



Lou's Clarionet.*

By C. G. D. ROBERTS.

IT was a Christmas Eve service in the Second Westcock Church.

The church at Second Westcock was quaint and old-fashioned, like the village over which it presided. Its shingles were gray with the beating of many winters; its little square tower was surmounted by four spindling posts, like the legs of a table turned heavenward; its staring windows were adorned with curtains of yellow cotton; its uneven and desolate churchyard, strewn with graves and snowdrifts, occupied a bleak hillside looking out across the bay to the lonely height of Shepody Mountain.

Down the long slope below the church straggled the village, half-lost in the snow, and whistled over by the winds of the Bay of Fundy.

Second Westcock was an outlying corner of the rector's expansive parish, and a Christmas Eve service there was an event almost unparalleled. To give Second Westcock this service, the rector had forsaken his prosperous congregations at Westcock, Sackville and Dorchester, driving some eight or ten miles through the snows and solitude of the deep Dorchester woods.

And because the choir at Second Westcock was not remarkable even for willingness, much less for strength or skill, he had brought with him his fifteen-year-old niece, Lou Allison, to swell the Christmas praises with the notes of her clarionet.

The little church was lighted with oil lamps ranged along the white wall between the windows. The poor, bare chancel—a red cloth-covered kitchen table in a semicircle of paintless railing—was flanked by two towering pulpits of white pine. On either side the narrow, carpetless aisle were rows of unpainted benches.

On the left were gathered solemnly the men of the congregation, each looking straight ahead. On the right were the women, whispering and scanning each other's bonnets, till the appearance of the rector from the little vestry-room by the door should bring silence and reverent attention.

In front of the women's row stood the melodeon; and the two benches behind it were occupied by the choir, the male members of which sat blushing self-consciously, proud of their office, but deeply abashed at the necessity of sitting among the women.

There was no attempt at Christmas decoration, for Second Westcock had never been awakened to the delicious excitements of the church greening.

At last the rector appeared in his voluminous white surplice. He moved slowly up the aisle, and mounted the winding steps of the right-hand pulpit; and as he did so his five-year-old son, forsaking his place by Lou's side, marched forward and seated himself resolutely on the pulpit steps. He did not feel quite at home in Second Westcock Church.

The sweet old carol, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," rose rather doubtfully from the little choir, who looked and listened askance at the glittering clarionet, into which Lou

was now blowing softly. Lou was afraid to make herself distinctly heard at first, lest she should startle the singers; but in the second verse the pure vibrant notes came out with confidence,

and then for two lines the song was little more than a duet between Lou and the rector's vigorous baritone. In the third verse, however, it all came right. The choir felt and responded to the strong support and thrilling stimulus of the instrument, and at length ceased to dread their own voices. The naked little church was glorified with the sweep of triumphal song pulsating through it.

Never before had such music been heard there. Men, women and children sang from their very souls; and when the hymn was ended the whole congregation stood for some seconds as in a dream, with quivering throats, till the rector's calm voice, repeating the opening words of the liturgy, brought back their self-control in some measure.

Thereafter every hymn and chant and carol was like an inspiration, and Lou's eyes sparkled with exultation.

When the service was over the people gathered round the stove by the door, praising Lou's clarionet, and petting little Ted, who had by this time come down from the pulpit steps. One old lady gave the child two or three brown sugar biscuits, which she had brought in her pocket, and a pair of red mittens, which she had knitted for him as a Christmas present.

Turning to Lou, the old lady said, "I never heard nothing like that trumpet of yours, Miss. I felt like it just drew down the angels from heaven to sing with us to-night. Their voices was all swimming in a smoke like, right up in the hollow of the ceiling."

"Tain't a trumpet!" interrupted Teddy shyly, "it's a clar'onet. I got a trumpet home!"

"To be sure!" replied the old lady indulgently. "But, Miss, as I was a-sayin', that music of yours would jest soften the hardest heart as ever was."

The rector had just come from the vestry-room, well wrapped up in his furs, and was shaking hands and wishing every one a Merry Christmas, while the sexton brought the horse to the door. He overheard the old lady's last remark, as she was bundling Teddy up in a huge woollen muffler.

"It certainly did," said he, "make the singing go magnificently to-night, didn't it, Mrs. Tait? But I wonder, now, what sort of an effect it would produce on a hard-hearted bear if such a creature should come out at us while we are going through Dorchester woods?"

The mild pleasantry was very delicately adapted to the rector's audience, and the group about the stove smiled with a reverent air befitting the place they were in; but the old lady exclaimed in haste,—

"My land sakes, Parson, a bear'd be jest scared to death!"

"I wonder if it would frighten a bear?" thought Lou to herself, as they were getting snugly bundled into the warm, deep "pung," as the low box-sleigh with movable seats is called.

Soon the crest of the hill was passed, and the four-poster on the top of Second Westcock Church sank out of sight. For a mile or more the road led through half-cleared pasture lands, where the black stumps stuck up so strangely through the drifts that Teddy discovered bears on every hand. He was not at all alarmed, however, for he was sure his father was a match for a thousand bears.

By and by the road entered the curious inverted dark of the Dorchester woods, where all the light

seemed to come from the white snow under the trees rather than from the dark sky above them. At this stage of the journey Teddy retired beneath the buffalo robes, and went to sleep in the bottom of the pung.

The horse jogged slowly along the somewhat heavy road. The bells jingled drowsily amid the soft, pushing whisper of the runners. Lou and the rector talked in quiet voices, attuned to the solemn hush of the great forest.

"What's that?"

Lou shivered up closer to the rector as she spoke, and glanced nervously into the dark woods whence a sound had come. He did not answer at once, but seized the whip and tightened the reins, as a signal to old Jerry to move on faster.

The horse needed no signal, but awoke into an eager trot, which would have become a gallop had the rector permitted.

Again came the sound, this time a little nearer, and still, apparently, just abreast of the pung, but deep in the woods. It was a bitter, long, wailing cry, blended with a harshly grating undertone, like the rasping of a saw.

"What is it?" again asked Lou, her teeth chattering.

The rector let old Jerry out into a gallop, as he answered, "I'm afraid it's a panther—what they call around here an 'Indian devil.' But I don't think there is any real danger. It is a ferocious beast, but will probably give us a wide berth."

"Why don't he attack us?" asked Lou.

"Oh, it prefers solitary victims," replied the rector. "It is ordinarily a cautious beast, and does not understand the combination of man and horse and vehicle. Only on rare occasions has it been known to attack people driving, and this one will probably keep well out of our sight. However, it's just as well to get beyond its neighborhood as quickly as possible. Steady, Jerry, old boy! Steady; don't use yourself up too fast!"

The rector kept the horse well in hand; but in a short time it was plain that the panther was not avoiding the party. The cries came nearer and nearer, and Lou's breath came quicker and quicker, and the rector's teeth began to set themselves grimly, while his brows gathered in anxious thought.

If it should come to a struggle, what was there in the sleigh, he was wondering, that could serve as a weapon? Nothing, absolutely nothing, but his heavy pocket-knife.

"A poor weapon," thought he, ruefully, "with which to fight a panther." But he felt in his pocket with one hand, and opened the knife, and slipped it under the edge of the cushion beside him.

At this instant he caught sight of the panther bounding along through the low underbrush, keeping parallel with the road, and not forty yards away.

"There it is!" came in a terrified whisper from Lou's lips; and just then Teddy lifted his head from under the robes. Frightened at the speed, and at the set look on his father's face, he began to cry. The panther heard him and turned at once toward the sleigh.

Old Jerry stretched himself out in a burst of extra speed, while the rector grasped his poor knife fiercely; and the panther came with a long leap right into the road, not ten paces behind the flying sleigh.

Teddy stared in amazement, then cowered down in fresh terror as there came an ear-splitting screech, wild and high and long, from Lou's clarionet. Lou had turned, and over the back of the seat was blowing this peal of desperate defiance in the brute's very face. The astonished animal shrank back in his tracks, and sprang again into the underbrush.

Lou turned to the rector with a flushed face of triumph, and the rector exclaimed in a husky voice, "Thank God!" But Teddy, between his sobs, complained, "What did you do that for, Lou?"

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