

A Nativity Play in Glasgow Cathedral.

It is not surprising that the story of the Nativity, the mere reading of which imprints it upon the mind in vivid pictures, accompanied as it is by the throb of human and heavenly song, should be aptly fitted for portrayal in the tradition of drama—a language, like painting, expressive of a meaning outside the range of words.

If a Nativity Play, presented by men and women of Christian faith, requires any defence, its justification is surely this, that there are themes of spiritual truth that even the tongue of poetry is too clumsy to express, and times when the heart is more deeply touched by an act performed or a gesture made, than by the most appropriate word.

The presentation of the Christmas Story, which has been enacted for four successive years in Govan Old Parish Church and last year in Glasgow Cathedral, has the merit, valuable for many reasons, of containing no spoken word, its silence being broken only by the intermittent reading of the Gospel record, and carols sung by a screened choir.

From the darkness of the Cathedral's nave the gaze of the observer could mount beyond the outline of the mediaeval rood-screen to the fan-traced roof of the choir, tinged with upthrusts of soft reflected light ; could hover for a moment of satisfying rest, as a bird might check its winging way to prolong the sun's caress ; and could then plunge, lost, into unseen depths of shrouded mystery. Below the screen was a curtained platform framed between two Gothic pillars, on which the figures moving softly to and fro seemed almost as marionettes—the dignity of human form dwarfed to insignificance in the setting of the grandeur that human hands had built.

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The choir, accompanied by string players, chant the first words of the *Benedictus*, the song of Zacharias, and the Presentation has begun.

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“ Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people ” Before the eye the aged Priest, with two of the Temple boys, is ministering at the Altar of Incense in the order of his course. Scarcely

are his hands upraised in the ritual prayer when there appears, as through a haze of incense, an angel standing at the altar, For his unbelief in the angel's message of promise Zacharias is struck dumb, and the silence which follows the last notes of the *Benedictus* is expressive of the silence which now holds the tongue of the Priest, as he gropes his faltering way from the Temple courts.

In simple contrast to the ritual observance of the Temple and the symbolic failure of its priest, follows the homely piety of the Virgin Mary.

Bearing a pitcher, she enters a simple room of a simple house. There are homely objects to occupy her attention—a bowl of flowers, a tidy room, needlework for her deft fingers: but her mind is troubled with vague, uncertain apprehension, as though she heard a distant music with a strangely surging sound, now near, now far, rising and falling, speaking of greatest joy and deepest sorrow. Her needlework drops unheeded. She moves, in response to the bidding of a Higher Will, to refresh her troubled mind in the familiar Scriptures.

As she kneels, the vision comes: the Angel of the Annunciation, bearing his momentous news, stands before her, with upraised hand, and calms her troubled breast, while peace rewards her submission to the Divine command. "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to Thy Word".

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Hurrying to the hill-country, to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, Mary enters the house of Zacharias. She greets Elizabeth, and stoops to receive the Priestly blessing.

Her face is filled with rapture. She stands before them, conscious of another world whose language only song can translate.

" My soul doth magnify the Lord,
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden :
For behold from henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed ;
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things :
and holy is His Name."

Before such Majesty she bends the knee. The aged Priest, sensible of the Unseen Presence, raises his outspread hands in benediction.

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The edict has gone out to all the world: Caesar Augustus commands that all shall be enrolled.

The road to Bethlehem carries its complement of dust-stained pilgrims, and a wayside well affords successive groups of travellers a welcome halt. A beggar, almost turned bandit, with a threatening knife, is roughly handled by folk already burdened with anxiety. He lurks, morose and brooding, no longer hiding hatred or the knife, when Mary and Joseph, travellers also to David's city, pause to refresh themselves from the well's cool depths.

How strange the gentleness with which this woman shows her care, and offers the charity their slender means can provide ! The beggar bends his head, confused, and her cool hand is soft upon his brow. A moment more, and they are gone, travellers who must hasten on their journey, but the gentle memory of them remains. The man stands, emotion surging through his breast, one hand outstretched in dumb acknowledgment, the other still holding the knife. That too must go. Like heated steel it burns the hand she touched. He throws it from him. It has gone.

Wearily, the travellers enter Bethlehem's inn. Mary's steps are slow, and she leans more heavily on Joseph's arm. The lowly hostel is thronged with an unusual crowd. Roman soldiers, guardians of the peace, idle away the hours with wine and dice. More humble folk pass in and out, or stand or sit gossiping casually in groups. Children play games at their elders' feet.

One girl, more thoughtful than the rest, proffers a kindly stool, then silently draws back : but not her eyes, which remain fixed upon the stranger as she rests. Joseph seeks the innkeeper, harassed already by so many requests.

The inn is full : what need of words ? The crowded room is eloquent of that. But surely some corner of poor comfort can be found for his precious charge. His hands, his eyes, his every act and gesture beseech.

The innkeeper pauses, chin in hand. Why should he ponder further, having refused so many others ? There is the stable, but attendant problems spring to mind ; and another guest is tugging at his dress, impatient of delay. All right, the stable let it be. He calls his boy to fetch a lamp.

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Darkness, save for the moon and stars outside ; and a stable empty within. The light held aloft by the innkeeper's boy shines in the doorway, and they enter.

It is a barren place, for the beasts are on the hills.



THE STABLE THAT WAS A PALACE.

"The courtiers of the Infant King."

By courtesy of the "Glasgow Herald."



MARY AND ELIZABETH EXCHANGE GREETINGS.

A scene from a Nativity Play in the Copper Belt of Africa, which received inspiration from the Govan Presentation,

The boy withdraws, to return with an armful of straw to make a couch. Youth is generous towards others' needs, and with a brush he seeks to make more decent the stable's poverty.

Another step is heard at the door, and the girl from the inn enters, modest and half afraid. Across her arm she carries the warm wrap she has gone to fetch, and she sets it about Mary's shoulders. Then, of an impulse, pausing like some gentle, timid animal, she drops upon her knee, and kisses a corner of the stranger's dress, then rises and is gone. The boy follows with lingering footsteps.

Such little acts express a heart's desire to help.

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The silent, unhurried watches of the night are an emblem of the Eternal. In the darkness time stands still, and men move in the rhythm of a more spacious sphere than the visible frontiers of day.

By night, in the fields of Bethlehem, shepherds keep guard over their flocks. In silence they pace their watch, or stand with eyes that see far into the shadows, or they gather round the fire.

They were there when David slew the lion and the bear ; and they are there to-day.

To those, this night, who share the comradeship of the dark canopy of the open sky, Heaven draws very near, and the stars become the lamps about a sanctuary. Their ears, tuned to the murmur of the wind and the soft whisper of the grasses, are opened to the song of angels. Amazed they stand, seeing the vision that appears before their eyes, while the air thrills with exultant praise.

Then, calling one to another, they hasten with common purpose to see the thing which has come to pass, and to bow before the Lamb of God's redeeming love.

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The brilliant court of Herod is dark with covert treachery. Its fashionable ladies whisper and cast side-long glances at their throned ruler, reading and interpreting for mischievous gossip each frowning look or flash of his eye.

Round him are gathered at his obedience priests and scribes, quoting the Scriptures and declaring Prophecy.

With a wave he bids them go, plunderer of their knowledge, and summons to his hearing the Wise Men, lately come to Jerusalem.

Gravely, and with becoming dignity, they enter, and, as kings, salute a king : then, in answer to his deceiving questions, they tell him plainly of the Star. His jewelled hand conceals the wicked smile with which his evil plan is formed, and, rising, he bids them speed upon their errand. " Go and search diligently for the young child ; and when ye have found him, being me word again."

What feast for eyes ! what food for talk ! The whole court watches the retreating figures with avid gaze, and Herod sinks contented back, reflecting on his strategy.

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These were the scenes which carried the worshippers' thoughts along the several paths that led to Bethlehem's stable.

The two concluding tableaux are as hard to describe as they were lovely to see. Much of the effect was due to the lighting, and to the blending of colours ; the rest to the realism of the players, who for the moment became almost re-incarnations of the spirit and emotions of the characters they represented.

By a striking movement, first made almost by chance at an earlier rehearsal, they formed a group about the manger that quite caught away one's breath, and gave that deep, tingling feeling of inward pleasure which comes through the eye from certain arrangements of colour and form. This group formed the basis of the last scene but one, and in a way the climax.

The stage was dark, and the light from the manger grew, reflected first in Mary's watchful face, then increasing to show Joseph standing guardian at her side, and finally illuminating the empty stable. Softly, on tip-toe, entered a shepherd boy, tightly clutching in his hands some cherished flowers. He peeped into the manger, smiled, and laid the flowers upon the straw, then turned to beckon his laggard comrades.

The girl from the inn was there, and the boy who had carried the lamp. Two other children from the inn had also found their way.

The kings, and their attendants, in more solemn state, arrived bearing their gifts, and presented them before the manger.

So they stood, as in the imagination that little group has always stood, courtiers of the Infant King, till the light faded from their many-coloured clothes, and paused a

moment shining up on Mary's and Joseph's faces, and then was gone.

The last tableau, brief and still, showed the Holy Family—Mary and Joseph watching over the manger, its gentle light reflected in their faces ; and, more dimly seen, those whom the Child has deigned to call His brethren, men and women, old and young, and children, standing in adoration, contentment, or wonder—facing, in symbol, as Christ's Church must always face, towards the Light of the World.

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It seems worth while to add a word on some of the incidental effects of this Nativity Play. Apart from the strong appreciation and desire for its repetition expressed by the several hundreds of people who have witnessed it during the past five years, the increasing reverence and sense of loyalty of those taking part have been its more striking features.

The tableaux have been varied each year in regard to the numbers taking part. On one occasion there were as many as sixty, though latterly, for reasons of organisation, only about thirty. They ranged from children to married men and women. For most of the older people it would have been a matter of great disappointment if the Play had been produced, and they had not been again asked to take part.

Considerable sacrifice of time was willingly made during the preparatory three weeks before the Presentation, and two men at least, this last year, sacrificed a late shift of work and pay to enable them to be in their places on one of the nights of the performance. "Zacharias," a young married tradesman in ordinary life, of his own accord learnt by heart the words of the *Benedictus* that he might sing it to himself during the first tableau, and thus enrich his representation. By common consent, too, it was agreed that a corporate act of devotion should be made each night before the Play was presented.

There is no doubt that to those who took part a new experience of the vitality of the Christmas Story has been given, and that by their devout rendering of the scenes, they have passed on something of this experience to those who were present, and helped them to read anew the Lesson which these scenes convey.

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