

# The Greater Gift

By Laura Goodman Salverson

**L**ITTLE Magnus considered the weather gravely. It looked as though it were going to snow. Above the shacks opposite, the sky seemed singularly low. He had an idea that if he could ascend a house-top he might run his finger along the woolly clouds.

Out in the street he saw where a small hungry-looking dog sniffed at the hard earth as he loped along disconsolately. It reminded Magnus that he was not so very full himself.

Slowly he turned round to watch his mother busy with her ironing. She was a small, vigorous woman and the perspiration of her face curled the fine hair about her temples instead of dampening it—perhaps this was nature's way of flying undaunting colors. Now she was flushed and hot and very tired. Beside her on a chair was a large basket of clothes. They were all to be ironed so she might deliver them that afternoon to the grocer's wife.

"Mama, I think I'm just a little, little hungry."

She set the iron down sharply, wiped her forehead and smiled.

"It is good that, isn't it, my lamb? Then it will be such fun to have your porridge. If you will just wait till I finish this blouse, then we shall waken Maria and have our dinner."

"Mama, is it true that God loves children?"

"What else could he do, beloved?"

"And, mama, isn't this Christmas?"

"In the old land we would say that Christmas begins this midnight. You shall see—the stars will shine with a twinkle, for the angels shine them anew in their joy."

"Mama, Samuel told me there will be a tree at the church. Couldn't I go? A tree with lights on it! He said so. Oh, mama! I never saw one—it isn't so cold—please couldn't I go?"

His mother had finished the blouse. She hung it carefully over the back of a chair, set aside her ironing board and went to the small stove. Perhaps it was to hide her emotions that she peered so carefully and so low over the porridge pot.

From the next and only other room came a weak voice asking the time of day.

"It is half past twelve, Peter," said his wife.

"Mama, couldn't I go?"

"Will you not be frightened going alone, dear? And with papa so ill I couldn't take you."

Little Magnus' face lit up with joy.

"No, no. Oh mama, it will be Christmas! And I shall hear the singing and see the stars, too—papa, papa! I'm going to see the tree at the church," he called shrilly, running to the door of the bedroom.

White and very worn from his long illness, the poor father regarded the child, saw his big shining eyes so full of expectation and he groaned.

"You will freeze, Magnus, and become sick like papa."

"But No! I shall run—and see, I shall stick my hands into my coat-sleeves—and mama puts paper in my shoes—it isn't so cold then if you run fast."

Over the meager dinner, his mother tried to make plain many things without revealing too much.

"There will perhaps be gifts, Magnus, for the little children whose fathers are well. You must not let it grieve you if there are no presents for you."

But little Magnus had another belief. Had not his friend told him of a mysterious person who brought gifts to good little boys and had he not been a good little boy; carrying wood and water

and helping his mother with the heavy baskets of clothes? And did he not mind Maria while their mother was away? And had not his mother said God loved small children? So of course there would be something wonderful for him on that tree! The tree in God's house—he was sure of it. He had even hinted a little to God in his prayers.

**S**HORTLY after seven he began to wash himself. He was very careful about his ears, even asking his mother to look into them; and he brushed his stiff close-cropped hair long and painstakingly. Then his mother helped him into a clean shirt, brushed his old coat, lined his worn boots with paper and watched him with a heavy heart.

But little Magnus sang with delight. It made his father clench his hands in the darkness to listen to the shrill sweet voice. How the child sang! Like a bird in the morning.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed, "fill with compassion some heart—poor little child, poor little child."

When Magnus was ready he flung himself upon his father and kissed him. He squeezed his little sister till she cried out in pain, then he flew to his mother's arms. She smiled into his eyes, kissing them one after the other.

"Be a good child and remember if it were not for papa's illness you would have a gift too. Be a little man and be brave."

He turned back to wave at her, lunched in the shoulders through habit in fighting the wind, and called gaily, "You shall see, mama, something will happen—just you wait."

When he was gone she sat down heavily. Maria picked at her sleeve but she did not heed her. The child sighed and then slipped off into a corner where she sat down and talked to the people behind the wall.

"My dear, wasn't it unwise to let him go?" Peter called tonelessly.

"No doubt, but he would not have understood or forgotten that we denied him so little a thing. Oh Peter, but that it should be Christmas Eve!"

Then they said no more. After a time Maria fell asleep weary with her make-believe and her mother put her to bed. From time to time she glanced at the clock. She tried to knit but the stitch was irritating. She wiped off the stove, swept the floor again, putting away the papers Maria had scattered about.

But Magnus ran on gaily. He gritted his teeth and refused to believe that he was cold. The long streets were white and the dim light of the street lamps cast a ghostly glimmer over them. Now and again someone passed him, or rather he fled by them unseeing.

When at last he saw the big grey church, tremendously big to him, all a-light with its Christmas candles, his little heart swelled to bursting. He thought how beautiful the yellow patches of light were that flung themselves from the church windows out upon the snow. And up aloft over the church steeple gleamed the white cross, silvered in the moonlight. He was so happy to see all this that he wanted to cry. And when shivering with cold and nervous excitement he slipped into a far back pew, he was even more delighted.

At first he was just a little confused. It was so warm and there was such a wonderful odor of spruce in the air, and such a buzz of voices. With stiffened fingers he tugged at his comforter and at last unwound it. He hung it carefully behind himself so as not to get it in anyone's way. Then he sank back against the seat and just looked and looked.

**T**HE arches of the church were garlanded in green and everywhere were candles twinkling down at one like tiny golden spirits. But wonder of wonders—beside the altar was a tree! Great and tall and all a-glitter! It was like a wonderful dream. It was unbelievable and yet it was true. High above the altar was a flaming message done in golden tinsel: "Glory to God in the Highest." He could read it quite well, he had read it so often for his mother. But now it dazzled him. He felt its glory enveloping him in a hot flame.

He did not hear so much of the sermon, but he wished he dared sing. The singing was so lovely. And when, after a bit, a band of little children dressed in white marched around the aisles singing, "Oh Little Babe of Bethlehem," he had to blink hard and fast for somehow his eyes would not behave.

But all the while he was so still and so quiet that no one observed him. A gaunt woman had settled down on one side of him and a fussy red-faced man on the other. They looked at him with some annoyance and surprise at first—and then forgot him.

When the program ended a big man with a smiling face began calling out names. And every time he called some child hurried up the aisle and came back from the wonder tree with something hugged close. Little Magnus sat up, very stiff and very patient. When a child passed him he longed so to say how glad he was and perhaps to see the present. And the man called on and on. It was very peculiar, Magnus thought, how long the man was calling the children. And now the tree seemed to be stripped of so many, many bundles that had swung there so gaily before.

Then suddenly he came to himself with a shock. The man had stopped calling. There were no more children passing up the aisle. Then in one movement the congregation rose. It seemed to him the people all became one huge moving mass. And it rose, this mass of living people, and sang very loudly and discordantly, and then began pushing past him.

The thin woman wrapped her fur around her, picked up her purse and left the seat beside him. The fussy little man found his overshoes, grunted in putting them on, sighed, and went also. But little Magnus sat on like stone—this was God's house and he had been good—but God had forgotten him. He bit his lips hard, fumbled for his muffler and stumbled out.

**W**ITH the passing of each slow hour his mother had become increasingly disturbed. Something urged her to action. She darted to the cupboard. There was little enough there, but she decided to make a few pancakes. She had grown very clever at making pancakes without eggs and they were not bad at all. When they were made she rolled them carefully, cut them in two and piled them in curious formations round the big plate. From an old trunk she drew an old tablecloth and spread it on the pine table. Then she removed the lamp chimney, shined it anew, and set the lamp in the centre of the table. Not knowing why, she hunted feverishly again in that old trunk and miracle or miracles! Found a little white candle and a bit of ribbon. She fastened a smart bow around the candle and then put it under the plate, waiting Magnus. This done she sat down again listening for every sound.

A little past ten she caught at her breast as if to silence the beating of her heart. She flew to the door and flung it wide.

It had begun to snow. Heavy gusts of wind carried the flakes in sweeping eddies. She was almost blinded as she ran out into the path. And there like a stray, black flake, he came—the little disillusioned one—sobbing aloud and fighting the wind.

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returned to their everyday doings, we struck a new key note."  
 "You don't need to tell me what it was, mother, I know."  
 "I hope you do, Carrie, for we tried to keep to it all through the years that followed. We tried three more Christmases on the new plan, not repeating the same thing, but always getting into touch with some children. And then you came to gladden our home, and afterwards Charlie and Dick and Mattie and little Joyce."  
 "And did you never give any more gay Christmas parties, mother, in those three years?" Carrie asked.

"Oh, yes, we did, but somehow we gathered different friends around us, and they came with their children, and the children seemed to be the centre of things and to make our parties a success. Just as your parties are always a success, Carrie, although you didn't have to go into the wilderness to learn your lesson, as I did."  
 "And that is how you came to see Christmas so much through the eyes of children, is it, mother?"  
 Mrs. Soutar made no reply, but Carrie thought she heard her softly saying 'He took a child, and set him in the midst of them.'

## The Greater Gift

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He almost fell at her feet.  
 "Oh mama, oh mama—! And I was so good!"  
 She lifted him up high in her arms and carried him in. She hurried to the chair by the stove, and there with him on her lap drew off his shoes and his wet clothes; saying nothing, letting him cry his pitiful little cry; saying nothing, but thinking fast.

When he was wrapped warmly in a shawl, she took his face in her hands smiling at him brightly and said:

"So, my precious, you *did* get the best gift of all!"

His eyes widened and he fought his tears. He was an imaginative child. Perhaps it had come to the house. How silly he had been!

"What, mama?"  
 She cuddled him close again and swung him around so that his feet might get the warmth from the fire.

"You remember the little Christ-child. You remember that when He came to earth there was no room for Him. Only a little stall near the sheep."

"Yes, mama."  
 "And think—perhaps His mother, the blessed Mary, wept a little for sadness—it was not much for her baby—this stall. And then you remember how the king would have killed Him—the Most Blessed One. And they had to flee, those good parents. This, too, was sad, little Magnus, don't you think?"  
 "Yes, mama."

"And perhaps there were few joys for the little Jesus in the days to come in Galilee—and you remember all the sadness that followed this again. You remember the lonely Jesus in that garden one dark night—and that day before Pilate—and you remember the cross."  
 "Yes, mama."

Little Magnus was now ready to weep for the abused Jesus.

"And this Christmas—it is first a time of remembrance and then a time of joy, you know that, little one? And every year at Christmas time, the Most Blessed Lord comes down to earth again in the likeness of the child He once was—and He comes and stands behind the child He has found most worthy that year. And while He stands so, the shadow of His cross falls upon Him again as it did in the manger, and falls, too, upon His little chosen one. This is the *real* Christmas gift—this is God's favour."

"Oh, mama!" Magnus' eyes were bright with amazement. His mother swallowed painfully, smoothed the shawl about him, then holding him close, smiled her beautiful smile.

"And *this* is the gift you received, little Magnus."

"But, mama—"  
 "Think—were you not unobserved? Did anyone see you? Did anyone speak to you? Or seek to detain you?"

"No, mama, but—"  
 "There then! Can you not see? It was not possible! It was not possible—they did not see you, these people. You were over-shadowed. And it is ever so. Those that are favoured by the cross, they go alone walking with their Lord. Little joys are not for them—they have the stars for company, and the friendship of the angels. Come, my sweet, smile again. Are you not proud to be so loved of your God?"  
 "Oh, mama!" Suddenly little Magnus

flung his arms around her neck, kissing her passionately. "Oh, it is so beautiful! But how *did* you know it?"

She laughed happily, now much relieved, got up and carried him to the table.

"Oh, perhaps it was whispered to me, who knows? And look! here we have a party—is it not gay?"

She stepped about briskly pouring him out a little coffee and milk, then sat down beside him.

When Magnus lifted his plate and found the candle, tied so smartly with its red ribbon, he clapped his hands.

"Oh, let's light it mama, and watch it burn while we eat."

"No, my precious, we will light it when you are in bed and it shall burn beside you till you are asleep. It is the Christmas candle, such as the children burned for the Christ-child in my dear country. And as you sleep I have no doubt that you will dream—you, the little chosen one."

After he was in bed, watching the tiny flickering candle drowsily, he called his mother. She came toward him, tired-looking but satisfied, and bent above him. He wound his arms around her neck.

"Mama," he whispered, "do you think He was sorry I should have cried—that I didn't understand?"

She smiled down at him mistily.  
 "No, my beloved. I think above all else He would understand."

Just a little while the child gazed up at her earnestly, then he smiled contentedly.

"I guess the shadow fell on you too, mama, when you were little. That is why you always understand."

## The Empire's Oldest Xmas Dinner

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Afterwards, a little cheery music is provided, and each man is handed a pipe of English Cherrywood, a tin of tobacco containing half a pound of the soothing wood herb, a box of matches, a pair of woollen mittens, a Christmas card and a present of money.

Then, as on other nights, the guests between nine and ten o'clock are shown to their separate beds, comfortable with blankets and snowy sheets, in the dormitories, that probably are the oldest in active use in the British Isles, if not in Europe. Dating from the late 16th century establishment of "Watts" they are six in number—three on the ground floor, and three above, but approached by an outside staircase. In the morning the visitors are called early, and usually are off on the tramp again between seven and eight o'clock. Breakfast is not provided. Each of the men, however, is handed four pennies, and has the remains of his supper wrapped up to eat at his convenience.

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