

The Minister's Wife
by Mary Kyle Dallas

“That lady for Mr. Hawty, ma’am,” said Myrtle, the little waiting-maid, allowing a peculiar expression to rest on her rather suspicious countenance. “She told me not to disturb *you*, ma’am, for she only came on church business.”

The minister’s wife counted six stitches in her embroidery before replying, calmly:

“Very well, Myrtle. She will find Mr. Hawty in his study.”

And Myrtle whisked away, thinking to herself that she had given Mrs. Hawty a little idea of that handsome, bold Miss Rue’s “goings on” at last.

“It’s too bad how cool she takes it,” said Myrtle to herself. “*I* wouldn’t in her place.”

But now that the girl was gone Mrs. Hawty sat with her work dropped into her lap and fell into a brown study.

“The servants begin to notice it,” she said; “and no wonder. This is the sixteenth time Anastasia has called on Edward this month. It is well I am not of a jealous disposition, and that I know dear Edward as well as I do.”

Mrs. Hawty was a plain woman. No longer very young—never what people call fascinating—but she was a lady; and Mr. Hawty, who was forty odd himself, had chosen her because she seemed the very nicest woman in the world to him. He was very fond of her. Through all his life his affections had been as temperate as his habits. He was a man of the best morals and the best manners, and very good looking in a certain way. The present Mrs. Hawty had known when she married that people would “wonder that Mr. Hawty had not chosen a more beautiful woman, being so handsome himself.” She knew that remarks of this sort were being constantly made, but it did not matter while her husband was satisfied.

“I never admired a woman sufficiently to resolve on marrying her before I met you,” he had said to his wife on one occasion. “For a little while I thought I should choose Anastasia Rue, but she would have made the worst minister’s wife in the world. She is erratic. That is the worst, perhaps, but it is not well in a woman, and I could not endure it in a wife.”

When Mrs. Hawty first met Anastasia she felt that it was a matter of surprise that any man who might have married her had not done so. She was a beauty; she was stylish; she had money, and, above all, she had a bewitching manner. She was a thoroughly fascinating woman, and she exerted herself to charm every man she met, high or low, rich or poor, young or old. She was a member of Mr. Hawty’s church; she taught in the Sabbath-school, sang in the choir, and belonged to the sewing circle. She was always giving something to the church—a baptismal font, a new pulpit-cushion, books for the library, a set of chairs, and after Mr. Hawty’s marriage she was more lavish in these offerings than before. She had endeavored to marry the handsome

clergyman; failing in that, she had determined to punish him, and his plain wife also, by making him fall in love with her. She quite understood that it was because she was not what Mr. Hawty considered a model of prudence that he had not chosen her; and she knew equally well that this fact would not prevent the married clergymen from admiring her. Her plan was this: to lead him on by slow degrees to say things that in his position he could have no right to say to her. Then to expose him; painting herself as the most saint-like creature ever offended by words of love from a married man, wringing plain Mrs. Hawty's heart and driving them from the place forever, with the loss of reputation added to the loss of position and salary.

With such thoughts in her heart she came "on church business" to the minister's study oftener and oftener.

The presence of Mrs. Hawty in the house would silence scandalous tongues, but very soon she fell into the habit of bidding Myrtle "not disturb Mrs. Hawty." And the book, the contribution, the idea about the Sunday-school, made an excuse for a long *tête-a-tête* with her pastor. To-day Mrs. Hawty felt a little uncomfortable. She was not, as she had said, a jealous woman; but she could not feel pleased that this woman should do as she was doing. To drive away her uneasiness, and to enable herself to meet her husband cheerfully at dinner time, she resolved to go to the church and practice the music for next Sunday upon the organ, which she had played since her marriage; and tying on her bonnet she slipped out of a side door, and her way across fields and through green, shady lanes, entered the church, and was soon absorbed in the beautiful and solemn music. She played for a long time; then, quite happy and at peace, she entered a pew, and kneeling down, breathed a whispered but ardent prayer for help and strength in all life's trials. It was her custom always before she left the spot. Generally when she arose she went her homeward way, without meeting anyone; but to-day, as she still knelt, she heard voices in the church below, and rising, leaned over the railing of the gallery and saw that her husband and Anastasia Rue had come into the church together. For a moment she thought they were in search of her, but in a moment more she felt convinced that this was not the case. She stood leaning over the railing, in full sight if they had but lifted their eyes, but they did not. Miss Rue was looking bashfully down upon the floor, and Mr. Hawty was looking full into her face.

"Oh, thank you. A little praise is such a comfort," Anastasia was saying; "I do *love* the church."

"Indeed, I must repeat that I know no one so zealous," replied Mr. Hawty, "and personally my obligations are—" he paused for words.

"Oh, personally—I—you—I don't know what I was about to say," faltered Anastasia. "I—I love—the—church, as I said, though I have been told that people say I never would make a good minister's wife."

"Some one said that before having the pleasure of a perfect acquaintance with you," said Mr. Hawty. "Assuredly, Miss Anastasia, the clergyman who wins you for a wife will have a help-meet indeed."

"I shall never marry, *now*," said Anastasia. "Once I *did* think I should prefer such a vocation to all others, but—no, not now, Mr. Hawty, not now."

The minister looked at the lady very gravely.

“You are still very young,” he said. “You have not yet met the man who—”

“Yes I have,” cried Anastasia. “At least I—I—don’t say anything more, Mr. Hawty. The man I liked thought me frivolous and—” here she lifted her handkerchief to her eyes.

The minister’s wife listened from the gallery. A less sensible woman would have desired to hear more; a more jealous one would have grown furious; but Edith Hawty grasped the situation. She saw that Anastasia was acting; she penetrated her motives. As for her husband, he was a simple man with tender feelings, and, like all men, easily moved by beauty in distress. Could he only be brought to believe that he had broken Anastasia’s heart he might place himself in her power.

The first thing to be done was to prevent the utterance of another word. To call to them might fill her husband’s mind with a suspicion that she had been listening; but there was another way.

Edith Hawty flew to the organ, seated herself before it, and began to play. The effect was what she supposed it would be; in a few moments her husband hurried up the gallery steps.

“You here, Edith!” he said. “I came over with Miss Rue to look at the pulpit. I wanted her to come up with me, but she said she fancied you would not want her. She thinks you do not like her. I assured her it was not so.”

“I think her the handsomest woman in the place; and she certainly gives more to the church than any one I know,” said Mrs. Hawty.

“My dear, I knew you were appreciative,” said the clergyman, tucking his wife’s arm under his, as they went down the gallery stairs together.

“Dear old fellow! he sha’n’t be forced to make move to that pretty woman, make me unhappy, and disgrace himself,” said Mrs. Hawty.

She went home quietly, and her husband had never seen her gayer, but, all the same, she was hatching a deep-laid plot, and before she slept, a little note was slipped into the post-office box. It was this:

“DEAR MISS ANASTASIA: If you meant anything by what you said yesterday, tell me where I may see you the day after to-morrow. I prefer the church.

“Yours, E. HAWTY.”

The lady’s name was Edith, her husband’s Edward. The initial belonged to both.

An answer came before noon next day. Edith knew the delicate hand and the monogram, and opened it, though the envelope was addressed to her husband. It read thus:

“DEAR EDWARD: I meant whatever you please. Meet me in the church at four o’clock, and pray destroy this note.

“Yours, A.”

At four the next afternoon, Mrs. Hawty entered the church alone, leaving her spouse hard at work at his Sunday’s sermon in his study. Anastasia stood near the front, her gift; one hand rested upon its marble, the other was pressed upon her heart. So an actress might have waited for the curtain to rise upon an impassioned scene.

Mrs. Hawty advanced. Anastasia, startled into naturalness, stared at her without a word.

“I wrote to you yesterday, Miss Rue,” said Mrs. Hawty, “and I have received a very singular answer. You evidently thought the letter was from my husband.”

“You intended that I should, if the note was not actually written by him,” said Anastasia.

“I confess it,” said Mrs. Hawty. “I overheard your conversation the other day, and I determined to catch you in your own trap. If it was love you felt for my husband I might pity you, for he loves me, but you simply hate him. I read motives very thoroughly, Miss Rue, and I now hold in my hand a note which, in connection with mine, of which I have preserved a copy, is sufficient to ruin your reputation. Had you replied to me, you would have found that I wanted to speak to you about the pulpit, which you kindly spoke of having repolished. My husband mentioned that to me.”

Anastasia ground her teeth in rage, but said nothing.

“I will use the letter against you if it becomes necessary,” continued Mrs. Hawty, “not else. I desire to injure no woman’s reputation. Meanwhile you can make these terms with me. You have often spoken of going to C— to live. Your aunts and uncles reside there. Assuredly you need their advice. Go, the sooner the better. It will be better for you, and you will be quite safe. I will defend rather than injure you. It is not that I am jealous. I simply will not let you work your will, and if you choose, the matter may rest between you and me and go no farther.”

Anastasia gave one look into the plain, strong face of the woman before her, and shrugged her shoulders.

“Of course, I also alluded to the carvings on the pulpit,” she said. “You dare not think anything else. But I had already resolved to go to C— to reside, and I never like to belong to a church where the minister’s wife is not an agreeable person. So I shall resign my membership with this.”

After this the ladies bowed formally to each other and parted.

Anastasia did as she had promised.

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