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## CLERICAL TRAGEDIES.

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A., late Chaplain of  
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THAT there is plenty of comedy in a parson's life *Punch* himself is witness, for the oddities of human nature often make rare fun. It is good that it is so, for it helps the parson to bear his lot with a more sprightly air. A good laugh is better than a cry, and the latter is often prevented by some odd specimen of humanity who happens to cross his path.

But there are more tragedies, I think, perhaps more than any of us have ever suspected. How many and how grave they are, perhaps we ourselves shall never know until the curtain rings down and we stand to give our account.

It is to our interest to reduce these tragedies if we can. And in order to reduce them we must get to know them. This is the object of this paper—to point them out.

What a first-class tragedy it is *when a parson dislikes his work!* There are such, and they do not scruple to say that they never did like the work, and that they never will like it. They were, it seems, either forced into it by others, or they entered upon it for a living, or they fancied it was different from what it was. Anyway, they are round men in square holes, and they would like to get out and keep out. It is all collar work, all against the grain, all hateful. Their happiest times are when they are off duty, outside their parishes, and doing something else. Could they change into farmers, or soldiers, or sportsmen, they would do so gladly and at once. But to spin sermons, to visit sick people, and to look after children sickens them. They have indeed no special interest in religion itself, so how in the world are they likely to care to bring others into its fold? I have called this a first-class tragedy, and it is. It is a tragedy for himself, for he is going steadily down hill, and there is no brake on. It is a tragedy for his people, for they are left without a pastor, and have only a wooden figure-head. The hand that should keep them from doing ill is nerveless; the voice that should warn and console and instruct is only a feeble echo. If this is not tragedy, what is?

It is also a tragedy when a Gospel minister has *no Gospel to*

*deliver.* He is a fireman without his water-bucket, a doctor without his medicines, a coastguard without his rocket apparatus. If he denies that he is a Gospel minister, that is a greater tragedy still, for if he is not that, what is he? If he is not that, why is he there at all? That was his commission, and the Book was delivered to him for that purpose. Without a Gospel of Redemption how is he going to bring men to salvation? Is not that his lever to lift souls to Heaven? No wonder the people pass his church and swarm off to the chapels. They know what they want, even if he does not; and they miss the vital message and resent it. Is it any wonder that they should demand the one comforting message which as sinners they need? And if any are content to have it so, and think as little of the Gospel as their minister, on whose head will their blood rest when the great scrutiny is made? We are not perfect messengers, any of us, but if we omit our Gospel of life and love and forgiveness we are not messengers at all, but simply hirelings, and not true shepherds of the wandering sheep.

And this is a tragedy too when messages of life *pass over cold lips*. I suppose you can light a fire on a glacier, but I imagine that the fire would not be as hot as it should be, and that it would not last. I am always sorry for the man whose heart is chill when he speaks words of warmth and life. I am more sorry still for the Gospel which turns to ice on his lips. In truth it is not the Gospel of the grace and love of God at all. It ceases to be a message, and becomes a mere proposition. With its appeal gone, and with vehemence lacking, it may be well articulated and theologically sound, but God is not in it, and nobody is persuaded. If a man told me in business-like tones, and without a quaver in his voice, or the slightest change of expression, that my house was on fire, I should not believe him. It is not so that great and terrible news is ever told. I expect a note of alarm, a large element of urgency, something of heat and energy. I have a right to expect it, for both good news and bad are generally brought to us steaming hot. And shall the greatest of all dangers, and the best of all good news, be served up in matter-of-fact tones, and with all emotion and concern discharged from them? Surely, this is a real tragedy, for nothing but the most tragic consequences can flow from such coolness, impassiveness, and unconcern. A hot Gospel needs a man on fire to deliver it, unless he would spoil it. That he is not on fire

simply means to ordinary folk that he does not believe it himself.

It is a tragedy also *when a minister of Christ loses heart*. It does happen sometimes, and its gravity cannot be exaggerated. I have known many, and so have my readers. It may be the eye of some depressed soul catches this message. I would not minimize the good record of the past. That stands out, and the Books have it all down. But the pity of it is that the volcano should be now extinct, and all the red fires died down. And the cause of it probably is more tragic still; for no one loses heart, who is in touch with the great Heart of God. Desert winds have been blowing around; the world has been too much with us; the spirit of prayer has been ebbing; the promises and assurances of the Blessed Word have ceased to shine out in their golden glory; faith has paled; from living agents we have turned into automata; conventionalism has replaced freedom and life. And with all this parching and paralysing influence, who can be surprised that difficulties should loom large, and antagonisms look fiercer than ever before? We never lose heart so long as we can trust and feel the Hands of our Lord underneath us. When He ceases to be real we shrivel up, and grow limp, and lose heart. For then we are shut up to ourselves for company and encouragement, and desert fare is extremely emaciating and enfeebling. When a man loses heart he loses the best thing about him and, the spring thus running down, the watch plays sad tricks. A minister is out of the running when he loses heart; or if he runs he is like a spinning-wheel which spins nothing to any purpose. Sad are the prospects of the parish whose minister has lost heart. His people have nothing to gain from him, not a single blessing, until he finds his heart again.

When a man *loses the confidence of his people* he is the actor in a terrible tragedy. I do not ask whose fault this dissension may be. He may be entirely blameless, but, if such schism happens, dire are the consequences. There is bound to be an end of all chances of usefulness. Unacceptable ministrations can scarcely do dissentients good, for they will either refuse to listen or listen with a defiant snort. Every word of his passes over a thick stratum of poison gas which distorts and stifles all he says. Nothing lives in such an atmosphere as that, and nothing can take root. What can such a man do? Live it down if he can, but that takes time

and specially good management. Better still if he can cut and run. In another parish, and amongst another flock, he may meet with a better fate. Unfortunately, we are in such a chaotic condition that our Fathers in God, be their children ever so unfortunate, are obliged to look helplessly on, and be content with idle wishes. And so parishes are at sixes and sevens, and go from bad to worse, while they wring their helpless hands and scatter their ardent wishes. Skilful and powerful hands could place men in the best possible positions for themselves and their people if they had due control of the ecclesiastical chess-board. And so the mischief spreads, and day by day gets worse, and the chasms wider until the newspapers get hold of it. It is a tragedy when these mischiefs begin; it becomes a blacker tragedy when they work to a head and burst. And the beginning? Well, probably it sprang from some bit of change, or some small fit of obstinacy and self-will, or a refusal to give the laity a voice. Whoever managed to get his way has had to pay dearly for it, much more than it was worth.

A woeful tragedy comes in when the *spirit of doubt grips the minister*. Most of us cherish the old truths embalmed in our Prayer Book and handed down from old, old days, even from the beginning. Our heart-strings have got entangled around them. And when they are traversed and scouted by those in the seat of the teacher we do not sit comfortably down under the new régime. It is like pulling up our deepest convictions by the root and laying waste our spiritual fatherland. Were it done less ruthlessly and more gently we might be ready at least to take in the new side which is being set before us. But to cast our dear faith upon the rubbish heap straightway, and to be left without a roof to cover our souls, is a treatment which most of us resent, and rightly. This new botanist wants to pull our sweet flowers to pieces that we may admire the parts and the general construction. We want the flower to yield its fragrance, and we prefer it by its old name and in its old place in our religious garden. It is very dry, barren provender they offer us, and we prefer the old, succulent Gospel of the Grace of God. What is the good of free thought when the old thoughts have become a very part of us, and the old truths have nourished us for many a day and night? But they would unsettle and undermine us, and break up our anchors to make us freer.

And we are certainly more free to run on rocks and get out of our course. The bull in the china shop is nothing to this man of broad views. And when he gets made a Bishop, as broad men often do, we are left as the country-side is left after a storm has passed. It will take us a long time to get back to our old moorings, and the tragedy of it is that some men never do get back.

Tragedy is terribly to the fore when the parson is afflicted with a *love of change*. It may be a small change or a big change, a change in the service, or a change in the officers, a change in what he wears, or in what he leaves off. Some clergymen seem to fancy that any change is a change for the better, and that progress and advance are marked by the number of changes which accompany his revolutions. Now, unfortunately for the parson and his changes, most men are at the bottom conservative and hate change. If our parson is raw he has to find that out; if he is aware of the deep-rooted tenacity of his people for what they have been used to, he ought to know better than to play tricks with them. But many things move a parson from which ordinary folks are exempt. He is often æsthetic, and likes gay garments, and so he alters a little in that direction; or he hates intoning, and he alters that; or he likes symbolic ornaments, and promptly gets some, quite small perhaps. And he does it, all unconscious of the deep hum of disapproval all round. He is engrossed, you see, and only hears what he wants to hear. And all the time the fires of dissension are being stoked, fresh fuel is being heaped up, the slow-match is burning, and by and by there is an alarming flare-up. Then he is surprised.

The mistake our parson has been making is that he made the wrong changes and chose the wrong subjects. What was wanted to make progress was a change in himself, not in his surroundings. If he wanted to appeal to his people in a new and more impressive way, he should heighten his spirituality, put more life into his sermons, get closer to his people's hearts, and gain their confidence by quicker and more loving response to their needs.

It is possible to change for the better, and it is equally possible to change for the worse, but it is hard to believe that that is a change for the better which alienates the parish, empties the church, and brings the parson into grievous unpopularity. It is not worth the candle. Cæsar's wife needed to be above suspicion, and so

should the parson. That a change unsettles a people, breeds suspicion, and limits usefulness is enough to condemn most of the changes made. It is pure tragedy.

There is one kind of tragedy which we may see occasionally and which is always lamentable : it is bitter *conflict between a clergyman and part of his people*. Sometimes it is a political conflict in which party spirit is to the fore. A parson is bound to have his political views, and to know where his vote is to be conferred ; but for him to throw himself into the arena, and fight a political battle, is bound to set a large part of his parish by the ears, for he is not there as a political agent, and to fight elections. If in his heat and violence of statement he sets all the other side against his ministry, the loss is tragical. Suppose he brings his man in at the top of the poll, he himself will be at the bottom of his parochial lists in the opinion of a large proportion of his people. Probably they will never listen to him with the old satisfaction again. He is against their politics ; they are going to set themselves against him and his messages. A parson should, for the sake of his religious influence, keep out of political storms if he wants his people's vote and interest for his Gospel. Why should he imperil them for political propaganda ? Sometimes his standard is raised against Dissent and Dissenters. Here are endless possibilities of tragedy. A free country like England loves to go its own way without let or hindrance. Freedom is an Englishman's birthright, and he prizes it much. And when a parson rises up to denounce them, to consign them to the nethermost hell, and to rain down imprecations upon their devoted heads, the fat is in the fire. A hitherto peaceful parish forms itself into two camps, and war is waged with the utmost bitterness. Not so are men won to better ways. Controversy will confirm those who are convinced already, but it rarely brings over anybody who is wedded to other thoughts. After all, these are still his people, placed under his charge, and for whom he is responsible. Let him not drive them away by reproaches and heat and extreme statements. The way of gentleness and love is infinitely better. Let him be content to see them sometimes at church on great occasions ; let him baptize their babies and marry them if they offer themselves. Let him bury their dead, and do it sympathetically as regards the mourners. They can appreciate kindness, and appreciation will grow into friendliness

in time; and after that anything may happen. And if they do not come over to his side they can be content to differ and show kindness to one another and think the very best.

But a pugnacious parson is sure to be fighting somebody. The best thing is to lose his pugnacity if he can, and be gentle and loving. The man of God must not strive.

The tragedy of *ineffectiveness* is one not sufficiently faced, but it is one of the greatest of all. How many parishes there are with large organizations, busy parsons, and multiplied services, but all apparently in vain. Plenty of sowing, but no harvest; and the parson content to have it so. A gallant array of blossom, where nothing sets, and where there is no fruit.

I know that with apparent failure there may well be deeper success, and that we shall one day be permitted to see much fruit which came without our knowledge. But suppose there is absolutely none. No sower sees all his seed germinate, but if he saw none he would give up his garden or his farm. It cannot be all due to his seed; he must take the blame in part for bad farming. It cannot be all due to the soil, for his neighbour achieves something with no better soil.

The tragedy comes in when our parson does not see his failure, does not even mourn it, takes it even for granted as what he might expect. If he only questioned himself, and ascertained something to guide him better in future sowing, the matter might be mended. But he does not take even this trouble. A more successful brother would gladly have advised him and pointed out where he failed.

Then if he discovered that he was dealing with souls on a wrong method, or that he was not using the right means, or that he was not aiming at results or expecting them, he would probably mend the wrong. And if, too, he found out that he himself was spiritually out of gear, and that the Spirit of God had no footing in his soul, and that even he himself might never have passed under the Hand of the Lord Jesus, he could have it all made right. The blind cannot lead the blind, we all know, but he might receive his sight if he would. And then with a new heart and spirit, labouring for the love of souls, and wielding the potent charm of the Gospel of the Cross and the Risen Christ, he would be gladdened by seeing such a change passing over his parish as would astonish him. All effective work begins in the parson's own soul, and from

thence spreads near and far. There is nothing so catching as Christian life and love.

The final tragedy I want to deal with is the *tragedy of conduct*. The minister preaches two kinds of sermons—the one in the pulpit, and the other, the longer sermon, outside the pulpit and the church. Woe betide the man when they tell different tales. You cannot sever the sacred functions of the parson from his secular ones: they stand or fall together. At the background of every pulpit is the preacher's weekday life; that is his commentary which mingles with every word he says. He may preach an excellent sermon, but his hearers will be recalling the weekday applications, and many a man has preached in vain simply because his way of living has tripped him up. Better that a man should preach a poor, feeble sermon if so be his life helped on to better things.

This tragedy of conduct is fatal. All the time that his lips are pouring out eloquent periods his flock are recalling how hot his temper is, how fond he is of money and how grasping, how he loves tittle-tattle and that not of the most charitable kind, and how close a grip the world and material things have upon his soul. We know, and they know, that a minister is but a man and is bound to have some human frailties. But they expect him to be up to the average of goodness, and a trifle beyond perhaps, seeing that he professes a holy calling. And are they wrong? Neither may a minister resent this view of things. If he be a city set on a hill, as he is, it is surely that the people may look at him and keep looking. Our modes of life may be private matters, but in public men there can be no privacy: we are known and read by every one. Judge then the tragedy when looking up to catch an excellency they discover instead a bad blemish. The shock to religion is inevitable and tragic, and hard to get over.

A melancholy series this list of parish tragedies, neither pleasant to write nor pleasant to read. But they are worth pointing out, if only to bring them to the surface. What is unsuspected or not recognized remains the blot it is. But once in the open they can be dealt with and remedied. May it be so with these tragedies which we have been passing under review! And if the Great Master takes us in hand, the worst of tragedy becomes quickly changed. We may thank God that what is so easy with Him is also His will.