

## Choice Literature.

LAICUS,

OR THE EXPERIENCES OF A LAYMAN IN A COUNTRY PARISH.

## CHAPTER VI. OUR CHRISTMAS AT WHEATHEDGE.

Is there any reason why Episcopalians, Lutherans and Roman Catholics should have a monopoly of Christmas? Is its glorious old patron saint partial? Has the Christ-child no gifts for us as well as for other folks? Have the December heavens no brightness—the angel host no song for “blue Presbyterians”? May we not come to the sacred manger, too? Are our church festivals so many that we need dread to add another? Is our religion so inclined to gaiety and merry-making that we need curb its joyous tendencies? The very air of Christmas is marvellous. The heavens are never so blue, the sun never shines with a profuser generosity. The very earth clothes itself in the spotless white of the heavenly robe, as if to prepare for the coming of its Lord.

Alas for him who does not believe in Christmas! May the ghost of Scrooge haunt him into a better mind.

This was what I mentally ejaculated to myself last Saturday afternoon after Mr. Hardcap's protest against our Christmas celebration.

The Sabbath morning previous, Miss Moore came to me mysteriously after church. “I want to walk home with you, Mr. Laicus,” said she. I have a wife and children, and I felt safe. “I shall be delighted with the honour,” I replied. But Miss Moore's honours are never empty ones. I knew that she wanted something; I wondered what. I had not long to wonder; for we had not crossed the road before she opened the subject.

“We are going to trim the church for Christmas,” said she, “and we want you to superintend getting the evergreens.”

“What?” said I, aghast.

Confidentially, please not mention it, I have been in the habit for a good many years of taking my wife and my prayer-book to the Episcopal Church on Christmas-day. Dickens converted me to its observance ten years or more ago. But none are so sound as those who are tinged with heresy. And am I not a “blue Presbyterian”? It would not do to lend my countenance too readily to indecorous invasions of the sanctuary with festivals borrowed from the Roman Catholics. Besides, what would the elders say? I asked Miss Moore as much.

Deacon Goodsole will lend us his pung,” was the reply.

“And the trustees?” said I.

But Miss Moore never leaves a point unguarded.

“Young Wheaton is home from school,” said she, “and he will go with you to the woods. He will call to-morrow night after breakfast.”

For a difficult piece of generalship give me a woman. Not fitted for politics! Why, they are born to it. Here was Miss Moore bent on trimming the church. And Lawyer Laicus was to go in Deacon Goodsole's sleigh with the son of the President of the Board of Trustees to get the “trimmings.” He who dares to complain after that enlists two dignitaries and one very respectable layman against him at the outset.

“Very well,” said I. “I will go.”

“Go!” said Miss Moore, “of course you'll go. Nobody doubted that. But I want to tell you where to go and what to get.”

The next morning I was just finishing my second cup of coffee when I heard the jingle of bells, and, looking up, saw Jim Wheaton and the Deacon's sleek horse at my door. So, bidding Harry, who was to go too, “be quick,” an exhortation that needed no repeating, we were very soon in the pung, armed, I with a hatchet, Harry with a pruning-knife.

That ride was one to be remembered. The air was crisp and clear. Just snow enough had fallen in the night to cover every black and noisome thing, as though all Nature's sins were washed away by her Sabbath repentance, and she had commenced her life afresh. There was luxury in every inhalation of the pure air. The horse, more impatient than we, could scarcely wait for leave to go, and needed no word thereafter to quicken his flying feet. Down the hill, with merry ringing bells, ever and anon showered with flying snow from the horse's hoofs; through the village street with a nod of recognition to Deacon Goodsole, who stood at his door to wave us a cheery recognition; round the corner with a whirl that threatens to deposit us in the soft snow and leave the horse with an empty sleigh; across the bridge which spans the creek; up, with unabated speed, the little hill on the other side; across the railroad track, with real commiseration for the travellers who are trotting up and down the platform, waiting for the train, and must exchange the joyous freedom of this day for the treadmill of the city, this air for that smoke and gas, this clean, pure mantle of snow for that fresh accumulation of sooty sloshy filth; past the school-house, where the gathering scholars stand, snow-balls in hand, to see us run merrily by, one urban, more mischievous than the rest, sending a ball whizzing after us; up, up, up the mountain road, for half-a-mile, past farm-houses whose curling smoke tells of great blazing fires within; past ricks of hay all robed in white, and one ghost of a last summer's scare-crow watching still, though the corn is long since ingathered and the crows have long since flown to warmer climes; turning off, at last, from the highway into Squire Wheaton's wood road, where, since the last fall of snow, nothing has been before us, save a solitary rabbit whose track our dog Jip follows excitedly, till he is quite out of sight or even call.

Here we are at last. And here the evergreens are about us in a profusion which would make the eyes water of my honest friend the Dutch grocer who supplied me with my family trees so many years in New York. Our smoking nag is over his impatience now, and, being well blanketed, understands what is wanted of him quite as well as if he were tied, and stands as still as if he were Squire

Slowgoes' fat and lazy “family horse.” With pants tied snarply over our topboots to keep out the intruding snow, we plunge into the woods. The ringing blows of our hatchets on the cedar trees bring down a mimic shower on our heads and backs. Young Wheaton understands his business, and shows me how the fairest evergreens are hid beneath the snow, and what rare forms of crystalline beauty conceal themselves altogether beneath this white counterpane. So sometimes cutting from above and sometimes grubbing from below, we work an hour or more, till our pung is filled to its brim. Long before we have finished, Jip has returned from his useless search, and the neighing horse in cages his impatience to be off again.

When we got back to the church we found it warm with a blazing fire in the great stove, and bright with a bevy of laughing girls, who emptied our sleigh of its contents almost before we were aware what had happened, and were impatiently demanding more. Miss Moore had proposed just to trim the pulpit—oh! but she is a shrewd manager—and we had brought evergreens enough to make two or three. But the plans had grown faster by far than we could work. One young lady had remarked how beautiful the chandelier would look with an evergreen wreath; a second had pointed out that there ought to be large festoons draping the windows; a third, the soprano, had declared that the choir had as good a right to trimming as the pulpit; a fourth, a graduate of Mount Holyoke, had proposed some mottoes, and had agreed to cut the letters, and Mr. Leacock, the store-keeper, had been forged on for pasteboard, and an extemporized table contrived on which to cut and trim them. So off we were driven again, with barely time to thaw out our half-frozen toes; and, in short, my half morning's job lengthened out to a long day's hard but joyous work, before the pile of evergreens in the hall was large enough to supply the energies of the Christmas workers.

Of course, we must trim the Sunday school-room as well as the church, for the children must have their Christmas; and trimmed it was, so luxuriantly that it seemed as though the woods had laid siege to and taken possession of the sanctuary, and that nature was preparing to join on this glad day her voice with that of man in singing praise to Him who brings life to a winter-wrapped earth, and whose fittest symbol, therefore, is the tree whose greenness not even the frosts of the coldest winter have power to diminish.

Of course Christmas itself passed without recognition. I went, as is my wont, with my wife and my prayer-book, to the Episcopal Church. Our Christmas waited till Sunday. A glorious day it was. The sun never shone more brightly. The crisp keenness was gone from the air. The balmy breath of spring was in it. The church never was so full before and never has been since. The story of its decorations had been spread far and wide, and all Wheathedge flocked to see what the Presbyterians would make of Christmas. The pulpit, he walks the gallery, the chandelier, were festooned with wreaths of living green. A cross—*O tempora! O mores!*—of cedar and maple, stood on the communion table. Over the pulpit were those sublime words of the sublimest of all books: “He shall save His people from their sins.” Opposite it, emblazoned on the gallery, was heaven and earth's fitting response to this sublime revelation: “Glory be to God on high.” Miss Moore was better than her word. She managed both choir and minister. Both were in the spirit of the occasion. The parson never preached a better sermon than his Christmas meditation. The choir never sang a more joyous song of praise than their Christmas anthem. And before the influence of that morning's service I think the last objection to observing Christmas faded out.

For there had been some objections. I heard of two.

One came from Mr. Wheaton. Monday afternoon, going by the church, he saw the door open, went in, found it full of busy workers; ceiling, aisles, pulpit and gallery strewn with evergreens, and the clatter of merry voices keeping pace with the busy fingers. It was his first intimation of what was going on.

“Heyday!” said he. “What is all this? Who authorized it, I should like to know?”

The chatter of merry voices ceased. The young ladies were in awe. Miss Moore was not there to answer for them. No one dared act as spokesman. Young Jim Wheaton was on a step-ladder rather dangerously resting on the backs of two pews. He was tacking the letter G to the gallery. He noticed the silence and discerned the cause.

“Father,” said he, “I wish you would hold this ladder for me for a minute. It is rather ticklish.”

“Ah, Jim, is that you?” said the old man. Pride in Jim is the father's weak point. The ladder was held. Then his advice was asked about the placing of the mottoes; and it was given, and that was the last of Mr. Wheaton's objection.

The other objection came from Mr. Hardcap, the carpenter. I met him at the door of the church Saturday afternoon, just as the last rubbish had been swept out and we were closing the door.

“Looks beautiful, doesn't it, Mr. Hardcap?” said I.

“They'd better have spent their time on their knees than with these fixins,” growled Mr. Hardcap: “'twould ha' done the church more good, a deal sight.”

“Did you spend your time on your knees?” I could not refrain from asking.

But Mr. Hardcap did not answer.

## CHAPTER VII.—MR. GEAR AGAIN.

Our Bible class at the Mill has prospered greatly. Mr. Gear was better than his word. The first Sabbath he brought in over a dozen of his young men; the half-dozen who were already in the Sabbath school joined us of course. Others have followed. Some of the children of the Mill village gathered curiously about the school house doors from Sunday to Sunday. It occurred to me that we might do something with them. I proposed it to Mr. Gear. He assented. So we invited them in, got a few discarded singing books from the Wheathedge Sabbath school, and used music as an invitation to more. Mrs. Gear has come in to teach them. There are not over a dozen or twenty all told as yet. If the skating or the sliding is good they are reduced to five or six. Still the number is gradually increas-

ing, and they are enough to constitute the germ of a possible mission school. I wish we had a pastor. He might make something out of it.

Mr. Gear adheres to his pledge and I to mine. We had no theological discussions in the class. Occasionally, is deed pretty frequently, we got on themes on which we were not agreed. But we never debate. Mr. Gear has made several attempts at a theological discussion out of the class, but I have avoided them. I hope he does not think I am afraid of discussion.

I am not. But I am convinced that no mere intellectual opinion is a sin. If Mr. Gear is in darkness it is because he neglects some known if not some recognized duty. My wish is not to convince him of the error of his opinions, I probably never could do that. And his opinions are not of much consequence. My work is to find out what known duty he is neglecting, and press it home upon his conscience. And so far I have not discovered what it is. He is one of the most conscientious men I ever knew. Yet something is wanting in Mr. Gear. I believe he half thinks so himself. He is mentally restless and uneasy. He seems to doubt his own doubts, and to want discussion that he may strengthen himself in his own unbelief. But still I make no progress. Since that first night I have got no farther into his heart.

“John,” said Jennie, “I wish you would call and see Mr. Gear. He has not been in church for six or eight weeks.”

“It is no use,” said I, “I have asked him once or twice, and he always says that he is not coming till we get a pastor. He says he does not care to hear candidates; he does not consider himself a good judge of the article. ‘Hardcap,’ says he, ‘is a ministerial expert, but I am not.’”

“How is he getting on?” said Jennie.

“To tell the truth, Jennie, I don't know,” I replied. “I don't see that he gets on at all. He seems to be just where he was.”

Jennie drew a long sigh.

“Patience, Jennie, patience,” said I, “time works wonders.”

“No, John,” said Jennie, “time never works. It eats and undermines and rots and rusts and destroys. But it never works. It only gives us an opportunity to work.”

Perhaps Jennie is right. Perhaps we expect time to work for us, when time is only given us that we may work. “Besides,” said Jennie, “there is that volume of Theodore Parker's sermons which you borrowed of him the other day, you have never returned it.”

No! And I had never read it. Our theme in Bible-class had touched on prayer. After the class Mr. Gear had tried to get me into a theological discussion about prayer. I had been silent as to my own views, but had asked him for his. And he had handed me this volume in reply. It contained a sermon by Theodore Parker on the subject which Mr. Gear said expressed his own views exactly. Jennie's remark brought this volume to mind. I took it down from the shelf, opened to the sermon, and read it aloud to Jennie.

We both agreed that it was a good sermon, or rather, to speak more accurately, a sermon in which there was good. It is true that in it Mr. Parker inveighed against the orthodox philosophy of prayer; he denied that God could really be influenced or His plans changed. But on the duty of prayer he vehemently insisted. Mere philanthropy and humanity, he said, are not religion. There must also be piety. The soul must live in the divine presence; must inhale the Spirit of God; must utter its contrition, its weakness, its wants, and its thanksgivings to its Heavenly Father.

That evening's reading suggested a thought to me. To next evening I started for Mr. Gear's to try if it were true, and to try the practicability of the plan it had developed in my mind. Mr. Gear welcomed me cordially. Mrs. Gear went off almost immediately on pretence of putting the children to bed, and left us two alone together. I opened the conversation by handing her husband the volume of sermons and thanking him for it.

“What do you think of the sermon?” said he.

“I liked a great deal of it very much indeed,” said I. “I believe you told me that you liked it.”

“Very much,” said he. “I think it's one of Theodore Parker's ablest sermons.”

“And you believe in it?” said I, interrogatively.

“With all my heart,” said he. “Who can believe in the Great Infinite First Cause can be influenced, and His plans changed by the teasing of every one of His insignificant little creatures?”

“But the rest of the sermon,” said I. “Do you believe that? Last Sunday Professor Strait preached for us. He preached against what he called humanitarianism. He said it was living without God; that there was very little difference between ignoring God and denying His existence, and that the humanitarians practically ignored Him; that they believe only in men.”

“It is not true,” said Mr. Gear, somewhat bitterly. “You can see for yourself that it is not true. Theodore Parker believes in prayer as much as Professor Strait. I don't believe but that he prayed as much.”

“And you agree with him?” said I, with a little affectation of surprise.

“Agree with him, Mr. Laicus,” said he, “of course I do. There can be no true religion without prayer, without piety, without gratitude to God, without faith in Him. Your Church has not the monopoly of faith in God, by any means, that assumes to have.”

“And you really believe in prayer?” said I.

“Believe in prayer? Why, of course I do. Do you ask me for a heathen?” replied he, with some irritation.

“And every night,” said I, “you kneel down and commend yourself to our Heavenly Father's protection? and every morning you thank Him for His watchfulness, and beseech divine strength from Him to meet the temptations of the day; and every day you gather your family about His throne that you may teach your children to love and reverence the Father you delight to worship?”

There was a long pause. Mr. Gear was evidently taken by surprise. He made no answer; I pressed my advantage.

“How is it, my friend?” said I.