

Abbeychurch

By

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Preface

Rechauffes are proverbially dangerous, but everyone runs into them sooner or later, and the world has done me the kindness so often to inquire after my first crude attempt, that after it has lain for many years 'out of print,' I have ventured to launch it once more-- imperfections and all--though it is guilty of the error of pointing rather to a transient phase of difficulty than to a general principle. The wheels of this world go so quickly round, that I have lived to see that it would have been wiser in the clergyman to have directed rather than obstructed the so-called 'march of intellect.' I have lived also to be somewhat ashamed of the exuberant outpouring of historical allusions, which, however, were perfectly natural among the set of girls from whom my experience was taken: but these defects, as well as the more serious one of tyrannical aversion to vulgarity, are too inherent in this tale to be removed, and the real lesson intended to be conveyed, of obedience and sincerity, of course remains unchanged.

The later story was a rather hasty attempt to parody the modern sensation novel, as Northanger Abbey did the Radclyffe school, but it makes the mistake of having too real a mystery. However, such as they are, the two stories go forth in company, trusting that they may not prove too utterly wearisome to be brought forward this second time.

May 9th, 1872,

Chapter I.

One summer afternoon, Helen Woodbourne returned from her daily walk with her sisters, and immediately repaired to the school-room, in order to put the finishing touches to a drawing, with which she had been engaged during the greater part of the morning. She had not been long established there, before her sister Katherine came in, and, taking her favourite station, leaning against the window shutter so as to command a good view of the street, she began, 'Helen, do you know that the Consecration is to be on Thursday the twenty-eighth, instead of the Tuesday after?'

'I know Lizzie wished that it could be so,' said Helen, 'because the twenty-eighth is St. Augustine's day; but I thought that the Bishop had appointed Tuesday.'

'But Papa wrote to him, and he has altered the day as Papa wished; I heard Mamma and Mr. Somerville talking about it just now when I went into the drawing-room,' answered Katherine.

'Will everything be ready in time?' said Helen.

'Dear me!' cried Katherine, 'I wonder if it will. What is to be done if that tiresome Miss Dighten does not send home our dresses in time? We must go and hurry her to-morrow. And I must get Mamma to go to Baysmouth this week to get our ribbons. I looked over all Mr. Green's on Monday, and he has not one bit of pink satin ribbon wide enough, or fit to be seen.'

'Oh! but I meant the things in the church--the cushions and the carving on the Font,' said Helen.

'Oh dear! yes, the Font is very nearly done, we saw to-day, you know; and as to the cushions, Mrs. Webbe may have Sarah to help her, and then they will certainly be finished. I wonder whether there will be any fun!' said Katherine.

'Is a Consecration an occasion for fun?' asked Helen very gravely.

'Why, no, I do not exactly mean that,' replied Katherine, 'but there will be a great many people, and the Mertons staying here, and Rupert is always so full of fun.'

'Hm--m,' said Helen, 'I do not suppose he will be come back from Scotland.'

'And Mrs. Turner says,' continued Katherine, 'that of course as the Bishop is coming to luncheon after Church, Mamma must give an elegant dejeuner a la fourchette to everybody. Next time I go to St. Martin's Street, Mrs. Turner is going to give me a receipt for making blanc-manger with some cheap stuff which looks

quite as well as isinglass. It is made on chemical principles, she says, for she heard it all explained at the Mechanics' Institute. And Aunt Anne will be sure to bring us some of their grand fruit from Merton Hall. What a set-out it will be! The old Vicarage will not know itself; how delightful it will be!

'So you think the happiness of the Consecration day depends upon the party and the luncheon,' said Helen.

'No, no, of course I do not,' said Katherine; 'but we must think about that too, or we should not do what is proper.'

'Someone must,' said Helen, 'but it is happy for us that we are not called upon to do so yet.'

'Why, we must help Mamma,' said Katherine; 'I am sure that is our duty.'

'Certainly,' said Helen; 'but we need not dwell upon such thoughts for our own pleasure.'

'No, I do not, I am sure,' said Katherine; 'I do not care about the grand dejeuner, I am sure I think a great deal more about the Church and the Bishop--I wonder whether he will come by the railroad.'

At this moment, the door was thrown back hastily, and Elizabeth, the elder sister of Katherine and Helen, darted in, looking full of indignation, which she only wanted to pour forth, without much caring whether it was listened to with sympathy or not.

'So have you heard,' she began, 'these Hazlebys are coming. Did you ever hear of such a nuisance? Anything so preposterous? Mrs. Hazleby at a Consecration--I should as soon think of asking Gillespie Grumach.'

'It is for the Major's sake, of course,' said Helen; 'he will like to come.'

'Ay, but he is not coming, he cannot get leave,' said Elizabeth; 'if he was, I should not mind it so much, but it is only Mrs. Hazleby and the girls, for she has the grace to bring Lucy, on Mamma's special invitation. But only think of Mrs. Hazleby, scolding and snapping for ever; and Harriet, with her finery and folly and vulgarity. And that at a time which ought to be full of peace, and glorious feelings. Oh! they will spoil all the pleasure!'

'All?' said Helen.

'All that they can touch, all that depends upon sympathy,' said Elizabeth.

'Well, but I do not see--' said Katherine.

'No, no,' said Elizabeth, 'we all know that you will be happy enough, with your beloved Harriet. How frivolous and silly you will be, by the end of the first evening she has been here!'

'I am sure I think Harriet is very silly indeed,' said Katherine; 'I cannot bear her vulgar ways, bouncing about as she does, and such dress I never did see. Last time she was here, she had a great large artificial rose upon her bonnet; I wonder what Papa would say if he saw me in such a thing!'

'Pray keep the same opinion of her all the time she is here, Kate,' said Elizabeth; 'but I know you too well to trust you. I only know they will keep me in a perpetual state of irritation all the time, and I hope that will not quite spoil my mind for the Service.'

'How can you talk of Mamma's relations in that way, Lizzie?' said Helen.

'I do not care whose relations they are,' said Elizabeth; 'if people will be disagreeable, I must say so.'

'Mrs. Staunton used to say,' replied Helen, 'that people always ought to keep up their connexion with their relations, whether they like them or not. There were some very stupid people, relations of Mr. Staunton's, near Dykelands, whom Fanny and Jane could not endure, but she used to ask them to dinner very often, and always made a point--'

'Well, if I had any disagreeable relations,' said Elizabeth, 'I would make a point of cutting them. I do not see why relations have a right to be disagreeable.'

'I do not see how you could,' said Helen. 'For instance, would you prevent Mamma from ever seeing the Major, her own brother?'

'He cannot be half so well worth seeing since he chose to marry such a horrid wife,' said Elizabeth.

'Would you never see Horace again, if he did such a thing?' said Katherine; 'I am sure I would not give him up. Would you?'

'I could trust Horace, I think,' said Elizabeth; 'I will give him fair warning, and I give you and Helen warning, that if you marry odious people, I will have done with you.'

'When I was at Dykelands,' said Helen, 'everybody was talking about a man who had married--'

'Never mind Dykelands now, Helen,' said Elizabeth, 'and do put down your pencil. That drawing was tolerable before luncheon, but you have been making

your tree more like Mr. Dillon's Sunday periwig, every minute since I have been here. And such a shadow! But do not stop to mend it. You will not do any good now, and here is some better work. Mamma wants us to help to finish the cushions. We must do something to earn the pleasure of having St. Austin's Church consecrated on St. Austin's day.'

'What, do you mean that I am to work on that hard velvet?' said Helen, who was a little mortified by the unsparing criticism on her drawing.

'Yes, I undertook that we three should make up the two cushions for the desk and eagle; Mrs. Webbe's hands are full of business already, but she has explained it all to me, and Kate will understand it better than I can.'

'I thought Sarah Webbe was to help,' said Helen.

'She is doing the carpet,' said Elizabeth. 'Oh! if you look so lamentable about it, Helen, we do not want your help. Dora will sew the seams very nicely, and enjoy the work too. I thought you might be glad to turn your handiwork to some account.'

'Really, Lizzie,' said Helen, 'I shall be very glad to be useful, if you want me. What shall I do?'

This was said in no gracious tone, and Elizabeth would not accept such an offer of assistance. 'No, no; never mind,' said she, putting a skein of crimson sewing-silk over Katherine's outstretched hands, and standing with her back to Helen, who took up her pencil again in silence, and made her black shadows much darker.

Elizabeth, who had not been of the walking party, and had thus heard of all the arrangements which had been made that afternoon, went on talking to Katherine. 'As soon as Church is over, the Bishop is coming to luncheon here, and then to settle some business with Papa; then is to be the school-children's feast--in the quadrangle, of course. Oh, how delightful that will be! And Mamma and I have been settling that we will have a little table for the smallest creatures, because the elder sisters get no time to eat if they are attending to them, and if the little ones are all together, everyone will come and help them.'

'The old women in the Alms-houses will,' said Katherine.

'Yes; and Dora will manage that nicely too, the table will not be too high for her to reach, and she will be very happy to be able to wait on her little class. And they are to have tea and cake, instead of dinner, for we do not want to have more cooking than can be helped, that people may not be prevented from going to church, and the children will be thirsty after being in church all the morning.'

'But we have a dinner-party, do not we?' said Katherine.

'Yes, but our youth and innocence will save us from being much plagued by it,' said Elizabeth.

'Oh! I thought you and Anne at least would dine with the company,' said Katherine.

'So Mamma thought,' said Elizabeth; 'but then she recollected that if we did, and not Harriet, Mrs. Hazleby would be mortally offended; and when we came to reckon, it appeared that there would be thirteen without us, and then Papa and I persuaded her, that it would be much less uncivil to leave out all the Misses, than to take one and leave the rest. You know Anne and I are both under seventeen yet, so that nobody will expect to see us.'

'Only thirteen people?' said Katherine; 'I thought the Bishop was to dine and sleep here.'

'Oh no, that was settled long ago; Papa found he had engaged to go to Marlowe Court,' said Elizabeth, 'and so there was room for the Hazlebys; I hoped he would have guarded us from them.'

'But will there be room?' said Katherine; 'I cannot fancy it.'

'Oh! half the rooms can be made Knight's Templar's horses and carry double,' said Elizabeth; 'Mrs. Hazleby and both the girls may very well be in the blue room.'

'And there is the best room for the Mertons, and Horace's for Rupert,' said Katherine.

'Poor Horace! it is a shame that he, who laid the first stone, should not be at the Consecration,' said Elizabeth.

'Well, but where is Anne to be?' said Katherine; 'if we take Dora into our room, and Winifred goes to the nursery, there is their room; but Aunt Anne's maid must have that.'

'Anne shall come to my room--if Aunt Anne will let her, that is to say,' said Elizabeth; 'I wonder I never thought of that before, it will counteract some of the horrors of the Hazlebys. I shall have the comfort of talking things over with the only person who knows what to feel. Yes, I will go and speak to Mamma, and shew her that it is the only way of lodging the world conveniently. Oh, how happy we shall be!'

As soon as Elizabeth had finished winding her skein, she hastened to Mrs. Woodbourne, and found no great difficulty in gaining her consent to the plan; and she then sat down to write to Miss Merton to inform her of the change of day, and invite her to share her room.

Elizabeth Woodbourne and Anne Merton were first cousins, and nearly of the same age. They had spent much of their time together in their childhood, and their early attachment to each other, strengthening as they grew older, was now becoming something more than girlish affection. Anne was an only daughter; and Elizabeth, though the eldest of a large family, had not hitherto found any of her sisters able to enter into her feelings as fully as her cousin; and perhaps there was no one who had so just an appreciation of Elizabeth's character as Anne; who, though hers was of a very different order, had perhaps more influence over her mind than anyone excepting Mr. Woodbourne.

Sir Edward Merton was brother to Mr. Woodbourne's first wife, the mother of Elizabeth, Katherine, and Helen; he had been Mr. Woodbourne's principal assistant in the erection of the new church, and indeed had added all the decorations which the Vicar's limited means, aided by a subscription, could not

achieve; and his wife and daughter had taken nearly as much interest in its progress as the ardent Elizabeth herself. Anne eagerly read Elizabeth's note to her mother, and waited her consent to the scheme which it proposed.

'Well, Mamma,' said Anne, 'can you consent to this arrangement, or are you afraid that Lizzie and I should chatter all night?'

'I hope you have outgrown your old habits of gossiping and idling,' said Lady Merton; 'I believe I may trust you; and it may be inconvenient to Mrs. Woodbourne to find room for you elsewhere.'

'I am very much obliged to you, Mamma,' said Anne, at first gravely, then laughing, 'I mean that I shall enjoy it very much. But pray, Mamma, do not trust too much to our age and experience, for I do not know anything more difficult than to stop short in a delightful talk, only just for the sake of going to sleep.'

'Yes, it requires some self-control,' said Lady Merton.

'Self-control!' repeated Anne. 'Mamma, I am sure that "Patient cautious self-control is wisdom's root," must be your motto, for you are sure to tell me of it on every occasion.'

'I hope you are not tired of it, Anne,' said Lady Merton, 'for most probably I shall often tell you of it again.'

'Oh yes, I hope you will,' said Anne; 'there will be more need of it than ever, in this visit to Abbeychurch.'

'Yes,' said Lady Merton, 'you live so quietly here, excepting when Rupert is at home, that you must take care that all the excitement and pleasure there does not make you wild.'

'Indeed I must,' said Anne; 'I cannot fancy enjoying anything much more than the Consecration of a church for which Papa has done so much, and going with Lizzie, and meeting Rupert. Really, Mamma, it is lucky there is that one drawback, to keep it from seeming too pleasant beforehand.'

'You mean the Hazelbys,' said her mother.

'Yes, Mamma,' replied Anne; 'I am rather surprised to hear that they are to be there. I should not think that a vulgar-minded Scotchwoman, such as Lizzie describes Mrs. Hazleby, would take much delight in a Consecration; but I suppose Uncle Woodbourne could not well avoid asking them on such an occasion, I believe she is rather touchy.'

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