

Aunt Jane started and shivered as with an ague. She was fearful of a caller at that hour, and a feeling of dread made her blood grow cold. Hastening into the entry, she demanded :

'Who's there?'

'It is I,' answered a woman's voice faintly.

'It's some poor creature in distress,' said Aunt Jean.

She hesitated no longer, but, turning the key in the lock, drew back the bolt and opened the door. An icy breeze swept in, and the moonlight streamed for a space on the hall carpet.

A thin, wan, haggard, middle-aged woman staggered in. She looked as if trouble or sickness had broken down her beauty and made her prematurely aged. She seemed fitter for bed than to be out on such a night.

'Please let me in for a moment!' she pleaded. 'It is bitterly cold out here.'

Aunt Jean closed the door and led the way into the dining room. There she bustled about and set a second place at the waiting table. The kettle was singing merrily and the aroma of the tea in the pot filled the room with a mild fragrance.

'To think of your being out so late!' Aunt Jean murmured sympathetically, with a hint of woman's curiosity, as the stranger tremblingly took a seat at the table in a way that threw her face into shade. 'Have you come far?' she added presently.

'A long, long way,' answered the woman; 'and a longer way lies yet before me.'

'Poor thing! I'm sorry for you. I'll have you some tea in a minute. Must you go on to-night?'

'Yes, without fail.'

'Fortunately, the station is not far from here,' said Aunt Jean, with a tone of interrogation.

'I did not come by train, and I'll not go by train,' was the reply.

'Well, sit here and have some tea. I'll have you some toast and a poached egg in two seconds.'

The stranger drew closer to the table, saying in a low voice that thrilled the listener :

'Thank you!—I do not need food. I can stay but a moment, and shall trespass no further on your hospitality.'

Aunt Jean sat on the other side of the table and drew her own steaming cup toward her. She was glad of company and began to talk, rattling on about the weather and Christmas and everything else. Something about her guest disposed her to awe; but a stronger influence—a magnetic wave of good-will—seemed to hearten her with a sense of consolation.

With the singing of the kettle, the ticking of the clock, and the chatter of Aunt Jean, the little room waxed cheery. The lamp shone brighter and the stove threw out more heat. The stranger looked around the apartment with an air of puzzled familiarity, and when her eyes lighted on the little Christmas-tree she smiled.

The hands of the clock were almost on the stroke of midnight.

'I must go now,' she said, getting up. 'I have a message for you.'

Aunt Jean stared with frightened eyes.

'One whom you once loved,' went on the woman, gliding rather than walking toward the door, 'and whom I see you still remember with affection, has at last come back to God.'

The room swam before Aunt Jean, and through the haze she seemed to recognise in the face of the stranger the unforgotten lineaments of her young niece. She tried to call out 'Deborah!' but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She was beginning to swoon, when the door opened and the figure passed out into the night. With an effort of the will she kept her senses, and, struggling to her feet, tottered to the door. There was no one to be seen. She peered up and down, but the untrodden snow showed no footprints.

The clock struck twelve, and from the neighbouring church steeple the chimes began the anthem :

'Glory be to God in the highest,

And on earth peace to men of good-will!'

Aunt Jean shivered. She hurriedly closed the door and went in. As soon as she regained her chair she fainted away. It was half-past four o'clock before she came to herself. The lamp still shone bright and the fire glowed in the stove. She could not recall at first what had happened. Had she fallen asleep in her chair? It all came back upon her like a flash. She shuddered with awe at the memory of it. Then she arose, went to the door, and looked out. The pavements were covered with unspotted snow.

'Who was that woman?' Aunt Jean asked herself. 'Could it have been Deborah's self?'

A strange peace filled the old lady's heart. She got on her knees to give thanks for what she felt was the good news of her niece's conversion. Then she vividly recalled the words, 'If ever I come back to God, I'll come back to you!' If Deborah were still living, where was she? That probably would be learned in due time.

And Christmas for Aunt Jean was no longer sad. Whether dream or vision, the hope of Deborah's reconciliation with God was in her heart. She was grateful for the comfort that it gave her.

As she arose from her knees, thinking to go to the five o'clock Mass, the door bell rang. A messenger handed her a telegram. It was signed by Deborah's husband, and ran thus :

'Deborah died to-night near midnight. We were coming back for good from Apia, expecting to give you a surprise by spending Christmas with you, for whose love she pined ever since her marriage. A priest was on the train, going to a sick call, when the hemorrhage came upon her. He ministered to her. She died in peace,—yes, with radiant joy; hoping to find mercy, begging your forgiveness and blessing God.'

'May the Lord be praised! May God have mercy on her even as she hoped!' murmured Aunt Jean ecstatically. 'It's a sad and happy Christmas for me. The telegram explains it. But did I dream it or did I see it? Could it have been Deborah's self?'—'Ave Maria.'

## THE CONVERTS' CHRISTMAS

The first Christmas kept by converts to the Catholic Church has always been among the most memorable of their new experiences; as such they have spoken of it to friends again and again. Yet the record has hardly managed to get into print, probably because Christmas is too busy a season to afford much time for letter-writing, or for notes in diaries. Such glimpses as we can get of Manning, Newman, and Faber on their first Christmas days as Catholics are interesting if only from their marvellous variety.

Newman, who was received into the Church in October, 1845, remained in his 'monastery' at Littlemore for his Christmas under the new conditions. For Mass he went to Oxford, by a road through the fields which least exposed him and his fellow neophytes to the eye of a public that was not only curious, but actually censorious. There is a fine church in Oxford now, and it has Jesuits to serve it. But the old St. Clement's had insufficiencies that moved the most serious of neophytes to laughter—as when the announcement was made from the altar: 'Confessions will be heard next Sunday afternoon in the arbor.' Newman did not then divine his future. He was writing to Cardinal Wiseman: 'Did your Eminence know me you would see that I was one about whom there has been far more talk for good and bad than he deserves, and about whose movements far more expectation than the event will justify.' To others he was writing: 'You may think how lonely I am!' Before two years were over he was ordained a priest at Rome; and it was on Christmas Eve in 1847 that he first set foot in England in that capacity.

Faber, received into the Church in the same year, 1845, spent his first Catholic Christmas in a little house, No. 77 Carolina street, Birmingham. 'A little hovel,' he called it, into which he gathered 'my dear monks,' the young men who had followed him to Rome. The English Christmas is the time for feasting. But Faber, a layman, like the rest, was writing at that time: 'How are we to be supported I do not know. Mutual love is next door to victuals and drink, and it is some comfort to me that I shall be simply on a level with them, and live like a poor man.' A sketch of that first Christmas season of theirs comes as a rather welcome antidote to the display of fattened bees in every street. It is supplied by a visitor, Mr Hutchinson, afterwards to be one of Faber's fellow Fathers of the Oratory. 'Preparations for dinner,' he says, 'were going on. Faber was acting as cook, and, though terribly scorched by the fire, was perseveringly stirring a kettle full of pea-soup. I remember well the impression John Strickson (afterward Brother Chad) made on me. He wore a cassock of some very shaggy material, and he looked so gaunt and hungry that I thought him the beau-ideal of a wolf in sheep's clothing. The furniture of the house was very scanty. A benefactor had