

Brief Reflections relative to the Emigrant French Clergy

Fanny Burney

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BRIEF
REFLECTIONS
RELATIVE TO THE
EMIGRANT FRENCH CLERGY:

EARNESTLY SUBMITTED
TO THE HUMANE CONSIDERATION
OF THE
LADIES OF GREAT BRITAIN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
EVELINA AND CECILIA.

London:

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appropriated to the Relief of the*

EMIGRANT FRENCH CLERGY.

APOLOGY.

HOWEVER wide from the allotted boundaries and appointed province of Females may be all interference in public matters, even in the agitating season of general calamity; it does not thence follow that they are exempt from all public claims, or mere passive spectatresses of the moral as well as of the political œconomy of human life. The distinct ties of their prescriptive duties, which, pointed out by Nature, have been recognised by reason, and established by custom, remove, indeed, from their view and knowledge all materials for forming public characters. The privacy, therefore, of their lives is the dictate of common sense, stimulated by local discretion. But in the doctrine of morality the reverse is the case, and their feminine deficiencies are there changed into advantages: since the retirement, which divests them of practical skills for public purposes, guards them, at the same time, from the heart-hardening effects of general worldly commerce. It gives them leisure to reflect and to refine, not merely upon the virtues, but the pleasures of benevolence; not only and abstractedly upon that sense of good and evil which is implanted in all, but feelingly, nay awefully, upon the woes they see, yet are spared!

It is here, then, in the cause of tenderness and humanity, they may come forth, without charge of presumption, or forfeiture of delicacy. Exertions here may be universal, without rivalry or impropriety; the head may work, the hand may labour; the heart may suggest, indiscriminately in all, in men without disdain, in women without a blush: and however truly of the latter to withdraw from notice may be in general the first praise, in a service such as this, they may with yet more dignity come forward: for it is here that their purest principles, in union with their softest feelings, may blend immediate gratification with the most solemn future hopes.—And it is here, in full persuasion of sympathy as well as of pardon, that the Author of these lines ventures to offer to her countrywomen a short exhortation in favour of the emigrant French Clergy.

BRIEF
REFLEXIONS
RELATIVE TO THE
EMIGRANT FRENCH CLERGY.

THE astonishing period of political history upon which our days have fallen, robs all former times of wonder, wearies expectation, sickens even hope! while the occurrences of every passing minute have such prevalence over our minds, that public affairs assume the interest of private feelings, affect domestic peace, and occupy not merely the most retired part of mankind, but even mothers, wives, and children with solicitude irresistible.

Yet the amazement which has been excited, though stupendous, though terrific, by the general events that in our neighbour kingdom have convulsed all order, and annihilated tranquility, is feeble, is almost null, compared with that produced by the living contrast of virtue and of guilt exhibited in the natives of one and the same country; virtue, the purest and most disinterested, emanating from the first best cause, religion; and guilt, too heinous for any idea to which we have hitherto given definition.

The emigrant FRENCH CLERGY, who present us with the bright side of this picture, are fast verging to a situation of the most necessitous distress; and, notwithstanding the generous collections repeatedly raised, and the severest œconomy unremittingly exercised in their distribution, if something further is not quickly obtained, all that has been done will prove of no avail, and they must soon end their hapless career, not by paying the debt of nature, but by famine.

That the kingdom at large, in its legislative capacity, will ere long take into consideration a more permanent provision for these pious fugitives, there is every reason to infer from the national interest, which has universally been

displayed in their cause. To preserve them in the mean time is the object of present application.

So much has already so bountifully been bestowed in large donations, that it seems wanting in modesty, if not in equity, to make further immediate demands upon heads of houses, and masters of families.

Which way, then, may these destitute wanderers turn for help? To their own country they cannot go back; it is still in the same state of lawless iniquity which drove them from it, still under the tyrannic sway of the sanguinary despots of the Convention.

What then remains? Must their dreadful hardships, their meek endurance, their violated rights, terminate in the death of hunger?

No! there is yet a resource; a resource against which neither modesty nor equity plead; a resource which, on the contrary, has every moral propensity, every divine obligation, in its favour: this resource is FEMALE BENEFICENCE.

Already a considerable number of Ladies have stepped forward for this Christian purpose. Their plan has been printed and dispersed. It speaks equally to the heart and to the understanding; it points out wretchedness which we cannot dispute, and methods for relief of which we cannot deny the feasibility.

The Ladies who have instituted this scheme desire not to be named; and those who are the principal agents for putting it in execution, join in the same wish. Such delicacy is too respectable to be opposed, and ostentation is unnecessary to promulgate what modest silence may recommend to higher purposes. There are other records than those of newspapers, and lists of subscribers; records in which to see one fair action, one virtuous exertion, one self-denying sacrifice entered, may bring to its author, *that peace which the world cannot give*, and a joy more refined than even the praise of the worthy.

Such names, nevertheless, will ultimately be sought, for what now is benevolence will in future become honour; and female tradition will not fail to hand down to posterity the formers and protectresses of a plan which, if successful, will exalt for ever the female annals of Great Britain.

The minutest scrutinizer into the rights of charity cannot here start one objection that a little consideration will not supersede. No votaries of pleasure, ruined by extravagance and luxury, forfeit pity in censure by imploring your assistance; no slaves of idleness, no dupes of ambition, invite reproof for neglected concerns in soliciting your liberality. The objects of this petition are reduced, indeed, from affluence to penury, but the change has been wrought through the exaltation of their souls, not through the depravity of their conduct. Whatever may be their calls upon our tenderness, their claims, to every thinking mind, are still higher to our admiration. Driven from house and home, despoiled of dignities and honours, abandoned to the seas for mercy, to chance for support, many old, some infirm, all impoverished? with mental strength alone allowed them for coping with such an aggregate of evil! Weigh, weigh but a moment their merits and their sufferings, and what will not be sooner renounced than the gratification of serving so much excellence. It is to *itself* the liberal heart does justice in doing justice to the oppressed; they are its own happiest feelings which it nourishes, in nourishing the unfortunate.

By addressing myself to females, I am far from inferring that charity is exclusively their praise; no, it is a virtue as manly as it is gentle; it is christian, in one word, and ought therefore to be universal. But the pressure of present need is so urgent, that the ladies who patronize this plan are content to spread it amongst their own sex, whose contributions, though smaller, may more conveniently be sudden, and whose demands for wealth being less serious, may render those contributions more general^[1].

Nor are the misfortunes we would now mitigate so foreign to our "business and bosoms" as we may lightly suppose: all Europe is involved by the circumstances which occasioned them, and with indignation as strong, though with sensations less acute, has watched their wonderful progress^[2].

Whatever by unbelievers may be urged in defence of what they style the *religion of nature*, its inefficacy, even for the exclusive purposes of morality, is now surely exposed beyond all theory or controversy: and the *religion of God* has received a testimony as clear of its *moral* influence, by the atrocious acts of the Convention since it has been cast aside, as of its *divine*, in the voluntary

sacrifices offered up at its shrine by those who still adhere to its holy doctrines.

And shall we, with our arms, our treasures, our dearest blood, resist the authors of these wrongs, yet forbear to protect their victims?

All ages have furnished examples of individuals who have been distinguished from their contemporaries by actions of Heroism: but to find a similar instance of a whole body of men, thus repelling every allurements of protection and preferment, of home, country, friends, fortune, possessions, for the still calls of piety, and private dictates of conscience, precedent may be defied, and the annals of virtue explored in vain.

Shall we deem it a misfortune to be burthened with beings such as these? No; let us, more justly, conclude it a blessing. Prosperity is apt to be forgetful, to confound what it possesses with what it deserves; but the claims we here feel to give, awaken us to remember the abundance we have received.

Thankfully, and not disdainfully, let us bow down to an admonition thus mildly instilled through the medium of borrowed experience. What a contrast to the terrible lesson given to the distracted country which offers it! where both crimes and afflictions are of such enormous magnitude, as to engross the whole civilized earth between resentment and compassion!

Already we look back on the past as on a dream, too wild in its horrors, too unnatural in its cruelties, too abrupt in its succession of terrors, even for the exaggerating pencil of the most eccentric and gloomy imagination; surpassing whatever has been heard, read, or thought; and admitting no similitude but to the feverish visions of delirium! so marvellous in fertility of incident, so improbable in excess of calamity, so monstrous in impunity of guilt! the witches of Shakespeare are less wanton in absurdity, and the demons of Milton less horrible in denunciations.

Of the present nothing can be said but, *what is it?*—It is gone while I write the question.

The future—the consequences—what judgment can pervade? The scenery is so dark, we fear to look forward. Experience offers no direction, observation no

clue; the mystery is as impervious, the obscurity as tremendous, as that we would vainly penetrate for our destinies in the world to come. Ah! might the veil but drop to clearness as refulgent!

Let us not, however, destroy the rectitude of our horror of these enormities, by mingling it with implacable prejudice; nor condemn the oppressed with the oppressor, the slaughtered with the assassin. Are we not all the creatures of one Creator? Does not the same sun give us warmth? And will not *the days of the years of our pilgrimage* be as short as theirs? It is an offence to Religion, an injury to Providence, to suppose That vast tract of land wholly seized by evil spirits; though licentiousness, rapacity, ambition, and irreligion have given rulers to it, of late, abhorrent to all humanity.

We are too apt to consider ourselves rather as a distinct race of beings, than as merely the emulous inhabitants of rival states; but ere our detestation leads to the indiscriminate proscription of a whole people, let us look at the Emigrant French Clergy, and ask where is the Englishman, where, indeed, the human being, in whom a sense of right can more disinterestedly have been demonstrated, or more nobly predominate? O let us be brethren with the good, wheresoever they may arise! and let us resist the culpable, whether abroad or at home.

The world, in all its varied stores of good, contains nothing that can vie with Philanthropy—that soft *milk of human kindness*, that benign spirit of social harmony, that genuine emblem of practical Religion! seeking some extenuation from goodness even amongst the fallen, accepting some apology from temptation even amongst the sinful; lenient in its judgments, conciliating in its awards, forgiving in its wrath! and receiving in bosom-serenity all the solace it humanely expands.

But while to the individual we talk of alms, and plead distress, sickness, infirmity; to the community we may be bolder, juster, firmer, and talk of duties.

Flourishing and happy ourselves, shall we see cast upon our coasts virtue we scarce thought mortal, sufferers whose story we could not read without tears, martyrs that remind us of other days—and let them perish? Behold age unhonoured, disease unattended, strangers unfed? and not till they are no more,

till the compassionating hand of Death has closed their miseries, learn to do them justice? *then*, when we can only lament,—not *now*, when we may also succour? Is it to that period we must wait to enquire, to exclaim "How came they to this pass?"

Anticipate the answer, anticipate the historians of times to come: will they not say, "These holy men, who died for want of bread, were Priests of the Christian Religion. They had committed no sin, they had offended against no law: they refused to take an oath which their consciences disapproved; their piety banished them from their country; and the land in which they sought refuge received, admired, relieved—neglected, forgot, and finally permitted them to starve!

"And what was this land? some wild, uncultivated spot, where yet no arts had flourished, no civilization been spread, no benefits reciprocated? no religion known? Where novelty was the only passport, and where kindness was the short-lived offspring of curiosity? Unhappy men! to have struck on such inhospitable shores, amidst a race so unapprized of all social, all relative ties, as to confer favours only where they may be expected in return, unconscious, or unreflecting that every unoffending man is a brother!

"Or—were they thrown on some bleak northern strand, where life is mere existence, where the genial board has never welcomed the wearied traveller, where freezing cold benumbs even the soft affections of the heart, and where, from the first great law of self-preservation, compassion is monopolized by internal penury and want? Ill-fated passengers! it was not here, in the chill atmosphere of personal misery, your woes should have sought redress; the commiseration which is your due can only be conceived by those who have known the height from which ye have fallen, who have enjoyed the same affluence, and blessed Heaven for similar peace and joy—"

But no; this, at least, has not been their doom—nor will this, I trust, be their fate. No land of barbarians has been insensible to their worth, no ruthless region of the north has blighted sensibility for their misfortunes from ignorance of milder life: the land to which they sailed was Great Britain; in the fulness of its felicity, in the meridian of its glory, not more celebrated for arts and arms, than beloved for indulgent benevolence, and admired for munificence of liberality.

Here, then, ye reverend fathers, blest at least in the choice of your asylum, here rest your weary limbs, *till the wicked cease from troubling!* secure of the kindest, and, when once your exigency is known, the most effectual succour. Calm, therefore, your harrassed spirits, repose your shattered frames, look around you with fearless reliance; you will see a friend in every beholder, you will find a sympathizer in every auditor.

It ought also, to be remembered, that though the money now gathered will be paid into foreign hands, it is wholly among ourselves it will be expended; it is all and entirely our own by immediate circulation.

Yet—were it not—what is it but a refined species of usury? a hoard lodged beyond all reach of bankruptcy? a store for futurity? exempt from the numerous losses and disappointments of those who mistake the blessing of wealth to consist in its power of selfish appropriation?

Whoever bestows, whether promptly from impulse, or maturely from principle, will alike be content with the recompence of doing good: but in justice, in delicacy to the uncommon objects of this unexampled contribution, we should suggest what cannot fail to pass in their own minds, and anticipate what we cannot doubt will be the result of their restored powers: that those who survive the anarchy by which they are desolated, who live to see their country rescued from its present despotic tyrants, will still be strangers to repose, even at the natal home for which now every earthly sigh is heard, till, with their restituted property, they have cleared their dignity of character from every possible aspersion of calumny, and returned—not to their benefactors—whose accounts, far more nobly, will be settled elsewhere!——but to the poor of the kingdom at large, that bounty which has sustained them in banishment and woe.

Who is there that can look forward without emotion to the period of their recal and departure? With what blessings and what prayers will their hearts overflow! "Farewell, they will cry, ye friends of the unhappy! ye protectors of the houseless! ye generous rich, who thus benignly have worked for us! Ye patient poor who thus unrepiningly have seen us supported! Blest be your kingdom! Long live your virtuous sovereign? Be heavenly peace your portion! and never may ye know the sorrows of national divisions!"

Yet, to many it may appear, that where so much has been done, nothing more can be required. This is rather a mistake from failure in reflexion than in benevolence. To such, it is sufficient to ask, "Why gave ye at all?"

The answer is obvious; to save a distressed herd of fellow-creatures from want.

And are they less worth saving now, their helplessness, unhappily, being the same? Was the novelty of their appearance and situation a plea more forcible than acquaintance with their merits? than the view of their harmless lives, their inoffensive manners, their patient resignation to the evils of their lot?

But—*are we to give, ye cry, for ever?*

Ah! rather, and for more generously, reverse the question, and, in *their* names exclaim, "Must we *receive* for ever? will the epoch never arrive when our injuries may be redressed, and our sufferings allowed the soft recompence of manifesting our gratitude?"

O happy donors! compare but thus your subjects for murmuring with the feelings of your receivers! and do not, because ye see them, bowed down by adversity, thus lowly grateful for the pittance that grants them bread and covering, imagine them so unlike the human race to which they belong, that sometimes, in bitterness of spirit, they can forbear the piercing recollection of better days; days, when beneficence flourished from their own deeds, when anguish and poverty were relieved by their own hands!

Still a little nearer let us bring reflexion home, and entreat those who having done much, would do no more, to suppose themselves, for a moment only, placed in *l'Eglise des Carmes*, in Paris, on the 2d of September, 1792, in full sight of the hapless assemblage of this pious fraternity, who there sought sanctuary—not for the crimes they had committed, but for the duty they had discharged to their consciences, not from just punishment of guilt, but from fury against innocence.

Here, then, behold these venerable men, collected in a body, enclosed within walls dedicated to holy offices, bewailing the flagitious actions of their country-

men, yet devout, composed, earnest in prayer, and incorruptible in purity.

Now, then, in mental retrospection, witness the unheard-of massacre that ensued! Behold the ruffians that invade the sacred abode, each bearing in his hand some exterminating weapon; in his eye, a more than fiend-like ferocity. Can it be you they seek, ye men of peace? unarmed, defenceless, and sanctuarised within the precincts of your own religious functions!——Incredible!——

Alas, no!—behold them reviled—chaced—assaulted. They demand their offence? They are answered by staves and pikes. They fly to the altar—to that altar where, so lately, salvation seemed to hang upon their benediction.—

Here, at least, are they not safe? At this sanctified spot will not some reverence revive? some devotion rekindle? Will not the fell instruments of destruction fall guiltless from the shaking hands of their contrite pursuers? Will not remorse seize their inmost souls, and vibrate through the hallowed habitation, in one universal cry of, "O men of God! live yet—so forgive—and pray for us!"—Ah, deadly shame! indelible disgrace! not here, not even here, could compunction or humanity find a friend—

"Would not those white hairs move pity?"—

No!—the murderers dart after them: the pious suppliants kneel—but they rise no more! They pray—and their prayers ascend to heaven, unheard on earth! Groans resound through the vaulted roof—Mangled carcasses strew the consecrated ground—derided, while wounded; insulted, while slaughtered—they are cleft in twain—their savage destroyers joy in their cries——Blood, agony, and death close the fatal scene!

And ye, O ye who hear it, revere the immortal faith that, proof against this consummate barbarity, preferred its most baneful rage, to uttering one deviating word! And then, while your hearts bleed fresh with sympathy, will ye not call out, "O could they have been rescued! had pitying Heaven but spared the final blow, and, snatching them from their dread assassins, cast them, despoiled, forlorn, friendless, on this our happy isle, with what transport would we have welcomed and cherished them! sought balm for their lacerated hearts, and

studied to have alleviated their exile, by giving to it every character of a second and endearing home. Our nation would have been honoured by affording refuge to such perfection; every family would have been blessed with whom such pilgrims associated; our domestics would have vied with each other to shew them kindness and respect; our poor would have contributed their mite to assist them; our children would have relinquished some enjoyment to have fed them!"

Let not reflection stop here, nor this merciful regret be unavailing: extend it a little farther, and mark the question to which it leads: can ye, wish this for those who are gone, and not practice it for those who remain? Sufferers in the same cause, bred in the same faith, and firm in the same principles; the banished men now amongst us would have shared a similar fate, if seized upon the same spot. Venerate them, then, O Christians of every denomination, as the representatives of those who have been slain; and let the same generous feeling which would call to life those murdered martyrs, protect their yet existing brethren, and save them, at every risk, and by every exertion, from an end as painful and more lingering; as unnatural, though less violent.

Come forth, then, O ye Females, blest with affluence! spare from your luxuries, diminish from your pleasures, solicit with your best powers; and hold in heart and mind that, when the awful hour of your own dissolution arrives, the wide-opening portals of heaven may present to your view these venerable sires, as the precursors of your admission.

FINIS.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] The females of that miserable country whence these meritorious outcasts are driven, had the happiness, in former and better times, of exercising a charity as decisive for life or death as that which the females of Great Britain are now conjured to perform. St. Vincent de Paule, *aumonier général des galeres*, to whom France owes the chief of its humane establishments, instituted amongst the rest, the Foundling Hospital of Paris. His fund for its endowment failing, after repeated remonstrances for further general alms, which though not unsuccessful, proved insufficient, he gathered together a congregation of females, before whom he presented the innocent little objects of his prayers. His address to them was at once simple and sublime: "I call not upon you, he cried, as Christians, nor even as fellow creatures; I call upon you solely

and singly to pronounce sentence as judges. To the largesses you have already bestowed, these orphans owe their natural existence: but those largesses are exhausted, and without a further supply, their existence is at an end. You are their judges—pronounce, then, their fate; do you ordain them to live? do you doom them to die?"

[2] 5000 French ecclesiastics *live* in Switzerland, 4000 in the ecclesiastical State, 15,000 in Spain, more than 20,000 in Germany, Holland, and the Austrian Netherlands; and shall 6000 be suffered to *die* in England?

N.B. A Translation of this Tract is preparing for the press by M. D'ARBLAY.

PLANS and ADVERTISEMENTS, proposed to the LADIES OF GREAT BRITAIN for the relief of the Emigrant French Clergy, may be had at the Publisher's.

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