one except the minister," finished her husband. "Well, the surprise is certainly on me, but I must get even with those people some way."

The news of the minister's marriage spread like wildfire through the town. He had sent a laconic message to one of his church officers to the effect that he had been married in Boston and would occupy his pulpit the following Sunday. That was all. Married, after all, and none of his congregation knew a word about it. Who was she? No-body knew. Conjecture was rife on every point and one version after another of the story of his wedding found quick credence. Some of the older members of his flock were thunder-struck. To think that Mr. Morris should trick them like that and be engaged all the time. They had just set their hearts on his marrying "Miss Nell," whom everybody knew and loved. They were accustomed to "Miss Nell" and her ways. But a stranger to steal their beloved minister!

All week long the tongues wagged incessantly over the minister and his bride, but at Saturday midnight no one had seen either of them. The church was packed Sunday morning. The bells had ceased ringing, and only a few late comers saw the Gilbert carriage drive up to the door and the minister and a lady alight from it.

Straight up the middle aisle he led her, sweet and demure looking, while the organ played softly and the silence of the church could be felt. At the Gilbert pew he left her, and the congregation had a good view of the sweet face framed in the masses of soft brown hair. Mrs. Thorpe almost jumped out of her seat. It was none other than "Miss Nell." Glance followed glance all over the church. The minister certainly had surprised his congregation.

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The marriage is announced of one of Forest's Old Boys, Wm. Lyle Macken, son of the late Joseph Macken, formerly of Forest, to Miss Mason, of Hamilton, Ont. The marriage took place on the 8th of March.



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