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"AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM"

By THRESA SILVER

In a little far-off town, skirted on one side by a deep, dark forest and bounded on the other by a vast expanse of water, dwelt in seclusion a people who were once noted for their religious fervor and devotion to their church, half frozen fingers closed over it when it swayed with him, which they, in order that each might feel a closer relation. Once, twice, thrice it awoke the stillness of the night with to his God, had styled "The Home of My Lord." How the first Christmas comes of many a decade. It aroused beautiful is religion, and when it enters the hearts of the people it makes them truly beautiful, too.

When or how so radical a change was effected no one fearing that his act might bring retribution upon his own heart of a devoted Christian people into those of a good-prayer from the depths of his bosom heart-prayer to nothing, almost barbarous race. Cold-blooded murders, which the walls of the sacred edifice had been strangers were, alas, of frequent occurrence and thefts and robbery were rife.

Poor, miserable and unhappy were they in their non-religion was the sound to the inhabitants; their grandfathers, strange superstitions, of which they could not free now it seemed like knells from other lands.

Lord, which otherwise had had no existence. Notwithstanding the condition of these folk, there lived among them some few good, true souls who hoped and prayed that things might alter.

"Everything in God's world undergoes a change; from the most promising crops we oftentimes reap the richest harvests. Let us hope for the best; it may be that God will send us one of his bright angels down to lead us aright."

"Little Paul," (he was always called so,) knew no other name. As far back as his memory could reach he had trod the roads of the little town clad in rags, dependent upon the charities of the inhabitants.

He carried withal a hopeful heart, for therein was enshrined a love of the good a fear of the Lord. He loved the beautiful sunshine, but the darkness held no terrors. He even awaited its coming, for it was then that he might peer with sparkling wondering eyes into the homes which to him were visions of paradise-paradise which he sometime hoped to enter. The radiance, the joy, all that was beautiful was in his God; the little children in the pretty robes, with their soft, curling hair and sweet faces were his bright angels.

And now on Christmas eve, as he tramped footsore and hungry, he gazed with longing eyes into the homes of the wealthy; the rich and powerful, who had no thought of little Paul, of poor half starved little Paul.

A sign escaping from the deep recesses of his heart had scarcely made its exit ere he heard a sound as of the crisp snow being cunched beneath a heavy heel and ere he was aware a firm hand was laid upon his shoulder and a gruff voice addressed his ear: "Here, boy, why tarry here?" Come, come with me." Paul in wonderment turned his eyes upon the speaker and in the moonlight beheld a well-dressed man, whose face had in it a strange expression of cunning. Paul, however, accustomed all his life to obey other's commands, had no other thought but to follow the stranger as requested.

Before he was aware he was lifted in the strong arms of his companion and placed in a cutter, which stood in the shadow. The man then jumped in, whipped up the horses, and then they flew over the hard snow. Paul's fears were now thoroughly aroused, but he nevertheless noted with apparent interest an other occupant of the sleigh, a villainous looking individual, surely, with his projecting upper teeth and heavy, overhanging brows; he spoke never a word, but sat as rigid as if frozen by the biting wind which assailed them in their fierce fast drive over the whistling roads. At last, as had done a sacred edifice almost in ruins, the cutter was the only one of which the town could boast.

Very familiar indeed did it appear to Paul's eyes, for had he not oft in the still, dark nights crept to its small entrance and nestled there, sometimes gazing, sometimes to only think and think, until the dawn of the gray morning, when life and all that he held seemed even daintier than the blackness of the night.

The men hurriedly alighted from the sleigh, when the one who had accosted Paul, again, lifted him in his arms, and after the other had opened a window of the church, with whose bolts and bars Father Time had dealt rather harshly, the boy was shoved through and dropped affrighted on a bench beneath. "Strike this match, make a light and hand out to me all that you can find here, but quick about it," said the man with the cunning expression, and the boy, too frightened to disobey, did as he was bid. There were many valuable articles which had been given as offerings to the church in the days gone by, and which had never to this day been molested. Paul had been busied at his task but a few moments when the robbers, evidently becoming startled at something, hastily closed the window, and ere the boy could conceive of his situation the sound of the horses' hoofs and the glide of the cutter was fast receding in the distance.

Alone and a prisoner, with only the dust and the spiders for company. Long festoons of cobwebs adorned the walls and all was silent as the tomb. A sudden fear seized the child; for the first time in his lonely life he feared the darkness which seemed gathered and stowed away in the far corners of the room. He was cold, ah, so cold; he would light up the place and then mayhap, he would find something to throw over his poor trembling shoulders.

Yes, there was a garment, little enough protection to be sure, but any covering, no matter how scanty, was welcome. He shook from it the dust, it seemed for centuries; the robe of a little choir boy, long since dead and forgotten. Mechanically he threw it over his tatters, and

as if influenced by a being superhuman; then, penitently, he knelt before the altar and offered up a prayer, nothing more than a silent offering to the God of his heart.

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