

had prided himself on thoroughly understanding the character of his boys, and he was as much mortified as pained, when Ambrose had, as he supposed, deceived him. The Rector had once told his class that it was given to only a few to have their names openly enrolled as visible martyrs of the cross, and that the many were called to bear their trials in secret, but that God took note of all, and sent His children help according to their need. We must remember this, he had said, when God tried us with something hard to bear, and in which no one but He could help us.

This was what Ambrose was trying to do now—to remember this. He was innocent of the offence, but appearances were against him, and he had no power to stand up under the crushing weight of circumstantial evidence that had gathered against him. He ceased to protest after the first when his best friend refused to believe him. He came to Sunday school as usual, but not to church. No power, he felt, could induce him to do this yet, with the thought of his surplice hanging on its hook in the choir-room unused and his music book unopened, and the boys in their places and his place empty. And with the consciousness of his own wrong mingled a regret almost as keen for the Rector's loss. This manuscript had been talked of amongst the choir boys. From the older members of the congregation, who were proud that their clergyman should voice the sentiment of the church on an important question, rumors of its merits had floated down until even the youngest choirster had come to feel an almost personal interest in its appearing. The Rector was bearing his loss bravely, as became his Christian character, but it could not be repaired—not now, at all events, and meanwhile the golden opportunity was passing. And Ambrose, realizing the greatness of the loss, was miserable for the Rector as well as for himself. It was a sorrowful Advent time for both, and even the near approach of Christmas-tide failed to dispel entirely the gloom. Owen Madoc took the part that had been first assigned to Ambrose, and the practicings went on as usual.

It wanted but a few days to Christmas, and all were busy in special preparation for the festival. Quantities of cedar and hemlock, with the beautiful trailing arbutus, and of wintergreen and squaw berries had been brought from the woods to decorate the church, and great green ropes of wreathing, with letters, designs and symbols, were awaiting the latest moment to be put in their places.

A few short weeks before the thought of all this had filled Ambrose's mind with delightful anticipations. He had pictured himself then as among the foremost in assisting the Rector and Curate in adorning the church for the coming of her Lord, and his heart and voice had thrilled when he had rehearsed the exultant words of the Christmas anthem that he should sing on that day:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

In everything Owen Madoc had supplanted him. Often he had seen him in these last days passing to the church with his arms filled with fragrant greenery or glistening berries, or carrying a carefully folded banner; and it was hard not to feel revengeful towards him, hard even not to rebel against God. But Ambrose struggled and prayed, and sometimes in his misery a feeling came into his heart that was akin to peace. A text that he had once learned, a hymn that he had often sung, comforted him in these days as nothing else did. "For what glory is it, if, when ye are buffeted for your faults, ye take it patiently; but, if when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." This was the text, and the hymn was one familiar to every choir boy of St. Mary's,—

"The trials that beset you,
The sorrows ye endure,
The manifold temptations
That death alone can cure."

"What are they but His jewels
Of right celestial worth?
What are they but the ladder
Set up to heaven on earth?"

"O, happy band of pilgrims,
Look upward to the skies,
Where such a light affliction
Shall win so great a prize."

But now a startling event happened. On Christmas Eve, in the early morning, a summons came to the Rector, that Owen Madoc had been taken suddenly and dangerously ill, and earnestly desired to see his clergyman. The Rector found the boy suffering from an attack of inflammation brought on by a chill which he had taken in returning from the church the previous night in a severe storm. The doctor had been called in and had pronounced the case a very serious one.

"And nothing would do him, sir, but he should see you, at once, when he found himself so bad," said the mother. "He said that he had something that he must tell you at once, so I sent as soon as it was daylight."

They left the two alone, the Rector and the sick boy, and in broken, labored words, interrupted often by his sobs, Owen told his painful story. He it was, not Ambrose True, who had entered the Rector's vestry, and had tampered with the papers which he had found upon the table, and had afterwards carelessly overturned the ink bottle, and spilt the contents upon the manuscript. He had not meant to conceal his action at the first, but when he had found himself unsuspected, and that the guilt was imputed to Ambrose, the temptation to let things take their course had proved too strong for him to resist. He was a boy of weak principles, but with a limited desire to do right, so that his conscience had troubled him continually since the event, and he had often been on the point of confessing, but as often his courage had failed him, until now, when the terrors of a possibly fatal termination to his illness had impelled him to do so while there was yet time.

It was with a humbling sense of his own lack of wisdom, and a regret that would linger with him long for the wrong done, that the Rector, when he had heard Owen Madoc's confession, and had spoken words of pardon and of peace to the deeply penitent boy, left him to seek an interview with Ambrose True. What passed between them, none but they two ever knew exactly; but when they parted, there were tears in both their eyes, though a glad light was shining on Ambrose's face.

That evening when the choir boys were all assembled, the Rector entered, leading Ambrose by the hand, and told them that his innocence had been completely established, and that he had come to reinstate him in his place; and then, in the presence of them all, he turned to Ambrose and said:

"My boy, I ask your forgiveness. I ought to have believed your word, for I had never found you guilty of falsehood. I hope it will be a lesson to me as long as I live, and to all of us, not to judge by appearances alone."

There was no mention of Owen Madoc. His illness accounted for his absence, and pity for his sufferings, and Ambrose's earnest pleadings in his behalf, induced the Rector to withhold his name.

That Christmas morning dawned as no Christmas morning had ever dawned before, to one at least of St. Mary's choir boys, and when the old joyful strain, "O come all ye faithful," broke from the lips of the united choir in the Processional, one voice among them, clear as a seraph's, sang as it had never sung before.

When the service was over Ambrose went straight to the bedside of Owen Madoc, to carry to the sick boy the message of peace that had come to his own soul. He had not been permitted to see him on the previous day, but now there was an amendment in his case; and permission was given for a short interview.

Owen begged to be forgiven, and Ambrose assured him gladly of his readiness to forget his share in what had passed; and so it was a day of peace to all, the blessed birthday of the Prince of Peace, but I do not think that either the Rector, or Owen or Ambrose will ever forget the lesson of the events that culminated with it.