

SAINT CECILIA; OR, THE POWER OF MUSIC

A catholic legend

By Heinrich Vonkleist

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, when iconoclasm was raging in the Netherlands, three young brothers, who all studied at Wittenberg, chanced to meet at Aix-la-Chapelle with a fourth, who had been appointed preacher at Antwerp. They wished to take possession of an inheritance, which had fallen to them by the death of an old uncle, perfectly unknown to all of them, and had turned into an inn, because no one was on the spot to whom they could apply. After the lapse of some days, which they had passed in listening to the preacher's accounts of the remarkable occurrences that had taken place in the Netherlands, it chanced that the festival of Corpus Christi was just about to be solemnised by the nuns of St. Cecilia's convent, which then stood before the city gates. The four brothers heated with fanaticism, youth, and the example of the Netherlands, determined to give the town of Aix-la-Chapelle a spectacle of image-breaking. The preacher, who had been more than once at the head of such enterprises, assembled in the evening preceding the festival a number of young tradesmen and students, devoted to the new doctrine, who spent the night in eating and drinking at the inn. Day had no sooner appeared over the battlements than they provided themselves with axes and all sorts of instruments of destruction, to begin their violent work. Exulting with delight, they agreed upon a signal at which they would begin to knock in the windows, which were painted over with biblical subjects, and, secure of finding a great number of followers among the people, they betook themselves to the cathedral, at the hour when the bells first rang, with the determination not to leave one stone upon another. The abbess, who, as early as daybreak, had been informed by a friend of the peril in which the convent stood, sent several times, but always in vain, to the imperial officer who held command in the town, requesting him to appoint a guard for the

protection of the convent. The officer, who, clandestinely at least, was favorably imposed towards the new doctrine, refused her request, under the pretext that she was merely dreaming, and that not the slightest danger to her convent was to be apprehended. In the meanwhile the hour appointed for the commencement of the solemnities arrived, and the nuns prepared themselves for mass, praying and trembling with the apprehension of approaching events. The bailiff of the convent, an old man, aged seventy, with a troop of armed servants, whom he had posted at the entrance of the church, was their only protection. In nuns' convents, it is well known, the sisters themselves, who are well practised in every sort of instrument, are their own musicians, and they play with a precision, a feeling, and an intelligence, which we often miss in orchestras of men, probably because there is something feminine in this mysterious art. Now it happened, to increase the embarrassment, that the conductress of the orchestra, Sister Antonia, had fallen sick of a nervous fever some days before, and the consequence was, that the whole convent was in the greatest tumult about the performance of a suitable piece of music, to say nothing of the fact that the four profane brothers were already visible, wrapped in mantles among the pillars of the church. The abbess who, on the evening of the preceding day, had ordered the performance of a very old Italian mass, by an unknown master, with which the greatest effect had always been produced on account of its peculiarly sacred and solemn character, and who was now more than ever bent on her purpose, sent again to sister Antonia to know how she was. The nun who took the message, returned with the intelligence that the sister lay in a perfectly unconscious condition and that all notion of her conducting the music must be entirely given up. In the meanwhile, there had already been several very critical scenes in the convent into which more than a hundred impious persons of all ranks and ages, armed with hatchets and crowbars, had gradually found their way. Some of the guards who stood at the portals had been shamefully annoyed, and the nuns, who, engaged in their holy offices, had from time to time appeared singly in the porticoes, were insulted by the most unseemly expressions. At last the bailiff retreated to the

sacristy, and there upon his knees implored the abbess to stop the festival, and to seek the protection of the commander in the city. But the abbess was immovable, insisting that the festival which had been instituted for the honour of the Deity must take its course. She reminded the bailiff that it was his duty to defend the mass, and all the solemnities of the cathedral with life and limb, and as the bell had rang, ordered the nuns, who surrounded her, shaking and trembling, to take an oratorium of some sort or other, and make a beginning by performing it.

The nuns had just taken their places in the organ-loft, the different parts of a composition that had already been frequently played, were distributed, violins, oboes, and bass-voles were tried and tuned, when suddenly Sister Antonia, quite fresh and well, though her face was a little pale, appeared from the stairs. She had under her arm the parts of the old Italian mass, on the performance of which the abbess had so earnestly insisted. To the questions of the nuns, who asked with astonishment whence she came, and how she had so suddenly recovered, she replied, "No matter, friends, no matter!" distributed the parts she had carried, and glowing with enthusiasm, sat down to the organ, to undertake the direction of the excellent composition. This phenomenon was a wonderful and truly heavenly consolation to the hearts of the pious ladies; they at once sat down to their desks with their instruments, and the very embarrassment in which they were placed, had the effect of bearing their souls, as if upon wings, through all the heaven of harmony. The oratorium was played with a musical magnificence of the noblest and highest kind. Not a breath was heard through the benches and aisles, and when the *Salve Regina*, and still more, when the *Gloria in excelsis* was performed, it was as if the whole population in the church was dead. In spite of the four profane brothers and their followers, not so much as the dust on the pavement was disturbed, and the cloister remained standing till the end of the "Thirty Years' War," when it was secularized by virtue of a clause in the "Treaty of Westphalia."

Six years had passed, and this occurrence had been long forgotten, when the mother of the four youths came from the Hague, and mournfully alleging that they had completely disappeared, instituted judicial inquiries with the magistrates of Aix-la-Chapelle, to learn what road they had taken from the city. The last account that had been received of them in the Netherlands, where they purposely resided, was, as she said, contained in a letter which the preacher had written to his friend, a schoolmate at Antwerp, on the eve of a Corpus Christi day. The preacher, with great cheerfulness, or rather wantonness, had closely filled four sides of this letter with the account of an enterprise which he had projected against the Convent of St. Cecilia, and which the mother would not enter upon more particularly. After many vain endeavours to find the persons whom this afflicted lady was seeking, it was at last remembered that seven years ago--at a time which seemed to correspond to the account--four young people, whose country and origin was unknown, had been put in the madhouse, which had been recently erected in the city by the emperor. However, as these persons were affected by religious extravagance, and their deportment--as the court believed it had heard--was exceedingly melancholy, this account seemed to accord so little with the disposition of the sons--which was but too well known to the mother that there was no need for her to attach much importance to it, especially as it was pretty evident that the persons were Catholics. However, as she was struck by many peculiarities which were described to her, she went one day to the madhouse accompanied by one of the messengers of the court, and asked the superintendent to allow her to examine four unfortunate lunatics who were confined there. But who can describe the poor lady's horror, when, on entering the door, she recognised her sons at the very first glance. They were dressed in long black robes, and were sitting round a table, on which was a crucifix. This they appeared to worship, leaning silently and with folded hands upon the board. To the questions of the lady, who had sunk into a chair quite exhausted, as to what they were doing, the superintendents replied, that they were merely occupied in the glorification of the Redeemer, of whose divinity, according to their

own account, they had a clearer knowledge than others. They added that the young men had led this ghost-like life for six years, that they slept little and tasted little, that no sound usually passed their lips, and that it was only at the hour of midnight that they rose from their seats, when, with voices loud enough to shatter the windows of the house, they sang the Gloria in excelsis. The superintendents concluded with the remark that the young men enjoyed perfect bodily health, that a certain serenity, though of a very serious and solemn kind, could not be denied them, and that when they heard themselves called mad, they shrugged their shoulders with an air of compassion, and had more than once declared that the good city of Aix-la-Chapelle if it knew what they knew, would cease from all business and likewise devote itself to singing the Gloria round the crucifix.

The lady, who could not support the horrible sight of her unfortunate sons, and who was soon led back tottering to her house, set off on the following morning to Herr Veit Gotthelf, a celebrated cloth-merchant of the city, to gain some intelligence as to the cause of this unfortunate occurrence. She did so because the letter from the preacher mentioned this man, and showed that he had taken a lively interest in the plan for destroying the cloister of St. Cecilia on Corpus Christi day. Veit Gotthelf, the cloth-merchant, who had become a husband and a father since the time, and had moreover undertaken his father's extensive business, received his visitor very kindly, and when he heard the affair that had brought her to him, bolted the door, and having requested her to take a seat, proceeded as follows:

"My good lady, if you will promise to subject me to no legal investigation, I will tell you all, truly and without reserve. I was indeed on intimate terms with your sons six years ago,--yes, we entertained the project which is mentioned in the letter. How the plan, for the execution of which, the most careful preparations were made with truly impious acuteness, proved a failure, is to me utterly incomprehensible. Heaven itself seems to have taken the convent of those pious ladies under its holy protection. For you must know that

your sons had already, as a prelude to some determined action, interrupted divine service by all sorts of ribaldry, and that more than three hundred rascals gathered together within the walls of our then misguided city, and armed with hatchets and links only waited for the signal which the preacher was to make, to level the cathedral with the ground. Directly the music began, your sons, with a simultaneous movement and in a manner that surprised us, suddenly took off their hats; as if overcome by deep inexpressible emotion, they bowed down their faces, and gradually covered them with their hands. At last the preacher suddenly turning round, after an astounding pause, called to us with a loud terrific voice to uncover our heads also. In vain did some of his comrades whisper to him, and sportively jogging him with their arms, desire him to give the concerted signal for destruction, the preacher, instead of answering sank upon his knees, with his hands crossed on his heart, and fervently laying his forehead in the dust, with all his brothers, recommenced the whole series of prayers, that he had before derided. The crowd of miserable fanatics, deprived of their leader, and utterly confounded by the spectacle I have described, remained in a state of irresolution and inactivity till the conclusion of the oratorium, which pealed down wondrously from the organ-loft, and as at this moment several arrests were made by order of the commanding officer, and some wicked fellows who had behaved indecorously, were seized and led off by a guard, the wretched troop had nothing to do but to avail themselves as speedily as possible of the shelter of the crowd that rose to depart, thus to escape from the cathedral. In the evening, after vainly asking several times for your sons at the inn, whither they had not returned, I went with some friends to the convent in a state of the greatest uneasiness that I might make inquiries of the door-keepers, who had assisted the imperial guard. How, noble lady, shall I describe my horror, when I saw the four men as before, with the hands folded, touching the ground with their heads and breasts, as though they had been petrified there--in short, bowed down before the altar of the church with the most intense devotion? In vain did the bailiff of the convent, who came up at this moment, pull them by their cloaks, and shake them by their arms, and

desire them to leave the cathedral, which was already growing quite dark, and in which nobody was left; half-rising in their dreamy fashion they did not listen to him, until he ordered his men to take them up by the arms, and lead them out at the porch. Then, at last, they followed us into the city, though not without sighing, and frequently looking back, with the most heart-rending sorrow, at the cathedral, which shone gloriously behind us in the light of the setting sun. The other friends and I repeatedly, and in the most affectionate manner, asked them what terrible cause could possibly have produced such a thorough change in their minds. They looked kindly upon us, and from time to time, with an expression that still cuts me to the heart, wiped the tears from their eyes. When they had reached their dwelling, they ingeniously fashioned a cross of birchen-twigs, and fixed it in a little pyramid of wax on the large table in the middle of the room between two candles, with which the servant had made her appearance. While the friends, whose number increased hourly, stood by, wringing their hands, and in scattered groups, and speechless with grief, looked at their quiet ghost-like proceedings, they seated themselves down at the table, as if their senses were closed to every other object, and folding their hands, began their devotions. They neither desired the repast, which the servant brought in to regale their companions, according to the orders they had left in the morning, nor afterwards, when night advanced, did they care for the couch which she had set up in the adjoining room, because they appeared weary. The friends, that they might not provoke the anger of the host, who seemed much surprised at the whole proceeding, sat down to a side-table profusely covered, and ate the viands, which had been prepared for a large party, salting them at the same time with their tears. The hour of midnight now suddenly struck, and your four sons, after listening for a moment to the dull sound of the bell, rose from their seats with a simultaneous movement, and while we, laying down our napkins, looked at them, anxious to know what would follow so strange a commencement, they began to sing the Gloria in excelsis in the most hideous and horrible voice. The sound of leopards and wolves, when on an icy winters night they roar at the sky, may be

something like it. The pillars of the house, I assure you, were shaken, and the window-panes smitten by the visible breath from their lungs, rattled and threatened to fall in, as if handfuls of heavy sand were dashed against their surface. At this frightful sight we lost all self-possession, and with hair erect, we darted off in different directions. Leaving hats and cloaks behind us, we dispersed through the neighbouring streets, which in a short time were filled, not with us, but with more than a hundred men who had been awakened from sleep. The people bursting open the hall-door hurried upstairs to the room, to discover the source of these fearful and revolting howls, which seemed to implore the divine mercy, as if from the lips of condemned sinners in the deepest abyss of the infernal regions. At last when the clock struck one, the brothers, without having listened to the indignation of the host, or the exclamations of horror that were uttered by the people, closed their lips, wiped with a handkerchief from their forehead the perspiration which fell upon their chin and breast in large drops, and, spreading out their cloaks, lay down on the floor to rest an hour from such painful labours. The host, who let them take their own course, made the sign of the cross over them as soon as he saw them asleep; and glad to get rid of the infliction, for the time at least, induced the assembled crowd of people, who were whispering mysteriously to one another, to leave the room, under the assurance that the morning would bring with it a salutary change. But, alas! with the first crow of the cock, the unhappy men rose again to recommence before the cross which stood on the table, the same dreary, ghost-like cloister-life, which exhaustion alone had interrupted for the moment. They would receive no assistance nor advice from their host, whose heart was melted at their mournful aspect; they merely asked him to dismiss with kindness their friends, who were in the habit of assembling about them every day. They wished nothing from him but bread and water, and a litter of straw, if possible, for the night, so that the man who used to derive a good profit from their convivial disposition, was now obliged to submit the whole case to the legal authorities, and to request them to remove from his house the four persons, who, without doubt, were possessed of an evil spirit. By

order of the magistrates they underwent a medical examination, and being proved mad, they were, as you know, removed to the lunatic asylum, which the benevolence of our late emperor founded for the benefit of such unfortunate persons within our walls."

This was said by Veit Gotthelf, the cloth merchant, with much besides, which we suppress, as we think we have said enough to give a clear insight into the real state of the case. When he had finished he again requested the lady not to implicate him in any manner, should the case undergo a legal investigation.

Three days afterwards the lady who had been greatly shocked at the account she had heard, took advantage of the fine weather and walked to the convent, leaning on the arm of a female friend, with the mournful purpose of surveying the fearful spot where the Almighty had stricken down her sons, as it were, by invisible lightning. They found the entrance of the cathedral boarded up, because some building was going on, and even with straining were unable to see through the chinks of the boards, any thing but the rosace-window which sparkled magnificently in the back of the church. Hundreds of workmen, who were singing merry songs, were on intricate, lightly-built scaffoldings, occupied in making the towers a good third higher, and in covering the cross and battlements, which had hitherto been only slated, with strong, bright copper, which shone in the sunbeams. A thunder-cloud, completely black, with borders of gold, was behind the building. When it had spoken its thunder over Aix-la-Chapelle, and had darted some ineffectual flashes in the direction of the cathedral, it sank grumbling into the east, dissolved in vapour. It happened that while the ladies were, from the steps of the spacious convent, contemplating the double spectacle, absorbed in various thoughts, a nun who was passing by learned who it was that was standing under the portico. The abbess, therefore, who had heard of a letter respecting the affair of the Corpus Christi day, in the possession of the Netherland lady, immediately sent the sister to her, requesting her to walk up. The Netherland lady, although surprised for the moment, respectfully

complied with the request; and while her friend, at the invitation of the nun, retired to a room near the entrance, the folding doors of the beautifully-formed gallery were thrown open to the visitor who ascended the stairs. There she found the abbess, who was a noble lady, of calm, and even royal aspect, with her foot resting upon a stool supported by dragons' claws. On a desk by her side lay the score of a piece of music. The abbess, after she had desired her visiter to take a chair, told her that she had been already informed of her arrival by the burgomaster. When she had inquired after the state of the unfortunate sons in the kindest manner, and had recommended her to console herself as to their fate, now it was not to be altered, she expressed a wish to see the letter which the preacher had sent to his friend, the schoolmaster, at Antwerp. The lady, who had experience enough to see what would be the consequence of such a step, felt confused for the moment. However, as the venerable countenance of the abbess inspired her with unlimited confidence, and it was by no means credible that she could have any design of making a public use of the contents of the letter, she took it from her bosom, after a short hesitation, and handed it to the noble lady, fervently kissing her hand. Whilst the abbess was reading the letter, she cast a look at the score, which happened to lie open on the desk; and as the cloth merchant's narrative had given her the notion that it might have been the power of music that had turned the brains of her poor sons on that awful day, she timidly turned round, and asked the nun who stood behind her chair, whether that was the composition which had been played in the cathedral on the memorable Corpus Christi day, six years ago. The young nun answered in the affirmative, saying that she remembered hearing of the affair, and that since then, when the music was not used, it was generally kept in the abbess's room. At this the lady, deeply moved, arose and placed herself before the desk, occupied by various thoughts. She looked at the magical unknown signs, with which, as it seemed, some fearful spirit had mysteriously marked out its circle, and was ready to sink into the ground, when she found the "Gloria in excelsis" open. It seemed to her as if the whole terrors of music, which had proved the destruction of her sons, were whirling

over her head; at the mere sight of the score her senses seemed to be leaving her, and with an infinitely strong feeling of humility and submission to the divine power, she heartily pressed the leaf to her lips, and then again seated herself in her chair. The abbess had, in the meanwhile, read the letter, and said, as she folded it up: "God himself, on that wonderful day, preserved the cloister from the wantonness of your misguided sons. The means that He employed may be indifferent to you, since you are a Protestant; indeed, you would hardly understand what I could reveal to you on the subject. For you must know that nobody has the least notion who it was, that under the pressure of that fearful hour, when destruction was ready to fall upon us, calmly sat at the organ, and conducted the work which you there find open. By evidence taken on the following morning, in the presence of the bailiff of the convent and several other persons, as recorded in our archives, it is proved that Sister Antonia, the only one among us who knew how to conduct the work, lay in the corner of her cell, sick, insensible, and without the use of her limbs during the whole time of its performance. A nun who, as a personal relative, was appointed to take charge of her, never stirred from her bedside during the whole morning on which the festival of Corpus Christi was celebrated in the cathedral. Nay, Sister Antonia would herself have confirmed the fact, that it was not she who in such a strange and surprising manner appeared in the organ-loft, had her insensible condition allowed her to be questioned on the subject, and had she not, on the evening of the same day, died of the nervous fever of which she lay ill, and which did not before appear to be dangerous. The Archbishop of Trèves, to whom the occurrence was related, has given the only possible explanation; viz., that St. Cecilia herself performed this miracle, which is at once so sublime and so fearful; and I have received a communication from the pope, in which this explanation is confirmed."

The abbess returned to the lady the letter, which she had merely asked for to gain some further information on a matter which she already partially knew, promising at the same time that she would make no

use of it. Then inquiring whether there were any hopes of her sons' recovery, and whether by money or other assistance she could do any thing towards that end--questions which the weeping abbess, while she kissed her gown, answered in the negative--she kindly shook hands with her, and dismissed her.

Thus ends this legend. The lady, whose presence in Aix-la-Chapelle was not required, deposited with the legal tribunals a small sum for the benefit of her poor sons, and then returned to the Hague, where, in the course of the year, deeply moved by the event which had taken place, she returned to the bosom of the Catholic church. The sons died a calm and happy death, at a late old age, after they had once more sung the "Gloria in excelsis" as usual.