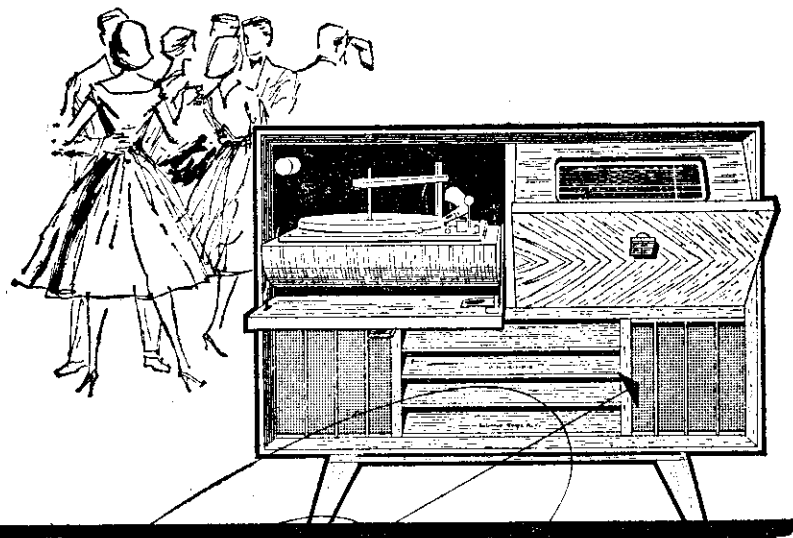


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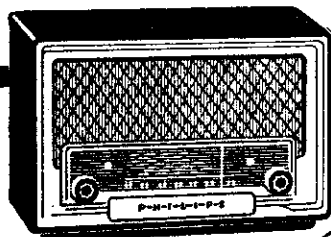
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A Clergyman in Court

"FROM the very hour that you are ordained," said the Rev. G. A. Naylor, addressing an imaginary candidate for the Ministry in a recent broadcast, "you will find yourself in the unfortunate position of being able to make headlines in the paper more easily than anyone else in the country, with the possible exception of Judges and Cabinet Ministers." It is well understood that clergymen must keep themselves above reproach, and that if they fall into error their lapses are magnified in the public mind by the sad contrast between precept and practice. But even Mr Naylor must have been surprised when a London correspondent cabled hundreds of words to newspapers in this country about the Vicar of Lower Halston, charged with dangerous driving and driving under the influence of drink.

As an example of a perverted sense of news values and an exaggeration of the trivial, this report should be hard to beat. From a distance of 12,000 miles we were expected to goggle at a clergyman's predicament. The details were no doubt of interest to his parishioners (who would know more about the man than the newspapers could tell them), but outside his parish they were merely pathetic, and the wide publicity given them seemed to be senseless and cruel. It appears that the vicar has been known to use strong language "to emphasise a point." The language quoted in the evidence was a single adjective which the vicar said he used in "the high-spirited 17th century sense when they referred to young gentlemen as bloods." Under the influence of a glass or two of sherry he also made fatuous remarks, including a reference to the tie worn by the police doctor who examined him. These details were fully reported, possibly because they were thought to be amusing. If readers found them so, and were not moved instead by other feelings, the decline of public taste has been faster than we had supposed. The case ended with a conviction, but also with a comment from the deputy-chairman of the

Court: "I cannot conceive that any bishop in this country would think it right to take disciplinary action against a clergyman of 56, of exemplary character, who had been found guilty of an offence in no way connected with his duties as a clergyman."

Reports of this kind are usually defended on the grounds that they are in the public interest. It may be true that in his own parish and neighbourhood the vicar had more to gain than lose from a full account of the proceedings. The report was fair within its limits, in that the defence was quoted at least as fully as the prosecution. A brief statement of the charge, the conviction and the penalty might have been damaging. As it was, the mitigating facts—especially the facts about his health—allowed the public to see the case in perspective. But how widely must the public interest be served? If an unimportant case is reported fully in metropolitan newspapers, and is even cabled overseas, the intention is clearly not to instruct, but to entertain. Anything that happens to great or notorious persons is, of course, believed to be newsworthy. The Vicar of Lower Halston is neither great nor notorious, but he happens to be a clergyman. It could be argued that clergymen in England who like a glass of sherry now and then will be reminded by the case of their special position. They will know what treatment awaits them if they fall a little from grace. But the Church would have come to an evil time if its priests were thought, like the unhappy nations, to be so much in need of a deterrent. The report was played up in England and cabled to New Zealand for one reason only—because it was judged a good story. It concerned a clergyman who drank sherry and used a word which for some extraordinary reason is believed to be profane. Let us gape at the shocking facts, and console ourselves for our own shortcomings! But there is no need to pretend that any interest is being served which can survive a moment of honest examination.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, SEPTEMBER, 13, 1957,