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Star-Led to the Heights

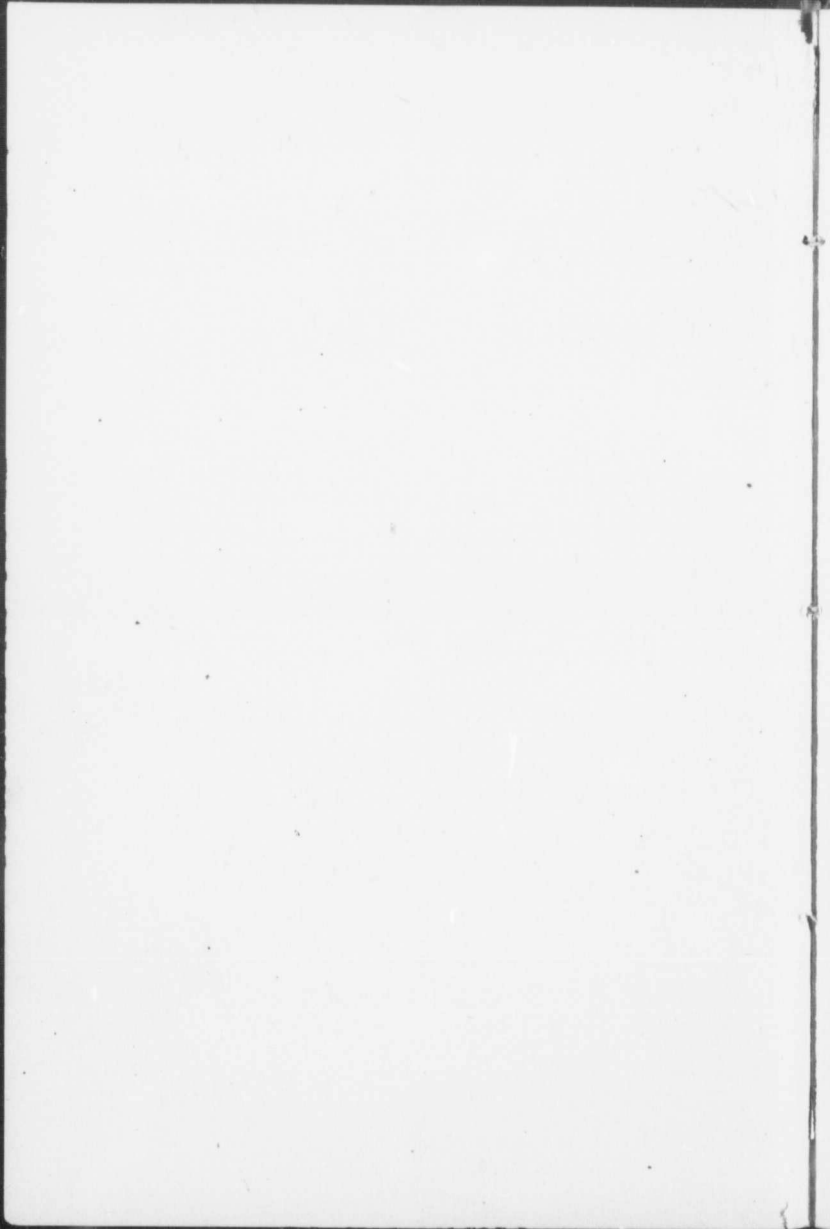
A Christmas Story



BY

DORA FARNCOMB

AUTHOR OF "THE VISION OF HIS FACE"



To
The Friends
who
inspire me
to climb

*The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains—
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?
Is not the Vision He, tho' He be not that which He seems?
Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?*

*The ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see:
But if we could see and hear this Vision—were it not He?*

—TENNYSON.

Star-Led to the Heights

IT was Christmas Eve, and the spirit of the festive season made itself felt even in the Jewish quarter of the city where Gabriel Imlah poured himself out, body and soul, in enthusiastic service for Christ. The narrow, crowded streets were very dear to him. He loved the little curly-headed youngsters who played happily on the doorsteps while their brothers and sisters were in school, and he often stopped before a little group to ask after the health of a forlorn doll or broken-winded horse.

This afternoon no children were in sight, and well the young clergyman knew the reason. He smiled as he turned from Emma St. into Pine Avenue—an avenue where no tree could

possibly force its way through the pavement—and found, as he had expected, that the door of the Settlement House was besieged by a noisy crowd of boys and girls.

A shout was raised, “Here comes Mr. Imlah ! Now we’ll be able to get in !” and the tall figure of the young man was instantly surrounded by a surging mass of eager children. Each child seemed determined to get as near to him as possible, and the noise would have been deafening to less accustomed ears than Gabriel’s.

One little mite was swept almost under his feet, but was promptly swung aloft with a cheery, “How’s that, Esther !” as the hero of the hour strode easily through the crowd to the tightly-closed door. A triple pressure on the electric bell caused that grim barrier to swing open for his entrance, but it shut again with a bang before any of the children could slip through, except the

triumphant little Esther on her elevated perch.

A group of bright-faced settlement workers waited inside, eager to exhibit the Christmas tree with its gay decorations, candles and gifts. Soon the children, suddenly transformed into orderly beings, were all seated in the big room. Tiny kindergarten chairs were just the thing for the very little ones, while older boys and girls filled the benches behind. All were gazing with delight at the splendid tree, "Our very own Christmas tree!" as dark-eyed Ruthie Rubinowitz murmured delightedly under her breath, her tiny hands tightly clasped in her excitement.

The whispering and shuffling of restless feet stopped suddenly as Gabriel rang the silence-bell and began that beautiful Christmas story, "The Other Wise Man." Very simply he told it, in language suited to the youngest of his hearers : so that—even with a loaded

Christmas tree facing them—the children grasped the great truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Later in the evening, when Gabriel found himself alone in his little room that looked out on the squalid street—for he lived in the midst of his people—the story he had told the children seemed to press insistently on his own soul.

“Are you, like ‘the other wise man,’ willing to devote yourself entirely to the service of the King?” came the searching question. “Are you prepared to lay down your most precious jewel if a brother’s need should claim the sacrifice?” went on the voice within his heart.

Worn out in body and troubled in spirit, Gabriel flung himself wearily on the narrow rug-covered couch that did duty as a bed at night. The reading-lamp on the table threw a subdued light on the plain furniture and bookshelves. The library-bedroom looked

like the quarters of a ship's surgeon, with its various contrivances for packing as much as possible into cramped space.

The young man lay for some time in an attitude of utter exhaustion. Then, with a sigh that was almost a groan, he picked up two open letters which were on the table and read them slowly through, though he was already well acquainted with their contents.

The first was a note from a college friend, as follows :

“DEAR OLD CHAP,—Of course you will come out to eat your Christmas dinner at Sunnydale. Nan backs me up with all she is worth in the invitation, so you can't refuse us both. As for Betty, you know she always wants to hear the latest account of Abraham, Isaac and all the other patriarchs who are so unmerciful in their demands on your time and strength. She was wild to accept your invitation to their tree, and I fully intended to bring her, but

the little lady has caught a bad cold, and the wife is afraid to trust her out of her sight.

"We shall expect you by the 6.30 train, and Betty will be flattening her small nose against the window long before that hour. She is already talking about the stories you will have ready for her, so be prepared. But you always seem to have stories on tap. You were cut out for the father of a family, if ever a man was.

Yours as always,

FRANK OSBORNE."

Gabriel shut his eyes as the letter dropped to the floor beside him, and the vision of his friend's bright home stood out like a moving picture in his imagination. This is what he saw.

Frank in an easy chair before a blazing fire, with his little daughter climbing over him. She stands on his knee and pulls his hair over his eyes as she whispers in his ear, "Me loves my own dear daddy."

The pretty sitting-room stands out distinctly, with its dainty furnishings and sunny water-color landscapes. Betty slips down in her father's arms, protesting that she is "not one bit s'eeepy," though the saucy eyes have lost something of their sparkle now and the lids are drooping.

At the piano a sweet-faced woman is playing dreamily in the flickering fire-light, for the lamp, with its tinted shade, is turned low.

"Surely such dear home happiness is the life God wants His children to enjoy," thought Gabriel, as he opened the second letter and read it twice through. It was a call to undertake the charge of a parish in a large country town. If it were God's will that he should accept this offer he also might have a real home. His heart leaped at the thought and he stood up excitedly.

"Margaret will come to me if I hold out my hands to her," he thought

exultantly ; for he knew without the shadow of a doubt that God had worked the miracle that is so old and yet so wondrously new, and had linked a woman's heart and life indissolubly with his.

Instead of accepting Frank Osborne's invitation, why could he not go to her and make this Christmas "the first day of the year" to them both ?

Another picture painted itself before his eyes. A long drawing-room with a woman sitting in a basket-chair before a fire of glowing coals. She is not reading, though an open book lies on her lap, but is gazing into the fire, while a dreamy smile touches her lips and shines in her eyes. She looks up, without any start of surprise, as a tall figure leans over the low chair and stretches out both hands to her, saying, "Well, little girl, are you glad to see me?"

As the vision faded, Gabriel opened the window, feeling the rush of cold air

a relief, for his head was hot and his heart was throbbing violently. Why could he not make the vision a reality? Was there any barrier in the way? Surely God, Who had already given him the deep, inner strength of that sacramental mystery which makes man and woman one, intended him to reach out his hand to take the outward part of the sacrament also, now that it was possible to grasp it. Why could he not?

On his knees before the open window, looking up at a bright star which shone solemnly down between the two rows of tenement houses, Gabriel faced the question.

“O God,” he prayed, “help me to be brave and strong enough to follow Thy guiding star. Is it leading me along this pleasant path which looks so easy and inviting, or must I turn my back on comfort and climb a lonely path up the mountain of difficulty?”

Then the young man bowed his head in wondering awe, feeling that the King

Himself was very near. The prayer for guidance would be answered—why did he shrink back as though he knew and feared the answer ?

In the midnight silence that hushed the weary city with a touch of Christmas peace, the wild throbbing of nerves and pulse grew quiet as Gabriel bent his head lower beneath his Master's touch.

Then came one word of command, "Look !"

Did he hear it, or was it experienced by a finer sense than that of hearing ?

He lifted his head and saw a vast crowd of people looking pleadingly up at him. At first they were indistinct, but gradually grew clearer as the houses opposite melted away. Well-known faces stood out here and there, and all had the same hungry, eager look which said wordlessly to his listening soul, "God sent you to our help in our great need. Will you go away and leave us

to suffer alone ? If *you* do not love us enough to stay beside us in our fight with sin and misery, who will ?”

Again Gabriel bowed his head as the quiet tones of his Master's voice spoke within his heart : “All these souls are hungering for the Bread of Life, and you—you, whose days are glad in the sure consciousness of My love and abiding presence—are pleading for a life of ease and luxury. Can you bear to turn your back on your brothers, when your love for them and their love for you makes it possible for you to help them as no other man on earth can do ? Look again !”

Lifting his head Gabriel sees in a swiftly-passing vision the fulfilment of his dearest earthly hope. Margaret is his, and their home is bright as love and a comfortable income can make it. Year after year slips easily away in the sunshine of uninterrupted prosperity. Growing fame as a preacher and writer opens

up wider opportunities of influence, and it is easy to extend practical help to the poor. Yet there is something missing. The peace and joy of earlier years of struggle have vanished. Sermons win praise from others, but they seem dull and lifeless to the preacher himself. He knows that a man who has deliberately refused a great opportunity for self-sacrificing service, in order to secure his own earthly happiness, cannot sound the clarion note of a call to follow to the death One Who "pleased not Himself."

"I saved myself, others I cannot save!" is the disappointed cry of the soul that has chosen to follow the lower of two possible paths. Even the marriage with Margaret fails to satisfy, though the love of husband and wife is true and deep. The fragrance of the woman's unseen presence is not, as of old, always with the man. He no longer satisfies her ideals. His spirit is no longer an inspiration to hers, mightily sweeping her—body and soul—nearer

to God and holiness. The disappointment is real and deep, though it springs from something vague and intangible, something that refuses to be analysed.

Gabriel sprang up with a wonderful sense of relief, as the vision faded and the tall houses opposite stood out in grimy dinginess in the glare of the electric light below. He threw back his head, as if flinging off an intolerable weight of shame, remembering that the choice still remained in his own hands.

“I have had strange experiences to-night,” he thought, “and feel in the mood to try the old-fashioned expedient of pressing my finger at random on a text, just to see if it will confirm the message of that Christmas star up there.”

Sitting down in the revolving chair before the table, he laid one finger lightly on the open page of his Bible, which the wind was fluttering. Glancing down, only half in earnest in the search for a sign, he was startled to find that his

finger rested on the words, "Micaiah the son of Imlah."

"'Imlah,' my own name!" he exclaimed in astonishment, "I wonder what the name means."

Turning to the dictionary of proper names at the end of his Oxford Bible, he found "Micaiah—Who is like the Lord?" and "Imlah—He will fill up."

"How very strange," he said wonderingly. "'Who is like the Lord? He will fill up.' Surely I can trust Him to fill up, as no other can do, all the natural hopes and desires of my hungry heart. I wonder what Gabriel means—I have quite forgotten."

There the name stood in his Bible dictionary: "Gabriel—a hero of God." He looked at the page long and earnestly, then said quietly, "So, from the day of my baptism I have been called to be a hero of God, and yet I have been trying to shirk my high vocation. It seems as though I wanted to secure for myself

a comfortable passage on a Pullman car through this wilderness, leaving my brothers and sisters to struggle on alone."

Gabriel rose to his feet with the power of a settled resolution showing in every movement.

"God has given me a star for my guidance," he said to himself. "Many men are called to the settled peace of happy home life, but my star leads up the lonely mountain path. I could never keep my glad peace of heart if I turned my back on present duty. As for Margaret, she trusts me as I trust her ; there can be no disappointment possible to either of us if we are faithful to God's calling. He will hold us together in the mystical union of the communion of saints—'we have for ever'—but the highest joy can only come through sacrifice."

Again he knelt before the open window gazing up at the shining star as if it had power to lead him aright, and again a vision flashed its light upon his soul.

Margaret is standing in a brightly lighted room, in animated conversation with a group of friends. Evidently her bodily senses give her no warning that the man she loves is near, and yet her face lights up with wonderful gladness as Gabriel clasps her hand, saying quietly, "Come !"

Then he finds himself climbing a difficult mountain path. A storm of wind and sleet is beating in his face and often he is forced to cling to the rocks in order to keep his footing. A glorious star shines above, flooding the steep path with light, and a song of exultant joy rings out through the night, as the climber struggles ever onward and upward. The touch of a woman's hand is warm within his own, and the Presence of his King fills his soul with courage and his heart with gladness.

THE VISION OF HIS FACE

By Dora Farncomb

BISHOP BRENT (of the Philippine Islands) writes : "Its simplicity, its unstudied devoutness, its buoyancy—it is as though beaded bubbles winked at its brim!—commend the book to me. Sincerity kindles belief, and I am sure your vision will help others to see, especially those who have allowed their eyesight to become dimmed through lack of use."

CANON DYSON HAGUE says : "The book is valuable in the extreme. It is a devotional work of deeply spiritual quality....Many a clergyman, Sunday school teacher, and Christian worker ought to find in it an increment of hope and inspiration of life."

THE REV. J. STUART HOLDEN writes : "These brief chapters are full of that unspeakable radiance which the Vision imparts to beholding souls. . . . Without having anything of the sound of the trumpet, this book vibrates with the music of the harp, and I am certain that those who take it up in the desire of gaining more clearly the Vision of the King in His beauty, will lay it down with deep gratitude and satisfaction of heart."

Some British Press Notices

"Let us recommend 'The Vision of His Face', a book under whose shadow we have sat down with great delight. It catches the attention first by the exceeding appropriateness of its quotations. It holds it by its own exceeding spirituality."—*Expository Times*.

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"The Vision of His Face" contains seventeen chapters—more than 200 pages. Cloth, with gilt lettering. Price, \$1.00 postpaid. Canadian edition, The William Weld Co., London, Canada. English edition, Robert Scott, 62 Paternoster Row, E. C., London. American edition, The American Tract Society, 150 Nassau St., New York.

