

Sir John Croke's Plot
by Mary Kyle Dallas

Even in these days it is not in the nature of things that a curate of the Church of England should be a wealthy man; and though young bachelor curates are generally comfortable, and much petted by the ladies, who are fond of asking them to five o'clock tea and croquet parties, a curate with a family may have so hard a time of it that his wife's one silk gown may be turned thrice before it is given up; that he will have a good deal of cold meat for his dinners, and warnings from his wife not to open the windows to let the sun shine on his parlor carpet, when strangers are in that rather shabby room.

When Parson Hawkins flourished, and counted nine olive branches at his hearth, carpets were not necessary even to the floors of English royalty, and life was altogether simpler and less expensive for a curate's family; but it cannot be denied, nevertheless, nine children are a heavy pull on the paternal purse, and right happy was Parson Hawkins when Sir John Croke, of Chilton, offered him the curacy of Chilton church, and the position of chaplain in his own dwelling, with a salary of fifty pounds a year.

The first thing he did was to kneel down amidst his family and lead them in the thanks-giving for prosperity, as set down in the book of common prayer for such an occasion. The second, to pack together all his movables and find a wagon and wagoner to take them, with his family, to Chilton.

"I know not why Sir John Croke hath chosen me," he said to the partner of his joys and sorrows, "but perhaps he may have heard my Easter sermon, which, without vanity, I may consider powerful."

The truth, however, was that the late chaplain had considered it his duty to reprove Sir John Croke for certain actions which were in his opinion great sins; and Sir John, growing wrathful, had discharged him and chosen in his place the mildest and most inoffensive person he could hear of. He knew of his hardships, the smallness of his salary and the size of his family, and he believed that this elderly man, anxious to provide for his household, would not dare to speak as the enthusiastic young curate, who felt himself set upon a mission and defied the world to turn him from it.

He welcomed his new chaplain very pleasantly, therefore, and gave him considerable liberty in view of the fact that he desired much for himself.

But Parson Hawkins was by no means made of the stuff of which cowards are manufactured, and though he was thin and narrow-chested and by no means a mighty man to look at, he had a very lion of a conscience. Therefore when, by degrees, he discovered that his patron was generally carried to bed intoxicated, that he nearly broke his wife's heart, and refused to pay his honest debts, he first uttered grave private remonstrances and then hurled at him from the pulpit such a thunderous sermon, full of admonition, reprobation and warning, that Sir John's face became scarlet, and every mortal in the church knew to whom the preacher alluded.

“Mark you, Parson,” said Sir John, the next time he was alone with this man of words, “I forgive you this once, but the next time you so presume, away you go, brats and all, to starve, if you choose. What, do you think that I pay a fellow to insult me in my domain?”

“I spoke for the sake of your own soul, Sir John, and because I dared not hold my peace,” replied the curate.

“Henceforth remember who feeds you,” replied Sir John.

Parson Hawkins did remember it. For some time he tried to believe that he had turned Sir John from his evil ways, that he had done his best, and knew no more to do. He looked at his wife, into whose faded cheeks the color was fast returning; at his children, growing happy and bright in the comfort of their new life, and he was a man, though he was a parson.

At last, however, he found himself so placed that he must speak or be a villain. A sermon was preached which all well understood, and at which many wept. And Sir John, furious with rage, sought a revenge much greater than the simple dismissal of the parson would have been.

In those days theft was a hanging matter. A woman had recently been hung for stealing a loaf of bread. The laws were not only stern but cruel.

Fancy, then, the horror of poor Parson Hawkin’s family when it was known that Sir John had made a charge of theft against him, in which it was set forth that on a certain day in November, he, the said Halbert Hawkins, being left alone in a room in the castle, did unlawfully possess himself of “a golden goblet, a silver goblet, two guineas, and a piece of white hollands,” to which fact two sworn witnesses were willing to attest.

The parson himself, after the first shock, grew brave again, and declared that he defied his enemies, and that none who knew him would doubt his honesty; but he was forced to go to jail to await his trial, and with him went his faithful wife, while their one maidservant cared for his children. Two servants of Sir John’s swore to have seen the parson at his work of pillage. One declared that he had been behind a curtain when the goblets and the guineas were taken from a cupboard. The other vowed that he had been at the head of the stairs when he had taken the holland from a press to wrap the gold and silver in.

But others, not in Sir John’s service, had met the parson bearing no bundle on the same day, and though, as the presiding justice declared, proof had been brought sufficient to hang twenty men, the position of the defendant and the bad character of Sir John’s witnesses held his judgement in check. He did all he could for poor Parson Hawkins, but, alas, Sir John had bribed witnesses at his command, and the dreadful fate of the gallows was hanging over the poor man’s head, kept from falling instantly only by a demand for the production of the stolen goods which, if the accusation were true, must have been hidden somewhere.

Meanwhile Betty, the serving-woman, had been to prison with some food for her master and mistress, and was returning, half blinded by her tears, when she saw approaching her on the road a servant of Sir John’s, who was earnestly talking to Old Peggy, a beggar woman, who sought

her bread from door to door, carrying a pouch at her side and leaning on a thick stick, with which, if occasion required, she could administer a good beating to either dogs or impudent boys. Betty did not like to meet anyone in her then state of mind, and simply for this reason she crept behind a big thorn bush, and there crouched down, intending to wait until they should have passed. Old Peggy hobbled along slowly, and as she neared the thorn bush she paused.

“The parson never did me harm,” she said.

“But it’s forty pounds in your pocket; you’ll be a rich woman,” said the servant.

“How will I be sure he’ll pay me?” said the woman.

“No fear. You’ll have the money,” said the servant. “I’d do it myself, but little Betty would never let me inside of the house. You go in often. Ask to warm yourself, and when she’s not looking, slip the bundle into some snug place. Master will demand another search and”—here the noise of wheels caused him to lower his voice to a whisper—but Betty heard the words—“at eight tonight I’ll be outside the window and pay you as you come out.”

Poor Betty! this was some terrible plot against her master, and what could she, a poor girl, do to prevent its success? Suddenly a thought struck her; she turned her steps another way, and ran toward the house of the good justice, who was her master’s friend. What happened there we will not tell just yet.

At eight o’clock Betty sat in the family room of the parsonage; the children were asleep in their beds, and she waited for Old Peggy’s coming. A fire burnt on the hearth; the tall press in the corner frowned down upon the girl and her idle spinning-wheel; on the queer little three-legged stool which the children had left on the hearth, and on the empty chairs of master and mistress, each beside the ingle. An hourglass was fast running down the table; by that token Betty knew that it was the hour of eight.

Indeed the last sand had just sifted through, and she had reversed it, when the tap of a stick came on the door, and drawing the bolt, Betty saw the weather-beaten face of Peggy, the beggar woman.

“It’s me, Betty dear,” said the old woman; “for God’s sake let me in to warm my feet, and give me a sup of warm ale, for I’m chilled to the heart.”

Betty said nothing; she let the creature pass, and she seated herself in the parson’s own great chair, with her pouch still at her side; a bit of white holland peeped out of it; as she saw it she covered it with the end of her dirty cloak.

“Will ye fetch me the beer, Betty, child?” she whined. “God knows what may come to you in your old age!”

Betty, still saying nothing, took a pannikin and left the room. Her feet were heard on the cellar stairs, and instantly Old Peggy started up. She went toward the great press. As its door opened she gave a little cry. A hand grasped her by the arm and drew her into the press.

“Move or speak and you are a dead woman!” said a voice in her ear. And the door closed again.

Betty meanwhile came up the cellar steps and set the pannikin of beer on the fire. Hardly had she done so when a knocking came upon the door.

“Who is there?” cried Betty.

“Officers of the law to search this house,” said a voice.

Betty opened the door.

“We are honest folk here,” she said. “Come in.”

And two men entered, followed by Sir John and his servant.

“The press first,” said the foremost man.

And he put his hand to the door. As he did so the door flew open, and out stepped Justice Hale, holding by her arm the old beggar woman; at the same instant, from the floor above, heavy steps were heard descending the stairs, and four armed men stood ready for their orders.

“Your vile plot is discovered, Sir John,” said Justice Hale. “You are under arrest; and thank God, Parson Hawkins is proved an innocent man from this day, for here in this beggar’s pouch are hidden the goblets, the guineas, and the holland cloth which you accused the good curate of stealing, and which she was to have hidden in this honest house to prove its master a thief. God knoweth your punishment will be merited.”

Then the armed men took into their custody Sir John and his fellow, and ere next eve the good parson was with his little ones again. Moreover, the news of his persecution spread over the land and raised up friends who helped him to such prosperity as he had never dreamed of, so that, until the day of his death, he knew no more anxiety.

Sir John was punished by certain fines and imprisonment, and it is recorded that he died miserably, in great poverty.

New York Ledger, March 19, 1881