



Person: Joseph Hesselgrave Thompson (1811 - 1889)
Description: Recollections of his Curate's son.
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STAFFORDSHIRE GLEANINGS
IN HISTORY AND TRADITION.

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Author of Staffordshire Sketches, " Olden Warwickshire," Oldbury and Round About,"
The Story of the Shire," etc.

XXVII.—AN ECCENTRIC BLACK COUNTRY PARSON.

The following character sketch, under the title of "A Black Country Vicar," appeared a few years back in the cultured columns of "The Spectator." So-racy, and so vastly entertaining was it, that permission to give it a wider circulation in the Black Country area was at once sought and has now been willingly granted by the Editor of that journal and the writer of the article.

Indeed, the latter has been kind enough to add a few more details which did not appear in the original article. The subject of this sketch was the Rev. Joseph Hesselgrave Thompson, who was Vicar of Cradley for nearly 30 years, and who died in 1889. (Cradley, be it noted, is beyond Cradley Heath, and just across the border in that corner of the Black Country which reaches into north-east Worcestershire). The writer of the reminiscences is the son of a long-suffering¹ curate, who for nearly 15 years worked with this eccentric vicar, and of the extraordinary sayings and doings of this very unconventional old parson he found his memory so crowded and so teeming that when he took pen in hand he had to exercise the utmost restraint upon himself to compress his lively recollections thus within the restricted space of single page of "The Spectator":-

"Call me Old Tommy Two-Sticks," he say to the children when, owing to an accident, he had to walk with the aid of two sticks. And the name stuck to him for the rest of his life. His parish was unlovely and his parishioners were mostly uncultured, but nothing would induce him to leave, not even his shrewd suspicion that his acceptance of another benefice would have been greeted in some quarters with the polite regret that conceals a profound relief. He lived among his "poor people" for thirty years, and his one unchangeable intention was to die among them and buried among them. And he carried his intention out. It would scarcely be true to say that he was loved, but there was probably no strong feeling of animosity against him; he was great curiosity, and perhaps the parishioners felt it was interesting to have such an eccentric vicar. They recognised his cleverness, and on the whole they were rather proud him, even when - as often happened - he offended them. And they frequently had good reason to be offended.

His hobby was botany, and he was a great authority on the subject. His enthusiasm for this pursuit once led to his arrest as a supposed lunatic. He suddenly discovered rare plant for which he had searched for years, and immediately began to dance round it, exclaiming: "Oh, you little darling. I've got you, I've got you!" The next moment he felt two strong hands seize hold of him and heard a voice

¹ The curate in question was the Rev John Buncher (1836 - 1886). He had two sons who would have encountered JHT - John Bowen Buncher (1866 - 1909) and Rev. William Cecil Buncher (1875 - 1946). In view of their death dates the latter is the most likely candidate for authorship of the article and in an obituary notice he was described by the Lichfield Mercury (1946 April 12) as a "candid cleric with flair for journalism, Lichfield's outspoken vicar."

saying; "Yes, and we've got you! Come along." Two warders from a neighbouring asylum were looking for an escaped lunatic, and thought they had found, if not the object of their search, at least a man who had escaped from another madhouse. He protested and explained, but in vain, and was taken to the asylum. On the way he remembered to his relief that he knew the Medical Superintendent, but his arrival this official was out, and the vicar was locked up for half-an-hour. When the doctor returned both of them laughed heartily at the adventure. The vicar, far from keeping the incident to himself, related it to his parishioners in the course of a sermon.

Every year he went to Spain for a holiday, and was absent for eight weeks generally going just before Easter. He was a confirmed bachelor, but the people had a theory that he had a black wife in Spain (their geographical ideas being rather mediaeval), and this accounted for his annual journey. It caused him great amusement. He never contradicted them, for he did not wish to deprive them the pleasure that this belief gave them.

It was interesting, though seldom inspiring, to go to church, for something extraordinary nearly always happened. The church itself had no beauty, and there was scarcely anything in it that was "correct." It had originally been a Lady Huntingdon Chapel; it had no chancel, and the East End was at the West End. The reading desk faced the people (suggesting that the prayers, like the sermon, were addressed to them, and the vicar's style of reading them favoured the idea). Reverence was not taught by example, and it was difficult remember that we were in a "place of worship." The vicar could not tolerate a silent form of devotion; he liked "hearty services" (bellowing himself like a herd of Bashan bulls), and he used to walk round the church and stand by one person after another, with his hand upon his ear, to discover whether they were singing. Celebrations were not always helpful, for his conduct was curious. He would stand on a pew to count the communicants, and he was once known uncork a bottle of wine at the altar. His sermons were always an entertainment in spite of their length. Those were the days when brevity was unknown, but even then complaints were made about long-windedness. I remember him often saying that if some one would provide a half-hour glass for the pulpit, he would undertake leave off when the sand had run through. But one took up the challenge. He always wrote his sermons, but he rarely read them, for after the first few pages he would go off at a tangent and be carried hopelessly and violently away from his subject. Had he read what he had written, should perhaps have had reason to call him a good preacher. But least was never dull. More than once I laughed audibly, and mother (I was quite child those days) apologised to him afterwards on my behalf, but did not hesitate add: "If you will say such rubbish, you must expect to laugh." She never refrained from telling him what she thought of his ways, but he never resented her plain speaking. On the other hand, she was always ready to come to his aid; on one occasion he appealed (from the pulpit) for some lady to mend his gown, and she undertook the task. He showed his gratitude by being pointedly personal not long afterwards when she was for a time absent from church after having all her teeth extracted. He was preaching about artificially. "People have everything false nowadays—false hair, false eyebrows, and (looking straight into our pew) even false teeth." This, however, was only a mild case of his "personalities"; they were often much worse. He was once haranguing the people on the subject of the collections and said: "Put your threepenny bits back into your purses. I don't mean you poor people up in the gallery. Of course, if you've got nothing you can give nothing." This was quite inoffensive, but went to say, looking straight into one pew: "Of course, if you've five thousand pounds less than nothing, why you can't give anything all." The occupant of that pew had just failed for that amount When the churchwardens, after the service, remonstrated with the vicar, he replied that had no recollection of saying anything of the kind. And possibly he was telling the truth. On another occasion he electrified the congregation by exclaiming: "Thou vile old caitiff, thou grey-headed old fool, thou old man of sixty-five, where hast thou been all these years?" When they recovered from their astonishment at this outburst, they realised that he was apostrophising himself. He ended by saying: "It will be the curate's turn next Sunday." He frequently turned to the curate in the course of a sermon to ask his opinion, and insisted on having answer. If the curate's opinion differed from his own, he would say; "Wrong again; I stand corrected." I often saw the curate cover his face with the folds of his surplice and shake all over with

suppressed laughter. When the churchyard was enlarged the Bishop was not well enough to preach, and it was suggested by the churchwardens that the rector of the adjoining parish (the patron the living and the son of an Earl) should be asked to preach. "Certainly not," was the reply; "the Bishop shall see that the vicar of this parish can preach well as any one." During the sermon (which on this occasion he read as well as wrote) he turned round to the Bishop and the clergy, who were in the Sanctuary, and quoted a Latin author, and then, turning back, said to the people: "I have said that in Latin for the benefit of my clerical brethren." The curate informed his family that it was well that the vicar gave the quotation in Latin, as it was not fit to repeat English. As I was only six years old the time, I have no recollection of the matter the sermon, but I can remember the manner of it well. The fact that he was asked to preach before the British Association in Birmingham is evidence that he was regarded as a man of considerable attainments. He did not always give this impression in his own church, but he had always enough, and more than enough, to say, and he said it with much force, and generally with some action. One Sunday found his flow of eloquence impeded the hassock. After several unsuccessful attempts to get it out his way, he turned round and kicked it down the pulpit steps, and then resumed his, discourse with perfect composure.

To give a true idea of his reading of the Lessons would be beyond the power of the most skilful writer. His intention was depict a scene; his effect often was nearly to cause one. His efforts to be a graphic made it impossible for his hearers to be grave. He suited the action to the words in a manner that was more realistic than reverent. The Miracle at Cana gave him an opportunity that he could not lose. "They have no more wine," was uttered in whisper with hand to his mouth.

He took a special delight in the Wednesday night service, and secured a congregation by giving doles of tea to the women who attended it, distributing tickets one week and the tea the next. I have often seen a queue of women lining up outside the vestry to receive the reward of godliness. He always started for his holiday on Thursday, and always preached the previous evening on the text, "I take my journey into Spain." The curate abhorred the vicar's method of bribery, and at one of these services, in giving out the notices, said "The vicar starts for his holiday to-morrow, so next Wednesday we shall see who are the Bread-and-Butter Christians."

His eccentricities were endless and, to the curate more than anyone else, exasperating; but he had the merit of being true to his principles. He was a bigoted teetotaler, and even when he was seized with a sudden illness in the pulpit he refused to take any brandy, though he knew he was risking his life carrying his convictions to this extreme.

He was a Low Churchman rather than an Evangelical, but took a keen delight in referring to Cardinal Newman as my "Parish Priest," from the fact that he had been at Oxford when Newman was vicar of St. Mary's. His service ceremonial was in part typically "Low," and in part peculiarly his own. But he felt within himself quite sure that it would not remain the "use" of his church after his departure, and often said: "When I'm gone you'll have a man who will turn his back you." But when he was asked what he did when he went to church where they turned to the east for the Creed and the Ascription after the sermon, he replied with smile: "I turn half-way."

The vicar was a strange man, but he had many good points, and with all his peculiarities it could be said that "had the root of the matter in him." He was seen at his best at the ²funeral of the curate, who had worked with him for more than fourteen years. It was only by a supreme effort that he was able to master his emotion. He held up through the service with a wonderful self-restraint, but as the last words passed from his lips he covered his face with his surplice to hide the grief he could no longer keep back. His genuine sorrow at that moment showed what his true self would have been if his heart had always ruled his life.

² July 1886

He always hoped for a sudden death, and he was given what he desired. He lived in lodgings (stubbornly refusing to have a vicarage built), and one evening his landlady went into his sitting-room and said: "Isn't it sad, sir? Richard Salt has died suddenly." "Sad?" he replied. "No, certainly not. Sudden death, sudden glory. It's exactly what I want myself." The next morning his wish gratified. He fell down dead as he was dressing. So he passed to his rest to receive healing of the mind, and, may be hoped, find that with all his strangeness he had not wholly lived in vain. It is more than thirty years since he died, and no one has yet recorded his words and his ways. Yet they were worth recording, for he was a character such as we rarely meet in real life. If some great novelist had depicted him exactly as he was, the world would have said; "Of course, it is exaggeration, though perhaps there was some foundation the back." But no character in fiction was ever more striking or more strange than Black Country vicar. To have known him in childhood is to remember him more and more distinctly to the end of my days.

B.