

## A SIMPLE STORY.



HAD risen earlier than usual, for this was the long-expected day when the Holy Father Hilarion would stop and bless her hearth. With him her son Felix, whom it had pleased God to make a priest.

A wreath of polished ivy leaves made the door quite bright. The floor was fresh-strewn with rushes and sweet-smelling herbs; the roughly-hewn table stained red; a cross painted in red above the hearth, and by its foot a trimmed lamp placed. All this in honour of the Holy Father and her dear son, both now on their way to the Seven Isles, to bless and baptise there in the

name of God.

Her eyes swelled with tears of pride, though she found so many matters to attend to. She bustled the two girls, Matilda and Basine, and her tearful face grew flushed over the wheaten cakes that would not bake. Those wheaten cakes still flat! and the Holy Father so near and probably so hungry!

The morning was radiant; something sang in the tangled hedge, something sang in the pale blue sky; these she did not heed, the cakes destroyed the smell of the fresh earth. Her wrath boiled over when Basine upset a precious earthen jar, and buried in her hands a crying head decked with yellow flowers. She had not noticed that before; yellow flowers in her yellow hair! and so much to do! She bustled the girls still more—sat down to moan with despair. She became

still more tearful and active when the village people began to stir, to walk up to the hill-top and shade their eyes with their hands, waiting for the Holy Father. The sheep, still penned, thrust out perplexed and bleating heads, wondering when they would be led to pasture; the dogs were as active as Batilda. Young men congregated about the tall elm near the stream. Every one looked anxious, and their little brother ran backwards and forwards, distracting the two crazy girls with the news that the Holy Father had not yet come.

The sky grew paler, the pale green sea turned silver towards noon, and still no Holy Father. Everything had been ready some time, but Batilda still fretted, bustling the two girls for talking to everyone who came to see the wonderfully clean room, with the pretty ivy wreath, always with the question, Had the Holy Father come? so futile, since they knew as well as she did that he had not. The men put up with cold porridges without the usual lordly complaints, the excitement had been so great. Batilda stood robed in washed clothes, fretful but full of pride. The crowd on the hill-top stirred; her little boy ran down to say, There is a mule with brother Felix by it, and the Holy Father on top of the mule. Batilda wept with joy. People left their straw and clay covered huts. Radegond and her daughter ran past in blue robes, crying Batilda! Batilda! will you not come to meet the Holy Father? There were women who had time to think of blue gowns with fringes; they had not been up before the day to work for the Holy Father. The two crazy girls turned pale with excitement when Hilarion appeared, surrounded by the whole village out to welcome him; the aged dropped on their knees at their doors as he passed. After three hours' suspense and despair, the cakes had baked as if by a miracle—how tall and handsome her boy Felix had grown! how like a saint he looked, supporting with his arm the Holy Father! how proud her husband would have been could he only have lived! She sank on her knees under the blessing of the Bishop, and her heart sang like the little black speck singing ecstatically, almost at the throne of God, lost in the pale blue sky.

The whole village of course flocked round. Some began to pray very audibly to make up for the five years since the Father last came. Little children were pushed forward; children with little square faces, pale blue eyes, hair almost the colour of their blonde flesh. Some hung back tearfully, frightened at their fathers beckoning solemnly to them; some kept their fists doubled in their eyes; but most looked frankly at the Bishop, with legs firmly apart and little bellies in dignified prominence.

The red table had been spread by active hands, with fresh porridge, baked fish, cakes, milk and tender herbs. Batilda almost wished to push the Bishop in at the door, so slow was he to enter, recognising this old man, that decrepit old woman, gutturally venting in holy exclamations. People now came forward with cheeses and shell-fish. The cows lowed as the frothing milk was brought from the stables by children who stopped obstinately at the door. As if she meant to starve the Holy

Father! Stupid Basine was weeping for her sins, but Matilda laughed loudly as she sent people from the door, which grew more and more obstructed. Even the wicked Nazie, the one-eyed shepherd, was there, with his wicked dog, the terror of all the children. Young men pushed the children away, and stared sheepishly, their huge hands and arms hanging heavily at their sides. The Father would eat scarcely anything, nodding kindly to the crowd that looked almost alarmed each time he did so. Both the crazy girls now laughed loudly, pushing the people away. Batilda, shocked, wished to close the door; the very dogs would be coming in next! The Bishop, however, had finished with "those excellent cakes" as he called them.—Could a man eat so little?—He motioned the foremost of the crowd to come forward. All swayed nervously, so he rose and spoke kindly to them. There were two couples to marry and their little children to baptise; three quarrels to arbitrate, and much kindness to teach. Though it was broad daylight, Batilda lit the lamp and placed it near him. Felix stood solemnly by, like a bishop; he could not think of his mother only. The day advanced. People had come on mules from the hamlets. The Holy Father had stepped out on the common to speak to all; to console and chide. He spoke at length of a father in his home, told them that you must not move boundary stones in the night, nor strike a neighbour in a dark road because he had taken your corn from the big common granary (where the wheat stood in jars under a roof of rushes). He spoke of God's goodness in sending leaves and fruits every year, in putting fish in the waters. As he spoke he looked at the sky, becoming coloured with lovely clouds; some birds flew across it, and he almost wept, thinking if only the Holy Ghost might fly down to him with flaming wings.

Felix was to tarry the night with his mother, and join the Father next day in the Isles. The sea was becoming golden, golden as the sky. He still spoke to them, while Radegond in her blue robes sobbed audibly. Loic the sailor was ready; his boat looked black against the yellow sea; he would get the holy man across before sundown.

The crowd was dense around the Father; women holding dazed children to be blest; children dazed at seeing their parents weep, and smaller children washed by the Bishop. Radegond gave little moans, which the women took up with interest as the Father neared the beach, the sun shining in his eyes. When he turned towards them the sun flamed like a halo round his sparsely-locked head. Footsteps clattered on the beach, and the water gently lapped, lapped in golden ripples lined with green. The Father entered the boat, which had been bowing solemnly to him, and stood against the sun—Peace be with you—he bowed three times in the names of the three spirits. Men shoved away the boat. Some one came too late, rattling down the beach, to see the Bishop. The crowd, swaying with wistful faces, felt something was leaving them,—Peace be with you—he raised his hand and bent fingers. Some women went on their knees; the men still stood in the water. He

blessed them again; they waded further, making large glittering circles, flashing with blue and green.—Peace be with you—they waded still further, while the oars beat rhythmically, slowly drowning his voice. He stood up, his arms outstretched like a cross, still blessing them, till he was lost against the sail. Two or three swam out a short distance. The boat now looked like a bird flying towards the violet horizon, where stood the Seven Isles.

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