

THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

The Wonder and the Drama of a Child

BY

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THEY had started long before the late dawn, and had driven for hours through the woods. Pete had been but half awake when they carried him to the sleigh, and the sound of the runners on the hard snow, the warm smell of the horses, the hushed voice of his mother, all these familiar things had broken over his senses in waves of drowsiness, edged with a shadowy foam of dreams. Between the ebb and flow of sleep he awoke to a knowledge of the dim trees beside the trail, and of a violet-blue sky covered with cold stars. Once he saw the stars shining greenly through great flakes and bars of rose, and the white trail before them was stained with pink and gold. Then the aurora flickered away, and the snow was blue-grey again, and the horses' breath hung like dust of silver in the cold, dry air.

When he awoke again he saw a white star hanging in a sky that throbbed with clear colour, like the pavements of that New Jerusalem his father had read about last Sunday. He tried to picture Zion behind her glowing gates, but he could not. For he had never seen a city.

The trees grew clearer in the young light, and taller and more solemn as the trail ran upward. The white star sank deeper into its golden pavement, so that it was no more than a point of pale fire.

"That is Venus," said Pete's father, pointing with unused whip, "the old celestial Aphrodite, goddess of pure love." He leaned back and touched his wife's hand, and she smiled at him and at the star. Pete could not understand them, so he went to sleep again.

More sleep, more dim dreams, with the thin air nipping his breath, and the white trail lifting higher through dark forest. Spruces reached out their delicate drooping fans of deep grey toward the sleigh, and shook down loads of fine dry snow upon the horses. The sky overhead grew harder and bluer, losing its rich inlay of stars. But the winter day was long in coming.

At last the trail turned eastward along the flanks of a hill, massed to the summit with spruce and white pine. Pete woke and wondered at these stately trees, so much loftier than the birches and merry maples that ringed the clearing at home.

Down in the south-east there showed a long feather of crimson, and then the round red winter sun floated slowly upward.

"The sun of Christmas," said Pete's mother softly, and she kissed him.

The crows and whiskey-jacks began fighting among the branches, and the cold, beautiful day was born.

But Pete did not awaken fully until they drove into a great clearing, and their journey was ended. As he looked about him, he thought he had never seen so wonderful a sight.

Under a long, thick shelter of hemlock boughs stood nearly two-score horses, shaggy, blanketed, picking at heaps of hay. Men went down the line with buckets, and the hardy brutes drank and munched and quarrelled among themselves contentedly. Pete had scarcely believed there were so many horses in the world.

And surely everybody in the world,—men, women, and children like himself—surely they were all gathered about that long building of logs in the centre of the clearing, that building with the cross upon the roof.

"Is that the church?" whispered Pete. "Father, is that the church?"

"That is God's house," answered his father gravely.

"God must need a pretty big house," said Pete softly, "with all those angels."

His father, laughing, unharnessed the team and led them toward the shed. People came—a bewildering succession of faces—and shook hands with him, and gave him hot coffee and a thick pork sandwich, wishing his mother "A merry Christmas, ma'am." And then all at once they were caught up in a little crowd and swept inside the church.

IT was only a little church, but Pete shrank nearer to his mother as he entered it. The walls were of great logs, and the benches were of unpainted wood, redolent of the pine and balsam of the hills. Six great cedar pillars supported the sharply peaked roof, and the place was hung with sweet evergreen boughs and bunches of red and white berries. The roof that seemed so far above was filled with an odorous golden gloom.

Level shafts of light crossed over the heads of the people from square windows set deep with beneath the eaves. Pete thought that the six great cedar trunks soared upward into the resin-scented shadows as if they were trying to pierce the dim roof and touch the calm blue heaven beyond; and his soul throbbed within him, like a bird striving to win free and follow them on untried wings. He was filled with an aching happiness.

Then the clergyman came in, and Pete found in him a friend. "That's the man you pulled out of the snow-drift," he said, poking his father with an imperious finger, "and brought home for mother to melt." But his father was hunting through a prayer-book, and did not answer.

"When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive."

"To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him; neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God to walk in His laws which He set before us."

For the first time Pete heard the service of his Church, and his soul floated away on a tide of wonderful words. At first he felt awed and a little strange. But then the people stood up to sing, and they sang, "Christians awake, salute the happy morn." He heard his young mother's beautiful voice leading all the others in the familiar tune. That fluttering, imprisoned bird in his breast seemed to find peace, and he sang too with all his might, his eyes upon her face. He did not know that his voice followed hers as a silver flute follows a golden horn, and that many were silent to listen.

Then, when the Lord's Prayer came, he and all the other children joined in that, straggling a line behind the grown-ups. When he rose from his knees, he did not feel strange any more, though the awe and the wonder remained.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good things of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, thy God reigneth."

And then the service was over, and Pete found himself outside in the air with all the others, who were talking of nothing but the new church and all it would mean to them. He fancied that if he had been allowed to stay in the church, the angels might have come further down their bright ladder and talked to him. He looked back at the soaring cedar shafts with a longing for which he could find no words.

During his long drive home he was so silent that his father asked him if he were tired, and if he liked to go to church. Pete said "Yes." He could not communicate his feelings. He could find no words for the awe and joy that held him in a delicate ecstasy, possible only in a soul not long from God.

There are longings too dim for speech; there are hopes too fine to endure a careless touch. Pete only spoke of the church once in the weeks that followed.

"When are we going there again?" he asked. But his mother shook her head. "It's too far, lad, die, to go often," she said wistfully.

SO Pete decided to find the church himself.

Through much dreaming he had grown to believe that it would be easy to find. He thought that he would only have to walk through the forest until the trees changed, and that then the church would be before him; empty, perhaps, of people, but yet full of sweet music and solemn prayers, and angel wings astir in the resinous gloom of the roof. The dream drew him, waking and sleeping; and at last it drew him from the house and the fenced garden and the lonely clearing, into the dim white fastnesses of the winter woods. He entered the woods with no clear purpose. Only, in some wide space where birch and maple gave place to the dark splendour of pine and hemlock, he knew the church stood. And his feet were drawn toward it whether he would or no.

The surface of the snow was frozen bare and level, and his light feet did not break it. The silence of the woods was deep as sleep, and his quiet

passing left it undisturbed. He was not afraid, for he looked up at the trees and thought of the little squirrels there cradled safe from the cold; he looked at the tangled undergrowth in the hollows, and thought that perhaps here or there the jolly brown bears were dreaming. The woods were full of life; only it was life suspended, waiting until the sap should rise and the sun be warm once more.

It was very cold, and he walked on quickly. But the trees did not change. Here and there he saw a proud pine fallen, that had disdained to fight for life with the upstart elm and poplar. But the pines of his dream, upon whose crests the sky seemed to rest, so vast, so dark, ever watching, ever murmuring—of these he saw nothing.

"The church is not here," said Pete. And the hardwood maples moved their long trailing branches and the wild cherry seemed to whisper, "The church in the wilderness is not here."

"I must go farther," said Pete. And the little wind in the branches seemed to say, "Go farther, go farther."

So Pete went farther into the woods, and they grew thicker and wilder about him. In a little hollow he came upon a solitary wild doe, cutting away the ice with her sharp, delicate hooves to reach the grass and moss underneath. She did not run away—only looked at him with her great mild eyes.

"Do you know where the church is?" Pete asked her. But she only blew a cloud of silvery breath through her velvet-soft nostrils, and gazed at him curiously with those beautiful, foolish eyes. Pete went on, deep and deeper into the woods.

It had been afternoon when he started; and, child-like, he held time in no account, nor took any thought of those he left behind. The ground led upward, and soon it grew rough and broken, with narrow, deep ravines and piles of rock. Pete scrambled around these with some difficulty, for his legs were short and easily tired. But he never thought of turning back, though it was very cold and he was already weary.

Outside the woods the winter day was drawing slowly toward its end. In the clefts of the lower hills to which Pete climbed, there was already twilight, beautiful and still. From one of the ravines, a shadow raised itself as he passed—a shadow scarcely seen upon the amethyst glimmer of snow, that yet looked at him with eyes greener than any emerald. Pete knew it was a timber-wolf, but he was not afraid.

"Do you know where the church is?" he whispered. His lips were pinched and stiffened with the quiet touch of the cold, and his voice was faint. Yet the little sound spread and grew upon the silence like a ripple on a still pool.

"Per-lease tell me," said Pete. But the wolf faded away like a wreath of smoke, and there was no answer save the sound of his own voice echoing far away under the rocks. He put his fist suddenly to his eyes.

"They know," he said, "they all know. I can see it in their eyes. But they won't tell."

He dried his eyes on his rough woollen mitts, and looked about him. And he was aware that evening had come.

IT would be difficult to imagine how he knew it, for the twilight of the woods was scarcely deepened. But it lacked some golden afterthought of sun. The snow, stretching up and up between the trees until his eyes could follow its glitter no further—the snow was suddenly veiled and softened, and the blue shadows spread and mingled together. Pete knew that soon the stars would be coming out.

Upon a little clear rocky space stood a young pine. Pete climbed to it slowly and laid his cheek against its frozen bark. The trunk was covered with a delicate broiery of lichens, each edged with a silver rim of frost. But Pete's cheek was so cold that the frost-fringes were unmelted.

He closed his eyes, weighted with the touch of the cold. He could hear the sound of the Christmas hymns swelling in his ears, clear and sweet. But he could not find the church in the wilderness.

He opened his eyes and looked up the straight stem of the young pine. He could see a broad square of lilac-coloured sky, in which a star shone like a silver lamp. He clasped the tree with his arms. "Tell me where to find the big pines," he implored. His cold lips made no movement, yet he thought he spoke aloud.

"Tell me where the church is," he prayed, his cheek against the hard bark. His tears ran and