

GOD'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

Doctor McLeod wearily pushing the papers from him leaned back in his office chair and gave himself up to thought. He was an attractive, well proportioned man of medium height, whose dark hair was slightly tinged with grey. The joyous shouts of happy children playing outside his window brought back to him memories—unpleasant memories. There was a time when he had a child, a little boy, with soft brown curls, on whom he lavished all the care and attention that an affectionate father could bestow. But Frank had grown up, and—well, he meant nothing to his father now.

Long ago, when Frank had come back from Italy, where he had been studying art, his father promised him a home with him:

“Marry some good, industrious girl,” he had said “and stay here and live with your old father.”

A few years later, at the house of a friend, Frank met Edna Wills, a beautiful young lady,—at least she was so to him for he found himself deeply attracted by her. Acquaintance strengthened his affection, until one day he asked her to be his wife.

“Do you—can you really love me?” he asked.

“I should be untruthful if I said that I did not love you,” said the girl simply.

“Then will you be my wife? We can have a home in comfort and ease with my father, and I shall try to make you happy.”

This was a trying moment for Edna. She was poor herself, and found it hard sometimes to get along; besides, she really did love Frank. Her unsteady gaze suddenly fell upon the village church spire, pointing its long finger towards Heaven, and she stood erect, her lips set firm. Frank thought that he had never seen her so beautiful before.

"No," she said. "You are not a Catholic."

"I am not really anything," he said, half in fun. "My father is a firm protestant, and I try to please him."

"I cannot marry you," she said with a sigh, and turned to leave him; but he followed pleading.

"Is there no hope, Edna"? he said.

"Frank," she answered, "if at some time you become a Catholic,—not for my sake, remember, but because you see in it the way of truth and right, I will gladly become your wife, whether you are rich or poor. Until then I shall never marry anyone else."

The time came, however, when Frank and Edna were married by the white-haired priest of the village. Frank had discovered peace in religion, but he had incurred the wrath of his father in so doing, and he was now left with but a small annuity bequeathed him by his mother, in addition to his own doubtful wages.

The Doctor woke from his reverie with a start. Why should he think of his reprobate son, when he meant nothing to him? Even his death three years ago did not seem to make any impression on his offended parent. Now nobody even mentioned Frank before his father.

The calendar on the wall showed that it was the month of December.

"This is the twenty-second," the Doctor muttered, looking at his watch. "I think I'll go down to the town, and have a look at that silver carving that MacDonald told me was at the pawn shop. He says it is a beauty, and I would not like the Judge to get there before I do, as he may know about it".

The Judge was a great friend of the Doctor's and they usually exchanged gifts every Christmas. So McLeod, hearing of this carving, desired to secure it as a gift for the Judge, who was fond of antiques.

He put on his hat and coat, and made his way to the town; he walked briskly in the cold, crisp air, and soon arrived at the shop.

The dealer brought forward at his request an exquisitely carved crucifix, and passed it to him for inspection.

"That's a piece of genuine fifteenth century work;" he said. "One of the finest pieces I've ever seen. Nothing of the sort made now-a-days. The poor woman who brought it here was nearly broken-hearted at parting with it—nice isn't it"?

The Doctor bought it, jubilant at his good fortune, and when he left the shop a few minutes later he held the precious gift in his hand.

He walked hurriedly from the door, and stepped from the sidewalk to the pavement. As he did so an automobile suddenly turned the corner. The Doctor endeavored to escape, but in vain. He was borne down beneath the car. He opened his eyes a few days later, and, for the first time since the accident, felt well enough to look about him. He was in a small, but poorly furnished room; although many things were old and threadbare, yet all was scrupulously clean and neat, showing the work of busy hands. One of the first objects that met his eye was the carved crucifix, which stood on a shelf near the foot of his bed.

He frowned, and said half aloud:

"That is not the place for that. It will get all over dust."

"Oh yes," replied a small voice beside him."

"That's where mother always kept it, when this was our parlor, but she had to sell it because I was sick, although she hated to part with it, for it belonged to daddy. We didn't have enough money. I am so glad you brought it back. Mother said you just happened to have it. Didn't you really mean it for a gift?"

"Why yes," said the Doctor, "I really meant it for a gift, I—"

The child jumped up and pranced around the floor with delight.

"I knew it," he cried, "for I asked Our Lady to send it back to us. She's awfully good, isn't she? Don't you love Our Lady?"

The sick man glanced at the sweet, round face of the child, the large hazel eyes, and the mop of brown curls. Where had he seen such a face before? Memory came back to him like a stab. This was the image of his own child, Frank.

"What are you doing here?" asked the Doctor.

"Oh," said the child, stopping suddenly. "Mother told me to stay here until you wake up. I must go and tell her now," and he turned to leave the room.

"Stop," said the invalid; then, after a pause, "What is your name?"

"My name is Frank McLeod," said the child.

The Doctor sighed. He was being sheltered in the home of the son whom he had disowned.

"This is no place for me," he thought. "I must get out of here as soon as possible."

Just then the door opened, and Doctor Lahrne entered, accompanied by the mistress of the house.

"Good morning. How are you today?" he asked. "This is Mrs. McLeod, the nurse who has been so diligent in her care of you."

The invalid bowed slightly to Mrs. McLeod, and turning to the Doctor said:

"May I speak with you alone for a few minutes?"

The Doctor consented, and Mrs. McLeod withdrew.

"How did I come to be in this house?" the sick man asked.

"You were knocked down by an auto just across the

street, and Mrs. McLeod, who was passing at the time, insisted that you be brought to her house, as it seemed too dangerous to take you to the hospital."

"How soon can I get out of here?" asked McLeod impatiently.

"What?" said the Doctor. "Anxious to leave already? Well, I should say it will be a week or more before you can be moved with safety. You are now in the best of hands, as Mrs. McLeod is a most skilful nurse, and I have the utmost confidence in her even for the most critical cases."

"Nonsense," said the sick Doctor, "I can take care of myself if I leave."

"But it happens that you are under my orders, and you must stay."

So it was settled that he should stay a while longer. It was with a secret feeling of content that the Doctor resigned himself to the care of his son's wife. As he watched her gliding about the room, skilfully arranging everything, his feelings of dislike soon gave way to admiration, and he longed to tell her who he was, and to ask her for forgiveness.

The crucifix by his own special order still stood on the shelf. He soon became so accustomed to it that he began to look upon it rather as a dear friend than a piece of valuable art. The silent lesson that it teaches sank deep into his soul, and he marvelled at the great love of the God who sacrificed so much for sinners.

Then there came a day when the air was filled with the merry ringing of bells, and the Doctor was told that it was New Year's. He was to sit up for the first time that day. The feelings of new-born happiness took a strange hold on him. When the nurse had adjusted his pillows and placed his letters and papers near him so that he might read them with comfort, his eyes followed her lovingly. As she was about to leave the room, he called her back to his bedside.

Then with eyes bright with tears he told her all the history of his anger towards his son. He told her that he had really repented the deed long ago, but had been too proud to admit it.

"Can you ever forgive me?" he asked, finally.

"Forgive you? Why, if there is anything to forgive it is forgotten long ago," and she looked past the bed to the shining crucifix on the shelf.

As little Frank nestled in his grandfather's arms some time later he asked:

"Are you going to take the crucifix away with you, when you go?"

"Yes, indeed," said the Doctor. "It has been such a friend to me that I could not part with it; but I am going to take you and your mother with me, too, and we all will have a share in it."

"Oh, goody! goody!" exclaimed the child. "I must go and thank Our Lady. How glad I am."

As soon as the Doctor was sufficiently recovered, the party moved to his own house which his daughter-in-law soon made cosy and cheery. It was not long before the Doctor's gray hairs mingled with the child's brown curls, as they bowed in prayer before the shrine of "Our Lady."

J. Fitzgerald '25

