

HIS BIRTHRIGHT

'Mother, haven't we any saints? The Catholics seem to have so many.'

Mrs. Stewart dropped her embroidery into her lap and looked at her little son, the slow color rising in her cheeks.

'Why, Archie dear, what do you mean?' she questioned in surprise. 'The saints do not exclusively belong to any church.'

'But we never ask their help, like the Catholics do,' the boy persisted. 'And—and they have the Virgin! There's a beautiful white marble statue of her in St. Leo's Church and there's always flowers before it and lighted candles and—'

'Archie Stewart! What took you to St. Leo's Church?' his mother demanded sternly, all the soft color dying out of her cheeks.

'Why, I went with Billy Andrews. He was taking a basket of flowers for the Sisters to put on the altars. Ah, mother, it was all so beautiful!' he went on with shining eyes. 'There were statues of so many saints. Billy told me their names, but the beautifullest one of them all was the Virgin. Billy's father is sick, and before we came away Billy lit a candle and knelt down before her and asked her to make his father well. She seemed to smile down at him as if she understood. I wish we had a statue of the Virgin in our church,' he concluded wistfully.

Mrs. Stewart wisely refrained from making any reply. She was more disturbed than she cared to admit. This dreamy little son of hers had developed some strange notions.

His passionate admiration for the 'doers of valorous deeds' had at first been a source of amusement to his father and herself, but of late she had in a gentle way tried to discourage his extravagant devotion. This new interest to one of his temperament was rather alarming.

'This magazine contains a splendid description of Napoleon; shall I read it to you?' she asked presently, anxious to divert his attention.

For a moment his eyes lighted, then he sighed. 'I—I'd rather hear about the Virgin,' he said slowly. 'She was greater even than Napoleon. Why, she was the Mother of God! Think of that, the Mother of God!'

Mrs. Stewart forced herself to smile indulgently, humoring his childish whim, but she was really alarmed.

'We will visit the art gallery, perhaps to-morrow,' she said gently. 'I did not know my little boy was such a lover of art,' she added, smiling.

But the nude marble figures did not appeal to the boy. He stood for a long time before a life-size bust of George Washington, his face luminous with the old hero-worship.

Mrs. Stewart congratulated herself upon her wisdom in bringing him here, where, while feasting his eyes on the chiselled features of dead and gone heroes (his vivid imagination supplying the local color), he could worship to his heart's content the brave men he so passionately loved. But in the midst of her self-congratulatory thoughts she became conscious of a painful shock. 'He was the father of his country,' she heard him murmur, 'but she was the Mother of God!'

When Mrs. Stewart related the story of Archie's new infatuation to her husband that night, she met another shock, one so totally unexpected that she felt stunned mentally and physically.

A wave of apoplectic color swept over John Stewart's face as he listened; then slowly receded, leaving him quite pale. 'I have never told you, Ethel,' he said a little thickly, 'but—I—I was raised a Catholic.'

'John!' was all his wife had strength to say.

'Oh, I know your father would turn over in his grave if he knew you had married a Catholic!' John said a little bitterly. 'But don't look so frightened,' he added. 'The world and its money-getting has too deep a hold on me now for me to be anything but the suave, gentlemanly money-grabber you know so well.' And, putting on his hat, John Stewart, restless, unhappy, dissatisfied with all the world, but particularly with himself, strode off to his club.

The old friendly relation between husband and wife seemed to have vanished, and in its place was one of constraint.

The subject of religion was never mentioned, but each knew that it was uppermost in the other's thoughts.

Stewart entered heart and soul into business, spending most of his spare time at the club smoking long, black cigars and frowning into space, while his wife rushed feverishly from one social function to another, finding nowhere the contentment she sought.

So Archie was left much alone with his books, his pictures, and his long, long thoughts. Because of a peculiar delicacy, which had followed him from babyhood, he did not attend school, like other boys of his age, but had a tutor for a few hours every day at his own home.

'It's a poor mite of a lonely he is,' thought Nannie, the parlor maid, and in the kindness of her heart, in spite of her many duties, found time to amuse the lonely child, winning his deep affection and finally his confidence.

He had been looking forward eagerly to Washington's Birthday as a day to be marked with a 'white stone.' Mrs. Stewart had intended taking him to a matinee where the life of Washington was vividly portrayed in very life-like moving pictures, but a social engagement, which she remembered at the last moment, prevented her going. So Nannie was sent instead, and a very pleasant afternoon it proved to her as well as her little charge.

Upon their return home Archie went to his room and stood for a long time before the flag-draped picture of Washington. 'You were a great man,' he said, 'and this is your birthday.'

He remembered suddenly one day when he had gone for a walk with Nannie how they had stopped at a church, and she had taken him in to see the crib. He remembered, too, that his mother was quite angry when he told her about it. Nannie lit a candle, and when he asked her why she did it she replied: 'In honor of our Lord's birthday.'

There was a box of Christmas candles in his desk. He would light two candles and place them before the picture.

There was only one candlestick on the mantel, and that had been placed there merely as an ornament. A heavy, ornate affair, in which the tiny pink candle wobbled foolishly; but it burned bravely enough, and he was content at least for a little while.

While he stood gazing up at the unchanging pictured face a sudden discontent seized him; it was all so cold and so—so tame.

He wondered if he ought to kneel down, but the thought of kneeling to a mere creature was distasteful. He sighed disappointedly. 'If I only had a picture of the Virgin,' he thought wistfully.

The candle suddenly spluttered, and stooping to straighten it, the handkerchief in his breast pocket came in contact with the flame. It burst into a blaze as he snatched it from his pocket, and he stood holding it out with both hands, not knowing what to do with it.

'Nannie! Nannie!' he called in a terrified scream.

But it was his mother who came in answer to his cry, snatching up a rug as she ran.

'My darling boy! What happened?' she cried, holding him fast.

'They light candles before the Virgin's statue on her feast day,' he sobbed brokenly. 'We haven't any Virgin or saints, so I lit a candle, 'cause it's Washington's birthday, you know, and—'

A muffled ejaculation from the doorway made them both start and turn. 'You shall have a statue of the Mother of God—and as many saints as you wish,' Mr. Stewart said in a low, determined tone, striding forward and taking the hand of his little son in a grip that hurt. Then, turning to his wife, added, with a look she had never seen on his face before: 'I am going back to my Church, Ethel! My son shall have his birthright.'

Archie and his mother made their First Communion on the same day.—*Young Catholic Messenger.*