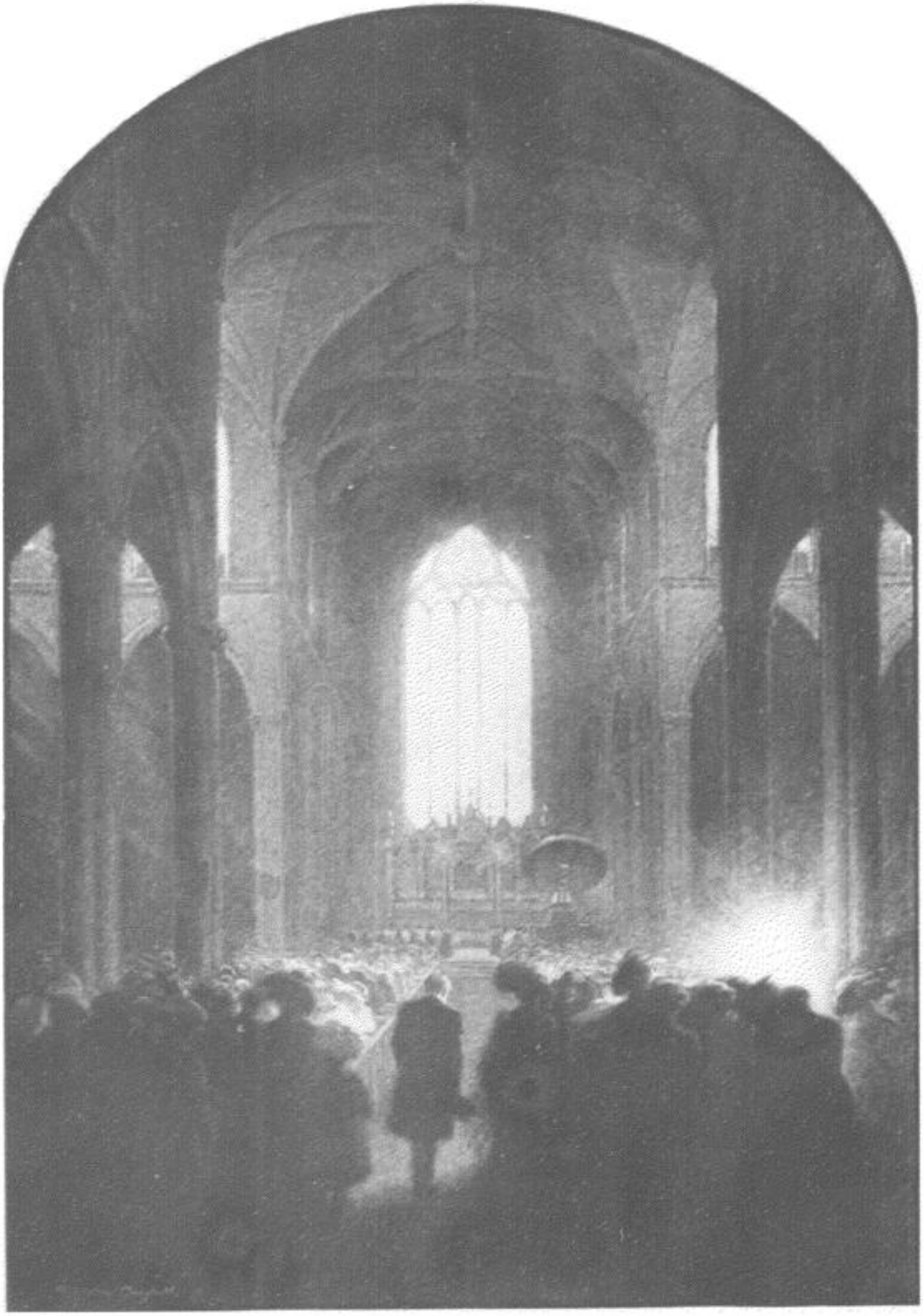
THE STRANGER'S PEW



The Stranger

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BY

Thomas Nelson Page

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THE church-bells were ringing loudly, and the bells of St.——'s Church were giving forth a particularly deep and resonant tone, which set the frosty morning air to throbbing. It was a fine chime, and the parishioners were justly proud of it. The tune the bells rang now was, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." The broad street on which the church faced was full of shining vehicles: automobiles, with fur-clad chauffeurs, and carriages with well-groomed horses prancing in the chill air. The sidewalks, which in the sunshine were covered with a sort of slush

from the now melting snow, were alive with well-dressed men and richly dressed ladies who moved decorously toward the handsome stone portal, above which carven saints, who had lived holy lives, stood in stony repose. With solemn mien the worshippers entered, exchanging with acquaintances tempered salutations or fragmentary bits of news; bowing to the bowing vergers, who obsequiously showed them up the dim aisles to their seats in cushioned pews, where they settled themselves with an air of satisfaction. Each pew contained a plate or card engraved with the name of the owner.

As the congregation passed in, off to one side, in a shadow beneath the gargoyles, which, with satanic rage graved in their stone faces, appeared

as if trying to spring down from the eaves on the heads of the church-goers, stood a person gravely observing those who entered the church. His garb was poor and he was manifestly a stranger in that section. He had come immediately from the lower part of the town where, a little while before, he might have been found in a group about a rusty street-preacher, whose husky voice, as he tried to tell the throng about him of heaven and the kingdom of God, appeared to excite their amusement. Oaths and foul language were freely passed among them; yet when the preacher ended, a few of them moved off with serious faces, and one or two of them stopped and offered their pennies to a blind beggar working at a wheezy accordion. The

stranger joined the preacher and walked away with him as if they had been friends, and when he left him he turned toward St. ——'s, whose bells were just beginning to peal. He accosted one of the passers-by with the words, "Whose church is this?" "This is Doctor ——'s church," said the gentleman as he passed on. The stranger moved a little away—out of the shadow to where the sunlight fell, and looked long and curiously at the building. Another person as he passed him and followed his glance said: "A fine church. It's the finest in the city." The stranger, however, did not appear to hear. He only shivered slightly. His worn clothing was so thin as to appear wholly unsuitable to the winter temperature, and his shoes showed his bare feet through

their gaping sides. His face was grave, and marked as if by want or sorrow. His eyes, deep sunken as with care, were habitually cast down, and his shoulders stooped as though he had long borne heavy burdens. He might, but for his gentle expression, have been a workman out of work, who had known better days, but his countenance, as he talked to some little children who had stopped by him, was kind and gentle, and had something childlike in it. As he stood talking with and enjoying them, a number of the church-goers observed him and, after a consultation, one turned back and said something to the children in a commanding voice, at which they started and ran off, looking back, now at the stranger and now at the gentleman, who still

remained in sight as if to see that his orders were obeyed. The stranger too gazed after the children, as if in a sort of pleasant dream. From this he was aroused by another church-goer with an official mien, who, after a casual glance at him, paused at the threshold and then turned back. In his gloved hand he carried a small gold-headed cane, as fine as a reed, with which he pointed at the stranger as he approached him, and called in a tone of authority: "Don't hang around the church— Go on." So the stranger kept on until he had crossed the street, when he turned just in time to see the gentleman enter the church. As the latter passed a bowing usher he paused to say: "I am expecting friends in my pew to-day —Lord and Lady —— [the name

was lost], so do not show any strangers to it." The usher bowed. Close on his heels came another who said: "No strangers in my pew, they annoy me." "Yes, sir," bowed the usher. At that moment a poor woman, dressed like a widow, in a thin, shabby, black dress, long worn threadbare, and with shoes old and broken, came along, and entering the church stood in the aisle just within the door, timidly waiting to be allowed to sit down in one of the empty pews. The official-looking gentleman passed her, apparently without looking at her; but as he passed a verger he said to him, with a jerk of the head: "Give her a seat; don't let people block up the aisles." The verger turned back and said to the woman, in the same tone the other

had used: "Sit there, and don't block up the aisle." He indicated a seat in a pew near the door, and she sat down coughing. Her cough was bad, and it appeared to irritate the verger. Every time he returned from showing some one to his pew he kept looking at her with an expression of disapproval, and presently he walked up to her and said: "You had better sit in that side-pew. Perhaps you will not cough so much there." He pointed to the first pew at the side, under a gallery. The widow thanked him, and, trying to stifle her cough, moved to the other seat.

A little later the sound of the processional came through the closed door, and the stranger, outside, returned to the church, and, as if half timidly, entered the vestibule by a

door beside the main entrance. The vestibule was empty. He stopped long enough to read the inscription on a memorial tablet, declaring that the church was erected to the glory of God, and in memory of some one whose name was almost indecipherable. Then he glanced at the list of pew-holders, in a gilded frame, containing many names, though there was still room for others. He tried to open the heavy middle door, but it appeared to have caught fast; for a drop of blood trickled down as he stopped and gazed around. Finally, after some apparent irresolution, he entered the church by a small door at the side of the vestibule. The church was a large one and very richly ornamented. The fine, stained-glass windows represented a number

of scenes taken from Bible history, most of them, indeed, from the life of our Lord—there was the annunciation; the scene in the stable at Bethlehem; the healing of Jairus's daughter; the raising of Lazarus; and over the high altar, on which burned brightly a number of candles, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The church was so large that even with the congregation that had entered, many of the pews were yet unoccupied. In one or two of them was a card bearing the word: "Reserved." The congregation was praying as he entered—at least, some were; the priest was reading a confession, and they were following the words, some as they gazed around, others with bowed heads. Near the door, in pews, were a few shabbily dressed persons.

After a glance of interest at the windows, followed by a moment of irresolution, the stranger moved up to where gaped a number of empty pews; but even in the dusk of the church the eye of a verger was too sharp for him, and as he started to take his seat the verger, with a gesture and a word, halted him. "These pews are all taken—you must stand till after the second lesson." He indicated the open space near the door, and the stranger, as if abashed, moved haltingly back. It was the first time he had showed a lameness. He stood near the door while the service proceeded, and listened to the fine choir singing and chanting to the strains of a great organ, wonderfully played. Once or twice vergers came silently down the aisle, when some

one of the congregation entered late, and rather scowled at him for standing in the way. But when the "second lesson" was ended, the verger either forgot the stranger, or missed him; so he continued to stand, though from his expression he appeared to suffer from pain, and now and then shifted his pose wearily. Only once he smiled. It was when, after a telling notice of the needs of the parish by the white-robed priest, and a high tribute to the generosity of the people, a company of gentlemen in kid gloves passed down the aisles, with large silver platters, and took up the offertory, while the well-trained choir sang a voluntary of much intricacy—a part of which ran, "How beautiful are the feet of them who bring the glad tidings!"

and as one of the collectors passed near him, the old woman in black, with the bad cough, tremblingly put in two cents. The collector wore a set and solemn expression of severe virtue, quite as he had done outside the church when he had ordered the little children off. But the stranger smiled at the old widow. The old woman caught his eye upon her and, moving up a little, made a place beside her which he took with a smile of thanks. As he passed the collector he reached out his hand over the plate, but whatever he put in it fell so softly as to make no sound. The collector turned without looking at him and placed his hand mechanically over the plate to press down the loose notes. Just then the choir ceased singing, the collectors formed

in line and marched up the aisle, standing in a line while the collection was poured jingling from one plate into another. Then the priest received it, turned and marched to the altar, and while he held it aloft the congregation sang, "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." The old woman stood up, but could not sing; she only coughed.

When the service was over the congregation, fur-clad and cheery, poured out of the church, greeting each other with words or smiles somewhat measured, entered their luxurious vehicles, and drove off. The stranger in the pew near the door, with a smile of thanks as the poor widow, with her racking cough, passed quietly out, followed her and

crossing the way stood for a moment in the shadow, as if observing the congregation; then, as the vestryman who had ordered him off before the service appeared, he turned and disappeared in the direction which the widow had taken toward the poorer part of the city. She was picking her way slowly along the sidewalk when she heard his voice, offering his arm to support her. Her shoes were old and worn in holes, and let in the icy water; but she appeared not to mind it. Her interest was in the stranger.

"Why, you are almost barefooted!" she exclaimed in a pitying voice.

"Not any more than you," he smiled.

"Why, your feet are actually bleeding!" she argued.

"Old hurts," he answered her. "The church was cold."

"Yes, it was cold near the door," she coughed. "You must come in and let me see what I can do for you."

He smiled his thanks.

"You must come in and let me make you a cup of hot—something, I will make up my fire at once." She was going to say "hot tea," but she remembered she was out of tea.

"A cup of water would do for me," said the stranger.

She was at her door now, and her hands were cold as she fumbled at the lock, and as she turned after entering to call him in, he had disappeared. She made her way up to her little, cold, back room and sat down, shivering and quite out of breath. The coal was out, so she could not

make a fire, but she wrapped herself up as well as she could and presently forgot her cold and hunger in sleep.

As the official-looking man lifted his hand on his way home his wife said, "Why, your hand has blood on it!"

He glanced at it with annoyance. "It must have come from that money. I thought that person's hand was bleeding."

"Whose?" demanded his wife.

"Oh, a stranger who was hanging around the church."

It was not long afterward that, in the poor part of the little town, in a very small and dingy house, and in a little back bedroom of that house, a sick woman lay dying. The doctor who had attended her, sent by a

charity organization connected possibly with St. ——'s, had just left her side and stood on the little dark landing outside the door, which was slightly ajar, speaking in a professional tone to a white-habited nurse, who also had been furnished by the charity organization.

"Well, there is nothing further to be done," he said as he drew on his right glove.

"No, sir."

"How long did you say the coma has lasted?"

"All day."

"She will not rally again. You know what to do when it is over?"

"Yes, sir." It was all professionally kind.

Just then a murmur came from the dying woman within, and nurse and

doctor, moved by professional instinct, stepped softly back to the bedside. Some change had taken place in the patient. Her worn face had changed. A new light had fallen on it. "He is coming!" she murmured. "Oh, the glory!—You!" she exclaimed. "You!—Lord— It was nothing— How beautiful are the feet!"

Her head turned slightly on the pillow, and a subtle smoothing came over her face. The doctor instinctively laid his hand on her. "She is gone," he said; "I knew she would." But he little knew how.