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Art. VII.—CURIOSITIES OF CLERICAL EXPERIENCE. No. I.

AN EPISODE IN THE PAROCHIAL LIFE OF A LONDON CLERGYMAN.

THE concerns of human life are so varied and entangled, and subject to such rapid and complicated changes, that inexperienced persons can form no adequate idea of the curious complications to be met with in the everyday history of society. Lawyers have an opportunity of knowing a good deal of what goes on behind the scenes, doctors still more; but clergymen, in large London parishes of a mixed population of rich and poor, have the greatest facilities of all. The sensational novel-writer owes much of his success to the semblance of reality which pervades the scenes he so graphically depicts. But the vicissitudes of families and individuals which the plain, unvarnished narrative of their experience could unfold, would exceed anything that the wildest conjectures of romance have ever conceived. The old saying, that fact is stranger than fiction, finds an apt and ample illustration in real life. The most fertile ingenuity of the most brilliant novelist could never imagine anything so apparently extravagant and unnatural as the episodes in many a dismal story of private adventure. The laws, the circumstances, the events of human life, the stir that is incessantly around us, as "the sound of many waters,"—in fact, all that taken together makes the great tide of social influences drift with the experience of mortal creatures, constitute a never-failing source of interest to anyone whose position in society enables him to discern the ever-shifting scenery of social existence. Of all cities in the world London offers the widest field for such observation. There every nationality on earth has its representative. It is the safest asylum on the surface of the globe for refugees from every quarter. The political exile finds himself secure from the secret machinations and espionage of the foreign police in his native country; the man who has seen "better days," and from the pressure of contracted means has had to drop out of the ranks of society, can nowhere so thoroughly enjoy the privilege of obscurity; "the lone woman," who may have made a false step, and over whose pathway a chill, withering shade hangs like a cloud of doom, gratefully accepts the silence and the secrecy of the overgrown metropolis, where she ceases to be the subject of censorious criticism and unsympathetic comment; the people who are living for mere appearances in the provinces, or in some remote country place, can conceal their real poverty amid the solitudes of the great City; in a word, all of every class who, from whatever cause, desire

complete protection against intrusion, find in this modern Babylon a refuge from the fierce light of social gossip and impertinent curiosity.

London is the greatest wilderness in the world. There is a loneliness about it to be found nowhere else. Amid its impenetrable seclusion, a man may lead the life of a hermit with greater security from interruption than if he were to retire to the deserts of Arabia, or to the gloomy recesses of some primæval forest. The misanthrope, or the decayed gentleman, or the religious fanatic, or the close-fisted miser, may each and all pass their lives in some back-street or dingy square, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot." Amid the hum and bustle, the gladness, and the splendour of the living tide which flows around them, these solitary specimens of humanity can move along in the strictest *incognito*, seeing, but not seen.

The "stricken deer" of society take refuge in the grateful shelter of the big city. Whether the arrow that pierces them be tipped with the poison of sin, or with the bitterness of sorrow, they find a peaceful solitude in the vast "continuity of shade" which the London wilderness throws over them. There are, or at least there were in my time, secluded villas in the region of St. John's Wood, and what formerly used to be called "the wilds of Brompton," where a person could live in the most perfect isolation, cut off from all communication with the outer world. The lonely occupant of such "a messuage or tenement" led a life of solitary confinement. An air of mystery surrounded him. He or she, or he and she, lived in inaccessible retirement. Sometimes the "bijou residence," as it is called in the phraseology of the house-agent, stood by itself, in its own grounds, not very extensive, surrounded by walls conveniently high, so as to exclude neighbourly inquisitiveness. The outer gate, communicating with the street, generally had a small square opening, fortified with an iron grating, through which the tenant held intercourse with any stray visitor or passing stranger who might have mistaken the house. These little excitements, at long intervals, were the only breaks in the continuity of the mysterious solitude and silence that reigned within. These voluntary exiles were not by any means unhappy. To them these obscure retreats from the pitiless world which they so much despised were havens of rest. This, however, was not so in every case. Some—and the majority it is to be feared—found such hermitages well adapted for the Bohemian lives which their occupiers carried on. "Birds of prey" also made them their places of refuge. Adventurers of every description concealed themselves from public observation there. Altogether, the residents in those villas of refuge formed the most heterogeneous class of people that could anywhere be found in the

suburbs of any city upon earth. There were many of those "self-contained" houses in which very respectable people lived—worthy members of society—who preferred them for purposes of air, and health, and comparative freedom of action, to the houses in the continuous regularity of a street. But, as is the case in London society generally, they knew none of their own neighbours, and none of their neighbours knew them. Even in the streets the people in one house knew nothing, and cared less, about the people next door to them. Like solitary stones of witness, these "dwellers in Mesopotamia" had no connection with each other, and were as much isolated as if they were living at the back of the blue mountains.

This being the state of things, it is easy to perceive that whenever circumstances led the clergyman of such a parish to pay a visit—I was one of the curates—he had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with some strange episodes in the history of these people. But, for that matter, every house has its skeleton; and it was the articulation of its joints in the presence of the family, when it was brought forth from the proverbial "cupboard," that supplied interesting facts connected with the curiosities of clerical experience.

There have been some—there always will be—who, so far from courting the charm of solitude as a choice, are, from circumstances, forced to adopt it. Such persons are terribly depressed. The loneliness in the midst of crowds is more difficult to endure than that of the solitude of the forest or the prairie. The constant sense of being within the sound of human voices to which no response can be made, and of confronting human faces in which can be read only the vacancy of estrangement, produces that indescribable feeling of heart-sickness so lowering in its effects upon the animal spirits. The friendly visit of a clergyman to such a family or individual is like news from a far country. To know some one amid the crowd is a boon to those doomed to such exclusive solitude. Were it not for the sympathy of the parochial clergy in such a city as London, there are many who would find life hardly worth living. There are others who, on the other hand, would regard a clerical visit as anything but agreeable. They would be as miserable under the bare idea of clerical inspection as the mouse that built its nest in the cat's ear. And, of course, no clergyman need repeat a visit to any house where his presence would be unwelcome, so that the occupants have it entirely in their own power to receive or to reject the only sure and certain friend to whom they could look for a word of hope to cheer them in their loneliness.

The following episode in my clerical experience may, in some measure, serve to illustrate the curious complications,

and entanglements of social life, which may occasionally be met with in the metropolis.

The interval of time which has elapsed since the event here described took place has so entirely obliterated every trace of the family who are the chief subjects of this sketch, that, except in my own case, their very names are forgotten. No member of the family is now living; and if there were, they could not obtain the slightest clue to their relationship from anything that may be written in these pages.

One Sunday afternoon, in the year 1854, a complete stranger called at my house, and left a message with the servant to the effect that there was a lady lying very ill in a certain street in the parish, mentioning at the same time the number of the house, and that it would be conferring a great favour upon the person who left the message, if the clergyman were to go there. It was particularly requested that no allusion should be made to the fact that anyone suggested that the clergyman should visit the lady in question. I went, as requested, next day at eleven o'clock. The house stood in a side street, near the Regent's Park. It was pleasantly situated, and, in appearance, was above the average. It was one of those residences which contained five bedrooms, two sitting-rooms, and servants' room. It presented an air of comfort, as if the tenants were persons enjoying the surroundings of competent means. As I passed the window, I saw a lady reclining on a sofa in the window, which was partly open to admit fresh air, the weather being very sultry. The door was opened by a young lady, about four-and-twenty, good-looking, and neatly dressed. She hesitated as to giving me admission, and keeping the door partly open, she inquired courteously enough what was the object of my visit. Having explained briefly that I was the curate of the parish, and that my sole object was to know if I could be of any use to the invalid lady, who might, perhaps, be glad to be visited by a clergyman, I was admitted into the hall. Closing the door of the dining-room very gently, she said in a low and almost inaudible voice, that her sister was a very great invalid—that it was very kind on my part to call—but that, as her sister had not expected me, it would not be desirable, in her weak state, to have a stranger introduced to her without first apprising her of the matter, and therefore, she would be much obliged if I would call next day at the same hour.

Punctually at the appointed time I presented myself at the house, next day. The door was opened by the same person as before. When I got inside, I was informed that the invalid lady would be very glad to see me, and, without further preface, I was at once shown into the drawing-room, and introduced to her. She was about eight-and-twenty years of age

— sad, worn, and wan — far advanced in consumption; had evidently been very handsome, and even still, in spite of the ravages of disease, the remains of her former beauty were not obliterated. She lay on the same sofa on which I had seen her the day before as I passed by her house. On seeing me she assumed an appearance of cheerfulness, and, in a few and formal words, she thanked me for calling. Being very feeble, the sight of a stranger flurried her a little, and she became a little excited. On such occasions there is nothing so unpleasant for both parties as the suspense of an awkward pause. Accordingly, in order to avoid it, I began immediately by saying that, if quite agreeable to her, I should be glad to call every day, or every second day, as she pleased, if my visits would not bore her; that my doing so might tend to break up the monotony of a sick-room, and perhaps cheer up her mind. My remarks had the desired effect of putting her at her ease; and, after thanking me, she said that she would be glad to see me whenever I found it convenient to call. In reply to a remark of mine, as to the probability of her having been long confined to her room, she said, "Yes, for the last three months, or thereabouts. My doctor tells me that I cannot recover. I am suffering now from dropsy; and at times I am in much pain. My sister is my only companion during the day, as my husband has to go to his place of business."

Knowing nothing of the antecedents of the family—not even their names, and not daring to intrude so far as to ask—I was in entire ignorance of their circumstances or social position. After a little further conversation of a somewhat desultory character, I waited a fitting opportunity to ask if she would wish me to read a few verses of the Bible with her. To this she assented, but with some slight hesitation. Assuming that she had an ordinary acquaintance with the Scriptures, I inquired if she would like me to read about our Lord's allusion to the lifting up of the brazen serpent, by Moses, in the wilderness, as recorded in the third chapter of St. John's Gospel. She said, "I cannot say that I remember it. In fact, I know hardly anything about the Bible: I have not read it for years. My life has been very chequered, and my health has been very precarious." I proceeded to read the passage referred to in the conversation which Christ held with Nicodemus. I then briefly explained the circumstances recorded in the book of Numbers—the fiery serpents, the murmuring of the people, their punishment, and the Divine remedy for their complete restoration. To all this she listened with attention; and, having finished my remarks, I inquired if there was anything she would like to ask me upon the sub-

ject. "No," she said; "I know I am very ignorant, but I hope God will make allowance for it and for my sins; they are very many. I don't care to live; but I am not fit to die. My life has been a sad one; and my greatest misfortune is that I ever was born."

The tone of voice in which the lady spoke, her look of sadness, and the broken accents in which she gave utterance to her depression of spirits, very plainly indicated that she had a hard experience of sorrow. After a short prayer I left, and promised that I should call again next day. Her sister, who was present all the time, preceded me to the hall, when she said, "Ah! sir, you don't know what a sufferer my sister has been. Her life has been full of trials: at present, neither she nor I can tell you much about it. She may, perhaps, tell you later on, when she knows you better."

Next day, same hour, I called again. The invalid was on the sofa, as before. The more I looked at her face, the more plainly it told a tale of something more than physical suffering. Care, long continued, had traced its lineaments upon her features. After I had taken my seat, she said, in a feeble, faltering tone of voice, that she had mentioned to her husband my having called, and also my promise to call again. And then she added, "Your remarks about religion I repeated to him; and as I did so, being very weak, I could not help crying when I thought how soon I have to appear before God, and how utterly unfit I am to go into His presence. My husband was annoyed, and he said he would write and ask you not to come again. I state this because you may receive a letter from him in the course of the day." I told her at once, that, as her husband did not wish me to go to her house, I had no option in the matter, though I much regretted his decision. I said I should like to call on him.

"Yes," she said, "I wish very much you could do so, because I am certain he does not understand that my crying did not arise from anything that you said to me, but because my heart was very sad when I remember what I have gone through in the past, and think of the unknown future before me. I dare not speak to my husband about religion—he does not believe in it, and he never goes either to church or chapel. My life has been clouded, and it was the recollection of this that depressed me—not your words. Still, he will have it that it was your talking to me about religion, and all that, which made me fret. Do, please, call upon him this evening."

It was easy enough to notice that there was some family secret—some mystery of sorrow in her past experience of which I as yet knew nothing. I had no right to ask. My duty was to try and cheer the invalid, and if she felt disposed

to communicate anything to me—"any weighty matter" with which her conscience might be burdened—that was her affair; but I do not think it is the part of any clergyman to inquire or to pry into any family or individual secrets. Seeing that she was much depressed, I asked her if I might leave with her a published sermon, entitled "A Cure for Care," preached by one of the most gifted pulpit orators of his day, from whose lips I first heard the simple and intelligent story of the Redemption. I allude to the late Lord Bishop of Cork, familiarly but affectionately known by the young men who attended his public ministry in Dublin, before he was elevated to the Bench, as "John Gregg." To what an opening world of new ideas he was the means of introducing my mind! I remember to this day, with all the vividness of detail, the first sermon I ever heard him preach. It was from Gal. iii. 10-13. That sermon riveted my attention. The man, his manner, and the matter, all combined powerfully to impress upon my mind the subject, which he handled with extraordinary ability and clearness. It was the first time in my life that I ever heard the plain, simple Gospel. And I have never forgotten it or him. Peace to his memory, and honour to his grave! I always had some of his published sermons by me, and on the present occasion I selected the one already referred to, for this sick lady. The subject was admirably adapted to her case. The language was simple, and the thoughts were weighty. Anyone could understand it. No one under the pressure of corroding care could read it without a sense of relief. It was like oil on a troubled sea.

The invalid gladly accepted the sermon, and I left, after promising again that I would call the same evening to see her husband. Meanwhile, in the afternoon I received a letter from him, in which he stated that "he did not want anyone to talk about religion to his wife—that he had *his* ideas on the subject, and that he could read the Prayer-book to her, if she wanted him to do so—that her mind had been disturbed by what I said to her, and that he never knew her to have been depressed before." The latter assertion was very far from the truth, but it suited him to say so. He concluded his letter by "thanking me for having called, but he did not wish me to have any further conversations with the invalid upon religious topics." When one receives such a letter, the best way of replying to it is—*in person.* There is something too cold about pen, ink, and paper. They lack the electrical influence of the human face and voice. Like the weird sisters on the blasted heath, they often brew a caldron of mischief. And, therefore, in many instances it is far better to talk face to face than through the chilling and formal medium of paper-work. With this view, I called the same evening to see the writer. He

himself opened the door, and on seeing me was somewhat taken aback.

"Didn't you receive a letter from me, sir?"

"Yes, sir, and I have come for the purpose of replying to it."

"But, sir, it required no answer, except your doing what I stated—viz., not to visit here any more."

"Exactly so, but I feel persuaded you are under a mistake when you talk of religion making your wife sad. All I did was to read a few verses of the Bible, and pray with her."

"Yes, I know, and I am much obliged to you so far as your good intentions are concerned. But I am of opinion that all this talking to sick persons about religion is very bad, and it makes them feel unhappy. I don't believe in priests or parsons, in church or chapel."

"In that case, sir, you have, I presume, no fear of death?"

"None whatever; I should die this moment without the least fear of any hereafter. I don't believe in any future existence after death."

"I have often noticed that men are very brave when death is far away, but the same men I have observed to be anything but calm when death comes to their bedside. Even if your view of the case be right, death is an awful termination to a man's hopes. What would be the use of honour and virtue if there were no future life, where these moral principles should have a wider scope."

"I simply state my belief—I don't want to argue. The good and the bad both die alike, and pass into annihilation at death. That's my creed, and you can't make me alter it."

"This is not the time or place for that discussion. If you will allow me, I shall be happy to enter into detail with you on that point some other time; but what I wish now to impress upon you is, that it was not my talking about religion to your wife that made her unhappy. The fact is, I found her very much depressed, and if my remarks tended to add to her depression, she would not have requested me to repeat my visit."

"With that I have nothing to do. All I know is, she had been crying before I came home, and on inquiry I heard you had been to visit her as a clergyman. You parsons have a way of talking about death that would drive the very devil himself into a fit of the blues."

"That is only your opinion, based on nothing but your imagination. I make you a very fair offer. Allow me, just for once, to visit your wife again in your presence, and do me the justice of deciding on the merits of the case, whether anything I may say can have any effect but that of cheering her mind. Her sister has been present on the only two occasions I have been here. Ask her what she thinks."

"I decline any such experiment. I have no faith in Bibles, or church, or parsons, or priests, and I don't want to be bored. If my wife wants me to read to her, I can do so without your aid."

After this curt expression of opinion I left the house. The lady's husband was not a man of prepossessing appearance. He looked to be about thirty-five years of age, small in stature, strongly built, sallow complexion, of an irritable and nervous temperament, and not exhibiting the manner or the bearing of a gentleman. I could see, from incidental remarks, that he was afraid, not so much that his wife should hear from me anything about religion, as that I should hear from her anything connected with their family history. This was the real ground of his objection to my visiting her. He had kept her in complete seclusion. Not a creature but her sister and one other lady—an elderly and kindhearted woman—ever visited the house.

Some four or five days passed since my interview with the lady's husband, when, to my surprise, I received a letter from him to the effect that, as his wife was very anxious to see me, he withdrew his objection, and I might call whenever I liked.

I went, next day, at eleven o'clock. The short interval that had elapsed since I saw the invalid showed a marked increase in her symptoms, and it was manifest that she had but a short time to live. She was very glad to see me, and almost her first words were an apology for her husband's brusqueness of manner in his interview with me. She was now unable to sit up, and therefore a bed was made for her in the other part of her dining-room, which was separated by folding-doors from the front portion. She told me she had read the sermon with great pleasure, and it had done her an immense amount of good. "But," she said, "I fear it is too late for me now to turn over a new leaf." I assured her that religion was not so much a matter of time, as of fact; that the merits of our Redeemer were not affected by our applying to Him sooner or later. Sin, like the poison of the fiery serpents, had infected our moral nature, and the sovereign and only remedy for our sins was "looking unto Jesus" as the Israelites looked upon the brazen serpent. After some minutes she seemed calm and peaceful—she took in the ideas implied in the passages of Scripture referred to; and then, changing the conversation, she said that she had something on her mind, and it would relieve her to tell me all about it. The sum and substance of what she said was as follows: Her husband was the proprietor of a gambling-house at the West End—he seldom came home till about three o'clock in the morning. After his dinner at seven o'clock, he left for "his place of business,"

and she saw him no more till somewhat late on the following day. He first met her at her father's house in the country. She was then seventeen years of age. He represented himself as a gentleman living in London, at the West End. Her father also was taken in by the plausible demeanour of her husband. They were married, quite privately, in London, as it was the special request of her husband, and her father made no objection. They went to live first of all at a villa in St. John's Wood. She was left almost all day to herself; her husband left about eight o'clock in the evening, to attend, as he said, to "his place of business." His wife, being a mere child almost, was easily deceived. In reply to inquiries as to his friends, he said he had quarrelled with his relations, and that, having no time for visiting, his acquaintances dropped off one by one. But at last, one day, seeing a letter addressed to her husband, and marked "strictly private," she could not resist the temptation of opening it, and for the first time since she had known her husband, she discovered, to her intense mortification, that she was a gambler's wife in the worst sense of the word. She was dreadfully cut up by this unlooked-for information, and went to her room, and there had a regular good fit of crying. On her husband's return, he saw the opened letter in the dining-room; he became frantic with rage, went to her room, and, finding it locked, burst it open. Seeing his wife bewildered with excess of grief and despair, he became more quiet. He asked her what was the cause of her depression. "That letter in your hand," was her reply. "I now see what your 'place of business' means. You have deceived me and my father, and I can never again regard you with the same feelings that I had before I made this discovery." Her husband told her that she was very foolish, that she knew nothing about the matter. "Very well, then," she said; "let me accompany you this evening to your so-called place of business, and we can soon decide whether I am wrong or not." This home-thrust made her husband furious, and he left the house in a rage. Her father was dead, so, also, was her mother. She had not a friend, except her sister, on earth. The life of four years' entire isolation from the world had soured her disposition and undermined her health. From that date she became melancholy; life had lost its zest, and she had nothing left to live for. Gradually disease of the lungs set in, and, after trying many places of health-resort, she finally went to live in the street where I first saw her. "You don't know, sir," she said to me, "how utterly powerless a woman is in the hands of a husband who chooses to treat her with indifference, but who supplies her with money and everything she requires for her wants." Her sister had just a bare sufficiency to live

upon, and, having no home of her own, she generally resided at a boarding-house at the seaside. She alone knew the facts of the case.

After I heard this narrative of woe, I left, promising to call next day.

I called, but the invalid was not there. She had gone, during the night, to the place where "the weary are at rest." Peacefully she passed away, about one o'clock in the morning, having been unconscious for about two hours before her death. Her husband returned from his "place of business" three hours afterwards. On going into the dining-room, he saw the lonely watcher by her sister's body, and for a moment or two, as his sister-in-law stated, he seemed to feel his position and its surroundings, and, with a long look of pain at the face of his dead wife, whom he had so grossly deceived, he retired, as usual, to his room.

In a few days a very simple funeral took place. A hearse with two horses, and one mourning-coach containing two persons, the husband and the deceased wife's sister, conveyed away the mortal remains of the poor heart-broken woman. The house was shut up, the furniture removed, and, in a few months, new occupants entered into possession. The husband went on with his "professional" occupation as if nothing had occurred. The sister-in-law died soon after, and the husband, I understood, followed both to that land where the righteous reaction of retributive providence metes out the just reward for those unrepented deeds of secret wrongs for which no human law provides any remedy.

G. W. WELDON
(Vicar of Bickley).

Reviews.

Plain Reasons against Joining the Church of Rome. By R. F. LITTLEDALE, LL.D., D.C.L. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
The One Offering. By M. F. SADLER, Prebendary of Wells. London: Bell and Sons.
The Church Quarterly Review, No. 26. January, 1882.
The Sacrificial Aspect of the Holy Eucharist: an Eirenicon. By the Rev. E. F. WILLIS. Parker and Co.

(*Concluded.*)

WE think, then, that the contention of those who would make τοῦτο ποιεῖτε to mean "*sacrifice this*," has been sufficiently disposed of.

But then, taking the words in their natural meaning—Will they not gather, it may be asked, a sacrificial signification from what Christ Himself did at that Passover table? Here we are brought to another question—Did Christ sacrificially offer Himself to the Father in His own Supper?