

CHRISTMAS STORIES COUNTDOWN BOOK

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INTRODUCTION



My grandma made my family a book like this when I was very young. It had a story for each night from December 1st until Christmas day. The stories were focused on Christ and Christlike attributes that we try harder to emulate at this time of year, rather than Santa and the commercialized parts of Christmas that we often encounter during this season. Each night my family would gather around our Christmas tree in our pajamas and read one of these stories along with our scriptures. It is one of my favorite memories.

After I got married my mom made me a similar book of Christmas stories. I was really excited to start reading them with my own family and continue the tradition with them. The spirit of Christmas really seems to come alive as you get your focus on the reason behind our celebration—the life of Jesus Christ.

As I was nearing the Christmas season this year I wanted to share my family's tradition with others. I set out to find copies of books that had already been compiled. While there were many pre-made books that I could have easily printed and passed along I found that I had a specific idea for what I wanted to include. So, I finally decided to scour the internet to find the stories that I wanted to share. After many hours of searching, compiling, and editing stories this book is the end result.

I hope you and your family will enjoy reading these stories together. I hope they will help you to keep your focus on the Savior at this time of year. May we keep the spirit of Christ in our hearts as we go through the Christmas season and all seasons. Merry Christmas!

With Love,
-Brittney Hansen

DECEMBER 1ST - THE GIFT OF THE MAGI



by O. Henry

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling--something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation--as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value--the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends--a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Cooney Island chorus girl. But what could I do--oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two--and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again--you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice-- what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.



"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you--sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"



Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs--the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims--just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

DECEMBER 2ND - THE COBBLER AND HIS GUEST

Author Unknown

There once lived in the city of Marseilles an old shoemaker, loved and honored by his neighbors, who affectionately called him "Father Martin"

One Christmas Eve, as he sat alone in his little shop reading of the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus, and of the gifts they brought, he said to himself. "If tomorrow were the first Christmas, and if Jesus were to be born in Marseilles this night, I know what I would give Him!" He rose from his stool and took from a shelf overhead two tiny shoes of softest snow-white leather, with bright silver buckles. "I would give Him those, my finest work."



Replacing the shoes, he blew out the candle and retired to rest. Hardly had he closed his eyes, it seemed, when he heard a voice call his name..."Martin! Martin!"

Intuitively he felt a presence. Then the voice spoke again..."Martin, you have wished to see Me. Tomorrow I shall pass by your window. If you see Me, and bid Me enter, I shall be your guest at your table."

Father Martin did not sleep that night for joy. And before it was yet dawn he rose and swept and tidied up his little shop. He spread fresh sand upon the floor, and wreathed green boughs of fir along the rafters. On the spotless linen-covered table he placed a loaf of white bread, a jar of honey, and a pitcher of milk, and over the fire he hung a pot of tea. Then he took up his patient vigil at the window.

Presently he saw an old street-sweeper pass by, blowing upon his thin, gnarled hands to warm them. "Poor fellow, he must be half frozen," thought Martin. Opening the door he called out to him, "Come in, my friend, and warm, and drink a cup of hot tea." And the man gratefully accepted the invitation.

An hour passed, and Martin saw a young, miserably clothed woman carrying a baby. She paused wearily to rest in the shelter of his doorway. The heart of the old cobbler was touched. Quickly he flung open the door.

"Come in and warm while you rest," he said to her. "You do not look well," he remarked.

"I am going to the hospital. I hope they will take me in, and my baby boy," she explained. "My husband is at sea, and I am ill, without a soul."

"Poor child!" cried Father Martin. "You must eat something while you are getting warm. No, then let me give a cup of milk to the little one. Ah! What a bright, pretty fellow he is! Why, you have put no shoes on him!"

"I have no shoes for him," sighed the mother sadly. "Then he shall have this lovely pair I finished yesterday." And Father Martin took down from the shelf the soft little snow-white shoes he had admired the evening before. He slipped them on the child's feet...they fit perfectly. And shortly the poor young mother left, two shoes in her hand and tearful with gratitude.

And Father Martin resumed his post at the window. Hour after hour went by, and although many people passed his window, and many needy souls shared his hospitality, the expected Guest did not appear.

"It was only a dream," he sighed, with a heavy heart. "I did not believe; but he has not come."

Suddenly, so it seemed to his weary eyes, the room was flooded with a strange light. And to the cobbler's astonished vision there appeared before him, one by one, the poor street-sweeper, the sick mother and her child, and all the people whom he had aided during the day. And each smiled at him and said. "Have you not seen me? Did I not sit at your table?" Then they vanished.

At last, out of the silence, Father Martin heard again the gentle voice repeating the old familiar words. "Whosoever shall receive one such in My name, receiveth Me...for I was an hungered, and ye gave Me meat; I was athirst, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me in...verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me."

DECEMBER 3RD - THE LAST STRAW



By Paula McDonald
from Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul

It was another long, winter afternoon with everyone stuck in the house and the four McDonald children were at it again -- bickering, teasing, fighting over their toys. At times like these, Mother was almost ready to believe that her children didn't love each other, though she knew that wasn't really true. All brothers and sisters fight, of course, but lately her little lively bunch had been particularly horrible to each other, especially Eric and Kelly, who were just a year apart. They seemed determined to spend the whole winter making each other miserable.

"Gimme that. It's mine!"

"Is not, fatso! I had it first!"

Mother sighed as she listened to the latest argument coming from the living room. With Christmas only a month away, the McDonald house seemed sadly lacking in Christmas spirit. This was supposed to be the season of sharing and love, of warm feelings and happy hearts. A home needed more than just pretty packages or twinkling lights on the tree to fill it with the Christmas spirit. But how could any mother convince her children that being kind to each other was the most important way to get ready for Christmas.

Mother had only one idea. Years ago her grandmother had told her about an old Christmas custom that helped people discover the real meaning of Christmas. Perhaps it would work for her family. It was worth a try. Mother gathered her four little rascals together and sat them down on the stairs, smallest to tallest -- Mike, Randi, Kelly and Eric.

"How would you kids like to start a new Christmas project this year?" she asked. "It's like a game, but it can only be played by people who can keep a secret. Can everyone here do that?"

"I can!" shouted Eric, wildly waving his arm in the air.

"I can keep a secret better than he can," yelled Kelly, jumping up and waving her arm in the air, too. If this was a contest, she wanted to make sure she beat Eric.

"I can do it!" chimed in Randi, not quite sure what was happening but not wanting to be left out.

"Me too, me too, me too," squealed little Mike, bouncing up and down.

"Well then here's how the game works," Mother explained. "This year we're going to surprise Baby Jesus when he comes on Christmas eve by making him the softest bed in the world. We're going to build a little crib for him to sleep in right here in our house, and we'll fill it with straw to make it comfortable. But here's the catch: Each piece of straw we put in the manger will represent one kind thing we do for someone between now and Christmas. The more kind things we do, the more straw there will be for Baby Jesus. The secret part is -- we can't tell anyone what good things we're doing and who we're doing them for."

The children looked confused. "How will Baby Jesus know it's his bed?" asked Kelly.

"He'll know," said Mother. "He'll recognize it by the love we've put into the crib, by how soft it is."

"But who will we do the kind things for?" asked Eric.

"It's simple," said Mother. "We'll do them for each other. Once every week between now and Christmas, we'll put all of our names in this hat, mine and Daddy's too. Then we'll each draw a name and do kind things for that person for a whole week. But here's the hard part. We can't tell anyone whose name we've drawn for that week, and we'll each try to do as many favors as we can for our special person without getting caught. And for every secret good thing we do, we'll put another piece of straw in the crib."

“But what if I pick someone I don’t like?” frowned Kelly.

Mother thought about that for a minute. “Maybe you could use extra fat straws for the good things you do for that person, because they might be harder to do. But just think how much faster the fat straws will fill up our crib. Then on Christmas eve we’ll put Baby Jesus in his little bed, and he’ll sleep that night on a mattress made of love. I think he’d like that, don’t you?”

“Now, who will build the crib for us?” she asked.

Since Eric was the oldest, and the only one of the children allowed to use tools, he marched off to the basement to give it a try. For the next couple of hours loud banging and sawing noises came from the basement. Then for a long time there were no noises at all. Finally Eric climbed back up the stairs with the manger in his arms. “Here it is,” he grinned. “The best crib in the world! And I did it all myself.”

For once, everyone agreed: the little manger was the best crib in the world. One leg was an inch too short, of course, and the crib rocked a bit. But it had been built with love -- and about a hundred bent nails -- and it would certainly last a long time.

“Now we need some straw,” said Mother, and together they headed out to the car to go searching for some in the nearby fields. Surprisingly, no one fought over who was going to sit in the front seat that day as they drove around the countryside, looking for an empty field. At last they spotted a small vacant patch of land that had been covered with tall grass in summer. Now, in mid-December, the grass had dried down to yellow stalks that looked just like real straw.

Mother stopped the car and the kids scrambled out to pick handfuls of the long grass.

“That’s enough!” Mother finally laughed, when she saw that the cardboard box in the trunk was almost overflowing. “Remember, it’s only a small crib.” So home they went, where they spread the straw carefully on a tray Mother had put on the kitchen table. The empty manger was placed gently on top, and the straw hid its one short leg.

“When can we pick names!” shouted the children.

“As soon as Daddy comes home for dinner,” Mother answered.

At the supper table that night, the six names were written on separate pieces of paper, folded up and shuffled around in an old baseball hat. Then the drawing began.

Kelly picked first and immediately started to giggle. Randi reached into the hat next. Daddy glanced at his scrap of paper and smiled quietly behind his hand. Mother picked out a name, but her face never gave away a clue. Next, little Mike reached into the hat, but since he couldn’t read yet, Daddy had to whisper in his ear and tell him which name he had picked. Eric was the last to choose, and as he unfolded his piece of paper a frown crossed his face. But he stuffed the name in his pocket and said nothing. The family was ready to begin.

The week that followed was filled with surprises. It seemed the McDonald house had suddenly been invaded by an army of invisible elves, and good things were happening everywhere. Kelly would walk into her room at bedtime and find her little blue nightgown neatly laid out and her bed turned down. Someone cleaned up the sawdust under the workbench without being asked. The jelly blobs disappeared magically from the kitchen counter after lunch one day while Mother was getting the mail. And every morning, while Eric was brushing his teeth, someone crept quietly into his room and made his bed. It wasn’t made perfectly, but it was made.

“Where are my shoes?” asked Daddy one morning. No one seemed to know, but before he left for work, they were back in the closet, all shined up.

Mother noticed other changes during that week, too. The children weren’t teasing or fighting as much. An argument would start and then suddenly stop for no good reason. Even Eric and Kelly seemed to be getting



along better. In fact, all the children wore secret smiles and giggled to themselves at times.

By Sunday, everyone was anxious to pick new names again, and this time there was even more laughter and merriment during the picking process, except for Eric. Once again he unfolded his paper, looked at it, and stuffed it in his pocket without a word. Mother noticed, but said nothing.

The second week of the game brought more amazing events. The garbage was taken out without anyone being asked. Someone even did two of Kelly's hard math problems one night when she left her homework out on the table.

The little pile of straw grew higher and softer. With only two weeks left until Christmas, the children wondered if their homemade bed would be comfortable enough for Baby Jesus.

"Who will be Baby Jesus anyway?" Randi asked on the third Sunday night after they had all picked new names.

"Perhaps we can use one of the dolls," said Mother. "Why don't you and Mike be in charge of picking out the right one?"

The two younger children ran off to gather up their favorite dolls, but everyone else wanted to help pick Baby Jesus, too. Little Mike dragged his Bozo the Clown rag doll from his room and proudly handed it over, sniffing later when everyone laughed. Soon Eric's well-hugged teddy bear, Bruffles, joined the dolls filling up the couch. Barbie and Ken were there, along with Kermit the Frog, stuffed dogs and lambs, and even a cuddly monkey that Grandma and Grandpa had sent Mike one year. But none of them seemed quite right.

Only an old baby doll, who had been loved almost to pieces, looked like a possibility for their Baby Jesus. "Chatty Baby," she had once been called, before she stopped chatting forever after too many baths.

"She looks so funny now," said Randi, and it was true. Once while playing beauty shop, Kelly had cut her own blonde hair along with Chatty Baby's, giving them both a raggedy crew cut. Kelly's hair had eventually grown back, but Chatty Baby's never had. Now the wisps of blonde hair that stuck out all over the dolls head made her look a little lost and forgotten. But her eyes were still bright blue and she still had a smile on her face, even though her face was smudged here and there by the touch of many chubby little fingers.

"I think she's perfect," said Mother. "Baby Jesus probably didn't have much hair when he was born either, and I bet he'd like to be represented by a doll who's had so many hugs."

So the decision was made and the children began to make a new outfit for their Baby Jesus -- a little leather vest out of some scraps and some cloth diapers. Best of all, Baby Jesus fit perfectly into the little crib, but since it wasn't quite time for him to sleep there yet, he was laid carefully on a shelf in the hall closet to wait for Christmas eve.

Meanwhile, the pile of straw grew and grew. Every day brought new and different surprises as the secret elves stepped up their activity. The McDonald home was finally filled with Christmas spirit. Only Eric had been unusually quiet since the third week of name picking.

The final night of name picking was also the night before Christmas eve. As the family sat around the table waiting for the last set of names to be put in the hat, Mother said, "You've all done a wonderful job. There must be hundreds of straws in our crib -- maybe a thousand. You should be so pleased with the bed you've made. But remember, there's still one whole day left. We all have time to do a little more to make the bed even softer before tomorrow night. Let's try."

For the last time, the hat was passed around the table. Little Mike pulled out a name, and Daddy whispered it to him, just as he had done every week. Randi unfolded hers carefully under the table, peeked at it and hunched up her shoulders, smiling. Kelly reached into the hat and giggled happily when she saw the name. Mother and Daddy each took their turns, too, and then handed the hat with the last name to Eric. But as he unfolded the small scrap of paper and read it, his face pinched up and he suddenly seemed about to cry. Without a word, he ran from the room.

Everyone immediately jumped up from the table, but Mother stopped them. "No, stay where you are," she



said. "Let me talk to him alone first."

Just as she reached the top of the stairs, Eric's door banged open. He was trying to pull his coat on with one hand while he carried a small suitcase with the other hand.

"I have to leave," he said quietly, through his tears. "If I don't, I'll spoil Christmas for everyone!"

"But why? And where are you going?" asked Mother.

"I can sleep in my snow fort for a couple of days. I'll come home right after Christmas. I promise."

Mother started to say something about freezing and snow and no mittens or boots, but Daddy, who was now standing just behind her, put his hand on her arm and shook his head. The front door closed, and together they watched from the window as the little figure with the sadly slumped shoulders and no hat trudged across the street and sat down on a snowbank near the corner. It was very dark outside, and cold, and a few snow flurries drifted down on the small boy and his suitcase.

"But he'll freeze!" said Mother.

"Give him a few minutes alone," said Dad quietly. "Then you can talk to him."

The huddled figure was already dusted with white when Mother walked across the street 10 minutes later and sat down beside him on the snowbank.

"What is it, Eric? You've been so good these last few weeks, but I know something's been bothering you since we first started the crib. Can you tell me, honey?"

"Aw, Mom, don't you see?" he sniffed. "I tried so hard, but I can't do it anymore, and now I'm going to wreck Christmas for everyone." With that he burst into sobs and threw himself into his mother's arms.

"But I don't understand," Mother said, brushing the tears from his face. "What can't you do? And how could you possibly spoil Christmas for us?"

"Mom," the little boy said through his tears, "you just don't understand. I got Kelly's name all four weeks! And I hate Kelly! I can't do one more nice thing for her or I'll die! I tried, Mom. I really did. I sneaked in her room every night and fixed her bed. I even laid out her crummy nightgown. I emptied her wastebasket, and I did some homework for her one night when she was going to the bathroom. Mom, I even let her use my race car one day, but she smashed it right into the wall like always!"

"I tried to be nice to her, Mom. Even when she called me a stupid dummy because the crib leg was short, I didn't hit her. And every week, when we picked new names, I thought it would be over. But tonight, when I got her name again, I knew I couldn't do one more nice thing for her, Mom. I just can't! And tomorrow's Christmas eve. I'll spoil Christmas for everybody just when we're ready to put Baby Jesus in the crib. Don't you see why I had to leave?"

They sat together quietly for a few minutes, Mother's arm around the small boy's shoulders. Only an occasional sniffle and hiccup broke the silence on the snowbank.

Finally Mother began to speak softly, "Eric, I am so proud of you. Every good thing you did should count as double because it was especially hard for you to be nice to Kelly for so long. But you did all those nice things anyway, one straw at a time. You gave your love when it wasn't easy to give. Maybe that's what the spirit of Christmas is really all about. If it's too easy to give, maybe we're not really giving much of ourselves after all. The straws you added were probably the most important ones, and you should be proud of yourself."

"Now, how would you like a chance to earn a few easy straws like the rest of us? I still have the name I picked tonight in my pocket, and I haven't looked at it yet. Why don't we switch, just for the last day? It will be our secret."



“That’s not cheating?”

“It’s not cheating,” Mother smiled.

Together they dried the tears, brushed off the snow and walked back to the house.

The next day the whole family was busy cooking and straightening up the house for Christmas Day, wrapping last-minute presents and trying hard not to burst with excitement. But even with all the activity and eagerness, a flurry of new straws piled up in the crib, and by night-fall it was overflowing. At different times while passing by, each member of the family, big and small, would pause and look at the wonderful pile for a moment, then smile before going on. It was almost time for the tiny crib to be used. But was it soft enough? One straw might still make a difference.



For that very reason, just before bedtime, Mother tip-toed quietly to Kelly’s room to lay out the little blue nightgown and turn down the bed. But she stopped in the doorway, surprised. Someone had already been there. The nightgown was laid neatly across the bed and a small red race car rested next to it on the pillow.

The last straw was Eric’s after all.

DECEMBER 4TH - AN ADVENTURE WITH GRANDMA

Author Unknown

I remember my first Christmas adventure with Grandma. I was just a kid. I remember tearing across town on my bike to visit her on the day my big sister dropped the bomb: "There is no Santa Claus," she jeered. "Even dummies know that!"

My Grandma was not the gushy kind, never had been. I fled to her that day because I knew she would be straight with me. I knew Grandma always told the truth, and I knew that the truth always went down a whole lot easier when swallowed with one of her world-famous cinnamon buns. I knew they were world-famous, because Grandma said so. It had to be true.

Grandma was home, and the buns were still warm. Between bites, I told her everything. She was ready for me. "No Santa Claus!" she snorted. "Ridiculous! Don't believe it. That rumor has been going around for years, and it makes me mad, plain mad. Now, put on your coat, and let's go."

"Go? Go where, Grandma?" I asked. I hadn't even finished my second world-famous, cinnamon bun.

"Where" turned out to be Kerby's General Store, the one store in town that had a little bit of just about everything. As we walked through its doors, Grandma handed me ten dollars. That was a bundle in those days. "Take this money," she said, "and buy something for someone who needs it. I'll wait for you in the car." Then she turned and walked out of Kerby's.

I was only eight years old. I'd often gone shopping with my mother, but never had I shopped for anything all by myself. The store seemed big and crowded, full of people scrambling to finish their Christmas shopping. For a few moments I just stood there, confused, clutching that ten-dollar bill, wondering what to buy, and who on earth to buy it for.

I thought of everybody I knew: my family, my friends, my neighbors, the kids at school, the people who went to my church. I was just about thought out, when I suddenly thought of Bobby Decker. He was a kid with bad breath and messy hair, and he sat right behind me in Mrs. Pollock's grade-two class. Bobby Decker didn't have a coat. I knew that because he never went out or recess during the winter. His mother always wrote a note, telling the teacher that he had a cough, but all we kids knew that Bobby Decker didn't have a cough, and he didn't have a coat. I fingered the ten-dollar bill with growing excitement. I would buy Bobby Decker a coat!

I settled on a red corduroy one that had a hood to it. It looked real warm, and he would like that. "Is this a Christmas present for someone?" the lady behind the counter asked kindly, as I laid my ten dollars down. "Yes," I replied shyly. "It's for Bobby." The nice lady smiled at me. I didn't get any change, but she put the coat in a bag and wished me a Merry Christmas.

That evening, Grandma helped me wrap the coat in Christmas paper and ribbons (a little tag fell out of the coat, and Grandma tucked it in her Bible) and write, "To Bobby, From Santa Claus" on it -- Grandma said that Santa always insisted on secrecy. Then she drove me over to Bobby Decker's house, explaining as we went that I was now and forever officially one of Santa's helpers.

Grandma parked down the street from Bobby's house, and she and I crept noiselessly and hid in the bushes by his front walk. Then Grandma gave me a nudge. "All right, Santa Claus," she whispered, "get going."

I took a deep breath, dashed for his front door, threw the present down on his step, pounded his doorbell and flew back to the safety of the bushes and Grandma. Together we waited breathlessly in the darkness for the front door to open. Finally it did, and there stood Bobby.

Fifty years haven't dimmed the thrill of those moments spent shivering, beside my Grandma, in Bobby Decker's bushes. That night, I realized that those awful rumors about Santa Claus were just what Grandma said they were: ridiculous. Santa was alive and well, and we were on his team.

I still have the Bible, with the tag tucked inside: \$19.95.



DECEMBER 5TH - SOMEONE'S MISSING AT THE MANGER



by Elizabeth Starr Hill ---From Good Housekeeping Magazine

It was two days before Christmas, and Marcie was troubled. She sat on the floor in the glowing fan of warmth from the fire, over a dozen books stacked by her, and flipped through one until she came to a manger scene. In the picture, shepherds had come to visit the Baby Jesus. The Kings were off in the distance, but plainly on the way. Even a cow and a donkey stood nearby in the stable.

It was just as she had thought. Marcie shut the book with a snap, and picked up another. The manger scene in this one was a bit different. The Kings were kneeling in front of the Crib. A boy goatherd stood behind them. A couple of cherubs hovered over the shepherds. But, except for some animals, there was no one else.

Marcie looked through every Christmas book she owned. She found tall and short shepherds, fat and thin Kings, black sheep and white lambs. She found boys 'with crutches and crooks, and even one dressed like a choirboy.

But, in each story, someone was missing from the manger. There was no little girl. Not one.

Marcie went into the kitchen where her mother was feeding Kevin, her baby brother. "Mom, when the Baby Jesus was born, how come no little girl went to the stable to see him?"

Her mother spooned some mashed potatoes carefully into Kevin's mouth, and smiled up at Marcie. "Are you sure no one did?"

"Have you ever seen a picture of a little girl at the manger?" Marcie demanded.

"Why, I guess not," her mother answered, her hazel eyes thoughtful. "Unless you count angels. Some of them look as though they might be little girls."

Marcie shook her head emphatically. "You can't count angels. They're too--too angelic. I mean plain, ordinary girls like me."

"I never thought of it before," her mother admitted, "but you are right. It is odd."

Marcie's older brother, Tod, came bursting in, bringing a rush of cold air with him. "I'm starving," he announced, seizing an apple from a bowl on the kitchen table and crunching into it.

"I'll start lunch. Marcie, will you finish feeding Kevin? And this afternoon," her mother said, "you and I must finish up the pageant costumes."

Marcie beamed, thrilled by the reminder of how soon the pageant was. She had been looking forward to it for days and days--in fact, for a year, because she had been sick with a bad cold last Christmas, so she and her mother had stayed home from church.

The pageant was going to be tomorrow, Christmas Eve. This year, Marcie's mother had been chosen to play the Mother of Jesus. Her father was one of the Kings, and Tod was a shepherd boy. Marcie's name would be on the program, too, for helping with the costumes.

She could hardly wait to see how everybody looked. Probably the most beautiful costume of all was the Herald Angel's. It was white and so heavenly. Marcie had helped make it.

She wondered if she would ever get to be the Herald Angel. This year the part had gone to Dorothy Cooper. Dorothy was a senior. She had an irritating manner and crooked teeth, but she could play the trumpet, so she was ideal for the part. Her trumpet could lead the carol singing.

Marcie sighed. About the only thing I'd be ideal for, she thought, is a plain, ordinary little girl. But, of course, there was no role like that.

As though reading her mind, her mother said, "Tod, Marcie and I were wondering why no little girls are ever shown at the manger, in Christmas scenes. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because it's a man's world, what's why," Tod said cheerfully. He tramped away, whistling.

Furious, Marcie wanted to yell after him, "It is not! It's a girl's world."

But underneath, she had her doubts. Sometimes it seemed to her that boys had the best of everything and not just at Christmas, either. Tod could run faster than she could, skate better, climb trees higher. He was allowed to stay out after dark and to play rough games. When he tore his clothes or got them dirty, people said approvingly that he was a "real boy," but when she acted wild, she was scolded for being "unladylike."

Kevin couldn't do much, of course, but he certainly got away with a lot. No one minded that he had terrible table manners. Even now, he was dribbling his mashed potatoes. And everybody waited on him. And people thought he was so cute-adorable, they said--for no better reason than that he had red hair, only two teeth, and dimples.

In her heart, Marcie feared that she herself was reflected in the pane of the kitchen window: just a usual kind of little girl, with long brown pigtails and a freckled nose. She was in-between, nobody special.

She pushed the last of the potatoes into Kevin's reluctant mouth, washed his plate and spoon, and went back to sit by the fire. She curled up on the rug, one arm under her head, and gazed into the warm orange and yellow flames.

She imagined it was nearly two thousand years ago, and that she lived in a little town called Bethlehem, near Judea. She was the daughter of a shepherd, and one night she went out with her father to help tend the sheep.

As they watched in the dark fields, a mysterious light appeared in the sky, and grew brighter, and brighter still. Then they saw it was an angel; a real, actual angel, coming to speak to them. They were terrified. They thought it might be the end of the world. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I've come to tell you a Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord. You'll find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Then the angel pointed the way to where the Christ Child was, and a brilliant Star shone in the East to guide anyone who wanted to visit him. Marcie cried out to her shepherd father, "Oh, please, I want to see the Baby! Look, everybody's going!"

It was true; following the glorious light, the other shepherds took up their crooks and walked toward the Star, their faces full of wonder.

"Well, I don't know," her father said doubtfully. "It is His birthday and I'd like to take a present to the Child. Suppose I could take a baby lamb for Him to play with. But you, Marcie, what could you take?"

"I could make cookies," Marcie suggested. "They're always good to have, when you've got company coming. Don't forget, He may have to entertain Kings."

So she and her father hurried home. Marcie baked cookies and wrapped them in gold paper. Then they set out to join the other shepherds, and follow the star.

As they walked across the silvery, light-struck fields, a sense of miracle was upon them all. The sound of the wind was like a rush of angels, the very trees seemed to whisper with the voices and the promises of angels.

Soon the Star led them to a stable. Marcie was about to step inside when--



"Marcie! Set the table!" her mother called from not cute at all. She could see herself right now the kitchen.

She jumped at the sound of her name and the day dream faded away.

Late that afternoon, the whole family went to the last pageant rehearsal. Marcie carried Kevin, and promised to mind him and to take him home if he fussed. She waited with the baby in the church while the rest of the family went off to change into their costumes.

She looked around the church, her brown eyes wide. The altar was covered with red and green poinsettias. Pine branches with red ribbons decorated the choir stalls, and everything smelled like pine, like candles--like Christmas. For some reason she could not understand, Marcie's throat closed up, and she felt like crying.

"Nnh-nnh," Kevin complained, squirming in her lap. She just hummed Jingle Bells to soothe him and he quieted down a little.

Across the aisle, not far from where Marcie was sitting, a crèche had been set up. Marcie looked at the small wooden figures with a familiar annoyance. No little girl anywhere.

There was plenty of room for one more. And cookies might have come in very handy.

Kevin began to whimper again. Marcie wished everybody would hurry up and get their costumes on. The baby was getting fussier by the moment. "Hey, cheer up," she urged him. But he whimpered all the more and finally he began to cry.

She realized she would have to take him home. Once he got in a bad mood, he didn't come out of it too easily. She told herself: Oh, well, there's always tomorrow. Anyway, it might be better to see the pageant all at once, when it was perfect. The baby was staying with a neighbor tomorrow.

She skipped home, jogging Kevin and singing lustily, Dashing through the snow...in a one- horse open sleigh... Overhead, the first stars of evening blazed down.

Next morning, Marcie woke up early, bursting with anticipation. It was Christmas Eve. She ran to the window. The day was brilliantly clear, and all the town seemed decorated for Christmas: the giant fir tree out front glittered with its burden of snow; glowing icicles hung from every roof and sill of every house; whitened streets reflected the sun with a magical brightness.

The hours of the day seemed to fly by. There were last-minute presents to wrap, popcorn balls to make, celery and onions to be chopped for stuffing the turkey.

In the afternoon, Marcie and her mother wrapped one of Marcie's favorite dolls in swaddling clothes. The doll was to be the Baby Jesus in the pageant. Marcie felt very proud that her beloved doll was to be used. She washed the doll's face carefully after it was dressed, to be sure it looked its best.

Everyone's eyes were bright with excitement, but Marcie's more than all. She raced upstairs and changed into her red velvet dress, and tied red ribbons on her pigtails. Then she went to Kevin's crib to dress him in his snowsuit, but suddenly noticed he looked strange. He had some bumpy spots on his face, and he was unusually hot to the touch.

Alarmed, Marcie called her parents. Her mother took one look at the baby, and groaned, "Chicken pox!"

"I'm afraid so," Marcie's father agreed after a moment. Marcie remembered 'when she and Tod had chicken pox. Yes, they had looked just the way Kevin did now.

After taking Kevin's temperature, her mother phoned Mrs. Carter, the neighbor who had planned to take care of Kevin. She explained about the chicken pox, and asked if Mrs. Carter's three small children had had it. The answer was no; Mrs. Carter was awfully sorry, but of course she couldn't under the circumstances, take Kevin.

Her mother called two more neighbors to baby-sit, but without success.



"We've got to get somebody," Tod said. "We're late already. And what are they going to do if we don't show up? What good is a Christmas pageant without the Baby Jesus? And His Mother? And one King and one shepherd?"

Marcie swallowed hard. It was true that the whole pageant would be ruined without her mother and father and brother. But, she thought, there was one person who would not be missed--who, in fact, was always missing--a plain, ordinary little girl with no place at the manger.

Still, it was hard to say the words. Marcie's voice sounded husky as she volunteered, "I'll stay with Kevin."

Her mother protested, "No. I know how much you've been looking forward to the pageant. There must be something else we can do."

But they all knew that time had run out. After giving Marcie a comforting hug, her father phoned the doctor and asked if it would be all right to leave Kevin with Marcie for an hour or so. The doctor said yes; if Marcie had any trouble, she could call him up, but the best thing for the baby was sleep.

Marcie held back tears until after her family had hurried off to the pageant. But then she flung herself across her bed and sobbed. She had imagined just how it would be; her mother, so beautiful in a blue robe; her father, every inch a King in scarlet and gold; and Tod, the handsomest of the shepherds. She pictured the angels, her doll as Baby Jesus...

And she wouldn't see any of it. She was going to miss it all...

There was to be a short procession first, around the outside of the church, 'with everyone singing and Dorothy playing. Marcie Heard the music start. She ran to a window. She could not see the church, but she could hear the singing better with the window open: Silent Night, holy night...

Even from this distance, Dorothy's trumpet sounded strong and fine. So did the voices: All is calm, all is bright...Through the ache of her disappointment, the words touched Marcie's heart. It 'was a calm and bright night. She loved carols and she hummed along, as verse after beloved verse followed.

Then the trumpet took on a summoning note. The tune changed to Marcie's favorite: Oh, come, all ye faithful...

"I wanted to," Marcie whispered to herself and to the Baby Jesus. "I couldn't, that's all."

Something seemed to answer: a memory, right at the edge of her mind. At first she couldn't quite catch hold of it. Then she remembered: it was what the leader of their church had said to their mother last year when they had to stay home.

All at once she heard his words, as clearly as though he were speaking now, to her: "When you want to see the Christ Child and duty keeps you at home, wait in peace and faith for He will surely come to you.

Sing, choirs of angels...sing in exultation... the voices chorused. Church bells began to peal. The procession was nearly over.

Marcie shut the window. She could still hear the singing, and the triumphant notes of the trumpet. And, for today and for always, the words.

For suddenly she knew, in a crystal moment of understanding, why there were never any little girls at the manger. Girls were needed at home. They could not be spared.

Kevin cried faintly. Marcie hurried to his crib. And in the frosty Christmas air, the bells rang joy to all the little girls in the world.



DECEMBER 6TH - WHY THE CHIMES RANG



by Raymond McAlden

There was once in a faraway country where few people have ever traveled, a wonderful church. It stood on a high hill in the midst of a great city; and every Sunday, as well as on sacred days like Christmas, thousands of people climbed the hill to its great archways, looking like lines of ants all moving in the same direction.

When you came to the building itself, you found stone columns and dark passages, and a grand entrance leading to the main room of the church. This room was so long that one standing at the doorway could scarcely see to the other end, where the choir stood by the marble altar. In the farthest corner was the organ; and this organ was so loud, that sometimes when it played, the people for miles around would close their shutters and prepare for a great thunderstorm. Altogether, no such church as this was ever seen before, especially when it was lighted up for some festival, and crowded with people, young and old. But the strangest thing about the whole building was the wonderful chime of bells.

At one corner of the church was a great gray tower, with ivy growing over it as far up as one could see. I say as far as one could see, because the tower was quite great enough to fit the great church, and it rose so far into the sky that it was only in very fair weather that any one claimed to be able to see the top. Even then one could not be certain that it was in sight. Up, and up, and up climbed the stones and the ivy; and as the men who built the church had been dead for hundreds of years, every one had forgotten how high the tower was supposed to be.

Now all the people knew that at the top of the tower was a chime of Christmas bells. They had hung there ever since the church had been built, and were the most beautiful bells in the world. Some thought it was because a great musician had cast them and arranged them in their place; others said it was because of the great height, which reached up where the air was clearest and purest; however that might be no one who had ever heard the chimes denied that they were the sweetest in the world. Some described them as sounding like angels far up in the sky; others as sounding like strange winds singing through the trees.

But the fact was that no one had heard them for years and years. There was an old man living not far from the church who said that his mother had spoken of hearing them when she was a little girl, and he was the only one who was sure of as much as that. They were Christmas chimes, you see, and were not meant to be played by men or on common days. It was the custom on Christmas Eve for all the people to bring to the church their offerings to the Christ-Child; and when the greatest and best offering was laid on the altar there used to come sounding through the music of the choir the Christmas chimes far up in the tower. Some said that the wind rang them, and others, that they were so high that the angels could set them swinging. But for many long years they had never been heard. It was said that people had been growing less careful of their gifts for the Christ-Child, and that no offering was brought great enough to deserve the music of the chimes.

Every Christmas Eve the rich people still crowded to the altar, each one trying to bring some better gift than any other, without giving anything that he wanted for himself, and the church was crowded with those who thought that perhaps the wonderful bells might be heard again. But although the service was splendid, and the offerings plenty, only the roar of the wind could be heard, far up in the stone tower.

Now, a number of miles from the city, in a little country village, where nothing could be seen of the great church but glimpses of the tower when the weather was fine, lived a boy named Pedro, and his little brother. They knew very little about the Christmas chimes, but they had heard of the service in the church on Christmas Eve, and had a secret plan which they had often talked over when by themselves, to go to see the beautiful celebration.

"Nobody can guess, Little Brother," Pedro would say; "all the fine things there are to see and hear; and I have even heard it said that the Christ-Child sometimes comes down to bless the service. What if we could see Him?"

The day before Christmas was bitterly cold, with a few lonely snowflakes flying in the air, and a hard white crust on the ground. Sure enough Pedro and Little Brother were able to slip quietly away early in the afternoon; and although the walking was hard in the frosty air, before nightfall they had trudged so far, hand in hand, that they saw the lights of the big city just ahead of them. Indeed they were about to enter one of the great gates in the wall that surrounded it, when they saw something dark on the snow near their path, and stepped aside to look at it.



It was a poor woman, who had fallen just outside the city, too sick and tired to get in where she might have found shelter. The soft snow made of a drift a sort of pillow for her, and she would soon be so sound asleep, in the wintry air, that no one could ever waken her again. All this Pedro saw in a moment and he knelt down beside her and tried to rouse her, even tugging at her arm a little, as though he would have tried to carry her away. He turned her face toward him, so that he could rub some of the snow on it, and when he had looked at her silently a moment he stood up again, and said:

"It's no use, Little Brother. You will have to go on alone."

"Alone?" cried Little Brother. "And you not see the Christmas festival?"

"No," said Pedro, and he could not keep back a bit of a choking sound in his throat. "See this poor woman. Her face looks like the Madonna in the chapel window, and she will freeze to death if nobody cares for her. Every one has gone to the church now, but when you come back you can bring some one to help her. I will rub her to keep her from freezing, and perhaps get her to eat the bun that is left in my pocket."

"But I cannot bear to leave you, and go on alone," said Little Brother.

"Both of us need not miss the service," said Pedro. "and it had better be I than you. You can easily find your way to church; and you must see and hear everything twice, Little Brother--once for you and once for me. I am sure the Christ-Child must know how I should love to come with you and worship Him; and oh! if you get a chance, Little Brother, to slip up to the altar without getting in any one's way, take this little silver piece of mine, and lay it down for my offering, when no one is looking. Do not forget where you have left me, and forgive me for not going with you."

In this way he hurried Little Brother off to the city and winked hard to keep back the tears, as he heard the crunching footsteps sounding farther and farther away in the twilight. It was pretty hard to lose the music and splendor of the Christmas celebration that he had been planning for so long, and spend the time instead in that lonely place in the snow.

The great church was a wonderful place that night. Every one said that it had never looked so bright and beautiful before. When the organ played and the thousands of people sang, the walls shook with the sound, and little Pedro, away outside the city wall, felt the earth tremble around them.

At the close of the service came the procession with the offerings to be laid on the altar. Rich men and great men marched proudly up to lay down their gifts to the Christ-Child. Some brought wonderful jewels, some baskets of gold so heavy that they could scarcely carry them down the aisle. A great writer laid down a book that he had been making for years and years. And last of all walked the king of the country, hoping with all the rest to win for himself the chime of the Christmas bells. There went a great murmur through the church as the people saw the king take from his head the royal crown, all set with precious stones, and lay it gleaming on the altar, as his offering to the Holy Child. "Surely," every one said, "we shall hear the bells now, for nothing like this has ever happened before."

But still only the cold old wind was heard in the tower and the people shook their heads; and some of them said, as they had before, that they never really believed the story of the chimes, and doubted if they ever rang at all.

The procession was over, and the choir began the closing hymn. Suddenly the organist stopped playing; and every one looked at the old minister, who was standing by the altar, holding up his hand for silence. Not a sound could be heard from any one in the church, but as all the people strained their ears to listen, there came softly, but distinctly, swinging through the air, the sound of the chimes in the tower. So far away, and yet so clear the music seemed--so much sweeter were the notes than anything that had been heard

before, rising and falling away up there in the sky, that the people in the church sat for a moment as still as though something held each of them by the shoulders. Then they all stood up together and stared straight at the altar, to see what great gift had awakened the long silent bells.

But all that the nearest of them saw was the childish figure of Little Brother, who had crept softly down the aisle when no one was looking, and had laid Pedro's little piece of silver on the altar.



DECEMBER 7TH - THE TABLECLOTH

by Laura Wilder

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry, to reopen a church in suburban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve. They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting, etc., and on Dec 18 were ahead of schedule and just about finished.



On December 19 a terrible tempest hit the area and lasted for two days. On the 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high. The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home.

A nearby business was having a flea market type sale for charity so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored, crocheted tablecloth with exquisite work, fine colors and a Cross embroidered right in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. An older woman running from the opposite direction was trying to catch the bus. She missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus 45 minutes later. She sat in a pew and paid no attention to the pastor while he got a ladder, hangers, etc., to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. The pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area.

Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. "Pastor," she asked, "where did you get that tablecloth?" The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials, EBG were crocheted into it there. They were.

These were the initials of the woman, and she had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria. The woman could hardly believe it as the pastor told how he had just gotten the Tablecloth.

The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week. She was captured, sent to prison and never saw her husband or her home again.

The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth; but she made the pastor keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her home, that was the least he could do. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a house cleaning job.

What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve. The church was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service, the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door and many said that they would return.

One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood, continued to sit in one of the pews and stare, and the pastor wondered why he wasn't leaving. The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war and how could there be two tablecloths so much alike? He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee for her safety, and he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and put in a prison. He never saw his wife or his home again all the 35 years in between.

The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman's apartment, knocked on the door and he saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.

DECEMBER 8TH - CHRISTMAS SHOES



by John Greenleaf Whittier

It was only four days before Christmas. The spirit of the season had not yet caught up with me, even though cars packed the parking lot of our local discount store. Inside the store was worse. Shopping carts and last-minute shoppers jammed the aisles.

Buying for someone who had everything and deploring the high cost of items, I considered gift buying anything but fun. Hurriedly, I filled my shopping cart with last-minute items and proceeded to the long checkout lines. I picked the shortest, but it looked as if it would mean at least a 20 minutes wait.

In front of me were two small children - a boy of about five and a slightly younger girl. She carried a beautiful pair of shiny, gold house-slippers. As the Christmas music sounded in the store's stereo system, the small girl hummed along, off-key, but happily.

When we finally approached the checkout register, the girl carefully placed the shoes on the counter. She treated them as though they were a treasure.

The clerk rang up the bill. "That will be \$6.09," she said.

The boy laid his crumpled bills atop the stand while he searched his pockets. He finally came up with \$3.12. "I guess we'll have to put them back," he bravely announced. "We'll come back some other time, maybe tomorrow." With that statement, a soft sob broke from the little girl. "But Jesus would have loved those shoes." she cried.

"Well, we'll go home and work some more. Don't cry, we'll come back." he assured her.

Quickly I handed \$3.00 to the clerk. These children waited in line for a long time. And after all, it was Christmas.

Suddenly a pair of arms came around me and a small voice said, "Thank you lady."

"What did you mean when you said Jesus would like the shoes?" I asked. The boy answered, "Our mommy is sick and going to heaven. Daddy said she might go before Christmas to be with Jesus."

The girl spoke, "My Sunday school teacher said the streets up in heaven are shiny gold, just like these slippers. Won't my mommy be beautiful walking on those streets to match these shoes?"

My eyes flooded as I looked into her tear-streaked face. "Yes," I answered, "I'm sure she will."

Silently I thanked God for using these children to remind me of the true spirit of giving.

Somehow, not only for Christmas
But all the long year through
The joy that you give to others
Is the joy that comes back to you

DECEMBER 9TH - THE LITTLEST ANGEL



by Charles Tazewell

Once upon a time -- oh many, many years ago as time is calculated by men -- but which was only Yesterday in the Celestial Calendar of Heaven -- there was, in Paradise, a most miserable, thoroughly unhappy, and utterly dejected cherub who was known throughout Heaven as The Littlest Angel.

He was exactly four years, six months, five days, seven hours, and forty-two minutes of age when he presented himself to the venerable Gate-Keeper and waited for admittance to the Glorious Kingdom of God.

Standing defiantly, with his short brown legs wide apart, the Littlest Angel tried to pretend that he wasn't at all impressed by such Unearthly Splendor, and that he wasn't at all afraid. But his lower lip trembled, and a tear disgraced him by making a new furrow down his already tear-streaked face -- coming to a precipitous halt at the very tip end of his small freckled nose.

But that wasn't all. While the kindly Gate-Keeper was entering the name in his great Book, the Littlest Angel, having left home as usual without a handkerchief, endeavored to hide the tell-tale evident by snuffling. A most un-angelic sound which so unnerved the good Gate-Keeper that he did something he had never done before in all Eternity. He blotted the page!

From that moment on, the Heavenly Peace was never quite the same, and the Littlest Angel soon became the despair of all the Heavenly Host. His shrill, ear-splitting whistle resounded at all hours through the Golden Streets. It startled the Patriarch Prophets and disturbed their meditations. Yes, and on top of that, he inevitably and vociferously sang off-key at the singing practice of the Heavenly Choir, spoiling its ethereal effect.

And, being so small that it seemed to take him just twice as long as anyone else to get to nightly prayers, the Littlest Angel always arrived late, and always knocked everyone's wings askew as he darted into his place.

Although these flaws in behavior might have been overlooked, the general appearance of the Littlest Angel was even more disreputable than his deportment. It was first whispered among the Seraphim and Cherubim, and then said aloud among the Angels and Archangels, that he didn't even look like an angel!

And they were all quite correct. He didn't. His halo was permanently tarnished where he held onto it with one hot little chubby hand when he ran, and he was always running.

Furthermore, even when he stood very still, it never behaved as a halo should. It was always slipping down over his right eye. Over his left eye. Or else, just for pure meanness, slipping off the back of his head and rolling away down some Golden Street just so he'd have to chase after it!

Yes, and it must be here recorded that his wings were neither useful nor ornamental. All Paradise held its breath when the Littlest Angel perched himself like an unhappy fledgling sparrow on the very edge of a gilded cloud and prepared to take off. He would teeter this way--and that way--but, after much coaxing and a few false starts, he would shut both of his eyes, hold his freckled nose, count up to three hundred and three, and then hurl himself slowly into space!

However, owing to the regrettable fact that he always forgot to move his wings, the Littlest Angel always fell head over halo!

It was also reported and never denied, that whenever he was nervous, which was most of the time, he bit his wing-tips! Now, anyone can easily understand why the Littlest Angel would, sooner or later, have to be disciplined.

And so, on an Eternal Day of an Eternal Month in the Year Eternal, he was directed to present his small self

before an Angel of the Peace. The Littlest Angel combed his hair, dusted his wings and scrambled into an almost clean robe, and then, with a heavy heart, trudged his way to the place of judgment. He tried to postpone the dreaded ordeal by loitering along the Street of the Guardian Angels, pausing a few timeless moments to minutely pursue the long list of new arrivals, although all Heaven knew he couldn't read a word. And he idled more than several immortal moments to carefully examine a display of aureate harps, although everyone in the Celestial City knew he couldn't tell a crotchet from a semiquaver. But at length and at last he slowly approached a doorway which was surmounted by a pair of golden scales, signifying that Heavenly Justice was dispensed within. To the Littlest Angel's great surprise, he heard a merry voice, singing!



The Littlest Angel removed his halo and breathed upon it heavily, then polished it upon his robe, a procedure which added nothing to that garment's already untidy appearance, and then tip-toed in!

The Singer, who was known as the Understanding Angel, looked down at the small culprit, and the Littlest Angel instantly tried to make himself invisible by the ingenious process of withdrawing his head into the collar of his robe, very much like a snapping turtle.

At that, the Singer laughed, a jolly, heartwarming sound, and said, "Oh! So you're the one who's been making Heaven so unheavenly! Come here, cherub, and tell me all about it!" The Littlest Angel ventured a furtive look from beneath his robe.

First one eye. And then the other eye. Suddenly, almost before he knew it, he was perched on the lap of the Understanding Angel, and was explaining how very difficult it was for a boy who suddenly finds himself transformed into an angel. Yes, and no matter what the Archangels said, he'd only swung once. Well, twice. Oh, all right, then, he'd swung three times on the Golden Gates. But that was just for something to do!

That was the whole trouble. There wasn't anything for a small angel to do. And he was very homesick. Oh, not that Paradise wasn't beautiful! But the Earth was beautiful too! Wasn't it created by God, Himself? Why, there were trees to climb, and brooks to fish, and caves to play at pirate chief, the swimming hole, and sun, and rain, and dark, and dawn, and thick brown dust, so soft and warm beneath your feet!

The Understanding Angel smiled, and in his eyes was a long forgotten memory of another small boy long ago. Then he asked the Littlest Angel what would make him most happy in Paradise. The cherub thought for a moment, and whispered in his ear.

"There's a box. I left it under my bed back home. If only I could have that?"

The Understanding Angel nodded his head. "You shall have it," he promised. And fleet-winged Heavenly messenger was instantly dispatched to bring the box to Paradise.

And then, in all those timeless days that followed, everyone wondered at the great change in the Littlest Angel, for, among all the cherubs in God's Kingdom, he was the most happy. His conduct was above the slightest reproach. His appearance was all that the most fastidious could wish for. And on excursions to Elysian Fields, it could be said, and truly said, that he flew like an angel!

Then it came to pass that Jesus, the Son of God, was to be born of Mary, of Bethlehem, of Judea. And as the glorious tidings spread through Paradise, all the angels rejoiced and their voices were lifted to herald the Miracle of Miracles, the coming of the Christ Child.

The Angels and Archangels, the Seraphim and Cherubim, the Gate-Keeper, the Wingmaker, yes, and even the Halosmith put aside their usual tasks to prepare their gifts for the Blessed Infant. All but the Littlest Angel. He sat himself down on the topmost step of the Golden Stairs and anxiously waited for inspiration. What could he give that would be most acceptable to the Son of God? At one time, he dreamed of composing a lyric hymn of adoration. But the Littlest Angel was woefully wanting in musical talent.

Then he grew tremendously excited over writing a prayer! A prayer that would live forever in the hearts of men, because it would be the first prayer ever to be heard by the Christ Child.

But the Littlest Angel was lamentably lacking in the literate skill. "What, oh what, could a small angel give that would please the Holy Infant?"

The time of the Miracle was very close at hand when the Littlest Angel at last decided on his gift. Then, on that Day of Days, he proudly brought it from its hiding place behind a cloud, and humbly, with downcast eyes, placed it before the Throne of God. It was only a small, rough, unsightly box, but inside were all those wonderful things that even a Child of God would treasure!



A small, rough, unsightly box, lying among all those other glorious gifts from all the angels of Paradise! Gifts of such rare and radiant splendor and breathless beauty that Heaven and all the Universe were lighted by the mere reflection of their glory!

And when the Littlest Angel saw this, he suddenly knew that his gift to God's Child was irreverent, and he devoutly wished he might reclaim his shabby gift. It was ugly. It was worthless. If only he could hide it away from the sight of God before it was even noticed!

But it was too late! The Hand of God moved slowly over all that bright array of shining gifts, then paused, then dropped, then came to rest on the lowly gift of the Littlest Angel!

The Littlest Angel trembled as the box was opened, and there, before the Eyes of God and all His Heavenly Host, was what he offered to the Christ Child.

And what was his gift to the Blessed Infant? Well, there was a butterfly with golden wings, captured one bright summer day on the high hills above Jerusalem, and a sky blue egg from a bird's nest in the olive tree that stood to shade his mother's kitchen door. yes, and two white stones, found on a muddy river bank, where he and his friends had played like small brown beavers, and, at the bottom of the box, a limp, tooth-marked leather strap, once worn as a collar by his mongrel dog, who had died as he had lived, in absolute love and infinite devotion.

The Littlest Angel wept hot, bitter tears, for now he knew that instead of honoring the Son of God, he had been most blasphemous.

Why had he ever thought the box was so wonderful?

Why had he dreamed that such utterly useless things would be loved by the Blessed Infant?

In frantic terror, he turned to run and hide from the Divine Wrath of the Heavenly Father, but he stumbled and fell, and with a horrified wail and clatter of halo, rolled into a ball of consummate misery to the very foot of the Heavenly Throne!

There was an ominous and dreadful silence in the Celestial City, a silence complete and undisturbed save for the heartbroken sobbing of the Littlest Angel.

Then suddenly, the Voice of God, like Divine Music, rose and swelled through Paradise!

And the Voice of God spoke, saying, "Of all the gifts of all the angels, I find that this small box pleases Me most. Its contents are of the Earth and of men, and My Son is born to be King of both. These are the things My Son, too, will know and love and cherish and then, regretfully, will leave behind Him when His task is done. I accept this gift in the Name of the Child, Jesus, born of Mary this night in Bethlehem."

There was a breathless pause, and then the rough, unsightly box of the Littlest Angel began to glow with a bright, unearthly light, then the light became a lustrous flame, and the flame became a radiant brilliance that blinded the eyes of all the angels!

None but the Littlest Angel saw it rise from its place before the Throne of God. And he, and only he, watched it arch the firmament to stand and shed its clear, white, beckoning light over a Stable where a Child was Born.

There it shone on that Night of Miracles, and its light was reflected down the centuries deep in the heart of all mankind. Yet, earthly eyes, blinded, too, by its splendor, could never know that the lowly gift of the Littlest Angel was what all men would call forever "The Shining Star of Bethlehem!"

DECEMBER 10TH - THAT THINE ALMS MAY BE IN SECRET



by George Durrant

That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

--Matthew 6:4

Most folks in Steelville were just a little bit afraid of Big Sam Edwards. Sam had lost his job when the steel plant had cut back, and he hadn't been able to find work during the past six months. He was a proud man; and now, with Christmas coming, he made a few telephone calls to important people telling them that he didn't want any "do-gooders" trying to help his family at Christmas. He gruffly warned, "I'll be staying up on Christmas Eve, and if anybody comes around trying to leave anything at the door, somebody's going to get hurt."

On Christmas Eve, when his wife, Kathryn, and his children had gone to their beds, Sam sat in his small front room with a shotgun draped across his lap. He became so weary that around two o'clock he fell asleep.

The next morning when he awoke, there in front of him he saw a whole pile of toys, a large ham, a small Christmas tree, and an open Bible. For a few seconds, he felt a surge of joy. But then he became angry. To himself he muttered, "I warned them, and somebody will pay for poking their nose into my business." Just then the children came into the room. Seeing the toys, they shouted, "Look, Daddy! See what Santa left us!"

Sam jumped from his chair and quickly stepped between the children and the toys. "Don't touch those things!" he shouted. "This is not our stuff, and somebody is going to pay for sneaking in here and leaving it. That's breaking and entering, and I'm not going to put up with it."

Sam went quickly to the telephone and called his long-time friend Sheriff Walt Durrant. After several rings the sleepy sheriff picked up the phone. Sam blurted out, "Sheriff, you get over here. Somebody broke into my house. I want them arrested." He hung up.

Sam looked over to the corner of the room where his children were standing in a huddle, gazing longingly at the pile of toys. "You kids get back to bed," he said. They didn't move, but fixed yearning eyes on their mother, who stood behind them. She didn't know what to do. During the past few discouraging months, she had more or less given up on helping Sam. If she voiced her thoughts, it always started an argument.

Sam sternly repeated, "I said get back to bed. It's too early for you kids to be up anyway."

The children reluctantly retreated. Kathryn went into the kitchen and started cooking some oatmeal. Breakfast might be the best meal they were going to have that day.

Thirty-five minutes later, Sheriff Walt Durrant knocked on the door. "Come in!" Sam shouted. The sheriff opened the door and said cheerfully, "Merry Christmas." Sam's only reply was a look of disgust.

"Now, what's happened here?" asked the sheriff.

"Somebody broke in last night and left all of this stuff on the floor, and I want them arrested."

"Well, Sam, that looks like pretty good stuff to me. Did they take anything?"

"No, they didn't take nothing, but I'm fed up with all of the do-gooders in this town. I can take care of myself and my family. I don't need help from nobody. Besides, didn't I tell you to keep those meddlers away from here?"

"Were you gone away last night when they did it?"

"No, I was sitting right there in that chair."

"Well, Sam, you know nobody could have come in here without making a big racket."

Sam, more angry than ever, replied, "They might have made a big racket, but I guess I slept right through it."

"I guess you did," the sheriff drawled. "Funny thing is, when I drove down your lane from the road, I could see that nobody else had been down here since the big snow last night."

"Well, somebody drove or walked in here. Now you find out who it was."

"I told you, there's not a track out there. The snow quit falling last night around nine, and nobody has been in here since then."

"Sheriff, there must be some tracks out there."

"Go see for yourself, if you think you're so smart. See if you can see where anybody came in here."

"I'll show you," said Sam. "I don't know why we pay taxes for a blind sheriff like you anyway."

Together the two men went outside. Sam wandered down the lane searching for some tracks other than those left by the sheriff, but there were none.

He returned to where the sheriff stood. "Let's go around the house," he said. "There will be some tracks out back."

Together they circled the house, but all around it the snow was as smooth as a calm lake. Not a mark on it.

Sam, more irritated than ever, shouted, "Somebody's raked over the tracks."

"Nonsense," said the sheriff, "nobody has been here. I don't know where that stuff came from, but I know this--nobody brought it here."

Sam didn't know what else to say or do. The sheriff spoke as kindly as he could. "Look, Sam, I've got Christmas waiting at home. Why don't you just take the stuff and enjoy it. Forget where it came from. Just be grateful."

Sam's voice was choked with emotion as he replied. "Sheriff, I'm not grateful for nothing, except the stuff I provide for my own family."

The sheriff replied, "I know, Sam. But you'll get work soon. Things will get better." He drove away.

Completely mystified by what had happened, Sam came back into the house and sat in his chair. Kathryn spoke softly. "Sam, what does it matter how it got here? It's here."

Sam's only reply was, "I just can't figure out how somebody came here without leaving no tracks."

Little four-year-old Katie, who was standing nearby with the other children, excitedly said, "Daddy, maybe there's some tracks on top of the house."

"I don't think so, honey," Sam replied gently.

Then it hit him like a light. Some troublemaker had actually rented a helicopter and landed on his roof!

A few minutes later Sam propped his old wooden ladder against the side of the house, and to the amazement of Kathryn and the children he almost ran to the top. Up there he looked carefully around. "Nothing," he muttered. Little Katie called up to him, "Are there any reindeer tracks?"



Sam paused and looked down at her and the other children. Then he winked at Kathryn and said with a chuckle, "Yeah, I think I can see some reindeer tracks over by the chimney."

Suddenly Sam had a feeling that he had not had in years. He shouted out, "Well, what are you kids waiting for? Those toys are for you, you know!"

Soon the ham was cooking in the oven. The children were playing with their toys. The miniature Christmas tree was on the table. Unnoticed by his family, Sam picked up the open Bible. A verse was underlined. He softly read: "That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly." Never before or since has more joy been packed into one little house or into one father's heart than there was at that moment.



From then on and through the years everybody in town knew that Sam had changed. During the next thirty-six years almost everyone had been touched by one of Sam's kindnesses. He'd done everything from helping Arnold Conder build a house to being the chief cook at the annual old folks' dinner. On his sixty-eighth birthday he was honored as the city's most generous citizen. Sheriff Durrant, his closest friend, was appointed to present him the plaque.

Sam wasn't much of a public speaker. As he accepted the award, he awkwardly said, "I don't do no more stuff for others than anybody else around this here town. I just wish I could do like Jesus said in the Bible. I wished I could do something good and do it in secret so nobody would ever know."

As the years went by, in almost every conversation he had with Sheriff Durrant he would say, "You remember, don't you, Sheriff--that Christmas when there was no tracks nowhere? If I could do something good for someone and leave no tracks, that would be the merriest Christmas of all for me." The sheriff would smile and say, "Maybe someday, Sam."

All in the community mourned when Sam's wife died. By now the children were all grown up and married, and had moved to larger cities to get work. They and their children visited Sam as often as they could, but most of the time he was alone.

Now it was once again Christmas Eve. Tomorrow Sam's house would be filled with his children, his grandchildren, and even his two-week-old great-grandson. It was a family tradition for all the family to come home on Christmas afternoon. But tonight he was alone. He would have gone to visit some friends but his eyesight was such that he could no longer drive, and his arthritis made walking a lot less than pleasurable.

At about five o'clock the Gentrys had come over to sing Sam a Christmas carol. They were a young family who during the past summer had moved into the old Conder home across the hayfield from Sam. Their two young children, five-year-old Lexie and three-year-old Ben, had taken a special liking to Sam, and he to them. The family made it a point to give Sam a ride to church every Sunday. The children loved him to tell them stories about when he was little. They and their mom, Marinda Gentry, came to visit him often.

This Christmas Eve tears moistened his cheeks as first Lexie and then Ben hugged him and said, "We love you, Grandpa Sam. Merry Christmas." Just before they left to go home he gave Lexie a doll and Ben a ball. He had wanted to make each of them something, but his hands were not now his servants as they had once been. Sam watched them through his front window as the little family departed down his driveway toward the country road that led the one block to their home. A heavy snowfall had begun.

Sam, who had difficulty in sleeping anyway, had decided to stay up late this night. As he prepared for bed he looked out of the window and saw that the gentle snow had covered all of the fields in the country neighborhood with a soft smooth whiteness. The snow by then had stopped falling. The winter scene reminded him of that mysterious "trackless" night so long ago. As he let his mind wander in a multitude of memories, he was suddenly jolted back to reality. Looking out across the field toward the Gentry house he saw an orange glow. To his horror he realized that the Gentrys' house was on fire. Hurrying from his chair he scooped up a jacket on his way to the back door. He quickly climbed the wire fence that separated his house from the hayfield. His pains forgotten in his fears for his friends' safety, he hurried toward the burning house. There he found a group of people standing together near the mailbox. The firetruck had just arrived, and the hurrying men were unrolling hoses and exchanging shouted instructions.

No one saw Sam approach, all eyes being on the leaping flames. Mrs. Gentry was screaming, "Bennie is still in there!" The boy's father shouted, "I'll try again!" but two men grabbed him and shouted, "You can't go back! It's no use!" Unnoticed by anyone, Sam ran around and entered through the back door. He couldn't

see because of the thick smoke but that didn't matter because he knew the layout of the house, since he had helped build it. Flames were everywhere. He could feel the heat biting against him. The smoke choked his lungs. Suddenly he heard a faint cough. He blindly made his way toward the sound and found little Bennie lying on the floor. He scooped the crying child up in his arms and, running through the flames, made his way to the back door. Once outside he held the boy close to his body and looked heavenward. After coughing violently for several seconds the child began to cry. He placed little Bennie down on the snow and told him to go out front to the mailbox to his mother.



Now for the first time Sam could feel the pain. His lungs seemed to be on fire and his skin felt as though he had been immersed in boiling water. He wanted to be home. Home was where he wanted to die. Without consciously knowing what he was doing, Sam, as if carried by the angels, crossed the snow-covered field, climbed the fence, and staggered into his home.

A fireman found Bennie crying and making his way through the snow. Soon the little boy was in the arms of his mother, who embraced him as she wept with love and gratitude. As she held him, Bennie repeated over and over, "Sam, Sam, Sam." Overwhelmed with emotion, the parents didn't register this, but someone else did. The former Sheriff Durrant, now too old to be a regular lawman, but always a volunteer, stood up straight, and a look of wonder crossed his face. "Sam," he said softly to himself, and he walked back a few yards so that he could see across the field. Just as he did, he saw the light go on in Sam's bedroom window.

The sheriff walked back to where he could watch as Doctor Jones looked at the boy. After just a minute the doctor said: "He looks fine, other than his curly hair is mostly gone. But why don't you drive down to the hospital, and I'll come down and we'll have a good look. Then we'll find a good place for you to stay until the house can be rebuilt."

The sheriff tapped the doctor on the shoulder and said, "You rode out on the firetruck. Why don't you let me give you a lift down to the hospital." As the old sheriff and the doctor pulled out of the Gentry lane, the sheriff said, "Let's just stop in and wish old Sam a Merry Christmas. It will only take a minute." The doctor replied, "He'd be sleeping, wouldn't he?" "No, I don't think so," the sheriff replied. "I think he stays too busy to sleep much."

As they pulled down Sam's lane, the sheriff said softly, "No tracks in or out."

"What's that?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, nothing."

The deep new snow on the doorstep was undisturbed. The two men knocked, but there was no response. The door was not locked. The sheriff pushed it open and entered. The doctor said, "Let's go, he's asleep. Let's not wake him."

"Sam," shouted the sheriff, as he moved further into the house. "Let's look back here," he said, as he walked toward the bedroom.

A few seconds later they switched on the light and found Sam lying fully dressed on his bed. He didn't stir as the sheriff said, "Sam! Sam! are you okay?" At the same time, the doctor took Sam's limp wrist in his hand. There was a faint pulse. He put his hand on Sam's forehead. "He looks flushed," he said softly. "Feels like he has the flu that's all over town. He's burning up with fever."

The sheriff moved closer and said, "I can smell smoke, can't you, Doc?"

"Yeah, it must be on our clothes," replied the doctor.

The sheriff spoke again, "Sam, can you hear me?" There was no response. "Sam, have you been over to the Gentrys?"

"What are you talking about, Sheriff?" the doctor asked. "This man's one of my patients. He can hardly walk."

The sheriff leaned down so his face was only a foot away from his old friend and asked, "Sam, did you go to the Gentrys?"

"What's wrong with you, Sheriff? I told you he can't walk much, and he's sick, and besides, when we drove in here I noticed that there wasn't a single track out there in the snow."

An almost indistinguishable smile crossed Sam's face. A smile that only someone like the old sheriff could have seen. Then his head fell to the side. Sam Edwards had died. The doctor placed his fingers around Sam's wrist, and after a few seconds he said: "He's gone. The flu didn't do it on its own. My best guess is his old ticker just plain gave out on him."

"Maybe too much strain?" the sheriff asked.

"No, just too much age," the doctor replied.

Near two in the morning, the sheriff had the Gentrys settled in at the local motel. Warren Anderson from the mortuary had come an hour earlier and had taken Sam's body away. Now the sheriff came back to Sam's house. There was something he felt he had to know.

Sheriff Durrant parked his car just in front of the dark and quiet house. In his heart he felt certain that in some miraculous way Sam had gone to the burning house. Soon he would know. Were there tracks out back and across the field? Had Sam saved the boy and brought the greatest joy a family could ever know?

As the old sheriff's boots crunched into the cold snow, he felt for a moment he could hear the angels singing. He paused and looked up at the stars.

He spoke softly as he looked up. "Oh, heck, Sam! You and I both know there ain't no tracks out there. Besides, I need to be home. It's Christmas."

As the sheriff opened his car door, he looked back at Sam's house. He'd miss his old friend. A tear ran down his cheek, and he felt he heard Sam's voice saying, "I finally did it, Sheriff. Merry Christmas."

Already there was a rumor in town that the life of a little child had been saved by a miracle. Sheriff Durrant felt satisfied with that.



DECEMBER 11TH - ANGEL ON A DOORSTEP



by Shirley Bachelder - originally published in the Reader's Digest

When Ben delivered milk to my cousin's home that morning, he wasn't his usual sunny self. The slight, middle-aged man seemed in no mood for talking.

It was late November 1962, and as a newcomer to Lawndale, Calif., I was delighted that milkmen still brought bottles of milk to doorsteps. In the weeks that my husband, kids and I had been staying with my cousin while house-hunting, I had come to enjoy Ben's jovial repartee.

Today, however, he was the epitome of gloom as he dropped off his wares from his wire carrier. It took slow, careful questioning to extract the story from him. With some embarrassment, he told me two customers had left town without paying their bills, and he would have to cover the losses. One of the debtors owed only \$10, but the other was \$79 in arrears and had left no forwarding address. Ben was distraught at his stupidity for allowing this bill to grow so large.

"She was a pretty woman," he said, "with six children and another on the way. She was always saying, 'I'm going to pay you soon, when my husband gets a second job.' I believed her. What a fool I was! I thought I was doing a good thing, but I've learned my lesson. I've been had!"

All I could say was, "I'm so sorry."

The next time I saw him, his anger seemed worse. He bristled as he talked about the messy young ones who had drunk up all his milk. The charming family had turned into a parcel of brats.

I repeated my condolences and let the matter rest. But when Ben left, I found myself caught up in his problem and longed to help. Worried that this incident would sour a warm person, I mulled over what to do. Then, remembering that Christmas was coming, I thought of what my grandmother used to say: "When someone has taken from you, give it to them, and then you can never be robbed."

The next time Ben delivered milk, I told him I had a way to make him feel better about the \$79.

"Nothing will do that," he said, "but tell me anyway."

"Give the woman the milk. Make it a Christmas present to the kids who needed it."

"Are you kidding?" he replied. "I don't even get my wife a Christmas gift that expensive."

"You know the Bible says, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' You just took her in with all her little children."

"Don't you mean she took me in? The trouble with you is, it wasn't your \$79."

I let the subject drop, but I still believed in my suggestion. We'd joke about it when he'd come. "Have you given her the milk yet?" I'd say.

"No," he'd snap back, "but I'm thinking of giving my wife a \$79 present, unless another pretty mother starts playing on my sympathies."

Every time I'd ask the question, it seemed he lightened up a bit more.

Then, six days before Christmas, it happened. He arrived with a tremendous smile and a glint in his eyes. "I did it!" he said. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present. It wasn't easy, but what did I have to lose? It was gone, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said, rejoicing with him. "But you've got to really mean it in your heart."

"I know. I do. And I really feel better. That's why I have this good feeling about Christmas. Those kids had lots of milk on their cereal just because of me."

The holidays came and went. On a sunny January morning two weeks later, Ben almost ran up the walk. "Wait till you hear this," he said, grinning.

He explained he had been on a different route, covering for another milkman. He heard his name being called, looked over his shoulder and saw a woman running down the street, waving money. He recognized her immediately -- the woman with all the kids, the one who didn't pay her bill. She was carrying an infant in a tiny blanket, and the woman's long brown hair kept getting in her eyes.

"Ben, wait a minute!" she shouted. "I've got money for you."

Ben stopped the truck and got out.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I really have been meaning to pay you." She explained that her husband had come home one night and announced he'd found a cheaper apartment. He'd also gotten a night job. With all that had happened, she'd forgotten to leave a forwarding address. "But I've been saving," she said. "Here's \$20 toward the bill."

"That's all right," Ben replied. "It's been paid."

"Paid!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Who paid it?"

"I did."

She looked at him as if he were the Angel Gabriel and started to cry.

"Well," I asked, "what did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do, so I put an arm around her. Before I knew what was happening, I started to cry, and I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was crying about. Then I thought of all those kids having milk on their cereal, and you know what? I was really glad you talked me into this."

"You didn't take the \$20?"

"Heck no," he replied indignantly. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present, didn't I?"



DECEMBER 12TH - IN THE GREAT WALLED COUNTRY



by Raymond Macdonald Alden

Away at the northern end of the world, farther than men have ever gone with their ships or their sleds, and where most people suppose that there is nothing but ice and snow, is a land full of children, called The Great Walled Country. This name is given because all around the country is a great wall, hundreds of feet thick and hundreds of feet high. It is made of ice, and never melts, winter or summer; and of course it is for this reason that more people have not discovered the place.

The land, as I said, is filled with children, for nobody who lives there ever grows up. The king and the queen, the princes and the courtiers, may be as old as you please, but they are children for all that. They play a great deal of the time with dolls and tin soldiers, and every night at seven o'clock have a bowl of bread and milk and go to bed. But they make excellent rulers, and the other children are well pleased with the government.

There are all sorts of curious things about the way they live in The Great Walled Country, but this story is only of their Christmas season. One can imagine what a fine thing their Christmas must be, so near the North Pole, with ice and snow everywhere; but this is not all. Grandfather Christmas lives just on the north side of the country, so that his house leans against the great wall and would tip over if it were not for its support. Grandfather Christmas is his name in The Great Walled Country; no doubt we should call him Santa Claus here. At any rate, he is the same person, and, best of all the children in the world, he loves the children behind the great wall of ice.

One very pleasant thing about having Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor is that in The Great Walled Country they never have to buy their Christmas presents. Every year, on the day before Christmas, before he makes up his bundles for the rest of the world, Grandfather Christmas goes into a great forest of Christmas trees, that grows just back of the palace of the king of The Great Walled Country, and fills the trees with candy and books and toys and all sorts of good things. So when night comes, all the children wrap up snugly, while the children in all other lands are waiting in their beds, and go to the forest to gather gifts for their friends. Each one goes by himself, so that none of his friends can see what he has gathered; and no one ever thinks of such a thing as taking a present for himself. The forest is so big that there is room for every one to wander about without meeting the people from whom he has secrets, and there are always enough nice things to go around.

So Christmas time is a great holiday in that land, as it is in all the best places in the world. They have been celebrating it in this way for hundreds of years, and since Grandfather Christmas does not seem to grow old any faster than the children, they will probably do so for hundreds of years to come.

But there was once a time, so many years ago that they would have forgotten all about it if the story were not written in their Big Book and read to them every year, when the children in The Great Walled Country had a very strange Christmas. There came a visitor to the land. He was an old man, and was the first stranger for very many years that had succeeded in getting over the wall. He looked so wise, and was so much interested in what he saw and heard, that the king invited him to the palace, and he was treated with every possible honor.

When this old man had inquired about their Christmas celebration, and was told how they carried it on every year, he listened gravely, and then, looking wiser than ever, he said to the king:

"That is all very well, but I should think that children who have Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor could find a better and easier way. You tell me that you all go out on Christmas Eve to gather presents to give to one another the next morning. Why take so much trouble, and act in such a round-about way? Why not go out together, and every one get his own presents? That would save the trouble of dividing them again, and every one would be better satisfied, for he could pick out just what he wanted for himself. No one can tell what you want as well as you can.

This seemed to the king a very wise saying, and he called all his courtiers and counselors about him to hear it. The wise stranger talked further about his plan, and when he had finished they all agreed that they had been very foolish never to have thought of this simple way of getting their Christmas gifts.

"If we do this," they said, "no one can ever complain of what he has, or wish that some one had taken more pains to find what he wanted. We will make a proclamation, and always after this follow the new plan."

So the proclamation was made, and the plan seemed as wise to the children of the country as it had to the king and the counselors. Every one had at some time been a little disappointed with his Christmas gifts; now there would be no danger of that.

On Christmas Eve they always had a meeting at the palace, and sang carols until the time for going to the forest. When the clock struck ten every one said, "I wish you a Merry Christmas!" to the person nearest him, and then they separated to go their ways to the forest. On this particular night it seemed to the king that the music was not quite so merry as usual, and that when the children spoke to one another their eyes did not shine as gladly as he had noticed them in other years; but there could be no good reason for this, since every one was expecting a better time than usual. So he thought no more of it.

There was only one person at the palace that night who was not pleased with the new proclamation about the Christmas gifts. This was a little boy named Inge, who lived not far from the palace with his sister. Now his sister was a cripple, and had to sit all day looking out of the window from her chair; and Inge took care of her, and tried to make her life happy from morning till night. He had always gone to the forest on Christmas Eve and returned with his arms and pockets loaded with pretty things for his sister, which would keep her amused all the coming year. And although she was not able to go after presents for her brother, he did not mind that at all, especially as he had other friends who never forgot to divide their good things with him.

But now, said Inge to himself, what would his sister do? For the king had ordered that no one should gather any presents except for himself, or any more than he could carry away at once. All of Inge's friends were busy planning what they would pick for themselves, but the poor crippled child could not go a step toward the forest. After thinking about it a long time, Inge decided that it would not be wrong if, instead of taking gifts for himself, he took them altogether for his sister. This he would be very glad to do; for what did a boy who could run about and play in the snow care for presents, compared with a little girl who could only sit still and watch others having a good time? Inge did not ask the advice of any one, for he was a little afraid others would tell him he must not do it; but he silently made up his mind not to obey the proclamation.

And now the chimes had struck ten, and the children were making their way toward the forest, in starlight that was so bright that it almost showed their shadows on the sparkling snow. As soon as they came to the edge of the forest, they separated, each one going by himself in the old way, though now there was really no reason why they should have secrets from one another.

Ten minutes later, if you had been in the forest, you might have seen the children standing in dismay with tears on their faces, and exclaiming that there had never been such a Christmas Eve before. For as they looked eagerly about them to the low-bending branches of the evergreen trees, they saw nothing hanging from them that could not be seen every day in the year. High and low they searched, wandering farther into the forest than ever before, lest Grandfather Christmas might have chosen a new place this year for hanging his presents; but still no presents appeared. The king called his counselors about him, and asked them if they knew whether anything of this kind had happened before, but they could tell him nothing. So no one could guess whether Grandfather Christmas had forgotten them, or whether some dreadful accident had kept him away.

As the children were trooping out of the forest, after hours of weary searching, some of them came upon little Inge, who carried over his shoulder a bag that seemed to be full to overflowing. When he saw them looking at him, he cried:

"Are they not beautiful things? I think Grandfather Christmas was never so good to us before."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried the children. "There are no presents in the forest."



"No presents!" said Inge. "I have my bag full of them." But he did not offer to show them, because he did not want the children to see that they were all for his little sister instead of for himself.

Then the children begged him to tell them in what part of the forest he had found his presents, and he turned back and pointed them to the place where he had been. "I left many more behind than I brought away," he said. "There they are! I can see some of the things shining on the trees even from here."

But when the children followed his footprints in the snow to the place where he had been, they still saw nothing on the trees, and thought that Inge must be walking in his sleep, and dreaming that he had found presents. Perhaps he had filled his bag with the cones from the evergreen trees.

On Christmas Day there was sadness all through The Great Walled Country. But those who came to the house of Inge and his sister saw plenty of books and dolls and beautiful toys piled up about the little cripple's chair; and when they asked where these things came from, they were told, "Why, from the Christmas-tree forest." And they shook their heads, not knowing what it could mean.

The king held a council in the palace, and appointed a committee of his most faithful courtiers to visit Grandfather Christmas, and see if they could find what was the matter. In a day or two more the committee set out on their journey. They had very hard work to climb the great wall of ice that lay between their country and the place where Grandfather Christmas lived, but at last they reached the top. And when they came to the other side of the wall, they were looking down into the top of his chimney. It was not hard to go down this chimney into the house, and when they reached the bottom of it they found themselves in the very room where Grandfather Christmas lay sound asleep.

It was hard enough to waken him, for he always slept one hundred days after his Christmas work was over, and it was only by turning the hands of the clock around two hundred times that the committee could do anything. When the clock had struck twelve times two hundred hours, Grandfather Christmas thought it was time for his nap to be over, and he sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, sir!" cried the prince who was in charge of the committee, "we have come from the king of The Great Walled Country, who has sent us to ask why you forgot us this Christmas, and left no presents in the forest."

"No presents!" said Grandfather Christmas. "I never forget anything. The presents were there. You did not see them, that's all."

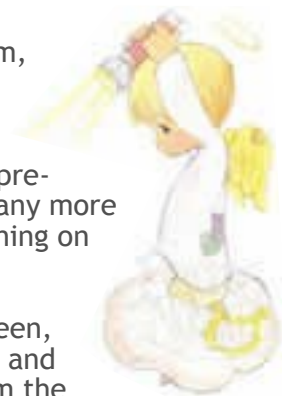
But the children told him that they had searched long and carefully, and in the whole forest there had not been found a thing that could be called a Christmas gift.

"Indeed!" said Grandfather Christmas. "And did little Inge, the boy with the crippled sister, find none?"

Then the committee was silent, for they had heard of the gifts at Inge's house, and did not know what to say about them.

"You had better go home," said Grandfather Christmas, who now began to realize that he had been awakened too soon, "and let me finish my nap. The presents were there, but they were never intended for children who were looking only for themselves. I am not surprised that you could not see them. Remember that not everything that wise travelers tell you is wise." And he turned over and went to sleep again.

The committee returned silently to The Great Walled Country, and told the king what they had heard. The king did not tell all the children of the land what Grandfather Christmas had said, but, when the next December came, he made another proclamation, bidding every one to seek gifts for others, in the old way, in the Christmas-tree forest. So that is what they have been doing ever since; and in order that they may not forget what happened, in case any one should ever ask for another change, they have read to them every year from their Big Book the story of the time when they had no Christmas gifts.



DECEMBER 13TH - THE CHRISTMAS ORANGE



Author Unknown

Jake was nine years old with tousled brown hair with blue eyes as bright as a heavenly angel. For as long as Jake could remember he had lived within the walls of a poor orphanage. He was just one of ten children supported by what meager contributions the orphan home could obtain in a continuous struggle seeking donations from townsfolk.

There was very little to eat, but at Christmas time there always seemed to be a little more than usual to eat, the orphanage seemed a little warmer, and it was time for a little holiday enjoyment. But more than this, there was the Christmas orange!

Christmas was the only time of year that such a rare treat was provided and it was treasured by each child like no other food admiring it, feeling it, prizing it and slowly enjoying each juicy section. Truly, it was the light of each orphan's Christmas and their best gift of the season. How joyful would be the moment when Jake received his orange!

Unknown to him, Jake had somehow managed to track a small amount of mud on his shoes through the front door of the orphanage, muddying the new carpet. He hadn't even noticed. Now it was too late and there was nothing he could do to avoid punishment. The punishment was swift and unrelenting. Jake would not be allowed his Christmas orange! It was the only gift he would receive from the harsh world he lived in, yet after a year of waiting for his Christmas orange, it was to be denied him.

Tearfully, Jake pleaded that he be forgiven and promised never to track mud into the orphanage again, but to no avail. He felt hopeless and totally rejected. Jake cried into his pillow all that night and spent Christmas Day feeling empty and alone. He felt that the other children didn't want to be with a boy who had been punished with such a cruel punishment. Perhaps they feared he would ruin their only day of happiness. Maybe, he reasoned, the gulf between him and his friends existed because they feared he would ask for a little of their oranges. Jake spent the day upstairs, alone, in the unheated dormitory. Huddled under his only blanket, he read about a family marooned on an island. Jake wouldn't mind spending the rest of his life on an isolated island, if he could only have a real family that cared about him.

Bedtime came, and worst of all, Jake couldn't sleep. How could he say his prayers? How could there be a God in Heaven that would allow a little soul such as his, to suffer so much all by himself? Silently, he sobbed for the future of mankind that God might end the suffering in the world, both for himself and all others like him.

As he climbed back into bed from the cold, hard floor, a soft hand touched Jake's shoulder, startling him momentarily and an object was silently placed in his hands. The giver disappeared into the darkness, leaving Jake with what, he did not immediately know!

Looking closely at it in the dim light, he saw that it looked like an orange! Not a regular orange, smooth and shiny, but a special orange, very special. Inside a patched together peel were the segments of nine other oranges, making one whole orange for Jake! The nine other children in the orphanage had each donated one segment of their own precious oranges to make a whole orange as a gift for Jake.

Sharing what we truly value is the true spirit of Christmas. Our Heavenly Father gave us His beloved Son. May we, like the children in the orphanage, find ways to share His love with others less blessed.

DECEMBER 14TH - WILL THE CHRIST CHILD COME?



By Gaye Willis

One Christmas we had an interesting experience that I would like to share. Halfway through December we were doing the regular evening things when there was a knock at the door. We opened it to find a small package with a beautiful ceramic lamb inside. We looked at the calendar and realized that the 12 days of Christmas were beginning! We waited excitedly for the next night's surprise and only then, with the gift of a matching shepherd, did we realize that the lamb was part of a nativity set.

Each night we grew more excited to see what piece we would receive. Each was exquisitely beautiful. The kids kept trying to catch the givers as we slowly built the scene at the manger and began to focus on Christ's birth.

On Christmas Eve, all the pieces were in place, but the baby Jesus. My 12 year-old son really wanted to catch our benefactors and began to devise all kinds of ways to trap them. He ate his dinner in the mini-van watching and waiting, but no one came.

Finally we called him in to go through our family's Christmas Eve traditions. But before the kids went to bed we checked the front step -- No Baby Jesus! We began to worry that my son had scared them off.

My husband suggested that maybe they dropped the Jesus and there wouldn't be anything coming. Somehow something was missing that Christmas Eve. There was a feeling that things weren't complete. The kids went to bed and I put out Christmas, but before I went to bed I again checked to see if the Jesus had come -- no, the doorstep was empty.

In our family the kids can open their stockings when they want to, but they have to wait to open any presents until Dad wakes up. So one by one they woke up very early and I also woke up to watch them. Even before they opened their stockings, each child checked to see if perhaps during the night the baby Jesus had come. Missing that piece of the set seemed to have an odd effect. At least it changed my focus. I knew there were presents under the tree for me and I was excited to watch the children open their gifts, but first on my mind was the feeling of waiting for the ceramic Christ Child.

We had opened just about all of the presents when one of the children found one more for me buried deep beneath the limbs of the tree. He handed me a small package from my former visiting teaching companion. This sister was somewhat less-active in the church. I had been her visiting teacher for a couple of years and then, when she was asked to be a visiting teacher, she requested to go with me. I had learned over time they didn't have much for Christmas, so that their focus was the children. It sounded like she didn't get many gifts to open, so I had always given her a small package--new dish towels, the next year's Relief Society lesson manual--not much, but something for her to open. I was touched when at Church on the day before Christmas, she had given me this small package, saying it was just a token of her love and appreciation.

As I took off the bow, I remembered my friendship with her and was filled with gratitude for knowing her and for her kindness and sacrifice in this year giving me a gift. But as the paper fell away, I began to tremble and cry. There in the small brown box was the baby Jesus. He had come! I realized on that Christmas Day that Christ will come into our lives in ways that we don't expect. The spirit of Christ comes into our hearts as we serve one another. We had waited and watched for him to come, expecting the dramatic "knock at the door and scurrying of feet" but he came in a small, simple package that represented service, friendship, gratitude, and love.

This experience taught me that the beginning of the true spirit of Christmas comes as we open our hearts and actively focus on the Savior. But we will most likely find him in the small and simple acts of love, friendship and service that we give to each other. This Christmas I want to feel again the joy of knowing that Christ is in our home. I want to focus on loving and serving. More than that I want to open my heart to him all year that I may see him again.

DECEMBER 15TH - A GOOD CHRISTMAS STORY



By Raynier Maharaj, Toronto, Canada.

On Christmas Eve, in homes everywhere, there is quiet excitement. festive feeling and the warmth this holiday brings reminds me of a Christmas tale I love to relate each year. It's a true story, even though it might sound unbelievable. And it gives proof that miracles do happen.

A long time ago there was a group of young people who decided to spread some Christmas cheer. They had discovered that there were several children who would be spending Christmas in a community hospital near by. So they bought nice presents, wrapped them, and armed with guitars, sweet voices and one of the friends dressed as Santa Claus — dropped in at the hospital unexpectedly.

The children were overjoyed at seeing Santa, and by the time the group was handing out presents and singing Christmas Carols, there were tears everyone's eyes. From then on, it was decided they would play Santa every year.

The next year, the ladies at the hospital were included in their rounds, and by the third year it was expanded to embrace some poor children in the the fourth year however, after all the rounds were made, Santa looked into his bag to discover there were still a few extra toys left. So the friends mulled- it over, trying to figure out what to do. Somebody mentioned a few squatters' shacks nearby in which a couple of desperately poor families lived.

So the group decided to go there. Thinking there were perhaps three families at most. But as they drove over the crest of the hill into this lonely area — it was around midnight now — the shocked group saw a large number standing at the side of the street.

There were children, more than thirty of them. Behind them were not three shacks, but rows and rows of them. As the car drew to a stop, the children came running out, shouting with joy. It turned out they had been waiting patiently all night for Santa Claus. Somebody - no one could remember who - had told them he was coming, although our Santa had decided to go there moments before.

Everyone was stunned, except for Santa. He was in a panic. He knew he didn't have enough toys for all the children. Not wanting to disappoint the children, he decided to give whatever toys he had to the smallest. When the presents ran out, he'd just have to explain to the bigger kids happened.

So moments later he found himself perched on top of the cars hood these thirty or more sparkling clean children, dressed in their best clothes, lined up in order according to height, with the smallest first. Waiting for their moment with him. As each anxious child approached, Santa dipped into his bag, his heart heavy with dread, hoping to find at least one more toy. And, by some miracle, he found a toy each time he dipped into the bag. And as the last of the children received there present, Santa looked into his deflated bag, it was toyless. It was empty- empty as it should have been 24 children ago.

With relief, he let out a hearty HO-HO-HO and bade the kids farewell. But as he was about to enter the car, (the reindeer apparently had the day off) he heard a child scream, "Santa, Santa, Wait!!" And out of the bushes rushed little children, a boy and a girl. They had been asleep. Santa's heart sank. This time he knew for sure he had no more toys. The bag was empty. But as the out of breath kids approached, he summoned up some courage and dipped in to the bag once more. And, lo and behold, there were two more presents in there.

The group of friends, now all grown adults, still talk about this miracle on Christmas morning. They still have no explanation for it, other than the it happened. How do I know so much about this? Well I was the one playing Santa.

DECEMBER 16TH - CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING



By Pearl S. Buck

He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still! Fifty years ago, and his father had been dead for thirty years, and yet he waked at four o'clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep.

Why did he feel so awake tonight? He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was fifteen years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother.

"Mary, I hate to call Rob in the mornings. He's growing so fast and he needs his sleep. If you could see how he sleeps when I go in to wake him up! I wish I could manage alone."

"Well, you can't, Adam." His mother's voice was brisk. "Besides, he isn't a child anymore. It's time he took his turn."

"Yes," his father said slowly. "But I sure do hate to wake him."

When he heard these words, something in him spoke: his father loved him! He had never thought of that before, taking for granted the tie of their blood. Neither his father nor his mother talked about loving their children--they had no time for such things. There was always so much to do on the farm.

Now that he knew his father loved him, there would be no loitering in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up after that, stumbling blindly in his sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes shut, but he got up.

And then on the night before Christmas, that year when he was fifteen, he lay for a few minutes thinking about the next day. They were poor, and most of the excitement was in the turkey they had raised themselves and mince pies his mother made. His sisters sewed presents and his mother and father always bought him something he needed, not only a warm jacket, maybe, but something more, such as a book. And he saved and bought them each something, too.

He wished, that Christmas when he was fifteen, he had a better present for his father. As usual he had gone to the ten-cent store and bought a tie. It had seemed nice enough until he lay thinking the night before Christmas. He looked out of his attic window, the stars were bright.

"Dad," he had once asked when he was a little boy, "What is a stable?"

"It's just a barn," his father had replied, "like ours."

Then Jesus had been born in a barn, and to a barn the shepherds had come...

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not give his father a special gift too, out there in the barn? He could get up early, earlier than four o'clock, and he could creep into the barn and get all the milking done. He'd do it alone, milk and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking he'd see it all done. And he would know who had done it. He laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he would do, and he mustn't sleep too sound.

He must have waked twenty times, scratching a match to look each time to look at his old watch -- midnight, and half past one, and then two o'clock.

At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised. It was early for them, too.

He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He kept thinking about his father's surprise. His father would come in and get him, saying that he would get things started while Rob was getting dressed. He'd go to the barn, open the door, and then he'd go get the two big empty milk cans. But they wouldn't be waiting or empty, they'd be standing in the milk-house, filled.

"What the--," he could hear his father exclaiming.

He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant.

The task went more easily than he had ever known it to go before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else, a gift to his father who loved him. He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milk-house door carefully, making sure of the latch.

Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened.

"Rob!" His father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas."

"Aw-right," he said sleepily.

The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know. His dancing heart was ready to jump from his body.

The minutes were endless -- ten, fifteen, he did not know how many -- and he heard his father's footsteps again. The door opened and he lay still.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad--"

His father was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of laugh.

"Thought you'd fool me, did you?" His father was standing by his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the cover.

"It's for Christmas, Dad!"

He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father's arms go around him. It was dark and they could not see each other's faces.

"Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing--"

"Oh, Dad, I want you to know -- I do want to be good!" The words broke from him of their own will. He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love.

He got up and pulled on his clothes again and they went down to the Christmas tree. Oh what a Christmas, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother and made the younger children listen about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself.

"The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I'll remember it, son every year on Christmas morning, so long as I live."

They had both remembered it, and now that his father was dead, he remembered it alone: that blessed Christmas dawn when, alone with the cows in the barn, he had made his first gift of true love.

This Christmas he wanted to write a card to his wife and tell her how much he loved her, it had been a long time since he had really told her, although he loved her in a very special way, much more than he ever had when they were young. He had been fortunate that she had loved him. Ah, that was the true joy of



life, the ability to love. Love was still alive in him, it still was.

It occurred to him suddenly that it was alive because long ago it had been born in him when he knew his father loved him. That was it: Love alone could awaken love. And he could give the gift again and again. This morning, this blessed Christmas morning, he would give it to his beloved wife. He could write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began his love letter to his wife: My dearest love...

Such a happy, happy Christmas!



DECEMBER 17TH - THE THREE TREES



Author Unknown

Once upon a mountain top, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up. The first little tree looked up at the stars and said: "I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I'll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!"

The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. "I want to be traveling mighty waters and carrying powerful kings. I'll be the strongest ship in the world!"

The third little tree looked down into the valley below where busy men and women worked in a busy town. "I don't want to leave the mountain top at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me, they'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I will be the tallest tree in the world."

Years passed. The rain came, the sun shone, and the little trees grew tall. One day three woodcutters climbed the mountain.

The first woodcutter looked at the first tree and said, "This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining axe, the first tree fell.

"Now I shall be made into a beautiful chest, I shall hold wonderful treasure!" The first tree said.

The second woodcutter looked at the second tree and said, "This tree is strong. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining axe, the second tree fell.

"Now I shall sail mighty waters!" thought the second tree. "I shall be a strong ship for mighty kings!"

The third tree felt her heart sink when the last woodcutter looked her way. She stood straight and tall and pointed bravely to heaven.

But the woodcutter never even looked up. "Any kind of tree will do for me." He muttered. With a swoop of his shining axe, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the woodcutter brought her to a carpenter's shop. But the carpenter fashioned the tree into a feedbox for animals.

The once beautiful tree was not covered with gold, with treasure. She was coated with saw dust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals.

The second tree smiled when the woodcutter took her to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ship was made that day. Instead the once strong tree was hammered and sawed into a simple fishing boat. She was too small and too weak to sail to an ocean, or even a river; instead she was taken to a little lake.

The third tree was confused when the woodcutter cut her into strong beams and left her in a lumberyard.

"What happened?" the once tall tree wondered. "All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountain top and point to God..."

Many, many days and nights passed. The three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night, golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feedbox.

"I wish I could make a cradle for him." her husband whispered.

The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone on the sturdy wood. "This manger is beautiful." she said.

And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake.

Soon a thundering and thrashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. She knew she did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through with the wind and the rain.

The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, "Peace." The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun.

And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

One Friday morning, the third tree was startled when her beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to her.

She felt ugly and harsh and cruel.

But on Sunday morning, when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It had made the third tree strong.

And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God. That was better than being the tallest tree in the world.



DECEMBER 18TH - A SMALL WHITE ENVELOPE



Author Unknown

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so.

It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas---oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it- overspending... the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma---the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

Mike loved kids-all kids-and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition---one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there.

You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more.

Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

DECEMBER 19TH - A BROTHER LIKE THAT



Author Unknown

Paul received an automobile from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it.

"Is this your car, Mister?" he asked.

Paul nodded and said, "My brother gave it to me for Christmas."

The boy was astounded and remarked, "You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish..."

Then he hesitated.

Of course Paul knew what he was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the lad said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels.

"I wish," the boy went on, "that I could be a brother like that."

Paul looked at the boy in astonishment, then impulsively he added, "Would you like to take a ride in my automobile?"

"Oh yes, I'd love that."

After a short ride, the boy turned and with his eyes aglow, said, "Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?"

Paul smiled a little. He thought he knew what the lad wanted. He wanted to show his neighbors that he could ride home in a big automobile. But Paul was wrong again.

"Will you stop where those two steps are?" the boy asked. He ran up the steps. Then in a little while Paul heard him coming back, but he was not coming fast because he was carrying his little crippled brother.

He sat him down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against him and pointed to the car. "There she is, Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Christmas, and it didn't cost him a cent. And some day I'm gonna give you one just like it... Then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I've been trying to tell you about."

Paul got out and lifted the lad to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride going around to see all the Christmas windows.

That Christmas Eve, Paul learned what Jesus meant when he had said: "It is more blessed to give..."

DECEMBER 20TH - TEACH THE CHILDREN



Author Unknown

Late one Christmas Eve, I sank back, tired but content, into my easy chair. The kids were in bed, the gifts were wrapped, the milk and cookies waited by the fireplace for Santa. As I sat back admiring the tree with its decorations, I couldn't help feeling that something important was missing. It wasn't long before the tiny twinkling tree lights lulled me to sleep.

I don't know how long I slept, but all of a sudden I knew that I wasn't alone. I opened my eyes, and you can imagine my surprise when I saw Santa Claus himself standing next to my Christmas tree. He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot just as the poem described him, but he was not the "jolly old elf" of Christmas legend. The man who stood before me looked sad and disappointed, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Santa, what's wrong?" I asked, "Why are you crying?"

"It's the children," Santa replied sadly.

"But Santa, the children love you," I said.

"Oh, I know they love me, and they love the gifts I bring them," Santa said, "but the children of today seem to have somehow missed out on the true spirit of Christmas. It's not their fault. It's just that the adults, many of them not having been taught themselves, have forgotten to teach the children."

"Teach them what?" I asked.

Santa's kind old face became soft, more gentle. His eyes began to shine with something more than tears. He spoke softly. "Teach the children the true meaning of Christmas. Teach them that the part of Christmas we can see, hear, and touch is much more than meets the eye. Teach them the symbolism behind the customs and traditions of Christmas which we now observe. Teach them what it is they truly represent."

Santa reached into his bag and pulled out a tiny Christmas tree and set it on my mantle. "Teach them about the Christmas tree. Green is the second color of Christmas. The stately evergreen, with its unchanging color, represents the hope of eternal life in Jesus. Its needles point heavenward as a reminder that mankind's thoughts should turn heavenward as well."

Santa reached into his bag again and pulled out a shiny star and placed it at the top of the small tree. "The star was the heavenly sign of promise. God promised a Savior for the world and the star was the sign of the fulfillment of that promise on the night that Jesus Christ was born. Teach the children that God always fulfills His promises, and that wise men still seek Him."

"Red," said Santa, "is the first color of Christmas." "He pulled forth a red ornament for the tiny tree. Red is deep, intense, vivid. It is the color of the life-giving blood that flows through our veins. It is the symbol of God's greatest gift. Teach the children that Christ gave his life and shed his blood for them that they might have eternal life. When they see the color red, it should remind them of that most wonderful gift."

Santa found a silver bell in his pack and placed it on the tree. "Just as lost sheep are guided to safety by the sound of the bell, it continues to ring today for all to be guided to the fold. Teach the children to follow the true Shepherd, who gave His life for the sheep."

Santa placed a candle on the mantle and lit it. The soft glow from its one tiny flame brightened the room. "The glow of the candle represents how people can show their thanks for the gift of God's son that Christmas Eve long ago. Teach the children to follow in Christ's foot steps...to go about doing good. Teach them to let their light so shine before people that all may see it and glorify God. This is what is symbolized when the twinkle lights shine on the tree like hundreds of bright, shining candles, each of them representing one of God's precious children, their light shining for all to see."

Again Santa reached into his bag and this time he brought forth a tiny red and white striped cane. As he hung it on the tree he spoke softly. "The candy cane is a stick of hard white candy. White to symbolize the virgin birth and sinless nature of Jesus, and hard to symbolize the Solid Rock the foundation of the church, and the firmness of God's promises. The candy cane is in the form of a "J" to represent the precious name of Jesus, who came to earth. It also represents the Good Shepherd's crook, which He uses to reach down into the ditches of the world to lift out the fallen lambs who, like all sheep, have gone astray. The original candy cane had three small red stripes, which are the stripes of the scourging Jesus received by which we are healed, and a large red stripe that represents the shed blood of Jesus, so that we can have the promise of eternal life.



"Teach these things to the children."

Santa brought out a beautiful wreath made of fresh, fragrant greenery tied with a bright red bow. "The bow reminds us of the bond of perfection, which is love. The wreath embodies all the good things about Christmas for those with eyes to see and hearts to understand. It contains the colors of red and green and the heaven-turned needles of the evergreen. The bow tells the story of good will towards all and its color reminds us of Christ's sacrifice. Even its very shape is symbolic, representing eternity and the eternal nature of Christ's love. It is a circle, without beginning and without end. These are the things you must teach the children."

I asked, "But where does that leave you, Santa?"

The tears gone now from his eyes, a smile broke over Santa's face. "Why bless you, my dear," he laughed, "I'm only a symbol myself. I represent the spirit of family fun and the joy of giving and receiving. If the children are taught these other things, there is no danger that I'll ever be forgotten."

"I think I'm beginning to understand."

"That's why I came," said Santa. "You're an adult. If you don't teach the children these things, then who will?"

DECEMBER 21ST - WALLY'S CHRISTMAS PAGEANT



by Dina Donohue

For years now whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the Nativity Play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in the town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, Wally was liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important.

Most often they'd find a way to keep him out, but Wally would hang around anyway - not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lambard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of crooks and crèches, of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stageful of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lambard had to make sure he did not wander on-stage before his cue.

Then came the time when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the Innkeeper was there, waiting.

"What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere." Wally looked straight ahead, but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled."

"Sir we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and we are very weary."

"There is no room in this inn for you." Wally looked properly stern.

"Please good innkeeper, this is my wife Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Be gone!" the prompter whispered from the wings.

"No!" Wally repeated automatically. "Be gone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary, and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside the inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, and his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

And suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others.

"Don't go Joseph," Wally called out. "Bring Mary back." And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room."

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were other- many, many others- who considered it the most Christmas of all Christmas pageants that they had ever seen.



DECEMBER 22ND - YES VIRGINIA, THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS



By Francis Pharcellus Church, Editor of the New York Sun, in response to a letter by Virginia O'Hanlan

"We take pleasure in answering thus prominently the communication below, expressing at the same time our great gratification that its faithful author is numbered among the friends of The Sun:

Dear Editor,

I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in the Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

DECEMBER 23RD - SONG FOR A PROPHET

(JOSEPH SMITH'S BIRTHDAY)



By Lori Mortensen, Liahona, Dec 2002, 6

Based on an actual event

Ten-year-old Olivia* rolled over on her side and tried to go back to sleep, even though she knew it would be impossible. After all, it was Christmas—Christmas 1843. “Well, just barely,” Olivia thought as she counted the 12 chimes that echoed softly from her mother’s clock.

Last Christmas, she had lived far away in Leek, England. Then Grandpa had listened to the missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “These men speak the truth,” he had said. Three months later, Olivia and her entire family were baptized, along with Grandpa Richard and Grandma Lettice Rushton.

The decision to leave England to join the Saints in America had been a very hard one. Would Grandpa be able to sell his silk business? What kind of work would Papa find? Would baby James get sick and die, like Mama’s other baby? And what about Grandma Lettice? Because she was blind, it would be especially difficult for her to leave her home for an unfamiliar land. After a lot of prayer and asking the Lord, Papa knew they needed to follow the counsel of the Prophet Joseph Smith and join the Saints in Zion.

And now it was Christmas—and Christmas in Nauvoo was very different from Christmas back home. For one thing, Grandpa Rushton had died, and Olivia missed him terribly. For another thing, people here in Nauvoo didn’t burn yule logs, sing carols, and exchange presents, as people in England did. In fact, many people in Nauvoo didn’t celebrate the day at all. Mama said that it was because of the religious customs many of them had before they joined the Church. But that didn’t seem like a very good reason to Olivia. “If only we could celebrate Christmas as we did in England!” she thought with a sigh.

Just then, she heard muffled voices by the front door. Olivia slid out of bed and tiptoed across the cold floor. “Mama?”

Her mother and father were bundled up in warm coats and hats!

“Where are you going, Mama?”

“What are you doing up, Olivia?” Mama whispered. “You should be in bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep—and then I heard you.”

“Well, go back to bed,” Mama said. “Grandma Lettice asked us to go singing with her.”

“Singing—now? May I come too?”

“It’s cold outside,” Papa said.

“I don’t mind,” Olivia replied. “Please?”

Mama and Papa exchanged glances. “Well, all right,” Papa said. “But you’ll have to dress quickly. We don’t want to be late.”

Olivia changed into her warmest clothes, then followed her parents into the chilly darkness. The cold stung her face, and her breath turned into puffy clouds. “Where are we going?” she asked. “Are we going to sing a song I know?”

“You’ll see,” Mama said.

Just as she was wondering how much farther she would have to walk, Olivia saw her aunts and uncles,

Grandma Lettice, and several neighbors gathered together outside the Mansion House at the corner of Main Street and Water Street.

The Prophet's house! Olivia caught her breath. "Are we going to sing to the Prophet?" she wondered.

"All right, everyone," Grandma Lettice whispered. "Just as we rehearsed it."

For a split second, Olivia wondered if it had been a mistake to come—she hadn't rehearsed anything. But after hearing only two notes, Olivia realized that she did know the song. It was one of the songs in Sister Emma Smith's hymnal. She took a deep breath and sang with the rest of the carolers:

"Mortals, awake! with angels join,
And chant the solemn lay;
Love, joy, and gratitude combine
To hail th' auspicious day."

(A Collection of Sacred Hymns for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [1835], number 77)

Soon lights flickered to life, and windows of the Mansion House opened. The Prophet Joseph Smith, his family, and the boarders who were living at the Smith home all looked out.

"Who's singing?" someone asked.

"How lovely," whispered another.

"Are there angels outside?"

Although Olivia wasn't an angel, she certainly felt like one as a wave of warmth spread from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "How happy the Prophet looks," she thought.

When they finished singing, the Prophet thanked them for their beautiful serenade and blessed them in the name of the Lord.

"Merry Christmas," Olivia called as she and the other singers left. All at once she didn't want to be back in England anymore. She knew she belonged here with her family, the restored Church, and the Lord's prophet. In fact, she couldn't think of a better place to have Christmas.

The Grandma Who Sang

We don't know whether any children actually went along on the late-night caroling party. But the grandma in the story—Lettice Rushton—was a real person, and she and some of her family and neighbors actually did sing for the Prophet Joseph Smith on Christmas morning, 1843.

The mother of 10 children, Lettice Rushton became blind from cataracts five years before she was baptized. She was one of thousands of British converts who listened eagerly to the missionaries and immigrated with their families to Nauvoo to join the Saints.

The Prophet Joseph Smith recorded that at 1:00 on Christmas morning, 1843, Lettice Rushton and her family and neighbors gathered under his window and began singing, "which caused a thrill of pleasure to run through my soul." The music so moved him that he "felt to thank ... Heavenly Father for their visit, and blessed them in the name of the Lord." (See History of the Church, 6:134.)

Notes

* Although Olivia is a fictional character, the event in this story really happened.



DECEMBER 24TH - THE NATIVITY



Editor's Note: On Christmas Eve our family, like many others, has a tradition of re-enacting the Nativity. Often this story is told by simply reading Luke 2. However we leave out the story of what happened at Christ's birth in the Americas by sticking to this traditional retelling. In the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ we are told of how the people in the Americas also knew of Christ's birth. In this story I have combined the accounts given in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. I drew directly from the scriptures with minimal commentary to transition between the two. If you want to use this version as a Nativity play you will probably want to add a few prophets (Isaiah, Nephi, Lehi, Alma & Samuel the Lamanite) or one person to represent these prophets, and some angry Nephites to your usual cast.



Long before Jesus was born many prophets testified of his coming. In Israel Isaiah prophesied –

Isaiah 7

14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

15 Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.

16 For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

In the Americas there were many prophets who testified of Christ's coming. Starting with Lehi -

1 Nephi 10

4 Yea, even six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world.

5 And he also spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of these things, concerning this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world.

6 Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer.

His son Nephi also prayed and testified of the following vision that he received -

1 Nephi 11

12 And it came to pass that [the Angel] said unto me: Look! And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence.

13 And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

14 And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

15 And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

16 And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

17 And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

18 And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

19 And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

20 And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

Later Alma testified that Christ should come -

Alma 7

7 For behold, I say unto you there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people. ...

10 And behold, he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God.

Alma 9

26 And not many days hence the Son of God shall come in his glory; and his glory shall be the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace, equity, and truth, full of patience, mercy, and long-suffering, quick to hear the cries of his people and to answer their prayers.

27 And behold, he cometh to redeem those who will be baptized unto repentance, through faith on his name.



Later Samuel the Lamanite was sent to the Nephites to testify of the Lord's coming -

Helaman 13

2 And it came to pass that in this year there was one Samuel, a Lamanite, came into the land of Zarahemla, and began to preach unto the people. ...

4 And it came to pass that they would not suffer that he should enter into the city; therefore he went and got upon the wall thereof, and stretched forth his hand and cried with a loud voice, and prophesied unto the people whatsoever things the Lord put into his heart.

5 And he said unto them: Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart;...

Helaman 14

2 ... Behold, I give unto you a sign; for five years more cometh, and behold, then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name.

3 And behold, this will I give unto you for a sign at the time of his coming; for behold, there shall be great lights in heaven, insomuch that in the night before he cometh there shall be no darkness, insomuch that it shall appear unto man as if it was day. ...

5 And behold, there shall a new star arise, such an one as ye never have beheld; and this also shall be a sign unto you.

Helaman 16

1 And now, it came to pass that there were many who heard the words of Samuel, the Lamanite, which he spake upon the walls of the city. ...

2 But as many as there were who did not believe in the words of Samuel were angry with him; and they cast stones at him upon the wall, and also many shot arrows at him as he stood upon the wall; but the Spirit of the Lord was with him, insomuch that they could not hit him with their stones neither with their arrows....

6 ... [When] they saw that they could not hit him with their stones and their arrows, they cried unto their captains, saying: Take this fellow and bind him, for behold he hath a devil; and because of the power of the devil which is in him we cannot hit him with our stones and our arrows; therefore take him and bind him, and away with him.

7 And as they went forth to lay their hands on him, behold, he did cast himself down from the wall, and did flee out of their lands, yea, even unto his own country, and began to preach and to prophesy among his own people...

Despite the disbelief of many of the people soon the words of Samuel began to be fulfilled -

Helaman 16

13 [It] came to pass in the *ninetieth year of the reign of the judges, there were great signs given unto the people, and wonders; and the words of the prophets began to be fulfilled.

14 And angels did appear unto men, wise men, and did declare unto them glad tidings of great joy; thus in this year the scriptures began to be fulfilled.

15 Nevertheless, the people began to harden their hearts, all save it were the most believing part of them...

23 And notwithstanding the signs and the wonders which were wrought among the people of the Lord, and the many miracles which they did, Satan did get great hold upon the hearts of the people upon all the face of the land....

The signs which the prophet Samuel had testified would come were being fulfilled because back in Israel the miracle of Christ's birth was beginning -



Luke 1

26 ... [The] angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,
27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

29 And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS...

34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God...

38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Matthew 1

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. ...

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

Not long after these things happened with Joseph and Mary there was a conflict among the Nephites -

3 Nephi 1

4 And it came to pass that in the commencement of the ninety and second year, behold, the prophecies of the prophets began to be fulfilled more fully; for there began to be greater signs and greater miracles wrought among the people.

5 But there were some who began to say that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite.

6 And they began to rejoice over their brethren, saying: Behold the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled; therefore, your joy and your faith concerning this thing hath been vain.

7 And it came to pass that they did make a great uproar throughout the land; and the people who believed began to be very sorrowful, lest by any means those things which had been spoken might not come to pass.

8 But behold, they did watch steadfastly for that day and that night and that day which should be as one day as if there were no night, that they might know that their faith had not been vain.

9 Now it came to pass that there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet.

10 Now it came to pass that when Nephi, the son of Nephi, saw this wickedness of his people, his heart was exceedingly sorrowful.

11 And it came to pass that he went out and bowed himself down upon the earth, and cried mightily to his God in behalf of his people, yea, those who were about to be destroyed because of their faith in the tradition of their fathers.

12 And it came to pass that he cried mightily unto the Lord all that day; and behold, the voice of the Lord came unto him, saying:

13 Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfill all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets.

14 Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfill all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh. And behold, the time is at hand, and this night shall the sign be given.

15 And it came to pass that the words which came unto Nephi were fulfilled, according as they had been spoken; for behold, at the going down of the sun there was no darkness; and the people began to be astonished because there was no darkness when the night came.

16 And there were many, who had not believed the words of the prophets, who fell to the earth and became as if they were dead, for they knew that the great plan of destruction which they had laid for those who believed in the words of the prophets had been frustrated; for the sign which had been given was already at hand.

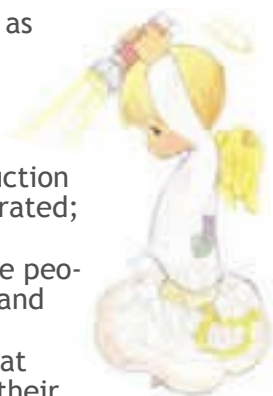
17 And they began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear; yea, in fine, all the people upon the face of the whole earth from the west to the east, both in the land north and in the land south, were so exceedingly astonished that they fell to the earth.

18 For they knew that the prophets had testified of these things for many years, and that the sign which had been given was already at hand; and they began to fear because of their iniquity and their unbelief.

19 And it came to pass that there was no darkness in all that night, but it was as light as though it was mid-day. And it came to pass that the sun did rise in the morning again, according to its proper order; and they knew that it was the day that the Lord should be born, because of the sign which had been given.

20 And it had come to pass, yea, all things, every whit, according to the words of the prophets.

21 And it came to pass also that a new star did appear, according to the word.



As the signs given by Samuel were fulfilled the events they foretold were happening in Israel -

Luke 2

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Matthew 2

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.



Today the Prophets are still testifying of our Savior. The First Presidency & Quorum of the Twelve Apostles put out this statement entitled, The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles—

As we commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ two millennia ago, we offer our testimony of the reality of His matchless life and the infinite virtue of His great atoning sacrifice. None other has had so profound an influence upon all who have lived and will yet live upon the earth.

He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. Under the direction of His Father, He was the creator of the earth. “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). Though sinless, He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), yet was despised for it. His gospel was a message of peace and goodwill. He entreated all to follow His example. He walked the roads of Palestine, healing the sick, causing the blind to see, and raising the dead. He taught the truths of eternity, the reality of our premortal existence, the purpose of our life on earth, and the potential for the sons and daughters of God in the life to come.

He instituted the sacrament as a reminder of His great atoning sacrifice. He was arrested and condemned on spurious charges, convicted to satisfy a mob, and sentenced to die on Calvary’s cross. He gave His life to atone for the sins of all mankind. His was a great vicarious gift in behalf of all who would ever live upon the earth.

We solemnly testify that His life, which is central to all human history, neither began in Bethlehem nor concluded on Calvary. He was the Firstborn of the Father, the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, the Redeemer of the world.

He rose from the grave to “become the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20). As Risen Lord, He visited among those He had loved in life. He also ministered among His “other sheep” (John 10:16) in ancient America. In the modern world, He and His Father appeared to the boy Joseph Smith, ushering in the long-promised “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10).

Of the Living Christ, the Prophet Joseph wrote: “His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah, saying:

“I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father” (D&C 110:3-4).

Of Him the Prophet also declared: “And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

“For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

“That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof

are begotten sons and daughters unto God” (D&C 76:22-24).

We declare in words of solemnity that His priesthood and His Church have been restored upon the earth—“built upon the foundation of ... apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

We testify that He will someday return to earth. “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Isaiah 40:5). He will rule as King of Kings and reign as Lord of Lords, and every knee shall bend and every tongue shall speak in worship before Him. Each of us will stand to be judged of Him according to our works and the desires of our hearts.

We bear testimony, as His duly ordained Apostles—that Jesus is the Living Christ, the immortal Son of God. He is the great King Immanuel, who stands today on the right hand of His Father. He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world. His way is the path that leads to happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come. God be thanked for the matchless gift of His divine Son.



DECEMBER 25TH - CHRISTMAS GIFTS, CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS



By Thomas S. Monson, Ensign, Dec 1995, 2

“What did you get for Christmas?” This is the universal question among children for days following that most celebrated holiday of the year. A small girl might reply, “I received a doll, a new dress, and a fun game.” A boy might respond, “I received a pocketknife, a train, and a truck with lights.” Newly acquired possessions are displayed and admired as Christmas day dawns, then departs.

The gifts so acquired are fleeting. Dolls break, dresses wear out, and fun games become boring. Pocket-knives are lost, trains do nothing but go in circles, and trucks are abandoned when the batteries that power them dim and die.

If we change but one word in our Christmas question, the outcome is vastly different. “What did you give for Christmas?” prompts stimulating thought and causes tender feelings to well up and memory’s fires to glow ever brighter.

Giving, not getting, brings to full bloom the Christmas spirit. Enemies are forgiven, friends remembered, and God obeyed. The spirit of Christmas illuminates the picture window of the soul, and we look out upon the world’s busy life and become more interested in people than things. To catch the real meaning of the spirit of Christmas, we need only drop the last syllable and it becomes the Spirit of Christ.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part,
Yet what can I give Him?
Give my heart.
(Christina Georgina Rossetti)

One ever remembers that Christmas day when giving replaced getting. In my life, this took place in my tenth year. As Christmas approached, I yearned as only a boy can yearn for an electric train. My desire was not to receive the economical and everywhere-to-be-found windup model train; rather, I wanted one that operated through the miracle of electricity. The times were those of economic depression; yet Mother and Dad, through some sacrifice I am sure, presented to me on Christmas morning a beautiful electric train.

For hours I operated the transformer, watching the engine first pull its cars forward, then push them backward around the track. Mother entered the living room and said to me that she had purchased a windup train for Mrs. Hansen’s son, Mark, who lived down the lane. I asked if I could see the train. The engine was short and blocky, not long and sleek like the expensive model I had received. However, I did take notice of an oil tanker car that was part of his inexpensive set. My train had no such car, and pangs of envy began to be felt. I put up such a fuss that Mother succumbed to my pleadings and handed me the oil tanker car. She said, “If you need it more than Mark, you take it.” I put it with my train set and felt pleased with the result.

Mother and I took the remaining cars and the engine down to Mark Hansen. The young boy was a year or two older than I. He had never anticipated such a gift and was thrilled beyond words. He wound the key in his engine, it not being electric like mine, and was overjoyed as the engine and two cars, plus a caboose,

went around the track.

Then Mother wisely asked, “What do you think of Mark’s train, Tommy?”

I felt a keen sense of guilt and became very much aware of my selfishness. I said to Mother, “Wait just a moment. I’ll be right back.”

As swiftly as my legs could carry me, I ran home, picked up the oil tanker car plus an additional car from my train set, and ran back down the lane to the Hansen home, joyfully saying to Mark, “We forgot to bring two cars that belong to your train.” Mark coupled the two extra cars to his set. I watched the engine make its labored way around the track and felt supreme joy, difficult to describe and impossible to forget. The spirit of Christmas had filled my very soul.



That experience made it somewhat easier for me to make a difficult decision just one year later. Again Christmastime had come. We were preparing for the oven a gigantic turkey and anticipating the savory feast that awaited. A neighborhood pal of mine asked a startling question: “What does turkey taste like?”

I responded, “Oh, about like chicken tastes.”

Again a question: “What does chicken taste like?”

It was then that I realized my friend had never eaten chicken or turkey. I asked what his family was going to have for Christmas dinner. There was no prompt response, just a downcast glance and the comment, “I dunno. There’s nothing in the house.”

I pondered a solution. There was none. I had no turkeys, no chickens, no money. Then I remembered I did have two pet rabbits. Immediately I took them to my friend and handed the box to him with the comment, “Here, take these two rabbits. They’re good to eat—just like chicken.”

He took the box, climbed the fence, and headed for home—a Christmas dinner safely assured. Tears came easily to me as I closed the door to the empty rabbit hutch. But I was not sad. A warmth, a feeling of indescribable joy, filled my heart. It was a memorable Christmas.

I recall a young man who, as a boy of thirteen, led his quorum of deacons in a successful search for the Christmas spirit. He and his companions lived in a neighborhood in which many elderly widows of limited means resided. All the year long, the boys had saved and planned for a glorious Christmas party. They were thinking of themselves, until the Christmas spirit prompted them to think of others. Frank, as their leader, suggested to his companions that the funds they had saved so carefully be used not for the planned party, but rather for the benefit of three elderly widows who resided together.

The boys made their plans. As their bishop, I needed but to follow. With the enthusiasm of a new adventure, the boys purchased a giant roasting chicken, the potatoes, the vegetables, the cranberries, and all that comprises the traditional Christmas feast. To the widows’ home they went, carrying their gifts of treasure. Through the snow and up the path to the tumbledown porch they came. A knock at the door, the sound of slow footsteps, and then they met.

In the unmelodic voices characteristic of thirteen-year-olds, the boys sang: “Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright.” They then presented their gifts. Angels on that glorious night of long ago sang no more beautifully, nor did Wise Men present gifts of greater meaning. I gazed at the faces of those wonderful women and thought to myself, “Somebody’s mother.” I then looked on the countenances of those noble boys and reflected, “Somebody’s son.” There then passed through my mind the words of the immortal poem by Mary Dow Brine:

The woman was old and ragged and gray

And bent with the chill of the Winter's day.
 The street was wet with a recent snow,
 And the woman's feet were aged and slow.
 She stood at the crossing and waited long,
 Alone, uncared for, amid the throng
 Of human beings who passed her by,
 Nor heeded the glance of her anxious eye.
 Down the street, with laughter and shout,
 Glad in the freedom of "school let out,"
 Came the boys like a flock of sheep,
 Hailing the snow piled white and deep. ...[One] paused beside her and whispered low,
 "I'll help you cross, if you wish to go." ...
 "She's somebody's mother, boys, you know,
 For all she's aged and poor and slow.
 And I hope some fellow will lend a hand
 To help my mother, you understand,
 If ever she's poor and old and gray,
 When her own dear boy is far away."
 And "somebody's mother" bowed low her head
 In her home that night, and the prayer she said
 Was, "God be kind to the noble boy,
 Who is somebody's son, and pride and joy!"
 ("Somebody's Mother")



Not one of those boys ever forgot that precious pilgrimage. Christmas gifts had become Christmas blessings.

Times change, years speed by; but Christmas continues sacred. It is through giving, rather than getting, that the spirit of Christ enters our lives. God still speaks. He prompts. He guides. He blesses. He gives.

Many years ago, President Harold B. Lee recounted to me an experience of a President Ballantyne who grew up in Star Valley, Wyoming. This is harsh country. The summers are short and fleeting, while the winters linger and chill. President Ballantyne told of a special Christmas season from his boyhood days. He said:

"Father had a large family; and sometimes after we had our harvest, there was not much left after expenses were paid. So Father would have to go away and hire out to some of the big ranchers for maybe a dollar a day. He earned little more than enough to take care of himself, with very little to send home to Mother and the children. Things began to get pretty skimpy for us.

"We had our family prayers around the table; and it was on one such night when Father was gone that we gathered and Mother poured out of a pitcher, into the glass of each one, milk divided among the children—but none for herself. And I, sensing that the milk in the pitcher was all that we had, pushed mine over to Mother and said, 'Here, Mother. You drink mine.'

" 'No, Mother is not hungry tonight.'

"It worried me. We drank our milk and went to bed, but I could not sleep. I got up and tiptoed down the stairs, and there was Mother, in the middle of the floor, kneeling in prayer. She did not hear me as I came down in my bare feet, and I dropped to my knees and heard her say, 'Heavenly Father, there is no food in our house. Please, Father, touch the heart of somebody so that my children will not be hungry in the morning.'

"When she finished her prayer, she looked around and saw that I had heard; and she said to me, somewhat embarrassed, 'Now, you run along, son. Everything will be all right.'

“I went to bed, assured by Mother’s faith. The next morning, I was awakened by the sounds of pots and pans in the kitchen and the aroma of cooking food. I went down to the kitchen, and I said, ‘Mother, I thought you said there was no food.’



“All she said to me was, ‘Well, my boy, didn’t you think the Lord would answer my prayer?’ I received no further explanation than that.

“Years passed, and I went away to college. I got married, and I returned to see the old folks. Bishop Gardner, now reaching up to a ripe age, said to me, ‘My son, let me tell you of a Christmas experience that I had with your family. I had finished my chores, and we had had supper. I was sitting by the fireplace reading the newspaper. Suddenly, I heard a voice that said, “Sister Ballantyne doesn’t have any food in her house.”

I thought it was my wife speaking and said, “What did you say, Mother?” She came in wiping her hands on her apron and said, “Did you call me, Father?”

“ ‘ “No, I didn’t say anything to you, but I heard a voice which spoke to me.”

“ ‘ “What did it say?” she asked.

“ ‘ “It said that Sister Ballantyne didn’t have any food in her house.”

“ ‘ “Well, then,” said Mother, “you had better put on your shoes and your coat and take some food to Sister Ballantyne.” In the dark of that winter’s night, I harnessed the team and placed in the wagon bed a sack of flour, a quarter section of beef, some bottled fruit, and loaves of newly baked bread. The weather was cold, but a warm glow filled my soul as your mother welcomed me and I presented her with the food. God had heard a mother’s prayer.’ ”

Heavenly Father is ever mindful of those who need, who seek, who trust, who pray, and who listen when He speaks. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God’s gift becomes our blessing. May every heart open wide and welcome Him—Christmas day and always.