

If a man would know the whole truth about himself, he had better hear what his enemies say. They will often show him things which he never suspected to exist; and, even though spiced with malignity, such revelations may assist him to that most valuable of all knowledge—the knowledge of himself. They may also goad him on to that most valuable of all pursuits—the effort after improvement.

It is precisely for this reason we notice “Salem Chapel.” Bitterly malignant and spiced with deadliest venom as it is, there is a sufficient basis of truth in its delineations to make it worth while for us to ponder them carefully. A sufficient basis, we say, and that is all; for we would protest against being supposed to endorse the entire truthfulness of any one either of the characters or the incidents of the book; and we shall be able to show, before closing this review, that many—and these the very incidents which bear the hardest upon us—are essentially false.

The characters of the book are, first, Mr. Vincent, the minister, who is young, intellectual, rather proud, and more ignorant of the world than any student of Homerton, accustomed to go about amongst different congregations, is likely to be. He makes a terrible fool of himself by falling madly in love with a certain charming dowager (for the authoress, cunning creature that she is, has taken care to weave a web of love, romance and mystery into her story, to ensure her poison being swallowed), and is represented as caring more about making a sensation in the town, taking his place in society, and becoming a grand centre of intellectualism to the community, than about the comparatively tame business of edifying his flock, and saving souls. His deacons are a buttermilk dealer, a poultry dealer, and a cheesemonger,—very vulgar fellows all—who look upon the chapel as a kind of pew-letting machine, and torment the poor minister alternately with their criticism, their advice, and their patronage. These deacons, it must be remarked, have wives, who are a trifle more vulgar, more ignorant, more patronising, and more impertinent than their husbands. One of these last, to say the truth, and he the senior deacon, rather commands our respect than otherwise, and we are inclined to forgive his coarseness and sordid calculations about pew rents, when we find him standing up for the minister in a crisis, and carrying out like a hero his determination to “pull him through.” The wives, however, have no redeeming feature about them, though all were members of the church, and one is a most odious creature. When a woman talks about a minister’s wife “getting her bread out of me and my husband’s hard earnings,” and indulges in such vile trash as this, when a neighbour talks about the minister having business of his own—“Business of his own! a minister aint got no right to have business of his own, leastways on Sundays. Preachin’s his business. I don’t hold with that notion; he’s in our employ, and we pays him well;”—when a woman, we say, talks in this strain, our fingers itch to box her ears. We have next the deacons’ daughters, who “set their caps” at the minister in such a downright style, that we wonder he could remain single for a month; his mother, a lady-like, well-dressed little body, whose cunning diplomacy—which Mrs. Oliphant wants us to admire—is carried to the extent of downright lying; the former minister, a pompous old simpleton, ever tormenting his “young brother” with fatherly advice; and a Mr. Beecher, a fellow-student of Vincent’s, who talks about his friend having “made an ‘it,” like a