

## A Child at Christmas

Perhaps it was hearing the excited voices of school children trooping up the Abbey steps that brought Christmas back to Marie. At least that is where it began. Or did it? For weeks now she had this longing for things as they used to be, no doubt prompted by the thought of another Christmas on her own. The children, like their father, had become wanderers, spending most of their lives on the other side of the world. Yes, they still cared, though Marie lived with recriminations about not giving them more of her time when they were around. But then, there were cards and parcels and both Jackie and Paul would 'phone. She had put the parcels under her Christmas tree. Some would say why bother with a tree just for yourself, but it was for the sake of memories, ... and old Mrs. Paton across the landing would be coming for dinner. It would be after dinner, when Mrs. Paton had gone home to sleep it off, that Marie found the loneliest time. The time of memories. It had been easier in the past. That was when faith in God was a taken-for-granted reality, but that had slipped away. Just lately Marie had found herself longing for that reality to return.

Which is why she was standing on the bottom step of the Abbey this Christmas Eve, soaking up the excitement of the children and their parents, all muffled up against the cold, yet warmed by the glow of Christmas lights and busy shop-fronts. She had seen the special Christmas Eve family Carol Service advertised in the local paper. A crowded church seemed just the place to make an anonymous search for what she had lost.

Arriving early was a mistake. She hesitated at the bottom of the steps, waiting to tag along behind a group of people entering together. Mostly, it seemed the arrivals were parents with children. Marie noticed one who seemed a little out of place. Wearing a thin coat with no hat, scarf or gloves, the young woman was hardly dressed for the weather, or for the Abbey from what Marie remembered of it. She struggled with a carry-cot and two large bags. Marie could see the baby at least was well covered. Instinctively she went forward. *You've a heavy load there! Can I help!*

The young woman hurried on, barely turning her head. *It's all right. I can manage,* she muttered in a quiet, curtly fearful voice.

Marie assumed she had an older child performing, wanted to see her or him, and had no-one with whom to leave the baby. She wondered if she should have made efforts like this for her own children.

Running after the young mother had at least brought Marie up the Abbey steps and through the doors. Inside, it seemed as though everything was happening. A group of ministers and clergy in robes stood with the choir preparing to process. She heard someone say, *Quiet now! The bishop's coming!*

The crowd moved back as Marie tried to pass, causing her to bump into a table. She just caught the flowers as they began to topple.

*Careful!* A large lady pulled her away from the table, thrust a programme into her hand and with a dramatic gesture, said, *Up there on the left. You'll find a seat there.*

*I'd rather sit at the back,* Marie said quietly. The large woman usher looked at her in such a way as made Marie want to add, *and I won't steal the brasses!* She felt the excitement of the event drop away from her, and had the idea that finding God here may not be as easy as she had thought. She slipped into a seat at the far end of the row. There were several vacant rows in front and she was thinking of moving forward when suddenly all went quiet. The organist stopped playing. A hush gradually seeped through the whole abbey. A child's clear voice began singing behind her, *Away in a manger ....*

The choir, clergy and the bishop snaked forward and away from her.

*Are you sure, you don't want to go forward?* The big lady usher sounded much gentler this time as she bent to whisper. Marie shook her head and the usher went to sit a few rows ahead of her on the other side of the aisle.

The choir had taken up the carol now. *'The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes'* Marie thought for a moment that someone had devised sound-effects for the carol. But no, surely that was a real baby's cry. It must be the young mother she saw coming in, or even another wanting to be here for her family.

Now someone was reading the first Christmas lesson .. *A child is born to us! A son is given to us.* Marie felt secure again listening to the familiar words. It came again. *That **was** a baby's cry!* The cry was followed by a low but unmistakeable sob. It came from the shadows behind the pillar to her left.

The congregation stood and as the choir soared above them with *O come all ye faithful,* Marie rose from her seat and went across and back to where she had heard the sounds. She had not been mistaken. On a pew hidden from the main body of the Abbey was the young woman Marie had seen on the steps outside. She was clutching her shawled baby close to her, shaking with stifled sobs.

*I can't do it! I can't do it!* She cried as Marie sat beside her. Marie put an arm round her. The young woman sunk her head into Marie's shoulder and gave way to a flood of tears.

*What's the matter?* It was the usher again.

*It's all right. Leave her to me.*

At last the young woman's tears subsided. *I can't do it!* she mumbled into Marie's shoulder.

*What can't you do?*

*Leave him. Leave my baby. It was all Rob's idea!* She looked up momentarily and Marie saw the face of a frightened child. From a few broken sentences Marie heard how the young woman, Holly, was homeless. She had had no contact with her family for a couple of years. The older man she was living with, who was not the father of little Jack, had turned her out. *I can't stand that baby crying all night, he had stormed, drunkenly. If you want to stay here, get rid of it. You should*

*have been rid of it before it was born. He had told her take Jack to the church and leave him there. Someone'll be fool enough to want him. I was going to leave him in the church as everybody left, Holly wept again. But I can't. I can't leave him! He's my baby! I love him! .....*

It seemed a most obvious and natural thing for Marie to say. *Come on. Come on home with me for tonight .....*

A couple of hours later, Holly was fast asleep in the spare room at Marie's eighth floor flat, with the empty carry-cot beside her bed. Little Jack lay cradled in Marie's arms, wide awake but contented, his eyes fixed on the lights of the Christmas tree.

Marie gently sang, *Away in a manger*, remembering all the words, but not thinking about them. Her actual thoughts were jumbled. All about wanting to go to the Abbey for the carol service. It had been like searching for God. She had not found **him**. In some strange way it seemed **he** had come to her. She could feel his presence with her. God had come to her - Marie. She had not met him through the huddle of clergy, nor even the bishop, not in the words or songs or beautiful vestments, or even the children singing. God had met her in one of those shadowy, cluttered places where heartache and compassion come together.

*It must have been like this for Mary*, she mused. Even trying not to think about tomorrow was just as it would have been for her. What would tomorrow bring? How many tomorrows? Talking to social workers? Finding Holly's family? How long would they let Holly stay? People would tell her it was a risk .. And, *Oh goodness - Mrs. Paton! What about Mrs. Paton coming for dinner tomorrow!*

But, like Mary of Bethlehem, Marie sensed a deep calm inside her - an unexplained feeling that if God was in this it would work out right.