

from *Shirley* (1849) By Charlotte Brontë (England)

Line 5 Of late years an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the North of England: they lie very thick on the hills; every parish has one or more of them; they are young enough to be very active, and ought to be doing a great deal of good. But not of late years are we about to speak. We are going back to the beginning of this century: late years—present years—are dusty, sunburnt, hot, arid. We will evade the noon—forget it in siesta, pass the mid-day in slumber—and dream of dawn.

10 If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect 15 passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that 20 they must rise and betake themselves thereto. It is not positively affirmed that you shall not have a taste of the exciting—perhaps towards the middle and close of the meal—but it is resolved that the first dish set upon the table shall be one that a 25 Catholic—ay, even an Anglo-Catholic—might eat on Good Friday in Passion Week. It shall be cold lentils and vinegar without oil; it shall be unleavened bread with bitter herbs, and no roast lamb.

30 Of late years, I say, an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the North of England; but at that time that affluent rain had not descended. Curates were scarce then; there was no Pastoral Aid, no Additional Curates' Society to stretch a 35 helping hand to worn-out old rectors and

incumbents, and give them the wherewithal to pay a vigorous young colleague from Oxford or Cambridge. The present successors of the Apostles, disciples of Dr. Pusey and tools of the Propaganda, 40 were at that time being hatched under cradle-blankets or undergoing regeneration by nursery-baptism in wash-hand basins. You could not have guessed by looking at any one of them that the Italian-ironed double frills of its net-cap surrounded 45 the brows of a pre-ordained, specially sanctified successor of St. Paul, St. Peter, or St. John; nor could you have foreseen in the folds of its long nightgown the white surplice in which it was hereafter cruelly to exercise the souls of its 50 parishioners, and strangely to nonplus its old-fashioned vicar by flourishing aloft in a pulpit the shirt-like raiment which had never before waved higher than the reading-desk.

Yet even in those days of scarcity there were 55 curates: the precious plant was rare, but it might be found. A certain favored district in the West Riding of Yorkshire could boast three rods of Aaron blossoming within a circuit of twenty miles. You shall see them, reader. Step into this neat garden-house on the skirts of Whinbury, walk forward into the little parlor—there they are at dinner. Allow me to introduce them to you: Mr. Donne, curate of Whinbury; Mr. Malone, curate of Briarfield; Mr. Sweeting, curate of Nunnely. These are Mr. 65 Donne's lodgings, being the habitation of one John Gale, a small clothier. Mr. Donne has kindly invited his brethren to regale with him. You and I will join the party, see what is to be seen, and hear what is to be heard. At present, however, they are only eating, 70 and while they eat we will talk aside.