

Sidelights upon the Eighteenth Century Clergy.

(Concluded from p. 700.)

ONE more quotation from this volume—this time not from a leading article, but from its “Foreign and Domestic Intelligence”:

“Friday the Lords of the Admiralty were pleased to appoint the Rev. Richard Green (*the celebrated mock patriot and pretended duellist*) to be Chaplain of his Majesty’s ship the *Prince of Wales*, of 74 guns.”

To what branch of clerical work the words in italics can refer I leave my readers to guess, for I cannot conceive!

The fiction of the eighteenth century will not do much to relieve this gloomy picture of the clergy of the time. I have very few volumes of the kind upon my shelves, but the contents of those few are not encouraging. The parsons of “Tom Jones” are terrible indeed. And, apart from his “Tristram Shandy,” Laurence Sterne himself—pluralist, scurrilous wit, and neglecter of his own wife—affords a melancholy instance of the worldly ecclesiastic.

There is no lack of evidence as to the nature of contemporary preaching. It was for the most part lengthy, dignified, intellectual, and somnolent. Sir Roger de Coverley’s chaplain preached each Sunday a sermon by one of the acknowledged orators of the time, such as South, Tillotson, and Barrow. These preachers were much admired in their own age, but it is doubtful if they would hold any modern congregation. Their efforts seem to have largely aimed at avoiding “enthusiasm” in themselves or their hearers. As decent pompous moral discourses they were welcomed by an age which looked upon religion chiefly as a magistrate to keep the common folk in order, but they were hardly of a kind to stir the hearer’s conscience or save his soul. Dr. Johnson’s criticism of contemporary preaching, as reported by Boswell, seems to hit the mark exactly. “He observed,” Boswell says, “that the established clergy in general did not preach plain enough, and that polished

periods and glittering sentences flew over the heads of the common people, without any impression upon their hearts." Addison, after describing the method of Sir Roger's chaplain aforesaid, says :

"I was so charmed with the gracefulness of his figure and delivery, as well as the discourses he pronounced, that I think I never passed any time more to my satisfaction. A sermon repeated after this manner is like the composition of a poet in the mouth of a graceful actor. I could heartily wish that more of our country clergy would follow this example; and, instead of wasting their spirits in laborious compositions of their own, would endeavour after a handsome elocution, and all those other talents that are proper to enforce what has been penned by great masters."

Not so says William Cowper. To him plagiarism in the pulpit was a symptom of laziness in the closet and unspirituality in the heart. The sermon-seller is a disgrace to the Church :

"He hails the clergy; and, defying shame,
Announces to the world his own and theirs!
He teaches those to read, whom schools dismissed,
And colleges, untaught; sells accent, tone,
And emphasis in score, and gives to prayer
The *adagio* and *andante* it demands.
He grinds divinity of other days
Down into modern use; transforms old print
To zig-zag manuscript, and cheats the eyes
Of gallery critics by a thousand acts.
Are there who purchase of the doctor's ware?
Oh, name it not in Gath!—it cannot be,
That grave and learned clerks should need such aid.
He doubtless is in sport, and does but droll.
Assuming thus a rank unknown before—
Grand caterer and dry-nurse of the church!"

And the sermon-seller's clients come in for equal censure :

"Would I describe a preacher,
I would express him simple, grave, sincere;
And doctrine uncorrupt; in language plain.
And plain in manner! decent, solemn, chaste,
And natural in gesture; much impressed
Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
May feel it too: affectionate in look,
And tender in address, as well becomes
A messenger of grace to sinful men.
Behold the picture! Is it like?—Like whom?"

The things that mount the rostrum with a skip,
 And then skip down again ; pronounce a text ;
 Cry—hem ; and reading what they never wrote,
 Just fifteen minutes, huddle up their work,
 And with a well-bred whisper close the scene !”

The affected preacher is especially contemptible :

“ In man or woman, but far most in man,
 And most of all in man that ministers
 And serves the altar, in my soul I loath
 All affectation. ’Tis my perfect scorn ;
 Object of my implacable disgust.
 What !—will a man play tricks, will he indulge
 A silly fond conceit of his fair form,
 And just proportion, fashionable mien,
 And pretty face, in presence of his God ?
 Or will he seek to dazzle me with tropes,
 As with the di’mond on his lily hand,
 And play his brilliant parts before my eyes,
 When I am hungry for the bread of life ?”

Dr. Calamy, in his autobiography, tells of a young City incumbent who was rash enough to preach at a funeral a sermon of Calamy's which had been printed some time before. The widow, finding out by accident that the sermon was not original, sent the preacher half a guinea instead of the usual guinea. Foolishly enough, the preacher grumbled loudly at this, and, explanation following upon his complaints, his plagiarism was made known to all.

Over against these gloomy pictures we have to record the fact that Oliver Goldsmith could draw a decent priest in his “Vicar of Wakefield,” and a saintly one in “The Deserted Village.” Addison speaks, for the most part, with great respect of the clergy. He tells of a parson who frequented his club, and was respected by all its members for his candour and intellectual force ; whilst Sir Roger's chaplain is moral and decent, if somewhat weak. Dr. Johnson has nothing to say against Church divines. I have waded through my Boswell, and, though the great man mentions sometimes vice or folly in individual ecclesiastics, I cannot find (with the exception of the criticism on their preaching quoted above) a deprecatory remark upon the clergy as a class.

The Church had not allowed her torch of witness to flicker quite away when the leading man of contemporary letters could speak of the cure of souls as a heavy burden and an awful charge. In one of Dr. Johnson's "Conversations" we find the following remarks :

"EDWARDS. I wish I had continued at College.

"JOHNSON. Why do you wish that, Sir ?

"EDWARDS. Because I think I should have had a much easier life than mine has been. I should have been a parson, and had a good living, like Bloxham and several others, and lived comfortably.

"JOHNSON. Sir, the life of a parson, of a conscientious clergyman, is not easy. I have always considered a clergyman as the father of a larger family than he is able to maintain. I would rather have Chancery suits upon my hands than the cure of souls. No, Sir, I do not envy a clergyman's life as an easy life, nor do I envy the clergyman who makes it an easy life."

The Church had not allowed the ideals of the ministry wholly to perish when the son of a parish priest could limn such a portrait as this :

"A man he was to all the country dear,
And passing rich with forty pounds a year;
Remote from towns he ran his godly race,
Nor e'er had chang'd, nor wish'd to change his place ;
Unskilful he to fawn, or seek for power,
By doctrines fashion'd to the varying hour ;
Far other aims his heart had learn'd to prize,
More bent to raise the wretched than to rise.

Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride,
And e'en his failings lean'd to Virtue's side ;
But in his duty prompt at every call,
He watch'd and wept, he pray'd and felt for all ;
And, as a bird each fond endearment tries,
To tempt its new-fledg'd offspring to the skies,
He tried each art, reprov'd each dull delay,
Allur'd to brighter worlds, and led the way.

Beside the bed where parting life was laid,
And sorrow, guilt, and pain, by turns dismay'd,
The rev'rend champion stood. At his control,
Despair and anguish fled the struggling soul ;
Comfort came down the trembling wretch to raise,
And his last falt'ring accents whisper'd praise.

At church, with meek and unaffected grace,
His looks adorn'd the venerable place ;
Truth from his lips prevail'd with double sway,

And fools, who came to scoff, remain'd to pray.
 The service past, around the pious man,
 With steady zeal, each honest rustic ran ;
 E'en children follow'd with endearing wile,
 And pluck'd his gown, to share the good man's smile.
 His ready smile a parent's warmth express'd,
 Their welfare pleas'd him, and their cares distress'd ;
 To them his heart, his love, his griefs, were given,
 But all his serious thoughts had rest in heaven."

And William Law, who did so much to restore reality to religion in an age of religious formalism, has given, in his picture of "Ouranium," a still more touching and beautiful expression to the Church's conception of the priestly office :

"Ouranium is a holy priest, full of the spirit of the Gospel, watching, labouring, and praying for a poor country village. Every soul in it is as dear to him as himself ; and he loves them all, as he loves himself, because he prays for them all, as often as he prays for himself. . . .

"When Ouranium first entered into holy orders, he had a haughtiness in his temper, a great contempt and disregard for all foolish and unreasonable people ; but he has prayed away this spirit.

"The rudeness, ill-nature, or perverse behaviour of any of his flock, used at first to betray him into impatience ; but it now raises no other passion in him, than a desire of being upon his knees in prayer to God for them. . . .

"It would strangely delight you to see with what spirit he converses, with what tenderness he reproves, with what affection he exhorts, and with what vigour he preaches ; and it is all owing to this, because he reproves, exhorts, and preaches to those for whom he first prays to God. . . .

"At his first coming to his little village, it was as disagreeable to him as a prison, and every day seemed too tedious to be endured in so retired a place. He thought his parish was too full of poor and mean people, that were none of them fit for the conversation of a gentleman. . . .

"But now his days are so far from being tedious, or his parish too great a retirement, that he now only wants more time to do that variety of good, which his soul thirsts after. The solitude of his little parish is become matter of great comfort to him, because he hopes that God has placed him and his flock there, to make it their way to Heaven.

"He can now not only converse with, but gladly attend and wait upon the poorest kind of people, and is so far from desiring to be considered a gentleman, that he desires to be used as the servant of all ; and in the spirit of his Lord and Master girds himself, and is glad to kneel down and wash any of their feet."

Into which spirit may God ever more and more lead us clergy of the twentieth century !

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