

A Christmas Offering

(By RUTH C. NICOLLS, in the Far East.)

Mrs. O'Malley laid the beautiful little figure of the Christ-Child upon its bed of straw, and rose to her feet with a tired, happy sigh. She had spent the afternoon decorating the church for the morrow's feast of Christmas, leaving to the last the sweetest part of her labor of love—the arranging of the Crib. Now, all was finished; holly boughs with glistening leaves and warm-red berries; sprays of rich, trailing ivy; white and delicately-tinted chrysanthemums, had been carried by basketsful from her gardens; her own deft fingers had done the rest, and the little village church looked very "Christmassy."

The parish was poor enough if judged by the world's standards, but it was rich in the Faith of the scattered flock, who took it as a matter of course to tramp miles over hilly roads for Mass on Sundays and holidays. "Didn't our dear Lord walk a more weary way for me, with the cross on His blessed shoulders," had been the reply of an old man bent with rheumatism, to whom a kindly foreign motorist had given a "lift" one bleak Sunday, venturing, at the same time, an energetic remonstrance against anyone undertaking a three-mile walk to church and back when age and failing strength were to be reckoned with.

Well did Mrs. O'Malley know the Faith of her co-parishioners, and she loved to picture their joy next day at sight of the perfectly arranged Crib. She had lived in the big house at the end of the village street during her short married life, and she clung to the familiar surroundings when her beloved husband, the studious, clever doctor, died fifteen years ago, leaving her to fill his place so far as possible to Diarmuid, their little baby boy, and to the poor who had loved "the Doctor" well. She had done her part nobly; Diarmuid loved her as a good Irish son loves his good Irish mother; and the poor spoke of her in their prayers.

The short walk home was a happy one for Diarmuid's mother; her boy was to reach home from college in time for dinner, and she lived in glad anticipation every day of this Christmas vacation. After the long vacation of the approaching summer, he would begin his medical studies, and mother and son had woven together many a day-dream for the future.

A few hours later Mrs. O'Malley knelt in her room; Christmas morning was very near now, but the Christmas joy that filled her heart all day was gone. Diarmuid had come home, and she had sent a silent prayer of happy thanksgiving speeding to Heaven as she gave her son the mother-welcome his heart had been longing for. He looked such a boyish picture of his father, she thought during dinner, and yet, was he quite so boyish-looking after all? There was a new seriousness in his expression, a new ring in

his voice—in some strange way, unexplained to her then, she felt that he was no longer the care-free boy who had returned to college but a few months previously after the happiest of summer holidays. As they talked together before the library fire, she learned the reason of the change. Diarmuid had heard the voice of Christ pleading for laborers in His desolate Chinese vineyard, and he now turned to his mother for help to make his sacrifice.

"I've tried not to believe it, mother, astore," said the boy, his eyes fixed on the glowing Christmas logs. "I've told myself again and again that it's just a passing attack of enthusiasm, for the thought only came after one of our fellows had been telling us of his brother who had given up a splendid career as a barrister to become a missionary priest; but, deep down in my heart, I know it's real, and that God wants me as a priest in China. Mother! it's awfully hard; we had planned so differently, you and I, and you have only me in the world. But you've always told me God must come first—won't you help me to put Him first now, mother? I don't know how I can go through with it if you don't help me!"

The boy's voice was shaky as he threw himself on his knees beside the mother who had always been his best comrade, who had always taught him that "God must come first."

She comforted him without saying anything very definite—her own soul felt dazed under the unexpected blow—promising that they would have a big talk on the morrow, and Diarmuid had gone to his room, his heart aching for the pain he had read under his mother's words of sympathy and love, yet clinging to the conviction that just because she was "mother" she would understand and help him.

And "mother" knelt in her room through hour after hour of that Christmas Eve night, fighting out her battle alone before God. Could He not choose some other mother's son for His far-off mission-field? True, it was greater—ah! she knew it well!—to give one soul to God than to heal many stricken bodies, but a Catholic doctor's work had a glory and a sanctity all its own, and she had only Diarmuid in all the world to live for! So the hours passed on unheeded, and the Angel of Sleep folded his wings about the weary mother as she knelt.

Suddenly she found herself before the Crib in the church; the night was bitterly cold, and the figures—but no! they were "figures" no longer. On the straw lay the Christ-Child Himself; beside Him, in an ecstasy of adoration and love, knelt Mary, His Mother, and St. Joseph watched over them as he had watched over them in Bethlehem. In humble adoration, Diarmuid's mother prostrated herself before the Divine Infant, and when

she rose to her knees, she saw that Mary had lifted her Son from the straw, and was gazing down upon the beautiful Baby Face with a look of inexpressible love. Then she spoke: "O, Christ, my God! be it done to me according to Thy word. Jesus, my Treasure, my little Child! I offer Thee to Thy Eternal Father for the souls of men. Thy will be done!"

As the sweet voice ceased, the vision faded, but Diarmuid's mother understood as never before what that first Christmas night must have meant to the Mother of God. Having witnessed Mary's sacrifice for souls, how could she refuse to make her own? How could she grudge Diarmuid where Mary had given Jesus?

In the sunlight of a radiant Christmas morning, mother and son met. The boy looked up anxiously as he heard her enter the room; he was finding his own battle hard to fight—would "mother" fail him now for the first time? But her greeting reassured him. "A Happy Christmas, Diarmuid, avic machree!" she exclaimed, holding out her hands to him; then, she added bravely, "Let us start a little early for Mass, astore; I want to offer you to God and His Blessed Mother at the Crib, and then, we will help each other to put God first."

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