

CHAPTER XXXII.

OUR friend's acquaintance with the rector of St. James's church had grown into something like friendship, and the two men were quite often together in the evening. John went sometimes to Mr. Euston's house, and not unfrequently the latter would spend an hour in John's room over a cigar and a chat. On one of the latter occasions, late in the autumn, Mr. Euston went to the piano after sitting a few minutes and looked over some of the music, among which were two or three hymnals. "You are musical," he said.

"In a modest way," was the reply.

"I am very fond of it," said the clergyman, "but have little knowledge of it. I wish I had more," he added in a tone of so much regret as to cause his hearer to look curiously at him. "Yes," he said, "I wish I knew more—or less. It's the bane of my existence," declared the rector with a half laugh. John looked inquiringly at him, but did not respond.

"I mean the music—so called—at St. James's," said Mr. Euston. "I don't wonder you smile," he remarked; "but it's not a matter for smiling with me."

"I beg pardon," said John.

"No, you need not," returned the other, "but really— Well, there are a good many unpleas-

ant and disheartening experiences in a clergyman's life, and I can, I hope, face and endure most of them with patience, but the musical part of my service is a never-ending source of anxiety, perplexity, and annoyance. I think," said Mr. Euston, "that I expend more nerve tissue upon that branch of my responsibilities than upon all the rest of my work. You see we can not afford to pay any of the singers, and indeed my people—some of them, at least—think fifty dollars is a great sum for poor little Miss Knapp, the organist. The rest are volunteers, or rather, I should say, have been pressed into the service. We are supposed to have two sopranos and two altos; but in effect it happens sometimes that neither of a pair will appear, each expecting the other to be on duty. The tenor, Mr. Hubber, who is an elderly man without any voice to speak of, but a very devout and faithful churchman, is to be depended upon to the extent of his abilities; but Mr. Little, the bass—well," observed Mr. Euston, "the less said about him the better."

"How about the organist?" said John. "I think she does very well, doesn't she?"

"Miss Knapp is the one redeeming feature," replied the rector, "but she has not much courage to interfere. Hubber is nominally the leader, but he knows little of music." Mr. Euston gave a sorry little laugh. "It's trying enough," he said, "one Sunday with another, but on Christmas and Easter, when my people make an unusual effort, and attempt the impossible, it is something deplorable."

John could not forbear a little laugh. "I should think it must be pretty trying," he said.

"It is simply corroding," declared Mr. Euston.

They sat for a while smoking in silence, the contemplation of his woes having apparently driven other topics from the mind of the harassed clergyman. At last he said, turning to our friend:

"I have heard your voice in church."

"Yes?"

"And I noticed that you sang not only the hymns but the chants, and in a way to suggest the idea that you have had experience and training. I did not come here for the purpose," said Mr. Euston, after waiting a moment for John to speak, "though I confess the idea has occurred to me before, but it was suggested again by the sight of your piano and music. I know that it is asking a great deal," he continued, "but do you think you could undertake, for a while at least, to help such a lame dog as I am over the stile? You have no idea," said the rector earnestly, "what a service you would be doing not only to me, but to my people and the church."

John pulled thoughtfully at his mustache for a moment, while Mr. Euston watched his face. "I don't know," he said at last in a doubtful tone. "I am afraid you are taking too much for granted—I don't mean as to my good will, but as to my ability to be of service, for I suppose you mean that I should help in drilling your choir."

"Yes," replied Mr. Euston. "I suppose it would be too much to ask you to sing as well."

"I have had no experience in the way of leading or directing," replied John, ignoring the suggestion, "though I have sung in church more

or less, and am familiar with the service, but even admitting my ability to be of use, shouldn't you be afraid that my interposing might make more trouble than it would help? Wouldn't your choir resent it? Such people are sometimes jealous, you know."

"Oh, dear, yes," sighed the rector. "But," he added, "I think I can guarantee that there will be no unpleasant feeling either toward you or about you. Your being from New York will give you a certain prestige, and their curiosity and the element of novelty will make the beginning easy."

There came a knock at the door and Mr. Harum appeared, but, seeing a visitor, was for withdrawing.

"Don't go," said John. "Come in. Of course you know Mr. Euston."

"Glad to see ye," said David, advancing and shaking hands. "You folks talkin' bus'nis?" he asked before sitting down.

"I am trying to persuade Mr. Lenox to do me a great favor," said Mr. Euston.

"Well, I guess he won't want such an awful sight o' persuadin'," said David, taking a chair, "if he's able to do it. What does he want of ye?" he asked, turning to John. Mr. Euston explained, and our friend gave his reasons for hesitating—all but the chief one, which was that he was reluctant to commit himself to an undertaking which he apprehended would be not only laborious but disagreeable.

"Wa'al," said David, "as fur 's the bus'nis itself 's concerned, the hull thing's all nix-cum-rouse to me; but as fur 's gettin' folks to come an' sing, you c'n git a barn full, an' take your

pick; an' a feller that c'n git a pair of hosses an' a buggy out of a tight fix the way you done a while ago ought to be able to break in a little team of half a dozen women or so."

"Well," said John, laughing, "*you* could have done what I was lucky enough to do with the horses, but——"

"Yes, yes," David broke in, scratching his cheek, "I guess you got me that time."

Mr. Euston perceived that for some reason he had an ally and advocate in Mr. Harum. He rose and said good-night, and John escorted him downstairs to the door. "Pray think of it as favorably as you can," he said, as they shook hands at parting.

"Putty nice kind of a man," remarked David when John came back; "putty nice kind of a man. 'Bout the only 'quaintance you've made of his kind, ain't he? Wa'al, he's all right fur 's he goes. Comes of good stock, I'm told, an' looks it. Runs a good deal to emptins in his preachin' though, they say. How do you find him?"

"I think I enjoy his conversation more than his sermons," admitted John with a smile.

"Less of it at times, ain't the'?" suggested David. "I may have told ye," he continued, "that I wa'n't a very reg'lar churchgoer, but I've ben more or less in my time, an' when I did listen to the sermon all through, it gen'ally seemed to me that if the preacher 'd put all the' really was in it together he wouldn't need to have took only 'bout quarter the time; but what with scorin' fer a start, an' laggin' on the back stretch, an' ev'ry now an' then breakin' to a stan'still, I gen'ally wanted to come down out o' the stand be-

fore the race was over. The's a good many fast quarter hosses," remarked Mr. Harum, "but them that c'n keep it up fer a full mile is scurce. What you goin' to do about the music bus'nis, or hain't ye made up your mind yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I like Mr. Euston," said John, "and he seems very much in earnest about this matter; but I am not sure," he added thoughtfully, "that I can do what he wants, and I must say that I am very reluctant to undertake it; still, I don't know but that I ought to make the trial," and he looked up at David.

"I guess I would if I was you," said the latter. "It can't do ye no harm, an' it may do ye some good. The fact is," he continued, "that you ain't out o' danger of runnin' in a rut. It would do you good mebbe to git more acquainted, an' mebbe this'll be the start on't."

"With a little team of half a dozen women, as you called them," said John. "Mr. Euston has offered to introduce me to any one I cared to know."

"I didn't mean the singin' folks," responded Mr. Harum, "I meant the church folks in gen'ral, an' it'll come 'round in a natur'l sort of way—not like bein' took 'round by Mr. Euston as if you'd *ast* him to. You can't git along—you may, an' have fer a spell, but not alwus—with nobody to visit with but me an' Polly an' Dick, an' so on, an' once in a while with the parson; you ben used to somethin' diff'rent, an' while I ain't sayin' that Homeville soci'ty, pertic'lerly in the winter, 's the finest in the land, or that me an' Polly ain't all right in our way, you want a change o' feed once in a while, or you *may* git the colic. Now,"

proceeded the speaker, "if this singin' bus'nis don't do more'n to give ye somethin' new to think about, an' take up an evenin' now an' then, even if it bothers ye some, I think mebbe it'll be a good thing fer ye. They say a reasonable amount o' fleas is good fer a dog—keeps him from broodin' over *bein'* a dog, mebbe," suggested David.

"Perhaps you are right," said John. "Indeed, I don't doubt that you are right, and I will take your advice."

"Thank you," said David a minute or two later on, holding out the glass while John poured, "jest a wisdom toothful. I don't set up to be no Sol'mon, an' if you ever find out how I'm bettin' on a race jest 'copper' me an' you c'n wear di'monds, but I know when a hoss has stood too long in the barn as soon as the next man."

It is possible that even Mr. Euston did not fully appreciate the difficulties of the task which he persuaded our friend John to undertake; and it is certain that had the latter known all that they were to be he would have hardened his heart against both the pleadings of the rector and the advice of David. His efforts were welcomed and seconded by Mr. Hubber the tenor, and Miss Knapp the organist, and there was some earnestness displayed at first by the ladies of the choir; but Mr. Little, the bass, proved a hopeless case, and John, wholly against his intentions, and his inclinations as well, had eventually to take over the basso's duty altogether, as being the easiest way—in fact, the only way—to save his efforts from downright failure.

Without going in detail into the trials and tribulations incident to the bringing of the mu-

sical part of the service at Mr. Euston's church up to a respectable if not a high standard, it may be said that with unremitting pains this end was accomplished, to the boundless relief and gratitude of that worthy gentleman, and to a good degree of the members of his congregation.