

# Prayer-Book and Ledger.

By M.S.P.

A STORY FOUNDED ON FACT.

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## CHAPTER I.

Most stories end with a wedding: mine begins with one. Was there ever a woman so lost to all the sweets of womanhood that such a ceremony failed to call forth her sympathetic interest? If so, she certainly did not reside in Chelford on the bright spring morning of which I write. It was nearly eleven o'clock, the hour at which sweet Gertrude Harley and Richard Joyce were to become man and wife. The village streets were almost deserted, the churchyard being just now the centre of attraction. Seated upon its moss-grown slabs, or leaning idly upon the hoary tombstones, was a motley assemblage of "old men and maidens," mothers and babies-in-arms, with a sprinkling of the pride of manhood—indeed, everybody whose business could possibly be postponed for an hour. Sundry scraps of important news were in circulation, chiefly, of course, relating to the bride. Near the gate an animated discussion was in progress as to the material of which her dress was made.

"I tell you it's cream-coloured satin," insisted a stout old dame, whose hands were folded beneath a washed-out red-flannel apron. "Sarah Jane Mudge said as 'twere, and her warn't like to be mistook, bein' a dressmaker, if her didn't make it."

"Taint nothing of the kind, if you won't be hurted at me saying so, Mrs Pengelly," rejoined a meek-looking little woman, whose pale face and short, hacking cough indicated that it would not be long before she found her final resting-place in the churchyard. "It's got a kind of patten on it, and they call it *broashy*. My Beetrice had it from Peg White, her as is cousin to the doctor's servant, and she 'd ought to know."

"What age will she be?" enquired a tall, hard-featured woman, whose wooden clogs and north country accent betrayed her a stranger in the neighbourhood.

The first speaker threw her head back and gave vent to a scornful sniff at this deplorable exhibition of ignorance before replying:

"Her were born a week before my Ridginald as had whoopin' cough, and one day the cough come and tuck and chuck un right off! He'd a bin three-and-twinty come next Michelmas, would Ridginald Pingilly, and Miss Gerty's ma—the poor sawl, died herself two or three year after—she come and laid some white roses in his coffin, she did —"

Mrs Pingilly's family reminiscences were at this point interrupted by a wild whoop of "Here they come!" from the youthful sentinels posted outside the gate. A stir of expectation passed over the various groups, and all eyes were turned towards the carriage as the doctor alighted and passed through their midst, his only daughter—somewhat abashed at the interest concentrated upon her—leaning upon his arm. She was of middle height, with sunny brown hair and sparkling eyes of the same hue. As they disappeared into the church, where the rest of the wedding party were already gathered, the crowd pressed in after them.

Solemnly the words floated down the dim aisles—"For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, till death us do part." Half-an-hour later, as the joyous notes of Mendelssohn's Wedding March burst from the organ, the Rev. Richard Joyce, looking radiantly happy, emerged from the porch with his bride. Outside, the girls of Gertrude's Sunday-school class were strewing the path with flowers. She raised her eyes, filled with a trustful gladness, and had a glance and smile for each. How they would miss her, these girls who were growing up to womanhood beneath her care! They had brought to her their joys and sorrows; she had wept with, counselled, prayed over them. Hers had been the joy of leading some of them to the Saviour's feet, and guiding their first faltering footsteps in the pathway of life. Who would take her place?

As they drove through the luxuriant Devonshire lanes, with their high green hedges lined with delicate yellow primroses, Gertrude looked a long farewell at each familiar object among the surroundings of her childhood's home.

That evening the young curate and his wife were whirling through tall chimneys and deserts of slate roofs stretching for miles in every direction, and dismal in their monotony. But their hearts were brave and hopeful as they neared the London parish, to the service of which they had solemnly dedicated themselves.

Next day it was whispered in the village with a laugh that Horace Tothill, the young lawyer, had left the wedding festivities in such a state of elevation as necessitated his being conveyed home by two of his friends.

"Beast," muttered the doctor, as he went his lonely rounds. "It's a pity he can't enjoy himself without forgetting that he's a gentleman!" And there was no friend at his elbow there to ask, "Doctor, who placed the temptation in his way?"

(To be continued.)