

EXTRACTS FROM

A PARSON'S TALE

A COMEDY

by CHRISTOPHER OWEN

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A PARSON'S TALE was first performed by Christopher Owen on the 4th of March, 1995, at the Arts Centre at St Mary's Church, Perivale in West London. It was directed by Richard Osborne.

Between 1995 and 2004, it played in well over 100 venues up and down the UK and in the Gulf States.

In writing A PARSON'S TALE, Christopher Owen gained much inspiration and material from the book My Curates By A Rector written in 1890 under the pseudonym Rev. J. Swith.

Story: The year is 1895. The Rev. J.T. Smith of St Peter's, Mulworth, has just arrived at the Parish Hall in the village of Norton. It is a very special occasion: the celebration of the rebuilding of the Old Bell Tower at St Peter's.

A Guest Speaker, the Very Rev. Dean Hole is expected. Songs are to be sung by Rev. Smith's wife and his former curate Mr Rashleigh, now Rector of the Parish of Norton. Extracts from Charlotte Bronte, Washington Irving are to be performed. Unfortunately, neither Dean Hole, nor Mr Rashleigh, nor the Rev Smith's wife has as yet arrived.

But the audience has....

Brilliant – a masterpiece of sustained characterisation – The Surrey Advertiser.

An evening of comedy – totally engrossing – a must see - The Bordon Herald.

By the end of the evening it felt we were taking leave of a dear friend - Lichfield Mercury.

Outstanding - much enjoyed by the audience - a prolonged ovation – The Stage.

The sources of quotations not stated in the play can be found at the back of the script.

FIRST EXTRACT:

PART ONE

THERE ARE FOUR CHAIRS, A TABLE, A LECTURN
AND A PORTABLE HARMONIUM.

THE REV J. T. SMITH ENTERS - THROUGH THE
AUDITORIUM.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very sorry to have to tell you Mr Rashleigh isn't here yet.

We're going to have to wait a few minutes before we start the evening. No sign of him, eh, Mrs Fletcher? Mrs Pearce is outside, is she? Mrs Pearce is outside. Keeping an eye open for him. I'm sure he'll be here very soon.

For anyone here who may not know me, perhaps I may take this opportunity to introduce myself.

I am the Reverent J.T. Smith, rector of St Peter's, way over at Mulworth, - and it gives me great pleasure to be here with you this evening in this the county of Buckinghamshire in your charming village of Norton, and to see so many of you here, and not only from Norton, but also, as I'm told, from Eastleigh and Doddington, and one or two of my own parishioners from Mulworth are here. Thank you for making the journey, Mulworth.

This evening, as we all know, is a Very Special Occasion, and I'm most grateful to your rector, Mr Rashleigh - who I'm sure will be here soon - for inviting us to stage this event in this splendid building here at Norton. As I expect some of you will know, we were to have held this evening at our own parish hall at Mulworth - but unfortunately our squire, Sir Thomas Stanton, decided not to let us use it. But we're not here this evening to talk about our recent difficulties in Mulworth.

We are here to celebrate the rebuilding of the old bell tower of St Peter's Church, Mulworth - where I have been rector now for the past 35 years. It was 5 years ago that the old bell tower at St Peter's partially gave way. The great bell itself fell through the floor into the vestry, narrowly missing our churchwarden, Mr Binstead - who subsequently joined the Wesleyans.

Today, on the (the day and month of performance) **1895**, I am delighted to confirm that rebuilding work will at last commence at the end of this month. And I think that deserves a round of applause.

I know that we are all greatly looking forward to our guest speaker tonight, who indeed is none other than my old friend, the Very Rev Reynolds Hole, the Dean of Rochester.

Dean Hole has recently completed a most splendid book of reminiscences – and he is a great authority on old time country parsons throughout this the C19th.

We shall also be hearing a number of rather lovely songs, sung by my wife, the ever-enthusiastic Mrs Smith, and by your rector, Mr Rashleigh, these songs being accompanied by my wife, Mrs Smith, with considerable gusto and aplomb I might say, on her portable harmonium.

Unfortunately, neither Dean Hole, nor my wife, Mrs Smith, has as yet arrived either.

No sign of them, eh, Mrs Fletcher?

Dean Hole informed me that he would be catching the half past two train from Rochester this afternoon. I can only imagine that there has been some small delay on the line.

We can, however, I am sure, be confident that they will all be arriving very soon.

Celebrating, as we are, the rebuilding of the old bell tower at St Peter's, we felt that this evening we should have as our theme the growing renewal and resurgence of the Anglican Church in our countryside. Today, just 5 years before we enter the C20th and all that might hold for us, many people believe that there is a reawakened sense of confidence in the Anglican Church, a renewed vigour and hope - and this has as its

reflection the great many country parish churches up and down the land that in recent decades have been so lovingly and beautifully restored – as indeed we may hope St Peter’s will be in the months ahead.

Perhaps we should have a cup of tea now. While we are waiting for our special guests. Mrs Fletcher, would you ask Mrs Cooper if we can have the tea now?

Mrs Fletcher (at back of auditorium): Mrs Cooper’s only just filled the urn.

Smith: Did you hear that? Mrs Cooper has only just filled the urn. The caretaker would like us to leave by half past nine o'clock. We ought to do something, eh, Mrs Fletcher?

During the second half of this evening, I shall be reading a short piece from Charlotte Bronte. Perhaps I could read it now - (HE GOES AND PICKS UP THE BOOK FROM THE TABLE) – on the other hand, if I read it to you now, I won't be able to read it to you later, because when I read it to you later, you will already have heard me read it to you now - and that might upset the balance of our programme. So I won't read it to you now.

I shall also have to pleasure of reading out my introduction to our special guest speaker tonight.

Here we are: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am greatly honoured and privileged to introduce our special guest speaker tonight, whom I have known for many years - a gentleman of great eminence and distinction. Dean Hole was born and brought up in the village of Caunton in Nottinghamshire’ Well, that's what I'm going to read out later - when I introduce our special guest speaker.

Then Dean Hole will come up here, and I know you all will give him a warm welcome, and I shall shake him by the hand - and he will then begin to regale us with stories of the church 100 years ago.

END OF FIRST EXTRACT.

SECOND EXTRACT:

You know, I've never been one for all this extemporizing - nothing written down - all off the top of the head. As a preacher it is not something I go in for at all. I can't get on with most of these extempore preachers, I have to say. Their sermons tend to be so unconsidered, don't you think? And, as a consequence, frequently so physical. Like that fellow standing in for Mr Townsend over at Winstead at the beginning of last August. Did any of you see him? All that shouting. Leaping in the air. Trying to tear the devil out of the pulpit rails. And his pump position, as I call it, was the most appalling. Then he glared motionless at his admiring listeners, as if he had fallen into a trance, with his arms upraised. And the next moment, the hurricane broke. And he went on and on far, far too long. I am of a mind with the Hon Edward Bligh when he wrote: "Twelve minutes is long enough for one monkey to be talking to a lot of others."

There is one song I do know, and which I have accompanied myself singing on a number of occasions over the years at the Rectory – but which we decided was not appropriate for this evening as it's about fishermen and their families, and here at Norton you don't live anywhere near the sea, do you? But under the circumstances, I think perhaps I'd like to attempt to sing it to you now. If you would be happy with that, would you? The song is called Three Fishermen - Three Fishers Went Sailing. And the sad words were written by Mr Charles Kingsley, who also wrote a number of reforming novels. Anybody here read any of them? The Water Babies – boys going up and down chimneys – and Alton Locke, in which he attacked the insanitary slum conditions of South London, and, on account of which, he was greatly mistrusted by much of the Establishment.

This song was also a great favourite with my father. He was always singing it – when he was alive. My father was born and bred in the fishing village of Porthmenna in Cornwall, where most of the men were themselves fishermen.

Well, let's see.

HE PLAYS AND SINGS 'THREE FISHERS WENT SAILING'.

The sad words of that song, as I say, were written by the Rev Charles Kingsley, who may be equated with other reforming clergymen, such as the Rev Sydney Smith, who was rector at Foston-le-Clay in Yorkshire, and who campaigned for better housing and employment conditions - and, for his pains, was labelled, "a dangerous revolutionary".

George the Third said of him: "He is a very clever fellow, but he will never be a Bishop".

Then, ladies and gentlemen, there was Christian Socialist Movement, founded in the 40's, as a reaction to the belief of the Establishment, as I understand it, that the laws of commerce are the laws of Nature and of God, which on no account must be tampered with.

But we, country parsons cannot all be Charles Kingsleys or Sidney Smiths.

I believe there is a great need for reconciliation in this world of ours. And I hold, and have for many years now held it to be my duty as a clergyman to tread the sometimes much despised, middle ground, to find that which people of greatly opposing views have, in fact, in common, and to bring them together. That's what I've tried to do.

But we're not here this evening to talk about our recent difficulties at Mulworth.

We are here to celebrate the rebuilding of the Old Bell Tower at St Peter's - and very soon now, our special guest speaker Dean Hole will come up here, and I know all of you will give him a warm welcome, and I shall shake him by the hand, and he will then begin to regale us with stories of the church 100 years ago - when much of the church of England, especially in the countryside, had declined into a state of spiritual and moral inertia.

Only last week, my wife Mrs Smith reminded me that I had a great, great, great uncle, a Mr Jenkins, who was a rector at Wisbech in Norfolk, and it is said that whenever it rained, he used to keep his hens in the pulpit.

END OF SECOND EXTRACT.

THIRD EXTRACT:

Has your Mr Rashleigh started to wave the old incense about?

We had a fellow started to do that at Mulworth in the 70's. My young curate, Mr Maypole.

I had, in fact, great confidence in young Mr Maypole. His sermons contained a good deal of sound matter. In view of this, Mrs Smith and I determined upon taking a long-contemplated trip to visit old friends in Canada.

During our stay in Canada, we were greatly struck by the large numbers of poor British immigrants over there.

Any young man here in the audience tonight, who feels he has a calling, he can be assured there is a great need for the Anglican Church in the North Western Territories of Canada. In fact, I have to say, these last few months, I have been eager that Mrs Smith and I should seriously consider the possibility of going out there ourselves. Mrs Smith herself, however, is of the view that there is plenty to be getting on with here. I was telling you about Mr Maypole.

As I said, we went out to visit old friends, the Kilgariths, in Canada, and we left our young curate, Mr Maypole, in sole charge in our absence. On our return we found a great many 'changes' had taken place in the Church. A processional hymn was now sung before the service; the choir were now in cassocks as well as surplices. Mr. Maypole had adopted coloured stoles, green ones at that particular time. In the pulpit, he had assumed a more statuesque attitude; he seemed to take considerable pains in arranging the fingers of one hand so as to correspond with those of the other. The intonation of his voice was now pitched in a higher key, as he spake forth amid a swirling cloud of incense.

And a very uncivil war had broken out in the columns of the Mulworth Weekly Express. My churchwarden at that time, Mr Wagstaff, had resigned, and, with a few others, had joined the Wesleyans. My curate was hooted in the streets. Indeed at one Sunday Service it had been found necessary to have some policemen in attendance.

As rector of the parish I was placed in a dilemma. Should I acquiesce in the present state of things? Or should I return to our former and more simple use? Frankly, I felt Mr Maypole had been greatly out of order in the whole business. However, my wife Mrs Smith, pragmatic as she is,

reminded me that hardworking young curates were very difficult to get hold of - and Mr Maypole had been of great use to us as an excellent teacher in our local parish school, and in visiting the sick and elderly, and as a leading member of the choir. In view of this, we decided that for the time being we would leave things as they were, and attempt to seek some sort of reconciliation.

We had no sooner announced our decision, than pandemonium broke out.

END OF EXTRACTS.