

The Jewish Girl

Hans Christian Andersen

Among the other children in the charity school was a little Jewish girl, clever and good-in fact, the brightest of them all. But there was one class she could not attend, the one where religion was taught, for she was in a Christian school.

During the hour of this class, she had her geography book before her to study, or did her arithmetic, but the lessons were quickly learned, and then, though the book might still be open before her, she did not read from it; she listened. And the teacher soon noticed that she listened more intently than any of the rest.

"Study your book," said the teacher, gently yet earnestly. But she looked back at him with her black, eager eyes, and when he put his questions to her as well as the rest he found she knew more than all the others. She had listened, understood, and kept his words.

Her father was a poor but honest man, and when he first brought her to the school he had given instructions that she should not be taught the Christian faith. But to send her from the room during the Scripture lesson might have given offense and raised various thoughts in the minds of the other children in the class, and so she remained. But this could not go on any longer.

So the teacher went to her father and explained that he must either take his daughter away from the school or consent to her becoming a Christian.

"I cannot bear to see those burning eyes, that sincere yearning thirst of the soul, so to speak, after the words of the Gospel," he said.

Then her father burst into tears. "I know very little myself of our own faith," he replied, "but her mother was a daughter of Israel, strong and steadfast in her faith, and on her deathbed I promised her that our child should never receive Christian baptism. That promise I must keep, for to me it is like a pact with God."

So the little Jewish girl was taken away from the Christian school.

Years had passed.

In a humble household, in one of the smallest provincial towns of Jutland there was a maidservant, a poor girl of the Jewish faith; this was Sarah. Her hair was as black as ebony, and her eyes were dark yet full of brilliant light, such eyes as you see among the daughters of the East. And the expression in the face of the grown-up girl was still that of the child who sat on the schoolroom bench, listening with eager and wistful eyes.

Every Sunday the sound of the organ and the singing of the congregation sounded from the church, and the tones floated across the street and into the house where the Jewish girl attended diligently and faithfully to her work. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," was her law; but her Sabbath was a day of labor to Christians, and only in her heart could she keep it holy. And that she believed was not enough.

But then the thought came to her soul, "What do days and hours matter in the sight of God?" and on the Sunday of the Christians she had her own undisturbed hour of devotion. Then if the sound of the organ and the singing came across to her as she stood behind the sink in the kitchen, even this became a quiet and consecrated spot. Then she would read the treasure and property of her own people, the Old Testament, and that alone; for she kept deep in her heart what her father had told the teacher and herself when she was taken from the school-the promise he had made to her dying mother, "that Sarah should not be baptized, nor forsake the faith of her fathers." The New Testament was, and would forever remain, a sealed book to her; and yet she knew much of it, for it shone through the

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memories of her childhood.

One evening she was sitting in a corner of the living room while her master read aloud. She allowed herself to listen, for this was not the Gospel; no, he was reading from an old storybook, so she could remain. The master read to them of a Hungarian knight who was taken captive by a Turkish pasha and yoked with oxen to the plow. He was driven with lashes of the whip and suffered pain and thirst almost beyond endurance.

But at home his wife sold her jewels and mortgaged their castle and lands, while friends contributed large sums to help raise the almost unbelievable amount of money that was demanded as ransom. This finally was collected, and he was delivered from slavery and disgrace. Sick and suffering, he returned home.

But soon there resounded over the countryside the summons to a crusade against the foe of Christianity. The sick man heard the call and could have neither peace nor rest any longer; they had to lift him on his war horse. Then the blood rushed again to his cheeks, his strength seemed to return, and he rode forth to victory. The very pasha who had made him suffer pain and humiliation yoked to the plow became his captive. He was taken home to the castle dungeon, but before he had been there an hour the knight came to him and asked his prisoner, "What do you think now awaits you?"

"I know," replied the Turk. "Retribution."

"Yes, the retribution of a Christian," said the knight. "The teachings of Christ tell us to forgive our enemies and love our fellow men. God is love! Go in peace to your home and loved ones, and be gentle and good to all who suffer."

Then the prisoner burst into tears. "How could I have believed such a thing possible?" he cried. "I was certain I would have to suffer shame and torture, hence I took poison, and within a few hours I shall die. There is no remedy. But before I die, teach me the faith which is so full of such love and mercy; it is great and divine! In that faith let me die; let me die a Christian!" And his request was granted him.

That was the legend, the story that was read to them. All listened to it with close attention, but it sank deepest into the heart of her who sat in the corner, the servantmaid, Sarah, the Jewess. Large tears stood in her sparkling coal-black eyes while she sat there, as years ago on the school bench, and felt the greatness of the Gospel. The tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Let not my child become a Christian!" Her mother's dying words rang through her soul with those of the law, "Honor thy father and thy mother!"

"Still I have not been baptized! They call me 'the Jewess'; the boys of the neighborhood mocked me last Sunday as I stood outside the church door and looked in at the burning altar lights and the singing congregation. Ever since my school days, up to this very hour, the power of Christianity, which is like a sunbeam, and which, no matter how much I close my eyes, penetrates into my heart. But, my mother, I will not bring you sorrow in your grave! I will not betray the promise my father made to you; I will not read the Christian's Bible! Have I not the God of my fathers? On Him let me rest my head!"

And the years rolled by.

The husband died, and the wife was left in difficult circumstances. The servant girl had to be dismissed, but Sarah would not leave the widow. She became her help in time of trouble and kept the little household together; she worked late every night, and by the labor of her own hands got bread for the house. There were no close relatives to help a family where the widow grew weaker each day, lingering for months on a sickbed. Gentle and good Sarah watched and nursed and labored and was the blessing of the poverty-stricken home.

"There is the Bible," said the sick woman one evening. "Read a little to me; the evening is so long, and I sadly need to hear the word of God."

Sarah bowed her head, picked up the Bible and folded her hands around it, opened it, and read aloud to the sick woman. Often the tears came into her eyes, but they shone more clearly, and the darkness lifted from her soul. "Mother, your child shall not receive the baptism of the Christians, shall not be named in their communion. You have wished it, and I shall honor your wish. In this we are united here on earth, but above this is-is a greater union in God. He leads and guides us beyond Death. 'I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground.' Oh, I understand now! I do not know myself how I came to it! Through Him it was-in Him-Christ!"

And she trembled as she spoke the holy name; a baptism of fire streamed through her, stronger than her feeble frame could bear, and she sank down, more exhausted even than the sick woman whom she nursed.

"Poor Sarah!" people said. "She is worn out with labor and nursing!"

They took her to the charity hospital, and there she died, and thence she was carried to her grave. It was not to the graveyard of the Christians-that was not the place for a Jewish girl; no, outside by the wall they dug a grave for her.

But God's sun, which shines upon the graves of the Christians, shines as well upon that of the Jewish girl; and the hymns which are sung beside the Christian graves sound also beside her grave outside the wall. And out there, too, reaches the promise: "There is resurrection in Christ, in Him, the Saviour, who said to His Disciples, 'John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holv (NB = Holy) Ghost!' "

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