

## COMING MEN

The Rev. S. Baring-Gould

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There are many able preachers among the clergy, but there are few who possess the gifts which have secured for Mr. Baring-Gould a unique reputation in the literary world. Not that he has exposed himself to the charge of minimising the importance of his sacred duties. His parochial work has not been neglected. He did not mistake his vocation. There is no reason why a clergyman who has leisure and literary tastes should not make the most of them. Mr. Baring-Gould graduated B.A. at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1850, and M.A. in 1856. But he did not take holy orders until 1864, when he was ordained by the Bishop of Ripon, and appointed to the curacy of Horbury, near Wakefield. In 1867 he accepted the incumbency of Dalton, Yorkshire, and later was offered by the Crown the rectory of East Mersea, in the diocese of Rochester. In 1881 he became rector of Lew Trenchard, North Devonshire. This is the somewhat uneventful record of his clerical career.

But if he is not exactly known as a popular preacher, those who have heard him do not require to be assured that his pulpit discourses are far above the average in quality, and are characterised by intense earnestness of manner. Mr. Baring-Gould has published a large number of theological works which attest his erudition, and several volumes of sermons. It has, however, been one of his objects to explain the great truths of the Christian faith to children, and in this direction he has been as successful as in confirming the belief of persons of riper years. The children of Lew Trenchard are highly favoured. Mr. Baring-Gould is, no doubt, an advanced High Churchman, and it is open to anybody to differ from him in matters of doctrine. But no one who reads the addresses which, after being delivered, were published last year by Messrs. Skeffington, under the title of "The Parish Church," can complain that he is not able to show cause for his convictions or lacks the power to enforce them in plain and vigorous language. It has often been said that it is harder to preach to children than to grown-up people.

Mr. Baring-Gould can command the undivided attention of a congregation in the West-end of London, but he reserves some of his happiest thoughts for the consideration of the youthful sons and daughters of his humble parishioners. And yet it is not altogether to be regretted that he has not been preferred to a position in a populous town. Perhaps he has had the chance, and has declined to avail himself of it. But it cannot be denied that with the cares of a large parish he would have found it impossible to pursue his literary studies so freely. Literature has accordingly gained by his banishment from, say, London society, in which he would have been warmly welcomed.

The versatility of Mr. Baring-Gould is remarkable. Especially versed in mediaeval and antiquarian lore, his works of that character include "Post-mediaeval Preachers", published in 1865; "Curious Myths of the Middle Ages", one series in 1865, and the other in 1868; "Book of Were Wolves", 1865; "Appendix on Household Tales to Folk-lore of Northern

Counties", 1866; "Curiosities of Olden Time", 1869; and "Legendary Lives of Old Testament Characters", two volumes, 1871. His theological works embrace "The Path of the Just", "The Origin and Development of Religious Belief", "Luther on Justification", two lectures delivered in 1870; "One Hundred Sermon Sketches for Extempore Preachers", "The Mystery of Suffering", "The Passion of Jesus", and "The Seven Last Words". He has also published "Secular versus Religious Education", in 1872; "Lives of the Saints", seven volumes in 1873; "The Power of the Press", and the "Life of the Vicar of Morwenstowe" - Mr. Hawker.

These do not by any means exhaust the list; there are two other departments in which Mr. Baring-Gould has used his pen with good effect. He not only preaches excellent sermons to children; he writes admirable stories for them. Little readers of that charming collection of contributions, "Just One More Tale", will endorse any tribute which may be paid to the author of "The Queen of Dentists" and "Wow-Wow". Mr. Baring-Gould does not aim over the heads of small folks. He seems to understand exactly what they want and what is best for them, and it may safely be affirmed that he has never failed to afford amusement.

But it is in quite another sphere of literary activity that, as some think, he has achieved the most signal success. The author of "John Herring" is a distinguished novelist. There are persons who hold that all fiction is objectionable, and that anyone who writes a novel is not qualified to teach religion. Happily, they are a diminishing, if not a vanishing, minority. The overwhelming majority of the community feel that fiction, so long as it is pure, is not merely harmless, but beneficial. Bad novels are not less objectionable than bad plays; but a good novel, with a skilful plot, sparkling dialogue, and a reasonable amount of love-making, is a thing to be thankful for, not a thing to moan over as evidence of the depravity of the age.

There is nothing ignoble about the mission of the novelist, who seeks to afford healthy relaxation to the weary minds of the multitude. Life would scarcely be worth living to thousands of poor souls doomed to spend their days in the Sleepy Hollows of England if it were not for the pleasure of reading the books from circulating libraries. Those who concede that novels are essential will assent to the view that the loftier they are in tone the better, and that it is an incalculable advantage when an author is also an individual who wears the white flower of a blameless life. Mr. Baring-Gould has not produced a page of fiction which is unworthy of him in his clerical capacity. He has not been foolish enough to introduce religion in his novels, but they are all saturated with the same spirit. In the pulpit and his theological works Mr. Baring-Gould expounds Christianity in detail; in his novels he expounds

it in a general way, holding up to reprobation and scorn the wrong-doer and the hypocrite, surrounding with a halo of glory the upright and the honourable.

This is not the place to enter into a criticism of "Mehalah", or "John Herring", "Court Royal" or "Jacquitta". The last has only just commenced, but the early chapters are full of promise, and "The Gaverocks", which opens auspiciously in Cornhill this month, will excite much interest. Of the three others, "John Herring" has been most cordially appreciated, but "Mehalah" is, in some respects, the most fascinating. Mr. Baring-Gould has plenty of imagination, but he always turns facts and local knowledge to his account. The local colouring of "Mehalah" is, of course, one of its features, and it is quite within the range of probability that the pale counterparts of Glory and Rebow lived among the Essex marshes

while Mr. Baring-Gould was rector of East Mersea. The original of John Herring may also exist in the West of England, and perhaps that extraordinary girl Johanna, the heroine of "Court Royal", was not entirely evolved out of the author's inner consciousness.

Mr. Baring-Gould's novels are not free from defects, but they are so bracing, so original, so interesting, so destitute of cant, and so wholesome that every fresh work of fiction from his pen is sure of a hearty welcome. Nevertheless, it does not follow that he has produced his best book. That will be published when he has become a dean and can devote the greater portion of his time to the yet more assiduous cultivation of those talents which have enabled him, according to his views, to be loyal to the Church and to make a name in the world.

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