

THE VISION—A LEGEND

Every civilized nation has its legends—stories that deal with varying phases of life. Sometimes the story is of a famous departed hero whose spirit is ready at all times to return and, with preternatural prowess, lord it over those who would rob his countrymen of their dues—as in Denmark, where 'tis said that Ogier, in time of need, "will shake off his slumbers and come forth from the land of Avalon to avenge the right."

Again, the tradition tends to inspire the people to be faithful to their religious duties. In France, for instance, it is believed that off the coast there was, age ago, an island on whose rolling hills flourished a village. Prominently situated in the village was a church, with its majestic, cross-crowned spire, and sonorous bell, which never failed to call the people to weekly prayer. But one day the village sank. The island, with all its inhabitants, submerged and was whelmed forever by the ruthless breakers of the deep. Ever since, there has been about the scene of its former thriving one vestige only of the island that was and is not. The legend says that while on calm days there is no such sound, yet whenever a storm rages and the waves beat with unusual fury, there can be heard above the wild din the feeble but unmistakable ringing of a bell—the church bell of the sunken city. The people on the mainland, hearing the mournful tones, are reminded that though their lives be busy and their labors heavy, they must still find time for humble adoration of their God.

But occasionally a country has a legend telling of how, in some lonely or hallowed place, an individual was favored by a visitant from the other world, who encouraged, instructed, entertained in a holy manner, or in some miraculous way communicated with the earthly sojourner regarding his subsequent life and its relation to his fellow men. It is such a legend that is related below. Neither the name of the country however, nor that of the religious house, nor the exact date of its events, has come down to us. The legend, as we have it, is as follows:

In the choir of the Convent of —, on the night of December 31st, of the year 186—, a novice, whom we may call Brother Thaddeus, was sitting silent and alone, communing with his Eucharistic God. Save for the rattle of an occasional vehicle without, the far-carrying screech of some distant, speeding loco-

motive, or the slow sighing of a dying gale that had blown for twenty hours, the convent chapel knew no sound. Except for the flickering sanctuary light which, though visible always from any point in the largest church illumines but weakly its little ambit as it hangs in darkness like a planet in space, the convent chapel had no light. The high altar, with its carved woodwork, was but dimly visible. The stained-glass windows, devotional by day, had long before grown grotesque and weird in the deepening twilight, and now hardly distinguishable from the wall, offered nothing of their accustomed aid to prayer. Still the novice prayed.

Moved by a romantic spirit, as well as by a desire to practise his favorite devotion, Brother Thaddeus had sought and obtained permission to await in choir the passing of the old year and the birth-hour of the new. So, adoring his Master, he was calmly and quietly expecting the epochal moment. The other members of the community had long ago retired, content to greet the ensuing year when its first day should be well advanced. Not Brother Thaddeus; he had resolved, and would abide by his resolution.

But a weary body means a weary brain. At last, while his drowsing mind rested now on things of God, now on the vicissitudes of life, that inexorable purpose which had kept him so long awake was forgotten, and, yielding to nature's needs, he fell asleep. He had not slept long when he became conscious of a figure approaching from the rear of the choir. It drew near slowly and quietly, and, having genuflected before the Tabernacle, took its place in the stall next to that occupied by the wondering novice. Neither spoke—the one too amazed for words, the other calm, but not yet disposed to express himself. Finally, the newcomer said:

"Think it not strange, friend, that at this unseemly hour you should be visited by one whom you believe you know not. We are not strangers. Your existence, your name and your doings are to me well known. I have watched and prayed for you during all the years of your religious life. When you received the habit you now wear, there was added one to my army of spiritual children, for I am none other than the humble Father and founder of the Order of your choice. Behold the same habit that clothes you, telling the world that you spurned it, the flesh that you conquered it, and the devil that you would not be en-

trapped through his insidious wiles—the same is mine. Mine it has been for hundreds of years. And for hundreds of years have I watched with anxious eye the toilings and triumphs, the reverses and victories, the tears and smiles, the sorrows and joys, that have marked the lives of those who, called by God to “leave father, mother, brother and sister,” have done so by entering the Order which I founded. It is given me to behold in full the deeds, great and small, and all the circumstances of my children’s lives, even unto death. Looking tonight from the tower-tops of my divinely prophetic vision, I see the priesthood as it comes to you, in all your human weakness and unworthiness, bringing to you its sublime dignity, its awful powers, its tremendous responsibilities; making you truly, in word and work, ‘another Christ’—raising you to that unearthly eminence through the love unspeakable of an all-wise, omnipotent God.

“I look again and see your imperial spirit, humbled and trembling as you kneel in adoration before a Host that has been transubstantiated by the mystic potency of your own simple words.

“I look again—and, behold! you are lifting aloft a chalice, within whose jewelled cup is the unseen crimson of the Precious Blood. For one short moment your mind goes back to a long-past scene in a distant place. But in that one moment you witness the sad First Act in the Sublime Tragedy, ‘Man Redeemed.’ You see Christ Jesus in Gethsemane as He prays: ‘Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me. But not My will but Thine be done.’ You then behold Him prone on the ground, and as He takes upon Himself the sins of all time, His revulsion of soul at the sight of the demons that surround Him is so great that Blood—the Blood in the chalice you hold—appears in every pore of His sacred flesh. All this you recall in an instant of time. But then, remembering that Our Lord’s anguish of spirit is now over forever, you calmly continue the august memorial of His Passion.

“I look again, and see you preaching the Word, ‘instant in season, out of season; reproving, entreating, rebuking in all patience and doctrine’; urging the impure to be chaste, the weary to be strong, arousing in all the fear and love of God, and proclaiming always and everywhere death’s certainty and life’s uncertainty.

“Yet again I scan the future, and even when the ‘silver of seventy years’ whitens your locks, you still go about ‘doing

good.' As long as the race endures there will be sorrow and strife, there will be motherless children, and widows who weep. Poverty, sickness, disease and death, the false friend, the unprincipled foe and every manner of misfortune and tribulation now known to the world will continue to be known until the end of time. But your kindly words conciliate friends who have quarrelled. The tired eyes of the orphan brighten, the wailings of the widow cease, the blighting ravages of war and perfidy are assuaged, while the distress of spirit incident to disease and death grows less as you preach the consolations of faith, show forth in your life the beauties of the Sermon on the Mount, and administer to all, the saving sacraments of the Church of God.

"The last scene of all, that the future gives me I shall not portray. I shall merely say, that when wrinkles mark your brow and age halts you step, thrice happy you will be if you can say: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.' Remember that 'he who shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved.' Thrice happy you will be if then you can go to your God in the tabernacle and say:

'Before thy mystic altar, heavenly truth,
I kneel in manhood as I knelt in youth.'

"I would urge you to

'Be strong for man is not here to drift.
He has hard work to do and loads to lift.
Shun not the struggle—face it,
'Tis God's gift.'"

The words of the speaker were peculiarly fascinating to the silent listener. More than once he asked himself if what he had heard was real or imaginary. He tried to decide whether or not he himself, on mind's mystic wings, had crossed the intervening void and was then conversing at heaven's gate with his saintly father in religion; or whether that father, from his beatific home, after assuming human form and earthly garb had traversed the cosmic chasms of space and was then actually speaking to him the beautiful words that seemed so real.

Perhaps Brother Thaddeus would have settled his doubts by question had he not the next moment awakened. It was only a vision; "but on his heart deeply had sunk a lesson that did not soon depart."

—Martin McDermott, O. P.