

THE SILENT MASS OF THE SHADES.

By Anatole France.

(Translated from the French by Henri Pene Du Bois.)

This is what the sacristan of the Church of Saint Eulalia, at Neville-d'Aumont, related to me under the trellis of the White Horse Tavern, one beautiful winter evening, while drinking a bottle of wine to the health of a man whom he had carried to earth in the morning, with honor, under a cloth studded with beautiful silver tears.

"My poor father was a grave-digger. He had an agreeable mind, and this was doubtless an effect of his profession, for it has been observed that people who work in graveyards have a jovial temperament. Death does not frighten them; they never think of it. I, sir, go into a graveyard at night as calmly as under the trellis of the White Horse. And if, peradventure, I meet a ghost, this does not frighten me, because I consider that he has a right to attend to his affairs as I attend to my own. I know the habits of the dead and their characteristics. I know on this subject things that the priests themselves do not know. And if I told all that I have seen you would be astonished. But all truth is not good to tell, and my father, who liked to tell things, has not revealed a twentieth part of what he knew. To make things even, he repeated often the same tales, and he must have related a hundred times, at least, Catherine Fontaine's adventure.

"Catherine Fontaine was an old maid, whom he remembered to have seen when he was a child. I should not be astonished if there were still in this country at least three old men who remember having heard speak of her, for she was well known and of good renown, although poor. She lived at the corner of the Rue aux Nonnes, in the tower which you may see now, and which is an addition to an old mansion hall destroyed and overlooking the Ursulines' garden. There are half-effaced figures and inscriptions on this tower. The deceased cure of Saint Eulalia, M. Lavasseur, assured me that these inscriptions said in Latin that love is stronger than death. This, he said, was understood to be divine love.

"Catherine Fontaine lived alone in that little tower. She was a lace-maker. You know that the laces of our country were formerly celebrated. She was not known to have parents or friends. It was said that when she was eighteen she loved the young knight d'Aumont-Clery, to whom she was secretly betrothed. But good people would not believe it, and they said it was a tale which had been imagined because Catherine Fontaine had the air of a lady rather than of a working girl, because she retained under her white hair the remains of a great beauty, because she had a sad air, and wore on her finger one of those rings which the goldsmith decks with two clasped hands, and because it was a custom in former times for engaged people to exchange such rings. You will know in a moment what truth there was in this story.

"Catherine Fontaine lived in piety. She went to the churches, and every morning, in any weather, heard the six o'clock mass at Saint Eulalia.

"Well, one night in December, when she was in bed in her room, she was awakened by the sound of the bells; doubting not that they were ringing the first mass, the pious girl put on her clothes and went into the street, where the night was so dark that one could not see the houses and not one light showed itself in the black sky. And there was such silence in this darkness that not one dog barked in the distance, and that one felt in it separated from all living creatures. But Catherine Fontaine, who knew every stone on which she pressed her feet, and who could have

gone to the church with closed eyes, reached without trouble the corner of the Rue aux Nonnes and of the Rue de la Paroisse, where stands the frame house wearing a tree of Jesse carved on a big pillar. At this place she saw that the doors of the church were open and that a great clearness of tapers came from it. She continued to walk, and having passed through the porch, she found herself in a numerous assembly which filled the church. But she recognized none of the congregation, and she was surprised to see them dressed in velvet and brocade, with feathers in their hats, and wearing their swords in the fashion of former times. There were lords who held tall canes, and ladies wearing lace hats held by diadem combs. Chevalliers of Saint Louis extended their hands to these ladies, who hid under their fans faces which were painted, of which one could see only the powdered temples and patches near the eyes. And all went to their places without noise, and one heard, while they walked, neither the sound of their steps on the slabs nor the rustling of stuffs. The aisles were filled with a crowd of young artisans in brown waistcoats, short trousers, and blue stockings, who held by their waists young girls who were pretty, pink, and lowered their eyes. And near the fountains of holy water peasant girls in red skirts and laced bodices sat on the floor with the tranquility of domestic animals, while young men standing behind them opened big eyes and rolled their hats in their fingers. And all these silent faces seemed to stand there for eternity in the same thought, soft and sad. Kneeling at her customary place, Catherine Fontaine saw the priest advance toward the altar, preceded by two altar boys. She recognized neither the priest nor the boys. The mass began. It was a silent mass, where one could not hear the sound of lips that moved nor the tintinnabulation of the bells. Catherine Fontaine felt that she was under the look and the influence of her mysterious neighbor, and, having looked at him without hardly turning her head, she recognized in him the young chevalier d'Aumont-Clery who had loved her and who had died forty-five years before. She recognized him by a mole under his left ear, and especially by the shadow which his long black eyelashes made on his cheeks. He wore the hunting habit, red with gold braid, which he wore the day when, having met her in the Saint Leonard wood, he asked her for a drink and took a kiss. He had retained his youth and his good looks. His smile revealed teeth of a young wolf. Catherine said to him in a low voice:

"My lord, who were my friend and to whom I gave what is dearest to a girl, may God keep you in His grace! May He inspire me with regret for the sin that I have committed; for it is true that, in spite of my white hair and the nearness of death, I do not yet repent for having loved you. But, my handsome lord, tell me who are these people dressed in the fashion of old times who are listening here to the silent mass?"

"The chevalier d'Aumont-Clery replied, with a voice feebler than a breath and yet clearer than crystal:

"Catherine, these men and women are souls of Purgatory who have offended God by sinning as we did, but who are not, for that reason, separated from God, for their sin was, like ours, without malice.

"While separated from those whom they loved on earth, they are purified in the fire of Purgatory. They suffer the ills of absence, and this is their most cruel suffering. They are so miserable that an angel in heaven takes pity on their love trouble. With the permission of God, he reunites every year, for an hour at night, the lovers in their parochial church, where they may listen, while holding hands, to the mass of the shades. Such is the truth. If it is permitted to me to see you before your death, Catherine, this

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