

MARGARET.

A CHRISTMAS SKETCH.

(Continued from fourth page.)

her; but in vain. She had answered his knock by saying:

"Go, Father! I can not think, I can not talk, I can only wait."

And when he had spoken again, really as a father might speak to a grief-stricken child, she had only answered with sobs:

"We were so happy, all by ourselves! We were so very happy!"

And a third time she had answered, with a low wail that made the priest shiver:

"Keep Christmas away, Father!—keep it away! We were so happy last year! I must die if it comes!"

The priest went away, shaking his head sadly. And she went back and lived over again that happy evening, when with the little Wilfred in her arms she had sung the *Adeste Fideles* in honor of the feast, while the proud father listened.

But Christmas came nearer and nearer. She who would have given the world to turn back the tide and make it yield its treasures, could not stop time. The priest at the little church always gathered the fishermen and their wives and children at Midnight Mass; and there was, too, after Mass, the Adoration of the Holy Infancy. All the country around, Catholic and non-Catholic, was proud of the beautiful Crib the priest had made himself. But this year it was rumored that it would be more beautiful than ever, and that Father Hyacinth had carved the loveliest little boy ever seen. Inspired by one of those strange presentiments that come often to good women and sometimes to good men, he had studied the photographs of the little Wilfred; he had cut out a little shepherd to stand near the Holy Child, whose face was like that of Margaret's beloved. Why he had done so he could not tell. He would have told you that the dear child was often in his thoughts.

On Christmas Eve he spoke to his choir of little boys, and begged them to walk along the sands and sing their sweetest carols under the windows of the Widow Margaret. And an hour before midnight she heard childish voices singing the *Adeste Fideles*. At this her heart nearly broke; for surely there, among them, must be the voice of her little boy. After a time the voices grew distant; and, throwing her cloak around her, she followed them afar off. She followed them to the door of the lighted church, which she had not entered since the fair days of June. Turning aside, dazzled by the glow of the candles, she saw the confessional; and on a sudden impulse entered it. A few people who had come early wondered at the deep sobs that came from the green-curtained box. At last absolved, she knelt in the aisle, near the altar railing; and as she dropped her thin hands from before her face an acolyte lit the candles around the Crib. Her heart stood still; the organ softly began:

"Adeste fideles, hinc triumphantes—"

Surely that must be little Wilfred—her little Wilfred,—so near the Infant, with the hand of the kind St. Joseph resting on his head! It was he!—it was he!

"Ah," she whispered to herself, "he is not in the sea; he is safe with Our Lord and His Mother! He is not in the sea. I must go to him!"

And, as the joyous anthem swelled louder and sweeter, she fell forward in the aisle, her white, almost transparent hands grasping the lily leaves carved in the wood of the rail.

"I must go to them!" she murmured.

And thus on Christmas Eve Margaret found her little child.

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THE FROZEN HANDS.

THE Princess Gerda Istrogoloff and her little brother were playing in their nursery one afternoon in the winter time, when the snow lay on the ground and icicles hung from every tree, and the wind was so bitterly cold that the children were not allowed to go out.

"O look, Ivan," cried the little Princess, as she looked out of the window into the castle yard. "See the poor little beggars."

"The steward will give them some money," said Ivan; "our father has ordered him never to turn away a beggar from the door."

"I wish we could go down and speak to them," said Gerda. "We never do anything for the poor, and yet our mother's mother is descended from the Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, who was so good to the poor that she worked miracles."

"Well," returned the Prince, "I have a plan in my head; and if you will promise not to tell it to nurse, as you generally do, I will tell you."

"O Ivan, I promise faithfully, and I never told any of your own secrets, when you made me promise not."

"Come into the corner, then," said Ivan, drawing into a corner of the spacious nursery. "Did you listen to the Father Nikanor preaching last Sunday, and hear what he said about those words in the Gospel: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of one of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto Me?' Well, we must do something for the poor this winter."

"But what shall we do? we are never allowed to go out alone."

"We shall go out on Christmas Eve, when everybody is in church and Caterina has left us alone here. You must sew some clothes by that time, instead of always making clothes for your dolls, and we must get the cook to give us some food, and we will give all the roubles grandmother gave us on our fete."

"Yes," assented Gerda cheerfully, although she disliked sewing very much. "But, O Ivan, have you thought how dark it will be, and the wolves? I heard one howling last Christmas night, when I was in bed."

"Well, of course if you are going to be afraid I must go by myself," rejoined Ivan, rather crossly. "You are always preaching about the poor, so I thought you would be brave enough for that."

"Yes, I will go, Ivan darling," said the little girl, putting her arms coaxingly round her brother's neck, "and I will begin the sewing to-morrow."

Every day the little Princess sat sewing for the poor children, when she and Ivan were not at lessons with the priest, or out walking in the grounds with Caterina or sleighing.

Towards Christmas Eve their father and mother went to St. Petersburg to spend Christmas. On Christmas Eve, therefore, they found themselves quite free to dress in their warm furs, to fill a large basket with the clothes made by the Princess Gerda, and the good things they coaxed from the cook. They carried the basket between them down stairs, when every one was in Church at confession, opened the door and looked out.

"Ugh," shivered Gerda, as they stepped out into the cold.

"Now then," said Ivan sharply, "are you going to turn coward?"

"No," answered Gerda, but her voice faltered.

"Come on," said the Prince, as they passed by a little plantation of fir trees; "let us hasten, or perhaps Caterina will notice that we are gone and come after us."

In reality, he was beginning to be rather afraid himself, but would not have owned it for the world before his sister.

"We can't go any faster with this heavy basket," gasped Gerda; "change hands with me, Ivan." Her poor little hands were becoming fast numbed. They trudged on for about a mile, and then found themselves on the top of a hill, at the foot of which was the village. They could hear the Christmas bells and see the lights of the torches which the people going to church carried in their hands.

"There," said Ivan joyfully, as they put down the basket to rest for a moment, "we have gone more than half the way."

But it was very difficult going down the hill with the heavy basket. It was so slippery that every now and then they slid down a few steps, which ended in a fall. Gerda lost one of her snowshoes, and Ivan bruised his head very badly in a fall.

"Shall we ever get there?" sobbed Gerda, her little shoeless foot hurting her dreadfully with cold. "My hands and feet are freezing, Ivan, and they will drop off."

"So are mine," answered Ivan. "What shall we do if our hands freeze to the basket? They will have to be cut off."

"Let us pray to the Infant Jesus," suggested Gerda. "Perhaps He will not let us freeze like that, when we came out on purpose to please Him."

They knelt down and prayed together: "Jesus, sweetest infant, born in a stable, laid in a manger, crucified on the hard wood of the cross, be our stay in the hour of need," a little prayer taught them by their mother, to which Gerda added: "And please keep our hands from freezing to the basket, dear Jesus."

Then they took up their basket, but it had grown so light that they cried out in wonder.

"You have let some of the things drop out," said Ivan.

"No, it is just as full up to the brim as when we started, and see the things are in the same place," said Gerda, lifting a corner of the wolf skin with which they had covered their treasures. "And oh," she cried, "I am quite warm, and the snow feels like a warm bearskin to my foot, and my hands are like toast."

"So are mine," exclaimed Ivan joyfully. "It is Jesus who has answered our prayer, so let us kneel and thank Him from the bottom of our hearts."

They knelt on the snow, which gave forth a warmth like that of a fire, and thanked God for this wonder which He had wrought to preserve them in the "hour of need."

As they passed down the hill they still found the snow warm to their feet, and the basket light to carry.

In the first cottage in the valley which they entered they found an old woman in bed. She was so very, very old that she shivered with cold, though there was a large fire burning on the hearth. They covered her with a warm covering which Gerda had knitted, and she immediately cried out that she no longer felt cold, and her teeth ceased chattering, and her stiffened fingers grew warm and supple.

The two children passed through the village giving to all who were needy something from the basket, and there was not one in want who did not receive wherewith to satisfy his wants.

Lastly, they came to a hut wherein they found a little lame boy, who had been obliged to lie on his back for nine years, and he was only ten years old. Gerda gave him the best and nicest things from the cook's store, and putting her little arms round his neck kissed him; and immediately the little lame boy felt the pain in his back vanish, and he was able to get up and run to meet his mother, who had just returned from Mass and Communion, and who had been praying to the Infant Saviour for her boy.

The two children, Ivan and Gerda, were taken back to the castle in a sleigh, amidst the shouts and cries of the villagers who went with them with torches.

And to this day in the little village of Istrogoloff the fathers and mothers tell their children on Christmas Eve the story of the little Prince and Princess, who set out with a large basket filled with food and clothes on Christmas Eve in honor of the Infant Jesus, and how they were wonderfully helped, and their devotion rewarded by the miraculous cure of the lame boy, for when dear Jesus smiles, "Winter himself grows warm beneath the glow."

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