

Chronicles of Carlingford.

**THE PERPETUAL
CURATE**

MRS OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER I.

CARLINGFORD is, as is well known, essentially a quiet place. There is no trade in the town, properly so called. To be sure, there are two or three small counting-houses at the other end of George Street, in that ambitious pile called Gresham Chambers; but the owners of these places of business live, as a general rule, in villas, either detached or semi-detached, in the North-end, the new quarter, which, as everybody knows, is a region totally unrepresented in society. In Carlingford proper there is no trade, no manufactures, no anything in particular, except very pleasant parties and a superior class of people—a very superior class of people, indeed, to anything one expects to meet with in a country town, which is not even a county town, nor the seat of any particular interest. It is the boast of the place that it has no particular interest—not even a public school: for no reason in the world but because they like it, have so many nice people collected together in those pretty houses in Grange Lane—which is, of course, a very much higher tribute to the town than if any special inducement had led them there. But in every community some centre of life is necessary. This point, round which everything circles, is, in Carlingford, found in the clergy. They are the administrators of the commonwealth, the only people who have defined and compulsory duties to give a sharp outline to life. Somehow this touch of necessity and business seems needful even in the most refined society: a man who is obliged to be somewhere at a certain hour, to do something at a certain time, and whose public duties are not volunteer proceedings, but indispensable work, has a certain position of command among a leisurely and

unoccupied community, not to say that it is a public boon to have some one whom everybody knows and can talk of. The minister in Salem Chapel was everything in his little world. That respectable connection would not have hung together half so closely but for this perpetual subject of discussion, criticism, and patronage; and, to compare great things with small, society in Carlingford recognised in some degree the same human want. An enterprising or non-enterprising rector made all the difference in the world in Grange Lane; and in the absence of a rector that counted for anything (and poor Mr Proctor was of no earthly use, as everybody knows), it followed, as a natural consequence, that a great deal of the interest and influence of the position fell into the hands of the Curate of St Roque's.

But that position was one full of difficulties, as any one acquainted with the real state of affairs must see in a moment. Mr Wentworth's circumstances were, on the whole, as delicate and critical as can be imagined, both as respected his standing in Carlingford and the place he held in his own family—not to speak of certain other personal matters which were still more troublesome and vexatious. These last of course were of his own bringing on; for if a young man chooses to fall in love when he has next to nothing to live upon, trouble is sure to follow. He had quite enough on his hands otherwise without that crowning complication. When Mr Wentworth first came to Carlingford, it was in the days of Mr Bury, the Evangelical rector—his last days, when he had no longer his old vigour, and was very glad of "assistance," as he said, in his public and parish work. Mr Bury had a friendship of old standing with the Miss Wentworths of Skelmersdale, Mr Francis Wentworth's aunts; and it was a long time before the old Rector's eyes were opened to the astounding fact, that the nephew of these

precious and chosen women held "views" of the most dangerous complexion, and indeed was as near Rome as a strong and lofty conviction of the really superior catholicity of the Anglican Church would permit him to be. Before he found this out, Mr Bury, who had unlimited confidence in preaching and improving talk, had done all he could to get the young man to "work," as the good Rector called it, and had voluntarily placed all that difficult district about the canal under the charge of the Curate of St Roque's. It is said that the horror with which, after having just written to Miss Leonora Wentworth to inform her what "a great work" his young friend was doing among the bargemen, Mr Bury was seized upon entering St Roque's itself for the first time after the consecration, when the young priest had arranged everything his own way, had a very bad effect on his health, and hastened his end. And it is indeed a fact that he died soon after, before he had time to issue the interdict he intended against Mr Wentworth's further exertions in the parish of Carlingford. Then came Mr Proctor, who came into the town as if he had dropped from the skies, and knew no more about managing a parish than a baby; and under his exceptional incumbency Mr Wentworth became more than ever necessary to the peace of the community. Now a new *régime* had been inaugurated. Mr Morgan, a man whom Miss Wodehouse described as "in the prime of life," newly married, with a wife also in the prime of life, who had waited for him ten years, and all that time had been under training for her future duties—two fresh, new, active, clergymanly intellects, entirely open to the affairs of the town, and intent upon general reformation and sound management—had just come into possession. The new Rector was making a great stir all about him, as was natural to a new man; and it seemed, on the whole, a highly doubtful business whether he and

Mr Wentworth would find Carlingford big enough to hold them both.

"We could not have expected to begin quite without difficulties," said Mrs Morgan, as she and her husband discussed the question in the drawing-room of the Rectory. It was a pretty drawing-room, though Mr Proctor's taste was not quite in accordance with the principles of the new incumbent's wife: however, as the furniture was all new, and as the former rector had no further need for it, it was of course, much the best and most economical arrangement to take it as it stood—though the bouquets on the carpet were a grievance which nothing but her high Christian principles could have carried Mrs Morgan through. She looked round as she spoke, and gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head: she, too, had her share of disagreeables. "It would not look like Christ's work, dear," said the clergyman's wife, "if we had it all our own way."

"My dear, I hope I am actuated by higher motives than a desire to have it all my own way," said the Rector. "I always felt sure that Proctor would make a mess of any parish he took in hand, but I did not imagine he would have left it to anybody who pleased to work it. You may imagine what my feelings were to-day, when I came upon a kind of impromptu chapel in that wretched district near the canal. I thought it a Little Bethel, you know, of course; but instead of that, I find young Wentworth goes there Wednesdays and Fridays to do duty, and that there is service on Sunday evening, and I can't tell what besides. It may be done from a good motive—but such a disregard of all constituted authority," said the Rector, with involuntary vehemence, "can never, in my opinion, be attended by good results."

"Mr Wentworth, did you say?" said Mrs Morgan, upon whose female soul the Perpetual Curate's good looks and good manners had not been without a certain softening effect. "I am so sorry. I don't wonder you are vexed; but don't you think there must be some mistake, William? Mr Wentworth is so gentlemanly and nice—and of very good family, too. I don't think he would choose to set himself in opposition to the Rector. I think there must be some mistake."

"It's a very aggravating mistake, at all events," said Mr Morgan, rising and going to the window. It was, as we have said, a very pretty drawing-room, and the windows opened upon as pretty a bit of lawn as you could see, with one handsome cedar sweeping its dark branches majestically over delicious greensward; but some people did think it was too near George Street and the railway. Just at that moment a puff of delicate white vapour appeared over the wall, and a sudden express-train, just released from the cover of the station, sprang with a snort and bound across the Rector's view, very imperfectly veiled by the lime-trees, which were thin in their foliage as yet. Mr Morgan groaned and retreated—out of his first exaltation he had descended all at once, as people will do after building all their hopes upon one grand event, into great depression and vexation, when he found that, after all, this event did not change the face of existence, but indeed brought new proofs of mortality in the shape of special annoyances belonging to itself in its train. "On the whole," said the Rector, who was subject to fits of disgust with things in general, "I am tempted to think it was a mistake coming to Carlingford; the drawbacks quite overbalance the advantages. I did hesitate, I remember—it must have been my better angel: that is, my dear," he continued, recollecting himself, "I would have hesitated had it not been for you."

Here there ensued a little pause. Mrs Morgan was not so young as she had been ten years ago, all which time she had waited patiently for the Fellow of All-Souls, and naturally these ten years and the patience had not improved her looks. There was a redness on her countenance nowadays which was not exactly bloom; and it stretched across her cheeks, and over the point of her nose, as she was painfully aware, poor lady. She was silent when she heard this, wondering with a passing pang whether he was sorry? But being a thoroughly sensible woman, and above indulging in those little appeals by which foolish ones confuse the calm of matrimonial friendship, she did not express the momentary feeling. "Yes, William," she said, sympathetically, casting her eyes again on the objectionable carpet, and feeling that there *were* drawbacks even to her happiness as the wife of the Rector of Carlingford; "but I suppose every place has its disadvantages; and then there is such good society; and a town like this is the very place for your talents; and when affairs are in your own hands—"

"It is very easy talking," said the vexed Rector. "Society and everybody would turn upon me if I interfered with Wentworth—there's the vexation. The fellow goes about it as if he had a right. Why, there's a Provident Society and all sorts of things going on, exactly as if it were his own parish. What led me to the place was seeing some ladies in grey cloaks—exactly such frights as you used to make yourself, my dear—flickering about. He has got up a sisterhood, I have no doubt; and to find all this in full operation in one's own parish, without so much as being informed of it! and you know I don't approve of sisterhoods—never did; they are founded on a mistake."

"Yes, dear. I know I gave up as soon as I knew your views on that subject," said Mrs Morgan. "I daresay so will the ladies here."

Who were they? Did you speak to them? or perhaps they belonged to St Roque's."

"Nobody belongs to St Roque's," said the Rector, contemptuously—"it has not even a district. They were the two Miss Wodehouses."

Mrs Morgan was moved to utter a little cry. "And their father is churchwarden!" said the indignant woman. "Really, William, this is too much—without even consulting you! But it is easy to see how *that* comes about. Lucy Wodehouse and young Wentworth are—; well, I don't know if they are engaged—but they are always together, walking and talking, and consulting with each other, and so forth—a great deal more than I could approve of; but that poor elder sister, you know, has no authority—nor indeed any experience, poor thing," said the Rector's wife; "that's how it is, no doubt."

"Engaged!" said the Rector. He gave a kindly glance at his wife, and melted a little. "Engaged, are they? Poor little thing! I hope she'll be as good as you have been, my dear; but a young man may be in love without interfering with another man's parish. I can't forgive that," said Mr Morgan, recovering himself; "he must be taught to know better; and it is very hard upon a clergyman," continued the spiritual ruler of Carlingford, "that he cannot move in a matter like this without incurring a storm of godless criticism. If I were sending Wentworth out of my parish, I shouldn't wonder if the 'Times' had an article upon it, denouncing me as an indolent priest and bigot, that would neither work myself nor let my betters work; that's how these fellows talk."

"But nobody could say such things of you," said Mrs Morgan, firing up.

"Of me! they'd say them of St Paul, if he had ever been in the circumstances," said the Rector; "and I should just like to know what he would have done in a parish like this, with the Dissenters on one side, and a Perpetual Curate without a district meddling on the other. Ah, my dear," continued Mr Morgan, "I daresay they had their troubles in those days; but facing a governor or so now and then, or even passing a night in the stocks, is a very different thing from a showing-up in the 'Times,' not to speak of the complications of duty. Let us go out and call at Folgate's, and see whether he thinks anything can be done to the church."

"Dear, you wouldn't mind the 'Times' if it were your duty?" said the Rector's wife, getting up promptly to prepare for the walk.

"No, I suppose not," said Mr Morgan, not without a thrill of importance; "nor the stake," he added, with a little laugh, for he was not without a sense of humour; and the two went out to the architect's to ascertain the result of his cogitations over the church. They passed that sacred edifice in their way, and went in to gaze at it with a disgust which only an unhappy priest of high culture and aesthetic tastes, doomed to officiate in a building of the eighteenth century, of the churchwarden period of architecture, could fully enter into. "Eugh!" said Mr Morgan, looking round upon the high pews and stifling galleries with an expressive contraction of his features—his wife looked on sympathetic; and it was at this unlucky moment that the subject of their late conference made his appearance cheerfully from behind the ugly pulpit, in close conference with Mr Folgate. The pulpit was a three-storeyed mass,

with the reading-desk and the clerk's desk beneath—a terrible eyesore to the Rector and his wife.

"I can fancy the expediency of keeping the place in repair," said the Curate of St Roque's, happy in the consciousness of possessing a church which, though not old, had been built by Gilbert Scott, and cheerfully unconscious of the presence of his listeners; "but to beautify a wretched old barn like this is beyond the imagination of man. Money can't do everything," said the heedless young man as he came lounging down the middle aisle, tapping contemptuously with his cane upon the high pew-doors. "I wonder where the people expected to go to who built Carlingford Church? Curious," continued the young Anglican, stopping in mid career, "to think of bestowing *consecration* upon anything so hideous. What a pass the world must have come to, Folgate, when this erection was counted worthy to be the house of God! After all, perhaps it is wrong to feel so strongly about it. The walls *are* consecrated, though they are ugly; we can't revoke the blessing. But no wonder it was an unchristian age."

"We have our treasure in earthen vessels," said Mr Morgan, somewhat sternly, from where he stood, under shelter of the heavy gallery. Mr Wentworth was shortsighted, like most people nowadays. He put up his glass hastily, and then hurried forward, perhaps just a little abashed. When he had made his salutations, however, he returned undismayed to the charge.

"It's a great pity you have not something better to work upon," said the dauntless Curate; "but it is difficult to conceive what can be done with such an unhallowed type of construction. I was just saying to Folgate—"

"There is a great deal of cant abroad on this subject," said Mr Morgan, interrupting the young oracle. "I like good architecture, but I don't relish attributing moral qualities to bricks and mortar. The hallowing influence ought to be within. Mr Folgate, we were going to call at your office. Have you thought of the little suggestions I ventured to make? Oh, the drawings are here. Mr Wentworth does not approve of them, I suppose?" said the Rector, turning sternly round upon the unlucky Curate of St Roque's.

"I can only say I sympathise with you profoundly," said young Wentworth, with great seriousness. "Such a terrible church must be a great trial. I wish I had any advice worth offering; but it is my hour for a short service down at the canal, and I can't keep my poor bargees waiting. Good morning. I hope you'll come and give us your countenance, Mrs Morgan. There's no end of want and trouble at Wharfside."

"Is Mr Wentworth aware, I wonder, that Wharfside is in the parish of Carlingford?" said the Rector, with involuntary severity, as the young priest withdrew calmly to go to his "duty." Mr Folgate, who supposed himself to be addressed, smiled, and said, "Oh yes, of course," and unfolded his drawings, to which the clerical pair before him lent a disturbed attention. They were both in a high state of indignation by this time. It seemed indispensable that something should be done to bring to his senses an intruder so perfectly composed and at his ease.

CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE Mr Wentworth, without much thought of his sins, went down George Street, meaning to turn off at the first narrow turning which led down behind the shops and traffic, behind the comfort and beauty of the little town, to that inevitable land of shadow which always dogs the sunshine. Carlingford proper knew little about it, except that it increased the poor-rates, and now and then produced a fever. The minister of Salem Chapel was in a state of complete ignorance on the subject. The late Rector had been equally uninformed. Mr Bury, who was Evangelical, had the credit of disinterring the buried creatures there about thirty years ago. It was an office to be expected of that much-preaching man; but what was a great deal more extraordinary, was to find that the only people now in Carlingford who knew anything about Wharfside, except overseers of the poor and guardians of the public peace, were the Perpetual Curate of St Roque's—who had nothing particular to do with it, and who was regarded by many sober-minded persons with suspicion as a dilettante Anglican, given over to floral ornaments and ecclesiastical upholstery—and some half-dozen people of the very *élite* of society, principally ladies residing in Grange Lane.

Mr Wentworth came to a hesitating pause at the head of the turning which would have led him to Wharfside. He looked at his watch and saw there was half an hour to spare. He gave a wistful lingering look down the long line of garden-walls, pausing upon one point where the blossomed boughs of an apple-tree overlooked that enclosure.

There was quite time to call and ask if the Miss Wodehouses were going down to the service this afternoon; but was it duty? or, indeed, putting that question aside, was it quite right to compound matters with his own heart's desire and the work he was engaged in, in this undeniable fashion? The young priest crossed the street very slowly, swinging his cane and knitting his brows as he debated the question. If it had been one of the bargemen bringing his sweetheart, walking with her along the side of the canal to which Spring and sweet Easter coming on, and Love, perhaps, always helpful of illusions, might convey a certain greenness and sentiment of nature—and echoing her soft responses to the afternoon prayers—perhaps the Curate might have felt that such devotion was not entirely pure and simple. But somehow, before he was aware of it, his slow footstep had crossed the line, and he found himself in Grange Lane, bending his steps towards Mr Wodehouse's door. For one thing, to be sure, the Canticles in the evening service could always be sung when Lucy's sweet clear voice was there to lead the uncertain melody; and it was good to see her singing the 'Magnificat' with that serious sweet face, "full of grace," like Mary's own. Thinking of that, Mr Wentworth made his way without any further hesitation to the green door over which hung the apple-blossoms, totally untroubled in his mind as to what the reverend pair were thinking whom he had left behind him in the ugly church; and unconscious that his impromptu chapel at Wharfside, with its little carved reading-desk, and the table behind, contrived so as to look suspiciously like an altar, was a thorn in anybody's side. Had his mind been in a fit condition at that moment to cogitate trouble, his thoughts would have travelled in a totally different direction, but in the mean time Mr Wentworth was very well able to put aside his perplexities. The green door opened just as he reached it, and Lucy and her elder sister came out in

those grey cloaks which the Rector had slandered. They were just going to Wharfside to the service, and of course they were surprised to see Mr Wentworth, who did not knock at that green door more than a dozen times in a week, on the average. The Curate walked between the sisters on their way towards their favourite "district." Such a position would scarcely have been otherwise than agreeable to any young man. Dear old Miss Wodehouse was the gentlest of chaperones. Old Miss Wodehouse people called her, not knowing why—perhaps because that adjective was sweeter than the harsh one of middle age which belonged to her; and then there was such a difference between her and Lucy. Lucy was twenty, and in her sweetest bloom. Many people thought with Mr Wentworth that there were not other two such eyes in Carlingford. Not that they were brilliant or penetrating, but as blue as heaven, and as serene and pure. So many persons thought, and the Perpetual Curate among them. The grey cloak fell in pretty folds around that light elastic figure; and there was not an old woman in the town so tender, so helpful, so handy as Lucy where trouble was, as all the poor people knew. So the three went down Prickett's Lane, which leads from George Street towards the canal—not a pleasant part of the town by any means; and if Mr Wentworth was conscious of a certain haze of sunshine all round and about him, gliding over the poor pavement, and here and there transfiguring some baby bystander gazing open-mouthed at the pretty lady, could any reasonable man be surprised?

"I hope your aunts were quite well, Mr Wentworth, when you heard from them last," said Miss Wodehouse, "and all your people at home. In such a small family as ours, we should go out of our wits if we did not hear every day; but I suppose it is different where there are so many. Lucy, when she goes from home," said

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