

## Choice Literature.

## LAICUS;

OR THE EXPERIENCES OF A LAYMAN IN A COUNTRY PARISH.

## CHAPTER VIII.—MR. GEAR.

"Jennie," said I, "Harry and I are going out for our walk."

It was Sunday afternoon. I had enjoyed my usual Sunday afternoon nap, and now I was going out for my usual Sunday afternoon walk. Only this afternoon I had a purpose beside that of an hour's exercise in the fresh air.

"I wish I could go with you, John," said Jennie, "but it's Fanny's afternoon out, and I can't leave the baby. Where are you going?"

"Up to the mill village, to see Mr. Gear," said I. "I am going to ask him to join the Bible class."

"Why, John, he's an infidel, I thought."

"So they say," I replied. "But it can't do an infidel any harm to study the Bible. I may not succeed; I probably shan't; but I certainly shan't if I don't try."

"I wish I could do something to help you, John. And I think I can. I can pray for you. Perhaps that will help you?"

Help me. With the assurance of those prayers I walked along the road with a new confidence of hope. Before I had dreaded my errand, now I was in haste for the interview. I believe in the intercession of the saints; and Jennie is a — but I forget. The public are rarely interested in a man's opinion about his own wife.

The mill village, as we call it, is a little collection of cottages with one or two houses of a somewhat more pretentious character, which gather round the wheel-barrow factory down the river, a good mile's walk from the church. It was a bright afternoon in October. The woods were in the glory of their radiant death, the air was crisp and keen. Harry, who now ran before, now loitered behind, and now walked sedately by my side, was full of spirits, and there was everything to make the soul feel hope and courage. And yet I had my misgivings. When I had told Deacon Goodsole that I was going to call on Mr. Gear he exclaimed at my proposition.

"Why he's a regular out and outer. He does not believe in anything—Church, Bible, Sunday, Christ, God, or even his own immortality."

"What do you know of him?" I asked.

"He was born in New England," replied the Deacon, "brought up in an orthodox family taught to say the Westminster Assembly's Catechism (he can say it better than I can to-day), and listened twice every Sunday till he was eighteen to good sound orthodox preaching. Then he left home and the Church together; and he has never been to either, to remain, since."

"Does he ever go to church?" I asked.

The Deacon shrugged his shoulders. "I asked him that question myself the other day," said he. "You never go to church, Mr. Gear, I believe?" said I.

"Oh! yes, I do," he replied. "I go home every Christmas to spend a week. And at home I always go to church for the sake of the old folks. At Wheathedge I always stay away for my own sake."

"And what do you know of his theology?" said I.

"Theology," said the Deacon; "he hasn't any. His creed is the shortest and simplest one I know of. I tried to have a religious conversation with him once but I had to give it up. I could make nothing out of him. He said he believed in the existence of a God. But he scouted the idea that we could know anything about Him. He was rather inclined to think there was a future life; but nobody knew anything about it. All that we could know was that if we are virtuous in this life we shall be happy in the next—if there is a next."

"He does not believe that the gates are wide open there," said I.

"No," said the Deacon; "nor ajar, either."

"And what does he say of Christ and Christianity?" said I.

"Of Jesus Christ," said the Deacon, "that—well probably such a man lived, and was a very pure and holy man, and a very remarkable teacher, certainly for his age a very remarkable teacher. But he ridicules the idea of the miracles; says he does not believe them any more than he believes in the mythical legends of Greek and Roman literature. And as to Christianity he believes it's a very good sort of thing, better for America than any other religion; but he rather thinks Buddhism is very likely better for India."

"But I wish you would go and see him," continued the Deacon. "Perhaps you can make something out of him. I can't. I have tried again and again, and I always get the worst of it. He'll well read, I assure you, and keen as—as," the Deacon failed in his search for a simile and closed his sentence with, "A great deal keener than I am. He's a real good fellow, but he doesn't believe in anything. There is no use in quoting Scripture, because he thinks it's nothing but a collection of old legends. I once tried to argue the question of inspiration with him. 'Deacon,' said he to me, 'suppose a father should start off one fine morning to carry his son up to the top of Hurricane Hill and put him to death there, and should pretend he had a revelation from God to do it, what would you do to him?' 'Put him in the insane asylum,' said I. 'Exactly,' said he. 'My boys came home from your Sabbath school the other Sunday full of the sacrifice of Isaac, and Will, who takes after his father, asked me if I didn't think it was cruel for God to tell a father to kill his own son. What could I say? I don't often interfere, because it troubles my wife so. But I couldn't stand that, and I told him very frankly that I didn't believe the story, and if it was true, I thought that Abraham was crazy. He had me there, you know," continued the Deacon, good-naturedly; "but then I never was good for anything in discussion. I wish you would go to see him, may be you would bring him to terms."

And so I was going now, not without misgivings, and with no great faith in any capacity on my part to "bring him to terms," as the Deacon phrased it, but buoyed up a good deal, notwithstanding, by the remembrance of those promised prayers.

And yet though Mr. Gear is an infidel he is not a bad man. Even Dr. Argue, and he is fearfully sound on the doctrine of total depravity, admits that there are some good traits about him, "natural virtues," he is careful to explain, not "saving graces."

Of his thorough, incorruptible honesty, no man ever intimated a doubt. In every business transaction he is the soul of honour. His word is a great deal better than Jim Wheaton's bond.

In every good work he is a leader. When the new school house was to be built, Mr. Gear was put, by an almost unanimous consent, upon the board, and made its treasurer. When, last fall, rumours were rife of the mismanagement of the Poor-house, Mr. Gear was the one to demand an investigation, and, being put upon the committee, to push through against a good deal of opposition, till he secured the reform that was needed. In his shop there is not a man whose personal history he does not know, not one who does not count him a personal friend. That there has not been a strike for ten years is due to the workmen's personal faith in him. When Robert Dale as caught in the shafting and killed last winter, it was Mr. Gear who paid the widow's rent out of his own pocket, got the eldest son a place on a farm, and carried around personally a subscription to provide for the family, after starting it handsomely himself. He is appointed to arbitrate in half the incipient quarrels of the neighbourhood, and settles more controversies, I am confident, than his neighbour, Squire Hodgson, though the latter is a justice of the peace. There is always a difficulty in collecting our pew-rents. Half the church members are from one week to one quarter behind-hand. Mr. Gear has a pew for his family, and his pew-rent is always paid before it becomes due. The Deacon tells me confidentially that Mr. Work does not think it prudent to preach against intemperance because Jim Wheaton always has wine on his table New Year's Day. Mr. Gear is the head of the Good Templars, and has done more to circulate the pledge among the workmen of the town than all the rest of us put together. He is naturally an intensely passionate man, and I am told rips out an oath now and then. But that he is vigorously labouring with himself to control his temper is very evident, and it is equally evident, so at least the Deacon says, that he is gaining a victory in this life-campaign.

"It is very clear," said I to myself, as I walked along, "that there are some good points in Mr. Gear's character. He must have a side where Christian truth could get in, if one could only find it; where indeed it does get in, though he thinks, and every one else thinks, it does not. Be it my task to find the place."

## CHAPTER IX.—I GET MY FIRST BIBLE SCHOOL

A pretty little cottage—white, with green blinus; the neatest of neat fences; a little platform in front of the sidewalk with three steps leading up to it—a convenient method of access to our high country carriages; two posts before the gate neatly turned, a trellis over the front door with a climbing rose which has mounted half way to the top and stopped to rest for the season; another trellis, fan-shaped, behind which a path disappears that leads round to the kitchen-door; the tastiest of little bird-houses, now tenantless and desolate—this is the picture that meets my eye and assures me that Mr. Gear is a man both of taste and thrift, as indeed he is.

Mrs. Gear, who comes to the door in answer to my knock, and who is a cheerful little body, with yet a tinge of sadness in her countenance, as one who knows some secret sorrow which her blithe heart cannot wholly sing away, is very glad to see me. She calls me by my name and introduces herself with a grace that is as much more graceful as it is more natural than the polished and stately manners which Mrs. Wheaton has brought with her from fashionable society to Wheathedge. Mr. Gear is out, he has gone down to the shop—will I walk in? he will be back directly. I am very happy to walk in, and Mrs. Gear, introducing me to a cozy little sitting-room with a library table in the centre, and a book-case on one side, well filled too, takes Harry by the hand, and leads him out to introduce him to the great Newfoundland dog whom we saw basking in the sunshine on the steps of the side door, as we came up the road.

I am accustomed to judge of men by their companions, and books are companions. So whenever I am in a parlour alone I always examine the book-case, or the centre table—if there is one. In Mrs. Wheaton's parlour I find no book-case, but a large centre table on which there are several annuals with a great deal of gilt binding and very little reading, and a volume or two of plates, sometimes handsome, more often showy. In the library, which opens out of the parlour, I find sets of the classic authors in library bindings, but when I take one down it betrays the fact that no other hand has touched it to open it before. And I know that Jim Wheaton buys books to furnish his house, just as he buys wall paper and carpets. At Mr. Hardcap's I find a big family Bible, and half-a-dozen of those made up volumes, fat with thick paper and large type, and showy with poor pictures, which constitute the common literature of two-thirds of our country homes. And I know that poor Mr. Hardcap is the unfortunate victim of book agents. At Deacon Goodsole's I always see some school books lying in admirable confusion on the sitting-room table. And I know that Deacon Goodsole has children, and that they bring their books home at night to do some real studying, and that they do it in the family sitting-room and get help now and then from father and from mother. And so while I am waiting for Mr. Gear I take a jurtive glance at his well filled shelves. I am rather surprised to find in his little library so large a religious element, though nearly all of it heterodox. There is a complete edition of Theodore Parker's works, Channing's works, a volume or two of Robertson, one of Furness, the English translation of Strauss's Life of Christ, Renan's Jesus, and half-a-dozen more similar books, intermingled with volumes

of history, biography, science, travels, and the New American Cyclopaedia. The *Radical* and the *Atlantic Monthly* are on the table. The only orthodox book is Beecher's Sermons—and I believe Dr. Argue says they are not orthodox; the only approach to fiction is one of Oliver Wendell Holmes's books, I do not remember which one. "Well," said I to myself, "whatever this man is, he is not irreligious."

I had just arrived at this conclusion when Mr. Gear entered. A tall, thin, nervous man, with a high forehead, piercing black eyes, and a restless uneasiness that forbids him from ever being for a moment still. Now he runs his hand through his hair, pushing it still further back from his dome of a head, now he drums the table with his uneasy fingers, now he crosses and uncrosses his long legs, and once, as our conversation grows animated, he rises from his seat in the vehemence of his earnestness, and leans against the mantel-piece. A clear-eyed, frank-faced, fine looking man, who would compel your heed if you met him anywhere, unknown, by chance, on the public street. "An infidel you may be," I say to myself, "but not a bad man; on the contrary a man with much that is true and noble, or I am no physiognomist or phrenologist either." And I rather prize myself on being both.

We lawyers learn to study the faces of our witnesses, to form quick judgments, and to act upon them. If I did not mistake my man the directest method was the best, and I employed it.

"Mr. Gear," said I, "I have come to ask you to join my Bible class."

"Me!" said Mr. Gear, unmistakably surprised. "I don't believe in the Bible."

"So I have heard," I said quietly. "And that's the reason I came to you first. In fact I do not want you to join my Bible class. I have not got any Bible class as yet, I want you to join me in getting one up."

Mr. Gear smiled incredulously. "You had better get Deacon Goodsole," said he—"or," and the smile changed from a good-natured to a sarcastic one, "or Mr. Hardcap."

"I have no doubt they would either of them join me," said I. "But they believe substantially as I have been taught to believe about the Bible. They have learned to look at it through creeds, and catechisms, and orthodox preaching. I want to get a fresh look at it. I want to come to it as I would come to any other book, and to find out what it means, not what it seems to mean to a man who has been bred to believe that it is only the flesh and blood of which the dry bones are the Westminster Assembly's Catechism."

"Mr. Laicus," said Mr. Gear, "I thank you for the honour you do me. But I don't believe in the Bible. I don't believe it's the Word of God any more than Homer or Tacitus. I don't believe those old Hebrews knew any more than we do—or half so much. It says the world was made in six days. I think it more likely it was six millions of years in making."

"So do I," said I.

"It says God rested on the Sabbath Day. I believe He always works, day and night, summer and winter, in every blazing fire, in every gathering storm, in every rushing river, in every growing flower, in every falling leaf."

He rose as he spoke and stood, now leaning against the mantel-piece, now standing erect, his dark eyes flashing, his great forehead seeming to expand with great thoughts, his soul all enkindled with his own eloquence: for eloquent he really was, and all unconscious of it.

"Your Bible," said he, "shuts God up in a Temple, and in an ark in that, and hides Him behind curtains where the High Priest can find Him but once a year. My God is everywhere. There is no church that can hold Him. The heavens are His home; the earth is His footstool. All this bright and beautiful world is His temple. He is in every mountain, in every cloud, in every winter wind and every summer breeze."

He looked so handsome in his earnest eloquence that I had no heart to interrupt him. And yet I waited and watched for any opening he might give me, and thought of Jennie, and her prayers at home, and declared to myself by God's help I would not let this man go till I had caught him and brought him to know the love that now he knew not.

"Your Bible, Mr. Laicus," said he, "sets apart one day for the Lord and gives all the rest to the world, the flesh, and the devil. I believe all days are divine, all days are the Lord's, all hours are sacred hours and all ground is holy ground."

(To be continued.)

## THE BLACK STONE IN THE KAABA

In the Kaaba, the most ancient and remarkable building of the great Mosque at Mecca, is preserved a miraculous stone, with the print of Abraham's feet impressed upon it. It is said, by Mohammedan tradition, to be the identical stone which served the patriarch as a scaffold when he helped Ishmael to rebuild the Kaaba, which had been originally constructed by Seth, and was afterwards destroyed by the deluge. While Abraham stood upon this stone it rose and sank with him as he built the walls of the sacred edifice. The relic is said to be a fragment of the same gray Meccan stone of which the whole building is constructed, in this respect differing from the famous black stone brought to Abraham and Ishmael by the angel Gabriel, and built into the north-east corner of the exterior wall of the Kaaba, which is generally supposed to be either a meteorite or fragment of volcanic basalt. It is supposed to have been originally a jacinth of dazzling whiteness, but to have been made black as ink by the touch of sinful man, and that it can only recover its original purity and brilliancy at the day of judgment. The millions of kisses and touches impressed by the faithful have worn the surface considerably, but, in addition to this, traces of cup shaped hollows have been observed on it. There can be no doubt that both the relics associated with Abraham are of high antiquity, and may possibly have belonged to the prehistoric worship which marked Mecca as a sacred site long before the followers of the prophet had set up their shrine there.—*Blackwood's Magazine*.