

Little Jean

A Christmas Story

by Francois Coppee

Long ago, and far from here, in a country with a name too hard to pronounce, there lived a little boy named Jean. In many ways, he was just like the boys here, for there are many Johns over here, are there not? Then too, Jean lived with his auntie, and some of our boys do that too. His father and mother were dead, and that is true here sometimes, isn't it? But in some ways things were quite different with Jean. In the first place his auntie was very, very cross, and she often made him climb up his ladder to his little garret room to go to sleep on his pallet of straw, without any supper, save a dry crust. His stockings had holes in the heels, and toes and knees, because his auntie never had time to mend them, and his shoes would have been worn out all the time if they had not been such strong wooden shoes—for in that country the boys all wore wooden shoes. Jean did many a little service around the place, for his auntie made him work for his daily bread, and he chopped the wood and swept the paths and made the fires and ran the errands, but he never heard anyone say "Thank you."

Jean's happiest days were at school, and I wonder if he was like our boys in that? There his playmates wore much better clothes and good stockings too, and warm top coats, but they never thought of making fun of Jean, for they all loved to play with him. One morning Jean started off to school (which was next to the big church), and when he got there he found the children all so happy and gay and dressed in their best clothes, and he heard one boy say, "Won't it be jolly tomorrow with the big tree full of oranges and popcorn and candy, and the candles burning?" And another added, "Won't it be fun to see the things in our shoes in the morning, the goodies that boys love?" And another said, "My, but we have a big, fat goose at our house, stuffed with plums and just brown to a turn," and he smacked his lips as he thought of it. And Jean began to wonder about that beautiful tree and wish that one would grow at his house. And he thought about his wooden shoes and knew there would be no goodies in them for him in the morning. Then he heard one boy say, "Don't you love Christmas?" And Jean said, "Christmas! why, what is Christmas?" But just then the teacher came in and said, "Boys, come into the church now and hear the music." And so the boys marched one behind the other just as they do in school here, and they went into the great church. Jean thought it was beautiful in there! The soft light, the warm pleasant air, the flowers, and the marble altar, and then the music! Oh, such music Jean had never heard, and somehow as he sat on the high-backed bench and listened, his own heart grew very warm although he could not understand why, and he loved so to hear them singing: "Peace on earth, good will to men." And it began to sing itself over and over in his heart, this sweet, sweet song of "Peace on earth, good will to men." Then the time came to go home, and the boys all shouted, "Good-bye, Jean! and Merry Christmas!" And though Jean didn't know about "Merry Christmas," he kept singing in his little warmed heart, "Peace on earth, good will to men," and then he was glad the other boys could have the tree and the goose and the wooden shoes full of goodies even if he couldn't.

As Jean went home the snow began to fall and the big flakes lodged on his shoulders and cap and hands, but he didn't mind the cold for his heart was so warm. By and by as he ran down the street he passed a tall house with the steps going up from the street, and there sitting on the bottom step he saw a little boy with soft curling hair and a beautiful face, leaning his head against the stone house, fast asleep. Somehow as Jean looked at the sleeping face, his own heart grew still and quiet and warm, and he felt like he could look at it forever, and suddenly he caught himself singing softly under his breath, "Peace on earth, good will to men." And then he looked down at the little boy's feet and he saw that he was barefooted and his little feet were purple with the cold. As Jean looked at the feet, and then at the

face of the child, and thought of the sweet song in his heart, he said, "Oh! I wish I could give him my shoes, for I have stockings to keep me warm, but auntie would be so mad! And the more he looked and thought, the more he longed to give his shoes away, until all at once he said, "I know what I'll do, I'll give him one shoe and one stocking and then he won't be so cold," and he felt as though he couldn't get his shoe and stocking off fast enough to give them to the little child. So gently and tenderly he lifted the little cold foot in his hand to put on the shoe that he did not waken the sleeping boy, even when he had put the stocking on the other foot, and then as he stood up again and took a last look at the lovely face, before he knew it he was singing aloud, "Peace on earth, good will to men." Then he hopped off home in the snow with the happiest heart he had ever had.

Now, I wish the story turned out differently and that his auntie said when he told her about it, "I'm so glad you did it, Jean." But she was so very cross, that she slapped Jean and sent him off to bed without any supper, saying, "You had no right to give away that shoe and stocking for my money paid for them!" Somehow Jean didn't mind doing without supper that night and he soon went fast asleep and dreamed a beautiful dream, for he thought he was still singing "Peace on earth, good will to men!" And he saw a vision of the little sleeping boy, that grew into a tall and gentle man with a radiant face who walked to and fro in Jean's dream, singing with him "Peace on earth, good will to men!" Then morning came and outside his window, Jean heard the voices of children singing, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will to men!" And he heard a very strange sound too, for his auntie's voice, soft and gentle, said, "Jean, wake up, and come down and see what has happened," and Jean came down the ladder and lo! there was a wonderful tree just like the other boys were having today, and a goose, and by the fireplace his own wooden shoe, and beside it the mate that he had given to the sleeping child, and far in the distance Jean heard the children's voices singing as they ran down the street, "Peace, peace on earth, good will to men!" Then the room grew very still and peaceful and Jean's heart did too—and through the silence there came a voice so tender and loving—so gentle that the auntie's eyes were full of tears, and Jean wanted to listen forever, and the voice said, "Jean, inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto ME."

Source:

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