

THE INNKEEPER'S SON



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IT WAS A BITTER NIGHT, though very clear. Under the sparkling stars a wild north wind drove cold into the veins, into the cracks and crannies of the tightest dwelling, and the tree limbs sighed and creaked. The snow that had fallen yesterday swirled up afresh and made new drifts, and the frozen earth was swept bare in wide swathes. No creature moved abroad, and except for the moan of the wind the world lay silent.

But the inn was warm and cozy in the firelight and in the lamplight flickering from the walls. The smell of roast goose and pudding and spiced wine permeated the air. There was the glitter of holly on the shelf above the hearth, and greens were hung in bunches from the great black rafters. The four men at the table set their flagons down in unison with loud thumps and burst into raucous singing, not for the first time that evening to

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be sure.

*God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ our Savior
Was born upon this day!*

Perhaps it was concern for the decorum of his house that brought the innkeeper from the kitchen then—or perhaps concern for a sale of more ale—for he came in bearing a foaming jug and set it before them, and stood with arms akimbo, grinning, as they filled their mugs and drank his health. Then his glance flickered to the settle by the hearth, where his boy sat alone. He was a slender lad, dark, with great blue eyes that stared empty into space, blinking occasionally. His hands lay upon his knees. The innkeeper's face shadowed a moment, then his mind came back to his guests.

“So, gentlemen, here is more cheer for you this bitter eve. The goodwife sends you greetings, and hopes you won't tarry too long this night from your own hearths.”

The townsmen laughed and the first one spoke, “More cheer here than on my own hearth. Bickerings and brawling brats! No peace on earth for a man there, Christmas Eve or no.”

But the second chided him. “Come now, what say you, Nat! They are all hale and hearty, just a bit lively and numerous. This is a holy eve, and like as not we should all be home,” and he pushed back his chair as if to rise. But the third laid a hand on his sleeve, saying, “Like as not, but it's warm and merry here, and cold and bleak without.”

And in a low voice the last one spoke, “But a night of mystery all the same. We should be home by our own hearths, for this is

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the night the Christ Child walks, by the old legends.”

Then the innkeeper leaned upon the table with his hands and shook his head. “A likely tale, a likely tale!”

“Nay, but ’tis true,” broke in the second. “You know the kindly woodcarver from Terminaison beyond the mountain who said a heavenly visitor carved him a most marvelous chest when he was an awkward and mistreated lad?”

And the third spoke, remembering, “And that woman of the same town whose long-lost husband was led home by a fair-haired angel child one Christmas Eve, after years of wandering?”

“And that lame girl,” said the fourth man. “Do you recall that lame girl in the next village—the village of La-Croche—she who gave her last crust to a little lost boy—and next morning awoke with legs as strong and straight as yours or mine?”

Then the innkeeper glanced again at his son on the settle by the hearth, and he eased himself onto a stool and put his head close to his guests. “There was a time,” he said in a low voice, “when I prayed for him, yonder, that his affliction would be lifted. Aye, and my wife and I laid many pence before the altar, and lit many a candle. But his eyes are still vacant, and scant use a blind lad is to a man like me! He does what he can, but that is little enough.”

But the boy had heard, for he drooped his head and passed one hand across his eyes. Then he sat as before. A little silence fell upon the room, and the fire crackled and hissed. At length the first townsman spoke.

“Such tales are told to give us comfort. Not one of us has seen such with our own eyes. ’Tis true that now Terminaison has

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a name for good works that is unsurpassed in all the province, and the girl in La-Croche is said to be a veritable saint, giving of her own to the poor till there is nothing left for herself. But who can say the world itself has changed?"

Still the uneasy silence lay upon the room. The boy sat with bowed head, the innkeeper poked at the fire, and the men slouched in their chairs, all merriment quenched. Then the third townsman slapped his thigh and spoke in a loud voice.

"The priests sometimes, to get our pence and our candles, spread these miracles. I do right as I see it, and look for no sudden and unearned ending to my troubles. But why be sad, for the world is full of sorrows and disappointment, if we dwell upon it." And he rose with the jug, to lean across the table and fill all their mugs, until the last drop was drained.

So they all broke into song again, and as they sang they did not hear the soft knock, nor see the latch move and the door slowly open. The stranger stood against the night unnoticed, watching them; then he quietly shut the door behind him. He was dark and thin, and wore a threadbare cloak, and clutched a gnarled staff with one brown hand. He waited for a moment while their song rang out.

*In Bethlehem in Jewry
This blessed babe was born
And laid within a manger
Upon this blessed morn.*

But the boy had turned his head with the opening of the door, and rose now, his hand against his heart and his head following the stranger as he slowly crossed to the fire, laid down his staff, and stretched out his hands to the warming flames. And suddenly the song died out as the innkeeper saw the newcomer by

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the hearth and got to his feet, with a troubled face.

"What now, a wayfarer, on such a night! What do you seek, stranger?"

But the man simply looked up, smiling, and held his brown hands to the flames. The innkeeper, a bit nettled, said grudgingly, "Well, warm yourself, and later I'll fetch you a bite. 'Tis no night to turn a man out." Then to the four silenced townsmen, "So now, lads, 'tis going on twelve o'clock, and like it or not, soon out ye go!"

And they all chimed in:

"One more toast, that this blessed eve is a bright one the world around!"

"Riches, and a long life!"

"Health, and an obedient wife!"

"An end to all domestic strife!"

They drained their tankards and banged them down with loud laughing and crowded to the door, flinging sheepskin jackets over their shoulders, slapping one another upon the back. The innkeeper followed them, herding them out like noisy and unruly cattle. He shut the door upon them, calling cheerily, "God bless you one and all, and until next year!" and they were heard going off into the night with shouts and singing.

In the silence that fell, the innkeeper stood a moment, his face blank and tired. Then he came wearily back to the table, gathering up the empty tankards and the soiled cloth. On his way to the kitchen door he stopped a moment, looking to the fire where the man still stood, and to his son, who waited in the shadow.

"Son, fetch this stranger the ends of bread from the pantry, and see that he is well warmed before he goes forth. I'm off to bed. Tomorrow bids fair to be a busy one, and my bones ache." Then he went across the room, kicking the door open with his

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toe and letting it fall to behind him.

After a long moment, when the fire whispered and glowed more golden and peace seemed to come gathering down from the shadowing corners, the man gave a vast and weary sigh. He sank upon a low stool by the fire and laid aside his cloak. He felt his worn shoes, now thawing and wet, and slipped them off to set them nearer the flames to dry. The boy still stood with his face toward the man, but now he turned and went to the hutch. He felt carefully around till he found the snowy cloth covering six loaves of fresh, white bread. One of these he drew forth and laid it on the board, cutting it in generous slices. These he put on a wooden trencher, and then fetched a wedge of yellow cheese from the shelf. Slowly he crossed the room and set the supper on a bench beside the stranger. For a long moment the man looked up into the boy's face, glowing in the firelight; then he began to eat. Again the boy turned and crossed the room, and this time he brought back a slender green bottle of mead, and a blue mug. These he set down beside the bread and cheese. He stood for a moment, as if listening to be sure the man was indeed eating, then he went to the great chest in the corner of the room. Opening this, he lifted from it a fur rug. He carried the rug back to the fire and kneeling, spread it carefully before the hearth. Then he rose and backed off and spoke softly, "Master, when thou art done, rest awhile."

He slipped away then into the shadows and sat on a stool, waiting. When the man had finished, he stretched out on the rug in the warmth of the flickering fire and sighed again, and after a bit there came the sound of peaceful breathing. Then the boy arose and felt his way carefully across the room. He stooped over the man, and with his hands hunted for the shoes laid out to dry. With his delicate fingers he felt the soles and found the holes

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in them; then he laid them against his own foot, to try to size. The match was perfect. He slipped off his own shoes and put them where the man's had been. Then he went back across the room and set the old shoes beside the great chest. From a peg on the wall he took down a cloak, his own, heavy and serviceable. He crept back across the room and felt again on the floor near the man, until he found his cloak. He ran his fingers over the worn spots, the patches, and the holes. Then he laid his own cloak down in its place, and took the old one back across the room, putting it on the peg where his had been. Then he went softly across to the settle near the hearth and sank upon it, and he whispered to himself, "I will watch by his side tonight, lest he lack for anything."

The clock struck the hour of one, and the man slept on. The boy sat unwavering, his face peaceful and full of joy. The quiet room was bright with the steady glow of firelight, for the wood seemed not to be consumed, though no seen hand replenished it. The sound of the wind faded, and the hiss of blown snow against the pane. The flicker of starlight came beyond the window.

The clock struck the hour of two, then three, then four, and still the man slept, and the boy, smiling faintly, watched on. But then the peace, the utter quiet and content, settled over his heart and little by little his head nodded, till his cheek rested against the side of the settle and his blind eyes closed.

When the clock struck five, the man stirred. He stretched, and then sat up, and in the faint, warm light he took in the sleeping boy, the new shoes, the sturdy cloak. He rose then, and in the old room he seemed very tall and fair, a king and not a beggar from the road. He swung the cloak about his shoulders and slipped his feet into the shoes, and knelt to fasten them. Then he crossed

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the room and stood for a long moment looking into the face of the boy. He reached out his hand and with one finger he softly touched the eyelids of the boy, and then with gentleness he stroked his hair. The boy smiled in his sleep but did not waken. Then the man turned and went across the room to the door. The latch clicked as the door swung wide, a gust of morning air, cool and fresh, blew in, and then without a sound the door closed. On the hearth the fire suddenly winked down, only a few coals glowing still, and the room grew chill.

Perhaps it was the chill that woke the boy, or in his heart the knowledge that a presence was gone. For he suddenly jerked awake, and with wide eyes looked into the dim room, where dawn was already striking at the windows. He stared, leaped to his feet, and rushed to the hearth.

"Master!" he cried. "Thou art gone. I slept. I did not watch by thee!" And he bent his head upon his knees, and wept. But then his sobs suddenly ceased. He raised his head and took his hands from his eyes and looked around.

"But I see!" he gasped. "I see!" He seized the crust of bread left upon the trencher and the crumbs of cheese. "Look, where he ate!" And he felt the fur robe with wondering fingers. "And see where he has lain." Then he saw the staff. "And this, this he leaned upon." He leaped up then, holding the old staff, and ran to the chest in the corner. "And these are his shoes, and this his cloak. Here are the rents I felt last night...but now I see...I see!" He stood dumbstruck, panting, and stared around the room, the tears upon his cheeks. "But oh where, where has he gone?" Then he rushed to the door and flung it wide and looked out upon the world. He stood thus, clutching the frame, while the blue and rose and gold of the first dawn grew and blossomed in the east.

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"Hast lost thy wits, stupid boy!" thundered his father, in the dark, cold room behind him. "Shut the door! Put wood upon the fire and hasten. This day ye know full well the draper and all his clan feasts here. 'Tis Christmas and more to do than we have hands to manage. Shut the door, thou fool!" He pulled the boy back and slammed the door to in a fury. "Now the room is icy. We must start the fire afresh before we set up the trestles and lay the cloth. Look lively! Nay, I wonder at thee."

He went to the bin behind the settle and brought out a log, lugging it to the hearth. In the shadows he stumbled over the fur rug and with a tinkle of glass the bottle of mead toppled over and smashed. The innkeeper dropped the log and stared about him in dismay, and with an oath turned to face his son. The boy stood staring at him with wide, dark eyes, his face stricken.

"Is this the way ye served that beggar last night? Mead!" He nudged the trencher with his foot. "White bread! The best robe! Are ye bewitched, crazed?"

The boy stood, wordless. Then the father went up and seized him by the shoulder. "Fool, blind fool," he shouted into his face. "Without sight and without wit also. What have I done to deserve such misfortune!" He gave him a shove, then, in a calmer voice—"Fetch kindling from the bin and stir the fire. And don't cut thy stupid knees on that glass. I'll get the broom to sweep it up. The next stranger that comes I'll deal with myself, and give him short shrift!" And he went out muttering into the kitchen.

The boy looked after him, his face pale, the tears welling out of his eyes. For a long moment he stood, trembling, the silence of the empty room pounding in his ears. He raised his hands and pressed them over his eyes, and whispered: "Oh, Master, who has given me sight, now I must serve thee, and follow thee, even

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to the ends of the earth. But where, where has he gone?"

Then he lifted his head, listening. Words came back to him, spoken half in disbelief, yet with a core of truth. "La-Croche," he whispered. "Terminaison...perhaps there. At least I would find others who have seen him also, and believed."

He went across the room. With sure and steady hand he took the stranger's shoes and put them on his own feet. He flung the man's cloak across his shoulders, and he held the old staff in his hands. Then without a backward glance he strode to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the morning, and the door swung shut behind him.

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