

The Vesper Sermon

(Written for The Register by H. Adams.)

Great is the power of eloquence, but never is it so great as when it pleads along with nature, and the culprit is a child, strayed from its duty and returned to it again with tears—Sterno.

"Hadden't you better take an umbrella, Roy? I fear we are going to have a storm."

There was an anxious ring in Mrs. Roberts's voice as she uttered these words.

"A storm, Vio? How ridiculous! Why, it's lovely out, a perfect day—a charming afternoon."

"And yet," returned the young wife slowly, "and yet, there is a queer, unusual feeling in the air you know, Roy, I pride myself on being a second Old Probs I feel certain we are going to have a storm to-night."

"Nonsense, Vio. Just see how calm—"

"Remember, Roy, before a storm there is a lull and to-day it is oppressively calm."

"More proverbs, wife. I often wonder where you picked them all up. But I must be off, for," consulting his tiny jewelled timepiece, "it is almost four o'clock and I promised to be at Brighton's at half-past. I'd better get a gat on."

The husband picked up his hat and silver-mounted cane and walked out into the hall.

The lovely young wife followed. There was something so restless and uncertain in the expression of her fair face that even the careless husband remarked it.

"What is it, Vio?" he asked more tenderly than was his wont. "What is the trouble, little sweetheart?"

Violette Roberts caught her husband's hand impulsively.

"Roy," she whispered softly, as she raised her large beautiful eyes, full of earnest entreaty to the young man's face. "Roy, I wanted to ask you to come home early this evening. You will, will you not?"

"Well—er, it depends upon—er—circumstances. By the way, what on earth do you want me home early for, little one?"

"Well—nor don't be angry, Roy—but I wanted to know if—if you would come with me to vesper to-night," she went on bravely.

A deep angry scowl marred Roy Roberts's handsome face, as he cried fiercely, "I thought, Violette, this was a subject never to be mentioned between us. When you married me it was understood that each of us could go our own way. You, Violette, are the first to break our compact. But I might have expected it, all women are religious fanatics."

"Oh, Roy, I didn't mean to make trouble," cried the poor girl brokenly. "I only didn't want to go alone, because people talked so and said hard things about you."

"Let them say," he cried, recklessly, as he jammed his hat upon his curly head and strode away.

Violette Roberts stood long at the richly-draped window watching him disappear. Then she threw herself into a hall chair and went off into a day-dream.

One could easily guess her thoughts. Her mind dwelt upon her husband—her gay, careless husband, who had no religion, and, as the world said, no honor, no principle. She thought of how she had met him, in the dim forest glade, one burning July day, well nigh two years ago. He was the man, she, as a giddy school girl had pictured as her husband. Then she remembered how they had met so often and he had asked her to be his wife, telling her, at the same time, he had no religion, but he loved her. In her almost childish simplicity she had married him, thinking, deep down in her own heart, that home influence and perseverance would work wonders. But alas! the hope of the lovely, guileless wife were doomed to meet a bitter disappointment.

Instead of improving her husband grew worse, until people, even their own friends, called him "Roy Roberts, the infidel."

No wonder Violette Roberts grew sad; no wonder her love was on the wane. With a bitter sigh she thought of the time she had said fondly, "Though everyone should hate you, Roy, I shall love you forever and forever."

And she meant it then.

The little painted clock on the mantel told the hour of seven when Violette Roberts donned her bewitching hat and ordered the carriage for church.

"John," she had told the coachman, "do not come for me unless it is raining."

The servant bowed respectfully to his mistress as she passed under the great grey portal into the dim old cathedral.

An hour later we find Roy Roberts hurrying along the streets.

The beautiful but oppressive afternoon had developed into a dull, ominous night. The moon was hidden behind a mountain of heavy opaque clouds; not a star twinkled in the sky, while darkness, impenetrable darkness, reigned supreme. Presently a long chain of lurid lightning flashed across the sky, only to be followed by a deafening peal of thunder.

Roy Roberts, however, appeared to be unaffected by the storm. He was hurrying along the streets.

It was a lovely night. The storm had blown over, leaving the earth fresher and fairer. Far up in the sky, silvery luna, like a majestic queen, sailed along, attended by her numerous pages, the laughing, twinkling stars. The air was heavy with the odor of wetted earth and the perfume of flowers, while the rain-drops fell like glittering pearls from the branches overhead.

To Roy Roberts the night seemed to be a new world.

He had never thought of death and now, when reminded of it, his whole sinful life arose before him. Every little detail was disclosed, as when lightning suddenly brightens the midnight sky and reveals the landscape to the pale and fearful watcher at the window. Thus he saw his past and shuddered.

Benediction sung, the people filed out, while the organ solemnly pealed forth its last soft notes. In the fast-gathering gloom Roy Roberts knelt alone with his conscience and his God. Two hours later, when he came forth from the church, he was no longer an infidel, a scoffer, but a Christian and a Catholic. His soul had been relieved from its heavy burden of sin in the sacred tribunal of penance. Aye, truly, did he realize that night the meaning of those Scriptural words "Were your sins as scarlet, you may become whiter than snow."

On leaving the church he ran lightly down the path and out on the streets.

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had burst asunder, so great was the downpour.

Instinctively the man looked around for shelter. On one side of the deserted street lay a row of darkened cottages on the other frowned the massive walls of St. Alban's Cathedral.

"It's my only resort," he soliloquized, as he strode up the asphalt walk.

Quickly he entered the vestibule and then hesitated.

It was quite deserted. Roy Roberts brushed the glistening drops from his hat and wiped his patent-leather shoes on the matting. Then he listened.

He could hear the choir chanting vesper. Somehow that singing awakened memories well nigh dead. It had such a familiar ring in it that the infidel's thoughts flew on to his innocent youthful days when he, too, had joined in the evening worship.

Softly he stole to the door and looked within.

An usher approached him with "A seat, sir?"

Roy Roberts started, flushed and muttered an inaudible reply.

"A seat, sir?" repeated the man in a louder key.

"In a retired part of the church I am a stranger and came in only to escape drenching," replied the newcomer recovering his self-possession immediately.

When seated, his eyes involuntarily roved in the direction of his wife's pew.

Yes she was there—alone! The man's heart smote him as he glanced at the pale lovely face showing beneath the rose-trimmed elegant hat.

"What a beast I am," he commented. "To let such a sweet little wife come alone! What if I am no longer a Catholic, haven't I a right to escort my wife to church?"

But his thoughts came to an end by the organ ceasing.

He glanced towards the sombre, russet-draped pulpit. The speaker was just ascending the steps.

Roy Roberts could scarcely suppress a sneer as he gazed on the priest.

"Great Heaven!" he thought, "What can he have to say. Why, he's only a boy."

Yes, he was only a boy, or at least, not much more. He seemed young, very young and was exceedingly handsome.

How noble he looked in his spotless, lace-trimmed surplice and dark soutan.

Yes, even Roy Roberts, the sceptic, had to confess it. There was a look of mingled scorn and pity on his handsome face as he settled himself back in the cushioned pew to listen.

The church was very still.

Not a sound broke the tomb-like silence save the steady patter of the rain without and the occasional flapping of the branches against the richly-stained windows.

Presently the preachers read his text:

"Now is the accepted time, now is the hour of salvation."

Roy Roberts started. The cynical look vanished from his cold, proud face, while a serious light crept into the handsome eyes.

He looked around that magnificent cathedral with its brilliant altars and costly statues; its wrapt, attentive congregation; and then, his eyes roved back to the young priest's face.

Ah! what was the speaker saying? These were the only words throughout that whole sermon that Roy Roberts heard:

"Remember those words, 'Now is the accepted time' Take them to heart, and, hark you, do not procrastinate. Perhaps, who knows, this may be your last night on God's fair earth. How would the angel of death find you? Is your account ready for inspection? If not, remember, 'now is the accepted time, now is the hour of salvation.'"

The sermon was over, the priest had gone.

Roy Roberts sat as one in a trance.

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home and his sad-eyed, lonesome wife. He did not see the brightly-lighted electric car nor hear the motor-man's shrill whistle.

The car was upon him! He staggered and stumbled only to fall beneath the cruel wheels which crushed out his life—the fair and promising life of twenty-four short summers.

To-day, in the Catholic cemetery, a few miles from the city, might be seen a magnificent marble monument surmounting a green flower-spangled grave. And the inscription on it reads:

ROY ROBERTS, Aged 24 years.

"Now is the accepted time, now is the hour of salvation."

POEMS OF POPE LEO XIII.

"The Poems, Charades and Inscriptions of Pope Leo XIII," including the revised compositions of his early life in chronological order, with English translation and notes, by the Rev. Hugh T. Henry, of St. Charles Seminary, Overbrook, Pa., have been brought out in beautiful style by the Dolphin Press, of New York and Philadelphia.

Those who know the Pope, statesman and scholar, as he is reflected in his marvellous Encyclicals, should know the poet, too, if they would truly gauge the great man whom God has given to His Church in these days of storm and stress.

The years of man's life are three-score and ten, says the Psalmist; but if in the strong they be four-score years, and what is more of them is labor and sorrow. When Joachim Pecci was twenty years of age he was a frail and sickly youth. In the book before us we find a poem in anticipation of that early grave to which he seemed foredoomed.

Haggard and wan my face, and laboring is my breath; Languid I walk the way to dusty death.

Why shall I cheat my heart and years a-plenty crave When Atropos compels the dreaded grave?

Rather my soul will speak O Death, where is thy sting? With gladness I await thy triumphing!

Happy the exile's feet to press the Fatherland; Happy the storm-tossed bark to gain the strand.

This was in 1830, and more than the three-score years and ten of man's allotment have since gone over his head. Moreover, it has been in the years of "labor and sorrow"—for he was nearly seventy when he came to the Chair of Peter—that he has done his greatest intellectual work.

His Encyclicals on the chief religious, moral and social questions that concern the human race are of a virile majesty, and show forth beyond all else the strength and comprehensiveness of his genius. But his poems give the tender, pathetic and sometimes playful aspect of his many-sided nature.

It is beyond us to comment on the beauty of the poems in their original Latin and Italian. Everyone knows that the Pope is a rare classical scholar and a lover of the great Italian poets, especially of Dante. The Right Rev. Bishop McQuaid, of Rochester, N. Y., in Rome some years ago, with the late Charles A. Dana, obtained for the latter a special audience with Pope Leo XIII. The conversation turned on Dante, and suddenly this white, frail, shadowy old man took up the word and recited page after page of his beloved poet with resonant voice and glowing eyes.

As Father Henry says in his brief foreword: "To the educated man who still retains some interest in the classic rhythms of his collegiate study, such a volume should appeal with special force, as it furnishes a pleasing illustration of modern themes dressed out in the diction of Virgil and Horace."

The poems have been fortunate in their translator, himself a true poet, who has Englished them with a singular fidelity to the spirit and manner of the original.

The first poem in the book was composed by its illustrious author when he was a child of twelve in the Jesuit college at Viterbo. It is in honor of the Provincial Vincenzo Pavani, the charades, written in his early twenties, are ingenious and musical.

When the illustrious author was Bishop of Preugia, he took pleasure in writing poems, in honor of those among his priests, or the religious under his care, who were distinguished for the virtues of their state. Here is his fatherly praise of a most worthy subject, Sante Petrazzini, parish priest of Ramazzano, who died in 1855, noted for his piety and his charity to the poor.

Dissolved in grief, Religion, Piety, This title placed to thee.

"For twenty years his flock he gently led And generously fed

"Wonderful to help his zeedy flock, He poured Wealth from the scantiest hoard!"

The strength of his family affections is shown in his poem on the death of his father and mother in the Crisis of Nazareth:

Whose childhood crowded domestic love With glories caught from Heaven.

The sweet sympathy with youth and love—reminding one of the same strain in St. Francis de Sales' epigrams in the "Epithalamium," written for Alphonsus Sterbini and Julia Pizzirani on their nuptials in 1897. We give it entire.

Two hearts—twin altars—claim A single love-lit flame. You ask me whence it came?

Kindred in heart and soul— Love silent on them stole And gained complete control!

Sweeter its victory, When virtue's laws decree Inviolable loyalty!

At Mary's shrine they bow, A mutual troth to vow In love made hollower now.

What more? I end my lay, Heaven's choicest gifts to pray On this, their wedding day!

Another revelation of human sympathy is in the Pope's poem to his old-time comrades of the Arcadian Society, on the occasion of its bicentenary. It is the greeting of "Neander Hercules"—the name given young Pecci on his admittance to the Academy in 1832. The Society, founded in 1690, was an echo of the Renaissance, and lovers of the classics will find the spirit of that great movement in the poem.

Of the inscriptions written by the Holy Father, the first is for the tomb of his mother, Anne Proserpi, Countess Pecci, whom he eulogizes as "a mother to the poor, most devoted to her children, a matron of the olden piety, a model of domestic virtue, provident and generous."

The last, written in 1883, is on the life he shall lead in his pontificate.

For the rest of my mortal life I am firmly resolved by offering daily the Victim of propitiation, to cleave more closely to God, and with watchful and ever-growing zeal, to labor for the eternal salvation of the souls of men. Forward, then, Leo, Strive, strive to surmount with courage whatsoever obstacle; to endure with patience whatsoever trials, fear not, your life is nearly ended; your race is nearly run, renounce and spurn all that is perishable, aspire to the heights, press forward with constant longing towards thy heavenly Fatherland.

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