Christmas in My Heart® 28

Contents

"Meditation" in a Minor Key

by Joseph Leininger Wheeler

*Twenty-seven years ago (in 1992), our first collection of Christmas stories (*Christmas in My Heart*) rolled off the presses of Review and Herald® Publishing Association in Hagerstown, Maryland. Back then, we had not even an inkling that the modest little 128-page book would end up changing our lives. Nor did we even dream that it would touch so many hearts that it would eventually become the longest-running Christmas story series in America. Neither our publisher nor we had any idea as to what we had just given birth to or that it would live longer than twelve months. No number "1" appeared on the cover to even hint to readers that someday there might possibly be a sequel.*

We thought it was good—how good we should have known when our book editor, Penny Estes Wheeler [no relation], prefaced her first phone call to me with these words: "Joe, the committee has cried its way through your manuscript."

The book's success was foreordained by my mother's love of story, readings, and poetry. An elocutionist of the old school, even when still in high school, Mother could hold audiences in the palm of her hand; at the end, she'd wring them out to dry. I've long felt God preordained me to carry on the story torch after her storytelling days were over.

We have been humbled and often overwhelmed by torrents of unsolicited letters of appreciation for caring enough to create a new Christmas story collection every year. We've never felt personal ownership of the series: from the beginning to this day it has been a God thing—never a Wheeler thing. How amazing that our Lord condescends to partner with the least of His children.

Not long before we sent in our manuscript for our first book, I was convicted that I ought to write a Christmas story of my own. The catalyst was a piece of music I had long loved. As far as I knew, it had no Christmas roots or tie-ins whatsoever. All I knew was that it was so hauntingly beautiful that I could not even listen to it without weeping. It was Massenet's "Meditation," often publicly performed on a violin.

As I wrote my rough draft, I constantly prayed that God would cowrite it with me. Later, Virginia Fagel, a professional violinist and cherished friend, wrote me a letter in which were these words: "Joe, I just finished reading your new story, ' "Meditation" in a Minor Key.' That was such a wonderful story that you and God wrote."

Another serendipity was that Ingrid Vargas, a double major of English and music at Washington Adventist University, asked if she might read the story as it was being written. Since she is a perfectionist, she insisted that every sentence, every paragraph in the story be perfect. She'd even call me up in the middle of the night, grousing that certain lines were not quite perfect. Thanks to divine inspiration and Ms. Vargas's dedicated proofreading, the story approaches the sublime. I have received more mail responses to this story than any other story I have ever written. And thanks to these responses, I have written a new Christmas story for each Christmas collection since then.

I later discovered that "Meditation" was written by Massenet as a musical bridge between the secular and spiritual realms of our lives—hence its emotive power.

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Eight minutes until curtain time, Mr. Devereaux."

"How's it looking?"

"Full house. No. *More* than full house—they're already turning away those who'll accept Standing Room Only tickets."

"Frankly, I'm a bit surprised, Mr. Schobel. My last concert here was not much of a success."

"I remember, sir. . . . The house was barely a third full."

"Hmm. I wonder . . . uh . . . what do you suppose has made the difference?"

"Well, for one thing, sir, it's your first-ever Christmas concert. For another, people are regaining interest—that Deutsche Gramophone recording has all Europe talking. But pardon me, sir. I'd better let you get ready. Good luck, sir."

And he was gone.

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No question about it, he mused as he bowed to acknowledge the applause, the venerable opera house was indeed full. As always, his eyes panned the sea of faces as he vainly searched for the one who never came—had not in ten long years. He had *so* hoped tonight would be different. That package—it hadn't done the job after all. . . .

Ten years ago . . . tonight . . . it was. Right here in Old Vienna. It was to have been the happiest Christmas Eve in his life: was not Ginevra to become his bride the next day?

What a fairy-tale courtship that had been. It had all started at the Salzburg Music Festival, where he was the center of attention—not only of the city but of the world. Had he not stunned concert-goers by his incredible coup? The first pianist to ever win grand piano's Triple Crown: the Van Cliburn, the Queen Elizabeth, and the Tchaikovsky competitions?

Fame had built steadily for him as one after another of the great prizes had fallen to him. Now, as reporters, interviewers, and cameramen followed his every move, he grew drunk on the wine of adulation.

It happened as he leaned over the parapet of Salzburg Castle, watching the morning sun gild the rooftops of the city below. He had risen early in order to hike up the hill to the castle and watch the sunrise. A cool alpine breeze ruffled the trees just above—but it also displaced a few strands of raven black hair only a few feet to his left. Their glances met—and they both glanced away, only to blush as they glanced back. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. But beautiful in more than mere appearance: beautiful in poise and grace as well. Later, he would gradually discover her beauty of soul.

With uncharacteristic shyness, he introduced himself to her. And then she withdrew in confusion as she tied the name to the cover stories. Disarming her with a smile, he quickly changed the subject: What was *she* doing in Salzburg?

As it turned out, she was in Europe for a summer-long study tour—and how his heart leaped when she admitted that her study group was staying in Salzburg the entire week. He made the most of it: before her bus had moved on he had pried from her not very reluctant fingers a copy of the tour itinerary.

And like Jean Valjean's inexorable nemesis, Javert, he pursued her all over Europe, driving his concert manager into towering rages. Had he forgotten that there was the long and arduous fall schedule to prepare for? Had he forgotten the time it took to memorize a new repertoire? No, he hadn't forgotten. The truth of the matter was that his priorities had suddenly changed. Every midweek, in around-the-clock marathons, he'd give his practicing its due—then he'd escape in order to be with Ginevra for the weekend.

They were instant soul mates. They both loved the mountains and the sea, dawn and dusk, Tolstoy and Twain, snow and sand, hiking and skiing, Gothic cathedrals and medieval castles, sidewalk cafes and old bookstores. But they were not clones: in art, she loved Georges de la Tour and Caravaggio whereas his patron saints were Dürer and Hieronymus Bosch; in music, he preferred Mozart and Prokofiev whereas she reveled in Chopin and Liszt.

He knew the day he met her that, for him, there would never be another woman. He was that rarity: a man who out of the whole world will choose but one—and if that one be denied him. . . .

But he wasn't denied. It was on the last day of her stay, just hours before she boarded her plane for home, that he asked her to climb with him the zig-zagging inner staircases of the bell tower of Votivkirche, that great neo-Gothic cathedral of Vienna, paling in comparison only with its legendary ancestor, Saint Stephen's.

Far up in the tower, breathing hard for more than one reason, his voice shook as he took both her hands captive . . . and looked through her honest eyes into her heart—his, he knew, even without asking. She never *did* actually say yes, for the adorable curl of her lips, coupled with the candle-lit road to heaven in her eyes, was her undoing.

The rapture which followed comes only once in a lifetime—when it comes at all.

Then the scene changed, and he stiffened as if receiving a mortal blow, for but four months later, in that self-same bell tower, his world had come to an end. That terrible, terrible night when his nuptial dreams were slain by a violin.

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Ginevra drew her heavy coat tighter around her as the airport limousine disappeared into the night. Inside the opera house she made her way to the ticket counter to ask for directions to her section.

From the other side of the doors she heard Bach's "Italian Concerto" being reborn. . . . She listened intently. She had not been mistaken after all: a change *had* taken place.

Leaning against a pillar, she let the distant notes wash over her while she took the scroll of her life and unrolled a third of it. How vividly she remembered that memorable fall. Michael's letters came as regularly as night following

day: long letters most of the time, short messages when his hectic schedule precluded more. Her pattern was unvarying: she would walk up the mountain road to the mailbox, out of the day's mail search for that precious envelope, then carry it unopened on top of the rest of the mail back to the chalet, perched high on a promontory point 1,600 feet above the Denver plain. Then she'd walk out onto the upper deck and seat herself. Off to her right were the Flatirons massed above the city of Boulder. Front and center below was the skyline of Denver—at night a fairyland of twinkling lights; to the left, the mountains stair-stepped up to 14,259-foot Longs Peak and Rocky Mountain National Park. Then she'd listen for the pines—oh! those heavenly pines! They would be sighing their haunting song . . . and *then* she would open his letter.

So full of romance were her starlit eyes that weeks passed before she realized there was a hairline crack in her heart—and Michael was the cause of it. She hadn't realized it during that idyllic summer as the two of them had spent so much time exploring Gothic cathedrals, gazing transfixed as light transformed stained-glass into heart-stopping glory, sitting on transepts as organists opened their stops and called on their pipes to dare the red zone of reverberating sound.

She finally, in a long letter, asked him point-blank whether or not he believed in God. His response was a masterpiece of subterfuge and fence-straddling, for well he knew how central the Lord was to her. As women have ever since the dawn of time, she rationalized that if he just loved *her* enough—and surely he *did*—then of course he would come to love God as much as she.

So it was that she put her reservations and premonitions aside and deflected her parents' concerns in that respect as well. Michael had decided he wanted to be married in the same cathedral where he had proposed to her, and, as it was large enough to accommodate family as well as key figures of the music world, she had reluctantly acquiesced. Personally, she would have much rather been married in the small Boulder church high up on Mapleton Avenue. A Christmas wedding there, in the church she so loved . . . but it was not to be.

Deciding to make the best of it, she and her family drove down the mountain, took the freeway to Stapleton Airport, boarded the plane, and found their seats. As the big United jet roared off the runway, she looked out the window at Denver and her beloved Colorado receding below her. She wondered: could Michael's European world ever really take its place?

It was cold that memorable Christmas Eve, and the snow lay several feet deep on Viennese streets. Ginevra, ever the romantic, shyly asked Michael if he would make a special pilgrimage with her.

"Where to?" queried Michael. "It's mighty cold outside."

"The bell tower of Votivkirche."

He grinned that boyish grin she loved. "I really *am* marrying a sentimentalist, aren't I? Oh well," he complained good-naturedly, "guess I'd better get used to it. Let's find our coats."

An unearthly quiet came over the great city as they once again climbed the winding staircases of Votivkirche. She caught her breath at the beauty of it all when they

at last reached their eyrie and looked down at the frosted rooftops and streets below. Michael, however, much preferred the vision *she* represented in her flame-colored dress and sable coat.

Then it was . . . faintly and far away . . . that they heard it. They never did trace its origin exactly. It might have wafted its way up the tower from below, or it might have come from an apartment across the way. Ordinarily, in the cacophony of the city, they could not possibly have heard it, but tonight, with snow deadening the street sounds, they could distinctly pick up every note. Whoever the violinist was . . . was a master.

Ginevra listened: transfixed. Michael, noting her tear-stained cheeks, shattered the moment with an ill-timed laugh. "Why you old crybaby, it's nothing but a song! I've heard it somewhere before. I don't remember who wrote it, but it's certainly nothing to cry over."

He checked as he saw her recoil as if he had slashed her face with a whip. Her face blanched, and she struggled for control. After a long pause, she said in a toneless voice: "It's not a song—it's 'Meditation' by Massenet."

"Well, that's fine with me," quipped Michael; "I'll just meditate about *you*."

There was a long silence, and now, quite ill at ease, he shuffled his feet and tried to pass it all off as a joke.

But in that, he failed abysmally: "You . . . you don't hear it at all," she cried. "You just don't. . . . I never hear that melody without tears, or without soaring to heaven on the notes. Massenet *had* to have been a Christian! And, furthermore, whoever plays it like we just heard it played *has* to be a Christian too!"

"Oh, come now, Ginevra. Aren't you getting carried away by a simple little ditty? *Anyone* who really knows how to play the violin could play it just as well. . . . *I* certainly could—and I don't even believe in . . . in God—" He stopped, vainly trying to slam his lips on the words in time, but perversely they slipped out of their own accord.

Deep within the citadel of her innermost being, Ginevra felt her heart shudder as if seized by two powerful opposing forces. Then—where the hairline crack of her heart once was—there was an awful *crack*—and a yawning fault took its place.

The look of agony on her face brought him to his senses at last—but it was too late. She looked at him with glaciered cheeks and with eyes so frozen that he could barely discern the tiny flickering that had, only moments ago, almost overpowered him with the glow of a thousand lovelit candles.

She turned, slipped something which had once been on her finger into his coat pocket, and was gone. So quickly was the act done that at first he failed to realize she was no longer there. Then he called after her and ran blindly down the stairs. Ginevra, however, with the instinct of a wounded animal, found an unlocked stairwell door and hid inside until he had raced down the tower and into the street. Much later, she silently made her way out into a world made glad by midnight bells. But there was no Christmas gladness in *her* heart.

She determined to never see him again. Neither his calls nor his letters nor his telegrams would she answer; writing him only once: "Please do not *ever* try to contact me in any way again."

And he—his pride in shreds—never had.

* * * * *

Never would he forget that awful Christmas when—*alone*—he had to face the several thousand wedding guests and the importunate press with the news that it was all off. No, he could give them no reasons. And then he had fled.

Since he had planned on an extended honeymoon, he had no more concerts scheduled until the next fall. That winter and spring he spent much time in solitude, moping and feeling sorry for himself. By late spring, he was stir-crazy, so he fled to the South Pacific, to Asia, to Africa, to South America—*anywhere* to get away from himself and his memories.

Somehow, by midsummer, he began to regain control; he returned to Europe and quickly mastered his fall repertoire. That fall, most of his reviews were of the rave variety, for he dazzled with his virtuosity and technique.

For several years, his successes continued, and audiences filled concert halls wherever he performed. But there came a day when that was no longer true, when he realized that most dreaded of performing world truths: that it was all over—he had peaked. Here he was, his career hardly begun, and his star was already setting. But *why*?

Reviewers and concert-goers alike tried vainly to diagnose the ailment and prescribe medicinal cures, but nothing worked. More and more the tenor of the reviews began to sound like the following:

"How sad it is that Devereaux—once thought to be the rising star of our age: the worthy successor to Horowitz—has been revealed as but human clay after all. It is as if he represents but a case of arrested development. Normally, as a pianist lives and ages, the roots sink deeper and the storm-battered trunk and branches develop seasoning and rugged strength. Not so with Devereaux. It's as if all growth ceased some time ago. Oh! No one can match him where it comes to razzle-dazzle and special effects, but one gets a bit tired of these when there is no offsetting depth."

Like a baseball slugger in a prolonged batting slump, Michael tried everything: he dabbled in every philosophy or mysticism he came across. Like a drunken bee, he reeled from flower to flower without any real sense of direction.

And "Meditation" had gradually become an obsession with him. He just couldn't seem to get it out of his consciousness. He determined to prove to her that you didn't have to be religious in order to play it well. But as much as he tried, as much as he applied his vaunted techniques and interpretive virtuosity to it, it yet remained as flat, stale, and unmoving as three-hour-old coffee.

He even went to the trouble of researching the tune's origins, feeling confident that it, like much music concert performers play, would apparently have no religious connections whatsoever. In his research, he discovered that "Meditation" came from Massenet's opera *Thaïs*, which he knew had to do with a dissolute courtesan. Aha! He had her! But then, he dug deeper and discovered, to his chagrin, that although it was true that *Thaïs* had a dissolute sexual past, as was true with Mary Magdalene, she was redeemed—and "Meditation" represents the intermezzo bridge between the pagan past of the first two acts and the oneness with God in the third act.

So he had to acknowledge defeat here too.

As for Ginevra, she was never far from his thoughts. But not once would his pride permit him to ask anyone about her, her career, or whether or not she had ever married.

He just *existed* . . . and measured his life by concerts and hotel rooms.

* * * * *

Ginevra too, after the long numbness and shock had at last weathered into a reluctant peace, belatedly realized that life had to go on . . . but just what should she do with her life?

It was during a freak spring blizzard that snowed her in that the answer came. She had been sitting in the conversation pit of the three-story-high massive moss rock fireplace, gazing dreamily into the fire, when suddenly, the mood came upon her to write. She reached for a piece of paper, picked up her Pilot pen, and began writing a poem. A poem about pain, disillusion, and heartbreak. The next day, she mailed it off to a magazine. Not long after, it was published.

She decided to do graduate work in the humanities and in education. She completed, along the way, a master's, and later a PhD; in the process, becoming the world's foremost authority on the life and times of a woman writer of the American heartland. She also continued, as her busy schedule permitted, to write poems, essays, short stories, inspirational literature, and longer works of fiction.

So it was that Ginevra became a teacher: a teacher of writing, of literature—and life. Each class was a microcosm of life itself; in each class were souls crying out to be ministered to, to be appreciated, to be loved.

Because of her charm, vivacity, *joie du vivre*, and sense of humor, she became ever more popular and beloved with the passing of the years. She attracted suitors like children to a toy store. Yet, though some of these friendships got to the threshold of love, none of them got any further: it was as if not one of them could match what she had left behind in Vienna.

The good Lord it was who saw her through: who shored up her frailties and helped to mend the brokenness.

Meanwhile, she did find time to keep up with Michael's life and career. In doing so, she bought all his recordings, and played them often. Yet, she was vaguely dissatisfied: she too noting the lack of growth—and wondered.

One balmy day in late November during the seventh year after the breakup, as she was walking down the ridge to her home, she stopped to listen to her two favorite sounds: the cascading creek cavorting its way down to the Front Range plain and the sibilant whispering of the pines. Leaning against a large rock, she looked up at that incredibly blue sky of the Colorado high country.

As always, her thoughts refused to stay in their neat little cages. She had tried all kinds of locks during those seven years, but not one of them worked. And now, when she had thought them safely locked in, here came all her truant thoughts: bounding up to her like a rag-tag litter of exuberant puppies, overjoyed at finding her hiding place.

And every last one of the little mutts was yelping Michael's name.

What would *he* be doing this Christmas. It bothered

her—had bothered her for almost seven years now—that her own judge had refused to acquit her for her Michael-related words and actions. Periodically, during these years, she had submitted her case to the judge in the courthouse of her mind; and every last time, after listening to the evidence, the judge had looked at her stern-faced. She would bang the gavel on the judicial bench and intone severely: "Insufficient evidence on which to absolve you. . . . Next case?"

She couldn't get out of her head an article she had read several months before—an article about Michael Devereaux. The writer, who had interviewed her subject in depth, had done her homework well: for the portrait of Michael rang true to Ginevra. The individual revealed in the character sketch was both the Michael whom Ginevra knew and a Michael she would rather not know. The interviewer pointed out that Michael was a rather bitter man for one so young in years. So skittish had the interviewee been when approached on the subject of women in his life, that the writer postulated that it was her personal conviction that somewhere along the way Devereaux had been terribly hurt by someone he loved deeply. . . . And here, Ginevra winced. The writer concluded her character portrait with a disturbing synthesis: "Devereaux, his concert career floundering, appears to be searching for answers. But he's not looking in the direction of God. Like many, if not most, Europeans of our time, he appears to be almost totally secular; thus he has nowhere but within himself upon which to draw strength and inspiration. Sadly, his inner wells appear to retain only shallow reservoirs from which to draw. . . . A pity."

A nagging thought returned to tug at her heartstrings: What had *she* done—what had she *ever* done—to show Michael a better way? . . . "But," she retorted, "I don't want him to become a Christian just for *me*!" But this time that oft-used cop out didn't suffice. She kept seeing that stern-faced judge within. . . . In the long, long silence that followed was born a plan of action. If it worked, if he responded as she hoped he might, sooner or later, she would *know*! For inescapably, the secret would "out" through his music.

She determined to implement her plan of action that very day.

Several weeks after Ginevra's decision, Michael had returned to his hotel after a concert, a particularly unsatisfactory one—and it seemed these days that there were more and more of this kind. Even the crowd had been smaller than any he could remember in years. He was increasingly convinced that his career and life were both failures—and that there was little reason to remain living. He went to bed and vainly tried to sleep. After an hour or two of thrashing around, he got up, turned on the light, and looked for the last packet of mail forwarded to him by his agent. There was something in it that intrigued him. Ah! Here it was.

A small registered package had arrived from New York. There was no return address, and he didn't recognize the handwriting on the mailer. Inside was a slim, evidently long-out-of-print book titled *The Other Wise Man* written by an author he had never heard of: Henry Van Dyke. . . . Well, it looked like a quick read and he couldn't sleep anyhow . . .

A quick read it was not. He found himself rereading certain passages several times. It was after three o'clock in the morning when he finally put it down. He was moved in spite of himself. Then, he retired, this time to sleep.

During that Christmas season, he reread it twice more—and each time he read it, he wondered what had motivated that unknown person to send it.

Three months later came another registered packet from New York. It too was obviously a book and, to his joy, another old one. To his relief—for he had an intense fear of God and religion—it did not appear to be a religious book. The author and title were alike unknown to him: Myrtle Reed's *The Master's Violin*. The exquisite metallic lamination of this turn-of-the-century first edition quite took his breath away. *Someone* had spent some money on *this* gift! He read it that night, and it seemed, in some respects, that the joy and pain he vicariously experienced in the reading mirrored his own. And the violin! It brought back memories of that melody, that melody which just would not let him go, that melody which represented the high tide of his life.

It was mid-June, three months later, when the next registered package arrived from New York. This time, his hands were actually trembling as he opened the package. Another book by yet another author he'd never heard of: Harold Bell Wright. Kind of a strange title it had: *That Printer of Udel's*. But it was old and had a tipped-in cover: the combination was irresistible. He dropped everything and started to read.

He was not able to put it down. In it he saw depicted a portrait of Christian living unlike any he had ever seen before: a way of life that had to do not just with sterile doctrine but with a living, loving outreach to one's fellow man. He finished the book late that night. A month later, he read it again.

By late September, he had been watching his mail with great anticipation for some time. What would it be this time? Then it came: another book, first published in 1907, by the same author, with the intriguing title *The Calling of Dan Matthews*. It made the same impact upon him its predecessor had. Nevertheless, Michael was no easy nut to crack: he continued to keep his jury sequestered—he was nowhere near ready for a verdict of any kind.

Early in December arrived his second Van Dyke: *The Mansion*, a lovely lime-green illustrated edition. This book spawned some exceedingly disturbing questions about his inner motivations. Of what value, really, was *his* life? When was the last time he had ever done anything for someone without expecting something in return? For such a small book, it certainly stirred up some difficult-to-answer questions!

March brought a book he had often talked about reading but never had the temerity to tackle: Victor Hugo's forbidding *Les Miserables*: almost 1,500 pages unabridged! He wondered: *Why?* Why such a literary classic following what he had been sent before? He didn't wonder long: the story of Jean Valjean was a story of redemption: the story of a man who climbed out of hell. The first Christ-figure he could ever remember seeing in French literature. By now, he was beginning to look for fictional characters who exhibited, in some manner, Christian values.

At the end of the book was a brief note:

No other book for six months. Review.

He did . . . but he felt terribly abused, sorely missing the expected package in June.

By the time September's leaves began to fall, he was in a state of intense longing. Certainly, after *Les Miserables*, and after a half-year wait, it would have to be a blockbuster! To his amazement and disgust, it was a slim mass-market paperback with the thoroughly unappetizing title of *Mere Christianity*. The author he knew of but had never read: C. S. Lewis.

Swallowing his negative feelings with great difficulty, he gingerly tested with his toes . . . Lewis's Jordan River. As he stepped farther in, he was—quite literally—overwhelmed. Every argument he had ever thrown up as a barrier between him and God was systematically and thoroughly demolished. He had had no idea that God and Christianity were any more than an amalgamation of feelings—for the first time, he was able to conceptualize God with his *mind*!

Whoever was sending him the books was either feeling sorry for making him wait so long—or punishing him by literally burying him in print! He was kindly given two weeks to digest *Mere Christianity* and then began the nonstop barrage of his soul. First came three shells in a row: Lewis's Space Trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. At first, Michael, like so many other readers of these books, enjoyed the plot solely on the science fiction level. Then, he wryly observed to himself that Lewis had set him up: woven into the story was God and His plan of salvation!

The trilogy was followed by Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. How Michael laughed as he read this one! How incredibly wily is the Great Antagonist! And how slyly Lewis had reversed the roles in order to shake up all his simplistic assumptions about the battles between Good and Evil.

A week later: another shell—*The Four Loves*. In it, Michael found himself reevaluating almost all of his people-related friendships in life. That was but the beginning: then Lewis challenged him to explore the possibilities of a friendship with the Eternal.

Two shells then came in succession: *Surprised by Joy* and *A Grief Observed*. At long last, he was able to learn more about Lewis the man. Not only that, but how Lewis, so late in life introduced to the joys of nuptial love, related to the untimely death of his bride. How Lewis, in his wracking grief, almost lost his way—almost turned away from God Himself! Paralleling Lewis's searing loss of his beloved was Michael's loss of Ginevra: relived once again, it was bone-wrenching in its intensity. More so than Lewis's—for he had not Lewis's God to turn to in the darkest hour.

The final seven shells came in the form of what appeared to be, at first glance, a series of books for children: Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. It took Michael some time to figure out why he'd been sent this series last—after such heavyweights! It was not until he was about halfway through that he knew. By then, he had fully realized just how powerful a manifestation of the attributes of Christ Aslan the lion was. By the moving conclusion of *The Last Battle*, the fifteen shells from Lewis's howitzer had made mere rubble out of what was left of Michael's defense system.

Then came a beautiful edition of the Phillips translation

of the New Testament. On the flyleaf, in neat black calligraphy, was this line:

MAY THIS BOOK HELP TO MAKE YOUR NEW YEAR TRULY NEW.

He read the New Testament with a receptive attitude, taking a month to complete it. One morning, following a concert the night before in Florence, he rose very early and walked to the Arno River to watch the sunrise. As he leaned against a lamppost, his thoughts (donning their accountant coats) did an audit of the past three years.

He was belatedly discovering that a life without God just wasn't worth living: in fact, *nothing*, he now concluded, had any lasting meaning divorced from a higher power. He looked around him, mentally scrutinizing the lives of family members, friends, and colleagues in the music world. He noted the devastating divorce statistics, the splintered homes, and the resulting flotsam of loneliness and despair. Without God, he now concluded, no human relationship was likely to last very long.

Nevertheless, even now that he was thoroughly convinced—in his mind—that God represented the only way out of his dead-end existence, he bullheadedly balked at crossing the line out of the Dark into the Light.

The day before Easter of that tenth year, there came another old book, an expensive English first edition of Francis Thompson's poems. Inside, on the endsheet, was this coda to their faceless three-year friendship:

Dear Michael,
For almost three years now,
you have never been out of my
thoughts and prayers.
I hope that these books have come
to mean to you what they do to me.
This is your last book.
Please read "The Hound of Heaven."
The rest is up to you.
Your Friend

Immediately, he turned to the long poem and immersed himself in Thompson's lines. Although some of the words were a bit antiquated and jarred a little, nevertheless he felt that the lines were written laser-straight to him, especially those near the poem's gripping conclusion—for Michael identified totally with Thompson's own epic flight from the pursuing celestial Hound:

Whom will you find to love ignoble thee
    Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
    Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
    All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home.
    Rise, clasp My hand, and come!

These lines broke him . . . and he fell to his knees.

It was the morning after, and Michael awakened to the first Easter of the rest of his life. Needing very much to be alone, he decided to head for the family chalet near Mont Blanc. How fortunate, he mused, that the rest of the family

was skiing at Saint Moritz that week.

Two hours before he got there, it began to snow, but his Porsche, itself born during a bitterly cold German winter, growled its delight as it devoured the road to Chamonix. It was snowing even harder when he arrived at the chalet, where Michael was greeted with delight by Jacques and Marie, the caretakers.

Breakfast was served adjacent to a roaring fire in the great alpine fireplace. Afterward, thoroughly satisfied, he leaned back in his favorite chair and looked out at the vista of falling snow.

He *felt*, he finally concluded, as if sometime in the night he had been reborn. It was as if all his life he had been carrying a staggeringly heavy backpack, a backpack into which some cruel overseer had dropped yet another five-pound brick *each* January 1 of his life, for as far back as he could remember. And now—suddenly—he was *free*! What a paradoxical revelation that was: that the long-feared surrender to God resulted in—not the dreaded strait-jacketed servitude—but the most incredible euphoric freedom he had ever imagined!

Looking back at the years of his life, he now recognized that he had been fighting God every step of the way, but God, refusing to give up on him, had merely kept His distance. He went to his suitcase, reached for that already precious book of poems, returned to his seat by the fire, and turned again to that riveting first stanza:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
    I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
    Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
    Up vistaed hopes I sped;
    And shot, precipitated
Adown Titanic glooms of chastened fears,
    From those strong Feet that followed, followed
        after.
But with unhurrying chase,
    And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
    They beat—and a Voice beat
    More instant than the Feet—
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me!"

He turned away, unable, because of a blurring of his vision, to read on.

"How many *years* I have lost!" he sighed.

Years during which the frenetic pace of his life caused the Pursuing Hound to sadly drop back. Years during which he proudly strutted, wearing the tinsel crown of popularity. And then . . . that flimsy bit of ephemera was taken away and the long descent into the maelstrom had taken place. And it had been in his darkest hour, when he actually felt Ultimate Night reaching for him, that he plainly and distinctly heard his Pursuer again.

For almost three years now that Pursuer had drawn ever closer. There had been a strange meshing: the Voice in the crucifixion earthquake who spoke to Artaban, the Power that defied the Ally in the Dan Matthews story, the Force revealed through the pulsating strings of "mine Cremona," the Presence which—through the Bishop's incredible act

of forgiveness and compassion—saved the shackled life of Jean Valjean, the Angel who showed John Weightman's pitiful mansion to him, Malacandra of the Perelandra story, and Aslan in the Narnia series. As he read "The Hound of Heaven," all the foregoing lost their distinctiveness and merged into the pursuing Hound. They were one and the same!

Michael resonated with a strange new power, a power he had never experienced before. It was as if, during the night, in his badly crippled power station (a generating facility to which, over the years, one incoming line after another had been cut, until he was reduced to but one frail piece of frayed wire that alone kept him from blackout), a new cable, with the capacity to illuminate an entire world, had been snaked down the dusty stairs, and then: *plugged in*.

Then—from far back (even before his descent into hell), two images emerged out of the mists of time: one visual and one aural: the tear-stained face of the Only Woman . . . and the throbbing notes of "Meditation."

Tingling all over, he stood up and walked over to the grand piano always kept in the lodge for his practicing needs, lifted up the lid, seated himself on the bench, and looked up. Humbly, he asked the question: "Am I ready at last, Lord?"

Then he reached for the keys and began to play. As his fingers swept back and forth, something else occurred: for the first time in over nine years, he was able—without printed music—to replay in his mind every note, every intonation, he and Ginevra had heard in that far-off bell tower of Votivkirche. Not only that . . . but the sterility was gone! The current that had been turned on inside him leaped to his hands and fingers.

At *last* . . . he was ready.

* * * * *

Michael immediately discarded the fall concert repertoire, chosen as it had been merely for showmanship reasons, and substituted a new musical menu for the old. Ever so carefully, as a master chef prepares a banquet for royalty, he selected his individual items. In fact, he agonized over them, for each number must not only mesh with all the others, but enhance as well, gradually building into a crescendo that would trumpet a musical vision of his new life.

Much more complicated was the matter of his new recording. How could he stop the process at such a late date? Not surprisingly, when he met with Polygram management and dropped his bombshell, they were furious. Only with much effort was he able to calm them down—and that on a premise they strongly doubted: that his replacement would be so much *better* that they would be more than compensated for double the expected production expense!

He walked out of their offices in a very subdued mood. If he had retained any illusions about how low his musical stock had sunk, that meeting would have graphically settled the question. If his new recording failed to sell well, he would almost certainly be dropped from the label.

Then, he memorized all the numbers before making his trial run recording; this way, he was able to give his undivided attention to interpretation before wrapping up the

process. Only after he himself was thoroughly satisfied with the results did he have it recorded and then hand-carried by his agent to Deutsche Gramophone/Polygram management.

He didn't have to wait very long; only minutes after they played his pilot recording, Michael received a long-distance phone call from the president himself. Michael had known him for years and knew him to be a very tough hombre indeed. Recognizing full well that he and the company lived and died by the bottom line, he was used to making decisions for the most pragmatic of reasons. And recording artists feared him because he had a way of telling the unvarnished truth sans embellishments or grace-notes. And now he was on the line. Initially, almost speechless, he finally recovered and blurted out, "What has happened, Michael? For years now, your recordings have seemed—pardon my candidness, but you know blunt me—a bit tinny, fluffy, sometimes listless, and even a bit . . . uh . . . for want of a better word: "peevish," more or less as if you were irritably going through the motions again, but with little idea why. Now, here, on the other hand, comes a recording which sounded to us like you woke up one morning and decided to belatedly take control of your life and career; that there were new and exciting ways of interpreting music—interpreting with power . . . and beauty . . . and, I might add, Michael . . . a promise of depth and seasoning we quite frankly no longer believed was in you! *What has happened*?"

That incredible summer passed in a blur of activity. The long ebb over at last, the incoming tidal forces of Michael's life now thundered up the beaches of the musical world. Deutsche Gramophone management and employees worked around the clock to process, release, and then market what they firmly believed would be the greatest recording of his career. Word leaked out even before it was released; consequently, there was a run on it when it hit the market. All of this translated into enthusiastic interest in his fall concert schedule.

Early in August, before the recording had been released, Michael phoned his New York agent, who could hardly contain himself about the new bookings which were flooding in for the North American tour, spring of the following year. Michael, after first swearing him to secrecy, told him that he was entrusting to his care the most delicate assignment of their long association—one which, if botched, would result in irreparable damage. The agent promised to fulfill his instructions to the letter.

He wanted of him three things: to trace the whereabouts of a certain lady (taking great pains to ensure that the lady in question would not be aware of the search process); to find out if the lady had married; to process a mailing (the contents of the mailing would be adjusted according to whether the lady had married or not).

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Ginevra played the waiting game—a very *hard* game to play without great frustration. And for her, the frustration level had been steadily building for almost three years. *When* would she know?

Within a year after mailing her first book, she felt reasonably confident that he was reading what she had sent, but she had little data upon which to base her assumptions.

During the second year, little snips of information relating to possible change in Devereaux appeared here and there. Nothing really significant, but enough to give her hope.

She had knelt down by her bed that memorable morning before she mailed Thompson's poems. In her heartfelt supplication, she voiced her conviction that, with this book, she had now done all that was in her power to do. The rest was up to Him. Then she drove down the mountain to the Boulder post office and sent it to her New York relayer—and returned home to wait.

It was several months before the Devereaux-related excitement in the music world began to build. Her heart beat a lilting "allegro" the day she first heard about the growing interest in Michael's new recording. She could hardly wait to get a copy.

Then came the day when, in her mailbox, there appeared a little yellow piece of paper indicating that a registered piece of mail was waiting for her in the post office. It turned out to be a *very large* package from an unknown source in New York.

Not until she had returned to her chalet did she open it. Initially, she was almost certain that one of her former students was playing a joke on her, for, the box was disproportionately light. She quickly discovered the reason: it was jammed full with wadded-up paper. Her room was half full of paper before she discovered the strange-shaped box at the very bottom of the mailing carton. . . . *What* could it be? . . . *Who* could it be from? . . . In this box, obviously packed with great care, were five items, each separated by a hard cardboard divider: a perfect flame-red rose in a sealed moisture-tight container, Michael's new Deutsche Gramophone recording, a publicity poster of a concert program, which read as follows:

MICHAEL DEVEREAUX
FIRST CHRISTMAS EVE CONCERT
VIENNA OPERA HOUSE

(followed by the other data giving exact time and date), a round-trip airline ticket to Vienna, and at the very bottom, in an exquisite gold box—a front section ticket to the concert.

* * * * *

Fearing lest someone in the Standing section take her place before she could reach her seat, during the enthusiastic applause following Bach's "Italian Concerto," Ginevra asked an usher to escort her to her seat in the third row. Michael, who had turned to acknowledge the applause, caught the motion: the beautiful woman coming down the aisle. And she was wearing a flame-red rose. Even in Vienna, a city known for its beautiful women, she was a sight to pin dreams on.

How terribly grateful he was to the audience for continuing to clap, for that gave him time, precious time in which to restore his badly damaged equilibrium. It was passing strange, mused Michael. For years now, both his greatest dream and his greatest nightmare were one and the same: that Ginevra would actually show up for one of his concerts. The nightmare had to do with deep-seated fear that her presence in the audience would inevitably destroy his concentration, and with it the concert itself. And now,

here she was! If he ever needed a higher power, he needed it now. Briefly, he bowed his head. When he raised it, he felt again this new sense of serenity, peace, and command.

Leaving the baroque world of Bach, he now turned to César Franck; being a composer of romantic music, but with baroque connections, Michael had felt him to be a perfect bridge from Bach to Martin and Prokofiev. As he began to play Franck's "Prelude: Chorale et Fugue," he settled down to making this the greatest concert of his career. He had sometimes envied the great ones their announced conviction that, for each, the greatest concert was always the very next one on the schedule—they *never* took a free ride on their laurels. Only this season it had been that he had joined the masters, belatedly recognizing that the greatest thanks he could ever give his Maker would be to extend his powers to the limits, every time he performed, regardless of how large or how small the crowd.

The opera house audience had quickly recognized the almost mind-boggling change in attitude. The last time he had played here, reviewers had unkindly but accurately declared him washed up. So desperate for success of any kind had he become that he openly pandered to what few people still came. It was really pathetic: he would edge out onto the platform like an abused puppy, cringing lest he be kicked again. Not surprisingly, what he apparently expected, he got.

Now, there was never any question as to who was in control. On the second, he would stride purposefully onto the stage, with a pleasant look on his face, and gracefully bow. He would often change his attire between sections: adding a visual extra to the auditory. His attire was always impeccable: newly cleaned and pressed, and he was neither over- nor underdressed for the occasion.

But neither was he proud, recognizing just how fragile is the line between success and failure—and how terribly difficult it is to stay at the top once you get there. Nor did he anymore grovel or play to the galleries. The attitude he now projected was, quite simply: *I'm so pleased you honored me by coming out tonight. I have prepared long and hard for this occasion; consequently, it is both my intent and my expectation that we shall share the greatest musical hour and a half of our lifetimes.*

Ginevra felt herself becoming part of a living, breathing island in time. Every concert performed well, is that: kind of a magic moment during which outside life temporarily ceases to be. Great music after all, is outside of time and thus not subject to its rules. Thus it was that Ginevra, like the Viennese audience, lost all sense of identity as Devereaux's playing became all the reality they were to know for some time.

These weren't just notes pried from a reluctant piano they were hearing: this was life itself, life with all its frustrations and complexities.

With such power and conviction did César Franck speak from the grave that they stood applauding for three minutes at the end of the first half. In fact, disregarding opera house protocol, a number of the younger members of the audience swarmed onto the stage and surrounded Michael before he could get backstage. The new Michael stopped, and with a pleasant look on his face all the while, autographed every last program that was shoved at him. Nay—more than that: as one of these autograph seekers, jubilant of face, came back to Ginevra's row, she saw him

proudly showing the program to his parents. Michael had taken the trouble to learn each person's name so he could inscribe each one personally!

Michael's tux was wringing wet. As for the gleaming black Boersendorfer, with such superhuman energy had Michael attacked it that it begged for the soothing balm of a piano tuner's ministrations; hence it was wheeled out for a badly needed rest. In its place was the monarch of the city's Steinway grands. Michael had specifically requested this living nine feet of history. No one knew for sure just how old it was, but it had for years been the pride and joy of Horowitz. Rubinstein would play here on no other, and it was even rumored that the great Paderewski performed on it. Michael, like all real artists, deeply loved his favorite instruments. Like the fabled Velveteen Rabbit, when an instrument such as this Steinway has brought so much happiness, fulfillment, meaning, and love into life . . . well, over the years, it ceases to be just a piano and approaches personhood. Thus it was that Michael, before it was wheeled in, had a heart-to-heart chat with it.

A stagehand, watching the scene, didn't even lift an eyebrow—concert musicians were *all* a loony bunch.

Only after a great deal of soul-searching had Michael decided to open the second half of his concert with Swiss-born Frank Martin's "Eight Preludes." He had long appreciated and loved Martin's fresh approach to music, his lyrical euphonies. Martin reminded Michael of the American composer Howard Hanson. He often had a difficult time choosing which one to include in a given repertoire; but this season, it was Martin's turn.

More and more sure of himself, Michael only gained in power as he retold Martin's story; by the time he finished the Preludes, he owned Vienna. The deafening applause rolled on and on. And nobody appeared willing to ever sit down.

Finally, the house quiet once again, a microphone was brought out and Michael stepped up to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I have a substitution to make. As you know, I am scheduled to perform Prokofiev's Sonata number 6 in A Major, opus 82, as my concluding number, but I hope you will not be *too* disappointed"—and here he smiled his boyish grin—"if I substitute a piece that I composed, a piece that has never before been performed in public."

He paused, then continued: "Ten years ago tonight, in this fair city, this piece of music was born, but it was not completed until late this spring. I have been saving it for tonight." And here, he dared to glance in the direction of Ginevra.

"The title is . . . 'Variations on a Theme by Massenet.' "

Nothing in Michael's composing experience had been more difficult than deciding what to do with "Meditation." And the difficulties did not fall away with his conversion. He still had some tough decisions to face: Should his variations consist merely as creative side-trips from that one melodic base? By doing so, he knew he could dazzle. Should the variations be limited to musical proof that he and his Maker were now friends? With neither was he satisfied.

Of all the epiphanies he had ever experienced, none could compare with the one which was born to him one "God's in His Heaven / All's right with the world" spring morning: He realized that he could create a counterpart to what Massenet had done with the "Meditation" intermezzo: a fusion of

earthly love with the divine. Belatedly, he recognized a great truth: God does not come to us in the abstract—He comes to us through flesh and blood. We do not initially fall in love with God as a principle; rather, we first fall in love with human beings whose lives radiate friendship with the divine. It is only *then* that we seek out God on our own.

Ginevra was such a prototype—that is why he had fallen in love with her. And he had little doubt in his mind but that it was she who had choreographed his conversion. No one else had he ever known who would have cared enough to institute and carry out such a flawless plan of action. Besides, some of the book choices made him mighty suspicious.

Michael had also recognized what all true artists do sooner or later: that their greatest work must come from within, from known experience. If he was to endow his variations with power akin to the original, they must emanate from the joys and sorrows that made him what he was . . . and since she and God were inextricably woven together in Michael's multi-hued bolt of life, then woven together they must remain throughout the composition.

It would not be acceptable for her to distance herself and pretend she could judge what he had become dispassionately. No, Ginevra must enter into the world he had composed . . . and decide at the other end whether or not she would stay.

In Ginevra's mind, everything seemed to harken back to that cold night in the tower of Votivkirche, for it was there that two lives, only hours from oneness, had seen the cable of their intertwining selves unravel in only seconds.

Furthermore, there was more than God holding them apart. More than her romanticism as compared to his realism. That far-off exchange of words had highlighted for her some significant problems which, left unresolved, would preclude marriage even if Michael *had* been converted. Let's see: How could she conceptualize them?

Essentially, it all came down to these. Michael had laughed at and ridiculed her deepest-felt feelings. Had made light of her tears. Had shown a complete absence of empathy. Worse yet, he exhibited a clear-cut absence of the one most crucial character trait in the universe: *kindness*. Also, at no time since she had known him had she ever seen him admit in any way that he was wrong about anything—and compounding the problem, he had refused to disclose his true identity to her:

There had been a locked door halfway down to his heart.

There had been another locked door halfway up to his soul.

As far as she knew, both doors were still closed.

But if they ever *were* to be unlocked . . . "Meditation" would be the key.

* * * * *

As-soft-as-a-mother's-touch pianissimo, Michael begins to play. So softly that there appear to be no breaks at all between the notes, but rather a continuous skein of melodic sound. And, for the first time in Michael's career, there is a flowing oneness with the piano: impossible to tell where flesh, blood, and breath end and where wood, ivory, and metal join.

Ginevra cannot help but feel tense in spite of blurred fingers weaving dreams around her. Deep down, she knows that what occurs during *this* piece of music will have a profound effect upon the rest of her life. And the rest of Michael's life.

But she hadn't traveled so many thousands of miles just to be a referee or a critic. If their two worlds are ever to be one, she must leave her safe seat in the audience and step into the world of Michael's composition. Strangely enough—and living proof that it is the "small" things in life that are often the most significant—Michael's exhibition of kindness to the young people who blocked his exit during intermission strongly predisposes her in his favor.

How beautifully his arpeggios flow, cascading as serenely as alpine brooks singing their way down to the sea. All nature appears to be at peace. As Michael plays, she can envision the birds' wake-up calls, the falling rain and drifting snow, the sighing of her dear pines, and the endless journey of the stars. The world is a beautiful place . . . and love is in the air.

Suddenly, she stiffens: certainly those are bells she is hearing. Yes: Christmas bells, flooding the universe with joy. She listens intently as their pealing grows ever louder—then *that theme*! It begins to mesh with the bells, but only for an instant. Right in the middle of it, there is an ominous shift from major to minor key, and from harmony to dissonance. And the bells! In that self-same instant, the pealing joy ceases and is replaced by tolling sorrow. How uncannily perfect is Michael's capture of that moment—that moment when all the joy in their world went sour.

The dissonance and tolling eventually give way to a classical music potpourri. Here and there she recognizes snatches of well-known themes, some of them from piano concertos. But the notes are clipped off short and played perfunctorily: more or less as if the pianist doesn't much care how they sound as long as they all get played in record time. Several times, the Theme tries to edge in, but each time it is rudely repulsed.

Now it is that Dvorak's "New World Symphony" thunders in. Aha! At last: some resolution! Some affirmation! Not so. It quickly becomes apparent that this paean to a brave new world is, ironically, in steady retreat instead of advancing to triumph. Almost—it seems to her—as if it were a retrograde "Bolero": its theme progressively diminishing in power instead of increasing. Once again, "Meditation" seeks entry; once again, it is unceremoniously disposed of.

By now, Ginevra is deciphering Michael's musical code quite well: vividly revealed has been the progressive deterioration of Michael both as a person and as a pianist. From the moment in the cathedral tower when the bells

began to toll, every variation that followed has dealt with the stages of his fall.

Then, clouds close in, thunder rumbles in the east, lightning strikes short-circuit the sky, and the rain falls. Torrents of it. Darkness sweeps in, and with it all the hells loose on this turbulent planet. Ginevra shivers as Michael stays in minor keys, mourning all the sadness and pain in the universe.

The winds gradually increase to hurricane strength. Far ahead of her—for she is exposed to the elements too—she sees Michael, almost out of sight in the gloom, retreating from the storm. She follows, and attempts to call to him, but to no avail. The tempest swallows the words before they can be formed. Then the black clouds close in . . . and she loses sight of him altogether.

As the hurricane reaches ultimate strength, major keys are in full flight from the minors (Ginevra discovered some time back that Michael is equating majors with the forces of Light, and minors with the forces of Darkness). It does not seem possible that any force on earth could save Michael from destruction.

It is now, in the darkest midnight, when the few majors left are making their last stand. She senses that, for Michael, the end is near. Now, when she has all but conceded victory to the Dark Power, she again hears the strains of *Thaïs*'s Theme! How can such a frail thing possibly survive when leagued against the legions of Darkness? But, almost unbelievably, it does.

At this instant, Ginevra chances to look with wide-open eyes at—not Michael the pianist but Michael the man. He has clearly forgotten all about the world, the concert audience, even *her*. In his total identification with the struggle for his soul, he is playing for only two people: himself—the penitent sinner—and God. And his face? Well, never afterwards could she really explain, but one thing was absolutely certain: there before her . . . was Michael's naked soul.

With Michael's surrender, the tide turns at last: The storm rages on, but the enemy is now unmistakably in retreat. Dissonance and minors contest every step of the battlefield, trying vainly to hold off the invading Light. Then victorious majors begin sweeping the field.

Ginevra discovers in all this a great truth: it is minors that reveal the full beauty of majors. Had she not heard "Meditation" sobbing on the ropes of a minor key, she would never have realized the limitless power of God. It is the minor key that gives texture and beauty to the major; and it is dissonance that, by contrast, reveals the glory of harmony. . . . It is sorrow that brings our wandering feet back to God. . . .

Finally, with the mists beginning to dissipate and the sun to break through, the Theme reappears, but alone for the first time. Now it is that Ginevra feels the full upward pull of the music, for "Meditation" soars heavenward with such passion, pathos, and power that gravity is powerless to restrain it.

> And Ginevra . . . her choice made . . . reaches up,
> and with Michael,
> climbs the stairs of heaven to God.