

with him on her lap, drew off his shoes and his wet clothes; saying nothing, letting him cry his pitiful little cry; saying nothing, but thinking fast.

When he was wrapped warmly in a shawl, she took his face in her hands, smiling at him brightly, and said:

"So, my precious, you did get the best gift of all!"

His eyes widened and he fought his tears. He was an imaginative child. Perhaps it had come to the house. How silly he had been!

"What, Mama?"

She cuddled him close again and swung him around so that his feet might get the warmth of the fire.

"You remember the little Christ-child. You remember that when He came to earth there was no room for Him. Only a little stall near the sheep."

"Yes, Mama."

"And think—perhaps his mother, the blessed Mary, wept a little for sadness . . . it was not much for her baby—this stall. And then you remember how the king would have killed Him—the Most Blessed One. And they had to flee, those good parents. This, too, was sad, little Magnus, don't you think?"

"Yes, Mama."

"And perhaps there were few joys for the little Jesus in the days to come in Galilee . . . and you remember all the sadness that followed this again. You remember the lonely Jesus in that garden one dark night . . . and the day before Pilate . . . and you remember the cross."

"Yes, Mama."

Little Magnus was ready to weep for the abused Jesus.

"And this Christmas—it is first a time of remembrance and then a time of joy, you know that, little one? And every year at Christmas time, the Most Blessed Lord comes down to earth again in the likeness of the child He once was . . . and He comes and stands behind the child He has found most worthy that year. And while He stands so, the shadow of His cross falls upon Him again as it did in the manger, and falls, too, upon His little chosen one. This is the real Christmas gift—this is God's favor."

"Oh, Mama!" Magnus' eyes were bright with amazement. His mother swallowed painfully, smoothed the shawl about him, then holding him close, smiled her beautiful smile.

"And this is the gift you received, little Magnus."

"But, Mama . . ."

"Think—were you not unobserved? Did any one see you? Did any

one speak to you? Or seek to detain you?"

"No, Mama, but . . ."

"There then! Can you not see?"

It was not possible! It was not possible—they did not see you, these people. You were over-shadowed. And it is ever so. Those that are favored by the cross, they go alone walking with their Lord. Little joys are not for them—they have the stars for company, and the friendship of angels. Come, my sweet, smile again. Are you not proud to be so loved of God?"

"Oh, Mama!" Suddenly little Magnus flung his arms around her neck, kissing her passionately. "Oh, it is so beautiful, so beautiful! But how did you know it?"

She laughed happily, now much relieved, got up and carried him to the table.

"Oh, perhaps it was whispered to me, who knows? And look! Here we have a party—is it not gay?"

She stepped about briskly pouring him out a little coffee and milk, then sat down beside him.

When Magnus lifted his plate and found the candle, tied so smartly

with its red ribbon, he clapped his hands.

"Oh, let's light it, Mama, and watch it burn while we eat."

"No, my precious, we will light it when you are in bed and it shall burn beside you till you are asleep. It is the Christmas candle, such as the children burned for the Christ child in my dear country. And as you sleep, I have no doubt that you will dream . . . you, the little chosen one."

After he was in bed, watching the tiny flickering candle drowsily, he called his mother. She came toward him, tired-looking, but satisfied, and bent above him. He wound his arms around her neck.

"Mama," he whispered, "do you think He was sorry I should have cried—that I don't understand?"

She smiled down at him mistily. "No, my beloved. I think, above all else, He would understand."

Just a little while the child gazed up at her earnestly, then he smiled contentedly.

"I guess the shadow fell on you, too, Mama, when you were little. That is why you always understand."

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