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CHURCH LIFE UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

BY THE REV. LE B. E. FRENCH, Canon of Clonfert, and
Examining Chaplain to the Bishop of Killaloe.

THE Emerald Isle has always been a "distressful country." To those who know her best the "tear in her eyes" is more evident than "the smile." Certainly it has been so of late years. Some of us on this side of the Irish Sea believe that the majority of English Church people have even now little idea of "the great fight of afflictions" through which their "brethren 'neath the Western sky" have passed. This is largely due to the fact that many of the outrages which a few years ago were of daily occurrence were not reported in the English Press. That some of those in high position in the English Church did realize the state of things was indicated to the present writer by a kind letter he received in the spring of 1923 from the Archbishop of York, now Archbishop-designate of Canterbury, in which his Grace expressed his warm admiration for the clergy in the south and west of Ireland who remained at their posts under such trying circumstances. It was shown also by a letter from the late Bishop Chavasse in which he asked one of his former pupils if he would like work in England, "if it would not be forsaking your flock in their time of need." A few personal reminiscences will show something of the "afflictions" and "fears" out of which we have been "delivered."

In the closing years of the British occupation we became sadly used to lawlessness and violence, which were justified by many under the dignified name of War. One Sunday I noticed a fresh grave close to one of the churches I was then serving in a large amalgamated country parish, and was informed, upon inquiry, that the body of a murdered constable, a member of the Roman Church, had been buried there. A short time before one of the same force had fallen to the assassins' bullet in another parish well known to me, the fatal shot having been fired from a small wood in which I have waited for pigeons in happier days. About the same time a young Yorkshireman, a "black and tan" (so called), who had served in the Great War, and became a parishioner of mine when he joined the Royal Irish Constabulary in Co. Galway, met his death in an ambush shortly after he had been moved to Belfast. On another Sunday I met unexpectedly two British officers at luncheon in the house of a well-known Irish nobleman, whose hospitality I habitually enjoyed between services in different churches some miles apart. A week or two later we were grieved to hear that one of them had been, with his wife, laid low by another ambush outside a country gentleman's gate when returning from a tennis party. A gentleman of high social position known to me when my work lay in the King's County was shot from behind a hedge as he was driving to his home where his family were waiting

for him. In this case it is probable that some private spite was responsible for the murder. Among others to whom death came in this awful form was a lady of singularly amiable disposition, one who by her personal charm and character worthily upheld the traditional fame of Erin's daughters, and who was godmother to one of my children. It is fair to say that it was not she whom the assassins wanted to kill, but her husband, whose crime, like that of the officers and policemen already mentioned, was that he wore His Majesty's uniform. But the fact that she happened to be in the direct line of fire did not keep them from discharging the fatal volley. Of course, many other instances of "murder most foul" might be given, but this article is concerned only with persons and localities known to the writer.

The Treaty which was signed in December, 1921, was greeted by the greater part of the Press outside Ireland with an almost universal chorus of jubilation. Some of the old loyalist party who were left in this country cherished the fond hope that they had found an end of troubles. Others waited in suspense, and soon a fresh orgy of outrage and bloodshed began. It is easy to be wise after the event, but a serious defect in the agreement reached was the removal of the British troops, and the disbanding of that splendid body—"robur et æs triplex circa,"—the Royal Irish Constabulary, before a fresh force had been created, or any measures taken to insure the maintenance of law and order.

When the ægis of British authority was removed, the exodus of the landed gentry which had been in progress for some time was greatly accelerated, and in some cases this led also to the departure of a number of Protestant families who had been dependent on them. The congregation of the chief church under my charge was greatly diminished. When "the big house" in the parish was closed it was almost immediately seized by some thirty-five Republican soldiers, who retained possession for some months until they were dispossessed by the Free State troops. A few of the "Irregulars" were also quartered in "the Forester's Lodge," close to the chief avenue. Some of my flock were much alarmed by this invasion, especially during the first week, when a constant stream of motor-cars carrying armed men was passing among them. Three police-barracks in the parish were destroyed, and our school had to be closed, as the teacher's house was twice raided, and she was obliged to leave by the threat of worse things to come. Her offence was that she was married to a Sergeant in the R.I.C., who fortunately had found a haven of refuge in another part of the country. Happily no blood was spilt among us, though there were a couple of murders in adjacent parishes. These crimes are not to be laid to the charge of the irregular soldiers. One at least was entirely due to an agrarian dispute. The victim was a local landlord of the Roman faith who was shot on his way to Mass one Sunday morning because he had refused to part with his land. A similar fate had a couple of years before met another local gentleman for an identical reason. Throughout the country outside

Ulster the trouble was (as I often wrote at the time to friends in England) political and agrarian, and not religious. It is true that a few churches were burnt down or maliciously injured, but this was due to the wave of lawlessness which swept over the land, and was the work of "certain vile fellows of the rabble" who were out to do what mischief they could, and in some cases were actuated by private animosity. One of the churches destroyed was a very favourable specimen of an Irish country church. It was full of memorials of a noble family rightly held in the highest esteem by all classes. The Roman Catholic population for miles round were indignant at this wanton outrage, and their aged priest in that parish was moved to tears when he called upon the Rector to express his regret and sympathy. The Free State Government gave large compensation, and it is pleasing to relate that a beautiful new church has been erected on the site of the old, which was consecrated by the Bishop of Killaloe in September, 1926. At this time bands of men were roaming the country, demanding food, and sometimes shelter at night. One afternoon a Roman Catholic neighbour called at the Rectory who mentioned that he had left twenty-five men feeding in the house of his nephew, with whom he lived. Shop-keepers and others had constantly to supply provisions in this way, and one of my parishioners had to put up a dozen men for a night. Personally I had nothing of which to complain, and, though I often awoke in the early hours and wondered if we should be raided, we were not molested in any way.

Some of my brethren were not so fortunate. The aged Dean of Clonfert had some unpleasant experiences. When the raiders visited him they took all his clothes except an old knock-about suit, and also his gold watch. When informed that a particular box contained the Communion plate of the church they left it alone.

Sometimes the marauders were only searching for arms. As a rule they offered neither violence nor insult to those who yielded them peaceably, but it was trying for ladies to have the rooms in which they were in bed searched by masked men. A hot-tempered friend was rash enough to threaten his midnight visitors with a revolver, and received a severe beating for this. One fear that often obsessed me in the night was that I should hear next morning that "the big house" had been burnt down, like so many in our neighbourhood and elsewhere. Fortunately this catastrophe did not happen, and the owner has been for some years living in his own home again. When the Republicans took possession of it I called, and was courteously received by a junior officer, wearing a belt of cartridges, as the Commandant was not at home. A young man carrying a blunderbuss watched us from a window. After some little conversation I thought it wise to ask permission to call on a Protestant family who had been ejected from their dwelling, and had taken refuge in the house of the former steward, who had found it convenient to return to Scotland. This was at once granted, and the officer accompanied me through the large carriage-yard,

which was full of motor-cars which had been looted from far and near. Young men of "the Irregulars" looked on, who might have thought it their duty to inquire my business had I been unattended, but they would not have interfered with me in any other way.

A common feature of the country at this time were the pits which were dug in fields close to the public road. These were called graves, and were intended to convey a warning to some landlord or tenant who had a large farm, or perhaps more than one, and showed himself reluctant to divide his land, as to the fate he might expect. This attention was paid to Roman Catholic holders of land quite as much as to Protestants. A minor form of outrage which caused much annoyance was the blocking of the main roads in order to impede the movement of the regular troops. Sometimes this was done by building a wall, but generally by the felling of large trees in such a way that they lay directly across the roads. At one time no less than eight of these obstacles blocked the road to our market-town, about six miles away, but they were quickly removed. One road which was to me almost daily "the path of Duty" had a large beech tree across it for about a month. I used, with considerable difficulty at first, to lift my bicycle over the tree, but my wife and family had to make a "détour" of several miles when driving our humble pony carriage in that direction.

To have one's letters censored by a self-constituted authority, and to receive them stamped with the words "Passed by the I.R.A." (Irish Republican Army), was an indignity too small to ruffle anyone's temper.

One day, while the Republicans were in possession, I called at the Forester's Lodge to ask the officer in charge if he would kindly exert his authority in a particular way. (It must be remembered that Law and Order had ceased to exist.) I had to make my way along a barbed-wire entanglement to a door which had never been kept closed to me when some Scottish Presbyterians lived there. Upon knocking, I was confronted by a youth, not in uniform, who leaned out of a window and levelled a double-barrelled pistol on full cock at my face. He made no response to my request to see the officer, being evidently uncertain how to act. I mentioned my name, but this meant nothing to him, which showed he was one of divers who came "from far." I then said, "I am the Protestant clergyman," whereupon, with the innate courtesy of the Irish, he lifted his cap, though he did not lower his weapon. He then instructed me where to go. My interview with the officer was brief, and did not lead to much practical result, but I was received in the politest possible manner, and possibly had I not called more damage might have been done among us.

Before our police-barracks had been destroyed half a dozen of these troops came to live in one of them. A false report reached me that two of these were Churchmen, and so I called at once. Here also the officer, who was scarcely more than a boy, and was of the uneducated class, met me courteously, and kindly promised, "If I have any of your Church I will let you know." This was

not altogether an impossible supposition, for here and there a stray member of the Irish Church was to be found among the Irregulars. When a little later a small body of Free State troops were quartered in the parish there was one of our way of thinking among them, so that the green uniform was regularly seen at the Church services. He assured me that he never suffered the slightest unpleasantness on account of his religion, and the first time I called to see him his superior officer actually ran to find him. Officers and men always "saluted the cloth" when I met them on the road, and though, owing to diminished numbers and the danger of being out at night, meetings and classes had to be abandoned, my work was never, even in the worst times, in any way interfered with, and my neighbours of the Roman Church, many of whom were Sinn Feiners, never failed to show me and my family the greatest courtesy and kindness. A few years before, when my son had made the supreme sacrifice in France, and while the Union Jack was flying at half-mast in the Rectory garden, the first to call to express sympathy was a local tradesman whose attachment to the cause of Sinn Fein was undoubted. This, of course, implied a pro-German bias. Such apparently inconsistent conduct is not surprising to those who know "the people of the land." However low in the social scale he may be, the Irishman who is not a gentleman is not true to the breed. When lawlessness was at its height, and while the church in the next parish was a blackened ruin, we carried out extensive repairs to the fabric of the most distant church under my charge, all of which were done by Roman Catholic workmen.

Much more might be said to illustrate both the perils and amenities of the days now happily past, but if this article is to be kept within reasonable limits I must content myself with relating two further incidents, with one of which I was not concerned. A brother-clergyman, who had formerly lived in the Rectory which was my home during the years of warfare, has special cause for thankfulness. He was riding a motor-bicycle along a country road at night, and was dressed for the part, when some men sprang from a hedge and pulled him down, under the impression that he was a District Inspector of Constabulary who was "wanted." He told them who he was, but "they gave no credence unto his word," and would undoubtedly have carried out the sentence they had been sent to execute were it not that on searching him they found both a gold presentation-watch and a silver cigarette-case inscribed with the name he had given them. They then apologized, and were as affable as circumstances permitted. The moral of this true story appears to be for a parson, Stick to your clerical collar!

My last reminiscence is to me a particularly pleasing one. Before the flag of Britain had been lowered in Southern Ireland, and while our little barracks were still standing, the Roman Curate with whom I was on friendly, though not intimate terms, stopped me one day in the village street. After we had shaken hands he surprised me by saying, "I want to speak to you about that young

Scotsman." He referred to a young man who had formerly served in the Navy, and had been in the battle of Jutland, but who had lately joined the R.I.C., and so was "a black and tan." He, as the Curate informed me, was thinking of joining the Church of the majority. Of course, as I at once surmised, there was a girl in the case. I must confess that I had not previously heard of the contemplated change of religion, and I thanked the Roman priest warmly for being the first to mention it. He said, "I would not like to do anything without letting you know," whereupon I assured him that he would have "nothing to do" if I could prevent it, and I then wended my way to the barrack in no hopeful frame of mind. Only too often "the black-blue Irish hair and Irish eyes," and other charms of Irish girls are far more persuasive than the strongest theological arguments. Was not this the reason why the English settlers long ago became "more Irish than the Irish"? Happily the "young Scotsman" was not deeply in love. At least, no other reason is apparent for the readiness with which he promised to take no further step on his Romeward journey until he had talked over the question with his family in Scotland, whom he was soon to visit on his annual furlough. The Church of Rome did not on this occasion gain a proselyte, but the courtesy of one of her clergy must be acknowledged in chronicling this fact.

The land now has rest, and the Church of Ireland, which claims to be the true Catholic Church of this island, though others see in her only the Church of the English Settlement, faces the future with hope and confidence. She has not come unscathed through the years of trial. Her numbers have greatly decreased, and her children are to a large extent impoverished, though, if report be true, she has not lost in prestige. But she feels that she has a mission to fulfil, and humbly she believes, "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved."

SUNSET AND SUNRISE. Thoughts upon Death and the Future Life of the Soul. Compiled by Cecilia Lady Boston. London: H. R. Allenson, Ltd. 3s. 6d. net.

A Foreword is contributed by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Hook, D.D., formerly Suffragan Bishop of Kingston (who, by the way, is incorrectly described as "Sometime Bishop of Southwark"!). He commends it as "an invaluable help to those, both lay and clerical, whose blessed lot it is to minister to the sufferers of life." The passages have been well selected in a truly Catholic spirit. Here may be found quotations from St. Francis de Sales, Wesley, Faber, Kingsley, Keble, Bickersteth, John Bunyan, Browning and many others, representing very varied types of religious belief and expression. The result is an anthology well suited as a handbook for Sick Visiting or a Bedside Manual.