

THE YOUNG CURATE.

(From "Bernard Leslie," by Rev. W. Grealey, M. A.)

Not very long after my arrival at High Kirkhall, and when all things were going on satisfactorily, I lost a very excellent curate, who had been of essential service to the parish; but as the cause of his removal was an appointment to a living, I could not but feel happy at his preferment. I found, however, great difficulty in supplying his place. It has been stated, I believe on good authority, that the number of young clergy ordained is smaller than what are required to supply the annual deaths. When, in addition to the ordinary demand, we take into consideration the new churches built from time to time, very serious apprehensions arise whether a sufficient number of clerical men will be found to supply the wants of the Church. The fact is, that the endowments are so small, the labour in many cases so overwhelming, the prospect of honour and emolument so much reduced by the late Cathedral Act, that parents who desire to place their sons in a respectable profession, where they may get an honest living, will no longer educate them for the Church. Unless, therefore, an enthusiasm, or zeal for the ministry, can be called forth, independent of professional prospects, it is much to be feared that either labourers will be wanting in the vineyard, or that they will gradually deteriorate in point of education and ability.

After a good deal of inquiry and difficulty, I at length heard of a curate who seemed likely to suit me, being strongly recommended for learning and piety, which hitherto he had not been employed beyond the walls of his college. On the arrival of Mr. Monkton, I was pleased with his manner and conversation. He was evidently well read—possessed, indeed, of much more information than most young men of his age; a little too fond, as it struck me, of bringing his learning forward—but that, perhaps, was to be expected in one who had just emerged from the common room. His mind was also evidently devoted to his sacred office, and imbued with a deep interest for all things connected with it. I certainly anguished well from the first interview, and hoped that he would prove a valuable aid to me in the ministry. The only thing which I did not like in his dress, which consisted of a very long coat, or cassock, hanging down to his heels, with a straight upright collar, and a row of buttons up the front, after the fashion of a Roman Catholic Priest. Certainly I would infinitely rather have seen him wear such a dress, than that of the dandy young clergyman whom one sometimes meets, with black or coloured stocks, chains on their waistcoats, smart-fitting boots, and coats in the newest fashion. Mr. Monkton's fault was all on the right side. Still I would have preferred that he had avoided unnecessary peculiarity, and kept to the decent and grave costume which respectable clergymen generally wear. Whatever may be the merit of the abstract question as to the propriety of the clergy wearing a distinctive dress, any change should come from the recommendation of our superiors.

However, this was not the only peculiarity of my new curate. When he began to officiate in the church he exhibited a more than usual appearance of devotion in his manner. He invariably bowed at the name of Jesus; and on entering the church, or repeating the creed, or approaching the east end, he would bow towards the altar, and cross his breast. These proceedings of course attracted the attention of the congregation; and I could observe that many of them, instead of attending to what they were about, were watching Mr. Monkton. Several also, amongst the most respectable members of the congregation, made serious objections to some of these peculiarities. It was evident to me, therefore, that it was my duty to remonstrate with him.

"My dear sir," I said, as we left the church together, "it is right, in the relation in which we stand to each other, that there should be no reserve or restraint between us; and I trust you will not feel annoyed if I advert to any part of your conduct which may seem to me to need correction."

"I beg," said Mr. Monkton, "that you will never scruple to inform me of anything which is amiss; and if I can conscientiously do so, you may depend on my altering it."

"Mr. L.—Well, then, since you are disposed to receive my remarks with so much candor, I must say that objection has been made—and I think with justice—to some of your conduct in church."

"Mr. M.—Ah! I know to what you allude, sir. But surely you do not object to an act of betokening reverence. When one looks around and sees the lamentable apathy generally observable in a congregation—some staring about them, others loling in their pews instead of reverently kneeling, and their disregard for the Sacred Presence in which they are assembled—surely any the slightest action which tends to remind them, or indeed oneself, of the awful majesty of Him in whose house we are; must be not only not objectionable, but most desirable."

"Mr. L.—I go along with you, my good friend, in all you can say on the propriety, or rather the necessity, not only of the inward spirit, but of outward forms of reverence. Speaking abstractedly, the slightest indication of so good a feeling is desirable. For this cause, I like to see my congregation turn to the east, in the good old fashion, when they say the creed; and often wonder at two or three persons in the church, who go out of their way to behave differently from the rest of the congregation, by standing immovably like stocks, or looking their neighbours in the face, as much as to say, 'How much better I know how I ought to behave than you!'"

"This affectation of want of reverence is much worse than affectation of the contrary; and if one must do differently from other people, it is better to err on the side of reverence. Do not think, therefore, that I disagree with you in principle. The question is simply with regard to the propriety of particular acts. As to bowing at the name of Jesus, I quite approve of it. We teach our children: why not practise it ourselves? Indeed, a good many of the more respectable amongst the older members of the congregation retain the habit; and I should like to see it become more general. With regard to bowing towards the altar, also, you are kept in countenance by many of the congregation, especially some from the country, who retain the reverent custom of bowing as they come up the church. It is the practice, I believe, of the dean and chapter at some of our cathedrals. Why should it be thought improper or unnecessary to use in God's house the same mark of respect which we scruple not to adopt in the presence of royalty? But to come to the point, the part of your behaviour to which objections have been made—and, I think, not without reason—is your open use of the sign of the cross."

"Mr. M.—Indeed, sir! what Mr. Monkton, apparently surprised. What objection can there possibly be to that holy emblem which typifies our salvation? How can it be wrong for men, who are to know nothing save Christ and Him crucified—men whose only hope is in the cross of Christ,—to remind themselves continually of His precious sufferings and death?—"

Surely those who object cannot be aware that the early Christians continually used the sign of the cross, and saw it in everything: the mast of a ship, with its cross-beam; the extended arms in the figure of the human body; the very hilts of their swords; all appeared to them so many types and memorials of our salvation.

"Mr. L.—I am quite aware, I replied, that the practice is sanctioned by the almost universal custom of the early Church; and I admit, that in itself it is most pious and edifying. Still we all know that it has come to be associated in the minds of the people with the superstitions of Romanism; and our Protestant congregations are very jealous of anything which appears connected with those exploded errors.

"Mr. M.—Surely, sir, the abuse of a good thing is no argument against its use.

"Mr. L.—In essentials I grant you that this rule is sound. However much the Romanists may have abused the sacraments, the priesthood, or any thing else essential to the Church, we must not, on that account, discontinue them. But the sign of the cross is not a point of necessary duty; it is simply useful as conducing to edification; and if, as it is most certain, people are distracted in their devotions, and scandalized by what appears to them, it may be in their ignorance, a relic of popery, we are bound, for the sake of our weaker brethren, to abstain. I trust, therefore, my dear sir, that you will comply with my wishes in this respect.

My curate, though with somewhat of evident reluctance, promised that, at my request, he would give up the practice, which he accordingly did: and I was in hopes that things would have gone on very well; for he was diligent in his duty, and otherwise well disposed.

Some while after, I had occasion to be absent from home; and on my return, being at my accustomed place at the altar, what was my surprise, when Mr. Monkton bowed his head on entering from the vestry, to see that he had shaved the hair from the top of his crown—in short, had adopted a regular tonsure!

"Well, this is too bad!" said I to myself, half angry, half laughing. I am sorry to say I could not get rid of the thought even during the service. The thing took me by surprise, and I could not drive it from my mind, so as to attend to my devotions; and I have no doubt that the same effect was wrought in my congregation by Mr. Monkton's new eccentricity.

However, the worst was yet to come. On entering the vestry, I made no observation to my curate, not wishing to discuss the matter in the presence of the clerk. As soon as Mr. Monkton left the vestry, the old clerk began:

"Well, that's a strange gentleman, to be sure.—The people don't half like his ways. I suppose, sir, you have not seen the churchwardens since you came home. But they want to speak to you about what happened on Thursday last at the communion"—for I had a communion on every festival.

"No, I have not seen them, Simon. What was it that took place?"

"Why, sir, Mr. Monkton would not use the bread which was there, but brought a number of little wafers, which he had made at his lodgings. Some of the people who went up to the rail would not take them, but came away without communicating. I do not know what you will think of it, sir; but the parish is all up in arms about it."

"No wonder," I said; "I must look to this matter without delay."

On getting home to my house, the first thing I did was to turn to the rubric in the Communion Service, in which I had imagined that it was strictly ordered that common wheat bread was to be used. But this was not the case: had it been so, I felt much inclined to have presented my curate to the Bishop.—But the words were these: "To take away all occasion of discussion and superstition which any person hath or might have concerning the bread and wine, it shall suffice that the bread be such as is usually to be eaten; but the best and purest wheat bread that conveniently may be gotten." Now, in this rubric it is not stated that it must be wheat bread. Indeed, it seems to be implied that wafers continued to be commonly used, as had been the custom before the Reformation; and therefore I could not accuse him of any positive violation of the rubric. Still, the revival of a custom long since exploded, at the certain risk of giving needless offence, seemed to me an unpardonable act of indiscretion, or perhaps it might be termed, irreverent affectation. At any rate, it appeared to me that Mr. Monkton was not the sort of person with whom I could continue to act with any degree of satisfaction; and therefore I wrote at once the following letter:

"DEAR SIR,—From your compliance with my request respecting the use of the sign of the cross, I entertained hopes that I should have been enabled to profit for a continuance by your ability and diligence in my parish; but the information which I have received since my return home, and what I have myself had occasion to observe prevents me from any longer indulging that hope. That you should think fit to shave your head, intending it, I suppose, in imitation of the Roman tonsure, would appear rather a subject of ridicule than of grave animadversion; were it not that things of this trifling nature are often proved a greater stumbling-block in the path of the simple minded than more grave delinquency. 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