HELIANTHUS

By the Hand of a Child

IT was the glorious day of the Fête de Jeunesse in Berne, that little town of Switzerland which lies nestled at the foot of the Alps. The streets were a medley of youth and color, and the old walls reëchoed with the ringing of young laughter and the strains of gay music. Girls and boys, dressed in the quaint costume of the ancient Swiss fashion, ran singing down the long, sunlit walks; bright banners of many-colored silks streamed from the houses and waved and gleamed in the clear summer sunshine; confetti, thrown from a thousand childish hands, floated in the light, and, caught in the playful wind, shimmered in a veritable dance of rainbow color; men and women with staid faces, old dames and grandsires alike, seemed infused with the eternal joy of youth, and features long unused to mirth were smiling and laughing with the children. In the background the Jungfraü lifted her stately head, white against the vivid sky, and from her lofty crest there glowed a deeper radiance, as if she, too, would join in the general light and color of the Fête de Jeunesse, the Festival of Youth.

Down the wide main street of the city danced a gay procession of children, their sweet, high voices joined in a wild burst of laughter-filled music, and their gay clothing flashing in a medley of red and gold and blue in the sunlight. They drifted down the street like a glorious multi-colored cloud, their feet scarce touching the ground in the lightness of their dancing. Foremost among the throng were two children, a boy and a girl, who, hand-in-hand, led the others on, and these two seemed the very embodiment of all that was young and fair and joyous. Their eyes glowed, and the girl's long, fair hair floating in the breeze behind her gave her laughing face an air of childish abandonment to amusement, and the sweet enjoyment of the hour.

On and on they danced, until the main street dividing into several smaller ones, they separated. It was into one of these narrow side streets that the two little enthusiasts of the dance, Mathilde Gentil and her brother Pierre, turned. They walked more slowly now to regain breath. She, still half-dancing along by his side, was dressed as a wee woman in short, black skirt and red corsage laced with gold, while his sturdy figure held itself erect in the splendor of a gold-braided coat and a three-cornered hat perched above his chubby face.

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Down the narrow byway they wandered, still hand in hand, apart for a while from the others, but waiting to join them again at some unexpected corner. They made a quaint picture, the little couple, walking down the cobbled street with the picturesque Swiss houses overhanging them, and their childish voices echoing cheerfully among the hidden naves and cornices of the many gables.

"Dost think, Pierre, that my dress is very pretty?" asked Mathilde, looking with intense satisfaction upon her abbreviated skirt and little feet encased in all the glory of silver-buckled slippers.

"Ever so pretty," answered Pierre, his eyes lighting with proud admiration as he looked at her rosy cheeks and happy eyes. Then reprovingly:

"But 'tis naughty to be vain."

"Nay, I'm not vain," she rejoined hastily, "but, surely, 'tis not wrong to tell the truth about the matter. Thou knowest how much prettier I am than Adèle—yes, even *Maman* says so."

"Adèle has black eyes. I like black eyes," said Pierre: "and also Adèle can run faster than you."

There was an uncomfortable silence; then Mathilde said in a small voice:

"But I am thy sister, Pierre—and—and—it matters not about Adèle. Perhaps a girl has no need to run so fast—anyway, I don't want to run faster than thou, Pierre."

Whereupon, overcome by this sisterly devotion, Pierre was obliged to stop and embrace the little sister in true French fashion, and the two proceeded amicably along.

"When shall we join the others again, Pierre?" asked the little girl finally. "It grows late, and, besides, all our sugar plums and confetti are gone and——"

"Hush! I don't know. Look! Who is that standing there all dressed in black?" and Pierre stopped superstitiously, and pointed a finger at the shadow of a dark form, which stood in the doorway of a decrepit-looking house near by. "See, it is a woman, and dressed as a nun, too," he added, as Mathilde drew him closer.

They crept quite near the woman and watched her a moment before she was aware of their presence. Then she turned toward them, and her face was strangely sad as if with some mighty sorrow, her eyes hopeless and burning with some unsatisfied longing.

The children looked at her curiously. A nun was unusual in those streets, and their quick child eyes noted the deep mournfulness of her face, the nervous hands that clasped a crucifix, and the sad lips which tried in vain to frame themselves into a kindly smile. There was a moment's silence, then:

"Why don't you cry?" asked Pierre bluntly. "Your eyes are so sorry that it hurts me. Why don't you cry then? Mathilde does, and then she feels quite good again, especially when she has been naughty. Have you been naughty, too?"

The woman met his direct, innocent gaze for a moment, then dropped her head in her hands and was silent. When she lifted her head again there were unshed tears in her eyes, and she answered simply:

"Yes, I have been naughty, too."

"Then you ought to have to cry. *Maman* says——"

"Hush, Pierre!" interrupted Mathilde, "dost thou not see she is hurt inside?" And slipping her little hand in the woman's she said comfortingly, "Never mind, *chère mam'selle;* he is so careless, but it is always so with boys, isn't it? But I—I know, too, how it feels to be naughty and have to cry. Oh, yes," nodding her head sagely, "I know. One has quite a funny place in one's throat, and oh! such a pain in one's heart; but then I always go to *Maman* and say, 'Oh, *Maman*, I am so very sorry I am naughty. It was the old *diable* that made me so bad, and now I have prayed, *le bon Dieu*, and He makes me all good again.' And then *Maman* loves me once more, and I am good for a long, long time. Why don't you go to your *Maman?* Perhaps she will tell you how to be good again."

But the shadow upon the woman's face deepened.

"I have sinned," she murmured to herself; "God alone knows how I have sinned, and wandered far out into the darkness. I am alone and without hope."

Her great, dark eyes gazed unseeingly into the distance, and the sharp lines of suffering were accentuated on her thin, sensitive face. Mathilde's rosy face grew serious, and Pierre looked half-frightened, half-fascinated into the nun's deep eyes.

"*Pauvre mam'selle*, have you been so very naughty?" asked Mathilde, pityingly, laying her head against the nun's arm. "Perhaps if you will tell us we can help."

"Yes, we know all about being naughty," said Pierre, reassuringly. "*Mon père* says sometimes we are quite possessed with evil."

But the nun looked down into Mathilde's blue eyes, lovely in the intensity of childish sympathy, and feeling in their clear sweetness some strength of innocence which her own sad heart did not know, she said falteringly: "You can not know, my child, wherein I have sinned. Suffice it to say that I have sinned beyond hope of redemption." Her face grew stern, her lips set. "I am a lost soul. A lost soul! There is no help in Christ for such as I! I have fallen forever through my own vain desire for human happiness, and instead of happiness I have found untold misery, for I have lost the Christ!" Then seeing the perplexity in the childish, questioning eyes, she added quickly, "Ah, it is not right to burden a little heart so happy and bright and pure. Go, my child. Too soon your own sorrows will come without the shadow of mine upon your youth. My sin is upon my own soul, and mine alone."

But Mathilde pressed closer, and asked wonderingly: "Didst say thou hadst lost the Christ, *mam'selle*? Why, but we know where He is, Pierre and I: we know quite well. Pierre, thou knowest the Cathédrale Münster here? Dost not remember we thought the Christ was there? And there is a statue, too, all white, and oh! so beautiful, of the Christ."

"Yes, I know," interrupted Pierre reflectively, "and thou didst kiss His feet. That was silly, because it was not the real Christ, but then girls are ever silly."

The little girl blushed at the accusation, but the nun's eyes filled with tears, and she turned away with a half-sob. The children heard her murmur a name over and over to herself; then suddenly she threw up her head with a gesture of utter despair, and, drawing her hood over her face, she drooped her head upon her breast again, and turned to depart. But Mathilde grasped her hand and said decidedly:

"Come, *mam'selle*, we will take you to the Christ. We know the way, and perhaps He will let you be good again."

There was a moment of irresolution, then without a word the nun allowed the children to lead her passively along. Slowly they went down the

street, silent save for the occasional echo of a gay burst of music or the shout of merry voices. The nun's figure glided along as still and dark as a shadow, and the children tried to measure their footsteps to hers. Gradually the hopefulness of their sweet youth seemed to be infused from their little, warm, rosy hands into her thin, cold ones, for her step grew more firm as she went, her heavy eyes less somber in their fixed intensity.

"Perhaps they will indeed lead me to Him," she murmured: "O Christ, who pardonest sinners, pardon me!"

On they went, the children instinctively choosing the less frequented streets, where the fête was less apparent in all its riot of color. Gradually they approached the cathedral, and the children crossed themselves devoutly as they ascended the broad, marble steps. Within the threshold, a sacred hush fell upon them. Even Pierre was awed, and tiptoed reverently along. The silence of the vast cathedral was intense, yet it seemed fraught, too, with a deep meaning, as if the fragrance of the incense, the spirit of many prayers, still lingered there and hallowed it. The rich light from the stained windows filtered through lofty naves and shadowed arches, and fell upon the group as they walked slowly up the great aisle between the massive pillars, enhancing the glowing freshness of the children, and throwing into yet deeper shadow the downcast, black-robed figure of the nun.

Slowly, silently, they passed to the front, and Mathilde, motioning Pierre to stay behind, led the nun gently to the altar. For a moment they knelt; then, turning to the right, they came to a statue. It was a prostrate figure of the Christ, as He had been when His loved ones took His body from the cross. Pain and suffering were mingled with an expression of lofty grandeur and unutterable peace upon the still, white face. The hands, all pierced and torn, lay at rest upon His bosom, and the rich hair, matted with thorns, fell away from the broad, smooth brow upon the low, marble pedestal.

For a moment the nun stood motionless, looking with an intense, burning gaze upon that face of the Christ. Then without a word she sank at His feet, as once that other Magdalene had done, in an agony of sorrow and love and repentance.

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Softly the little girl turned away, and, rejoining her brother, the two went out again into the bright, sunlit streets. Soon their voices were gay among the music and laughter of the many. But within the great cathedral the still, soft light fell upon a woman, robed in black, kneeling beside the statue of the Christ. Her face was upturned in a rapture of joy, and the light of heaven was in her eyes.

She had found the Christ.

P. C. Sydenstricker, 1914.