

The Minor Canon

Anonymous

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It was Monday, and in the afternoon, as I was walking along the High Street of Marchbury, I was met by a distinguished-looking person whom I had observed at the services in the cathedral on the previous day. Now it chanced on that Sunday that I was singing the service. Properly speaking, it was not my turn; but, as my brother minor canons were either away from Marchbury or ill in bed, I was the only one left to perform the necessary duty. The distinguished-looking person was a tall, big man with a round fat face and small features. His eyes, his hair and mustache (his face was bare but for a small mustache) were quite black, and he had a very pleasant and genial expression. He wore a tall hat, set rather jauntily on his head, and he was dressed in black with a long frock coat buttoned across the chest and fitting him close to the body. As he came, with a half saunter, half swagger, along the street, I knew him again at once by his appearance; and, as he came nearer, I saw from his manner that he was intending to stop and speak to me, for he slightly raised his hat and in a soft, melodious voice with a colonial "twang" which was far from being disagreeable, and which, indeed, to my ear gave a certain additional interest to his remarks, he saluted me with "Good day, sir!"

"Good day," I answered, with just a little reserve in my tone.

"I hope, sir," he began, "you will excuse my stopping you in the street, but I wish to tell you how very much I enjoyed the music at your cathedral yesterday. I am an Australian, sir, and we have no such music in my country."

"I suppose not," I said.

"No, sir," he went on, "nothing nearly so fine. I am very fond of music, and as my business brought me in this direction, I thought I would stop at your city and take the opportunity of paying a visit to your grand cathedral. And I am delighted I came; so pleased, indeed, that I should like to leave some memorial of my visit behind me. I should like, sir, to do something for your choir."

"I am sure it is very kind of you," I replied.

"Yes, I should certainly be glad if you could suggest to me something I might do in this way. As regards money, I may say that I have plenty of it. I am the owner of a most valuable property. My business relations extend throughout the world, and if I am as fortunate in the projects of the future as I have been in the past, I shall probably one day achieve the proud position of being the richest man in the world."

I did not like to undertake myself the responsibility of advising or suggesting, so I simply said:

"I cannot venture to say, offhand, what would be the most acceptable way of showing your great kindness and generosity, but I should certainly recommend you to put yourself in communication with the dean."

"Thank you, sir," said my Australian friend, "I will do so. And now, sir," he continued, "let me say how much I admire your voice. It is, without exception, the very finest and clearest voice I have ever heard."

"Really," I answered, quite overcome with such unqualified praise, "really it is very good of you to say so."

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"Ah, but I feel it, my dear sir. I have been round the world, from Sydney to Frisco, across the continent of America" (he called it Amercker) "to New York City, then on to England, and to-morrow I shall leave your city to continue my travels. But in all my experience I have never heard so grand a voice as your own."

This and a great deal more he said in the same strain, which modesty forbids me to reproduce.

Now I am not without some knowledge of the world outside the close of Marchbury Cathedral, and I could not listen to such a "flattering tale" without having my suspicions aroused. Who and what is this man? thought I. I looked at him narrowly. At first the thought flashed across me that he might be a "swell mobman." But no, his face was too good for that; besides, no man with that huge frame, that personality so marked and so easily recognizable, could be a swindler; he could not escape detection a single hour. I dismissed the ungenerous thought. Perhaps he is rich, as he says. We do hear of munificent donations by benevolent millionaires now and then. What if this Australian, attracted by the glories of the old cathedral, should now appear as a *deus ex machina* to reendow the choir, or to found a musical professoriate in connection with the choir, appointing me the first occupant of the professorial chair?

These thoughts flashed across my mind in the momentary pause of his fluent tongue.

"As for yourself, sir," he began again, "I have something to propose which I trust may not prove unwelcome. But the public street is hardly a suitable place to discuss my proposal. May I call upon you this evening at your house in the close? I know which it is, for I happened to see you go into it yesterday after the morning service."

"I shall be very pleased to see you," I replied. "We are going out to dinner this evening, but I shall be at home and disengaged till about seven."

"Thank you very much. Then I shall do myself the pleasure of calling upon you about six o'clock. Till then, farewell!" A graceful wave of the hand, and my unknown friend had disappeared round the corner of the street.

Now at last, I thought, something is going to happen in my uneventful life—something to break the monotony of existence. Of course, he must have inquired my name—he could get that from any of the cathedral vergers—and, as he said, he had observed whereabouts in the close I lived. What is he coming to see me for? I wondered. I spent the rest of the afternoon in making the wildest surmises. I was castle-building in Spain at a furious rate. At one time I imagined that this faithful son of the church—as he appeared to me—was going to build and endow a grand cathedral in Australia on condition that I should be appointed dean at a yearly stipend of, say, ten thousand pounds. Or perhaps, I said to myself, he will beg me to accept a sum of money—I never thought of it as less than a thousand pounds—as a slight recognition of and tribute to my remarkable vocal ability.

I took a long, lonely walk into the country to correct these ridiculous fancies and to steady my mind, and when I reached home and had refreshed myself with a quiet cup of afternoon tea, I felt I was morally and physically prepared for my interview with the opulent stranger.

Punctually as the cathedral clock struck six there was a ring at the visitor's bell. In a moment or two my unknown friend was shown into the drawing-room, which he entered with the easy air of a man of the world. I noticed he was carrying a small black bag.

"How do you do again, Mr. Dale?" he said as though we were old acquaintances; "you see I have come sharp to my time."

"Yes," I answered, "and I am pleased to see you; do sit down." He sank into my best armchair, and placed his bag on the floor beside him.

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"Since we met in the afternoon," he said, "I have written a letter to your dean, expressing the great pleasure I felt in listening to your choir, and at the same time I inclosed a five-pound note, which I begged him to divide among the choir boys and men, from Alexander Poulter, Esq., of Poulter's Pills. You have of course heard of the world-renowned Poulter's Pills. I am Poulter!"

Poulter of Poulter's Pills! My heart sank within me! A five-pound note! My airy castles were tottering!

"I also sent him a couple of hundred of my pamphlets, which I said I trusted he would be so kind as to distribute in the close."

I was aghast!

"And now, with regard to the special object of my call, Mr. Dale. If you will allow me to say so, you are not making the most of that grand voice of yours; you are hidden under an ecclesiastical bushel here—lost to the world. You are wasting your vocal strength and sweetness on the desert air, so to speak. Why, if I may hazard a guess, I don't suppose you make five hundred a year here, at the outside?"

I could say nothing.

"Well, now, I can put you into the way of making at least three or four times as much as that. Listen! I am Alexander Poulter, of Poulter's Pills. I have a proposal to make to you. The scheme is bound to succeed, but I want your help. Accept my proposal and your fortune's made. Did you ever hear Moody and Sankey?" he asked abruptly.

The man is an idiot, thought I; he is now fairly carried away with his particular mania. Will it last long? Shall I ring?

"Novelty, my dear sir," he went on, "is the rule of the day; and there must be novelty in advertising, as in everything else, to catch the public interest. So I intend to go on a tour, lecturing on the merits of Poulter's Pills in all the principal halls of all the principal towns all over the world. But I have been delayed in carrying out my idea till I could associate myself with a gentleman such as yourself. Will you join me? I should be the Moody of the tour; you would be its Sankey. I would speak my patter, and you would intersperse my orations with melodious ballads bearing upon the virtues of Poulter's Pills. The ballads are all ready!"

So saying, he opened that bag and drew forth from its recesses nothing more alarming than a thick roll of manuscript music.

"The verses are my own," he said, with a little touch of pride; "and as for the music, I thought it better to make use of popular melodies, so as to enable an audience to join in the chorus. See, here is one of the ballads: 'Darling, I am better now.' It describes the woes of a fond lover, or rather his physical ailments, until he went through a course of Poulter. Here's another: 'I'm ninety-five! I'm ninety-five!' You catch the drift of that, of course—a healthy old age, secured by taking Poulter's Pills. Ah! what's this? 'Little sister's last request.' I fancy the idea of that is to beg the family never to be without Poulter's Pills. Here again: 'Then you'll remember me!' I'm afraid that title is not original; never mind, the song is. And here is—but there are many more, and I won't detain you with them now." He saw, perhaps, I was getting impatient. Thank Heaven, however, he was no escaped lunatic. I was safe!

"Mr. Poulter," said I, "I took you this afternoon for a disinterested and philanthropic millionaire; you take me for—for—something different from what I am. We have both made mistakes. In a word, it is impossible for me to accept your offer!"

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"Is that final?" asked Poulter.

"Certainly," said I.

Poulter gathered his manuscripts together and replaced them in the bag, and got up to leave the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Dale," he said mournfully, as I opened the door of the room. "Good evening"—he kept on talking till he was fairly out of the house—"mark my words, you'll be sorry—very sorry—one day that you did not fall in with my scheme. Offers like mine don't come every day, and you will one day regret having refused it."

With these words he left the house.

I had little appetite for my dinner that evening.