

Christmas Eve in the Forest



IN A DEEP FOREST, long ago, lived a little girl named Simonetta. She was very beautiful, and very kind, and very good. Some who knew her said she should have been a princess, because she looked as beautiful as all princesses look, and acted as beautifully as all princesses should act.

But Simonetta was not the daughter of a king. She was the daughter of a mighty hunter who was known far and wide for his prowess. Every morning the mighty hunter slung his quiver over his shoulder, picked up his bow, kissed Simonetta good-bye, and departed for the depths of the forest. Every day he remained in the haunts of the wild creatures, and every evening he returned home laden with what he had killed.

Now, although Simonetta loved her father dearly, she dreaded his return each day. Always he brought home the body of another deer or rabbit, fox or squirrel, who had once been her friend. For Simonetta was friend to all the animals. As much as the forest creatures feared her father, so much did they love her.

Every morning after the mighty hunter had departed from his cottage, animals crept out from behind the bushes where they had been waiting and visited with Simonetta. All day long she tended those who were sick, comforted those who were sad, and joined in the games of those who were merry.

Then, as the twilight of the forest gathered about them, Simonetta would say, "Now you must go quickly, for my father will soon be home. Remain hidden in the forest until morning, and then return to me."

And the animals departed and were not seen by

mortal eyes until the following day.

So the time went by. The mighty hunter hunted, and the forest creatures feared him as the worst of enemies. Simonetta loved, and the forest creatures adored her.

Winter came early upon the land one year, and hardly had the brilliantly colored leaves of autumn carpeted the ground than they themselves were carpeted by new-fallen snow. It grew bitter cold, and in the evenings even the mighty hunter was glad to return to the warmth of his fireside.

The creatures of the forest, too, were cold, and every morning Simonetta welcomed them into the cottage where they could warm themselves. When twilight gathered, as it did early on those glacial days, her heart ached as she sent them out into the frigid air. But she dared not let them stay longer by the fireside, for great would be the wrath of the mighty hunter if he should return to find them so.

Then one morning, as the mighty hunter collected his weapons, Simonetta said, "Father, today is Christmas Eve. Please do not hunt today. Please stay home and help me decorate our tree."

"No, child, I cannot stay home," replied the mighty hunter. "I must get more skins to sell and more meat to smoke and store. You can decorate the tree by yourself. You have always done it well."

The mighty hunter slung his quiver over his shoulder, picked up his bow, and moved toward the

door.

“Father, Father,” Simonetta cried, catching at his sleeve, “please do not kill anything today. Not on the eve of Christ’s birth.”

“What nonsense is this, child?” asked the mighty hunter impatiently, pulling away from her grasp. “We need skins to sell and we need meat to eat, whether it is the eve of Christ’s birth or no. Now, do not look so sad. I will shoot a stag today, and we will have fresh venison for our Christmas Feast.”

The mighty hunter kissed Simonetta good-bye and strode out the door.

Simonetta looked after him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “When you return, Father, I will be gone.” she whispered. But the mighty hunter did not hear.

Then the animals came in to warm themselves at the fireside, as they did every cold morning. Simonetta tended those who were sick, and tried to comfort those who were sad, but did not join in the games of those who were merry. She had much work to do before her father’s return, she told them, but the animals could tell she was deeply troubled.

All morning she cleaned and scrubbed and mended and baked, all the while sighing deeply and wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. The animals watched and wondered, but they could do nothing to cheer her.

In the afternoon, Simonetta decorated the tree with the ornaments they had used when she was very little, before the time that her mother had gone to Heaven. She hung up strings of bright berries and fastened a candle carefully to the end of every branch. But even while doing this most joyous of all tasks, Simonetta did not smile or sing. She continued to sigh deep sighs and wipe her eyes on the corner of her apron.

Then Simonetta took up a piece of bark kept for the purpose, and with a stick dipped in the juice of blackberries she wrote

“To my dear Father, whom I love very much. I have gone away with the animals. I can no longer stay here, where every day I must look upon the dead bodies of creatures who once were my friends. Please do not try to find me, for living in the home of a hunter is too hard for me to bear. Maybe Mother will come from Heaven



and get me. I baked a Christmas cake which is in the oven, and I mended your torn shirt, and I scrubbed the house as clean as I could. Someday you will come to Heaven too, and then we can all be together again. Your loving daughter, Simonetta.”

She put the piece of bark on the table, wrapped her warmest shawl around her shoulders, and said to the animals, “Come, let us go. My father will be home soon, and I must be far away by then.”

“Simonetta, no!” exclaimed the fox, who realized at last what she was doing. “It is bitter cold outside, and you will freeze. You are not dressed in warm fur as we are. You must not leave your fireside.”

“Indeed, dear Fox, I must leave my fireside,” answered Simonetta, “for I can no longer live in the home of a hunter.”

“There is no food for you in the winter forest,” said the squirrel. “If I had not nuts stored away, I would have nothing to eat.”

“Very well, kind Squirrel,” answered Simonetta, “I will take some food with me. There are still apples here, and a few seeds from the sunflowers. But I will not need much food, for I hope that my mother will come from Heaven and take me away.”

The other animals, too, tried to persuade Simonetta against leaving the warm cottage, but she would not listen. She gathered a few apples and seeds together in a little sack, and went to the door.

“Now come,” she said. “It is getting late, and we must hurry.” Simonetta hastened out the door into the forest, the animals reluctantly following.

The deer, the last to leave, thought first of propping the door open so that the wind would come in and blow out the fire, making the cottage cold for the mighty hunter’s return. But then the deer thought, “No, I will leave him warmth, for his home will be bleak enough this Christmas Eve.” So the deer closed the door and bounded ahead, leaping over the other animals in his haste to catch up with Simonetta.

It was indeed bitter cold. Simonetta shivered and drew her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. But it was as the fox had said—the warmth of her woven shawl could not be compared to the warmth of their furs.

“Hurry, hurry,” called Simonetta. “We are still too near my father’s cottage. We must go much deeper into the forest.”

So on they went, farther and farther, as the night grew dark around them and the very air crackled with cold. Then, at last, they came to a place where only the deer and the fox had been before. Even Simonetta knew nothing of it, for it lay in the thickest part of the forest, hidden from most of the world.

It was, in summer, a grassy grove, shaded by giant trees and bordered with ferns. In a long bygone age huge rocks had been placed to form a circle, inside which the grove now stood. Whether this had been done by a race of giants or by the great God Himself, no one now alive on Earth can tell. Here, then, protected from wind by the encircling boulders, Simonetta and the animals took shelter.

“This is where I will wait for my mother to come from Heaven,” said Simonetta. “My father will not find me here, for if he had known of this place, he would surely have told me.”

She smiled at the animals who were watching her anxiously. “Thank you for coming so far with me, dear friends,” she said. “I would have been afraid in the dark forest if you had not been with me, but I am not afraid here. It is a good place.”



She looked up through the bare branches to where, high overhead, one brilliant star cast its light down upon them.

“I think it is a sacred place,” she whispered. “I will be safe here. Go to your own homes now, for you must be very tired. And remember my love for you.”

“No Simonetta,” said the raccoon, “we will not leave you. As long as you remain in the forest, we will be your companions. We will keep watch with you for the coming of your mother.”

And try as she would, Simonetta could not persuade the animals to go.

Then, at last, she said, “My best of friends, thank you for staying with me. Perhaps it is right that we should be together, for this is Christmas Eve, the night when enough love for the whole year flows down into Earth from our Father in Heaven.”

And then, as the raccoon wrapped his tail around her feet to keep them warm, the rabbit and the squirrel snuggled up on either side of her, and two chipmunks sought shelter in the pocket of her skirt, she leaned back against the wolf, warming her cold ears in his fur, and told them the Christmas story.

She told it well, for she long had known it by heart, and even the deer and the fox, who had heard it before, marveled at the sublime gift of Life and Love that the Lord God had given to His Earth.

“And this is the night that Christ comes back to Earth?” asked a chipmunk who, forgetting how cold it was, had crept out of the pocket to hear better.

“This is the night,” said Simonetta, smiling at him. “At this very moment His Light is shining all around us, and the cold Earth is being warmed with His Love.”

“Shouldn’t we thank Him?” whispered the rabbit, who never said much because he was too shy but who sometimes had some very good ideas.

“Indeed we should,” agreed Simonetta, “and one way to do that is to sing Christmas carols. Do you know any carols?”

The fox knew some, because he sometimes wandered to the outskirts of the village and once had heard a group of carolers. But to the other animals Christmas carols were a strange thing about which they knew nothing. So Simonetta sang to them and, little by little, they got the idea and joined in. Soon, all the animals had raised their voices in song.

Now if you had been there, and if you had been listening with your Earth ears, you would have heard the wolf howling, the coyote baying at the Moon, the squirrel chattering, and a hodge-podge of other noises that did not sound at all like Christmas carols. But if you had been listening with your Heaven ears, you would have heard the sweetest music, for it came from the hearts of those who were truly thankful.

“Oh come let us adore Him, oh come let us adore Him, oh come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

Meanwhile, the mighty hunter had returned to his cottage, the body of a great stag slung across his shoulders.

“Simonetta,” he called, “Come and see what I brought for our Christmas feast.”

He laid the stag on the ground outside the door and waited for her to come out and greet him, as she always did. But the door did not open and an unexplained cold fear began to chill his heart. Thrusting open the door, he burst into the cottage. The fire was roaring merrily in the hearth, the sweet, spicy aroma of Christmas cake came from the oven, the floor gleamed in the firelight and the highly polished table caught the reflection of a lone candle. In the corner stood the dazzling Christmas tree and neatly folded over the arm of his chair was the torn shirt he had asked Simonetta to mend. But Simonetta herself was nowhere to be seen.

Then the mighty hunter saw the note on the table. With loudly beating heart and trembling hands he snatched it up. He read it once and did not believe the words. He read it a second time, and a terrible groan like the cry of a wounded beast tore itself

from deep within him.

He staggered to the chair and buried his face in his hands. Not then did pictures of his little Simonetta pass before his eyes. Instead, he saw the form of a wounded stag running through the forest, only to collapse in agony. He saw the form of hundreds of wild creatures going about their business suddenly felled by arrows perfectly aimed.

How long he remained thus, only the blessed One Who knows the agonies of all men and, with infinite compassion, feels them in His own heart, knows for sure. But when, with tear-stained eyes, the mighty hunter returned to the present, the fire in the hearth was but a glowing ember and a chill like that of death was in the room.

Once more he groaned. Then, sinking to his knees, he clasped his hands and whispered: “I know now that I have done great harm. I know now that it is wrong to take life from Your creatures. I am ready to make atonement, however You decree. But do not let my child suffer for this, I beg You. Spare her. Help me find her.”

He knelt thus a little longer and then, almost imperceptibly, warmth and strength once more entered his limbs. He had passed through the Shadow, and had emerged cleansed. Now there was work to do.

The mighty hunter leaped to his feet. Grabbing a sturdy branch from the stack of firewood, he held it to the ember until, fitfully, a spark caught. Carefully he nursed the little flame until it became a brightly glowing torch. Then he hurried out into the night. With the light of the torch, the mighty hunter plainly could discern the tracks made by the departing animals. Here and there, almost obliterated by the others, was one of Simonetta’s footprints and, seeing these, he took further heart. “Keep her warm,” he said, looking up at a brilliant star almost directly overhead. “Keep her safe. Guide me to her, I pray You.”

With the torch, the tracks were easy to follow, and the mighty hunter hastened onward, deeper into the forest than even he had ever ventured. Suddenly he saw a glow amidst distant trees that seemed to rise from behind a wall of rock and fill the whole space of heaven in that place.

“A fire,” the mighty hunter thought. “She has



built a fire. She is warm. Thank God.”

But the closer he came, the more sure he was that it was not the glow of a fire. The light was too steady, too white, too pure. Then he heard sounds. A wolf howled; a coyote bayed at the Moon.

“The animals,” he thought. “If they have harmed her —”

But then the mighty hunter listened again, and he heard, not howling and baying, but music sweeter than any he had imagined possible.

The words were plain: “Oh come let us adore Him, oh come let us adore Him, oh come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

The mighty hunter stood his torch in a snowdrift, where it remained upright. Cautiously he moved forward toward the glow. He circled the wall of rock till he came to an opening, and was dazed by the sight that met his eyes.

Simonetta leaned trustingly against a wolf, whose eyes were watchful and protective. All manner of forest creatures, large and small, clustered

around her. They were singing.

Then the mighty hunter saw something else. A figure—human, yet without vestige of mortality—hovered over Simonetta, sending down upon her and the animals wave after wave of pure, white light. As the mighty hunter gazed awestruck at the figure, she—for it was feminine—turned toward him, and he gasped. She it was whom he had once loved, and whose once familiar, tender presence now was but a poignant memory that only rarely came to him.

The figure stood beside him, gently stroking his face with her fingers. He felt no touch, but it was as if a warm spring breeze had played across his cheek. She smiled at him affectionately.

“My dear,” he whispered. “Is it you?”

“Yes,” said the figure. “I received permission to come to you this night, for I knew I would be needed.”

“You guided Simonetta to this place, and kept her safe?” asked the mighty hunter.

The figure nodded.

“Has she seen you?” he went on.

“No,” said the figure. “It is better that she not see me, for my departure may then be too painful. But she knows I am near, and is content.”

“Then...then you must again depart,” the mighty hunter said sadly.

“I must,” the figure answered, as gently as she could. “A great boon has been granted me, and I dare not abuse it. But after tonight, neither of you will need me so much, for you have learned a terrible lesson, and now your ways will change.”

The mighty hunter sighed deeply. “Did you have something to do with that, too?” he asked.

“I asked that the slain animals be pictured to you,” answered the figure, “for when the blow of Simonetta’s note hit you so deeply, I knew you were ready for your eyes to be opened.

For a long moment, the mighty hunter gazed at the figure, who returned his scrutiny with tender, loving eyes. Then she said softly, “Now, beloved, I must go. Take Simonetta home. She will go willingly. And remember her words. ‘Someday you will come to Heaven too, and we can all be together again.’”

With that, the figure once more caressed his

cheek, and slowly ascended toward the brilliant star high overhead. Long after she was out of sight, the pure, white glow remained in that place.

Then the mighty hunter stepped forward. “Simonetta,” he said softly.

“Oh, Father!” she cried, jumping up and running into his arms. “Mother was here. I could feel her. She made everything warm for us.”

“I know, child,” said the mighty hunter. “I saw her.”

“You saw her?” Simonetta’s eyes opened wide. “Was she as beautiful as ever?”

“More beautiful,” he answered simply, his heart too full to speak further.

“I’m glad,” she said, hugging him.

“And now, child, will you come home with me? It is very late, and beyond this place it is very cold.”

“I will come home,” said Simonetta, placing her hand in his.

“And your friends,” he said, looking at the animals, “are all welcome to come too. I know they have no reason to trust me, but I promise that from this night forward, as long as I dwell in the forest, no harm that I can prevent shall come to them.”

With that the wolf, who had been watching cautiously, relaxed. Slowly he walked toward the once-mighty hunter and nuzzled his free hand.

As the man patted the wolf’s head, the other animals too came forward. They gathered around Simonetta and her father and accompanied them on the long trek through the forest.

When, at last, they were almost home, the once-mighty hunter remembered with a start the body of the stag that he had left lying before the cottage. “I would give anything,” he thought, “if I could keep Simonetta from seeing that.”

Dejectedly he trudged on, and Simonetta, sensing trouble in his heart, looked at him with concern.

But as they approached the cottage, the body of the stag was gone. There were no drops of blood in the snow, and no marks where the body had lain.

As the once-mighty hunter pondered in disbelief, Simonetta suddenly released his hand and raced forward.

“Ramo, Ramo,” she called, “I am so glad to see you!”

As her father watched in amazement, Simonetta



threw her arms around the neck of a magnificent stag who had suddenly appeared before them. It was the same animal who had been slaughtered for the Christmas feast.

The stag tolerated Simonetta’s exuberant hugs for a moment, then broke gently away from her embrace. He strode up to the once-mighty hunter and regarded him knowingly.

“I can hardly believe that you live,” said the man humbly, “but I praise God for it.”

“Yes,” said the stag, “it is for all of us to praise God. He has softened your heart and He has returned to me that life that had been taken away. May His blessings remain with you all.”

And the stag, with a mighty leap, disappeared into the darkness.

Then Simonetta and her father and their animal companions entered the cottage where, miraculously, the fire in the hearth was again burning brightly and a comforting warmth filled the room. And on that night, and on many nights to come, while Simonetta and the once-mighty hunter slept in their warm beds, the animals slept, safe and unmolested, before the warm fire. □

—Dagmar Fragme