

around the stable where the infant Jesus will be laid tonight."

"Isn't He there yet, muvver?" in a tone of disappointment.

"Not yet, dearie! Don't you know I've told you that He won't be in the crib until midnight—the time when the angels brought the news of His birth to the shepherds?"

The little boy nodded, his eyes bright with interest.

"I member," he answered, "and you said I might go to the crib with the shepherds—that I might be the little shepherd."

"And so you shall when we come to the early Mass. Now go and tell Our Lord that you'll be here to welcome Him; and keep very quiet while mother goes to make her confession."

The little boy nodded again; and being well accustomed to going to church with his mother, and keeping quiet while she prayed or withdrew into the mysterious box where so many persons went in and out, he turned his step towards the chapel, which had been transformed into the stable of Bethlehem—a stable fascinating in its realism, as it stood, with boughs of cedar drooping over the roof, where the star had not yet appeared. The little boy paused before it, and regarded eagerly the curtain which concealed the interior, behind which he knew that the manger was ready for the infant that was to come, and the ox and the ass were waiting in their stalls. And there was anxiety as well as eagerness in his gaze; for he had on hand an enterprise, concerning which he had said nothing to his mother. Having seen a picture in which the shepherds were represented as bringing lambs from their flocks to offer to the Divine Infant, "the little shepherd" felt that it would not do for him to approach the crib empty-handed. And so, concealed under the cape of his coat, he had brought a lamb—small, but covered with real wool—which was his favorite toy, and which he meant to offer as a plaything to the infant Jesus.

But here were encountered disappointment and difficulty. The crib was concealed from sight; the infant had not yet been laid in it; and how was the little shepherd to dispose of the lamb, which he did not wish to take away with him? He glanced around; there was no one near—no one to notice the small figure in the obscurity; for the lights were at the other end of the church about the confessionals, where kneeling people were gathered, absorbed in their own affairs. And so, after some hesitation, he slipped behind the curtain and found himself alone in the stable, at the foot of the empty manger.

He did not intend to remain longer than a minute; he wanted only to put his lamb in the crib, where the Christ-Child might find it when He came. But something in the atmosphere of the place suddenly filled his little heart with a strange sense of awe; and after he had placed the woolly toy in the straw, an instinct made him kneel down. The light which came through the curtain was dim, but not so dim that he could not see distinctly how everything was in readiness for the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem; and then—suddenly—it seemed to the child's wondering eyes that He was there. Had he been mistaken in fancying that the crib was unoccupied? For surely there was a charming infant in it—an infant who smiled at him in acceptance (so he understood) of the lamb he had brought—the lamb it had cost a sensible sacrifice to surrender—and who held in His hand a decorated lighted candle! . . . It was only for a moment that the wide, delighted eyes took in the vision—and then they saw again only an empty manger filled with straw, where no infant yet lay.

When the little boy's mother presently came in search of him, she found the small figure curled in the corner of a seat opposite the crib, watching with a bright, intent gaze the curtain which hung before it. She touched him, smiling.

"Come, dear!" she said. "There's no good in watching the crib now, you know. As I told you, it isn't time yet for the infant Jesus to come."

"But He did come, muvver," the little boy whispered eagerly in reply. "He came and smiled at me—for I gave Him my lamb—and then He went away. But I've been thinking He might come back, and I'd like to see Him again."

"Dennis!" his mother gasped.

She was shocked to the utmost fiber of her being; for he had never been, like some children, given to imaginative romancing, to relating things which had never happened; and that he should begin now and here—that he should tell what was untrue on such a subject, seemed to her dreadful beyond expression. She seized his arm and led him from the church without another word; but once outside, she stopped and looked at him with an expression such as he had never seen on her face before.

"Dennis," she said gravely, "what is the meaning of this? What possessed you to say what was untrue about Our Lord Himself, in His own church? Were you asleep and did you dream? I can't think you meant to tell a falsehood, yet you must know that you didn't see Him."

"But truly I did, muvver!" the little fellow answered, earnestly. "I

wasn't asleep, and I wasn't dreaming; I couldn't have been, for I was in the crib!"

"You were in the crib! O Dennis, I wouldn't have believed it! What made you do such a thing?"

"I went," Dennis explained with the same earnestness, "to put my lamb in the manger, so the infant Jesus would find it there when He came."

"Your lamb!" His mother regarded him as if she feared he were losing his mind. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my lamb—my own lamb, with the white wool—that Mrs. Riordan gave me," Dennis answered patiently. "I thought if I was to be the little shepherd, I ought to carry a lamb, like the other shepherds, to the infant Jesus—only, of course mine wouldn't be a real lamb like theirs. But I knew He'd know I'm only a little boy, and it was all the lamb I had; and I liked it very much, so I thought He might like it, too. And He did, muvver! You ought to see how pleased He looked!"

"Dennis!" his mother exclaimed once more.

And then she paused, her heart beating fast, and not knowing what to say; for she was quite sure now that the boy was not speaking falsely. There is a convincing power in truth, and there was a convincing light also in the eyes of the child lifted to meet hers. Clearly, he had seen something—it was most likely to have been fancy—in the dim light of the curtain-shrouded crib, and she decided that the best thing was to say nothing more about it.

"You must have fallen asleep while you were waiting for me, and dreamed it all," she said, as they turned to walk on; "and so we won't talk about it."

"But I didn't dream about leaving my lamb," Dennis urged. "I put it in the straw, and then I knelt down and said my prayers; and then I saw the infant Jesus, holding a candle, and He smiled at me—truly He did, muvver!"

"But the infant Jesus never holds a candle. You'll see, when we go back for the Mass, and He's just a little baby, with His arms wide open."

"He had a candle in one hand," the boy persisted, "and it was such a pretty candle, with silver flowers and green leaves and red berries all round it."

"Dennis!" his mother gasped again; for she knew at once what he was describing was the Christmas candle of Ireland, and he had not only never seen anything of the kind, but it was not likely that he had ever heard of the custom of lighting such a candle. Had the child really the Celtic "second-sight"—though he had never exhibited any signs of it before—and had he truly seen a vision? The deep-rooted mysticism of the Celt made her more ready to believe this than one of another race would have been. For was it not Christmas Eve? And were not candles such as he described burning in many windows in distant Ireland, in gracious invitation to any poor wandering woman and child to enter and shelter? But the Green Isle of the faithful hearts and tender customs was far away, and why should such a vision of its symbolic light have been shown to one for whom no door stood open, in memory of Bethlehem, in this cold, material land? The mother, whose heart was heavy with care, with a great fear of the future, and a haunting dread of the necessity to separate from her child in order to find work and bread for both of them, asked herself this question with a sense of deepening wonder and awe, while she walked on, hardly noticing the direction her steps were taking.

And so it was that presently, looking around with a start, she found that, in her preoccupation of thought, she had taken a wrong turn, and was in an unfamiliar street, instead of on that which led to her place of lodging. She paused with the intention of going back; but as she turned, Dennis caught her hand quickly.

"Muvver!" he cried, in a tone of excitement—"muvver, there's the candle!"

"My boy, what's the matter with you?" she asked tremulously. "There's no candle anywhere in sight."

"Oh, yes, there is!" he said, with growing excitement. "Don't you see it yonder, in that window?"

He seized her dress now with both hands; and yielding to his insistence, she let him draw her across the street. And then—it was almost unbelievable—there before her eyes, burning in the window of a small cottage somewhat withdrawn from the street, was a Christmas candle, dressed with holly leaves and berries and tinsel flowers—such a candle as she had never seen since she was a small child in Ireland.

As she stood staring at it, wondering if she, too, were seeing visions, the little boy was talking eagerly.

"It's the very candle I saw!" he said. "There's the silver flowers and the leaves and the berries! But that one was in the church, and the infant Jesus had it." He paused, as a sudden sense of mystery touched even his young mind. "How did it come here, muvver—how did it come?" he asked in an awestruck voice.

"God only knows," his mother answered, speaking as much to herself as to him. "But it must have been a meaning! It couldn't be for nothing that it was shown to a little child, as a sign to be followed. Dennis—the boy started at her tone—"if that light is put there for us, and it seems faithless to think anything else, the door will be open, and it's meant that we shall enter. Come, dear, let us try it in the name of the infant Jesus!"

Her voice was so grave that Dennis felt as if she were summoning him to his prayers. But he slipped his hand into hers with a great sense of trust, and together they went up the short path which led to the door of the house.

The evening meal over, Mrs. Gilroy and her daughter were sitting together, their minds full of the thought of other and different Christmas Eves, and of those who were gone out of their lives—the dead and the missing—so that conversation was difficult, and they had fallen into a sad silence, which was presently broken by the mother saying with a deep sigh:

"It's clear to me at last, Aileen, that I would have done better to stay at home in Ireland, as Father Phelan told me, than to come to this breaking country in the hope of finding Dennis. Sure, I'm not a bit nearer to him now than I was then. So I've made up my mind to go back, and just wait God's good time for the news that may or may not come."

Aileen looked up from the needlework in her hands, with a flash of joy in her eyes.

"And it's myself that's glad to hear you say so, mother!" she exclaimed. "I'll be thankful indeed, when we're once more safe at home; for I feel as if my heart would break with the strangeness and loneliness here, and I'm thinking of you even more than of myself. You want to be back under your own roof and leave Dennis in the hands of God."

"It's where I must leave him," the mother said with sorrowful decision. "I've been feeling it for some time, but I couldn't make up my mind until I finished my novena that ends today. I begged the Blessed Mother, by all her joy of Bethlehem, to bring my boy to me, or, if that's not according to the holy will of God, to show me what to do—whether to stay here or go back home; and the answer has seemed to be, 'Go home.'"

"I believe it's what herself would bid you do," Aileen said confidently. "And I'm thankful—thankful!" she repeated fervently. "To hear you say that we are going back to Ireland is the best Christmas gift that you could give me."

"My poor girl!" her mother said, in a tone of mingled tenderness and self-reproach. "I know you've been homesick and heartick, and yet so patient and cheerful always that I haven't thought of you as I should. But you shall have your wish now; we'll take our passage on the first ship that's sailing after Christmas, so we'll be in Ireland for the New Year; and I'll just trust Dennis with God."

"He's safe with Him, mother."

"Oh, yes, yes! But my poor old heart's aching and breaking for him allanna!"

It was a very bitter cry—the cry as ancient as humanity, of the mother mourning for her children, and "refusing to be comforted because they are not"—and even as it trembled on the air, and brought tears to Aileen's eyes, there was a touch on the door, which stood slightly ajar, it was pushed gently open, and a soft voice uttered the familiar salutation:

"God save all here!"

As the two rose to answer instinctively, they fancied that some Irish neighbor pitying their loneliness, had come in. But the next moment their startled glance recognized that it was a stranger who stood before them—a pale young woman in mourning, to whose hand a little boy clung.

"I won't ask you to pardon me," she said, seeing the surprise in their faces; "for it was the candle brought me in. I haven't seen one of the kind since I was a little child in Ireland, but I haven't forgotten what it means. And though I'm not in need of shelter, I thought I'd look in and say 'God save and bless you!' on this Christmas Eve."

"God save and bless you!" mother and daughter answered simultaneously. "And it's welcome you are—many times welcome, whether needing shelter or not!" Mrs. Gilroy added. "But sometimes there's other shelter needed than that for the body. Sometimes it's a word with our own that we're longing for; and glad I am if the candle led you in for that. So sit down and tell us what part of Ireland you come from."

"Tell me first what made you think of putting the candle in the window—here where no one would be likely to know what it meant?" asked the stranger earnestly.

"We've always done it in Ireland," Aileen replied; "and my mother wasn't satisfied that Christmas Eve should pass without it even here. So when we came back from church a little while ago, nothing doing but I must dress a candle for the lighting—and now I remember, she broke off suddenly, "that we met you in the door of the church, you and your little boy. You were going in as we came out, and you held the door open for us. I was struck by the little boy; for he has a lovely face, and a look in it

like—like—"

"Like my Dennis," the mother said, with her eyes upon the child and a quick clutch at her heart.

"Just such a little boy he was, God bless him!"

"My name is Dennis, too," the child said suddenly.

"Is it?" She looked at him with a new interest. "And what is your other name, my little man?" Dennis what?"

"Dennis Gilroy," the clear, childish tones answered.

"Dennis Gilroy!" She echoed the name like one who cannot believe the testimony of her ears, while her eyes opened wide.

"Dennis Gilroy! And you come with my son's face, to my door on this Christmas Eve, when I begged the Holy Mother to send me news of him! In the name of God!" (she turned to the young woman, who was gazing at her in startled wonder), "who is this child and who are you?"

"He is Dennis Gilroy's son," the other answered, "and I am his widow."

"His widow! Then my Dennis is dead?"

"He has been dead for more than a year, and if you are his mother—"

"Oh, I am—I am his mother, who has come from Ireland to seek him!"

"Then when he was dying he bade me tell you that he was grieved to neglect to let you hear from him; that he sent you his love and prayed your pardon. And I wrote, but I've never had any answer."

"You couldn't, for we have been in America nearly a year," Aileen interrupted breathlessly. "And we didn't even know that my brother had been married. But we could find no trace of him, and my mother had given up hope of him at last; and just before you came in she told me that she would go back to Ireland in a few days. And to think—to think that but for the Christmas candle which—God forgive me—I thought it was foolishness to light here, we should have gone away and never found you!"

"I told you," Mrs. Gilroy said in an awed whisper, "that I felt bidden to light the candle when I was in church. There's more in it than chance."

"Far more," the young widow said, in a tone as awed as her own. Then she drew the little boy, who was listening to all the excited talk with a wondering face, into the midst of their circle.

"Dennis," she bade him gravely, "tell us exactly what it was you saw in church when you went behind the curtain of the crib."

"I saw," said Dennis, looking fearfully up into the agitated face of his newly found grandmother, "the infant Jesus in the manger; and He had a candle in His hand just like yours, and" (the little voice grew proud) "He smiled at me."

And when at the early Christmas Mass four happy people knelt in thanksgiving before the crib, it seemed to them that the infant Jesus smiled once more.

COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

He little knew the sorrow that was in his vacant chair. He never guessed they'd miss him, or he'd surely have been there;

He couldn't see his mother or the lump that filled her throat, Or the tears that started falling as she read his hasty note; And he couldn't see his father, sitting sorrowfully and dumb, Or he never would have written that he thought he couldn't come.

He little knew the gladness that his presence would have made, And the joy it would have given, or he never would have stayed. He didn't know how hungry had the little mother grown Once again to see her baby and to tell him how she loved him.

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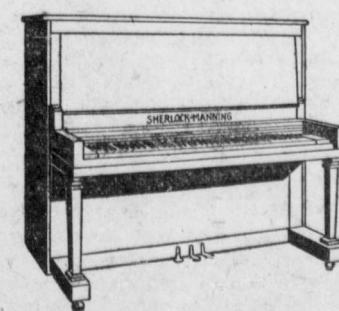
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