

The Singing of the Magnificat

A Legend of Christmas Eve, by E. Nesbitt, in "Lays and Legends"

IN midst of wide green pasture-lands, cut through
By lines of alders bordering deep-banked
streams,
Where bulrushes and yellow iris grew,
And rest and peace, and all the flowers of dreams,
The Abbey stood—so still, it seemed a part
Of the marsh-country's almost pulseless heart.

Where grey-green willows fringed the stream and
pool,
The lazy meek-faced cattle strayed to graze,
Sheep in the meadows cropped the grasses cool,
And silver-fish shone through the watery ways,
And many a load of fruit and load of corn
Into the Abbey storehouses was borne.

Yet though so much they had of life's good things,
The monks but held them as a sacred trust,
Lent from the storehouse of the King of kings
Till they, His stewards, should go back to dust.
"Not as our own," they said, "but as the Lord's,
All that the stream yields, or the land affords."

And all the villages and hamlets near
Knew the monks' wealth, and how their wealth
was spent.
In tribulation, sickness, want, or fear,
First to the Abbey all the peasants went,
Certain to find a welcome, and to be
Helped in the hour of their extremity.

When plague or sickness smote the people sore,
The Brothers prayed beside the dying bed,
And nursed the sick back into health once more,
And through the horror and the danger said:
"How good is God, who has such love for us,
He lets us tend His suffering children thus!"

They in their simple ways and works were glad:
Yet all men must have sorrows of their own.
And so a bitter grief the Brothers had,
Nor mourned for others' heaviness alone.
This was the secret of their sorrowing,
That not a monk in all the house could sing!

Was it the damp air from the lonely marsh,
Or strain of scarcely intermitted prayer,
That made their voices, when they sang, as harsh
As any frog's that croaks in evening air—
That made less music in their hymns to lie
Than in the hoarsest wild-fowl's hoarsest cry?

If love could sweeten voice to sing a song,
Their hearts had been sweetest song was ever sung:
But their hearts' music reached their lips all wrong,
The soul's intent foiled by the traitorous tongue
That marred the chapel's peace and seemed to scare
The rapt devotion lingering in the air.

The birds that in the chapel built their nests,
And in the stone-work found their small lives fair,
Flew thence with hurried wings and fluttering
breasts
When rang the bell to call the monks to prayer.
"Why will they sing," they twittered, "why at all?
In heaven their silence must be festival!"

The Brothers prayed with penance and with tears
That God would let them give some little part
Out for the solace of their own sad ears
Of all the music crowded in their heart.
Their nature and the marsh-air had their way,
And still they sang more viciely every day.

And all their prayers and fasts availing not
To give them voices sweet, their souls' desire,
The Abbot said, "Gifts He did not allot,
God at our hands will not again require;
The love He gives us He will ask again
In love to Him and to our fellow-men.

"Praise Him we must, and since we cannot praise
As we would choose, we praise Him as we can.
In heaven we shall be taught the angels' ways
Of singing—we can afford to wait a span.
In singing, as in toil, do ye your best;
God will adjust the balance—do the rest!"

But one good Brother, anxious to remove
This, the reproach now laid on them so long,
Rejected council, and for very love
Besought a Brother, skilled in art of song
To come to them—his cloister far to leave—
And sing Magnificat on Christmas Eve.

So when each brown monk duly sought his place,
By two and two, slow pacing to the choir,
Shrined in his dark oak stall, the strange monk's
face
Shone with a light as of devotion's fire,
Good, young and fair, his seemed a form wherein
Pure beauty left no room at all for sin.

And when the time for singing it had come,
"Magnificat," face raised, and voice, he sang:
Each in his stall the monks stood glad and dumb,
As through the chancel's dusk his voice outrang,
Pure, clear, and perfect—as the thrushes sing
Their first impulsive welcome of the spring.

At the first notes the Abbot's heart spoke low:
"Oh God, accept this singing, seeing we,
Had we the power, would ever praise Thee so—
Would ever, Lord, Thou know'st, sing thus for
Thee;
Thus in our hearts Thy hymns are ever sung,
As he Thou blestest sings them with his tongue."

But as the voice rose higher, and more sweet,
The Abbot's heart said, "Thou hast heard us
grieve,
And sent an angel from beside Thy feet,
To sing Magnificat on Christmas Eve;
To ease our ache of soul, and let us see
How we some day in heaven shall sing to Thee."

Through the cold Christmas night the hymn rang
out,
In perfect cadence, clear as sunlit rain—
Such heavenly music that the birds without
Beat their warm wings against the window pane,
Scattering the frosted crystal snow outspread
Upon the stone-lace and the window lead.