

17.

LIGHT OVER BYWELL

NARRATOR And as the flood of years moves on
Just as that other flood, the Tyne,
Which circles round us here, has moved
Throughout the centuries. From earliest dawn
of time, since glaciers gorged their way
Through Peaninè's folds, and to the Northern Sea
Has rippling Tyne meandered round our Church.
How many are its moods, how strange its whims
Which sends it smiling smoothly on a summer day
And raging angrily, when winter's grasp
Descends upon our Bywell countryside.
To such a time as this we now return,
Two hundred years, or near, slip swiftly by,
See in this snug warm church a different scene,
Witness the water glinting in the nave,
Moss on the pillars, earth on chancel steps.
Feel in the air the dankness, smell the
Slime which shimmers in the slanting candle's rays.
Sense in the glistening gloom the woes and fears
Born on a flood of Bywell people's tears.

(The organ swells and continues to play as a verger
emerges from the vestry, and begins to brush away
imaginary pools of water from the Acting Area.
He takes the opportunity of moving the chair away
from the Area. He stoops, leans on his broom and
shakes his head, as Thomas Bewick, a fashionable
young man of 18 enters from the West door.
The year is 1771:)

BEWICKE Well Thomas Greenwell, this is a sorry sight.

VERGER It is indeed Mr Bewicke. Two days since the flood went
down, and just look at the mud that's left.

BEWICKE If mud were all we had to worry about the damage would
be slight indeed, but think of all the other things--

VERGER Aye, the dead, God rest their souls --

BEWICKE The houses that have vanished ---

VERGER The graveyard swept away ---

BEWICK The bridge at Newcastle ^{washed} clean into the Tyne, and the new
one at Hexham utterly destroyed.

VERGER A tragedy sir, a tragedy! 1771 will long be remembered
with horror in Bywell. Did I see you here taking refuge
from the flood?

BEWICKE Indeed you did. I was on my way home to Cherryburn Farm
at Mickley, but the tracks were like torrents, so I
turned aside here at Bywell. At first I rode my horse
to the stables at the Hall, but the water was already
a foot deep there, and the horses were being led into
the church here. So I followed, along with half the
village folk.

VERGER What a time that was, the children crying, the shouting
of the men, the neighing of the horses, and all the time
the roar of the river.

LIGHT OVER BYWELL

BEWICKE I thought we should be safe here, but the water rose and rose. People were standing in the pews, in the pulpit, up in the tower. I took Bonny, my mare, up to the altar itself, else she would have been drowned for sure,

VERGER Aye and-- but hush sir, here comes young Jean from the village.

(A woman in black enters from the West door)
Jean my dear, how are you lass?

JEAN I am as well as the times allow. My father is not here?
(she sits on left rostrum)

VERGER Tom Leighton? No, Are you seeking him?

JEAN Yes I thought he would be here. He will be either here or in Tyne, for he is distraught to the bounds of madness

VERGER Poor Tom.

BEWICKE What ails him Madam? (he goes across to her)

JEAN My brother's child, Mary Leighton, his grandchild, perished in the flood. Only a baby she was poor mite, but he doted on her. I fear for his reason. Not a morsel of food has passed his lips these last two days.

BEWICKE I'm sorry for you Mistress Jean.

JEAN We are not the only ones to grieve, Six Bywell folk were swept away. At least our cottage is left; ten others were dashed to the ground.

VERGER Here is Tom Mistress.

(an old man enters slowly from the vestry. The verger and Jean go up to him, but he motions them away)

TOM Only a child she was, a very babe. Can it be seven months ago I stood here in this very church and saw her christened? Mary Leighton, with a cross of holy water on her forehead. Water! cruel unholy water that swept her to her doom.

(Jean runs forward, kneels and grasps his hand
he shakes her off)

O Lord, here I am, old, useless, worthless. My life has run its span, my days are done.

(he turns his back to the congregation, hands upraised)
Take me! Give back young Mary to my son and take me in her stead.

(he covers his face, then turns to face the congregation again)

There she lay sweetest innocent in Bywell, crooning in her cradle, laughing at the wind, and chuckling when the rain drove through the roof and trickled down her face.

And then - the roar, the crashing waves, the cries of terror, and the cradle lifted high aloft and carried off - and I am left behind.

(He moves forward and falls on his knees on the right rostrum)

LIGHT OVER BYWELL

TOM cont. Oh my God, if only I could look once more upon her face, what praises would I not bestow upon Thee!

(He remains in prayer. The organ plays softly. Bewicke crosses to the vergers. They confer, then approach the old man. The music swells and then stops with a sudden chord. A voice from the West end of the church is heard. It is the voice of Mrs Leighton, Mary Leighton's mother)

Mrs LEIGHTON Father! Father! Mary is alive She's alive!
(The mother comes down the aisle, carrying a cradle-
The actual cradle can be obtained from Trinity House in Newcastle.

Bewicke and the vergers start back in surprise. Tom rises slowly and peers in unbelief. As the mother reaches the Acting Area she puts down the cradle, puts her arm round Tom's neck and kisses him. Jean rises.)

Mrs Leighton Father, its your grandchild, Mary.

TOM Mary? Mary is drowned.

Mrs L We thought she was drowned. She was carried away in the cradle, but a miracle happened. The cradle was picked out of the flood waters at the very mouth of the river. Don't you understand Father? Mary's alive.

TOM Mary! Alive!
(He bends down, kneels and looks closely at the child Then rises, mounts the chancel steps and faces the Congregation.
Mary Leighton takes the cradle to Bewicke, Jean and the Verger at the left rostrum.
the organ plays softly as Tom speaks)

TOM Mary alive! My granddaughter back from the grave. Oh my Lord, I promised with an old man's faith, that if I could look on my Mary's face again, I would praise Thee without ceasing. But now, in my great joy, the words cannot come, my tongue is tied. What can an old man say when he sees a child who means everything to him?
(The Actors all kneel, looking up at Tom, who stands erect. He raises his head and his hands, and a tableau is formed as the Commentator says " The Song of Simeon")

COMMENTATOR "Lord now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word:
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel"

(The organ swells. The choir sings "Coventry Carol Hymn" (Oxford Book of Carols)

Mary Leighton picks up the cradle and gives it to Tom. He carries it out. Mary Leighton, the Verger and Bewicke follow him up the nave to the West door. As the hymn ends only the lights above the Acting Area are alight. The Narrator moves down the chancel from the Altar, until he reaches the chancel steps. Slowly he closes the curtains

LIGHT OVER BYWELL

(NARRATOR (cont'd) ---behind him, and then speaks:-)

NARRATOR "And the Light shineth in darkness" (pause)
 Here in our church are all the seekers after light.
 Mingling the past and present in their age-long hunt.
 Saxon in search of peace and life secure.
 Norman intent on finding more than power.
 Youngsters pursuing joy through Scottish raids,
 Veteran who seeks a child's consoling cry.
 We too to-night, inside this ancient church
 Still seek this Christmastide, for peace and love.
 Can it be that our search ends here, at hand?
 Is the light shining now at Bywell, as it shone
 At Bethlehem those many years ago?
 Think, as the past and present ply their search,
 Is not the light they search within this very church??"

(The choir breaks into "How Far is it to Bethlehem?"
 The Narrator draws the curtains apart, revealing
 a Tableau of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.
 Three candlebearers illuminate them.

Down the central and South nave from the West door proceed
 the characters of the play in slow-moving parties:-

1. Down the centre aisle, preceded by one candlebearer
 come Egbert and the messenger.
2. Down the South aisle, preceded by 1 candlebearer
 come Guy, Barnard, and Gurth.
3. Down the Centre Aisle come six children.
4. Down the South Aisle, preceded by 1 candlebearer
 come Tom and Mary Leighton.

The candlebearers stand on the steps of the pulpit
 The six children kneel before the chancel steps
 The remainder assume devotional attitudes.
 As the carol ends, the Narrator says slowly:-)

NARRATOR "And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness
 comprehendeth it not".

COMMENTATOR (clearly and firmly)

Then spake Jesus unto them, saying 'I am the light of the
 world, he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness,
 but shall have the light of life' "

(The choir and congregation sing "Oh come all ye
 Faithful" in descant. The players move up the chancel
 slowly, past the Nativity Group, and into the vestry.
 The candlebearers, the Commentator and the Narrator follow.
 As the Hymn ends, the curtains are slowly drawn, and
 the church is lighted.)

As the congregation leaves the organist might play
 the Prelude on "In Dulce Jubile" (Bach)