

SALEM CHAPEL

VOLUME I

BY
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SALEM CHAPEL.

CHAPTER I.

TOWARDS the west end of Grove Street, in Carlingford, on the shabby side of the street, stood a red brick building, presenting a pinched gable terminated by a curious little belfry, not intended for any bell, and looking not unlike a handle to lift up the edifice by to the public observation. This was Salem Chapel, the only Dissenting place of worship in Carlingford. It stood in a narrow strip of ground, just as the little houses which flanked it on either side stood in their gardens, except that the enclosure of the chapel was flowerless and sombre, and showed at the farther end a few sparsely-scattered tombstones—unmeaning slabs, such as the English mourner loves to inscribe his sorrow on. On either side of this little tabernacle were the humble houses—little detached boxes, each two storeys high, each fronted by a little flower-plot—clean, respectable, meagre, little habitations, which contributed most largely to the ranks of the congregation in the Chapel. The big houses opposite, which turned their backs and staircase windows to the street, took little notice of the humble Dissenting community. Twice in the winter, perhaps, the Miss Hemmings, mild evangelical women, on whom the late rector—the Low-Church rector, who reigned before the brief and exceptional incumbency of the Rev. Mr. Proctor—had bestowed much of his confidence, would cross the street, when other profitable occupations failed them, to hear a special sermon on a Sunday evening. But the Miss Hemmings were the only representatives of anything which could, by the utmost stretch, be called Society, who ever patronised the Dissenting interest in the town of Carlingford. Nobody from Grange Lane had ever been seen so much as in Grove Street on a

Sunday, far less in the chapel. Greengrocers, dealers in cheese and bacon, milkmen, with some dressmakers of inferior pretensions, and teachers of day-schools of similar humble character, formed the *élite* of the congregation. It is not to be supposed, however, on this account, that a prevailing aspect of shabbiness was upon this little community; on the contrary, the grim pews of Salem Chapel blushed with bright colours, and contained both dresses and faces on the summer Sundays which the Church itself could scarcely have surpassed. Nor did those unadorned walls form a centre of asceticism and gloomy religiousness in the cheerful little town. Tea-meetings were not uncommon occurrences in Salem—tea-meetings which made the little tabernacle festive, in which cakes and oranges were diffused among the pews, and funny speeches made from the little platform underneath the pulpit, which woke the unconsecrated echoes with hearty outbreaks of laughter. Then the young people had their singing-class, at which they practised hymns, and did not despise a little flirtation; and charitable societies and missionary auxiliaries diversified the congregational routine, and kept up a brisk succession of “Chapel business,” mightily like the Church business which occupied Mr. Wentworth and his Sisters of Mercy at St. Roque’s. To name the two communities, however, in the same breath, would have been accounted little short of sacrilege in Carlingford. The names which figured highest in the benevolent lists of Salem Chapel, were known to society only as appearing, in gold letters, upon the backs of those mystic tradesmen’s books, which were deposited every Monday in little heaps at every house in Grange Lane. The Dissenters, on their part, aspired to no conquests in the unattainable territory of high life, as it existed in Carlingford. They were content to keep their privileges among themselves, and to enjoy their superior preaching and purity with a compassionate

complacence. While Mr. Proctor was rector, indeed, Mr. Tozer, the butterman, who was senior deacon, found it difficult to refrain from an audible expression of pity for the “Church folks” who knew no better; but, as a general rule, the congregation of Salem kept by itself, gleaning new adherents by times at an “anniversary” or the coming of a new minister, but knowing and keeping “its own place” in a manner edifying to behold.

Such was the state of affairs when old Mr. Tufton declined in popularity, and impressed upon the minds of his hearers those now-established principles about the unfitness of old men for any important post, and the urgent necessity and duty incumbent upon old clergymen, old generals, old admirals, &c.—every aged functionary, indeed, except old statesmen—to resign in favour of younger men, which have been, within recent years, so much enforced upon the world. To communicate this opinion to the old minister was perhaps less difficult to Mr. Tozer and his brethren than it might have been to men more refined and less practical; but it was an undeniable relief to the managers of the chapel when grim Paralysis came mildly in and gave the intimation in the manner least calculated to wound the sufferer’s feelings. Mild but distinct was that undeniable warning. The poor old minister retired, accordingly, with a purse and a presentation, and young Arthur Vincent, fresh from Homerton, in the bloom of hope and intellectualism, a young man of the newest school, was recognised as pastor in his stead.

A greater change could not possibly have happened. When the interesting figure of the young minister went up the homely pulpit-stairs, and appeared, white-browed, white-handed, in snowy linen and glossy clerical apparel, where old Mr. Tufton, spiritual but homely, had been wont to impend over the desk and exhort his

beloved brethren, it was natural that a slight rustle of expectation should run audibly through the audience. Mr. Tozer looked round him proudly to note the sensation, and see if the Miss Hemmings, sole representatives of a cold and unfeeling aristocracy, were there. The fact was, that few of the auditors were more impressed than the Miss Hemmings, who *were* there, and who talked all the evening after about the young minister. What a sermon it was! not much in it about the beloved brethren; nothing very stimulating, indeed, to the sentiments and affections, except in the youth and good looks of the preacher, which naturally made a more distinct impression upon the female portion of his hearers than on the stronger sex. But then what eloquence! what an amount of thought! what an honest entrance into all the difficulties of the subject! Mr. Tozer remarked afterwards that such preaching was food for *men*. It was too closely reasoned out, said the excellent butterman, to please women or weak-minded persons: but he did not doubt, for his part, that soon the young men of Carlingford, the hope of the country, would find their way to Salem. Under such prognostications, it was fortunate that the young minister possessed something else besides close reasoning and Homerton eloquence to propitiate the women too.

Mr. Vincent arrived at Carlingford in the beginning of winter, when society in that town was reassembling, or at least reappearing, after the temporary summer seclusion. The young man knew very little of the community which he had assumed the spiritual charge of. He was almost as particular as the Rev. Mr. Wentworth of St. Roque's about the cut of his coat and the precision of his costume, and decidedly preferred the word clergyman to the word minister, which latter was universally used by his flock; but notwithstanding these trifling predilections, Mr. Vincent, who had been brought up

upon the 'Nonconformist' and the 'Eclectic Review,' was strongly impressed with the idea that the Church Establishment, though outwardly prosperous, was in reality a profoundly rotten institution; that the Nonconforming portion of the English public was the party of progress; that the eyes of the world were turned upon the Dissenting interest; and that his own youthful eloquence and the Voluntary principle were quite enough to counterbalance all the ecclesiastical advantages on the other side, and make for himself a position of the highest influence in his new sphere. As he walked about Carlingford making acquaintance with the place, it occurred to the young man, with a thrill of not ungenerous ambition, that the time might shortly come when Salem Chapel would be all too insignificant for the Nonconformists of this hitherto torpid place. He pictured to himself how, by-and-by, those jealous doors in Grange Lane would fly open at his touch, and how the dormant minds within would awake under his influence. It was a blissful dream to the young pastor. Even the fact that Mr. Tozer was a butterman, and the other managers of the chapel equally humble in their pretensions, did not disconcert him in that flush of early confidence. All he wanted—all any man worthy of his post wanted—was a spot of standing-ground, and an opportunity of making the Truth—and himself—known. Such, at least, was the teaching of Homerton and the Dissenting organs. Young Vincent, well educated and enlightened according to his fashion, was yet so entirely unacquainted with any world but that contracted one in which he had been brought up, that he believed all this as devoutly as Mr. Wentworth believed in Anglicanism, and would have smiled with calm scorn at any sceptic who ventured to doubt. Thus it will be seen he came to Carlingford with elevated expectations—by no means prepared to circulate among his flock, and say grace at Mrs. Tozer's "teas," and get up *soirees* to amuse the

congregation, as Mr. Tufton had been accustomed to do. These secondary circumstances of his charge had little share in the new minister's thoughts. Somehow the tone of public writing has changed of late days. Scarcely a newspaper writer condescends now to address men who are not free of "society," and learned in all its ways. The 'Times' and the Magazines take it for granted that all their readers dine out at splendid tables, and are used to a solemn attendant behind their chair. Young Vincent was one of those who accept the flattering implication. It is true, he saw few enough of such celestial scenes in his college-days. But now that life was opening upon him, he doubted nothing of the society that must follow; and with a swell of gratification listened when the advantages of Carlingford were discussed by some chance fellow-travellers on the railway; its pleasant parties—its nice people—Mr. Wodehouse's capital dinners, and the charming breakfasts—such a delightful novelty!—so easy and agreeable!—of the pretty Lady Western, the young dowager. In imagination Mr. Vincent saw himself admitted to all these social pleasures; not that he cared for capital dinners more than became a young man, or had any special tendencies towards tuft-hunting, but because fancy and hope, and ignorance of the real world, made him naturally project himself into the highest sphere within his reach, in the simple conviction that such was his natural place.

With these thoughts, to be asked to Mrs. Tozer's to tea at six o'clock, was the most wonderful cold plunge for the young man. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled to himself over the note of invitation, which, however, was very prettily written by Phoebe, Mrs. Tozer's blooming daughter, on paper as pink as Lady Western's, and consented, as he could not help himself. He went out from his nice lodgings a little after six, still smiling, and

persuading himself that this would be quite a pleasant study of manners, and that of course he could not do less than patronise the good homely people in their own way, whatever that might be. Mr. Vincent's rooms were in George Street, at what the Grange Lane people called *the other end*, in an imposing house with a large door, and iron extinguishers fixed in the railing, which had in their day quenched the links of the last century. To cross the street in his evening coat, and walk into the butter-shop, where the two white-aproned lads behind the counter stared, and a humble member of the congregation turned sharply round, and held out the hand, which had just clutched a piece of bacon, for her minister to shake, was a sufficiently trying introduction to the evening's pleasure; but when the young pastor had been ushered up-stairs, the first aspect of the company there rather took away his breath, as he emerged from the dark staircase. Tozer himself, who awaited the minister at the door, was fully habited in the overwhelming black suit and white tie, which produced so solemnising an effect every Sunday at chapel; and the other men of the party were, with a few varieties, similarly attired. But the brilliancy of the female portion of the company overpowered Mr. Vincent. Mrs. Tozer herself sat at the end of her hospitable table, with all her best china tea-service set out before her, in a gown and cap which Grange Lane could not have furnished any rivals to. The brilliant hue of the one, and the flowers and feathers of the other, would require a more elaborate description than this chronicle has space for. Nor indeed in the particular of dress did Mrs. Tozer do more than hold her own among the guests who surrounded her. It was scarcely dark, and the twilight softened down the splendours of the company, and saved the dazzled eyes of the young pastor. He felt the grandeur vaguely as he came in with a sense of reproof, seeing that he had evidently been waited for. He said grace devoutly when the tea

arrived and the gas was lighted, and with dumb amaze gazed round him. Could these be the veritable womankind of Salem Chapel? Mr. Vincent saw bare shoulders and flower-wreathed heads bending over the laden tea-table. He saw pretty faces and figures not inelegant, remarkable among which was Miss Phœbe's, who had written him that pink note, and who herself was pink all over—dress, shoulders, elbows, cheeks, and all. Pink—not red—a softened youthful flush, which was by no means unbecoming to the plump full figure which had not an angle anywhere. As for the men, the lawful owners of all this feminine display, they huddled all together, indisputable cheesemongers as they were, quite transcended and extinguished by their wives and daughters. The pastor was young and totally inexperienced. In his heart he asserted his own claim to an entirely different sphere; but, suddenly cast into this little crowd, Mr. Vincent's inclination was to join the dark group of husbands and fathers whom he knew, and who made no false pretences. He was shy of venturing upon those fine women, who surely never could be Mrs. Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, and Mrs. Pigeon, the poulterer's wife; whereas Pigeon and Brown themselves were exactly like what they always were on Sundays, if not perhaps a trifle graver and more depressed in their minds.

“Here's a nice place for you, Mr. Vincent—quite the place for you, where you can hear all the music, and see all the young ladies. For I do suppose ministers, bein' young, are like other young men,” said Mrs. Tozer, drawing aside her brilliant skirts to make room for him on the sofa. “I have a son myself as is at college, and feel motherlike to those as go in the same line. Sit you down comfortable, Mr. Vincent. There ain't one here, sir, I'm proud to say, as grudges you the best seat.”

“Oh, mamma, how could you think of saying such a thing!” said Phœbe, under her breath; “to be sure, Mr. Vincent never could think there was anybody anywhere that would be so wicked—and he the minister.”

“Indeed, my dear,” said Mrs. Pigeon, who was close by, “not to affront Mr. Vincent, as is deserving of our best respects, I’ve seen many and many’s the minister I wouldn’t have given up my seat to; and I don’t misdoubt, sir, you’ve heard of such as well as we. There was Mr. Bailey at Parson’s Green, now. He went and married a poor bit of a governess, as common a looking creature as you could see, that set herself up above the people, Mr. Vincent, and was too grand, sir, if you’ll believe me, to visit the deacons’ wives. Nobody cares less than me about them vain shows. What’s visiting, if you know the vally of your time? Nothing but a laying up of judgment. But I wouldn’t be put upon neither by a chit that got her bread out of me and my husband’s hard earnins; and so I told my sister, Mrs. Tozer, as lives at Parson’s Green.”

“Poor thing!” said the gentler Mrs. Tozer, “it’s hard lines on a minister’s wife to please the congregation. Mr. Vincent here, he’ll have to take a lesson. That Mrs. Bailey was pretty-looking, I must allow——”

“Sweetly pretty!” whispered Phœbe, clasping her plump pink hands.

“Pretty-looking! I don’t say anything against it,” continued her mother; “but it’s hard upon a minister when his wife won’t take no pains to please his flock. To have people turn up their noses at you ain’t pleasant——”

“And them getting their livin’ off you all the time,” cried Mrs. Pigeon, clinching the milder speech.

“But it seems to me,” said poor Vincent, “that a minister can no more be said to get his living off you than any other man. He works hard enough generally for what little he has. And really, Mrs. Tozer, I’d rather not hear all these unfortunate particulars about one of my brethren——”

“He ain’t one of the brethren now,” broke in the poulterer’s wife. “He’s been gone out o’ Parson’s Green this twelvemonths. Them stuck-up ways may do with the Church folks as can’t help themselves, but they’ll never do with us Dissenters. Not that we ain’t as glad as can be to see you, Mr. Vincent, and I hope you’ll favour my poor house another night like you’re favouring Mrs. Tozer’s. Mr. Tufton always said that was the beauty of Carlingford in our connection. Cheerful folks and no display. No display, you know—nothing but a hearty meetin’, sorry to part, and happy to meet again. Them’s our ways. And the better you know us, the better you’ll like us, I’ll be bound to say. We don’t put it all on the surface, Mr. Vincent,” continued Mrs. Pigeon, shaking out her skirts and expanding herself on her chair, “but it’s all real and solid; what we say we mean—and we don’t say no more than we mean—and them’s the kind of folks to trust to wherever you go.”

Poor Vincent made answer by an inarticulate murmur, whether of assent or dissent it was impossible to say; and, inwardly appalled, turned his eyes towards his deacons, who, more fortunate than himself, were standing all in a group together discussing chapel matters, and wisely leaving general conversation to the fairer portion of the company. The unlucky minister’s secret looks of distress awoke the interest and sympathy of Phœbe, who sat in

an interesting manner on a stool at her mother's side. "Oh, mamma," said that young lady, too bashful to address himself directly, "I wonder if Mr. Vincent plays or sings? There are some such nice singers here. Perhaps we might have some music, if Mr. Vincent——"

"I don't perform at all," said that victim,—“not in any way; but I am an exemplary listener. Let me take you to the piano.”

The plump Phœbe rose after many hesitations, and, with a simper and a blush and pretty air of fright, took the minister's arm. After all, even when the whole company is beneath a man's level, it is easier to play the victim under the *supplice* inflicted by a pretty girl than by two mature matrons. Phœbe understood pretty well about her *h*'s, and did not use the double negative; and when she rose up rustling from her low seat, the round, pink creature, with dimples all about her, was not an unpleasant object of contemplation. Mr. Vincent listened to her song with decorous interest. Perhaps it was just as well sung as Lucy Wodehouse, in Grange Lane, would have sung it. When Phœbe had concluded, the minister was called to the side of Mrs. Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, who had been fidgeting to secure him from the moment he approached the piano. She was fat and roundabout, good woman, and had the aspect of sitting upon the very edge of her chair. She held out to the distressed pastor a hand covered with a rumpled white glove, which did not fit, and had never been intended to fit, and beckoned to him anxiously. With the calmness of despair Mr. Vincent obeyed the call.

"I have been looking so anxious to catch your eye, Mr. Vincent," said Mrs. Brown; "do sit you down, now there's a chance, and let me talk to you a minnit. Bless the girl! there's Miss

Polly Pigeon going to play, and everybody can use their freedom in talking. For my part,” said Mrs. Brown, securing the vacant chair of the performer for her captive, “that’s why I like instrumental music best. When a girl sings, why, to be sure, it’s only civil to listen—ain’t it now, Mr. Vincent? but nobody expects it of you, don’t you see, when she only plays. Now do you sit down. What I wanted to speak to you was about that poor creetur in Back Grove Street—that’s the lane right behind the chapel. She do maunder on so to see the minister. Mr. Tozer he’s been to see her, and I sent Brown, but it wasn’t a bit of use. It’s you, Mr. Vincent, she’s awanting of. If you’ll call in to-morrow, I’ll show you the place myself, as you’re a stranger; for if you’ll excuse me saying it, I am as curious as can be to hear what she’s got to say.”

“If she has got anything to say, she might prefer that it was not heard,” said Vincent, with an attempt at a smile. “Is she ill—and who is she? I have never heard of her before.”

“Well, you see, sir, she doesn’t belong rightly to Salem. She’s a stranger here, and not a joined member; and she ain’t ill either, as I can see—only something on her mind. You ministers,” said Mrs. Brown, with a look of awe, “must have a deal of secrets confided to you. Folks may stand out against religion as long as things go on straight with them, but they’re sure to want the minister as soon as they’ve got something on their mind; and a deal better to have it out, and get a little comfort, than to bottle it all up till their latter end, like old Mrs. Thompson, and let it out in their will, to drive them as was expecting different distracted. It’s a year or two since that happened. I don’t suppose you’ve heerd tell of it yet. But that’s what makes old Mrs. Christian—I dare to say you’ve seen her at chapel—so uncomfortable in her feelins. She’s never got over it, sir, and never will to her dying day.”

“Some disappointment about money?” said Mr. Vincent.

“Poor old folks! their daughter did very well for herself—and very well for them too,” said Mrs. Brown; “but it don’t make no difference in Mrs. Christian’s feelins: they’re living, like, on Mr. Brown the solicitor’s charity, you see, sir, instead of their own fortin, which makes a deal o’ difference. It would have been a fine thing for Salem too,” added Mrs. Brown, reflectively, “if they had had the old lady’s money; for Mrs. Christian was always one that liked to be first, and stanch to her chapel, and would never have been wanting when the collecting-books went round. But it wasn’t to be, Mr. Vincent—that’s the short and the long of it; and we never have had nobody in our connection worth speaking of in Carlingford but’s been in trade. And a very good thing too, as I tell Brown. For if there’s one thing I can’t abear in a chapel, it’s one set setting up above the rest. But bein’ all in the way of business, except just the poor folks, as is all very well in their place, and never interferes with nothing, and don’t count, there’s nothing but brotherly love here, which is a deal more than most ministers can say for their flocks. I’ve asked a few friends to tea, Mr. Vincent, on next Thursday, at six. As I haven’t got no daughters just out of a boarding-school to write notes for me, will you take us in a friendly way, and just come without another invitation? All our own folks, sir, and a comfortable evening; and prayers, if you’ll *be* so good, at the end. I don’t like the new fashion,” said Mrs. Brown, with a significant glance towards Mrs. Tozer, “of separatin’ like heathens, when all’s of one connection. We might never meet again, Mr. Vincent. In the midst of life, you know, sir. You’ll not forget Thursday, at six.”

“But, my dear Mrs. Brown, I am very sorry: Thursday is one of the days I have specially devoted to study,” stammered forth the

unhappy pastor. “What with the Wednesday meeting and the Friday committee——”

Mrs. Brown drew herself up as well as the peculiarities of her form permitted, and her roseate countenance assumed a deeper glow. “We’ve been in the chapel longer than Tozer,” said the offended deaconess. “We’ve never been backward, in takin’ trouble, nor spendin’ our substance, nor puttin’ our hands to every good work; and as for makin’ a difference between one member and another, it’s what we ain’t been accustomed to, Mr. Vincent. I’m a plain woman, and speak my mind. Old Mr. Tufton was very particular to show no preference. He always said, it never answered in a flock to show more friendship to one nor another; and if it had been put to me, I wouldn’t have said, I assure you, sir, that it was us as was to be made the first example of. If I haven’t a daughter fresh out of a boarding-school, I’ve been a member of Salem five-and-twenty year, and had ministers in my house many’s the day, and as friendly as if I were a duchess; and for charities and such things, we’ve never been known to fail, though I say it; and as for trouble——”

“But I spoke of my study,” said the poor minister, as she paused, her indignation growing too eloquent for words: “you want me to preach on Sunday, don’t you? and I must have some time, you know, to do my work.”

“Sir,” said Mrs. Brown, severely, “I know it for a fact that Mr. Wentworth of St. Roque’s dines out five days in the week, and it don’t do *his* sermons no injury; and when you go out to dinner, it stands to reason it’s a different thing from a friendly tea.”

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