

THE ACCEPTABLE GIFT

(By M. E. Colman.)

The good curé was highly excited. He walked briskly along the village street, form erect, eyes flashing, a happy smile on his benevolent old face. Suddenly, as he turned a corner, he came upon a little knot of his people gathered about the doorway of a house slightly larger than the others. From within came the sound of wild weeping and lamenting. All made way for the curé as he hurried to the door:

"What is the matter, my children; what is the matter?"

A dozen voices answered, and above them all rose the shrill wail of Mère Lenoir:

"My little one, my daughter, my daughter well beloved."

The priest raised his hand and sternly demanded silence.

"You, Lenoir, tell me what has happened."

Marc Lenoir had been standing, sullen and silent, beside his wife, but at the priest's question he looked up and spoke hoarsely:

"It is Jeanette. She is gone. You remember the gay Seigneur who passed through here last summer? He chuckled the girl under the chin, told her some nonsense about her hair being like sunshine on the grapes, kissed her and went his way, laughing. But she did not forget. May God not forget him in the day of vengeance! He came again, and I forbade Jeanette to leave the house. They told me she met him beyond the village, so I locked her in her room. This morning she was gone. The window was open, there are hoof-marks on the sod beneath it."

The mother broke into fresh lamentations; the neighbours peered curiously, some weeping or cursing in sympathy, some whispering and cackling maliciously, for Jeanette was the belle of the village, and her father its richest farmer.

The curé's face was grey and drawn. Every line the sins and sorrows of his flock had graven there in the fifty years of his service, was clear in the morning sunlight. But his voice was brave and clear as he spoke:

"The hand of our God is heavy upon us, for this is a greater grief than death. But keep up your hearts. This very morning a gracious sign was vouchsafed me. I found in an unused cupboard of the sacristy an ancient manuscript which tells that on the day (nigh two hundred years ago) that the organ, the glory of our humble church, was dedicated, a wandering friar passed this way and made the prophecy that if ever a gift perfectly acceptable were laid upon the altar, heavenly hands would play upon the organ, and angel choirs sing in token of God and our Lady's pleasure."

There was a murmur of surprise and awe, and all crossed themselves devoutly.

"This prophecy, my children, has never been fulfilled. Indeed it had been forgotten. But my finding it on this sad morning seems to me a sign of Heaven's favor. Pray for Jeanette, but be of good cheer: Le Bon Dieu and His blessed Saints will guard her, and send her home again. Pray too, that some one may offer a perfectly acceptable gift at the Christmas Eve service. Prepare your gifts with humble and grateful hearts that God may be pleased with us and grant us our prayers for poor Jeanette. Go now, my children, to your homes. I would be alone with Lenoir and his wife."

Slowly the crowd dispersed, talking in eager whispers of the marvellous events of the morning, and the priest was left alone with the stricken parents.

There was no question of attempting to find the girl. Communication was slow and uncertain. Paris was so far away it seemed on the boundary of the universe. Besides how could poor peasants, or a country priest contend with a rich and noble seigneur? Only a holy faith could keep their hearts from fainting, and this faith the good curé strove to strengthen.

The weeks sped on. Christmas was at hand, and there had been no news of Jeanette. The church was ready for the holy festival. At the back the events of Christmas night were pictured by life-like wax figures: there was the stable with the ox and ass, there the Blessed Virgin sat watching the Saviour in His manger cradle while Joseph stood by; there the shepherds worshipped, and the Magi presented precious gifts. In front of this sacred scene was an altar, richly dight, to receive the gifts of the faithful.

At the appointed time the church was full of devout worshippers, the very air was vibrant with joyous expectancy. The curé took his place and the service began. A very solemn and impressive service it was, and to his parishioners the priest seemed no longer the curé in his shabby cassock, but a prophet mantled with authority, his face illumined with divine radiance.

The first part of the service concluded with the ancient carol:

"Black was the sky, and white the earth

On the night of our dear Saviour's birth."

The choir boys came down from the loft and took their places at one side, the curé stood behind the altar and gave the invitation; now the gifts were to be received.

A deep hush fell over all. The deep, clear voice of the priest as he blessed each giver was the only sound that broke the reverential silence.

Many and varied were the offerings, and many a tale of sacrifice they told. One brought a gold piece, the savings of the year; the baker gave a cake with a verse of praise to the Virgin, cunningly wrought in sugar, upon it; Jean-Marie, who played the organ, laid a roll of music, the crown

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