

Two Christmas Eves

I. CHRISTMAS EVE, 1852.

In a large provincial town in France the day was beginning to decline, and a sharp northeast wind to blow. The streets were nearly deserted, for everyone was anxious to get home to warmth and comfort. Many had been out to buy toys and bonbons; for in France Christmas is regarded as especially the children's feast, and every child is taught to expect a Christmas gift from the Infant Jesus.

In the silence of the darkening streets rose a clear, young voice: "Any chimneys to sweep?" It was a strange sound for such a night. Who was likely to have his chimneys swept on Christmas Eve? Little Johnny Chanterose sighed as he called on. Presently he came to the church and over the porch he saw the carved stone image of the Virgin Mother holding the Infant Jesus in her arms.

Johnny sank on his knees. "Sweet little Jesus," he said, "please let me find tonight, the eve of Thy feast, one chimney to sweep!" Then, rising up, he went on his way, calling out as before, "Any chimneys to sweep?" Suddenly a window opened, and there the boy found a chimney that needed sweeping. He soon climbed up, and by the quantity of soot that descended it was easy to see he had done his work well. But he never came back.

"Where can he be?" asked the family. Not in the chimney, for they peeped up. They shouted, but there was no reply. They were very busy; it was no affair of theirs, so they left Johnny to his fate.

Where was he? Safe on the roof, for this was why Johnny had prayed so hard to get a chimney to sweep. He was an orphan, all alone in the world, and he did so long to have, like other children, a Christmas gift from the Infant Jesus.

"Now," he argued, "the way the Infant Jesus goes down to give the children their presents at midnight is through the chimneys; there is no other way for Him. And in the garret where I sleep there is no chimney, so how can He come to me? I will wait for Him, then, on the roof, and surely He will see me, and listen to me." So he went about on the top of the house, and peeped down the chimney. At last he heard some voices from a group evidently sitting near a hearth, on which the fire was just expiring. He listened, and heard a soft, gentle voice say:

"Mark, you must be very obedient if you want the Infant Jesus to send you a beautiful Christmas present tonight by His angels."

A child's voice answered: "I want the Holy Infant to come Himself. I will have Him come - I *will!*" And then the child stamped his little foot.

A third voice spoke gravely: "Mark, the Infant Jesus loves children who are not self-willed. Take care that you do not find anything else in your stockings than a birchrod."

Johnny had heard enough. There was the place for him; evidently the Infant Jesus was expected here. The socks were on the hearth ready for the present, so he settled himself on the roof. But the wind grew more and more piercing, snow began to fall, and Johnny shivered under his rags. "Alas!" he said, "I shall be dead before midnight if I stay here. I'll creep into the chimney; the fire is out; I can hold myself very well - just as I do when sweeping, and I shall be warm, and sheltered. And if I do go to sleep, I shall wake up when the Infant Jesus passes by." So the little fellow planted himself well, and soon fell asleep; but after a while he lost his balance, and tumbled down the chimney into the middle of the hearth.

Papa, Mamma, and the little boy all started to their feet with a cry.

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Papa, "where do you come from?"

"It is the fault of the cold night, sir, please. I could not help it. I'm Johnny, the chimney sweep. Don't beat me."

"But what were you doing on the roof at this time of night?" said Mamma, gently.

"Please, madam, I was waiting for the Infant Jesus. I am an orphan, and so miserable I wanted to ask Him to make my master kinder to me, and to make me happy."

"Oh, don't beat him, Papa!" piped little Mark.

"Don't be afraid, my poor boy," said Papa. Then, turning to his own little son, he went on: "Mark, you said that the Holy Infant should come down Himself tonight. Look at Him. He has taken the form and the clothing of the children He loves the best in the world - the miserable children."

"It is true," said Mamma, with tears in her eyes.

Mark set a chair for the Infant Jesus, and ran to bring Him some bonbons. Poor, shivering Johnny was mute with astonishment. The father and mother spoke together in a whisper. They were excellent people, rich and charitable. They had lost four young children, and Mark, the only one left, was very delicate, and a cause of perpetual anxiety.

"Let us keep this little one, who is alone on earth, that God may bless and preserve our Mark?" said the mother.

"Yes, my wife, we will," answered her husband. "What is your name, child?" he continued.

"John Chanterose. I am nine years old."

"You have neither father nor mother? Would you like to stay with us?"

The child trembled all over; he could not speak.

“Will you be very good, and learn to read and write, and be Mark’s companion?”

Mark came in at this minute, loaded with bonbons. “Oh, what fun!” he cried as he heard his father’s last words.

The little orphan was nearly wild with joy. He fell on his knees, joined his hands and said: “Dear, Infant Jesus, dear Infant Jesus, I thank Thee!”

So Johnny was called the little Christmas brother. He was soon washed and dressed in Mark’s clothes - they were the same size - and now two pairs of socks were laid on the hearth to await the Christmas gifts. Next morning they were found well filled, and among Mark’s gifts was a tiny cross of honor, for he had always said he would be a general; and among the bonbons and toys for Johnny shone a pretty silver crucifix.

Never had the poor boy’s eyes fallen on such gifts before. “Oh, my dear Infant Jesus of Christmas!” cried he, sobbing with joy. “Now I have a father, mother, and brother. Indeed I *will* be good, and learn hard, and show you how I love you all.”

II. CHRISTMAS EVE, 1870

The two boys grew up together, and Johnny did not disappoint the hopes of his adopted parents. Mark was deeply attached to him, and the companionship of his brother did him good in every way. His health improved, and he was no longer the peevish, self-willed child he used to be.

Their boyhood passed away, and Mark, faithful to his childish fancy, chose the army as his profession; while Johnny was still happier, for to him was granted a vocation to the priesthood. Mark came home one winter, with his officer’s epaulettes, to assist at John’s first Mass, which was said on Christmas Eve, the day so dear to all their hearts.

At last, in 1870, came the terrible war between France and Prussia. Mark’s regiment was in the field, and John was appointed, by earnest solicitation, chaplain to it. There have been few harder or bitterer winters than that of 1870. On Christmas Eve the snow was falling fast. Mark’s regiment had been in action before the walls of an old cemetery, and had retreated. But in vain did John seek for his adopted brother: he was nowhere to be found - no one knew anything of him; all was in confusion; everyone must take his own chance.

Then John, with great difficulty, got a lantern and a party of peasants, and went out to search. At last he found him in the snow, “left for dead.” But life was not extinct. John raised him in his arms, laid him against his breast, and hastened to a place of shelter. The wounded man revived.

“Brother,” he said, “give me absolution. It is sweet to die in your arms, and you will console *them*----” Then he fainted again.

Finally they reached the hut where the general of the division had taken refuge. When he saw Mark, he cried: “Here you are, my brave lieutenant!” And taking off his own Cross of the Legion of Honor, he placed it on the wounded soldier.

The surgeon examined Mark; he had three bayonet wounds, and the case was serious and critical.

“John, take me to the old church,” whispered Mark.

The village church was turned into a hospital, but the sanctuary was left untouched, and at midnight John began his three Masses. Mark had made his confession, and was now ready to receive his God in Holy Communion. It was a strange scene, more like a Mass in some ancient catacomb than anything else. The wounded and suffering men joined fervently in the prayers, and during the Elevation there was solemn silence: every moan was hushed.

Next day Mark was better, and was able to be moved to an ambulance. A fortnight afterwards he went home to recruit his health. The father and mother wept with joy. “John has saved our Mark,” said the mother. “I knew well that through him God would bless and preserve our child.”

John continued with the army until the war was over, and then returned to his humble country parish. Mark recovered his health, and rejoined his regiment with the rank of captain. They still live, devoted brothers and friends, ever rejoicing that the Infant Jesus heard both of their childish prayers.