

A Promise



The short days before Christmas can be some of the dreariest in the year. This dank, cold afternoon was one of them. The light had almost completely gone inside the church. The stained glass windows had given up their colour to the darkness. Marie sat on a chair just inside the door, waiting. Reverend Michael would come soon to lock up. For her there was a safe feeling in the church. Her mother and she came every Sunday, that was when 'Mum' was well enough. Reverend Michael was so kind to them. Mum said she had never known anyone who reminded her of Jesus so much as he did. Marie practised what she wanted to say. To think of it though, was too much. She gave way, letting out the sobs she had stifled all afternoon.

'What is it ?' She wiped her tears on her coat sleeve as Michael sat down on the chair next to her, - and half on her chair. They always laughed about his size. He was such a giant; so tall and wide. Mum said he always needed two chairs in church, or the people either side were squashed. But she also said he had to be big to have such a big loving heart.

Reverend Michael took Marie's hand and waited for her to tell him. Soon she was blurring out the whole story. He knew most of it already. He knew Marie's mother had been deserted by her husband. He knew how she struggled to keep her job in the shop below their tiny flat. He knew how Marie tried so hard to help, especially on those mornings when her mother coughed and coughed to ease her lungs before she could even think of beginning the day.

'Mum said she was doing extra work so she could buy me presents for Christmas,' Marie told Michael. 'I want so much to buy her something, but everything I think of costs so much more than I can spend. I was telling my friend Carla about it at school this morning. David was listening and he said it was my fault. He said my Dad went away because Mum was horrid to him, and we deserved to be poor.' Marie burst out crying again.

'That's not true.' Michael squeezed her hand. 'Don't you believe what David said. You believe me. I know.'

'I hate David', Marie turned up her nose disdainfully.

'No, Marie, not hate. That will only hurt you, not David. Jesus said we should love people who are unkind to us. I know that's very hard, but we have to try. If you're kind to David, it could make him kind too.'

Marie wasn't sure about that, but she brightened up and blotted her eyes with the bottom of her jumper. 'But I still can't buy Mum a present.'

'Leave that to me,' said Michael. 'We'll find something to give her. Come and see me at my house on Christmas Eve. He pulled himself to his feet, still holding Marie's hand. 'Have you seen the Christmas Crib?' He took Marie to the front of the Church. 'Wait there,' he told her. Marie heard him press a switch. Then suddenly, before her appeared the most beautiful Christmas crib she had ever seen. She dropped to her knees in front of it. 'There's Mary,' she said. 'And Joseph and the baby...and the shepherds. And all those sheep! There's five..six..no, seven of them! They look so alive. They're beautiful.'

'There were even more in the box they came in,' said Michael. 'I thought seven was as many as we could fit in. He turned the light out again. 'Come on. Your mother will wonder where you are.' After locking the church, Michael walked to the end of the road with Marie. 'Now remember to come and see me Christmas Eve. And, don't worry anymore about your Mum's present.' Marie skipped home in a very different mood to the one which brought her to the church that afternoon. She waited impatiently for the next three days to pass. School had finished, and when she had decorated their little Christmas tree and made some paper chains, there was not a lot else to do but wait....and wait.

At last it was Christmas Eve. That morning Mum had put some parcels under the Christmas tree with instructions that they were not to be touched, or even felt to see what could be inside. Marie kept thinking of the parcel she would put there for Mum. It would be such a surprise.

Later that morning, she went down to Reverend Michael's house. There was no one there. He was not at the church either. She went again after dinner. She knocked loudly on the house door, but no-one came. She noticed there were lights in the church and the organ was playing. Inside the church she made straight for the organ and demanded of Mrs. Watson - 'Where's Reverend Michael?'

Mrs. Watson kept on playing, her eyes on the music, as she said. 'I don't know. Someone said he had had to go away suddenly.'

'When will he be back?'

'I don't know. They didn't say.'

Marie did not know what to do or say. Reverend Michael had promised. He would not let her down. There was a little park between the church and Reverend Michael's house. Marie sat on the bench there where she could see both places. She pulled her thin coat tight around her. The cold wind blew a few tiny snowflakes into her face.

'If he's forgotten,' she said aloud to herself, 'what can I do?' It was out of her desperation that the idea came. Mum loved animals. She would really like the Christmas Crib in church - and those sheep! 'What if I took one of them? It would make a wonderful present. It wouldn't really be stealing because Reverend Michael was going to give me a present for Mum, and if he can't, or if he's forgotten, it's only like helping him to give it to me. And he did say there were too many sheep.!''

Conscience satisfied, Marie went back into the church. Mrs. Watson had gone. Marie had seen her leave a few minutes before. No one else had entered the church since. Once inside, she stepped quickly to the front and to the Crib. It was light enough to see the figures. Marie put out her hand, then snatched it back again. Something inside her said it was not right. She pushed the feeling away and quickly grasped a sheep figure in her hand. She had not realised how cold her hands were. The figure slipped from her fingers. She gasped and cried. Surely the whole town must have heard the crash as the sheep broke into pieces at her feet.

All at once she felt the presence behind her. Turning to see his face, Marie spoke in a feeble, frightened voice, 'I'm sorry!'. She bent down to pick up the pieces. 'Will it stick together again?'

'I don't think so.' The man's voice was calm and reassuring. There was a touch of humour in the way he spoke. He got on his knees beside her and helped her find the last few pieces.

'What shall I do?' Marie asked. 'I wasn't stealing it, honestly I wasn't. Reverend Michael will understand. It was the present he didn't bring.' She knew the jumbled words would not make sense, yet the man seemed to understand.

'Yes, Michael will understand,' he said. 'Take the pieces to him and tell him what happened.'

'You know about it?' Marie was so surprised. She looked hard at the man who had now stood up again and was smiling at her. It was getting darker. She could not see much of what he was wearing, but his face seemed to shine as though some light was coming through a window straight on to him. She thought suddenly, 'Are you here instead of Reverend Michael? Isn't he coming back? Will you be taking the service for him tomorrow?'

'Well, sort of', the man replied. 'I will be here, but Michael will be back soon. He promised didn't he?'

Marie looked down at the broken sheep in her hand. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I really did think he had forgotten me.'

'Michael won't forget you,' said the man. 'He's like the good shepherd. You know the story in the Bible?'

'Yes. The man who had a hundred sheep, and one was lost,' she paused, 'Like this broken one I suppose.'

'That's right. And like you. The shepherd went looking for the one which was lost. He kept looking till he found it. He didn't let the sheep down. Michael won't let you down. I know. In fact, I think he will be home now. Why don't you go and see?'

Marie ran out of the church. 'Good-bye,' she called without looking behind her. Clutching the broken sheep she raced up the steps of the now lighted house. Reverend Michael was so pleased to see her. 'Sorry I haven't been to see you,' he said. 'I was called away.' Marie didn't let him finish. 'I know,' she said. 'The man who came to help you in the church told me. I've broken your sheep.' She held out the fragments to Michael.

'What man,' he asked.

'The man who's helping while you were away.'

'I don't know anything about a man helping me. Are you sure?'

Marie nodded.

'That's strange. I'll have a look when I lock up in a minute. But now, come and see.' Michael took Marie into the dining room. It was littered with books and magazines and Christmas cards. He went to the large table in the middle of the room. 'Do you think she'll like this,' he said, holding up a beautiful silk scarf.

'Like it? She'll love it!' Marie threw her arms round Michael - although they didn't go very far round his middle. 'Thank you. Thank you,' she said over and over.

'Now what about that sheep?' said Michael,

Marie put the pieces on the table. Michael brought his waste basket, already filled with torn papers, and swept the sheep pieces into it from the table. He then opened a cupboard by the fireplace and brought out a cardboard box. From the box he produced two more sheep just like the one that was broken. 'Now,' he said. 'Here's some Christmas wrapping paper. There's sticky tape on the desk. You wrap up your Mum's scarf, while I wrap up a sheep.'

When the parcels were ready, Michael said, 'I'll put a sheep back in the Crib. The wrapped one is my Christmas present to you and your Mum. He smiled at her open-mouthed wonder. There were no words to say the thanks Marie felt. Michael understood. 'You'd better be going. Your mother will be home soon.'

Marie walked down the path with him. She gave his big hand a squeeze as they parted.

Christmas morning came. Marie's wish had come true in the form of the most splendid doll, and clothes which mother had made in the evenings after Marie had gone to bed. Mum was surprised, amazed, and so pleased with the scarf... and with the sheep!

'There's lot's more like that in the church,' Marie said happily.

Marie felt there was something very special about going to the church for the Christmas morning service. The sun was shining brightly through the stained glass windows, painting rainbows all round the walls. She was between her friend Carla and her mother for the service.

It was about halfway through 'Silent Night' that Marie saw him. She had forgotten all about the man in church yesterday. The sun broke through the centre stained glass window which showed Jesus and two angels. It lit up the face of the angel on the right side of Jesus. Marie stopped singing, and held her breath for two whole lines. The face of the angel in the window ! It was the face of the man in church yesterday. She looked round her. There was no one like him in the church. Turning back to the window she could hardly believe what she saw.

When, later she told the story, most people said it was imagination - the winter sunshine produces strange tricks of light. But Marie had no doubt. The face of the angel lit up and one eye dropped as he winked at her knowingly.