

An Odd Man.

"REALLY, I fear not; this is quite an out-of-the-way place. The driver can tell you better than I can, but I know the neighborhood pretty well, and think you would have to send back to the Swan at B—for horses."

"It is very unfortunate, and it is past nine already; what is the nearest place, sir, where I could get decent accommodation for the night?"

"Why, the nearest place," said Harry hesitatingly, "is the 'Crown and Thistle,' about three miles off, but I can't say much for the accommodation. Wo-ho,"—one of the horses, tired at last of standing in the drizzling rain, was showing symptoms of an immediate return to his stable. The stranger merely gave vent to a dissatisfied "Humph!" and they stood silently awaiting the approach of a light along the road, which betokened Joe's return with assistance. The coach was soon righted, and set up against the side of a bank; and Mr. Haines, having given charge to one of his aids—extraordinary to keep watch by it till dawn with a light, both to prevent accidents and abstraction of the luggage, announced his intention of returning with the horses to B—, offering his inside passenger the choice of a ride back, or taking a nap in the coach till morning. "You won't be long getting home, Mr. Bolton, anyhow,"—and the pronoun was emphasized, to show that even this sympathy was little extended to his fellow-traveler.

"No, Joe, I must say you have been pretty considerate; as you were to break down, you could hardly have arranged it more handily for me. Just look me out my little carpet-bag, and I suppose you'll expect an extra shilling for your performance to-night, eh?"

Joe gave a hoarse laugh, and proceeded to rummage the boot; and Harry took advantage of the opportunity to whisper a few inquiries about his fellow-passenger.

"Well, I'm pretty sure, sir, it's a Dr. Bates, as preached at the opening on Tuesday. There was two or three black-coats came with him to the yard afore we started; he's quite a top-sawyer among 'em, and can hold on for two hours good, best pace, they tell me. He's giv' out to preach over at S—tomorrow morning. I see'd the printed bills stuck all over town to-day."

To-morrow was Sunday; and Bolton thought of a certain manuscript, not quite finished, lying in his desk at home. He glanced again at the stranger, and possibly in the orthodoxy of his heart, did not feel particularly grieved at the disappointment probably in store for the itching ears of the S—non-conformists.

"Well, good-night, Haines," said he. But seeing his late companion still standing in the road, looking rather helpless, and hesitating to leave him to the tender mercies of the coachman, "I am walking in the direction of the village inn," he continued, "and if I can show you the way, I shall be very glad to do so. I dare say I can also find some one to fetch your luggage."

"Thank you, sir," said the other. "I cannot do better than follow your example;" and he at once selected and shouldered, with some activity for a man obviously on the wrong side of forty, a carpet-bag of more cumbersome dimensions than Bolton's; and they strode down the road together, nearly in darkness, and with the rain still falling.

They had nearly reached the curate's humble cottage, without much further conversation, when the stranger repeated his inquiries as to the distance to the inn, and the probability of his obtaining there any tolerable accommodation. "A clean bed," he said, "would content him; was he likely to find one?"

A struggle had been going on, from the time they left the coach, between Harry Bolton's good-nature and what he thought his due dignity. Every word his fellow-passenger had uttered had convinced him, more and more, that he was a man of education and good sense, to say the least; a totally different being from the class of whom Jabber Green, who expounded at Mount Pisgah in his own parish on Sundays, and did a little shoemaking and poaching on week-days, formed a specimen ever before his eyes; and if it had not seemed a ludicrous misapplication of hospitality to have entertained the great gun of schism within the lares of "persona ecclesiastica," he would long ago have offered the very respectable and mild-mannered gentleman, dropped by an unlucky accident almost at his very door, at least a good fire and a pair of clean sheets for the night. Sleep at the Crown and Thistle!—why, on consideration, it was scarcely creditable to himself to send him there. The landlord was one of the most disreputable fellows in the parish, and by ten o'clock on a Saturday night, was usually so drunk as to be more likely to refuse a guest any accommodation at all, than to take any extra pains for him. And the dirt, and the noise, and the steers! No, Dr. Bates had better have stuck to the inside of the coach than to have tried the Crown and Thistle. But where was he to go? There was a good spare bedroom, no doubt, at Barby farm, within half a mile; but it had not been occupied since Harry slept in it himself on his first arrival in the parish, and then it took a

week's notice to move the piles of wool and cheese, and have it duly aired. The stranger coughed. Harry grew desperate and spoke out.

"We are close to my little place now, sir. I think I can offer you what you will hardly find at the inn—a clean room and a well aired bed; and it seems a mere act of common civility to beg you to accept it."

With many thanks, but with the natural politeness and ease with which a gentleman receives from another the courtesy which he is always ready to offer himself, the hospitable invitation was at once freely accepted; and in five minutes they had passed the little gate, and were awaiting the opening of the door.

This service was performed by the whole available force of Harry's establishment. One active little elderly woman, who was there on resident and permanent duty, in all capacities, assisted on this occasion by Samuel Shears, parish clerk, sexton, barber, bird-fancier, fishing-tackle maker, etc., etc., and acting gardener, valet, butler and footman, when required, to the reverend the curate. Loud was the welcome he received from both. "Had he walked through all the rain, surely! The coach was very late then; they'd most given him up; no, Sam hadn't, 'cause of service to-morrow," when their volubility was somewhat checked by the sight of his companion; and the old lady's face underwent no very favorable change when informed she must prepare a second bed.

"Walk in, pray, and warm yourself—that room—Sam, take these bags." And Harry stepped aside into the kitchen, to negotiate with his housekeeper for the stranger's accommodation; a matter not to be effected but by some little tact; for Molly, like servants of higher pretensions, did not like being put out of her way, by people "coming trampin'," as she said, at all hours of the night; and if Bolton had replied to her close inquiries as to who and whence the new guest was, with the statement that he was a stray Methodist preacher, it is probable that Molly, who had lived with clergymen since she was a child, and would sooner have missed her dinner than "her church," would have resigned her keys of office at once in high disgust.

"The gentleman will sleep in my room, of course, Molly, and I shall have my things put into the other;—anything will do for supper—bread and cheese, Molly, quite well—toast a little, will you? Poor man, he seems to have a cough."

"Toasted cheese ain't good for a cough."

"No; to be sure. Well, you can fry a little bacon and a few eggs, you know."

"There ain't no eggs. I don't know what's come to the 'ens; they behaves 'orrid, they does."

"Well, anything, anything, Molly. I am very tired, and I don't care what it is; we shall both be very glad to get to bed."

"Lor, I dare say you be tired, sir," said Molly, somewhat pacified. "You've had a very wet ride, to be sure; lawk-a-me, why this coat might be a-wringed out. And she hastened to relieve her master of his outer wrappings, and supply him with a warm dressing-gown and slippers, in which he soon joined his guest in the little parlor; and having introduced him to the room he was to occupy for the night, left him also to make himself comfortable.

If Harry Bolton did not repent of his hospitality, which would have been very unlike him, yet, upon consideration, he certainly felt he was acting the good Samaritan somewhat more literally than he ever expected to do.

"What on earth shall I do with him to-morrow, I should like to know?" was the first question that suggested itself—much more readily than did the answer. He could not be expected to go to church, perhaps; but would he stay quietly at home? or walk off to assist the very reverend Jabber at Mount Pisgah? As to his keeping his appointment at S—, that at least was out of the question; and, after all, there seemed to be so much good sense and feeling of propriety about the traveler, that it was most probable—at least Harry thought so—that he would not in any way offend against the rules of the household which he had entered under such circumstances.

So the curate brushed the clinging rain from his hair, and the cloud from his brow, with one and the same motion, and relapsed into his usual state of good-humor. Supper came in, and he and his guest sat down opposite to each other, and prepared to discuss old Molly's simple cookery. Really, now that one could look at him well, the man was very presentable in person as well as in manner. Harry said grace in a very few words, and the other's "amen" was audible and unexceptionable; reverent, and not nasal. He had a capital appetite; it was said to be characteristic of his calling, but in that point Harry fully kept pace with him; and the conversation was not, for the present, a very lively one. Sam came in at last to take away.

"Sam," said the curate, in a half-aside, "is there a bottle of port?—here's the key."

"La! sir, you bid me take it down to old Nan, you know; and it wor the last bottle, I tell'd you then."

"Ha! so I did so I did. Did she like it, Sam?"

"Like it?" said Sam, opening his eyes, "I warrant her!"

"Well, Sam, I hope it did her good; never mind. You must fare as I do, I am afraid," said he to the other. "Bring out the whiskey-jar, Sam."

Bolton mixed himself a glass without further preface or apology; and his neighbor, with the remark that it could not be much amiss after a wetting, very moderately followed his example.

"And now," said Bolton, rummaging in a little cupboard behind him, "I hope you don't dislike the smell of tobacco. I'm rather too fond of it myself. My weakness is a pipe; I could find you a cigar, perhaps, if you are ever—"

"Thank you, I never do smoke; but pray do not mind me. I was at a German university for a year and a half, and that is a pretty fair apprenticeship to cloud-raising."

Took a doctor's degree there, no doubt, thought Harry; but it served excellently as an opening for general conversation; and two pipes had been consumed, and Molly had twice informed the gentlemen that the beds were all ready, and that Sam was waiting to know if there were any orders for to-morrow, before Harry remembered that he had a sermon still to finish, and that it was verging upon Sunday morning—so intelligent and agreeable had been the discourse of the stranger.

"If you please, sir," said the clerk, putting his head in at the door, "the rain is a-coming down like nothing, and that great hole over the pulpit ben't mended yet. Master Brooks promised me it should be done afore to-night; but he's never seen to it."

"That Brooks is the very—but, there, it can't be helped to-night, Sam, at all events," said Bolton, rather ashamed that the defects of his parochial administration should be exposed, as it were, to the enemy. "I must speak to him about it myself."

"I clapped a couple of sods over it as well as I could, sir," said the persevering Sam; "and I don't think much wet can come in to hurt, like. Will this gentleman 'ficate to-morrow?" (this was said in a loud confidential whisper) "'cause the t'other surplice ain't—"

"Don't bother now—there's a good fellow," said Harry, considerably annoyed, as he shut the door in the face of his astonished subordinate, who was generally privileged to gossip as much as he pleased. He covered his embarrassment by showing his visitor at once to his room, and then sat down to complete his own preparations for the next day's duties.

The rain was as busily falling in the morning as it had only just begun, instead of having been at it all night. Harry had been more than usually scrupulous in his dress; but when they met at the breakfast-table, his guest's clerical *tout ensemble* beat him hollow. After a rather silent meal, in which both, as if by tacit consent, avoided all allusions to subjects connected with the day and its duties, Bolton mustered his courage, as they rose from the table, to say, "My service is at eleven, and I shall have rather a wet walk; you, perhaps, are not disposed to accompany me?"

"By all means," said the stranger, bowing. "I am quite ready; is it time to set out?" And in a few minutes they were picking their way, side by side, down the little miry lane.

The church, it must be confessed, was not a comely edifice. Its architectural pretensions must originally have been of the humblest order; and now, damp and dilapidated, it was one of the many which in those days were a disgrace to any Christian community. There was the hole in the roof, immediately over the curate's head, imperfectly stopped by Sam's extempore repairs; and very wretched and comfortable did the few who composed the congregation look, as they came dripping in, and disposed themselves among the crumbling pews. The service proceeded, and none showed such reverent attention as the stranger; and being placed in the rectorial pew, immediately opposite the clerk, the distinct though subdued tone of his responses was so audible, and so disturbed that functionary (who had that part of the service usually pretty much to himself, and had come to consider it as in some sort his exclusive privilege), that he made some terrible blunders in the hard verses in the Psalms, and occasionally looked round upon his rival, on these latter occasions especially, with unmistakable indignation.

The service concluded, Bolton found his guest awaiting him in the porch; and some ten minutes' sharp walking, with few remarks, except in admiration of the pertinacity of the rain, brought them home again to the cottage. A plain early dinner was discussed; there was no afternoon service; and the curate had just stepped into his kitchen to listen to some petition from a parishioner, when the stranger took the opportunity of retiring to his own apartment, and did not re-appear again until summoned to tea.

Bolton's visit to the kitchen had interrupted a most animated debate. In that lower house of his little commonwealth the new arrival had been a fruitful topic of discussion. The speakers were three; Molly, Sam and Binns the wheelwright, who had looked in, as he said, on a little busi-

ness with the parson. Molly, as has been said, was a rigid churchwoman. Her notions of her duty in that capacity might not have been unexceptionable, but they were, so far as the Sunday went, as follows: Church in the morning and afternoon if practicable; as much reading as her eyes—not quite what they used to be—could comfortably manage; pudding for dinner, and tea and gossip in the evening. If fine, a walk would have come among the day's arrangements; but with the rain coming down as it did, and after having rather puzzled herself with a sermon upon the origin of evil, the sudden, and in a degree mysterious, visit of a strange gentleman—when visitors of any kind were so rare—became invaluable as a topic of interesting—for aught we know, of profitable—discourse. Sam Shears dined with her always on this day, and was allowed, not without scruples, to have his pipe in the chimney-corner; in consideration of which indulgence, he felt it his duty to make himself as agreeable as possible; and inasmuch as his stock-stories respecting enormous perch caught, or gifted starlings educated by him Samuel Shears, had long ceased to interest—indeed had never much interested—his fair listener here, though they still went down, with variations, at the Crown and Thistle, he was reduced very often, in the absence of anything of modern interest stirring in the neighboring town of S—, to keep up his credit as "a rare good companion," by entering into politics—for which study, next to divinity, Molly had a decided taste—talking about reforms and revolutions in a manner that Molly declared made her "creep," and varying this pleasurable excitement by gloomy forebodings with regard to "Rooshia and Prooshia."

On this particular evening, however, the subject of debate was of a domestic nature, and Molly and the clerk had taken opposite sides; Binns arriving opportunely to be appealed to by both, and being a man of few words, who shook his head with great gravity, and usually gave a nod of encouragement to the last speaker. Molly, after her first indignation at the intrusion of a wet stranger, without notice, at ten o'clock of a Saturday night, had been so softened by the courteous address and bearing of the enemy, that she had gradually admitted him at least to a neutrality; and when Sam Shears had in confidence hinted that he "hadn't quite made up his mind about un" her woman's kindness of heart, or her spirit of contradiction, rushed forth as to the rescue of a friend.

"I wonder at you, Sam," said she; "you've had heddication enough to know a gentleman when you sees him; and you'd ought to have more respect for the cloth."

"Cloth! There now," replied Sam, "that's just it; I ain't so sure about his cloth, as you call it."

"Why, what ever do you mean, Sam Shears?"

"I mean," rejoined Sam, boldly, though he felt that Molly's fiercest glance was upon him, and almost choked himself in the endeavor to hide himself in a cloud of his own creating, "I don't think he's a regular parson. If he had been, you see, he'd have took some of the duty. Besides," continued the official, reassured by Binns's respectful attention, "We had a little talk while we was a-waiting for master after church—I offered him a humberella, you see—and I just asked whereabouts his church was, and he looked queerish at me, and said he hadn't no church, not exactly; and then I begged his pardon, and said I thought he was a clergyman; and he said, so he was, but somehow he seemed to put me off, as it might be." Binns nodded.

"To be sure," said Molly; and 'twas like your manners, Sam, to go questioning of him in that way."

"Bless you, I was as civil as I could be; however, I say again, I 'as my doubts; he'd a quakerish-looking coat too, such as I never see'd on a regular college parson. He's the very moral of a new Irvingite preacher."

"And what's their doctrines, Sam?" asked Molly, whose theological curiosity was irresistibly excited.

"Why," said the clerk, after a puff or two to collect his thoughts, "they believes in transmigration."

Binns made a gesture of awe and adjuration.

"Stuff?" said Molly, "that's popery; nor you don't suppose, Sam, that master would have anybody of that sort in his house—eh, Mr. Binns?"

The benefit of that gentleman's opinion was lost to both parties, for it was at that juncture "master" himself entered, and having discussed his communication, which related to a sick wife, bid him call again in the morning, and the wheelwright took his leave.

"And now, Shears," said the curate, "(don't put your pipe behind you, man; do you suppose I have not smelt it this half hour—I wish you would buy better tobacco)—you must be off to S—tomorrow at daylight, and order a chaise to be here, for this gentleman, by nine o'clock at the latest. Do you understand, now?"

"Yes sir, yes. I'll be sure to go. And what name shall I say, sir?" Concluded next week.

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