

By the Shrine of Saint Cuthbert

By H. Pease

The bells were ringing to evensong in the great cathedral dedicated to Saint Cuthbert, that stands like a fortress on its rock above the murmuring Wear—

'Half house of God, half castle 'gainst the Scot'—

in the windy dusk of a November evening.

The people of the saint, however—the 'Haliwer folc,' the 'folk of the Holy Man'—were few in attendance that afternoon, and the great nave seemed very empty as I sat down in a seat in front of the 'Galilee' beside the north door of entry.

I looked about me and admired the mighty Norman pillars diapered and fluted with exceeding skill by the great master builders of old, who built to, even as their great duke swore by, the 'Splendour of God.' My eye wandered upward and rested upon the great chevrons resembling sword-cuts that seemed deep-hacked within the rounded arches of the Triforium. Thence onward my gaze fluttered like a butterfly and rested upon a leering corbel, which seemed to scoff at priest and priest-craft with protruding tongue. The mighty stone roof soaring aloft—a ship's keel upturned—drew my eye eastward to the choir; there on the great east window, rose-shaped and many-coloured, the invading dusk gathered like water-drops upon the panes, and wove its dun mantle over them. The anthem now pealed along the roof, lapping capitals, corbels, and pillars in a tide of sound that swept unresisted through the wide spaces of the cathedral.

As the echoing song grew fainter, and ebbed away into the twilight shadows, my gaze returned to my immediate surroundings, and rested unconcernedly upon a man sitting a seat or two in front of me, beside one of the massive piers. He seemed to be in a most distressed and nervous condition, for he peered about him with an evident alarm, which was pitiful to witness. As he turned his face about I saw it was haggard with fear and sorrow, or remorse; his hair was matted, and beads of sweat were thick upon his brow.

It was as if he were terrified of impending danger. Yet what could he be afraid of in the great calm of the solemn cathedral? The benediction had been given, and the sparse congregation had now risen and was slowly departing, yet he rose not, but seemed to be hiding from view as he crouched behind the form front of him, and edged his way slowly within the shadow of the heavy pier to his left hand.

I sat on listening to the voluntary, and it me held by its strangeness. I knew that the Dean Chapter's organist was away on holiday, and I wondered who the strange player might be who was setting forth his own soul in the notes of the pealing organ. He sang of fellowship, of comradeship in ancient days through stress of adventure and deadly combat; then with organ sobs that shook the heart, of death and the infinite loneliness of death, and of the inappeasable sorrow of the survivor lamenting his Jonathan. A pause of black silence. Then brokenly a little sigh of life began to re-arise—a growth of hope—the fierce determination of revenge—quickenings with flame—breaking into triumph.

And now as the lights were being turned out, and gloom came rushing in upon the empty spaces of the cathedral I saw the unhappy figure shift indecisively as he rose from his seat in front of me, glance hurriedly about as if for a way of escape, then moving unsteadily round the

pier, to my surprise he shuffled off in the direction of the organ. The music seemed to fascinate him, to paralyse his will, even as the sphex paralyses its victim with its sting.

The organist was now engaged upon the coda of his fugue; the former motifs were rehearsed—love, sorrow, and revenge. Triumph resounded from the loft when I heard above the quickening notes a sudden patter of heels across the nave; then a pitiful drumming of fists upon the barred door that led into the east corner of the cloisters. Knowing that escape that way was now impossible for the distracted man, and feeling pity for him, I crossed the nave and followed after him in the gloom. As I drew near I heard him flee again—down the south aisle to the other door of the cloisters. Here once more he shook unavailingly upon the latch, and drummed pitifully with his fists. There was a scrabbling with nails on the oaken door—then a cry of anguish smote on my ear. An awful terror evidently had him in grip.

He rushed wildly on again—on—on to the only remaining door of escape into the northern close. Suddenly the music stopped on a throb of joy. The shock caused me to halt. As I started again to walk towards the door I heard no longer the miserable patter of feet in front of me. I was just about to reach out a hand to feel for the latch in the darkness when I stumbled over an obstacle on the pavement. I knelt down and felt about with my hands: I found a man's body lying inert at my feet.

God in Heaven! The darkness seemed to buffet me upon the ears. I heard a vague cry escape my lips, for the fugitive's hand had dropped from mine with a thud upon the stone. *The man was dead.*