

THE STAR

"The Star" was written by Jean Schaefer in 1979. She submitted her short story to The Muse Contest last year where she won second place. Jean has also entered and won other contests with her story. She has been so gracious to share it with St. Mary's again. Thank you Jean and Merry Christmas.

Leaving the old woman's house the carolers trudged happily through the snow, carrying in the pockets of their torn coats her last three dollar bills and a precious book of matches. They were warmed in body and cheered in soul, for the old woman had taken them into her home, hung their cold, wet socks in front of her fire to dry, and fed them the best meal they had seen in months . . . thick slices of turkey smothered in dark, rich gravy, lots of deep red cranberry sauce, plump green peas, and mounds of steaming sweet potatoes laced with nuts and raisins, but best of all were the desserts . . . mountains of cookies sprinkled with brightly-colored sugars, a huge, downy coconut cake, and a tremendous tray of assorted candies.

As she closed the door and pulled the threadbare shawl closer about her bony shoulders, a loving smile lit up her wrinkled face at the memory of the three starving children ravenously devouring most of the food the church had given her for Christmas.

The bent old woman crossed the dimly-lit room to the tall cupboard. As she stood on tiptoe to pull down the worn hatbox, a childlike sparkle appeared in her eyes. Her shoulders seemed to straighten a little as if a heavy burden had just been lifted from them. She gently placed the battered box on the floor beside a tiny tree that was resting in the corner. Opening the box carefully, she gazed at its contents with rapture. She lovingly fingered each ornament as if it were made of spun glass, instead of paper, wood, pine cones, and rocks. Then she withdrew a small pile of tiny candle stubs which were obviously going up for their last year.

A wistful smile passed from her lips to her tired eyes as she lifted from the box the one extravagance she had allowed herself to keep after her husband's death. Ever so gently, she pulled the tissue paper away to reveal a glittering star. She tenderly placed it at the top of the tree, and as she did so, its shimmering lights were reflected in a single tear coursing down the lines in the old woman's cheek. Her husband had chopped wood for three weeks to pay for the star and had given it to her on their first Christmas together. The star had become a symbol of the love they had shared for three short years before his sudden death.

Her decorating finished, she began slowly to prepare for bed. Fatigue and age bent the old woman as she unpinned and then brushed her sparse waist-length gray hair. She carefully hung up her faded dress and climbed wearily into bed.

As she was falling asleep, a sharp rap at the front window jolted her wide awake. Rising fearfully from her bed, she pulled the worn shawl about her and went to the door. She opened the door to find a small, shivering girl. She brought the coatless child in and tried to wrap her in a blanket. Shrugging it off, the girl whirled around to face the old woman. Tears now streamed down the small, anxious face.

"Please, please, help me!" she sobbed. "My mother just had a baby, and I can't wake her up, and the baby just keeps crying and crying. Please, can you help me?"

Assuring her she would, the old woman left the weeping child by the fire to get warm and returned to her bedroom to dress. After she was dressed, she quickly gathered up the remainder of her Christmas dinner and placed it in a basket. Over this she placed a hot water bottle and two thin blankets, the best she had to offer. Although she had no other wrap, she placed her old shawl around the thin girl's heaving shoulders and headed for the door. Then, as an afterthought, she thrust the basket into the scared child's arms and returned to fetch the tiny Christmas tree.

"Maybe this will cheer up your mother and the baby," she said, closing the door after them. "A baby is a wonderful gift and should be welcomed into the world in a very special way."

Arm in arm, the old woman and the little girl plodded in the deep snow for miles with the wind blowing them about and the sleet lashing their faces. Just when the old woman felt she could not take another step, the little girl shouted, "We're here!" and much to the old

woman's relief, they turned up the walkway of a broken-down cottage.

Tears sprang to the old woman's eyes as they entered the house and she saw the utter desolation of the cold, frightened little family. The young mother lay semi-conscious on the floor with nothing to cover her but a frayed blanket. In her arms lay the bawling baby. The wind knifed through the broken window panes, and snow was beginning to pile up on the sills. Four small children huddled in the corner trying to keep warm. No wood for the fireplace or stove was in sight.

The old woman sent the children to search for dry sticks, while she struck out to find straw to make a bed for the mother and her child. She remembered an old barn a mile or so down the road and retraced her steps there in hopes of finding enough straw for her needs.

She finally reached the barn and was elated to find several small piles of musty hay. Casting about for something to carry it in, she finally came upon a moldy piece of burlap. Gathering as much as she could possibly carry, she tied it up in the burlap and dragged it through the snow back to the little house.

Stumbling through the door, she pushed the hay over to the place where the mother and child lay and quickly made a bed for them. She then covered them up with the blankets she had brought and placed the hot water bottle on the baby's chest.

By this time the children had returned with their cache of sticks. She helped them kindle a fire in the stove and another one in the fireplace. Half-frozen, she warmed herself by the small fire and then began to prepare some food for the starving family.

After the mother was warm and nourished, the old woman could see that her mind was gradually clearing. Though the mother was still too groggy to speak plainly, her eyes blazed with love and appreciation. Satisfied that the mother was better and the children were warm and fed, the old woman slipped quietly out, leaving behind her food, her blankets, her shawl, and her beloved little tree.

After what seemed hours, she finally reached her own home and climbed wearily into bed. For a long time she lay awake mourning her star and the things it stood for. Finally, satisfied that her husband would have wanted the destitute family to have it, she fell asleep.

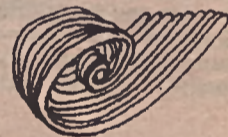
Through the night and the following day, the mother and her child continued to improve. As the last rays of sunshine filtered through the window, she felt she had the strength to get up.

As she was struggling to her feet, a light from across the room nearly blinded her. For several minutes it shone so brightly that she could hardly open her eyes. When it finally dimmed, she thought it seemed to have radiated from the star on the old woman's tree.

The sight of the tree brought rushing back to her the horrors and blessings of the night before. Although it was almost dark, she hurriedly sent the little girl to the old woman's house to invite her to come share the meager Christmas dinner that was rightfully hers.

When the old woman did not answer the little girl's first knock, the child became frightened and rapped a little louder. When the old woman still did not answer, the little girl pushed the door open and walked in. She found the whole house dark and the fire burned down. Deciding that the old woman must be resting, she tiptoed back to the bedroom.

In the bedroom, she found the old woman lying motionless on the bed, a tender smile on her lifeless lips. Through the window over the head of the bed, a blazing star threw its light on the old woman's face.



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Second Place, Prose
Muse Contest