

Choice Literature.

LAICUS;

OR THE EXPERIENCES OF A LAYMAN IN A COUNTRY PARISH.

CHAPTER XXVII.—FATHER HYATT'S STORY.

If you had known Charlie P., and had seen his little struggle, and had felt as I did the anguish caused by his tragic death, you would not talk of moderate drinking as a remedy for intemperance.

I was away from my parish when I first heard of it. I very well remember the start with which I read the first line of the note, "Charlie P. is dead"; and how after I had finished the account, written in haste and partaking of the confusion of the hour, the letter dropped from my hands, and I sat in the gathering darkness of the summer twilight, rehearsing to myself the story of his life and the sad, sad story of his tragic death. Years have passed since, but the whole is impressed upon my memory in figures that time cannot fade. If I were an artist, I could paint his portrait I am sure, as I see him even now. Such a grand, open-hearted, whole-souled fellow as he was.

It was about a year before that I first saw him in my church. His peculiar gait, as he walked up the centre aisle, first attracted my attention. He carried a stout cane and walked a little lame. His wife was with him. Indeed, except at his office, I rarely saw them apart. She loved him with an almost idolatrous affection; as well she might, for he was the most lovable man I ever knew; and he loved her with a tenderness almost womanly. I think he never for a moment forgot that it was her assiduous nursing which saved his life. His face attracted me from the first, and I rather think I called on the new-comers that very week. At all events we soon became fast friends, and at the very next communion husband and wife united with my church by letter from —, but no matter where; I had best give neither names nor dates. They lived in a quiet, simple way, going but little into society, for they were society to each other. They rarely spent an evening out, if I except the weekly prayer-meeting. They came together to that. He very soon went into the Sabbath school. A Bible class of young people gathered about him as if by magic. He had just the genial way, the social qualities and the personal magnetism to draw the young to him. I used to look about sometimes with a kind of envy at the eager attentive faces of his class.

Judge of my surprise when, one day, a warm friend of Charlie's came to me, privately, and said: "Charlie P. is drinking."

"Impossible," said I.

"Alas!" said he, "as too true. I have talked with him time and again. He promises reform, but keeps no promise. His wife is almost broken-hearted, but carries her burden alone. You have influence with him, more than any one else I think. I want you to see him and talk with him."

I promised, of course. I made the effort, but without success. I called once or twice at his office. He was always immersed in business. I called at his house. But I never could see him alone. I was really and greatly perplexed, when he relieved me of my perplexity. Perhaps he suspected my design. At all events one morning he surprised me by a call at my study. He opened the subject at once himself.

"Pastor," said he, "I have come to talk with you about myself. I am bringing shame on the Church and disgrace on my family. You know all about it. Everybody knows all about it. I wonder that the children do not point at me in the street as I go along. Oh! my poor wife! my poor wife! what shall I do?"

"He was intensely excited. I suspected that he had been drinking to nerve himself to what he regarded as a disagreeable but unavoidable duty. I calmed him as well as I could, and he told me his story.

He was formerly a temperate though never a total abstinence man. He was employed on a railroad in some capacity—express messenger I think. The cars ran off the track. That in which he was sitting was thrown down an embankment. He was dreadfully bruised and mangled, and was taken up for dead. It seemed at first as though he had hardly a whole bone in his body; but by one of those marvellous freaks, as we account them, which defeat all physicians' calculations, he survived. Gradually he rallied. For twelve months he lived on stimulants. His wife's assiduous nursing through these twelve months of anxiety prostrated her upon a bed of sickness. From his couch he arose, as he supposed, to go through life on crutches. But returning strength had enabled him to surmount a cane. Her attack of typhoid fever left her an invalid, never to be strong again. Alas! his twelve months' use of stimulants had kindled a fire within him which it seemed impossible to quench.

"I cannot do my work," said he, "without a little, and a little is enough to upset me. I am now a hard drinker, pastor, indeed I am not. But half a glass of liquor will sometimes almost craze me."

I told him he must give up the little. For him there was but one course of safety, that of total abstinence. He was reluctant to come to it. His father's sideboard was never empty. It was hard to put aside the notions of hospitality which he had learned in his childhood, and adopt the principles of a total abstinence which he had always been taught to ridicule. However, he resolved bravely, and went away from my study, as I fondly hoped, a saved man.

I had not then learned, as I have since, the meaning of the declaration. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

I saw him every few days. He never showed any signs of liquor. I asked him casually, as I had opportunity, how he was getting along. He always answered, "well." I sounded others cautiously. No one suspected him of any evil habit. I concluded he had conquered it. Though I did not lose him from my thoughts or prayers, I grew less anxious. He kept his Bible class, which grew in numbers

and in interest. Spring came, and I relaxed a little my labours, as that climate—no matter where it was, to me the climate was bad enough—required it. Despite the caution, the subtle malaria laid hold of me. I fought for three weeks a hard battle with disease. When I arose from my bed the doctor forbade all study and all work for six weeks at least. No minister can rest in his own parish. My people understood that, as parishes do not always. One bright spring day, one of my deacons called and put a sealed envelope into my hand to be opened when he had left. It contained a cheque for my travelling expenses, and an official note from the officers of the church bidding me go and spend it. In three days I was on my way to the White Mountains. It was there my wife's hurried note told me the story of Charlie's death. And this was it:

The habit had proved too strong for his weak will. He had resumed drinking. No one knew it but his wife and one confidential friend. He rarely took much; never so much as to be brutal at home or unfit for business at the office; but enough to prove to him that he was not his own master. The shame of his bondage he felt keenly, powerless as he felt himself to break the chains. The week after I left home his wife left also for a visit to her father's. She took the children, one a young babe three months old, with her, Mr. P. was to follow her in a fortnight. She never saw him again. One night he went to his solitary home—possibly he had been drinking—no one ever knew—opened his photograph album, covered his own photograph with a piece of an old envelope, that it might no longer look upon the picture of his wife on the opposite page, and wrote her, on a scrap of paper torn from a letter, this line of farewell:

"I have fought the battle as long as I can. It is no use. I will not suffer my wife and children to share with me a drunkard's shame. Good-bye. God have mercy on you and me."

The next morning, long after the streets had assumed their accustomed activity, and other houses threw wide open their shutters to admit the fragrance of flowers and the song of birds and the glad sunshine and all the joy of life, that house was shut and still. When the office clerk, missing him, came to seek him, the door was fast. Neighbours were called in. A window was forced open. Lying upon the bed, where he had fallen the night before, lay poor Charlie P. A few drops of blood stained the white coverlet. It oozed from a bullet wound in the back of his head. The hand in death still grasped the pistol that had fired the fatal shot.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—OUR VILLAGE LIBRARY.

To that prayer meeting and Father Hyatt's story of Charlie P., Wheathedge owes its library.

"Mr. Laicus," said Mr. Gear as we came out of the meeting together, "I hope this temperance movement isn't going to end in a prayer meeting. The praying is all very well, but I want to see some work go along with it."

"Very well," said I, "what do you propose?"

"I don't know," said he. "But I think we might do something. I believe in the old proverb: The gods help those who help themselves."

That very week Mr. Mapleson called at my house to express the same idea. "What can we do to shut up Poole's?" said he. "It's dreadful. Half our young men spend half their evenings there, lounging and drinking away their time." He proposed half-a-dozen plans and abandoned them as fast as he proposed them. He suggested that we organize a Sons of Temperance, and gave it up because neither of us believed in secret societies; suggested organizing a Band of Hope in the Sabbath school, but withdrew the suggestion on my remarking that the Sabbath school would not touch the class that made Poole's bar the busiest place in town; hinted at trying to get John B. Cough, but doubted whether he could be obtained. I told him I would think it over.

And the next evening I walked up to Poole's to survey the ground a little. I found, just as you turn the corner from the main street to go up the hill, what I had never noticed before—a sign, not very legible from old age and dirt, "Free Reading room." Having some literary predilections, I went in. A bar-room, with three or four loungers before the counter, occupied the foreground. In the rear were two round wooden tables. On one were half-a-dozen copies of notorious sensation sheets, one or two with infamous illustrations. A young lad of sixteen was glazing over the pages of one of them. The other table was ornamented with a backgammon board and a greasy pack of cards. The atmosphere of the room was composed of the commingled fumes of bad liquor, bad tobacco, kerosene oil and coal gas. It did not take me long to gauge the merits of the free reading-room. But I inwardly thanked the proprietor for the suggestion it afforded me.

"A free reading-room," said I to myself; "that is what we want at Wheathedge."

The same thought had for a lately occurred almost simultaneously to my friend, Mr. Korley, though his reasons for desiring its establishment were quite different from mine. His family spends every summer at Wheathedge. His wife and daughters found themselves at a loss how to spend their time. They had nothing to do. They pestered Mr. Korley to bring them up the last novels. But his mind was too full of stocks; he always forgot the novels. On Saturday he went over to Newton, hearing there was a circulating library there. He found the sign, but no books. "I had some books once," the proprietor explained; "but the Wheathedge folks carried them all off and never returned them." Thus it happened that when the week after my visit to the free reading-room, I met Mr. Korley on board the train, he remarked to me: "We ought to have a circulating library at Wheathedge."

"And a reading-room with it," said I.

"Well, yes," said he. "That's a fact. A good reading-room would be a capital thing."

"Think of the scores of young men," said I, "that are going down to ruin there. They have no home, no decent shelter even for a winter's evening, except the grog-shop."

"I don't care so much about the young men," said Mr.

Korley, "as I do about the middle-aged ones. My Jennie pesters me almost to death every time I go down, to buy her something to read. Of course I always forget it. Besides, I would like a place where I could see the papers and periodicals myself. I would give fifty dollars to see a good library and reading-room in Wheathedge."

"Very good," said I, "I will put you down for that amount." So I took out my pocket-book and made a memorandum.

"What! are you taking subscriptions?" asked Mr. Korley.

"I have taken one," said I.

That was the beginning. That night I took a blank book and drew up a subscription paper. It was very simple. It read as follows:

"We, the undersigned, for the purpose of establishing a library and reading room in Wheathedge, subscribe the sum set opposite our names, and agree that when \$500 is subscribed, the first subscribers shall call a meeting of the others to form an organization."

I put Mr. Korley's name down for \$50, which started it well. Mr. Jowett could do no less than Mr. Korley, and Mr. Wheaton no less than Mr. Jowett; and so, the subscription once started, grew very rapidly, like a boy's snowball, to adequate proportions. The second Tuesday in July, I was enabled to give notice to all the subscribers to meet at my house. My parlours were well filled. I had taken pains to get some lady subscribers, and they were here as well as the gentlemen. I read to the company the law of the State providing for the organization of a library association. Resolutions were drawn up and adopted. Stock was fixed at \$5, that everybody might be a stockholder. The annual dues were made \$2, imposed alike on stockholders and on outsiders. A board of trustees was elected. And so our little boat was fairly launched.

We began in a very humble way. The school trustees loaned us during the summer vacation a couple of recitation rooms which we converted into a library and conversation room. The former we furnished in the first instance with the popular magazines and two or three of the daily newspapers. We forthwith began also to accumulate something of a library. Mr. Wheaton presented us with a full assortment of Patent Office reports, which will be very valuable for reference if anybody should ever want to refer to them. We also have two shelves full chiefly of old school books, which a committee on donations succeeded in raising in the neighbourhood.

But apart from these treasures of knowledge our collection is eminently readable. Maurice Mapleson is on the library committee, and Maurice Mapleson is fortunately a very sensible man. "The first thing," he says, "is to get books that people will read. Valuable books that they won't read may as well stay on the publishers' shelves as on ours." So as yet we buy only current literature. We rarely purchase any book in more than two volumes. We have a good liberal assortment of modern novels—but they are selected with some care. We sprinkle in a good proportion of popular history and popular science. The consequence is our library is used. The books really circulate. Our conversation room has proved quite as popular as the library. It is furnished with chess and checkers. What is more important it is furnished with young ladies. For the Wheathedge library knows neither male nor female. And the young men find our checkers more attractive than Tom Poole's cards. They are ready to exchange the stale tobacco smoke and bad whiskey of his bar-room for the fair, fresh faces that make our reading-room so attractive. The boys, too, as a class, are very willing to give up the shameless pictorial literature of his free reading room for *Harper's* and the *Illustrated Christian Weekly*. In a word, the Wheathedge library became so universally popular that when the opening of the school threatened to crowd us out of our quarters, there was no difficulty in raising the money to build a small house, large enough for our present and prospective needs. The only objector was Mr. Hardcap. For Mr. Hardcap does not approve of novels.

This objection came out when I first asked him for a subscription payable in work on the new building.

"Do you have novels in your library?" said he.

"Of course," said I.

"Then," said he, "don't come to me for any help. I won't do anything to encourage the reading of novels."

"You do not approve of novels, then, I judge, Mr. Hardcap?" said I.

"Approve of novels!" said he, energetically. "If I had my way, the pestiferous things should never come near my house. I totally condemn them. I don't see how any consistent Christian can suffer them. They're a pack of lies anyhow."

"Do you not think," said I, "that we ought to discriminate; that there are different sorts of novels, and that we ought not to condemn the good with the bad?"

"I don't believe in no kind of fiction, nohow," said Mr. Hardcap, emphatically. "What we want is facts, Mr. Laicus—hard facts. That's what I was brought up on when I was a boy, and that's what I mean to bring my boys up on."

I thought of Mr. Gradgrind, but said nothing.

"Yes," said Mr. Hardcap, half soliloquizing, "there is Charles Dickens. He was nothing in the world but a novel writer, and they buried him in Westminster Cathedral, as though he were a saint; and preached sermons about him, and glorified him in our religious papers. Sallie is crazy to get a copy of his works, and even wife wants to read some of them. But they'll have to go out of my house to do it, I tell ye. Why, they couldn't make more to do if it was Bunyan or Milton."

"Bunyan?" said I. "Do you mean the author of 'Pilgrim's Progress'?"

"Yes," said he; "that is a book. Why, it's worth a hundred of your modern novels."

"How is that?" said I. "'Pilgrim's Progress,' if I mistake not, is fiction."

"Oh! well," said Mr. Hardcap, "that's a very different thing. It isn't a novel. It's an allegory. That's altogether different."