

"Or her blessed frock," said Percivale. "She hasn't got one, though. Why hasn't the little angel got her feathers on yet?"

"I was in such a hurry to bring her."

"To be kissed?"

"No, not exactly. It wasn't her I was in a hurry to bring; it was myself."

"Ah! you wanted to be kissed, did you?"

"No, sir. I didn't want to be kissed; but I did so want to kiss you, Percivale."

"Isn't it all the same, though, darling?" he said. "It seems so to me."

"Sometimes, Percivale, you are so very stupid! It's not the same at all. There's a world of difference between the two; and you ought to know it, or be told it, if you don't."

"I shall think it over as soon as you leave me," he said.

"But I'm not going to leave you for a long time. I haven't seen you paint for weeks and weeks—not since this little troublesome thing came poking in between us."

"But she's not dressed yet."

"That doesn't signify. She's well wrapped up, and quite warm."

He put me a chair where I could see his picture without catching the shine of the paint. I took the baby from him, and he went on with his work.

"You don't think I'm going to sacrifice all my privileges to this little tyrant—do you?" I said.

"It would be rather hard for me, at least," he rejoined.

"You did think I was neglecting you, then, Percivale?"

"Not for a moment."

"Then you didn't miss me?"

"I did—very much."

"And you didn't grumble?"

"No."

"Do I disturb you?" I asked, after a little pause. "Can you paint just as well when I am here as when you are alone?"

"Better. I feel warmer to my work somehow."

I was satisfied, and held my peace. When I am best pleased I don't want to talk. But Percivale, perhaps not having found this out yet, looked anxiously in my face; and, as at the moment my eyes were fixed on his picture, I thought he wanted to find out whether I liked the design.

"I see it now!" I cried. "I could not make out where the Magi were."

He had taken for the scene of his picture an old farm kitchen, or yeoman's hall, with its rich brown rafters, its fire on the hearth, and its red brick floor. A tub half full of bright water stood

on one side, and the mother was bending over her baby, which, undressed for the bath, she was holding out for the admiration of the Magi. Immediately behind the mother stood, in the garb of a shepherd, my father, leaning on the ordinary shepherd's crook; my mother, like a peasant woman in her Sunday-best, with a white handkerchief crossed upon her bosom, stood beside him, and both were gazing with a chastened yet profound pleasure on the lovely child.

In front stood two boys and a girl—between the ages of five and nine—gazing each with a peculiar wondering delight on the baby. The youngest boy, with a great spotted wooden horse in his hand, was approaching to embrace the infant in such fashion as made the toy look dangerous, and the left hand of the mother was lifted with a motion of warning and defence. The little girl, the next youngest, had, in her absorption, dropped her gaudily-dressed doll at her feet, and stood sucking her thumb, her big blue eyes wide with contemplation. The eldest boy had brought his white rabbit to give the baby, but had forgotten all about it, so full was his heart of his new brother. An expression of mingled love and wonder and perplexity had already begun to dawn upon the face, but it was as yet far from finished. He stood behind the other two, peeping over their heads.

"Were you thinking of that Titian in the Louvre, with the white rabbit in it?" I asked Percivale.

"I did not think of it until after I had put in the rabbit," he replied. "And it shall remain, for it suits my purpose, and Titian would not claim all the white rabbits because of that one."

"Did you think of the black lamb in it, then, when you laid that black pussy on the hearth?"

"Black lamb?" he returned.

"Yes," I insisted, "a black lamb in the dark background—such a very black lamb, and in such a dark background that it seems you never discovered it."

"Are you sure?" he persisted.

"Absolutely certain," I replied. "I pointed it out to papa in the picture itself in the Louvre: he had not observed it before, either."

"I am very glad to know there is such a thing there. I need not answer your question, you see. It is odd enough I should have put in the black puss. Upon some grounds I might argue that my puss is better than Titian's lamb."

"What grounds—tell me?"

"If the painter wanted a contrast, a lamb, be he as black as ever paint could make him, must still be a more Christian animal than a cat as white as snow. Under what pretence could a cat be used for a Christian symbol?"

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)