

A Christmas Story

Who Shall Carry The Candle?

by Donald A. Byers

It was evident to Reverend Bertram Thomas, as he waited at the side of the tiny stage in the Church Hall, while mothers and children filled the cane-backed chairs before him, that the Christmas Concert was a social event of prime importance in Loganville.

"Even television," the pastor thought with relief, if not satisfaction, "has not the attraction of the Church's age-old custom." And he showed his approval by smiling warmly at those who had assembled for the audition.

But there was another thought that tugged incessantly at the ear of his mind, demanding to be heard. And it was an unpleasant reflection to one as sensitive as Reverend Thomas.

"Was it really the spirit of the Concert itself that created such intense interest within Loganville's population of 724 citizens? Or was it the keen competition for leading roles in his musical pageant—roles whose achievement had taken on undue importance in the minds of some of the men and women of the village—was that the true motivating factor behind it all?"

The thought persisted. And, as he scanned the pattern of faces before him, he recalled the tense atmosphere that preceded concerts of other years and asked silently for guidance. For the pastor, from thirty years devotion to every soul in the village, had a deep affection, a great feeling of responsibility for each member of his flock.

One by one the children squirmed their way to the stage. There, while the minister's wife accompanied them dutifully on the piano, they squeaked their way through the carols—all the while scowling at coting mothers or staring solemnly at the high-beamed ceiling. A few were unable to utter a sound and stood, faces blanched, transfixed by fear, until the kindly pastor led them off the stage whispering: "Now, now—don't you worry about it. Go back and sit down and watch the others. Later, we'll try again."

All the lesser roles filled, the audition now reached its most important phase—the selection of the child who would sing the final solo.

Dressed in flowing white, this child would stand alone in the centre of the stage holding a long white candle whose soft glow would be the only light in the darkened hall. The children's chorus, invisible to the audience, would sing softly in the background.

It was the greatest honor of all, for this was the climax, an exciting and dramatic one, of the entire performance.

Reverend Thomas called the name of the first contestant. And little Catherine McMurray walked quickly to the platform.

Pretty, almost doll-like, she stood confidently in centre stage, waiting for Mrs. Thomas' piano introduction. But as she opened her mouth to sing, the door at the back of the hall was noisily opened emitting a blast of icy air. Everyone turned and looked.

A chubby, ruddy-faced boy, bundled up in strange, dark clothing had burst into the room and was tugging his mother behind him.

Mrs. McMurray turned to those near her, her large, full face livid with rage. "Of all the nerve . . . to think they would dare intrude!" she said, loudly enough for all to hear.

The boy stood his ground, re-

turning her insult with mute defiance, but his mother, her face hidden within a heavy shawl, turned and hustled him towards the door.

Reverend Thomas reached them before she could turn the knob. "Please, Mrs. Krzerko, I'm sure Mrs. McMurray didn't really mean what she said. We'd all like to hear Gerald sing."

"No trouble. We make no trouble," her face was turned away. "We go now."

Mrs. Thomas, who had followed her husband to the back of the room, took the woman gently by the arm.

"You come and sit next to me until it's Gerald's turn," she said, and led mother and son toward two empty chairs near the piano.

The pastor returned to the stage, his every movement followed by the sharp, bird-like eyes of Mrs. McMurray.

"If you are ready, Catherine, we'll start right at the beginning," said the pastor's wife. And she struck the opening chord with more than usual decisiveness.

Little Catherine sang with mechanical correctness. There was no question that she was better, technically, than any of the other children. It was obvious that she had been coached with exacting care. For the concert meant more to Mrs. McMurray than to anyone else in Loganville.

They clapped when Catherine had finished and Mrs. McMurray smiled triumphantly as her daughter strutted from the platform.

Reverend Thomas asked if there were any other contestants. An awkward pause followed. None answered his request.

"Alright, Gerald," he said, "if you would come up on the stage, I'm sure we'd like to hear you."

As the lad climbed the steps a low murmur swept through the room. He stood, legs apart, looking like a sturdy little tree topped with a cloud of dark, curly hair.

He had chosen 'Silent Night' and as Mrs. Thomas played softly in the background, he began to sing.

The clear, plaintive notes were vividly familiar to everyone in that room. But none in Loganville had ever listened to singing that could match the thrilling music they listened to now. Though the words were in a language none but the boy's mother could understand, there was no mistaking the exceptional quality of the voice.

To Reverend Thomas, the boy was revealing, in song, the pent-up emotions of thousands of children in the land from whence he had come—the fears, hopes and doubts to which they could never give adequate tongue.

"He's magnificent, Milly," the pastor whispered to his wife as he leaned over the piano, "simply magnificent!"

A burst of applause followed Gerald's singing as tiny hands clapped.

ped. But it ended as quickly as it had begun . . . stilled by stern maternal glances.

To avoid further embarrassment, Reverend Thomas once again took the centre of the stage.

"I think that we have the makings of the finest concert ever," he said to them, "and I want to thank each and every one for such a splendid turn-out tonight."

"Next Friday, sharp on seven, is our first rehearsal. I want you all to be here so we may hand out the parts!"

"Now, until then, may I thank you once again."

He had raised his hand to give the Benediction when up spoke Mrs. McMurray.

"Reverend Thomas, who will carry the candle this year?"

"And the tone of her voice belied casual curiosity."

"We'll see next Friday, Mrs. McMurray, when the parts are handed out," he answered.

And for the first time Reverend Thomas realized the magnitude of the decision which he would be called upon to make.

The minister and his wife walking with Mrs. Krzerko and Gerald as far as the edge of the town.

"We'll be looking for you on Friday," said the parson when they parted. "Do come . . . and let me say that in all the years I have been pastor here, we have made it a policy to welcome everyone into our midst. Be assured—you are welcome."

As man and wife turned back along the narrow, broken sidewalk, Reverend Thomas, averting his wife's questioning gaze, looked up at the sky where low clouds seemed to drift just above the treetops. "We'll get our first snow tonight, Milly," he said.

His wife looked troubled. Her voice seemed to come from a great distance when she said:

"To be welcome . . . Bert, is that the same as being wanted?"

Next morning, Millicent Thomas dressed quickly and hurried downstairs. As she neared the closed door of her husband's study, she could hear him pacing up and down.

She hesitated, her hand on the doorknob, then turned and went directly to the kitchen.

Outside, driving snow swept across the garden covering the frost-blackened dahlias that, only short weeks ago, had been part of a beautiful patchwork quilt of color. It was a gray, December dawn.

Several times as she prepared breakfast she wanted to go to him—to ask if she could help. But she realized that the decision of whether Gerald or Catherine would sing, could be his alone.

When the table was set she went to his room and knocked quietly. "Breakfast is ready, dear," she called.

"Coming, Milly."

He joined her at the table.

"Milly, I've made up my mind," he said, unfolding his serviette with a flourish, "the Krzerko boy must sing the leading part!"

"Oh Bert, I was hoping you'd decide that I prayed you would."

"How could I have chosen otherwise . . . and have been true to the things I believe and preach?" he said. And a smile brightened his tired face.

"And the others . . ." she asked,

unable to hide her concern, "the McMurray's, I mean?"

"I'll just tell them . . ." he began. But he knew better than to try to bluff Milly—not after twenty years of marriage. He couldn't minimize a problem with which he had wrestled half the night alone in his study. Milly would know.

He got up from the table and walked to the window.

"It's not going to be easy. The people here in Loganville are not the mean sort. It's just that the concert has always been a big event for them. And Krzerkos . . . well, they're different. I guess they are the first D.P.'s—I mean New Canadians—that we've had here in that time. And the way they've kept to themselves in that cottage on Fitzgerald's farm . . . well, no one seems to know anything about them; except, of course, what you hear."

Milly's voice was in harmony with the voice of his own conscience when she said, "Bert, do you know them?"

"Of course, I visited them to extend the hand of welcome just after they arrived last year."

"And since that time?"

He turned, looked down at her and grinned like a little boy admonished by the teacher for not doing his homework.

"I'll go today—this morning, Milly, I sometimes wonder if I'm doing much of a job as a minister. I wonder if I'm really qualified."

"Come and finish your breakfast, Bertram Thomas. And take a lesson from one of your own sermons: 'The best way to follow in the Lord's footsteps is to love your fellow man and have faith in your God.'"

A confident, mature expression crept over the pastor's face. He looked steadily at Milly, smiled, then sat down again and began to eat.

In her home on the other side of Main St., Mrs. McMurray put down the telephone and walked into the living room. Her exploring eyes appraised the furniture, the patterned wallpaper and expensive drapes.

How proud she was of her home—not the largest but certainly the most expensively furnished residence in town.

She'd have to dust, she thought, before the women arrived at 3:30 for tea. And, oh yes, she must phone Frank at the store—he could pick up some things to bring home when he came for lunch. She knew exactly what she would need. Everything must be just so—as it always was when she entertained.

But especially today.

No foreign ruff-raff would spoil her plans for Catherine, she thought as she began dusting vigorously. She would have a standing in Loganville—and not have to wait long, dreary years, as her mother had, for nice things. And it would begin at the concert. Catherine's voice was so much better than any of the others Mrs. McMurray knew that. And at least you could understand what she was singing!

The other mothers would see it her way, too, this afternoon!

Reverend Thomas turned his car off the highway and churned his way up the snow-filled Fitzgerald farm lane to the small cottage that commanded the brow of a low hill.

He parked off to one side of the lane and got out.

As he approached the house he took note of a single line of footprints which led from the back door and up the lane in the direction of the Fitzgerald house.

The minister reached the door



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