



Christmas Stories

Compiled By Michael James Johnston (www.ChristmasWithMike.com)

Christmas is a very Special Time of the year. I have compiled this collection of Christmas Stories to be shared with everyone. I will continue to add to this collection each and every year. You may contribute by going to www.ChristmasWithMike.com and share your Christmas Stories.

Christmas 2015

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(Updated as of December 15, 2015)

A Collection of Christmas Stories To Share With Family and Friends

(Compiled by Michael James Johnston – Please share your favorite Christmas Stories by going to www.ChristmasWithMike.com)

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A CHRISTMAS TRAIN

By Thomas S. Monson

He recalled a Christmas, probably in his tenth year; when he wanted an electric train more than anything else. He did not want the less expensive and easier-to-find wind-up train. He wanted a train that could be plugged into a socket and run by the wonder of electrical power.

The economy was still depressed at that time and asking for an electric train was asking for a lot—probably even requiring financial sacrifice by his parents. Nevertheless, Tommy hoped and dreamed and, much to his surprise, found an electric train under the tree on Christmas morning. He immediately put the train together and operated the electric transformer. He loved watching the train go forward, then backward, and all around the track.

Hours later, his mother interrupted Tommy at play by showing him a wind-up she had purchased for a boy named Mark Hansen who lived down the street. The train for Mark was not as sleek or as long as his train, but Tommy noticed an oil tanker car in Mark's set that was unlike anything he had. Even though he had a better train set, Tommy began to feel envious of Mark's oil tanker. Tommy pled with his mother to let him keep the tanker. She responded to his fussing: "If you need it more than Mark, you take it."

President Monson recalled how he added the tanker to his set and felt very satisfied---at least for a little while. Later, he walked with his mother over to Mark's home and presented him with the wind-up train, minus the oil tanker. Mark was thrilled with the generous gift. He put the train cars together and began playing with them. Then Tommy's mother wisely asked, "What do you think of Mark's train, Tommy?"

Tommy began to feel guilty about the tanker he had confiscated. He asked his mother to excuse him for a moment, and ran home as fast as his legs could carry him. He detached the oil tanker from his set, along with another car from his own set, and ran back to Mark's home.

Beginning to feel the joy of giving, Tommy burst through the door and said to Mark, "We forgot to bring two cars that belong to your train." He gave Mark the oil tanker and another of his own cars and helped attach them to Mark's set. President Monson remembers how he watched the trains go around the track and "felt a supreme joy, difficult to describe and impossible to forget. The spirit of Christmas had filled my very soul."

THE SCARLET FEVER CHRISTMAS

By Alan Barnes, as told to his wife, Kathleen Barnes

It was the winter of 1942, and Christmas was fast approaching. The world was at war, but it did little to dim the excitement I felt as a seven year-old boy, anticipating the arrival of Santa. I loved everything about Christmas: the biting cold that created the icicle swords hanging from our roof; the familiar colored glass ornaments that hung each year on our tree; my mother's rich pink fruitcake that was more than cake; and the wood logs that we hauled from the basement to replenish the fire in the living room grate.

Christmas brought with it a coziness of home and family and safety and love. It was filled with fun evenings of storytelling and games and puzzles and music . . . School had been dismissed for the holiday break. I was eagerly looking forward to endless days of play and excitement. There would be snow forts and sleigh riding. There would be trips to the store and the visit with Santa Claus and parties and friends and everything wonderful that comes with Christmas.

The excitement was mounting. My plans for fun were escalating—until I awoke one morning feeling sick. As the day wore on, I felt increasingly worse. With a sense of alarm, mother consulted with the doctor. Her greatest fears were confirmed. I had contracted scarlet fever.

This was one of the dreaded diseases of the time. Its complications could be serious, even fatal. The highly contagious nature of this disease required reporting, and by mid-afternoon, the Board of Health had placed a sign in the window that read “Scarlet Fever.” Our house was suddenly under quarantine. According to the public health standard set at the time, no one approached a quarantined home.

It was as if the Scarlet Letter had been stamped on our foreheads. Those in the house were to remain in the house, and those not in the house were not allowed to return. My mother and my twelve-year-old sister, Maureen were with me when the sign went up. My father and my older brother, Ray, were at work. They would not be allowed back in the house until the quarantine was lifted.

It was determined that Dad and Ray would live in our ill-equipped basement. Any supplies mother needed would be left on the back step but nothing could leave our quarters. They would be required to live independently of us and their belongings. . . We communicated by phone during the day, and occasionally in the evening, they would come to the window and wave to us.

Suddenly it was Christmas Eve, and the impact of the quarantine began to surface. Even in my feverish state I wondered, “What does a quarantine do to Santa? Does this mean he cannot come?” I imagined so. I began to worry. Everything I had ever felt about Christmas began to wash away. No Dad, no brother, no stockings by the fire, no Christmas Eve stories, no friends, no Christmas dinner, no presents, no Santa! In other words, “no Christmas.”

As the sun began to set on the day, I gazed from my bed through the window, looking into the night sky. Santa would be riding tonight . . . A deep sadness fell over me. If I had to have scarlet fever, couldn't it have come after Christmas?

While staring into the night, I suddenly saw him. I was sure of it. He passed by my window as if in a dream and yet so real . . . He was by my house. Maybe, just maybe, he would find a way to leave something on Christmas Eve for a small boy with scarlet fever. If the quarantine meant “no Santa,” he

might think to leave something on the front porch. I went to sleep with a glimmer of hope and childlike faith.

Christmas morning dawned. I awoke with mother standing over me, feeling my fevered brow. She grinned as I roused. "It's Christmas," she said, "and it's just possible that Santa found a way to leave a few gifts for you. Let's go see." Maureen joined us as we went to the living room. The fire in the fireplace brought warmth to the room. The lights on the tree seemed to twinkle "good morning," and beneath the tree, by some mystical magic, Santa had carefully placed presents wrapped in shiny paper. My heart leaped. "He did it!" I exclaimed. "He came into our quarantined house and left us gifts."

In the magic of the moment, I forgot about those of the family outside of the quarantine. A little rap on the window diverted my attention. There, bundled in coats, hats, gloves, and scarves, stood my dad and Ray, looking in with their noses pressed against the glass.

My little boy heart tugged as I realized that we were separated by illness. The coldness of their breath clouded their faces as they wistfully watched us enjoying the comforts of our warm, cozy room.

Mother began distributing the gifts. As we unwrapped each one, we held it up so Dad and Ray could give their nod of approval. The cold of the morning finally forced them indoors and back to the basement. Such was Christmas morning.

'Twas THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS By Clement Moore

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;

The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap,

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below,
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer,

With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name;

"Now, Dasher! Now, Dancer! Now, Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! On, Cupid! On, Donner and Blitzen!
To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!"

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too.

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,

Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.

His eyes---how they twinkled! His dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath,
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night."

CHRISTMAS VISIONS

By Don H Staheli

It was Christmas Eve and Grandma and three of her grandchildren were sitting in front of the fire as the last few embers gave off their soft heat. Outside it was cold and the snow was falling gently, so everyone cuddled up a little closer to be sure to stay warm. The children were so excited for Christmas morning that they could hardly hold still, but Grandma's quiet voice quickly got their attention.

"Now children," she said, "it's almost time for bed, but we still have a few minutes for a special story." The children squealed with delight, but then settled down and listened carefully, for they loved Grandma's stories.

Grandma began, "This is the story of the Little Match Girl. It is a story that will help us catch the vision of the true spirit of Christmas."

Busy holiday shoppers passed by without even noticing her. She was just a little girl dressed in ragged clothes. The evening air was freezing, but she had no gloves and no hat. Earlier in the day, as she was hurrying to cross the street, one shoe had fallen off and some thoughtless boys had teased her and run off with it. Now she wore only one tattered shoe, and the other foot was hardly covered in a small, thin stocking.

Her frail body shivered in the cold wind like the last leaf of autumn. "Won't someone buy some matches," she said with a weak voice, but no one seemed to hear. She had spent much of the day trying to sell small boxes of matches to those who hurried by on the sidewalk, but had not sold one. "I can't go home yet," she thought, "father will be so disappointed that I haven't even a penny." The tiny amount of money she made selling matches helped to put food on the table. Her mother and grandmother had died years ago, and father was so busy trying to keep the family fed.

Just then a gust of wintry wind sent the little girl into the narrow alley between two buildings to try to get out of the cold. As she huddled and shivered in the shadows she thought to herself, "Maybe I could just light a match and it would warm my hands a bit."

She took a match and struck it across the side of the box. Immediately, the flame shot up, and there before her eyes, as if the wall of the building had disappeared, was a beautiful dining table set with china plates, crystal goblets, and silver forks, and full of wonderful food---a large roasted turkey steaming bowls of vegetables, pies and cakes, and sparkling cider. "Oh my," said the little girl to herself, "everything I could ever want to eat!" But just as she reached to get a bite, the match went out and with it the vision of delicious food went away.

"I must light another match," she said, and she quickly chose one and struck it against the box. Again, the flame went up brightly and this time, there in the darkened alleyway, she thought she saw a tall and brilliant Christmas tree all decked with lights and shining tinsel. Her eyes were wide with delight as she gazed at the glorious star that shone on the top of the tree. "It is so beautiful," she said, her voice now weaker than ever, "If only father could see it!" But as she reached out to touch an evergreen bough, the match went out and with it went her vision of the wonderfully decorated tree.

Again in the frigid darkness of the alley, aching with cold and disappointment, the little girl decided to light all of the matches at once. "I must get warm," she thought. "I must. Father will understand."

As the bundled matches all lighted at once the alley was bathed in a dazzling flash of light. There standing over the little girl was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Dressed in white, she seemed to be glowing in the match light. Her skin was so soft and clear, and her eyes were gentle and kind. She smiled in a most loving way and tenderly spoke to the little match girl.

“Hello, my dear,” she said, “I’ve come to take you home.” And she reached out to take her by the hand.

“Oh, Grandmother, I love you,” replied the little girl, and she didn’t feel cold anymore.

“Oh, Grandma, that’s such a sad story,” cried one of the grandchildren.

“It does seem sad at first,” replied Grandma, “but when you think about it, it really is a happy story. From the little match girl we learn that material things, as nice as they are, do not bring true warmth and happiness. A vision of true love is the most important thing in life, especially at Christmastime.”

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

By Unknown

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

A Partridge in a Pear Tree

The partridge in a pear tree was a symbol for Jesus Christ (see Luke 13:34)

On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Two Turtle Doves

Two turtle doves represented the Old and New Testaments

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Three French Hens

Three French hens stood for the three Christian virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Four Calling Birds

Four calling birds were symbols of the four Gospels

On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Five Golden Rings

Five gold rings represented the first five books of the Old Testament.

On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Six Geese A-laying

Six geese referred to the six days of creation.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Seven Swans A-swimming

Seven swans reminded them of the seven gifts of the Spirit that Paul outlined in Romans 12:6-8.

On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Eight Maids A-milking

Eight maids stood for the eight Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-10)

On the Ninth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Nine Ladies Dancing

Nine ladies recalled the nine fruits of the Spirit that Paul taught the Galatians (Galatians 5:22-23)

On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Ten Lords A-leaping

Ten lords were symbolic of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1-17)

On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Eleven Pipers Piping

Eleven pipers represented the eleven faithful Apostles (see Luke 6:14-16)

On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .

Twelve Drummers Drumming

Twelve drummers stood for the Twelve Apostles

TILLY'S CHRISTMAS

By Louisa May Alcott

"Now I've a Christmas present after all," Tilly said smiling. "I've always wanted a bird, and this one will be such a pretty pet for me."

"He'll fly away the first chance he gets and die anyhow," said Bessy. "You'd be better off not to waste your time with him."

"He can't pay you for taking care of him, and my mother says it isn't worthwhile to help folks that can't help us," added Kate.

"My mother said, 'Do to others as you would be done to by them,' and I'm sure I'd like someone to help me if I was dying of cold and hunger. I also remember the little saying, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' This bird is my little neighbor, and I'll love him and care for him, just as I often wish our rich neighbor would love and care for us," answered Tilly. She leaned forward slightly, breathing her warm breath over the tiny bird, who looked up at her with confiding eyes, quick to feel and know a friend.

Little did Tilly know, her rich neighbor Mr. King overhears the conversation and observes Tilly's kindness. She carries the bird to her humble home and shares what little food she has with the robin. Her mother is cheered by the bird and encourages Tilly to take good care of him. Tilly begins to discover the joy of selfless love.

Such a poor little supper, and yet such a happy one, for love, charity, and contentment were welcome guests around the humble table. That Christmas Eve was a sweeter one even than that at the great house, where light shone, fires blazed, a great tree glittered, music sounded, and children danced and played.

"We must go to bed early," said Tilly's mother as they sat by the fire. "We must save the wood, for there is only enough to last through tomorrow. The day after, I shall be paid for my work, and we can buy more."

"If only my bird were a fairy bird and would give us three wishes," Tilly said quietly. "How nice that would be! But, the poor dear can give me nothing, and it is of no matter." Tilly was looking at the robin, who lay in the basket with his head under his wing, nothing more than a feathery little ball.

"He can give you one thing, Tilly," her mother said. "He can give you the pleasure of doing good. That is one of the sweetest things in life, and it can be enjoyed by the poor as well as the rich." As Tilly's mother spoke, she softly stroked her daughter's hair with her tired hand.

Suddenly, Tilly started with surprise and pointed toward the window. "I saw a face—a man's face," she confided in a frightened whisper. "He was looking in. He's gone now, but I truly saw him."

Tilly's mother stood up and went to the door. "Some traveler attracted by the light perhaps," she said.

The wind blew cold, the stars shone bright, the snow lay white on the field and the wood, and the Christmas moon was glittering in the sky, but no human person was standing within sight.

"What sort of face was it?" asked Tilly's mother, quickly closing the door.

"A pleasant sort of face. I think, but I was so startled to see it there that I don't quite know what it was like. I wish we had a curtain there," said Tilly.

"I like to have our light shine out in the evening, for the road is dark and lonely just here and the twinkle of our lamp is pleasant to people as they pass by. We can do so little for our neighbors. I am glad we can at least cheer them on their way," said Tilly's mother. "Now put those poor old shoes to dry and go to bed, dearie. I'll be coming soon."

Tilly went, taking her birdie with her to sleep in his basket near her bed, lest he should be lonely in the night. Soon the house was dark and still.

When Tilly came down and opened the front door that Christmas morning, she gave a loud cry, clapped her hands, together, and then stood still, quite speechless with wonder and delight. There, near the stoop, lay a great pile of firewood all ready to be burned. There was also a large bundle and a basket with lovely nosegay of wintry roses, holly, and evergreen tied to the handle.

"Oh, Mother! Who could have left it?" cried Tilly, pale with excitement and surprise of it all. She stepped out to bring in the basket, and her mother, a few steps behind, stooped down to scoop up the bundle.

"The best and dearest of all Christmas angels is called 'Charity,'" Tilly's mother answered, her eyes welling with tears as she undid the bundle. "She walks abroad at Christmastime doing beautiful deeds like this, and never staying to be thanked."

It was all there—all that Tilly had imagined. There were warm, thick blankets, the comfortable shawl, a pair of new shoes, and best of all, a pretty winter hat for Bessy. The basket was full of good things to eat, and on the flowers lay a small note saying, "For the little girl who loves her neighbor as herself."

"Mother, I really do think my little bird is an angel in disguise and that all these splendid things came from him," said Tilly, laughing and crying with joy.

It really did seem so. As Tilly spoke, the robin flew to the table, hopped to the nosegay, and perching among the roses, began to chirp with all his little might. The sun streamed in on the flowers, the tiny bird, and the happy child with her mother. No one saw a shadow glide across the window or ever knew that Mr. King had seen and heard the little girls the night before. No one ever dreamed that the rich neighbor had learned a priceless lesson from his poor little neighbor girl.

And Tilly's bird was a Christmas angel, for by the love and tenderness she gave to the helpless little creature, she brought good gifts to herself, faithful friendship of a little friend who did not fly away, but stayed with her until the snow was gone, making summer for her in the wintertime.

THE LITTLE BLUE DISHES

By Unknown

Once upon a time there was a poor woodcutter who lived with his wife and three children in a forest in Germany. There was a big boy called Hans and a little boy named Peter and a little sister named Gretchen, just five years old. When Christmas was getting near, the children went to the toy shop to look at all of the toys.

"Gretchen," said Peter, "What do you like best?"

"Oh! That little box of blue dishes," said Gretchen. "That is the very best of all."

On Christmas Eve the children hung up their stockings, although their mother had said that they were so poor they could not have much this Christmas. Hans ran out after supper to play with the big boys. Gretchen and Peter sat talking before the fire about the Christmas toys ---and especially about the box of blue dishes.

By and by Gretchen ran off to bed and was soon asleep. Peter ran to look in his bank. There was only one penny, but he took it and ran quickly to the toy shop.

"What have you for a penny?" he said to the toy man.

"Only a small candy heart," said the man. So Peter bought the candy heart and put it in Gretchen's stocking, and then he ran off to bed.

Pretty soon Hans came home. He was cold and hungry. When he saw Gretchen's stocking, he peeked in, then put his hand in and drew out the candy heart. "Oh, dear," he said, "that was for Gretchen for Christmas. I'll run and buy something else for her." So he ran to his bank and saw that he had ten pennies. Quickly he ran to the toy store.

"What have you got for ten pennies?" he asked the storekeeper.

"Well, I'm almost sold out," said the toy man, but here in this little box is a set of blue dishes."

"I will take them," said Hans, and home he ran and dropped the dishes into Gretchen's stocking. Then he went to bed.

Early in the morning the children came running downstairs. "Oh!" said Gretchen. "Look at my stocking!" And when she saw the blue dishes, she was as happy as could be.

But Peter could never understand how his candy heart had changed into a box of blue dishes!

GIFT OF THE MAGI

By O. Henry

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...

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 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: "Mne. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. . .

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have s 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.

And so Della sacrificed her most prized possession ----- her hair ---- in order to earn enough money to buy Jim a 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 (watch) 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. . . 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 Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do---oh! What could I do with a dollar and eight-seven cents?"

. . .Jim was never late. Della doubled the (watch) 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 of saying little silent prayers 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 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? . . . Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy . . ."

"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 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 . . . 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 jeweled rims---just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair . . . 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 dried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm . . . "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 . . . 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. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

RUDOLPH THAT AMAZING REINDEER

By Robert May

On a December night in Chicago several years ago, a little girl climbed onto her father's lap and asked a question. It was a simple question, asked in children's curiosity, yet it had a heart-rending effect on Robert May.

"Daddy," four year old Barbara asked, "Why isn't my mommy just like everybody else's mommy?"

Bob stole a glance across his shabby across his shabby two room apartment. On a couch lay his young wife, Evelyn, racked with cancer. For two years she had been bedridden; for two years, all Bob's income and smaller savings had gone to pay for treatments and medicines.

The terrible ordeal already had shattered two adult lives. Now Bob suddenly realized the happiness of his growing daughter was also in jeopardy. As he ran his fingers through Barbara's hair, he prayed for some satisfactory answer to her question.

Bob may know only too well what it meant to be "Different." As a child he had been weak and delicate with the innocent cruelty of children, his playmates had continually goaded the stunted, skinny lad to tears. Later at Dartmouth, from which he was graduated in 1926, Bob May was so small that he was always being mistaken for someone's little brother.

Nor was his adult life much happier, unlike many of his classmates who floated from college into plush jobs, Bob became a lowly copy writer for Montgomery Ward, the big Chicago mail order house. Now at 33 Bob was deep in debt, depressed and sad.

Although Bob did not know it at the time, the answer he gave the tousled haired child on his lap was to bring him to fame and fortune. It was also to bring joy to the countless thousands of children like his own Barbara on that December night in the shabby Chicago apartment. Bob cradled his little girl's head against his shoulder and began to tell a story.

"Once upon a time there was a reindeer named Rudolph, the only reindeer in the world that had a big red nose. Naturally people called him Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." As Bob went on to tell about Rudolph, he tried desperately to communicate to Barbara the knowledge that, even though some creatures of God are strange and different, they often enjoy the miraculous power to make others happy.

Rudolph, Bob explained, was terribly embarrassed by his unique nose, other reindeer laughed at him, his mother and father and sister were mortified too. Even Rudolph wallowed in self pity.

“Well,” continued Bob, “one Christmas Eve, Santa Claus got his team of husky reindeer – Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, and Vixen ready for their yearly trip around the world. The entire reindeer community assembled to cheer these great heroes on their way. But a terrible fog engulfed the earth that evening and Santa knew that the mist was so thick he wouldn’t be able to find any chimneys.

Suddenly Rudolph appeared, his red nose glowing brighter than ever. Santa sensed at once that here was the answer to his perplexing problem. He led Rudolph to the front of the sleigh, fastened the harness and climbed in. They were off! Rudolph guided Santa safely to every chimney that night. Rain and fog, snow and sleet, nothing bothered Rudolph, for his bright nose penetrated the mist like a beacon.

And so it was that Rudolph became the most famous and beloved of all the reindeer. The huge red nose he once hid in shame was now the envy of every buck and doe in the reindeer world. Santa Clause told everyone that Rudolph had saved the day and from that Christmas, Rudolph has been living serenely and happy.”

Little Barbara laughed with glee when her father finished. Every night she begged him to repeat the tale until finally Bob could rattle it off in his sleep. Then, at Christmas time he decided to make the story into a poem like “The Night Before Christmas” and prepare it in bookish form illustrated with pictures, for Barbara’s personal gift. Night after night, Bob worked on the verses after Barbara had gone to bed for he was determined his daughter should have a worthwhile gift, even though he could not afford to buy one.

Then as Bob was about to put the finishing touches on Rudolph, tragedy struck. Evelyn may die. Bob, his hopes crushed, turned to Barbara as chief comfort. Yet, despite his grief, he sat at his desk in the quiet, now lonely apartment, and worked on “Rudolph” with tears in his eyes.

Shortly after Barbara had cried with joy over his handmade gift on Christmas morning, Bob was asked to an employee’s holiday party at Montgomery Wards. He didn’t want to go, but his office associates insisted. When Bob finally agreed, he took with him the poem and read it to the crowd. First the noisy throng listened in laughter and gaiety. Then they became silent, and at the end, broke into spontaneous applause, that was in 1938.

By Christmas of 1947, some 6,000,000 copies of the booklet had been given away or sold, making Rudolph one of the most widely distributed books in the world. The demand for Rudolph sponsored products, increased so much in variety and number that educators and historians predicted Rudolph would come to occupy a permanent place in the Christmas legend.

Through the years of unhappiness, the tragedy of his wife’s death and his ultimate success with Rudolph, Bob May has captured a sense of serenity. And as each Christmas rolls around he recalls with thankfulness the night when his daughter, Barbara’s questions inspired him to write the story.

THE VIOLIN THIEF

By Joseh Auslander and Audrey Wurdemann

It was a day or two before Christmas. Like all courtrooms, this one smelled of disinfectant and too much steam heat. A few scant rays of pale winter sunshine, struggling in a watery rise through the high dirty windows, dulled the unshed electric lights to whitish blurs. Spectators were few. The docket didn't look exciting.

The accused little man stood before the golden oak bar of justice. He was an old man; they had allowed him the dignity of keeping his hat, but the big blue –coated policeman stood close behind him as the accuser spoke.

"All kinds of people come to my place." The plaintiff was saying. "You'd be surprised. Your honor ...bums, actors out of work, women from over on Park Avenue, too, sometimes. When this little guy comes in he looks respectable, see? So when he asks to see the violin I take it out of the window and hand it to him to look at. If he'd asked to see a watch or a ring, no matter how respectable he looked, I'd keep my eye on him like an eagle. But a fiddle! I turn my back for a second he's run halfway down the block. You wouldn't think he had the nerve!"

The violin lay on a table before the bench; the pale winter night tangled with its amber lacquer. "Seventy five dollars, Your Honor," said the pawn broker. "I wouldn't have let it go for a cent less. And this old goof, he thinks he can run out with it for nothing."

The judge, a fat, tired man, nodded wearily. "Did you tell him the price?"

"Sure, I told him. And he said he didn't have it, but maybe he could buy it on time. And I told him five dollars down and a dollar a week, but he said he didn't have the five."

The judge glanced at the waiting cop. "Suppose we hear from you now."

"It's like he said, your honor," the blue coat stated flatly. "I was just rounding the corner when this little character ran into me. I hear a lot of hooting and hollering where he came from, so I hung onto him. Then up comes Sol, here, who's had his shop on that same block for twenty years. And up come five or six other people who see the guy running out of Sol's place with the fiddle."

The big cop looked down at the little man.

"One thing I'll say about it, he don't make any trouble coming to the station. Only I have a real job getting him to let loose of the fiddle."

"Well," said the judge, "and what have you got to say about all this?"

The little mold man lifted his head; the judge saw that his eyes were a cloudy blue soft as a child's.

"Sir Magistrate, I don't speak English so much, so maybe I can't explain, I pay, sure I pay, someday, but I can't pay now. This all I got." He held up two fingers. "Two dollars I pay. Not five. But here I am lonesome for the violin, and her."

He put his hand over his heart and then at his neck, cocking his head as though his chin rested on a fiddle, "And here." He held out his hands, and though they were gnarled and twisted you could see that they might once have been the supple hands of an artist.

"I understand, Sir Magistrate. I pay, I want to pay, I don't know what came over me. I went crazy for a minute when I had the violin in my hands. I pay, little by little I pay up. But I need the violin now. Before I die. I die soon, without the music."

"Suppose you tell the court why you need the music so badly," said the judge, his eyes on the lozenges of light hovering over the violin on the table.

"Because I am a musician!" that old man drew himself up proudly. "Year in, year out, in Prague and then in Vienna I am a musician in the orchestra. First, I am a third violin, then second, then first. I play in the Theatre twenty years, in the summer for people who sit under trees, in the winter for skaters. Oh, how they waltzed on their skates to our music. But the enemy came. And he broke our violins over our heads because we would not [play the propaganda and they took us away." He shivered. I was away five years."

"You mean you were in a concentration camp?" asked the judge.

"Camp. . . salt mines. . . mills. . . camp again after I get too sick to work." The little man looked at his hands. "I don't know if I can play anymore. . . so good. But here . . . in my heart. . . it will still sing."

"And what do you do now?"

"I have job. I sweep out, sometimes I wash dishes. Busboy, they call me. In cafeteria . . . After I come back . . . from being away nobody was left. My wife, my son, my friends, all gone. So my brother in America send for me. But he's poor, big family, so I don't ask him to buy me violin. I buy myself, only little by little, but I die without."

"Let me see that fiddle," the judge reached across the bench; the cop handed it up to him, carefully he turned it in his hands, unfastened the bow which was attached to one of the pegs by a rubber band. After a moment he tucked the instrument under his chin. Curved his hand around the finger board and twanged the strings gently, But he did not lift the bow.

"Sir Magistrate," said the little man, "do you know what it means to be without music? It is as if they take away my soul."

The judge picked up the bow, held it for a moment on the strings and then laid it down. "Oh please," said the little man. "I must have the music. If I had the violin I can breathe again.

"What do you want for the instrument?" His fingers were softly plucking the strings.

"Seventy-five dollars, Your Honor."

"Seventy-five dollars . . . to, breathe again."

"Then silence fell in the courtroom and resounded through the fading light; the handful of people in the back of the room stared first at the judge and then at each other. "Case dismissed," said the judge. He reached into his trousers pocket. "I think we can fix up a way for you to have the violin. Five dollars down; Here's five."

He reached toward the pawn broker with the money and said, "I will stand behind this man's guarantee to pay you the balance."

The cop fished in his own pocket and came up with a five-dollar bill. "I must be the Irish in me," he said, shaking his head."

From the back of the room two men came up the aisle to the bench. "We're witnesses on another case," one of them said. "How about letting us in on the deal?"

Others struggled down the aisles. The little man tried to speak; choked; he could not be heard above the clamor. The judge rapped for order. And above the clamor the little man found his voice. He turned his hip around as he spoke.

“No, Sir Magistrate,” he said. “I hope you will understand. It is hard to talk now. I am filled up, here, it hurts.” He pointed to his throat. “How can I take so much. . . take the violin this way. I know what you try to do for me here, Judge, Sir Magistrate, how can I fix it up with him?” He pointed to the pawn broker. “So he knows I do not steal. . .Please, Sir Judge. . .I. . .What happens today squeezes in my heart.”

The judge looked at the pawn broker. “How much have you got there?”

The pawn broker regarded the grimy bills in his hands. He counted them slowly. “Twenty-nine dollars and thirty-five cents. Your Honor, but that’s okay by me,” he said, “Seeing as he’s a musician, I’ll make it my professional rate, thirty dollars. . .with the bow thrown in.”

The little man bowed, “A professional rate, yea, that I understand. Always In Europe the shops made rates for the artists. But these people who have paid for me. . .”

And, there, in that court, on a pale winter afternoon a day or two before Christmas, the little man with twisted, gnarled hands took the fiddle lovingly and reverently, as though he took up the pillow upon which rests the Holy Grail, and after a moment he tucked it under his chin, and twanged the strings into tune, and the room was filled with the simple heart searching magic of “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

After he finished, the judge glanced around the room. “Anybody who thinks he’s guilty enough to spend Christmas in jail can stay and be sentenced,” he said gruffly. “Otherwise, you all clear out. I’m remanding every arrest in this room till after New Year’s and then I want you back here, and if you don’t come in and police have to go hunting for you, I’ll crack down hard. And you. . .” He pointed to the little man. “You’re coming home to dinner with me and afterwards, maybe you’ll play for me. I could use a little music.”

CHRISTMAS IS FOR LOVE

By Unknown

Christmas is for love. It is for joy, for giving and sharing, for laughter, for reuniting with family and old friends, for tinsel and brightly decorated packages. But mostly, Christmas is for love. I had not believed this until a small student with wide, innocent eyes and soft rosy cheeks gave me a wondrous gift one Christmas.

Mark was an 11 year-old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter middle-aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's small son. She never failed to remind young Mark that, except for her generosity, he would be a vagrant homeless waif. Still, with all the scalding chilliness at home, he was a sweet gentle child.

I had not noticed Mark particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, I later found) to help me straighten up the classroom. He did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When we did talk, Mark spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite small when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman, who always spent much time with him.

As Christmas grew nearer, however, Mark failed to stay after school each day. I looked to his coming and when, as the days passed, and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, I stopped him one afternoon and asked why he no longer helped me in the room.

I miss being with you, Mark. Is something wrong at home?

Those large gray eyes eagerly lit up. *Did you really miss me?*

Yes, of course, you're my best helper.

I am making you a surprise, he whispered confidentially, a surprise for Christmas.

With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school any more after that.

Finally came the last school day before the holidays. Mark crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back.

I have your present, he said timidly when I looked up. I hope you like it.

He held out his hands, and there laying in his small palms was a tiny wooden chest.

It's beautiful, Mark. Is there something in it? I asked, opening the top and looking in.

Oh, you can't see what's in it, he replied, and you can't touch it, or taste it, or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time, and warm on cold nights, and safe when you're all alone.

I gazed into the empty box. *What is it Mark, I asked gently, that will make me feel so good?*

It's love, he whispered softly and mother always said it's the best when you give it away. And he turned and quietly left the room.

So, now I keep a small toy chest crudely made of scraps of wood, on the piano in my living room and only smile as inquiring friends raise quizzical eyebrows when I explain to them that there is love in it.

Yes, Christmas is for gaiety and mirth and song, for rich food and wondrous gifts. But, mostly, Christmas is for love.

THE LORD'S TREES

By Unknown

Far away on a hillside, grew a forest of trees. Little and big, old and young, tall and short. The trees were very happy with life just as it was on the hillside. But sometimes, too, they spoke of the future, of the things they would like to do and be when they grew up. In the forest there was a mother tree and her three children.

One said, "You know, I should like to be a baby's cradle. I have seen people come into this forest carrying babies in their arms. I think a baby is the sweetest thing I have ever seen and I should like to be made into a baby's bed."

A second tree spoke, "That would not please me at all, I want to be something important. I should like to be a great ship, strong and stately. I should like to cross many waters and carry cargoes of gold."

The third little tree stood off by himself, apparently in deep reflection but did not speak. "And what would you like to be?" asked Mother tree. Have you no dream of the Future?" "No dream," he answered, "except to stay on this hillside and point men to God. What could be better than that?" Mother tree looked at him fondly. "What, indeed?" she said.

Years passed and the three trees grew up to be beautiful tall trees. One day men came to the forest and cut down the first little one. "I wonder whether I shall be made into a baby's cradle. I hope so. I have waited so long," he whispered. But the little tree was not made into a cradle. Instead, it was hewn into rough pieces and carelessly put together to form a manger in Bethlehem. He was heartbroken. "I do not like this at all," he wailed. "This is not what I planned to be shoved into this dark stable with no one to see me but the cattle."

But God, who loved the little tree whispered, "Wait, I will show you something." And he did. For there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shown round about them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men.

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 unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath make known unto us.

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

“Oh, this is wonderful!” he whispered. “In all my dreams I never thought I would be part of such a beautiful miracle. Jesus came to earth to teach all people the way to live. This is better than all my planning.”

And out on the hillside, all the trees of the forest sang for joy because their brother, the little manger, had seen his wish come true.

Years passed by, and men came to the forest to cut down the second tree. “I wonder whether I shall be made into a great vessel now,” this one thought. “I have waited so long. Now perhaps I shall do great things which I have dreamed.”

But the little tree did not do great things. He was not made into a great ship to cross the ocean. But instead he became a tiny fishing boat, owned by a simple fisherman named Peter. The little boat was most unhappy. “To think that my life has come to this,” he said, “just a fishing boat, and Peter, only a fisherman.” But God who loves the little tree, said “Wait, I will show you something.” And he did.

For out of the crowd came a person called Jesus, who entered into the little boat and sat down and taught the people. He spoke words of such wisdom, beauty, and light, that even the multitude and even the boat listened eagerly.

“Oh this is wonderful!” he whispered. “In all my dreams I never thought I would be part of such a beautiful miracle. Jesus came to earth to teach all people the way to live. This is better than all my planning.”

And out on the hillside, all the trees of the forest sang for joy because their brother, the little boat, had seen his wish come true.

Months went by, and men came to the forest to cut down the third tree, the one that wanted just to stand on a hill and point the way to God. He was most unhappy as the axe cut into his heart. “I don’t want to go into the valley,” he thought. “Why couldn’t men leave me alone!”

But men did not leave the little tree alone. They tore away its branches, they cut into its bark and even deeper into its very heart. They hewed it apart and put it together again, in the form of a rude cross. The little tree quivered through all its being. “This is terrible!” he whispered. “They are going to hang someone. Oh, I never wanted this to happen to me. I, who wanted only to point men to God. This is awful?” But, God who loved the little tree said, “Wait I will show you something.” And he did.

For one day, outside Jerusalem, a great multitude gathered. They had come to hang Jesus upon the cross. The sky became dark and a storm came upon the land; there was wind and lightening.

Earthquakes frightened the people. Some know that a great mistake had been made. One Roman soldier standing near the cross said, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

The body of Jesus was taken off the cross and carefully laid in a tomb. There was much sadness because of His great suffering. Then a miracle happened. . . For three days after Jesus, who had been dead, came to life again. He looked the same, yet he was different. Jesus had returned as a resurrected being, and He would never die again! He would live forever.

And the cross began to understand. "This is wonderful!!" he whispered. "I am part of a miracle." Jesus' greatest mission was to give his life so that all who had ever lived on this earth, could someday return to God and live with Him again. In all my dreams, I never thought to point men to God in this way. This is better than all my planning.

At this Christmas time it is good for all of us to stop and think of that which Jesus had done for us. All of us are like the little trees. We are growing and learning and have a dream of what we should like to do someday. And like the little trees, we can each one become a part of this miracle. The miracle of Christmas.

PRECIOUS JEOPARDY

By Unknown

Phil was disgruntled on one particular Christmas Eve because he had just lost his job. His financial situation had been difficult enough even when he was working; now it seemed impossible.

That evening Shirley tried to include Phil in some of the Christmas Eve activities with Polly and Junior, but Phil just grumbled at the price of the gifts. He said Christmas was overly commercialized anyway. Eventually Shirley helped Polly and Junior get ready for bed. Then, tearfully, she retired to her bedroom.

A few minutes later she heard Phil calling from the hall. He yelled for her to go get the pliers. "I've stepped on a needle." Shirley brought the pliers, and Phil clamped the jaws on the needle protruding from his foot and pulled. Out came half of the needle! He and Shirley discussed the possibility of his going to the hospital that night to have the other half of the needle removed. But Phil assured her it could wait until morning.

The next day, Christmas, Phil drove to the hospital but paused outside the door. Somewhere he had heard that if you get a tiny fragment in your body and do not remove it, it could eventually move to one of the vital organs and cause death. Thinking of his finances and that it wasn't that serious of a medical emergency, Phil decided to leave the needle fragment in his foot and take the consequences, whatever they may be. He drove home and told Shirley that everything had been taken care of.

From that moment on Phil believed his life was in jeopardy. He really didn't know if he was going to live from one day to the next, and so he decided he would try to make the most of life on a day to day basis. That Christmas there was a marked change in Phil. He treated Shirley with much kindness and spent time playing with Polly and Junior. Christmas Day was the first day in a long time that Phil felt truly close to his family. Tomorrow he might be dead, but today he would enjoy the important things in life. And strangely, money no longer seemed important.

Tomorrow did come, and Phil Garland again found himself alive. For the second day he was especially considerate to his wife and children, because it might be the last day of his life. Each day thereafter Phil spent more time with Shirley, Polly and Junior, taking odd jobs daily to support his family.

"Precious Jeopardy" ended, as it began on Christmas Eve, one year later. The Garlands celebrations contrasted sharply with those of the previous Christmas, because Phil was happy and at peace. He had lived long enough to celebrate Christmas with Shirley and their children.

On Christmas Eve Phil played a few games with the children. Then the family exchanged a few gifts each had made during the year. During those months Phil had made a beautiful walnut sewing cabinet for Shirley. She wept at his thoughtfulness when he showed it to her.

As the clock struck midnight, Shirley handed Phil her gift – a small box containing a tiny fragment of steel pierced through a piece of velvet. It was the other half of the needle Phil thought was in his foot.

Shirley was in tears, asking Phil's forgiveness. She had found the other half of the needle a few days after he had his accident, but had secretly kept it because it had, in a sense, given Phil back to his family.

Phil, gratefully realizing how his life had changed since the previous Christmas, put his arms around Shirley and told her not to cry, It's Christmas!

LOVE AND CHRISTMAS FEELINGS

By Jack Smith

I didn't question Timmy, age nine, or his seven-year old brother, Billy about the brown wrapping paper they passed back and forth between them as we visited each store.

Every year at Christmas-time, our service club takes the children from poor families in our town on a personally conducted shopping tour. I was assigned Timmy and Billy, whose father was out of work. After giving them the slotted four dollars each we began our trip. At different stores I made suggestions, but always their answer was a solemn shake of the head, no. Finally I asked, "Where would you suggest we look?"

"Could we go to a shoe store, sir?" answered Timmy. "We'd like a pair of shoes for our daddy so he can go to work."

In the shoe store the clerk asked what the boys wanted. Out came the brown paper. "We want a pair of work shoes to fit this foot," they said.

Billy explained that it was a pattern of their daddy's foot. They had drawn it while he was asleep in a chair.

The clerk held the paper up against the measuring stick, then walked away. Soon, he came with an open box. "Will these do?" he asked.

Timmy and Billy handled the shoes with great eagerness. "How much do they cost?" asked Billy.

Then Timmy saw the price on the box. "They're \$16.05," he said in dismay. "We only have \$8.00."

I looked at the clerk, and he cleared his throat. "That's the regular price," he said, "But they are on sale, \$3.98 today only."

Then, with shoes happily in hand the boys bought gifts for their mother and two little sisters. Not once did they think of themselves.

The day after Christmas the boy's father stopped me on the street. The new shoes were on his feet, gratitude was in his eyes. "I just thank Jesus for people who care," he said.

"And I thank Jesus for your two sons," I replied. "They taught me more about Christmas in one evening that I had learned in a lifetime."

WAITING . . . WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS

By Elizabeth English

Herman and I finally locked our store and dragged ourselves home. It was 11:00 p.m. Christmas Eve. We'd sold almost all of our toys; and all of the layaways, except one package had to be picked up. But the person who had put a dollar down on that package never appeared.

Early Christmas morning our 12 year old son Tom and Herman and I were out under the tree opening up gifts. But there was something humdrum about this Christmas. Tom was growing up, and I missed his childish exuberance of past years. As soon as breakfast was over, Tom left to visit friends, and Herman disappeared into the bedroom mumbling. "I'm going back to sleep." So there I was alone. It was nearly 9:00 a.m. and sleet mixed with snow cut the air outside. Sure glad I don't have to go out on a day like today, I thought to myself. And then it began. Something I'd never experienced before. A strange, persistent urge, "Go to the store," it seemed to say. That's crazy, I said to myself, no one opens shop on Christmas Day. For an hour I fought that strange feeling. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer, and I got dressed. I put on my wool coat and cap on my head, then my galoshes and scarf and gloves. Once outside the wind cut right through me and sleet stung my cheeks. I felt ridiculous. I had no business being out in that bitter chill.

There was the store just ahead. But what in the world, I wondered? In front of the store stood two little boys, huddled together, poorly dressed and half frozen. One about nine, and the other six. "Here she comes!" yelled the older one. "See, I told you she would come," he said. The younger one's face was wet with tears, but when he saw me his eyes opened wide and his sobbing stopped. "What are you two children doing out here?" I scolded, hurrying them into the store. "We've been waiting for you," replied the older. "My little brother Jimmy didn't get any Christmas. We want to buy some skates. That's what he wants." I looked at the three dollars in his hand, and at their expectant faces. Then I looked around the store. "I'm sorry," I said, "But we have no ska. . ." Then my eye caught sight of the layaway shelf with its one lone package. Could it be. . .? I walked over and unwrapped the package. Miracle of miracles, there was a pair of skates!

Jimmy reached for them, "Dear Lord," I said silently, "let them be his size. . ." And miracle added upon miracle, they were his size. When the older boy finished tying the laces and saw that the skates fit perfectly he stood up and presented the dollars to me. "No, I'm not going to take your money," I told him. "I want you to have these skates, and use your money to get some gloves for your hands." What I saw in Jimmy's eyes was like a blessing. It was pure joy and it was beautiful. My low spirits rose. As I locked the door, I turned to the older brother and said, "How lucky that I happened to come along when I did. How did you boys know I would come?" I wasn't prepared for his reply. His gaze was steady, and he answered me softly, "I knew you would come," he said, "I asked Jesus to send you."

The tingles in my spine weren't from the cold. I knew God had planned this. As we waved good-bye, I turned home to a brighter Christmas than I had left.

THE SON

By Unknown

Once there was a Father and son who were very close and enjoyed adding valuable art pieces to their collection. Priceless works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet and many others adorned the walls of the family estate. The widowed, elderly man looked on with satisfaction as his only child became an experienced art collector. The son's trained eye and sharp business mind caused his father to beam with pride as they dealt with art collectors around the world.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His beloved son was missing in action. The art collector anxiously awaited more news, fearing he would never see his son again. Within days, his fears were confirmed. The young man had died while rushing a fellow soldier to a medic.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season, a season that he and his son had so looked forward to, would visit his house no longer. On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces of art on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home.

As he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man by saying, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you." As the two began to talk, the soldier told of how the man's son had told everyone of his, not to mention his father's, love of fine art. "I'm an artist," said the soldier, "and I want to give you this."

As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son, Though the world would never considered it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man thanked the soldier, promising to hang the picture above the fireplace.

A few hours later, after the soldier had departed, the old man set about his task. True to his word, the painting went above the fireplace, pushing aside thousands of dollars of paintings. And then the man sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given.

During the days and weeks that followed, the man realized that even though his son was no longer with him, the boy's life would live on because of those he had touched. He would soon learn that his son had rescued dozens of wounded soldiers before a bullet stilled his caring heart.

As the stories of his son's gallantry continued to reach him, fatherly pride and satisfaction began to ease the grief. The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, far eclipsing any interest in

the pieces for which museums around the world clamored. He told his neighbors it was the greatest gift he had ever received.

The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The art world was in anticipation! Unmindful of the story of the man's only son, but in his honor; those paintings would be sold at an auction. According to the will of the old man, all of the art works would be auctioned on Christmas day, the day he had received his greatest gift. The day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled this day; greatness would be achieved as many would claim, "I have the greatest collection."

The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum's list. It was the painting of the man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid. The room was silent. "Who will open the bidding for \$100?" he asked. Minutes passed. No one spoke. From the back of the room came, "Who cares about that painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's forget it and go on to the good stuff." More voices echoed in agreement. "No, we have to sell this one first," replied the auctioneer. "Now, who will take the son?" Finally, a friend of the old man spoke, "Will you take ten dollars for the painting? That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it."

"I have ten dollars. Will anyone go higher?" called the auctioneer. After more silence, the auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice, gone." The gavel fell. Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, "Now we can get on with it and we can bid on these treasures!"

The auctioneer looked at the audience and announced the auction was over. Stunned disbelief quieted the room. Someone spoke up and asked, "What do you mean it's over? We didn't come here for a picture of some old guy's son. What about all of these paintings? There are millions of dollars of art here! I demand that you explain what is going on here!" The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple, according to the will of the father, whoever takes the son . . . gets it all."

Puts things into perspective, doesn't it? Just as those art collectors discovered on that Christmas day, the message is still the same; the love of a Father, a Father whose greatest joy came from his son, who went away and gave his life rescuing others. And because of that Father's love, whoever takes the Son gets it all.

THE MISSING JESUS

By Jean Gietzen

About a week before Christmas the family bought a new nativity scene. When they unpacked it they found two figures of the Baby Jesus. "Someone must have packed this wrong," the mother said, counting out the figures. "We have one Joseph, one Mary, three wise men, three shepherds, two lambs, a donkey, a cow, an angel and two babies. Oh, dear! I suppose some set down at the store is missing a Baby Jesus because we have two."

"You two run back down to the store and tell the manager that we have an extra Jesus. Tell him to put a sign on the remaining boxes saying that if a set is missing a Baby Jesus, call 7126. Put on your warm coats, it's freezing cold out there."

The manager of the store copied down mother's message and the next time they were in the store there was the cardboard sign that read, "If you're missing Baby Jesus, call 7126."

All week long they waited for someone to call. Surely, they thought, someone was missing that important figurine. Each time the phone rang mother would say, "I'll bet that's about Jesus," but it never was. Father tried to explain there are thousands of these scattered over the country and the figurine could be missing from a set in Florida or Texas or California. Those packing mistakes happen all the time. He suggested just put the extra Jesus back in the box and forget about it. "Put Baby Jesus back in the box! What a terrible thing to do," said the children. "Surely someone will call," mother said. "We'll just keep the two of them together in the manger until someone calls."

When no call had come by five o'clock on Christmas Eve, mother insisted that father "just run down to the store" to see if there were any sets left. "You can see them right through the window, over on the counter," she said. "If they are all gone, I'll know someone is bound to call tonight." "Run down to the store?" father thundered. "It's 15 degrees below zero out there!"

"Oh, Daddy, we'll go with you," Tommy and Mary began to put on their coats, Father gave a long sigh and headed for the front closet. "I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered.

Tommy and Mary ran ahead as father reluctantly walked out in the cold. Mary got to the store first and pressed her nose up to the store window. "They're all gone, Daddy," She shouted. "Everyone set must be sold."

"Hooray," Tommy said. "The mystery will now be solved tonight!" Father heard the news still a half block away and immediately turned on his heel and headed back home. When they got back into the house they noticed that mother was gone and so was the extra Baby Jesus figurine. "Someone must have called and she went out to deliver the figurine," my father reasoned, pulling off his boots. "You kids get ready for bed while I wrap mother's present."

Then the phone rang. Father yelled “answer the phone and tell’em we found a home for Jesus.” But it was mother calling with instructions for us to come to 205 Chestnut Street immediately, and bring three blankets, a box of cookies and some milk.

“Now what has she gotten us into?” my father groaned as we bundled up again. “205 Chestnut. Why that’s across town. Wrap that milk up good in the blankets or it will turn to ice before we get there. Why can’t we all just get on with Christmas? It’s probably 20 below out there now. The wind is picking up. Of all the crazy things to do on a night like this.”

When they got to the house at 205 Chestnut Street it was the darkest one on the block. Only one tiny light burned in the living room and, the moment we set foot on the porch steps, my mother opened the door and shouted, “They’re here, Oh thank God you got here, Ray! You kids take those blankets into the living room and wrap up the little ones on the couch. I’ll take the milk and cookies.”

“Would you mind telling me what is going on, Ethel?” my father asked. “We have just walked through below zero weather with the wind in our faces all the way.” “Never mind all that now,” my mother interrupted. “There is no heat in this house and this young mother is so upset she doesn’t know what to do. Her husband walked out on her and those poor little children will have a very bleak Christmas, so don’t you complain. I told her you could fix that oil furnace in a jiffy.”

My mother strode off to the kitchen to warm the milk while my brother and I wrapped up the five little children who were huddled together on the couch. The children’s mother explained to my father that her husband had run off, taking bedding, clothing, and almost every piece of furniture, but she had been all right until the furnace broke down.

“I have been doing washing and ironing for people and cleaning the five and dime,” she said. “I saw your number every day there, on those boxes on the counter. When the furnace went out, that number kept going through my mind, 7162, 7162 that is what it said on the box. If a person is missing Jesus, they should call 7162, 7162. That’s how I knew you were good Christian people, willing to help folks. I figured that maybe you would help me, too. So, I stopped at the grocery store tonight and I called your miss’*s*. I’m not missing Jesus, mister, because I sure love the Lord. But I am missing heat. I have no money to fix that furnace.”

“Okay, Okay!” said father. “You’ve come to the right place. Now let’s see. You’ve got a little oil burner over there in the dining room, Shouldn’t be too hard to fix, probably just a clogged flue. I’ll look it over, see what it needs.”

Mother came into the living room carrying a plate of cookies and warm milk. As she set the cups down on the coffee table, I noticed the figure of Baby Jesus lying in the center of the table. It was the only sign

of Christmas in the house. The children stared wide-eyed with wonder at the plate of cookies my mother set before them.

Father finally got the oil burner working but said you need more oil. "I'll make a few calls tonight and get some oil. Yes, sir, you came to the right place," father grinned.

On the way home father did not complain about the cold weather and had barely set foot inside the door when he was on the phone.

"Ed, Hey, how are ya, Ed?" "Yes, Merry Christmas to you too. Say Ed, we have kind of an unusual situation here I know you've got that pickup truck. Do you still have some oil in that barrel on your truck? You do?"

By this time the rest of the family were pulling clothes out of their closets and toys off of their shelves. It was long after their bedtime when they were wrapping gifts. The pickup came. On it were chairs, three lamps, blankets and gifts. Even though it was 30 below, father let them fide along in the back of the truck.

No one ever did call about the missing figure in the nativity set, but as I grow older I realize that it wasn't a packing mistake at all. Jesus saves, that's what HE DOES.

WHY THE CHIMES RANG

By Raymond MacDonald Alden

There was once, in a far-away 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. Although, 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, everyone 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 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 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. Everyone has gone to the church now, but when you come back you can bring someone 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 the 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 anyone’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 tear, 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. Everyone 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 him.

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,” everyone 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 as though he had been shot, and everyone looked at the old minister, who was standing by the altar, holding up his hand for silence. Not a sound could be heard from anyone in the church, but 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.

THE GREAT WALLED COUNTRY

By Raymond MacDonald Alden

Away at the North End of the World, farther than men have ever gone with their ships or their sleds, is a land filled with children. It's filled with children because nobody who lives there ever grows up. The king and 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.

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 would 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 home 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, 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 all the people and no one sees the secrets and presents, and there are always enough nice things to go around.

But there was once a time, so many years ago that they would have forgotten 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, who had succeeded in getting over the wall.

When this old man inquired about their Christmas celebration, and was told how they carried it out every year he said to the king, "That is 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 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 everyone could pick out just what he wanted for himself."

They decided it was a very practical idea and so the proclamation was made, and the plan seemed as wise to the children of the country as it had to the king and his counselors. Everyone at some time had been a little disappointed with his Christmas gifts, and 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, everyone said, "I wish you a Merry Christmas!" to the person nearest him, and then they separated to go on their way 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 he spoke to one another their eyes did not shine as gladly as he had noticed them in other years; but there could be no reason for this, since everyone was expecting a better time than usual. So he thought no more of it. There was only one other 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 this 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 happy from morning to night. He had always gone to the forest on Christmas Eve and returned with his arms and pockets full of 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 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 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 for 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 anyone, for he was a little afraid others would tell him not to 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 on 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 they had never seen 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 they had seen other Christmas Eves. No presents. 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!” Inge said. “I have a bag full of them.” But he did not offer to show them, because he did not want the children to see that they were really all for his sister, instead of him.

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 footsteps 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 those things came from, and were told. “Why, from the Christmas tree forest.” And they shook their heads, not knowing what it meant.

The king held a council and appointed a committee to go on a very hard journey to visit Grandfather Christmas and see if they could find out what was the matter.

They had to go down Father Christmas’s chimney and when they reached the bottom of it they found themselves in the very room where Grandfather Christmas lay sound asleep. It was very difficult to wake him, but when they finally did, the prince, who was in charge of the committee said, “Oh, sir! 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 forgot anything. The presents were there. You did not see them, that’s all.

The children told him they had searched long and hard and found nothing. “Indeed!” said Grandfather Christmas.

“And did little Inge, the boy with crippled sister find none?” The committee had heard about that and didn’t know what to say.

“The presents were there, but they were not 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.”

The Proclamation was made next year that everyone was to seek gifts for others!

THE LITTLEST ANGEL

From the story by Charles Tazewell

Once upon a time—many, many years ago as time is calculated by men, but only Yesterday in the Celestial Calendar of Heaven—There was, in Paradise, a thoroughly un-happy, and 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 Gate-keeper and waited for admittance to the Glorious Kingdom of God.

Standing defiantly, he tried to pretend 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.

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, tried to hide the telltale evidence of sniffing. A most un-angelic sound, which so startled 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. The shrill, earsplitting whistle of the littlest Angel could be heard at all hours through the golden streets. It startled the Patriarch Prophets and disturbed their meditations. Yes, and on top of that, he 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 knocked everyone's wings askew as he darted into place.

Although his behavior might have been overlooked, his appearance was even worse. It was first whispered among the 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 hand when he ran, and he was always running. Even when he stood very still, it never behaved as a halo should. It was always slipping down over his right eye, or over his left eye. Or else, just for pure meanness, slipping off the back of his head and rolling down some Golden street just so he'd have to chase after it!

Yes, and his wings were neither useful nor ornamental. All Paradise held its breath when the Littlest Angel perched himself like a sparrow on the very edge of a 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 fact that he forgot to move his wings, the Littlest Angel always fell head over halo!

It was also reported 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 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 donned an almost clean garment, and then, with a heavy heart, trudged his way to the place of judgment.

He tried to postpone the ordeal by pausing a few moments to read the long list of new arrivals, although all Heaven knew he couldn't read a word. But at last he slowly approached a doorway on which was mounted a pair of golden scales, signifying that Heavenly Justice was dispensed within. To the Littlest Angel's great surprise, he heard a merry voice inside---singing!

The Littlest Angel removed his halo and breathed upon it heavily, then polished it upon his garment, which added nothing to his 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 pulling his head into the collar of his garment, 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 un-heavenly! Come here, Cherub, and tell me all about it!"

The Littlest Angel ventured a look. 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 a 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 shown a memory of another small boy from 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 a 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 and appearance was all that any angel could wish for. And 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 Wing-maker, yes, and even the Halo-Smith put aside their usual tasks to prepare their gifts for the Blessed Infant, All but the Littlest Angel. He sat himself down on the top-most step of Paradise and thought.

What could he give that would be most acceptable to the Son of God? At one time, he dreamed of composing a hymn of adoration. But the Littlest Angel was lacking in musical talent.

Then he grew 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 too small to read or write. “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 the Day of Days, he proudly brought it from its hiding place behind a cloud, and humbly 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 radiant splendor and beauty that Heaven and all the Universe were lighted by their glory. And when the Littlest Angel saw this, he suddenly 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 on bright summer day on the 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. 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?

He turned to run and hide, but he stumbled and fell, and with a cry and clatter of halo, rolled in a ball to the very foot of the Heavenly Throne!

There was an ominous silence in the Celestial City, a silence complete and undisturbed save for the 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, regretful, 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 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 men would call forever "The shining star of Bethlehem!"

THE OTHER WISE MAN

From the story by Henry Van Dyke

The other wise man's name was Artaban. He was one of the Magi and he lived in Persia. He was a man of great wealth, great learning and great faith. With his learned companions he had searched the scriptures as to the time that the Savior should be born. They knew that a new star would appear and it was agreed between them that Artaban would watch from Persia and the others would observe the sky from Babylon.

On the night he believed the sign was to be given, Artaban went out on his roof to watch the night sky. "If the star appears, they will wait for me ten days, and then we will all set out together for Jerusalem. I have made ready for the journey by selling all of my possessions and have bought three jewels—a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl. I intend to present them as my tribute to the king."

As he watched, an azure spark was born out of the darkness, rounding itself with splendor into a crimson sphere. Artaban bowed his head. "It is the sign", he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him."

The swiftest of Artaban's horses had been waiting saddled and bridled in her stall, pawing the ground impatiently. She shared the eagerness of her master's purpose.

As Artaban placed himself upon her back, he said, "God bless us both from failing and our souls from death."

They began their journey. Each day his faithful horse measured off the allotted proportion of the distance, and at nightfall on the tenth day, they approached the outskirts of Babylon. In a little island of desert palm trees, Artaban's horse scented difficulty and slackened her pace. Then she stood still, quivering in every muscle.

Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying in the roadway. His skin bore the mark of a deadly fever. The chill of death was in his lean hand. As Artaban turned to go, a sigh came from the sick man's lips.

Artaban felt sorry that he could not stay to minister to this dying stranger, but this was the hour toward which his entire life had been directed. He could not forfeit the reward of his years of study and faith to do a single deed of human mercy. But then, how could he leave his fellow man alone to die?

"God of truth and mercy," prayed Artaban, "direct me in the path of wisdom which only thou knowest." Then he knew that he could not go on. The Magi were physicians as well as astronomers. He took off his robe and began his work of healing. Several hours later the patient regained consciousness, Artaban

gave him all that was left of his bread and wine. He left a potion of healing herbs and instructions for his care.

Though Artaban rode with the greatest haste the rest of the way, it was after dawn that he arrived at the designated meeting place. His friends were nowhere to be seen. Finally his eyes caught a piece of parchment arranged to attract his attention. It said, "We have waited till past midnight, and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert."

Artaban sat down in despair and covered his face with his hands. "How can I cross the desert with no food and with a spent horse? I must return to Babylon, sell my sapphire and buy camels and provisions for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only the merciful God knows whether or not I shall lose my purpose because I tarried to show mercy."

Several days later when Artaban arrived at Bethlehem, the streets were deserted. It was rumored that Herod was sending soldiers, presumably to enforce some new tax, and the men of the city had taken their flocks into the hills beyond his reach.

The door of one dwelling was open, and Artaban could hear a mother singing a lullaby to her child. He entered and introduced himself. The woman told him that it was not the third day since the three wise men had appeared in Bethlehem. They had found Joseph and Mary and the young child, and had laid their gifts at His feet. Then they had gone as mysteriously as they had come. Joseph had taken his wife and babe that same night and had secretly fled. It was whispered that they were going far away into Egypt.

As Artaban listened, the baby reached up his dimpled hand and touched his cheek and smiled. His heart warmed at the touch. Then suddenly, outside there arose a wild confusion of sounds. Women were shrieking. Then a desperate cry was heard, "The soldiers of Herod are killing the children!"

Artaban went to the doorway. A band of soldiers came hurrying down the street. The captain approached the door to thrust Artaban aside, but Artaban did not stir. His face was as calm as though he were still watching the stars. Finally his out-stretched hand revealed the giant ruby. He said, "I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will go on his way and leave this house alone."

The captain, amazed at the splendor of the gem, took it and said to his men, "March on, there are no children here."

Then Artaban prayed, "Oh God, forgive me my sin, I have spent for men that which was meant for God. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

But the voice of the woman weeping of joy in the shadows behind him said softly, "Thou hast saved the life of my little one. May the Lord bless thee and keep thee and give thee peace."

Artaban, still following the King went on into Egypt seeking everywhere for traces of the little family that had fled before him. For many years we follow Artaban in his search. We see him at the pyramids. We see him in Alexandria taking counsel with a Hebrew rabbi who told him to seek the King not among the rich but among the poor.

He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land, and the poor were crying for bread. He made his dwelling in plague-stricken cities. He visited the oppressed and the afflicted in prisons. He searched the crowded slave-markets. Though he found no one to worship, he found many to serve, as the years passed he fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick and comforted the captive.

Thirty-three years had now passed away since Artaban began his search. His hair was white as snow. He knew his life's end was near, but he was still desperate with hope that he would find the King. He had come for the last time to Jerusalem.

It was the season of the Passover and the city was thronged with strangers. Artaban inquired where they were going. One answered, "We are going to the execution on Golgotha outside the city walls. Two robbers are to be crucified, and with them another called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people. He claims to be the Son of God and the priests and elders have said that he must die. Pilate sent him to the cross.

How strangely these familiar words fell upon the tired heart of Artaban. They had led him for a lifetime over land and sea. And now they came to him like a message of despair. The King had been denied and cast out. Perhaps he was already dying. Could he be the same one for whom the star had appeared thirty-three long years ago?

Artaban's heart beat loudly within him. He thought, "It may be that I shall yet find the King and be able to ransom him from death by giving my treasure to his enemies."

But as Artaban started toward Calvary, he saw a troop of soldiers coming down the street, dragging a sobbing young woman. As Artaban paused, she broke away from her tormentors and threw herself at his feet, her arms clasped around his knees.

"Have pity on me," she cried. "And save me. My father was also of the Magi, but he is dead. I am to be sold as a slave to pay his debts."

Artaban trembled as he again felt the conflict arising in his soul. It was the same that he had experienced in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem. Twice the gift which he had consecrated to the King had been drawn from his hand to the service of humanity. Would he now fail again? One thing was clear, he must rescue this helpless child from evil.

He took the pearl and laid it in the hand of the girl and said, "Daughter, this is the ransom. It is the last of treasures which I had hoped to keep for the King."

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky thickened and shuddering tremors of an earthquake ran through the ground. The houses rocked. The soldiers fled in terror. Artaban sank beside a protecting wall. What had he to fear? What had he to hope for? He had given away the last of his tribute to the King. The quest was over and he had failed. What else mattered?

The earthquake quivered beneath him. A heavy tile, shaken from a roof, fell and struck him. He lay breathless and pale. Then there came a still small voice through the twilight. It was like distant music. The rescued girl leaned over him and heard him say, "Not so, my Lord; for when saw I thee hungered and fed thee? Or thirsty and gave thee drink? When saw I thee a stranger and took thee in? Or naked and clothed thee? When saw I thee sick or in prison and came unto thee? Thirty-three years have I looked for thee; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered unto thee, my King."

The sweet voice came again, "Verily I say unto thee, that inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me."

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the face of Artaban as one long, last breath exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasure accepted. The Other Wise Man Had found the King.

THE FIFTY-DOLLAR GOLD PIECE

By L. Cameron

In Amsterdam there lived a wealthy merchant and his wife who were very devout Christians. Every year at Christmastime they would contribute thousands of dollars to hospitals and the poor. But this year they wanted to do something different, something that had never been done before, something that would last a long time and make everyone involved more thankful for their blessings.

They thought and thought with little success until one day the merchant's wife conceived of a brilliant plan. "I have it, I have it!" When the plan was explained, Hans admitted he could not have invented a better one himself. "Perfect," he concluded, "just perfect! We shall begin immediately."

The following day there appeared a strange and unbelievable notice in the newspaper which read: "Mr. and Mrs. Hans Holberg are offering a fifty-dollar gold piece to the first person to stand at their door at daylight on the morning of December 24th, Christmas Eve." That was all. The readers could not believe their eyes. "The notice must be a mistake," thought some. "Who would be so foolish as to give away a fifty-dollar gold piece to anyone who comes to the door? And what is the purpose in such a strange proposal? Only the educated can read and only the wealthy can afford the news—it certainly is not meant to help the poor". . . and many such thoughts went through the minds of the readers.

The Holberg family was well-known all over Holland for their generous contributions to charity—but this seemed incredible! Some thought they were getting senile and others thought it was a prank. But there it was in big, bold print--A FIFTY-DOLLAR GOLD PIECE—only for the asking!

Now, the first person to stand at the door was indeed one who needed more riches as a dog needs more fleas. For the person waiting first in line when the door was opened on Christmas Eve was none other than Joseph Adler, a moneylender, who lived in the wealthiest district of Amsterdam. At any rate, he was by no means the kind of person you would expect to find waiting at someone's door for a handout. But there he was, and the Holbergs could not deny him what they had promised.

Joseph Adler was invited in and the gold piece was taken from its container, a bluish, silver goblet, and slipped into the hand of its new owner. "One moment," cautioned Mr. Holberg, before Adler could reach the door. "We require just one stipulation and believing you are an honest man, we are sure you will comply with this simple request. We give you this gold piece on one condition—that if you should meet someone within a week who is less fortunate than yourself, you will give the coin with the same instructions we have given you." Adler nodded his head. "That is all. Thank you for coming."

Joseph Adler was happy now that he had camped all night on the Holberg porch, and yet he was disturbed at the prospect of losing the coin to someone else. "Well," he thought, "Mr. Holberg did not say if I should *find* someone less fortunate, but if I should *meet* someone less fortunate." And thus went his thought to ways and means he could devise to avoid such an unfortunate happenstance. "Maybe," he thought, "I can pretend an illness—then I shall not meet one such person—then I can honestly keep this coin without a guilt!"

But to Joseph Adler's surprise, even before he reached his home by alleys and seldom-traveled byways, he noticed a friend, or rather, a friend noticed him, even with Adler's face partly tucked inside his overcoat. He at first tried to ignore this friend, who was by no means poor but still less fortunate than himself; for this man's wife had recently died, leaving no mother for his seven children.

Adler soon realized, however, that he could not ignore his friend, and, with much hesitation, decided to comply with the condition he had agreed upon. So, giving the same instructions he had received from the Holbergs, he handed the coin to his surprised friend, Franz Freiburg, and continued on his way.

Franz, who had been feeling sorry for himself, was now feeling uplifted for the first time since his wife died. For he was a jolly sort who loved to sing and dance and make jokes. But over the past few months, he had not told a single joke, or laughed, or even smiled. "Today," he said to himself, "I think I shall smile again. Life is not so bad after all—I still have my business, a nice home, and seven wonderful children." And squeezing tightly the fifty-dollar gold piece, he too began to whistle as he walked.

But coming toward him was his Uncle's wife, the widow Freiburg, and without much thought he realized the coin could no longer be rightfully his. For she had not only lost her husband, as recent as six years before, but in that time had also lost her only child—a son, her sister, and her mother. And although she had been at one time an opera singer of great renown and a very pleasant person: now, with so many misfortunes falling upon her at once, she had turned bitter and was known only as a cantankerous old woman who held little praise for anyone.

And so it was with her meeting of Franz. Before he could open his mouth to announce the good news, she was scolding him like a mother hen. "You, Franz Garret Freiburg, you dare to speak to me! You, who have children and a business and a church and attend to none of them! I have not seen you at the church door since you were a child—and what would your wife think, if she were alive, seeing you here on the street like a vagabond at this hour of the morning—and on Christmas Eve with your seven little ones at home! Indeed! Well, what do you have to say for yourself!" And such was her railment until at length he was somehow able to speak his peace and pass on the fifty-dollar gold piece.

"I don't want your . . ." she tried to yell, but could see it was no use as he had turned the corner and disappeared. She would have to keep the coin she finally decided. "Anyway," she thought, "this coin does not belong to Franz but to the benevolent Holberg family, (which was one of the few families she found above reproach).

But unlike the other two, the widow Freiburg was not so naïve as to think she could keep the coin; for she was a good person at heart and realized there were many who needed the gold piece more than herself. So off she went and was soon relaxing in her favorite chair—humming a tune she had not sung for many years.

In the evening, there came a knock at the door, and supposing it was her brother's family coming to share the Christmas spirit, the widow Freiburg hurried to the door. But there instead was a chimney sweep, a young man of about twelve years who was so covered with soot she thought he could do a better service by cleaning himself. Her chimney had been recently cleaned and upon telling him this, he wrinkled up his face and turned to leave, when she grabbed his arm and pressed the shiny coin into the palm of his hand. Astonished and very much perplexed, he inquired the reason for such an act of extreme generosity. She then told the story of the coin's beginning and the one condition, which he promised to remember and keep.

So glad was the chimney sweep that his feet hardly touched the ground as he ran to meet his friend. The two sweeps met as they always did on the steps of the Westerkerk, and then began the long walk home, discussing their nightly adventures. Simon always saved the best news for last, but tonight he could hardly wait to tell his friend . . . but then he realized that there beside him was one even less

fortunate than himself. Peter had only one leg, the other was a peg, and Peter's family, the Hannesburgs, were even poorer than his own. The father Hannesburg had been ill for eleven years and his wife and ten children were fed and clothed on the meager amounts procured from a family fruit stand and Peter's chimney sweeps.

Overwhelmed and nearly speechless, Peter thanked his friend for this most welcome gift and hurried home to inform the rest of the Hannesburgs. "For who could be poorer," he asked himself, "and more in need of this gold piece than those of my own family?" Their home was barely adequate for five, much less twelve, and the ancient wood and bricks that held it together for over a century were finally beginning to crumble. They had no heat and depended solely on the rags that Peter's mother and sisters could obtain from the church to sew together for blankets.

The Hannesburgs stayed awake nearly all that night discussing their newly found treasure—stating over and over again how this was the happiest Christmas they had ever spent. For what could be greater than a fifty-dollar gold piece that equaled as much as the whole family could earn in several months and as much as Peter could earn in a year by sweeping chimneys! Oh, what a great thing the Lord had blessed them with!

Heidi wanted a doll. She had wanted a doll of her own since she was three; and although she was past the age when most girls play with dolls, she still wanted on more than anything. She didn't really care what kind as long as it was hers and she didn't have to share it with anyone. She could dress it anyway she pleased and snuggle up to it at night and show it off to her friends. Oh, how thankful she was for the fifty-dollar gold piece!

William was so excited he could hardly contain himself thinking about the color and shape of the bicycle he wanted. He couldn't wait until the day he could pick out just the perfect one and proudly ride it home. What a thrilling day it would be!

Peter wanted a fishing reel. He had carved his own pole and all he needed now was a reel to have an outfit lit the other fellow—boy he'd show those guys how to fish! And so went the thoughts of each child as they dreamed of their most treasured hopes.

The parents too had dreams. They were thinking of the family's future and how they could make each child a little happier. The children were so good to help and all they received for their labors was a run-down house and meagerest necessities. But now, now, they could finally show them how much they really appreciated them! "Let's see," they planned, "we could give each of the younger children two dollars and each of the older children three dollars. That would still leave six dollars to repair the leaky roof, twelve dollars for a new fruit stand, and nine left over for savings and emergencies! What a blessed day!"

On the following day, Christmas, it was customary for numerous unfortunate souls to go about the city seeking charity from those who could afford to give. Some were blind, some crippled, and others were retarded in the mind. They would offer to do what they could in the way of household chores but most often the donor would simply drop a coin in their cup and thank the Lord that he was not that unfortunate soul. And not one of these blind or crippled souls had ever approached the home of the Hannesburgs—at least, not until that very day.

Mr. and Mrs. Hannesburg had called the family together in their tiny anteroom to announce how they might divide the money, when a knock was heard at the door. When the door was opened, they could

hardly believe their eyes—for each of them knew the condition with which the coin was given and each was thinking the same thought: “Why did this beggar have to come here! For surely there are thousands of homes he would never visit and why couldn’t *ours* be one of *these*!” But the beggar’s maimed hand and white cane kept staring them in the face. What an unfortunate soul the lord had sent to their doorstep! One both blind and crippled!

The room was as quiet as a coffin. No one stirred. Each of them seemed as transfixed as a wax figurine. Finally, Mrs. Hannesburg slowly made her way to the door; and with much hesitation, carefully slipped the heavy coin into the beggar’s cup. When the coin was explained and the beggar had turned to leave, the eyes of each were filled with tears as they thought of the plans they had made. William thought of his bicycle—he only wanted a used one! The others were thinking similar thoughts and feeling sorry for themselves.

As they watched the blind beggar struggle down the steps and grope to find his way, a peculiar change came over them. They suddenly realized how selfish they had been and how unfortunate this beggar really was. “Surely no one could be less fortunate than this! Surely the coin will go no further!”

When the door was closed a piercing hush filled every corner of the room and a sweet, peaceful feeling penetrated the heart of everyone. It was then they realized that each of them could see and hear and use his arms and legs; it was then they realized how much God had blessed them!

Now you may think that this is the end of the story—that the blind beggar kept the coin. But this is not the case, for you see, the blind and crippled beggar did not think himself the least fortunate of all, for he befriended a leper who had no kin to watch him and . . .

**THE LITTLE SHEPHERD:
A VERY SPECIAL CHRISTMAS STORY**
As Retold by Don J. Black

The little boy sat quite alone on the hilltop, his shepherd's crook across his knees, his small square lunch basket beside him. He made an odd distorted shadow in the white light of the moon, for even the shawl that his mother had woven of the lamb's wool could not hide the ugly hump that lay (a burden much too heavy for so young a lad to bear) between his shoulders.

Far below him, dotting the hillside with irregular shadows, were the sheep. The majority of them slept but a few wandered aimlessly up and down the slope. The little boy, however, was not watching the flock. His head was thrown back, and his wide eyes were fixed on the sky. There was an intensity in his gaze and a strange wistful smile on his lips.

The smile reflected thoughts of, "Perhaps it will happen again, perhaps though a third of a century has gone by. Perhaps I shall be privileged to see the great star and hear the angel voices as my father did."

The moon riding high in the heavens, went under a black cloud. For a moment the world was dark. The little boy sighed and lowered his eyes. "Though it is the time of the anniversary," he breathed, "there will be no star this night. Neither will the angels sing...."

The time of Anniversary. How often the little boy had listened to the story of the miracle that had taken place so long ago! The little boy's father had been a little boy then—he had been the youngest of the shepherds on that glorious occasion when an angel anthem sounded across the world and a star shone over the tranquil town of Bethlehem. The little boy's father had followed that star; with other shepherds he had come to the stable of the inn. Crowding through the narrow doorway, he had seen a woman with a baby in her arms.

"But," his father would say, "She was no ordinary woman! There was something in her face that made one think of...lighted candle. And there was a tenderness in her smile that the very cattle felt, for they drew near unto her, and seemed to even kneel. It was not completely her beauty—altho' beauty she did possess! It was a shine from within."

"And the baby...what of the baby?" the little boy would say.

The father's hand habitually touched his small son's shoulder at this point—touched it and drew away as if the brief contact caused him anguish, the hump, high and distorted, was so obvious.

"The baby," he said, and his voice grew hushed, "was as unlike other infants as his mother was different from other women. Scarce an hour old when first I glimpsed him, there was a sense of wisdom on his brow, and his tiny, up curled hands seemed so tender, yet even to hold power. I found myself kneeling

as the cattle knelt, and there was moisture upon my face; and though I was lad tall for my age, I was not ashamed.

Alone on the hillside, the little boy could almost hear the sound of his father's voice in the stillness. His father's voice telling the story of the marvelous infant and of the Wise Men who had come to visit, following also, the path of the star. They had come bearing gifts, the fame of which traveled through all the land. Often the little boy had heard of the gold and frankincense and myrrh; often he had shivered at the tale of the king who had ordered death to all the infants. Often he had thrilled to the danger and excitement of a worried young mother and her sober husband who stolen away into the land of Egypt with her child.

"Many of us thought that the child had been captured and slain by Herod," the little boy's father invariably finished, "until a decade passed and we heard rumors of a youth who bore his name, and lectured in a Temple at Jerusalem to a group of learned doctors. A few years ago we heard that this same youth, now grown older, had organized group of men, that with them, he was journeying from place to place, preaching, teaching, and aiding the needy. And, (here the little boy's father had a habit of lowering his voice and glancing seriously around the room) "there are some who say he has become a Messiah, and that he does more than just help the cause of the common people. There are some who say that he performs wonderful deeds, healing the sick, and the blind, and the lepers—even raising the dead."

Once at this point the little boy interrupted, "O I would that I might meet him. I would that he might take the hump from my back and make me strong and straight like other children."

With a loving finger laid against her son's lips, the little boy's mother caused silence. "What must be, must be," she told him. "You were born that way, my son. It is better," looking at her husband, "that we change the subject! There might be listening near."

It was growing cold on the hillside. The child drew the shawl closer about his tired body and wished that he were not a shepherd. Shepherds led a lonely life—they did not fit into the bright places of the world. Rooms gaily lighted at eventide were of ease; they were not for shepherds. But what else could a crippled boy do? What else than tend sheep.

Yawning wearily, the little boy looked up at the sky. From the position of the moon he judged it to be about middle night; it would still a long while before sunrise, still hours before someone would come to take his place and he could limp home. And yet middle night had its good too! For at that time he could break his fast and partake of the lunch that his mother had packed so neatly into a basket.

As he reached for the basket, and opened it slowly, the little boy was wondering what had been prepared for him tonight by his mother. He found that there was a flask of goat's milk, and nearly a loaf of crusty, dark bread, and some yellow cheese; that there were dried figs, sugary with their own

sweetness. And, wrapped separately, he came upon a real treat—a cake made of eggs and sifted flour with lemon in it—and raisins!

He had expected the bread and the cheese and the milk. Even the figs he had expected. But the cake was a surprise, the sort of surprise that happened seldom to break the monotony of watching his father's sheep. His eyes gleamed as he surveyed it, and some of the sadness went out of them. Carefully he set the basket down and spread on the ground beside him the square of linen in which his mother had folded the lunch. Carefully, he laid out the flask of milk, the bread, the cheese, but not the cake, which he left tucked away in the depths of the basket. He left it there so he might not be tempted to eat it first!

"It is so good to be hungry," he said aloud. "Yes, and to have food."

Suddenly, from somewhere just behind him a voice spoke. It was not a loud voice and yet it seemed to carry beyond the hillside. "Indeed, yes," said a voice. "It is good to be hungry and to have food and to..."

Startled, for he thought he was quite alone with his thoughts and the drowsing sheep, the little boy glanced back across his crooked shoulder. He saw a man standing upon the brow of the hill, silhouetted against the moonlit sky. Ordinarily he would have been afraid, for there were often cruel robbers in the middle of the night. But somehow the sight of this man, who was tall and muscular, failed to frighten him. He did not know why he instinctively completed the man's unfinished sentence.

"And to share it," he murmured. "You are a stranger, sir?" the man came closer to the child and stood looking down on him. "No, not a stranger," he said slowly, "never a stranger. As it happens, my journey started not far from this very place—started years before you my lad saw the light. I am by way of completing a circle."

Altho' he couldn't imagine what the man meant, the boy made swift response.

"I was about to eat my lunch," pointing at the square of linen on which he had arranged the food from his basket. "One grows so hungry on the hillside. I am a shepherd, sir. I tend my father's flock, and each night my mother packs for me a simple meal. Will you be seated and break bread with me? Perhaps," the boy hesitated shyly, "you will talk with me as we eat? It grows lonely on the dark hillside—I long at times for companionship."

The man continued to peer down from his impressive height. His eyes held a warm glow; it was as if a candle burned somewhere behind them, the little boy thought. He recalled words that his father had spoken when he described a woman in a stable. He felt so comforted by the man's glance that he smiled up into the kindly face, and the man spoke again.

“It is a strange coincidence,” he said, “the fact that you are a shepherd, for I also tend my father’s flock! And I also...” his face shone a luminous smile, “have often grown lonely waiting for the gates of dawn to open. Are you sure,” (the man began to gracefully seat himself upon the ground) “that you have sufficient nourishment for two? I should not like to deprive you of anything.”

Gazing, fascinated, into the man’s face, the little boy replied: “But yes! I have a large flask of goat’s milk, and some yellow cheese and nearly a loaf of bread, and ten figs. And,” –for a second he hesitated— “that’s a great plenty,” he finished. He did not mention the cake, still wrapped in the basket. For a cake—cake made of sifted flour and eggs and lemon and raisins was indeed a rare delicacy. And it was not a very big cake.

The man bent forward to retie the thong of his sandal. The little boy saw that the sandal was covered in dust. He tried to keep his eyes from glancing toward his lunch basket as he tore the crusty brown bread into fragments.

“Perhaps your feet are aching,” he asked as he placed the fragments in the center of the linen cloth. “This hill is hard to climb. I am close to being spent when I reach the summit of it, but I must need sit high so that I can watch all the sheep.”

The man said slowly, “I have climbed steeper hills than this my lad, and know that there are steeper hills to be. My feet do not ache. How long,” abruptly changing the subject, “have you been crippled?”

Had the inquiry come from an ordinary person, the little boy would have resented such a display of curiosity. But for this man, the question seemed a natural one, to be answered naturally.

“Why,” he said, “I have never been without a hump between my shoulders. I hate it, but,” as he began to quote his mother, “what must be must be! Still,” (his childish face a trifle unchildish) “it is hard to go through life looking like one of the camels that the Wise Men rode when they came from the East with their caravans.”

The man interrupted, “What, lad? You know of the Wise Men from the East? How does it happen that you should mention them to me on this night? It is very curious!” the man began to partake of a piece of the crusty dark bread.

Laughing softly, the little boy answered, “I suppose the Wise Men are in my mind because this is the time of anniversary, and I have been thinking of the baby that was born in stable. I was hoping—before you arrived—that once again the great star might shine and that the angels might sing. I have in fact been watching the sky rather than the sheep.”

The man asked another swift question. “What do you know about these holy things about the star and the song? You are so very young!”

The little boy exclaimed, "All Bethlehem heard about the star, and the infant who lay in the manger because there was no room at the inn. I know perhaps more than the others, for my father, a child then, was one of the shepherds who saw the light from the heavens and heard the angel music. Will you," (the little boy had taken the flask of goat's milk in his hands) "will you share with me this cup, sir? For perhaps you thirst."

The man took the flask from the lad's small hands. His fingers were powerful, and yet as gentle as a woman's. He said, "I will share this cup with you lad, for I do thirst."

Then he watched the man drink deeply. The little boy thought, "It must be tiring to tramp from place to place."

He said on impulse, as the stranger set down the flask, "Will you tell me sir, of some of the towns in which you have stayed?"

The man answered, "One town is very much like another, laid with poverty and pain rubbing elbows against wealth, with greed taking toll all too often of humanity. With health on one side and illness on the other. With so few gracious deeds that one can do to help the sore distressed." His face was averted, "and a lifetime in which to them so desperately short!"

In a low tone the little boy said, "Sometimes when I was a tot, I hoped that my life might be short, but already I am ten years old. How old sir, are you? I feel older than my years..."

The man's voice was muted as he replied, "I am more times your age lad; but I, too, feel older than my years."

"You shouldn't," the boy exclaimed, "because you're so strong. When is your time of birth sir? I was born when it was spring," the boy concluded.

The man smiled his beautiful, luminous smile. "It's odd that you should ask, dear lad, for this is my day of birth. You, quite unknowingly, are giving me an anniversary feast—and never has a feast been more welcomed. I was weary and forlorn when I came upon you."

"Weary and forlorn!" the little boy queried. "Haven't you any people of your own? People with whom you can be happy with on the day of your birth? When my birthday arrives, mother prepares a real feast for me, and gives me gifts. This shawl I wear, have you noted it? She wove it for my last birthday. The year before, she pressed a sheaf of bright flowers into wax. And once when I was smaller, she made wondrous sweet meats of honey and grain."

The man reached over and rested his hand on the little boy's knee. "I fear," he said, "that I have grown too old and large for birthday gifts. Furthermore, my loved ones are not near enough just now to celebrate with me. But maybe, who knows, there will be a gift for me at my journey's end."

The little boy's knee felt a tingle under the pressure of the friendly hand. He asked, "When sir shall you come to your journey's end?"

The man did not meet the child's gaze, but solemnly replied, "Perhaps very soon!"

The little boy looked worried. He said, "You don't look happy about it. Don't you want to come to the end of your travels? Don't you want to reach home and see what gift they have in store for you?"

The man hesitated ever so slightly. "Yes," he said at last, "I want to reach home. But the gift, it may be too beautiful to bear; or too heavy for me to carry. I suppose," (His face looked drawn in the white moonlight) "I should be getting on. You have made this birthday very wonderful my lad."

Peeping down at the white cloth with its remnants of bread and cheese, the little boy thought, "There seems to be as much as ever. He couldn't have liked it." Slantwise he contemplated the man's face, and suddenly he was swept with a burning sense of shame. The boy cried out, one word tumbling over the other, "You did not enjoy your food sir! You have not had a true birthday feast. That is because I have been selfish and mean!" In a confessing tone, the boy continued, "I have a cake in my basket; a cake I was saving to eat alone, after you left. It is a cake of sifted flour and eggs and lemon and raisins, and I love cake! But now," the little boy's voice quivered, "I would not enjoy it if I ate it all alone. Sir, I desire to give the cake to you—as my birthday gift to you. Perhaps you will eat it later, when the chill of early morning has set in and you are on the road."

The man did not speak. His eyes were like stars now, instead of candles, as he watched his small host lift the cake from the basket and display its rich goodness. It was only when the lad extended it toward him that he broke into speech.

"Ah, my lad," he said, "You have sustained me with your bread, and we have drunk deep from the same cup. And now, we will share this cake, which shall be, through your bounty, my birthday cake. We will apportion it equally, and we will eat of it together, you and me. And as I walk alone along the road, I shall remember a little lad's generosity."

Gravely, as if he were handling something infinitely precious, the man took the rich cake into his fingers. Carefully he divided it so the two sections were equal, and said, "Bless unto us this food, my Father," and the little boy was startled, for there was no one else upon the hillside. Then the man continued, "This is the cake of life, lad. Enjoy it to the last crumb." So he and the little boy thought that he had never tasted such good food. It was as if the cake's richness were verily, the richness of life! As he licked the last crumbs from his fingers, he felt as if he was gathering force and vigor and purpose. In his mind,

for no reason at all, he saw a picture of himself, big and handsome and brave, striding down the road with his weakness, the ugly hump, cast from him.

“It’s like a vision,” he said aloud. But when the man asked, “What do you mean, lad?” the boy hung his head and was unable to answer.

Indeed, the little boy was silent so long that the man’s hand came to rest lightly upon his shoulder—lightly, but oh so firmly! There was something in the touch that made tears hang on the little boy’s eyelashes.

“Oh,” he cried, “do not leave me, sir! We could be such friends you and me. Come with me to my home and dwell with my family. My mother will bake many cakes for you, and my father will share with you of his plenty. And I, you can have my bed, and my waxed flowers, and even this fringed shawl that I wear. Oh do not journey on sir! Stay with me, here in... Bethlehem.”

The man spoke, his voice like a great bell tolling over hill and valley. “I must go on. I must be about my father’s business. But I shall never leave you my lad. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world!”

Bowing his head in his hands, covering his misted eyes, the little boy was aware of the man’s firm fingers traveling up from his shoulder until they touched his hair. But now he couldn’t speak, for a pulse drummed in his throat. When he raised his head, the man was gone, and the hillside empty, save for the shadows of the sheep, which were asleep.

The little boy sobbed once, sharply, with a sense of loss and then struggled to his feet. Only, he didn’t have to struggle really, for there was a curious lightness about his body, and a feeling of freshness and peace—a peace that transcended the pain of parting. But it was not until he pulled his fringed lamb’s wool shawl tighter across his back, that he realized how straight he was standing, and how straight he would now always stand.

SARA'S CHRISTMAS PROGRAM

By Marian Brincken Forscher

Sara slipped into the long, soft, blue robe that she was to wear in the Christmas program. Pulling the matching hood over her brown curls, she turned to Jennie. "Do I look like Mary now?" Jennie grinned. "You sure do, except for your size. It won't matter, though, because Joseph is only eight too."

Sara giggled at Jennie's joke, then sobered. "I really wanted to be Mary in the program, but now that it's time, I'm kind of scared."

Jennie reached out to straighten the folds on Sara's robe. "You'll do just fine. Everything went well at rehearsal this morning."

Sara's stomach gave a little lurch when she heard the organ begin playing "Silent Night." That was her cue to go on stage.

Sister Perkins came over and smiled at both girls. Looking at Sara, she said, "The curtains will be opening soon. It's time for you to take your place."

Sara hurried to her spot and sat down on a bale of straw. Eric, who was playing Joseph, was already there beside the manger. As Sara bent to arrange the blankets around the doll representing Baby Jesus, she heard the music change and the gentle strains of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" swell.

The curtains slowly opened on the quiet scene. A single spotlight highlighted Mary and Joseph admiring the Baby Jesus. Neither Mary nor Joseph had to say anything. Brother Egger stood out of sight with a microphone and told about the events of Jesus's birth as they were silently portrayed on stage. The organ played softly while he spoke: "And it came to pass in those days..."

Sara was distracted by something moving just below the stage. She moved her eyes carefully, trying not to turn her head and spoil the scene. There, climbing the stairs to the stage was her four-year old sister, Katie.

Sara's heart sank as Katie came toward her. What shall I do? She wondered. Why isn't Katie sitting with Mom and Dad? Sara sneaked a peek at her parents. Her mother wore a stricken, helpless look. Sara felt Katie brush against her knees as she bent to look into the manger. Katie's going to ruin the Christmas program! Why did she have to do this?

Sara was startled out of her thoughts by Katie's awed "Oh! He's beautiful!"

As Katie continued to just stand and intently watch the doll in the manger. Sara swallowed and felt calm. There was something about the spell around Katie that Sara couldn't bring herself to break. I think

the best thing to do is just let her stay. Sara decided. She's being quiet. So Sara reached out and slipped her arm around her sister's shoulder and nestled Katie next to her on the bale of straw. Katie relaxed against Sara, still gazing lovingly at the Baby Jesus.

Katie sat watching quietly as the shepherds came. The organist played "The First Noel" and Brother Egger read from the Bible about the shepherds coming to see Jesus. Even after the shepherds had left and the Wise Men had entered Katie leaned against Sara enraptured.

Katie really loves Baby Jesus, Sara thought. I don't blame her for wanting to get close and see better. She gave Katie a little squeeze. I'm really glad now that she came.

When the curtains closed, Sara gently whispered into Katie's ear. "Its time for the next scene, so you must go back to Mommy and Daddy." Katie looked at her sister. "Ok." She started to leave, then paused and turned. "Thanks, Sara. I liked looking at the Baby Jesus with you." Sara smiled. "I'm glad." She led Katie to the side stage door. "Now go back to Mom."

After the program the students looked through the crowd for their families. Just as Sara found her parents, she overheard an elderly man speaking to her mother. "I'm go glad I came. Because of your lovely girls, I caught a glimpse of the Savior tonight that I'd never seen before. Thanks."

Nobody at home said anything about Katie's unexpected appearance in the program until Mother tucked Sara into bed. "I didn't want to say anything in front of Katie," Mother said, "but I'm really sorry she barged in on your program. She'd slipped off Dad's lap, and by the time we realized what she was doing, she was up in front, and it was too late to stop her." Mother sat down beside Sara on her bed. "I hope it didn't ruin things for you."

"No. it was fine, Mother." Sara squeezed her mother's hand. "I really admire the way you handled it." mother continued. "It's hard to know what to do at times like that what you did was beautiful. Usually people giggle when something unplanned happens, but people got especially quiet after Katie said how beautiful the baby was."

"At first I was really worried," Sara admitted. "I didn't know what to do. Then I realized that the real Mary would have wanted her sister, as well as shepherds and Wise Men, to see her baby. Anyway, there was something special about Katie tonight. It was as though she really understood about the Baby Jesus somehow."

"You're right, Sara." Mother's voice was soft. "Several people came up to me afterward and said the same thing. Even though Katie's part in the programmed wasn't planned, I think it touched people's hearts. I think a lot of people will never forget tonight's program."

Sara settled back on her pillow. "I'm glad." Mother bent to kiss Sara. "I think you're really special, too. You taught us older folks a lot in the kind way you treated your sister. I'm sure Jesus was pleased with how you represented His mother tonight."

ANNIE AND WILLIE'S PRAYER

By Unknown

T'was the night before Christmas, goodnight had been said,
and Annie and Willie were tucked into bed.

There were tears on their pillows and tears in their eyes,
and each little bosom was heaving with sighs.

For tonight their stern father's command had been given,
that they should retire precisely at even, instead of at eight.

For they'd troubled him more,
with questions unheard of than ever before.

He had told them he thought this a delusion of sin,
and that no such being as Santa Claus ever had been.

And he hoped after this he would never more hear,
how he scrambled down chimneys with his presents each year.

And this was the reason the two little heads,
so restlessly tossed in their soft downy beds.

Eight, nine, and the clock struck ten,
not a word had been spoken by either till then.

When Willie's sad face from the blanket did peek,
he whispered, "Dear Annie, are you fast asleep?"

"Why no brother Willie," a sweet voice replies,
"I've long tried in vain, but I can't shut my eyes.

"Somehow it makes me so sorry because,
Papa said there is no Santa Claus."

"Now we know there is and it can't be denied,
for he came every year before our Momma died."

"But then I've been thinking that she used to pray,
and God would hear everything Momma would say."

“Well, why can’t we pray too just like Momma did then,
and ask God to send him with presents again.”

“I’ve been thinking so too,” and without word more,
four little feet bounded out on the floor,
Four little knees the soft carpet pressed,
and two tiny hands were clasped close to each breast.

“Now Willie, you know we must firmly believe,
the presents we ask for we’re sure to receive.”

“You wait very still till I say Amen,
and by that you will know your turn has come then.”

“Dear Jesus look down on my brother and me,
and grant us the favors we’re asking of thee.”

“I want a wax dolly, a tea set and a ring,
and an ebony work box that shuts with a spring. “

“Bless Papa, dear Jesus, and cause him to see,
that Santa Claus loves us as much as he.”

“Don’t let him get angry and fretful again,
at dear brother Willie and Annie, Amen.”

“Please Jesus let Santa Claus come down tonight,
and bring us some presents before it is light.”

“I want he should give me a nice little sled,
with bright shining runners and all painted red.”

“A box full of candy, a book and a toy,
Amen and then Jesus I’ll be a good boy.”

Their prayers being ended they raised up their heads,
and with hearts light and cheerful again sought their beds.

They were soon lost in slumber both peaceful and deep,
and with fairies in dreamland were roaming in sleep.

Eight, nine, and the clock in the steeple struck ten,
and the father had thought of his children again.

He seemed now to hear Annie's half suppressed sigh,
and to see the big tears in Willie's blue eye.

"I was harsh with my darlings," he mentally said.
"I shouldn't have sent them so early to bed."

"But then I was troubled, my feelings found vent,
for bank stocks today has gone down ten percent."

"But of course they'd forgotten their troubles air this,
and that I denied them the thrice asked for kiss."

"But just to make sure, I'll steal up to their door,
for I have never spoke so harsh to my darlings before."

So saying he gently ascended the stairs,
and arrived at the door to hear both of their prayers.

His Annie's bless Papa drew forth the big tears,
while Willie's promise fell sweet on his ears.

"Strange, strange, I'd forgotten," said he with a sigh,
"How I longed when a child to have Christmas draw nigh."

"I'll atone for my harshness," he mentally said,
"I'll answer their prayers before I sleep in my bed."

So he turned to the stairs and softly went down,
took off his velvet slippers and silk dressing gown.

Donned his hat, coat and boots, and was out in the street,
a millionaire facing the cold driving sleet.

Nor stopped he until he had bought everything,
from the box full of sweets to the tiny gold ring.

Indeed he kept adding so much to the store,

that his various presents outnumbered a score.

Then homeward he turned with his holiday load,
and with Aunt Nellie's help in the nursery t'was stowed.

Miss dolly was seated beneath a pine tree,
by the side of a table spread out for her tea.

A work box, well filled, in the center was laid,
and on it the ring for which Annie had prayed.

A soldier in uniform stood by a sled,
with bright shining runners and all painted red.

There were balls, dogs and horses, books pleasing to see,
and birds of all colors perched in the tree.

While Santa Claus laughing stood up in the top,
as if getting ready more presents to drop.

And as the father that picture surveyed,
he thought for his trouble he'd been amply paid.

And he said to himself as he brushed off a tear,
"I'm happier tonight than I've been for a year."

"I've enjoyed more real pleasure than ever before,
what care I if bank stock falls ten percent more."

"Here after I'll make it a rule I believe,
to have Santa Claus visit us each Christmas Eve."

So saying he gently extinguished the light,
and tripped downstairs to retire for the night.

As soon as the beams of the bright morning sun,
put darkness to flight and the stars, one by one.

Four little blue eyes, out asleep opened wide,
and at the same minute the presents they spied.

Out of their beds they sprang with a bound,
the presents they'd prayed for were all of them found.

They laughed and they cried in their innocent glee,
and shouted for Papa to "come quick and see,

What presents old Santa Clause brought in the night,
just the things that they wanted and left before light."

"And now," added Annie in a voice soft and low,
"You believe there's a Santa Claus, Papa I know!"

And dear little Willie climbed up on his knee,
determined no secrets between them should be.

And told in soft whispers how Annie had said,
that their blessed Momma, so long ago dead,

Used to kneel down and pray by the side of her chair,
and God up in heaven'd answer her prayer.

"And then we got up and prayed, just as well as we could,
and God answered our prayers, now wasn't he good!"

"I should say that he was, if he brought you all these,
and knew just what presents my children would please."

"We'll let him think so the dear little elf,
T'wd be cruel to tell them I did it myself."

Blind father, who caused you stern heart to relent,
and your hasty words spoken, so soon to repent?

T'was the being that bade you go so softly upstairs,
and made you his agent, to answer their prayers.

THE MAN WHO MISSED CHRISTMAS

By J. Edgar Park

It was Christmas Eve; and, as usual, George Mason was the last to leave the office. He walked over to a massive safe, spun the dials, swung the heavy door open. Making sure the door would not close behind him, he stepped inside.

A square of white cardboard was taped just above the topmost row of strongboxes. On the card a few words were written. George Mason stared at those words, remembering....

Exactly one year ago he had entered this self-same vault. And then, behind his back, slowly, noiselessly, the ponderous door swung shut. He was trapped—entombed in the sudden and terrifying dark.

He hurled himself at the unyielding door, his hoarse cry sounding like an explosion. Through his mind flashed all the stories he had heard of men found suffocated in time vaults. No time clock controlled this mechanism; the safe would remain locked until it was opened from the outside, tomorrow morning.

Then the realization hit him. No one would come tomorrow—tomorrow was Christmas.

Once more he flung himself at the door, shouting wildly, until he sank on his knees exhausted. Silence came, high-pitched, singing silence that seemed deafening. More than 36 hours would pass before anyone came—36 hours in a steel box three feet wide, eight feet long, and seven feet high. Would oxygen last? Perspiring and breathing heavily, he felt his way around the floor. Then, in the far right-hand corner, just above the floor, he found a small, circular opening. Quickly he thrust his finger into it and felt, faint but unmistakable, a cool current of air.

The tension release was so sudden he burst into tears. But at last he sat up. Surely he would not have to stay trapped for the full 36 hours. Somebody would miss him. But who? He was unmarried and lived alone. The maid who cleaned his apartment was just a servant; he had always treated her as such. He had been invited to spend Christmas Eve with his brother's family; but children got on his nerves and expected presents.

A friend had asked him to go to a home for elderly people on Christmas Day and play the piano—George Mason was a good musician. But he had made some excuse or another; he had intended to at home, listening to some new recordings he was giving himself.

George Mason dug his nails into the palms of his hands until the pain balanced the misery in his mind. Nobody would come and let him out. Nobody, nobody...

Miserably the whole of Christmas Day went by, and the succeeding night.

On the morning after Christmas the head clerk came into his office at the usual time, opened the safe, then went on into his private office.

No one saw George Mason stagger out into the corridor, run to the water cooler, and drink great gulps of water. No one paid any attention to him as he left and took a taxi home.

There he shaved, changed his wrinkled clothes, ate breakfast, and returned to his office where his employees greeted him casually.

That day he met several acquaintances and talked to his own brother. Grimly, inexorably, the truth closed in on George Mason. He had vanished from human society during the great festival of brotherhood; no one had missed him at all.

Reluctantly, George Mason began to think about the true meaning of Christmas. Was it possible that he had been blind all these years with selfishness, indifference, pride? Was not giving, after all, the essence of Christmas because it marked the time God gave his own Son to the world?

All through the year that followed, with little hesitant deeds of kindness, with small, unnoticed acts of unselfishness, George Mason tried to prepare himself...

Now, once more, it was Christmas Eve.

Slowly he backed out of the safe, closed it. He touched its grim steel face lightly, almost affectionately, and left the office.

There he goes now in his black overcoat and hat, the same George Mason as year ago. Or is it? He walks a few blocks, then flags a taxi, anxious not to be late. His nephews are expecting him to help trim the tree. Afterwards, he is taking his brother and his sister-in-law to a Christmas play. Why is he so happy? Why does this jostling against others, laden as he is with bundles, exhilarate and delight him?

Perhaps the card has something to do with it, the card he taped inside this office safe last New Year's Day. On the card is written, in George Mason's own hand:

"To love people, to be indispensable somewhere, that is the purpose of life. That is the secret of happiness."

A BROTHER LIKE THAT

By Unknown

A friend of mine named Paul received a new car from his brother as a pre-Christmas present. On Christmas Eve, when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny car, admiring it.

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

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

The boy looked astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you anything? Gosh, I wish..." He hesitated and Paul knew what he was going to wish. He was going to wish that he had a brother like that. But what he said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels. "I wish," the boy went on, "that I could be brother like that."

Paul looked at the boy in astonishment, and then impulsively asked, "Would you like a ride in my new car?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love that!"

After a short ride, the urchin turned, and with his eyes aglow said, "Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?" Paul smiled. 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 right where those 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. He was carrying his little polio-crippled brother. He sat down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed right up to 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 someday 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 little lad into 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.

That Christmas Eve, Paul learned what Jesus meant when He said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*"

WHO STARTED CHRISTMAS? BY Unknown

This morning I heard a story on the radio of a woman who was out Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable, and after hours of hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids.

She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season time of year. Overwhelming pressure to go to every party, every housewarming, taste all the holiday food and treats, getting that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, making sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and the pressure of making sure we respond to everyone who sent us a card.

Finally the elevator doors opened and there already was a crowd in the car. She pushed her way into the car and dragged her two kids in with her and all the bags of stuff. When the doors closed, she couldn't take it anymore and stated, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up, and shot."

From the back of the car everyone heard a quiet calm voice respond, "Don't worry we already crucified him." For the rest of the trip down the elevator it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

Don't forget this year to keep One who started this whole Christmas thing in your every thought, deed, purchase, and word. If we all did it, just think of how different this whole world would be.

HAVING LUNCH WITH GOD!

By Unknown

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and six-pack of root beer and started his journey

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old man. He was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons.

The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old man looked hungry, so he offered him a Twinkie. He gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer. Again, he smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old man and gave him a hug. He gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I had lunch with God." And before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? He's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen."

Meanwhile, the old man, also radiant with joy, returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and asked, "Dad, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." And before his son responded, he added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Embrace all equally.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH THE TOOTHLESS GRIN

By Sharon Palmer

I was doing some last-minute Christmas shopping in a toy store and decided to look at Barbie dolls for my nieces. A nicely-dressed little girl was excitedly looking through the Barbie dolls as well, with a roll of money clamped tightly in her little hand. When she came upon a Barbie she liked, she would turn and ask her father if she had enough money to buy it. He usually said "yes," but she would keep looking and keep going through their ritual of "do I have enough?"

As she was looking, a little boy wandered in across the aisle and started sorting through the Pokémon toys. He was dressed neatly, but in clothes that were obviously rather worn, and wearing a jacket that was probably a couple of sizes too small. He, too, had money in his hand, but it looked to be no more than five dollars, or so, at the most. He was with his father as well, and kept picking up the Pokémon video toys. Each time he picked one up and looked at his father, his father shook his head, "no."

The little girl had apparently chosen her Barbie, a beautifully-dressed, glamorous doll that would have been the envy of every little girl on the block. However, she had stopped and was watching the interchange between the little boy and his father. Rather dejectedly, the boy had given up on the video games and had chosen what looked like a book of stickers instead. He and his father then started walking through another aisle of the store. The little girl put her Barbie back on the shelf, and ran over to the Pokémon games. She excitedly picked up one that was lying on top of the other toys, and raced toward the check-out, after speaking with her father.

I picked up my purchases and got in line behind them. Then, much to the little girl's obvious delight, the little boy and his father got in line behind me. After the toy was paid for and bagged, the little girl handed it back to the cashier and whispered something in her ear. The cashier smiled and put the package on the counter.

I paid for my purchases and was rearranging things in my purse when the little boy came up the cashier. The cashier rang up his purchases and then said, "Congratulations, you are my hundredth customer today, and you win a prize!" With that, she handed the little boy the Pokémon game, and he could only stare in disbelief. It was, he said, exactly what he had wanted!

The little girl and her father had been standing at the doorway during all of this, and I saw the biggest, prettiest, toothless grin on that little girl that I have ever seen in my life. Then they walked out the door, and I followed, close behind them. As I walked back to my car, in amazement over what I had just witnessed, I heard the father ask his daughter why she had done that. I'll never forget what she said to him. "Daddy, didn't Nana and PawPaw want me to buy something that would make me happy?"

He said, "Of course they did, honey."

To which the little girl replied, "Well, I just did!" With that, she giggled and started skipping toward their car. Apparently, she had decided on the answer to her own question of, "do I have enough?"

I feel very privileged to have witnessed the true spirit of Christmas in that toy store, in the form of a little girl who understands more about the reason for the season than most adults I know! May God bless her and her parents, just as she blessed that little boy, and me, that day!

THE YEAR THE REINDEER COULDN'T FLY

By Daniel 'Chip' Ciammaichella

The storm had blown in quickly from the north that Christmas Eve, turning the rolling grasslands, south of Raton, into an endless blanket of white. The snow and ice had transformed the pinon, cedar and oak-brush into fine crystal sculptures, and the majestic peaks of the Sangre de Cristos were obliterated from view by the fusillade of snowflakes, driven by a biting north wind in the dim late afternoon light. As Elizabeth Porter eased her Ford Bronco down the I-25 off-ramp, west on to U.S. Highway 64, she was both enchanted by the savage beauty of the snow peppered northeastern New Mexico landscape, and irritated by the terrible condition of the road. There were other ways to get home to Cimarron, 40 miles to the west, but all were many miles out of the way and the roads would be in even worse condition.

It had been a hard day, and Elizabeth wanted nothing more than to get home to her two young daughters, Jessie and Megan. Her feet were sore from waiting tables all day at the El Matador restaurant, her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and worry, and the remains of a headache that had plagued her the entire day made sure that it kept its presence known. On top of it all, she missed her husband terribly. Bobby was the reason she couldn't sleep at night; he was halfway around the world in a little country called Kuwait, preparing to go to war. Sleep only brought Elizabeth nightmares of the worst. As she drove her Bronco down the snow-covered highway, Elizabeth held on to her dim hopes that somehow Bobby would be allowed to call home on Christmas. He had been able to call only twice in the months since his Guard unit shipped out to the Middle East.

She missed the soothing deepness of his voice so much - it always managed to calm her no matter how tired she was from working 12 hours a day or how worried she was about the pile of bills that never seemed to dwindle.

Elizabeth made her way slowly but surely closer to Cimarron, and a hot bath. The snowflakes danced like shooting stars in the beams of her headlights, as the dim light of the day succumbed to the darkness of night. She passed the Colfax Bar, now closed for the winter, and the only habitable building in what used to be the town of Colfax. She continued past the road to the ghost town of Dawson, once a thriving mining town, crossed the Vermejo river and then the Santa Fe railroad tracks that took the coal trains in and out of the mine up in York Canyon. The deserted white house at the road that entered VanBremmer canyon, leading to the magnificent Vermejo Park ranch, was the last building she would see until she crossed the Ponil river bridge into Cimarron. She knew she was almost home, but tried to keep her tired eyes alert and focused - deer, antelope and elk often ventured out into the road, causing many accidents. Ted Turner had buffalo on the Vermejo ranch now too... she cringed at the thought of hitting one of those monsters.

While her eyes were focused for signs of animals in the road, the sight of a man dressed up as Santa Claus, waving at her madly in the middle of the road took her totally by surprise. By the time the image of the man registered in her mind she had to slam hard on the brakes, fish-tailing wildly before finally coming to a sliding stop mere inches from his rotund belly. The man just stood still in front of her for a

moment, his eyes wide like a deer caught in the headlights, not yet sure that he was still in one piece. Elizabeth was angry at first, but what she saw standing in her headlights quickly turned her anger into uncontrollable giggling. The man finally seemed to regain some portion of composure, and walked weak-kneed to Elizabeth's window. He tapped on the window lightly, like a cop fixing to write a ticket to a speeding motorist. Tears were now running down Elizabeth's cheeks and she was still giggling as she rolled her window down.

"Of all the people I could find in my time of need, I find one who seems to derive pleasure from running down Santa Claus."

His eyes were the deepest blue Elizabeth had ever seen, and they seemed to twinkle with merriment in contrast to the gruff tone of his voice. She wiped the tears from her eyes and stifled her giggles before replying.

"I'm so very sorry sir, I wasn't laughing at you... at first. In fact I'm not sure if I was laughing or crying, you gave me quite a fright!" Then when I got a look at you, all dressed up in that Santa suit, just standing there in my headlights like a man who just saw his own ghost..." She began giggling again.

The white-bearded man let out a short chuckle, then his manner turned serious.

"No harm done young lady, but I do need your help, I am in a terrible predicament!" I must get to a veterinarian as fast as possible!"

Elizabeth could see the concern and worry that clouded the twinkle in his eyes, and immediately reached over to open the passenger side door.

"Get in out of the cold and the wind and tell me what the problem is. Thank God I didn't wreck my car...or you."

The chubby man in the Santa suit moved quickly to the other side of the car, slipping and falling square in his backside as he crossed through the headlights, causing Elizabeth to bite her lip to keep from giggling uncontrollably. She tried to avoid looking at him; afraid she would burst out into laughter, as he finally seated himself inside, brushing snow from his bright red suit

"Are you all right? That was quite a fall you took out there..." Elizabeth choked back another giggle.

"Yes I'm fine," the old man retorted, his cheeks red with embarrassment, " can you get me to a vet, if it's not too much trouble. My boys are very sick."

"Boys? Your boys need a vet?" "No, my reindeer of course. I call them my boys." The look on the old man's face was very matter-of-fact.

Elizabeth smiled. "I suppose you're going to tell me that you are Santa Claus, and you won't get your presents delivered tonight because your reindeer are sick." she asked jokingly. She assumed he was a

rancher, perhaps from Vermejo. They raised buffalo, and down near Logan some ranchers raised ostriches, so why not reindeer.

"Precisely. They were fine when we left the North Pole. I let them graze for a bit back up near Valle Vidal, I think they may have eaten some coyote poison or something."

Elizabeth pressed her foot to the accelerator as much as she dared, wanting to get into Cimarron as fast as possible. She was wondering if she should have allowed this man into her vehicle. He was obviously either drunk or crazy. She sniffed inconspicuously for the scent of alcohol. She hoped he wasn't dangerous too. She didn't speak, staring intently at the road ahead.

"Miss, I don't believe Cimarron has a veterinarian that I can recall. I really do need to get to a vet."

Elizabeth tried to be polite. "No we don't have a vet and the nearest one is 30 miles the other way, in Raton. I can't drive all the way back there, but I'll gladly drop you off at our police station and let Chief Allen help you from there."

"My reindeer are very sick - they could die if we don't hurry. I'm sure you could drive me there much faster. Please, I will give you anything you want, just get me to a vet."

Elizabeth could sense the concern and desperation in the old man's voice. She turned to look at him, their eyes meeting for a brief second before she quickly returned her gaze to the road.

"You are afraid of me...you don't believe that I'm Santa Claus, do you?"

Elizabeth didn't want to anger the Santa-clad stranger. She remained silent, concentrating on her driving.

"It's all right young lady, I understand. Not too many people believe in me anymore, and I can't blame you for doubting me. A young woman alone at night has good reason to be fearful of strangers these days. The world sure has changed, and not for the better. I'm sorry to put you out. I am so afraid for my old friends that I forgot my manners. Yes, you can just drop me off at your police station. I'm sure the officer will believe me and do everything necessary to save my reindeer." He slumped down in the seat and stared worriedly at the road ahead. Elizabeth didn't speak. The man's obvious worry bothered her. Maybe he wasn't dangerous...just a little crazy. She remembered what Bobby used to always say; 'Darlin', sometimes you gotta be a little crazy to keep yourself sane.'

She had seen plenty of sick and dying animals in this country, but could never get used to the sight of them. Now here she was, letting some poor animals die out in the cold, because she was afraid of some old man who thought he was Santa Claus.

"Like hell!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she slammed the brakes and cranked the steering wheel, forcing the Bronco to slide completely around before she stopped then continued in the opposite direction, back towards Raton. "Chief Allen will lock you up and throw away the key. Look, I don't know who you are, but whether you are who you say you are or just a crazy old man, I can't bear the thought of some poor

animal dying out there in the cold. I see no good coming from you being locked up on Christmas Eve just so I won't be late for my appointment with a hot bathtub."

The old man looked at her, startled at the sudden acrobatics of the vehicle and her words.

Then the twinkle came back into his eyes and he began making small talk as the Bronco made it's way down the snow-covered highway towards Raton.

The snow had subsided into an occasional flake here and there as Elizabeth and the old man pulled into the driveway of Dr. Ashley, Raton's local veterinarian. The drive had been uneventful, and Elizabeth found the old man to be a charming and entertaining conversationalist. He told her wonderful stories that, true or not, lifted her spirits and made her laugh. She told him about her life and her family, of how proud she was of her daughters and how much she missed her husband. He listened intently and offered nothing but kind words and encouragement. Elizabeth had to admit that she liked this old man...and maybe he wasn't so crazy after all.

Since she knew the doctor, Elizabeth accompanied the old man up the walk as the porch light came on.

"Hello Ron, " she said cheerfully when a kindly middle-aged man opened the door, "I'm sorry to bother you, but this gentleman here has some very sick animals and needs your help."

Dr. Ashley looked curiously at the white-bearded man in the Santa suit, as he explained what had happened to his reindeer. Elizabeth noticed the doubt and amusement in the doctor's eyes while the old Santa spoke. There was a moment of awkward silence before the doctor spoke.

"Elizabeth, what do you have to say about this? Is this some kind of joke? Do you think this man is telling the truth? Do you think he's Santa Claus? Elizabeth did not answer right away. She looked at the old man for a moment, meeting his twinkling eyes, which gave her the courage to answer.

"Ron, I know this sounds crazy, but I drove this man over thirty miles to get here, and while I can't say I know him well, I have come to trust him. I can't say for sure whether he is Santa Claus, but I can tell you this..." she paused for a moment, taking a deep breath, "if there really is a Santa Claus, I believe this man is him." There, she said it.

The veterinarian didn't look convinced.

"Young lady, I think you've been hitting the egg-nog a bit too hard this evening, but no matter. If there are sick animals out there, I need to tend to them. It's not like I've never been out in the middle of nowhere on a cold winter night, tending to a sick horse or heifer. It's part of my job and I'll treat this man as I treat any rancher around here, since you vouched for him. Let me get my coat and my bag..."

As the doctor went back into the house, the old man turned to Elizabeth.

"Thank you my dear. I know you don't really believe in me, but I appreciate all of your help."

He kissed her lightly on the cheek, his beard tickling her nose. She looked at him with a hurt look on her face.

"I never said anything of the sort. I admit, I'm not sure if Santa Claus exists, but I meant what I said. If Santa Claus does exist, you are he. I wish you good luck and I hope everything turns out OK. You're in good hands with Dr. Ashley and I have two girls to get from the babysitter...not to mention an appointment with a hot bath. Goodbye...Santa, I hope your reindeer get well. "

She began walking back to her Bronco, but the old man jogged after her, catching up as she opened the door.

"Wait, I promised that I'd give you anything you wanted if you helped me tonight, and you have helped me very much. Tell me, what do you want for Christmas?"

Her heart melted at his kindness, but she declined the offer.

"The only thing I can think of this Christmas is my husband, and I doubt that even Santa Claus could bring him home to me. A phone call from him would be nice...but no, there is nothing I want in return for helping you out tonight. Isn't that what Christmas is all about...people helping people? A country song I like does come to mind though. If you really are Santa, just do what you do... the happiness and cheer you bring is worth any minor trouble, but if you're not, please do something kind for someone else in need. Don't let the chain of love end with you." Before the old man could reply she got into the still-running Bronco, backed down the driveway and began the long drive home to her girls.

Elizabeth set down her cup of tea and wiped the tears from her eyes as Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed joined in a chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne' on the television set...in black and-white of course. She leaned forward in her worn but comfortable rocking chair and reluctantly put the phone back on the table. The telephone had not been out of her sight since she returned home from Raton the night before. The phone was within arms reach when she fixed dinner for her girls, as they ate popcorn and watched the TV and as she read them 'T'was the Night Before Christmas' at bedtime. The cordless phone was in the pocket of her robe as she retrieved the presents from under their hiding places and placed them under the Christmas tree, and she held it close to her as she fell asleep in her bed. It was back in her robe pocket again when Jessie and Megan woke her at 6 AM with excited shrieks that Santa Claus had come, and she held it tight in her hands as the girls opened their presents.

She didn't leave the house that Christmas Day, not only because she didn't want to miss a possible phone call from Bobby, but also because she just didn't feel like being around people at all today. There had been plenty of invitations to dinner, but Elizabeth did not want to face the pity and sympathy that her family and friends could not help but feel for her. She stole glances at the phone on the wall every few moments as she fixed the girls a nice Christmas dinner, trying to make it ring through sheer will. She kept her vigil the rest of the day until she tucked her daughters, now worn out from playing with their gifts, into bed that night.

She had kept a happy face for her girls, but now the musical ending of "It's a Wonderful Life" brought the tears streaming down her face. She always cried at the ending, but this time the tears were different. They came from a mixture of emotions; self sorrow that Bobby was not here with her, worry that he was alright, and a fading hope that the man she had met the night before had really been Santa Claus, and would somehow make it possible for Bobby to call home. As she had driven home from Raton that strange night, she had managed to convince herself that he might have indeed been Santa, and her faith in that notion had made it possible for her to make it cheerfully through Christmas day.

Now, she was beginning to second-guess that faith, but not letting go.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. She bundled up her robe as she opened the door to find her brother, Bill, standing there in his best duster and Stetson, his 16-year-old daughter Kim at his side. "Merry Christmas, sis! Missed you at dinner, but thought I come over and take you out dancing...they got a heck of a party goin' down at the Kit Carson. I ain't two-stepped with my baby sister in years, so what do you say? Kim here will be glad to watch your girls."

Elizabeth smiled and leaned over to give them both a hug and a kiss. "Merry Christmas to you both too! I'm so glad to see you. I'm sorry I didn't come to dinner, I just didn't feel very well. Come in before you both freeze!"

"So you'll come?"

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. "No Bill, not tonight. I'll take a rain check though, and you're both welcome to come in for some hot chocolate."

Bill persisted. "Come on Lizzie, you need a night out. Remember the last time we went to the Kit for Christmas? It was me and Jen and you and Bob..." He stopped suddenly as if he had cussed.

"No Bill, I'm sorry. I'm kind of expecting Bobby to call. I hope you understand."

"Sure sis, I understand. Heck them guys got it made over there. In my days in the Corps we never got to call home from 'Nam, times sure have changed. It's OK, we'll just leave you be, I know how much you miss him...and I bet I know how much he misses you."

Elizabeth hugged him tight and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Thanks big brother. I promise I'll come party with you for New Years next week. Give Jen my love and tell her Merry Christmas for me."

She let go of her brother and gave her niece another hug. She closed the door slowly as they bade goodbye and made their way back down the walk. After closing the door she walked to the kitchen to put the kettle back on for another cup of tea. Before she got halfway there was another knock on the door. She walked quickly back, now a bit irritated and opened the door. Bill's large frame filled the doorway.

"Are you sure I can't change your mind, sis?"

Elizabeth let out a loud sigh. "No Bill, please I'm tired..."

"What if we let this guy come along with us?"

Bill stepped aside to reveal the figure of a tall, handsome soldier; his irresistible cowboy smile made her heart almost stop.

"BOBBY!!!"

She flung herself out the doorway and into his arms, almost knocking her brother into the shrubs. Her husband picked her up into his arms and carried her back into the house, returning the rapid-fire kisses she was planting on him. Bill started to follow, then stood there for a second; smiling, before thinking better of it and sauntering back down the walk. "I don't think you two need no company tonight." He quipped half aloud.

After a time Elizabeth stopped showering kisses all over Bobby's face and stood back to look at him, still not convinced she wasn't dreaming. She kissed him again to be sure before leading him to the kitchen to feed him.

"How did you get home? Did Iraq surrender? I haven't watched the news in days...I couldn't."

"Well darlin', the how is easy, I sat on a lot of planes, it's the why that I'm not really sure of."

She gave him a mock icy stare.

"Why? You mean just coming home to the kids and I for Christmas wasn't a good enough reason?"

Bobby laughed. "No darlin, I can't think of any better reason than that. Heck I'd kick butt on Saddam's whole army myself to be here with you. I mean that I can't figure out why they let me come home."

"Maybe they finally figured out that I need you here more than they need you way over there?"

"Not hardly sweetie", he grinned, "it was the weirdest thing though. This morning I was just fixin' to pay a guy fifty bucks for his spot in line for the phone, when the sarge grabs me and tells me that I'm wanted in the HQ ASAP. I get there and I'll be damned if ole General Swartzkopf himself ain't there...and he was lookin' for me. He tells me that orders have come down from way up the chain of command to get me home ASAP.

Funny, the general ain't got many bosses...let's see there's General Powell and the Secretary of Defense and the President... Anyway next thing I know I'm being hustled onto a 727 and after lots of changing planes I ended up in Albuquerque, where a chopper was waiting to bring me to Crews field. Chief Allen was waiting there and drove me home. He said the Governor had called him personally!"

"Didn't anyone tell you why?"

"Well I asked the General why. He told me all that he was at liberty to say was 'Merry Christmas from Santa Claus'. I guess they didn't want me to know. I was so afraid that something had happened to you and the kids, but the General assured me that you were all fine."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, then a grin spread across her face. "I guess he was Santa after all..." she mumbled.

"What was that darlin'? Sorry my hearing is shot from all this travelling."

"Nothing honey, just so glad you are home. Let's go to bed and snuggle."

They smiled and gazed deeply into each other's eyes before walking hand in hand to the bedroom. As they left the room they could not hear the anchorwoman from Albuquerque on the late TV news show:

"Next, at eleven, we'll bring you the story of a Raton veterinarian who claims he saved

Christmas, by treating Santa's sick reindeer on Christmas Eve..."

IT HAPPENED ONE CHRISTMAS

By Daniel 'Chip' Ciammaichella

A picture could never do justice to downtown Raton at Christmastime. Traveling north on Main, one is treated to the twinkling glow of multi-colored Christmas lights lining the street and adorning the well-kept storefronts, all nestled under the imposing, snow covered mountains and mesas that separate New Mexico from Colorado. At this late hour on Christmas Eve the view was unspoiled by the presence of people and vehicles. Most folks were at home with family and friends, celebrating and looking forward to the magic of Christmas morning.

Despite the charm of downtown Raton, Daryl Washburn wasn't in a mood to appreciate it as he trudged up Main past the Christmas tree in Ripley Park. He was having a hard time getting into the Christmas spirit this year. Daryl, along with his wife and twin daughters, had moved to Raton almost two years earlier. He had taken a job at the Cimarron underground coal mining operation, but was recently laid off when the company shut the mine down. Daryl had been looking for work ever since, living off of his severance pay and doing any odd jobs he could find. His truck needed a transmission, he was a month behind with the rent, the kids were outgrowing clothing and shoes rapidly, and his wife Sara had recently quit working at the Loaf-n-Jug because of the advanced state of her pregnancy. It was going to be a lean Christmas for the Washburns.

As Daryl turned up towards Sugarite and the north part of town, he stopped to adjust the armload of packages he was carrying. These packages were all the presents the Washburns would get this Christmas. He'd gotten a winter coat and a doll for each of the twins, slippers and a ten-dollar pair of earrings for Sara, and a small turkey for Christmas dinner.

"Not much, but better than nothing," he mumbled to himself as he continued on his way towards home. He had hoped to buy more, but he'd lost the money to do so. It was his own fault. Daryl had figured on saving a few bucks on a Christmas tree by just cutting his own from up on the Old Pass Road. The tree turned out to be a very expensive one indeed, after the property owner had him arrested and the judge socked him with a three hundred dollar fine.

"If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all," he'd told the judge.

Despite his current run of bad luck, Daryl refused to let go of his lifelong dream. He wanted to own his own small business. Ever since high school Daryl had been interested in computers and the way they would change the way Americans lived, worked, and played. He figured that with the right computer equipment and software, he could offer a variety of services from his own home, starting off part-time as he worked a regular job and building up to a full time endeavor. Back home in Kentucky, he had followed in his father's footsteps and worked in the coal mines. Unfortunately, the coal mining business back east was mediocre, at best. Just as he would begin to earn enough money to start saving for his dream, the lay-offs would come. When he did return to work, it was all he could manage just to pay the bills that had piled up while he was laid off. He jumped at the chance to work in the New Mexico mine.

He worked hard, was well liked, and saved every penny he could. Just as he'd caught up on paying moving expenses, Sara discovered she was pregnant again. Then the Cimarron mine closed down, and Daryl was out of work again.

As Daryl made his way through the crisp Raton winter night he didn't notice the gay decorations, the twinkling lights, or the sweet smell of burning cedar and pinon that wisped up from every fireplace. His mind was so cluttered by his own problems he didn't even notice the struggling figures under the railroad underpass, until he was right on top of them. A feeble cry for help jolted his senses back to the here and now.

"Help me somebody! Please, don't do this."

Not ten feet in front of Daryl was an old man dressed as Santa Claus, lying on the ground, pleading with three youths who were kicking him as he lay defenseless.

"Come on, old man. Give us your money or we'll hurt you bad."

"Yeah, you fat old coot. Give up the cash."

"Please, I don't have any money. Leave me alone. I'm late; I've got to get going. Don't you boys believe in Santa Claus?"

"Sure, we believe in Santa, don't we guys? You'd better believe in God, cause your gonna need him if you don't hand over your wallet." The young thug punctuated his words with a kick to the old man's ribs.

As the ugly scene unfolded before his eyes, all of Daryl's sadness and frustration turned to rage. "Things like this don't happen in Raton, especially not on Christmas Eve," he thought angrily. He dropped his packages and rushed toward the old man and his assailants.

"Hey! You punks leave that old man alone."

Startled, the youths turned to face Daryl. While the three only looked to be only sixteen or seventeen, their eyes had the hollow look of hungry wolves closing in for the kill.

Daryl had fought his share of fights, but a chill ran down his spine as he wondered if he could handle this bunch alone. The old man in the Santa suit didn't look to be in much shape to help out, and Daryl thought furiously for a way to get out of this in one piece.

He thought, "When in doubt, bluff". "I've had a bad day, boys. Why don't you just go on your way and save me the trouble of giving you the whipping your daddies should have."

The youths only laughed. "What have we here, a concerned citizen? Why don't you just keep on walking, mister? Hurry, before we stomp on you like we did old Santa Bum there."

The closest youth let fly a large ball of spit that found its mark on Daryl's face.

"That tears it..." Daryl launched his right fist directly into the nose of the spitter, causing him to fall to the ground holding his bleeding, broken, nose between his hands. Daryl then turned to face the other two thugs, but before he could lash out again he felt a sharp pain shoot through his head, then another, and another, and another.

"So much for bluffing...", he thought as the world went black.

As Daryl began to regain his senses, he felt like every part of his body was in pain. His head felt like ten thousand little men were using jackhammers on it, from the inside. He tried to get up, but collapsed as the world began to spin around him.

"By golly, I was starting to think that you were dead, son."

Daryl opened his eyes, and once they regained focus he saw the face of a white bearded old man studying him. The old man's white hair and beard were matted with blood from his nose and split lip. His blue eyes twinkled with the reflected light of the street-lamps, though the tissue around them was red and swollen.

"Wha... what happened. I feel as bad as you look."

"Just take it easy son. Those boys gave you a pretty good beating. Sorry, but you don't look so good yourself, you kinda remind me of ten miles of bad road." The old man chuckled, then became serious again. "You saved me from those whippersnappers, and I sure thank you. I'm sorry you had to take a beating on my account. You broke that one fella's nose pretty good, and I'll bet the others really hurt their hands on your head." He chuckled again.

"Don't make me laugh, old man. It hurts too much. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Don't you recognize me?"

Daryl sat up and studied the old man. He had taken a bit of a beating himself, and his red Santa suit was soiled and torn.

"Sorry, I don't. Maybe if you took off the Santa outfit." The old man's massive belly shook as he laughed. "It's no costume, son. I'm the real thing. I'm Kris Kringle."

"Yeah right. I'm serious, laughing kind of hurts right now. Help me up and I'll walk you to the police station."

"Oh, no, no. That won't do at all. I've still got a lot of ground to cover tonight. I'm late, I must get going."

"Don't be silly. The police department is just a few blocks away. Let me just get my stuff and I'll walk over there with you. I'm O.K. Nothing broken or anything."

Daryl turned to retrieve his packages.

"I'm sorry, old timer. Things like this usually don't happen around here. Those young punks should be.... Wait! Where's my packages! Those little so and so's stole my Christmas presents and my turkey!"

Daryl's hand shot to his rear pocket. "They stole my wallet too! Of all the bad luck. I knew I should have minded my own business. Did you see which way they went?"

No answer.

Daryl turned to face the old Santa. "I asked you if you saw which way they... Old man?"

Daryl's gaze fell on an empty street. The old man in the Santa suit was nowhere to be seen. "Just great. I get my butt whipped, my wallet stolen, lose my Christmas presents and Christmas dinner, and that crazy old man just wanders off. OLD MAN, COME BACK!"

Daryl hollered in frustration.

Once he realized that the Santa was indeed gone, he began to rant, rave, and hit the concrete sides of the underpass. I can't repeat his words in mixed company. Suddenly, Daryl's ranting words were drowned out by a piercing, WHOOP, WHOOP. As Daryl turned towards the sound, the bright beam of the police spotlight blinded him.

"Now you guys show up."

Later, the police cruiser pulled up slowly in front of Daryl's house.

"Thanks for the ride, guy. I appreciate it." The police officer leaned towards the passenger side door.

"No problem. Sorry about the hard time we gave you tonight. You've got to admit, you were acting pretty crazy, and your story sounded even crazier. Santa getting mugged... I can't remember the last time Raton had a mugging, let alone on Santa Claus. Merry Christmas to you."

"Yeah, some Christmas. Thanks again, officer."

Daryl's mood had improved somewhat, but as he approached his front door he was filled with sadness. Christmas was ruined. He'd lost his presents for Sara and the kids, he'd lost Christmas dinner, and he'd lost the little money he had left.

"Darn crazy old man probably deserved to be mugged. Should have just minded my own business."

Sara was awake. The police had called and assured her that he was all right, but Daryl could tell that she had been crying. Daryl fell into her arms.

"I'm sorry babe."

His wife smiled sadly, "No use crying over spilled milk. Come on to bed and tell me all about it."

Sara and Daryl checked in on the kids before retiring to their bedroom. Daryl thought to himself how sweet and innocent his daughters looked.

"It's not fair that a bunch of young punks and a crazy old man should ruin their Christmas. It's just not fair."

As he lay in his bed, Sara stroking the hair on his forehead, Daryl relived the events of the night. Sara was silent after he finished. For a moment neither spoke, then Daryl broke down and began to cry.

"I'm so sorry, Sara. I've ruined Christmas. When will I ever learn? I'm just a born loser. You and the kids would be better off without me."

Sara took Daryl's head into her small hands and looked him in the eye. Daryl could see anger behind her ocean blue eyes, and he turned away.

"Here it comes," he thought to himself.

"You listen here, Mr. Daryl Washburn. You're no loser and I love you very much. I won't have such talk. You're a good husband and father. The twins adore you and I hope this little package I'm carrying now will be a boy... and I hope he grows up to be just like his daddy. You did the right thing tonight. You couldn't just stand by and watch a poor helpless old man get beaten and robbed. I'm proud of you, and I'll not tolerate any more self-pity. You didn't ruin Christmas, and neither did that old man or those terrible young hoodlums. Christmas has nothing to do with money, or turkeys, or presents. You're safe, you have a family that loves you, and we're together. What more could anyone ask for?"

Daryl raised his head and looked at his wife, tears welling in her eyes, proudly defiant.

She never looked more beautiful.

"I love you, Sara."

"Turn out the light, darling. Tomorrow is another day."

The excited screams of Daryl's twin daughters woke him after it seemed he had just fallen asleep.

"Daddy! Mommy! Wake up! It's Christmas!" Molly and Millie jumped into the bed, then back out, too excited to stay still.

"O.K. girls, go on downstairs. Daddy and I will be down in a minute. We need to talk to you."

Millie ran out, Molly close on her heels.

"Can we open our presents, Mommy?" they pleaded on the way out.

The girls were gone in a flash, saving Daryl and Sara the difficult answer.

"I guess we'd better get it over with."

Arms around each other, Daryl and Sara walked down the stairs, each dreading having to face their daughters empty handed on Christmas morning. Daryl's heart was almost torn to shreds when he saw the confused, worried look on the faces of his girls as they searched the house for presents they knew had to be somewhere.

"Santa didn't come, did he?" Millie's eyes were filling with tears.

Molly was more optimistic. "Maybe he's playing a trick on us. Kinda like the Easter Bunny does." Her voice didn't sound confident.

Daryl started to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Sara took charge, wiping her tear soaked eyes.

"Girls, let's sit down and talk..."

The ringing of the doorbell gave Sara a reprieve. "Who could that be? Get the door Daryl, I need to put something on." She streaked up the stairs.

When Daryl opened the door, he almost had a stroke. The police officer who had helped him the night before was standing on the porch, and he seemed to have the entire police department with him... and the fire department as well.

"Uh... Merry Christmas officer... er... officers. Can I help you?" Daryl's voice was meek, indeed.

"Sorry to bother you at home, sir. But we figured you would want this stuff."

He handed Daryl a few packages.

"I believe that these were the items stolen from you last night."

Daryl was dumbfounded. "How did you find them?"

"Well sir, the punks that stole it from you turned themselves in, and brought their loot with them. It seems they had a good night robbing citizens and looting businesses, but met up with some guy dressed in a Santa suit who scared the bejabbers out of them. They were so scared of the guy that they confessed to about three dozen robberies and burglaries, committed over that last month. They asked us to protect them by putting them in jail. Go figure."

"Daryl, why is the whole police department here?" Sara joined her husband at the door, her eyes wide with wonder.

"And the fire department too, ma'am," piped the policeman, "We needed some help in getting all your other stuff over here."

Now Daryl was confused. "What stuff? This is all I had, except for a turkey."

"We got your turkey too, sir. It wasn't in such good shape though, so these guys and I all chipped in to get you this one." The officer snapped his fingers, and a young fireman stepped forward and handed Daryl a thirty-pound Butterball.

Sara's eyes were beginning to get moist again. "Thank you all so much, but what is all that other stuff?"

"Well ma'am, that's a funny thing. We figured that you all needed a few more toys for your kids, so we went to load up the SWAT wagon with our leftover Toys-for-Tots stuff.

When we opened the door of the wagon, we found a bunch of Christmas packages, all with your names on them. The darn wagon was so full of stuff; we had to call the fire department to help us deliver it to you. I don't even want to think about how it all got there. We see lots of weird stuff in our line of work. I quit asking questions a long time ago."

As Daryl and Sara stood and stared, jaws dropped to their chests, the police and firemen formed a bucket line and began passing brightly wrapped packages to each other, and into the house. Molly and Millie began tearing the wrappings off at once, their delighted screams filling the paper-strewn air. It took most of the morning to unwrap all of the presents. There were toys and clothing for the twins, as well as for the little one on the way. There were grown-up presents as well. Sara got the set of books she wanted, the complete works of Stephen King. Daryl got a state-of-the-art computer, along with a printer, assorted software, and a book: How to Make Money at Home WITH Your PC.

Daryl's dream seemed within his reach once again.

"Yes, tomorrow is another day," he thought to himself.

Later that evening, Daryl laid back in the easy chair. The combination of all the excitement of the last day, and a great turkey dinner, had exhausted him. He didn't try to rationalize the events of the day... that could be done later, after a good night's sleep. For now, he was content at admitting that Christmas was indeed a magical day. He got up and went to the kitchen to turn off the lights. Sara had already gone up to bed, and he was anxious to snuggle up in a nice warm bed. He flipped the switch and returned to the living room.

"I told you I was running late."

The voice made Daryl jump. Sitting in Daryl's easy chair, smoking a pipe, was a chubby little old man with a white beard. His red suit was soiled and torn. His eyes had a twinkle that made Daryl recognize him at once.

"You'd better go up to your wife now, son."

Before Daryl could speak a word, he was gone. He rubbed his eyes, not sure of their accuracy.

"I'd better get some sleep," he mumbled as he trudged up the stairs, checked in on the girls and went to his bedroom. Sara was still awake, gazing out the window at the moon rising over Johnson Mesa.

"This is a magical town," she whispered.

"Yes, it is."

Sara turned to face him. There was a mysterious glow in her eyes. "There's one more present for you."

"You mean Molly and Millie missed one?"

"No dear." Her eyes were laughing.

"You mean...?"

Daryl wasn't that tired. He reached out to embrace her.

Sara began to giggle.

"Yes. I think it's time to go to the hospital."

A CHRISTMAS TREE FOR SANTA

By Daniel 'Chip' Ciammaichella

During the Christmas Season the usually stoic lobby of First State Bank of Raton was transformed into a Christmas wonderland, and this Christmas Eve was no different.

Wreaths and garlands graced the walls, and centerpieces made from pinecones were at each teller station. The female tellers and bank officers all wore cute little elf outfits, though the men still wore their usual suits and ties. Only the younger ones were bold enough to don a bright Christmas tie.

At the far end of the lobby three eight-foot tables were crammed with cakes, cookies, snacks, eggnog, and punch in a huge crystal punch bowl. A ten-foot tall Christmas tree, decorated with multi-colored ornaments, garlands, twinkling lights, and tinsel dominated the center of the lobby. Under the tree were brightly wrapped packages of all shapes and sizes, merely empty boxes of course, but what Christmas tree wouldn't have presents stuffed beneath it?

Sitting next to the tree in a great stuffed armchair sat Santa Claus...AKA Charlie Wagner.

Charlie was uncomfortable in the hot Santa suit and the itchy white beard, but he loved playing Santa Claus. He had never played Santa for the bank's annual Christmas open house before, but his friend Shannon, who was the Public Relations Manager of the bank, had asked him if he could...and Shannon Smith was a woman he could NEVER say no to.

Charlie simply adored Shannon. To him she was probably the most beautiful and sweet woman in the world, though he never dared to let her know he felt that way. Charlie didn't feel he was worthy of a woman like Shannon, let alone think she was attracted to him at all. She was a bright and beautiful woman, climbing the ladder to success, the best part of her life still ahead of her. On the other hand Charlie thought of himself as a washed-up old has-been who had fallen off that ladder years ago. He had once been an ambitious and successful community leader and businessman. Then his wife divorced him, he lost his home, his business fell on lean times, and he lost all confidence in himself...he burned out.

As Charlie sat in his place as Santa Claus, he watched Shannon move around the lobby performing her duties as hostess of the event. He never ceased to marvel at her grace, beauty, and especially her smile that seemed to not only brighten the room, but his heart as well. He remembered how she had offered to pay him to play Santa for the bank and the look of disappointment on her face when he declined. Broke as he was, he couldn't accept any money, even from a bank. He knew she was just trying to help him out, as a lot of his good friends had done after he fell on hard times, but taking money to play Santa on Christmas Eve just didn't seem right.

Charlie carefully adjusted the pillow he had duct-taped to his belly before the next child climbed into his lap. He was a bull of a man at over six feet tall, but hardly fat. People milled all around the bank lobby talking, laughing, and enjoying the snack feast at the refreshment table. A few children ran about playing, but the majority of them waited patiently for their turn to see Santa Claus and share their

Christmas wishes. Charlie greeted each one with a hearty "Ho, Ho, Ho", which sometimes scared the more timid young ones into tears and wails. Charlie was good with kids though, and after a bit even the most frightened child would be sitting in his lap laughing and giggling.

Charlie's full attention was on all of the children gathered about him, so he jumped slightly, almost bouncing a young boy right off of his knee, when Shannon came up next to him, leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"Does Santa need a break for a little while, or maybe some punch?"

Charlie turned and met Shannon's beautiful eyes for what seemed like an eternity, before averting his own, hoping the great white beard hid his blush.

"No ma'am, I'm just fine for now," he croaked.

Shannon's smile made his heart melt and his legs go weak.

"Well I want to thank you for doing this for me...us, Charlie. I really appreciate it. I can't think of anyone who is a better Santa Claus than you."

Charlie blushed again, not sure what to say. He thought it funny that she was so easy to talk to sometimes, yet at other times his tongue felt like a pound of chopped liver and forgot how to form words.

"Anytime you need a Santa Claus, you can count on me Shannon," he finally replied.

Charlie almost fainted when she gave him a light kiss on his Santa cap and walked away, finally sending the boy on his lap tumbling to the floor with a surprised squeal. The boy jumped up, indignant, and scolded Charlie.

"Gee Santa, you need to get your mind off the babes and onto business...I thought you were married to some old lady at the North Pole anyway?"

Charlie blushed deep red as both adults and children began to laugh. He wasn't sure if they were laughing at him or at the unexpected comments from such a small boy. He regained his composure quickly though, a quick-witted response coming to mind almost immediately, but he held his tongue, thinking a Santa should not say such things.

Charlie didn't notice that Shannon had turned a short distance away, watching him with a twinkle in her eyes. She knew he had a crush on her. It wasn't something he hid very well. The thought made her both uncomfortable and flattered all at the same time.

Though she had known Charlie for nearly ten years, she had never gotten to know him that well. They never had the same circle of friends and rarely met outside of business related functions. Shannon knew she could always count on him to help out when she had a problem requiring someone with his skills and experience, and she had always reciprocated by throwing some bank business his way. When he

was doing work for the bank he never failed to drop by her office to chat for awhile, always bright and cheerful, which ran counter to the rumor mill wisdom that made him out to be a grouchy bully. He had always treated her with respect and gentleness, and somehow she knew that was the real Charlie.

Shannon had never really considered getting into a relationship with another man since her divorce and a few painful relationships afterward. Her children and her career were the most important things to her, and while she missed having a man to share her life with, she didn't miss the pain that caring for one always seemed to bring her. She felt comfortable around Charlie...safe even, but she was always careful not to give him any signals that might lead him on. He had made a few shy attempts to show her that he cared for her, sometimes sending her flowers or a card. She always thanked him, but never let him see how flattered and happy those gifts really made her.

As she watched him now, bringing such joy into the eyes of every child in the room, Shannon couldn't help but feel pride in him. Life had thrown him a lot of curve balls the past few years, and a lesser man would probably have sunk himself into a bottle of whiskey...but not Charlie. Despite his misfortunes he never quit fighting to rebuild his life, and more importantly, never quit giving of himself to help other people as he was now. She remembered the fierce pride that radiated from his eyes, overcoming the pain and hurt that usually resided in them, as he declined any payment for playing Santa Claus today. As much as she wanted to help him, she couldn't help but respect him and his wishes. She wished she could see that fire in his eyes more often.

Just then Charlie glanced over at her, noticed she was watching him, and turned away quickly, his blush obvious even behind the white Santa beard. Shannon couldn't help but giggle as she turned back to her duties, thinking, "He's so darn cute when he does that!"

As the afternoon began to grow late, the number of children gathered around Charlie began to slowly subside. After a while he was alone again. The few children remaining in the lobby had already seen him and were now enjoying cookies and punch at the refreshment table. Charlie stood and stretched, holding the beard carefully as he yawned.

He turned to survey the remaining people in the bank, looking for Shannon in particular.

He loved to watch her while she went about her work. She was always friendly and warm; giving everyone a smile and making them feel welcome. That smile was no painted on beauty queen smile either. It was genuine, and in Charlie's mind the all-time most beautiful smile he'd ever seen.

Charlie's mind got lost watching Shannon for only few moments before a slight tug on his sleeve brought him back to earth. He looked down to see a small girl with the biggest brown eyes he'd ever seen looking up at him shyly, but with no trace of fear. "Are you really Santa Claus?" she whispered hopefully.

Charlie let out a hearty Santa laugh and dropped down to one knee.

"Well as a matter of fact I am...and I'll bet your name is...Mary?"

"Nope."

"Jennifer?"

"Nuh uh."

"Crystal?"

"Wrong again, Santa!"

Charlie rubbed his beard thoughtfully.

"Oscar?"

The little girl giggled and shook her head.

"OK darlin', Santa must be getting old...help me out?"

She giggled again before whispering "Wendy Garcia."

"WENDY! I knew it!"

Little Wendy giggled some more, then her big brown eyes turned serious.

"Can I sit on your lap?"

Charlie laughed again while sitting down into his chair and patting his knee. "Climb aboard Miss Wendy Garcia!"

Charlie helped her up onto his knee and waited while she settled in before asking, "What can Santa do for you this fine afternoon, Wendy?"

"Well I need to ask you for something."

"Ask away young lady. What can Santa get you for Christmas this year?"

"A Christmas tree," she said matter-of-factly.

"A Christmas tree?" "Yes, a Christmas tree, but not a very big one."

Charlie paused a moment, rubbing his beard thoughtfully.

"Didn't your Mommy and Daddy get a tree this year?"

Wendy looked Charlie straight in the eye.

"I don't have a Daddy, and Mommy is in Hollywood so she can be an actress, and can't come home for Christmas. I live with my Grandma and Grandpa." She pointed across the lobby.

Charlie followed her finger and picked out an old couple sitting at a desk opposite of one of the loan officers. The old man was dressed in a faded old flannel shirt, patched blue jeans, and a beat up straw hat. His face was creased and withered from many years of sun, wind, and rain. His wife was a plump friendly looking woman wearing a simple housedress and a worn knit shawl. The old man twiddled his thumbs nervously between his knees as the loan officer spoke on the phone.

Charlie turned his attention back to the little girl.

"Your grandparents look like they are very nice people, Wendy, and I'm sure that your Mommy misses you dearly. Just think, someday when she's a famous movie star you'll both live in a big mansion in Beverly Hills...right next door to Harrison Ford!"

Wendy's eyes lit up.

"Yes, won't it be cool?"

Then she looked at Charlie with a quizzical expression. "But I don't think I'd want to live next door to a car lot!"

She rolled her eyes at Charlie as they exchanged a look, then a hug.

"Never mind darlin'," he grinned. "OK now, what about this tree business? Won't your Grandma and Grandpa get you one this year?"

Wendy sighed.

"We never get a tree, Grandpa says we ain't got room for one. That's why I want just a little tree, one I could fit in my bedroom."

She paused a moment, then whispered, "Can you keep a secret?"

Charlie looked serious and crossed his heart with his finger. "Santa's no snitch darlin'. Your secret is safe with me."

Wendy looked at him for a moment, then a look of satisfaction came over her face as she continued to whisper.

"Well Grandma and Grandpa don't have much money. They don't know I was listening, but I heard them talking. They came down here to the bank to get money so they could buy me a Christmas present. I don't need anything, but I don't want to hurt their feelings either. Christmas isn't about presents anyway, it's about the baby Jesus...isn't it Santa?"

Charlie looked into Wendy's big brown eyes for a moment. He just wanted to take that wonderful little girl into his arms and hug her. After hearing so many children asking for expensive toys all day, it warmed his heart to hear this little angel speak of the true meaning of Christmas.

"Yes Wendy, you're one hundred percent right. You sure are smart for such a little girl.

So you've never had a Christmas tree?"

"Nope."

Charlie rubbed his beard again, seriously deep in thought.

"Here I go again. I'm gonna get myself involved in things that ain't my business. What the heck, it's Christmas. What can they do, shave my head and send me to Bosnia?"

A tug on his fake beard brought Charlie's attention back to Wendy.

"I don't mean to be pushy, Santa, but Grandpa looks like he's ready to go. Do you think you could just throw a little tree on your sleigh for me tonight? I won't ask for anything else, but I've always dreamed of having a Christmas tree like everyone else."

Charlie smiled, but before he could speak he noticed the old couple getting up from the loan officer's desk and walking away, an obvious look of pain and disappointment on their faces. He took young Wendy in his arms and lifted her back onto the floor as he stood.

"Yes Wendy, you'll get your tree. I promise. In fact if you'll excuse me I'll get right to work on it!"

Wendy could only watch as Charlie walked quickly across the lobby to the loan officer's desk. Bob, the loan officer looked up, somewhat surprised to see Santa Claus leaning over the front of the desk, beard draped over his computer screen.

"What can I do for you Charlie...or should I say Santa Claus?"

Charlie ignored his arrogant tone. "Bob, tell me something. Did those two old folks get their loan?"

Bob shook his head. "No. Their only income is Social Security, and they are way too deep into debt."

"Well how much did they want?"

Bob snickered. "One hundred dollars. We don't make loans that small."

Charlie felt his blood begin to boil. He leaned over the desk until he was eye to eye with the loan officer. Bob didn't like the look he saw in those eyes, and he liked Charlie's growling whisper even less.

"You mean to tell me you turned down a loan for a measly \$100 on Christmas Eve?" He let Bob stew under his glare before continuing. "My gosh Bob, you've always been a putz, but I never figured you for

a Scrooge. A big shot like you couldn't just loan them folks the money yourself? You blow that much cash going to Happy Hour!"

As Charlie rose and turned in disgust, Bob regained his courage and hissed, "Maybe that's why I've got money and you don't, loser!"

Charlie turned back to Bob, his eyes cold and hard. He fought the urge to reach out and grab him by the neck and throttle him, knowing Santa beating up on someone, even if he was a jerk, would not look good. Charlie changed tactics, his eyes softening.

"OK Bob, you have a job to do, I understand that. The old man upstairs would probably kick your butt for making a loan like that. Tell you what, we can skin this cat another way. How about you just give them the hundred bucks you owe me for playing Santa? I know I've got another hour, but what the heck, how about paying me now?"

Charlie gave Bob his best used-car salesman look. Bob started to agree...then caught himself and laughed at Charlie.

"Nice try pal, but you agreed to play Santa for free. I wasn't born yesterday. A deal is a deal, we don't owe you a cent."

Charlie muffled a growl, then grinned innocently at Bob.

"Well you can't fault a guy for trying Bob. I guess you're just too smart for me. OK, how about you just loan me \$100?"

Bob just laughed. "Sorry Charlie, you're probably a worse risk than those old folks are. I bet you don't have more than a dollar in your pocket, do you?"

Charlie gave Bob a confident look. "Wrong answer Bob. I may not have a hundred bucks, but I've got lots more than a dollar." He had one dollar and twelve cents to be exact. Charlie saw the old couple walking towards the door, motioning Wendy to follow. His mind raced furiously, then an alternate plan hatched in his mind. He turned and gave Bob his most intimidating glare.

"I'll deal with you later, count on it," he hissed before turning and running across the lobby. Shannon's eyes were not the only ones in the room that were surprised by Santa's sudden urge to emulate an OJ Simpson commercial as Charlie leapt over a couch on a dead run towards her.

"Charlie what are you doing?" she whispered as he pulled up in front of her, his breathing coming just a bit heavy.

"Shannon, I can't explain now. There's no time. I need a favor?"

Shannon looked at Charlie, sizing him up for a moment before shaking her head.

"Of course, Charlie, if I can."

"Do you see those old folks and that cute little girl heading towards the door? I need you to stop them, stall them, keep them here until I get back?"

"Get back? Where are you going?"

"I just need to run home and grab something. I promise I'll explain later. I want you to think over a second favor while I'm gone too...lend me a hundred bucks?"

Before Shannon could say anything he turned and ran to the door before the old couple could open it.

"Wait folks. You can't leave yet. Do you see that pretty girl standing over there? She needs to talk to you. I think you won the door prize or something."

Before they could reply, he winked at Wendy and ran out the door, leaving the old couple staring after him in confusion as Shannon walked over to greet them, just as confused as they were.

From the vantage point of his fully windowed office above the lobby, bank president Frank Talbot had been watching as his Santa Claus went berserk, then ran out of the building.

"That darn Charlie," he thought out loud. "I knew we shouldn't have let that loose cannon play Santa Claus. That lout has been nothing but a pain in my neck as long as I've known him. I imagine I'd better go down and find out what's going on before I call the police. It would be best to keep this as quiet as possible. I spend money on these dog-and-pony shows for good publicity, not bad. I hope the moron doesn't come back with an Uzi and really ruin my Christmas."

Talbot thought about that as he walked down his carpeted private staircase.

"Maybe I'd better call the cops anyway?"

Charlie was out of breath after running the three blocks to his small bungalow, all uphill.

His beard was hanging halfway off his face, and the Santa costume was soaked with sweat. He burst through the door and stopped, seeing what he came for immediately. He quickly walked over to the buffet and picked up his small, one foot tall, artificial Christmas tree, careful not to disturb any of the dozen small red ornaments he had hanging from it. He didn't even shut the door as he walked quickly back into the dusky late afternoon, carefully balancing the tree as he made his way down the hill back to the bank.

Shannon knew her boss had probably been watching everything from his office perch. He was always watching, like a hawk looking for prey.

"Come to think of it, he even looks like a hawk."

She tried to act casual as he walked across the lobby toward her with a stern look on his face. She hoped Charlie would get back soon, with a darn good story to boot.

"Ms. Smith, just what in the name of Michael is going on down here?"

Shannon hated the patronizing, scolding-father voice he always addressed her in. She knew he thought of her as just a dumb blonde, and had only hired her because of her looks. She didn't care. She was good at her job, and everyone else knew it. She didn't need his approval, but she did need the paycheck he signed, so she just did her job and let him think whatever he wanted.

"Well Mr. Talbot, it seems that Charlie had a sudden emergency, but I'm sure he'll be right back."

Before she could continue, Bob the loan officer leaned over Talbot's shoulder and whispered in his ear. Talbot's eyes grew wide as he listened.

"Call 911 now," he instructed before turning back to Shannon. "Ms. Smith, Bob says that Charlie tried to extort money from this bank, and flew into a rage when Bob called his bluff."

"Mr. Talbot, I don't think Char..."

"There's no time to discuss this, Shannon. I think Charlie is going to come back with a gun and rob us. You know as well as I that men who fall on hard times, like Charlie, often get depressed, suicidal and violent this time of year. I want you to help escort all of the customers out of the bank. Bob is calling the police now. With any luck they'll catch Charlie outside before he comes back."

Shannon opened her mouth to protest, but Talbot turned and began to walk away before noticing Wendy and her grandparents sitting on the couch.

"I'm sorry folks, it's closing time now. It is Christmas Eve after all, and we'd like to get our employees home to enjoy Christmas with their families. Thank you so much for coming, and Merry Christmas."

Shannon felt helpless as Talbot ushered the Garcias to the door. Then the door opened and her heart lifted, only to be disappointed when instead of Charlie, Police Chief Stan Sandoval and two SWAT team members burst through the open door. Despite her worry, she couldn't help but giggle at the serious looks on their faces.

The giggle turned into a laugh a few moments later as Charlie walked nonchalantly through to door, unnoticed by anyone but her, balancing a tiny Christmas tree in his right hand. He walked right over to the Police Chief, still unnoticed by anyone as they exchanged frantic words. He tapped the Chief on the shoulder.

"What happened Stan, somebody rob the place?"

"Not yet Charlie...CHARLIE!"

Every eye in the room turned to Charlie. Talbot turned white, and almost fainted when one of the SWAT officers leveled his M16 at Charlie and hollered, "FREEZE AND DROP IT SCUMBAG!"

Charlie gave the young cop a momentary look, then turned to Chief Sandoval.

"You think you could call off your hound dawg there, Stan? Does he think I've got a gun hidden in this itty-bitty Christmas tree...or does he just have some kind of sick Santa/Rambo thing goin' on?"

Chief Sandoval had an amused, but pained look on his face as he turned to his young officer. "Carl, put the darn gun down. You ain't even bright enough to realize I never gave you any bullets for that thing."

He turned to Charlie and rolled his eyes. "Kids."

Charlie just grinned.

"So what's going on here, Stan? Why all the hardware?"

Sandoval looked at Charlie seriously.

"Mr. Talbot says you got into a mad rage and stormed out, threatening to come back with a gun and kill everyone."

Charlie laughed a belly laugh that would make the real Santa proud, then looked over at the still ill-looking Talbot.

"Hi, Frank! Funny I don't remember you even being down here with the rest of us peons all day, let alone talking to you. Where did you get such a fool idea? I just ran home to get this little Christmas tree. I promise it won't hurt you, unless you're allergic to little fake trees? Perhaps someone spiked your eggnog...you don't look so good."

Talbot glared at Charlie.

"I didn't think any such thing. I just got bad information from a moron who used to work for me...Bob?"

Bob deflated like a balloon as every eye turned to him. Talbot felt more in control now.

"You're fired, Bob."

Bob collapsed into a chair, dumbfounded at his sudden misfortune. Charlie looked over at him and winked.

"Merry Christmas, Bob. Good thing you didn't loan me that money, seems you might be needing it."

Bob ignored the comment and sulked. Chief Sandoval looked around the room and motioned to his officers.

"Well, it looks like there's nothing for us to do here. Carl, Kevin, you boys had best git home and put them guns up before you hurt yourselves. I promise you'll get to play commando again soon. In the meantime, those cookies over there look like some kind of contraband...I'd better taste them to be certain though" "I think I'll join you Chief." Talbot took the Chief by the arm and led him to the refreshment table, talking to him like a long lost son each step of the way.

"...have I told you what a great job your department is doing..."

Shannon walked over to Charlie, her eyes still moist from laughing at the ludicrous events. He avoided her eyes as she stood in front of him, looking him over with a smile on her face. She took his chin gently into her hand and raised his head, looking him in the eye with amusement.

"So cowboy, you still haven't told me what this is all about. Why did you go home to get that cheap, but cute, little Kmart tree?"

Charlie grinned sheepishly, but before he could answer a young voice piped out from below them.

"It's for me!"

Charlie and Shannon looked down to see little Wendy, staring at the tree in Charlie's hand, her eyes wide with excitement. Shannon looked at Charlie, her eyes soft and moist.

"Is that what this is all about?"

Charlie looked into Shannon's eyes, and she could see that his were a bit moist as well, not to mention the cat-that-ate-the-canary grin on his face.

"She's never had a tree, and she wanted a small one. I figured this little thing of mine was perfect for her. Her grandparents had no money to buy her any presents, and your bank wouldn't loan them a measly hundred bucks. I sure don't have a hundred bucks, but I had this tree. I couldn't let that cute, young gal go home empty handed."

"That's what you wanted the hundred dollars for...to give to them?"

"Yep," Charlie was embarrassed, "I'll pay you back, you know I will."

Shannon was silent for a moment, then looked at Charlie sternly.

"No, Charlie."

"No?"

"No, I won't lend you the money." Her stern look melted into a big smile, "But I will give it to them, as my Christmas gift."

Charlie was speechless, and before he could utter a word Shannon reached over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, before walking over to where the elder Garcias were still sitting. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia

exchanged a look as she approached, both wondering if this bank was loco all the time. Charlie sighed, then knelt down next to Wendy.

"Is this tree OK, darlin?"

"Oh yes Santa, it's just the best tree I've ever seen, it's perfect!" Charlie smiled.

"Sweetie, I gotta tell ya, I'm not really Santa Claus."

Wendy just grinned as she hugged Charlie tight, giving him a kiss on the well-disheveled beard before whispering, "Oh yes you are." Charlie's heart melted. He returned her hug and wished her a very Merry Christmas.

"Santa had better be going now. You don't want me to be late tonight do you?"

Wendy looked at him sadly, but smiled.

"Well you don't have to come to my house, Santa, you've already given me the best Christmas present I've ever had. I love you."

Charlie smiled, trying to control the tears welling up in his eyes as he turned and walked towards the door. Shannon was busy trying to convince the Garcias to accept the crisp new 100-dollar bill in her hand, and didn't notice as he walked out the door and into the crisp Raton night.

As Charlie shuffled up the walk to his house, he noticed that he had left the door standing wide open.

"With my luck I probably got robbed by now."

He dismissed the thought quickly. They didn't have many burglaries in a town like Raton, and many people never bothered locking their doors. He also noticed that his dog Jake was quiet out in the back yard. He'd have been barking up a storm had someone been in the house.

Charlie walked in the door and fumbled for the light switch. When the light came on he started for the back door to let Jake inside, but stopped almost immediately. He took a step backward and turned the light switch back off, rubbing his eyes in the darkness for a moment before turning it back on. He thought he might have been seeing things the first time, but he was wrong.

In the corner of the living room stood a six-foot tall Christmas tree, decorated to the hilt, a small angel dressed in silk perched at the top. Charlie walked closer to the tree, dumbfounded. He spotted a note wedged between a few branches. He took the note and unfolded it.

People always ask me how I can be everywhere at once on Christmas Eve. I usually just give them a grin and a wink, but the truth is that people like you are the reason. You are the "real" Santa Claus, Charlie. Merry Christmas! Kris Kringle

Charlie read the note a dozen times before shaking his head with a chuckle, walking to the back door to let the dog in.

"Thanks, Santa." He whispered.

Jake, a large black Labrador, lay curled at Charlie's feet, sleeping contentedly now that the only master he had ever known was home, where he belonged. Charlie sat on the couch, staring at the photos of his kids on the wall, tears in his eyes. The biggest regret in his life was the fact that he couldn't be there to watch his children grow into fine young adults, to help them through the pains of growing up. He especially missed them at Christmas. He remembered how their eyes would light up when they awoke on Christmas morning to find that Santa had visited once again.

Charlie sighed and turned his stare to the blank TV screen. He'd usually be watching a Christmas classic like "It's a Wonderful Life," or "Miracle on 34th Street," but he couldn't afford to keep the cable hook up. He had a VCR, but didn't even have enough money to rent a movie. He'd been contemplating selling the TV and VCR too, but knew he'd be lucky to get 20 dollars for either of them.

Charlie was starting to doze off when a knock on the door and Jake's sharp bark alerted him. He stood and yawned, momentarily not sure of his surroundings. He walked to the door trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head. When Charlie opened the door he did a double take, and rubbed his eyes. A large fir tree took up the entire doorway, then moved slightly to the side revealing the bright smiling face of Shannon Smith.

"Are you going to make the kids and I stand here holding this tree, Charlie, or are you going to help us get it inside?"

Now fully awake, Charlie took charge of the tree, dragging it into the house, followed by Shannon's young son and daughter, each carrying an armload of packages while their mother went back to the car to grab some more. They gave Charlie a funny look when they spied the decorated Christmas tree, but Charlie motioned for them to keep silent. He propped the tree into a corner and ran out after Shannon in his bare feet.

"What are you doing here Shannon?" he asked, thinking he sounded awfully rude.

Shannon stood and looked at him for a moment with a smile, her eyes bright, then she began stacking packages into his arms. "Well Charlie, since you went and gave away your Christmas tree, I figured you might need another one. Of course I couldn't trust you to decorate it properly, so I had to get some ornaments and tinsel for it too. You have had a long day though, and I didn't want you to wear yourself out decorating the tree by yourself, so the kids and I decided we should help you. Since it might take awhile, and you probably didn't eat tonight, I brought some food and snacks, and even some nice old Christmas movies."

Shannon paused and reached back into the car. The mountain of bags and boxes she had stacked into his arms hid Charlie's face.

"Of course it's been a long day for me too, so I brought this to help take the edge off!"

Shannon was still smiling as she raised a bottle of wine so Charlie could see it through the mountain of packages.

"Shannon, I gotta tell you something..."

"Shh Charlie, not while you're holding all of that stuff. Take it into the house and then come back to help me with just one more thing."

Charlie dutifully carried the load into the house, deposited the packages, and walked back out the door. Shannon stood in the middle of the walk, her hands behind her back.

"C'mere cowboy, I've got something for you."

Charlie walked to her, still confused and a bit in shock. His confused look soon grew into a big grin as Shannon removed her hand from behind her back, holding a small piece of mistletoe. She held it over her head and grinned mischievously at Charlie.

"Now you have to kiss me Charlie...it's the law. You don't want me to have to call the SWAT team do you?"

Charlie took Shannon gently into his arms, confusion still all over his face. When they kissed, all confusion disappeared.

They stood and looked into each other's eyes for a moment, then were interrupted by a timid question from Shannon's son, standing in the doorway.

"Mom? Why did we bring a Christmas tree when he already has one?"

Now it was Shannon's turn to be confused as she looked back up at Charlie.

"I thought you didn't have a tree, Charlie."

Charlie grinned sheepishly "I didn't." "Did someone else bring you a tree before I did?"

Charlie began laughing, and Shannon could not help but notice that his eyes were laughing as well.

"Yes darlin, somebody got here before you did."

"Well? Who was it?"

"The note said Kris."

"Chris? Chrissy Morgan from the bank? I always knew she was after you."

Charlie was beginning to enjoy this game.

"No, not Chrissy Morgan."

"Well tell me who then?"

Charlie continued to be teasingly evasive and she kept grilling him with questions as they walked into the house, hand in hand, their eyes never leaving each other. The distant tingle of sleigh bells drifted on the cold night wind as Charlie closed the door.

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER (Christmas eve 1881)

By Rian B. Anderson

Pa never had much compassion for the lazy or those who squandered their means and then never had enough for the necessities. But for those who were genuinely in need, his heart was as big as all outdoors. It was from him that I learned the greatest joy in life comes from giving, not from receiving.

It was Christmas Eve 1881. I was fifteen years old and feeling like the world had caved in on me because there just hadn't been enough money to buy me the rifle that I'd wanted for Christmas. We did the chores early that night for some reason. I just figured Pa wanted a little extra time so we could read in the Bible.

After supper was over I took my boots off and stretched out in front of the fireplace and waited for Pa to get down the old Bible. I was still feeling sorry for myself and, to be honest, I wasn't in much of a mood to read Scriptures. But Pa didn't get the Bible, instead he bundled up again and went outside. I couldn't figure it out because we had already done all the chores. I didn't worry about it long though, I was too busy wallowing in self-pity. Soon Pa came back in. It was a cold clear night out and there was ice in his beard. "Come on, Matt," he said. "Bundle up good, it's cold out tonight." I was really upset then. Not only wasn't I getting the rifle for Christmas, now Pa was dragging me out in the cold, and for no earthly reason that I could see. We'd already done all the chores, and I couldn't think of anything else that needed doing, especially not on a night like this. But I knew Pa was not very patient at one dragging one's feet when he'd told them to do something, so I got up and put my boots back on and got my cap, coat, and mittens. Ma gave me a mysterious smile as I opened the door to leave the house. Something was up, but I didn't know what..

Outside, I became even more dismayed. There in front of the house was the work team, already hitched to the big sled. Whatever it was we were going to do wasn't going to be a short, quick, little job. I could tell. We never hitched up this sled unless we were going to haul a big load. Pa was already up on the seat, reins in hand. I reluctantly climbed up beside him. The cold was already biting at me. I wasn't happy. When I was on, Pa pulled the sled around the house and stopped in front of the woodshed. He got off and I followed. "I think we'll put on the high sideboards," he said. "Here, help me." The high sideboards! It had been a bigger job than I wanted to do with just the low sideboards on, but whatever it was we were going to do would be a lot bigger with the high side boards on.

After we had exchanged the sideboards, Pa went into the woodshed and came out with an armload of wood - the wood I'd spent all summer hauling down from the mountain, and then all Fall sawing into blocks and splitting. What was he doing? Finally I said something. "Pa," I asked, "what are you doing?" You been by the Widow Jensen's lately?" he asked. The Widow Jensen lived about two miles down the road. Her husband had died a year or so before and left her with three children, the oldest being eight. Sure, I'd been by, but so what?

Yeah," I said, "Why?"

"I rode by just today," Pa said. "Little Jakey was out digging around in the woodpile trying to find a few chips. They're out of wood, Matt." That was all he said and then he turned and went back into the woodshed for another armload of wood. I followed him. We loaded the sled so high that I began to wonder if the horses would be able to pull it. Finally, Pa called a halt to our loading, then we went to the smoke house and Pa took down a big ham and a side of bacon. He handed them to me and told me to put them in the sled and wait. When he returned he was carrying a sack of flour over his right shoulder and a smaller sack of something in his left hand. "What's in the little sack?" I asked. Shoes, they're out of shoes. Little Jakey just had gunny sacks wrapped around his feet when he was out in the woodpile this morning. I got the children a little candy too. It just wouldn't be Christmas without a little candy."

We rode the two miles to Widow Jensen's pretty much in silence. I tried to think through what Pa was doing. We didn't have much by worldly standards. Of course, we did have a big woodpile, though most of what was left now was still in the form of logs that I would have to saw into blocks and split before we could use it. We also had meat and flour, so we could spare that, but I knew we didn't have any money, so why was Pa buying them shoes and candy? Really, why was he doing any of this? Widow Jensen had closer neighbors than us; it shouldn't have been our concern.

We came in from the blind side of the Jensen house and unloaded the wood as quietly as possible, then we took the meat and flour and shoes to the door. We knocked. The door opened a crack and a timid voice said, "Who is it?" "Lucas Miles, Ma'am, and my son, Matt, could we come in for a bit?"

Widow Jensen opened the door and let us in. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The children were wrapped in another and were sitting in front of the fireplace by a very small fire that hardly gave off any heat at all. Widow Jensen fumbled with a match and finally lit the lamp.

"We brought you a few things, Ma'am," Pa said and set down the sack of flour. I put the meat on the table. Then Pa handed her the sack that had the shoes in it. She opened it hesitantly and took the shoes out one pair at a time. There was a pair for her and one for each of the children - sturdy shoes, the best, shoes that would last. I watched her carefully. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. She looked up at Pa like she wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come out.

"We brought a load of wood too, Ma'am," Pa said. He turned to me and said, "Matt, go bring in enough to last awhile. Let's get that fire up to size and heat this place up." I wasn't the same person when I went back out to bring in the wood. I had a big lump in my throat and as much as I hate to admit it, there were tears in my eyes too. In my mind I kept seeing those three kids huddled around the fireplace and their mother standing there with tears running down her cheeks with so much gratitude in her heart that she couldn't speak.

My heart swelled within me and a joy that I'd never known before, filled my soul. I had given at Christmas many times before, but never when it had made so much difference. I could see we were

literally saving the lives of these people.

I soon had the fire blazing and everyone's spirits soared. The kids started giggling when Pa handed them each a piece of candy and Widow Jensen looked on with a smile that probably hadn't crossed her face for a long time. She finally turned to us. "God bless you," she said. "I know the Lord has sent you. The children and I have been praying that he would send one of his angels to spare us."

In spite of myself, the lump returned to my throat and the tears welled up in my eyes again. I'd never thought of Pain those exact terms before, but after Widow Jensen mentioned it I could see that it was probably true. I was sure that a better man than Pa had never walked the earth. I started remembering all the times he had gone out of his way for Ma and me, and many others. The list seemed endless as I thought on it.

Pa insisted that everyone try on the shoes before we left. I was amazed when they all fit and I wondered how he had known what sizes to get. Then I guessed that if he was on an errand for the Lord that the Lord would make sure he got the right sizes.

Tears were running down Widow Jensen's face again when we stood up to leave. Pa took each of the kids in his big arms and gave them a hug. They clung to him and didn't want us to go. I could see that they missed their Pa, and I was glad that I still had mine.

At the door Pa turned to Widow Jensen and said, "The Mrs. wanted me to invite you and the children over for Christmas dinner tomorrow. The turkey will be more than the three of us can eat, and a man can get cantankerous if he has to eat turkey for too many meals. We'll be by to get you about eleven. It'll be nice to have some little ones around again. Matt, here, hasn't been little for quite a spell." I was the youngest. My two brothers and two sisters had all married and had moved away.

Widow Jensen nodded and said, "Thank you, Brother Miles. I don't have to say, May the Lord bless you, I know for certain that He will."

Out on the sled I felt a warmth that came from deep within and I didn't even notice the cold. When we had gone a ways, Pa turned to me and said, "Matt, I want you to know something. Your ma and me have been tucking a little money away here and there all year so we could buy that rifle for you, but we didn't have quite enough. Then yesterday a man who owed me a little money from years back came by to make things square. Your ma and me were real excited, thinking that now we could get you that rifle, and I started into town this morning to do just that, but on the way I saw little Jakey out scratching in the woodpile with his feet wrapped in those gunny sacks and I knew what I had to do. Son, I spent the money for shoes and a little candy for those children. I hope you understand."

I understood, and my eyes became wet with tears again. I understood very well, and I was so glad Pa had done it. Now the rifle seemed very low on my list of priorities. Pa had given me a lot more. He had given me the look on Widow Jensen's face and the radiant smiles of her three children.

For the rest of my life, whenever I saw any of the Jensens, or split a block of wood, I remembered,

and remembering brought back that same joy I felt riding home beside Pa that night. Pa had given me much more than a rifle that night, he had given me the best Christmas of my life.

GO TO BED EARLY, BECAUSE

By Dianna H. Cline

Santa Claus is coming on a cold Christmas Eve night wearing his red suit, black belt, boot's and his beard and hair so pretty and white.

He is sure to go to every house, with his bag full of toy's, to give to every little girl, and to all he little boy's.

He'll come down the chimney with soot on his face, but he won't be happy, till he leaves toy's all over the place.

When he gets to the last house that he has on his list, he'll know that you've been good, because you sent him a letter saying that you promised you would.

The Christmas tree was lit with colors of blue, green, and red, the snowflakes were falling, while you were fast asleep and cozy in your bed.

Old Saint Nick saw that you and your family were warm and safe, so he called for his Reindeer, then jumped in his sled.

Don't worry about Santa Claus, because he's going to be alright.

So, to all of our precious children, don't shed any tears because Santa Claus will be coming back, this same time, next year.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS"

**A CHRISTMAS POEM
A LIST FOR SANTA
By: Unknown**

Snowflakes softly falling
Upon your window when they play
Your blankets slung around you
Into sleep you drift away
I bend to gently kiss you
when I see you on the floor
there's a letter dearly written
I wonder who it's for
I quietly unfold it
making sure you're still asleep
It's a Christmas list for Santa
one my heart will always keep
It started just as always
with the toys seen on TV
a new watch for your father
and a winter coat for me
But as my eyes read on
I could see that deep inside
there were many things you wished for
that your loving heart would hide
You asked if your friend Molly
could have another Dad;

It seems her father hits her
and it makes you very sad
Then you asked dear Santa
if the neighbors down the street
could find a job that he might have
some food, and clothes, and heat
You saw a family on the news
whose house had blown away
"Dear Santa send them one thing
a place where they can stay"
"And Santa, those four cookies that
I left you for a treat,
could you take them to the children
who have nothing else to eat?"
"Do you know that little bear I have
the one I love so dear?
I'm leaving it for you to take
to Africa this year."
"And as you fly your reindeer
on this night of Jesus' birth,
Could you magic bring to everyone
goodwill and peace on earth"
"There's one last thing before you go,
so grateful I would be,
If you'd smile at Baby Jesus

in the manger by our tree"

I pulled the letter close to me

I felt it melt my heart

Those tiny hands had written

what no other could impart.

"And a little child shall lead them"

was a whispered in my ear

As I watched you sleep on Christmas Eve

while Santa Claus was there.

T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS IN THE 90's By Unknown

T'was the night before Christmas and Santa's a wreck
How to live in a world that's politically correct?
His workers no longer would answer to "Elves,"
"Vertically Challenged" they were calling themselves.
And labor conditions at the north pole
Were alleged by the union to stifle the soul.
Four reindeer had vanished, without much propriety,
Released to the wilds by the Humane Society.
And equal employment had made it quite clear
That Santa had better not use just reindeer.
So dancer and Donner, Comet and Cupid,
Were replaced with 4 pigs, and you know that looked stupid.
The runners had been removed from his sleigh,
The rust was termed dangerous by the E.P.A.
And people had started to call for the cops
When they heard sled noises on their roof tops.
Second-hand smoke from his pipe had his workers quite frightened
His fur trimmed red suit was called, "Unenlightened."
And to show you the strangeness of life's ebbs and flows,
Rudolf was suing over unauthorized use of his nose.
And had gone on Geraldo, in front of the nation,
Demanding millions in over-due compensation.
So half of the reindeer were gone, and his wife

Who suddenly said she'd had enough of this life.
Joined a self-help group, packed and left in a whiz,
Demanding from now on her title was Ms.
And as for the gifts, why, he'd ne'er had a notion
That making a choice could cause so much commotion
Nothing of leather, nothing of fur
Which means nothing for him. And nothing for her.
Nothing that might be construed to pollute
Nothing to aim. Nothing to shoot.
Nothing that clamored or made lots of noise
Nothing for just girls, or just for the boys.
Nothing that claimed to be gender specific.
Nothing that's warlike or non-pacifistic
No candy or sweet...they were bad for the tooth.
Nothing that seemed to embellish a truth.
No fairy tales, while not yet forbidden,
Were the Ken and Barbie, better off hidden.
For they raised the hackles of those psychological
Who claimed the only good gift was on ecological
No baseball, no football, someone could get hurt,
Besides, playing sports exposed kids to dirt.
Dolls were said to be sexist, and should be passe,
And Nintendo would rot your entire brain away.
So Santa just stood there, disheveled, perplexed.
He just could not figure out what to do next.

He tried to be merry, tried to be gay,
But you've to be careful with that word today.
His sack was quite empty, limp to the ground;
Nothing fully acceptable was to be found.
Something special was needed, a gift that he might
Give to all without angering the left or the right.
A gift that would satisfy, with no indecision,
Each group of people, every religion.
Every ethnicity, every hue,
Everyone, everywhere...even you.
So here is that gift, its price beyond worth
May you and your loved ones enjoy peace on earth.

CHRISTMAS AT FESSIWIG'S WAREHOUSE

By Charles Dickens

"Yo Ho! my boys," said Fezziwig. "No more work to-night! Christmas Eve, Dick! Christmas, Ebenezer! Let's have the shutters up!" cried old Fezziwig with a sharp clap of his hands, "before a man can say Jack Robinson. . . ."

"Hilli-ho!" cried old Fezziwig, skipping down from the high desk with wonderful agility. "Clear away, my lads, and let's have lots of room here! Hilli-ho, Dick! Cheer-up, Ebenezer!"

Clear away! There was nothing they wouldn't have cleared away, or couldn't have cleared away with old Fezziwig looking on. It was done in a minute. Every movable was packed off, as if it were dismissed from public life forevermore; the floor was swept and watered, the lamps were trimmed, fuel was heaped upon the fire; and the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry, and bright a ballroom as you would desire to see on a winter's night.

In came a fiddler with a music book, and went up to the lofty desk and made an orchestra of it and tuned like fifty stomach-aches. In came Mrs. Fezziwig, one vast substantial smile. In came the three Misses Fezziwig, beaming and lovable. In came the six followers whose hearts they broke. In came all the young men and women employed in the business. In came the housemaid with her cousin the baker. In came the cook with her brother's particular friend the milkman. In came the boy from over the way, who was suspected of not having board enough from his master, trying to hide himself behind the girl from next door but one who was proved to have had her ears pulled by her mistress; in they all came, anyhow and everyhow. Away they all went, twenty couple at once; hands half round and back again the other way; down the middle and up again; round and round in various stages of affectionate grouping, old top couple always turning up in the wrong place; new top couple starting off again, as soon as they got there; all top couples at last, and not a bottom one to help them.

When this result was brought about the fiddler struck up "Sir Roger de Coverley." Then old Fezziwig stood out to dance with Mrs. Fezziwig. Top couple, too, with a good stiff piece of work cut out for them; three or four and twenty pairs of partners; people who were not to be trifled with; people who would dance and had no notion of walking.

But if they had been thrice as many--oh, four times as many--old Fezziwig would have been a match for them, and so would Mrs. Fezziwig. As to her, she was worthy to be his partner in every sense of the term. If that's not high praise, tell me higher and I'll use it. A positive light appeared to issue from Fezziwig's calves. They shone in every part of the dance like moons. You couldn't have predicted at any given time what would become of them next. And when old Fezziwig and Mrs. Fezziwig had gone all through the dance, advance and retire; both hands to your partner, bow and courtesy, corkscrew, thread the needle, and back again to your place; Fezziwig "cut"--cut so deftly that he appeared to wink with his legs, and came upon his feet again with a stagger.

When the clock struck eleven the domestic ball broke up. Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig took their stations, one on either side of the door, and shaking hands with every person individually, as he or she went out, wished him or her, a Merry Christmas!

JIMMY SCARECROW'S CHRISTMAS

By Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

Jimmy Scarecrow led a sad life in the winter. Jimmy's greatest grief was his lack of occupation. He liked to be useful, and in winter he was absolutely of no use at all.

He wondered how many such miserable winters he would have to endure. He was a young Scarecrow, and this was his first one. He was strongly made, and although his wooden joints creaked a little when the wind blew he did not grow in the least rickety. Every morning, when the wintry sun peered like a hard yellow eye across the dry corn-stubble, Jimmy felt sad, but at Christmas time his heart nearly broke.

On Christmas Eve Santa Claus came in his sledge heaped high with presents, urging his team of reindeer across the field. He was on his way to the farmhouse where Betsey lived with her Aunt Hannah.

Betsey was a very good little girl with very smooth yellow curls, and she had a great many presents. Santa Claus had a large wax doll-baby for her on his arm, tucked up against the fur collar of his coat. He was afraid to trust it in the pack, lest it get broken.

When poor Jimmy Scarecrow saw Santa Claus his heart gave a great leap. "Santa Claus! Here I am!" he cried out, but Santa Claus did not hear him.

"Santa Claus, please give me a little present. I was good all summer and kept the crows out of the corn," pleaded the poor Scarecrow in his choking voice, but Santa Claus passed by with a merry halloo and a great clamour of bells.

Then Jimmy Scarecrow stood in the corn-stubble and shook with sobs until his joints creaked. "I am of no use in the world, and everybody has forgotten me," he moaned. But he was mistaken.

The next morning Betsey sat at the window holding her Christmas doll-baby, and she looked out at Jimmy Scarecrow standing alone in the field amidst the corn-stubble.

"Aunt Hannah?" said she. Aunt Hannah was making a crazy patchwork quilt, and she frowned hard at a triangular piece of red silk and circular piece of pink, wondering how to fit them together. "Well?" said she.

"Did Santa Claus bring the Scarecrow any Christmas present?"

"No, of course he didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a Scarecrow. Don't ask silly questions."

"I wouldn't like to be treated so, if I was a Scarecrow," said Betsey, but her Aunt Hannah did not hear her. She was busy cutting a triangular snip out of the round piece of pink silk so the piece of red silk could be feather-stitched into it.

It was snowing hard out of doors, and the north wind blew. The Scarecrow's poor old coat got whiter and whiter with snow. Sometimes he almost vanished in the thick white storm. Aunt Hannah worked until the middle of the afternoon on her crazy quilt. Then she got up and spread it out over the sofa with an air of pride.

"There," said she, "that's done, and that makes the eighth. I've got one for every bed in the house, and I've given four away. I'd give this away if I knew of anybody that wanted it."

Aunt Hannah put on her hood and shawl, and drew some blue yarn stockings on over her shoes, and set out through the snow to carry a slice of plum-pudding to her sister Susan, who lived down the road. Half an hour after Aunt Hannah had gone Betsey put her little red plaid shawl over her head, and ran across the field to Jimmy Scarecrow. She carried her new doll-baby smuggled up under her shawl.

"Wish you Merry Christmas!" she said to Jimmy Scarecrow.

"Wish you the same," said Jimmy, but his voice was choked with sobs, and was also muffled, for his old hat had slipped down to his chin. Betsey looked pitifully at the old hat fringed with icicles, like frozen tears, and the old snow-laden coat. "I've brought you a Christmas present," said she, and with that she tucked her doll-baby inside Jimmy Scarecrow's coat, sticking its tiny feet into a pocket.

"Thank you," said Jimmy Scarecrow faintly.

"You're welcome," said she. "Keep her under your overcoat, so the snow won't wet her, and she won't catch cold, she's delicate."

"Yes, I will," said Jimmy Scarecrow, and he tried hard to bring one of his stiff, outstretched arms around to clasp the doll-baby.

"Don't you feel cold in that old summer coat?" asked Betsey.

"If I had a little exercise, I should be warm," he replied. But he shivered, and the wind whistled through his rags.

"You wait a minute," said Betsey, and was off across the field.

Jimmy Scarecrow stood in the corn-stubble, with the doll-baby under his coat and waited, and soon Betsey was back again with Aunt Hannah's crazy quilt trailing in the snow behind her.

"Here," said she, "here is something to keep you warm," and she folded the crazy quilt around the Scarecrow and pinned it.

"Aunt Hannah wants to give it away if anybody wants it," she explained. "She's got so many crazy quilts in the house now she doesn't know what to do with them. Good-bye--be sure you keep the doll-baby covered up." And with that she ran cross the field, and left Jimmy Scarecrow alone with the crazy quilt and the doll-baby.

The bright flash of colours under Jimmy's hat-brim dazzled his eyes, and he felt a little alarmed. "I hope this quilt is harmless if it IS crazy," he said. But the quilt was warm, and he dismissed his fears. Soon the doll-baby whimpered, but he creaked his joints a little, and that amused it, and he heard it cooing inside his coat.

Jimmy Scarecrow had never felt so happy in his life as he did for an hour or so. But after that the snow began to turn to rain, and the crazy quilt was soaked through and through: and not only that, but his coat and the poor doll-baby. It cried pitifully for a while, and then it was still, and he was afraid it was dead.

It grew very dark, and the rain fell in sheets, the snow melted, and Jimmy Scarecrow stood halfway up his old boots in water. He was saying to himself that the saddest hour of his life had come, when suddenly he again heard Santa Claus' sleigh-bells and his merry voice talking to his reindeer. It was after midnight, Christmas was over, and Santa was hastening home to the North Pole.

"Santa Claus! Dear Santa Claus!" cried Jimmy Scarecrow with a great sob, and that time Santa Claus heard him and drew rein.

"Who's there?" he shouted out of the darkness.

"It's only me," replied the Scarecrow.

"Who's me?" shouted Santa Claus.

"Jimmy Scarecrow!"

Santa got out of his sledge and waded up. "Have you been standing here ever since corn was ripe?" he asked pityingly, and Jimmy replied that he had.

"What's that over your shoulders?" Santa Claus continued, holding up his lantern.

"It's a crazy quilt."

"And what are you holding under your coat?"

"The doll-baby that Betsey gave me, and I'm afraid it's dead," poor Jimmy Scarecrow sobbed.

"Nonsense!" cried Santa Claus. "Let me see it!" And with that he pulled the doll-baby out from under the Scarecrow's coat, and patted its back, and shook it a little, and it began to cry, and then to crow. "It's all right," said Santa Claus. "This is the doll-baby I gave Betsey, and it is not at all delicate. It went through the measles, and the chicken-pox, and the mumps, and the whooping-cough, before it left the North

Pole. Now get into the sledge, Jimmy Scarecrow, and bring the doll-baby and the crazy quilt. I have never had any quilts that weren't in their right minds at the North Pole, but maybe I can cure this one. Get in!" Santa chirruped to his reindeer, and they drew the sledge up close in a beautiful curve.

"Get in, Jimmy Scarecrow, and come with me to the North Pole!" he cried.

"Please, how long shall I stay?" asked Jimmy Scarecrow.

"Why, you are going to live with me," replied Santa Claus. "I've been looking for a person like you for a long time."

"Are there any crows to scare away at the North Pole? I want to be useful," Jimmy Scarecrow said, anxiously.

"No," answered Santa Claus, "but I don't want you to scare away crows. I want you to scare away Arctic Explorers. I can keep you in work for a thousand years, and scaring away Arctic Explorers from the North Pole is much more important than scaring away crows from corn. Why, if they found the Pole, there wouldn't be a piece an inch long left in a week's time, and the earth would cave in like an apple without a core! They would whittle it all to pieces, and carry it away in their pockets for souvenirs. Come along; I am in a hurry."

"I will go on two conditions," said Jimmy. "First, I want to make a present to Aunt Hannah and Betsey, next Christmas."

"You shall make them any present you choose. What else?"

"I want some way provided to scare the crows out of the corn next summer, while I am away," said Jimmy.

"That is easily managed," said Santa Claus. "Just wait a minute."

Santa took his stylographic pen out of his pocket, went with his lantern close to one of the fence-posts, and wrote these words upon it:

NOTICE TO CROWS: Whichever crow shall hereafter hop, fly, or flop into this field during the absence of Jimmy Scarecrow, and therefrom purloin, steal, or abstract corn, shall be instantly, in a twinkling and a trice, turned snow-white, and be ever after a disgrace, a byword and a reproach to his whole race. Per order of Santa Claus.

"The corn will be safe now," said Santa Claus, "get in." Jimmy got into the sledge and they flew away over the fields, out of sight, with merry halloos and a great clamour of bells.

The next morning there was much surprise at the farmhouse, when Aunt Hannah and Betsey looked out of the window and the Scarecrow was not in the field holding out his stiff arms over the corn stubble. Betsey had told Aunt Hannah she had given away the crazy quilt and the doll-baby, but had been scolded very little.

"You must not give away anything of yours again without asking permission," said Aunt Hannah. "And you have no right to give anything of mine, even if you know I don't want it. Now both my pretty quilt and your beautiful doll-baby are spoiled."

That was all Aunt Hannah had said. She thought she would send John after the quilt and the doll-baby next morning as soon as it was light.

But Jimmy Scarecrow was gone, and the crazy quilt and the doll-baby with him. John, the servant-man, searched everywhere, but not a trace of them could he find. "They must have all blown away, mum," he said to Aunt Hannah.

"We shall have to have another scarecrow next summer," said she.

But the next summer there was no need of a scarecrow, for not a crow came past the fence-post on which Santa Claus had written his notice to crows. The cornfield was never so beautiful, and not a single grain was stolen by a crow, and everybody wondered at it, for they could not read the crow-language in which Santa had written.

"It is a great mystery to me why the crows don't come into our cornfield, when there is no scarecrow," said Aunt Hannah.

But she had a still greater mystery to solve when Christmas came round again. Then she and Betsey had each a strange present. They found them in the sitting-room on Christmas morning. Aunt Hannah's present was her old crazy quilt, remodelled, with every piece cut square and true, and matched exactly to its neighbour.

"Why, it's my old crazy quilt, but it isn't crazy now!" cried Aunt Hannah, and her very spectacles seemed to glisten with amazement.

Betsey's present was her doll-baby of the Christmas before; but the doll was a year older. She had grown an inch, and could walk and say, "mamma," and "how do?" She was changed a good deal, but Betsey knew her at once. "It's my doll-baby!" she cried, and snatched her up and kissed her.

But neither Aunt Hannah nor Betsey ever knew that the quilt and the doll were Jimmy Scarecrow's Christmas presents to them.

SANTA CLAUS DOES NOT FORGET

By M.A. Haley

Bertie was a very good boy. He was kind, obedient, truthful, and unselfish. He had, however, one great fault,—he always forgot.

No matter how important the errand, his answer always was, "I forgot." When he was sent with a note to the dress-maker his mother would find the note in his pocket at night. If he was sent to the store in a great hurry, to get something for tea, he would return late, without the article, but with his usual answer.

His father and mother talked the matter over, and decided that something must be done to make the little boy remember.

Christmas was near, and Bertie was busy making out a list of things which Santa Claus was to bring him.

"Santa Claus may forget some of those things," said his mother.

"He cannot," replied Bertie; "for I shall write sled, and skates, and drum, and violin, and all the things on this paper. Then when Santa Claus goes to my stocking he will find the list. He can see it and put the things in as fast as he reads."

Christmas morning came, and Bertie was up at dawn to see what was in his stocking. His mother kept away from him as long as she could, for she knew what Santa Claus had done.

Finally she heard him coming with slow steps to her room. Slowly he opened the door and came towards her. He held in his hand a list very much longer than the one he had made out. He put it in his mother's hand, while tears of disappointment fell from his eyes.

"See what Santa Claus left for me; but I think he might have given me one thing besides."

His mother opened the roll. It was a list of all the errands Bertie had been asked to do for six months. At the end of all was written, in staring capitals, "I FORGOT."

Bertie wept for an hour. Then his mother told him they were all going to grandpa's. For the first time he would see a Christmas-tree. Perhaps something might be growing there for him.

It was very strange to Bertie, but on grandpa's tree he found everything he had written on his list. Was he cured of his bad habit? Not all at once; but when his mother saw that he was particularly heedless she would say, "Remember, Santa Claus does not forget."

A TURKEY FOR ONE

By Lavinia S. Goodwin

Lura's Uncle Roy is in Japan. He used to take Christmas dinner at Lura's home. Now he could only write her papa to say a box of gifts had been sent, and one was for his little girl.

The little girl clapped her hands, crying, "Oh, mamma! Don't you think it is the chain and locket dear uncle said he would sometime give me?"

"No," replied her papa, reading on. "Your uncle says it is a turkey for one."

"But we do not need turkeys from Japan," remarked the little daughter, soberly.

Her papa smiled, and handed the open letter to her mamma. "Read it aloud, every bit," begged Lura, seeing her mamma was smiling, too.

But her mamma folded the letter and said nothing.

On Christmas eve the box, which had just arrived, was opened, and every one in the house was made glad with a present. Lura's was a papier-mache turkey, nearly as large as the one brought home at the same time by the market-boy.

Next morning, while the fowl in the kitchen was being roasted, Lura placed hers before a window and watched people admire it as they passed. All its imitation feathers, and even more its red wattles, seemed to wish every man and woman, boy and girl, a Merry Christmas.

Lura had not spoken of the jewelry since her uncle's letter was read. It is not nice for one who receives a gift to wish it was different. Lura was not that kind of a child.

When dinner was nearly over, her papa said to her, "My dear, you have had as much of my turkey as you wanted; if you please, I will now try some of yours."

"Mine is what Uncle Roy calls a turkey for one," laughed Lura. She turned in her chair towards where her bird had been strutting on the window-sill, and added, in surprise, "Why, what has become of him?"

At that moment the servant brought in a huge platter. When room had been made for it on the table it was set down in front of Lura's papa, and on the dish was her turkey.

"Oh, what fun!" gayly exclaimed the child. "Did uncle tell you to pretend to serve it?"

"I have not finished what he directs me to do," her papa said, with a flourish of the carving-knife.

"But, papa—oh, please!" Her hand was on his arm. "You would not spoil my beautiful bird from Japan!"

A hidden spring was touched with the point of the knife. The breast opened, and disclosed the fowl filled with choice toys and other things. The first taken out was a tiny box; inside was a gold chain and locket; the locket held Uncle Roy's picture.

It was a turkey for one, for only Uncle Roy's niece. But all the family shared the amusement.

HOW DO I SAY MERRY CHRISTMAS IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE?

Afrikaner [Afrikaans]	"Geseënde Kersfees"
Albanian	"Urime Krishtlindjet"
Amharic	"Enkwan laberhana ledat abaqqawot" OR "Melkam amat ba`al yehunellachihu"
Arabic	"Milad Majid" OR "Milad Saeed"
Argentine	"Feliz Navidad"
Armenian	"Shenoraavor Nor Dari yev Pari Gaghand"
Bohemian	"Vesele Vanoce"
Brazilian Portuguese	"Feliz Natal"
Briton	"Nedeleg laouen na bloavezh mat"
Bulgarian	"Tchestita Koleda" OR "Tchestito Rojdestvo Hristovo"
Cambodian	"Soursdey Noel"
Chinese [Mandarin]	"Sheng Dankuai Le"
Chinese [Cantonese]	"Sing Daan Faai Lok"
Cornish	"Nadelik Lowen"
Croatian	"Sretan Bozic"
Czech	"Velike Vanoce"
Danish	"Glædelig Jul"
Dutch	"Vrolijk Kerstfeest"
English [American]	"Merry Christmas"
English [Australian]	"Ave a bonza Chrissy, Mate"
English [UK]	"Happy Christmas"
Esperanto	"Gojan Kristnaskon"
Estonian	"Roomsaid Joulu Puhi"
Farsi	"Christmas-e-shoma mobarak bashad"
Faroese	"Gleðilig Jól"

Filipino	"Maligayang Pasko"
Finnish	"Hauskaa Joulua"
French	"Joyeux Noël"
Frisian	"like Krystdagen en in protte Lok en Seine yn it Nije Jier"
Gaelic	"Nollaig Shona Dhuit"
German	"Froehliche Weihnachten"
Greek	"Kala Christouyenna"
Hawaiian	"Mele Kalikimaka"
Hebrew	"Mo'adim Lesimkha. Chena tova"
Hindi	"Shub Badadin"
Hungarian	"Boldog Karácsony"
Icelandic	"Gledileg Jol"
India	"Tamil Nadu - Christmas Vaazthukkal "
Indonesian	"Selamat Hari Natal"
Iraqi	"Idah Saidan Wa Sanah Jadidah"
Irish	"Nollaig Shona Duit"
Italian	"Buon Natale"
Japanese	"Meri Kurisumasu"
Klingon	"QISmaS Quch Daghajjaj"
Korean	"Sung Tan Jul Chuk Ha"
Latvian	"Prieci'gus Ziemsve'tkus un Laimi'gu Jauno Gadu"
Lithuanian	"Linksmu Kaledu"
Malay	"Selamat Hari Natal dan Tahun Baru"
Maltese	"Il-Milied it-tajjeb"
Maori	"Meri Kirihimete"
Navajo	"Ya'at'eeh Keshmish"
New Guinea Pidgin	"Meri Christmas"

New Zealand	"Happy Christmas"
Norwegian	"Gledelig Jul"
Pennsylvania German	"En frehlicher Grischtdaag"
Peru	"Felices Fiestas" OR "Feliz Navidad"
Polish	"Wesolych Swiat Bozego Narodzenia"
Portuguese	"Feliz Natal"
Punjabi	"Hacahi Ke Eide"
Rumanian	"Sarbatori Fericite"
Russian	"S Rozhdestvom Kristovym"
Serbian	"Hristos se rodi"
Slovakian	"Sretan Bozic" OR "Vesele vianoce"
Samoan	"Manuea le Karisimasi"
Scots Gaelic	"Nollaig chridheil huibh"
Slovak	"Vesele Vianoce. A stastlivy Novy Rok"
Slovene	"Srecen Bozic"
Spanish	"Feliz Navidad"
Swahili	"Heri ya Krismasi"
Swedish	"God Jul"
Tagalog [Philippines]	"Maligayang Pasko"
Tahitian	"Ia ora'na no te noere"
Telugu	"Santhasa Krismas"
Thai	"Suksan Christmas"
Turkish	"Noeliniz Ve Yeni Yiliniz Kutlu Olsun"
Ukrainian	"Z Rizdvom Krystovym" OR "Veselogo Rizdva"
Urdu [Pakistan]	"Shadae Christmas"
Uzbek	"Yangi Yiligiz Mubarak Bolsun"
Vietnamese	"Chuc Mung Giang Sinh"

Welsh

"Nadolig Llawen"

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

From the Old English 'Cristes Mæsse' ~ meaning the 'mass of Christ' ~ the story of Christmas begins with the birth of a babe in Bethlehem.

Many Christmas customs are based on the birth of Christ. Such as giving presents because of the Wise Men, who brought presents to the baby Jesus. Christmas carols based on Christ's birth and scenes of the birth with figures of shepherds, the Wise Men, and animals surrounding the baby Jesus.

But some of the ways people celebrate Christmas have nothing to do with Christ's birthday. Many bits of older holidays have crept into Christmas!

It wasn't until about 200 years after Christ's death that Christians even thought about celebrating his birth. No one knows the exact date of his birth. It is believed that December the 25th was chosen to turn people away from celebrating other holidays in this time of the year.

Saturnalia, was the Romans holiday that they celebrated in December. It was a time of feasting and parties. Also, in northern Europe there was a holiday known as Yule. They celebrated this holiday by making great fires. They then would dance around the fires, yelling for the winter to end.

In time, Christmas took the place of these holidays. But people kept some of the old customs -- such as burning a Yule log and having feasts and parties. The word Yule is still used as a name for the Christmas season.

As time went on, new customs crept into Christmas. One was the Christmas tree, which was started in Germany. As the Germans settled in new lands they brought with them this tradition.

In 16th-century Germany fir trees were decorated, both indoors and out, with apples, roses, gilded candies, and colored paper. In the Middle Ages, a popular religious play depicted the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

A fir tree hung with apples was used to symbolize the Garden of Eden — the Paradise Tree. The play ended with the prophecy of a savior coming, and so was often performed during the Advent season.

It is held that Protestant reformer Martin Luther first adorned trees with light. While coming home one December evening, the beauty of the stars shining through the branches of a fir inspired him to recreate the effect by placing candles on the branches of a small fir tree inside his home

The Christmas Tree was brought to England by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert from his native Germany. The famous Illustrated News etching in 1848, featuring the Royal Family of Victoria, Albert and their children gathered around a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle, popularized the tree throughout Victorian England. Brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans, in the late 19th century.

Last but not least is Saint Nick. A long time ago, a bishop named Nicholas lived in what is now the country of Turkey. No one knows much about him. There are stories that he often helped children in need. Many years after his death, Nicholas was made a saint. In time, he became the patron saint of children.

The origin of Santa Claus begins in the 4th century with Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, an area in present day Turkey. By all accounts St. Nicholas was a generous man, particularly devoted to children. After his death around 340 A.D. he was buried in Myra, but in 1087 Italian sailors purportedly stole his remains and removed them to Bari, Italy, greatly increasing St. Nicholas' popularity throughout Europe.

His kindness and reputation for generosity gave rise to claims he that he could perform miracles and devotion to him increased. St. Nicholas became the patron saint of Russia, where he was known by his red cape, flowing white beard, and bishop's mitre.

In Greece, he is the patron saint of sailors, in France he was the patron of lawyers, and in Belgium the patron of children and travellers. Thousands of churches across Europe were dedicated to him and some time around the 12th century an official church holiday was created in his honor. The Feast of St. Nicholas was celebrated December 6 and the day was marked by gift-giving and charity.

After the Reformation, European followers of St. Nicholas dwindled, but the legend was kept alive in Holland where the Dutch spelling of his name Sint Nikolaas was eventually transformed to Sinterklaas. Dutch children would leave their wooden shoes by the fireplace, and Sinterklaas would reward good children by placing treats in their shoes. Dutch colonists brought this tradition with them to America in the 17th century and here the Anglican name of Santa Claus emerged.

GOODY SANTA CLAUS

BY KATHERINE LEE BATES: BOSTON: D. LOTHROP CO., 1889

Santa, must I tease in vain, Deer? Let me go and hold the reindeer, While you clamber down the chimneys. Don't look savage as a Turk! Why should you have all the glory of the joyous Christmas story, And poor little Goody Santa Claus have nothing but the work?

It would be so very cozy, you and I, all round and rosy, Looking like two loving snowballs in our fuzzy Arctic furs, Tucked in warm and snug together, whisking through the winter weather Where the tinkle of the sleigh-bells is the only sound that stirs.

You just sit here and grow chubby off the goodies in my cubby From December to December, till your white beard sweeps your knees; For you must allow, my Goodman, that you're but a lazy woodman And rely on me to foster all our fruitful Christmas trees.

While your Saint ship waxes holy, year by year, and roly-poly, Blessed by all the lads and lassies in the limits of the land, While your toes at home you're toasting, then poor Goody must go posting Out to plant and prune and garner, where our fir-tree forests stand.

Oh! but when the toil is sorest how I love our fir-tree forest, Heart of light and heart of beauty in the Northland cold and dim, All with gifts and candles laden to delight a boy or maiden, And its dark-green branches ever murmuring the Christmas hymn!

Yet ask young Jack Frost, our neighbor, who but Goody has the labor, Feeding roots with milk and honey that the bonbons may be sweet! Who but Goody knows the reason why the playthings bloom in season and the ripened toys and trinkets rattle gaily to her feet!

From the time the dollies budded, wiry-boned and saw-dust blooded, with their waxen eyelids winking when the wind the tree-tops plied, have I rested for a minute, until now your pack has in it all the bright, abundant harvest of the merry Christmastide?

Santa, wouldn't it be pleasant to surprise me with a present? And this ride behind the reindeer is the boon your Goody begs; Think how hard my extra work is, tending the Thanksgiving turkeys And our flocks of rainbow chickens — those that lay the Easter eggs.

Home to womankind is suited? Nonsense, Goodman! Let our fruited Orchards answer for the value of a woman out-of-doors. Why then bid me chase the thunder, while the roof you're safely under, all to fashion fire-crackers with the lighting in their cores?

See! I've fetched my snow-flake bonnet, with the sunrise ribbons on it; I've not worn it since we fled from Fairyland our wedding day; How we sped through iceberg porches with the Northern Lights for torches! You were young and slender, Santa, and we had this very sleigh.

Jump in quick then? That's my bonny. Hey down derry! Nonny nonny! While I tie your fur cap closer, I will kiss your ruddy chin. I'm so pleased I fall to singing, just as sleigh-bells take to ringing! Are the cloud-spun lap-ropes ready? Tirra-lirra! Tuck me in.

Off across the starlight Norland, where no plant adorns the moorland Save the ruby-berried holly and the frolic mistletoe! Oh, but this is Christmas revel! Off across the frosted level where the reindeers' hoofs strike sparkles from the crispy, crackling snow!

There's the Man i' the Moon before us, bound to lead the Christmas chorus With the music of the sky-waves rippling round his silver shell — Glimmering boat that leans and tarries with the weight of dreams she carries To the cots of happy children. Gentle sailor, steer her well!

Now we pass through dusky portals to the drowsy land of mortals; Snow-enfolded, silent cities stretch about us dim and far. Oh! How sound the world is sleeping, midnight watch no shepherd keeping, though an angel-face shines gladly down from every golden star.

Here's a roof. I'll hold the reindeer. I suppose this weather-vane, Dear, Someone set here just on purpose for our teams to fasten to. There's its gilded cock, — the gaby! — wants to crow and tell the baby we are come. Be careful, Santa! Don't get smothered in the flue.

Back so soon? No chimney-swallow dives but where his mate can follow. Bend your cold ear, Sweetheart Santa, down to catch my whisper faint: Would it be so very shocking if your Goody filled a stocking Just for once? Oh, dear! Forgive me. Frowns do not become a Saint.

I will peep in at the skylights, where the moon sheds tender twilights equally down silken chambers and down attics bare and bleak. Let me show with hailstone candies these two dreaming boys — the dandies in their frilled and fluted nighties, rosy cheek to rosy cheek!

What! No gift for this poor garret? Take a sunset sash and wear it O'er the rags, my pale-faced lassie, till thy father smiles again. He's a poet, but — oh, cruel! He has neither light nor fuel. Here's a fallen star to write by, and a music-box of rain.

So our sprightly reindeer clamber, with their fairy sleigh of amber, On from roof to roof, the woven shades of night about us drawn. On from roof to roof we twinkle, all the silver bells a-tinkle, till blooms in yonder blessed east the rose of Christmas dawn.

Now the pack is fairly rifled, and poor Santa's well-nigh stifled; Yet you would not let your Goody fill a single baby-sock; Yes, I know the task takes brain, Dear. I can only hold the reindeer, and so see me climb down chimney — it would give your nerves a shock.

Wait! There's yet a tiny fellow, smiling lips and curls so yellow you would think a truant sunbeam played in them all night. He spins Giant tops, a flies kites higher than the gold cathedral spire in his creams — the orphan Bairnie, trustful little Tatterkins.

Santa, don't pass by the urchin! Shake the pack, and deeply search in all your pockets. There is always one toy more. I told you so. Up again? Why, what's the trouble? On your eyelash winks the bubble
Mortals call a tear, I fancy. *Holes in stocking, heel and toe?*

Goodman, though your speech is crusty now and then there's nothing rusty In your heart. A child's least sorrow makes your wet eyes glisten, too; but I'll mend that sock so nearly it shall hold your gifts completely. Take the reins and let me show you what a woman's wit can do.

Puff! I'm up again, my Deary, flushed a bit and somewhat weary, With my wedding snow-flake bonnet worse for many a sooty knock; But be glad you let me wheedle, since, an icicle for needle, Threaded with the last pale moonbeam, I have darned the laddie's sock.

Then I tucked a paint-box in it ('twas no easy task to win it From the Artist of the Autumn Leaves) and frost-fruits white and sweet, with the toys your pocket misses — oh! And kisses upon kisses To cherish safe from evil paths the motherless small feet.

Chirrup! Chirrup! There's a patter of soft footsteps and a clatter of child voices. Speed it, reindeer, up the sparkling Arctic Hill! Merry Christmas, little people! Joy-bells ring in every steeple, And Goody's gladdest of the glad. I've had my own sweet will.

CHRISTMAS ANGELS

By P.Z. Mann

The Whittles lived in Humbleburg,
As poor as poor can be,
But all their neighbors loved them,
For their generosity.
For though the Whittles' shelves were bare,
Their cottage tumbledown,
When Christmas came they made a toy,
For every child in town.

On Christmas Eve they climbed in bed,
After all the toys were made;
And while they dreamed of better times,
The Whittles were repaid.
That night three Christmas angels came,
To give them a reward --
For heaven won't let any act
Of kindness be ignored.

One angel searched the cupboard
And found just a crust of bread;
"Now, this won't do", she whispered,
"Let's prepare a feast instead!"

The angels flapped their magic wings,
As only they are able,
And in a flash a flood of food
Filled all the shelves and table!

The tiny house still looked quite drab,
It needed to be cheered;
And as the angels waved their wings,
A Christmas tree appeared!
Two angels trimmed the pretty tree;
The third flew to and fro,
Hanging bells and holly boughs,
And sprigs of mistletoe.

Outside, the angels dressed the house
With icicles and snow,
And on the door they placed a wreath,
Complete with a bright red bow!
They finished all they came to do,
Before the break of day,
And as the Whittles roused from sleep,
The angels flew away.

Now, when the Whittles saw the food
And all the decoration,
They pinched themselves and wept for joy,
Then danced in celebration!

As word spread through the village
Of their heaven-sent surprise;
Every Humbleburger came
To see with their own two eyes!

The Whittles shared their Christmas feast-
They emptied all the shelves;
Their kindness wouldn't let them keep
Good fortune to themselves.

When everyone had cleaned their plate,
They all joined in a song;
And up above-though no one heard-
The angels sang along!

T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE JESUS

By Union Fork Creek Baptist Church

T'was the night before Jesus came, when all through the house, not a creature was praying, not one in the house; The Bibles were lain on the shelf without care In hopes that JESUS would not come there;

The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And Mom in her rocker with baby on lap
Was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.
When out of the East there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!

When, what to my wondering eyes should appear
But angels proclaiming that Jesus was here,
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray
I knew in a moment this must be THE DAY!

The light of His face made me cover my head
It was Jesus! Returning just like He had said.
And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth, I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.

In the book of Life which He held in His hand
Was written the name of every saved man.
He spoke not a word as He searched for my name;
When He said "it's not here" my head hung in shame. The people whose names had been written with love He gathered to take to His Father above.

With those who were ready He rose without a sound While all the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late;
I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight;
Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.

In the words of this poem the meaning is clear;
The coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one life and when comes the last call
We'll find that the Bible was true after all.

"It is not for you to know the times or the season, which the Father hath put in his power". Acts 1:7
Jesus is the Reason for the Season.

JOSEPH'S LETTER HOME
A CHRISTMAS STORY
By Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

Dear Mom,

We're still in Bethlehem--Mary and I and little Jesus.

There were lots of things I couldn't talk to you about last summer. You wouldn't have believed me then, but maybe I can tell you now. I hope you can understand.

You know, Mom, I've always loved Mary. You and dad used to tease me about her when she was still a girl. She and her brothers used to play on our street. Our families got together for supper. But the hardest day of my life came scarcely a year ago when I was twenty and she only fifteen. You remember that day, don't you?

The trouble started after we were betrothed and signed the marriage agreement at our engagement. That same spring Mary had left abruptly to visit her old cousin Elizabeth in Judea. She was gone three whole months. After she got back, people started wondering out loud if she were pregnant.

It was cloudy the day when I finally confronted her with the gossip. "Mary," I asked at last, "are you going to have a baby?"

Her clear brown eyes met mine. She nodded.

I didn't know what to say. "Who?" I finally stammered.

Mom, Mary and I had never acted improperly--even after we were betrothed.

Mary looked down. "Joseph," she said. "There's no way I can explain. You couldn't understand. But I want you to know I've never cared for anyone but you." She got up, gently took my hands in hers, kissed each of them as if it were the last time she would ever do that again, and then turned towards home. She must have been dying inside. I know I was.

The rest of the day I stumbled through my chores. It's a wonder I didn't hurt myself in the woodshop. At first I was angry and pounded out my frustrations on the doorframe I was making. My thoughts whirled so fast I could hardly keep my mind on my work. At last I decided just to end the marriage contract with a quiet divorce. I loved her too much to make a public scene.

I couldn't talk to you. Or anyone, for that matter. I went to bed early and tried to sleep. Her words came to me over and over. "I've never cared for anyone but you.... I've never cared for anyone but you...." How I wished I could believe her!

I don't know when I finally fell asleep. Mom, I had a dream from God. An angel of the Lord came to me. His words pulsed through my mind so intensely I can remember them as if it were yesterday.

"Joseph, son of David," he thundered, "do not fear to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

I couldn't believe my ears, Mom. This was the answer! The angel continued, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel gripped my shoulders with his huge hands. For a long moment his gaze pierced deep within me. Just as he turned to go, I think I saw a smile on his shining face.

I sat bolt upright in bed. No sleep after that! I tossed about for a while, going over the words in my mind. Then I got up and dressed quietly so I wouldn't wake you.

I must have walked for miles beneath the moonless sky. Stars pricked the blackness like a thousand tiny pinpoints. A warm breeze blew on my face.

I sang to the Lord, Mom. Yes, me, singing, if you can imagine that. I couldn't contain my joy. I told Him that I would take Mary and care for her. I told Him I would watch over her--and the child--no matter what anyone said.

I got back just as the sun kissed the hilltops. I don't know if you still recall that morning, Mom. I can see it in my mind's eye as if it were yesterday. You were feeding the chickens, surprised to see me out. Remember?

"Sit down," I said to you. "I've got to tell you something." I took your arm and helped you find a seat on the big rock out back. "Mom," I said, "I'm going to bring Mary home as my wife. Can you help make a place for her things?"

You were silent a long time. "You do know what they're saying, don't you, son?" you said at last, your eyes glistening.

"Yes, Mom, I know."

Your voice started to rise. "If your father were still alive, he'd have some words, I'll tell you. Going about like that before you are married. Disgracing the family and all. You... you and Mary ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

You'd never have believed me if I'd tried to explain, so I didn't. Unless the angel had spoken to you, you'd have laughed me to scorn.

"Mom, this is the right thing to do," I said.

And then I started talking to you as if I were the head of the house. "When she comes I don't want one word to her about it," I sputtered. "She's your daughter-in-law, you'll respect her. She'll need your help if she's to bear the neighbors' wagging tongues!"

I'm sorry, Mom. You didn't deserve that. You started to get up in a huff.

"Mom," I murmured, "I need you." You took my hand and got to your feet, but the fire was gone from your eyes.

"You can count on me, Joseph," you told me with a long hug. And you meant it. I never heard another word. No bride could hope for a better mother-in-law than you those next few months.

Mom, after I left you I went up the road to Mary's house and knocked. Her mother glared at me as she opened the door. Loudly, harshly she called into the house, "It's Joseph!" almost spitting out my name as she said it.

My little Mary came out cringing, as if she expected me give her the back of my hand, I suppose. Her eyes were red and puffy. I can just imagine what her parents had said.

We walked a few steps from the house. She looked so young and afraid. "Pack your things, Mary," I told her gently. "I'm taking you home to be my wife."

"Joseph!" She hugged me as tight as she could. Mom, I didn't realize she was so strong.

I told her what I'd been planning. "We'll go to Rabbi Ben-Ezer's house this week and have him perform the ceremony."

I know it was awfully sudden, Mom, but I figured the sooner we got married the better it would be for her, and me, and the baby.

"Mary, even if our friends don't come, at least you and I can pledge our love before God." I paused. "I think my Mom will be there. And maybe your friend Rebecca would come if her dad will let her. How about your parents?"

I could feel Mary's tiny frame shuddering as she sobbed quietly.

"Mary," I said. I could feel myself speaking more boldly. "No matter what anyone says about you, I'm proud you're going to be my wife. I'm going to take good care of you. I've promised God that."

She looked up.

I lowered my voice. "I had a dream last night, Mary. I saw an angel. I know."

The anguish which had gripped her face vanished. She was radiant as we turned away from the house and began to walk up the hill together.

Just then her mother ran out into the yard. "Wait," she called. She must have been listening from behind the door. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"I'll get your father," she called, almost giddy with emotion. "We," she cried as she gathered up her skirts. "We," she shouted as she began to run to find her husband. "We ... are going to have a wedding!"

That's how it was, Mom. Thanks for being there for us. I'll write again soon.

Love,

Joseph

THE INNKEEPER'S TALE

By Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

They think I'm some kind of cruel, heartless landlord. Someone must have told them that. But they're wrong, just plain wrong, and it's time to set the record straight, once and for all.

People say I'm an innkeeper. I suppose you'd call it an inn. To us it's just a big house. My grandfather, Joshua ben-Yahoudi, built it back when his trading business was at a peak. And he built it big enough to fit all fourteen kids.

Well, a few years ago, the missus and I were just rattling around in that big house--kids grown up and all--and we were thinking, maybe we could take in a few travelers. Rachel has always been mighty good in the kitchen, so we just let out word that we'd take people in, and they started to come. Every night we'd have a person or two, sometimes more. People would always come back when they came to town again, intent on another bowl of Rachel's lamb stew.

Then came that blankety-blank census the governor thought up. Taxation, pure and simple! People from all over the province flooded into town that week. Filled us clean up. Rachel and I slept in the main room where we always do, and we started putting guests in the other three rooms. They kept coming. Then we doubled up two or three families to a room. They kept coming. Finally, when we had filled the main room with four families plus Rachel and me, we started turning people away.

I must have gotten in and out of bed ten times that night, stumbling over bodies to get to the door. "No more room, sorry folks. No more room. Come back in the morning. We have a couple of families leaving then." They'd mutter something and head back to their party, and sleep somewhere next to a house under the shelter of a blanket. I just couldn't make any more room. That's the honest truth.

But I did make room for one more couple. Joseph was a burly man with big arms and strong hands, down from Nazareth, I think he said. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer. I would say, "No, I'm sorry," and he'd tell me about his "little Mary." Well, when I saw "little Mary" she wasn't very little. She was just about as pregnant as a woman can get, and awfully pale. While Joseph was pleading, I saw her grab her tummy in pain, and I knew I couldn't let her have that baby outside in the wind and sleet.

The barn. That would just have to do, I told myself, and led them and their donkey out back. Now it was pretty crowded, so I shooed several animals into the pen outside to make room in one dry corner. Joseph said, "We sure are grateful, sir." Then with a serious look, he asked me, "Do you know where I can find a midwife in these parts? We might need her tomorrow or the next day."

That man didn't know much about having babies, it was plain enough to see. I ran to Aunt Sarah's house and pounded on the door until her husband came. "One of the travelers is having a baby," I told him. "I'll wait while Aunt Sarah gets dressed." I stopped a moment to catch my breath. "And tell her to hurry."

By the time we got back to the barn, Joseph had "little Mary" settled on some soft, clean hay, wrapped up in a blanket, wiping the perspiration off her brow, and was speaking softly to her as she fought the waves of pain. Aunt Sarah sent me to get my Rachel, and then pushed Joseph and me out of the barn. "This ain't no place for men," she said.

We waited just outside in the shelter of the barn for hours, it seemed like. Well, all of a sudden, we hear a little cry. "You've got a baby boy," Aunt Sarah was saying as we peeped around the corner. She hands the young-un to Rachel, and she wraps it up in those swaddling bands she had saved. Cute little thing, I tell you.

Well, Joseph goes over to Mary and gives her a big hug, and a kiss on the cheek, and Rachel hands Mary the baby, and then comes over to me and takes my hand. "Remember when our Joshua was born?" she whispers.

The lantern was blowing almost out, the cattle were lowing softly, and baby Jesus was asleep in his mother's arms. That's how I left them as I walked Aunt Sarah home. Chilly wind, though the sleet had stopped.

By the time I got back, Rachel was in bed, and I was about ready to put out the light, step over sleeping bodies, and get under the warm covers, when I heard some murmuring out by the barn.

I'd better check, I told myself. When I peeped in, I saw shepherds. Raggedy, smelly old shepherds were kneeling down on the filthy barn floor as if they were praying. The oldest one was saying something to Joseph about angels and the Messiah. And the rest of them just knelt there with their heads bowed, some with tears running down their faces.

I coughed out loud, and Joseph looked up. I was almost ready to run those thieving shepherds off, when Joseph motioned to me with his hand. "It's okay," he whispered. "They've come to see the Christ-baby."

The Christ-baby? The Messiah? That was when I knelt, too. And watched, and prayed, and listened to the old shepherd recount his story of angels and heavenly glory, and the sign of a holy baby, wrapped in swaddling bands, to be found in a stable-manger.

My Lord, it was my stable where the Christ-baby was born. My manger he rested in. My straw, my lamp, my wife Rachel assisting at his birth.

The shepherds left after a while. Some of them leaned over and kissed the sleeping Christ-child before they departed. I know I did.

I'll always be glad I made room in the barn for that family-- that holy family. You see, I'm not some mean inn-keeper. I was there. I saw him. And, you know, years later that boy came back to Bethlehem, this time telling about the Kingdom of God. Oh, I believe in him, I tell you. I was there. And, mark my words, if you'd seen what I've seen, you'd be a believer, too.

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 musn'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!

ELIZABETH: A CHRISTMAS BLESSING ALWAYS

By Lisa Saunders

Expecting our second child, due to arrive Christmas Eve of 1989, had been a delightful experience. What a Christmas present! But the moment Elizabeth was born, I felt a stab of fear. I knew there was something very wrong. My immediate thought was, "Her head looks so small--so deformed." Before she was twelve hours old, I found out why.

When the neonatologist entered my room the following morning, he said, "Your daughter has profound microcephaly--her brain is extremely damaged throughout. If she lives, she will never roll over, sit up, or feed herself."

He concluded that Elizabeth's birth defects were caused by congenital cytomegalovirus (CMV) — a virus that may have no symptoms for the mother, known as a "silent virus," or it may present itself with mild to severe cold-like symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that approximately 8,000 babies a year are born with or develop permanent disabilities because of congenital CMV. It is more common a cause of disabilities than Down syndrome.

How and why did I catch this virus that I had barely heard of? I read the CMV literature. It stated that women who care for young children are at a higher risk for catching it because it is frequently being shed in the saliva and urine of toddlers.

While I was pregnant with Elizabeth, I not only had a toddler of my own, but also ran a licensed daycare center in my home. I felt sick at what my lack of knowledge had done to my little girl. In milder cases, children with congenital CMV may lose hearing or struggle with learning disabilities later in life. But Elizabeth's case was not a mild one.

"My life is over," I thought. I asked God to heal her instantly, but since He didn't, I begged him to strike me dead. I just couldn't handle raising such an afflicted child, period. Although children are supposed to be a blessing, I felt far from blessed--I felt stricken.

Thankfully my husband Jim's love for Elizabeth far outweighed his grief. He said, "She needs me. I want to protect her from this cruel world she has been born into." He was just like Charlie Brown with that pathetic Christmas tree.

"Oh God," I prayed, "please help me love Elizabeth too."

We took Elizabeth home Friday morning, December 22. Although Elizabeth was no longer at death's door, my horror over her prognosis had not left. But I had to fight through it;

Christmas preparations needed to be made. Christmas had not turned out as hoped.

Initially, whenever I looked upon Elizabeth, my heart broke afresh--all I could see was her prognosis. It was as if the prognosis was more of a person than she was. This "prognosis" was like a living creature relentlessly torturing me. I couldn't seem to get past it and see Elizabeth for the sweet little girl she was.

In those early months of Elizabeth's life, it seemed all I could do was rock Elizabeth and read the book of Psalms. Many of the psalmists wrote things I wouldn't dare say to God. They questioned His love and power, thus helping me to honestly express my grief to God. I could relate to the writers' pain and feelings of abandonment as they waited on God's deliverance. Knowing I wasn't the only one despairing of life made me feel less alone in my anguish.

Elizabeth loved to be held--something my first-born daughter Jackie never enjoyed. Seeing Elizabeth rest contentedly in my arms brought me pleasure. One day, she looked directly into my eyes and smiled. We had finally connected! I eventually stopped asking God to kill me. Like George Bailey standing on the bridge at the end of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," I too began to cry, "I want to live again!"

Years later, I awoke feeling so proud on Elizabeth's 16th birthday, one week before her 17th Christmas. Listening to nostalgic songs like, "I'll be home for Christmas," I thought about how hard Elizabeth fought to stay with us each Christmas--overcoming several battles with pneumonia, recovering from major surgeries and most recently, seizures. Weighing only 50 pounds, she looked funny to strangers as a result of her small head and big adult teeth, but she was lovely to us with her long, thick brown hair, large blue eyes and soul-capturing smile. Although Elizabeth was still in diapers, and could not speak or hold up her head, she was a very happy young lady with a love of adventure — long car rides being one of her favorites. She especially enjoyed going to school and being surrounded by people, paying no mind to the stares of other children who approached her in public. Unlike Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, she had no desire to live on the Island of Misfit Toys.

Less than two months after she turned 16, I dropped Elizabeth off at school. Strapping her into her wheelchair, I held her face in my hands, kissed her cheek, and said, "Now be a good girl today." She smiled as she heard her teacher say what she said every time, "Elizabeth is always a good girl!" With that, I left.

At the end of the day, I got the call I had always feared. "Mrs. Saunders, Elizabeth had a seizure and she's not breathing. We called 911."

The medical team did all they could, but she was gone. While holding Elizabeth on his lap, my husband looked down into her partially open, lifeless eyes and cried, "No one is ever going to look at me again the way Elizabeth did." I knew he was right. No one adored us as

Elizabeth did. Although I was happy that she was free from her body, I knew it might be a very long time before we crossed the great divide to join her.

Today, my sorrow is gradually being replaced by a passion to prevent others from going through what Elizabeth did. Although congenital CMV is the #1 viral cause of birth defects, OB/GYNs still do not routinely warn pregnant women how they can avoid it, so for now, it is up to parents like me and CMV experts to warn the public. The CDC recommends that pregnant women:

#Do not kiss young children under the age of five or six on the mouth. Instead, kiss them on the head or give them a big hug.

Do not share food, drinks or utensils with young children.

#Wash hands often with soap and water, especially after changing diapers.

As I prepare to celebrate what would have been Elizabeth's 20th Christmas had she lived, it is with some heartache that I lift the holiday decorations from their boxes. Elizabeth used to love to sit on the couch with her formerly homeless, old dog Riley, and watch me decorate. But now our family has a new Christmas tradition: I open Elizabeth's drawer and pull out the black and red checked shirt she wore on her last day with us and drape it over an empty chair placed beside the fireplace. I still feel she is my Christmas blessing, my "Tiny Tim," saying, "God bless, everyone!"

HOW THE TREES KEPT CHRISTMAS

By Unknown

One Christmas Eve the trees in a wood were very unhappy. They wished very much to keep Christmas, but they did not know how to do so.

"We look so brown," said one.

"And so bare," said another.

"If we only had our pretty green summer dresses," said a third, "then we should be decorated and could keep Christmas."

"Hush, children, hush!" whispered North Wind in quite a gentle voice for such a rough fellow. "Make haste and go to sleep."

"Hush! Children, hush!" softly murmured a sleepy little bird. He was roosting on one of the branches of the unhappy trees.

So the trees dropped off to sleep, one by one, while a little star twinkled peacefully overhead.

But while they slept something happened. And when the trees awoke they found that someone, perhaps North Wind, had, during the night, cast over each of them a lovely soft cloak of spotless feathery white.

"How beautiful we are!" said the trees. "Now we can keep our Christmas!"

WHAT CHRISTMAS IS AS WE GROW OLDER

By Charles Dickens

Time was, with most of us, when Christmas Day, encircling all our limited world like a magic ring, left nothing out for us to miss or seek; bound together all our home enjoyments, affections, and hopes; grouped everything and everyone around the Christmas fire; and made the little picture shining in our bright young eyes complete.

And is our life here, at the best, so constituted that, pausing as we advance at such a noticeable milestone in the track as this great birthday, we look back on the things that never were, as naturally and full as gravely as on the things that have been and are gone, or have been and still are? If it be so, and so it seems to be, must we come to the conclusion that life is little better than a dream, and little worth the loves and strivings that we crowd into it?

No! Far be such miscalled philosophy from us, dear reader, on Christmas Day! Nearer and closer in our hearts be the Christmas spirit, which is the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness, and forbearance! It is in the last virtues especially that we are, or should be, strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of our youth; for, who shall say that they are not our teachers, to deal gently even with the impalpable nothings of the earth!

Welcome, old aspirations, glittering creatures of an ardent fancy, to your shelter underneath the holly! We know you, and have not outlived you yet. Welcome, old projects and old loves, however fleeting, to your nooks among the steadier lights that burn around us. Welcome, all that was ever real to our hearts; and for the earnestness that made you real, thanks to heaven!

Welcome everything! Welcome alike what has been, and what never was, and what we hope may be, in your shelter underneath the holly, to your places round the Christmas fire, where what is, sits openhearted!

Of all days in the year, we will turn our faces toward that City upon Christmas Day, and from its silent hosts bring those we loved among us. In the Blessed Name wherein we are gathered together at this time, and in the Presence that is here among us according to the promise, we will receive, and not dismiss, the people who were dear to us!

The winter sun goes down over town and village; on the sea it makes a rosy path, as if the Sacred Tread were fresh upon the water. A few more moments, and it sinks, and night comes on, and lights begin to sparkle in the prospect. In town and village, there are doors and windows closed against the weather; there are flaming logs heaped high; there are joyful faces; there is healthy music of voices. Be all ungentleness and harm excluded from the temples of the household gods, but be those memories admitted with tender encouragement! They are of Time and all the comforting and peaceful reassurances; and of the broad beneficence and goodness that too many men have tried to tear to narrow shreds.

THE STORY OF SANTA CLAUS

By Unknown

Once upon a time a man called Nicholas lived in Patara, a town in the East. Because he was very fond of children and was kind and generous to them, they came to think of him as their dear friend and their beloved saint. So it was that after a time the wonderful things he did were woven into a beautiful legend. You know that Santa means Saint and Claus stands for Nicholas, and that is how he came to be known as Santa Claus.

In Santa Claus's own town, Patara, lived a great lord who had three daughters. He was very poor, so poor that one day he was on the point of sending his daughters out to beg for food from his neighbors. But it happened that Saint Nicholas not long before had come into a fortune, and as he loved giving to those in need, he no sooner heard of the trouble the poor lord was in than he made up his mind to help him secretly. So he went to the nobleman's house at night, and as the moon shone out from behind a cloud, he saw an open window into which he threw a bag of gold, and with this timely gift the father was able to provide for his eldest daughter so that she could be married. On another night Santa Claus set off with another bag of gold, and threw it in at the window, so the second daughter was provided for. But by this time, the father had grown eager to discover who the mysterious visitor could be, and next night he kept on the lookout. Then for the third time Santa Claus came with a bag of gold upon his back and itched it in at the window. The old lord at once recognized his fellow townsman, and falling on his knees, cried out "Oh! Nicholas, servant of God, why seek to hide yourself?"

Is it not wonderful to think that this was so long ago, sixteen hundred years, yet we still look for the secret coming of Santa Claus with his Christmas gifts? At first he was said to come on his own birthday, which is early in December, but after a while, as was very natural with Christmas so near, the night of his coming was moved on in the calendar, and now we hang up our stockings to receive his gifts on Christmas Eve. In some countries children still put their shoes by the fireside on his birthday. In others they say it is the Christ-Kindlein or Christ Child who brings the gifts at Christmastime. But it is always a surprise visit, and though it has happened so many hundreds or times, the hanging up of the Christmas stocking is still as great a delight as ever.

THE HOLY NIGHT

By Selma Lagerlof

There was a man who went out in the dark night to borrow live coals to kindle a fire. He went from hut to hut and knocked. "Dear friends, help me!" said he. "My wife has just given birth to a child, and I must make a fire to warm her and the little one."

But it was way in the night, and all the people were asleep. No one replied.

The man walked and walked. At last he saw the gleam of a fire a long way off. Then he went in that direction and saw that the fire was burning in the open. A lot of sheep were sleeping around the fire, and an old shepherd sat and watched over the flock.

When the man who wanted to borrow fire came up to the sheep, he saw that three big dogs lay asleep at the shepherd's feet. All three awoke when the man approached and opened their great jaws, as though they wanted to bark; but not a sound was heard. The man noticed that the hair on their backs stood up and that their sharp, white teeth glistened in the firelight. They dashed toward him.

He felt that one of them bit at his leg and one at this hand and that one clung to this throat. But their jaws and teeth wouldn't obey them, and the man didn't suffer the least harm.

Now the man wished to go farther, to get what he needed. But the sheep lay back to back and so close to one another that he couldn't pass them. Then the man stepped upon their backs and walked over them and up to the fire. And not one of the animals awoke or moved.

When the man had almost reached the fire, the shepherd looked up. He was a surly old man, who was unfriendly and harsh toward human beings. And when he saw the strange man coming, he seized the long, spiked staff, which he always held in his hand when he tended his flock, and threw it at him. The staff came right toward the man, but, before it reached him, it turned off to one side and whizzed past him, far out in the meadow.

Now the man came up to the shepherd and said to him: "Good man, help me, and lend me a little fire! My wife has just given birth to a child, and I must make a fire to warm her and the little one."

The shepherd would rather have said no, but when he pondered that the dogs couldn't hurt the man, and the sheep had not run from him, and that the staff had not wished to strike him, he was a little afraid, and dared not deny the man that which he asked.

"Take as much as you need!" he said to the man.

But then the fire was nearly burnt out. There were no logs or branches left, only a big heap of live coals, and the stranger had neither spade nor shovel wherein he could carry the red-hot coals.

When the shepherd saw this, he said again: "Take as much as you need!" And he was glad that the man wouldn't be able to take away any coals.

But the man stopped and picked coals from the ashes with his bare hands, and laid them in his mantle. And he didn't burn his hands when he touched them, nor did the coals scorch his mantle; but he carried them away as if they had been nuts or apples.

And when the shepherd, who was such a cruel and hardhearted man, saw all this, he began to wonder to himself. What kind of a night is this, when the dogs do not bite, the sheep are not scared, the staff does not kill, or the fire scorch? He called the stranger back and said to him: "What kind of a night is this? And how does it happen that all things show you compassion?"

Then said the man: "I cannot tell you if you yourself do not see it." And he wished to go his way, that he might soon make a fire and warm his wife and child.

But the shepherd did not wish to lose sight of the man before he had found out what all this might portend. He got up and followed the man till they came to the place where he lived.

Then the shepherd saw the man didn't have so much as a hut to dwell in, but that his wife and babe were lying in a mountain grotto, where there was nothing except the cold and naked stone walls.

But the shepherd thought that perhaps the poor innocent child might freeze to death there in the grotto; and, although he was a hard man, he was touched, and thought he would like to help it. And he loosened the knapsack from his shoulder, took from it a soft white sheepskin, gave it to the strange man, and said that he should let the child sleep on it.

But just as soon as he showed that he, too, could be merciful, his eyes were opened, and he saw what he had not been able to see before, and heard what he could not have heard before.

He saw that all around him stood a ring of little silver-winged angels, and each held a stringed instrument, and all sang in loud tones that tonight the Savior was born who should redeem the world from its sins.

Then he understood how all things were so happy this night that they didn't want to do anything wrong.

And it was not only around the shepherd that there were angels, but he saw them everywhere. They sat inside the grotto, they sat outside on the mountain, and they flew under the heavens. They came marching in great companies, and, as they passed, they paused and cast a glance at the child.

There was such jubilation and such gladness and songs and play! And all this he saw in the dark night whereas before he could not have made out anything. He was so happy because his eyes had been opened that he fell upon his knees and thanked God.

What that shepherd saw, we might also see, for the angels fly down from heaven every Christmas Eve, if we could only see them.

You must remember this, for it is as true, as true as that I see you and you see me. It is not revealed by the light of lamps or candles, and it does not depend upon sun and moon; but that which is needful is that we have such eyes as can see God's glory.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE

By Henry Williamson

The First Battle of Ypres was over. The deluge in the second week of November 1914 decided that. Our battalion of the London Regiment (Territorials) was out at rest, leaving a memory of dead soldiers in field grau (field grey) and khaki lying in still attitudes between the German and British lines. 'Rest' meant no more fatigues or carrying parties; it meant letters from home, parcels, hazy nights in the estaminets of Hazebrouck with cafe'-rhum and weak beer, clouds of smoke and noisy laughter,

After 48 hours clear, a daily route march, leading to nowhere and back again, with new faces of the drafts which had come up from the base. The war was now a mere rumor from afar: a low-flashing, dull booming beyond an eastern horizon of flat, tree-lined and arable fields gleaming with water in cart-rut and along each furrow.

In the first week of December 1914 the King Emperor George V arrived at St. Omer in northern France, headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force. Orders were given immediately at all units to prepare for a royal inspection.

The King in the service uniform of a field-marshal, brown-booted with gold spurs, brown-bearded, prominent pouches under his blue eyes, passed with Field-Marshal Sir John French and various general staff officers down the ranks of silent, staring-ahead, depersonalized faces thinking that the gruff tones in which the King spoke to the commander-in-chief were of that other world infinitely remote from what really happened.

Behind the King walked the Prince of Wales, seeming somehow detached from the massive power of red and gold, the big moustaches and faces and belts and boots and spurs all so shining and immaculate between the open ranks of the troops standing rigidly at attention. The slim figure of the Prince, in the uniform of a Grenadier, appeared to be looking for something far beyond the immediate scene—a slight, white-faced boy in the shadow of Father.

The next afternoon the platoon sergeant walked from billet to billet, with orders that we were going into the line that evening. A waning moon rode the sky, memento of estaminet nights, moon-silvered cobble stones, color-washed house-fronts of the Grande Place. The decaying orb was ringed by scudding vapor; a wet wind flapped the edges of rubber groundsheets fastened over packs and shoulders of the marching men. A wind from the south-west brought rain to the brown, the flat, the tree-lined plain of Flanders.

Going back was by now a prospect of stoical acceptance, since marching in the rain absorbed nearly all personal memory, leaving little for coherent thought beyond the moment. We marched along a road lined with poplars towards the familiar hazy pallor thrown on low clouds by the ringed lights around Ypres -- called 'Ypriss' by the old sweats who had been out since Mons. As we came nearer, the sky was tremulous with flashes: the night burdened by reverberation of cannon heard with the lisp of rainy wind in the bare branches of trees above our heads.

At last we halted, and welcome news arrived. The company was in reserve. We were to be billeted for the night in some sheds, and thatched lofts around a farm. Speculation ceased when the platoon commander said that we were taking over part of the line the following evening. The Germans, he said, had attacked down south; the battalion was to remain in brigade reserve. It was a quiet part of the line. There was to be diversionary fire from the trenches, to relieve the pressure.

'Cushy, we said among ourselves as we entered our cottage, to sleep upon the floor. There was a large stove, radiating heat.

Bon for the troops!

The damp December dusk of next evening was closing down as No 1 Company approached the dark mass of leafless trees at the edge of a wood. Through the trees lay a novel kind of track, firm but knobbly to the feet, but so welcome after the mud of the preceding field. It was like walking on an uneven and wide ladder. Rough rungs, laid close together, were made of little sawn-off branches, nailed to laid trunks of oak trees. As we came near to the greenish-white German flares, bullets began to crack. The men of the new draft ducked at each overhead crack; but the survivors of the original battalion walked on upright, sometimes muttering, 'Don't get the wind-up, chum,' as the old sweats had said to them when first they had gone into the line, many weeks before.

We came to a cross-ride in the wood, and waited there, while a cock-pheasant crowed as it flew past us. Dimly seen were some bunkers, in which braziers glowed brightly. The sight was homely, and cheering. Figures in balaclava woolen helmets stood about.

'What's it like, mate?' came the inevitable question. 'Cushy,' came the reply, as a cigarette brightened. These were regulars, the newcomers felt happy again. Braziers, lovely crackling coke flames!

The relief company filed on down the path, and came to the luminous edge of the wood, beyond which the German parachute flares were clear and bright, like lilies. The trench was just inside the wood. There was no water in it, thank God! One saw sandbag-dugouts behind the occupants standing by for the relief. It was indeed cushy!

Thus began a period or cycle of eight days for No 1 Company: two in the front line followed by two days back in battalion reserve in billets, two in support within the wood and two more again in the front line.

It was not unenjoyable: danger was negligible—a whizz-bang arriving now and again—object more of curiosity than of fear—news of someone getting sniped; work in the trench, digging by day, riveting the parapet, and fatigues in the wood by night; for the weather remained fine. One trench had a well-made parapet with steel loopholes built in the sandbags, and paved along a length of 50 yards entirely by unopened tins of bully-beef taken from some of the hundreds of boxes lying about in the wood. These boxes had been chucked away by former carrying parties, in the days before 'corduroy' paths. The trench had been built by the regulars, now no longer bearded, though some of their toes showed through their boots. It was said that a cigarette end, dropped somewhere along it, was a 'crime' heavily punished.

Water to the waist

All form, and shape even, of the carefully-made trenches disappeared under rains falling upon the yellow clay which retained them, One was soaked all day and all night. The weight of a greatcoat was doubled by clay and water. 'We volunteered for this!' was an ironic comment among those in water sometimes to the waist.

After the rains, mist lay over a countryside which had no soul, with its broken farmhouse roofs, dead cattle in no man's land, its daylight nihilism beyond the parapet with never a movement of life, never glimpse of the Alleyman (Allemand-German)-except those who were dead, and lying motionless in varying attitudes of stillness day after day upon the level brown field extending to the yellow sub-soil thrown up from the enemy trench, beyond its barbed wire obstacles.

At night mist blurred the brightness of the light-balls, the Very lights or flares as they were now generally called. The mists, hanging heavier in the wood, settled to hear, which rimed trees, corduroy paths, shed and barn; and clarified into keener air in sunlight. Frost formed floating films of ice upon the clay-blue water in shell holes, which tipped when mess-tins were dipped for brewing tea; the daily ration of tea being mixed in sandbags with sugar. It was pleasant in the wood, squatting by a little stick fire. Movement was, however, laborious now upon the paths not yet laid with corduroy by the sappers. Boots became pattered with yellow clay. Still, we said, it might be worse-for memory of the tempest that had fallen on the last day of the battle for Ypres, of the misery of cold and wet, the dereliction of that time, was still in the forefront of our minds.

One afternoon, towards Christmas, a harder frost settled upon the vacant battle held. By midnight trees, bunkers, paths, sentries' balaclavas and greatcoat shoulders became stiff, thickly rimed. From some of the new draft came suppressed whimpering sounds. Only those old soldiers who had scrounged sandbags and straw from Inskilling Farm at one edge of the wood, and put their boots inside, lay still and sleeping. Lying with unprotected boots outside the open end of a bunker, one endured pain in one's feet until the final agony, when one got up and hobbled outside, seeing bright stars above the treetops. The thing to do was to make a fire, and boil some water in a mess-tin for some Nestle's cafe'-au-lait. There were many shell-fractured oak-branches lying about. They were heavy with sap, but no matter. One passed painful hours of sleeplessness in blowing and fanning weak embers amid a hiss of bubbling branch-ends.

The winter agony

As soon as I sat still, or stood up to beat my arms like a cabby on a hansom cab, the weak glow of the fire went dull. My eyes smarted with smoke, there was no flame unless I fanned all the time. My arms were heavy in the frozen greatcoat sleeves, mud-slabbed and hard as drainpipes; while the skirts of the coat were like boards. I went back to sleep, but pain kept me awake; so I crawled out again and was once more in frozen air, bullets smacking through trees glistening with frost. I was thirsty, but the water-bottle was solid. Later, when it was thawed out over a brazier, it leaked, being split, but there were many lying about in the wood, with rifles and other equipment.

We were issued with shaggy goatskin jerkins. Did it mean that the battalion was intended to be an Officers' Training Corps? That there would be no more attacks until the spring? The jerkins had broad tapes which cross-bound the white and yellow hairy skins against the chest. Officers and men now looked alike, except for the expression of an officer's face, and the fact that one appeared to stand more

upright: an effect given, perhaps, by the shoulder-high thumb sticks of ash many of them walked about with.

Senior officers also wore Norwegian type knee-boots, laced to the knee and then treble-strapped. I thought of asking my father to send me a pair, but a thaw came at the beginning of the third week of December, and the misery of mud returned. And then, with a jump of concealed fear, orders were read out for an attack across no man's land to the German lines. It was two days after the new moon. We were in support. The company lay out on the edge of the wood, shivering and beating hands and feet, in support of a regular battalion of the Rifle Brigade. The objectives were a cottage in no man's land called Sniper's House, and thence forward to a section of the enemy front line that enfiladed our dangerous T-trench.

The assault of muttering and tense-faced bearded men took place under a serried rank of bursting red stars of 18-pounder shrapnel shells, and supporting machine gun fire. Figures floundering across a root-field in no man's land, with its sad decaying lumps of dead cows and men. Hoarse yells of fear became simulated rage; while short of, into and beyond the British front line dropped shell upon shell to burst with acrid yellow fumes of lyddite from the British Long-toms of the South African war of 1902, with their worn rifling.

The order came for the company to carry on the attack. Survivors, coming back through the wood, wet through and covered with mud, uniforms ripped by barbed wire, were stumbling as they passed through us. When they had gone away -- away from the line, death behind them--a clear baritone voice floated back through the trees, singing Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove--far away, far away would I roam. They were wonderful, remarked a sergeant, a rigger-playing Old Blue in peacetime. Yes, because they were going out, I thought; they were euphoric, hurrying to warmth and sleep, sleep, sleep.

This local attack failed on the uncut German wire; but Sniper's House was taken. Our colonel, one heard later, had protested against the carrying on of the attack by our company. Later, it was reported in 'Comic Cuts,' or Corps Intelligence sheets, that the attack had been ordered to aid the Russians hard pressed on the Eastern Front. We laughed skeptically at that; a beginning of disillusion with 'the well-fed Staff'. I had no fear at night, and used to wander about in no man's land by myself, to feel some sort of freedom. One night I was sitting down by the German wire when a flare hissed out just by my face, I seemed, followed by another, and another, while machine-guns opened up with loud directness, accompanied by the cracking air-shear of bullets passing only a few inches, it seemed, above my neck. Then up and down the line arose the swishing stalks of white lights, all from the German lines, by which one knew that they were not going to attack, but feared an assault from our lines. This was remote comfort, as I felt myself to be large and visible, sweating with fear of sorts, while bullets from our lines thudded and whanged away upwards in ricochet. The sky above me appeared to be lit by the beautiful white lilies of the dead, as I thought of them.

This was an occasion of that phenomenon known as wind-up. As before a wind, fire swept with bright yellow-red stabs of thorn-flame up the line towards the light ringed salient around Ypres: bullets in flight, hissing, clacking or whining, crossed the lines of the hosts of the unburied dead slowly being absorbed into Flanders field. The wind of fear, the nightly wind of the battlefield of Western Europe, from the cold North Sea to the great barrier of the Alps--a fire travelling faster than any wind, was speckling the ridges above the drained marsh that surrounded Ypres, stabbing in wandering aimless design the darkness on the slopes of the Commines canal, running in thin crenellations upon the plateau

of Wytschaete and Messines, sweeping thence down to the plain of Armentieres, among the coal-mines and slags of Artois, across the chalk uplands of Picardy, and the plains of the rivers. The wind of fear rushed on, to die out, expended, beyond the dark forest of the Argonne, beyond the fears of massed men, where snow-field, ravine, torrent and crag ended before the peaks in silence under the constellation of Orion, shaking gem-like above all human hope.

It was still freezing hard on Christmas Eve. We had been detailed for what seemed to be a perilous fatigue in no man's land going out between the lines to knock in posts in a zigzag line towards the German front line. Around the posts wire was to be wound. On this wire, hurdles taken from a shed were to be laid. Then drying tobacco leaves, hung on the hurdles (as the leaves had been in the shed), would give cover from view should it be necessary, in an attack, to reinforce the front line.

What an idea, I thought. It would draw machine gun fire. It was about as sensible as the brigade commander's idea for the December 19 attack across no man's land, for some men to carry straw palliasses, to lean against the German wire and enable men to cross over the entanglements. As for the knocking-in of posts into frozen ground, that was utterly wrong! And in bright moonlight, 40 yards away from the Alleyman!

Stab of fear

After our platoon commander, a courteous man in his early 20s and fresh from Cambridge, had outlined the plan quietly, he asked for questions. I dared to say that the noise of knocking in posts would be heard. There was silence; then we were told that implicit directions had come from brigade, and must be carried out. We debouched from the wood, and were exposed. After an initial stab of fear, I was not afraid. Everything was so still, so quiet in the line. No flares, no crack of the sniper's rifle. No gun firing.

Soon we were used to the open moonlight in which all life and movement seemed unreal. Men were fetching and laying down posts, arranging themselves in couples, one to hold, the other to knock. Others prepared to unwind barbed wire previously rolled on staves. I was one who followed the platoon commander and three men to a tarred wooden shed, to fetch hurdles hung with long dry tobacco leaves, which we brought out and laid on the site of the reinforcement fence.

And not a shot was fired from the German trench. The unbelievable had soon become the ordinary, so that we talked as we worked, without caution, while the night passed as in a dream. The moon moved down to the treetops behind us. Always, it seemed, had we been moving bodilessly, each with his shadow.

After a timeless dream I saw what looked like a large white light on top of a pale put up in the German lines. It was a strange sort of light. It burned almost white, and was absolutely steady. What sort of lantern was it? I did not think much about it; it was part of the strange unreality of the silent night, of the silence of the moon, now turning a brownish yellow, of the silence of the frost mist. I was warm with the work, all my body was in glow, not with warmth but with happiness.

Suddenly there was a short quick cheer from the German lines-Hoch! Hoch! Hoch! With others I flinched and crouched, ready to fling myself flat, pass the leather thong of my rifle over my head and aim to fire; but no other sound came from the German lines.

We stood up, talking about it, in little groups. For other cheers were coming across the black spaces of no man's land. We saw dim figures on the enemy parapet, about more lights; and with amazement saw that a Christmas tree was being set there, and around it Germans were talking and laughing together. Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!, followed by cheering.

Our platoon commander, who had gone from group to group during the making of the fence, looked at his watch and told us that it was eleven o'clock. One more hour, he said, and then we would go back.

'By Berlin time it is midnight. A Merry Christmas to you all! I say, that's rather fine, isn't it?', for from the German parapet a rich baritone voice had begun to sing a song I remembered from my nurse Minne singing it to me after my evening tub before bed. She had been maid to my German grandmother, one of the Lune family of Hildesheim. Stillle Nacht! Heilige Nacht!

Tranquil Night! Holy Night! The grave and tender voice rose out of the frozen mist; it was all so strange; it was like being in another world, to which one had come through a nightmare: a world finer than the one I had left behind in England, except for beautiful things like music, and springtime on my bicycle in the country of Kent and Bedfordshire.

And back again in the wood it seemed so strange that we had not been fired upon; wonderful that the mud had gone; wonderful to walk easily on the paths; to be dry; to be able to sleep again.

The wonder remained in the low golden light of a white-rimmed Christmas morning. I could hardly realize it; but my chronic, hopeless longing to be home was gone.

The post arrived while I was frying my breakfast bacon, beside a twig fire where stood my canteen full of hot sugary tea. I sat on an unopened 28-lb box of 2-ounce Capstan tobacco: one of scores thrown down in the wood, with large bright metal containers of army biscuits, of the shape and size and taste of dog biscuits. The tobacco issue per day was reckoned to be 5,000 cigarettes at this time, or 'L4 lbs of tobacco. This was not the 'issue' ration, but from the many 'Comforts for the Troops' appeals in newspapers, all tobacco being duty free to our benefactors at home.

There was a Gift Package to every soldier from the Princess Royal. A brass box embossed with Princess Mary's profile, containing tobacco and cigarettes. This I decided to send home to my mother, as a souvenir.

'There's bloody hundreds of them out there!' said a kilted soldier to me as I sat there.

Face to face

I walked through the trees, some splintered and gashed by fragments of Jack Johnsons, as we called the German 5.9-inch gun, and into no man's land and found myself face to face with living German soldiers, men in grey uniforms and leather knee-boots-a fact which was at the time for me beyond belief. Moreover the Germans were, some of them, actually smiling as they talked in English.

Most of them were small men, rather pale of face. Many wore spectacles, and had thin little goatee beards. I did not see one piczelhaube. They were either bare headed, or had on small grey pork-pie

hats, with red bands. Each bore two metal buttons, ringed with white, black and red rather like tiny archery targets: the Imperial German colors.

Among these smaller Saxons were tall, sturdy men taking no part in the talking, but regarding the general scene with detachment. They were red-faced men and their tunics and trousers above the leather knee-boots showed dried mud marks. Some had green cords round a shoulder, and under the shoulder tabs.

Looking in the direction of the mass of Germans, I saw, judging by the serried rows of figures standing there, at least three positions or trench lines behind the front trench. They were dug at intervals of about 200 yards.

'It only shows,' said one of our chaps, 'what a lot of men they have, compared to our chaps. We've got only one line, really, the rest are mere scratches.' He said quietly, 'See those green lanyards and tassels on that big fellow's shoulders? They're sniper's cords. They're Prussians. That's what some Saxons told me. They dislike the Prussians. "Kill them all," said one, "and we'll have peace".'

'Yes, my father was always against the Prussians,' I told him. One of the small Saxons was contentedly standing alone and smoking a new and large meerschaum pipe. He wore spectacles and looked like a comic-paper 'Hun'. The white bowl of the pipe bore the face and high-peaked cap of 'Little Willie' painted on it. The Saxon saw me looking at it and taking pipe from mouth said with quiet satisfaction: 'Kronprinz! Prachtiger Kerl!' before putting back the mouthpiece carefully between his teeth.

Someone told me that Prachtiger Kerl meant 'Good Chap' or 'Decent Fellow'. Of course, I thought, he is to them as the Prince of Wales is to us.

A mark of German efficiency I noted: two aluminum buttons where we had one brass button on our trousers. Men were digging, to bury stiff corpses. Each feld grau 'stiffy' was covered by a red-black-white German flag. When the grave had been filled in an officer read from a prayer-book, while the men in feld grau stood to attention with round grey hats clutched in left hands. I found myself standing to attention, my balaclava in my hand. When the grave was filled, someone wrote, in indelible pencil, these words on the rough cross of ration-box wood: Hier Ruht In Gott ein Unbekannter Deutscher Held. 'Here rests in God an unknown German hero', I found myself translating: and thinking that it was like the English crosses in the little cemetery in the clearing within the wood.

I learned, with surprise, that the German assaults in mass attack through the woods and across the arable fields of the salient, during the last phase of the Battle for Ypres, had been made by young volunteers, some arm in arm, singing, with but one rifle to every three. They had been 'flung in' (as the British military term went) after the failure of the Prussian Guard, the elite Corps du Garde, modeled on Napoleon's famous soldiers, to break our line. And here was the surprise: 'You had too many automatische pistolen. in your line, Englische friend!'

As a fact, we had few if any machine guns left after the battle; the Germans had mistaken their presence for our 'fifteen rounds rapid' fire! Every infantry battalion had been equipped with two machine guns, of the type used in the South African War of 1902; with one exception. That was the London Scottish, the 14th Sattalion of the London Regiment, which had bought, privately before the war, two Vickers guns. These also were lost during the battle.

Another illusion of the Germans appeared to be that we had masses of reserve troops behind our front line, most of them in the woods. If only they had known that we had very few reserves, including some of the battalions of an Indian Division, the turbaned soldiers of which suffered greatly from the cold.

The truce lasted, in our part of the line (under the Messines Ridge), for several days. On the last day of 1914, one evening, a message came over no man's land, carried by a very polite Saxon corporal. It was that their regimental (equivalent to our brigade, but they had three battalions where we had four) staff officers were going round their line at midnight; and they would have to fire their automatische pistolen, but would aim high, well above our heads. Would we, even so, please keep under cover, 'lest regrettable accidents occur).

And at 11 o'clock-for they were using Berlin time-we saw the flash of several Spandau machine guns passing well above no man's land.

I had taken the addresses of two German soldiers, promising to write to them after the war. And I had, vaguely, a childlike idea that if all those in Germany could know what the soldiers had to suffer, and that both sides believed the same things about the righteousness of the two national causes, it might spread, this truce of Christ on the battlefield, to the minds of all, and give understanding where now there was scorn and hatred.

I was still very young. I was under age, having volunteered after the news of the Retreat from Mons had come to us one Sunday in the third week of August 1914. Our colonel had made a speech to the battalion, then in London, declaring that the British Expeditionary Force of the Regular army was very reduced in numbers after the 90-mile retreat which had worn out boots and exhausted so many, and was in dire need of help.

And now the New Year had come, the frost was settling again in little crystals upon posts and on the graves and icy shell holes in no man's land. Once more the light-balls were rising up to hover under little parachutes over no man's land with the blast of machine guns, and the brutal downward droning of heavy shells. And the rains came, to fall upon Flanders field, while preparations were in hand for the spring offensive.

OLIVE, THE ORPHAN REINDEER

By Michael Christie

CHAPTER 1

Wolves

The storm in the Barrens raged around the little reindeer with a nose like an olive. "Mommy! Daddy!" She'd lost her mother and father and brothers and sisters. The night wind shrieked. The snowflakes stung her eyes. "Mommy! Daddy! Where are you?" But no one could hear. And now - danger! - wolves. She could smell them. They were close. Maybe they got my family, she thought, and want me too. So the little reindeer ran as fast as she could. In the fierce storm she didn't know where she was going. She just knew she had to get away. The wolves chased her, but she soon left them far behind. Even when she no longer picked up their scent, she ran and ran. Finally she came to the North Pole.

CHAPTER 2

Mrs. Claus

Gasping for breath, she found herself in front of Santa and Mrs. Claus's house. Night here was calm and peaceful. She saw them arm in arm on their doorstep. They were looking at the stars. Santa Claus laughed when he saw the tired little reindeer. "Ho! Ho! Ho! Look, my dear. A reindeer with an olive for a nose! Goodness! Welcome to the North Pole, little one." Mrs. Claus smiled. "Well, aren't you just the cutest thing though! We'll have to call you Olive. Right, Santa?" Santa nodded. "Do you like cookies, Olive?" "I don't know, ma'am," she said. "Well, try this," said Mrs. Claus. She gave Olive a cookie. "It's raisin and oatmeal fresh from my bakery." Olive found it tasty. While she nibbled on it, Mrs. Claus tied a blue bow on her head. "There, Olive!" Mrs. Claus said, giving her a big hug. "You just needed a mite sprucing up." "I hope you can stay a while, Olive," said Santa. Olive felt she'd never see her family again. She was an orphan. So she decided to make the North Pole her home.

CHAPTER 3

Olive's Jobs

As the years passed and she got bigger, Olive became one of the best skaters among the spare reindeer. She always won the friendly races against them at Candy Cane Pond. Olive also had important jobs to do during the Christmas season. She looked through the magic telescope to see which boys and girls were naughty or nice, and reported their names to Number One, the chief elf. She hauled boxes of presents to Santa Claus's sleigh on the runway. She delivered muffins from Mrs. Claus's bakery to the hospital. In the toy factory she checked for broken toys coming off a line in Quality Control. She liked these jobs, but the job Olive wanted more than anything was to be on Santa's team. Will I be picked some day? She wondered.

CHAPTER 4

A Foolish Dream

It was Christmas Eve again. As always Olive wished she could go on the Big Trip. Many of her spare reindeer pals had gone. Why not me? She thought. But maybe that was a foolish dream. Only this morning an elf had shouted, "You over there - no, not you, Jingles. The other reindeer. Yes, you, green

nose. Give us some help." But at dusk when Olive got off shift, she began to do some serious thinking. Maybe it wasn't a foolish dream at all. What did that smart alec elf know anyway? So she decided right then to visit Santa and ask him if she could join the team.

CHAPTER 5 A Meeting With Santa

As she stood in front of Santa's house, Olive wasn't so sure of herself. Just who do you think you are? she thought. But she'd come this far so what did she have to lose? All Santa could do was say no. She hesitated then tapped at Santa's door. She waited. No answer. She tapped again. No one home. She sighed. "Oh, well, I tried." Just as Olive was about to leave, the door burst open. "Ho! Ho! Ho! Well, well, look who it is!" Santa said. He had only one boot on. "I'm just getting ready to go over to Mission Control to check things out before the Big Trip. What can I do for you, Olive?" "Hi, Santa. I thought I'd ask if there, uh, was - was -" "Was what, Olive?" "Well, anything I could do." Santa thought. "No, I can't think of anything." "Oh." "What did you have in mind?" "Well - uh - well -" Olive was tongue-tied. "Please, I'm really in a hurry," Santa said. "Well?" When he hears what I want he'll laugh at me, Olive thought. That's worse than a simple no. She just blinked.

"I can't think of a thing you could do," Santa said. "Well, I just thought I'd, you know, ask anyway." Santa shrugged. "Thank you for asking, Olive." "You're welcome, Santa." She left and Santa scratched his head. "What a strange conversation," he muttered.

CHAPTER 6 Countdown

Take-off time was ninety-seven minutes away. Best to forget about the Big Trip, Olive felt, by keeping busy. Maybe Mrs. Claus wanted some muffins taken to the hospital. She headed for the bakery. Lovely smells drifted from it: mincemeat tarts, chocolate cakes, jelly doughnuts, date squares, brownies, buns, bread, all kinds of muffins and cookies.

"Hi, Olive. That nose of yours sure works mighty fine," Mrs. Claus said. "Here's a nice warm raisin and oatmeal cookie just for you." "No thank you, Mrs. Claus," Olive said. "I'm not hungry. I just came over to see if you wanted some muffins taken over to the hospital." "I'm sorry, we made the muffin delivery this afternoon when you were at the toy factory."

"Oh." Mrs. Claus gave Olive a close look. "What's the matter, Olive? Why the glum looking face?" Olive pawed at the ground. "Well - it's nothing. Nothing." Mrs. Claus fixed Olive's blue bow. It was crooked. "Something is bothering you. Tell me, Olive, don't be shy with me. We girls have to stick together. What is it?" "It's nothing, Mrs. Claus. I'd better go now and see if they need me one last time at the toy factory." Olive trotted off. "You're my favorite reindeer you know. I'm always around if you need me," Mrs. Claus called after her.

CHAPTER 7

Too Late

At the toy factory Olive's best friend, Boomer, the chubby harness elf, sat on a crate by the shipping dock. He munched on a peanut butter sandwich. "Hi, Olive!" Boomer shouted. He liked to shout rather than talk. "Hi, Boomer. Do they need any more help inside?" "Not now. They're just tying up some loose ends. We're ready." "Oh." She wasn't needed here either. "What's eating you, Olive? Huh? You look really sad." "Well, it's just that I'd love to go on the Big Trip," Olive said. "Hey, come on! You'll make it one day." "Oh, I don't know about that, Boomer." "You will. You're fast. You always win the races on Candy Cane Pond. And you're strong too." "I'm just a nobody. After all these years I'm still called the other reindeer." "Aw, come on! Mrs. Claus for one doesn't call you that," Boomer said. "Tell her what you want."

"Mrs. Claus doesn't do the hiring." "No, but I'm sure she's got some clout with Santa." "I just talked to Mrs. Claus and I couldn't tell her about - about my dream. I just couldn't." "Huh? Why not?" "Well - I -" Boomer waved his sandwich in the air. "Sweet potatoes, Olive! You can't just wait for something to happen. And that's what you're doing." "I know, Boomer, I know." She wouldn't mention her visit with Santa Claus or Boomer would get really steamed. "But I just don't like to be - pushy." Boomer snorted. "Pushy? You really tick me off sometimes. You know that? The squeaky wheel gets the grease. Things won't come to you. And -" "And what, Boomer?" Boomer stared at his sandwich. "The Big Trip is only eighty-nine minutes away. But I have to say you can forget it just like the other ones. It's too late." Olive gulped. Maybe I should have said something to Mrs. Claus, she thought. I'll be staying behind again.

CHAPTER 8

The Numbers Aren't Good

Meanwhile Santa Claus, Number One, and Chip, the computer ace, were going over a few things in the Planning Room at Mission Control. They studied a wall map. Mittens, Santa's orange cat, was on Santa's shoulders. He seemed interested in the map too. "Santa, the numbers aren't good," Chip said. "We have a record number of kids this year and we just don't have enough reindeer power." Santa chuckled. "Chip, you worry too much. I have a great team, but we can always add one or two of the spare reindeer." Mrs. Claus passed by. She cupped her ear to listen. "One or two won't do it, Santa, even if we had them," Number One said. "Dr. Winters called me just before you arrived. An odd thing. The spare reindeer are in the hospital sick." Santa gasped. "Oh, dear! All of them at once? That's terrible!" "And the sleigh is loaded to overflowing," Chip said. "If we added any more toys we couldn't lift off. Lots of toys have to be left behind." He looked at his calculator. "The numbers aren't good." "They certainly aren't, Chip," Santa said. "Many places must be missed." Chip pointed at the map with a baseball bat. "Here, here, and here. And there." Santa Claus sank into an armchair with his head in his hands. Mittens almost fell off his shoulders. "But we can't let down any children," Santa moaned. "We can't! You're the computer expert, Chip. Think of something. Anything! We leave in fifty-six minutes. There must be something we can do." Chip threw up his hands. "There isn't, Santa, and that's a fact." After she heard this, Mrs. Claus hurried over to the hospital.

CHAPTER 9

Blackmail

In the hospital ward the spare reindeer lay in beds. With thermometers in their mouths were Speedy, Jingles, Flash, Igloo, Spinner, Rascal, Bingo, and Pokey. Dr. Winters took out the thermometers and read them. "Hmmm," he said. "I can't see anything the matter with any of you." He looked at his watch. "It's Christmas Eve with forty-three minutes 'til take-off. What if Santa needs some of you? Then what?" "Then that'll be too bad," Pokey stated. "We're not going back to that gloomy old stable." "Not until somebody paints it," said Flash. "Hah! So that's it," Dr. Winters said. "Blackmail!" "That's a mean thing to say," said Bingo. "But we're not going back to that stable. So there!" "Get up! Get up!" Dr. Winters yelled. "Where's your pride? Where's your courage? Where's your loyalty? Get up! Immediately! This is nonsense! This is - uh, please. With jam on it. Well?" But the reindeer just snuggled in their beds and answered with snores. They weren't going anywhere.

CHAPTER 10

Not A Very Nice Idea

Mrs. Claus rushed into the ward. She was alarmed by what she saw. "What's going on, Doctor?" Dr. Winters shook his head. "I never thought I'd hear myself say this, Mrs. Claus. Never in a million years. But what we've got here is a bunch of fakers who want to sleep all day long in nice comfy beds. In short, they're on strike!" Mrs. Claus thought. "I think I've got an idea. It's not a very nice one, but - " She whispered into Dr. Winters' ear. The reindeer squinted at them. What were they up to? The doctor held up a needle. He gave it a squirt. The reindeer stirred. "Now this might smart a little, you reindeer, but it's for your own good," Dr. Winters said. The reindeer shot up in bed. "Don't be scared," Dr. Winters said. "It'll only take a second." "I feel a lot better, Dr. Winters," Jingles said. "M-m-me too," Pokey stuttered. "See you, Dr. Winters," said Igloo, bolting for the door. "Don't call us, we'll call you," said the rest as they clomped after Igloo. Mrs. Claus and Dr. Winters split their sides as the reindeer stampeded down the corridor.

CHAPTER 11

Take-Off

Take-off was seconds away. From the runway red, gold, green, and blue fireworks lit the North Pole sky with fantastic patterns. Two elves at the front of the sleigh blew a trumpet fanfare. Tah-tah tah tah-tah tah tah. Tah-tah. Boomer sprinkled Santa's reindeer from his bag of magic sparkles. The sparkles gave them the power to fly. Chip and Number One looked on with frowns. Everyone was nervous except for the reindeer. "I'm all set, chief," said Dasher, and pawed at the ground. "Me too," said Dancer, and shook his bells. "Let's go, Santa," said Comet. From the front of Santa's team came a red glow and a giggle. The reindeer loved Christmas Eve. Santa didn't have the heart to tell them thousands of children would be given a miss on this one. He slumped in his sleigh. Even his beard seemed to droop. Olive watched from a rise. Although she wanted to forget about the Big Trip, she just couldn't help coming to see the show. She especially loved the fireworks. She heard the reindeer's excited voices. Oh, how she wished she could be one of them. But I'll always get left behind, she thought. Olive turned away. She'd seen enough. A tear trickled down her cheek. Suddenly there were cries of alarm. And...BANG!

CHAPTER 12
What Boomer Did

The sleigh had crashed. Santa Claus was tossed into a snow bank. The reindeer sprawled on the runway. Boxes of presents were scattered everywhere. Olive galloped to the overturned sleigh. Boomer stood near it. "Oh, no! This is awful!" Olive cried. "What happened, Boomer?" Boomer grinned. "I overloaded the sleigh when nobody was looking. I put a set of barbells across the back of the runners. "What! But why?" "You want to go with them, don't you?" "Shh! Of course I want to go, but -" "Well, if the team can't get airborne then you're in. You're in!" "But - but -" "Oh-oh!" Boomer clasped his mouth. "Look who's coming."

CHAPTER 13
No Time To Lose

Number One marched towards them. His face was red with anger. "I heard all that, Boomer. Oh, Santa! Santa!" he called. "I think there is something you should know." Santa struggled to his feet and brushed snow off himself. "What's going on here?" Santa said. "Tell Santa Claus the disgraceful thing you did, Boomer," Number One ordered. "Go on." Boomer hung his head. "I overloaded the sleigh with some barbells. I'm sorry, Santa, I really am. But please forget what I did and give Olive a chance to go with you. That's why I did it. Olive is as fast as greased lightning." Santa shook his head. The accident had confused him. "Olive?" he said. "Olive?" Then it dawned. "Yes, Olive! I was just talking to you. So you want to help deliver the presents, do you, Olive?" "Oh, yes, Santa. That's really why I came to see you." Boomer gave Olive a surprised look. "Huh? You did?" Santa stroked his beard. "So that was it! But why didn't you say so? Oh, never mind. We've got no time to lose. Come along, Olive." But Olive didn't move. "I'd love to, Santa, but I don't think it would be fair to go after this. If not for Boomer, you'd all be in the sky by now." Boomer clenched his teeth. "Olive, you're going to blow it." "Hmm, I see," Santa said. "I see." For a while no one knew what to say. Finally Number One spoke up. He'd cooled off. "Santa, may I say something?" he said. "Although I do not approve of such a deed, I think Boomer is a good fellow. He has served us well for many years. Perhaps we can overlook what he did." Santa nodded. "I agree, Number One. We'll give Boomer a second chance. So, Olive? Do you want to come? Yes or no?" Olive could hardly believe it. Was her dream about to come true? "Whoopee!" she shouted. "You'll see I'm really fast and strong, Santa." Santa's eyes twinkled. He patted Olive on the head. "Don't worry, Olive," Santa said. "I've had my eyes on you and I know how fast and strong you are. You were going to be on the team sooner or later. So as of now, you're officially hired." Chip joined them. He was studying his calculator and he didn't look happy. "I hate to be a party pooper, Santa, but this won't change much," he said. "With the help of Olive we can make Los Angeles just before sun up. But many other places will still get left out." Santa sighed. "I know, I know, I hadn't forgotten, Chip. How could I? All those children will be heart-broken. They'll never forgive me. But - but there's nothing we can do."

CHAPTER 14
Mrs. Claus's Surprise

At that moment they heard a whistle in the distance. It came from Mrs. Claus. She wore a red-and-white Santa outfit. And she was driving a team made up of the eight spare reindeer. "Hee-hah! Giddy-up, my honeys!" Mrs. Claus urged. The spare reindeer looked as fit as ever. They came at full steam. Snow swirled around their pounding hooves. Santa's mouth fell open as Mrs. Claus pulled up beside him. "Mrs. Claus! Goodness! What a surprise!" Santa said. "What are you doing here?" "Well, dear, I heard

you had a problem," Mrs. Claus said. "We do, we do. A whopper. But I thought all the spare reindeer were in the hospital." Mrs. Claus smiled. "They were. Flat on their backs until Dr. Winters came up with a - cure, you might say. And then I did a little wheeling and dealing about giving their stable a new paint job. You really should see it, Santa." "We can talk about that later, my dear. But right now I'd like to know why you're here." "Well, I thought we could load up my sleigh and I'll - go with you. If you don't mind." Santa clapped his hands. "Mind? Why should I mind? That's a terrific idea! You really want to go, don't you, my dear?" "It would be a hoot. A real hoot." "All these years and you've never once said anything." "Well, wouldn't a passenger have made the sleigh too heavy?" Mrs. Claus said. "So, dear? What do you say?"

CHAPTER 15

The Big Trip

Santa turned to Boomer. "Quick, Boomer! Hitch up Olive to Mrs. Claus's team. That will give us nine reindeer each." Boomer saluted. "Right away, Santa!" Boomer hitched Olive in the lead. A dozen elves gathered up the scattered toys. Another dozen brought the ones left over in the toy factory. The sleighs were quickly loaded. Boomer sprinkled Mrs. Claus's reindeer with the magic sparkles. For a moment the reindeer rose and floated on air. Mrs. Claus's team was now ready to fly. "Up and at 'em, Olive!" whooped Mrs. Claus. "Ho-ho! Ho-ho!" Santa winked. "You've got the words, my dear, but, well, the tune needs some work." Then with a merry "Ho! Ho! Ho!" and a "Ho-ho! Ho-ho!" Santa and Mrs. Claus whooshed off into the twinkling stars and over the moon. The elves jumped up and down and cheered the two sleighs in the sky. "Yippee! Yippee!" A few toasted each other with mugs of hot chocolate. As she led Mrs. Claus's team, Olive held her head up high. All the boys and girls got their presents on time and they were delighted. So was Olive. And she did such a super job that from then on she made the Big Trip with Mrs. Claus every Christmas Eve.

THE GIRL WHO MISSED CHRISTMAS

By Unknown

Christmas is the happiest time of year, but sometimes something terrible happens – like a kid misses it all together.

That’s what happened one year to a girl called Natalie.

Natalie’s life was almost perfect – apart from her annoying little brother called Joe. There was just one thing she didn’t like doing – and that was getting up in the morning. Her Dad was always warning that one day she would miss something important. And one day she did.

But fortunately this is time of year when no problem can’t be solved.... with just a little magic.

The Girl Who Missed Christmas:

Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Natalie.

Natalie was six. She lived on a nice house, in a nice street. She had a little brother called Joe, and dog called Marmalade.

And most of the time Natalie was happy.

She played with her friends.

She played with her dog.

Sometimes she even played with Joe – when he wasn’t being annoying.

But there was one thing Natalie didn’t like.

Getting up.

Every morning her Dad would come into her room and say: “C’mon Natalie, time to get up.”

And Natalie would say: “Just one more minute.”

“Now, now, you’ll be late for school,” said Dad.

“Just one tiny minute,” Natalie would say. “Pleeeeeeease.....”

“Now, Natalie.”

“It’s so warm in bed,” Natalie would moan.

And so it went on every morning.

Dad would shout at Natalie to get up.

Mum would shout at her.

And Marmalade the dog would bark.

And Joe would already be up.

And then Mum would shout at her again.

And the dog would bark even louder.

But Natalie just pulled the cover over her ears.

Because Natalie just really, really, really hated getting out of bed in the morning.

“You know, Natalie, one day you’re going to miss something really important because you stay in bed to long,” said Dad.

As it happened, something very important was about to happen. The nights were getting longer, and the leaves were falling from the trees, and soon Natalie was getting very excited because it was getting close to Christmas.

And she had so many different things she had asked for.

She wanted a new game for her Nintendo DS.

And a doll that cried real tears.

And a new DVD.

And lots and lots and lots of things.

Of course, she had to rehearse for the school play – except she nearly missed it because she was sleeping in.

And she had to go and see Santa in the grotto – but she nearly missed that as well because she didn't want to get out of bed.

"I just don't what to do about all this sleeping," said Mum.

But Natalie didn't care.

If I want to stay in bed, why shouldn't I? she decided to herself.

So finally Christmas Eve arrived. And Natalie was so excited she found it really hard to get to sleep. She wanted to stay and see if she could really see Santa. She tried ever so hard to stay awake as long as she could.

But eventually, she went off to sleep.

And she slept.

And slept.

And slept.

At one point she heard Dad coming into the room to wake her – but she just rolled over, put the pillow over her head, and went back to sleep again.

Finally she decided she had been so long in bed that it was starting to get boring.

She pulled away the pillow and looked towards the window.

It was morning.

"Wow, it's Christmas day," said Natalie. "I'm so excited."

She looked towards the end of her bed.

But where was the stocking? She wondered.

Where had Santa left all his toys?

Natalie jumped out of bed, and ran downstairs.

She was quite out of breath – because she'd never jumped out of bed before.

“Mum, Dad, its Christmas,” she shouted.

She glanced around the room.

Joe was playing with a new toy car.

Mum was folding away some used wrapping paper.

Dad was reading a boring looking book with no pictures — in fact, the sort of book Mum gave him every year.

And Marmalade the dog was eating something that looked suspiciously like turkey leftovers.

“Mum, Dad, it's Christmas,” shouted Natalie, even louder this time.

There was a silence.

Everyone looked at her – everyone that is except Marmalade who was busy eating turkey.

“It's Christmas...isn't it?” said Natalie, more quietly now.

“You mean, it was Christmas,” said Dad.

“You slept right through,” said Mum.

“We tried to wake you,” said Dad.

“But, but, but....” Said Natalie.

“I told you you'd miss something important one day,” said Dad.

“It was really good,” said Joe. “We had loads of food, and loads of presents.”

“And I missed it,” wailed Natalie.

And she started to cry.

And cry.

And cry.

“Sorry,” said Dad. “It also means you didn’t get any presents from Santa. But don’t worry, there will be another Christmas next year.”

“It’s not faaaaair,” wailed Natalie.

“But I always told you you’d miss something important if you didn’t get out of bed in time,” said Dad. “Now, help me clear away all this wrapping paper....”

But Natalie just walked out of the house.

She walked through the garden.

And across the park.

When she got there, she cried and cried.

She was so upset about missing Christmas.

And she didn’t know how she could wait for a whole year.

Now, it so happened that it was still very early in the morning.

And the sun was only just coming up, so it was still quite dark.

And at that very moment, Santa was just trudging his way across the sky in his sleigh on his way back to Lapland.

He was very tired.

And so were the reindeer, because they’d been all around the world delivering presents to all the children.

But, even though he was tired, he couldn’t help noticing one little girl sitting on a park bench all by herself.

And crying and crying.

“Whoa there Rudolf,” said Santa. “I wonder what’s wrong with that girl.”

“Maybe she didn’t like her presents,” said Rudolf, who was hungry and tired, and wanted to get back to his grotto to get some food. “Kids today! No gratitude....”

“We better see,” said Santa.

And so he pulled the sleigh down into the park.

“What’s the matter?” asked Santa.

But Natalie was so upset, she just kept crying, and her eyes were so full of water she couldn’t see anything.

“Huh, she’s probably upset because she only got one Nintendo, ten Polly Pockets, and a dozen Barbie dolls,” said Rudolph. “Kids today! When I started this job they were happy with a small piece of wood and an orange. The stuff you have to carry nowadays. It’s hardly surprising my back hurts.”

“Didn’t you like your presents?” said Santa.

Natalie rubbed her eyes, and then looked up.

And she gasped.

Santa was sitting right next to her.

“Oh-my-gosh,” she said. “Is it....you?”

“Shhhhh,” said Santa. “You see I’m not really supposed to show myself to children.”

“We’ll be in trouble for this,” moaned Rudolph. “I told you we should have gone straight home.”

But Natalie gave Santa a hug.

“You see Santa, I slept right through Christmas....and now I’ve missed it.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Santa.

Then he looked towards the house.

“We’ve still got a few things left in the sack,” he said. “So go inside, and check the fireplace in your bedroom in a few minutes.”

“But, but....”

“Just go,” said Santa.

So Natalie stated to walk home.

And Santa went back to his sleigh.

“We’re not doing another delivery are we,” said Rudolph. “Because, that’s overtime, that what that is...I’ll need an extra carrot for that.”

“Oh, c’mon you lazy animal,” said Santa.

And then Natalie came back into the house.

She couldn’t believe her eyes.

Jingle bells was playing on the hi-fi.

Everyone was wearing hats.

And her mum had re-heated some turkey and made some fresh roast potatoes.

“We thought we’d re-start Christmas,” said Dad. “Just for you.”

And Natalie jumped up and down, then ran upstairs.

Because in the fireplace in her bedroom there was stocking bursting with presents – there was a doll with real tears, a princess on a white pony, game for her Nintendo, and, finally, after she had opened all the other presents from Santa there was one special one from Dad – An Alarm Clock !

So for the rest of the day, Natalie had the best Christmas ever.

And do you know what?

A couple of weeks later it was the first day of a new term.

Dad came into the bedroom. “Wake up, Natalie. Time to go back to school,” he said.

The he looked around.

“Natalie,” he said, sounding worried. “Natalie..”

But he couldn’t see her anywhere.

Then he heard a voice from downstairs.

So he rushed down to kitchen.

And Natalie was out of bed, had put on her school uniform and brushed her hair, and had made breakfast for everyone.

“I’m never going to be late for anything again, Dad,” she said.

THE DIME

By Unknown

Bobby was getting cold sitting out in his back yard in the snow. Bobby didn't wear boots; he didn't like them and anyway he didn't own any. The thin sneakers he wore had a few holes in them and they did a poor job of keeping out the cold. Bobby had been in his backyard for about an hour already. And, try as he might, he could not come up with an idea for his mother's Christmas gift. He shook his head as he thought, "This is useless, even if I do come up with an idea, I don't have any money to spend."

Ever since his father had passed away three years ago, the family of five had struggled. It wasn't because his mother didn't care, or try, there just never seemed to be enough. She worked nights at the hospital, but the small wage that she was earning could only be stretched so far.

What the family lacked in money and material things, they more than made up for in love and family unity. Bobby had two older and one younger sister, who ran the house hold in their mother's absence. All three of his sisters had already made beautiful gifts for their mother. Somehow it just wasn't fair. Here it was Christmas Eve already, and he had nothing.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Bobby kicked the snow and started to walk down to the street where the shops and stores were. It wasn't easy being six without a father, especially when he needed a man to talk to. Bobby walked from shop to shop, looking into each decorated window.

Everything seemed so beautiful and so out of reach.

It was starting to get dark and Bobby reluctantly turned to walk home when suddenly his eyes caught the glimmer of the setting sun's rays reflecting off of something along the curb. He reached down and discovered a shiny dime. Never before has anyone felt so wealthy as Bobby felt at that moment.

As he held his new-found treasure, a warmth spread throughout his entire body and he walked into the first store he saw. His excitement quickly turned cold when the salesperson told him that he couldn't buy anything with only a dime.

He saw a flower shop and went inside to wait in line. When the shop owner asked if he could help him, Bobby presented the dime and asked if he could buy one flower for his mother's Christmas gift. The shop owner looked at Bobby and his ten cent offering.

Then he put his hand on Bobby's shoulder and said to him, "You just wait here and I'll see what I can do for you." As Bobby waited he looked at the beautiful flowers and even though he was a boy, he could see why mothers and girls liked flowers.

The sound of the door closing as the last customer left, jolted Bobby back to reality. All alone in the shop, Bobby began to feel alone and afraid. Suddenly the shop owner came out and moved to the counter.

There, before Bobby's eyes, lay twelve long stem, red roses, with leaves of green and tiny white flowers all tied together with a big silver bow. Bobby's heart sank as the owner picked them up and placed them gently into a long white box.

"That will be ten cents young man," the shop owner said reaching out his hand for the dime. Slowly, Bobby moved his hand to give the man his dime. Could this be true? No one else would give him a thing for his dime!

Sensing the boy's reluctance, the shop owner added, "I just happened to have some roses on sale for ten cents a dozen. Would you like them?"

This time Bobby did not hesitate, and when the man placed the long box into his hands, he knew it was true. Walking out the door that the owner was holding for Bobby, he heard the shop keeper say, "Merry Christmas son."

As he returned inside, the shop keeper's wife walked out. "Who were you talking to back there and where are the roses you were fixing?"

Staring out the window, and blinking the tears from his own eyes, he replied, "A strange thing happened to me this morning. While I was setting up things to open the shop, I thought I heard a voice telling me to set aside a dozen of my best roses for a special gift. I wasn't sure at the time whether I had lost my mind or what, but I set them aside anyway.

Then just a few minutes ago, a little boy came into the shop and wanted to buy a flower for his mother with one small dime.

"When I looked at him, I saw myself, many years ago. I too, was a poor boy with nothing to buy my mother a Christmas gift. A bearded man, whom I never knew, stopped me on the street and told me that he wanted to give me ten dollars. "When I saw that little boy tonight, I knew who that voice was, and I put together a dozen of my very best roses." The shop owner and his wife hugged each other tightly, and as they stepped out into the bitter cold air, they somehow didn't feel cold at all.

May this story instill the spirit of **CHRIST**mas in you enough to pass this act along.

Have a Joyous and Peace-filled season.

Goodness is the only investment that doesn't fail.

A MICROSOFT CHRISTMAS

By Unknown

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, except Papa's mouse.
The computer was humming, the icons were hopping,
As Papa did last minute Internet shopping.

The stockings were hung by the modem with care
In hope that St. Nicholas would bring new software.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of computer games danced in their heads.

PageMaker for Billy, and Quicken for Dan,
And Carmen Sandiego for Pamela Ann.
The letters to Santa had been sent out by Mom,
To santaclaus@toyshop.northpole.com -

Which has now been re-routed to Washington State
Because Santa's workshop has been bought by Bill Gates.
All the elves and reindeer have had to skedaddle
To flashy new quarters in suburban Seattle.

After centuries of a life that was simple and spare,
St. Nicholas is suddenly a new billionaire,
With a shiny red Porsche in the place of his sleigh,
And a house on Lake Washington that's just down the way

From where Bill has his mansion. The old fellow preens
In black Gucci boots and red Calvin Klein jeans.
The elves have stock options and desks with a view,
Where they write computer code for Johnny and Sue.

No more dolls or toy soldiers or little toy drums (ahem - pardon me)
No more dolls or tin soldiers or little toy drums
Will be under the tree, only compact disk ROMS
With the Microsoft label. So spin up your drive,
From now on Christmas runs only on Win95.

More rapid than eagles the competitors came,
And Bill whistled, and shouted, and called them by name.
"Now, ADOBE! Now, CLARIS! Now, INTUIT! too,
Now, APPLE! and NETSCAPE! you are all of you through,

It is Microsoft's SANTA that the kids can't resist,
It's the ultimate software with a traditional twist -
Recommended by no less than the jolly old elf,
And on the package, a picture of Santa himself.

Get 'em young, keep 'em long, is Microsoft's scheme,
And a merger with Santa is a marketer's dream.
To the top of the NASDAQ! to the top of the Dow!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away - wow!"

And Mama in her 'kerchief and I in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
The whir and the hum of our satellite platter,

As it turned toward that new Christmas star in the sky,
The SANTALITE owned by the Microsoft guy.
As I sprang from my bed and was turning around,
My computer turned on with a Jingle-Bells sound.

And there on the screen was a smiling Bill Gates
Next to jolly old Santa, two arm-in-arm mates.
And I heard them exclaim in voice so bright,
Have a Microsoft Christmas, and to all a good night.

JOHN HENRY FAULK'S CHRISTMAS STORY

December 9, 2005

The gifted storyteller and former radio broadcaster John Henry Faulk recorded his Christmas story in 1974 for the program *Voices in the Wind*.

Faulk was born to Methodist parents on August 21, 1913. The fourth of five children, he attended the University of Texas. For his master's thesis, he researched ten sermons in African-American churches and gained insight into the inequity of civil rights for people of color. He later taught English at the University and served as a medic in the Marines during World War II.

Before the *John Henry Faulk Show* debuted in 1951 on WCBS Radio, Faulk hosted numerous radio programs in New York and New Jersey.

He was blacklisted in 1957, but with support from Edward R. Murrow, won a libel suit against the corporation that branded him a Communist. Faulk's book, *Fear on Trial*, published in 1963, chronicles this experience.

Later in his career, Faulk appeared on *Hee-Haw*, wrote and produced the one-man plays *Deep in the Heart* and *Pear Orchard, Texas*, and made an unsuccessful bid for a congressional seat in 1983.

In 1990, John Henry Faulk died of cancer in his hometown of Austin. The downtown branch of the public library there now bears his name.

A Transcript of John Henry Faulk's Christmas Story....

The day after Christmas a number of years ago, I was driving down a country road in Texas. And it was a bitter cold, cold morning. And walking ahead of me on the gravel road was a little bare-footed boy with non-descript ragged overalls and a makeshift sleeved sweater tied around his little ears. I stopped and picked him up. Looked like he was about 12 years old and his little feet were blue with the cold. He was carrying an orange.

And he got in and had the brightest blue eyes one ever saw. And he turned a bright smile on my face and says, "I'm-a going down the road about two miles to my cousins. I want to show him my orange old Santa Claus brought me." But I wasn't going to mention Christmas to him because I figured he came

from a family — the kind that don't have Christmas. But he brought it up himself. He said, "Did old Santa Claus come to see you, Mister?" And I said, "Yes. We had a real nice Christmas at our house and I hope you had the same."

He paused for a moment, looked at me. And then with all the sincerity in the world said, "Mister, we had the wonderfulest Christmas in the United States down to our place. Lordy, it was the first one we ever had had there. See, we never do have them out there much. Don't notice when Christmastime comes. We heared about it, but never did have one 'cause — well, you know, it's just papa says that old Santa Claus — papa hoorahs a lot and said old Santa Claus was scared to bring his reindeer down into our section of the county because folks down there so hard up that they liable to catch one of his reindeer and butcher him for meat. But just several days before Christmas, a lady come out from town and she told all the families through there, our family, too, that they was — old Santa Claus was come in town to leave some things for us and if papa'd go in town, he could get some Christmastime for all of us. And papa hooked up the mule and wagon. He went in town. But he told us children, said, "Now don't ya'll get all worked up and excited because there might not be nothing to this yarn that lady told."

And—but, shucks, she hadn't got out of sight up the lane there till we was done a-watching for him to come back. We couldn't get our minds on nothing else, you know. And mama, she'd come to the door once in a while and say, "Now ya'll quit that looking up the lane because papa told you there might not be nothing." And — but long about the middle of the afternoon, well, we heared the team a-jangling harness a-coming and we ran out in the front yard, and Ernie, my little brother, called out and said, "Yonder come papa." And here come them mules just in a big trot, you know, and papa standing upright in the bed of that wagon holding two big old chickens, all the feathers picked off. And he was just yelling, "Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas." And the team stopped right in front of the gate. And all us children just went a-swarming out there like a flock of chichis, you know, and just a-crawling over that wagon and a-looking in.

And, Mister, I wish you could have seen what was in that wagon. It's bags of stripety candy and apples and oranges and sacks of flour and some real coffee, you know, and just all tinselly and pretty and we couldn't say nothing. Just kind of held our breath and looked at it, you know. And papa standing there just waving them two chickens, a-yelling, "Merry Christmas to you. Merry Christmas to you," and a-laughing that big old grin on his face. And mama, she come a-hurrying out with the baby in her arms, you know. And when she looked in that wagon, she just stopped, and then papa, he dropped them two chickens and reached and caught the baby out of her arms, you know, and held him up and said, "Merry Christmas to you, Santa Claus." And baby, little old Alvie Lee, he just laughed like he knowed it was Christmas, too, you know. And mama, she started telling us the name of all of them nuts. They wasn't just peanuts. They was — she had names for all of them. She — mama knows a heap of things like that.

She'd seen that stuff before, you know? And we was, all of us, just a-chattering and a-going on at the same time, us young'uns, a-looking in there.

And all of a sudden, we heard papa call out, "Merry Christmas to you, Sam Jackson." And we stopped and looked. And here comes Sam Jackson a-leading that old cripple-legged mule of his up the lane. And papa said, "Sam Jackson, did you get in town to get some Christmas this year?" Sam Jackson, you know, he sharecrops over there across the creek from our place. And he shook his head and said, "Well, no, sir, Mister. Well, I didn't go in town. I heared about that, but I didn't know it was for colored folks, too. I thought it was just for you white families." All of a sudden, none of us children were saying nothing. Papa, he looked down at mama and mama looked up at him and they didn't say nothing, like they don't a heap of times, but they know what the other one's a-thinking. They're like that, you know. And all of a sudden, papa, he broke out in a big grin again. He said, "Dad-blame-it, Sam Jackson, it's a sure a good thing you come by here. Lord have mercy, I liked to forgot. Old Santa Claus would have me in court if he heared about this. The last thing he asked me if I lived out here near you. Said he hadn't seen you around and said he wanted me to bring part of this out here to you and your family, your woman and your children."

Well, sir, Sam Jackson, he broke out in a big grin. Papa says, "I'll tell you what to do. You get your wife and children and you come down here tomorrow morning. It's going to be Christmastime all day long. Come early and stay late." Sam Jackson said, "You reckon?" And mama called out to him and said, "Yes, and you tell your wife to be sure and bring some pots and pans because we're going to have a heap of cookin' to do and I ain't sure I've got enough to take care of all of it." Well, sir, old Sam Jackson, he started off a-leading that mule up the lane in a full trot, you know, and he was a-heading home to get the word to his folks and his children, you know.

And next morning, it just — you remember how it was yesterday morning, just rosy red and looked like Christmastime. It was cold, but you didn't notice the cold, you know, when the sun just come up, just all rosy red. And us young'uns were all out of bed before daylight seemed like, just running in the kitchen and smelling and looking. And it was all there sure enough. And here come Sam Jackson and his team and his wife and his five young'uns in there. And they's all lookin' over the edge. And we run out and yelled, "Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas." And papa said, "Christmas gift to you, Sam Jackson. Ya'll come on in." And they come in and mama and Sister Jackson, they got in the kitchen and they started a-cooking things up. And us young'uns started playing Christmastime. And it's a lot of fun, you know. We'd just play Christmas Gift with one another and run around and around the house and just roll in the dirt, you know, and then we started playing Go Up To The Kitchen Door And Smell. And we'd run up and smell inside that kitchen door where mama and Sister Jackson was a-cooking at, and then we'd just die laughing and roll in the dirt, you know, and go chasing around and playing Christmas Gift.

And we played Christmastime till we just wore ourselves out. And papa and Sam Jackson—they put a table up and put some sheets over it, some boards up over some sawhorses. And everybody had a place, even the baby. And mama and Sister Jackson said, "Well, now it's ready to come on in. We're going to have Christmas dinner." And I sit right next to Willy Jackson, you know, and he just rolled his eyes at me and I'd roll mine at him. And we'd just die laughing, you know, and there was an apple and an orange and some stripety candy at everybody's place. And that was just dessert, see. That wasn't the real Christmas dinner. Mama and them had done cooked that up. And they just had it spread up and down the table.

And so papa and Sam Jackson, they'd been sitting on the front porch and they come in. Papa, he sit at one end of the table, Sam Jackson sit at the other. And it was just a beautiful table like you never had seen. And I didn't know nothing could ever look like that and smell that good, you know. And Sam Jackson, you know, he's real black and he had on that white clean shirt of his and then them overalls. Everything had been washed and was real clean. Papa, he said, "Brother Jackson, I believe you're a deacon in the church. I ain't much of a church man myself, but I believe you're a deacon. Maybe you'd be willing to give grace." Well, Sam Jackson, he stood up there and his hands is real big and he kind of held onto the side of the table, you know. But he didn't bow his head like a heap of folks do when they're saying the blessing. He just looked up and smiled. And he said, "Lord, I hope you having as nice a Christmas up there with your angels as we're having down here because it sure is Christmastime down here. And I just wanted to say Merry Christmas to you, Lord.

Like I say, Mister, I believe that was the wonderfulest Christmas in the United States of America."

A LONELY CHRISTMAS

By Johann Christoph Arnold

An excerpt from [Escape Routes](#).

Three weeks before Christmas 1993, Wolfgang Dircks died while watching television. Neighbors in his Berlin apartment complex hardly noticed the absence of the 43-year-old. His rent continued to be paid automatically out of his bank account. Five years later, the money ran out, and the landlord entered Dircks's apartment to inquire. He found Dircks's remains still in front of the tube. The TV guide on his lap was open to December 3, the presumed day of his death. Although the television set had burned out, the lights on Dircks's Christmas tree were still twinkling away.

It's a bizarre story, but it shouldn't surprise us. Every year thousands of people are found accidentally days or weeks after their solitary deaths in the affluent cities and suburbs of the Western world. If a person can die in such isolation that his neighbors never notice, how lonely was he when alive?

Forget about the Information Age: we live in the age of loneliness. Decades ago, single-person households were rare. Usually only widows lived by themselves. Nowadays, they are increasingly the norm. In a world where marriage rates are dwindling, children are cautiously planned for (or avoided by contraception and abortion) middle age is synonymous with divorce, and old age means a nursing home, people are bound to be very lonely. Imagine: only a quarter of American households consist of a nuclear family. None of this is to say that all was well in previous decades - it emphatically was not. But it is probably safe to say that loneliness has never been as widespread as it is today. How many of your neighbors or colleagues do you really know as friends? How many people in your church are just faces? How often do you turn on the television because you lack companionship?

Studies suggest loneliness is so hazardous that people who are physically healthy but isolated are twice as likely to die during a given decade as those who live surrounded by others. What is the cure? Surely there must be more to our cravings than can be answered by the simple presence of others around us - who hasn't felt lonely in the middle of a crowd? Indeed, that secret sense of isolation is the worst kind. Kierkegaard, by way of example, writes in his Journal that though he was often the life and soul of a

party, he was desperate underneath: "Wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me. But I went away. . .and wanted to shoot myself. "

Such desperation is a common fruit of alienation from our true selves. If it seems an exaggeration, recall your own adolescence. How often were you insecure or lonely, unable to measure up to all those people who seemed to have everything - people who were smart, fit, and popular? And even if you were well-liked, what about your hypocrisy, your deceit, your guilt? Who hasn't known the weight of these things? Multiply self-contempt a million times, and you have the widespread alienation that marks society today. What else is it that stops strangers from acknowledging each other in the street, that breeds gossip, that keeps co-workers aloof? What else is it that destroys the deepest friendships, that divides the most closely knit families and makes the happiest marriages grow cold?

Given our human imperfectability, all of us will disappoint or be disappointed at some juncture; we will hurt others and be hurt; we will be mistrusted, and we will mistrust. But all this does not have to be. We may justify the walls we throw up as safeguards against being used or mistreated, but that does not mean that they really protect us. If anything, they slowly destroy us by keeping us separated from others and encouraging pessimism. They result in the attitude summed up by Jean-Paul Sartre, who said that "hell is other people. "

How far we have fallen from our real destiny! If only we were able to break down a few of the barriers that separate us, we might not resign ourselves so quickly to the idea that they are an unavoidable fact of life, but open our hearts to the richness that human experience affords - both in the sheer miracle of our individual existence, and in the joy of meaningful interaction with others. Further, we might catch a glimpse of what it really means to be a part of this universe - this great community that includes everything from the tiniest clusters of quivering microbes to the unimaginable vastness of spinning galaxies and stars.

THE CHRISTMAS QUESTION

By Charles Moore

December 6, 2010

When I was nine years old my heart was set on one thing, and everybody knew what it was, including Santa. "So what do you really want for Christmas young man?" Santa asked. "I want a Civil War army set," I unabashedly replied. "Anything else?" "Nope. Just a Civil War army set."

When Christmas morning finally arrived I could hardly contain myself. How I fantasized what it was going to be like, when the door to the living room would fly open. How I would make a beeline to the tree and there, among the special unwrapped presents in front of the tree, would be my very own Civil War army set. Yes!

And then the moment came. There, right in the middle, in front of the tree, with a bike for my big brother on one side and a dolly set for my little sister on the other, was what I had longed for. I grabbed the box and lifted it high, doodle dancing for joy: "I got it! I got it! I really got it!"

"Chucky, Chucky," my Dad called out. "Slow down. Read what's on the box." And there, before my very eyes, on a bell shaped shiny tag, I saw the words: "For Jimmy. Love, Santa". What? I couldn't believe what I was seeing. This must be a mistake, this can't be! Santa doesn't make mistakes. But...

"Chucky, that gift is for Jimmy. But that one, over there," pointing his finger down low where the tree touched the couch, "that one is for you." "But Daddy..." But Dad kept pointing his finger, looking at me with wide-eyed expectation.

I sheepishly went over to see what Dad was pointing to. I knew that whatever it was I'd have to act excited and thankful. Otherwise, I would ruin everything.

As I bent over I saw a box with a picture of a boy, on his knees, building something. The words in bold at the top said, "Erector Set." I hadn't a clue what an Erector Set was. And then my older brother Rob got a hold of it. "That's cool, Chucky. Really cool! Let me show you how it works."

By the end of the day I was lost in a world of creating and building, of motors and pulleys and wheels and gears and leavers. I didn't get what I wanted...But I got something more, something better, something beyond.

Two thousand years ago God gave his Son to the world. But Mary was afraid, Joseph worried, and Herod became so incensed he was determined to destroy him. The Apostle Paul writes that the Greeks thought God's gift was foolishness, and the Jews an obstacle to their liberation. And in John's Gospel we read that the light shone in the darkness, but the darkness had not understood it; God's Word had come to his own but he was not welcomed.

And yet, some did receive him. And those who believed became children of God. Children of who? Yes, children of God! It was they who saw first-hand God's glory, full of grace and truth, and henceforth they received one blessing after another: Freedom from sin, peace on earth, goodwill toward all people.

Christmas is not about getting what we want or even giving what we think others want. Even less so is it getting something we or others need. It's something far more profound than that!

I played with my Erector Set for years afterwards—adding to it, replacing parts, and inventing all kinds of new configurations and ways of using it. I kept and played with it longer than any other toy I ever had. Dad and Mom knew something about me I didn't know. They knew I had to create and imagine and lose myself in something other than myself. And deep down, I knew that the Erector Set was more than a toy; it was a symbol of my parents' love for me and what they saw I needed to become.

That moment, when Dad was pointing his finger, I remember I had a choice whether to give into selfishness or accept what was being given. Over the years I've had to face this kind of decision again and again. God gives something I neither want nor expect. I long for one thing, but get another. Or worse, something or someone is taken away I'm not ready to give up. Whatever it is, I usually deem it as either stupid or a hindrance. I dig in and resist.

And yet, I've also learned that as soon as I accept, better yet, gladly receive what God gives, something far greater opens up. Jesus enters in and is able to bring something from God, something from heaven, something that truly makes a difference in the world. I discover anew God's love, not just for myself but for the world.

Isn't this what Christmas is all about—letting God enter our world so that he can transform and free it? His gift may come small, in a feeding trough, unexpectedly—barely recognizable. It may assault our desires, confound our feelings, insult our thinking, threaten our sense of control, but it comes to us from his very heart. For God is love; he always wants to give. Not as we want him to give, not as the world gives, but in a way that transcends the imagination and brings true healing and redemption to our world.

Not unlike occupied and impoverished Palestine two thousand years ago, we live in troubled and troubling times. We want job security, safer schools, better relationships, happier homes. We want cleaner environments, less stress, more freedom. But the question at Christmas time is not what we want, but what God wants and wants to give. This alone can redeem and save us. This alone matters. O, that we might be able to receive it.

CHRISTMAS PRESENCE
GIVING WHAT WE NEED AND WANT MOST
By Charles Moore

November 26, 2009

My best Christmas occurred days before Christmas. I was twelve and had just come home from school. Mom needed me to get the Christmas decorations down from the garage attic and then help her hang all the tinsely mobiles from our living room ceiling. Why me? Where was everybody else? Why weren't my older brothers and my older sister helping? In fact, why was the house so empty?

I still don't know why, but for the next two hours I was alone with Mom—just me and her, side by side. And for the first time that I could remember, she was there wholly with me and I wholly with her.

What was so special about that afternoon? It was being with Mom. By filling the room with her love, Mom gave me the best Christmas gift I ever had—herself. She was with me, and I with her, and that was all that mattered!

The miracle of Christmas is that *God* came into our existence. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," the Apostle John writes. There is no more astounding Christian fact than this: The divine became human. This is what theologians call the "scandal of particularity."

Why is this so important? It's because, as Kierkegaard reminds us, Christianity is not a doctrine but a fact. God entered time and space and took on human flesh—not to reveal doctrine but to reveal his glory.

The wonder of the Incarnation, of Immanuel—God with us— is that God came to us *in person*; he entered into a world ridden with social strife, ethnic and religious tension, a world locked in the chains of fear, oppression, and isolation. In so doing, he not only suffered our pain, but died under the weight of our guilt. God gave himself away—totally, unreservedly, vulnerably and unconditionally.

Christmas is a time of giving. But giving what? Presents? Dinner parties? Holiday cards? Good cheer? Christmas should actually remind us that we have been created to give and receive more than gifts. We are meant to give each other *ourselves*. There's a big difference!

Years ago my wife and I opened our home for street people to come to on Christmas day. We knew many of them personally as they had often rummaged through our alley garbage bin or chatted with us in our front yard as they pushed their shopping carts full of aluminum cans to the nearby recycling center. This Christmas we thought we would simply invite them into our home. We would have a table spread with food and hot drink, a fire going in the fireplace, Christmas music playing in the background, and table games laying around in various cozy places.

Well, word got out and our house was full—from beginning to end. And throughout the afternoon I had a wonderfully strange feeling inside. Was it that we were able to give from our abundance to those in need? No. Was it because we had opened our home to those who had none? Not quite. Was it the satisfaction that we finally found a way to rise above the crass materialism of Christmas shopping? Not that either.

It was only years later that I could finally identify the feeling. Those who came—Michael, Gayle, Marianne, Craig, to name a few—graced our home with themselves, and for an afternoon made their dwelling place amongst us. Each one came and gave who they were. Some ate more than they should have. Others were withdrawn and said nothing. Some smelled as they always had—of urine and cigarette smoke. Marianne would hug the dining room wall periodically, stroke it carefully, and then announce: “This is a friendly home!” Craig kept slipping in and out of the house, while Gayle made sure people were getting enough to drink, even if they didn’t want anything.

Those who came simply shared themselves. And my wife and I had the feeling that something wonderful had happened, and we were on the receiving end.

The most important gift we have is ourselves. Granted, this gift is far more costly than any other. But this is why it is all the more precious. And it is a gift we can all give—rich or poor!

To enter into another’s life, to suffer another’s pain, to offer oneself, to share one’s heart in humble trust, to allow another a glimpse into the secret chamber of your love, to be with another and to hope together for God’s redemption, to be an agent of giving *with* someone—these acts of being present are the gifts we most need and, if we are honest, most want.

I once heard a story of a boy and his father who were walking along the road and came across a large stone. The boy wondered if he would be able to move it. His father assured him that if he would use all his strength he could do it. After exerting himself all he could, the rock wouldn't budge. Having compassion on the boy's effort, the father came alongside him to help him move the stone. "I guess I was wrong," the father said. "All your strength wasn't enough." But the son replied, "No, daddy, all my strength was enough — *you've* been right here with me."

"Right here with me." This is Christmas. Being truly present. God with us, and we in turn, with each other. At this Christmas let us not become so busy, so hurried, so intent on doing things *for* each other and buying gifts that we forget to be truly *with* each other. "God so loved the world that he sent us his one and only son..." God gave himself! Will we do the same?

MAGIC BELLS

By Rebekah Elle

Christmas seems to be a magical time of the year. Short stories of family traditions and holiday fantasy seem to be a favorite topic to read or write about. There are favorite Christmas stories, books which endure from one generation to another because of the way we, as a people, enjoy preserving memories and family traditions. Some of my favorites now are a result of my youth and yet when my children were younger, I wanted to begin new traditions for our family also. Building family traditions is a wonderful keepsake for your children. Ours always revolve around a special book, a make believe story or a movie. For many years, I would include the following short story in our Christmas greeting cards, **Magic Bells**.

My oldest son, David, was in middle school and he wrote a special short story for an assignment. It was right before the holidays. They were to make up a story about the holiday season. It is a wonderful story about a young boy two days before Christmas. Sit back and enjoy.

Christmas Eve

Magic Bells

It was two days before Christmas and there was a boy lying in his bed staring blankly at the ceiling, not able to sleep. His name was Brian and the anticipation of Christmas kept him up, following the fan blades with his eyes, hoping to fall asleep. His eyes shut and he fell asleep, knowing that the next day was his favorite day of the year, Christmas Eve. It was his favorite day because the next day was Christmas; everyone would be happy, a big dinner with great food and not to forget, the presents.

Christmas Eve day Brian walked up to his mom and asked her to tell him the story of the 'Magic Bells.' The mom said, as she sat down, "On Santa's sleigh, there are four hundred silver bells. Each one of those bells serves a purpose. If and only if all four hundred of those bells are on Santa's sleigh will it be able to fly. If just one bell is gone or misplaced then there would be no Christmas..."

"Wow!" said Brian, quite amused with his mother's story. "So there really are magic bells!"

"Brian looked at the tree..."

That night after the family was all in bed and sound asleep, Brian looked out his window, still thinking of his mother's story. He laid on his back to stare at the fan blades again when he heard a soft clang on the back patio. He was very quiet in doing so, or else he would wake his parents.

He opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside. He wrapped his arms around himself because it was very cold and he looked around. At first he did not see anything, but then a shiny glimmer caught the corner of his eye. He bent down and pulled a shiny silver bell from the snow. He held it in his hand and looked at it. Strangely, while he was holding the bell, he was warm, he was not cold anymore. He was very happy that he found a silver bell when a thought emerged in his mind.

“Oh no!” Brian said to himself with a worried look in his eyes, “no Christmas...”. Brian decided to ring the bell and see what would happen. After he rang the bell, with some magic sparks, the bell disappeared and Brian was once again cold. He went into the house and went to sleep.

The next morning everyone opened all of their presents and everyone was happy. Brian looked at the tree and spotted one more present with a card attached to it. He opened the present in excitement and read the card. It said:

“I always keep a spare, thanks!”

St. Nick

Brian was very happy. He looked in the box and pulled out a magic bell!

Celebrate the Magic

I hope you enjoy this holiday season, however you celebrate, with your family, loved ones, alone or with friends. Children have a wondrous imagination and fill us with joy with their dreams and creativity, their yearning to believe in something magical. My son allowed me to share his writings with you and hopes that it will spread happiness to those who read. May your holiday season be filled with love and magic....

THE LOUDEST VOICE

By Grace Paley

There is a certain place where dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home. My voice is the loudest.

There, my own mother is still as full of breathing as me and the grocer stands up to speak to her. "Mrs. Abramowitz," he says, "people should not be afraid of their children."

"Ah, Mr. Bialik," my mother replies, "if you say to her or her father 'Ssh,' they say, 'In the grave it will be quiet.'"

"From Coney Island to the cemetery," says my papa. "It's the same subway; it's the same fare."

I am right next to the pickle barrel. My pinky is making tiny whirlpools in the brine. I stop a moment to announce: "Campbell's Tomato Soup, Campbell's Vegetable Beef Soup. Campbell's S-c-otch Broth . . ."

"Be quiet," the grocer says, "the labels are coming off."

"Please, Shirley, be a little quiet," my mother begs me.

In that place the whole street groans: Be quiet! Be quiet! but steals from the happy chorus of my inside self not a tittle or a jot.

There, too, but just around the corner, is a red brick building that has been old for many years. Every morning the children stand before it in double lines which must be straight. They are not insulted. They are waiting anyway.

I am usually among them. I am, in fact, the first, since I begin with "A."

One cold morning the monitor tapped me on the shoulder. "Go to Room 409, Shirley Abramowitz," he said. I did as I was told. I went in a hurry up a down staircase to Room 409, which contained sixth-graders. I had to wait at the desk without wiggling until Mr. Hilton, their teacher, had time to speak.

After five minutes he said, "Shirley?"

"What?" I whispered.

He said, "My! My! Shirley Abramowitz! They told me you had a particularly loud, clear voice and read with lots of expression. Could that be true?"

"Oh yes," I whispered.

"In that case, don't be silly; I might very well be your teacher someday. Speak up, speak up."

"Yes," I shouted.

"More like it," he said. "Now Shirley, can you put a ribbon in your hair or a bobby pin? It's too messy."

"Yes!" I bawled.

"Now, now, calm down." He turned to the class. "Children, not a sound. Open at page 39. Read till 52. When you finish, start again." He looked me over once more. "Now, Shirley, you know, I suppose, that Christmas is coming. We are preparing a beautiful play. Most of the parts have been given out. But I still need a strong voice, lots of stamina. Do you know what stamina is? You do? Smart kid. You know, I heard you read 'The Lord is my shepherd' in Assembly yesterday. I was very impressed. Wonderful delivery. Mrs. Jordan, your teacher, speaks highly of you. Now listen to me, Shirley

Abramowitz, if you want to take the part and be in the play, repeat after me, 'I swear to work harder than I ever did before.'

I looked to heaven and said at once, "Oh, I swear." I kissed my pinky and looked at God.

"That is an actor's life, my dear," he explained. "Like a soldier's, never tardy or disobedient to his general, the director, Everything," He said, "absolutely everything will depend on you."

That afternoon, all over the building, children scraped and scrubbed the turkeys and the sheaves of corn off the schoolroom windows. Goodbye Thanksgiving. The next morning a monitor brought red paper and green paper from the office. We make new shapes and hung them on the walls and glued them to the doors.

The teachers became happier and happier. Their heads were ringing like the bells of childhood. My best friend Evie was prone to evil, but she did not get a single demerit for whispering. We learned "Holy Night" without an error. "How wonderful!" said Miss Glacé, the student teacher. "To think that some of you don't even speak the language!" We learned "Deck the Halls" and "Hark! The Herald Angels" . . . They weren't ashamed and we weren't embarrassed.

Oh, but when my mother heard about it all, she said to my father: "Misha, you don't know what's going on there. Cramer is the head of the Tickets Committee."

"Who?" asked my father. "Cramer? Oh yes, and active woman."

"Active/ Active has to have a reason. Listen," she said sadly, "I'm surprised to see my neighbors making tra-la-la for Christmas."

My father couldn't think of what to say to that. Then he decided: "You're in America! Clara, you wanted to come here. In Palestine the Arabs would be eating you alive. Europe you had pogroms. Argentina is full of Indians. Here you got Christmas. . . Some joke ha?"

Very funny, Misha. What is becoming of you? If we came to a new country a long time ago to run away from tyrants, and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that our children learn a lot of lies, so what's the joke? Ach, Misha, your idealism is going away."

"So is your sense of humor."

"That I never had, but idealism you had a lot of."

"I'm the same Misha Abramovitch, I didn't change an iota. Ask anyone."

"Only ask me," says my mama, may she rest in peace, "I got the answer."

Meanwhile the neighbors had to think of what to say too.

Marty's father said: "You know, he has a very important part, my boy."

"Mine also," said Mr. Sauerfield.

"Not my boy!" said Mrs. Klieg. "I said to him no. The answer is no. When I say no! I mean no!"

The rabbi's wife said, "It's disgusting!" But no one listened to her. Under the narrow sky of God's great wisdom she wore a strawberry-blond wig.

Every day was noisy and full of experience. I was Right-hand Man. Mr. Hilton said: "How could I get along without you Shirley?"

He said: "Your mother and father ought to get down on their knees every night and thank God for giving them a child like you."

He also said: "You're absolutely a pleasure to work with, my dear, dear child."

Sometimes he said: "For God's sakes, what did I do with the script? Shirley! Find it."

Then I answered quietly: "Here it is Mr. Hilton."

Once in a while, when he was very tired, he would cry out: "Shirley, I'm just tired of screaming at those kids. Will you tell Ira Pushkov not to come in till Lester points to that star the second time?"

Then I roared: "Ira Pushkov, what's the matter with you? Dope! Mr. Hilton told you five times already, don't come in till Lester points to that star the second time."

"Ach, Clara," my father asked, "what does she do there till six o'clock she can't even put the plates on the table?"

"Christmas," said my mother coldly.

"Ho! Ho!" my father said. "Christmas. What's the harm? After all, history teaches everyone. We learn from reading this is a holiday from pagan times also, candles, lights, even Chanukah. So we learn it's not altogether Christian. So if they think it's a private holiday, they're only ignorant, not patriotic. What belongs to history, belongs to all men. You want to go back to the Middle Ages? Is it better to shave your head with a secondhand razor? Does it hurt Shirley to learn to speak up? It does not. So maybe someday she won't live between the kitchen and the shop. She's not a fool."

I thank you Papa, for your kindness. It is true about me to this day. I am foolish but I am not a fool.

That night my father kissed me and said with great interest in my career, "Shirley, tomorrow's your big day. Congrats."

"Save it," my mother said. Then she shut all the windows in order to prevent tonsillitis.

In the morning it snowed. On the street corner a tree had been decorated for us by a kind city administration. In order to miss its chilly shadow our neighbors walked three blocks east to buy a loaf of bread. The butcher pulled down black window shades to keep the colored lights from shining on his chickens. Oh, not me. On the way to school, with both my hands I tossed it a kiss of tolerance. Poor thing, it was a stranger in Egypt.

I walked straight into the auditorium past the staring children. "Go ahead, Shirley!" said the monitors. Four boys, big for their age, had already started work as prop-men and stagehands.

Mr. Hilton was very nervous. He was not even happy. Whatever he started to say ended in a sideward look of sadness. He sat slumped in the middle of the first row and asked me to help Miss Glacé. I did this, although she thought my voice too resonant and said, "Show-off!"

Parents began to arrive long before we were ready. They wanted to make a good impression. From among the yards of drapes I peeked out at the audience. I saw my embarrassed mother.

Ira, Lester, and Meyer were pasted to their beards by Miss Glacé. She almost forgot to thread the star on its wire, but I reminded her. I coughed a few times to clear my throat. Miss Glacé looked around and saw that everyone was in costume and on line waiting to play his part. She whispered, "All right . . ." Then:

Jackie Sauerfield, the prettiest boy in first grade, parted the curtains with his skinny elbow and in a high voice sang out:

"Parents dear

We are here

To make a Christmas play in time.

It we give

In narrative

And illustrate with pantomime.”

He disappeared.

My voice burst immediately from the wings to the great shock of Ira, Lester, and Meyer, who were waiting for it but were surprised all the same.

“I remember, I remember the house where I was born . . .”

Miss Glacé yanked the curtain open and there it was, the house---an old hayloft, where Celia Kornbluh lay in the straw with Cindy Lou, her favorite doll. Ira Lester, and Meyer moved slowly from the wings toward her, sometimes pointing to a moving star and sometimes ahead to Cindy Lou.

It was a long story and it was a sad story. I carefully pronounced all the words about my lonesome childhood, while little Eddie Braunstein wandered upstage and down with his shepherd’s stick, looking for sheep. I brought up lonesomeness again, and not being understood at all except by some women everybody hated. Eddie was too small for that and Marty Groff took his place, wearing his father’s prayer shawl. I announced twelve friends, and half the boys in the fourth grade gathered round Marty, who stood on an orange crate while my voice harangued. Sorrowful and loud, I declaimed about love and God and Man, but because of the terrible deceit of Abie Stock we came suddenly to a famous moment. Marty, whose remembering tongue I was, waited at the foot of the cross. He stared desperately at the audience. I groaned, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The soldiers who were sheiks grabbed poor Marty to pin him up to die, but he wrenched free, turned again to the audience, and spread his arms aloft to show despair and the end. I murmured at the top of my voice, “The rest is silence, but as everyone in this room, in this city ---in this world---now knows, I shall have life eternal.

That night Mrs. Kornbluh visited our kitchen for a glass of tea.

“How’s the virgin?” asked my father with a look of concern.

“For a man with a daughter you got a fresh mouth, Abramovitch.”

“Here,” said my father kindly, “have some lemon, it’ll sweeten your disposition.”

They debated a little in Yiddish, then fell in a puddle of Russian and Polish. What I understood next was my father who said, “Still and all, it was certainly a beautiful affair, you have to admit, introducing us to the beliefs of a different culture.”

“Well, yes,” said Mrs. Kornbluh. “The only thing . . . you know Charlie Turner---that cute boy in Celia’s class---a couple others? They got very small parts or no part at all. In very bad taste, it seemed to me. After all, it’s their religion.”

“Ach,” explained my mother, “what could Mr. Hilton do? They got very small voices; after all, why should they holler? The English language they know from the beginning by heart. They’re blond like angels. You think it’s so important they should get in the play? Christmas . . . the whole piece of goods ... they own it.”

I listened and listened until I couldn’t listen any more. Too sleepy, I climbed out of bed and knelt. I made a little church of my hands and said, “Hear, O Israel ...” Then I called out in Yiddish, “Please, good night, good night. Ssh.” My father said, “Ssh yourself,” and slammed the kitchen door.

I was happy. I fell asleep at once. I had prayed for everybody: my talking family, cousins far away, passersby, and all the lonesome Christians. I expected to be heard. My voice was certainly the loudest.

FACT AND FICTION

Advent: Beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas, the days that follow are designated as Advent, or the Season of the Coming. Advent ends Christmas Eve at midnight.

Anno Domini: This Latin phrase means “in the year of our Lord.” It is usually abbreviated as A.D. designates passage of time since the birth of Christ. Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk, is credited with the idea of dividing history into two eras: B.C., or the years before the birth of Christ, and A.D., the years following the birth.

Auld lang syne: These Scottish words, which mean “good old days” or “time remembered with fondness,” are from a song usually sung at Christmas or on the eve of the new year.

Candles: Consider a world in which the only source of light was the small flame flickering atop a candle. Candles were symbolic of the pagan hope that longer days of sunlight would return following dark winter days. Candles are used in religious rites to celebrate Jesus as the “Light of the World.”

Carols: These simple, joyful songs celebrate Christmas. St. Francis of Assisi introduced carols to formal church services.

Chimney: Many gift-giving traditions are associated with chimneys. Hanging stockings from the mantel may have originated with the legend of St. Nicholas, who said to have thrown bags of gold down a chimney into stockings hung up to dry.

Christians: The Christian belief is based on the Bible and on the acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God. Christianity was founded in the first century in Palestine by disciples of Jesus. An estimated one billion people belong to the Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox congregations.

Christmas: Telesphorus, the second bishop of Rome, A.D. 125-c. 136, declared that public church services should be held to celebrate the “Nativity of our Lord and Savior.” By A.D. 320, Pope Julius I and other religious leaders specified December 25 as the official date of the birth of Christ.

Epiphany, or Twelfth Night: Falling on January 6, Epiphany comes from the Greek word for *showing*. It celebrates the day when the Christ Child was shown to the Magi, who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gift givers: *St. Nicholas*, born in A.D. 280 in Patara, a city of Lycia in Asia Minor, became the bishop of Myra. His Christmas gifts were given late at night, so that the gift giver’s identity would remain a secret. S. Nicholas was eventually named the patron saint of children, sailors, Russia, and Greece. *Kris Kringle*

evolved from the German name for the Christ Child, *Christkindlein*. *Père Noël* is the French term for Father Christmas. French children also receive gifts from *le Petit Noël*, or Little Christmas. Russian children expect gifts from *Baboushka* during the night of January 5. In Brazil, *Papa Noël* arrives on Christmas Eve. Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam, which became New York, changed St. Nicholas to *Sinta Claes*. This name eventually became *Santa Claus*.

Jesus Christ: The name *Jesus* is Greek for the Hebrew word *Joshua*, which means “Savior.” *Christos* is the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*, which means “anointed.”

Magi: The plural of *magus*, a Latin word that means “magician,” or member of a group of ancient priests. Also known as Wise Men of the East, from the biblical verse “... there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1).

Manger scenes: St. Francis of Assisi began the practice of using figures to re-create the Nativity scene. These scenes depict Mary, Joseph, the Christ Child, and others present in the stable where Christ was born. The manger scene is called *crèche*, or cradle (France); *Krippe*, or crib (Germany); *presepio*, or manger (Italy); *Nacimienta*; or Nativity scene (Mexico, Guatemala).

Mummer: This word also means “masker” and is used for any person who masquerades as someone else in a parade, play, or pageant. In ancient Rome, during the festival called *Saturnalia*, people dressed in costume. Men would wear women’s clothing or animal costumes, and everyone enjoyed making loud music and creating disruptions. This tradition continued in various forms through the ages. In the United States the Philadelphia Mummers’ Parade is over one hundred years old.

Noel: Some of the oldest carols were French *noels*. This word is probably from the Latin word *natalis*, or “birthday.” *Noel* is also used to describe the Christmas season.

Pagan: In Latin, a pagan was a worshiper of false gods, a civilian, or “not a soldier of Christ.” We usually think of pagans as ancient people whose beliefs were based on their explanations for natural events that affected their lives.

Saturnalia: A season of riotous celebration in ancient Rome, from December 17 to 24, honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture. Less excessive festivities included the exchange of gifts of cakes and fruits, decoration of homes, and celebrations with singing and candles. These ancient rites form the basis for many Christian customs.

Wassail: A toast, from the Anglo-Saxon words *waes hael*, which translates as “to your health,” “what hail,” “here’s to you,” or “be whole.” Wassail was also a hot drink, a mixture of wine or ale, eggs, sugar, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, and roasted apples. It was usually served in a bowl with pieces of toast floating on top. Words spoken as a tribute when drinking are now called a “toast.” Originally, apple trees were sprinkled with wassail to ensure a good crop. The old custom of carrying a wooden wassail bowl from

home to home evolved into the tradition of caroling parties whose singers are invited inside for a cup of fruitlike punch, or wassail.

Winter solstice: *Solstice* is the Latin term for “sun standing still.” Winter solstice is the date, usually December 22, when the sun is at its greatest distance from the equator. It is the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Ancient people, with little understanding of science, believed the sun stood still during the short winter days. They turned to fire and its warmth as symbolic of spring and their hope for the return of longer hour of sunlight.

Xmas: An abbreviation of the word *Christmas*. The letter X is the Greek letter *Chi*, the first letter of Christ’s name written in the Greek alphabet.

Yule: Spelled in Old English as *geol*, *houl*, *hioul*, and in Norse as *jul*, this word was used to describe pagan midwinter festivals in honor of the sun. Yule logs were burned during these rites for protection against evil spirits and to destroy old misunderstanding and hatreds. To ensure the sun’s continued warmth, a part of the log was saved to light the Yule log the following year. Today the word *Yule* is frequently used to describe the Christmas season, although the only log seen at Christmas may be the *bûche de Noël*, a traditional French log-shaped cake.

ONE YOUNG LADDIE'S CHRISTMAS

By Kate Whiting Patch

Patch's story—set in the Boston of nearly a century ago—is a particularly touching portrayal of the power of a child's unshakable faith. It is also an unapologetically sentimental look at the man who may be the world's most lovable figure—Santa Claus.

It was the day before Christmas, and the hurrying, busy crowd of happy people filled the Boston streets and shops. A very small atom in that crowd was Sandy Martin, but he carried a large share of the Christmas happiness, although his hands were mitten less and his pockets full of holes. How could one help being light-hearted and glad in the midst of all that joyous bustle and flurry? It made Sandy feel as if he were going to have a glorious big Christmas himself, and he quite forgot to sigh because he was not. He stood by the big toy-shop window, flattening his little purple nose against the glass, and watching the people go in and out. He wondered what they were buying and what boy and girl was to be made glad with the contents of those mysterious parcels.

But by and by he began to grow cold, and the coldness set him to thinking; and as he walked along, up past the Common, he began to wonder, just a little, why it was that Santa Claus should have so much to do with all these people and so little to do with him. The puzzled look had not disappeared from his small, freckled face, when he looked across the street and could hardly believe his own eyes—for there was Santa Claus himself, walking through the Common!

Sandy stopped short, and stared and stared until his eyes couldn't open any wider. Yes, that was surely Santa Claus. He did not have his reindeer and sleigh, to be sure, for there was no snow; but nobody but Santa could own such a jolly face and long beard and nice furry clothes and big boots. Then he had a good many toys about him, too; and he carried a great sign, with something in big letters on it, which told people that the rarest treasures for Christmas stockings were to be found at a certain big store on Washington Street.

But Sandy could not read and he did not bother with the letters. He just stared and stared.

Santa was evidently tired; for while Sandy was looking at him, the old saint paused in his walk and sat down on one of the benches.

"It *is* Santa Claus," said Sandy to himself. "I'm going over to talk with him, and I'll ask him why he doesn't come down our chimney, too."

No sooner said than done. Across the street Sandy hurried, and marching up to the old man, he said, in a friendly way, "How do you do, Mr. Santa Claus?"

Santa looked up, a little surprised, but smiled good naturedly at the ragged urchin before him and remarked affable, "Well, young man, how do you do? And what may be your name?"

"I'm Sandy Martin," was the prompt answer. And with that, Sandy Martin, waiting for no further invitation, proceeded to pull himself up on the seat beside Mr. Santa Claus. "I've come over here to ask you a question," he began at one. "I want to know why you don't come to our house Chris'mus; we've got jus' as good a chimney as any one, and there's an ole lightning rod beside it fer you to tie your reindeer to."

Santa seemed immensely pleased, and chuckled to himself.

"You see," said he to Sandy, "I have so many places to go to, it is very hard to find 'em all. Where do you live, any way?"

"Up in Gower Street, No. 65. I thought you might have forgotten."

At this point Sandy became conscious that a third person was listening to the conversation. A tall, dark lady in deep mourning had come up to where the two were sitting, and stood near, waiting for a street-car. Her face was very pale and sad, and it quite surprised Sandy to think that any one could look so at Christmas-time, and before the very eyes of Santa Claus, too. As he stared up at her, the sadness was chased away for an instant by an amused smile. Sandy, who stood in awe of no one, smiled back at her, and said cheerfully, "Merry Christmas, ma'am."

The lady smiled, but sighed too.

"Thank you, my dear," she said, in a sweet, sad voice. "I hope that you may have a merry Christmas, but the day cannot be a merry one for me."

Sandy was surprised again, and gazed in bewilderment from Santa to the lady.

"Why? Don't grown-up people have merry Christmases?" he asked.

"Sometimes," answered the lady sadly. "I thought," continued Sandy, "that it was even more fun for the grown-up people than for the children; 'cause I thought you all knew Santa Claus and had secrets with him. All the other people I've seen looked jolly and glad, an' I thought every one was happy 'cause they was all thinkin' how they'd surprise some other one."

A shadow fell across Sandy's little face, and the lady saw it.

"My dear little boy," she said, with something like tears in her voice, although her eyes were smiling again, "don't let me spoil your thought of Christmas happiness. You are right, and I have been wrong; everyone should be happy at this blessed season, and I am going to have a secret with Santa Claus, and a merry Christmas, too."

Sandy looked happy again, and began to slide off the seat.

“I’ve got to go home now, for it’s getting dark,” he said; “but I’m ever so glad I met you, Mr. Santa Claus, and I hope you’ll find your way tonight all right. If you can, I wish you’d bring Maggie a doll with blue eyes, and Benny a sled, and mother a new shawl; and, Mr. Claus,” he added in a loud whisper, “I hope you’ll give that lady there something she likes and make her have a good time.”

Then Sandy trudged away, and when he looked back he was delighted to see the sad lady and Santa talking earnestly together.

While they ate their supper that night, Sandy excited the whole family with his story of meeting Santa Claus. His mother, tired out with her day’s work, sighed, and tried to persuade him that it was not really Santa Claus he had seen---in vain; before they went to bed, each child hung up a ragged stocking back of the kitchen stove.

Mrs. Martin looked at them, and then sank down in her chair and had a good cry. She had been sewing hard all day, poor soul; but the money she had earned was no more than enough to keep a roof over their heads and procure food for the hungry little mouths—there was nothing to spare for Christmas stockings.

“Oh, what will they say in the morning,” she wept, “when they find them empty! I can’t bear it; no, I can’t.”

She looked about the room, and finally rose and took her shawl down from the peg.

“It’s no use,” she said, “I can’t have them disappointed; I’ll go out and pawn this and get a few things to put in them stockings.”

She walked across the room and opened the door, but she did not go out, for someone was standing there.

“How do you do, ma’am?” he said, walking into the room. “I am Santa Claus, and as I couldn’t very well get down the chimney I took the liberty of coming in at the door. I’ve a few things here for the little folks, and I promised your boy I’d come; I see he is ready for me.

With that, Santa Claus went to work, and Mrs. Martin dropped into her chair and uttered never a word; she felt as if she were dreaming. Had the myths of her childhood come back again? Was there really a Santa Claus, and had Sandy met him that afternoon? Surely it could be no one else who stood there before her; and had not this bluff, kindly old man with his own lips declared his identity?

Mrs. Martin sat perfectly dazed, and watched him as he crammed full the ragged stockings, twined a wreath of evergreen here and there and piled up a number of packages and a big basket on the table. Then, before she could utter a word, he had disappeared with a "Merry Christmas" leaving her to wonder if she had not indeed awakened from a dream.

Before light, next morning, great was the joyful excitement and noise at 65 Gower Street; and this only settled momentary awe when mother told the children, that she herself had seen Santa Claus fill the stockings!

"But I thought you said there wasn't a Santa Claus," said Sandy reproachfully.

"Well, I didn't believe there was," answered his mother helplessly; "but if that wasn't Santa Claus I don't know who it was."

"Course it was Santa Claus!" exclaimed Maggie; "didn't Sandy tell him to bring me a doll with blue eyes?" (Sandy nodded solemnly.) "Well, and he did bring her, didn't he?---the pretty darling! See, ma, she's got lace-edged clothes clear through, and buttoned boots."

"And didn't Sandy tell him to bring me a sled?" broke Benny. (Sandy nodded solemnly again.) "And ain't the sled right here? And didn't the snow come, too, last night? And ain't I going coasting on the Common this very day?" Saying which Benny flung himself upon the shiny sled and tried to coast across the kitchen floor.

As if these arguments were not enough, Sandy turned to his mother again.

"And didn't I ask him to bring you a new shawl?" he said.

Mrs. Martin laid her hand on the soft thick shawl which Maggie had spread across the rocking-chair, and then patted Sandy's shoulder gently.

"What did you tell him to bring to you?" she asked.

Sandy looked up in sudden surprise.

"Why, I never told him about me!" he exclaimed. "It was getting late, and I just remembered about the doll and the sled and the shawl. I forgot all about me; but now I'm sure it was Santa Claus, for he brought just the things I wanted."

"So he did!" said Maggie wonderingly. "There is the tool-chest, and the harmonica, and the big picture-book."

Benny had been peeping into the market-basket. “Whew!” he cried. “There’s nuts and oranges and ‘nanas and grapes; and there’s red jelly and a turkey!”

“I see crackers and bread and ‘taters,” exclaimed Maggie from the other side of the basket. “Oh, ma! Ma! We can have a regular dinner, can’t we!”

It is needless to tell of all the comfort and joy that happy Christmas brought to Sandy and his home. But his faith in Santa Claus is firm and sure and even Mrs. Martin half believes that the good old saint does somewhere exist, and was drawn down to their humble home by little Sandy’s Christmas spirit.

THE ELVES AND THE SHOEMAKER

By The Brothers Grimm

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—German university professors of linguistics—were also known as the Brothers Grimm, producing books full of fairy tales that have long entranced both children and adults. While “The Elves and the Shoemaker” stands on its own as one of these fairy tales, it is also an example of how an act of selfless giving has the power to change lives for the better.

Once upon a time there was a poor shoemaker. He made excellent shoes and worked quite diligently, but even so he could not earn enough to support himself and his family. He became so poor that he could not even afford to buy the leather he needed to make shoes; finally he had only enough to make one last pair. He cut them out with great care and put the pieces on his workbench, so that he could sew them together the following morning.

“Now, I wonder,” he sighed, “Will I ever make another pair of shoes? Once I’ve sold this pair I shall need all the money to buy food for my family. I will not be able to buy any new leather.

That night, the shoemaker went to bed a sad and distraught man.

The next morning, he awoke early and went down to his workshop. On his bench he found an exquisite pair of shoes! They had small and even stitches, formed so perfectly that he knew he couldn’t have produced a better pair himself. Upon close examination, the shoes proved to be made from the very pieces of leather he had set out the night before. He immediately put the fine pair of shoes in the window of his shop and drew back the blinds.

“Who in the world could have done this service for me?” he asked himself. Even before he could make up an answer, a rich man strode into his shop and bought the shoe---and for a fancy price.

The shoemaker was ecstatic; he immediately went out and purchased plenty of food for his family---and some more leather. That afternoon he cut out two pairs of shoes and, just as before, laid all the pieces on his bench so that he could sew them the next day. Then he went upstairs to enjoy a good meal with his family.

“My goodness!” he cried the next morning when he found two pairs of beautifully finished shoes on his workbench. “Who could make such fine shoes---and so quickly?” He put them in his shop window, and before long some wealthy people came in and paid a great deal of money for them. The happy shoemaker went right out and bought even more leather.

For weeks, and then months, this continued. Whether the shoemaker cut two pairs for four pairs, the fine new shoes were always ready the next morning. Soon his small shop was crowded with customers. He cut out many types of shoes: stiff boots lined with fur, delicate slippers for dancers, walking shoes for

ladies, tiny shoes for children. Soon his shoes had bows and laces and buckles of fine silver. The little shop prospered as never before, and its proprietor was soon a rich man himself. His family wanted for nothing.

As the shoemaker and his wife sat by the fire one night, he said, "One of these days, I shall learn who has been helping us."

"We could hide behind the cupboard in your workroom," she said. "That way, we would find out just who your helpers are." And that is just what they did. That evening, when the clock struck twelve, the shoemaker and his wife heard a noise. Two tiny men, each with a bag of tools, were squeezing beneath a crack under the door. Oddest of all, the two elves were stark naked!"

The two men clambered onto the workbench and began working. Their little hands stitched and their little hammers tapped ceaselessly the whole night through.

"They are so small! And they make such beautiful shoes in no time at all!" the shoemaker whispered to his wife as dawn rose. (Indeed, the elves were about the size of his own needles.)

"Quiet!" his wife answered. "See how they are cleaning up now." And in an instant, the two elves had disappeared beneath the door.

The next day, the shoemaker's wife said, "Those little elves have done so much good for us. Since it is nearly Christmas, we should make some gifts for them."

"Yes!" cried the shoemaker. "I'll make some boots that will fit them, and you make some clothes." They worked until dawn. On Christmas Eve the presents were laid out upon the workbench: two tiny jackets, two pairs of trousers, and two little woolen caps. They also left out a plate of good things to eat and drink. Then they hid once again behind the cupboard to see what would happen.

Just as before, the elves appeared at the stroke of midnight. They jumped onto the bench to begin their work, but when they saw all the presents they began to laugh and shout with joy. They tried on all the clothes, then helped themselves to the food and drink. Then they jumped down, danced excitedly around the workroom, and disappeared beneath the door.

After Christmas, the shoemaker cut out his leather as he always had—but the two elves never returned. "I believe they may have heard us whispering," his wife said. "Elves are so very shy when it comes to people, you know."

"I know I will miss their help," the shoemaker said, "but we will manage. The shop is always so busy now. But my stitches will never be as tight and small as theirs!"

That shoemaker did indeed continue to prosper, but he and his family always remembered the good elves who had helped them during the hard times. And each and every Christmas Eve from that year onward, they gathered around the fire to drink a toast to their tiny friends.

THE MIRACULOUS STAIRCASE

By Arthur Gordon

On that cool December morning in 1878, sunlight lay like an amber fug across the dusty streets and adobe houses of Santa Fe. It glistened on the bright tile roof of the almost completed Chapel of Our Lady of *light* and on the nearby windows of the convent school run by the Sisters of Loretto. Inside the convent, the Mother Superior looked up from her packing as a tap came on her door.

"It's *another* carpenter, Reverend Mother," said Sister Francis Louise, her round face apologetic. "I told him that you're leaving right away, that you haven't time to see him, but he says ..."

"I know what he says," Mother Magdalene said, going on resolutely with her packing. "That he's heard about our problem with the new chapel. That he's the best carpenter in all of New Mexico. That he can build us a staircase to the choir loft despite the fact that the brilliant architect in Paris who drew the plans failed to leave any space for one. And despite the fact that five master carpenters have already tried and failed. You're quite right, Sister; I don't have time to listen to that story again."

"But he seems such a nice man," said Sister Francis Louise wistfully, "and he's out there with his burro, and ..."

"I'm sure," said Mother Magdalene with a smile, "that he's a charming man, and that his burro is a charming donkey. But there's sickness down at the Santo Domingo pueblo, and it may be cholera. So we have to go. And you have to stay and run the school. And that's that!" Then she called, "Manuela!"

A young Indian girl of 12 or 13, black-haired and smiling, came in quietly on moccasined feet. She was a mute. She could hear and understand, but the Sisters had been unable to teach her to speak. The Mother Superior spoke to her gently: "Take my things down to the wagon, child. I'll be right there." And to Sister Francis Louise: "you'd better tell your carpenter friend to come back in two or three weeks. I'll see him then."

"Two or three weeks! Surely you'll be home for Christmas?"

"If it's the Lord's will, Sister. I hope so."

In the street, beyond the waiting wagon, Mother Magdalene could see the carpenter, a bearded man, strongly built and taller than most Mexicans, with dark eyes and a smiling, wind-burned face. Beside him, laden with tools and scraps of lumber, a small gray burro stood patiently. Manuela was stroking its nose, glancing shyly at its owner. "You'd better explain," said the Mother Superior, "that the child can hear him, but she can't speak."

Goodbyes were quick--the best kind when you leave a place you love. Southwest, then, along the dust trail, the mountains purple with shadow, the Rio Grande a ribbon of green far off to the right. The pace was slow, but Mother Magdalene and Sister Mary Helen amused themselves by singing songs and telling Christmas stories as the sun marched up and down the sky. And their leathery driver listened and nodded.

Two days of this brought them to Santo Domingo Pueblo, where the sickness was not cholera after all, but measles, almost as deadly in an Indian village. And so they stayed, helping the harassed Father Sebastian, visiting the dark adobe hovels where feverish brown children tossed and fierce Indian dogs showed their teeth.

At night they were bone-weary, but sometimes Mother Magdalene found time to talk to Father Sebastian about her plans for the dedication of the chapel. It was to be in April; the Archbishop himself would be there. And it might have been dedicated sooner, were it not for this incredible business of a choir loft with no means of access---unless it were a ladder.

"I told the Bishop," said Mother Magdalene, "that it would be a mistake to have the plans drawn in Paris. If something went wrong, what could we do? But he wanted our chapel in Santa Fe patterned after the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, and who am I to argue with Bishop Lamy? So the talented Monsieur Mouly designs a beautiful choir loft high up under the rose window, and no way to get to it."

"Perhaps," sighed Father Sebastian, "he had in mind a heavenly choir. The kind with wings."

"It's not funny," said Mother Magdalene a bit sharply. "I've prayed and prayed, but apparently there's no solution at all. There just isn't room on the chapel floor for the supports such a staircase needs."

The days passed, and with each passing day Christmas drew closer. Twice, horsemen on their way from Santa Fe to Albuquerque brought letters from Sister Francis Louise. All was well at the convent, but Mother Magdalene frowned over certain paragraphs. "The children are getting ready for Christmas," Sister Francis Louise wrote in her first letter. "Our little Manuela and the carpenter have become great friends. It's amazing how much he seems to know about us all..."

And what, thought Mother Magdalene, is the carpenter still doing there?

The second letter also mentioned the carpenter. "Early every morning he comes with another load of lumber, and every night he goes away. When we ask him by what authority he does these things, he smiles and says nothing. We have tried to pay him for his work, but he will accept no pay..."

Work? What work? Mother Magdalene wrinkled up her nose in exasperation. Had that soft-hearted Sister Francis Louise given the man permission to putter around in the new chapel? With firm and disapproving hand, the Mother Superior wrote a not ordering an end to all such unauthorized activities. She gave it to an Indian pottery-maker on his way to Santa Fe.

But that night the first snow fell, so thick and heavy that the Indian turned back. Next day at noon the sun shone again on a world glittering with diamonds. But Mother Magdalene knew that another snowfall might make it impossible for her to be home for Christmas. By now the sickness at Santo Domingo was subsiding. And so that afternoon they began the long fide back.

The snow did come again, making their slow progress even slower. It was late on Christmas Eve, close to midnight, when the tired horses plodded up to the convent door. But lamps still burned. Manuela flew down the steps, Sister Francis Louise close behind her. And chilled and weary though she was, Mother Magdalene sensed instantly an excitement, an electricity in the air that she could not understand.

Nor did she understand it when they led her, still in her heavy wraps, down the corridor; into the new, as-yet-unused chapel where a few candles burned. "Look, Reverend Mother," breathed Sister Francis Louise. "Look!"

Like a curl of smoke the staircase rose before them, as insubstantial as a dream. Its top rested against the choir loft. Nothing else supported it; it seemed to float on air. There were no banisters. Two complete spirals it made, the polished wood gleaming softly in the candlelight. "Thirty-three steps," whispered Sister Francis Louise. "One for each year in the life of Our Lord."

Mother Magdalene moved forward like a woman in a trance. She put her foot on the first, step, then the second, then the third. There was not a tremor. She looked down, bewildered, at Manuela's ecstatic, upturned face. "But it's impossible! There wasn't time!"

"He finished yesterday," the Sister said. "He didn't come today. No one has seen him anywhere in Santa Fe. He's gone."

"But *who* was he? Don't you even know his *name*?"

The Sister shook her head, but now Manuela pushed forward, nodding emphatically. Her mouth opened; she took a deep, shuddering breath; she made a sound that was like a gasp in the stillness. The nuns stared at her, transfixed. She tried again. This time it was a syllable, followed by another. "Jo-sé." She clutched the Mother Superior's arm and repeated the first word she had ever spoken. "José!"

Sister Francis Louise crossed herself. Mother Magdalene felt her heart contract. José—the Spanish word for Joseph. Joseph the Carpenter. Joseph the Master Woodworker of...

"José!" Manuela's dark eyes were full of tears. "José!"

Silence, then, in the shadowy chapel. No one moved. Far away across the snow-slivered town Mother Magdalene heard a bell tolling midnight. She came down the stairs and took Manuela's hand. She felt uplifted by a great surge of wonder and gratitude and compassion and love. And she knew what it was. It was the spirit of Christmas. And it was upon them all.

Author's Note. You may see the inexplicable staircase itself in Santa Fe today. It stands just as it stood when the chapel was dedicated almost a hundred years ago—except for the banister, which was added late. Tourists stare and marvel. Architects shake their heads and murmur, "Impossible." No one knows the identity of the designer-builder. All the Sisters know is that the problem existed, a stranger came, solved it and left.

The 22 steps make two complete turns without central support. There are no nails in the staircase; only wooden pegs. The curved stringers are put together with exquisite precision; the wood is spliced in seven places on the inside and nice on the outside. The wood is said to be a hard-fir variety, nonexistent in New Mexico. School records show that no payment for the staircase was ever made.

CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE BLUE CHAMBER

By Jerome K. Jerome

"I don't want to make you fellows nervous," began my uncle in a peculiarly impressive, not to say blood-curdling, tone of voice, "and if you would rather that I did not mention it, I won't; but, as a matter of fact, this very house, in which we are not sitting, is haunted."

"You don't say that!" exclaimed Mr. Coombes.

"What's the use of your saying I don't say it when I have just said it?" retorted my uncle somewhat annoyed. "You talk so foolishly. I tell you the house is haunted. Regularly on Christmas Eve the Blue Chamber" (they call the room next to the nursery the "Blue Chamber" at my uncle's) "is haunted by the ghost of a sinful man—a man who once killed a Christmas carol singer with a lump of coal."

"How did he do it?" asked Mr. Coombes, eagerly. "Was it difficult?"

"I do not know how he did it," replied my uncle; "he did not explain the process. The singer had taken up a position just inside the front gate, and was singing a ballad. It is presumed that, when he opened his mouth for B flat, the lump of coal was thrown by the sinful man from one of the windows, and that it went down the singer's throat and choked him."

"You want to be a good shot, but it is certainly worth trying," murmured Mr. Coombes thoughtfully.

"But that was not his only crime, alas!" added my uncle. "Prior to that he had killed a solo cornet player."

"No! Is that really a fact?" exclaimed Mr. Coombes.

"Of course it's a fact," answered my uncle testily. "At all events, as much a fact as you can expect to get in a case of this sort.

"The poor fellow, the cornet player, had been in the neighborhood barely a month. Old Mr. Bishop, who kept the 'Jolly Sand Boys' at the time, and from whom I had the story, said he had never known a more hard-working and energetic solo cornet player. He, the cornet player, only knew two tunes, but Mr. Bishop, said that the man could not have played with more vigor, or for more hours a day, if he had known forty. The two tunes he did play were 'Aunie Laurie' and 'Home, Sweet Home; and as regarded his performance of the former melody, Mr. Bishop said that a mere child could have told what it was meant for;

"This musician—this poor, friendless artist—used to come regularly and play in this street just opposite for two hours every evening. One evening he was seen, evidently in response to an invitation, going into this very house, but was never seen coming out of it!"

"Did the townsfolk try offering any reward for his recovery?" asked Mr. Coombes.

"Not a penny," replied my uncle.

"Another summer," continued my uncle, "a German band visited here, intending—so they announced on their arrival to stay till the autumn.

"On the second day after their arrival, the whole company, as fine and healthy a body of men as one would wish to see, were invited to dinner by this sinful man, and, after spending the whole of the next twenty-four hours in bed, left the town a broken and dyspeptic crew; the parish doctor, who had attended them, giving it as his opinion that it was doubtful if they would, any of them, be fit to play an air again."

"You—you don't know the recipe, do you?" asked Mr. Coombes.

"Unfortunately I do not," replied my uncle; "but the chief ingredient was said to have been railway dining-room hash.

"I forget the man's other crimes," my uncle went on; "I used to know them all at one time, but my memory is not what it was. I do not, however, believe I am doing his memory an injustice in believing that he was not entirely unconnected with the death, and subsequent burial, of a gentleman who used to play the harp with his toes; and that neither was he altogether irresponsible for the lonely grave of an unknown stranger who once visited the neighborhood, and Italian peasant lad, a performer upon the barrel-organ.

"Every Christmas Eve," said my uncle cleaving with low impressive tones the strange awed silence that, like a shadow, seemed to have slowly stolen into and settled down upon the room, "the ghost of this sinful man haunts the Blue Chamber, in this very house. There, from midnight until cock-crow, amid wild muffled shrieks and groans and mocking laughter and the ghostly sound of horrid blows, it does fierce phantom flight with the spirits of the solo cornet player and the murdered carol singer, assisted at intervals by the shades of the German band; while the ghost of the strangled harpist plays mad ghostly melodies with ghostly toes on the ghost of a broken harp."

Uncle said the Blue Chamber was comparatively useless as a sleeping apartment on Christmas Eve.

"Hark!" said my uncle, raising a warning hand toward the ceiling, while we held our breath, and listened; "Hark! I believe they are at it now—in the Blue Chamber!"

I rose up and said that I would sleep in the Blue Chamber.

"Never!" cried my uncle, springing up. "You shall not put yourself in this deadly peril. Besides, the bed is not made."

"Never mind the bed," I replied. "I have lived in furnished apartments for gentlemen, and have been accustomed to sleep on beds that have never been made from one year's end to the other. I am young, and have had a clear conscience now for a month. The spirits will not harm me. I may even do them some little good, and induce them to be quiet and go away. Besides, I should like to see the show."

They tried to dissuade me from what they termed my foolhardy enterprise, but I remained firm and claimed my privilege. I was "the guest." "The guest" always sleeps in the haunted chamber on Christmas Eve; it is his right.

They said that if I put it on that footing they had, of course, no answer, and they lighted a candle for me and followed me upstairs in a body.

Whether elevated by the feeling that I was doing a noble action or animated by a mere general consciousness of rectitude is not for me to say, but I went upstairs that night with remarkable buoyancy. It was as much as I could do to stop at the landing when I came to it; I felt I wanted to go on up to the roof. But, with the help of the banisters, I restrained by ambition, wished them all good-night and went in and shut the door.

Things began to go wrong with me from the very first. The candle tumbled out of the candlestick before my hand was off the lock. It kept on tumbling out again; I never saw such a slippery candle. I gave up attempting to use the candlestick at last and carried the candle about in my hand, and even then it would not keep upright. So I got wild and threw it out the window, and undressed and went to bed in the dark.

I did not go to sleep; I did not feel sleepy at all; I lay on my back looking up at the ceiling and thinking of things. I wish I could remember some of the ideas that came to me as I lay there, because they were so amusing.

I had been lying like this for half an hour or so, and had forgotten all about the ghost, when, on casually casting my eyes round the room, I noticed for the first time a singularly contented-looking phantom sitting in the easy-chair by the fire smoking the ghost of a long clay pipe.

I fancied for the moment, as most people would under similar circumstances, that I must be dreaming. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. No! It was a ghost, clear enough. I could see the back of the chair through his body. He looked over toward me, took the shadowy pipe from his lips and nodded.

The most surprising part of the whole thing to me was that I did not feel in the least alarmed. If anything I was rather pleased to see him. I was company.

I said: "Good evening. It's been a cold day!"

He said he had not noticed it himself, but dared say I was right.

We remained silent for a few seconds, and then, wishing to put it pleasantly, I said: "I believe I have the honor of addressing the ghost of the gentleman who had the accident with the carol singer?"

He smiled and said it was very good of me to remember it. One singer was not much to boast of, but still every little helped.

I was somewhat staggered at his answer. I had expected a groan of remorse. The ghost appeared, on the contrary, to be rather conceited over the business. I thought that as he had taken my reference to the singer so quietly perhaps he would not be offended if I questioned him about the organ grinder. I felt curious about that poor boy.

"Is it true," I asked, "that you had a hand in the death of that Italian peasant lad who came to town with a barrel-organ that played nothing but Scotch airs?"

He quite fired up. "Had a hand in it!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Who has dared to pretend that he assisted me? I murdered the youth myself. Nobody helped me. Alone I did it. Show me the man who says I didn't."

I calmed him. I assured him that I had never, in my own mind, doubted that he was the real and only assassin, and I went on and asked him what he had done with the body of the cornet player he had killed.

He said: "To which one may you be alluding?"

"Oh, were there any more then?" I inquired.

He smiled and gave a little cough. He said he did not like to appear to be boasting, but that, counting trombones, there were seven.

"Dear me!" I replied, "you must have had quite a busy time of it, one way and another."

He said that perhaps he ought not to be the one to say so; but that really, speaking of ordinary middle-class society, he thought there were few ghosts who could look back upon a life of more sustained usefulness.

He puffed away in silence for a few seconds while I sat watching him. I had never seen a ghost smoking a pipe before, that I could remember, and it interested me.

I asked him what tobacco he used, and he replied: "The ghost of cut Cavendish as a rule."

He explained that the ghost of all the tobacco that a man smoked in life belong to him when he became dead. He said he himself had smoked a good deal of cut Cavendish when he was alive, so that he was well supplied with the ghost of it now.

I thought I would join him in a pipe, and he said, "Do, old man"; and I reached over and got out the necessary paraphernalia from my coat pocket and lit up.

We were quite chummy after that, and he told me all his crimes. He said he had lived next door once to a young lady who was learning to play the guitar, while a gentleman who practiced on the bass-viol lived opposite. And he, with fiendish cunning, had introduced these two unsuspecting young people to one another, and had persuaded them to elope with each other against their parents' wishes, and take their musical instruments with them; and they had done so, and before the honeymoon was over, *she* had broken his head with the bass-viol, and *he* had tried to cram the guitar down her throat, and had injured her for life.

My friend said he used to lure muffin-men into the passage and then stuff them with their own wares till they burst. He said he had quieted eighteen that way.

Young men and women who recited long and dreary poems at evening parties, and callow youths who walked about the streets late at night, playing concertinas, he used to get together and poison in batches of ten, so as to save expenses; and park orators and temperance lecturers he used to shut up six in a small room with a glass of water and a collection-box apiece, and let them talk each other to death.

It did one good to listen to him.

I asked him when he expected the other ghosts—the ghosts of the singer and the cornet player, and the German band that Uncle John mentioned. He smiled, and said they would never come again, any of them.

I said, "Why, isn't it true, then, that they meet you here every Christmas Ever for a row?"

He replied that it was true. Every Christmas Eve, for twenty-five years, had he and they fought in that room; but they would never trouble him or anybody else again. One by one had he laid them out, spoiled and made them utterly useless for all haunting purposes. He had finished off the last German band ghost that very evening, just before I came upstairs, and had thrown what was left of it out through the slit between the window sashes. He said it would never be worth calling a ghost again.

"I suppose you will still come yourself, as usual?" I said. "They would be sorry to miss you, I know."

"Oh, I don't know," he replied; "there's nothing much to come for now; unless," he added kindly, "you are going to be here. I'll come if you will sleep here next Christmas Eve."

"I have taken a liking to you," he continued; "you don't fly off, screeching, when you see a party, and your hair doesn't stand on end. You've no idea," he said, "how sick I am of seeing people's hairs standing on end."

He said it irritated him.

Just then a slight noise reached us from the yard below, and he started and turned deathly black.

"You are ill," I cried, springing toward him; "tell me the best thing to do for you. Shall I drink some brandy, and give you the ghost of it?"

He remained silent, listening intently for a moment, and then he gave a sigh of relief, and the shade came back to his cheek.

"It's all right," he murmured; "I was afraid it was the cock."

“Oh, it’s too early for that,” I said. “Why, it’s only the middle of the night,”

“Oh, that doesn’t make any difference to those cursed chickens,” he replied bitterly. “They would just as soon crow in the middle of the night as at any other time—sooner, if they thought it would spoil a chap’s evening out. I believe they do it on purpose.”

He said a friend of his, the ghost of a man who had killed a tax collector, used to haunt a house in Long Acre, where they kept fowls in the cellar, and every time a policeman went by and flashed his searchlight down the grating, the old cock there would fancy it was the sun, and start crowing like mad, when, of course, the poor ghost had to dissolve, and it would, in consequence get back home sometimes as early as one o’clock in the morning, furious because it had only been out for an hour.

I agreed that it seemed very unfair.

“Oh, it’s an absurd arrangement altogether,” he continued, quite angrily. “I can’t imagine what our chief could have been thinking of when he made it. As I have said to him, over and over again, ‘Have fixed time, and let everybody stick to it—say four o’clock in summer, and six in winter. Then, one would know what one was about.’”

“How do you manage when there isn’t any clock handy?” I inquired.

He was on the point of replying, when again he started and listened. This time I distinctly heard Mr. Bowles cock, next door, crow twice.

“There you are,” he said, rising and reaching for his hat,; “that’s the sort of thing we have to put up with. What *is the* time?”

I looked at my watch, and found it was half-past three.

“I thought as much, he muttered. “I’ll wring that blessed bird’s neck if I get hold of it.” And he prepared to go.

“If you can wait half a minute,” I said, getting out of bed, “I’ll go a bit of the way with you.”

“It’s very good of you,” he replied, pausing, “but it seems unkind to drag you out.”

“Not at all,” I replied; “I shall like a walk.” And I partially dressed myself, and took my umbrella; and he put his arm through mine, and we went out together, the best of friends.

A MISERABLE, MERRY CHRISTMAS

By Lincoln Steffens

My father's business seems to have been one of slow but steady growth. He and his local partner, Llewelen Tozer, had no vices. They were devoted to their families and to "the store," which grew with the town, from a gambling, mining, and ranching community to one of farming, fruit-raising, and building. Immigration poured in, not gold-seekers now, but farmers, businessmen and home-builders, who settled, planted, reaped, and traded in the natural riches of the State, which prospered greatly, "making" the people who will tell you that they "made the State."

As the store made money and I was getting through the primary school, my father bought a lot uptown, at Sixteenth and K Streets, and built us a "big" house. It was off the line of city's growth, but it was near a new grammar school for me and my sisters, who were coming along fast after me. This interested the family, not me. They were always talking about school; they had not had much of it themselves, and they thought they had missed something. My father used to write speeches, my mother verses, and their theory seems to have been that they had talents which a school would have brought to flower. They agreed, therefore, that their children's gifts should have all the schooling there was. My view, then, was that I had had a good deal of it already, and I was not interested at all. It interfered with my own business, with my own education.

An indeed I remember very little of the primary school. I learned to read, write, spell, and count, and reading was all right. I had a practical use for books, which I searched for ideas and parts to play with, characters to be, lives to live. The primary school was probably a good one, but I cannot remember learning anything except to read aloud "perfectly" from a teacher whom I adored and who was fond of me. She used to embrace me before the whole class and she favored me openly to the scandal of the other pupils, who called me "teacher's pet." Their scorn did not trouble me; I saw and I said that they envied me. I paid for her favor, however. When she married I had queer, unhappy feelings of resentment; I didn't want to meet her husband, and when I had to I wouldn't speak to him. He laughed, and she kissed me—happily for her, to me offensively. I never would see her again. Through with her, I fell in love immediately with Miss Kay, another grown young woman who wore glasses and had a fine, clear skin. I did not know her, I only saw her in the street, but once I followed her, found out where she lived, and used to pass her house, hoping to see her, and yet choking with embarrassment if I did. This fascination lasted for years; it was still a sort of super-romance to me when later I was "going with" another girl nearer my own age.

What interested me in our new neighborhood was not the school, not the room I was to have in the house all to myself, but the stable which was built back of the house. My father let me direct the making of a stall, a little smaller than the other stalls, for my pony, and I prayed and hoped and my sister Lou believed that that meant that I would get the pony, perhaps for Christmas. I pointed out to her that there were three other stalls and no horses at all. This I said in order that she should answer it.

She could not. My father, sounded, said that someday we might have horses and a cow; meanwhile a stable added to the value of a house. "Someday" is a pain to a boy who lives in and knows only "now." My good little sisters, to comfort me, remarked that Christmas was coming, but Christmas was always coming and grownups were always talking about it, asking you what you wanted and then giving you

what they wanted you to have. Though everybody knew what I wanted, I told them all again. My mother knew that I told God, too, every night, I wanted a pony, and to make sure that they understood, I declared that I wanted nothing else.

“Nothing but a pony?” my father asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Not even a pair of high boots?”

That was hard, I did want boots, but I stuck to the pony. “No, not even boots.”

“Nor candy? There ought to be something to fill your stocking with, and Santa Claus can’t put a poly into a stocking.”

That was true, and he couldn’t lead a pony down the chimney either. But no, “All I want is a pony,” I said. “If I can’t have a pony, give me nothing, nothing.”

Now I had been looking myself for the pony I wanted, going to sales stables, inquiring of horsemen, and I had seen several that would do. My father let me “try” them. I tried so many ponies that I was learning fast to sit a horse. I chose several, but my father always found some fault with them. I was in despair. When Christmas was at hand I had given up all hope of a pony, and on Christmas Eve I hung up my stocking along with my sisters’, of whom, by the way, I now had three. I haven’t mentioned them or their coming because, you understand, they were girls, and girls, young girls, counted for nothing in my manly life. They did not mind me either; they were so happy that Christmas Eve that I caught some of their merriment. I speculated on what I’d get; I hung the biggest stocking I had, and we all went reluctantly to bed to wait till morning. Not to sleep; not right away. We were told that we must not only sleep promptly, we must not wake up till seven-thirty the next morning—or if we did, we must not go to the fireplace for our Christmas. Impossible.

We did sleep that night, but we woke up at six a.m. We lay in our beds and debated through the open doors whether to obey till, say, half past six. Then we bolted. I don’t know who started it, but there was a rush. We all disobeyed; we raced to disobey and get first to the fireplace in the front room downstairs. And there they were, the gifts, all sorts of wonderful things, mixed-up piles of presents; only, as I disentangled the mess, I saw that my stocking was empty; it hung limp; not a thing in it; and under and around it—nothing. My sisters had knelt down, each by her pile of gifts; they were squealing with delight, till they looked up and saw me standing there in my nightgown with nothing. They left their piles to come to me and look with me at my empty place. Nothing. They felt my stocking; nothing.

I don’t remember whither I cried at that moment, but my sisters did. They ran with me back to my bed, and there we all cried till I became indignant. That helped some. I got up, dressed, and driving my sisters away, I went alone out into the yard, down to the stable, and there all by myself, I wept. My mother came out to me by and by; she found me in my pony stall, sobbing on the floor, and she tried to comfort me. But I heard my father outside; he had come part way with her, and she was having some sort of angry quarrel with him. She tried to comfort me; besought me to come to breakfast. I could not; I wanted no comfort and no breakfast. She left me and went on into the house with sharp words for my father.

I don’t know what kind of a breakfast the family had. My sisters said it was “awful.” They were ashamed to enjoy their own toys. They came to me, and I was rude, I ran away from them. I went around to the front of the house, sat down on the steps, and, the crying over, I ached. I was wronged, I

was hurt—I can feel now what I felt then, and I am sure that if one could see the wounds upon our hearts, there would be found still upon mine a scar from that terrible Christmas morning. And my father, the practical joker, he must have been hurt, too, a little. I saw him looking out of the window. He was watching me or something for an hour or two, drawing back the curtain ever so little lest I catch him, but I saw his face, and I think I can see now the anxiety upon it, the worried impatience.

After—I don't know how long—surely an hour or two—I was brought to the climax of my agony by the sight of a man riding a pony down the street, a pony and a brand-new saddle; the most beautiful saddle I ever saw, and it was a boy's saddle; the man's feet were not in the stirrups; his legs were too long. The outfit was perfect; it was the realization of all my dreams, the answer to all my prayers. A fine new bridle, with a light curb bit. And the pony was really a small horse, what we called an Indian pony, a bay, with black mane and tail, and one white foot and a white star on his forehead. For such a horse as that I would have given, I could have forgiven, anything.

But the man, a disheveled fellow with a blackened eye and a fresh-cut face, came along, reading the numbers on the houses, and, as my hopes—my impossible hopes—rose, he looked at our door and passed by, he and the pony, and the saddle and the bridle. Too much. I fell upon the steps, and having wept before, I broke now into such a flood of tears that I was a floating wreck when I heard a voice.

“Say, kid,” it said, “do you know a boy named Lennie Steffens?”

I looked up. It was the man on the pony, back again, at our horse block.

“Yes,” I spluttered through my tears. “That's me.”

“Well,” he said, “then this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you and your house. Why don't you put your number where it can be seen?”

“Get down,” I said, running out to him.

He went on saying something about “ought to have got here at seven o'clock; told me to bring the nag here and tie him to your post and leave him for you. But, hell, I got into a drunk—and a fight—and a hospital, and—”

He got down, and he boosted me up to the saddle. He offered to fit the stirrups to me, but I didn't want him to. I wanted to ride.

“What's the matter with you?” he said, angrily. “What you crying for? Don't you like the horse? He's a dandy, this horse. I know him of old. He's fine at cattle; he'll drive 'em alone.”

I hardly heard, I could scarcely wait, but he persisted. He adjusted the stirrups, and then, finally, off I rode, slowly, at a walk, so happy, so thrilled, that I did not know what I was doing. I did not look back at the house or the man, I rode off up the street, taking note of everything—of the reins, of the pony's long mane, of the carved leather saddle. I had never seen anything so beautiful. And mine! I was going to ride up past Miss Kay's house. But I noticed on the horn of the saddle some stains like rain-drops, so I turned and trotted home, not to the house but to the stable. There was the family, father, mother, sisters, all working for me, all happy. They had been putting in place the tools of my new business—blankets, currycomb, brush, pitchfork—everything, and there was hay in the loft.

“What did you come back so soon for?” somebody asked. “Why didn't you go on riding?”

I pointed to the stains. “I wasn't going to get my new saddle rained on,” I said. And my father laughed. “It isn't raining,” he said. “Those are not rain-drops.”

“They are tears,” my mother gasped, and she gave my father a look which sent him off to the house. Worse still, my mother offered to wipe away the tears still running out of my eyes. I gave her such a look as she had given him, and she went off after my father, drying her own tears. My sisters remained and we all unsaddled the pony, put on his halter, led him to his stall, tied and fed him. It began really to rain; so all the rest of that memorable day we curried and combed that pony. The girls plaited his mane, forelock, and tail, while I pitchforked hay to him and curried and brushed, curried and brushed. For a change we brought him out to drink; we led him up and down, blanketed like a racehorse; we took turns at that. But the best, the most inexhaustible fun, was to clean him. When we went reluctantly to our midday Christmas dinner, we all smelt of horse, and my sisters had to wash their faces and hands. I was asked to, but I wouldn’t, till my mother bade me look in the mirror. Then I washed up—quick. My face was caked with the muddy lines of tears that had coursed over my cheeks to my mouth. Having washed away that shame, I ate my dinner, and as I ate I grew hungrier and hungrier. It was my first meal that day, and as I filled up on the turkey and the stuffing, the cranberries and the pies, the fruit and nuts—as I swelled, I could laugh. My mother said I still choked and sobbed now and then, but I laughed, too; I saw and enjoyed my sisters’ presents till—I had to go out and attend to my pony, who was there, really and truly there, the promise, the beginning, of a happy double life. And—I went and looked to make sure—there was the saddle, too, and the bridle.

But that Christmas, which my father had planned so carefully, was it the best or the worst I ever knew? He often asked me that; I never could answer as a boy. I think now that it was both. It covered the whole distance from brokenhearted misery to bursting happiness—too fast. A grown-up could hardly have stood it.

THE SURGEON

By Mark Pemberton, vascular surgeon

The roads were very quiet when I drove back to Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth on Christmas morning to check on a patient I had operated on 12 hours earlier. I imagined I would only be there for a short while, and would be back in time to join my family for the church service up in the little chapel across the fields.

After parking the car, I decided to take the short cut up to the ward through the ER. I remember feeling a little self-conscious as I walked through the doors because I was wearing my new Christmas sweater. It all seemed very quiet, almost eerie. As I strode through I noticed someone having cardiac massage in “resuss” (the resuscitation area). For some reason, it struck me as quite a surreal sight, perhaps because this battle for life was taking place in an otherwise very still and very quiet atmosphere. Usually, the ER is a bustle of noise and activity.

As I walked into the main workstation area, there were two surgical registrars talking together, which is not something you expect to see early on Christmas morning. I knew something was up because they were both accountable to me, and my first thought was that there had been some complications with the patient on whom I’d operated the night before.

“Ah, Mr. Pemberton, we were just trying to call you,” one of them said. “We might have a ruptured aortic aneurysm for you. Did you see that man in the ER?”

I was a little surprised to hear this, skeptical even, because it’s very rare that someone who suffers such a rupture survives long enough for cardiac massage to be performed.

I went straight back to resuss, and the patient was looking pretty grim as the cardiac team continued to work on him. Whenever they stopped he had no blood pressure and the consensus was that he was too far gone to be saved. Any further efforts seemed futile, so once we had established that as a certainty I turned to his wife to explain what was happening and give her the bad news. It felt very off. A minute or two earlier I had been whistling my way across the parking lot, looking forward to having a chat with the patients on the wards, and the next thing I knew I was telling a woman her husband was about to die. “Hello, I’m the duty vascular surgeon,” I heard myself say. “Your husband is having cardiac massage.” I explained to her as best I could what a ruptured aneurysm meant and then said: “It seems highly likely he’s about to die, whatever we do, and these are the options: though his chances of survival are very slim indeed we can take him to the operating room, or we can accept that unfortunately he’s too far gone and sadly we have missed the very small window of opportunity we had to save him.”

“I want you to try and save him, even if it seems impossible,” she replied. Seconds later I was tearing off my Christmas sweater and quickly putting on my surgical clothes. We all rushed into the operating room, even though I was expecting someone to come in at any moment to tell me that the patient had passed away, I was absolutely stunned when he was wheeled in and I was told he still had a pulse, albeit a weak one.

We covered his chest in antiseptic and, no more than two or three minutes after talking to his wife, I was cutting the man open from his sternum to his pubis and clamping his aorta just above the diseased segment that had burst. That done, there was a brief respite while the anesthetic team improved his

general condition by giving him more fluids and stabilizing his blood pressure. This is a great moment because if the patient's still alive when you clamp them, you know they're in with a chance. We had to use an awful lot of blood throughout the operation because, as is the case with patients in shock, his blood wouldn't clot and everything we stitched just carried on bleeding until the coagulant products eventually started to work their magic. The human body contains an average of eight units of blood, and we used about 30 in this operation, which is masses.

We spent a full four hours repairing the rupture but as the operation wore on I grew in confidence that he was going to make it. It was an exciting feeling, knowing that this man was coming back from the brink. Somehow, the fact that it was Christmas Day made it all the more thrilling.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time we were done and the man could be wheeled out of the operating room to one of the wards. I was still buzzing with excitement when I finally arrived home—just in time to carve the giant turkey and pour the wine for our guests. In the event, our man made full recovery, was back home two weeks later, and at the time of writing he's still alive, over four years later. It wasn't quite a miracle, but it wasn't far off. Not since I was a young child have I felt the spirit of Christmas as keenly as I did that day in 2002.

THE DISC JOCKEY

By Lynn Parsons, disc jockey

I've worked on Christmas Day for most of my adult life and it's only recently, since I had my children, that I've been at home for the entire day. Working at Christmas never used to bother me when I was younger. In fact, I jumped at the chance of getting away from the tension that tends to build up at home as the day goes on and the relatives pour in the door. Christmas was the high season for arguments in our house!

With a job in television or radio, you soon get accustomed to working unsociable hours. Over the years, I grew used to slipping into the house in the small hours of Boxing Day morning, and quietly making myself a cold turkey sandwich before slipping up to my bedroom. Inevitably, the countertops would be covered in all the washed-up plates and dishes and I'd feel quietly pleased that, once again, I had managed to escape the Christmas mayhem and the marathon post-meal clean-up.

The one time I didn't feel like working on Christmas Day was in 1986, the year I got married. Missing Christmas is no great sacrifice when you're single, but that year I really wanted to be snuggled up with my husband. I was working as a vision mixer for the GMTV in those days and there was no chance of getting the day off. That particular Christmas Day was also memorable because the producers took the slightly risky decision to squeeze every single person in the building into the final shot of the program. The entire production crew plus the cleaners, security guards, the guy in the coffee shop round the corner—anyone who happened to be in the vicinity—all dropped what they were doing, and came one on the set and surrounded Anne Diamond and Nick Owen on the sofas. Once the crowd had assembled, the cameramen set their cameras to wide angle, locked them off, and ran round to join us. It was a fantastically chaotic scene as everyone jostled into the picture, laughing and waving. It felt a little nerve-racking knowing that we were going live to the nation and there wasn't a single human being at the controls!

I've spent most of my working life as a DJ and I've probably done as many Christmas Day shows as any living DJ. I used to love walking into Broadcasting House on Christmas Day. The commissionaires (receptionists to you and me) at the main entrance to the building are well known for their serious approach to their job but on Christmas Day even these professional custodians in their military-style uniforms ditched their customary reserve and waved us through with a grin and a festive greeting.

The streets outside were also unrecognizable from a normal day. All but a handful of shops, cafés, and bars, were shut, there were no crowds, and anyone who happened to be out and about seemed to be in a generous mood, dispensing greetings to whoever was sharing the pavement with them. In that one day I used to exchange more nods and hellos with strangers than I would for the rest of the year. It was as if everyone had decided to take the day off being grumpy or suspicious. The next day they'd be barging you out of the way or telling you to get lost, but on Christmas Day it's all smiles and greetings. That's what I love about Christmas—the goodwill of the strangers.

There is one Christmas Day broadcast I'll never forget. I was doing the morning show and I was talking live on air when the studio door opened and in walked a vicar . . . wearing an enormous amount of makeup! He had come in to do the "Pause for Thought" slot, in which a representative of one of the major faiths is invited to deliver a short, reflective piece with a moral lesson in it for the listeners to

consider. They are generally pretty serious interludes in an otherwise lighthearted show, but I found myself really struggling not to dissolve into nervous hysterics as I introduced him and exchanged pleasantries over the airwaves. I couldn't work out what on earth he was doing, wearing makeup. It's moments like these that can ruin a DJ's reputation for professionalism! It's not every day I find myself broadcasting to millions, talking to a vicar made up as Ru Paul, but it was the shock and surrealism of it that set me off. He's

called the Reverend Roger Royle, and I've since got to know him quite well. He's the world's loveliest, funniest vicar, and does lots of work for the BBC, including many of the funerals. Before delivering his piece, he explained about the makeup; he was appearing in (pantomime) somewhere up north, he told me, and hadn't had time to clean up; he had driven through the night like that to get to Broadcasting House.

THE LIFEBOATMAN

By Mark Sawyer, RNLi

I wasn't manning the station on Christmas Day but as always I was on call. Although there's plenty of commercial shipping going up and down the Channel, you don't expect many others to be out at sea. But just as I was settling down for a quiet end to the day the coastguard at Dover paged me; he had received a 999 call from someone on top of the cliffs at Beachy Head. The caller had been out walking his dog in the fading light when he heard voices shouting for help. He looked down from the cliff's edge and saw two people stuck on a ledge about halfway up the cliffs, which are about 500 feet high. It was clear that they had been cut off by the tides and had thought they could climb to safety. Right at the bottom the cliffs are not so steep. They suddenly become sheer, however, as this couple had discovered. They were lucky; it was almost dark when they were finally heard, and it was unlikely that anyone else would have come along later. Two local coastguard teams had gone up to the cliffs tops in their Land Rovers, and decided it would be safest to winch a man down to the ledge. From there he could take them one by one down to an RNLi boat. The weather wasn't too bad, but the dark was sure to pose some problems.

The center of Eastbourne was very quiet when I drove off and it took me only about five minutes to travel the three miles to the station for the all-weather lifeboat. The inshore lifeboat is located nearer the town center and the crews for both had been paged at the same time as I had. There was a pretty impressive turnout considering it was Christmas Day. ALL eight crew for the all-weather boat, all six for the inshore boat, and 14 shore helpers were ready to get going within minutes of the alarm being raised. We all knew what to do. The training just kicks in. My job as coxswain is to drive the bigger, all-weather boat and take command of the operation at sea.

It took us about 20 minutes to get to Beachy Head, but the faster inshore boat had already located the stranded couple with their searchlights. Luckily the couple had brought a flashlight with them. There wasn't much we could do at first except stand clear and keep our powerful lights on them while the coastguard teams on the cliffs rigged up their winches. It's fairly straightforward routine which involves digging spikes deep into the earth and then attaching rolling winches to them before lowering the man over.

What quickly became apparent was that the woman had slipped and tumbled about 60 feet down the nearly sheer slope before getting wedged in a gully. This was very, very lucky for her because if she had kept falling she wouldn't have survived. This realization increased the pressure on us because we didn't know if she had been injured. Either way, she would have been very badly shaken up. The good news was that we could see that both were wearing warm clothing. For some reason, I had been expecting the couple to be very young. I was a little surprised to discover they were in their fifties.

We kept one of our lights trained on the coastguard as he was winched down to the woman, attached his harness to her, and then continued down to the foot of the cliffs. The smaller inshore lifeboat was waiting at the water's edge to collect her and bring her over to us, before returning to pick up her partner. As they were lifted aboard you could tell both of them had been very frightened, but there was a huge sense of relief too. The woman confessed that the worst part of the whole experience was the seasickness she had begun to feel while waiting on the boat! "Well, there's just no pleasing

some people is there?” joked one of the lads in the crew. “You pluck someone off a cliff ledge and the next thing they’re moaning about the motion of the rescue boat!”

“Merry Christmas!” one of the crew members said as he pulled the man aboard. “Bah humbug, more like!” he replied. We wrapped them both up in thick blankets and gave them a cup of hot tea as we began to make our way home. By five o’clock we were back at the station, which was pretty impressive considering that just 90 minutes earlier we had all been snoozing in our armchairs or digging into our turkey roast. It was a good team effort. A paramedic checked the couple over before we dropped them back at their car, and they were able to drive home to London. We don’t see it as our roll to lecture people about their behavior, and so we just wished the couple well and went on our way. The coastguard, though, gently commented that they might have been better off waiting a short while for the tide to turn rather than climbing a 500-foot cliff in the gathering darkness. By half past six I was back home, just in time to settle down with the kids and watch *Ghostbusters*.

THE REAL GIFTS PARENTS CAN GIVE CHILDREN

By Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy

Christmas holidays in the Kennedy family . . . A tapestry of many places, people, and radiant memories. And yet, looking back, I find it difficult to recall any specific gifts we gave the children, or even that they gave to each other on their saved-up allowances. I remember we always had a tree, wherever we were, and sometimes a friend who played Santa. But the presents themselves do not seem that significant.

I suppose the reason is that to us, the actual physical gifts have always been secondary to the more spiritual gifts we tried to give our children. And now, as life patterns change, as I see in my own family and others how children exercise their options to go off alone, earlier, removing themselves from the home influence, I feel that perhaps I might speak in behalf of those old-fashioned gifts which all parents, no matter what their creed, can give their children, not just at Christmas, but throughout the year.

I refer, of course, to the principles and ideals which mothers and fathers can pass along to the next generation by example, and by teaching. And uppermost in mind, of course, is the gift of faith.

Faith is a gift truly given, and always to be cherished, guarded and nurtured. As Catholics, we of course believe deeply in the power of prayer. We know the peace of heart and mind which can come from prayer, no matter what the danger, perplexity and confusion.

Whatever his religion, with faith, a child knows exactly why he was created, he has well-defined obligations to God and man. He has sure direction, ever-courageous because he knows God is directing him for his ultimate destiny, helping him to dedicate his faculties and opportunities for best fulfilling God's plans. If he can pray, he will have that peace of mind and heart which accompanies prayers, regardless of how heavy is his cross. I have always felt and I think all my children did, too, that God never sends us a Cross too heavy for us to bear.

God wants a different thing from each of us, laborious or easy, conspicuous or quite private, but something which only we can do, and for which we were created. What a beautiful gift if only parents could pass along this concept to each of their children, and each could realize how important was his individual contribution.

Another gift which we have always tried to bestow is the gift of zest—of curiosity and interest and enthusiasm for life. Children should be stimulated by their parents to see, and touch, know, and understand, and appreciate. At meals, we always discussed history and current events. At Christmastime, for instance, Bethlehem as it was when Christ was born, and Bethlehem as it is today with the war between Arabs and Jews; Plymouth Rock when the Pilgrims arrived, and Plymouth as it is today; what the Pilgrims might have eaten for Thanksgiving in 1620 and what we will be eating in 1969. Thus, the children's interest was stimulated at an early age, and they participated in the family conversations.

... I believe in explaining family rules and requests, so that the children will trust their parents' reasoning, experiences, and have confidence in their judgment. For example, they were confined to sailing only in the harbor when they were little. The reason: if heavy fogs should settle in, they might have been lost or might crash against a rock. When the small ones come to visit now, I do not simply urge them to eat the healthy foods which make strong bones and teeth. I explain that if they eat foods like popcorn and candy, they will not be able to play football or swim as well as their father or brothers

do. Or I show them a drawing we keep at Hyannis Port of the President making his famous swim in the Solomon Islands in World War II, after his PT boat was sunk, rescuing a shipmate by holding the lifesaving belt strap in his teeth. In a few minutes all the youngsters are drinking their orange juice and showing me their white teeth.

... How can parents give children an interest and ingenuity to cope with life? One way is to encourage hobbies: stamps, antiques, gardening, painting, a musical instrument, sports ... Any sort of activity which distracts, releases tension, gives more channels to energies. There is no place for boredom in a mind that is constantly seeking new horizons.

Some people collapse under strain, discouragement, and problems. Others respond to challenges and difficulties and are excited by them. This has always been a Kennedy philosophy. I will never allow myself to be vanquished or annihilated. I have always enjoyed living and working, and I believe I have had a great life.

... Which brings me to my last gift: the gift of service. "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work."

In my case, God's work is largely concerned with the problems of retarded children. My husband and I knew what it was to have a retarded child, and now I try to save other parents from some of our anguish and heartbreak. If the knowledge which scientists and doctors have now were properly publicized, mental retardation could be reduced by 50 percent. It is my hope that it will one day be eradicated as has been polio, and that all babies will be born healthy and normal.

Women as women can contribute on many levels. Their special love, tenderness and understanding can bring about these gifts I have spoken of in the hearts of their children, their husbands, their friends. To women everywhere, I can only close with the epitome of my daily philosophy—which is not to think of what might have been, but to devote your time, efforts and energies to the living, and to the immediate challenges. In this way we turn our heartaches into constructive efforts to lighten the sorrow of others. And if you can transmit the same attitude to your children, that, too, will be a precious gift all their lives, whatever may be their destiny. They will radiate happiness and understanding and their homes will be havens of love, sympathy and peace. God has bequeathed on us pleasures as well as sorrows, laughter as well as tears. May He give us the capacity to enjoy all these gifts and to share them.

CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

By William Dean Howells

Well, once there was a little girl who liked Christmas so much that she wanted it to be Christmas every day in the year; and as soon as Thanksgiving was over she began to send postal cards to the old Christmas Fairy to ask if she mightn't have it. In about three weeks—or just the day before Christmas, it was—she got a letter from the Fairy, saying she might have it Christmas every day for a year, and then they would see about having it longer.

The little girl was a good deal excited already, preparing for the old-fashioned, once-a-year Christmas that was coming the next day, and perhaps the Fairy's promise didn't make such an impression on her as it would have made at some other time. She just resolved to keep it to herself, and surprise everybody with it as it kept coming true: and then it slipped out of her mind altogether.

She had a splendid Christmas. She went to bed early, so as to let Santa Claus have a chance at the stockings, and in the morning she was up the first of anybody and went and felt them, and found hers all lumpy with packages of candy, and oranges and grapes and pocketbooks and rubber balls and all kinds of small presents just as they always had every Christmas. Then she waited around till the rest of the family were up, and she was the first to burst into the library table—books, and dolls, and little stoves, and dozens of handkerchiefs, and ink stands, and slates, and snow shovels, and photograph frames, and little easels, and boxes of watercolors, and candied cherries, and doll's houses, and the big Christmas tree, lighted and standing in the middle.

She had a splendid Christmas all day. She ate so much candy that she did not want any breakfast; and the whole forenoon the presents kept pouring in and she went 'round giving the presents she had got for other people, and came home and ate turkey and cranberry for dinner, and plum-pudding and nuts and raisins and oranges and more candy, and then went and coasted and came in with a stomachache, crying; and they had a light supper, and pretty early everybody went to bed cross.

The little girl slept very heavily, and she slept very late, but she was wakened at last by the other children dancing 'round her bed with their stockings full of presents in their hands.

"What is it?" said the little girl, and she rubbed her eyes and tried to rise up in bed.

"Christmas! Christmas! Christmas!" they all shouted, and waved their stockings.

"Nonsense! It was Christmas yesterday."

Her brothers and sisters just laughed. "We don't know about that. It's Christmas today, anyway. You come into the library and see."

Then all at once it flashed on the little girl that the Fairy was keeping her promise, and her year of Christmases was beginning. She was dreadfully sleepy, but she sprang up like a lark—a lark that had overeaten itself and gone to bed cross—and darted into the library. There it was again! The Christmas tree blazing away, and the family picking out their presents, but looking pretty sleepy, and her father perfectly puzzled and her mother ready to cry.

"I'm sure I don't see how I'm to dispose of all these things," said her mother, and her father said it seemed to him they had had something just like it the day before, but he must have dreamed it. Well the next day, it was just the same thing over again, but everybody getting crosser; and at the end of a week's time so many people had lost their tempers that they perfectly strewed the ground. Even when

people tried to recover their tempers they usually got somebody else's, and it made the most dreadful mix.

The little girl began to get frightened, keeping the secret all to herself; she wanted to tell her mother, but she didn't dare to' and she was ashamed to ask the Fairy to take back her gift, it seemed ungrateful, and she thought she would try to stand it, but she hardly knew how she could, for a whole year. So it went on and on, and it was Christmas on St. Valentine's Day, and Washington's Birthday just the same as any day, and it didn't skip even the First of April, though everything was counterfeit that day, and that was some *little* relief.

After a while, turkeys got to be so scarce that they were about a thousand dollars apiece, and they got to passing off almost anything for turkey. And the cranberries—well, they asked a diamond apiece for cranberries. All the woods and orchards were cut down for Christmas trees and where the woods and orchards used to be, it looked just like a stubblefield, with the stumps. After a while they had to make Christmas trees out of rags, and stuffed them with bran, like old-fashioned dolls; but there were plenty of rags, because people got so poor, buying presents for one another, that they couldn't get any new clothes and they just wore their old ones to tatters. It was perfectly shameful.

Well, after it had gone on about three or four months, the little girl, whenever she came in to the room in the morning and was those great ugly lumpy stockings dangling at the fireplace, and the disgusting presents around everywhere, used to just sit down and burst out crying.

By the time people didn't carry presents around nicely any more. They flung them over the fence, or through the window, or anything; instead of taking great pains to write "For dear Papa," or "Mama," or "Brother," or "Sister," or "Susie," or "Sammie," or "Billie," or whoever it was, and troubling to get the spelling right, and then signing their names, and "Xmas 188-," they used to write in the gift books, "Take it, you horrid old thing!" and then go and bang it against the front door. Nearly everybody had built barns to hold their presents, but pretty soon the barns overflowed, and then they used to let them lie out in the rain, or anywhere. Sometimes the police used to come and tell them to shovel their presents off the sidewalk, or they would arrest them.

Well, before it came Thanksgiving, it had leaked out who had caused all these Christmases. The little girl had suffered so much that she had talked about it in her sleep; and after that, hardly anybody would play with her. People just perfectly despised her, because if it had not been for her greediness, it wouldn't have happened; and now, when it came Thanksgiving, and she wanted them to go to church, and have squash-pie and turkey, and show their gratitude, they said that all the turkeys had been eaten up for her old Christmas dinners, and if she would stop the Christmases, they would see about the gratitude. And the very next day the little girl began to send letters to the Christmas Fairy, and then telegrams, to stop it. But it didn't do any good; and then she got to calling at the Fairy's house, but the girl that came to the door always said "Not at home," or "Engaged," or "At dinner," or something like that; and so it went on till it came to the old once-a-year Christmas Eve. The little girl fell asleep, and when she woke up in the morning—it wasn't Christmas at last.

Well, there was the greatest rejoicing all over the country, and it extended clear up into Canada. The people met together everywhere, and kissed and cried for joy. The city carts went around and gathered up all the candy and raisins and nuts, and dumped them in the river; and it made the fish perfectly sick;

and the whole United States, as far as Alaska, was one blaze of bonfires, where the children were burning their gift-books and presents of all kinds. They had the greatest time!

The little girl went to thank the old Fairy because she had stopped its being Christmas, and she said she hoped she would keep her promise, and see that Christmas never, never came again. Then the Fairy frowned, and asked her if she was sure she knew what she meant; and the little girl asked her, why not? And the old Fairy said that now she was behaving just as greedily as ever, and she'd better look out. This made the little girl think it all over carefully again, and she said she would be willing to have it Christmas about once in a thousand years; and then she said a hundred, and then she said ten, and at last she got down to one. Then the Fairy said that was the good old way that had pleased people ever since Christmas began, and she was agreed. Then the little girl said, "What're your shoes made of?" And the Fairy said, "Leather." And the little girl said, "Bargain's done forever," and skipped off, and hippity-hopped the whole way home.

LETTER TO JOHN HANCOCK, PRESIDENT OF THE SECOND CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

By **GEORGE WASHINGTON**

George Washington describes crossing the Delaware River on Christmas.

December 27, 1776

Sir,

I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the success of an enterprise which I formed against a detachment of the enemy lying in Trenton, and which was executed yesterday morning.

The evening of the twenty-fifth I ordered the troops intended for this service to parade back of McKonkey's ferry, that they might begin to pass as soon as it grew dark, imagining we should be able to throw them all over, with the necessary artillery, by twelve o'clock, and that we might easily arrive at Trenton by five in the morning, the distance being about nine miles. But the quantity of ice, made that night, impeded the passage of the boats so much, that it was three o'clock before the artillery could all be got over; and near four, before the troops took up their line of march.

This made me despair of surprising the town, as I well knew we could not reach it before the day was fairly broke. But as I was certain there was no making a retreat without being discovered, and harassed on re passing the river, I determined to push on at all events. I formed my detachment into two divisions, one to march by the lower or river road, the other by the upper or Pennington road. As the division had nearly the same distance to march, I ordered each of them, immediately upon forcing the out-guards, to push directly into the town, that they might charge the enemy before they had time to form.

The upper division arrived at the enemy's advanced post exactly at eight o'clock; and in three minutes after, I found, from the fire on the lower road, that that division also got up. The out-guards made for small opposition, though, for their numbers, they behaved very well, keeping up a constant retreating fire from behind houses. We presently saw their main body formed: but, from their motions, they seemed undetermined how to act.

Being hard pressed by our troops who had already got possession of their artillery, they attempted to file off by a road on their right, leading to Princeton. But, perceiving their intention, I threw a body of troops in their way; which immediately checked them. Finding from our disposition, that they were surrounded, and that they must inevitably be cut to pieces if they made any further resistance, they agreed to lay down their arms. The number that submitted in this manner was twenty-three officers and eight hundred and eighty-six men. Colonel Rahl the commanding officer, and seven others, were found wounded in the town. I do not exactly know how many they had killed; but I fancy not above twenty or thirty, as they never make any regular stand. Our loss is very trifling indeed,--only two officers and one or two privates wounded.

I find that the detachment of the enemy consisted of the three Hessian regiments of Lanspach, Kniphausen, and Rahl, amounting to about fifteen hundred men, and a troop of British light-horse: but, immediately upon the beginning of the attack, all those who were not killed or taken pushed directly

down the road towards Bordentown. These would likewise have fallen into our hands, could my plan have been completely carried into execution. General Ewing was to have crossed before day at Trenton ferry, and taken possession of the bridge leading out of town; but the quantity of ice was too great, that, though he did everything in his power to effect it, he couldn't get over. This difficulty also hindered General Cadwallader from crossing with the Pennsylvania militia from Bristol. He got part of his foot over: finding it impossible to embark his artillery, he was obliged to desist.

I am fully confident that, could the troops under Generals Ewing and Cadwallader have passed the river, I should have been able with their assistance to have driven the enemy from all their posts below Trenton. But the numbers I had with me being inferior to theirs below me, and a strong battalion of light infantry being at Princeton above me, I thought it most prudent to return the same evening with the prisoners and the artillery we had taken. We found no stores of any consequence in the town.

In justice to the officers and men, I must add that their behavior upon this occasion reflects the highest honor upon them. The difficulty of passing the river in a very severe night, and their march through a violent storm of snow and hail, did not in the least abate their ardor: but, when they came to the charge, each seemed to vie with the other in pressing forward: and were I to give a preference to any particular corps, I should do great injustice to the others ...

I have the honor to be, &c.

G.W.

CHILDREN OF THE WORLD V. SANTA CLAUS

By Andrew M. McClurg

The Complaint

Plaintiffs, consisting of the class of all children who on or about Dec. 24, 1999, were hanging stockings by the chimney with care in the reasonable belief that S. Nicholas soon would be there, sue defendant and allege:

1. This is an action for an accounting, damages and injunctive relief.
2. Upon information and belief, defendant is a citizen and resident of the North Pole, where he maintains his principal place of business. The court has subject matter jurisdiction of the action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. 1332.

Count I: Breach of Contract. Throughout the fall of 1999, plaintiffs met with agents of defendant at various shopping malls to negotiate the delivery of certain goods on the evening of Dec. 24, for which plaintiffs paid valuable consideration in the form of exorbitant tie-in charges for photographs of the negotiating sessions.

Plaintiffs repeatedly informed defendant, through his agents, that time was of the essence in completing such deliveries. As of this date, many of the contracted goods have not been delivered.

Other goods were nonconforming and lacked batteries, rendering them useless to plaintiffs.

Count II: Deceit. Defendant fraudulently induced plaintiffs to improve their conduct against their will by misrepresenting that defendant knows if plaintiffs have been bad or good, when, in fact, defendant lacks sufficient knowledge upon which to form a reasonable belief regarding such matters.

In justifiable reliance upon these representations, plaintiffs invested substantial labor in not shouting, pouting, or crying, and at all times relevant hereto were good for goodness sake.

Count III: Infliction of Emotional Distress. On the relevant night, defendant knew or should have known that plaintiffs were snug in their beds with visions of hand-held video games and name-brand athletic apparel dancing in their heads.

Despite such knowledge, defendant willfully and maliciously concealed off-brand goods and inherently worthless property such as sweaters and umbrellas in packages that misrepresented their true contents. Plaintiffs suffered severe emotional shock and fright upon opening such packages.

Count IV: Trespass and Conversion. Defendant's implied license to enter plaintiff's premises terminated upon his substantial breaches of contract. Once on the premises, defendant exercised substantial dominion and control over an estimated 200 tons of cookies and 44,000 gallons of milk, converting such property and depriving plaintiffs of its beneficial use.

WHEREFORE, plaintiffs demand judgment for damages, injunctive relief and an accounting.

SIX TO EIGHT BLACK MEN

By David Sedaris

I'VE NEVER BEEN MUCH FOR GUIDEBOOKS, so when trying to get my bearings in some strange American city, I normally start by asking the cabdriver or hotel clerk some silly question regarding the latest census figures. I say "silly" because I don't really care how many people live in Olympia, Washington, or Columbus, Ohio. They're nice-enough places, but the numbers mean nothing to me. My second question might have to do with the average annual rainfall, which again, doesn't tell me anything about the people who have chosen to call this place home.

What really interests me are the local gun laws. Can I carry a concealed weapon and, if so, under what circumstances? What's the waiting period for a tommy gun? Could I buy a Glock 17 if I were recently divorced or fired from my job? I've learned from experience that it's best to lead into this subject s delicately as possible, especially if you and the local citizen are alone and enclosed in a relatively small area. Bide your time, though, and you can walk away with some excellent stories. I've learned, for example, that the blind can legally hunt in both Texas and Michigan. In Texas they must be accompanied by a sighted companion, but I heard that in Michigan they're allowed to go it alone, which raises the question: How do they find whatever it is they just shot? In addition to that, how do they get it home? Are the Michigan blind allowed to drive as well? I ask about guns not because I want one of my own but because the answers vary so widely from state to state. In a country that's become increasingly homogeneous, I'm reassured by these last charming touches of regionalism.

Firearms aren't really an issue in Europe, so when traveling abroad, my first question usually relates to barnyard animals. "What do your roosters say?" is a good icebreaker, as every country has its own unique interpretation. In Germany, where dogs bark "vow vow" and both the frog and the duck say "quack," the rooster greets the dawn with a hearty "kik-a-riki." Greek roosters crow "kiri-a-kee," and in France they scream "coco-rico," which sounds like one of those horrible premixed cocktails with a pirate on the label. When told that an American rooster says "cock-a-doodle-doo," my hosts look at me with disbelief and pity.

"When do you open your Christmas presents?" is another good conversation starter, as I think it explains a lot about national character. People who traditionally open gifts on Christmas Eve seem a bit more pious and family-oriented than those who wait until Christmas morning. They go to Mass, open presents, eat a late meal, return to church the following morning, and devote the rest of the day to eating another big meal. Gifts are generally reserved for children, and the parents tend not to go overboard. It's nothing I's want for myself, but I suppose it's fine for those who prefer food and family to things of real value.

In France and Germany gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve, while in the Netherlands the children open their presents on December 5, in celebration of Saint Nicholas Day. It sounded sort of quaint until spoke to a man named Oscar, who filled me in on a few of the details as we walked from my hotel to the Amsterdam train station.

Unlike the jolly, obese American Santa, Saint Nicholas is painfully thin and dresses not unlike the pope, topping his robes with a tall hat resembling an embroidered tea cozy. The outfit, I was told, is a carryover from his former career, when he served as the bishop of Turkey.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but could you repeat that?"

One doesn't want to be too much of a cultural chauvinist, but this seemed completely wrong to me. For starters, Santa didn't *used to do* anything. He's not completely wrong to me. He's not retired and, more important, he has nothing to do with Turkey. It's too dangerous there, and the people wouldn't appreciate him. When asked how he got from Turkey to the North Pole, Oscar told me with complete conviction that Saint Nicholas currently resides in Spain, which again is simply not true. Though he could probably live wherever he wanted, Santa chose the North Pole specifically because it is harsh and isolated. No one can spy on him, and he doesn't have to worry about people coming to the door. Anyone can come to the door in Spain, and in that outfit he'd most certainly be recognized. On top of that, aside from a few pleasantries, Santa doesn't speak Spanish. "Hello. How are you? Can I get you some candy?" Fine. He knows enough to get by, but he's not fluent and he certainly doesn't eat tapas.

While Santa flies in on a sled, the Dutch version arrives by boat and then transfers to a white horse. The event is televised, and great crowds gather at the waterfront to greet him. I'm not sure if there's a set date, but he generally docks in late November and spends a few weeks hanging out and asking people what they want.

"Is it just him alone?" I asked. "Or does he come with some backup?"

Oscar's English was close to perfect, but he seemed thrown by a term normally reserved for police reinforcement.

"Helpers," I said. "Does he have any elves?"

Maybe I'm overly sensitive, but I couldn't help but feel personally insulted when Oscar denounced the very idea as grotesque and unrealistic. "Elves," he said, "They are just so silly."

The words *silly* and *unrealistic* were redefined when I learned that Saint Nicholas travels with what was consistently described as "six to eight black men." I asked several Dutch people to narrow it down, but none of them could give me an exact number. It was always "six to eight," which seems strange, seeing as they've had hundreds of years to get an accurate head count.

The six to eight black men were characterized as personal slaves until the mid-1950s, when the political climate changed and it was decided that instead of being slaves they were just good friends. I think history has proved that something usually comes between slavery and friendship, a period of time marked not by cookies and quiet hours beside the fire but by bloodshed and mutual hostility. They have such violence in the Netherlands, but rather than duking it out amongst themselves, Santa, and his former slaves decided to take it out on the public. In the early years if a child was naughty, Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men would beat him with what Oscar described as "the small branch of a tree."

"A switch?"

"Yes," he said. That's it. They'd kick him and beat him with a switch. Then if the youngster was really bad, they'd put him in a sack and take him back to Spain."

"Saint Nicholas would kick you?"

"Well, not anymore." Oscar said. "Now he just *pretends* to kick you."

He considered this to be progressive, but in a way I think it's almost more perverse than the original punishment. "I'm going to hurt you but not really." How many times have we fallen for that line? The fake slap invariably makes contact, adding the elements of shock and betrayal to what had previously

been plain old-fashioned fear. What kind of a Santa spends his time pretending to kick people before stuffing them into a canvas sack? Then, of course, you've got the six to eight former slaves who could potentially go off at any moment. This, I think, is the greatest difference between us and the Dutch. While a certain segment of our population might be perfectly happy with the arrangement, if you told the average white American that six to eight nameless black men would be sneaking into his house in the middle of the night, he would barricade the doors and arm himself with whatever he could get his hands on.

“Six to eight, did you say?”

In the years before central heating, Dutch children would leave their shoes by the fireplace, the promise being that unless they planned to beat you, kick you, or stuff you into a sack, Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men would fill your clogs with presents. Aside from the threats of violence and kidnapping, it's not much different than hanging your stockings from the mantel. Now that so few people actually have a working fireplace, Dutch children are instructed to leave their shoes beside the radiator, furnace, or space heater. Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men arrive on horses, which jump from the yard onto the roof. At this point I guess they either jump back down and use the door or stay put and vaporize through the pipes and electrical cords. Oscar wasn't too clear about the particulars, but really, who can blame him?

While eight flying reindeer are a hard pill to swallow, our Christmas story remains relatively dull. Santa lives with his wife in a remote polar village and spends one night a year traveling around the world. If you're bad, he leaves you coal. If you're good and live in America, he'll give you just about anything you want. We tell our children to be good and send them off to bed, where they lie awake, anticipating their great bounty. A Dutch parent has a decidedly hairier story to relate, telling his children, “Listen, you might want to pack a few of your things together before going to bed. The former bishop of Turkey will be coming tonight along with six to eight black men. They might put some candy in your shoes, they might stuff you into a sack and take you to Spain, or they might just pretend to kick you. We don't know for sure, but we want you to be prepared.”

This is the reward for living in the Netherlands. As a child you get to hear this story, and as an adult you get to turn around and repeat it. As an added bonus, the government has thrown in legalized drugs and prostitution—so what's not to love about being Dutch?

Oscar finished his story just as we arrived at the station. He was an amiable guy—very good company—but when he offered to wait until my train arrived I begged off, claiming I had some calls to make. Sitting alone in the vast, vibrant terminal, surrounded by thousands of polite, seemingly interesting Dutch people, I couldn't help but feel second-rate. Yes, the Netherlands was a small country, but it had six to eight black men and a really good bedtime story. Being a fairly competitive person, I felt jealous, then bitter. I was edging toward hostile when I remembered the blind hunter tramping off alone into the Michigan forest. He may bag a deer, or he may happily shoot a camper in the stomach. He may find his way back to the car, or he may wander around for a week or two before stumbling through your back door. We don't know for sure, but in pinning that license to his chest, he inspires the sort of narrative that ultimately makes me proud to be an American.

MR. EDWARDS MEETS SANTA CLAUS

From Little House on the Prairie

By Laura Ingalls Wilder

The days were short and cold, the wind whistled sharply, but there was no snow. Cold rains were falling. Day after day the rain fell, pattering on the roof and pouring from the eaves.

Mary and Laura stayed close by the fire, sewing their nine-patch quilt blocks, or cutting paper dolls from scraps or wrapping-paper, and hearing the wet sound of the rain. Every night was so cold that they expected to see snow next morning, but in the morning they saw only sad, wet grass.

They pressed their noses against the squares of glass in the windows that Pa had made, and they were glad they could see out. But they wished they could see snow.

Laura was anxious because Christmas was near, and Santa Claus and his reindeer could not travel without snow. Mary was afraid that, even if it snowed, Santa Claus could not find them, so far away in Indian Territory. When they asked Ma about this, she said she didn't know.

"What day is it?" they asked her anxiously. "How many more days till Christmas?" And they counted off the days on their fingers, till there was only one more day left.

Rain was still falling that morning. There was not one crack in the gray sky. They felt almost sure there would be no Christmas. Still, they kept hoping.

Just before noon the light changed. The clouds broke and drifted apart, shining white in a clear blue sky. The sun shone, birds sang, and thousands of drops of water sparkled on the grasses. But when Ma opened the door to let in the fresh, cold air, they heard the creek roaring.

They had not thought about the creek. Now they knew they would have no Christmas, because Santa Claus could not cross that roaring creek.

Pa came in, bringing a big fat turkey. If it weighed less than twenty pounds, he said he'd eat it, feathers and all. He asked Laura, "How's that for a Christmas dinner? Think you can manage one of those drumsticks?"

She said, yes she could. But she was sober. Then Mary asked him if the creek was going down, and he said it was still rising.

Ma said it was too bad. She hated to think of Mr. Edwards eating his bachelor cooking all alone on Christmas day. Mr. Edwards had been asked to eat Christmas dinner with them, but {a shook his head and said a man would risk his neck, trying to cross that creek now.

"No," he said. "That current's too strong. We'll just have to make up our minds that Edwards won't be here tomorrow."

Of course that meant that Santa Claus could not come, either.

Laura and Mary tried not to mind too much. They watched Ma dress the wild turkey, and it was a very fat turkey. They were lucky little girls, to have a good house to live in, and a warm fire to sit by, and such a turkey for their Christmas dinner. Ma said so, and it was true. Ma said it was too bad that Santa Claus couldn't come this year, but they were such good girls that he hadn't forgotten them; he would surely come next year.

Still, they were not happy.

After supper that night they washed their hands and faces, buttoned their red-flannel nightgowns, tied their night-cap strings, and soberly said their prayers. They lay down in bed and pulled the covers up. It did not seem at all like Christmas time.

Pa and Ma sat silent by the fire. After a while Ma asked why Pa didn't play the fiddle, and he said, "I don't seem to have the heart to, Caroling."

After a longer while, Ma suddenly stood up. "I'm going to hang up your stockings, girls," she said. "Maybe something will happen."

Laura's heart jumped. But then she thought again of the creek and she knew nothing could happen.

Ma took one of Mary's clean stockings and one of Laura's, and she hung them from the mantel-shelf, on either side of the fireplace. Laura and Mary watched her over the edge of their bed-covers.

"Now go to sleep," Ma said, kissing them good night. "Morning will come quicker if you're asleep."

She sat down again by the fire and Laura almost went to sleep. She woke up a little when she heard Pa say, "You've only make it worse, Caroline." And she thought she heard Ma say: "No, Charles. There's the white sugar." But perhaps she was dreaming.

Then she heard Jack growl savagely. The door-latch rattled and someone said, "Ingalls! Ingalls!" Pa was stirring up the fire, and when he opened the door Laura saw that it was morning. The outdoors was gray.

"Great fishhooks, Edwards! Come in, man! What's happened?" Pa exclaimed.

Laura saw the stockings limply dangling, and she scrooged her shut eyes into the pillow. She heard Pa piling wood on the fire, and she heard Mr. Edwards say he had carried his clothes on his head when he swam the creek. His teeth rattled and his voice shivered. He would be all right, he said, as soon as he got warm.

"It was too big a risk for a Christmas dinner."

"Your little ones had to have a Christmas," Mr. Edwards replied. "No creek could stop me, after I fetched them their gifts from Independence."

Laura sat straight up in bed. "Did you see Santa Claus?" she shouted.

"I sure did," Mr. Edwards said.

"Where? When? What did he look like? Did he really give you something for us?" Mary and Laura cried.

"Wait, wait a minute!" Mr. Edwards laughed. And Ma said she would put the presents in the stockings, as Santa Claus intended. She said they mustn't look

Mr. Edwards came and sat on the floor by their bed, and he answered every question they asked him. They honestly tried not to look at Ma, and they didn't quite see what she was doing.

When he saw the creek rising, Mr. Edwards said, he had known that Santa Claus could not get across it. ("But you crossed it," Laura said. "Yes," Mr. Edwards replied, "but Santa Claus is too old and fat. He couldn't make it, where a long, lean razor-back like me could do so.") And Mr. Edwards reasoned that if Santa Claus couldn't cross the creek, likely he would come no farther south than Independence. Why should he come forty miles across the prairie, only to be turned back? Of course he wouldn't do that!

So Mr. Edwards had walked to Independence. ("In the rain?" Mary asked. Mr. Edwards said he wore his rubber coat.) And there, coming down the street in Independence, he had met Santa Claus. ("In the

daytime?" Laura asked. She hadn't thought that anyone could see Santa Claus in the daytime. No, Mr. Edwards said; it was night, but light shone out across the street from the saloons.)

Well, the first thing Santa Claus said was, "Hello, Edwards!" ("Did he know you?" Mary asked, and Laura asked, "How did you know he was really Santa Claus?" Mr. Edwards said that Santa Claus knew everybody. And he had recognized Santa at once by his whiskers. Santa Claus had the longest, thickest, whitest set of whiskers west of the Mississippi.)

So Santa Claus said, "Hello, Edwards! Last time I saw you, you were sleeping on a cornshuck bed in Tennessee." And Mr. Edwards well remembered the little pair of red-mittens that Santa Claus had left for him that time.

Then Santa Claus said: "I understand you're living now down along the Verdigris River. Have you ever met up, down yonder, with two little young girls named Mary and Laura?"

"I surely am acquainted with them," Mr. Edwards replied.

"It rests heavy on my mind," said Santa Claus. "They are both of them sweet, pretty, good little young things, and I know they are expecting me. I surely do hate to disappoint two good little girls like them. Yet with the water up the way it is, I can't ever make it across that creek. I can figure no way whatsoever to get to their cabin this year. Edwards," Santa Claus said, "would you do me the favor to fetch them their gifts this one time?"

"I'll do that, and with pleasure," Mr. Edwards told him.

Then Santa Claus and Mr. Edwards stepped across the street to the hitching-posts where the pack-mule was tied. (Didn't he have his reindeer?" Laura asked. "You know he couldn't," Mary said. "There isn't any snow." Exactly, said Mr. Edwards. Santa Claus traveled with a pack-mule in the southwest.)

And Santa Claus un cinched the pack and looked through it, and he took out the presents for Mary and Laura.

"Oh, what are they?" Laura cried; but Mary asked, "Then what did he do?"

Then he shook hands with Mr. Edwards, and he swung up on his fine bay horse. Santa Claus rode well for a man of his weight and build. And he tucked his long, white whiskers under his bandana. "So long, Edwards," he said, and he rode away on the Fort Dodge trail, leading his pack-mule and whistling.

Laura and Mary were silent an instant, thinking of that.

Then Ma said, "You may look now, girls."

Something was shining bright in the top of Laura's stocking. She squealed and jumped out of bed. So did Mary, but Laura beat her to the fireplace. And the shining thing was a glittering new tin cup.

Mary had one exactly like it.

These new tin cups were their very own. Now they each had a cup to drink out of. Laura jumped up and down and shouted and laughed, but Mary stood still and looked with shining eyes at her own tin cup.

Then they plunged their hands into the stockings again. And they pulled out two long, long sticks of candy. It was peppermint candy, striped red and white. They looked and looked at the beautiful candy, and Laura licked her stick, just one lick. But Mary was not so greedy. She didn't take even one lick of her stick.

Those stockings weren't empty yet. Mary and Laura pulled out two small packages. They unwrapped them, and each found a little heart-shaped cake. Over their delicate brown tops was sprinkled white sugar. The sparkling grains lay like tiny drifts of snow.

The cakes were too pretty to eat. Mary and Laura just looked at them. But at last Laura turned hers over, and she nibbled a tiny nibble from underneath, where it wouldn't show. And the inside of the little cake was white!

It had been made of pure white flour, and sweetened white sugar.

Laura and Mary never would have looked in their stockings again. The cups and the cakes and candy were almost too much. They were too happy to speak. But Ma asked if they were sure the stockings were empty.

And in the very toe of each stocking was a shining bright, new penny!

They had never thought of such a thing as having a penny. Think of having a whole penny for your very own. Think of having a cup and a cake and a stick of candy and a penny.

There never had been such a Christmas.

Now of course, right away, Laura and Mary should have thanked Mr. Edwards for bringing those lovely presents all the way from Independence. But they had forgotten all about Mr. Edwards. They had even forgotten Santa Claus. In a minute they would have remembered, but before they did, Ma said, gently, "Aren't you going to thank Mr. Edwards?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Edwards! Thank you!" they said, and they meant it with all their hearts. Pa shook Mr. Edwards' hand, too, and shook it again. Pa and Ma and Mr. Edwards acted as if they were almost crying. Laura didn't know why. So she gazed again at her beautiful presents.

She looked up again when Ma gasped. And Mr. Edwards was taking sweet potatoes out of his pockets. He said they had helped to balance the package on his head when he swam across the creek. He thought Pa and Ma might like them, with the Christmas turkey.

There were nine sweet potatoes. Mr. Edwards had brought them all the way from town, too. It was just too much. Pa said so. "It's too much, Edwards," he said. They never could thank him enough.

Mary and Laura were too excited to eat breakfast. They drank the milk from their shining new cups, but they could not swallow stew and cornmeal mush.

"Don't make them, Charles," Ma said. "It will soon be dinner-time."

For Christmas dinner there was the tender, juicy, roasted turkey. There were the sweet potatoes, baked in the ashes and carefully wiped so that you could eat the good skins, too. There was a loaf of salt-rising bread made from the last of the white flour.

And after all that there were stewed dried blackberries and little cakes. But these little cakes were made with brown sugar and they did not have white sugar sprinkled over their tops.

Then Pa and Ma and Mr. Edwards sat by the fire and talked about Christmas times back in Tennessee and up north in the Big Woods. But Mary and Laura looked at their beautiful cakes and played with their pennies and drank their water out of their new cups. And little by little they licked and sucked their sticks of candy, till each stick was sharp-pointed on one end.

That was a happy Christmas.

A CHRISTMAS TREE

By Piri Thomas

Two more weeks and it would come around again. Christmas. The year was 1938. I was ten years old and living with my family in Harlem. Las Navidades was a sacred time for all the devout Christians regardless of color, for it was in honor of Jesus Christ, who had not even known the comfort of being born in a hospital, since there had been no room at the inn. Instead he had been born in a manger in the stable. Popi, who was a death-bed Catholic, would only see a priest when he was ready to kick the bucket, but when anybody asked him what his faith was, he would proudly boom out, "Me, I'm *católico*."

For kids in El Barrio, Christmas was a time of great expectations and nighttime dreams of a beautiful yellow bicycle with balloon tires or a brand-new pair of ice skates. I dropped hints all over the place hoping to receive at least one or the other. I would write to Santa Claus asking for what I wanted, always sending my best regards to Mrs. Claus with the hope of establishing a better connection. But the truth of the matter was that nobody heard. Me. We Thomas children always got something, although not exactly what we had asked for. Our brave, tight smiles with the glimmer of a tear were meant to pass as the happy joy of receiving pretty close to what we wanted, but we sure didn't fool Mami, who, in gentle tones, would tell us that we ought to be thankful that we had received something, at least, since a lot of ghetto children had not gotten anything because of the great unemployment. The lines at Catholic Charities were long and not everybody in them was Catholic. The Twenty-third precinct on 104th Street gave out toys to the kids in our community, and then some of the cops proceeded to bust our chops for the rest of the year. La Casita María in El Barrio on 110th Street gave out warm blankets and clothes and bags of groceries and the Heckscher Foundation on 104th Street was there for us, too, and gave shoes and warm clothing to the very poor. Mami gave each of us a kiss and a tight hug and told us we should give thanks to God that our father had had a job at the toy warehouse for the past two years. I smiled in agreement, but with thoughts I responded, "Sí, Mami, but they don't have yellow bikes with balloon tires and pro ice skates."

Popi's boss was named Mr. Charles. Popi worked as a toy inspector who checked the toys, separating out the damaged ones as rejects. Popi also served with distinction as packer and porter. Popi had told us that his boss considered himself to be a good guy and so at Christmastime he allowed his workers to take home damaged toys as presents for their children. But all the toys Popi had brought home last Christmas were brand-new with the exception of one single reject among them. As it came out years later, Popi, who like many other parents wanted the best for his children, wanted brand-new toys instead of rejects, and had simply put prime-condition toys into a large potato sack and they placed a damaged one right on top, bringing them all home in one sack, which made us kids very happy on Christmas morning. Of course Popi didn't want Mami to know, because she, as a good Christian, would disapprove of any action that smacked of dishonesty.

It was four days before Christmas and we still had not gotten our tree. Popi had waited until he got his few dollars' Christmas bonus and then announced that it was time to buy our tree and asked us who wanted to come. Of course all four kids began to squeal and jump around, using any excuse for creating joy. I looked out the window of the living room which faced the street. The barrio was covered by a soft

whit blanket of snow that kept falling gently. “Dress warmly,” Mami admonished, and in no time at all the four of us looked like Eskimos, complete with warm scarves that swallowed our faces. As we ran out into the dimly lit hallway and noisily descended the stairs two at a time, I heard Mami call down to Popi about not going crazy and spending too much money on the Christmas tree.

The five of us stepped out into a white world of falling snow and muffled sounds. The snow looked good enough to eat. We could make snowballs and then pour on flavored syrup and eat the balls like *piraguas*. Popi exclaimed, “*Vaya* kids, look at all the snow, is this not a most beautiful sight?” We all shivered in agreement. Lots of *familias* with their children were heading toward Third Avenue. We turned the corner on 104th Street and Third and the avenue was ablaze on both sides of the street with millions of multicolored Christmas lights blinking at each other all the way up to 125th Street. Loudspeakers hooked to the outside walls of well-stocked stores blared Christmas songs like “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” “Joy to the World,” and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” with commercial breaks in English and Spanish that promised tremendous bargains with 50 percent off and instant credit.

José was anxious to get to the empty lot near Second Avenue, because he had been chosen to be the one to pick the tree. We all entered the huge lot full of all sizes and kinds of trees. Popi led us to where the regular-sized trees were trying to look their scrawny best, and we followed right behind him—that is, all except José, who was nowhere to be seen. Everybody took a point on the compass and frantically went José-hunting. I hoped he had not been kidnapped and held for ransom. Sis ended those lousy thoughts by waving at all of us to come over. We joined her and as she pointed to the more expensive, taller, and fuller trees, there was little José lost in wonder, looking up at one of the tallest and most expensive trees in the lot! I saw Popi’s face like he was remembering what Mami had said about not going crazy and spending too much money. We all stared at José, who turned to us with a big grin on his small face and pointed to what from his vantage point must have seemed like a giant redwood straight from California. Popi smiled at little José, and we all followed suit as Popi tried to persuade José to that he had to be kidding, trying to steer our little brother toward some Christmas trees more his size, but to no avail. José held his ground without a grin and kept his tiny forefinger pointed at the gorgeous tree of his choice. Popi offered him a delicious hot dog from a nearby stand, knowing that José (and us along with him) loved hot dogs with a passion, but José was determined not to be moved. His little lips started to quiver and his tiny forefinger was getting tired of pointing and just before the first tears formed, Frankie, my sister, and I were practically glaring at poor Popi who was hung up in the middle with no place to go. Popi did what he had to do and snatched José and all to hear, “Hey Mista, how much you want for this tree?” Popi’s eyes pleaded with the Negro brother that the price not be too high, so that he could please his youngest child along with the rest of the family.

The brother, who was an old man of about thirty, looked the tree over, lips pursed like he was into a real heavy decision. Popi finally said, “Well, Mista, what’s your price?” and added under his breath, “You know, if it’s too high, I won’t be able to deal with it.” I watched everyone closely. Their faces were somber, José had some tears ready just in case the price was out of the question.

“Well, sir, this tree is worth about ten dollars.” We gasped. Ten dollars in 1938 was like two months’ rent and food for months and months. Rice and beans were about five cents a pound. Popi shook his head grimly and did not dare look straight at José, who was nibbling his upper lip with his lower. “How

much do you have, sir?" asked the mista. "I got a five-dollar bill from which I gotta bring home at least two for the Christmas dinner." Popi squatted down to José size and offered him a whispered deal of how about us getting a smaller tree and José just shook his head and pointed his tiny forefinger up at his personal Christmas tree. Popi got up and whispered to the mista, "Say brother, what's the best you can do?"

"Wal, I sez if you don't mind giving me a hand tomorrow night, you got the tree for three bucks. Whatta ya say?"

"Done deal." Popi shook hands with the mista and said, "My name is Juan but I'm known as Johnny."

"My name is Matt," and that was that. Popi gave Matt the worn five-dollar bill and got two bucks in return. José put on one of his famous grins and we all broke out in a victorious cheer.

The five of us struggled through the snow until we were across the street in front of our building at 112 East 104th Street. We were living on the top floor and it suddenly dawned on Popi that the hallway was too narrow and the turns up the steps were even worse. We tried getting the tree into the hallway, but to no avail unless we wanted to scrape the branches clean. By this time a small crowd of neighbors had gathered around us, some of whom stopped to greet Popi and admire José's great choice of Christmas tree. Then the debate began on how in the heck were we going to get that twelve-foot tree up to our apartment, where the ceiling was only nine feet high. Some suggested we bind the tree firmly and squeeze and bend it around the banister. Popi was listening to the suggestions of the men when Mami, full of curiosity, came downstairs and out onto the street where the small crowd had gotten larger. Mami quickly sized up the situation and brightly suggested, "Why don't we pull it up the side of the building to the fifth floor and then haul it in through the front window?" Everybody smiled and agreed that Mami's way was the best, and soon Pancho, who had a small truck, came back with a long strong rope and a small pulley. He and Popi went up to our apartment and quickly secured the pulley to the side of the fire escape and then ran the rope through it to the street below. By this time neighbors were serving hot coffee to whoever wanted some and small shots of rum to those who might be extra cold. Everybody seemed to be extra cold, The tall, full Christmas tree was then tied to the rope and with Popi on the fifth-floor fire escape directing the hauling, Mami took charge below, with Sis and Frankie watching José, who took in the whole scene with a tremendous grin. Tenants appeared on each fire escape and hands from each of the fire escapes carefully helped guide the tall tree upward until it reached the fifth floor without the loss of a single branch. Popi and Pancho pulled the big tree in amidst a mighty cheer that rose up from the muffled street below—the sound of victory brought about by the unity of neighbors.

After all that, the tree did not fit in our apartment. But Popi was not to be defeated, so he measured it carefully and Pancho sawed off three feet, finally making it the right size. Then Mami had us carry the three feet of Christmas tree down to Abuela Santiago, who lived alone but had almost everybody in the building for an adopted family. Mami took some lights and trimmings and went down to her apartment with José so he could be the one to do most of the decorating, and Abuela blessed us after we finished. I thought that this promised to be a fine Christmas indeed.

When Christmas morning finally dawned, my siblings and I dashed out of our bedrooms to look under José's tree, which was now brightly decorated with multi-colored Christmas lights blinking on and off. Lo and behold, underneath the tree, in full view of the world, was a pair of ice skates just like the pros

used, and on closer look, who the heck cared if they were second-hand, fresh from the Salvation Army thrift store? They were professional skates and that was all I cared about. *Vaya*, next year might just bring the beautiful yellow bike with balloon tire. "Merry Christmas," I began to shout and my siblings followed my example. Soon we were joined by happy kids in the hallway stomping up and down the stairs, shouting Merry Christmas and *Feliz Navidad* to one another. *Punto*.

A WORN PATH

By Eudora Welty

It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made a grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird.

She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks, with a full pocket: all neat and tidy, but every time she took a step she might have fallen over her shoelaces, which dragged from her unlaced shoes. She looked straight ahead. Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper.

Now and then there was a quivering in the thicket. Old Phoenix said, “Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons, and wild animals! ... Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites ... Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don’t let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way.” Under her small black-freckled hand her cane, limber as a buggy whip, would switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things.

On she went. The woods were deep and still. The sun made the pine needles almost too bright to look at, up where the wind rocked. The cones dropped as light as feathers. Down in the hollow was the mourning dove—it was not too late for him.

The path ran up a hill. “Seem like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far,” she said, in the voice of argument old people keep to use with themselves. “Something always take a hold of me on this hill—pleads I should stay.”

After she got to the top she turned and gave a full, severe look behind her where she had come. “Up through pines,” she said at length. “Now down through oaks.”

Her eyes opened their widest, and she started down gently. But before she got to the bottom of the hill a bush caught her dress.

Her fingers were busy and intent, but her skirts were full and long, so that before she could pull them free in one place they were caught in another. It was not possible to allow the dress to tear. “I in the thorny bush,” she said. “Thorns, you dong your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little *green* bush.”

Finally, trembling all over, she stood free, and after a moment dared to stoop for her cane.

“Sun so high!” she cried, leaning back and looking, while the thick tears went over her eyes. “The time getting all gone here.

At the foot of this hill was a place where a log was laid across the creek.

“Now comes the trial,” said Phoenix.

Putting her right foot out, she mounted the log and shut her eyes. Lifting her skirt, leveling her cane fiercely before her, like a festival figure in some parade, she began to march across. Then she opened her eyes and she was safe on the other side.

"I wasn't as old as I thought," she said.

But she sat down to rest. She spread her skirts on the bank around her and folded her hands over her knees. Up above her was a tree in a pearly cloud of mistletoe. She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble-cake on it she spoke to him. "That would be acceptable," she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air.

So she left that tree and had to go through a barbed-wire fence. There she had to creep and crawl, spreading her knees and stretching her fingers like a baby trying to climb the steps. But she talked loudly to herself: she could not let her dress be torn now, so late in the day, and she could no pay for having her arm or her leg sawed off if she got caught fast where she was.

At last she was safe through the fence and risen up out of the clearing. Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard.

"Who you watching?"

In the furrow she made her way along.

"Glad this not the season for bulls, she said, looking sideways, "and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter. A pleasure I don't see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once. It took a while to get by him, back in the summer."

She passed through the old cotton and went into a field of dead corn. It whispered and shook and was taller than her head. "Through the maze now," she said, for there was no path.

Then there was something tall, black and skinny there, moving before her.

As first she took it for a man. It could have been a man dancing in the field. But she stood still and listened, and it did not make a sound. It was as silent as a ghost.

"Ghost," she said sharply, "who be you the ghost of?" For I have heard of nary death close by."

But there was no answer—only the ragged dancing in the wind.

She shut her eyes, reached out her hand, and touched a sleeve. She found a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice.

"You scarecrow," she said. Her face lighted. "I ought to be shut up for good," she said with laughter. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know. Dance, old scarecrow," she said, "While I dancing with you."

She kicked her foot over the furrow, and with mouth drawn down, shook her head once or twice in a little strutting way. Some husks blew down and whirled in streamers about her skirts.

Then she went on, parting her way from side to side with the cane, through the whispering field. At last she came to the end, to a wagon track where the silver grass blew between the red ruts. The quail were walking around like pullets, seeming all dainty and unseen.

"Walk pretty," she said. "This the easy place. This the easy going."

She followed the track, swaying through the quiet bare fields, through the little strings of trees silver in their dead leaves, past cabins silver from weather, with the doors, and windows, boarded shut, all like old women under a spell sitting there, "I walking in their sleep," she said, nodding her head vigorously.

In a ravine she went where a spring was silently flowing through a hollow log. Old Phoenix bent and drank. "Sweet-gum makes the water sweet," she said, and drank more. "Nobody know who made this well, for it was here when I was born."

The track crossed a swampy part where the moss hung as white as lace from every limb. "Sleep on, alligators, and blow your bubbles." Then the track went into the road.

Deep, deep the road went down between the high green-colored banks. Overhead the live-oaks met, and it was as dark as a cave.

A black dog with a lolling tongue came up out of the weeds by the ditch. She was meditating, and not ready, and when he came at her she only hit him a little with her can. Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed.

Down there, her senses drifted away. A dream visited her, and she reached her hand up, but nothing reached down and gave her a pull. So she lay there and presently went to talking. "Old woman," she said to herself, "that black dog come up out of the weeds to stall you off, and now there he sitting on his fine tail, smiling at you."

A white man finally came along and found her—a hunter, a young man, with his dog on a chain.

"Well, Granny!" he laughed. "What are you doing there?"

"Lying on my back like a June-bug waiting to be turned over, mister," she said reaching up her hand.

He lifted her up, gave her a swing in the air, and set her down. "Anything broken, Granny?" he asked, while the two dogs were growling at each other.

"Away back yonder, sir, behind the ridge. You can't even see it from here."

"On your way home?"

"No sir, I going to town."

"Why, that's too far! That's as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble." He patted the stuffed bag he carried, and there hung down a little closed claw. It was one of the bob-whites, with its bead hooked bitterly to show it was dead. "Now you go on home, Granny!"

"I bound to go to town, mister," said Phoenix. "The time come around."

He gave another laugh, filling the whole landscape. "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus.!"

But something held old Phoenix very still. The deep lines in her face went into a fierce and different radiation. Without warning, she had seen with her own eyes a flashing nickel fall out of the man's pocket onto the ground.

"How old are you, Granny?" he was saying.

"There is no telling, mister," she said, "no telling."

Then she gave a little cry and clapped her hands and said, "Git on away from here, dog! Look! Look at that dog!" She laughed as if in admiration. "He ain't scared of nobody. He a big black dog." She whispered, "Sic him!

"Watch me get rid of that cur," said the man. "Sic him, Pete! Sic him!"

Phoenix heard the dogs fighting and heard the man running and throwing sticks. She even heard a gunshot. But she was slowly bending forward by that time, further and further forward, the lids stretched down over her eyes, as if she were doing this in her sleep. Her chin was lowered almost to her knees. The yellow palm of her hand came out from the fold of her apron. Her fingers slid down and

along the ground under the piece of money with the grace and care they would have in lifting an egg from under a setting hen. Then she slowly straightened up, stood erect, and the nickel was in her apron pocket. A bid flew by. Her lips moved. "God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing."

The man came back, and his own dog panted about them. "Well, I scared him off that time," he said, and then he laughed and lifted his gun and pointed it at Phoenix.

She stood straight and faced him.

"Doesn't the gun scare you?" he said, still pointing it.

No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done," she said, holding utterly still.

He smiled, and shouldered the gun. "Well, Granny," he said, "you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing. I'd give you a dime if I had any money with me. But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you."

"I bound to go on my way, mister," said Phoenix. She inclined her head in the red rag. Then they went in different directions, but she could hear the gun shooting again and again over the hill.

She walked on. The shadows hung from the oak trees to the road like curtains. Then she smelled wood-smoke, and smelled the river, and she saw a steeple and the cabins on their steep steps. Dozens of little black children whirled around her. There ahead was Natchez shining. Bells were ringing. She walked on.

In the paved city it was Christmas time. There were red and green electric lights strung and crisscrossed everywhere, and all turned on in the daytime. Old Phoenix would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her.

She paused quietly on the sidewalk where people were passing by. A lady came along in the crowd, carrying an armful of red-, green-, and silver-wrapped presents; she gave off perfume like the red roses in hot summer, and Phoenix stopped her.

"Please, missy, will you lace up my shoe?" She held up her foot.

"What do you want, Grandma?"

"See my shoe," said Phoenix. "Do all right for out in the country, but wouldn't look right to go in a big building."

"Stand still then, Grandma," said the lady. She put her packages down on the sidewalk beside her and laced and tied both shoes tightly.

"Can't lace 'em with a cane," said Phoenix. "Thank you, missy. I doesn't mind asking a nice lady to tie up my shoe, when I gets out on the street."

Moving slowly and from side to side, she went into the big building, and into a tower of steps, where she walked up and around and around until her feet knew to stop.

She entered a door, and there she was nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head.

"Here I be," she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body.

"A charity case, I suppose," said an attendant who sat at the desk before her.

But Phoenix only looked above her head. There was sweat on her face, the wrinkles in her skin shone like a bright net.

“Speak up, Grandma,” the woman said. “What’s your name? We must have your history, you know. Have you been here before? What seems to be the trouble with you?”

Old Phoenix only gave a twitch to her face as if a fly were bothering her.

“Are you deaf?” cried the attendant.

But then the nurse came in.

“Oh, that’s just old Aunt Phoenix,” she said. “She doesn’t come for herself—she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork. She lives away back off the Old Natchez Trace.” She bent down. “Well Aunt Phoenix, why don’t you just take a seat? We won’t keep you standing after your long trip.” She pointed.

The old woman sat down, bolt upright in the chair.

“Now, how is the boy?” asked the nurse.

Old Phoenix did not speak.

“I said, how is the boy?”

But Phoenix only waited and stared straight ahead, her face very solemn and withdrawn into rigidity.

“Is his throat any better?” asked the nurse. “Aunt Phoenix, don’t you hear me? Is your grandson’s throat any better since the last time you came for the medicine?”

With her hands on her knees, the old woman waited, silent, erect and motionless, just as if she were in armor.

“You mustn’t take up our time this way, Aunt Phoenix,” the nurse said. “Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over. He isn’t dead, is he?”

At last there came a flicker and then a flame of comprehension across her face, and she spoke.

“My grandson. It was my memory had left me. There I sat and forgot why I make my long trip.”

“Forgot?” The nurse frowned. “After you came so far?”

Then Phoenix was like an old woman begging a dignified forgiveness for waking up frightened in the night. “I never did go to school, I was too old at the Surrender,” she said in a soft voice. “I’m an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me. My little grandson, he is just the same, and I forgot it in the coming.”

“Throat never heals, does it?” said the nurse, speaking in aloud, sure voice to old Phoenix. By now she had a card with something written on it, a little list. “Yes. Swallowed lye. When was it”—January—two, three years ago—“

Phoenix spoke unasked now. “No missy, he not dead, he just the same. Every little while his throat begin to close up again, and he not able to swallow. He not get his breath. He not able to help himself. So the time come around, and I go on another trip for the soothing medicine.”

“All right. The doctor said as long as you came to get it, you could have it,” said the nurse. “But it’s an obstinate case.”

“My little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself,” Phoenix went on. “We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don’t seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird. I remembers s plain now. I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation.”

“All right.” The nurse was trying to hush her now. She brought her a bottle of medicine. “Charity,” she said, making a check mark in a book.

Old Phoenix held the bottle close to her eyes, and then carefully put it into her pocket.

“I thank you,” she said.

“It’s Christmas time, Grandma,” said the attendant. “Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?”

“Five pennies is a nickel,” said Phoenix stiffly.

“Here’s a nickel,” said the attendant.

Phoenix rose carefully and held out her hand. She received the nickel and then fished the other nickel out of her pocket and laid it beside the new one. She stared at her palm closely, with her head on one side.

Then she gave a tap with her cane on the floor.

“This is what come to me to do,” she said. “I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, make out of paper. He going to fine it hard to believe there such a thing in the world. I’ll march myself back where he waiting, holding it straight up in this hand.”

She lifted her free hand, gave a little nod, turned around, and walked out of the doctor’s office. Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down.

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT TO LITTLE ONES

By Lewis Grizzard

Jordan, experiencing her fourth Christmas, dove into the mound of packages under the tree with a terrible resolve.

All laws of space and time were suspended. The child was ripping through two and sometimes three packages at once.

Wrapping paper flew. Ribbons flew. She was Jordan Scissorhands. She was Jordan Chainsawhands. "Slow down!" admonished her mother.

Do you tell the wind to slow down? Do you attempt to impede the progress of a raging river?

I saw a Ken doll emerge from an ever-growing tower of boxes and ripped-away paper and ribbons.

And there was a Cinderella doll.

And two stuff bears from granny.

There was a set of finger-paints. Jordan would do a lovely mural on the living-room wall later in the day.

I noticed a child's computer freed from a box. Not to mention a Little Mermaid exercise suit and a Little Mermaid battery-powered toothbrush.

There was a Beauty and the Beast home video and a game called Frog Soccer.

I did not give Jordan the Frog Soccer game because I don't even like soccer when it is played by participants who don't eat flies.

I did play a quick game of Frog Soccer with Jordan because she asked me to. She beat me 7-3, which is the most scoring in the history of any kind of soccer game.

I gave Jordan a doll house. I paid a guy \$50 to put it together. There were parts that attached to other parts that could not be seen by the naked eye. Frank Lloyd Wright would have had a difficult time assembling the thing.

As I was unloading the doll house from my car, however, the top floor came apart. I spent a great deal of Christmas Eve trying to do what I'd paid the guy the \$50 to do. But to no avail.

When Jordan saw the house, she was excited, but she wanted to know, "What happened to the top floor?"

"Termites," I said.

Somewhat confused, Jordan leapt at one last unwrapped gift. It was from Santa.

Once the paper was off, she opened the box. I couldn't believe what I saw.

It was a Slinky.

Surely you remember Slinkies. They've been around since I was a child.

A Slinky is nothing more than a series of circular divisions of a long wire that has an accordion effect to it.

Pull one of the circular divisions and the rest follow. You can make a Slinky jump from one of your hands to the other. A Slinky can even walk down steps.

Slinkies were big for Christmas when I was a kid back in ought-eight, or whenever it was, and now little Jordan's got one for Christmas 1992.

"Show me how this works," Jordan said to me.

I make the Slinky go from my right hand to my left. I played the Slinky like a yo-yo. I made it take two consecutive leaps along the carpet.

Jordan was beside herself with wonder and glee, and I'm thinking here are all these expensive complicated gifts—including a doll house with 14,806 parts, 4739 of which are no longer attached—and it's this cheap, simple, good ol' standby Slinky that has her attention.

So maybe kids aren't that different today. Remember opening your toys in the morning and then spending the afternoon playing with the boxes?

Something else did finally take Jordan's attention away from the Slinky. It was the packing around the toys that had been mailed to her. It was a cellophane substance with bubble-like protrusions. When you stomped on those bubbles it made neat, popping sounds.

Jordan stomped out every bubble and never again mentioned the insect-ridden doll house I had given her.

THE THREE SKATERS

by Lynne Roberts

In the faraway land of Holland, a baker sadly closed up his shop. He carried a worn sack with a few loaves of bread. Not many people came into the bakery that day, because times were hard and people did not have extra money for fresh bread. The baker had to bring home the leftovers so that they would not go to waste.

“Maybe I can make a nice bread pudding with these loaves,” said the baker to himself. “It would be a shame not to use such delicious bread.” The baker walked off into the cold, gray afternoon.

The baker’s mind drifted to visions of his family. He pictured them all warm and snug by the fireplace, waiting for his arrival. He knew his wife would be a little disappointed with the sales at the bakery, but she would take the loaves of bread and cheerfully make the best of them. He smiled beneath the scratchy wool of his scarf. His eyes watered, from the icy wind and from the joy that his family brought to him.

The baker blinked the tears away and kept walking. When he reached the frozen canal, he sat down upon a log and strapped his wooden skates to his feet. As he secured the straps, he looked down the icy canal. The land seemed to stretch out endlessly before him. The air was crisp and the wind was bitter. The baker shivered and pulled his scarf higher on his face.

About a half-mile down the canal, the baker could see the farmer coming toward him. Soon he was joined by the farmer, who was also his neighbor. He, too, carried a sack. The two men greeted each other quietly and began skating together. Their skates soon fell into a rhythm.

“Have you been to the market today?” asked the baker.

The farmer nodded slowly. “Not much luck, though,” he said.

“Same here. I still have a few loaves of bread,” said the baker. He turned his gaze down the canal and continued to skate.

The farmer also could not wait to be home with his family. He looked forward to warming himself by the fire and playing with his children. His youngest child, Lily, had been ill, and the farmer wanted to get her something special at the market. But he did not sell many apples and had to bring a sack of them back home.

“Perhaps a nice apple pie will warm little Lily and make her smile,” said the farmer to himself.

Times were tough for everyone. It was clear that both men did not need to say much to each other. They knew exactly how the other one felt.

As they continued to skate, the clouds grew thicker. The two men wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Soon they came to where another canal met up with theirs. They could see another figure coming toward them from the other canal. With a wave, they saw that it was their friend, the weaver.

“Hello, gentlemen,” said the weaver. He skated right up to the farmer and the baker. They greeted the weaver warmly, and they all began to skate together. Now the sound of the three men’s skates was all that could be heard on the smooth ice of the canal.

The weaver had also come from the market, where he had been trying to sell the beautiful blankets he had woven. Since no one had any extra money to spend, the weaver left the market with all of his

blankets and no money. He tried to keep his spirits up, however, by taking pride in knowing that his blankets were beautifully crafted and woven out of love.

"It will be wonderful when we get home and out of the chill," said the weaver, trying to start some cheerful conversation.

The other two men just nodded their heads in agreement. Their thick scarves and the biting wind made it hard to talk to one another. They continued along the canal in silence.

As they passed an abandoned farm, the weaver suddenly stopped skating. He turned his gaze toward the old rundown barn in the middle of the field. He thought he heard an unusual noise.

"Stop! Listen!" the weaver called to his companions.

The farmer and the baker quickly stopped. They returned to the spot where the weaver was standing,

The three men stood on the icy canal, staring at the old barn. Suddenly a slice of sunlight split through the clouds and shone brightly onto the barn. It was a most unusual sight!

"Listen. Do you hear that?" said the farmer.

The farmer and the baker held their breath and listened. All at once, the three men heard the familiar sound of a baby crying. It seemed to be coming from the old barn, now cast in an eerie glow.

"It sounds like a child," said the farmer.

"But how could it be? That farm has been abandoned for years," said the weaver.

"Perhaps a lamb was left in the barn," said the baker. "It sounds like a lamb."

The three men heard the sound again and knew in an instant that it was not a lamb. It sounded, most definitely, like a child.

Without another word, all three men stepped off the ice and into the snow. They took off their skates and began walking toward the barn. As they reached the doorway, they could hear the baby's cries beginning to soften as the gentle sound of a mother's voice sang a soulful lullaby. The men opened the barn door without knocking. It was as if they knew that it was all right—that whoever was inside wanted them to come in.

Inside the barn, thin beams of sunlight streamed through the holes in the roof and walls. There was not a lamb that had been abandoned by the barn's owner, but the scene inside the barn was most incredible. In the center of the barn sat a young woman holding a newborn infant. She was singing the most beautiful and unusual lullaby. She stopped singing as she looked up at the men. Then she smiled.

The men could not help but smile shyly back at the new mother. They were very surprised that anyone was in the abandoned barn, but even more surprised to see a lovely young mother holding a newborn infant. The three men looked around the barn and saw a man raking hay in a stall. The man looked very tired. After a moment, he stopped his chore and addressed the three strangers.

"It's not much of a home, but we had nowhere else to go," he explained. "We are on our way to visit relatives. My wife had the baby before we could reach our destination."

The farmer, the baker, and the weaver all turned back to look at the mother and her newborn baby.

"Are your relatives expecting you arrival?" asked the weaver.

"Yes, but traveling will be difficult now with the infant. We can't stay here long, though. We have no food, and it is very cold and drafty inside this barn," the man said. He then finished raking a soft pile of

hay and laid down a thin piece of cloth o top. Then the man walked over to the mother, took the baby, and placed it on its makeshift bed.

The mother father gathered around the child. It was obvious to the men that the young family was happy despite their hardship. The man and woman looked lovingly at each other and their new baby.

The family scene touched the three men and, all at once, they took their items from their sacks and laid them on the floor near the child's bed. They smiled at the family, then quietly left the drafty barn. Without a word, the farmer, the baker, and the weaver walked through the snow to the edge of the canal. They bent down to put on their skates, then skated off once again.

Now all three of the men's sacks were empty. They did not seem concerned with coming home empty-handed, however. They felt in their hearts that what they had done was right. Once again, the only sound to be heard was their skates on the ice.

As he skated, the baker thought of his home. The mother and child reminded him of his wife and children waiting to see him walk through the door. He felt blessed knowing that they were safe and warm in their small, but cozy house.

The farmer's thoughts drifted to his sick daughter. How fragile and tiny she looked when he left her that morning, bundled up in her blanket. He thought of the newborn child and how fragile it looked in its young mother's arms. He said a blessing for the young family left alone in that old barn.

The weaver's prayers also went out to the mother and her child. He hoped that his handmade blankets would provide enough warmth and shelter for the family until they could continue on their journey.

The three men were so deep in thought that they did not notice their sacks getting heavier. Slowing each sack was filling, as if someone was dropping items into each one. But the men did not perceive the growing heaviness. They did notice, however, that they were nearing the village where they all lived. A smile crossed each of their lips, because they knew that they would be home soon. It had been a truly strange, but amazing day.

As they reached the edge of town, the three men stepped off the ice. The crisp snow crunched under their skates. They still did not speak to one another. Each one took off his skates and slung them over his shoulders. Their sacks were quite full by this time, but still not one man made mention of it.

The farmer said good-bye to the baker and the weaver and headed toward his home. The baker and weaver also said good-byes and parted company. It had been an unusual day, but neither the farmer, the baker, nor the weaver felt like talking. It was as if they all knew what the other one was thinking.

By the time the baker reached his front door, his sack was brimming and very heavy. He walked into his home and found his family just as he had pictured, all huddled around the warmth of the fireplace. When they saw him come through the door, all the children shouted at once, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy's home!"

His wife walked over to the baker and gave him a warm hug. That is when she noticed the sack he was carrying. "Oh, dear! What a day at the shop!" she said, her eyes wide with wonder.

The baker put down the sack. Immediately cookies and cakes, hams and bread, teas and spices, fruits and vegetables came flooding out! There were also wrapped presents for everyone. The whole family began to dry with delight.

"Oh, Daddy! How wonderful!" cried the baker's daughter.

“Dear, we are blessed!” cried the baker’s wife.

The baker had no idea how his sack got so full with such wonderful gifts, but he knew it must have something to do with the amazing scene in the barn.

That night the baker and his family had the best dinner ever. Not only did they have enough for that night, but for forty nights after!

When it was time for bed, the baker gathered the children in front of the fire and told them the amazing story of the family in the old barn on the abandoned field. He described how the sunlight broke through the clouds and shone only on the little barn where they were staying.

“It was a wonderful sight, indeed!” he told the children.

After he put his family to bed with full bellies and wondrous visions in their heads, the baker sat up and looked out the window. He thought of the farmer and the weaver. He knew that their night was as joyous and amazing as his had been. They all gave everything they had out of pure generosity and the goodness of their hearts. And even though the winter winds howled outside, it was the warmest night the farmer, the baker, and the weaver had ever had.

NOT EVAN A. MOUSE

By Unknown

I am one mouse who should need no introduction. I belong among the ranks of the great mice of history, like Dock from Hickory Dickory, and Sir Nipsy, who nibbled the lion free from his net. I, too, changed the course of world events. If it hadn't been for me, there would be no proof that Santa truly exists: no letters to the North Pole, no snacks set out on Christmas Eve.

Oh, you know my story, or at least one version of it. But you don't know my name, and it's all because of Professor Moore's poor penmanship. Let me set the record straight. I am Evan A. Mouse. Listen to these famous lines and you'll understand my frustration: "Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." My place in history blurred forever because of missed capital letters and a poorly written vowel. If only the line had been properly penned, "Not Evan A. Mouse," I wouldn't have to defend myself today.

First, my credentials. I am a member of "Mus Legendarius" what the scientific community calls legendary mouse for those of you not up on your Latin. We L.M.'s live extraordinarily long lives and, as I've said before, we find ourselves at key places in history. I was just a youngster in those days, beginning my life's work as a house mouse. It was my job to supervise the Moore household, not an easy task I tell you, because of the four humans who lived there.

First, there was Professor Clement Moore. A teacher, he was forever leaving books, ink wells, and papers all over the house. It took many nibbles in his lecture notes for me to break him of this sloppy habit. Mrs. Moore had the human illness known in our trade as Female Mousaphobia. Her greatest fear was that I would take over her job in the home. When I would quietly remind the Professor to tidy up with a nibble here and there, Mrs. Moore would panic. She would go on a cleaning rampage for a week, just to get me out of the way. Women—who can understand them? The Moores' children, Bartley and Belinda, seemed to be normal enough for their race, loud and noisy. What more can I say? All human children look alike to me.

Back to the night in question, December 24, 1821. If you are familiar with Professor Moore's famous poem, you know how he portrays the events. Let me tell you what really happened. The Professor leads you to believe his home was a calm and peaceful place that Christmas Eve. Now I ask you, have you ever known any human dwelling to be quiet the day before Christmas? Last minute shopping, wrapping up gifts, gorging on goodies, relatives arriving by the dozens. Anything but peace!

Bartley and Belinda had picked at one another all day. Bartley would pin his red stocking to the chimney, and Belinda would snatch it down and race around the house, waving it over her head. "Bartley believes in Santy Claus! Ha—ha!" At bedtime, the feathers flew in a horrendous pillow fight as those two jumped from bed to bed. Bartley got in one good swing that knocked out a loose tooth Belinda had been wiggling for weeks.

Professor Moore stomped out of his study, rubbing his temples. Mrs. Moore began shrieking, "I don't care if it is Christmas Eve! If I hear one more peep from the two of you ..."

I knew there would be no Merry Christmas if I, Evan A. Mouse, didn't do something. I sent the adults to bed with ear plugs and a bottle of aspirin. Getting the younger Moores to settle down took some doing. I used the oldest trick in the House Mouse Book of Human Child Management—bribery. You

recall Professor Moore's line, something about sugarplums? I promised massive amounts of candy to the child who could fall asleep first. It worked like a charm.

At last, the household was quiet. I retreated to my observatory up on the roof where I had a first-rate telescope. The clear night promised to provide good viewing. I was looking at the constellation Orion when a strange movement in the heavens caught my eye. Fascinated, I watched as the speck darted from one planet to another. A careful recording of the movements showed that the speck, whatever it was, traveled to Mercury, Venus, and Mars in less than two hours. At that point, the speck turned and headed directly for Earth. "Professor Moore should witness this phenomenon!" I thought, and made a mad dash to his bedroom.

The aspirin I had given him earlier had done its job. The Professor was out cold. He claims that a noise outside the house woke him up that night. Might I remind you of the ear plugs he wore to bed? Only I remember that it took a swift bite on the big toe to wake that man up! By the time the two of us poked our heads out the bedroom window, the speck had become large enough to identify. Instantly, I knew I was seeing first-hand something only whispered of in the halls of mouse dom. It was the Great One himself, Santus Nikolais, Santa Claus. For generations, we legendary mice had come close to proving his existence, but no one had ever actually seen him in the flesh. And now I, Evan A. Mouse, was standing on the threshold of a major scientific breakthrough.

The way Professor Moore tells the story, the reindeer were lively and quick that night, and Santa called each one lovingly by name. But my memory has not failed. Fame and Fortune have not clouded my mind. Those reindeer barely made it up to our rooftop. They were totally exhausted. It was the tail end of their North American route. Santa himself practically fell out of the sleigh. "Um-a- Crasher. No, um, I mean, Cruncher ... No, no, you. .what's your name? Um, reindeer ...stay here and don't move until I get back!" Santa's scolding wasn't necessary. The minute their hooves had touched our roof, those deer were down and dozing. After three tries, Santa got his sack of toys up on his back and trudged over to our chimney. Somewhere south of New York, he had run into foul weather. His suit was plastered with sticky red mud. Messy, but it did make the trip down the chimney a quick one!

Downstairs, Professor Moore and I got our first close look at the Living Legend. The Professor remembers twinkling eyes and a nose red like a cherry. My superior powers of observation led me to notice more details. The Great One was suffering from a nasty cold. His eyes were watering, and he frequently wiped his runny nose on a handkerchief. Once again, I sprang into action, pushing Santa into the Professor's easy chair. First I filled the children's stockings, then I served Santa some hot chicken soup. Those few moments of rest and a dry pair of socks made all the difference that night.

I am convinced that Santa would not have been able to finish his route if I had not been there to give first aid.

Only one task remained, and that was to get the Good Gentleman back up the chimney to his transportation. Santa jumped, the Professor and I pushed from below, but it was hopeless. Finally, I pulled down the trap door to the attic and helped Santa Climb out onto the roof. The reindeer galloped into liftoff. Imagine my thrill as we heard these words echo across the night sky:

"Happy Christmas to all at Professor Moore's house,
Special thanks to my good friend, Evan A. Mouse!"

The rest, as they say, is history. The Professor decided to write up his observations and a newspaper printed the article in 1822. Soon, people all over the world believed in Santa Claus and loving and giving. But who gets the credit for all this? Not Evan A Mouse. All I want is a simple correction:

“Twas the night before Christmas,
When all through the house
Not a creature was stirring,
Not Evan A. Mouse!”

AS DARK AS CHRISTMAS GETS

By Lawrence Block

It was 9:54 in the morning when I got to the little bookshop on West 56th Street. Before I went to work for Leo Haig I probably wouldn't have bothered to look at my watch, if I was even wearing one in the first place, and the best I'd have been able to say was it was around ten o'clock. But Haig wanted me to be his legs and eyes, and sometimes his ear, nose and throat, and if he was going to play in Nero Wolfe's league, that meant I had to turn into Archie Goodwin, for Pete's sake, and noticing everything and getting the details right and reporting conversations verbatim.

Well, forget that last part. My memory's getting better—Haig's right about that part—but what follows won't be word for word, because all I am is a human being. If you want a tape recorder, buy one.

There was a lot of fake snow in the window, and a Santa Claus doll in handcuffs, and some toy guns and knives, and a lot of mysteries with a Christmas theme, including the one by Fredric Brown where the murderer dresses up as a department store Santa. Someone pulled that a year ago, put on a red suit and a white beard and shot a man at the corner of Broadway and 37th, and I told Haig how ingenious I thought it was. He gave me a look, left the room, and came back with a book. I read it—that's what I do when Haig hands me a book—and found out Brown had had the idea fifty years earlier. Which doesn't mean that's where the killer got the idea. The book's long out of print—the one I read was a paperback, and falling apart, not like the handsome hardcover copy in the window. And how many killers get their ideas out of old books?

Now if you're a detective yourself you'll have figured out two things by now—the bookshop specialized in mysteries, and it was the Christmas season. And if you'd noticed the sign in the window you'd have made one more deduction: i.e., that they were closed.

I went down the half flight of steps and poked the buzzer. When nothing happened I poked it again, and eventually the door was opened by a little man with white hair and a white beard—all he needed was padding and a red suit, and someone to teach him to be jolly. "I'm terribly sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid we're closed. It's Christmas morning, and it's not even ten o'clock.

"You called us," I said, "and it wasn't even nine o'clock."

He took a good look at me, and light dawned. "You're Harrison," he said. "And I know your first name, but I can't..."

"Chip," I supplied.

"Of course. But where's Haig? I know he thinks he's Nero Wolfe, but he's not gone housebound, has he? He's been here often enough in the past,"

"Haig gets out and about," I agreed, "but Wolfe went all the way to Montana once, as far as that goes. What Wolfe refused to do was leave the house on business, and Haig's with him on that one. Besides, he spawned some unspawnable cichlids from Lake Chad, and you'd think the aquarium was a television set and they were showing *Midnight Blue*."

"Fish." He sounded more reflective than contemptuous. "Well, at least you're here. That's something." He locked the door and led me up a spiral staircase to a room full of books, and full as well

with the residue of a party. There were empty glasses here and there, hors d'oeuvres trays that held nothing but crumbs, and a cut glass dish with a sole remaining cashew.

"Christmas," he said, and shuddered. "I had a houseful of people here last night. All of them eating, all of them drinking, and many of them actually singing." He made a face. "I didn't sing," he said, "but I certainly ate and drank. And eventually they all went home and I went upstairs to bed. I must have, because that's where I was when I woke up two hours ago."

"But you don't remember."

"Well, no," he said, "but then what would there be to remember? The guests leave and you're alone with vague feelings of sadness." His gaze turned inward. "If she'd stayed," he said, "I'd have remembered."

"She?"

"Never mind. I awoke this morning, alone in my own bed. I swallowed some aspirin and came downstairs. I went into the library."

"You mean this room?"

"This is the salesroom. These books are for sale."

"Well, I figured. I mean, this is a bookshop."

"You've never seen the library?" He didn't wait for an answer but turned to open a door and lead me down a hallway to another room twice the size of the first. It was lined with floor-to-ceiling hardwood shelves, and the shelves were filled with double rows of hardcover books. It was hard to identify the books, though, because all but one section was wrapped in plastic sheeting.

"This is my collection," he announced. "These books are not for sale. I'll only part with one if I've replaced it with a finer copy. Your employer doesn't collect, does he?"

"Haig? He's got thousands of books."

"Yes, and he's bought some of them from me. But he doesn't give a damn about first editions. He doesn't care what kind of shape a book is in, or even if it's got a dust jacket. He'd as soon have a Grosset reprint or a book-club edition or even a paperback."

"He just wants to read them."

"It takes all kinds, doesn't it?" He shook his head in wonder. "Last night's party filled this room as well as the salesroom. I put up plastic to keep the books from getting handled and possibly damaged. Or—how shall I put this?"

Anyway you want, I thought. You're the client.

"Some of these books are extremely valuable," he said. "And my guests were all extremely reputable people, but many of them are good customers, and that means they're collectors. Ardent, even rabid collectors."

"And you didn't want them stealing the books."

"You're very direct," he said. "I suppose that's a useful quality in your line of work. But no, I didn't want to tempt anyone, especially when alcoholic indulgence might make temptation particularly difficult to resist."

"So you hung up plastic sheets."

“And came downstairs this morning to remove the plastic, and pick up some dirty glasses and clear some of the debris. I puttered around. I took down the plastic from this one section, as you can see. I did a bit of tidying. And then I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

He pointed to a set of glassed-in shelves, on top of which stood a three-foot row of leather-bound volumes. “There,” he said. “What do you see?”

“Leather-bound books, but...”

“Boxes,” he corrected. “Wrapped in leather and stamped in gold, and each one holding a manuscript. They’re fashioned to look like finely-bound books, but they’re original manuscripts.”

“Very nice,” I said. “I suppose they must be very rare.”

“They’re unique.”

“That too.”

He made a face. “One of a kind. The author’s original manuscript, with corrections in his own hand. Most are typed, but the Elmore Leonard is handwritten. The Westlake, of course, is typed on that famous Smith-Corona manual portable of his. The Paul Kavanagh is the author’s first novel. He only wrote three, you know.”

I didn’t, but Haig would.

“They’re very nice,” I said politely. “And I don’t suppose they’re for sale.”

“Of course not. They’re in the library. They’re part of the collection.”

“Right,” I said, and paused for him to continue. When he didn’t I said, “Uh, I was thinking. Maybe you could tell me...”

“Why I summoned you here.” He sighed. “Look at the boxed manuscript between the Westlake and the Kavanagh.”

“Between them?”

“Yes.”

“The Kavanagh is *Such Men Are Dangerous*,” I said, “and the Westlake is *Drowned Hopes*. But there’s nothing at all between them but a three-inch gap.”

“Exactly,” he said.

“As *Dark As It Gets*,” I said. “By Cornell Woolrich.”

Haig frowned. “I don’t know the book,” he said. “Not under that title, not with Woolrich’s name on it, nor William Irish or George Hopley. Those were his pen names.”

“I know,” I said. “You don’t know the book because it was never published. The manuscript was found among Woolrich’s effects after his death.”

“There was a posthumous book, Chip.”

“*Into the Night*,” I said. “Another writer completed it, writing replacement scenes for some that had gone missing in the original. It wound up being publishable.”

“It wound up being published,” Haig said. “That’s not necessarily the same thing. But this manuscript, *As Dark...*”

"As *It Gets*. It wasn't publishable, according to our client. Woolrich evidently worked on it over the years, and what survived him incorporated unresolved portions of several drafts. There are characters who die early on and then reappear with no explanation. There's supposed to be some great writing and plenty of Woolrich's trademark paranoid suspense, but it doesn't add up to a book, or even something that could be edited into a book. But to a collector..."

"Collectors," Haig said heavily.

"Yes, sir. I asked what the manuscript was worth. He said, 'Well, I paid five thousand dollars for it.' That's verbatim, but don't ask me if the thing's worth more or less than that, because I don't know if he was bragging that he was a big spender or a slick trader."

"It doesn't matter," Haig said. "The money's the least of it. He added it to his collection and he wants it back."

"And the person who stole it," I said, "is either a friend or a customer or both."

"And so he called us and not the police. The manuscript was there when the party started?"

"Yes."

"And gone this morning?"

"Yes."

"And there were how many in attendance?"

"Forty or fifty," I said, "including the caterer and her staff."

"If the party was catered," he mused, "why was the room a mess when you saw it? Wouldn't the catering staff have cleaned up at the party's end?"

"I asked him that question myself. The party lasted longer than the caterer had signed on for. She hung around herself for a while after her employees packed it in, but she stopped working and became a guest. Our client was hoping she would stay."

"But you just said she did."

"After everybody else went home. He lives upstairs from the bookshop and he was hoping for a chance to show her his living quarters."

Haig shrugged. He's not quite the misogynist his idol is, but he hasn't been at it as long. Give him time. He said, "Chip, it's hopeless. Fifty suspects?"

"Six."

"How so?"

"By two o'clock," I said, "Just about everybody had called it a night. The ones remaining got a reward."

"And what was that?"

"Some 50-year-old Armagnac, served in Waterford pony glasses, and there were seven of them. Six guests and the host."

"And the Manuscript?"

"Was still there at the time, and still sheathed in plastic. See, he'd covered all the boxed manuscripts, same as the books on the shelves. But the cut-glass ship's decanter was serving as a sort of bookend to the manuscript section, and he took off the plastic to get at it. And while he was at it he took out one of the manuscripts and showed it off to his guests."

"Not, it was a Peter Straub novel, elegantly handwritten in a leather-bound journal. Straub collects Chandler, and our client had traded a couple of Chandler firsts for the manuscript, and he was proud of himself."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"But the Woolrich was present and accounted for when he took off the plastic wrap, and it may have been there when he put the Straub back. He didn't notice."

"And this morning it was gone."

"Yes."

"Six suspects," he said. "Name them."

I took out my notebook. "Jon and Jayne Corn-Wallace," I said. "He's a retired stockbroker, she's an actress in a daytime drama. That's a soap opera."

"Piffle."

"Yes, sir. They've been friends of our client for years, and customers for about as long. They were mystery fans, and he got them started on first editions."

"Including Woolrich?"

"He's a favorite of Jayne's. I gather Jon can take him or leave him."

"I wonder which he did last night. Do the Corn-Wallace's collect manuscripts?"

"Just books. First editions, though they're starting to get interested in fancy bindings and limited editions. The one with a special interest in manuscripts is Zoltan Mihalyi."

"The violinist?"

Trust Haig to know that. I's never heard of him myself. "A big mystery fan," I said. "I guess reading passes the time on those long concert tours."

"I don't suppose a man can spend all his free hours with other men's wives," Haig said. "And who's to say that all the stories are true? He collects manuscripts, does he?"

"He was begging for a chance to buy the Straub, but our friend wouldn't sell."

"Which would make him a likely suspect. Who else?"

"Philip Perigord."

"The writer?"

"Right, and I didn't even know he was still alive. He hasn't written anything in years."

"Almost twenty years. *More Than Murder* was published in 1980."

Trust him to know that, too. "Anyway," I said, "he didn't die. He didn't even stop writing. He just quit writing books. He went to Hollywood and became a screenwriter."

"That's the same as stopping writing," Haig reflected. "It's very nearly the same as being dead. Does he collect books?"

"No."

"Manuscripts?"

"No."

"Perhaps he wanted the manuscripts for scrap paper," Haig said. "He could turn the pages over and write on their backs. Who else was present?"

"Edward Everett Stokes."

"The small-press publisher. Bought out his partner, Geoffrey Poges, to become sole owner of Stokes-Poges Press."

"They do limited editions, according to our client. Leather bindings, small runs, special tip-in sheets."

"All well and good," he said, "but what's useful about Stokes-Poges is that they issue a reasonably priced trade edition of each title as well, and publish works otherwise unavailable, including collections of short fiction from otherwise uncollected writers."

"Do they publish Woolrich?"

"All his work has been published by mainstream publishers, and all his stories collected. Is Stokes a collector himself?"

"Our client didn't say."

"No matter. How many is that? The Corn-Wallaces, Zoltan Mihalyi, Philip Perigord, E. E. Stokes. And the sixth is.."

"Harriet Quinlan."

He looked puzzled, then nodded in recognition. "The literary agent."

"She represents Perigord," I said, "or at least she would, if he ever went back to novel-writing. She's placed books with Stokes-Poges. And she may have left the party with Zoltan Mihalyi."

"I don't suppose her client list includes the Woolrich estate. Or that she's a rabid collector of books and manuscripts."

"He didn't say."

"No matter. You said six suspects. Chip. I count seven."

I ticked them off. "Jon Corn-Wallace. Jayne Corn-Wallace. Zoltan Mihalyi. Philip Perigord. Edward Everett Stokes. Harriet Quinlan. Isn't that six? Or do you want to include our client, the little man with the palindromic first name? That seems farfetched to me, but.."

"The caterer. Chip."

"Oh. Well, he says she was just there to do a job. No interest in books, no interest in manuscripts, no real interest in the world of mysteries. Certainly no interest in Cornell Woolrich."

"And she stayed when her staff went home."

"To have a drink and be sociable. He had hopes she'd spend the night, but it didn't happen. I suppose technically she's a suspect, but..."

"At the very least she's a witness," he said. "Bring her."

"Bring her?"

He nodded. "Bring them all."

It's a shame this is a short story. If it were a novel, now would be the time for me to give you a full description of the off-street carriage house on West Twentieth Street, which Leo Haig owns and where he occupies the top two floors, having rented out the lower two stories to Madam Juana and her All-Girl Enterprise. You'd hear how Haig had lived for years in two rooms in the Bronx, breeding tropical fish and reading detective stories, until a modest inheritance allowed him to set up shop as a poor man's Nero Wolfe.

He's quirky, God knows, and I could fill a few pleasant pages recounting his quirks, including his having hired me as much for my writing ability as for my potential value as a detective. I'm expected to write up his cases the same way Archie Goodwin writes up Wolfe's, and this case was a slam-dunk, really, and he says it wouldn't stretch into a novel, but that it should work nicely as a short story.

So all I'll say is this. Haig's best quirk is his unshakable belief that Nero Wolfe exists. Under another name, of course, to protect his inviolable privacy. And the legendary brownstone, with all its different fictitious street numbers, isn't on West 35th Street at all but in another part of town entirely.

And someday, if Leo Haig performs with sufficient brilliance as a private investigator, he hopes to get the ultimate reward—an invitation to dinner at Nero Wolfe's table.

Well, that gives you an idea. If you want more in the way of background, I can only refer you to my previous writings on the subject. There have been two novels so far, *Make Out With Murder* and *The Topless Tulip Caper*, and they're full of inside stuff about Leo Haig. (There were two earlier books from before I met Haig, *No Score* and *Chip Harrison Scores Again*, but they're not mysteries and Haig's not in them. All they do, really, is tell you more than you'd probably care to know about me.)

Well, end of commercial. Haig said I should put it in, and I generally do what he tells me. After all, the man pays my salary.

And, in his own quiet way, he's a genius. As you'll see.

"They'll never come here," I told him. "Not today. I know it will always live in your memory as *The Day the Cichlids Spawned*, but to everybody else it's Christmas, and they'll want to spend it in the bosoms of their families, and ..."

"Not everyone has a family," he pointed out, "and not every family has a bosom."

"The Corn-Wallaces have a family. Zoltan Mihalyi doesn't, but he's probably got somebody with a bosom lined up to spend the day with. I don't know about the others, but..."

"Bring them," he said, "but not here. I want them all assembled at five o'clock this afternoon at the scene of the crime."

"The bookshop? You're willing to leave the house?"

"It's not entirely business," he said. "Our client is more than a client. He's a friend, and an important source of books. The reading copies he so disdains have enriched our own library immeasurably. And you know how important that is."

If there's anything you need to know, you can find it in the pages of a detective novel. That's Haig's personal conviction, and I'm beginning to believe he's right.

"I'll pay him a visit," he went on. "I'll arrive at 4:30 or so, and perhaps I'll come across a book or two that I'll want for our library. You'll arrange that they all arrive around five, and we'll clear up this little business." He frowned in thought. "I'll tell Wong we'll want Christmas dinner at eight tonight. That should give us more than enough time."

Again, if this were a novel, I'd spend a full chapter telling you what I went through getting them all present and accounted for. It was hard enough finding them, and then I had to sell them on coming. I pitched the event as a second stage of last night's party—their host had arranged, for their entertainment and edification, that they should be present while a real-life private detective solved an actual crime before their very eyes.

According to Haig, all we'd need to spin this yarn into a full-length book would be a dead body, although two would be better. If, say, our client had wandered into his library that morning to find a corpse seated in his favorite chair, *and* the Woolrich manuscript gone, then I could easily stretch all this to sixty thousand words. If the dead man had been wearing a deerstalker cap and holding a violin, we'd be especially well off; when the book came out, all the Sherlockian completists would be compelled to buy it.

Sorry. No murders, no Baker Street Irregulars, no dogs barking or not barking. I had to get them all there, and I did, but don't ask me how, I can't take the time to tell you.

"Now," Zoltan Mihalyi said. "We are all here. So can someone please tell me *why* we are all here?" There was a twinkle in his dark eyes as he spoke, and the trace of a knowing smile on his lips. He wanted an answer, but he was going to remain charming while he got it. I could believe he swept a lot of women off their feet.

"First of all," Jeanne Botleigh said, "I think we should each have a glass of eggnog. It's festive, and it will help put us all in the spirit of the day."

She was the caterer, and she was some cupcake, all right. Close-cut brown hair framed her small oval face and set off a pair of China-blue eyes. She had an English accent, roughed up some by ten years in New York, and she was short and slender and curvy, and I could see why our client had hoped she would stick around.

And now she'd whipped up a batch of eggnog, and ladled out cups for each of us. I waited until someone else tasted it—after all the mystery novels Haig's forced on me, I've developed an imagination—but once the Corn-Wallaces had tossed off theirs with no apparent effect, I took a sip. It was smooth and delicious, and it had a kick like a mule. I looked over at Haig, who's not much of a drinker, and he was smacking his lips over it.

"Why are we here?" he said, echoing the violinist's question. "Well, sir, I shall tell you. We are here as friends and customers of our host, whom we may be able to assist in the solution of a puzzle. Last night all of us, with the exception of course of myself and my young assistant, were present in this room. Also present was the original manuscript of an unpublished novel by Cornell Woolrich. This morning we were all gone, and so was the manuscript. Now we have returned. The manuscript alas, has not.

"Wait a minute," Jon Corn-Wallace said. "You're saying one of us took it?"

"I say only that it has gone, sir. It is possible that someone within this room was involved in its disappearance, but there are diverse other possibilities as well. What impels me, what has prompted me to summon you here, is the likelihood that one or more of you knows something that will shed light on the incident."

“But the only person who would know anything would be the person who took it,” Harriet Quinlan said. She was what they call a woman of an uncertain age. Her figure was a few pounds beyond girlish, and I had a hunch she dyed her hair and might have had her face lifted somewhere along the way, but whatever she’d done had paid off. She was probably old enough to be my mother’s older sister, but that didn’t keep me from having the sort of ideas a nephew’s not supposed to have.

Haig told her anyone could have observed something, and not just the guilty party, and Philip Perigord started to ask a question, and Haig held up a hand and cut him off in mid-sentence. Most people probably would have finished what they were saying, but I guess Perigord was used to studio executives shutting him up at pitch meetings. He bit off his word in the middle of a syllable and stayed mute.

“It is a holiday,” Haig said, “and we all have other things to do, so we’d better avoid distraction. Hence I will ask the questions and you will answer them. Mr. Corn-Wallace. You are a book collector. Have you given a thought to collecting manuscripts?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Jon Corn-Wallace said. He was the best-dressed man in the room, looking remarkably comfortable in a dark blue suit and a striped tie. He wore bull and bear cufflinks and one of those watches that’s worth \$5000 if it’s real or \$25 if you bought it from a Nigerian street vendor. “He tried to get me interested,” he said, with a nod toward our client. “But I was always the kind of trader who stuck to listed stocks.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning it’s impossible to pinpoint the market value of a one-of-a-kind item like a manuscript. There’s too much guesswork involved. I’m not buying books with an eye to selling them, that’s something my heirs will have to worry about, but I do like to know what my collection is worth and whether or not it’s been a good investment. It’s part of the pleasure of collecting, as far as I’m concerned. So I’ve stayed away from manuscripts. They’re too iffy.”

“And had you had a look at *As Dark As It Gets*?”

“No. I’m not interested in manuscripts, and I don’t care at all for Woolrich.”

“Jon likes hardboiled fiction,” his wife put in, “but Woolrich is a little weird for his taste. I think he was a genius myself. Quirky and tormented, maybe, but what genius isn’t?”

Haig, I thought. You couldn’t call him tormented, but maybe he made up for it by exceeding the usual quota of quirkiness.

“Anyway,” Jayne Corn-Wallace said, “I’m the Woolrich fan in the family. Though I agree with Jon as far as manuscripts are concerned. The value is pure speculation. And who wants to buy something and then have to get a box made for it? It’s like buying an unframed canvas and having to get it framed.”

“The Woolrich manuscript was already boxed,” Haig pointed out.

“I mean generally, as an area for collecting. As a collector, I wasn’t interested in *As Dark As It Gets*. If someone fixed it up and completed it, and if someone published it, I’d have been glad to buy it. I’d have bought two copies.”

“Two copies, madam?”

She nodded. “One to read and one to own.”

Haig’s face darkened, and I thought he might offer his opinion of people who were afraid to damage their books by reading them. But he kept it to himself, and I was just as glad. Jayne Corn-Wallace was a

tall, handsome woman, radiating self-confidence, and I sensed she'd give as good as she got in an exchange with Haig.

"You might have wanted to read the manuscript," Haig suggested.

She shook her head. "I like Woolrich," she said, "but as a stylist he was choppy enough *after* editing and polishing. I wouldn't want to try him in manuscript, let alone an unfinished manuscript like that one."

Mr. Mihalyi," Haig said. "You collect manuscripts, don't you?"

"I do."

"And do you care for Woolrich?"

The violinist smiled. "If I had the chance to buy the original manuscript of *The Bride Wore Black*" he said, "I would leap at it. If it were close at hand, and if strong drink had undermined my moral fiber, I might even slip it under my coat and walk off with it." A wink showed us he was kidding. "Or at least I'd have been tempted. The work in question, however, tempted me not a whit."

"And why is that, sir?"

Mihalyi frowned. "There are people," he said, "who attend open rehearsals and make surreptitious recordings of the music. They treasure them and even bootleg them to other like-minded fans' I despise such people."

"Why?"

"They violate the artist's privacy," he said. "A rehearsal is a time when one refines one's approach to a piece of music. One takes chances, one uses the occasion as the equivalent of an artist's sketch pad. The person who records it is in essence spraying a rough sketch with fixative and hanging it on the wall of his personal museum. I find it unsettling enough that listeners record concert performances, making permanent what was supposed to be a transitory experience. But to record a rehearsal is an atrocity."

"And a manuscript?"

"A manuscript is the writer's completed work. It provides a record of how he arranged and revised his ideas, and how they were in turn adjusted for better or worse by an editor, But it is finished work. An unfinished manuscript..."

"Is a rehearsal?"

"That or something worse. I ask myself, what would Woolrich have wanted?"

"Another drink," Edward Everett Stokes said, and leaned forward to help himself to more eggnog. "I take your point, Mihalyi. And Woolrich might well have preferred to have his unfinished work destroyed upon his death, but he left no instructions to that effect, so how can we presume to guess his wishes? Perhaps, for all we know, there is a single scene in the book that meant as much to him as anything he'd written. Or less than a scene—a bit of dialogue, a paragraph of description, perhaps no more than a single sentence. Who are we to say it should not survive?"

"Perigord," Mihalyi said. "You are a writer. Would you care to have your unfinished work published after your death? Would you not recoil at that, or at having it completed by others?"

Philip Perigord cocked an eyebrow, "I'm the wrong person to ask," he said. "I've spent twenty years in Hollywood. Forget unfinished work. My *finished* work doesn't get published, or 'produced,' as they so revealingly term it. I get paid, and the work winds up on a shelf. And, when it comes to having one's

work completed by others, in Hollywood you don't have to wait until you're dead. It happens during your lifetime, and you learn to live with it."

"We don't know the author's wishes," Harriet Quinlan put in, "and I wonder how relevant they are."

"But it's his work," Mihalyi pointed out.

"Is it, Zoltan? Or does it belong to the ages? Finished or not, the author has left it to us. Schubert did not finish one of his greatest symphonies. Would you have laid its two completed movements in the casket with him?"

"It has been argued that the work was complete, that he intended it to be but two movements long."

"That begs the question, Zoltan."

"It does, dear lady," he said with a wink. "I'd rather beg the question than be undone by it. Of course, I'd keep the Unfinished Symphony in the repertoire. On the other hand, I'd hate to see some fool attempt to finish it."

"No one has, have they?"

"Not to my knowledge. But several writers have had the effrontery to finish *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and I do think Dickens would have been better served if the manuscript had gone in the box with his bones. And as for sequels, like those for *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Big Sleep*, or that young fellow who had the colossal gall to tread in Rex Stout's immortal footsteps."

Now we were getting onto sensitive ground. As far as Leo Haig was concerned, Archie Goodwin had always written up Wolfe's cases, using the transparent pseudonym of Rex Stout. (Rex Stout = fat king, an allusion to Wolfe's own regal corpulence.) Robert Goldsborough, credited with the books written since the "death" of Stout, was, as Haig saw it, a ghostwriter employed by Goodwin, who was no longer up to the chore of hammering out the books. He'd relate them to Goldsborough, who transcribed them and polished them up. While they might not have all the narrative verve of Goodwin's own work, still they provided an important and accurate account of Wolfe's more recent cases.

See, Haig feels the great man's still alive and still raising orchids and nailing killers. Maybe in Murray Hill, or just off Gramercy Park...

The discussion about Goldsborough, and about sequels in general, roused Haig from a torpor that Wolfe himself might have envied. "Enough," he said with authority. "There's no time for meandering literary conversations, not would Chip have room for them in a short-story-length report. So let us get to it. One of you took the manuscript, box and all, from its place on the shelf. Mr. Mihalyi, you have the air of one who protests too much. You profess no interest in the manuscripts of unpublished novels, and I can accept that you did not yearn to possess *As Dark As It Gets*, but you wanted a look at it, didn't you?"

"I don't own a Woolrich manuscript," he said, "and of course I was interested in seeing what one looked like. How he typed, how he entered corrections..."

"So you took the manuscript from the shelf."

"Yes," the violinist agreed. "I went into the other room with it, opened the box and flipped through the pages. You can taste the flavor of the man's work in the visual appearance of his manuscript pages. The words and phrases x'd out, the pencil notations, the crossovers, even the typographical errors. The computer age puts paid to all that doesn't it? Imagine Chandler running Spell Check, or Hammett with

justified margins.” He sighed. “A few minutes with the script make me long to own one of Woolrich’s. But not this one, for reasons I’ve already explained.”

“You spent how long with the book?”

“Fifteen minutes at the most. Probably more like ten.”

“And returned to this room?”

“Yes.”

“And brought the manuscript with you?”

“Yes. I intended to return it to the shelf, but someone was standing in the way. It may have been you, Jon. It was someone tall, and you’re the tallest person here.” He turned to our client. “It wasn’t you. But I think you may have been talking with Jon. Someone was, at any rate, and I’d have had to step between the two of you to put the box back, and that might have led to questions as to why I’d picked it up in the first place. So I put it down.”

“Where?”

“On a table. That one, I think.”

“It’s not there now,” Jon Corn-Wallace said.

“It’s not,” Haig agreed. “One of you took it from that table. I could, through an exhausting process of cross-questioning, establish who that person is. But it would save us all time if the person would simply recount what happened next.”

There was a silence while they all looked at each other. “Well, I guess this is where I come in,” Jayne Corn-Wallace said. “I was sitting in the red chair, where Phil Perigord is sitting now. And whoever I’d been talking to went to get another drink, and I looked around, and there it was on the table.”

“The manuscript, madam?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know that was what it was, not at first. I thought it was a finely bound limited edition. Because the manuscripts are all kept on that shelf, you know, and this one wasn’t. And it hadn’t been on the table a few minutes earlier, earlier, either. I knew that much. So I assumed it was a book someone had been leafing through, and I saw it was by Cornell Woolrich, and I didn’t recognize the title, so I thought I’d try leafing through it myself.”

“And you found it was a manuscript.”

“Well, that didn’t take too keen an eye, did it? I suppose I glanced at the first twenty pages, just riffled through them while the party went on around me. I stopped after a chapter or so. That was plenty.”

“You didn’t like what you read?”

“There were corrections,” she said disdainfully. “Words and whole sentences crossed out, new words penciled in. I realize writers have to work that way, but when I read a book I like to believe it emerged from the writer’s mind fully formed.”

“Like Athena from the brow of What’s-his-name,” her husband said.

“Zeus. I don’t want to know there was a writer at work, making decisions, putting words down and then changing them. I want to forget about the writer entirely and lose myself in the story.”

“Everybody wants to forget about the writer,” Philip Perigord said, helping himself to more eggnog. “At the Oscars each hear some ninny intones, ‘In the beginning was the Word,’ before he hands out the screenwriting awards. And you hear the usual crap about how they owe it all to chaps like me who put

words in their mouths. They say it, but nobody believes it. Jack Warner called us schmucks with Underwoods. Well, we've come a long way. Now we're schmucks with Power Macs."

"Indeed," Haig said. "You looked at the manuscript, didn't you, Mr. Perigord?"

"I never read unpublished work. Can't risk leaving myself open to a plagiarism charge."

"Oh? But didn't you have a special interest in Woolrich? Didn't you once adapt a story of his?"

"How did you know about that? I was one of several who made a living off that particular piece of crap. It was never produced."

"And you looked at this manuscript in the hope that you might adapt it?"

The writer shook his head. "I'm through wasting myself out there."

"They're through with you, "Harriet Quinlan said. "Nothing personal, Phil, but it's a town that uses up writers and throws them away. You couldn't get arrested out there. So you've come back east to write books."

"And you'll be representing him, madam?"

"I may, if he brings me something I can sell. I saw him paging through a manuscript and figured he was looking for something he could steal. Oh, don't look so outraged, Phil. Why not steal from Woolrich, for God's sake? He's not going to sue. He left everything to Columbia University, and you could knock off anything of his, published or unpublished, and they'd never know the difference. Ever since I was you reading, I've been wondering. Did you come across anything worth stealing?"

"I don't steal, Perigord said. "Still, perfectly legitimate inspiration *can* result from a glance at another man's work.."

"I'll say it can. And did it?"

He shook his head. "If there was a strong idea anywhere in that manuscript, I couldn't find it in the few minutes I spent looking. What about you, Harriet? I know you had a look at it, because I saw you."

"I just wanted to see what it was you'd been so caught up in. And I wondered if the manuscript might be salvageable. One of my writers might be able to pull it off, and do a better job than the hack who finished *Into the Night*."

"Ah," Haig said. "And what did you determine, madam?"

"I didn't read enough to form a judgment. Anyway, *Into the Night* was not great commercial success, so why tag along in its wake?"

"So you put the manuscript..."

"Back in its box, and left it on the table where I'd found it."

Our client shook his head in wonder. "*Murder on the Orient Express*," he said. "Or in the Calais coach, depending on whether you're English or American. It's beginning to look as though *everyone* read that manuscript. And I never noticed a thing!"

"Well, you were hitting the sauce pretty good," Jon Corn-Wallace reminded him. "And you were, uh, concentrating all your social energy in one direction."

"How's that?"

Corn-Wallace nodded toward Jeanne Botleigh, who was refilling someone's cup. "As far as you were concerned, our lovely caterer was the only person in the room."

There was an awkward silence, with our host coloring and his caterer lowering her eyes demurely. Haig broke it. "To continue," he said abruptly. "Miss Quinlan returned the manuscript to its box and to its place upon the table. Then..."

"But she didn't," Perigord said. "Harriet, I wanted another look at Woolrich. Maybe I'd missed something. But first I saw you reading it, and when I looked a second time it was gone. You weren't reading it and it wasn't on the table, either."

"I put it back," the agent said.

"But not where you found it," said Edward Everett Stokes. "You set it down not on the table but on that revolving bookcase."

"Did I? I suppose it's possible. But how did you know that?"

"Because I saw you," said the small press publisher. "And because I wanted a look at the manuscript myself. I knew about it, including the fact that it was not restorable in the fashion of *Into the Night*. That made it valueless to a commercial publisher, but the idea of a Woolrich novel going unpublished ate away at me. I mean, we're talking about Cornell Woolrich."

"And you thought..."

"I thought why not publish it as is, warts and all? I could do it, in an edition of two or three hundred copies, for collectors who'd happily accept inconsistencies and omissions for the sake of having something otherwise unobtainable. I wanted a few minutes peace and quiet with the book, so I took it into the lavatory."

"And?"

"And I read it, or at least paged through it. I must have spent half an hour in there, or close to it."

"I remember you were gone a while," Jon Corn-Wallace said. "I thought you'd headed on home."

"I thought he was in the other room," Jayne said, "cavorting on the pile of coats with Harriet here. But I guess that must have been someone else."

"It was Zoltan," the agent said, "and we were hardly cavorting."

"Canoodling, then, but..."

"He was teaching me a yogic breathing technique, not that it's any of your business. Stokes, you took the manuscript into the John. I trust you brought it back?"

"Well, no."

"You took it home? You're the person responsible for its disappearance?"

"Certainly not. I didn't take it home, and I hope I'm not responsible for its disappearance. I left it in the lavatory."

"You just left it there?"

"In its box, on the shelf over the vanity. I set it down there while I washed my hands, and I'm afraid I forgot it. And no, it's not there now. I went and looked as soon as I realized what all this was about, and I'm afraid some other hands than mine must have moved it. I'll tell you this—when it does turn up, I definitely want to publish it."

"If it turns up," our client said darkly. "Once E.E. left it in the bathroom, anyone could have slipped it under his coat without being seen. And I'll probably never see it again."

"But that means one of us is a thief," somebody said.

"I know, and that's out of the question. You're all my friends. But we were all drinking last night, and drink can confuse a person. Suppose one of you did take it from the bathroom and carried it home as a joke, the kind of joke that can seem funny after a few drinks. If you could contrive to return it, perhaps in such a way that no one could know your identity...Haig, you ought to be able to work that out."

"I could," Haig agreed, "if that were how it happened. But it didn't."

"It didn't?"

"You forget the least obvious suspect."

"Me? Dammit, Haig, are you saying I stole my own manuscript?"

"I'm saying the butler did it," Haig said, "or the closest thing we have to a butler. Miss Botleigh, your upper lip has been trembling almost since we all sat down. You've been on the point of admission throughout and haven't said a word. Have you in fact read the manuscript of *As Dark As It Gets*?"

"Yes."

The client gasped. "You have? When?"

"Last night."

"But..."

"I had to use the lavatory," she said, "and the book was there, although I could see it wasn't an ordinary bound book but pages in a box. I didn't think I would hurt it by looking at it. So I sat there and read the first two chapters."

"What did you think?" Haig asked her.

"It was very powerful. Parts of it were hard to follow, but the scenes were strong, and I got caught up in them."

"That's Woolrich," Jayne Corn-Wallace said. "He can grab you, all right."

"And then you took it with you when you went home," our client said. "You were so involved you couldn't bear to leave it unfinished, so you, uh, borrowed it." He reached to pat her hand. "Perfectly understandable," he said, "and perfectly innocent. You were going to bring it back once you'd finished it. So all this fuss has been over nothing."

"That's not what happened."

"It's not?"

"I read two chapters," she said, "and I thought I'd ask to borrow it some other time, or maybe not. But I put the pages back in the box and left them there."

"In the bathroom?"

"Yes."

"So you never did finish the book," our client said. "Well, if it ever turns up I'll be more than happy to lend it to you, but until then..."

"But perhaps Miss Botleigh has already finished the book," Haig suggested.

"How could she? She just told you she left it in the bathroom."

Haig said, "Miss Botleigh?"

"I finished the book," she said. "When everybody else went home, I stayed."

"My word," Zoltan Mihalyi said. "Woolrich never had a more devoted fan, or one half so beautiful."

"Not to finish the manuscript," she said, and turned to our host. "You asked me to stay," she said.

"I *wanted* you to stay," he agreed. "I wanted to *ask* you to stay. But I don't remember..."

"I guess you'd had quite a bit to drink," she said, "although you didn't show it. But you asked me to stay, and I'd been hoping you would ask me, because I wanted to stay."

"You must have had rather a lot to drink yourself," Harriet Quinlan murmured.

"Not that much," said the caterer. "I wanted to stay because he's a very attractive man."

Our client positively glowed, then turned red with embarrassment. "I knew I had a hole in my memory," he said, "but I didn't think anything significant could have fallen through it. So you actually stayed? God. What, uh happened?"

"We went upstairs," Jeanne Botleigh said. "And we went to the bedroom, and we went to bed."

"Indeed," said Haig.

"And it was..."

"Quite wonderful," she said.

"And I don't remember. I think I'm going to kill myself."

"Not on Christmas Day," E.E. Stokes said. "And not with a mystery still unsolved. Haig, what became of the bloody manuscript?"

"Miss Botleigh?"

She looked at our host, then lowered her eyes. "You went to sleep afterward," she said, "and I felt entirely energized, and knew I couldn't sleep, and I thought I'd read for a while. And I remembered the manuscript, so I came down here and fetched it."

"And read it?"

"In bed. I thought you might wake up, in fact I was hoping you would, but you didn't."

"Damn it," our client said, with feeling.

"So I finished the manuscript and still didn't feel sleepy. And I got dressed and let myself out and went home."

There was a silence, broken at length by Zoltan Mihalyi, offering our client congratulations on his triumph and sympathy for the memory loss. "When you write your memoirs," he said, "you'll have to leave that chapter blank."

"Or have someone ghost it for you," Philip Perigord offered.

"The manuscript," Stokes said. "What became of it?"

"I don't know," the caterer said. "I finished it..."

"Which is more that Woolrich could say," Jayne Corn-Wallace said.

"—and I left it there."

"There?"

"In its box. On the bedside table, where you'd be sure to find it first thing in the morning. But I guess you didn't."

"The manuscript? Haig, you're telling me you want the *manuscript*?"

"You find my fee excessive?"

"But it wasn't even lost. No one took it. It was next to my bed. I'd have found it sooner or later."

“But you didn’t,” Haig said. “Not until you’d cost me and my young associate the better part of our holiday. You’ve been reading mysteries all your life. Now you got to see one solved in front of you, and in your own magnificent library.”

He brightened. “It is a nice room, isn’t it?”

“It’s first-rate.”

“Thanks. But Haig, listen to reason. You did solve the puzzle and recover the manuscript, but now you’re demanding what you recovered as compensation. That’s like rescuing a kidnap victim and insisting on adopting the child yourself.”

“Nonsense. It’s nothing like that.”

“All right, then it’s like recovering stolen jewels and demanding the jewels themselves as reward. It’s just plain disproportionate. I hired you because I wanted the manuscript in my collection, and now you expect to wind up with it in *your* collection.”

It did sound a little weird to me, but I kept my mouth shut. Haig had the ball, and I wanted to see where he’d go with it.

He put his fingertips together. “In *Black Orchids*,” he said, “Wolfe’s client was his friend Lewis Hewitt. As recompense for his work, Wolfe insisted on all of the black orchid plants Hewitt had bred. Not one. All of them.”

“That always seemed greedy to me.”

“If we were speaking of fish,” Haig went on, “I might be similarly inclined. But books are of use to me only as reading material. I want to *read* that book, sir, and I want to have it close to hand if I need to refer to it.” He shrugged. “But I don’t need the original that you prize so highly. Make me a copy.”

“A copy?”

“Indeed. Have the manuscript photocopied.”

“You’d be content with a...a copy?”

“And a credit,” I said quickly, before Haig could give away the store. We’d put in a full day, and he ought to get more than a few hours reading out of it. “A two thousand dollar store credit,” I added, “which Mr. Haig can use up as he sees fit.”

“Buying paperbacks and book-club editions,” our client said. “It should last you for years.” He heaved a sigh. “A photocopy and a store credit. Well, if that makes you happy...”

And that pretty much wrapped it up. I ran straight home and sat down at the typewriter, and if the story seems a little hurried it’s because I was in a rush when I wrote it. See, our client tried for a second date with Jeanne Botleigh, to refresh his memory, I suppose, but a woman tends to feel less than flattered when you forget having gone to bed with her, and she wasn’t having any.

So I called her the minute I got home, and we talked about this and that, and we’ve got a date in an hour and a half, I’ll tell you this much, if I get lucky, I’ll remember. So wish me luck, huh?

And, by the way...

Merry Christmas!

A CHRISTMAS STORY

A true story by Jay Frankston
(Submitted by Diane Schow)

There's nothing so beautiful as a child's dream of Santa Claus. I know, I often had that dream. But I was Jewish and we didn't celebrate Christmas. It was everyone else's holiday and I felt left out...like a big party I wasn't invited to. It wasn't the toys I missed, it was Santa Claus and a Christmas tree.

So when I got married and had kids I decided to make up for it. I started with a seven-foot tree, all decked out with lights and tinsel and a Star of David on top to sooth those whose Jewish feelings were frayed by the display and, for them, it was a Hanukah bush. And it warmed my heart to see the glitter, because not the party was at my house and everyone was invited.

But something was missing, something big and round and jolly, with jingle bells and a ho! ho! ho! So I bought a bolt of bright red cloth and strips of white fur and my wife made me a costume. Inflatable pillows rounded out my skinny frame, but no amount of makeup could turn my face into merry old Santa.

I went around looking at department store impersonations sitting on their thrones with children on their laps and flash-bulbs going off, and I wasn't satisfied with the way they looked either.

After much effort I located a mask maker and he had just the thing for me, a rubberized Santa mask, complete with whiskers and flowing white hair. It was not the real thing but it looked genuine enough to live up to a child's dream of St. Nick.

When I tried it on something happened. I looked in the mirror and there he was, big as life, the Santa of my childhood. There he was...and it was me. I felt like Santa, like I became Santa. My posture changed. I leaned back and pushed out my false stomach. My head tilted to the side and my voice got deeper and richer and a **"MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE."**

For two years I played Santa for my children to their mixed feeling of fright and delight and to my total enjoyment. And when the third year rolled around, the Santa in me had grown into a personality of his own and he needed more room than I had given him. So I sought to accommodate him by letting him do his thing for other children. I called up orphanages and children's hospitals and offered his services free. But, "We don't need Santa, we have all sorts of donations from foundations and...thank you for calling." And the Santa in me felt lonely and useless.

Then, one late November afternoon, I went to the mailbox on the corner of the street to mail a letter and saw this pretty little girl trying to reach for the slot. She was maybe six years old. "Mommy, are you sure Santa will get my letter?" she asked. "Well, you addressed it to Santa Claus, North Pole, so he should get it," the mother said and lifted her little girl so she could stuff the letter into the box. My mind

began to whirl. All those thousands of children who wrote to Santa Claus at Christmas time, whatever became of their letters?

One phone call to the main post office answered my question. They told me that, as of the last week of November, an entire floor of the post office was needed to store those letters in huge sacks that came from different sections of the city.

The Santa in me went ho! ho! ho! and we headed down to the post office. And there they were, thousands upon thousands of letters, with or without stamps, addressed to Santi Claus, or St. Nick, or Kris Kringle, scribbled on wrapping paper or neatly written on pretty stationary. And I rummaged through them and laughed. Most of them were gimme, gimme, gimme letters, like "I want a pair of roller skates, and a Nintendo, and a GI Joe, and a personal computer, and a small portable TV, and whatever else you can think of." Many of them had the price alongside each item...with or without sales tax.

Then there were the funny ones like: "Dear Santa, I've been a good boy all of last year, but if I don't get what I want, I'll be a bad boy all of next."

And I became a little flustered at the demands and the greed of so many spoiled children. But the Santa in me heard a voice from inside the mail sack and I continued going through the letters, one after the other, until I came upon one which jarred and unsettled me.

It was neatly written on plain white paper and it said: "Dear Santa, I hope you get my letter. I am eleven years old and I have two little brothers and a baby sister. My father died last year and my mother is sick. I know there are many who are poorer than we are and I want nothing for myself, but could you send us a blanket, cause mommy's cold at night." It was signed Suzy. And a chill went up my spine and The Santa in me cried, "I hear you Suzy. I hear you. And I dug deeper into those sacks and came up with another eight such letters, all of them calling out from the depth of poverty. I took them with me and went straight to the nearest Western Union office and sent each child a telegram: "GOT YOU LETTER. WILL BE AT YOUR HOUSE ON CHRISTMAS DAY. WAIT FOR ME. SANTA." I knew I could not possibly fill the need of all those children and it wasn't my purpose to do so. But if I could bring them hope. If I could make them feel that their cries did not go unheard and that someone out there was listening...So I budgeted a sum of money and went out and bought toys. I wasn't content with the five-and-ten cent variety. I wanted something substantial, something these children could only dream of, like an electric train, or a microscope, or a huge doll of the kind they was advertised on TV.

And on Christmas Day I took out my sleigh and let Santa do his thing. Well, it wasn't exactly a sleigh, it was a car and my wife drove me around because with all those pillows and toys I barely managed to get in the back seat. It had graciously snowed the night before and the streets were thick with fresh powder. My first call took me to the outskirts of the city. The letter had been from a Peter Barsky and all it said was: "Dear Santa, I am ten years old and I am an only child. We've just moved to this house a

few months ago and I have no friends yet. I'm not sad because I'm poor but because I'm lonely. I know you have many things to do and people to see and you probably have no time for me. So I don't ask you to come to my house or bring anything. But could you send me a letter so I know you exist." My telegram read: "DEAR PETER, NOT ONLY DO I EXIST BUT I'LL BE THERE ON CHRISTMAS DAY. WAIT FOR ME. SANTA."

We spotted the house and drove past it and parked around the corner. Then Santa got out with his big bag of toys slung over his shoulder and tramped through the snow.

The house was wedged in between two tall buildings. The roof was of corrugated metal and it was more of a shack than a house. I walked through the gate, up the front steps and rang the bell. A man opened the door. He was in his undershirt and his stomach bulged out of his pants. "Boje moy" he exclaimed in astonishment. That's Polish, by the way, and his hand went to his face. "P-p-please..." he stuttered, "p-please...de boy...de boy...at mass...church. I go get him. Please, please wait." And he threw a coat over his bare shoulders and, assured that I would wait, he ran down the street in the snow.

So I stood in front of the house feeling good, and on the opposite side of the street was this other shack, and through the window I could see these shiny black faces peering at me and waving. Then the door opened shyly and some voices called out to me "Hya Santa"... "Hya Santa."

And I ho! ho! hoed my way over there and this woman asked if I would come in and I did. And there were these five young kids from one to seven years old. And I sat and spoke to them of Santa and the spirit of love which is the spirit of Christmas.

Then, since they were not on my list, but assuming from the torn Christmas wrappings that they had gotten their presents, I asked if they liked what Santa had brought them during the night. And each in turn thanked me for...the woolen socks, and the sweater, and the warm new underwear.

And I looked at them and asked: "Didn't I bring you kids any toys?" And they shook their heads sadly. "Ho! ho! ho! I slipped up," I said "We'll have to fix that." I told them to wait, I'd be back in a few minutes, then trudged heavily through the snow to the corner. And when I was out of their sight, I ran as fast as I could to the car. We had extra toys in the trunk and my wife quickly filled up the bag, and I trodded back to the house and gave each child a brand new toy. There was joy and laughter and the woman asked if she could take a picture of Santa with the kids and I said, sure, why not?

And when Santa got ready to leave, I noticed that this five-year-old little girl was crying. She was as cute as a button. I bent down and asked her "What's the matter, child?" And she sobbed, "Oh! Santa, I'm so happy." And the tears rolled from my eyes under the rubber mask.

As I stepped out on the street, "Pan, pan, proche...please come...come," I heard this man Barsky across the way. And Santa crossed and walked into the house. The boy Peter just stood there and looked at

me. "You came," he said. "I wrote and...you came." He turned to his parents. "I wrote...and he came." And he repeated it over and over again. "I wrote...and he came." And when he recovered, I spoke with him about loneliness and friendship, and gave him a chemistry set, which seemed to be what he would go for, and a basketball. And he thanked me profusely. And his mother, a heavy-set Slavic-looking woman, asked something of her husband in Polish. My parents were Polish so I speak a little and understand a lot. "From the North Pole," I said in Polish. She looked at me in astonishment. "You speak Polish?" she asked. "Of course," I said. "Santa speaks all languages." And I left them in joy and wonder.

And I did this for twelve years, going through the letters to Santa at the post office, listening for the cries of children muffled in unopened envelopes.

In time I learned all that Santa has to know to handle any situation. Like the big kid who would stop Santa on the street and ask: "Hey, Santa, where's your sleigh?" And I'd say, "How old are you son?" And he'd say, "Thirteen." And I'd say, "Well, you're a big fellow and you ought to know better. Santa used to come in a sleigh many years ago, but these are modern times. I come in a car now." And I'd hop in the back seat and my wife would drive off.

Or the kid who would look at me closely and come out with, "That's a mask," pointing a finger. And you never lie to children so I'd say, "Sure, son, of course. I everybody knew what Santa really looks like they'd bother me all year long and I couldn't get my things ready for Christmas."

Or the mother who would whisper so her young son couldn't hear, "Where do you come from?" I'd turn to the child and say, "Your mom wants to know where I come from Willy." And he'd say, "From the North Pole, Mommy," with absolute certainty. And she'd nudge me and whisper, "You don't understand. Who sent you? I mean, how do you come to this house?" I'd turn to the boy and say, "Hey, Willy, your mom wants to know why I came to see you." And he'd say, "Cause I wrote him a letter, Mommy." And I'd pull out the letter and she knows she mailed it, and she's confused and bewildered and I'd leave her like that.

As time went on, the word got out about Santa Claus and me, and I insisted on anonymity, but toy manufacturers would send me huge cartons of toys as a contribution to the Christmas spirit. So I started with 18 or 20 children and wound up with 120, door to door, from one end of the city to the other, from Christmas Eve through Christmas Day.

And on my last call, a number of years ago I knew there were four children in the family and I came prepared. The house was small and sparsely furnished. The kids had been waiting all day, staring at the telegram and repeating to their skeptical mother, "He'll come, Mommy, he'll come." And as I rang the doorbell the house lit up with joy and laughter and "He's here...he's here!" And the doors swings open and they all reach for my hands and hold on. "Hya, Santa...Hya Santa. We just knew you'd come."

And these poor kids are all beaming with happiness. And I take each one of them on my lap and speak to them of rainbows and snowflakes, and tell them stories of hope and waiting and give them each a toy.

And all the while there's this fifth child standing in the corner, a cute little girl with blond hair and blue eyes. And when I'm through with the others, I turn to her and say: "You're not part of this family are you?" And she shakes her head sadly and whispers, "No." "Come closer, child," I say, and she comes a little closer. "What's your name?" I ask. "Lisa." "How old are you?" "Seven." "Come, sit on my lap," and she hesitates but she comes over and I lift her up and sit her on my lap. "Did you get any toys for Christmas?" I ask. "No," she says with puckered lips. So I take out this big beautiful doll and, "Here, do you want this doll?" "No," she says. And she leans over to me and whispers in my ear. "I'm Jewish." And I nudge her and whisper in her ear, "I'm Jewish too. Do you want this doll?" And she's grinning from ear to ear and nods with wanting and desire, and takes the doll and hugs it and runs out.

It's been a long time since I last put on my Santa suit. But I feel that Santa has lived with me and given me a great deal of happiness all those years. And now, when Christmas rolls around, he comes out of hiding long enough to say, "Ho! ho! ho! A Merry Christmas to you, my friend."

And I say to you now, MERRY CHRISTMAS MY FRIENDS.

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS STORY
by Unknown
(Submitted by Diane Schow)

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 Christmas tree for the last ten years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it, overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute for a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Granny. The gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to by-pass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way. Our son, Kevin, who was twelve that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the School he attended shortly before Christmas, there was a match scheduled against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly Black young boys. These youngsters dressed in sneakers so ragged that the shoestrings were 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 the other team was wrestling without headgear, a light helmet to protect the head and ears. It was a luxury the rag-tag team just could not afford! We ended up walloping the team, took every weight class. As each of the boys got up off the mat, he swaggered 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 of won. 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 is when the idea for the present came. That afternoon, I went to the 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 is was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and the succeeding years since. For each Christmas I have followed that tradition. One year sending a group of mentally handicapped to a hockey game, another year sending a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home burnt down 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 and such, would stand wide eyed in anticipation as their dad would reach for the envelope and reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical gifts, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year. When Christmas rolled around, I was still wrapped up in grief, I barely got the tree up. But there I was on Christmas-eve placing that envelope. When I came down in the morning my envelope had been joined by three others! Each of our children, unbeknownst to me and the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown, and will someday expand even further with our grandchildren standing around their tree in anticipation as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

CHRISTMAS AT THE GAS STATION

By Unknown

The old man sat in his gas station on a cold Christmas Eve. He hadn't been anywhere in years since his wife had passed away. It was just another day to him. He didn't hate Christmas, just couldn't find a reason to celebrate. He was sitting there looking at the snow that had been falling for the last hour and wondering what it was all about when the door opened and a homeless man stepped through.

Instead of throwing the man out, Old George, as he was known by his customers, told the man to come and sit by the heater and warm up. "Thank you, but I don't mean to intrude," said the stranger. "I see you're busy, I'll just go."

"Not without something hot in your belly." George said.

He turned and opened a wide mouth Thermos and handed it to the stranger. "It ain't much, but it's hot and tasty. Stew ... Made it myself. When you're done, there's coffee and it's fresh."

Just at that moment he heard the "ding" of the driveway bell. "Excuse me, be right back," George said. There in the driveway was an old '53 Chevy. Steam was rolling out of the front. The driver was panicked. "Mister can you help me!" said the driver, with a deep Spanish accent. "My wife is with child and my car is broken." George opened the hood. It was bad. The block looked cracked from the cold, the car was dead.

"You ain't going in this thing," George said as he turned away.

"But Mister, please help ..." The door of the office closed behind George as he went inside. He went to the office wall and got the keys to his old truck, and went back outside. He walked around the building, opened the garage, started the truck and drove it around to where the couple was waiting. "Here, take my truck," he said. "She ain't the best thing you ever looked at, but she runs real good."

George helped put the woman in the truck and watched as it sped off into the night. He turned and walked back inside the office. "Glad I gave 'em the truck, their tires were shot too. That 'ol truck has brand new ." George thought he was talking to the stranger, but the man had gone. The Thermos was on the desk, empty, with a used coffee cup beside it. "Well, at least he got something in his belly," George thought.

George went back outside to see if the old Chevy would start. It cranked slowly, but it started. He pulled it into the garage where the truck had been. He thought he would tinker with it for something to do. Christmas Eve meant no customers. He discovered that the block hadn't cracked, it was just the bottom hose on the radiator. "Well, shoot, I can fix this," he said to Himself. So he put a new one on.

"Those tires ain't gonna get 'em through the winter either." He took the snow treads off of his wife's old Lincoln. They were like new and he wasn't going to drive the car anyway.

As he was working, he heard shots being fired. He ran outside and beside a police car an officer lay on the cold ground. Bleeding from the left shoulder, the officer moaned, "Please help me."

George helped the officer inside as he remembered the training he had received in the Army as a medic. He knew the wound needed attention. "Pressure to stop the bleeding," he thought. The uniform company had been there that morning and had left clean shop towels. He used those and duct tape to bind the wound. "Hey, they say duct tape can fix anythin'," he said, trying to make the policeman feel at ease.

"Something for pain," George thought. All he had was the pills he used for his back. "These ought to work." He put some water in a cup and gave the policeman the pills. "You hang in there, I'm going to get you an ambulance."

The phone was dead. "Maybe I can get one of your buddies on that there talk box out in your car." He went out only to find that a bullet had gone into the dashboard destroying the two way radio.

He went back in to find the policeman sitting up. "Thanks," said the officer. "You could have left me there. The guy that shot me is still in the area."

George sat down beside him, "I would never leave an injured man in the Army and I ain't gonna leave you." George pulled back the bandage to check for bleeding. "Looks worse than what it is. Bullet passed right through 'ya. Good thing it missed the important stuff though. I think with time your gonna be right as rain."

George got up and poured a cup of coffee. "How do you take it?" he asked.

"None for me," said the officer.

"Oh, yer gonna drink this. Best in the city. Too bad I ain't got no donuts." The officer laughed and winced at the same time.

The front door of the office flew open. In burst a young man with a gun. "Give me all your cash! Do it now!" the young man yelled. His hand was shaking and George could tell that he had never done anything like this before.

"That's the guy that shot me!" exclaimed the officer.

"Son, why are you doing this?" asked George, "You need to put the cannon away. Somebody else might get hurt."

The young man was confused. "Shut up old man, or I'll shoot you, too. Now give me the cash!"

The cop was reaching for his gun. "Put that thing away," George said to the cop, "we got one too many in here now."

He turned his attention to the young man. "Son, it's Christmas Eve. If you need money, well then, here. It ain't much but it's all I got. Now put that pea shooter away."

George pulled \$150 out of his pocket and handed it to the young man, reaching for the barrel of the gun at the same time. The young man released his grip on the gun, fell to his knees and began to cry. "I'm not very good at this am I? All I wanted was to buy something for my wife and son," he went on. "I've lost my job, my rent is due, my car got repossessed last week."

George handed the gun to the cop. "Son, we all get in a bit of squeeze now and then. The road gets hard sometimes, but we make it through the best we can."

He got the young man to his feet, and sat him down on a chair across from the cop. "Sometimes we do stupid things." George handed the young man a cup of coffee. "Bein' stupid is one of the things that makes us human. Comin' in here with a gun ain't the answer. Now sit there and get warm and we'll sort this thing out."

The young man had stopped crying. He looked over to the cop. "Sorry I shot you. It just went off. I'm sorry officer."

"Shut up and drink your coffee." the cop said.

George could hear the sounds of sirens outside. A police car and an ambulance skidded to a halt. Two cops came through the door, guns drawn. "Chuck! You ok?" one of the cops asked the wounded officer.

"Not bad for a guy who took a bullet. How did you find me?"

"GPS locator in the car. Best thing since sliced bread. Who did this?" the other cop asked as he approached the young man.

Chuck answered him, "I don't know. The guy ran off into the dark. Just dropped his gun and ran."

George and the young man both looked puzzled at each other.

"That guy work here?" the wounded cop continued.

"Yep," George said, "just hired him this morning. Boy lost his job."

The paramedics came in and loaded Chuck onto the stretcher. The young man leaned over the wounded cop and whispered, "Why?"

Chuck just said, "Merry Christmas boy ... and you too, George, and thanks for everything."

"Well, looks like you got one doozy of a break there. That ought to solve some of your problems."

George went into the back room and came out with a box. He pulled out a ring box. "Here you go, something for the little woman. I don't think Martha would mind. She said it would come in handy some day."

The young man looked inside to see the biggest diamond ring he ever saw. "I can't take this," said the young man. "It means something to you."

"And now it means something to you," replied George. "I got my memories. That's all I need."

George reached into the box again. An airplane, a car and a truck appeared next. They were toys that the oil company had left for him to sell. "Here's something for that little man of yours."

The young man began to cry again as he handed back the \$150 that the old man had handed him earlier.

"And what are you supposed to buy Christmas dinner with? You keep that too," George said. "Now git home to your family."

The young man turned with tears streaming down his face. "I'll be here in the morning for work, if that job offer is still good."

"Nope. I'm closed Christmas day," George said. "See ya the day after."

George turned around to find that the stranger had returned. "Where'd you come from? I thought you left?"

"I have been here. I have always been here," said the stranger. "You say you don't celebrate Christmas. Why?"

"Well, after my wife passed away, I just couldn't see what all the bother was. Puttin' up a tree and all seemed a waste of a good pine tree. Bakin' cookies like I used to with Martha just wasn't the same by myself and besides I was gettin' a little chubby."

The stranger put his hand on George's shoulder. "But you do celebrate the holiday, George. You gave me food and drink and warmed me when I was cold and hungry. The woman with child will bear a son and he will become a great doctor.

The policeman you helped will go on to save 19 people from being killed by terrorists. The young man who tried to rob you will make you a rich man and not take any for himself. "That is the spirit of the season and you keep it as good as any man."

George was taken aback by all this stranger had said. "And how do you know all this?" asked the old man.

"Trust me, George. I have the inside track on this sort of thing. And when your days are done you will be with Martha again."

The stranger moved toward the door. "If you will excuse me, George, I have to go now. I have to go home where there is a big celebration planned."

George watched as the old leather jacket and the torn pants that the stranger was wearing turned into a white robe. A golden light began to fill the room.

"You see, George ... it's My birthday. Merry Christmas."

George fell to his knees and replied, "Happy Birthday, Lord Jesus." Merry Christmas!!

Thank you to all those who contributed into making this compilation of Christmas Stories a great success. If there are any mistakes, or if credit was given to the wrong person, we apologize for that and we will try to correct any problems that are found.