

Ballad: The Phantom Curate. A Fable

In "The Phantom Curate. A Fable," we are introduced to a bishop, albeit without revealing the location of his diocese, who significantly burdens his clergy with conventional expectations, rigorously limiting their freedoms and scrutinizing their actions for any hint of unintentional sin. Despite his upright intentions and dedication to setting examples, his strict approach towards ensuring his priests avoid even harmless pleasures underlines his adherence to maintaining appearances rather than fostering genuine goodness. This bishop, who himself indulges in the ordinary amusements of society, finds his principles challenged by the recurring presence of a curate at various social and entertainment events which the clergy is forbidden to enjoy.

This silent rebuke starts at a pantomime, where the bishop, amidst his laughter at the unsophisticated humor, spots the curate in the audience, unsettling his peace of mind. The incident repeats on Christmas Eve, when the bishop is dancing to entertain his children; he halts mid-frolic upon noticing the curate dancing with a young lady. The bishop's discomfort escalates further when, after succumbing to public demand to sing due to his renowned vocal talent, he discovers the curate joining in the performance, directly challenging the bishop's authority and stance on clerical participation in such activities.

The narrative reaches a crescendo with the bishop encountering the curate once more at a public performance of a Punch and Judy show. His amusement turns to dismay as he hears the curate laughing heartily at the scenes of comical violence, symbolizing the curate's persistent challenge to the bishop's strictures on enjoying simple, human pleasures.

The tale weaves through these encounters to deliver a fable on the complexities of moral leadership, the tension between public virtue and private enjoyment, and the inevitable contradictions that arise when rigid ideals are imposed on the naturally diverse inclinations of human character.