

The Storyteller

A CHRISTMAS VISION.

THE young assistant organist, Cuthbert McBean came into Church at five o'clock on Christmas afternoon. The morning had been brilliant with winter sunlight; but later on, a heavy, dense mist, almost like rain, had gathered, so that the church, except for the great sanctuary lamp, and the starlight light at the Christmas crib, was very dark indeed. He made his way slowly up the familiar aisle. Not one child, not even the most devout and constant haunter of the sacred place, scarcely ever solitary, was there. He knelt, and he smiled a little all by himself, remembering what he had heard the old sacristan say, one night, when he was locking the crowd out after Vespers.

'How can you make us leave our Blessed Lord alone?' a girl, with heavenly eyes and an angel's voice, had asked him reproachfully. (She was safe and happy now, that Christmas Day, in a convent of Perpetual Adoration.)

'There's better than us with Him!' Brother Rodriguez had replied, ungrammatically but truly.

They were great friends, the venerable sacristan and the young musician. Few words ever passed between them; but, without words, they sufficiently understood each other's ways. The one would linger about the altar fondly, while the other's fingers strayed lovingly over the organ's stops and keys, and each was very well aware that what the other did was done most earnestly, with all the whole heart's best endeavor, for the Lord within the tabernacle, so dear to both.

Brother Rodriguez had his own very definite and certainly not unfounded theories in regard to sacred music. Not without fruit had he been the sacristan so many years in the grand church of the Gesu, and heard the music of composers who are the world's wonder and admiration, Sunday after Sunday, and least after feast. Not without much shrewd wisdom gained, had he endeavored to link the music with his prayers, and with the reverent spirit of Holy Church. He knew well why he liked that delicate young assistant, who always had to take the second place, and never wielded the baton as director of a Christmas or Easter orchestra, but who also never made the vaulted roof above one's aching head resound as if it would cleave asunder, and fall down upon the worshippers below, in the crash and clang of a triumphant military or operatic march.

Cuthbert McBean would sit as contentedly for hours practising, with nobody but the Brother to hear him, as if the church were crowded with all the musicians of the city. Often he played something that the Brother loved, simply to please him—Gounod's Sanctus, Chopin's Funeral March, soft chords of 'O Veni Jesu! Veni, Amor mi!' or the old Gregorian 'De Profundis.' And if, sometimes, under his skilled fingers, the notes of the tremendous 'Dies Irae' pealed forth like an archangelic trumpet, the Brother stoutly maintained that the touch of the master was in it, and that, under such firm, controlled touch, the roof could never fall till the time of the Master of all things should come!

'The lad up there plays the organ for the greater glory of God!' the Brother said to the Father Rector one day, when they met in the sacristy, and, unseen, heard Cuthbert playing as softly and as sweetly as though a Solemn High Mass were being sung by the best quartette in the city.

On this dark Christmas afternoon, at five o'clock, however, not even the

Brother sacristan was in the church, which was in itself a very unusual thing. Cuthbert McBean knelt by the crib awhile, watching the Christ-Child's holy face, the loving eyes of the Virgin Mother, the intent countenance of the faithful St. Joseph; even the minutest details, the quaint manger bed, the ox, the straw. All his earliest Christmas memories were linked with that Christmas crib; his childhood, his boyhood, his Communion, his prayers,—sweet thoughts that he could not tell, even to his mother, only to his organ; and there he often told them, for angel cars, that heard.

By and by, he left the crib, and knelt at the high altar. What marvellous stillness, what perfect peace, dwelt there! Here, really, was Jesus Christ. All the lad's sensitive nature felt that Divine Presence, that unearthly peace, the true Christmas peace. All the chivalrous loyalty within him sprang to greet it.

'There's better than we are here, I know,' he exclaimed, half aloud in the stillness. 'But the angels sang at the first Christmas, and there is no music here. Ah, dearest Lord! let me take the angels' part for them.'

Down the dark aisle he sped, and up the stairs, to his wonted place in the magnificent organ gallery that had been designed by one who ardently loved the Sacramental Lord; so wide that no singer had any excuse for not kneeling; and with the keyboard and bench so placed that the organist was always face to face with the tabernacle and the altar.

Cuthbert opened the organ and pulled out a stop or two, then he paused, to drink in again the inspiration of the scene. The light in the Christmas crib flared up for a moment, flickered, and died away. All the light then, in the immense edifice, came from the unique, massive lamp of solid brass, with its seven crimson cups, suspended from the lofty arch. The vaulted roof, like St. Peter's ship, turned downward, big-ribbed and high—the tall, painted windows—showed no sign of their gilded tracery or brilliant coloring; but, in their shadowy recesses, something seemed to sway softly, and to tremble, as if, indeed, in that Christmas twilight, more than man was there. The majestic marble altar, a mound of solid snow, rose in dim outline against the darkness of the wall behind it. The seven lamps, like the seven mystical gifts of that Divine Spirit, who breatheth where He will, touched, with faint roseate hue, cross or cornice or candlestick, here and there, uncertainly. The same roseate gleam rested, delicately clear and steadily, however, on the tabernacle door, as if well aware of the Divine Presence enshrined therein.

'I am all alone with Jesus Christ, on Christmas night,' the young musician thought rapturously.

In the darkness and the stillness, delicious music thrilled forth from beneath his fingers, as if his very heart were in them, and spoke to the Christ-Child's heart. He thought, rapturously, that he had never played so well before.

But, suddenly, in that darkness, without stir or sound of voice, or light of candle, it was to him as though a firm hand was laid gently on his fingers, and, in a moment, they and his heart itself stood still. Then—his soul heard that which man strives in vain to tell, for it is unspeakable, and he saw, with the soul's vision, that indeed the Lord had, with Him, those who are better than we.

By that same faculty, only a thousand times intensified, whereby he would have recognised his father or his friends, had they entered sudden-

ly, he perceived that the church was full of the guardian angels of all the dead who had ever loved and worshipped in that sacred place. Harp and viol and flute and lute were with them, made of some heavenly mechanism, and tuned to a harmony beyond the dream of earth. Baby voices mingled therein—the angel voices of the little ones who had been baptised and gone to heaven from the baptistry of the Gesu—and all were singing sweetly to the Babe of Bethlehem, the listening Lord on his altar throne.

Then other things took up the strain. Birdlike notes rang from the evergreens twined about pillar and window, notes full of a mysterious woodland melody, in which a trill of more wondrous ecstasy than lark's or nightingale's was blended, distinct and true. Window and roof and floor gave forth celestial harmonies. The flood of soundless song ran from fresco to fresco, from statue to statue. From station to station, all along the Way of the Cross, was heard the 'Stabat Mater,' far other than Rossini's; a canticle of gladdest joy, because the all-wise Lord had once allowed his Dearest to suffer with Him, and to share His woes; and now, with Him, she reigned.

Nearer the altar, over and over again, the sweetest acts of Eucharistic joy were rising; the unnumbered acts of faith and love and thanksgiving, after unnumbered Communion, never forgotten, but forever preserved in heavenly keeping by the Lord to Whom they were made.

'My Beloved to me and I to Him,' they sounded in delicious unison. 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo; et in terra pax, hominibus voluntatis!'

Cuthbert heard it all; and, as he had never done before, he understood the Benedicite. Outside the church a driving rain had taken the place of the dense fog. He heard its pelting drops and the violent gusts of wind, but they all were attuned to a grand orderly cadence, as they beat against window and wall and roof. He realised now to the full, for his soul heard it, that 'the showers and dews the clouds and darkness, the night and day, the fire and heat, the frost and cold, all green things, the mountains and hills, the whole earth, the spirits and the souls of the just,' on that holy night, 'blessed the Lord; praised and exalted, and gave Him thanks forever.'

Nothing was overlooked, nothing too small for notice. The all-seeing Lord was mindful of everyone who had ever there been mindful at all of Him. The precious bits of Mexican onyx, set in the high altar, were reaching in the strangest, loveliest way the stalwart mason's earnest words: 'When I had the privilege of setting those marbles in that altar I was all alone in this church until half-past eleven o'clock.' Once again, in delicious melody, the feet of happy children going to their First Communion, sounded along the aisles like joy-bells ringing, or like the voice of the Holy Innocents around the great white throne. Up and down with songs of special ecstasy, went the feet that had carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession, in Benediction, and in Communion for fifty years.

Each separate thing had its own voice and separate melody, clearly recognizable, and all were blended in such a harmonious chorus, full of such unearthly rapture, that the young organist in his highest musical delights had never so much as faintly dreamed such melody could possibly be. An intense longing that he might be permitted to take part in that heavenly chorus possessed his soul; yet he heard nothing that seemed to be his. All that he had ever known before of music appeared to him now as folly, and his own work like so many discords. A most painful sense of his unworthiness seized upon him. Then that firm, awe-inspiring, yet kindly touch of his chilled fingers passed off from them, and paused as if in blessing