

As Vincenzo drew near home he began to sing with a resonant, musical baritone the grand old Christmas hymn "Adeste Fideles," and as the song resounded through the clear, vibrant air the door of the cottage opened, sending out ruddy beams of light, and two little children ran shouting and laughing to meet him.

"Oh, father!" they cried in unison, "we have been to the village. Sister Agnese came to see a sick woman in the cottage over there by the cascades, and so, on returning, she took us down to the church to see the Madonna and the dear Christ Child in the manger. You should see it! The creche stands without the chancel, and St. Joseph is there, too. Oh, it is lovely! And we had a dish of soup at the convent and the good mother gave us some frosted cakes, and a waxen Bambino."

"Softly, softly!" said the father smiling. "If you tell it all now there will be naught to tell around the fire later on; that will all keep. First let us restore this lost lamb to its anxious mother. Hear her mourn! It is not well that any of God's creatures should mourn on this blessed evening. Remember, my children, that the dear Christ is called the 'Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world'."

The children were silent and a little awed; they clung to their father's hands as he led the way round a bend back of the house where cut in the rock was a cave which served for a shelter for the flock and from whence could be heard their rapid breathing. The lamb was restored to the joyful mother, and leaving the animals snug and warm the shepherd with his laughing, dancing little ones entered the cottage where in the chimney corner by a blazing fire, which sent forth resinous, piny odors, sat an old woman knitting with a purring cat on her lap.

The good wife, a handsome, dark-eyed woman of some thirty years, came to meet her husband with a smile on her lips, helped him get on a soft, warm coat, brought his goat skin slippers and busied herself serving a savory stew.

But Vincenzo saw that her smile was forced and that she had been crying.