

# Brother Robber



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# Brother Robber

Helene Christaller

THE HUT HUNG like a swallow's nest on the southern slope of the Apennines. Built of the same stone as the rock on which it stood, it appeared a part of nature, not a work of man. A small window opening was stopped with straw to keep out the cold wind that blew over the mountains.

The inside looked wretched, even though Brother Angelo was trying to clean and decorate the hermitage for Christmas. His brown habit was tucked up to his knees, and he was sweeping together a big pile of rubbish with a homemade broom – pieces of wood and bark, ashes and brushwood. At last the dirty red of the rough brick floor became visible, and the young Franciscan put the broom in the corner. Satisfied, he looked around the bare, gloomy room. Through the half-open door came the faint light of day, together with a moist, chilly draft.

The monk broke a dry branch into pieces and threw them into the fire burning in a crooked brick stove. He hung a rusty kettle filled with water over the flame, and, shivering, closed the door. The flickering flame of the stove gave a dim light to the room.

"It ought to be warm when the brothers come home, and festive," he murmured. Proudly he examined the rough wooden cross on the wall, which he had decorated with fresh ivy. Two white candles were fastened to the beams of the cross. They were to burn for the Christmas Eve celebra-

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tion.

The water began to boil, puffing out big clouds of steam. The fire flickered and crackled, showering the monk with sparks as he clumsily threw handfuls of meal into the pot for soup. The small room was warming up, except for the draft from the window, and for the north wind, blowing in through the chimney, filling the hut with smoke.

Brother Angelo sat down on the floor close to the fire, folded his delicate brown fingers across his thin knees, and listened for something outside. His soft, fair hair hung down to his shoulders. The well cut features with the aquiline nose and fine mouth were those of a young Knight of the Cross rather than of a brown-clad penitent monk.

Suddenly the door opened and a small, gaunt man came in, barefoot and carrying a coarse, half-filled sack on his back and a little pitcher of wine in his hand. Brother Angelo started up devotedly and relieved him of his burden.

"Come to the fire and warm yourself, Brother Francis," he said eagerly. "It is cold outside, but the soup is simmering already, and the brothers will be here soon."

The dark-haired man with the emaciated face, in which great eyes shone, looked around the little hut. "You have been quite busy, Brother Angelo. The Holy Child may well visit our hut. Would that our hearts, too, be well prepared!"

"Yes, Brother Francis." The youth's reply sounded slightly embarrassed. The older man raised his eyes in question.

The younger kept silence and bowed his head.

"You were alone this morning?"

"Not the whole time. I had a great fright. Three robbers from the mountains—they are known here, I think—came and asked me for food."

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"And you?"

"I sent them away and scolded them well for their bad ways. I told them God would damn them eternally."

"You said that and sent them away?"

"Their hands were red with blood."

"They stretched them out for help and you left them unfilled?"

"They were robbers, Brother Francis."

"They were brothers, Brother Angelo."

"Brothers? The robbers?"

Francis looked at him severely and his great eyes blazed. "Yes, the robbers," he said emphatically.

The young man blushed and did not answer.

"They wander in cold and hunger," Francis continued, "and you make yourself comfortable in the warm house. Oh, Brother Angelo, your heart is not so well prepared for Christmas as this hut is."

Tears sprang to the youth's eyes. "Be not angry with me, my brother; I will make good where I failed!"

A mild light began to glow in the monk's serious face. "If you want to make it good, take this sack of bread and the pitcher of wine, and go out into the mountain to seek the robbers. Take the food to them and ask their forgiveness for your hardness. Then return, so that we may celebrate Christmas together with pure hearts."

"And if they kill me in anger?"

Francis smiled, serene and unworried, and remained silent.

Thereupon the young man bowed his head obediently, threw the sack over his shoulder, and walked out of the house without a word of contradiction.

A thin blanket of snow covered the mountains. Mighty old

oaks stood out boldly in dark masses from the dazzling white; here and there stood a gnarled olive tree rooted in the stony soil, still with a few ripe olives on it. Snow covered the branches, and when the wind blew on them, fell to the ground with a soft rustling.

Brother Angelo kept his eyes turned to the ground looking for footprints. There were deer and fox tracks coming from the nearby forest. And there, that was a mule, with a driver who wore heavy wooden sandals. But here—these were naked feet; they went criss-cross in confusion, rather as if several people had walked one behind the other. Blood marked one of the footprints again and again.

The monk followed these footprints. They were leading into the mountains. The sun was no longer high—he must hurry if he wanted to find the robbers before nightfall. A snow flurry had started and whirled a few handfuls of white flakes into his face. Soon gaps were torn in the clouds and the sun smiled through, only to be swallowed up again by gray monsters chased by the strong wind. His brown habit whipped about him and his long fair hair tossed while he patiently battled the gale, his eyes turned to the ground, all the time taking care not to spill the wine in the pitcher.

The landscape was growing wild and desolate. He came across a ruined hut, but it was abandoned. Big boulders with caps of snow were scattered over the mountain slope. In the distant plain a dense sea of fog was swelling, hiding the church towers and pinnacles, the winding river and the houses. Not a sound penetrated to him, no ringing of bells, not a voice could be heard. Silence of death, stones, defiant rocks, ice, snow, howling storm. A flock of crows flew cawing over the wanderer's head toward the plain, disappearing in the billowing gray masses of fog.

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The monk stood still. He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked back. How long had he been walking in this wintry silence, in dull obedience, toward an adventurous goal? Just in this way had he left wealth and family upon a word of the friar who was now sending him to the robbers. His face lit up as he thought of Brother Francis. "No, not dully and lifelessly like a corpse," he cried aloud. "I go in joyful obedience on the way you send me, Brother Francis!"

With new zeal he climbed over the rocks. Here on the summit the wind had blown away the snow and blotted out the footprints. The fog was creeping up on him from the valley, dampening his hair and the hem of his robe so that it flapped heavily against his legs.

"You robbers, where are you?" he cried aloud in his perplexity. But only the echo answered and another flock of crows flew hurrying over him. Dark caves and clefts yawned in the rocks here, not a tree gave life to the wilderness, no water rushed over the stones. Everything was white and gray, the last blue patch had vanished from the sky, and the sun was hanging, pale as the disc of the moon, behind dark veils.

Suddenly a black, disheveled head appeared behind a rock, staring at the approaching friar with sinister, burning eyes. The young man's step faltered. Horror gripped his heart. He turned pale.

"Ho there," the robber shouted, rising to his feet in anger. Slowly another figure rose and threatened the frightened monk with his hairy fist. Then a third man came into view; he was standing over a small, smoldering fire, plucking a crow in order to roast it.

"It seems you want to share our Christmas treat, pious brother?" he mocked. "I can't promise you more than a leg."

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"What do you want, monk?" the first one bellowed at him, making Brother Angelo tremble. "To give us a penitential sermon as you did this morning? It's hard preaching to empty stomachs. Look out!"

"No," said Brother Angelo humbly, stepping close. He laid down the sack of bread and placed the pitcher of wine carefully on a ledge. Then he knelt in the snow and said pleadingly, "Dear robbers, forgive me for sending you away from the threshold today with such hard words. I have come now to bring you some bread and wine and to ask your forgiveness for my sin." He remained on his knees with head bowed. The wild men looked at the delicate, aristocratic figure, the youthful, sensitive face. The oldest of them turned pale, bit his lip, and stubbornly turned away. As for the second, the hot blood rose to the black tufts of hair above his brow. He covered his eyes with his hands like an ashamed child. But the third, the youngest, laughed a little, embarrassed, and said, "We'll gladly forgive you, because you are a good man. We felt very hungry today..."

"Why don't you get up?" asked the pale one.

"Stay and eat with us," said the other.

Brother Angelo stood up and shook the snow from his habit. "I cannot stay and eat with you," he said timorously. "Brother Francis expects me for Midnight Mass down at the monastery. And I must hurry, for it will soon be night. But perhaps you can visit us in the monastery some time when you are in need of something."

"And Brother Francis? Will he not scold us?"

The face of the young man lit up. "He calls you brothers."

"Brothers!" said all three as with one voice, and then kept an uneasy silence.

"Farewell, brother robbers," said Brother Angelo, extend-

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ing his delicate fingers to take their rough, stained ones. "Good-bye." Without answering a word, the three wild men stared after the youth as he disappeared rapidly from their sight. Nor did any one of them reach for the wine or bread, and each avoided the glance of his companions. Now the fog had swallowed up the figure of the young man and the desolate countryside lay silent and white. Then clear notes could be heard in the distance, sounding now like the deep ringing of bells, now like the chanting of a priest at the altar, and then again like the jubilant song of a skylark. And so the old Christmas carol was carried up to the three lost men: "Adeste fideles, laeti triumphantes, Venite, venite ad Bethlehem."

There is a legend that at a later time the three robbers came down and joined the Brotherhood of Franciscans and led a blessed life until their peaceful end.

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