

BROTHER BENEDICTUS.

By James Clarence Harvey.

A BRASS crucifix, bent and twisted so that the figure upon it seemed to writhe in the dreadful agony of Calvary, hung upon the wall; and this was the story which had clung to the rood through four long centuries.

Brother Benedictus had owned it in the long ago. It had hung from his girdle as he walked along the cloisters of a monastery, high up the mountain side, and it had known the impassioned clasp of his hands as he knelt in prayer upon the cold stones of the chapel. Among all the brothers of the order, not one was more sincere in self imposed humiliation, more severe in keeping the fasts; and none surpassed him in the multiplicity of his penances.

"He will deserve much in the Great Beyond," said mild mannered Brother Antonius.

"Dark deeds in his past," said austere Brother Correntian, and both were right.

Brother Benedictus was of noble birth. His mother had died when he was but a child. His father, the old count, had watched the studious habits of the boy with alarm, fearing that the church would claim him, and that with him the family name would cease to be, for he was the last of the line. Then had come a time when the young man had met and loved the old count's ward, Cecilia. This too had filled the father with alarm, for he was ambitious for his son, and Cecilia was of humble birth, and sweetness and beauty were her only dower. And so the young heir was sent away; but in all his wanderings his one love held firm and true, and between him and the waywardness of youth the sweet face of Cecilia always rose to check and to strengthen him.

Cecilia was but a child, and her past had been in the hands of her guardian.

She knew that her future was in his hands as well, and when he voiced his disapproval of a union with his son, and urged upon her a marriage with the nobleman whose estates adjoined his own, she yielded, though with heartache and bitter tears.

When the young heir returned, he was stunned by the news of Cecilia's marriage; and for a time he sought solitude and the companionship of holy men. His studies were renewed, and he turned a deaf ear to his father's entreaties that he should marry.

Then came a night when, filled with tender heart thoughts of the past, he had sought their trysting place, and stood beneath the tree where Cecilia had raised her face to his for their betrothal kiss. Filled with memories of those fleeting days, he had cried aloud:

"May God forgive her!"

"May God forgive me," had echoed close at hand.

"Cecilia!"

"Arthur!"

The pale moon, climbing up the sky, sifted showers of silver light upon them as they strove to mask their heart throbs with words breathed low, lest passionate utterance should betray the turbulence within. But words could not disguise the great love each look revealed. Their hearts had met. The forms and ceremonies of the world were to them as the vagaries of some fitful dream, and time sped on, its flight unnoticed.

They loved, and whatever the will of man had accomplished, in the light of heaven these two should have been man and wife.

The meeting had not been of their seeking. Fate had thrown them together; and even though their paths might divide forever, the pain of the future would be lessened by the thought

of that hour. Above them, the branches of the old familiar trees waved as if in benediction. Yet, within the heart of each, there rankled and burned the knowledge that, even though lips were silent, to meet and look into each other's eyes the passion of their lives would be to live beneath the shadow of unpardonable sin.

Suddenly they were startled by a crashing among the tangled underbrush. Harsh words were spoken, and a woman's name was coupled with terms of dishonor. Swords flashed in the moonlight, and the silence was broken by the ring of steel.

Vainly Arthur strove to parley with his frenzied adversary, but his words fell upon unhearing and unmindful ears. No course was left but to give blow for blow, and strike down the assailant; and when again the quiet of the night held sway, Cecilia's husband lay dead upon the ground.

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At the monastery of St. Ignatius, the brothers had finished their morning prayers under the benevolent eye of the good Abbot Augustine. The closing words of the blessing were drowned by the clanging of the bell which told of a visitor at the outer gate. When the portal was opened, a man tottered in and fell fainting upon the ground. His clothing was rent in many places. His hands were scratched and bleeding as though he had rushed madly through bush and bramble, forgetful of self, in the delirium of some overmastering emotion.

For many days death seemed to hover near; but the brothers vied with each other in patient care and deeds of kindness, and a time came when the stranger had asked the good abbot to prepare him for a life among them, renouncing the vanities of the world, and striving against the weaknesses of the flesh.

His novitiate had been a faithful one, and because he was noble, unselfish, and earnest, he had been called Benedictus, the blessed. But into the eyes of Brother Benedictus there would come, at times, that same wild look that had filled them

when he had tottered in at the gate; and at other times a look of unutterable longing would be seen there. After these brief periods his penances and fasts were so severe that the abbot remonstrated with him, saying:

"The humiliation of the flesh is better far than following the pathways of the wicked, but it is for us to keep the body fit for the Master's work. Spare yourself, my son. Offer not to the Lord a broken vessel or a bruised reed."

Then the Abbot Augustine had sent Brother Benedictus on a pilgrimage, in the belief that while attending to the duties of the order he would relax the severity of his penances. When the mission was fulfilled, and Benedictus had returned, there came to his ears, at times, rumors of the good deeds performed by one Angelo, a young layman of the third order, who had given his wealth and offered his service to the monastery of St. Ignatius. Angelo's sweetness of disposition, mildness of manner, and consistent piety were known to the brotherhood even though words of praise were withheld.

The pilgrimage of Brother Benedictus had been most salutary. His mind had been occupied with new duties in bright surroundings. Introspection being checked, occupation had tempered his rigor, as the abbot had expected. The dark circles beneath his eyes had disappeared. The emaciation of his face was less noticeable, and the lines of suffering were fading away. Even Benedictus himself realized that a stronger control of his own thoughts had come to him with the new found strength of his physical being.

Kneeling upon the stones of the chapel, one morning, he had remained long after the celebration of the mass. The sun, climbing up the sky, had pierced the oriel window with golden beams that changed to purple and blue and red in passing the stained glass panes above him, and left a flickering halo about the head of the penitent.

"At last! At last!" breathed Benedictus, lifting his face to the altar, in thanksgiving that he had conquered the memories of the past, and the desires of

the human heart within him. But the prayer of thanksgiving froze upon his lips. His clasped hands trembled, and cold beads of perspiration started out upon his forehead as Angelo passed down the aisle with his cowl thrown back.

It was the first time Benedictus had seen the face of the young man. Rising slowly to his feet, he steadied himself with a wandering hand outstretched towards the railing, and with startled amazement gazed after the receding figure.

As it disappeared through the doorway, he extended his arms longingly, and like a cry of pain one word broke from his lips:

"Cecilia!"

The doors opened, as if in answer to his cry, and before him stood the tall, gaunt form of Brother Correntian. Benedictus drew his thin hands across his eyes, and looked again. His lips parted with inaudible words as Correntian neared him, wearing a look of reproach and contempt.

"It is not for the brothers of this order to mingle the desires of the flesh with their prayers before the altar," said the austere Correntian.

"God's mercy is for him who is tempted but does not fall, rather than for him to whom temptation comes not," answered Benedictus as he turned to kneel at the altar rail.

From that day Brother Benedictus renewed his penance and fasts with rigorous austerity, until the dark circles under his eyes grew deeper, and his cheek bones seemed about to pierce the flesh. The abbot watched with alarm this change in the young monk, who was so much beloved by all save Correntian. The beneficial effect of his pilgrimage was remembered, and it was decided that he should again go forth on a mission for the good of the order.

"And to temper the severity of the enthusiast," said the abbot, "let us bid the gentle Angelo to attend him."

The sun had seemed to pause for an instant above the mountain top, and then a shadow had begun to creep down toward the monastery, when Brother Benedictus and his companion set forth,

with their long staves in hand. At a bend in the road they turned to receive a parting blessing from the extended hands of the abbot, who stood beneath the portal of the gate. Then for the first time Benedictus looked into the eyes of Brother Angelo.

"Do you not know that even death might follow the discovery of this violation of the laws of the order?"

"And what is life that I should fear death?" answered Angelo. "To be near him whose life I have blasted, to lighten one single hour, to relieve one moment's pain, is all I ask."

The hands of Brother Benedictus clutched his staff convulsively. At last he said brokenly:

"It may be that a soul devoted to God's work, in penitence and prayer, may yet be saved. It may be that this new trial is but to test the depth of my repentance, but oh, Cecilia, the human heart cries out even while the spiritual nature lifts its prayers to heaven. I pray you, turn away. If needs must be, leave me, and I will follow from afar. God knows the desire of my heart to serve him, and to expiate the madness of that dreadful past, which perhaps it is even now a sin to recall. But to know that within reach of my outstretched hand is all that life held so fondly dear, and to know that eternal damnation must attend the yielding, is too great a pain, even for me, to whom pain has become the attendant of every breath. Leave me, I beg. Let me believe that Cecilia is dead."

The skies had clouded with the suddenness of a mountain storm. Pattering drops of rain fell upon the bared head of Benedictus, but he heeded them not. With eyes bent upon the ground, his face distorted with the intensity of his emotions, he strode forward until Cecilia laid her hand upon his arm.

Benedictus stopped, and clasped his hand upon his averted head.

"Arthur, we must take refuge from this storm. The wind is rising. It is not safe. You have a duty to perform. You cannot throw away the life to which has been intrusted an important mission. See, here is a deserted hut. When the

storm is past, you shall continue alone, if you so will it. It is not for me to bring fresh pain upon you. I have risked all, in the vain hope that I might aid you. I now see how wild was the dream; how impossible the method. Come!"

Weak and trembling, Cecilia led Benedictus beneath the tumbled ruins of the hut; and as the storm grew fiercer, he adjusted the fallen door to keep out the chilling blasts.

Darkness came down upon them, and distant thunder began to roll as the violence of the storm increased. They could hear the crashing of the falling boughs in the forest. The sweeping branches of a mighty tree unroofed their place of refuge, and a blinding glare of lightning seemed to envelop them in living flame. Cecilia shrank within the protecting arms of Benedictus.

No words were spoken as they huddled close to the wall with only a few bits of broken timbers between them and the fury of the gale, but when the lightning bolts seemed to fall close at hand the man's arms would tighten as the woman's shrinking form drew nearer. In vain Benedictus tried to persuade himself that he was but doing his duty, as a man and a Christian, in thus protecting a woman. Deep in his heart he knew that, in spite of the storm and its dangers, a wild delirium filled his soul as he realized that the one woman of all the world, his life love, lay trembling in his arms. He almost wished that the mighty tree trunks that swayed and groaned about them would fall and crush them. They could not live together; surely it was no sin to be content to die together.

Again the lightning flashed above them, and again the sweeping branches of the great tree swept the ruined hut.

With a startled cry Cecilia turned to speak as Benedictus bent closer above her, and their lips met.

Neither had wished or willed it. It seemed the decree of fate that it should be. Benedictus, worn with vigils and fastings, ceased to struggle against the human.

How long that close embrace con-

tinued they never knew. The storm had partially subsided. The rain had ceased, and only now and then the reflected brilliancy revealed the wreck and ruin about them. Just as one of these fitful gleams lit up their surroundings, Benedictus looked up and met the steely glitter of Brother Correntian's eyes, fastened upon them through a rift in the shattered boards of the hut.

With a wild cry, Benedictus sprang from the shelter. In an instant his hands were about Correntian's throat.

"Arthur! Remember!" came to him, close by, as a hand was laid upon his shoulder. He relaxed his grasp, and waited for Correntian to speak.

"I have followed you with a forgotten missive," said the austere brother; "but since you have laid violent hands upon me, I demand that you return to the abbot. He shall deal with you as he will. And as for you," he continued, turning towards Cecilia, "mild mannered, kind hearted, and gentle Angelo, you know your fate."

Through the darkness, without a word, they returned to the monastery, and rang the bell at the outer gate. Soon the flickering of lights, here and there, told that the brothers of the order had been summoned for a meeting.

Before a crucifix, set in its niche upon the wall, Benedictus knelt in prayer for guidance, until a touch upon his shoulder warned him that he must appear before his accuser and his judges. In long, solemn rows they sat rigidly upon the stiff backed benches, their faces set and stern in the flickering light of the torches that filled the vaulted room with clouds of brooding smoke.

"You know of what you are accused?" asked the abbot.

Benedictus bowed his head.

"You, whose novitiate was such that it was deemed fitting to call you Benedictus, the blessed, have brought shame and disgrace upon us. What have you to say?"

Benedictus raised his head as though to speak. Meeting the cruel eyes of Correntian, he paused, then dropped his gaze and remained silent.

"That you have done much to con-

quer this passion, I believe," continued the abbot. "That your temptation was a trying one, I realize. It is not meet that your sufferings and struggles should go unrecognized. You have a mission to perform. Go. Your error has made delay which even now may lead to disaster; and that you may the more speedily perform your duty, go alone. Attend to your mission and return. Meanwhile, we shall consider, in solemn conclave, our duty to God, and afterwards our duty towards you."

Benedictus lifted his head slowly until his fearless eyes met those of the abbot. Then he said deliberately:

"And what of her?"

A smothered exclamation burst from the monks around him, and excited whispers told that they believed their leniency had been outraged.

"You know the law," replied Augustine sternly.

With a smothered imprecation, Benedictus rushed from the room. Cecilia was kneeling where he had knelt, before the crucifix.

"Come!" he hissed. "No words!"

Seizing her by the arms, he led her by one passage and another, unseen, to a heavy door studded with bosses of iron. Down the cold staircase he carried her, almost roughly, and again through winding passages, through the vaults of the monastery. A heavy oaken door was torn open. Cecilia was thrust within, and the key turned in the lock.

Through the iron grating of the door Benedictus whispered hoarsely:

"They believe us guilty, in their ignorance of our temptation and its subjugation. They would not have believed the truth. Fear not. I will return. Whatever may happen, make no outcry. Sleep, if you can; then count the moments until I return."

Then he rushed back, in time to meet the brothers coming from the council chamber. Passing the Abbot Augustine, Benedictus knelt; but the abbot said, with sorrowful voice:

"I cannot bless you, my son, until the fear of God and the confessional have purified you and lifted you above your sin." Go. Pray and strive."

Benedictus rushed through the gateway, and plunged madly along the road. He did not even glance toward the deserted hut, but sped onward as though pursued. By nightfall of the next day, exhausted and footsore, he reached his destination, and performed his mission. Entreaties that he should rest and refresh himself availed naught. A glass of milk and a few bits of bread were forced upon him, and again he fled, with bruised and trembling feet, along the roadway. All night long, with struggling breath, he strove to keep up; but just as the gray dawn was pearly in the east, a broken branch across his path threw him headlong, and when he opened his eyes the sun was high in the heavens.

Refreshed by a few crumbs of bread and by the water from a running stream, he hastened on, and soon the scene of his temptation appeared before him.

"Here I will pray. Here I will pledge anew my penitence and faith," he said, kneeling among the storm swept ruins.

Holding before him his brass crucifix he prayed aloud:

"O Christ of the five wounds, to whom belongs the life we make or mar, strengthen my resolve to live for Thee alone! Thou hast said, 'Teach me Thy will, that I may hold no longer precious the things of this life.' In the communion of souls, beyond the grave, the sorrows of earth are but the shadows of a day. Grant me the strength to do Thy will."

At the monastery all was quiet and reposeful, and Benedictus knew that they believed Cecilia had escaped. He sought the abbot at once, and made known to him the result of his mission. Augustine was surprised at his speedy return, but believed it due to the zeal of the young monk to atone for his error, and therefore made small comment.

"Meet us tonight in the council chamber," said the abbot as Benedictus turned away.

As soon as he could do so unobserved, Benedictus hastened to the stone stairway, and felt his way along the passages until he came to the door behind which he had placed Cecilia. His eyes

had not yet become accustomed to the darkness, so he felt along the casement for the great key, which had fastened the door. The hook upon which it had always hung was gone. Cold beads of perspiration started out upon his forehead as he sought the iron grating.

It was covered with a heavy oaken panel, so securely fastened that only the complete demolition of the door could remove it.

Benedictus sank limp and nerveless to the stones, uttering but one word: "Correntian!"

Stunned and hopeless, the power of action left him for a time. Then with frenzied struggles he began to tear at the heavy oaken door, regardless of his bruised fingers and their broken nails, torn to the quick. It was like tearing at solid rock.

He turned to renew his efforts, and the clink of metal against the stones caught his ear. He must speak to her. What fate was in store for him after the meeting in the council chamber he knew not. He must open the door now. He seized the brass crucifix from the stones, and holding it in both hands high above him, knelt adoringly. Then, pressing it hard against his lips with a silent prayer, he tore it from its fastenings at his girdle, and began to dig away the corner of the door with its sharp edges.

Little by little, as a rat gnaws his way

to liberty, Benedictus could feel the oaken corner growing thinner and thinner, until at last, exerting all his strength, a piece of jagged oak was pushed away from the inside, leaving a ragged opening just large enough to admit his hand. Bending to the opening, he called breathlessly:

"Cecilia!"

No answer came from within.

"Cecilia," he called again. "I am here. It is I, Arthur."

It seemed to him that a faint sigh reached him. With the crucifix, he began to dig again at the door, until the opening would admit his arm.

He reached through, and moving his hand to and fro across the stones, felt Cecilia's hand, still warm. The fingers seemed to flutter in his grasp, as though attempting to return his pressure; then they relaxed, and lay lifeless in his palm.

When the brothers met in the council chamber that night, Correntian waited until all was silent, then said: "Brethren, follow me."

The monks filed down into the vaults beneath the monastery, and unfastened the door which separated the two lifeless forms in the habit of the order. Upon their dead, clasped hands rested a brass crucifix, bent and twisted so that the figure upon it seemed to writhe in the dreadful agony of Calvary.

THE MOUNTAIN.

GIRT by a meadow
Mirthful in flowers,
Yonder a mountain
Mightily towers.

Heaven his firm comrade
Through smile or frown,
Moonlight his mantle,
Starbeams his crown,

Grand gales to bear him
Homage unsought,—
Still would he languish
But for the thought

That far beneath him,
Hauntingly sweet,
Daisies and buttercups
Break at his feet!

Edgar Fawcett.