

Sandu could not see, everything was black before his eyes, he was hot all over and a fire seemed to burn within him. He gnashed his teeth and stretched the skin as though he would tear it, and rinsed as though he had some rival to surpass.

At midday the apprentice came to call him to dinner. On the way he remembered what had happened and would have liked to turn back. In the ante-room he saw Ana, and his heart beat as though it were on fire. Ana, too, was radiant, her eyes laughed with joy, and the dimples in her cheeks were more tantalizing than ever. Sandu's heart was full of delight; he forgot what Costa had said; he was only conscious of Ana's voice.

After dinner the cold was not quite so cruel, the calm was not so intense, and he did not feel alone; there seemed to be plenty of life around him, but whenever he turned his head he could only see Ana. And longings awoke in his heart, and many pleasant thoughts passed through his mind, and they all gathered round Ana's form. His thoughts carried him far, and he pictured himself with a workshop and a house of his own, and Ana beside him making life sweet. They were so tempting and so full of charm that Sandu smiled to himself as he strung together tender, caressing words to say to Ana, for he felt she belonged to him, and no one could disturb the peace of these happy days.

Night closed sadly in and Sandu had long ago finished his work, but he did not want to move. He was loath to leave the pleasant, quiet spot where he had pictured to himself the path in life that was awaiting him. He gave a sigh of regret as he stepped along the bank and walked towards the house of Mistress Veta.

The nearer it drew to the Christmas festival the busier became the fairs, and the tanners raised the price of their goods because the weather was moist, and the peasants were obliged to buy sandals whether they wanted to or not.

Christmas Eve fell on a Tuesday, and, accordingly, the weekly fair had never been better.

Although Mistress Veta had such a lot to do that she had hardly time to turn round, she remained at the booth till ten o'clock, when she returned home.

The little white, crown-shaped rolls were baked and divided up, some for the house, some for the poor, and some for the guests who would expect hospitality the day after Christmas Day. When everything was finished and put ready, and Master Dinu arrived, they all went into the front room. There they lit a fire that must not be allowed to die out, that Christ, who was born on this night, might not feel the cold, and there they quietly waited till their house was visited by carol-singers and lads carrying "Stars" or "Magi." To make the joy next day more complete, they lit the Christmas Tree, and out of a cupboard Master Dinu took a little riding-horse for Gheorghitza, and for Ana a work-frame and other things suitable for a big girl. The parents were happy at the gratitude written on their children's faces.

Gradually the world seemed to wake up, the quiet in the town was dispelled. As the stars rose in the sky, there appeared in every street, girls carrying "Christmas Trees," boys with "Stars" or "Magi" or "the Manger," and young men with "carols," and amidst this busy movement, amidst this pleasant noise, amidst slow, sad songs or beautiful carols, the whole town seemed enveloped in an atmosphere of reverence; each one, forgetting the troubles of life, felt himself drawing nearer to the glory of God.

While Master Dinu was listening to the carol-singers from his windows, and taking the symbol of the Magi into his house, Sandu sat alone in the workshop over the way. He had lit an end of candle, and was sitting on a chair in front of the opening in the stove below the boiler.