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<ENGLISH CLERGYMEN IN FOREIGN WATERING-PLACES.>

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Those persons who object to the influence of the clergy in their

parishes at home, and who dislike the idea of being laid hold of by

the ecclesiastical crook and dragged perforce up steep ways and narrow

paths, ought to visit some of our little outlying settlements in

foreign parts. They might take a revengeful pleasure in seeing how the

tables there are turned against the tyrants here, and how weak in the

presence of his transmarine flock is the expatriated shepherd whose

rod at home is oftentimes a rod of iron, and his crook more compelling

than persuasive. Of all men the most to be pitied is surely the

clergyman of one of those small English settlements which are

scattered about France and Italy, Germany and Switzerland; and of all

men of education, and what is meant by the position of a gentleman, he

is the most in thraldom.

His very means of living depending on his congregation, he must first

of all please that congregation and keep it in good humour. So, it may

be said, must a clergyman in London whose income is from pew-rents and

whose congregation are not his parishioners. But London is large; the

tempers and thoughts of men are as numerous as the houses; there is

room for all, and lines of affinity for all. The Broad Churchman will

attract his hearers, and the Ritualist his, from out of the mass, as

magnets attract steel filings; and each church will be filled with

hearers who come there by preference. But in a small and stationary

society, in a congregation already made and not specially attracted,

yet by which he has to live, the clergyman finds himself more the

servant than the leader, less the pastor than the thrall. He must

<p> 'suit,' </p> else he is nowhere, and his bread and butter are vanishing

points in his horizon; that is, he must preach and think, not

according to the truth that is in him, but according to the views of

the most influential of his hearers, and in attacking their souls he

must touch tenderly their tempers.

These tempers are for the most part lions in the way difficult to

propitiate. The elementary doctrines of Christianity must be preached

of course, and sin must be held up as the thing to avoid, while virtue

must be complimented as the thing to be followed, and a spiritual

state of mind must be discreetly advocated. These are safe

generalities; but the dangers of application are many. How to preach

of duties to a body of men and women who have thrown off every

national and local obligation? ~~ who have left their estates to be

managed by agents, their houses to be filled by strangers, who have

given up their share of interest in the school and the village

reading-room, the poor and the parish generally ~~ men and women who

have handed themselves over to indolence and pleasure-seeking, the

luxurious enjoyment of a fine climate, the pleasant increase of income

to be got by comparative cheapness of breadstuffs, and the abandonment

of all those outgoings roughly comprised under the head of local

duties and local obligations? ~~ how, indeed? They have no duties to be

reminded of in those moral generalizations which touch all and offend

none; and the clergyman who should go into details affecting his

congregation personally, who should preach against sloth and slander,

pleasure-seeking and selfishness, would soon preach to empty pews and

be cut by his friends as an impertinent going beyond his office.

His congregation too, composed of educated ladies and gentlemen, is

sure to be critical, and therefore all but impossible to teach. If he

inclines a hair's breadth to the right or the left beyond the point at

which they themselves stand, he is held to be unsound. His sermons are

gravely canvassed in the afternoon conclaves which meet at each

other's houses to discuss the excitement of the Sunday morning in the

new arrivals or the new toilets. Has he dwelt on the humanity

underlying the Christian faith? He is drifting into Socinianism; and

those whose inclinations go for abstract dogmas well backed by

brimstone say that he does not preach the Gospel. Has he exalted the

functions of the minister, and tried to invest his office with a

spiritual dignity and power that would furnish a good leverage over

his flock? He is accused of sacerdotalism, and the free-citizen blood

of his listening Erastians is up and flaming. Does he, to avoid these

stumbling-blocks, wander into the deeper mysteries and discourse on

things which no man can either explain or understand? He is accused of

presumption and profanity, and is advised to stick to the Lord's

Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. If he is earnest he is

impertinent; if he is level he is cold. Each member of his

congregation, subscribing a couple of guineas towards his support,

feels as if he or she had claims to that amount over the body and soul

and mind and powers of the poor parson in his or her pay; and the

claim is generally worked out in snippets, not individually dangerous

to life nor fortune, but inexpressibly aggravating, and as depressing

as annoying. For the most part, the unhappy man is safest when he

sticks to broad dogma, and leaves personal morality alone. And he is

almost sure to be warmly applauded when he has a shy at science, and

says that physicists are fools who assert more than they can prove,

because they cannot show why an acorn should produce an oak, nor how

the phenomena of thought are elaborated. This throwing of date-stones

is sure to strike no listening djinn. The mass of the congregations

sitting in the English Protestant churches built on foreign soil, know

little and care less about the physical sciences; but it gives them a

certain comfortable glow to think that they are so much better than

those sinful and presumptuous men who work at bacteria and the

spectroscope; and they hug themselves as they say, each man in his

own soul, how much nicer it is to be dogmatically safe than

intellectually learned.

Preaching personal morality indeed, with possible private application,

would be rather difficult in dealing with a congregation not

unfrequently made up of doubtful elements. Take that pretty young

woman and her handsome <hi> roué </hi>-looking husband, who have come <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg>

knows whence and are <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> knows what, but who attend the services

with praiseworthy punctuality, spend any amount of money, and are

being gradually incorporated into the society of the place. The parson

may have had private hints conveyed to him from his friends at home

that, of the matrimonial conditions between the two, everything is

real save the assumed <p> 'lines.' </p> But how is he to say so? They have made

themselves valuable members of his congregation, and give larger

donations than <rege orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> else. They have got the good will of the

leading persons in the sacred community, and, having something to

hide, are naturally careful to please, and are consequently popular.

He can scarcely give form and substance to the hints he has had

conveyed to him; yet his conscience cries out on the one side, if his

weakness binds him to silence on the other. In any case, how can he

make himself the Nathan to this questionable David, and, holding forth

on the need of virtuous living, thunder out, <p> 'Thou art the man!'? </p> Let

him try the experiment, and he will find a hornet's nest nothing to

it.

How too, can he preach honesty to men, perhaps his own churchwardens,

who have outrun the constable and outwitted their creditors at one and

the same time? How lecture women who flirt over the borders on the

week days, but pay handsomely for their sittings on Sundays, on the

crown with which Solomon endowed the lucky husband of the virtuous

woman? He may wish to do all this; but his wife and children, and the

supreme need of food and firing, step in between him and the higher

functions of his calling; and he owns himself forced to accept the

world as he finds it, sins and shortcomings with the rest, and to take

heed lest he be eaten up by over-zeal or carried into personal

darkness by his desire for his people's light.

Sometimes the poor man is in thrall to <reg orig=”some one”> someone </reg> in particular rather

than to his flock as a body; and there are times when this dominant

power is a woman; in which case the many contrarieties besetting his

position may be multiplied <hi> ad infinitum </hi>. Nothing can exceed the

miserable subjection of a clergyman given over to the tender mercies

of a feminine despot. She knows everything, and she governs as much as

she knows. She makes herself the arbiter of his whole life, from his

conscience to his children's boots, and he can call neither his soul

nor his home his own. She prescribes his doctrine, and takes care to

let him know when he has transgressed the rules she has laid down for

his guidance. She treats the hymns as part of her personal

prerogative, and is violently offended if those having a ritualistic

tendency are sung, or if those are taken whereof the tunes are too

jaunty or the measure is too slow. The unfortunate man feels under her

eye during the whole of the service, like a schoolboy under the eye of

his preceptress; and he dare not even begin the opening sentences

until she has rustled up the aisle and has said her private prayer

quite comfortably. She holds over his head the terror of vague threats

and shadowy misfortunes should he cross her will; but at the same time

he does not find that running in her harness brings extra grist to his

mill, nor that his way is the smoother because he treads in the

footsteps she has marked out for him.

Sometimes she takes a craze against a voluntary; sometimes she objects

to any approach to chanting; and if certain recalcitrants of the

congregation, in possession of the harmonium, insist on their own

methods against hers, she writes home to the Society and complains of

the thin edge of the wedge and the Romanizing tendencies of her

spiritual adviser. In any case she is a fearful infliction; and a

church ruled by a female despot is about the most pitiable instance we

know of insolent tyranny and broken-backed dependence.

But the clergymen serving these transmarine stations are not often

themselves men of mark nor equal to their contemporaries at home. They

are often sickly, which means a low amount of vital energy; oftener

impecunious, which presupposes want of grip and precludes real

independence. They are men whose career has been somehow arrested; and

their natures have suffered in the blight that has befallen their

hopes. Their whole life is more or less a compromise, now with

conscience, now with character; and they have to wink at evils which

they ought to denounce, and bear with annoyances which they ought to

resent. In most cases they are obliged to eke out their scanty incomes

by taking pupils; and here again the millstone round their necks is

heavy, and they have to pay a large moral percentage on their

pecuniary gains. If their pupils are of the age when boys begin to

call themselves men, they have to keep a sharp look-out on them; and

they suffer many things on the score of responsibility when that

look-out is evaded, as it necessarily must be at times. As the

characteristic quality of small societies is gossip, and as gossip

always includes exaggeration, the peccadilloes of the young fellows

are magnified into serious sins, and then bound as a burden on the

back of the poor cleric in thrall to the idle imaginings of men and

the foolish fears of women. One black sheep in the pupilary flock will

do more damage to the reputation of the unhappy pastor who has them in

hand than a dozen shining lights will do him good. Morality is assumed

to be the free gift of the tutor to the pupil; and if the boy is bad

the man is to blame for not having made that free-gift betimes.

Look at it how we will, the clergyman in charge of these foreign

congregations has no very pleasant time of it. In a sense

expatriated; his home ties growing daily weaker; his hope of home

preferment reduced to <hi> nil </hi>; his liberty of conscience a dream of the

past; and all the mystical power of his office going down in the

conflict caused by the need of pew-rents, submission to tyrants, and

dependence on the Home Society, he lives from year to year bemoaning

the evil chances which have flung him on this barren, shifting,

desolate strand, and becoming less and less fitted for England and

English parochial work ~~ that castle in the air, quiet and secure,

which he is destined never to inhabit. He is touched too in part by

the atmosphere of his surroundings; and to a congregation without

duties a clergyman with views more accommodating than severe comes

only too naturally as the appropriate pastor. The whole thing proves

that thraldom to the means of living, or rather to the persons

representing those means, damages all men alike ~~ those in cassock and

gown as well as those in slop and blouse ~~ and that lay influence can,

in certain circumstances, be just as tyrannical over the clerical

conscience as clerical influence is apt to be tyrannical over lay

living.