

Current Topics

When Homer Nods

We are accustomed—and with good reason—to make merry over the glowing blunders of the callow newspaper reporter or the less excusable No-Popery writer when describing matters of Catholic doctrine and practice—over the genius, for example, who described how 'the Cardinal wore on his head a *cappa magna*'; or that other who told how a priest 'carried the Vatican to a dying parishioner,' and 'wore a baldacchino'; or yet a third who saw 'a thurifer suspended from the roof' while Mass was being said. It comes upon us, however, with something of a shock to find so great a writer and so warm an admirer of mediaevalism as Sir Walter Scott perpetrating blunders scarcely less absurd. The gifted priest-novelist, 'John Ayscough,' in a delightful article on 'Sir Walter' in the February number of the *Catholic World*, remarks: 'However clever a writer may be, if he can regard mediaeval Christianity only from outside, and only from a Georgian standpoint, he is bound to blunder. The outside view of the Catholic Church Scott had, and he had a keen eye for the picturesque, so he could describe vividly; but even in description he came appalling "croppers."'

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And, as a case in point, 'John Ayscough,' in his *Catholic World* article, supplies the following: 'In the second volume of the *Antiquary* there is a flagrantly picturesque account of the midnight obsequies of the Catholic Countess of Glenallan. The priest, dressed in "cope and stole held open the service book"—(the breviary, as we are informed on the next page)—"another churchman in his vestments bore a holy water sprinkler—and two boys in white surplices held censers with incense," and the dirge goes on until a loud *Alleluia*, pealing through the deserted arches of St. Ruth, closed the singular ceremony.' Singular, indeed. Sir Walter Scott was undoubtedly the only human being who ever heard an *Alleluia*, however loud, in the funeral offices of the Catholic Church.'

A Minister on Long Sermons

Mark Twain is quoted as having on one occasion thus described his experience regarding long sermons: 'I went to church one time, and was so impressed by what the preacher told me about the poor heathen that I was ready to give up a hundred dollars of my own money, and even to go out and borrow more to send to the heathen. But the minister preached too long, and my own enthusiasm began to drop, about twenty-five dollars a drop, till there was nothing left for the poor heathen, and, by the time he was through and the collection was taken up I stole ten cents off the plate.'

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The joke has a moral; and an American minister, the Rev. E. W. Caswell, in an article in the *N.Y. Christian Advocate*, has been trying to impress it upon his Protestant brethren. The moral is that, broadly speaking, the day of long discourses has gone by. 'Argue about it as we will, or dislike it as we may,' writes Mr. Caswell, 'half an hour or twenty-five minutes from the best of us, and fifteen or twenty minutes from the most of us, is as much as the modern congregation wants or will stand for long.' 'It is well known,' he continues breezily, 'that many ministerial orators have nearly ruined their career owing to the lack of "terminal facilities." If many sermons could be eliminated at both ends and reduced in the middle, they could produce greater results. Audiences are willing to excuse bishops whom they expect to hear only once in a lifetime, and elderly clergymen who find it difficult to abbreviate old sermons preached at times when people brought their lunches to church in order to remain for the afternoon services. . . . Would it not be better if sixty-minute sermons, fifteen-minute public prayers, ten-minute notices, long readings and musical numbers could be divided and "come in on the

limited"?' We find it difficult to concentrate attention longer than one hour, and younger persons find it contrary to their disposition to do so. It is often remarked that the last quarter of certain sermons ruins the former three-quarters; for, when the attention is lost, the portion already received goes with it.' After pointing out that the great preachers of New York City, who draw and hold large audiences, do not average more than thirty minutes for a sermon, he concludes: 'They know that brevity is the soul of wisdom as well as of wit. They are aware that, to be in accord with the spirit of this rapid-firing, moving-picture age, they must lay aside the long, heavy, ponderous style of sermonising.'

Colonel Bell and Regimental Chaplains

Colonel Allen Bell, officer commanding the Wai-kato Regiment, is evidently a man of great plainness of speech, and one who has never cultivated the art of breaking things gently. In a printed official memorandum, just issued for the information of the chaplains attached to the regiment, he has given those unhappy officials a most unmerciful 'ragging.' After mentioning—by way of introduction to his subject—that 'in the past the chaplains, with a few notable exceptions, have been a useless excrescence on the various regiments,' he proceeds: 'The utter uselessness of the present methods was never more clearly demonstrated than at the church parade held at the termination of the training camp at Tauherenikau, the only striking feature of which was that the hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers," was not sung.' Only those who know with what wearisome, monotonous regularity that time-honored melody is 'worked off' on such occasions can appreciate the biting sarcasm of the last sentence. After pointing out some of the ideals which might fittingly have been presented on the occasion, but which the tired parson had never thought of, he continues remorselessly: 'Instead of having pointed out to us those grand ideals, we were treated to the singing of a few hymns and the old stock sermon. The formal service held in a military camp on Sundays is merely a parade productive of unuttered profanity on the part of most of those who have to attend it, and doing no really good work for the betterment of the forces. . . . I am quite certain that the majority of the chaplains to our forces are men who wish to do good work. The trouble seems to be that they do not know how their upbringing and training seems to totally unfit them for the work of appealing to their fellow-men.'

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How far these strictures are true we do not know, and as our priests are not included in the criticism the matter does not really concern us. But one portion of Colonel Bell's memorandum we are interested in, and Catholics generally will read it with pleasure. 'I make these suggestions,' he concludes, 'after an experience of over fifteen years of military life on active service and in times of peace, as a trooper and in command of a regiment. I can safely say that during that long period I have only been associated with one chaplain who did any really good and lasting work. That was a Jesuit priest named Father Barthelemy, chaplain to our forces in the Matabele war. He was one of those who recognised that the alpha and omega of an army chaplain's life was not to hold church parades. His actions, example, and modern methods of work called up the manly qualities of all with whom he was associated, and he did more to raise the moral tone of our column than anybody else associated with it.' Colonel Bell's experience regarding Catholic military chaplains is evidently on all fours with that of Rear-Admiral Osbon, of the United States Navy, as described on one occasion in an address to a body of naval cadets in the John Street Methodist Church, New York. 'The best thing,' he said, 'that ever happened to the American sailor was when Catholic priests were introduced to the navy. They are the most faithful men in the service. They watch Jack. They talk with him. They walk with him. They live with him. The upshot of their work is that the American sailor is a cleaner-hearted