

THE ROSE OF THE VISITATION.

Eliza Allen Starr in the Rosary.

In what lies the mysterious, we might almost say, mystical charm, which lingers around a certain valley-town in New England? Stay there one week and you will feel as if you could never leave it. No absent one year, ten, a longing for some effect of its sunshine, of its moonlight, of its atmosphere, will be ready to spring up in your heart. You will say to yourself a hundred times: "All this is a mere imagination. What could be more exquisite than these shadows falling around my door, this moonlight flooding the mock-orange bush before the window!" But no sooner do you come within the limits of the valley-town, no sooner does the train leave you on the platform of the small station overlooking the villages near and far, the winding river, the fertile meadows the hills with their amethystine atmosphere melting into the summer sky, than you know that the charm is not a mere imagination, but a beautiful verity as real as it is ideal.

One of the memories which have clung to us, is that of the Sunday afternoon. There has been nothing in the whole day like other days; but the afternoon, the wearing of the day towards evening, has brought a tranquillity into the air which is like the exultation of a natural idea of peace. The vesper *Magnificat*, the *Ave Maria Stella*, have been sung, but before the day sets, we turn even from the quiet of the village to certain byways leading across narrow meadows, coming out across small bridges to the very edge of the broad river, where the natural fall has been strengthened, until the stream above it lies like a mirror, wherein we see reflected the rocky banks, the overhanging hemlock and pine, the feathery brake, even the slender hare-bell nodding from its cleft in the sandstone ledge—all with so mysterious a beauty that we wonder at the loveliness of the world. Every now and then we have paused to gather some blossom edging the wayside, or peeping from some hiding place on the bank at the end of the bridge over the clear brook. But while all these are recalled faintly, though pleasantly, there is one flower which blooms afresh in the memory whenever we recall these strolls of a Sunday afternoon, and this is, the wild rose; flushing, fragrant, so absolutely perfect in form, in tint, that all the glories of the garden pale before it: the Wilding Rose, to which one of our own poets has attuned his sweetest song:

"Symbol of love divine,
Five-petaled rose
Sparkling with dew wine,
On the uncultured sod
Thy beauty glows,
Fresh from the hand of God"

Blooming, as it does, in the last rays of June, onward through July, we have one of the most charming treasures of our Lady's Rose-garden for her Feast of the Visitation, a feast which gives us one of the themes for our five Joyful Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary, and also, one of the themes dear to those artists, devout towards the Incarnation.

But, before we speak of their conceptions, let us turn to Saint Luke and his gospel, to find in his narrative those immortal canticles which make the Visitation, as a mystery, one of the fountains of sacred song.

What blissful days have passed over that home in Nazareth since the angel, having given his message to Mary, "departed from her!" as we are told. St. Joseph has heard nothing, seen nothing, has been told nothing, but a joy exceeding all the joy he has known since taking the Daughter of Joachim and Anna to his home, has had possession of his soul. All at once Mary proposes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin; as if, suddenly had been recalled to her that other announcement made known to her by the angel: "And behold thy

cousin Elizabeth hath conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her that was called barren." Nothing must keep her from the side of Elizabeth, with whom we can believe there must have been heretofore a lovely intercourse, while there was still another motive than her love and womanly sympathy for Elizabeth. The Eternal Wisdom who had chosen her for His seat, had revealed to her that He is to perform, even before His own birth or the birth of Elizabeth's offspring, a work of sanctification no less than the sanctification of His own Precursor. With what haste, then, did not Mary prepare for her visit to the hill country, the home of Zachary and Elizabeth! Beautiful haste, even to the eyes of Saint Joseph, although he may not have fully understood; beautiful, and altogether without tumult, because full of charity!

How joyful was the surprise of her aged kinswoman, when the salutation of Mary fell on her ear, and not of Elizabeth only, but of the unborn babe in her womb, leaping for joy! On Elizabeth, too, who had been one of the meek of the earth, came the gift of the Holy Ghost, so that she cried out:

"Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?"

See how this daughter of Aaron grasps the mystery of the Incarnation. "The Mother of my Lord;" as if the clothing in flesh of this second Person of the Holy Trinity were already revealed to her! Then added her prophecy to that of Gabriel: "Blessed art thou that hast believed, because the words spoken to thee by the Lord will be accomplished."

But what voice, clearer, sweeter, softer yet more triumphant than the song of any skylark, is this which responds to the salutation, the benediction, the prediction of the aged Elizabeth? No other than the voice of Mary in her own glorious canticle, the *Magnificat*: excluded from no office of the entire year, and which is to go down through the innumerable generations of men yet to be born, as it has come down to us, from the moment it was uttered, to the present.

In Overbeck's great picture, now in Frankfort, called "The Triumph of Religion in Art," we see the Blessed Virgin, in the height of the arch which encloses the design, enthroned on clouds, within a circle of cherub's heads. In her right hand she holds her pen, in her left the scroll on which she has inscribed her own canticle of triumph. Thus enthroning the Blessed Virgin herself as the patroness of that "poesy, which," in the words of Overbeck, "is the centre of all art as the mystery of the Incarnation is the centre of all religious ideas."

During the whole of this wonderful scene, no mention is made, in the narrative of Saint Luke, either of Zachary, the host, or of Saint Joseph, the guest. We cannot suppose them to have been outside, or in any way indifferent. Zachary, indeed, was dumb, as a rebuke to his slowness of belief in the prediction of the angel, and as to Saint Joseph, no word from the lips of this humble virgin spouse of Mary the Virgin, has come down to us. While in this scene we might say that the destiny of the world, of its souls born and unborn, has been entrusted to two holy women, a matron and a virgin. All that has ever been claimed for woman in our century, pales before this exalted colloquy—taking the form of song, as if in no other way could they express their rapture—between the Mother of the Incarnate Word and the mother of His sanctified precursor.

But all the fountains of song which were to gush forth during this visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, have not yet been opened. No sooner was the Precursor, now born into the world,

brought to his father Zachary to receive his name, than, having called for a tablet, on which he wrote: "John is his name," this true son of Aaron, of the course of Abia, not only recovered the gift of speech, but broke forth into that canticle, which like the *Magnificat*, comes into the Sacred Office during the most solemn season, is chanted in full voice during the Ten-days of Holy Week, and is a part of that magnificent burial service by which bishops and priests are laid in their sepulchre.

What a sanctification may we not call this visit of our Lord to the house of Zachary and Elizabeth, while still in the womb of his Virgin Mother, a sanctification, an illumination, not only of the unborn Precursor, but of his holy parents, and with the sanctification and the illumination, what an inspiration! We have but to close our eyes to the sights around us, our ears to the sounds of busy life, to enter upon a plane of human existence, made possible by God for His creatures according to His own divine will, for His own divine ends, which is like a translation to another world. Yet, all the actors in this event of the Visitation, divided into scenes as dramatic as an Æschylus or a Shakspeare could devise, are human beings, were all born, were all to die. They dwell on this earth, seemingly like their neighbors; and not only the Precursor, but He for whom he "prepared the way, making his paths straight," is as truly human as we who pen or those who will read these lines. These wonders do not lie outside our humanity; they only illustrate God's providence towards it in creation, above all, in its redemption; and that most touching petition in the preparation for the Holy Sacrifice, daily offered, comes to mind with a pathos which may well bring tears to our eyes: "Grant that by the mystery of this water and wine, we may be made partakers of His divinity, who vouchsafed to become partaker of our humanity, Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord."

To deny the Divinity of our Lord is not the only wrong we can do Him, for His humanity has been endeared to Him by untold suffering and humiliation, and He claims it as His own—true Son of Mary as He is true Son of God. Nor is this more plain in His Nativity than in this mystery of the Visitation on which we meditate as we say our Rosary beads.

Let us now turn to those artists who have delighted in depicting the scenes which show forth the Incarnation of the Son of God under its loveliest aspects. Without attempting to give the history of the Visitation in connection with art, although it might be carried back to a very early period, we can speak of Cimabue's Visitation as one full of the most delicate feeling. But still more beautiful, still more tender, is one among the treasured choir books of the Camaldoline monastery of the Angeli, Florence. These books are adorned by the hands of their own monks, and were so much admired by Lorenzo the Magnificent, that when his son, Leo X., visited Florence and the Camaldoli, he asked to have these books shown to him, enjoying them with the same exquisite taste as his father. The Visitation which we have in mind was painted by the monk, Don Lorenzo, and to see it is almost to unfit one for admiring any other; so profound is the sentiment expressed by these two holy women, so altogether mystical the beauty of the figures, so noble yet so amiably engaging the heads, above all that of the Blessed Virgin herself, which is celestial in its humility; while the head of the kneeling Elizabeth has an earnestness in its pose and its expression which makes us believe all that St. Luke tells us of her joy on hearing the voice of Mary. We have taken this as the highest type known to us of the Mystery of

the Visitation; for not until we come to that by Frederick Overbeck of our own century, do we know of one which comes so near, in any way, to the text of St. Luke. There is in both the same engaging amiability, and even more affectionateness in Overbeck's Virgin than in Don Lorenzo's, as she hastens up the steps, in one hand her staff, the other stretched out towards the aged Elizabeth, who receives, on her knees, hands, and arms extended, her young kinswoman. In this by Overbeck also, we see both Zachary and Joseph, not, however, as in Don Lorenzo's, in conversational greeting. Saint Joseph, leading the gentle animal from which Mary has alighted, is just passing from under the shadow of the arch, and looks with wonder on the scene before him, while Zachary, who seems to have followed Elizabeth to welcome their guests, is standing behind her in the portico, leaning on his crutch, but with a magnificently patriarchal head and air, one hand raised, too, in wonder at the scene which has so moved Saint Joseph. The background and accessories of this design are beautiful in the extreme, while the simplicity in the blending of the natural and supernatural could only have been caught by one whose whole soul was steeped in the reality of the Incarnation.

Succeeding this picture in the series of "Forty Illustrations of the Four Gospels," is the naming of St. John the Baptist, as Zachary writes, "John is his name," on a tablet. The curiosity of the handmaidens who look over Zachary's shoulder from behind a pillar, the happy Elizabeth on her couch in an inner room, the priest of the circumcision waiting patiently, knife in hand, for Zachary's answer to his question, the charming figure of a young mother, and her young son afraid of the knife, resting, point upward, on the knee of the priest; the venerable form of Zachary bending over his tablet as he writes, and, standing, so as to be higher than any others in the group, in her mantle and crowned by her aureole, the Blessed Virgin bearing in her arms the sanctified child, Precursor of her unborn Son, gives us a composition so complete that we seem to see the subject treated for the first time in all its gracious possibilities.

As we write, the Midsummer feast of the Nativity of St. John Baptist is passing through its octave. The glory of the season is around us. There is no end of bloom, of umbrageous groves, of morning and evening perfumes. But standing, as we do, close to the threshold of the Feast of Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth, our Rosary mystery takes on a fresh significance as the beads drop through our fingers on our Sunday evening's stroll across meadows, and winding rivulets; the broad river's course over its bed giving voice to the solemnity of the Compline hour until the far-off curfew of the village bell, in its sweet minor key, floats over the misty landscape, and we cull still another wilding rose, fresh with the falling dews that imperil its five petals, all aflush with the charity which urged Mary to the hill-country from Nazareth, and name it the Rose of the Visitation.

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