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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

## The Holy Night

*Selma Lagerlöf*

"Once upon a time," said my Grandmother, as we sat together one Christmas Day when all the others had gone to church, "there was a man who went out at night to borrow some fire. 'Help me, kind people,' he said. 'My wife has a little baby, and I must light a fire to warm her and the child.'

"But it was very late, so everybody was asleep, and no one answered.

"The man walked farther and farther on. At last in the distance he saw the glimmer of flames, and, going in that direction, he perceived that the fire was burning in the open air. Around it lay sleeping a flock of white sheep, watched by an old shepherd.

"When the man came up he saw that three large dogs also rested asleep at the shepherd's feet. Waking at his approach, they opened their wide jaws as if to bark, but no sound was heard. The man saw the hair rise on their backs and their sharp teeth glitter in the firelight as they rushed upon him. One snapped at his legs, one at his hand, and a third sprang at his throat. But neither jaws nor teeth[Pg 259] would obey and the man did not feel the smallest hurt.

"He wanted to go on that he might get what he needed. But the sheep lay so close together that he could not move forward. So he stepped on the animals' backs, and walked across them to the fire. But not a single one moved or stirred."

"Why didn't they move, Grandmother?" I asked.

"You will find out in a little while," answered Grandmother, and kept on with the story.

"When the man had almost reached the fire the shepherd looked up. He was a surly old man, cross and disagreeable to everybody. So when he saw the stranger, he caught up the long, pointed staff he carried in his hand while he was watching the flock, and hurled it at him. The stick flew straight at the man, but before it struck him, turned aside and whizzed far over the field."

Here I interrupted again. "Grandmother, why didn't the stick hit the man?" But she went on without answering.

"Then the man said to the shepherd, 'Good friend, aid me by letting me have a

little fire. My wife has an infant child and I need it to warm them both.'

"The shepherd would gladly have refused, but when he thought that his dogs had not been able to hurt the man, that the sheep had not run from him, and his staff would not strike him, he felt a little afraid, and did not dare to do so.

"Take as much as you need,' he said.

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"But the fire was almost out. There were no branches or brands, only a heap of glowing embers, and the stranger had nothing in which he could put the coals.

"The shepherd saw this and was glad because the man could get no fire. But the stranger stooped down, took the coals from the ashes with his hands, and put them in his cloak. And the coals neither scorched his hands nor singed his cloak. The man carried them away as if they were nuts or apples."

Here I interrupted a third time, "Grandmother, why wouldn't the coals burn the man?"

"You will soon hear," she replied, and went on.

"When the shepherd, who was a sullen, bad-tempered man, saw all these things, he began to wonder: 'What kind of night is this when the dogs do not bite, the sheep feel no fear, the lance does not kill, and fire does not burn?' He called to the stranger, asking: 'Why is it that all things show mercy upon you?'

"I cannot tell you if you do not see for yourself,' said the man, and went away to light the fire for his wife and child.

"But the shepherd wanted to find out what all this meant, so he followed him and discovered that the man did not even have a hut to live in, only a sort of cavern with bare stone walls.



"The shepherd thought the poor little child might be chilled, and though he was a harsh man, he pitied and wanted to help it. So he gave the stranger a [Pg 261] soft white sheepskin, and told him to put the child in it.

"But the very moment he showed that he, too, could be merciful, his eyes were opened and he saw and heard what he had neither seen nor heard before.

"He saw a dense circle of silver-winged angels, each with a harp in his hand, and all singing that on this night was born the Saviour, who would redeem the world from its sin.

"Then the shepherd understood why on this night all creatures were so happy

that they did not desire to harm anything.

“The angels were not only around the shepherd, but he saw them everywhere. They were in the cave, on the mountains, and flying under the sky. They came in throngs along the way, and, as they passed, stopped and gazed at the child.

“There were joy and happiness and mirth and singing, and he saw all this amid the darkness of the night, where he had formerly seen and heard nothing. And he was so happy that his eyes were opened—that he fell on his knees and thanked God.”

Then Grandmother sighed, saying, “But what the shepherds saw, we could see, too, for the angels are flying over the earth every Christmas Eve, if we could only see them.”

And Grandmother laid her hand on my head, adding, “Remember this, for it is as true as that I see you and you see me. It does not depend upon candles and lamps, or on the moon and sun, but what we need is eyes to behold the glory of God.”

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