

DECEMBER 24, 1906

whelmed by love and devotion, sank down on his knees at the foot of the manger, and, weeping and praying with joy and ecstasy, spent the whole night in contemplation beside the rude representation which was the work of his own patient hands.

What a picture it must have been, on that Christmas Eve at Assisi long centuries ago! The manger, poor in its bare simplicity and Franciscan poverty, yet rich in the gloriously simple faith of the saint and ecstatic; the group of brown-robed attendant monks, full of sympathy and reverence for their dearly loved master; and the gaping, curious crowd of the townsfolk of Assisi, who had come to gaze, more in curiosity perhaps than in devotion, at this new piece of old Pietro Bernadone's visionary son.

Softened and subdued in spite of themselves into reverence by the child-like faith of St. Francis, they too remained to pray by the Crib; and wondering, they looked with awe unexpressed at the slender figure of the saint kneeling so motionless, so absorbed, with a look of unearthly rapture and ecstasy shining on his pure, ethereal features.

The burning zeal of St. Francis pouring out the overflowing love of his seraphic heart at the Crib of Bethlehem had gained the favor for which he had so humbly begged; and in his wake the "Poverello" (poor man) of Assisi drew many an erring and worldly heart to his Master's feet that Christmas Eve.

Crude and simple, perhaps, as St. Francis' Crib had been, the fresco of Giotto representing the incident is none the less so; but Avis Leigh and her aunt lingered near it, loving to recall its story—for the pilgrim to Assisi learns to live again in the life of St. Francis and to treasure every painted or written record of his life. High up on a scaffolding an artist was painting, making a copy of the fresco, reproducing the quaint outlines line by line and bit by bit.

He seemed absorbed in his work, and never even glanced at the passing strangers below him, for tourists are the rule and not the exception at Assisi. Then the ladies passed on to admire one and another of the frescoes, slowly making the round of the church; but still the artist painted on till the rosy sunset light faded; and at last, with a start, as if realizing for the first time that the painted figures on the wall before him were fading into gloom, he put aside the brushes and prepared to make his descent.

At the sound of the opening door by which the two travellers were just going out the painter turned his head, and that instant's glance was enough for the girl. Avis Leigh clutched her astonished aunt's arm tightly, and drawing her rapidly after her, hurried out and down the staircase, never pausing for breath till they had gained the door of their hotel once more, which was only a short distance from the church.

"My dear Avis, what has come over you? You must be ill or bewitched!" ejaculated the bewildered old lady, as soon as she recovered her breath.

"You nearly killed me dragging me down those stairs so fast; but oh! my dear, you are as white as death, and look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Once inside the safe shelter of their own rooms the girl tried, but not altogether successfully, to laugh away her aunt's fears, explaining that she had felt suddenly faint and weary (which was indeed the case).

"Indeed, dear auntie, you must not trouble about me," she said at length tenderly; "I was very stupid and fanciful to frighten you so, but I shall be all right to-morrow. It is only that I have been doing too much sight-seeing, and have become tired and out of sorts."

All through the long, tiresome table d'hôte and in the quiet of her room afterwards Avis's thoughts were strangely disturbed; and though she held a book before her eyes, it was but a pretence of reading, for her mind was far away in the dreamland to memories, recalling all the incidents of the last three years which this Christmas Eve in Assisi had summoned up! It was indeed a ghost that poor child had seen in the Upper Church a few short hours ago—the ghost of a dead and buried love she never thought would revive again; for in the mysterious painter of the fresco Avis Leigh had recognized Herbert Carlton, the man to whom her girlish love was once given, and to whom she had been engaged two years ago! It was a sad little story and full of bitter-sweet recollections to the girl, and Avis had looked it up, as we look up so many of our deepest thoughts and feelings, deep in the inmost recesses of our hearts, even from those nearest and dearest to us, and she had striven to forget it utterly.

But on Christmas Eve, the very day of their engagement, it always arose to confront her, and on this one especially, in the face of that chance meeting, the memory refused to be thrust away, (and bit by bit in her lonely vigil Avis had to go over it all again.

How happy she had been that Christmas Eve when Herbert first told her he loved her; and her parents had consented to the engagement, only stipulating that she should wait a year before she married, as she was so young—to young to know her own mind, they said. Then all the happy months that followed; Avis so rich in her youth and love and sweet faith in her lover, which he amply repaid with honest, manly affection. But just before the time appointed for their marriage, early in the next December, the cruel blow came which was to ruin their happiness. For a long time Herbert Carlton became grave and serious,

and seemed constantly preoccupied and worried, though tender and loving to his fiancée as of old; but Avis' quick eyes noticing the change and fearing he had ceased to love her, summoned up her courage after many doubts and fears to ask him what was the matter.

He told her the truth—that he was about to become a Catholic, and feared her and her parents' displeasure, knowing that they came of a family strong in its Protestant convictions, who could see no good in any one belonging to the "Romish Church," and would look with horror upon an alliance with a member of that creed, more especially one who had left the "faith of his fathers" to become a "pervert" (as they called it). Carlton had been perfectly right in his apprehensions. Avis begged, prayed and interceded with him to give it up; using every loving art and persuasion and reproaching him that he cared for her no longer, till his heart was almost torn asunder in the struggle between love and duty. The blood of Puritan ancestors ran in Avis's veins, and at last, weary of importuning and dashing herself in vain against the solid rock of her lover's convictions, she declared passionately: "I will never marry you, Herbert, never, if you are a Catholic, much as I love you!" And so they parted.

His religion cost Herbert Carlton, as it cost many others, the supreme sacrifice, not in this case of worldly honors and goods, but the one love of his life; and in the first darkness after the struggle he could not be forgiven if he thought his lot was hard, and that the Master had asked too much from him in return for the gift of faith?

He still worked on hard at his profession; steadily, doggedly painting his way to fame, and plunging heart and soul into the art which was to take the place of happiness to him in the future.

Herbert Carlton never saw Avis again after their bitter parting, for he went abroad immediately to paint, and the only reminder of the man she had loved so dearly were occasional rumors of his whereabouts abroad and the success of his pictures. Avis on her part plunged wildly into all the dissipation of society, for her one desire was to forget—to bury the past and shut her eyes resolutely to the prejudice that had blinded her; and in vain she fought against her own sense of self-reproach, and the fact that she had acted cruelly and foolishly.

The loving, impulsive girl, whose sweet girlish gaiety and innocence of heart had first won Herbert Carlton's love, was fast turning into a woman of the world; brilliant and sparkling when she chose, but with an undercurrent of sadness and sorrow. Her contact with the world, however, did Avis Leigh good in one way; it made her more tolerant and broad minded, and since the bitter outburst of foolish prejudice which cost her her life's happiness many of her dear and trusted friends had become practical members of the Church she had despised and hated.

Now and again a more than usually bitter half hour came to Avis, as with a gay party of friends she wandered through some gallery or exhibition of pictures where Herbert Carlton's name figured at the foot of many a gem of art—a gorgeous sunset in Algiers, a moonlit river scene on the Nile, a Moorish mosque in all its wealth of Eastern coloring—and every one spoke in terms of highest praise of the artist whose exhibits were so well known a feature of every art exhibition, not only in America but in the capitals of Europe.

Time went on, and Avis, brilliant and beautiful as ever, continued her series of society triumphs, outwardly successful, inwardly disappointed and disillusioned, till in the dark days of January another blow struck the girl's already aching heart. One after the other her parents fell ill with typhoid fever, and within three short weeks Avis was left an orphan, lonely and desolate in the beautiful home where she had reigned so long as queen.

Fate had indeed been cruel to her, she thought bitterly; all had gone which a life worth living; first her lover, then her parents and her home, for the empty riches of her solitary abode seemed home no longer without her dear ones. Her mother's sister, Aunt Ruth, came from her quiet home in the Quaker City to keep her niece company; but even her gentle companionship failed to rouse the girl from her grief, and she passed day after day in a complete apathy, far more painful than demonstrative sorrow. Even after some time had elapsed since her loss and it seemed impossible for Avis to interest herself in anything, and she went nowhere and saw no one.

One day her aunt, trying to divert her by telling the news which some callers had brought, happened to mention Herbert Carlton's name, and spoke incidentally of the report of his marriage. "He had married the daughter of a French count," the visitors said; and they wondered if he was ever coming home, or would take up his residence abroad with his French bride.

Poor Avis! it seemed as if another blow had been dealt her; not in the fact of Carlton's marriage, for any thought of a reconciliation with him was as far from her mind as ever; but the thought that he too had forgotten her utterly and completely, and that she had passed out of his life forever. All the butterfly friends of her gay society life dropped off one by one, too; for Avis Leigh in her heavy mourning, silent and quiet, no longer giving receptions and enter-

tainments, was a very different person to the society girl they used to know; so our young heroine found out bitterly the value of worldly friendships and acquaintances in times of trouble.

Wholly disillusioned of the world, Avis tried to find comfort in her religion; but the church services seemed cold and formal, altogether conventional and utterly lacking what she had hoped to find. Finally, passing a Catholic church one day, the girl had the curiosity to enter it. She did it half shamefacedly and feeling quite reprehensible in so doing. After that she began to be attracted and interested in spite of herself. It is the first step that costs in religion as in any thing else, and soon Avis Leigh became a frequent visitor to the quiet little church, sitting there for hours in the peace of that Presence which makes every Catholic church so truly the "House of God."

The sequel to this is not hard to surmise. It was only the old, old story, new in every heart of the triumph of Divine grace, and after many a struggle with her prejudice and pride Avis gave way to the overwhelming conviction which mastered her; and in return for her sacrifice found the peace and comfort she had never hoped to find again on earth, at the foot of the Cross.

After her conversion, which caused a nine-days' wonder among her friends, Avis Leigh went abroad with her aunt, bound for a pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land; and the good old Father who had received her into the Church begged her to stop on a visit to Assisi on her way, and see the home of dear St. Francis, of whom he had spoken to her so often. And it is thus she came to be found at Assisi this cold Christmas Eve, in company with her good aunt, who, though not having the least leaning towards Catholicity herself, looked with leucency on the religion which seemed to give her dearly-loved niece so much comfort and resignation; for, after all her troubles, Avis was slowly gaining strength and courage once more. Amid new scenes and faces the dull misery passed from her young face, and, in spite of the mourning she wore and the ineffaceable memories of troubles past, she seemed more like her old self again—more like she was as Herbert Carlton's girl love than the brilliant, worldly woman of those hollow society days.

But as she sat by the fireside in the Assisi hotel on this Christmas Eve all the trouble seemed to have come back to the beautiful face; for that one glimpse of the artist in the Lower Church revived all the dormant memories and made them doubly keen.

He was so little changed, she thought, since the Christmas Eve she saw him last, standing at the door of her father's drawing room with that grave, questioning look on his face as he said "So it is to be good-bye, Avis?" as if giving her a last chance. And in her childish resentment she had never even answered him.

And now, when it is too late, Avis acknowledged to herself what she had never even dared to dwell on, even in her secret thoughts, that the love of her youth was not dead and buried, as she thought, but had endured through all her gay life and through all her trouble.

Then the poor girl pulled herself together with a powerful effort and with her accustomed courage. It was only a temptation, to be met and conquered, as she had already conquered others, and she reproached herself for the momentary weakness. What business had she, Avis Leigh, to be stirred so strangely by the face of a person she had known and loved long ago, but who was nothing to her now? Why, scarce than nothing when he was another woman's husband, and should not even want to recognize her; for that momentary glimpse of Herbert Carlton's face Avis had seen that no gleam of recognition rested in his grave eyes. No; they had met as strangers, and as strangers they must remain; to speak to him, if only once again, seemed to grow stronger and stronger.

"We must leave Assisi to-morrow," Avis thought to herself, "for in a small place like this these meetings are always liable to take place, and I could not stand them—could not go through another."

A few minutes after, when she had roused herself finally from her thoughts, the girl stepped softly into her aunt's room adjoining, to call the old lady; but no one answered. Aunt Ruth, having found her niece but poor company in her abstracted mood, had gone down stairs to the "salon" to talk to some of the guests at the hotel; and presently she returned full of the information some one had been giving her about the beautiful representation of the Crib of Bethlehem arranged in the Lower Church of San Francesco, which was to be lighted up this evening.

At first Avis refused to accompany her, alleging as an excuse that she was very tired and weary. "I am so tired of it all, the sight-seeing and the strange country, and I feel homesick to-night, and wish we were on our way homeward! Dear auntie, let us leave Assisi to-morrow," she said.

"Leave on Christmas Day?" asked the old lady, surprised. "Why, you were so anxious to spend Christmas here; but do as you like, my dear, if you are so anxious to go," she continued good naturedly, "for I am ready to start again when you wish. But I should like to go and see the Crib to-night; they say it is so very lovely."

So Avis bravely put aside her own feelings and accompanied her aunt to the church; and they were well re-

warded by the beautiful scene that met their view as they passed through the arched cloisters in the moonlight and entered the dim precincts of the church.

Gloriously beautiful at any time! that Lower Church of Assisi; for even in full daylight the sun's rays only fall with a subdued and mellow radiance through the narrow windows and cast shadows, purple, gold, and crimson, on the marble pavement. Within this dim Gothic sanctuary the everlasting calm of eternity seems to dwell, as if the gentle spirit of St. Francis still hovered over it and around it; but on Christmas Eve it is transformed to a living representation of the Stable of Bethlehem on that Night of Nights, nineteen centuries ago, when Mary and Joseph knelt by the side of their new-born King and worshipped Him.

The great Gothic arches of the church, stretching away into gloom, seem to frame as a picture the lowly manger of straw with its figure of the Babe of Bethlehem, surrounded by His Mother and foster father and the kneeling shepherds, while numbers of starry lights cast their radiance on the scene. Childish and simple this representation might appear to a mere on-looker, but, oh! how touching in its tender devotion to one who looks below the mere surface of things, and thinks of the great mystery it so graphically pictures.

Around the Crib kneels many a silent, motionless figure in the Francis can habit, so still that one might fancy the living friars part of the painted representation, and in the deep mysterious awe of the place, in the stillness of the Christmas midnight, one feels it would cause no wonder if the brown-robed figure and pale, ecstatic face of St. Francis would reveal itself to come and kneel once again, as he did on earth, by his well loved representation of the Crib of Bethlehem; for, though not present to our bodily eyes, the spirit of the dear Saint of Poverty is very near Assisi on Christmas Eve.

Avis and her aunt gazed spell-bound on the sight before them, but with widely varying emotions: Aunt Ruth with curiosity not unmixed with wonder, but with an involuntary softening of her heart towards the religion which could produce a scene so deeply religious in its childlike simplicity. "Blessed are the pure in heart!" murmured the dear old lady softly, as she gazed from the Crib to the face of an old Franciscan friar, bowed with the weight of years, who knelt with clasped hands in an attitude of deep devotion, his aged face lit up with a light of tenderest love and devotion.

She turned around to look for Avis; but the girl had fallen on her knees not far away, her face buried in her hands, as she laid the burden of her sorrows at the feet of the Babe of Bethlehem, there to seek strength and comfort for the struggle going on in her heart; for the struggle was bitter and stronger than it had been for years rose up the love she thought she had put behind long ago.

It swept over her in a tide the girl felt powerless to resist—the poor human longing for the happiness she had for- gotten, and which could be hers no longer. Bitter tears rolled down her face and sobs shook her slight frame as she knelt, unheeding all around. The simple peasants near glanced at her in pity, and with a compassionate exclamation of "Poveretta!" applied themselves to their rosaries again, for in these Umbrian hill-sides, alas! sorrow and want and suffering seem but the common heritage of every day life, to be borne with patiently. . . . And Avis prayed on, patiently, almost hopelessly, fighting the struggle with her thoughts, till at last light seemed to dawn through the darkness, giving her strength to banish all thoughts of the love which from a blessing had come to be the torment of her life. With the coming of the Infant King of Peace comfort flowed in to her sorely tried heart, and she felt that, come what would, now she had more strength to endure, and if happiness was to be denied her, peace would at least be hers. The old priest in New York had been right when he begged his young friend to visit Assisi, for the unfulfilled peace of the home of St. Francis had done its work and brought balm to another wounded heart.

When Avis rose at last to join her aunt near the door they turned back on the threshold to take a last look at the Crib, and another figure took its place in the group there, a familiar figure which, in spite of its bowed head Avis recognized as Herbert Carlton's! He was standing quietly not far from the manger, his eyes fixed upon it thoughtfully with an earnest expression on the strong face she knew so well, and in the bright light of the candles shining around the Crib Avis saw he had changed greatly and grown older, thinner, and graver. It was by no means the face of a happy or successful man, brilliantly successful though she knew his career to have been; but of one who had struggled and suffered but conquered in the end, and who yet bore the marks of the trial.

Suddenly Carlton raised his head and looked unconsciously straight in the direction where Avis stood apart in the dim shadow, and in that glance he too recognized the face of his old love! Their eyes met for a second, his wondrous and almost incredulous, hers deep with unutterable sadness. Benighted and unapproachable as a sorrowful angel Avis appeared to him in her fair young beauty, the fairness of her serving to whiten the gold of her shining hair; and as he looked at her, unable to bear the tension of the moment, Carlton's first impulse was to spring to her side and break the spell,

for even yet he thought his eyes must have deceived him, and that it was no flesh and-blood Avis who stood there in the shadows, but the dream-like vision of a Christmas midnight evoked from his own sad thoughts and the associations of this medieval world. Then as she turned away he recognized Avis fully, for she looked just as she had when she turned from him on that Christmas Eve in New York two years ago, and in the action he accepted a renewal of her dismissal, and once more seemed to hear the bitter words that had rung so often in his ears: "I will never marry you, Herbert, never as long as you are a Catholic, much as I love you." Hope died forever within him now, and Carlton tried to turn away his thoughts and resolutely crush down his trouble, as he had done for months past.

The softening which had come over his face at the sight of Avis passed quickly away again, leaving it even harder and sterner than it was before, for a bitter flood of anguish overwhelmed the strong man at this moment. He had been true to Avis all these years, but the first sorrow of their parting had become more passive, and it was hard, hard to see her again and to be obliged to renew the struggle of two years ago—a fiery furnace he had hoped never to pass through again.

He tried to pray, but words failed him in the face of his misery, and he could only kneel there silent and hopeless; but surely the compassionate heart of the Babe of Bethlehem could pity and forgive the poor human weakness, for he too knew the bitterness of the cup of self-sacrifice.

Another trial, another struggle, was going on in the place where Avis had laid down her burden of sorrow, and Herbert Carlton prayed—not for strength to resist temptation, for that had been met and conquered long ago, and the thought of giving up his religion for his love never entered his steadfast heart, but for forgetfulness—that he might be able to forget the love of his life and learn to give it up willingly and freely; above all, that he might never see Avis again to disturb the peace which had been so hard to win. The sweet face of the Christ Child smiled upon him from the manger, and he seemed to hear the words: "He that loveth father and mother, brother and sister more than Me, is not worthy of Me." And Herbert Carlton raised his face to the arched roof above, where St. Francis' mystic wedding with his Lady Poverty is painted in Giotto's glorious fresco, and the deep peace of the spot stole gradually over his senses, while for a few brief moments the joy of renunciation was his.

The storm had passed and the calm came after it, and, strengthened and consoled, Herbert Carlton rose from his knees and passed out of the church softly into the glorious moonlight which was flooding the picturesque town of Assisi with its silvery light. As he stood there a sudden desire seized him to make his way to the Upper Church and visit his beloved Giotto frescoes in the moonlight, to mark the effects of its mellow lights and shadows on their quaint beauty, and perhaps to banish for a time the present in the art he loved and which was to be the only companion of his life's loneliness. The moonlight poured through the church as he entered it, and in the pale, ethereal light the pictures on the wall assumed almost an appearance of life, and the spiritual features of St. Francis and his companions shone with a strange, clear radiance like faces in a vision.

Slowly Carlton wandered through the sanctuary, pausing every now and then to admire his special favorites, and finally stopping before the fresco he was copying, "The Crib of Assisi." The artist had just stooped to lift the draperies from his copy when a faint sound, like a suppressed sigh, met his ear, and turning sharply towards the doorway whence the sound proceeded, he just caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure disappearing. In a second he was at the entrance, and in his haste almost stumbled up against a black-robed figure on the greensward in front of the church.

Surely the golden hair, the tall, slender figure were the same he had seen by the Crib, and, forgetting all his resolutions never to see her again, he cried out, "Avis, is it you?" The sudden shock and effort for self control making his voice almost harsh as he spoke.

The girl drew back swiftly into the shadow with an involuntary cowering movement; and, as if made aware of the brusqueness of his manner by the action, he forced himself to speak gently and evenly, for who was she that he was to address her by her Christian name? And when Carlton tried again it was more in the calm and courteous manner of a chance acquaintance. "Miss Leigh," he began again, very quietly this time, "forgive me if I startled you just now. I could not realize it was really you, and I am naturally astonished to find you in this remote corner of Italy." His self-possession was retreating now and he got on bravely, but the evident trouble of his companion unerved him. "I am sorry to find you alone and in trouble; you perhaps have lost your way down to the hotel; your friends—?" He came to a full stop, hesitating, for the task of making conversation alone was hard and no response came from

the dark figure in the shadow. Poor Avis was beyond words, for a passion of tears, long fought against, shook her from head to foot, and only a suppressed tremulous sob broke the silence at last after Herbert's gallant effort at talking. His studied coldness of manner, instead of reassuring her as he had intended, had quite the opposite effect, and now, like at the sight of tears Herbert Carlton could endure it no longer, and self control flew to the winds as a wild, irresistible influence to tempt his fate once more came over him. "Avis, my love, my darling!" he pleaded, the whole intensity of his strong love ringing in his voice, "we have met again at last after all this long time. It is your fate; forget the past, forget the prejudice and your decision on that dreary Christmas Eve, and take me now, dear, Catholic as I am, for you are alone and in trouble, and you want some one to take care of you. Avis, you loved me a little once; listen to me, only for this time," as she tried to turn away, "and I will never trouble you any more. My life has been hard—God knows how hard!—these last two years, and you make it harder by refusing me even one kind word in parting."

His voice ended abruptly, for he could go no further, and silence reigned between them, broken at last by Avis's tones, low and trembling. The passionate pleading of the man she loved had touched her strangely, but the fatal rumor of his marriage rose up like a spectre before her. Was he deceiving her and himself, and was his love but a passing emotion evoked from a sudden impulse of pity for her loneliness and the memories of "and lang syne?"

"Forgive me, Herbert; I was wrong—wrong that Christmas Eve, and wrong to-night. They told me you were married long ago, and I thought perhaps you only spoke to me in a sudden impulse and in pity for my loneliness, and so—"

Suddenly through the hush of the moonlit night the joy bells rang out with a glorious peal from monastery, to give warning that the holy night is ended. Midnight is striking and another Christmas is breaking over a sleeping world. Merry talk and laughter were hushed into utter stillness, and Herbert Carlton raised his hat as his companion involuntarily bowed her head to salute the holy hour in which the Christ-Child came on earth. Avis and he were at last one in faith as in love.

Over hill and valley, from every church and monastery on the Umbrian hillside, the peal of Christmas bells softly echoed and re-echoed with a rhythmic chime, and below in the valley the lights of "Our Lady of the Angels" twinkled through the darkness. Looking down over the broad expanse of the spaces rolling Umbrian plains and the vast expanse of the starlit sky, they thought of another plain near Bethlehem, where shepherds watch their flocks by night, and the light of the heavens hath shone on in the dark blue sky while their angelic chorus led its divinest message of peace and pardon. Upon this scene St. Francis looked on a Christmas midnight long ago, and its inspiration caused the representation of the Crib of Bethlehem; which after all these centuries, when the tender heart of the Seraph of Assisi has long ceased to beat on earth, is still so faithfully carried out by his Franciscan brethren in his early home, and over the place where his relics now rest in the everlasting peace of the saints.

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