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On some Contents of a Parish Chest.

BY THE REV. FRANCIS ST. JOHN THACKERAY, M.A.

THERE are worse ways of spending a dull, leaden, November afternoon in a remote vicarage, than devoting it to clearing out and weeding the contents of an antique parish chest. Albeit there is much dirt and dust to be encountered from the accumulations of, it may be, many years, yet there are unexpected sources of interest. But it is in some respects a perilous undertaking. In the first place, the lid of the heavy oak chest has to be securely adjusted, lest it fall *in domini caput immerentis*. Then, when you have peered into the dark recesses, using the aid of a flashlight for fear of conflagration, and dived into the depths to extract and sift the old-fashioned parish books and documents, some of them on their way to decay, and calling for some drying or flattening process or repair, and rearrangement in their proper place, there is the danger of doing away with something of real value which cannot be restored, and is of unique interest as a record of the distant past. To guard against any such accident, I had taken the precaution of inviting to my vicarage a legal friend, who could be relied on to warn me as to what to preserve and what to destroy.

The historical importance of these repositories of varied information, social, parochial, and religious, has of late years been fully recognized, and their treasures have been brought to light, in many invaluable publications. Those in my own custody cannot claim to be in the first rank of such collections, but a few particulars may be noted, sufficient to reward a search.

The parish register naturally ranks first in interest, its earliest entry being that of a wedding, February 7, 1627. It also contains a curious autograph memorandum of a charge made by letters patent from Oliver Cromwell for a payment of twelve shillings from the parish of Mapledurham, to the

building of the church at Oswestry, in Shropshire. There are old volumes bound in sheepskin with brass bosses and clasps, full of various parish papers, faculties, indentures of apprenticeship, accounts of surveyors of road and overseers of the poor, revealing the scandalously lavish allowances in lieu of work under the old Poor Law—*i.e.*, before the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. A tantalizing entry frequently occurs at the beginning of the nineteenth century of a few shillings charged for Swing "Pockets," or "Porketts." No satisfactory explanation has been given. It has been suggested that alms-bags are meant.

Curiosities of spelling abound, such as "Jannery," "disburstments," "sighning" for "signing," "causelties" for "casualties," "diner and liquor at Easter £4. 4s. 9d." Among the miscellaneous *débris* at the bottom of the chest was a preacher's book, and inside it some bands flattened out, 6 inches long by $4\frac{1}{2}$, not divided, like those so common in portraits of divines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are really a relic of the *amice*, a square linen tippet, or collar, and were worn within the memory of persons now living. My father, on one occasion, had a note handed up to him from the clerk in the lowest tier of the three-decker to this effect, "*Sir, your bands are under your left ear.*"

Then we come upon a faded old-fashioned sermon-case, which to those who reflect is eloquent of the past. How many discourses, good, bad, and indifferent, some often no doubt preached more than once, has not this old case held in its day! The subject of old sermons has been a fruitful source of anecdote, generally at the expense of the preacher, though not always with perfect fairness, as an old piece of work, if carefully pruned and revised, with fresh matter introduced, often is very effective, and one of the best productions of its kind. A preacher may plead in self-defence that he is like the householder who brings forth out of his treasure things *new and old*. The following American story I have never seen in print. Brother Tagger had three times to take the place of the regular

minister, and three times he delivered the same address on Peter's wife's mother. On the Monday, one of the congregation, seeing him at Brooklyn while a bell was tolling, remarked that he thought it must be for Peter's wife's mother! "She was very bad all the day before."

A sermon-case minus its proper enclosure suggests some possibly rather awkward situations. It has happened, *e.g.*—no doubt more than once—that a clergyman on his way home has dropped his MS. Once a discourse, on the fly-leaf of which the numerous dates of its previous delivery had been carefully entered, was returned to its owner with a pencil-note added by the finder, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

A keener trial, however, may befall the loser of his sermon, if the loss occurs on the way to his church instead of on his return from it, or if it has been left, through inadvertence, at home. It is bad enough if he becomes conscious of its absence during the service, but how far more disconcerting if he does not realize it till he has actually ascended the pulpit steps.

One has heard of one intending preacher in such a predicament, after an awkward pause while the congregation remained expectant, pronouncing the ascription "Now to God the Father," etc., and immediately descending the stairs without any explanation, and of another letting himself out of the church and returning no more.¹

The horror of finding the case empty! Even then, however, if he has not been culpably careless, neglectful of his subject, almost oblivious of his text, if he has honestly thought over and prepared his subject, one who finds himself suddenly in such a difficult position will not be utterly at sea.

An instance of this is given by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, in his "Old Time Parson," in the case of an able preacher, now an American Bishop, who had promised to preach an important sermon to a large and educated congregation at Oxford. "He placed his sermon-case unopened on the desk, and when the last strains of the hymn had died away he opened his case and

¹ Ditchfield, "The Parish Clerk," chapter xx.

discovered—a blank! He had scarcely a moment to recall the text and recover from the shock; but there is little doubt that he came through the ordeal fairly well.” The ordeal he had to go through was not so severe as that of those candidates for the ministry in some Dissenting communities, who are tested for their office by not knowing beforehand on what subject they are to address their flock till they are actually face to face with them. Of one of these we are told that he found on the pulpit cushion a strip of paper with the single word “Zacchæus.” He began thus: “Zacchæus was up in a tree; I, like him, am up a tree!” Of such a promising exordium one would like to have heard the sequel.

It is related of a late distinguished scholar and professor, that he once found himself placed in one of those awkward predicaments already mentioned. It was at a Cathedral service. On reaching the Chapter House, he discovered that he had only his sermon-case without the companion MS. In vain he solicited the officiating clergy to help him. From the Dean downwards they all declined to preach *ex tempore* at such short notice. He had to go through with it himself as best he could. Fortunately, in the pocket of his sermon-case there was a peroration, written some time before, and adaptable to any occasion. During the service, he devoted himself to his subject, quarrying in the Anthem Book for texts and suitable passages, and by these means he managed to deliver a very passable oration, and drew at last on his reserve. Oh, how thankful must that preacher (and the congregation also) have been when he arrived at that peroration—like a gallant ship, after stormy seas, sailing calmly into a well-known harbour!

