

MIDNIGHT MASS AT THE ORATORY.

"'Tis Christmas Eve, and none must fail
To tell their beads at the Midnight Mass."
—*Ruadh.*

England can boast of more stately monuments than the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, which nestles modestly among the stately trees of Edgbaston, at Birmingham, but of none that contains more interest for the Catholic and the scholar of to-day, associated as it is so closely with the name of one who is a light in religion as well as in literature, and whose writings will always stand as models of pure Anglo-Saxon. It is at the Oratory that the saintly John Henry Newman has put forth his best powers for Catholicity and enriched with his thought and work the literature of the religion which he combated so fiercely in his younger days, before the answer came to his beautiful petition, "Lead, Kindly Light," whose sobbing monosyllables proclaim with all the strong, earnest, passionate yearning of a soul at sea:

"The night is dark, and I am far from home."

The Oratory has been a home indeed—a haven of real rest, where the weary heart might find repose, free from the jarring discords of the busy, unsympathetic world. I shall not presume, in this fugitive sketch, to review the life of John Henry Newman or the history of the Oratory, but rather to reproduce, in the form of a reminiscence, the impression made upon me "twenty golden years ago" as an attendant at the great Cardinal's place of worship, before he became Cardinal. It is an impression that lasts like the fragrance of some imperishable perfume and that becomes intensified always at this solemn season.

The Oratory is far enough removed from the throbbing activity and the bustle of busy Birmingham to be undisturbed by the noise of the great town, but not so far away that it cannot be reached easily by residents of the borough desiring to attend divine worship there, particularly if the worshippers be young, active, vigorous, and in the mood to enjoy a brisk walk. The wide, well-kept road, with its handsome homes and venerable shade-trees, that leads to the famous church is suggestive of quiet and comfort, not to say ease and elegance. Here the aristocracy of Birmingham, for the most part, have their residences, and to live in Edgbaston is almost as good as a patent of nobility, since it is an evidence of one's social status. The Oratory is an unpretentious building, or rather cluster of buildings of simple and almost severe exterior. It stands a short distance from the road on the right, and at the time of which I speak the walk leading from the main thoroughfare to the door of the church was prettily embowered with evergreens. Pious Catholics and a great many persons who were not Catholics went there every Sunday to witness the solemn ceremony of the Mass and to hear the exquisite singing of the boys' choir, whose beautiful treble voices, trained by a competent preceptor, rang out gloriously in the striking passages of the sacred music. The modest exterior of the Oratory does not prepare one for the ample and elaborate interior upon which the eyes rest upon entering the sacred edifice. The main altar, fronting the principal entrance, rises up white and beautiful and symmetrical in full view of all, and is approached by a series of steps leading to a wide platform, around which priests, choristers and attendants are seated. It is much higher than the main body of the auditorium, and it is impossible for anybody in any part of the church to be deprived of a view of the altar. Then there are side altars, at some one of which a Father of the Oratory is celebrating Mass during the early hours of morning. Priests and attendants move about noiselessly and an atmosphere of hushed devotion pervades the place like rising incense. One feels the solemnity of the scene, but it is a solemnity that is elevating, restful and heart-stirring. Presently the stillness, which it was almost profanity to break, yields gently to the soft melody of the organ, as it begins its lofty strain in a sacred whisper, which increases in volumes until it reaches its full tone as it heralds the procession which enters from the little side chapel, full-robed for the Mass.

The central figure, upon which every eye is immediately

riveted, is that of Dr. Newman. He is not yet a Cardinal, but as a man he claims and holds public attention. He moves slowly. His face is thin, and he seems to feel the weight of years, although he lacks two years of seventy at the time. The Fathers surrounding him are very attentive. When the Gospel of the day is read he comes slowly down the centre aisle until he reaches the raised pulpit which stands about the middle of the church in view of the congregation. His step is feeble as he ascends the stairs, and when he begins to read his voice trembles. Now we have an opportunity to study the great but unostentatious divine. His prominent nose, with its aquiline tendency, tells of force of character; his cheeks are wrinkled and sunken; his eyes large and expressive, and as he grows earnest at some particular point in his sermon the face which at first seems that of an ascetic becomes illumined with intelligence, warmth and inspiration, and the speaker is young again. Ordinarily he speaks with deliberation. His language is clear and simple, but sublime in its vivid portrayal of the truth he wishes to teach, and the scholar shines out between his words rather than in them.

As Dr. Newman stands there he reminds one of an animated picture of one of the saints. I could not help thinking of his eventful life, as I heard the words of hope from his lips. Here indeed was a searcher for truth, a scholar, a modern Saul of Tarsus, who began by persecuting the Church of Christ, and whose mature judgment led him to be its most devoted servant. The appearance of the man and all that he represented in his great personality, his discourse, the music, the church, made upon my mind a life-long impression, and the entire scene comes back to me with an agreeable distinctness, even now, as I write these hurried lines.

One other picture witnessed at the Oratory is remembered more vividly, and that is the celebration of a midnight Mass. At most of the churches in the principal cities of England this beautiful service, that seems to bring men and angels nearer, is observed regularly every Christmas, but nowhere, it seems to me, is it more divinely impressive than at the Oratory, where the inspiring music and the exquisite voices of the boys' choir, voicing the "Adeste Fideles" like a song of silver, turn the night into a dream of Paradise, while the glad tidings of a Saviour's birth are rehearsed once more as they were nearly two thousand years ago on the Judean hills.

While this solemn and beautiful scene is in progress at the Oratory, the streets of the great town in the distance are echoing with the music of the "waits" and the "carols" of the belated worshippers at the shrine of Bacchus, who have no thought for the sacred things that are touching the hearts of the men and women of Dr. Newman's devout congregation. The trodden snow on the side of the street leading to the Oratory tells that many feet have pressed it at that unseasonable hour, and the worldly wonder what power can so stir the Catholic heart as to attract a large congregation at such a time. At last the benediction is given, and hundreds who seem loath to leave, and whose thoughts are with the Christ-Child, cradled in the manger nearly two thousand years ago, linger behind and spend some little time in devotion. All the Christmas Services at the Oratory are sublime, and those who have the privilege of attending divine worship there always look forward to them with pleasure and feel a tinge of regret when the advancing seasons carry them forward to other ceremonies.

The present Duke of Norfolk, who stands next in rank to royalty, was a student at the Oratory school at the time of which I write, and, trained under such influences, it is not to be wondered at that he remains true to the faith of his fathers, who were loyal to the Church in the darkest days of England's persecution of Catholicity. The Oratory since then has become celebrated as the home of a Cardinal, and John Henry Newman has become a prince of the Church; but no honours that could be conferred upon him could add to the sublime sense of beauty with which it impressed me twenty years ago while attending Midnight Mass.—*Erigena, in Philadelphia Catholic Standard.*