

The Greater Gift

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Little Magnus considered the weather gravely. It looked as though it were going to snow. Above the shacks opposite, the sky seemed singularly low. He had an idea that if he could ascend a housetop he might run his finger along the wooly clouds.

Out in the street he saw where a small, hungry-looking dog sniffed at the hard earth as he loped along disconsolately. It reminded Magnus that he was not so very full himself.

Slowly he turned round to watch his mother busy with her ironing. She was a small, vigorous woman, and the perspiration of her face curled the fine hair about her temples instead of dampening it — perhaps this was nature's way of flying undaunted colors. Now she was flushed and hot and very tired. Beside her on a chair was a large basket of clothes. They were all to be ironed so she might deliver them that afternoon to the grocer's wife.

"Mama, I think I'm just a little, little hungry."

She set the iron down sharply, wiped her forehead, and smiled.

"It is good that, isn't it, my lamb? Then it will be such fun to have your porridge. If you will just wait till I finish this blouse, then we shall waken Maria and have our dinner."

"Mama, is it true that God loves children?"

"What else could He do, beloved?"

"And, Mama, isn't this Christmas?"

"In the old land we would say that Christmas begins this midnight . . . you shall see . . . the stars will shine with a twinkle, for the angels shine them anew in their joy."

"Mama, Samuel told me there will be a tree at the church. Couldn't I go? A tree with lights on it! He said so. Oh, Mama, I never saw one . . . it isn't so cold . . . please, couldn't I go?"

His mother had finished the blouse. She hung it carefully over the back of a chair, set aside her ironing board, and went to the small stove. Perhaps it was to hide her emotions that she peered so carefully and so low over the porridge pot.

From the next and only other room came a weak voice asking the time of day.

"It is half past twelve, Peter," said his wife.

"Mama, couldn't I go?"

"Will you not be frightened going alone, dear? And with papa so ill I couldn't take you."

Little Magnus' face lit up with joy. "No, no. Oh, Mama, it will be Christmas! And I shall hear the singing and see the stars, too . . . Papa, Papa! I'm going to see the tree at the church," he called shrilly, running to the door of the bedroom.

White and very worn from his long illness, the poor father regarded the child, saw his big shining eyes so full of expectation, and he groaned.

"You will freeze, Magnus, and become sick like Papa."

"But no! I shall run . . . and see, I shall stick my hands into my coat-sleeves . . . and Mama puts paper in my shoes . . . it isn't so cold then if you run fast."

Over the meagre dinner his mother tried to make plain many things without revealing too much.

"There will perhaps be gifts, Magnus, for the little children whose fathers are well. You must not let it grieve you if there are no presents for you."

But little Magnus had another belief. Had not his friend told him of a mysterious person who brought gifts to good little boys, and had he not been a good little boy? Carrying wood and water and helping his mother with the heavy baskets of clothes? And did he not mind Maria while their mother was away? And had not his mother said God loved little children? So, of course, there would be something wonderful for him on that tree!—the tree in God's house—he was sure of it. He had even hinted a little to God in his prayers.

Shortly after seven he began to wash himself. He was very careful about his ears, even asking his mother to look into them; and he brushed his stiff, close-cropped hair long and painstakingly. Then his mother helped him into a clean shirt, brushed his old coat, lined his worn boots

with paper, and watched him with a heavy heart.

But little Magnus sang with delight. It made his father clench his hands in the darkness to listen to the shrill sweet voice. How the child sang! like a bird in the morning. "Oh, Lord," he prayed, "fill with compassion some heart . . . poor little child, poor little child."

When Magnus was ready he flung himself upon his father and kissed him. He squeezed his little sister till she cried out in pain, then flew into his mother's arms. She smiled into his eyes, kissing them one after the other.

"Be a good child, and remember if it were not for Papa's illness you would have a gift, too. Be a little man and be brave."

He turned back to wave at her, hunched in the shoulders through habit in fighting the wind, and called gaily, "You shall see, Mama, something will happen . . . just you wait."

When he was gone she sat down heavily; Maria picked at her sleeve, but she did not heed her. The child sighed and then slipped off into a corner, where she sat down and talked to the people behind the wall.

"My dear, wasn't it unwise to let him go?" Peter called tonelessly.

"No doubt, but he would not have understood or forgotten that we denied him so little a thing. Oh, Peter, but that it should be Christmas Eve!"

Then they said no more. After a time Maria fell asleep, weary with her make-believe, and her mother put her to bed. From time to time she glanced at the clock. She tried to knit, but the stich was irritating. She wiped off the stove, swept the floor again, putting away the papers Maria had scattered about.

But Magnus ran on gaily. He gritted his teeth and refused to believe that he was cold. The long streets were white and the dim light of the street lamps cast a ghostly glimmer over them. Now and again someone passed him, or rather he fled by them unseeingly.

When at last he saw the big grey church, tremendously big to him, all a-light with its Christmas candles, his little heart swelled to bursting. He thought how beautiful the yellow patches of light were that flung themselves from the church windows out upon the snow. And up aloft over the church steeple gleamed the white cross, silvered in the moon-

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