

Choice Literature.

LAICUS;

OR THE EXPERIENCES OF A LAYMAN IN A COUNTRY PARISH.

CHAPTER XXIX.—MAURICE MAPLESON TRIES AN EXPERIMENT.

Five or six weeks ago Maurice came to us in some excitement. "Mr. Laicus," said he, "is it true that ten of you gentlemen have to contribute thirty dollars apiece this year to make up my salary?"

"No," said I.

"Why, John?" said Jennie.

"We didn't *have* to do it," I continued. "But in point of fact we do it."

"I don't like that," said he, soberly. "If the church can't pay me fifteen hundred dollars a year I do not want to receive it. I thought the church was strong and well able to do all it professed to do."

"My dear Mr. Mapleson," said I, "you attend to the spiritual interests of the church and leave its finances to us. If we cannot pay you all we have promised, we will come and beg off. Till then you just take it for granted that it's all right."

Maurice shook his head.

"Why, my dear friend," said I, "how much do you suppose I pay for pew-rent?"

"I haven't the least idea," said he.

"Fifty dollars," said I. "That provides myself and wife and Harry with a pew in church twice on the Sabbath if we want it. It pays for Harry's Sabbath school instruction and for your service as a pastor to me and to mine. But we will make no account of that. Fifty dollars a year is a dollar a week, fifty cents a service, twenty cents a head, Harry half-price, and the Sabbath school, and the prayer meetings and the pastoral work thrown in. It is cheaper than any lecturer would give it to us, and a great deal better quality too. My pew-rent isn't what I pay for the support of the Gospel. It is what I pay for my own spiritual bread and butter. It won't hurt me nor Deacon Goodsole, nor Mr. Wheaton, nor Mr. Jowett, nor any one else on that list, to contribute thirty dollars more for the cause of Christ and the good of the community."

Maurice shook his head thoughtfully, but said nothing more about it then, and the matter dropped.

The last week in December we have our annual meeting. It is generally rather a stupid affair. The nine or ten gentlemen who constitute the board of trustees meet in the capacity of an ecclesiastical society. In the capacity of a board of trustees they report to themselves in the capacity of a society. In the capacity of a society they accept the report which they have presented in the capacity of a board of trustees, and pass unanimously a resolution of thanks to the board, *i.e.*, themselves, for the efficient and energetic manner in which they have discharged their duties. They then ballot in a solemn manner for themselves for the ensuing year and elect the ticket without opposition. And the annual meeting is over.

But this year our annual meeting was a very different affair. The Sabbath preceding, the parson preached a sermon on the text: "The poor have the Gospel preached to them." In this sermon he advocated a free pew system. His arguments were not very fresh or new (there is not much that is new to be said on the subject) till he came to the close. Then he startled us all by making the following proposition:

"The chief objection," said he, "to the free pew system is the question: 'Where shall the money come from?' From God, I answer. I believe if we feed His poor, He will feed us. I, for one, am willing to trust Him, at least for one year."

It slipped out very naturally, and there was a little laugh in the congregation at the preacher's expense. But he was very much in earnest.

"I propose to this society to throw open the doors of this church, and declare all the pews free. Provide envelopes and papers and scatter them through the pews. Let each man write thereon what he is willing to pay for the support of the Gospel, and whether he will pay it weekly, monthly, quarterly, semi-quarterly or annually. Give those sealed envelopes to me. No one shall know what they contain but myself and the treasurer. I will pay out of the proceeds all the current expenses of the church, except the interest. Whatever remains I will take as my salary. The interest, the trustees will provide out of the plate collections and with the aid of the ladies. This is my proposition. Consider it seriously, earnestly, prayerfully, and come together next Wednesday night to act intelligently upon it."

I hardly think the minister's eloquence would have sufficed to carry this plan, but the treasurer's balance-sheet helped his case amazingly.

I supposed there would be a small deficit, but I thought I knew it could not be very great. But I had not reckoned on the genius for incapacity which characterizes church boards. To have the unusual deficit, which was involved by the increase of the pastor's salary, provided for by a special subscription was more than they could bear. They had regarded it as their duty, made plain by the example of their predecessors in office for many years, to bring the church in debt, and nobly had they fulfilled their duty. On the strength of that extraordinary subscription they had rushed into extraordinary expenditures with a looseness that was marvellous to behold. Here is the annual exhibit as it appears in the treasurer's report:

BALANCE SHEET.

Cr.

Pew-rents	\$1,250.00
Sunday Collections	325.25
Received by a Ladies' Fair	113.34
Special Subscription	300.00
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	\$1,988.59

Dr.

Minister's Salary	\$1,500.00
Organist (a new expenditure advocated by Mr. Wheaton because of the Special Subscription), Six months' Salary	100.00
Church Repairs (a new fence and new blinds, etc., advocated by Mr. Wheaton because of the Special Subscription)	134.75
Reed Organ for the Sabbath School (advocated by Mr. Wheaton because of the Special Subscription)	150.00
Interest on Mortgage	315.00
Sexton	200.00
Fire, lights and incidentals	225.00
Commission for collecting pew-rents	55.75
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	\$2,680.50
	1,988.59
Deficit	\$691.91

Of course, the minister's salary was behind; and, of course the minister was behind the grocer, and the baker, and the butcher, and the dry-goods dealer; and, of course, everybody felt blue. There was a good deal of informal discussion before the parson's proposition was taken up. Mr. Hardcap wanted to decrease the minister's salary. Mr. Wheaton wanted to raise the pew-rents. Mr. Leacock thought Mr. Wheaton could afford to give up his mortgage on the church. Mr. Line proposed to take up a subscription, pay the balance off on the spot, and begin the new year afresh. Mr. Gazbag thought it ought to be left to the ladies to clear off the debt with a concert or something of that sort. Mr. Cerulian thought (though he said it very quietly) that if we had a minister who could draw better, we shouldn't have any difficulty.

The parson kept his own counsel till these various plans had been, one after the other, proposed and abandoned. Then he again proposed his own.

"I do not want," he said, "any more salary than this church and congregation can well afford to give. I am willing if it is poor to spare its poverty. I believe if it is prosperous it will be willing to share with me its prosperity. I have studied the matter a good deal; I believe the pew-rent system to be thoroughly bad. It excludes the poor. What is more to the purpose, it excludes those whom we most need to reach. The men who most need the Gospel will not pay for it. The law of supply and demand does not apply. No man pays a pew-rent who does not already at least respect religion, if he does not personally practise it. The influence within the Church of selling the Gospel in open market is as deadly as its influence without. It creates a caste system. Practically, our pews are classified. We have a parquette, a dress circle, a family circle and an amphitheatre. The rich and poor do not meet together. We are not one in Jesus Christ. Moreover, I believe it to be as bad financially as it is morally. When an American makes a bargain he wants to make a good one. What he buys he wants to get as cheap as his neighbour. If you rent your pews, every renter expects to get his seat at the lowest rates. But Americans are liberal in giving. If they contributed to the support of the Gospel, if what they gave the church was a free gift, I believe they would give with a free hand. At all events I would like to try the experiment. It can be no worse than it has been this year. The trustees can have no difficulty in raising interest money from the plate collections and a special subscription. There can be no injustice in requiring them to secure a special fund for any special expenditures. And all the other expenditures I will provide for myself out of the free gifts of the congregation. I am willing to run all the risks. It may do good. It can do the church no harm."

A long discussion followed this proposal.

Mr. Wheaton was at first utterly opposed to the plan. He thought it was tempting Providence to make no more adequate provision for our debts. Six of us quietly agreed to assume the mortgage debt, that is to say, to insure him that the plate collections and the ladies together would pay the interest promptly. That changed his view. He said that if the minister had a mind to risk his salary on such a crazy scheme, very well. And at the last he voted for it.

Mr. Hardcap thought it was a first-rate plan. It was noticed afterwards that he moved from a plain seat in the gallery to a cushioned and carpeted seat in the centre aisle. Whether he paid any more contribution than he had before paid of pew-rent, nobody but the parson knows. But nobody suspects him of doing so.

Mrs. Potiphar thought it was horrid. What was to prevent any common, low-born fellow, any carpenter's son, right from his shop, coming and sitting right alongside her Lillian? She couldn't sanction such communist notions in the church.

Deacon Goodsole warmly favoured the minister's idea—was its most earnest advocate, and was the man who first started the plan for buying Mr. Wheaton's acquiescence.

Mr. Line hadn't a great deal of faith in it. This was not the way the church used to raise money when he was a boy. Still, he wanted to support the minister, and he wanted to have the poor reached, and he hadn't anything to say against it.

Squire Rawlins said: "Go ahead. The minister takes all the risk, don't you see? He's a big fool in my opinion. But there's no law agin a man makin' a fool of himself, ef he wants ter."

Miss Moore organized that very night a double force to carry the plan into effect. One was a ladies' society to pay the interest; the other was a band of workers, young men and young women, to go out on Sunday afternoons and invite the people who now do not go anywhere to church, to come to ours.

On the final vote the plan was carried without a dissenting voice. I beg Mrs. Potiphar's pardon. Her voice was heard in very decided dissent as the meeting broke up. But, as the ladies do not vote in the Calvary Presbyterian

Church, her protest did not prevent the vote from being unanimous.

Maurice Mapleson is sanguine of results, I am not. I am afraid he will come out bankrupt himself at the end of the year. I wanted to raise a special subscription quietly to insure his salary. But he would not hear of it. He replied to my suggestion: "I said I would trust the Lord, and I will. If you want to add to your envelope contribution, very well. But I do not want any more than that will give me."

But one thing I notice and record here. Our congregation has increased from ten to twenty per cent. Miss Moore's invitations have met with far greater success than I anticipated. I could never get any of the boys from the Mill village to come to church at all regularly under the old system. When this change was made I gave notice of it, and now over half my Bible class are in the congregation. But I can get no intimation from Maurice how the plan is prospering financially. All he will say is: "We shall all know at the close of the year."

CHAPTER XXX.—MR. HARDCAP'S FAMILY PRAYERS.

"Jennie," said I, the other evening, "I should like to go and make a call at Mr. Hardcap's."

Our new pastor had preached a sermon on that unapplied passage of Scripture, Luke xiv. 12-14. It had made a great stir in our little village. Mr. Wheaton thought it a grand sermon, but impracticable. Mrs. Potiphar resented it as personal. Deacon Goodsole thought it was good, sound doctrine. I thought I would give the sermon a trial; meanwhile I reserved my judgment.

It is not a bad method, by the way, of judging a sermon to try it and see how it works in actual experiment.

Jennie assented with alacrity to my proposition; her toilet did not take long, and to Mr. Hardcap's we went.

It was very evident that they did not go into society of expect callers. In answer to our knock we heard the patter of a child's feet on the hall floor and Susie opened the door. As good fortune would have it, the sitting-room door at the other end of the hall stood invitingly open, and so, without waiting for ceremony, I pushed right forward to the common room which a great blazing wood fire illuminated so thoroughly that the candles were hardly necessary. Mrs. Hardcap started in dismay to gather up her basket of stockings; but on my positive assurance that we should leave forthwith if she stopped her work she sat down to it again. Luckily the night was cold and there was no fire in the stove of the cheerless and inhospitable parlour. So they were fain to let us share with them the cheery blaze of the cozy sitting-room. We did not start out till after seven, and we had not been in the room more than ten minutes before the old-fashioned clock in the corner rang out the departure of the hour and ushered in eight o'clock—whereat James laid aside his book, and at a signal from his father brought him the family Bible.

"We always have family prayers at eight o'clock," said Mr. Hardcap, "before the children go to bed; and I never let anything interfere with it."

This in the tone of a defiant martyr; as one under the impression that we were living in the Middle Ages and that I was an Inquisitor ready to march the united family to the stake on the satisfactory evidence that the reading of the Bible was maintained in it.

I begged him to proceed, and he did so, the defiant spirit a little mollified.

He opened at a mark somewhere in Numbers. It was a chapter devoted to the names of the tribes and their families. Poor Mr. Hardcap! If he was defiant at the first threatening of martyrdom, he endured the infliction of the torture with a resolute bravery worthy of a Covenanter. The extent to which he became entangled in those names, the new baptism they received at his hands, the singular contortions of which he proved himself capable in reproducing them, the extraordinary and entirely novel methods of pronunciation which he evolved for the occasion, and the heroic bravery with which he struggled through, awoke my keenest sympathies. Words which he fought and vanquished in the first paragraph rose in rebellion in the second to be fought and vanquished yet again. The chapter at length drew to an end. I saw to my infinite relief that he was at last emerging from this interminable feast of names. What was my horror to see him turn the page and enter with fresh zeal upon the conquest of a second chapter.

Little Charlie (five years old) was sound asleep in his mother's arms. Her eyes were fixed on vacancy and her mind interiorly calculating something. I wondered not that James snored audibly on the sofa. Susie never took her eyes off her father; but sat as one that watches to see how a task is done. My wife listened for a little while with averted face, then wandered off, as she afterwards told me, to a mental calculation of her resources and expenses for the next month. And still Mr. Hardcap rolled out those census tables of Judea's ancient history. It was not till he had finished three chapters that at length he closed the book and invited me to lead in prayer.

Half-an-hour later when Jamie had been roused up from his corner of the sofa and sent off to bed, and Charlie had been undressed and put to bed without being more than half aroused, Mrs. Hardcap asked my advice as to this method of reading the Bible.

"Mr. Hardcap," she said, "read a statement the other day to the effect that by reading three chapters every day and five on Sunday he could finish the Bible in a year, and he is going through it in regular course. But I sometimes doubt whether that is the best way. I am sure our children do not take the interest in it which they ought to; and I am afraid those chapters of hard names do not always profit me."

The martyr in Mr. Hardcap re-asserted itself. "All Scripture," said he solemnly, "is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness. We cannot afford to pass by any part of the Word of God."

"What do you think about it, Mr. Laicus?" said Mrs. Hardcap.