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Autor: [s.n.]
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A Christmas Tale

It was night over Galilee.

The stars shone bright in the clear sky and the moon was so silvery that one could count the sheep which were grazing on the gentle slopes of the hills.

Reclining on the elbows or squatting with their heads resting on their clenched fists, shepherds were listening to the thin melodies of the pipe.

Emmanuel played softly and the melancholy notes pearled away down the slopes and up the hills and past the scanty bushes away to the gold-lined horizon.

Emmanuel played and John listened.

Emmanuel was tall, and strong, and handsome. His dark tanned skin of a pleasant olive hue shone dimly under the blueish rays of the moon while his lightly inflated cheeks blew into the rustic pipe. He had curly hair, so black that it looked nearly blue.

John had laid his head on his friend's lap and he had closed his eyes. His heart throbbed wild, as it always did when he was close to Emmanuel, and lost in his dreams he wondered whether it was the pounding of his own heart he felt, or that of Emmanuel's, or the time of the nostalgic ditty which his fellow-shepherds were rhythmically beating on the sandy soil of the meadow.

John was from Nazareth and like most Nazareans he had long lithe fair hair which fell like a silky veil over his shoulders. John was still nearly a child and Emmanuel formed his whole universe, father, mother, brother and friend at the same time . . . Emmanuel was the strongest shepherd of all the hills around Bethlehem and none possessed like him the art of throwing stones with a sling.

John had often wondered before how the handsome Bethlehemite had ever noticed and taken an interest in the shepherd boy from Nazareth.

But now he had stopped wondering, for he knew . . .

He knew that Emmanuel loved him and that this love was true and strong and he tried very hard to do his best to repay his friend for a feeling he in his innocence fancied himself so unworthy of.

And on sang the pipe, and on dreamt John, enraptured and happy.

And suddenly there was like the loud shrill call from a thousand trumpets and the melody of a thousand voices and the dark veil of the sky was torn open and out streamed an innumerable sea of lights as if all the stars of the Galaxy had met there to sing a song of glory.

And the Angels of God and the Cherubim and the Seraphim intoned a triumphal canticle of love.

John opened his eyes and gazed and Emmanuel gazed and all the shepherds gazed and slowly they rose to their feet and they saw the Legions of Heaven which were gathering above the hills, chanting: «Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth Peace to Men of Good Will!»

And the shepherds joined in the heavenly chorus and marched away to the Stable that glittered far away in the valley.

And Emmanuel and John went side by side holding each other's hand.

And they were silent.

And when they came to the Stable they found a new-born Child wrapped up in swaddles and falling on their knees they adored Him.

And Mary lay there bedded in straw and Joseph was fanning her gently with a palm and the Child slept on His mother's breast. And an Angel stood there

with a sword of flame in his hand, saying: «Here is the King of Kings and the Shepherd of Shepherds and the Friend of Friends, adore Him!»

And all the shepherds and John and Emmanuel knelt and adored Him.

And then the Child turned his head away from the breast and He looked at Emmanuel and John. And John had laid his head on his friend's chest.

And the God-Child saw another John with his head laid on another Emmanuel's chest, thirty-three years later.

And he smiled.

And the Angel spoke:

«Blessed be they who love and blessed be they who suffer in their love, for theirs shall be the Kingdom.»

FRANK

AUBADE

As when they were drawn into the deep sleep of exhaustion so they still lie — in close embrace, as though even in sleep they wanted to be sure of each other's presence.

Morning light filters through the green curtains submerging the long room in glowing twilight. On the pillow two heads, face to face — one strongly chiselled, wavy-haired, the early light kindling reddish-golden sparks in the other boy's brown thatch. How vulnerable their young shoulders, one slim and deeply tanned, thick and white and strong the other pair.

It's time for the sleepers to return from timeless dreams to enter the mills of day. When I cup their heads firmly with my hands to lift them they only draw closer together. A long minute passes before they realize my presence, and the world's. «Oh, it's you,» one says. «Ach, du bist es.» says the other. But an instant later they are swallowed again by suction from the night past.

Let them have a respite! I take a long time washing, shaving, dressing. Back in the room I find them asleep again. This time my hands are cold and wet and I put them firmly on their naked shoulders. They start convulsively and come awake. Soon — growling, grumbling, swearing — they disappear into the bath.

I draw back the green curtains and let in the trumpet light of day. Last night I was the midwife of their love. Now I am the sergeant of their duty.

R. A.