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IN MY FIRST CURACY.

By the Rev. J. D. Mullins, D.D.

IN the parish to which I was ordained, now many years ago, there came to live near the church three elderly maiden sisters, who seemed even then to be survivals from an earlier age. A large house had been left to the youngest, and they had come up from the country to live in it.

They and all their set have long since passed away, but they have left behind a memory of quaint ways and sayings, not quite like those of any other people that I have ever met.

The three had been people of some consequence in their village home, and still carried themselves with an air. Blunt, outspoken, good-natured, but utterly unsentimental, given to strange phrases, but unconscious of their oddities, they soon established themselves as one of the institutions of the parish.

Their forbears had been of the "Squarson" type, rather like some of Anthony Trollope's clergy, I imagine. Their father had been something of a scholar. "There have always been clergy in our family until the present generation," they would say. They were of an uncertain age; Miss Lav, though sensitive on the point, referred to their contemporaries as "elderly gals like us." (I feel confident that she said "gals," not "gayels.") Their names were the Misses Elizabeth, Lavinia, and Isabella Keene—that was not their surname, but it will serve. In the circle of the Church workers they soon became known as Miss Liz, Miss Lav, and Miss Bella, for it was by these names that they referred to each other.

Miss Liz was the oldest of the three—tall, gaunt, and grey-haired. She was very deaf, and always carried a vulcanite fan, which she pressed against her teeth and presented towards you when she wished to hear what you had to say. Otherwise she heard never a word, yet it seemed to be an odd fatality that when any topic had been broached and disposed of in a general conversation, poor Miss Liz was sure to break in with it afresh and put up her fan for replies. Telepathy, I suppose.

The face of Miss Lav, the second of the three, faintly resembled the portraits of George Eliot. She was the most original of them all; in fact, the most piquant of the sayings I remember came from her.

Once, by way of kindly notice of the junior curate, she said to me: "We heard your siren voice in church on Sunday, Mr. Mullins."

"Oh, Miss Lav," I replied, "don't you remember that the Sirens lured people to destruction?"

"You know quite well what I mean!" she said, with a toss of her head. I scorn the ribald suggestion that Miss Lav meant a *steam* siren.

She was also the most adventurous of the sisters, for once she

set out by herself on a tour up the Rhine. To go up the Rhine had been one of the correct tours in her youth, no doubt. In recounting her experiences, the one which stood out in her memory was that she had been confronted by a demand of some hotel-keeper that she should enter in the hotel register certain particulars about herself.

"What do you think?" she would exclaim indignantly. "They actually asked me to put down my age! Well, I put myself down at a fancy price!"

When anyone had been narrating a story at some length, or when some argument had reached its climax, Miss Lav would add, "And then the horse went to be shaved." The meaning of this cryptic utterance seemed to be something like the modern slang phrase "That put the lid on it," or "So that's that."

One of Miss Lav's oddest actions was done as a kindness to my fellow-curate. She heard that he had been known to go out on a journey and find when miles away from home that he had not enough money even for a bus fare. On one such occasion a friendly policeman had come to his rescue with a loan of two half-crowns. With a view to such an emergency in the future, Miss Lav surreptitiously secured one of his overcoats, cut off the buttons, and replaced them with florins sewn up in cloth, so that at a pinch my colleague might cut one off and apply it to relieve his necessities!

Miss Bella, the youngest sister, had perhaps not reached fifty. She was buxom, and had a hearty laugh. I remember her saying that she liked to see a red spot in a landscape, and certainly every winter she provided one in her own person by wearing always a scarlet cloak. I owed to her one of the great privileges of my life, for she used to lend me *Macmillan's Magazine.* Though long since defunct, it was once a rival of *Cornhill* and *Blackwood.* When handing it to me one month—I cannot recall the exact date, but it was in the late eighties—she mentioned that there was a story in that number by a new writer which she thought might please me. It did indeed. It was "The Head of the District," by Rudyard Kipling, a name then quite unknown to me. Soon afterwards came "The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvany." It is the fashion at such crises to refer to the peak of Darien, and to astronomers into whose ken new planets swim. Without labouring that hackneyed quotation, it was the opening of a new vision to me, and I have been an ardent Kiplingite ever since.

All three sisters were cultivated people, though they read little of contemporary literature. They were familiar with the more obvious of the English classics, and would introduce allusions to Shakespeare and Scott. I am afraid I was once guilty of playing upon this weakness of theirs, for having led the conversation to the subject of sleep I said: "You remember what Shakespeare said—

> "'Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care,
> And makes each particular hair to stand on end,
> Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.'"

I contrived to keep from smiling, and although puzzled by the Shakespearean words, they did not discover the sacrilegious patchwork. No doubt my readers can place the several parts of the quotation.

In a lighter vein they would sometimes revert to a habit of their youth, when it had been ladylike to collect and put in an album riddles of a genteel type, and would propound them. Two of these remain in my memory:

"Where does Neptune stable his horses?"

Answer: "Where the seamews are," and

"Of what religion were Adam and Eve in Paradise?"

Answer: "Adam thought Eve angelical."

The Keenes' method of housekeeping was practical and original. Miss Liz was the housekeeper of the party. Whenever money was needed she announced the fact, when each of the three put a five-pound note into the common fund.

Each had her private sitting-room, in which she could entertain her own friends. Miss Lav had her harp and Miss Bella a piano in their respective boudoirs. Both of them, by the way, were really competent performers. But the three were nearly always at home to their general circle of friends at tea-time.

Tea was with the Keenes a serious meal. All three appeared in their bonnets and gloves, and the fingers of the latter were pinched out so as to extend beyond the fingers of the hand inside. A tablecloth was laid, and everyone sat up to the table. They were very attentive and sometimes embarrassing hostesses. I remember once a shy male being overwhelmed with confusion when Miss Lav said in what she meant for a gracious manner: "Now come and sit next to this fascinating young lady."

The sisters considered it the correct thing to do more than offer their viands. "Let me press you to a piece of this cake," "Let me press you to another cup of tea," were typical forms of invitation, in which they felt obliged to persist so long as a guest showed any sign of going on. My fellow-curate was one of those very polite men who are always anxious to oblige. Consequently he found it difficult to refuse the food repeatedly pressed upon him, and used to complain that he always left these tea-tables in a dreadful state of repletion.

The days when the church was to be decorated, as for Christmas, Easter, or the Harvest Festival, were great times for the Keenes' tea-table. The whole of the decorators were made free of it, including some who at ordinary times were outside the pale, such as "people who had been in trade."

As I have said, they have long since passed away. Miss Lav, who survived her two sisters, was practical and unromantic to the last, for she left a thousand pounds, the interest of which was to be used on repairs to the church.