

The Clerical Subaltern.

FROM the time that he reads himself in shyly and self-consciously, to the day when he receives his presentation to a living, and removes, we may hope, to a more important sphere of independence, our subaltern is well before the limelight. "Our Curate" all call him, as if he were a parish institution and possession, which he is. And during this long or short interval he is made or marred, stamped with the hall-mark of popular approval, or damned as a ghastly failure and nonentity. Reputations are soon made, or lost, in the parochial world, and our Curate is no exception.

Now, like an old sea captain, who has travelled over many a mile of ocean, and loves to point out to some sea apprentice the perils of the way, its shoals and rocks, I would fain draw upon the past to help those whose feet are on the verge of the new life, or just beyond it.

Some of these rocks we have, maybe, struck upon ourselves, and much of our experience has been bought in dear markets, so, lest our knowledge should die with us, we must give it vent. We may misread our life's pages, or others may have read them better, but we are not absolved from the duty of saying the word which we think is good and helpful.

Like all lives, the Curate's life has its lights and shadows, and, like all other lives, the shadows are mostly of his own making. It should be light, it is meant to be light, and its lights when present are the brightest of all lights, but its shadows are darker too, when he turns to the left and plays the fool.

Perhaps the great outstanding fact in the history of the Curate is the change for the better which has come to his fortunes as a class. These are halcyon days for him compared with the past. Relatively, he is in clover.

His status is higher, for one thing. There must be few alive to-day who remember the old depressing days when a Curate was left on the Vicar's doorstep and treated as a menial, when the high and mighty Rector never thought of even shaking hands with him, when hospitality towards him was scanty. The Vicar treated him as the Bishop treated the Vicar, for all was of a piece in those humiliating days.

His stipend is higher too, happily. Not tearingly great even now, it has risen in our own days by leaps and bounds. And the end of this good improvement is not yet reached. A stipend which has wellnigh doubled in a generation points to a decided amelioration of a man's lot. There is no need now to speak of men "passing rich on forty pounds a year."

His value has increased even more, for we are treated to-day to the spectacle of Vicars running after Curates and not of Curates running after badgered Vicars. No one is more in request, more advertised for, or more treasured. And this too is something to be thankful for, unless it turns his head and makes him conceited. For he can pick and choose to his heart's content, and loftily say Yes or No to the panting hunters.

And it follows from all this that his independence is most fully assured in any parish where he may elect to work. He cannot be ordered about in the old unpleasant way, neither can he be bound down with his nose to the grindstone, and compelled to do allotted tasks about which he has not been consulted. He is certainly a freer and so far a more self-respecting man.

How much net gain for the Curate there is in all these changes it requires no very vivid imagination to appreciate.

But all changes bring their own special pitfalls, and in some ways the new ones are deeper and more threatening than the old.

He is no longer tempted to undue obsequiousness to the powers that be. He can lift his head with the best, and carry himself as a true freeman should. He has the opportunity now to remember that he too is a servant of the Lord with rights as palpable as a Bishop's, although in a different order. Spiritually, he is below none.

The fear now is lest he should think himself better than most, and, in his new-born democracy, lift his head too high. For he may imagine in his short-sightedness that his new value in the parish world is due to his personality rather than to his class. He is apt to forget that if his ranks were to be largely increased his value in the market would decline to the old level. Forgetting all this, he may too easily lose his head and mar his usefulness. A man is never so small a man as when he becomes too large for his place.

And it may be due to this that we hear so loud an outcry from some of our elder brethren that a change for the worse has come

over the Curate world or, as they put it, the breed is changed. It may be that they have not realized the changed condition of things to-day when they lament the good old times, but, even with this measure of discount applied, the possibility of a deterioration must be recognized. Other times, other men ; other men, other manners.

There is a justifiable expectation that a junior should not give himself airs, that he should be willing to receive orders as one under authority, and should not forget that age, larger experience, and perhaps larger culture should have their weight in establishing positions. The reins must be in somebody's hands if the ecclesiastical chariot is to go forward at all, and it appears more seemly that they should be in those of the Vicar than of the Curate.

Perhaps, too, the younger men are more apt than of old to stand upon their rights and to press them to an extremity. And this being so, they are more likely to take offence, imagine slights, and generally assert themselves. From which cause arise many sadnesses, for those of us who have lived longer in the world have discovered that fighting for one's own hand is a short cut to clenching other people's hands, and of possibly ensuring as many losses as gains. The partition between justice to ourselves and injustice to others is very thin.

This danger to which a present-day Curate is exposed is only one of many, and it will not be amiss if here we point out a few of the menacing things which our subaltern will have to reckon with.

In his freedom he may do less than his duty. This is evident.

A clerk in an office knows his hours to a stroke, and knows too what his day's work is. He is under his master's eye, and at his master's call. He cannot slacken off, even if he would. But a Curate is left necessarily very much to himself and his own initiative. He is not tied to hours or to duties, saving his regular church ones. Now a man who has all this liberty, and is trusted so implicitly, may waste his time enormously, and, if he wills, lead a pretty lazy life. Being left to his conscience, his energy will depend on whether his conscience is of the rigid or the slack sort.

Or he may do his work formally and thus fatally.

For a spiritual man cannot estimate the work he has done by the number of hours expended upon it, by the number of sermons he may preach, nor even by the number of visits he has paid. In reality, he may not have preached one satisfactory sermon, and all

his work may be so vitiated by the alien spirit in which it has been done as to amount to a simple cipher. What is his work in Christ's sight? How will it appear in the Great Day? How much life was there in it? It is this which makes formality so deadly. Days of seeming work will often be days altogether blank.

Our subaltern, like his fellows in the ministry, and even perhaps more so, may be shunted off on perilous courses. He is young, we will say, he is active in his temperament, he loves the society of his friends, male and female, and just for a diversion he takes his exercise in some manly game. Quite so. Who will gainsay him in all lawful exercise? No sensible man or woman. But suppose he overdoes it, repeats it too often, and makes it a business in his efforts to excel? Suppose it all diverts him from the profession which is his, and makes him less active in his duties. This is a nice point which has to be faced by every ardent young Curate, because he may be found crossing the line into forbidden land. If the Curate be swallowed up in the sportsman, it is the Curate who suffers, and the Curate's parish. And the cost will be found too large.

There is also a danger lest our Curate may be made a catspaw for party purposes. Once let him listen to the disaffected, and he gets upon an inclined plane which may lead him into absolute disloyalty. For where is the parish where some disaffected people are not found? And, being there, what more likely—yea, certain is it—than that these bitter people will be only too glad to find a leader so admirable as the Curate, and who will lay themselves out to corrupt him to their hands. They will praise him to the very eyes, they will extol his preaching as so much better than the Vicar's, they will try to find some sore place in his subaltern skin which is a little raw and rub it for all they are worth, they will ask his opinion as being worth so much more than his chief's, and so they will play upon the young mind until he is committed to some incriminating word or deed quite disloyal and rebellious.

You see, he is very young, very ductile, very open to flattery, and very inexperienced in the ways of a naughty world, and so he falls into the trap. But not, however, if he sees it and hates the spirit of disloyalty too much to take the first step in its direction.

A man once branded with disloyalty is blasted for life, and such a man is not only not a true Christian, he is not even a gentleman. Fly disloyalty, then, as you would fly the devil.

The danger of restlessness is not an unknown one in the Curate's life. No sooner are some men settled down in a parish than they fancy that they are led somewhere else. Tempted by a better stipend, by less wearing work, or by other inducements, they pack up and go. And so they fritter away their lives in moves. There is little good to be said of this constant unsettlement. It is apt to give a man a bad character, however undeserved. Patrons look doubtfully on the man of many moves. If a subaltern thinks that he will ever find a parochial Elysium in any diocese he may as well give up the idea at once. The perfect Vicar, the perfect congregation, the perfect climate have never yet appeared upon earth, and it is not likely that they ever will on this side of the Millennium. Besides, restlessness is an internal disease which no perfection of parish will ever cure. It is the organic disease of the Curate himself.

He will have his ambitions too, which may be lawful or not, though some he is bound to have. He must be on the look out lest they lead him astray and spoil his ministry. He may wish to excel, to become a fine and popular preacher, to be talked about, and to shine in the world's fine favour. And this may easily become a snare to him. Self will sit enshrined in all that he does under this kind of inspiration, and the lawful purposes of his life will be quenched and stifled. That he should wish for a living is quite lawful and natural; all Curates do. But he may wish it too strongly, wish it too absorbingly, wish it to the detriment of his work and the kindling of discontent with his present lot. He may wish for his independent sphere so much as to take strange ways to accomplish his longing, and badger patrons until they become sick of him. There is nothing which requires so strong a curb upon it as ambition. An ounce of contentment is worth a ton of it.

Perhaps it is useless to dissuade men from this inordinate craving for an independent sphere, but they will do well to remember that their life's main troubles will begin when they sit in the cherished seat of a Vicar. Vicars taste more poverty than Curates, and fat livings go not half so far as fat curacies. Expenses increase enormously; responsibilities are more galling; and half the Vicars wish themselves back in the old days when cares were few, and when, if they made mistakes, their Vicars had to bear the brunt of them. To exchange a good curacy for a meagre living is to leave a com-

parative palace for a workhouse. Of course the former Curate finds some bits of sunshine in his independence, and I would not deny it. He is no longer dependent on another's will, except that of the parish, which is often far more galling. He is a free man in his movements, and can if he likes tack another week on to his summer holiday, but he will have to find the money for it. He has something which he can call his own in a peculiar way, his own at first hand and not at second hand. Then he can have as much preaching as he likes and not be relegated to the background by a Vicar; probably he will wish for less before he has been a Vicar long. Still, there are charms in his new life, even though you deduct so many drawbacks. And then, if he wants to marry, which is more than likely, the advent of a living will probably facilitate that event. And this will, no doubt, outshine every other consideration in this bit of his ambition. And is it not an idea familiar to all such persons that two can live cheaper than one, and that love in a cottage is the cheapest and happiest thing on earth? Well, well; we have to find out things for ourselves, and so do before very long.

Our Curate, if he be wise, will be much on his guard against flattery. There are foolish people in every parish who will think to please by saying delightful things. They do not mind so much whether they are true, but that is a trifle. The best people know better than to play with such edged tools, and probably have opinions which it would not be so pleasant to listen to. But those who have axes which need grinding, those who wish to curry favour, those who wish to put a Vicar's nose out of joint, if they can, those who wish to be popular with the Curate, will pile on the flattery so thick that you cannot see the stale plain bread which it covers. And he is so willing to hear such delightful things and more than half ready to believe it all, being the echo of his own foolish thoughts, that he swallows it all without winking. Later on, he will probably discover that these flatterers have become his open foes. Let the clerical subaltern then hold the flatterer at arm's length, and further back still, if he can. They are an odious class, and exceedingly mischievous. Better have them for your enemies than your friends. They are safer so.

If a Curate is married then he will have to look out for perils which his single brother will escape. For to his angles must be added

the angles of the lady. And where she has angles these are apt to be sharper than the man's. I mean no disrespect, but, having oftentimes a more definite and unrelieved character and disposition, she must perforce have corners of the same definite hardness and protrusiveness. Any way, experience shows that where a man alone can keep the peace, the man plus the wife finds it much harder. We may apportion the blame as we please.

The wife, you see, is an unpaid subaltern, and therefore under no constraints. And yet she has a semi-official position in the parish. Being coupled together by law, they are coupled also in the eye of the parish as one person like shadow and substance. Again no disrespect, but a plain fact which may be seen with the naked eye, the stronger one of the pair being, of course, the substance. And therefore they bear praise and blame more or less together.

Now the Curate's wife may get on excellently with the Vicar, but she may get on very badly with the Vicar's wife. On the other hand, they may be the best of friends, and then there can be no storms. But if they should happen by chance not to hit it off well together, then I am sorry for all persons concerned, and especially sorry for the parish and the husbands.

And there are so many things to disagree about, should they feel so disposed. She may think her husband badly treated, and very possibly will set this down to the interference of the Vicar's wife. Or she may imagine some slight or neglect, or some evil-disposed person may bring some tale attributed to the lips of the Vicar's wife, or a thousand other things of small or large calibre may arise. Given a Curate's wife of the sensitive order, or endowed with no small sense of her own importance, and you may expect anything from a storm in a teacup to a roaring hurricane. Things begin to hum ominously when the wives set up their backs. And then parties form and two camps are found in one parish.

The Curate's wife, having naturally the ear of the Curate, makes mischief there, and, being her natural ally, he enters the fray with more or less impetuosity, and the war clouds gather faster.

Now I am not saying that the Curate's wife may not be in the right all the time, and have just cause for indignation. She possibly may be right. I am only saying that the Curate's wife brings another element of risk into the parish circle, for were she not there that special storm centre would have had no existence. And I say

it, not with a view to lecture the wife, but just to set our friend the subaltern on his guard as to the possibility of trouble.

But what can he do, poor fellow, under the danger? Must he not take the risk and leave it to chance? Not necessarily. He may be a soothing influence for peace behind the scenes. He may be able to point out where his wife was wrong, if he is wise enough to think that she can ever be wrong. He may minimize small things, and reduce them to their right perspective. He may put some more charitable construction on what has given such dire offence. He may be able perhaps to limit the expression of his wife's woe by gently suggesting that the least said soonest mended. Or, as a last expedient, only to be used when the hopelessness of mending the breach is evident, he may carry her sobbing form out of the danger zone and get another curacy. She may do better in another parish with another Vicar's wife. But then, if our subaltern is of the malleable sort, who lives only to please and keep the peace at home by giving in on all occasions, and only lives to echo his wife's sentiments, then to all intents and purposes he ceases to exist as an element in the situation, and she is the supreme master.

Of course, the remedy for this danger is to be provided at an earlier date when our friend makes his choice, and if he could only be persuaded to look a little forward and imagine the future and its dangers he might also be advised to choose his bride not for her face so much as for her common sense and tact and peaceableness. A Curate's wife does not save parish situations by good looks and cleverness so much as by gentleness and good sense.

From all that has been said thus far it is evident that it takes a good all-round man to be a good Curate, and that only the best man is likely to come through so many perils unscathed. One thing is certain, that unless he has these necessary endowments within, all the Orders in the world are not going to make him fit. Orders give authority, but never fitness.

Let us then see what these inner fitnesses are.

Well, first and foremost, he must be able to set before himself the great Master Whom he serves. We serve the Lord Christ. His Master is not then so much any earthly authority as heavenly. Not the Vicar, or the Bishop, or the congregation, but Christ. He is a servant of the King.

This aspect of service lifts the whole atmosphere of it, for there will be no man-worship, no playing for popularity, no seeking to please and attract, but a lofty ambition to please His Great Master. How much this motive will save him from is incalculable. It will help to steer him through some of the most dangerous channels in his ministerial life. He will steer by a Star. It is when low motives disappear, and the highest take their place, that a man is at his best. And then, behold, he has pleased others too, so far as they are worth pleasing. This is through the bounty of Him Who thus honours the aim that is spiritual and lofty.

Then, while he is anxious to put Christ highest, he is just as anxious to eliminate self. The one is really a complement of the other, for we cannot hold self and Christ as objects of pursuit in the same heart. And when self is gone, what a blessed clearance for the heart and work! For more men go down through striking this rock of self than from any other cause. Self-love and self-pursuit are the subtlest poisons distilled in hell, and injected into a minister's soul-veins curse him absolutely. They paralyse all his higher centres, and turn his movements into those of an automaton, lifeless, dead and useless. They take the pith out of his sermons, the virtue out of his visits, and the power out of himself. But self goes when Christ comes.

It is of first importance, too, in his career that he should love it supremely. So long as there is a contest between our work and our pleasures, there is clearly lack of heart in spiritual matters. Our work ought to be our joy, and we should extract our best pleasure from it. To admit a rival is an act of treason. It is this which makes our ministry so delightful, because it chimes in with our taste and sets our hearts singing in a constant refrain while we are engaged in it. For in all the world there is nothing which gives such high delight as the pursuit of such a ministry as ours. On the other hand, of all the drudgeries and the drags nothing excels that of the daily round which is a daily treadmill, because we would prefer to be doing something more terrestrial. It is here that we make our discoveries. The moment that we lose heart in our work for God, that moment something within us has broken. The main-spring is out of order. We need treatment.

Then his fitness must be made fitter by all those many means which we all know. He must be a man of prayer, for certain He

must be a man of faith too, trusting our Lord for the supplies without which all natural gifts are unavailing. He must be a man of method, parcelling out his time with all wisdom. He must be hopeful, for how else can he preach the Gospel of hope? He must ever keep in touch with the Master Whom he must ever lean upon. Just as a gymnast keeps himself in condition by training day by day, so must the Curate and all we ministers see that we keep in good condition bodily, mentally, and, above all, spiritually. With such gorgeous supplies close at hand it is criminal to run alone and depend on self.

He Who called the man to the work does not send him unsupplied to his tasks, and does not grudge plenty and to spare for each task as it comes up. Let none then fail in the faith which sees and believes and takes and uses.

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[The next article in this series will be published in February, and will treat of " Party and Party Spirit."]

