

Parochial Vignettes.

VI. THE PARSON'S WIFE.

(Concluding Article.)

GREATLY daring, I am attempting to consider the place, power, and excellencies of the Parson's wife. If in the course of my thoughts her deficiencies creep in, it will be pardoned for the sake of truth. There are lights and shades in every class of human kind, and they will not be found lacking here. That she is an important personality in the parish in which her lot is cast, all must acknowledge. For weal or woe she is second to none, not even to the Squire's wife. It is true she is only an accessory and is imported, not by ecclesiastical ordinance, but by the will, and under the shadow of, the Vicar, yet, once there, her unofficial presence is conspicuous to a degree. From the first day to the last of her sojourn in the parish she stands out in the limelight, and moves under the scrutinising and critical eye of a sometimes kindly, sometimes unkindly, public. In fact, she is a power to be reckoned with, and summed up.

There is nobody in the world so thrown upon her own native resources as the Parson's wife. Like the poet, if a success, she is born, not made. Untrained, as a rule, passing through no special discipline for her arduous post, she is plunged into the whirl of semi-public life whether she can swim or not. It is a case of swimming or sinking. It is therefore to her credit that she rarely sinks, and swims with more or less facility. In truth, she is often found swimming, when her poor husband is struggling in the parochial seas, and nigh to sinking.

Instances many will occur to most minds, I think.

And here let me say boldly that in the face of a great celibate church, and despite the anathemas to which a married clergy are exposed by a Church which is wiser apparently than nature or Scripture, our Parsons' wives have more than justified their existence. And the Romanists would say so too if they were not more keen on having a fighting body at their sole disposal untrammelled from a tie which would keep them ever so little from subjection to themselves. They will have no divided affections, and prefer to crush

the wife rather than endanger their mastery. It is in their case the Church against the home, the Church against nature, the Church against womanhood.

It would be too large a question to consider how far the Roman Church has suffered for the lack of the humanising influence of the wife, whether a gentler voice would have made itself heard, whether the harshness and the almost savagery of the priest in history would not have been modified by the womanly element at the man's elbow. Shorn of all that was soft and kind and feminine, left to their inhumanity, what wonder that the Inquisitors should have racked and burned? With no gentle, detaining hand possible, we need not marvel that mercy was left out and that the brute became paramount.

But we must not be drawn aside by speculations, however interesting, from the main object of our inquiry, which is the Parson's wife as she lives, and moves, and talks, and works under our very eyes.

Let us first of all *define her place*.

There is, of course, the woman's sphere and the man's, and smooth working depends naturally on each keeping to their own line of metals, like the trams in our streets. It prevents collisions. Naturally, her place is not the first. However great her ability or powers of management, she can never be the Vicar of the parish. She is just a helper. She may, and no doubt will, pull strings behind the throne, and manage her husband to her heart's content if he does not mind, but before the world and the parish he is the superior always. A wise woman will recognize it. And even when she uses her lawful power in the home she will, if she be wise, do so silently and secretly. Her place is inside the coach, and his on the box, and it is better if she stays inside and abstains from even getting on the box beside him. There is a little pneumatic tube which may be used to communicate with the driver, and of this no doubt she will avail herself at times with advantage to the safety and direction of the coach. But even this should not be used too ostentatiously. Not, however, that a wise husband will wish to keep her in subjection. This would be sheer slavery. She will have her definite sphere, in which she will be the mistress, and which she will adorn far better than he ever can. A man in a **Mothers' Meeting**, for instance, is like a fish out of water. A class

of girls, too, is beyond him. But she knows her sex, and understands their ways and artifices and peculiarities. And now that so much is being done for women the sphere of the Parson's wife is by no means restricted. There let her be queen, subject, of course, to proper restrictions in the very nature of things parochial. Neither will she be able quite to share her husband's whole life, for many of the secrets he is told in confidence he must not share even with her. The golden rule of a married life is to have no secrets from each other, and personal secrets even the Parson will not have, but other people's secrets are not his to share, and on them his lips should be hermetically sealed.

But her chief sphere is not a public one at all. Her real parish is her husband, and over him she can and will exercise the best of care. And where there are children too, she knows as a mother which should come first of all. It is not merely a question of minding the house and mending the stockings and keeping everything domestic in good order. She can make it easy for him to do his work; she can make him fitter to do it mentally and physically; she shares his mental interests; she can save him from the endless worry of a parson's life; she can be a kindly spur to help him along when apathetic, or a spirit of optimism to cheer him when oppressed, or a mentor to hew a way through his many difficulties, for a woman's wit can wind through devious ways which a mere man will find it hard to strike. In fact, a good wife doubles the Parson's powers and contributes just the elements which he is almost sure to lack. Of how many Parsons must it be said that it was his wife who made a man of him. She has softened his harshnesses, warmed his heart, and kept the spiritual to the fore when the mind was in danger of drowning the heart. And if sometimes she has been useful to him as a spur, not infrequently she has hung on to him as a drag, preventing some precipitate action which he would be sorry for later. Her delicate tact is worth a fortune to the blundering man, and the bloom and edge of his ministry have often been of her providing. Over his sermons, too, if she be a woman of courage and discernment, she will prove her worth, for she can say what no one else can dare to say, and no man worth his salt will resent it. She can brisk him up in his sermons, as she has probably had to do in his appearance, and send him forth spick and span before his people. His "white horses"

she will detect and declare. His tricks of manner and faults of inflection she will detect. If he is too long she can in her inimitable way shorten him, and if he is too short lengthen him out. If turbid in his sermonic flow she can clear him, and if he has unwittingly said something foolish she can lay her finger upon it and show it up. Love is not afraid to do all this, for she lives not to please but to make more pleasing. And love can say anything. Of course, she must have managed more or less to be abreast of him in knowledge of things, but that is not difficult for the clever wife, and as a matter of fact the clergy in the mass are not very advanced in their intellectual standards. She may never be a philosopher, but she will always have a ready wit and nimbleness of mind which can see clearly by intuition and instinct. She may not know how she arrives at a thing, but that she gets there is evident to all.

Then her sphere is to run a model home in the face of the parish. And rich are the fruits of a Vicarage where everything is as it should be. Its regular hours, its pieties, its peaceableness, its serenity, its utilities will stand out as a beacon to the homes which are broken and sad. And its lessons will not be lost, for every eye turns towards the Parson's house, and the busy little birds flit about the parish telling all of its excellencies. Every Vicarage home is set upon the hill-top, and it cannot possibly be hidden. Her hospitalities, too, will be famous, for up to the limits of her means she will be generous and kindly, treating all alike with a liberal and loving hand. Not that she will be hospitable to the mere beggar, for she will have the wit to see through the whine, and detect the reality beneath. Because she is tender she is not a fool. To rich and poor, to young and old, her hand will be extended in welcome, and, free from all exclusiveness, she will feel that she lives for all.

Such is a part of the sphere of the Parson's wife. There is much that one might have dwelt on had space permitted, such as her sympathy with the sick and suffering, her care for the lonely ones, her love for the little ones, and her special care for the neglected ones. For, being the mother of the parish, she, like the good mother, looks after the feeblest and neediest first.

Let us now ponder a little over her *trials and difficulties*. For certain it is that her lot will not prove a bed of roses. There will be disillusionments many, and she may wish before very long that she had been some one and somewhere else. For the Parson's wife,

like the Parson, is the parish target at which many a bolt will be shot. There will be trials from the critics, trials from the gossips, trials from the jealous, and trials from the superior ones. Human nature in parishes, I fancy, finds it come more natural to blame than to praise; at least most natures work out so.

Certainly, the Parson's wife must not expect to give complete satisfaction, nor to please everybody. Either she does too much and is meddling and interfering, or she does too little and is lazy. She will have imputed to her things she never said, and she will have put to her credit actions she never did or thought of doing. She will day by day pass through all extremes of climate; now she will be gushed over, and later she will catch sight of an averted shoulder. She will be misrepresented continually. If she says too little she is reserved. If she says too much she is "such a talker." Little innocent reflections are often so twisted that, after going the round of the parish, she will fail to recognize them as her own, if she should chance to hear them.

She will get abundant credit for everything after she is gone, and her successor will be told of her good deeds to repletion, but so long as she is on the spot she must live in hope. And the trouble is that it is usually because she does so much that she lays herself open to such reflections. Had she been lazy, only showing herself once a week to the parish, she would probably escape any unpleasantnesses. The mistake the parish makes is that they misunderstand her position, and do not realize that she is not at their disposal at all except by way of benevolence. She is a voluntary worker, and not a paid curate. And woe betide her if she is sick for too long. For then there is a standing grievance against her, and they feel that she is a fraud and ought to make way for some stronger successor. The parish is not getting their money's worth, it seems, and it resents it. As if the poor Parson's wife enjoyed being ill, or were ill on purpose.

Neither is this all the tale of her woes, for in addition to her own peculiar ones she has to bear her husband's as well. So she is between a double fire. If he becomes unpopular, somehow she is covered with the same pall. And when you add to all this a supposed criminality of the poor wife in any unwelcome changes on the part of the Vicar, her cup is pretty well full. *Cherchez la femme*, was the old cry when some evil emerged. And so when

the husband becomes "high" in an ecclesiastical sense it is the wife who is held responsible for the change. To the popular view she is undoubtedly at the bottom of all changes supposed to be for the worse. His ups and downs are manipulated by her. And so she becomes the parish scapegoat.

A wonderful view has the Parson's wife of human nature unadorned; a little world of it. And she is shut up with it, unable to escape even if she would. And, having to come to close quarters with it, she gets an enlarged view of people's innermost crotchets. And they, being close to her, can make their very whispers heard and make manifest their very facial contortions. It is not that there is so much of it but that the few bulk so largely in the little parish ring-fence. Most people are excellent, honest and kind, but just as a bee in a bottle raises the echoes and resounds far, so a few ill-conditioned natures can poison the air with their buzzings.

No Parson's wife sets herself up as perfect, and probably all of them would confess that they might have done things better and that they have much to learn, the young wives especially, who are only in their apprenticeship and can only learn by their mistakes. But what pains and hurts them is that no allowances are made for their mistakes, that no credit is given them for their good intentions, and but little praise for what they really have succeeded in achieving. Ah! well, if it is any comfort that all fare alike, and that no Parson's wife quite escapes the critic's lash, they may have that measure of consolation to the full. And if it be a consolation that they will be praised to the skies when they are gone, they may enjoy that too. All the same, the better comfort would be to have a little in the hand in the thick of work when the balm would be most grateful.

It is high time now that we dealt with some of the *consolations of the Parson's wife* lest any should think that her bed is made only of thorns. For, undoubtedly, no life in this world is more calculated to bring brightness than hers. She treads the highway of blessing, if any woman on earth does.

For she is a woman with a mission, and that of the best. She knows her work, and she lives in the midst of it. No need that she should be in doubt when she wakes in the morning as to what she is intended to do that day. The path of duty stretches out before her white and shining. There is misery to be grappled

with, perplexed feet to guide along the way of life, burdens to be lifted and lots made easier by loving ministries. And the recipients of her kindly sympathies live beside her very door, and look to her for the smile which refreshes like rain in a dry and sultry world. And if a well-filled life be a happy one she has that satisfaction to the full. No reverberation of emptiness in her life; if anything, it is likely to be too full. The trouble in many a woman's life is that she is self-centred and idle, and no woman on God's earth can expect peace in such a life. But the Parson's wife has something to do, something to think solidly about, something to make for. And the results of her work will ever tend to brighten her spirit, because she goes where darkness may be found thick and terrible and it will be her privilege and joy to see that darkness pass and the true light shine. Is there not the best of joy in driving dull care away, in smoothing out the deep dint in the knitted brow, in bringing hope into the eye and hearts of the despairing? Even where she does not succeed perfectly she cannot fail utterly, and to have done something to lighten and brighten is to have something of that sunshine reflected back.

There is a great deal of comfort, too, in feeling that she is laying out her life to the best advantage. There is no need for her to worry as to whether she is in the place God intended her to be. Your frivolous lady, who from morning to night is planning her pleasures, may well doubt whether her life is well lived. In fact, she may be sure that it is not. But the Parson's wife, amidst all the hardness and disappointments of her life, need be tormented within by no discords but may have the happy consciousness that God's choice blessing rests upon the woman who is trying to live for God and humanity. God's "Well done" is after all the best music in life. The clouds which she drives away from others cannot gather around her own head, and the springs of fresh and sweet waters which she taps for the thirsty will be found to quench her own thirst too. And she will discover constantly that with the lifting of others' weights her own take wings and fly away. As for the ingratitude of men which the Parson's wife will taste to the full, the less she expects gratitude the less she will be hurt at the want of it. If she works for gratitude, and does not get it, her cup will be full of bitterness, but if she works entirely for her Master's glory, and only for His approval, the shrill voices of the querulous

and complaining will pass unheeded. Human popularity she may or may not get, but if she is swayed by higher desires she will not mind if it does not come. She will be sorry for the ungrateful, but for herself not at all. Unspeakable indeed will be the consolations of the Parson's wife who lives in the upper spheres of the spiritual and divine, and only comes down to bring a bit of Heaven into darkened hearts and homes and lives.

I should like now to dwell a little on the *perils of the Parson's wife*, perils to which she is peculiarly exposed by her position. They will occur to herself, no doubt, but it will be well to deal with them honestly.

There are *personal perils* which she needs to guard against. The peril, for instance, of thinking that fitness comes from position, and that finding herself a Parson's wife she must needs therefore have the needful capacity to be one. Whereas fitness can only come along the common road of thought and prayer and self-discipline and experience. She has to learn her business like her husband, and often learn, alas! by many sad failures. There is also the danger of the official drowning the woman, official fussiness, official peremptoriness, or official pride pushing out the deeper womanly instincts. There is the peril of over importance, and of claiming a deference which only capacity has a right to. There is the peril of underestimating the spiritual in her work and life, as if machinery would go on healthfully without the inner driving power. For the Parson's wife will find her influence rise with the rise of thinner temperature and fall as that falls. In truth, personal piety must be her chief asset, and she, like her husband and all Christian workers, must be dependent upon the Holy Spirit's enabling for every step. Energy is good, business-like methods are good, but the best of all is a spiritual character, and a heart resting on the perfect sufficiency of the Master and Lord. Her special peril is in forgetting this.

Then there are *social perils* which will assail her as the Parson's wife. She may forget in the claims of society that she is not the Parson's wife for one class only, and so be unjust to the neglected. Or she may display the spirit of condescension when ministering to the poor, as if she had to descend many painful steps in order to reach them, and would be glad when her work was over that she might mount again to the upper regions of her social life. Then

the claims of society may eject the duties of the home and the parish, the paramount being laid aside because society bids her, and her inclination coinciding therewith. Society undoubtedly has its place, but its place is not a first one by any means, and to put it first is to spoil the life. Influence once lost is not easily regained, and the Parson's wife who reverses the right order will step down from her high place and dishonour it. Then there are wifely perils of no mean danger which must be met.

She may glorify her husband beyond his merits. She may praise his powers and make him ridiculous by overestimating them. She may scheme for his advancement and degrade him by her interference. Perhaps he may be worthy of the fattest of livings, be fit as to his calves for the canonical leggings, and even be worthy to grace a bishop's throne, but it would be better if other people made all this known and gave him the leg up. For her to sound his praises as a preacher, and to undervalue others on his behalf, is not a wise pursuit. And this is dangerous ground, and she had better keep off it religiously.

Then there are *parochial perils*, which like rocks just below the surface, jagged and threatening, await the Parson's wife. She may overstep the line between the wife and the husband, and attempt to wear his authority. She may do it with the best of intentions, yet nothing but harm can come of it, because if she forgets her position the parish does not, and nothing is more resented. And then when he champions the wife in his chivalry the battle is joined and parochial blood is shed. Choirs, curates, parish workers could write volumes on the mischief which comes from interference from the Parson's wife. It certainly is not easy to play well the part of a Parson's wife, for all her defects are magnified in the parish lens, and her words are spoken as in a whispering gallery. Without the gift of reserve and silence she may set the parish by the ears. And unless she walks warily she will tread continually on the parish toes. It is well therefore that she should be awake to her many perils.

There is one thought I should like to discharge finally in the course of my consideration of the Parson's wife, and I wish it were unnecessary to touch upon it at all. I refer to what I may call *the tragical wives*. There are some, alas! and they are not difficult to classify. Naturally, there will be some bad eggs in the clerical

and parochial basket both of Vicars and Vicaresses. I am thinking of the wives of parsons whose thoughts and sympathies are outside the parish boundaries, and who are square women in round holes. Their tastes run on lower planes than altruistic ones, and they are happier when the mundane things of life are in the ascendant. Had they not been parsons' wives they would have been seen rarely in church, and never at religious meetings. They have no calling for any approach to saintship, and frankly declare their preference for sinners rather than saints. They are worldly women who by some unhappy turn of the wheel find themselves where they hate to be. And so parish work becomes a bitter drudgery, and religious aims something unintelligible. Pagan in sympathies, they wear the Christian vesture as a penance and as a disagreeable duty. Of course, anybody can see how this tragical state of things is bound to work out. Such a Parson's wife necessarily lives a separate life from her husband, and they will travel along in double harness which will gall and chafe both. Pulling in different ways, there is a danger that the parochial carriage overturn. Certainly, there will be disaster sooner or later, the poor parish will suffer, and the scandal of the Vicarage friction is not likely to be unknown, while the wicked will rejoice, and the serious be outraged. For, however skilfully the lack of unity be covered over, sharp eyes and ears will soon detect the chasm, and sharp tongues tell the news abroad. Such a Parson's wife can only be a millstone around his neck to cast him and his usefulness into gulfs unsoundable and bottomless.

For the connexion between lack of sympathy and sheer antagonism is soon bridged, and she who is so religiously cool will before long become an open foe in his household.

Not, however, that the case is quite hopeless, for who knows but that soon the light of Heaven will visit this dark soul and show her her lack of that life which alone can transform chill into warmth, and hostility into liking and love. And, surely, the grace of God can never do a grander work than when it has reached down to pick up from the cold ground the world-bound spirit of the tragical Parson's wife.

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