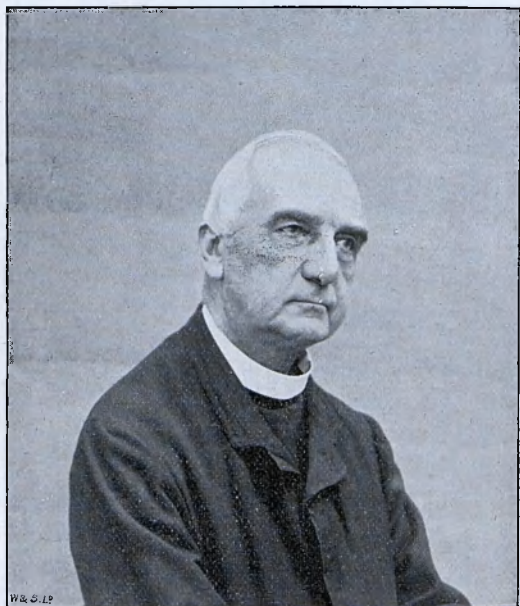


FATHER JOHN MORRIS.

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FATHER JOHN MORRIS, S.J.

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BY THE

REV. RICHARD F. CLARKE, S.J.

Frederick

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Father John Morris,

"ONE generation passeth away and another generation cometh." These words of the Wise Man seem to be but a truism, but they have a very real and a very sorrowful significance to us when we see those who have been our friends, our guides, our counsellors, pass away and leave us in our loneliness. Somehow, as life advances, their loss is for the most part not that of single individuals. They seem to depart from us not so much one by one, when each loss might be compensated by the presence of those who still remain, but in such quick succession that there appears to be a sort of strange conspiracy among them which leaves us no breathing-time to recover from our sorrow before it is renewed by missing another familiar face from the circle of those we love. So has it been of late with the English Province of the Society of Jesus. One generation of veterans is quickly passing onward, of which but few are now left to remind us that they belong to a little company of noble souls of whom the greater number have already gone to their reward. We have scarce recovered from the loss of Fathers Christie and Coleridge and Tickell and Jones and Harper, when a fresh blow falls upon us in the death of Father Wynne, an ideal of the English Christian gentleman, chivalrous, stalwart, large-hearted, generous, ready to

sacrifice all that was dearest to him when conscience bid him ; to quit the home of his youth and the College Fellowship which held out sweet prospects of a life of cultured luxury and gentleman-like ease. And among those who lived in close contact with him after he had entered the Society of Jesus, who is there who will not remember Father Wynne with hearty affection and fond regret ?

Yet this was but the harbinger of a fresh sorrow. Another of those who fought in the front ranks has left in desolation and bereavement a large circle both within and without the religious body to which he belonged. The sudden death of Father Morris has been a severe blow to all members, both high and low, of the Catholic Church in England. He was well known and greatly respected, both within and without it, for his remarkable historical knowledge, his wonderful faculty of persevering intellectual labour, his vast store of accurate and varied information, his intimate knowledge of all that related to the ritual and ceremonies of the Church, and his clear and attractive literary style. If he was respected for his intellectual gifts, he was loved, and fondly loved, for his noble moral nature. He had an extraordinary gift of counsel, that made him the trusted adviser of all who knew him. His single-minded devotion to his friends and unswerving loyalty to them, his tender-hearted gentleness and kindness, and above all, his unaffected humility, and his loyal and unquestioning obedience to all those in authority, were also signal features in his character. Of all his virtues, this last was perhaps the most pronounced. Father Morris had a very intense military spirit. He

was a soldier by nature, and he rejoiced—we might almost say revelled—in the military spirit of blind obedience that the Society of Jesus inculcates in her sons. He was naturally a very strong man with a very strong will and a very keen intellect, and this strength exhibited itself in all its chastened intensity in his life in the Society. He was a living proof that so far from Jesuit obedience involving any slavish subserviency or destroying the force and individuality of the character of those who practise it, it is found most perfect and in its fullest development in the strong and not in the weak, in the man of intellectual force, not of intellectual feebleness, in the determined and resolute, not in those easily led and of a naturally pliant will.

It was impossible for any one to be for even a short time in Father Morris' company without being impressed by his strength. His words were listened to instinctively by all who heard them, and always carried weight even with those who held a different opinion from his own. His acuteness and incisive power were no less remarkable than his strength. He was as sharp as a needle in seeing the general bearing of any question submitted to him. No one ever advanced more rapidly from premiss to conclusion, or gathered up the threads of an argument with greater quickness. Yet his rapid inferences were never hurried, and he simply worked out in a few moments what required a long process of thought in the slower intelligences of ordinary men. This mental speed was helped not a little by the astonishing readiness and accuracy of his memory. He never forgot anything, and, unlike most men of

abnormal retentive power, was able to give to each fact its due importance, and to see the relation between the vast assemblage of details that were ever ready to present themselves just as he needed them in his mental field of vision. A striking instance of his keen insight into difficult questions occurred while he was Professor at St. Beuno's. In one of the cases of conscience which have to be solved by the students there, the solution turned on some very nice point connected with the privileges granted to a certain convent of nuns. When the solutions had been read, the president of the case gave his decision in a speech that carried with it all present. It was well argued and a fine piece of rhetoric, and the grounds given for his opinion seemed unassailable. The next day Father Morris, who had been present, gave his usual lecture on the points that had been raised the previous day. One by one he gently but most unequivocally disposed of each and all of the reasons given for the solution, and before his lecture was over had completely reversed, by arguments quite indisputable, and to the satisfaction of every member of his class, the conclusion that had been arrived at.

But in the order of nature Father Morris' intellectual power and great moral gifts were only the setting that rendered more brilliant his supernatural virtue and the moral beauty of his character. He invariably threw himself with all his force on the side of authority in any question that presented itself. This was especially striking on account of his singular independence of mind and the jealous care with which he always defended the rights of the individual to his

own opinion where there was no utterance of the Church that was clearly infallible. He hated minimizing, and used to dwell with great earnestness on the mistaken policy of "paring down" the doctrines of the Church for the sake of rendering the acceptance of her teaching more easy to those who are weak in faith. He was a perfect instance, so far as anything human can be perfect, of the just proportions with which a fearless independence of thought, and liberty of opinion in things doubtful, can be united with a resolute spirit of obedience, a most intense and unfaltering personal loyalty to those who speak in the name of God, and with the most absolute submission of the individual judgment whenever there are present undoubted marks of the infallible voice of the Catholic Church speaking through her appointed representatives.

In spite of all his gifts, never was there a man of greater simplicity, or one more humble and unpretending. He was always ready, amid the press of the most important business, to find time for any one who desired to consult him, and the gentleness and patience with which he listened to those in trouble and perplexity, have healed the wounds and assuaged the sorrows of many a heart that was well-nigh broken. He was wonderfully considerate, and in his tender sympathy made the troubles of others his own, and seemed to identify himself with them even while they were conscious all the time that he was for them a strong support, firm as a rock, on whom they could implicitly rely. He had a great dread of being feared, and used to regret a certain sternness of

exterior that made the superficial looker-on think that he was severe. For he was the very reverse of severe, the gentlest and the kindest of men, and most gentle and kind to those who knew him best.

This was one of the most remarkable traits of Father Morris' character, and is the highest praise that can be bestowed on any one, that it was his intimates, those who were brought into the closest and nearest connection with him day by day, who loved and esteemed him the most. Most men reveal to the members of their own community certain weaknesses and pettinesses hidden from the outer world. Not so Father Morris. He could bear close inspection, and such inspection only discovered fresh virtues. He was always the same. He was remarkably exempt from the mere changes and variations to which even the best men are subject. No need to study time and place to obtain from him what you desired. Morning, noon, or night, when he was well or when he was ailing, when he was full of business or when comparatively at leisure, there was the same firm, friendly, reliable, constant kindness, the same flow of interesting, edifying, charitable conversation, the same readiness to help, the same humble acceptance of any suggestion from those who were obviously and confessedly his inferiors, the same just, equable, fair-judging, keen-sighted appreciation of all that was interesting and important in the world around.

Of his inner life we cannot attempt to speak in a slight sketch like this. Happily there remain notes, sermons, retreats, lights in prayer, which give us some little insight into the beautiful soul from

whence they sprang. But they are scarcely needed ; for an exterior so constantly edifying as his, was of necessity the product of an interior holiness of very high type. It was impossible for any one to hold confidential converse with him without having his tone and standard raised thereby. There was such a continual element of the supernatural underlying and running through his ordinary talk—not outwardly expressed, but present none the less ; not put forward, but all the more influential because kept in the background.

But while he raised the tone of all, he had a special gift of leading on to perfection holy souls who desired to devote themselves wholly to the higher service of their Lord. How many good Religious who owe their vocations to him will thank him in Heaven to all eternity ! How many are indebted to him for having led them on to a sanctity to which they would never have attained without him ! How many both in the cloister and in the world has he rebuked, exhorted, warned, encouraged, with such a prudent judgment and such a clear perception of their needs, that from their first experience of his guidance and his unwearied kindness and wise counsel they became his faithful and devoted friends for ever ! And of these faithful and devoted friends he had many indeed. It would be difficult to find a man in England who has left behind him, I do not say more friends, but more who felt and will feel all their lives through, that they owe him a debt of gratitude that they can never repay, that he has built up the life of their souls as only a master builder could build it, and

has raised them nearer to Heaven with the powerful hand of one who himself lived near to God and drew from Him that supernatural strength which he was able to communicate to the souls of others.

Father Morris died, as he himself had always wished, in the midst of his work. The day before his death he had been busily engaged with the Life of Cardinal Wiseman, to which he had for some months past devoted himself almost exclusively. He was then apparently in excellent health; bright, active, cheerful, and full of energy. On Sunday morning he read out to two of the Fathers some notes of the sermon he had prepared for the eleven o'clock Mass, and afterwards paid a long-promised visit to the lay-brother in the kitchen, inquiring about the stove, the cooking, the domestic arrangements generally. He then went down to the church, taking for his text the words of our Lord from the Gospel, "Whose image and inscription is this?" His sermon was a most interesting one, full of fire and animation. He had finished a long introduction on the various parables and sayings of our Lord during the first three days of Holy Week. All the incidents were narrated with striking minuteness and precision, and in dealing with the story of the tribute-money he illustrated the relations of the Jews to the Romans from those of modern nationalities. He was just entering on the words by which our Lord baffled His crafty assailants, when he made a long pause, began again to repeat with great difficulty the words: "Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's," and then fell backward into the arms of one of the congregation

who had hastened up the pulpit steps to his assistance. He was carried into the sacristy, but by the time that he was laid on the floor he was quite dead.

The death of Father Morris has left a blank in many a heart, a gap that never can be filled. He possessed that gift which belongs more specially to men of personal holiness: the gift of dealing with each as if that individual was his greatest friend on earth. In this there was no unreality, no effort to show a friendliness he did not feel. His was the supernatural friendliness of one who regarded all as representatives of our Lord, and worthy of being so treated. One of the many beauties of his character was the power that he possessed of thus idealizing his friends. He honoured them each and all so highly, and loved to praise and exalt them in their absence. Many indeed there are who, as they stood at his grave or read the news of his death, cried out in their hearts, with the writer of this little notice,—O truest, and kindest, and most loyal of friends, powerful in word and work, prudent and patient counsellor, model priest and exemplary Religious: “how art thou numbered among the children of God, and thy lot is among the saints!”



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