



TODDINGTON CHURCH from the East (1880).

Toddington Memories  
of  
The Rev. John Shearmer

On the Monday after my ordination, I went to my first curacy at Toddington, in Bedfordshire, a large straw-plaiting village with a population of about 2000.

The Midland Railway between London and Bedford was then in course of construction, and consequently some 400 navvies were temporarily added to the parish. This gave me much extra work, and was a valuable experience, as I was frequently called to the huts to visit sick or injured men.

Old Neale, the parish clerk of Toddington, was a great character. He occupied the lowest tier of the "three-decker" pulpit and recited the responses in so loud a tone that there was nothing left for the congregation to do. He was a painter by trade and sometimes suffered from painter's colic, which kept him from church. On those occasions the congregation took an audible part in the service. I asked them why they did not do so when Neale was present, and received the answer :

" Do you wish us to take the bread out of his mouth ? "

In my first week at Toddington the whole Wednesday evening service devolved on me. Neale, having taken stock of the new curate, remarked :

"There are two baptisms to-night." This was sufficiently alarming, but my nervousness was increased when he added, " Take care you don't brain the children against the corner of the seat. It's bin done afore now."

When I reached the font, I perceived that the corner of the semi-high pew was indeed in dangerous proximity !

There was a large Sunday School in Toddington, numbering some hundreds of scholars. A new schoolmaster straight from college a dapper little man of very youthful appearance had arrived in the parish about the same time as myself He was to be superintendent of the boys' department, and I was deputed superintendent of the girls'.

The first classes consisted of young men and young women, upwards of twenty years of age. The appearance of these very-well-dressed young women the Toddington girls earned very good wages as bonnet-sewers and spent most of their money on finery whom it was my duty to instruct, alarmed me considerably, for I was but a youth myself. I had not been long seated at my class when the little master came to ask if I allowed corporal punishment in Sunday School. When I contrasted his diminutive stature with that of the hulking yokels under his charge, I could not help suggesting that it might be prudent to refrain from a personal encounter with them.

" I can do nothing with the lads," he said, "unless I enforce my authority."

So I gave him the desired permission, and presently a resounding box on the ear startled the whole school !

The plucky little master's authority was

established ; due submission followed, and he had no further trouble with his scholars.

Shortly after my arrival in Toddington my Rector, the Rev. John Clegg, left for a holiday, on account of his health, and was absent for several months. To have a large parish like this thrown entirely on my young and inexperienced shoulders was a grave responsibility ; added to which, a severe outbreak of typhus fever occurred amongst some of the poorest inhabitants crowded in very insanitary houses.

I could not possibly have coped with all the work, had I not received much kind assistance and advice from the Rev. J. M. Hamilton, Vicar of the neighbouring parish of Chalgrove. The monthly Celebration of Holy Communion was taken by him as I was only in deacon's orders.

I remember one Sunday morning before matins the church being filled with navvies attending the funeral of three of their mates who had been killed by a landslip. Mr. Burgeman, the engineer in charge of the railway-works, asked me to give them a special address.

It was a remarkable sight when these navvies, numbering about 400 men, marched up the village four abreast.

They were dressed all alike in white slops, black trousers and with black neckties tied in a sailor's knot. Their behaviour in church was very reverent and attentive, and they sang the hymns with evident feeling.

During the outbreak of typhus fever, one evening at about nine o'clock, I was summoned to visit some fever-stricken people. I had never visited an infectious case before, and must confess to having felt rather nervous at the idea.

Arrived at the house, I knocked at the door ; but as no one opened it to me I walked inside and, guided by the sound of loud voices, I found my way to an upstairs room. There a terrible spectacle met my eyes : a mother and two daughters lying in bed, both the girls raving in delirium. I visited many such cases after that, but none quite so shocking.

A large number of deaths occurred, and the disease spread to a neighbouring village. The young Rector consulted me about visiting the cases. He had the greatest dread of infection and a strong presentiment that he should catch the fever and die. He was called to the sick-bed of the butler of Lady Inglis the Lucknow heroine, and widow of Sir Robert Inglis and, sure enough, fell a victim to typhus and died.

His death cast a sad gloom over the neighbourhood. I still have in my possession a writing-table and chair which belonged to him.

The chancel of Toddington Church was of unusual length, being about equal to the nave, from which it was separated by the tower.

On the occasion of my first wedding, while I was robing in the vestry which opened out of the

chancel, I was astonished to hear a tremendous babel of voices at the opposite end of the church.

" What does it mean ? " I inquired of old Neale.

" Oh," said he, " that's the gals. They always comes to a wedding."

I determined to stop the noise, so, having donned my surplice, and with what dignity I could command, I walked down the long chancel, through the tower arch and into the nave. There I found a large number of young women standing on the seats, chattering and laughing loudly, while they busily plaited their straws.

I raised my hand, and sternly bade them :

'\* Sit down ! "

Rather to my surprise they instantly obeyed. Then I spoke to them on the duty of reverence in God's House.

The next day I met a party of them on the village green. One of the girls, acting as spokeswoman, came forward and said :

" We are very much obliged to you, sir, for what you said to us yesterday. We had never been spoken to before, and did not know we were doing wrong. You may be sure it will never happen again."

And it never did.

On Easter Monday, that year, I had to take seven weddings at the same time. Only five couples could kneel at the Altar-rails. I went from couple to couple, repeating the words of the marriage service. Then I asked one of the men :

" Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife ? " I waited for his reply. As no answer came, I whispered, "You must say, 'I will.'" Whereupon he explained :

" I hain't agoin' to marry this woman I'm a-fathering of her."

But a man amongst the crowd of persons in the chancel held up his hand, saying :

" I'm the man for that woman, sir ! "

In those days the custom of preaching in a black gown had not quite died out. During the singing of the hymn before the sermon the clergyman used to repair to the vestry to change his surplice for a gown.

One rather dark evening Neale looked up from his desk below mine on the "three-decker," and said in a loud stage whisper :

" Can ye see to preach ? You go an' shift, and I'll light the gas."

The reason of our giving up the black gown at Toddington is worth mentioning. It came about in this wise. When I took my M. A. degree at Oxford in 1867, I ^ft niy B.A. gown there, but did not care to go to the expense of buying a Master's gown, and therefore I returned to Toddington crownless.

My Rector was much annoyed at this, and declared to me that a black gown was imperative. I, for my part, maintained that it is the duty of churchwardens to provide the proper vestments in any church.

As there was much agitation in the country just then with regard to ritualistic practices, my Rector was afraid that my appearance in the pulpit clad in a white surplice might create a disturbance in the congregation ; moreover, he was particularly apprehensive of giving offence to the Squire. However, as he refused to lend me his own beautiful black silk gown, when Sunday morning came I ascended the pulpit stairs in my surplice.

Wonderful to say, the congregation made no remark whatever about this innovation. At length, anxious to ascertain what the Squire, Major Cooper, thought about it, I wended my way to Toddington Manor.

I asked him if he had noticed anything unusual about me on Sunday morning. After thinking a moment, he replied :

" Yes, you had your Master's hood on."

I told him there was something besides that. Quite unable to understand what I alluded to, he summoned Mrs. Cooper. She had noticed nothing. When I told them that I had preached for the first time in a surplice, he exclaimed :

" What, the white thing ? Well, why on earth shouldn't you ? "

From that day, the black gown was worn no more by rector or curate in Toddington Church.

One other amusing incident may be mentioned in connexion with Major Cooper and the church. On the twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, when I



was reading the chapter about Nebuchadnezzar and the image of gold, I distinctly heard from the Squire's pew the word, " Woodcocks ! " Afterwards I asked him what it meant.

"Oh, don't you know?" he replied. "After Nebuchadnezzar- Sunday, look out for woodcocks ! "

In the nave of Toddinofton Church the roof was of oak and supported by beautifully carved angels, but it was very much out of repair, and the Rector did not see his way to the carrying out of the sadly needed restoration. But one Sunday his father, who was patron of the living, happened to be staying at the Rectory and attended service, when, as good luck would have it, the rain fell very heavily and came through the roof, so that an old woman was forced to open her large gingham umbrella !

This so shocked Mr. Clegg, that he generously undertook the restoration of the roof at a cost of ;^600, Mr. St. Aubyn being the architect.

In June, 1867, I was ordained priest in Ely Cathedral by Bishop Harold Browne.

Among the many kind friends and acquaintances whom I made in that neighbourhood were Mr. Hastings Russell, M.P. for Bedfordshire, afterwards Duke of Bedford ; Mr. Coventry Champion of Westoning Manor ; Lord Charles Russell of Woburn ; Major Morgan of Toddington Park ; Major and Mrs. Brooks of Flitwick Manor, both of whom had had narrow escapes in the Indian Mutiny ; Colonel, afterwards Sir Richard Gilpin, at

whose house I used to meet Bishop Harold Browne, he being related to Lady Gilpin ; Mr. Bromilow with his daughter, Mrs. Jary, and son-in-law. Major Jary, with whom I spent many happy days at Battlesden Park, a house which, alas, no longer exists.

Before I finish my recollections of Toddington, I must not forget to mention that I was invited by Major Cooper, when he was High Sheriff, to attend him as chaplain, at the Bedford Assizes, in the absence of my Rector ; and so it came to pass that I had a seat on the bench near the Judge, and heard a trial which caused immense excitement in the neighbourhood.

The criminal was a man named Perry who had been acting as curate to Mr. Pott near Bedford. He and his supposed wife were very accomplished and agreeable people. They played and sang delightfully, and were much patronized by society in general. It was a terrible blow to their admirers when it transpired that Mr. Perry was accused of having forged his letters testimonial, and that, in fact, he had never been ordained. Very many of his friends stoutly refused to believe in his guilt.

The whole countryside was present at the trial ; and the sensation may be imagined when at the commencement of the proceedings news was brought into Court that the principal witness, Mr. Pott, the Vicar of the parish in which the prisoner had officiated, had been thrown from his horse and killed on his way to the Assizes.

The Judge was Baron Pollock.

There were seven counts against the prisoner, the first being the forgery of his letters testimonial, on which he was tried and found guilty.

In pronouncing the sentence, the Judge said :

"Thomas Perry, I do not suppose a greater scoundrel has ever stood in the dock."

The consternation and excitement amongst the ladies in the Grand Jury Gallery was evident. It is true the weather was hot, but that was not the chief reason why their faces were flushed and their fans worked so vigorously.

The Judge continued addressing the prisoner :

"You have taken upon yourself the sacred duties of a clergyman, when you have never been ordained ; you have palmed off upon society a woman who is not your wife " here the ladies fanned themselves more vigorously than ever "and you have brought down upon yourself the just condemnation of every right-thinking person. The sentence of the Court is that you be imprisoned with hard labour for eighteen calendar months. I wish it were in my power to give you a longer term of imprisonment."

Perry, who stood in the dock dressed as usual in a most immaculate clerical suit, listened to the sentence with perfect sang-froid, and apparently with indifference.