

## Introduction

This small booklet has been put together at the request of parents who are trying to make Advent more meaningful for their families. There has been a growing movement within the Church to restore the many traditional Advent customs that formed the well-loved part of family life when many of us were much younger.

Advent isn't easy. Physical preparation, cleaning, decorating, wrapping presents, limited resources which can lead to arguments and disappointments can rob us of time for spiritual preparation.

Unable to commercialise waiting, the world **ignores** Advent. Christmas music, decorations, and parties materialise in mid November and vanish in December 26. Who remembers that the twelve days of Christmas refer from December 25 until the Epiphany? Waiting until Christmas before celebrating has become a foreign idea - and it would be Scrooge-like to refuse to participate in the festivities, misplaced though they may be.

The purpose of this small booklet, therefore, is to search for other ways to provide families with ideas for home celebrations and help towards restoring the **true meaning of Advent to the family.**

One of the most important symbols is the **ADVENT WREATH** Page 1

We have also included another popular custom,  
**THE PROMISE BRANCH.** Page 4

A beautiful custom already carried out in some homes and parishes is that of reminding us of Mary and Joseph looking for shelter. Hence we have the tradition of **SHELTER SEEKING.** Page 5

The Christmas tree is something we have all grown up with, but how many of us know of or understand  
**THE DRESSING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE ?** Page 6

Advent is also a time for looking back, examining the present, and anticipating the future. To help us reflect on how we can live closer to God we have included two short stories:  
**THE ORPHAN'S ORANGE** by S Carroll Page 9  
**A JOYFUL CHRISTMAS FOR ALL** by Ursula Berg Page 10





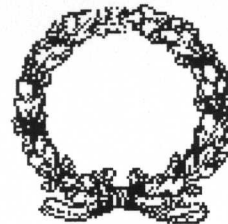
**"Sounds nice.** I hang one on my door every year."

**Wrong !** An Advent wreath is one that you make or buy and has four candles in it. It is a very special way that Christians have of focusing on the coming of Christ **and if you haven't tried it, you're missing a lot.**

**Wreaths can be bought , but it is more fun to make your own.**

The Advent wreath imparts the spirit of Advent to us, and reminds us again and again of the Light to come at Christmas.

The circle of the wreath reminds us of the Eternal God, who is without beginning or end.



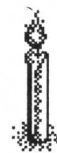
The evergreen speaks of God's everlasting love for us and of the hope that one day we will share this love and life in eternal bliss in heaven.



The four candles indicate the many hundreds of years when mankind awaited Christ's coming.



The purple candles point to these days of waiting and longing for Christ's birth, to a time of prayer and silence, a time of purification and sacrifice.



The pink candle symbolises the joy and hope we share in awaiting Christ's coming and constant presence among us.



As we light one more candle and watch the light grow, we become filled with great joy because the true Light of the world is near.

### BLESSING OF THE ADVENT WREATH

Family celebration at the beginning of Advent, with the participation of all family members.

**FATHER:** Lord Jesus Christ, as a family we are gathered together with you and your Mother to begin the Holy season of Advent. In these coming weeks we wish to prepare a worthy dwelling place for you in our home, in our family, and in our hearts. With great longing and joyful expectation we await your coming, and we rejoice in the promise of your constant presence among us.

**MOTHER:** For thousands of years, people waited for your birth, as God had promised. Every year, in the four weeks before Christmas, the Church remembers these long years of darkness. In the midst of all the hustle and bustle of our busy lives - sending Christmas cards, buying presents, baking, organising parties (each one can add his and her own concerns and busy activities) we want to think of you, Lord Jesus, our true light, the Light of the world we will celebrate again. We are eagerly awaiting your coming to us on Christmas, your coming into our hearts day by day, and your coming in glory and majesty at the end of time on the final judgment day. Your birth has changed world history. It will also change our lives and fill us with the great hope to become united with you in eternal happiness.

**CHILD:** In this holy season of Advent we look at the Blessed Mother as she waited with great love and longing for your coming and prepared for your birth. We wish to walk at her side through the time of darkness into the light of Christmas.



**ALL:** Come, Lord Jesus, into our homes and hearts. We want to prepare your way, and we long for your light to shine in our daily lives.

**FATHER:**

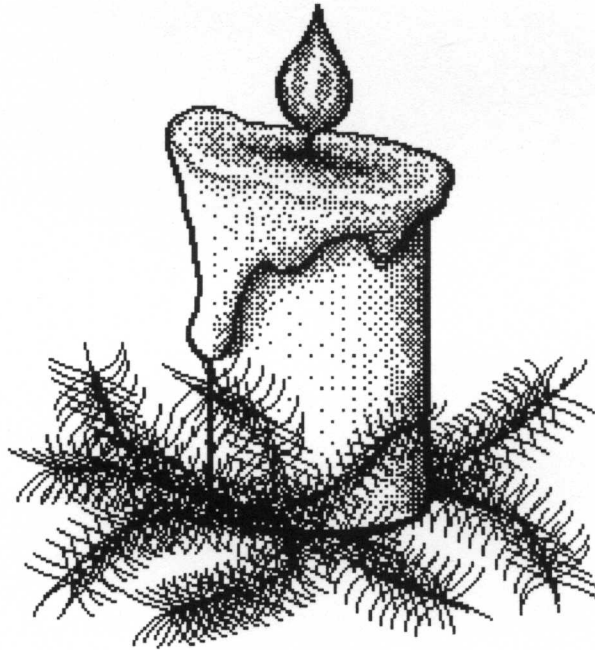
This Advent wreath shall be a sign of our faith in you, Lord Jesus. It shall remind us of our holy task in these weeks. We must get ready to meet you when you come; we must open our hearts and purify them so that we can follow your direction and fulfil your holy will.

Lord Jesus, accept this readiness to make this Advent a holy season, a time of prayer and purification, a time of love and sacrifice, a time of joyful expectation and longing for your coming. Graciously hear our petitions and fulfil our desires and secret wishes.

(Each member of the family may express his or her special intentions and wishes for this Advent season.)

Lord Jesus, we ask you now to bless this wreath and to grant us your special help and strength for our journey to the Light.

The father of the family makes the sign of the cross over the wreath.



# The Promise Branch



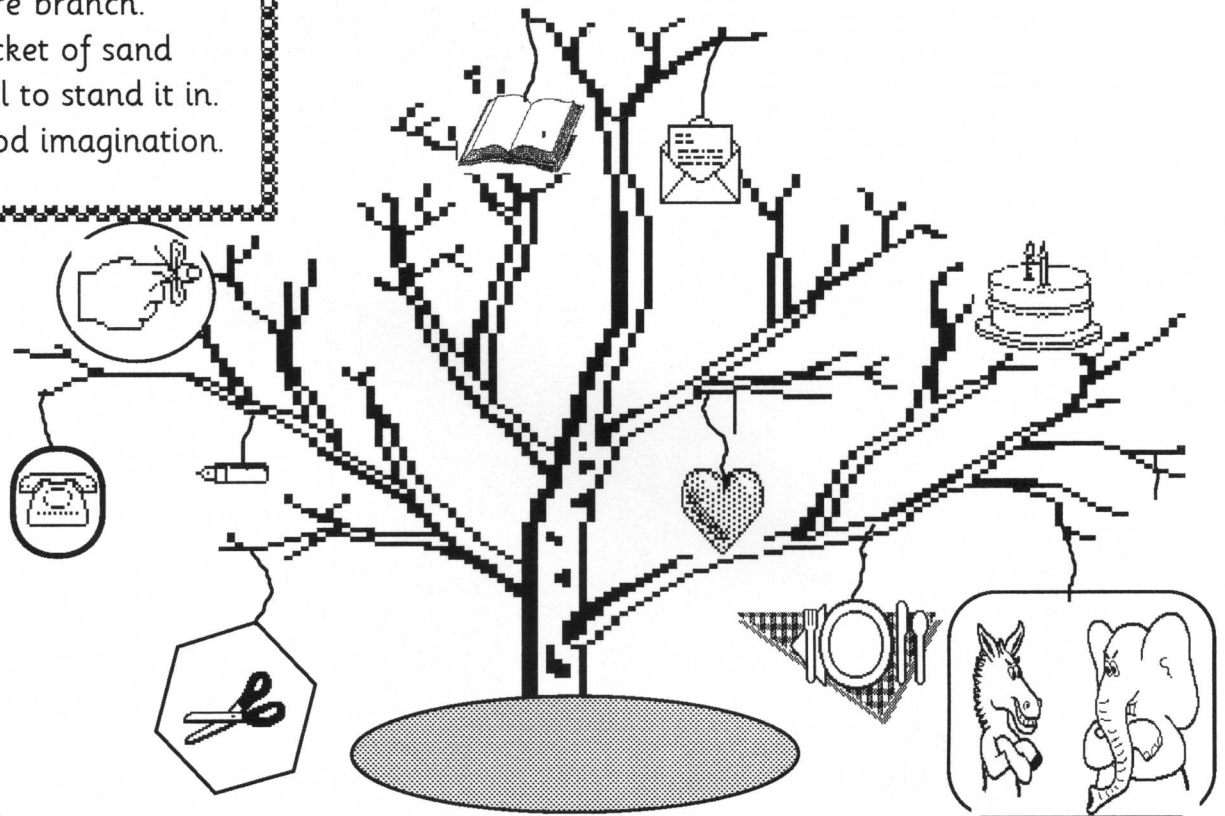
The promise branch is a unique way of celebrating Advent.

Advent is the season of promise.

We come to know God's promise in the promises we make and keep to one another.

## Requirements:

- A bare branch.
- A bucket of sand or soil to stand it in.
- A good imagination.



Put the branch in a **special place**. The idea is for family members to take turns making promises. You can promise anything to anybody. **Tell it, or keep it a secret**. Each day, a new promise is added to the branch.

Things are hung on the promise branch to symbolise your promises. For example, a pen could be a promise to write a letter which is overdue or has been put off; a piece of straw could be a promise to sweep the floor; a picture of a book could be a promise to read to a young child, or if it is a secret, a piece of coloured string or wool. Whatever you choose, **use your imagination**.

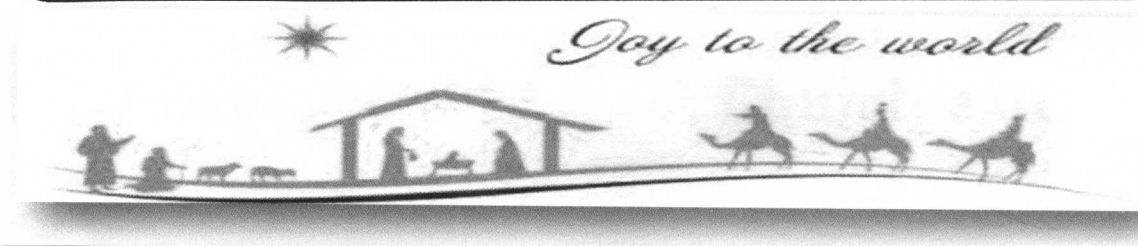
As Advent goes on, the branch becomes filled, and at Christmas it gives way to the Christmas Tree. The Advent Branch can be blessed much like the wreath, and the promises can be made during family prayer or at any other suitable time.

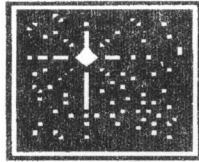
# Shelter Seeking



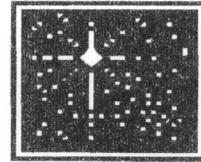
**Begins THURSDAY  
16th December  
until Christmas Eve**

**Will He find shelter this  
Christmas with us ?**





# Shelter Seeking

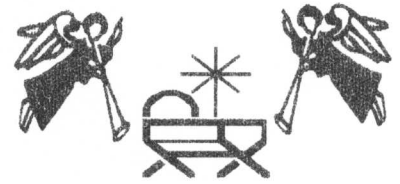


## What is it ?



Shelter Seeking is an old custom, which probably originated in Austria, reminding us of Mary and Joseph looking for shelter when Our Lord was about to come into the world. But at Bethlehem "there was no room for them at the inn."

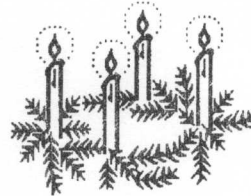
Shelter Seeking reminds us of Christ's coming today into our world. Will He find shelter today ? With us ?



Shelter Seeking is a **Novena in preparation for Christ's coming into our home.** We want to open our doors and our hearts to Him and His Mother this Christmas.

## How to conduct Shelter Seeking

1. Prepare a place of honour for Our Lady and her Child. You may use either a picture or statue and decorate it with flowers and a candle.
2. Welcome Our Lady and her Son on the first evening of the Novena (**16th December**) with a prayer(s) of your own choosing.
  - involve every member of the family (where possible)
  - let the children say their prayer
  - the mother may say a special prayer
  - the parents can say a prayer together
  - you may want to pray the **Joyful Mysteries** (one or more decades)



## Prayer of Welcome

Mother Mary, please help us to make our home bright and full of love, all ready for your little son to be born again on Christmas night. Like you we want to make Him welcome so that He will be happy when He comes to stay here in our home.

We have our presents - nearly ready - of kind deeds, helping hands, kind words, smiling eyes, of sharing and of saving for the poor, because we know that it gives Him joy on Christmas Day to bring a smile of happiness to faces that are often sad. He wants to come not just to us, He wants to come to everyone.

Teach us, Mother, how to prepare as you did.

Amen

## Our Lady in your home

- the picture/statue starts out from e.g the living room on the **16th December** and stays there for that evening, moving to another room on the next evening and so on **until the end of the Novena on Christmas Eve;** you may have to visit the same room more than once.
- try to pray as a family, reminding yourselves of the presence of Christ and His Mother in your home.

**Our hearts must be ready to welcome the Saviour**



# Dressing the Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree has become an essential part of our Christmas decorations in our homes. Yet, who of us know the meaning of this custom? Now is the time for us to look into the matter and find the explanations for the Christmas Tree and its many varied and delightful decorations.

Christmas customs evolved from seasonal, pagan and religious practises, hedged about with legend and tradition, long outdating recorded history. In the beginning many of earth's inhabitants were Sun-worshippers and elaborate ceremonies were always held at the period of the winter solstice. In northern lands mid-December was a critical time as the days became shorter and shorter and the sun was weak and these ancient people held feasts and built great bonfires in order to give the sun-god strength and to bring him back to life again. The exact day and year of Christ's birth have never been satisfactorily settled, but in AD 440 the Fathers of the Church decided on a date to celebrate the event and wisely chose the day of the winter solstice, which was firmly fixed in the minds of the people and was already their most important festival. The pagan element of feasting is very evident in our traditional festive board, where the table groans beneath the weight of the large amounts of food and drink consumed at this time of the year.

The Christmas Tree stands for **LIFE**, with its roots in the earth and its arms reaching always for heaven. It is generally believed that the first Christmas Tree was of German origin, when, in the 8th Century Boniface, (the Apostle of Germany) replaced the sacred oak of the pagan god Odin with a fir tree adorned in tribute to the Christ Child. However, it wasn't until the 19th century that the first Christmas tree was introduced into England by Prince Albert, soon after his marriage to Queen Victoria.

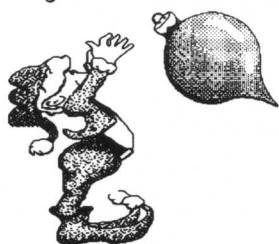
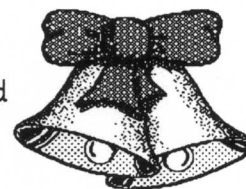
At the very top of the tree there is a shining Star. In pagan eyes the star represented man's spirit.

For us it is the true Spirit of Christmas - the light of hope shining in the darkness, for it was a Star which guided the Wise Men to the birth-place of the King of Love. High on the tree we hang, not fairies, but Angels, symbols of praise, bearers of good news, guardian spirits of all children. Above the discordant sound which fill our world today, we are reminded to listen for the echoes of the glorious music of the heavenly host which sang for joy at the Christ Child's birth.



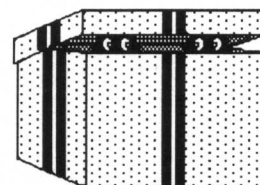


Then there are the little Bells which hang from the branches. In ancient mythology the tolling of a bell signified creative power and the shape of the bell meant safety and asylum; if the bell was suspended it symbolised a link between heaven and earth.



The baubles which add splendid colour to the tree symbolise the joy of Christmas, the fun and laughter, the friendship, love and good will.

The colourfully-wrapped gifts also find a place on the Christmas Tree. In pagan times sacrifices were made to the spirits of the dead in order to ensure a happy and prosperous year to follow.



The Wise Men brought gifts for the Christ Child on the first Christmas and as we too give presents to others the thought, and perhaps the sacrifice which goes into the choosing of those gifts is a faint reflection of God's gift of his Son to the world.



The tree is not complete without the candles. Candles represent the light which came into the world when Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Ancient mythology has it that the candle is the spirit - the flame that lights the body of man, but it is believed that it was Martin Luther who introduced the first Christmas Tree lit with candles.



Tinsel is another addition that beautifies the tree. There are many superstitions and meanings surrounding the chain or garland which this tinsel represents. It was believed that all things in the universe were linked and the garland was symbolical of the binding together in fellowship.

In Scandinavian countries garlands of grain are still hung on the trees at Christmas as a gift to the birds.

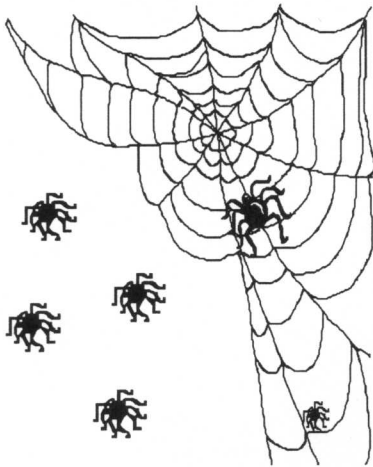


## Here is a charming fantasy about the origin of the first tinsel.

It happened that as Mary and Joseph were fleeing away into Egypt with the young child Jesus, night overtook them and seeing a cave nearby, they sought shelter inside.

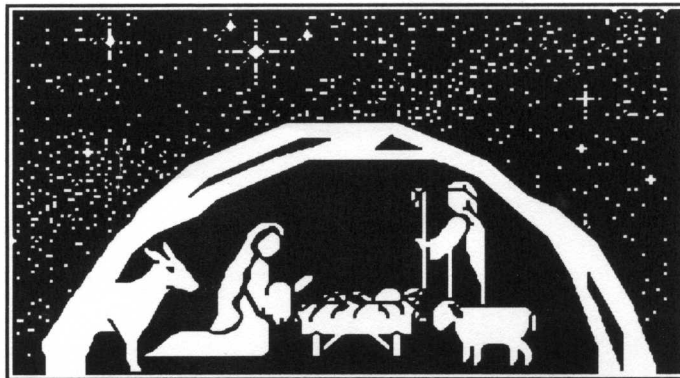
Here they passed the night in warmth and safety, but unknown to them, during the darkest hours a mass of tiny spiders began to spin a huge web right across the mouth of the cave.

Then, as it grew light some of King Herod's mounted soldiers could be seen approaching the cave and thinking this might be a likely hiding place they turned aside to search.



Suddenly their leader called a halt. "Men," he shouted, "don't waste your time. No one could have entered or left this cave without breaking that huge spider's web." And so the soldiers turned and went on their way. But now a wonderful thing happened. As the sun rose Mary and Joseph saw that the whole of the spiders' web was covered with dew which sparkled and shone in the morning light, as every strand was a beautiful silver chain of precious jewels.

May your Christmas Tree be a very special tall tree with arms outstretched to shelter you and yours in the coming year. Trim it with love, surround it with faith. May your Christmas Tree have a bright shining star at its very tip. May it shine through the darkest of days bringing hope and peace to our land and the world around, as it shone so long ago above a humble stable.



# The Orphan's Orange

by S Caroll



I lost my parents when I was still a small boy, and was sent to an orphanage near London when I was nine. It was more like a prison. We had to work fourteen hours a day - in the garden, kitchen, stables and fields. No day brought a change, and there was only a single day of rest for us in the whole year. That was Christmas day.

On that day each boy was given an orange to celebrate the birth of Christ. That was all. No sweets. No toys.

Yet even this single orange was given only to those who had not been guilty of some misdeed during the year, and who always had been obedient.

This orange at Christmas contained all the longings of a whole year.

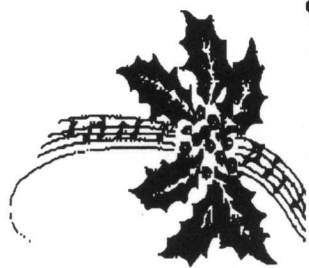


Christmas had come again, but for me it almost meant the end of the world. While the other boys filed past the orphanage head, and each received an orange from him, I had to stand in a corner of the room and look on. This was my punishment for trying to run away from the orphanage one day in summer. Once the presents had been given out, the other boys were allowed to play in the courtyard. I however, had to go to the dormitory and spend the rest of the day in bed. I was terribly ashamed and unhappy. I cried and wished I could die.

After a time I heard footsteps in the room. A hand drew back the blanket under which I tried to hide. I looked up. A small boy called William stood next to my bed holding an orange in his outstretched hand and offering it to me. I could not believe my eyes. How was it possible that an extra orange had found its way to me? I looked from William to the fruit and dimly felt that there was something special about that orange. Suddenly I realised that the orange was already peeled, and when I looked at it more closely I knew what had happened. Tears came into my eyes. As I reached out my hand to take the orange, I knew that I would have to hold it firmly to keep it from falling apart.

What had happened? Ten boys had met in the courtyard and decided that I had to have my orange for Christmas. So each had peeled his orange, taken off a section and then carefully put the ten separate sections together to form a new, beautifully round orange. This orange was the finest Christmas Present I have ever received in my whole life. It taught me what a consolation real friendship can be.





## A Joyful Christmas for All

by Ursula Berg

It was the last morning before the Christmas holidays and snow was falling heavily. When it stopped the Standard Nine pupils ran out of their classroom and soon a lively snow ball fight was in progress. Stephen sat in his wheel-chair watching his friends at their boisterous play. Last year he had been the centre of all their activities, but since his terrible accident he was paralysed and could only look at this surroundings with growing resignation. No sign of emotion showed on his face. Before the accident he had been cheerful and outgoing.



'Why did this happen to me?' he asked himself again and again, but he kept his pain, rage and despair to himself.

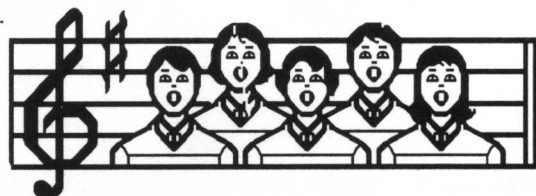


His parents, teachers and school friends had tried in vain to unlock his emotions. Stephen had become almost apathetic. The only exception was the school choir, not because he liked to sing, but because his strong clear voice carried the choir and because he was the only one who could sing the solo parts. The choir master, Mr Rupert, had told him in no uncertain terms that it would have been anti-social behaviour on his part to desert the small choir. The choir needed him urgently. How urgently Stephen needed the choir, he could not yet guess.

Every year at Christmas time there were requests from hospitals, Old Age Homes and Children's Homes to sing at their Christmas celebrations. The boys and the choir master gladly accepted these requests. They even gave up their free time on the Sundays of Advent. Stephen always belonged to them. His place was always in the front row. On this last day of school there was an urgent phone call from the Home for the Blind. A choir had agreed to sing for the blind people during their celebrations on Christmas Eve. Unfortunately so many of the choir members had been laid low with flu that the few healthy members did not feel capable to handle the celebration.

Mr Rupert thought about it for some time, then he agreed.

At 3 o'clock all the chairs in the hall of the Home for the Blind were occupied. The pupils were standing in a semi-circle with Stephen's wheelchair in the front row as usual. After a short introduction the choir began by singing 'JingleBells'. The blind people took up the rhythm and clapped enthusiastically.

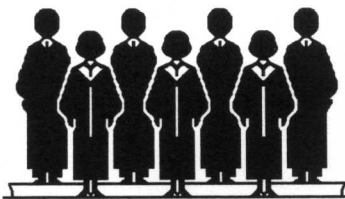


During the first short break, a bed with a ten year old girl was pushed through the middle aisle of the hall. The girl was almost sitting in her bed. 'She is not only Blind, but also paralysed,' the manager of the home whispered to the young singers. The choir members looked at Mr Rupert with concentration. Stephen was staring at the little girl as though hypnotised. She was smiling.

'The snow falls softly,' the choir sang. Stephen had eyes only for the little girl. He noticed that she turned her head at the first sounds as if she did not want to miss a single note. Suddenly Stephen pushed his wheelchair to her bed. 'Rejoice, the Christ child is coming.....' he sang with his beautiful, clear voice.

The girl turned her head in the direction of his voice. 'In all hearts sorrow and worries are silent...!' Stephen sang with a loud voice as if he did not only want to encourage the girl, but also himself.

Mr Rupert understood the situation immediately. With a movement of his hand he made the choir sing very softly. For the first time since the accident, Stephen was shedding tears. He did not know whether they were tears for the girl or for himself. Perhaps they were tears of gratitude when he understood that he was better off than this girl. The girl held Stephen's hand tightly, smiling a radiant, grateful smile. This was somebody who sang only for her, who felt with her. She did not see the boy nor his wheelchair, but she understood that this person gave her joy, and that apparently she was able to give him something in return.



A murmur went through the room. The choir members were deeply touched, but at the same time somewhat confused. They saw the change that was taking place in Stephen; they saw his tears and did not want to disturb him.

At the end of the hymn there was an eerie silence. Into this silence a lovely woman's voice started to sing: 'Thou joyful day, O thou blessed day' and the choir continued enthusiastically: 'gladsome, peaceful Christmastide. Earth's hopes awake, Christ's life hath taken,' Stephen's voice was rejoicing, and how happy he was when he heard the girl's high-pitched voice: 'Praise him, O praise him on every side.'



Much later than planned the choir left the celebration.

Their parents were waiting impatiently with their gifts at home. But on this Christmas Eve there could be no more important and more beautiful gift than the experience which they had had.

For Stephen this Christmas celebration was a very significant experience. He suddenly understood that there were people who had to suffer much more than he did, but who could pass on a smile to others in spite of it. He also understood that his voice was a treasure with which he could give others joy. He was much richer than he thought he was. From now on he would visit the girl, talk to her and sing for her. She, in turn, would give him strength to go on living with a gratitude about which he knew nothing before this special Christmas Eve.

