

BROTHER CELESTINE.

(From the Portfolio of a Tourist.)

Translated by J. H. LEUCK from the German of
M. VON GREIFFENSTEIN.

It was in Paris, in 18—. I was strolling about the Place Vendôme, when a curious mob that had gathered in the vicinity of the famous pillar attracted my attention. Loud and boisterous screaming, intermingled with voices of protest, gave evidence of a little riot. I hastened to enter, in order to ascertain the cause of the trouble. The scene that presented itself to my view was disgusting in the highest degree, and, although my religious opinions and sentiments at that time were far from being satisfactory, I was offended to my innermost soul. In the midst of the rabble stood a poorly covered cart, on which, in wild disorder, lay a number of crucifixes. As I found out later, these had, by order of the municipality, been removed from the public schools of the capital city. Nearest the cart were several wanton school-boys, who danced about, shouting and laughing, thus giving vent to their mockery of the symbol of our holy religion. Four or five men in working jackets, by rude jokes and exclamations, lent their support to the evil doings of the boys. To complete the crowd, representatives of the famous fisherwomen of Paris had added their presence, some of whom raised lively protests against the impious treatment of the crucifixes, while others looked on laughing cynically.

Although the official servant repeatedly tried to continue on his way with the cart, the boisterous mob prevented his doing so. Being aware that interference on the part of a stranger promised little success, I was about to proceed on my way, when a new apparition made its appearance on the scene.

From a large, elegant house a young boy eight years of age, with highly flushed face and flying hair, came rushing out. Despite the winter's cold the lad came but without hat or overcoat, dressed only in a light-brown velvet suit. His dress and appearance seemed evidently to indicate that he belonged to the better class.

With great agility he pressed through the crowd and managed to get near the cart. Here he halted, turned with a threatening motion towards the bystanders, and, trembling with indignation, exclaimed: "Vous êtes des méchants!" (You are scoundrels!) Then, seizing a crucifix and with childlike tenderness enfolding it in his arms, he repeated over and over again: "O my Jesus, I love Thee; I will never do anything wrong against Thee." The quick darning of his action, the pathetic charm of his being, had for a moment put a stop to the game. But already the next moment curses and imprecations rained down on the little one's head: "Calotin! mouchar, espece de reptile!" (Hypocrite, Spy! Reptile!), in short, the whole repertory of a French street rabble. A broad-shouldered Socialist had just seized the boy by his coat collar and raised him from the ground when policemen appeared, who liberated the little fellow and allowed the bystanders to depart.

I now scrutinized the little hero more closely. His appearance on the scene and his manly action had aroused not a little interest in me. Everything about this child was unusual. His dress, which clothed the neat little figure most becomingly, was not cut according to modern fashion, but bore the marks of the old Spanish costume. His face was framed by long blond curls, which produced a vivid contrast to his dark eyes and brows. His features were of perfect fineness and regularity, his movements of inimitable gracefulness. I asked myself, how this apparition, which seemed to have stepped forth from the frame of an ancient princely family painting, had got out upon this modern street, when the little one turned to me, looked at me questioningly, and then laid his hand into mine, which I had smilingly stretched out to him.

"You are good," he said, "you would not have done anything like that . . . Oh, I am glad that the policemen drove those horrid people away."

The little face, which in quick succession had worn the expressions of deepest indignation, overflowing tenderness, and at last, by coming in contact with the Socialist, that of fright and disgust, now beamed in sunny friendliness.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"My name is Aristide Blanchard," said the child, at which the little figure raised itself with just a little touch of self-consciousness. "See there"—he pointed to the elegant house from which he had stepped forth—"there lives papa. Have you seen papa already?" he continued, chatting with the perfect liveliness and unrestrainedness of a Parisian child.

"No, I do not know your papa," I replied.

"You don't know papa?" he asked, much astonished. "Why, everybody knows him. Oh, you must come some evening when papa wears his beautiful royal garments and stands on the stage. Then he is at one time Emperor Augustus, at another, King Macbeth, and everybody claps his hands."

"So your father is an actor?"

"Yes, papa is a renowned actor, and when I grow big I want to be one, too."

I was somewhat disappointed. The mobility of his spirit had, within a few minutes, brought us far away from the scene which had just fascinated me so. But how came this actor's child to the religious sentiments he had displayed with such great fervency? This puzzle I would have solved.

"Tell me, how did you happen to get amongst those wild people?" I questioned.

"Oh, I was standing at the window," chatted the lad, while his little face suddenly again grew very sober, "and I saw everything they did. When that red-haired boy began to dance with the crucifix in his hand, I could no longer control myself, and I rushed down the stairs."

"No doubt, you love the Saviour very much?" I continued.

How wonderfully those little eyes beamed at this question. Although I had observed them all the time, only now did I become conscious of the fact that the greatest charm of this face lay in the large, dark-brown eyes, with their mellow glance and their playful lights. In rapid changes they threw the veil of sorrow or the sunshine of transfiguration on the little, quickly moving features. Now a rich treasure of joy and tenderness lay in them. The little fellow took my hand and pressed it against himself, while he answered:

"Whether I love Him?! Why, He died for me. I shall never forget that. Oh, I wish I could die for Him, too."

"Who has told you about Him, then?"

"That mama did. Oh, she is so good; she can relate so nicely about Him. See, there she comes to get me," he added, pointing to a young woman who was hurriedly approaching us. She had heard that her little son had happened into a street rabble, and she now thanked God to find her child in peaceful conversation with me. We exchanged a greeting and a few words, and I withdrew, while she with her little boy, who turned round a few times to look after me, walked towards the house.

I got into an omnibus, and during the half-hour drive that followed, my thoughts reverted again and again to the scene I had just witnessed. What may have become of the child after ten to twenty years from now? How much will he have retained of the dispositions and sentiments which he today in such an embarrassed manner displayed before the eyes of the world?

A Parisian actor's child!—Did not this word seem to give me answer to my question, while at the same time lowering the tints coloring of the picture, which had lost half its charm since he child had so praised his father's art to me? How much inherent talent for mimicry and dramatic display may already, unconsciously, have been in play at this occurrence, which at first charmed me so? And even if there had been no such influence in the incident, and the child's feelings had been ever so true, would they be more vital than the tender winter blossoms that I had seen in the florists' shows? . . .

Behind one of these show windows now appeared a woman's face that bowed down, in care and nursing, to an opening rosebud. It nearly resembled the face of my little Aristide's mother, and into my pessimistic thoughts came the remembrance of her who "could relate so nicely of Him."

Although I remained at Paris for six weeks at the time and often came across the Vendôme, I did not get to see my little friend again. In the course of time I had nearly forgotten all about him, when, after about twenty years, I was unexpectedly reminded of him again. While at Naples in the fall of 18—, I received orders from the director of a transient Passion Play Co. to make photographs of some of the groups of his play. In order to be able better to judge and to select the respective instances, I decided first to attend the performances of an evening, of which I had heard that they were among the best of their kind produced. They differed materially from the Oberammergau and other Passion Plays insofar as they were performed without there being any speaking done. The entire representation took place in pantomimic pictures, while choirs of angels located on side stages, now in lyric, now reciting, accompanied the course of the transaction.

The Passion Play had already begun when I entered. The Washing of the Feet was over and the scene of the Last Supper began, by which the leading actor evidently had been inspired by the painting of Leonardo da Vinci. What the master, by wonderful art in his painting, lets one see as having gone before or as yet to come was now all displayed before our eyes, with a dignity, inspiration, and majesty that caused the soul of the spectator at once to sink into deepest recollection. The decoration was most happily chosen; the choirs that sang the text of the Gospel to his scene—a text so beautiful and sublime that word of man cannot describe it—were masterfully distributed and schooled; and yet, I was but half conscious of all this, so intensely was my attention drawn to the person who acted the part of Christ. Yes; just so He must have appeared among men, who had fascinated the multitudes, at whose lips they hung, and whom, forgetting hunger and thirst, they followed into the desert and withersoever He went. Just so that mysterious love-feast must have been celebrated. . . .

The Christ stood erect in the middle of the hall, illuminated by the light of an ancient hanging lamp suspended from the ceiling. His eyes were raised up on high, his hands held up the bread in an offering manner, and his lips moved in silent prayer. At this moment the orchestra stopped playing, the angels knelt in silent adoration, and not a sound was audible in the spacious room. But more distinctly than any human voice could have pronounced it, the up-raised countenance, as though transfigured in ecstasy, spoke the prayer of sacrifice and of expiation.

Quickly now the music again began. . . . Christ sat at table, disclosing to his devoutly attentive disciples the mystery of his Eucharistic love-feast. Joyfully surprised, with tears of emotion, the apostles understood him. Next he blessed the bread, and then, with an indescribable motion, which was all love, all resignation, he extended his arm and handed a morsel to each one of them. A solo voice sang: "This is My body."

The beauty of this moment was so overwhelming that the spectators, who up to now, with bated breath, had remained silent, could no longer control their feelings. From all sides hands were raised up with a motion of longing and love, and quiet, suppressed calls of "O Signor! O Gesu dolcissimo!" (O Lord! O sweetest Jesus!) became perceptible. I saw strong men who, sobbing, bowed under the power of interior emotion. . . .

Now the instruments began a gloomy lamentation. A shadow of unspeakable sadness fell on the pale countenance transfigured in love. . . . With a look full of fear, Christ glanced over his disciples; his breast rose and sank under the weight of a deadly secret. At last the disclosure escaped his lips. "One of you will betray Me."—In cutting tones, which pierced to the marrow, the words had been sung by a tenor; then, weeping and sobbing, the voice of the orchestra again fell in.

I do not wish to describe the course of the Last Supper scene any farther, but will limit my description to saying that the entire scene, till to the end, was performed in the same solemn, most touching manner. When the curtain was lowered (Christ stood ready to depart: courage, that fears not death, and determination in every line of his countenance. It was a picture of sublime majesty.

After a minute's pause, applause broke forth from all sides of the hall. Not, however, a passionate applause, as would have been in accordance with Neapolitan character, but as though subdued by the power of a divine influence. The moderate, half-suppressed exclamations of enthusiasm were a beautiful victory of the religious moment, and gave evidence to the character of the impression received.

To be continued.

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